# Running Head: Traditional versus Modern Ethics Response

## Historical Developments of Moral and Political Philosophy

## Abstract

Moral Philosophy is often written as though the history of the subject were only of secondary and incidental importance. Moral concepts can be examined and understood apart from their history. Some philosophers have even written as if moral concepts were a timeless, limited, unchanging, determinate species of concept; the content of moral judgments may vary from society to society and from person to person. Moral concepts change as social life changes and are embodied in and are partially constitutive forms of social life. One key way in which we may identify one form of social life as distinct from another is by identifying differences in moral concepts. There are continuities as well as breaks in the history of moral concepts. Just here lies the complexity of the history, which is increased because philosophy is involved in changing moral concepts. The moral concepts, which are objects for analysis to the philosophers of one age, may sometimes be what they are partly because of the discussions by philosophers of a previous age. All moral theories whether philosophy or judgment so far as they are philosophical theories, is neutral as regard actual conduct.

The cultural relativism of the sophists is an attempt to meet the simultaneous demands of two tasks that of assigning a coherent set of meanings to the evaluative vocabulary, and of explaining how to live well in a city-state. What would convince and please in one place might fail to convince and please in another. Individual sophists, men such as Protagoras and Gorgias and their disciples, all had their own doctrines and theories. But we can pick out a general amalgam of sophistic theory, which is what Plato objected to and Socrates earlier criticized and rivaled. This amalgam would run as: To function well as a man in the city-state is to be a successful citizen. It is impossible to produce more than a reasonable account of the historical Socrates and the most obvious reason for this is it is impossible to say at what point in Plato’s dialogues the character called Socrates became merely a mouthpiece for the mature Plato. In the Gorgias, which is certainly a fairly early dialogue, we see Plato set most of his central problems in ethics. The *Republic* opens with a request for a definition, and the first book clarifies the nature of this request. The definition of justice as “telling the truth and paying one’s debts” is rejected, not only because it may sometimes be right to withhold the truth or not to return what one has borrowed, but because no list of types of action could supply what Plato is demanding.

The difficulty of the *Republic* lies in the fact that Plato tries to achieve so much in so little space.

The book, which Aristotle opens, is traditionally known as the Nicomachean Ethics. Aristotle’s word covers both what we mean by political and what we mean by social and does not discriminate between them. Greek philosophical ethics differs from later moral philosophy in ways that reflect the difference between Greek society and modern society. The differentiation of function in early societies produces a vocabulary in which men are described in terms of the roles they fulfill that it is in the transition from the society which was the bearer of the Homeric poems to the society of the fifth-century city-state that good and its cognates acquired a variety of uses, and that it is in the following decades that men reflect self-consciously about those uses. Greek philosophical ethics differs from later moral philosophy in ways that reflect the difference between Greek society and modern society.

David Hume’s moral and political theory leads to the standards of artistic judgment, the political system, and the system of morals prevailing at any time are for Hume the products of the passions and of knowledge and much of this knowledge comes to men through experience.

A striking feature of moral and political argument in the modern world is the extent to which it is innovators, radicals, and revolutionaries who revive old doctrines, while their conservative and reactionary opponents are the inventors of new ones. It is easy to suppose the one cause, that made Hume shift his attention from philosophical to historical writing was a growing awareness that greater accessions of knowledge could be made by examining man's past than by philosophizing. Indeed, the argument seems far stronger that Hume's view of the past was basically negative, he dealt with the past primarily either to show the progressive character of his own policy proposals or to exercise troublesome political ghosts.

Modern Moral Philosophy opens on a quietly apocalyptic note. Moral philosophers, it is explained, have hitherto failed to answer the questions, which they posed satisfactorily, because they have failed to be clear about the questions themselves. (*Alasdair Macintyre, A Short History of Ethics: A History of Moral Philosophy from the Homeric Age to the Twentieth Century, Place of Publication: London. Publication Year: 1998).* Descartes founded modern philosophy, the great truths that societies are not mere collections of individuals, and that social institutions are not means to the psychological ends of such individuals. (*John B.Stewart, The Moral and Political Philosophy of David Hume, Columbia University Press. Place of Publication: New York. Publication Year: 1963).* The distinction is made at last, or so it is proclaimed, in the preface to G. E. Moore’s Principia Ethica. Unwarrantable assertions are made in Principia Ethica than in any other single book of moral philosophy, but they are made with such well mannered, that it seems almost gross to disagree.

### Aristotle, Politics 1269a (John B.Stewart, The Moral and Political Philosophy of David Hume, Columbia University Press. Place of Publication: New York. Publication Year: 1963)

“It is from habit, and only from habit, that law derives the validity, which secures obedience. But habit can be created only by the passage of time.”

## References

*Alasdair Macintyre,* A Short History of Ethics: A History of Moral Philosophy from the Homeric Age to the Twentieth Century, Place of Publication: London. Publication Year: 1998

*John B.Stewart,* The Moral and Political Philosophy of David Hume, Columbia University Press. Place of Publication: New York. Publication Year: 1963