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Some Opening Remarks on the Exclusionary Tendency in Western Philosophy



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There is a serious danger involved in taking the idea of the "philosophical tradition" too narrowly. Many readers of this journal will be familiar with the dangers of *cultural* exclusion—in particular with the long-standing tendency of many Western philosophers to reject out of hand the legitimacy of Chinese, Indian, and Japanese philosophy, on the grounds that these Asian modes of thinking do not appear to address the same problems that Western philosophers are interested in, in the same kind of way that Western philosophers prefer to approach these problems. This culturally myopic view of what is entitled to be called "philosophy" is deplorable, and needs to be resisted, but it probably helps to remember in this regard that the Asian philosophical traditions have not been the only victims of this attitude. It was not that long ago, no more than fifty or sixty years, in fact, that many Anglo-American analytic philosophers were adopting a similarly exclusionary attitude toward European Continental philosophy—declaring that Nietzsche and Heidegger, for example, were "*not philosophers*." This, it turned out, meant little more than that coming to understand these *alien* thinkers required more effort than the deniers of their philosophical *bona fides* were willing to put in. In time influential thinkers emerged—William Barrett and Walter Kauffman come immediately to mind—who *were* willing to put in the effort required to understand what these seminal Continental figures were saying, and to explain their messages in terms that more typical Anglo-American analytic philosophers could grasp. And thus the legitimacy of the phenomenological and existential approaches to philosophy came gradually to be accepted even in the most die-hard analytical departments.

Today, a similar service is being performed for the various Asian philosophical traditions by, to name just a few, people like Roger Ames, Arindam Chakrabarti, and Thomas Kasulis. We can hope that, in due time, their efforts will bear similar fruit, and that figures like Xunzi, Śāṅkara, and Dōgen will come to be recognized in Western philosophy departments as being as "mainstream" as Heidegger and Nietzsche are now understood to be.

But it is not *cultural* exclusion and myopia that worries me most, and which I want to address first in this introductory piece. Rather, it is *disciplinary* myopia. Philosophy began historically, and begins for each budding young future philosopher, in *wonder*: wonder at what the fact of our existence means, if anything; wonder at the astonishingly intricate structure of the natural world; and wonder about how best we should live our lives within this astonishing world. Thus, philosophy has always been, and remains, bound up with the search for meaning and direction. But so, too, right from the outset, it was bound up with the effort to understand more clearly the precise *nature* of that world the meaning of which we were trying to penetrate. Thus, metaphysics is as old a component of philosophy as is ethics, and epistemology—or the effort to explain to ourselves *why* our metaphysical and ethical claims deserve to be taken seriously—is almost as old as either of the other two major branches of philosophy.

In the West, philosophy is sometimes referred to as “the mother of the sciences,” and this is a far less metaphorical claim than it might appear to be. The early philosophers simply *were* the early scientists, as the examples of Thales, Anaximander, Anaxagoras, Empedocles, Democritus, and, in particular, Aristotle make abundantly clear. The basic question that generated the various sciences—what is the precise nature of the world, and how does it work?—is a question that the early philosophers were intensely interested in as well. But it has been a recurrent feature of the history of philosophy that, as inquiry into one or another of the various dimensions of the natural world has matured to the point of developing its own distinct methodology, it has hived off from philosophy and established its own distinct identity as a new science. We see a steady progression of these new sciences emerging, and leaving philosophy permanently behind, from about the sixteenth century on. Astronomy and physics were the first to leave. Then chemistry in the eighteenth century. In the nineteenth century, “natural philosophy” gradually transformed into biology. And today we see a number of “social sciences”—economics, psychology, sociology—hacking away at the apron strings that still connect them to the “mother” discipline of philosophy.

As the new sciences have taken their departure, there has gradually been a corresponding change in the task that philosophy sets for itself. For example, the sort of metaphysical speculation with which Ancient Greek philosophy began, and which continued to play a dominant role in Western philosophy right up to and through the end of the nineteenth century, no longer looks like a prudent (or indeed, even a legitimate) activity for philosophers to engage in. Alfred North Whitehead, in the 1920s, may prove to have been the last philosopher who still considered it feasible to provide a comprehensive speculative metaphysical scheme that aspired to at least conform to all that we currently knew about the world through the efforts of the natural sciences. Since the publication of *Process and Reality* in 1927, speculative metaphysics has continued to dwindle in importance as a facet of philosophy. Now when someone describes herself as a metaphysician, she almost certainly means that she is engaged in a form of conceptual clarification that is closely connected to the philosophy of

language, rather than in bold and creative speculation about humanity's place in the nature of things.

Epistemology, too, has been transformed as a result of the development of the natural sciences. While traditional questions concerning, for example, the boundaries and precise nature of *a priori* knowledge or the reliability of knowledge based in immediate sense perception continue to be addressed, these days so much of our knowledge comes to us indirectly, through the natural sciences, with their various rich and complicated methodologies, that the philosophy of science is becoming an increasingly central component of epistemology. This in turn means that some knowledge of probability theory and inductive logic, with its attendant mathematics, is indispensable for the serious epistemologist. But so, too, is a knowledge of the *history* of the sciences, since their methodologies are not static algorithmic procedures, but are constantly evolving practices. And the rationale for implementing changes in these practices can only be understood by examining the nature of the problems being considered at a specific time, the resources that were then available to be brought to bear on these problems, and the state of knowledge within the field at the time. Thus, today an informed epistemologist must bring to her discipline not just a background in mathematics and logic, but also a wealth of historical knowledge. This is something that I think might usefully be described as the “cross-fertilizing” of the philosophical tradition.

Both in metaphysics and in epistemology, then, appropriate acknowledgments of the discoveries and significance of modern science have been forthcoming. How different the situation appears to be in ethics, however. In the West, value theory continues to be treated as if it is exclusively the concern of philosophy, and thus what our “daughter” disciplines, the sciences, might have to contribute is marginalized. In ethics, especially, we see the continued reliance upon, and elaboration of, a handful of classical theories (Kantian deontology, Aristotelian virtue ethics, and Mill's utilitarianism), all of which predate Darwin and modern psychology. It is as if, for ethicists, Darwin never existed. As intellectuals, these same ethicists will, of course, claim to accept the theory of evolution. But somehow the implication of evolutionary theory—which is that humans are *not*, at bottom, *rational* beings, in either the Aristotelian or Kantian sense of that term, and are *not* utility maximizers either, as the economist Mill would have us believe—never seems to register with them. The rationale offered for this refusal to take Darwin seriously is invariably that ethics is meant to be *prescriptive*, not *descriptive*. Thus, even if Darwin himself, and contemporary evolutionary psychologists, have insights to offer about the emergence of moral behavior in our species, this is held to be “the wrong *sort* of account.” A more spurious justification for ethicists ignoring the implications of evolutionary biology would be hard to imagine. For how does one presume to prescribe behavior for someone whose true nature and true situation and circumstances one refuses to understand?

It matters enormously to what ethics *should be* that humans *evolved* as social animals with young requiring an extraordinarily long period of caregiving on the

part of their parents, which in turn biologically favored the evolutionary development of strong pair-bonds and strong family identification in members of our species. It matters that humans, and especially males, have a powerful desire for social status naturally ingrained in us, given its usefulness in ensuring the propagation of our genes. It matters that, from a very young age, we exhibit an apparently innate sense of fairness at the treatment we receive relative to our peers. It matters that we possess a capacity (developed to varying degrees of strength) for sympathetic identification with other members of our own species. And it matters especially that we possess a strong natural tendency to identify powerfully with an in-group, toward which we exhibit varying degrees of altruism, coupled with a strong natural tendency to *dis-identify* with out-groups—which is to say, with competitors for the resources that we wish to appropriate for ourselves. This last characteristic of our species leads directly to the difficult problem, which should be central to ethics, but which is often skirted entirely (as it is in utilitarianism), of balancing legitimate claims of partiality against legitimate claims to equality.

The great scandal of contemporary ethics, on which the trolley car problem is thought to throw revealing light, is our belated recognition that humans appear to be committed to logically inconsistent fundamental intuitions about what is morally permissible in different situations. In certain circumstances, we reason like deontologists. (Do *not* push the fat man off the footbridge onto the railway tracks to prevent the runaway train from killing five trapped people.) In other situations, only slightly different, we reason like consequentialists. (On the other hand, it is not only okay, it is *laudable* to throw the switch diverting the runaway train away from the cutting with five trapped people and into the cutting with just one trapped person.) And in still other situations, we reason like virtue ethicists. Philosophers have a powerful preference for consistency, and the knee-jerk response of many philosophers confronted with the evidence of these inconsistent fundamental intuitions is, first, to express dismay at the superficial thinking of the average person, and then to insist that genuine ethics must constitute a logically coherent set of commitments.

But if we take Darwin seriously, as evolutionary psychologists do, there is no *scandal* to be found in mental modularity. Our moral intuitions, like our emotions, are instinctual. And instincts are acquired, not because they are logically consistent with each other, but because each of them has had, over a period of hundreds if not thousands of generations, in the specific kinds of circumstances that trigger it, survival and/or reproductive benefits for the individuals exhibiting the instinct in question. In different circumstances, sometimes only marginally different, different responses will be optimally beneficial. Thus, it should be no more surprising that the average person possesses an array of apparently “conflicting” moral intuitions than it is that a chess player will possess an array of different openings in his repertoire. But instincts, while they are powerful and very difficult to argue with, should never be thought of as being perfectly uniform across a species. Variation among the individual members of a species is an absolute precondition of natural selection. And what this implies is that, insofar as ethics attempts to accommodate our human moral intuitions, there is never going to be universal agreement on what morality *requires* of

us in all circumstances—because people’s fundamental moral intuitions vary, not a lot, but enough to produce irreconcilable differences of opinion.

Ethics, in other words, for anyone who takes evolutionary biology seriously, cannot be thought of as being about the discovery of ethical *truth*. This is where even Philip Kitcher, the one first-rank contemporary philosopher who has tried to recast the ethical project in line with what we now know about human nature through the science of biology, goes astray. Kitcher is absolutely right, I think, in claiming that “amelioration of altruism failure was the initial function of ethical practice”¹ and remains the primary concern of ethics. But Kitcher was a philosopher of science before he turned his hand to ethics, and this has colored his thinking about ethical truths. In *The Advancement of Science*,² Kitcher responded to the skeptical doubts about the possibility of scientific progress raised by Thomas Kuhn and others in the 1960s and ’70s. Kitcher argued there for a Deweyan warranted assertability kind of truth that accrues to the most successful of our scientific theories—such as Darwin’s own theory of evolution. When he turned to ethics on the broad scale, with his book *The Ethical Project*, published in 2011, he argued that the same warranted assertability kind of truth could be attributed to certain key developments in our collective understanding of what is morally permissible. Thus, to use one of his most telling examples, the claim that “slavery is wrong” can be understood to express an ethical truth that at an earlier stage of world history was not immediately apparent to people (in particular, not to slave owners) but which has now gained virtually universal acceptance. The obvious, and somewhat superficial, rejoinder to this is that slavery continues to exist in certain places in the world even today, and so the claim that “slavery is wrong” is not seen as obviously true by everyone.

But the deeper problem with Kitcher’s talk of ethical truth is that there is a fundamental disanalogy between scientific theories and moral theories. Scientific theories attempt to do descriptive justice to what appears to be a world operating in conformity with a single logically coherent set of principles. In contrast, moral theories attempt to formulate what is permanently and profoundly “correct” about our moral intuitions. Thus, Peirce’s idea of scientific theories converging asymptotically through time upon the final truth, which is a fully adequate description of the real world is at least a coherent notion, even if, practically speaking, it represents an unattainable ideal. But given that there is a certain amount of irreducible variation in human moral intuitions, both among contemporaries and also across the ages, to contend that there even *is* something permanently and profoundly “correct” about some subset of these intuitions is deeply question begging.

Ethical claims, I would argue, are much more like legal proclamations than they are like scientific claims. Scientific claims, in the long run, prove to be either warrantably assertable or not—true or false, in the soft Deweyan sense. Legal proclamations, in contrast, while aiming at, and more or less successfully providing, real-world solutions to practical problems, are invariably the result of political compromise. And where compromise cannot be reached, majority rule takes its place. To take seriously what evolutionary biology has to tell us about human nature is thus to agree with J. L. Mackie’s claim that ethics is a matter of *inventing* (not *discovering*) right

and wrong. Because ethics is a practical matter, concerned with addressing social problems arising from our current situation, which is itself often significantly transitioning into a different situation, the pursuit of ethics should most definitely be a rational endeavor, but not a rational endeavor focused on the discovery of permanent “ethical truths.”

So what should an ethics that takes seriously what evolutionary biology tells us about human nature look like? It would, I think, look surprisingly like David Hume’s ethical theory. I say “surprisingly” because I am sure that the first thing that will cross many minds is that Hume, too, wrote long before Darwin did—in fact even before Kant and Mill did. But here again we see the benefits to be had from appropriately “cross-fertilizing” the philosophical tradition. Virtually all of the great early modern Western philosophers had a second string to their bow—a discipline other than philosophy in which they were almost as, if not equally, proficient. With Descartes and Leibniz it was mathematics; with Kant it was astronomy; with Mill there are too many to mention, but it is obvious that economics had a significant influence on his moral theorizing. And with Hume, it was history. But history, I would argue, is an especially relevant second discipline to have mastered if one is proposing a moral theory. It supplies one with a rich source of evidence about human nature and about the kinds of social arrangements that work, as well as those that do not work. And most importantly, perhaps, it will impress upon one the sheer *multivarioussness* of human types and human motivations—a *multivarioussness* much of which a sound ethics must accommodate as legitimate, rather than cast into the regions of criminality and perversity. Thus, no student of history will presume that providing a canon of moral behavior will be a relatively straightforward matter because, after all, all humans are substantially the same, cut from the same material—either as utility maximizers or as rational beings subject to the occasional animal temptation.

The very feature of Hume’s ethical theory that contemporary ethicists often hold against it—that it focuses on explaining *how and why* morality emerged among human beings, rather than on providing and justifying a long list of prescriptions and proscriptions for human behavior—is actually a strength rather than a weakness of his theory. For it implicitly acknowledges the importance of the human situation as *we actually find it at some moment in time* in determining what should and should not be expected in the way of moral behavior. There are, as Hume sees it, no *permanent* requirements of morality. In the opening pages of the second *Enquiry*, Hume observes that morality is called for in the first place only because of certain crucial conditions of the human situation, and that if these conditions were different, morality (in the form of a concern for justice) would be utterly extraneous. Ironically, these crucial conditions are precisely the same as the conditions that Thomas Hobbes identifies as being responsible for the “war of each against all” that *he* sees as characterizing the state of nature. These conditions are, on the one hand, the limited resources that are available for human consumption and, on the other, the fact that humans have a selfish streak and do *not* find it either natural or obligatory (contra the claims of utilitarianism) to “share and share alike” with *everyone*. But to this mix, Hume adds two elements that Hobbes underappreciates—first, the human family

and second, our natural, if limited, tendency to sympathize with our fellow human beings.

The family, for Hume, as for Confucius, is the crucible of morality, although for Hume the emphasis is less on filial piety and parental responsibility than it is on the challenge posed by sibling rivalry, which first compels parents to formulate rules of behavior and treatment that they can justify as “fair” to their children. Justice having been established within the family as a solution to sibling rivalry, it was then just a small step to extend it to quasi-family members, which is to say, to friends and confederates, so that a community could be maintained. And as humans discovered the value of exchanging ideas and goods with others beyond the confines of their immediate community, the principles of justice that had been established in the family and then extended to the community were there, ready and waiting, to be extended still further to the outsiders with whom one wished to exchange goods and ideas. This is the model of the expanding circle of moral concern. But there is nothing inevitable about that expansion, Hume insisted. Any particular invitation to the outsider to enter into a relationship in which we will treat each other fairly stands in danger of being rebuffed with a swipe of the sword. With this response, the boundaries of our moral community become clearly defined. The principles of justice that we recognize and observe with respect to other members of our community extend, in their application, precisely *this* far and no farther.

To my mind, this represents a crucial insight on Hume’s part—an insight that captures a basic truth about life. As biology and history both inform us, in the effort to secure the necessities of life there are always two available strategies in play: cooperation and fierce competition. Which of the strategies it makes most sense to embrace at a given moment depends on circumstances. The male lion, for example, if he is without brothers, does not cooperate with other male lions. His life’s task is to seize control of a pride, by driving out the resident male, so that he can breed and leave offspring. Even if he gains control of a pride, he is unlikely to hold onto it for more than a few short years. That is a hard fact about the life of lions. Humans, in contrast, are constantly inventing new ways in which to share the benefits of mutual cooperation. But that does not mean that the logic of competition has been overcome for us—that we have become angels rather than lions. On the contrary, in many respects we find that *controlled* competition—in the political sphere, the economic sphere, in sports, in the pursuit of scientific discovery, and in many other realms of activity—yields far greater rewards than would a more *pacified* approach to life. And so we encourage the competition even as we take great care to ensure that it is sufficiently controlled so that it does not become destructive and self-defeating.

This delicate balance that we achieve again and again, domesticating competition, as it were, by constraining it through cooperation, complicates enormously the task of ethical reasoning. For if there is to be cooperation at all, forbearance must be a part of it, and thus the need for morality. But as the sheer size of our communities continues to grow, as a direct result of our success at domesticating competition, we find that we no longer have the luxury of having to cooperate only with those who

share most, if not all, of our own beliefs and attitudes. We must learn to cooperate even with those whose points of view we find foolish or incomprehensible. For in a world littered with nuclear weapons and rapidly approaching an environmental crisis, we also no longer have the luxury of simply going to war with those whose beliefs and attitudes are simply too different from our own to be tolerated. The task of ethics today, then, should be understood as facilitating the expansion of the circle of moral concern by finding and espousing new forms of cooperation with which to domesticate competition. A crucial component of this task, moreover, will be helping to refine the rules agreed upon within the community so as to accommodate more fully the legitimate multivarioussness of the community members. But to accomplish either of these goals, ethicists must give up the presumption that there are permanent ethical *truths* to be discovered and then rigidly adhered to. Such a presumption is actually an impediment to our making progress on the true task of ethics, in that it encourages people to think that a refusal to compromise, which is to say a refusal to cooperate, is somehow *virtuous*.

In political discourse, this tendency to reject out of hand the possibility that one might need to listen to, and perhaps even learn from, one's opponents has been increasingly evident in recent years. The political discourse of left and right has become increasingly intransigent—increasingly a matter of preaching to the already converted, rather than reasoning with those who see things differently. In America, in its most virulent form, this insistent “principled” rejection of compromise could be seen in the flagrantly unconstitutional refusal of Senate Republicans even to consider for almost an entire year *any* nominee for appointment to the Supreme Court put forward by President Obama, on the unreasonable expectation (which has been unfortunately rewarded) that their party would recapture the White House at the next general election, allowing them to preserve the conservative majority on the Supreme Court to which Republicans apparently feel themselves to be permanently entitled.

In philosophical discourse, one seldom encounters quite such extreme violations of the commonsense injunction that we must engage openly and honestly with each other. Philosophers are always prepared to acknowledge, at least in principle, that inquiry is advanced by remaining open to the insights provided by others. But this is a principle to which it is easy to pay lip service while ignoring its more demanding implications. For to *actually* learn from someone else, it is not enough merely to acknowledge that presumably we *could* learn from someone else, if only we had the time to listen properly. An effort has to be made, in other words, if the principle is to be genuinely acknowledged rather than merely mouthed. And *what* an effort it would seem is being called for if the *other* to be listened to, attentively, is Asia! China, India, and Japan, important as they undeniably are, each has its own enormous intellectual heritage. And we philosophers are, after all, merely human—finite creatures, with limited resources of time, energy, and patience. It follows, surely, that we must “tend our own gardens” and not dissipate our energies by pursuing every passing fancy. This equally commonsense injunction can readily be invoked, however, not only to defend our concentrating our attention on our own projects, but also to *downplay*

the significance of what we have not bothered to investigate for ourselves. (To the dedicated Manhattanite, who has never strayed from home, no doubt the streets of Paris could not possibly compare with Park Avenue or Broadway.) As the essays collected in this special issue of *PEW* make clear, the task of getting Western philosophy departments to appreciate the true value of the conceptual resources available in the various Asian philosophical traditions can be daunting.

Notes

- 1 – Philip Kitcher, *The Ethical Project* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), p. 7.
- 2 – Philip Kitcher, *The Advancement of Science: Science without Legend, Objectivity without Illusions* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).