

Preface

You shall find, dear reader, no new ideas in my book. At least, I trust not. If you seek novelty, you had best search another volume for the pleasures of your diversion. I cannot presume on a topic of so great an importance as ethics to have discovered a truth not yet known to my fellows, whether philosophically inclined or not. Even this very point others made centuries ago. Immanuel Kant did, for example.

If, however, you are a seeker of self-knowledge and its pleasures, read on. I have attempted to explore knowledge of this variety, and I do believe that I have met with some success. But I must offer you a word of caution at the very outset: Any success in an endeavor of this alluring sort is at best rather elusive, and whatever success one might actually claim could quite possibly be illusive.

But how can I hope to gain self-knowledge without discovering a new truth? you may ask. This book, I would respond, is merely an experiment in the analysis of ideas about human goodness. But the ideas I intend to analyze are not at all unique to me. I propose to take a concept of happiness gleaned from the ancients and to see what the consequences might be if we were to take it seriously as a principle of moral philosophy. What could happiness tell us about ourselves, our autonomy, our obligations, and our circumstances, not to mention our virtue?

One might be tempted to think that an experiment with self-knowledge is itself a novel idea. But proponents of the experimental method for the moral sciences have in the past century made the idea very current. I am thinking of William James and John Dewey, especially. These philosophers themselves claim an ancient lineage for the procedure. They trace its origins through David Hume and John Stuart Mill down to Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle.

In my experiment I shall elaborate a hypothesis that is rather limited. I pretend to no divine knowledge of any eternal or necessary sort. One cannot but at times feel that certain ideas do provide a glimpse of eternity. But even

these ideas, though they may fill us with ecstasy, we cannot take for certain. They may perhaps approach the ideas of a god, I concede, and we ought surely to treat them with some diffidence. But I must ask, How could we ever be sure that we have stumbled upon any idea truly divine?

My hypothesis concerns human knowledge. I take our knowledge to rest on a feeble intellect and on frail senses. Our faculties with their contingent natures can hardly grasp even their proper objects. What is more, these objects themselves are apparently contingent. They not infrequently change under our very gaze. How could one ever hope to grasp their truths with much confidence?

Nor dare I attempt an experiment that would tie all truth, if only human, into one tidy bundle. Truth, if it is one, is too grand a thing for our mind to grasp. We must therefore choose our experiments and choose them carefully. I have chosen to elaborate a hypothesis that sheds some light on truths now forgotten by many. There are surely good reasons for our forgetfulness. But our lapse has consequences that appear to me equally great, if not grave. The truths by which we presently live do have their advantages. But because they are not exhaustive, these truths also have their disadvantages.

If you wish, you may think of this book as dedicated to the idea of an ephemeral teleology. An ephemeral teleology?! Yes, the phrase does sound oxymoronic. We are today much accustomed to think of teleologies, especially moral ones, as requiring eternal, fixed forms. But need they? I for one do not think so. We are surrounded by plants and animals whose forms of life are very obviously teleological and yet constantly changing over their lifetimes, not to mention their species evolution and extinction. I wish to remind you that we ourselves are of these fleeting forms as are the ecosystems within which we dwell. And so I shall ask, What are the implications of a temporal teleology, autochthonous and almost evanescent by comparison to its alternative, for moral theory and practice?

I shall, then, have repeated recourse to the ancient Greek philosophers. I mean Plato and Aristotle. They expound a natural and moral teleology that we would do well to take into consideration. Many philosophers, of course, would argue that their teleology requires eternal forms for its foundation. I am not convinced that it does. But my reservations need not trouble you. My purpose is to trouble you with a larger question. I wish to ask, Need a moral or a natural teleology rest on invariable forms? I think not. What I shall do, then, is take the ancient concept of teleology and make use of it as if it were of variable forms.

David Hume and Immanuel Kant provide extraordinary confirmations of this principal idea, especially if one considers how inimical their philosophies seem to be to those of the Greeks. With his distinction between relations of ideas and matters of fact, Hume echoes the ancient distinction between knowledge and opinion. Kant advocates a moral teleology that includes a concept of value very similar to that of the ancients, despite its

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transcendental form. His teleology also contains other concepts useful for my analysis, such as freedom, imperative, and cosmology.

But Kant and Hume remain the Scylla and Charybdis of our efforts to understand the Greeks. These gentlemen are veritable demigods who cast conceptual shadows so long as to obscure our vision of ancient philosophy. I suspect, for example, that our tendency to attribute fixed rational forms to moral teleology arises in large part from Kant. From Hume would appear to arise our reluctance to accept a rational teleology of any sort in moral matters.

I shall borrow from the American philosophers their method, albeit with some modification. I shall also attempt to reconstruct their general philosophical outlook. My intention is to apply the experimental method to moral problems with the purpose of advancing intellectual teleologies and not emotional ones. A moral experiment, I shall argue, is successful if its hypothesis is conducive to the enriched activity of our mind rather than to the enhanced passivity of our emotions. The consequences of this change for our felicity are not insignificant.

My hope, then, is that by recalling an idea, almost archaic by contemporary standards, and by arraying it before you, gentle reader, with other ideas, both ancient and modern, I can foster in your soul a forgotten moral outlook and attitude.

But I must now ask you, if you be of kindred spirit and so inclined, to peruse my book itself.