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The Long Shadow of Aristotelian Naturalism in the Development of Ethics

* **Published in** *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 18:1 (2010)

A critical notice of Terence Irwin, *The Development of Ethics: Volume I: From Socrates to the Reformation*. . .
Oxford University Press, 2007. Pp. vii + 812. ISBN 978198242673. Hbk £55.00 (\$125.00).

If required to give a title in the style of 17th and 18th century works, Terence Irwin would have called his ambitious and deeply rewarding historical survey of moral philosophy,

The Development of Ethics

being a selective historical and critical study of

moral philosophy in the Socratic tradition

with special attention to Aristotelian naturalism

its formation, elaboration, criticism, and defence. (p. 1)

So described, this articulates Irwin's main approach to the history of moral philosophy. Over three separate volumes, Irwin provides an extended discussion of moral philosophy as a discipline systematically engaged in a Socratic method of inquiry which reacts to different aspects of Aristotelian naturalism. The first volume begins with Socrates and ends with the Reformation, covering major classical Greek and Christian philosophical movements; the second volume discusses early modern philosophy from Suarez to Rousseau and different approaches towards natural law; the third volume covers the Enlightenment and modernity, from Kant to Rawls. The Socratic method and Aristotelian naturalism are the unifying strands throughout all three books. I here focus on the first volume.

As a renowned classicist, Irwin provides a magisterial and critically engaged account of the major Greek philosophic schools, from Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, to the Stoics, as well as other lesser-known schools, such as the Cyrenaics and Cynics. Given his main unifying theme, a large portion of the book focuses on Aristotle and the Christian Aristotelianism of Aquinas, containing sympathetic and detailed

discussion of themes such as *eudaimonia*, nature, and virtue. Irwin's treatment of Aristotle is sophisticated and echoes many themes from his earlier book, *Aristotle's First Principles*. Irwin's concentration on Aristotelian naturalism, however, confines too narrowly his exegesis of Christian thinkers and the voluntarist natural law tradition. Particularly controversial is Irwin's interpretation of Augustine as working broadly within, rather than against, the Aristotelian tradition. Irwin's contentious reading stems from underlying weaknesses with his overall methodology; these I discuss in what follows. Section I examines Irwin's methodological approach to the history of ethics. Section II illustrates the drawbacks of this approach by taking a closer look at his interpretation of the Christian outlook, particularly Augustine.

I.

According to Irwin, the Socratic dialectical method of moral philosophy incorporates both historical reflection and constructive philosophical criticism. Irwin describes his project as following and participating within this Socratic tradition; he aims to pay careful attention to historical specificities, balanced with critical analysis of the actual philosophical arguments. Those philosophers who share his own commitment to the historical dimension of the Socratic method are Irwin's focus in his book:

I present them as participants in a collective effort to apply this method to the past and present of moral philosophy. [...] But I do not simply intend to describe a collective Socratic inquiry in its historical aspect. I also try to evaluate it, and therefore to take part in it. In this respect I do not draw a sharp distinction between the method of a historian of moral philosophy and the method of a moral philosopher. It is more difficult to engage in a constructive conversation with an interlocutor whose starting point differs widely from one's own than to argue with someone with whom one already has a lot in common. But if one can find common ground with interlocutors who begin from widely different presuppositions, one may have grounds for greater confidence in the conclusions reached from the common ground. (p. 3)

The philosophical dimension to the Socratic method Irwin understands as a process of constructive, critical dialogue, designed to identify puzzles and inconsistencies in our prevailing moral beliefs and views. This

dialogue facilitates progress towards a moral outlook that is based on improved, more defensible philosophical arguments. The philosopher's task, therefore, is to use his or her judgement in search of "the best statement we can find of their essential points, and of their bearing on points raised by later philosophers" (p. 5). An optimistic outlook underpins the Socratic method, where the implicit assumption is that we can learn from the criticism and progressive refinement of our moral views and ethical theories. In Irwin's words, "I assume we can criticize an earlier theory constructively from the point of view of a later theory, and that in many cases a defender of an earlier theory can reasonably be expected to learn something from the criticisms of later theorists" (p. 8). According to Irwin, the historical aspect of the Socratic dialogue leads quite naturally to the philosophical method: points of convergence between different theories, regardless of historical period, point to the critical evolution of certain enduring philosophical ideas. "[D]eeper examination of the apparently various and conflicting tendencies in ethical theory will reveal some considerable agreement on the main principles; and this degree of agreement will constitute some argument for the principles" (p. 7). Specific philosophical themes or dilemmas persist throughout history, though these may be articulated differently depending on intellectual or cultural context. Historical reflection helps us to detect some "relatively permanent principles" (p. 7) such as, for Irwin, the substantive theme of Aristotelian naturalism.

It may indeed be true that the Socratic method points to how philosophy contains interrelated historical and argumentative strands. Whether Irwin successfully balances these two constituent strands is, however, debatable. Genuine historical engagement may be sacrificed in the interest of constructing a unified and coherent philosophical argument. Irwin says explicitly that his study does not follow the Cantabrigian method. This approach towards the history of ideas, made famous by the Cambridge school, emphasises the significance of the social and political context to our understanding of historical texts; for without consideration and explanation of this context, we are liable to misunderstand historical thinkers or themes. Despite the fact that Irwin devotes little space to even perfunctory explanations of salient historical factors which may indeed intrude on philosophical ideas – particularly in the case of Medieval Christianity – he claims that "[t]he Cantabrigian approach and my approach are not competitors; they should supplement each other and offer some mutual illumination" (p. 10). But it remains an open question how these two approaches mutually support each other.

First of all, a more Cantabrigian approach would find suspect Irwin's assumption that enduring philosophical principles, like Aristotelian naturalism, can indeed be found throughout the history of ideas. Irwin aims to "consider objections to Aristotelian naturalism, and discuss the non-Aristotelian or anti-Aristotelian views that seek to correct the errors and omissions of the Aristotelian outlook" (p. 5). Under this broad thematic umbrella are schools of thought as diverse as the Epicureans, Cyrenaics, Sceptics, the Augustinian tradition, voluntarists such as Scotus and Ockham, and trends within philosophy which originate in Hobbes, Hume, and Kant. Essentially, the history of ethics is envisaged as one long debate between Aristotelian naturalism and its critics. Irwin states, "[s]ince I do not think they dislodge Aristotelian naturalism, it is all the more important to try to present their position fairly and sympathetically, so that one can see where they have raised legitimate points that a defender of Aristotle ought to concede, where their criticisms rest on misunderstanding, and where Aristotelian naturalism has a reasonable answer to them" (p. 5).

It might be the case that seen through the lens of Aristotelian naturalism the history of ethics is both interesting and informative. It can also function, however, as an excessively restrictive and misleading lens which commits what Quentin Skinner calls the "reification of doctrines"¹, and consequently fails to do proper justice to the diversity and richness of the development of moral philosophy. Under Irwin's treatment, Aristotelian naturalism is in danger of "becom[ing] hypostatized into an entity"², where thinkers who have diverged sharply, or fail to engage with Aristotelian naturalism, are nonetheless understood as part of the same developmental, philosophical story.³ For example, Irwin believes that both Aristotelian and Kantian approaches towards morality are "not mutually antagonistic, and that a proper modification of the Aristotelian position ought to incorporate some of the major Kantian claims" (p. 9). Even if we grant Irwin that some 'relatively permanent principles' can indeed be discovered in the history of ideas, the intrinsic philosophical, indeed moral value, of melding together different ethical approaches is debatable. Both historical traditions bring something unique to moral philosophy, and contribute in distinctive ways to the collective pool of philosophical resources which contemporary thinkers can now draw upon for support or inspiration. It seems to me we inevitably reduce the size, variety, and richness of that pool once we search for perennial

¹ Quentin Skinner, "Meaning and History in the History of Ideas," *History and Theory* 8, no. 1 (1969): p. 11.

² *Ibid.*, p. 10.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.

philosophical themes, in hopes of achieving an arbitrary historical linearity and coherence. In this respect, Skinner is right to insist on the philosophical and moral value of a more variegated, contextual approach to the history of ethics, insofar as this method “help[s] to reveal [...] not the essential sameness, but rather the essential variety of viable moral assumptions and political commitments.”⁴

To be fair, Irwin is correct that Aristotelian naturalism casts a long shadow in the history of moral philosophy; yet, as he himself acknowledges, in the early modern era ‘naturalism’ takes a new form, and one which does not reflect the Aristotelian conception. Irwin’s use of the term ‘naturalism’ differs from the contemporary Moore-ian meaning, as well as from what I would consider the more early modern connotation, where “we [...] try to understand morality without reference to any immanent or transcendent God or gods” (p. 4). The fact that ‘naturalism’ as a term goes through such variation of meaning throughout history should in itself point to the historical contingency of supposed ‘grand’ or ‘universal truths’ about it. In confining himself to the perennial problem of Aristotelian naturalism, Irwin fails to consider how different historical contexts inform the different philosophical uses of terms. Once this is appreciated, his account may not be as supportive of the Cantabrigian approach as he claims. Yet this in turn impedes a fuller textual and philosophical appreciation of different ethical ideas, not as “anti-Aristotelian” or “non-Aristotelian”, but for their own merits, independently of any presumed unifying theme.

Irwin’s methodological onesidedness could be alleviated with greater sensitivity to the historical context. Ultimately, any synoptic history of ideas requires balance between the historical understanding provided by the Cantabrigian approach, and the critical examination of ideas supplied by a more philosophical approach that Irwin favours. But to adopt some insights from the Cantabrigian approach need not imply we too must conclude, like Skinner, that all ideas are the “embodiment[s] of a particular intention, on a particular occasion, addressed to the solution of a particular problem.”⁵ Excessive particularism is another extreme that should be avoided: the overcontextualisation of ideas is as myopic as the search for overarching narratives or universal philosophical truth. Ultimately, both tendencies have to be overcome for a fuller picture to emerge of the history and development of moral philosophy. It is perfectly legitimate to assume that some ethical questions resonate from one historical context to another. But we risk misunderstanding how philosophers’

⁴ Ibid., p. 52.

⁵ Ibid., p. 50.

own distinctive presuppositions may depart from ours, including our favoured particular answer to their questions, if insufficient attention is paid to the historical context. As the next section shows in more detail, Irwin's emphasis on philosophical unity causes him to downplay distinctive innovations within Augustinian philosophy.

II.

So far I have indicated that Irwin's adopted methodology is not wholly successful. This comes to the fore in his analysis of Christian reactions to the Greek moral outlook. Orthodox readings of the history of philosophy usually understand the advent and spread of Christian morality, with its innovative doctrines of predestination, sin, divine grace and revelation, and free will, as a decisive point of departure from classical Greek views. On this picture, the Christian outlook – particularly in its Augustinian strand – calls into question the Greek optimism that the moral good is immanently achievable through the cultivation of our natural rational capacities.⁶ Irwin, by contrast, focuses on points of convergence between the two traditions: for example, like Christianity, Stoicism expresses a degree of moral pessimism, and the Pauline division between the soul and flesh echoes the Platonic separation between the rational and non-rational. By themselves, Irwin's points here are both accurate and relatively uncontroversial. More contentious is Irwin's depiction of how Christianity attempts to supplement and indeed, *complete* Greek morality; where these two traditions should be understood as, not antagonistic, but complementary to each other.

Irwin begins his section on Christian philosophy by pointing to what John Hare appropriately describes as the moral gap.⁷ "According to the Christian analysis," Irwin writes, "the moral law points beyond itself. [...] Once we aim at this end, we look for the resources to fulfil it. Once we recognize that our natural resources cannot fulfil it, we cannot reasonably refuse a hearing to Christian views about how to achieve the aims of morality" (p. 386). Distinctive to the Christian ethical outlook is the postulated gap which exists between the moral ideal and human natural capacities to fulfil it. Human practical activity points to the perfection of this moral ideal: we acknowledge it is as a valid and relevant solution to our flawed human

⁶ Of course, this is a gross simplification. To Irwin's credit, he draws out the different ways in which the Greek schools theorise about the moral ideal and its connection to human practical reason.

⁷ See John Hare, *The Moral Gap; Kantian Ethics, Human Limits, and God's Assistance* (Oxford: UP, 1997).

condition and we desire its achievement, but it nonetheless remains remote from our immediate grasp. The moral ideal is something perfect and intuitively appeals to us; but our natural abilities fall short of its achievement, particularly since the Christian outlook introduces other crippling human impediments – such as human sinfulness and the fallen nature of the flesh. Added to these impediments are theological concerns surrounding God’s ultimate sovereignty. And it is ultimately through appeal to theological doctrines of divine grace, faith, and salvation, that Christian philosophers overcome the moral gap. According to Irwin, Christian pessimism about the human ability to fulfil the moral ideal “is not to reject the perfectionist aspects of Greek moral systems. On the contrary, the perfectionist aspects *support* the Christian doctrines of justification and sanctification” (p. 385, emphasis added). Irwin’s first claim is surely right and uncontroversial, but the second claim goes too far.

Though the Christian outlook agrees with Greek perfectionism, in so doing, it arguably points to a conception of morality which deviates sharply away from the views of Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics. No longer can we look to or build upon human rational nature as an immanent source of morality, nor can we rely on the social order to resolve our most pressing moral dilemmas. Instead, doctrines of justification and sanctification point to a moral source outside of human rational control. Moreover, the moral gap likely finds its most tragic expression in the mature views of Augustine, whose solution exposes deep tensions between the Christian and conventional Greek moral outlook. The weakness of Irwin’s methodology becomes particularly evident in his interpretation of Augustine. Irwin downplays the acute tension between the Christian and Greek philosophical views, and emphasises strands of Augustinian thought which support this claim (p. 397). But in doing so, he neglects those intractable antagonisms between these two positions. Let me examine this in more detail.

According to Irwin, Augustine “belongs to the tradition in Christian moral thinking that seeks to strengthen and to complete, not to destroy, the outlook of non-theological moral theory” (p. 433); even more explicitly, “Augustine [is] firmly [within] the Greek tradition” (p. 397). Most commentators agree that neo-Platonic overtones and imagery predominate Augustine’s early, pre-400 philosophical writings, expressing the soul’s ascent towards God and some initial optimism about how social and political goods contribute to salvation. But on Irwin’s reading, Augustine rejects Platonic dualism in favour of a Stoic, intellectualist account of motivation, assent, choice and action (p. 407). Unlike the Platonic and Aristotelian view, the

Stoics contend that passions are not pre-reflective states, but require rational judgement and assent. In spite of Augustine's verbal claims of disagreement with their position, Irwin insists that his conception of the will indicates his implicit agreement with the Stoic account on this issue: passions have a motivational influence on agents, insofar as individuals assent to them (p. 407).

The association between Stoic intellectualism and Augustine helps Irwin to downplay the Christian departure from the Greek outlook. Ultimately, Irwin wants to deny – contentiously – that Augustine has a voluntarist conception of will. Augustine allegedly agrees with the Stoic assertion “that we are not free to reject the apparently greater good” (p. 411) . According to Irwin, the will – in terms of choice, consent, and assent – is not a morally-neutral faculty of volition; rather, the will's freedom is associated with consent to one's greater or apparent good. In the case of sin, the will is still responsible for action, insofar as passions and non-rational desires motivate free action only with our consent, yet our will cannot move us to act in ways independent of what we assume to be our greater good (p. 412). The self-assertion of Adam and Eve was “mistaken; but their particular mistake would not have appealed to them if they had not been rational agents pursuing their overall good” (p. 412). Sin committed by the will is therefore understood as ‘mistakes’ or false beliefs. These mistakes are nonetheless situated within a broader rational understanding of the good. If Augustine's account of will essentially follows an intellectualist view of choice and action, and agrees with the Stoic notion of assent of the passions, attributions of voluntarism to Augustine would appear as absurd as if we ascribed such a position to the Stoics. Interpreted this way, Augustine “accepts Stoic intellectualism and avoids voluntarism” (p. 412).

For Irwin, moreover, Augustine's overlap with other Greek thinkers is not confined to the Stoics. Irwin alleges that Augustine agrees with Plato and Aristotle on the intrinsic value of some external goods and pagan virtues. Shared among Plato, Aristotle, and Augustine is a “teleological criterion for virtue”. We can either adopt a moderately strict or extremely strict criterion: according to the former, an agent possesses a virtue if they act on the “morally correct” conception of the ultimate end; by contrast, the latter stipulates that an individual is virtuous if their action is guided by a “wholly correct” conception of the ultimate end (p. 424). If Augustine relies on the latter, he would be committed to the claim that, since pagans lack Christian faith – which is constitutive of the ultimate end – they therefore possess no virtues whatsoever. It is only the agent who is justified and saved by faith, and whose soul is driven by love of God, who possesses true virtue. On

Irwin's reading, however, Augustine accepts and relies on the moderate criterion. This indicates that Augustine makes concessions to the pagan conception of the ultimate end. Pagan philosophers are correct to choose virtues for their intrinsic, non-instrumental value, though they ultimately violate their own standards, since they adhere to the virtues because they generate human esteem and approval, and mistakenly assume that happiness is achievable in this temporal life (p. 426). Based on the moderate criterion, the pagan with virtues possesses genuine virtues. We can therefore assume that both Christians and pagans share a common moral outlook (p. 415).

If Irwin's account of Augustinian virtue is true, if there is indeed some overlap between the pagan and the Christian about conceptions of the ultimate moral good, it is plausible that he follows other Greek thinkers in the belief that the social and political good is worthy of pursuit. In statements which call to mind Aquinas more immediately than Augustine, Irwin writes:

The cardinal virtues recognized by pagan moralists require the regulation of passions by rational desire focussed on one's own good and the good of others, especially the good of the society whose good is part of one's own good. Augustine agrees with this conception of the virtues, and claims that we are in a better position to practise them if we recognize our dependence on God for our growth in virtue, and the insufficiency of the goods of this world for our complete happiness. (p. 432)

Irwin continues, "a Christian does not lose interest in earthly peace in the light of heavenly peace. [...] Augustine [...] claims, against the Stoics, that external goods are really part of the human good, and that they are worth pursuing, though they are secondary to the complete happiness of the afterlife" (p. 432). Read through the lens of the extreme criterion reading, Augustine's division of the two cities based on their divergent objects of love would indeed imply a sharp departure from the Greek attitude towards the political good. But Irwin assumes that Augustine's moderate view accommodates, indeed values, the earthly peace brought through the political and social good; similar to Aquinas' Christian Aristotelianism, the political good is part of happiness, though it ultimately takes second place after the supernatural ultimate good. Irwin therefore claims that Augustine "does not appeal directly to his own theological and moral outlook, but examines pagan moral philosophy by a standard that pagan philosophers accept; hence his critique deserves

their attention for philosophical reasons” (p. 427). The assumption is that if Augustine does rely heavily on his theological views, his moral theory is problematic from a philosophical point of view. Since, however, both Augustine and the pagan philosophers begin from similar presuppositions and are engaging with the same moral outlook, we can use both to supplement and enhance one other.

There are several things one could say in response to Irwin. Firstly, one should distinguish between early and mature Augustine, which leads to scepticism about Irwin’s claim that both Greek and Christian outlooks are relatively coherent. Second, the claim is surely questionable that a theory of will exists prior to Augustine. It is precisely his attachment to the Judaeo-Christian tradition that allows him to develop such an account of practical motivation. These points may appear as minute quibbles surrounding a reading of just one particular philosopher; however, they illustrate a deeper problem with Irwin’s methodology. Specifically, Irwin’s interpretation and integration of Augustine within the Greek philosophical tradition perpetuates these misguided “mythologies of coherence” within the history of ideas.⁸ The illusion of philosophical unity and consistency is bought at the price of neglecting what is distinctive about different thinkers. Let me examine these points in more detail; the first two I will discuss together.

Examined in isolation, Augustine’s philosophy evolves over time and is far from consistent. Commentators agree that Augustine’s mature views symbolise a marked departure away from the Greek tradition. This is significant to the extent that his more considered philosophical views do indeed appeal strongly to his theological beliefs, and as a result, some intractable contradictions emerge between his early and late philosophical positions. These contradictions present difficulties where we are concerned to reconstruct coherent philosophical argument; however, they reflect Augustine’s own internal debates and growing scepticism about the connection between providential purpose, and the historical city and church.⁹ By around 400, Augustine’s views undergo a transformation where stronger emphasis is placed on how the achievement of the ultimate good is impeded by unavoidable human impairments.¹⁰ The neo-Platonic language and imagery remains throughout *The Confessions*, though it is now transferred onto a Christian platform: humans strive towards a perfect God, but our reunification with Him is impossible through purely human, natural efforts. Augustine puts his case even more strongly in the *City of God*, where the moral gap

⁸ Skinner, “Meaning and Understanding,” p. 16.

⁹ See R. A. Markus, *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of St. Augustine* (Cambridge: UP, 2007) p. 72.

¹⁰ See *Ibid.*, pp. 82-7.

becomes much more acute. Pagan virtues, and the social and political order are no longer indicative of moral progress towards perfection. Earthly peace, achieved through adherence to pagan virtues, is riddled with disorder and conflict, and instead becomes a reminder of humanity's distinctly tragic and fallen condition.¹¹ In short, social and political goods no longer contribute to the soul's gradual ascent towards God.

This change can be partly explained by Augustine's voluntarist position, evident in both his account of motivation and of God's sovereign will and authority. Albrecht Dihle provides a convincing case that a conception of the will – as a volitional force independent of cognition and judgement – did not exist prior to Augustine.¹² Though Stoic assent may point to an inchoate voluntarism, their overriding cosmological view forestalls a notion of will as an independent faculty of choice. The claim that the human mind is congruent with the natural, rational order is the main defining feature of Greek intellectualist theories of motivation. Our moral practices and determinate reality are in agreement through the exercise of human reason, more specifically, through our rational insight into the natural order. To put the same point differently, as participants of that order through natural law, our evaluations of moral, practical activities are based upon, and aligned within, that existing rational order. In the case of the Stoics, the freedom of the sage comes about when one's life and practices are arranged, through choice of and assent to appropriate and virtuous ends, in accordance with the intelligible cosmological order. The soul is the locale of choice, and its rational and irrational components contain both intellectual planning capacities and volitional force meant to be aligned to the systemic harmony of rational nature. Crucially, the volitional force is never fully separable from cognitive judgements.¹³ Vice occurs when we can lack relevant knowledge, or the passional aspects of the soul lack proper habituation.

If this rather simplistic account nonetheless accurately describes the Greek intellectualist account of motivation, Augustine's views do indeed represent the first philosophically cogent theory of voluntarism. Irwin contends that Augustinian freewill is analogous to Stoic conceptions of autonomy, whereby Augustine "intends no significant doctrinal difference", regardless of how "he attributes assent to the will rather than to reason, both in ordinary cognition and in action" (p. 411). But I do not believe the difference between assent

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² See Albrecht Dihle, *The Theory of Will in Classical Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California, 1982).

¹³ Ibid., p. 63. This becomes much more complex in the Aristotelian case, who believes that instances of *akrasia* and *enkrasia* occur precisely from conflict between rational and irrational parts of the soul.

and will amounts to merely a small quibble surrounding Stoic and Augustinian terminology. Rather crucially, Augustine argues that the exercise of will or reason no longer signals our participation with the rational cosmological order: the order we see in nature is unbound to the divine order and eschatological purpose of a transcendent God.¹⁴ Unlike the Greek cosmological view outlined above, we cannot look to the natural rational order to provide insight into how we ought to order and structure our moral lives; instead, we must seek the will of God, which stands and rules over that natural rational order (*De Trinitate* 3.4.10). Moreover, the human will is not necessarily aligned with the divine order; it can independently and deliberately choose against true knowledge of the good. This would not be a case of *akrasia*, as in Aristotle, which is attributable to the poor habituation of the soul's non-rational parts. Irwin is, on one hand, correct to point out that Augustine concurs with the Stoic intellectualist conception of the good: Augustine does indeed attribute sin to ignorance or a lack of knowledge. On the other hand, Augustine attributes to the will the free choice to *seek* knowledge of the good in the first place, suggesting that faith stems from will's consent. He writes in *De libero arbitrio*, "[t]he soul is charged with guilt, not because by nature it lacks knowledge or is incapable, but because *it did not make an effort to know* and because it did not work adequately at acquiring the capability of doing well"(3.22.64).¹⁵ Elsewhere, Augustine says,

[T]o consent to the calling of God or to dissent from it belongs to the will itself...And this not only does not invalidate the saying, "For what do you have which you have not received?," it in fact confirms it. For the soul cannot receive and have these gifts...except by consenting. And so whatever it has and whatever it receives comes from God, but to receive and to have comes from the one receiving and having. (*De spiritu et littera* 34.60)¹⁶

¹⁴ Augustine's earlier view is quite Stoic, suggesting that the positive, human laws of political society should appeal to and follow eternal law. However, Augustine's later view turns sharply away from this suggestion. See R. A. Markus' write-up on Augustine in A. H. Armstrong, ed., *The Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early Medieval Philosophy* (Cambridge: UP, 1967) pp. 387-8.

¹⁵ Qtd. in Eleonore Stump, "Augustine on Free Will," in *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine* (Cambridge: UP, 2001) p. 132, emphasis added.

¹⁶ Qtd. in *ibid.*, p. 138.

What Augustine says here points to, not just a terminological disagreement between him and his predecessors, but most fundamentally a systematic notion of the will as an independent faculty which does not necessarily obey reason or the passions, nor is deterministically orientated towards the ultimate good of faith in God.

In minimising these points within Augustine's thought, Irwin overemphasises the coherence between the Greek and Christian traditions. As a result, he underestimates the deep intellectual shift that occurs between the Greek conception of natural order, and the theological voluntarism predominating Biblical depictions of God's authority and becomes pre-eminent in the Medieval period. Irwin is correct to say that Augustine's early immersion in pagan philosophy points to a cohesive order between divine and natural law; however, he neglects to mention how Augustine ultimately retracts from this position, and asserts in its place how the inscrutability of God's will renders completely separate the purposes of these two orders. We can no longer look at the natural rational order as an analogue or representation of God's own rational will. As Augustine increasingly draws upon the Judaeo-Christian cosmological outlook, he begins to minimise human natural capacities to achieve the good in this temporal life, and appeals more strongly to theological doctrines of grace and predestination. In itself, the will's free choice to seek faith and knowledge of the good is a gift from the will of God. Heavily debated is whether Augustine successfully reconciles his voluntarist account of human motivation, and his theological voluntarism in terms of predestination and grace; arguably Augustine fails in his attempts.¹⁷ Nonetheless, his conception of will becomes a crucial point of departure for succeeding theories of natural law, and provides the framework of discussion for questions regarding the priority of will over natural law, or vice versa. Augustine's debate within himself, his own exodus away from the Greek conception of morality, casts a long historical shadow, leading to conceptions of moral obligation, and social and political authority which differ from the Greek model, illustrated particularly in Hobbesian political philosophy.

Conclusion

Irwin's sympathetic but nonetheless, misguided interpretation of Augustine is a good example of the allure of what Skinner calls the 'mythology of coherence'. Augustine's internal inconsistencies are

¹⁷ For interesting amendments, see Stump, "Augustine on Free Will," pp. 124-47.

minimised, giving the misleading impression not only that his philosophy is internally constant and systematic, but also that it fits relatively unproblematically within the Greek tradition of moral philosophy. The mythology of coherence is attractive because it provides us the means by which we can reach common philosophical ground. Irwin attributes to Augustine an implicit endorsement of various aspects of pagan philosophy in hopes that a more fruitful philosophical discussion could be had if deep and irreconcilable differences are minimised. On this picture, much less than forward a highly original moral argument which reflects the unique social context and theological outlook available to him, Augustine merely progresses the discussion that precedes him. We may understand why Irwin assumes that we need to do this. If philosophers with seemingly deep theological or metaphysical commitments in fact begin from philosophical premises most of us can reasonably accept, these thinkers are ‘rescued’ from their potentially implausible frameworks. In so doing we find our own thinking reassuringly reflected back to us in that of our predecessors. Indeed, this is a deeply tempting strategy, in vogue within many moral philosophical circles such as Rawlsian liberal theory.

Ultimately, this to me seems a misguided strategy: any historical account of the development of ethics would need to understand how philosophers are not necessarily conversing in the same language or horizon of meaning, and as a result, come up with entirely unique answers to our questions about morality. In particular, this seems to be Gadamer’s insight on a hermeneutical perspective, when he says, “[i]t is the historically experienced consciousness that, by renouncing the chimera of perfect enlightenment, is open to the experience of history. [...] [I]ts realization [is] the fusion of horizons of understanding, which is what mediates between the text and its interpreter.”¹⁸ Irwin’s assumption that we can be better served by conferring coherence, rather than difference, onto the history of ethics, is problematic, as it assumes that it is possible to achieve a disengaged, Archimedean vantage point of philosophical judgement. If we automatically assume coherence and unity, we close ourselves from such ‘fusions of horizons’ and genuine understanding. To put this point in more concrete terms, Skinner is correct to note how difference and incoherence can also be interesting, informative, and philosophically fruitful, if only to show how the history of ethics is not a linear, progressive development towards, say, the advancement of reason, nor the gradual

¹⁸ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd ed., trans. by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Continuum, 2004) p. 370.

elimination of religious belief towards a scientific naturalism we can more readily accept, nor – in Irwin’s case – the critical development and refinement of Aristotelian naturalism. Rather, awareness of historical contingency, of how this breeds difference rather than unity, have normative significance insofar that we come to the recognition how divergent and perhaps more idiosyncratic horizons of meaning are just as legitimate as many others, and equally worthy of philosophical consideration.¹⁹

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¹⁹ I am indebted to Katrin Flikschuh for all her helpful comments.