DELIBERATIO
STUDIES IN CONTEMPORARY PHILOSOPHICAL CHALLENGES

2025, *5*, 9-20

https://deliberatio.uvt.ro/
ISSN 2810 – 5826 ISSN – L 2810 – 5532 Print
ISSN 2810 – 5532 ISSN – L 2810 – 5532 Online

The Task of Moral Philosophy: A Case Study for the Christian Interest in Philosophy

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Abstract

This article explores the transformative power of philosophy and impediments to it, concentrating on philosophy's relations with Christianity not only in the past but also today. Drawing on philosophical practice, on testimonies of philosophers, on recent research and conclusions from it, and on moral philosophy as a test case, it enquires into the viability of the autonomy of philosophy as a requirement for its transformative power to be rekindled.

Keywords: Christianity, philosophy, transformative philosophies, moral philosophy

Introduction

This article focuses on moral philosophy as a test case for the interest that Christianity still seems to have in philosophy. The ground for addressing transformative philosophy and its impediments is laid by sharing some concerns about the possibility of personal change in philosophical practice and by exemplifying this charge through examples taken from the philosophic literature, from Friedrich Nietzsche and Arthur Schopenhauer. The investigation of transformative philosophy which follows is presented first by the main conclusions about the impediments to it that were presented in the Handbook of Transformative Philosophy, and continues with new conclusions that were gathered from some of its chapters. Finally, the case of moral philosophy is presented to assess whether this representative field of personal transformation is indeed so, and if yes, to which direction does the transformation point? Moral philosophy is offered as a test case when inquiring into the viability of the autonomy of philosophy, which is seen as

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a requirement for its transformative power to be rekindled, and the role that Christianity and its influence plays in furthering or denying this autonomy in the past as well as today.

1. From Personal Changes and Their Hurdles to Transformative philosophy

Transformative philosophy seems to be a recent, however intensive, interest of mine (Amir, 2023, 2025-2026, forthcoming), a new field put on the agenda of philosophers and philosophical practitioners alike; however, my preoccupation with personal change in philosophical practice has been voiced many years ago (Amir, 2004); and, both theoretical and practical interest in these questions dates way back: some to more than 30 years ago, when I began practicing philosophy with others, and some to 50 years ago, when I began practicing philosophy alone as part of my studies of philosophy.

Whatever my personal investment in the matter may have been, the urgency of discussing this topic became palatable for me when I noticed that clients expect personal change from their meetings with me. Can philosophy promise personal change? Should it? What good is philosophical practice, if not? Is awareness of one's impotence to change in the light of philosophic ideals beneficial or harmful? That it is painful is amply demonstrated by Friedrich Nietzsche's litany on this topic in one of the *Untimely Meditations*, "Schopenhauer as Educator" (1983). Reflecting on his impotence in light of the ideal that he thinks he should follow, he writes:

> Alas…all that I call mine, how I despise you! Not to be able to fly, only to flutter! To see what is above you but not to be able to reach it! To know the way that leads to the immeasurable open prospect of the philosopher, and almost to set foot on it, but after a few steps to stagger back!... merely to think of this makes the soul infinitely solitary… if shame, fear and desire died away…And what a fate, on the other hand, to sense sufficient of the certainty and happiness of the philosopher to be able to feel the whole uncertainty and unhappiness of the non-philosopher, of him who desires without hope! (Nietzsche, 1983, *Untimely Meditations*, III, section 5)

In a later work, *Ecce Homo* (1979), summing up his itinerary, Nietzsche singles out this Meditation and another one ("Wagner in Bayreuth") as describing his own view of education rather than the mighty names he offered as a disguise.

We know that Nietzsche devised his own way of liberation, yet Nietzsche saw himself as a psychologist; and the way he describes seems to follow a different pattern than reaching an ideal: Nietzsche describes what happens to him and, consciously projecting it from the inside out, sets it as an ideal rather than following one of the ideals that philosophy offers. His "ideal" may fit with the vague ideal of self-realization (see Amir, 2026b). However, when Nietzsche attempts to follow a given ideal (I believe it is the individual philosophic redemption, devised by

Benedict Spinoza), his offers fall short of a coherent proposal, the notions of the positive phase of his philosophy do not cohere, and the positive phase clash with the critical one (Amir, forthcoming b).

On the other hand, the philosopher that he idolized at the time, Arthur Schopenhauer, said that we cannot expect the sculptor to be as beautiful as the sculpture, that is, the philosopher need not, and maybe cannot, exemplify the ideal he describes.

Between these two opposed situations, three, if we take into account Nietzsche's initial yearning and impotence, the entire drama of personal change according to a philosophic ideal, or the call for transformative philosophy, and its limitations, is being displayed. With this dramatic opening accord, I wish to pursue investigating the power of philosophy to transform.

2. Transformative Philosophy in the Handbook for Transformative Philosophy

Is philosophy transformative in the first place, at least potentially? Is it its aim? My focus has recently turned into investigating the explicit goal of philosophy of advancing transformative philosophies, inquiring whether transformation or deep and lasting change is pervasive in philosophy, as all education transforms and philosophy is (mainly) self-education.

In the "Introduction to Transformative Philosophy" that opens the *Handbook of Transformative Philosophy* (Amir, 2026a), I addressed two eminent scholars of ancient philosophy, Pierre Hadot and John Cooper, who followed in Hadot's wake. They both advanced the view that if one is interested in personal transformation, one should turn to ancient philosophy instead of modern philosophy.

I showed there that the early view of Hadot that only ancient philosophy is transformative has been refuted by his own list of modern exceptions (Hadot, 1995, Ch. 11, p. 10n15) and by own avowal of changing his mind about medieval philosophy in the Preface to Juliusz Domanski's work (1996). Cooper argues that not all ancient philosophies are transformative, that some modern are, such the thought of the early modern Benedict Spinoza (Copper, 2012, p. 16n23); notably, Cooper added that nothing impedes modern philosophy to hold again the ancient transformative view of reason, and disregard the complex account of motivations which modern philosophy has developed (2012, p. 24).

When looking at these modern accounts of motivation, it seems that they were devised in the wake of the view that reason itself has been compromised by the Fall. They present a picture of ignorance and of failures of self-knowledge combined with an emphasis on our supposedly free will. These are all topics in which Christian influence is felt. The complication of motivation clutters our capacity to act clearly in direction of what has now become another form of truth,

exemplified in altruism at the expense of egoism, now become the enemy, and leaving a margin for God's power to effectuate His grace.

In the chapter "Early Modern and Modern Transformative Philosophies" in the same *Handbook* (Amir, 2026b), I have listed the impediments that stand in the way of philosophy to recover this explicit transformative aim which was abrogated by Medieval Christianity and which threatened the very life of early modern and modern philosophers who attempted to liberate philosophy from the yoke of serving the only truth, the Christian one. Although Christianity presented itself as a philosophy, first, before it took over all other philosophic theories—a task that was facilitated by philosophy's own turn into religion as exemplified by theurgic Neo-Platonist philosophies—it found a place for philosophy when it needed to address Islam and offer arguments for the specifics of the Christian religion. Yet when medieval philosophy was over-throned, the menace over free thinking and the persecutions it called for are enough to show the difference between religion and philosophy.

No philosophy was threatening other philosophies' representative, not even in Hellenistic times when competition was hard, the main tool against the rivals being rather wit, humor, and ridicule than actual persecution. When philosophers were persecuted in Antiquity, as Socrates actually was, and as Aristotle was afraid to be, the reasons were mainly political. Socrates has been associated with the rule of the thirty in Athens, following Sparta's victory over Athens, and Aristotle fell victim to anti-Macedonian feelings being himself from Macedonia and having served at court as a teacher of the very person who deprived Athens of its independence, Alexander.

However important were the limitations on free thinking that were imposed on philosophers whom we consider as part of the canon (Bayle, Descartes, Spinoza, the Enlightenment philosophers, etc.), these are not the sole impediments that stand today in the way of philosophy if it wishes to break free not only of the yoke of Christianity, but also to regain its autonomy and unleash its transformative power. I have called attention to the following factors (Amir, 2026b): apart from the attempt of philosophy from early modern times on to gain back its autonomy after medieval Christianity, I listed the loss of status of philosophy in relation to science in the 17th century (the scientific revolution) and the 19th century (Darwinism), and in relation to psychology, with "mental health" replacing that of "virtue"; the renunciation of synoptic ethics, based on cosmology, and of the philosophic ambition of human fulfillment; the current emphasis on Romantic love and on love of the family rather than the impersonal and indiscriminate loves that philosophy regularly advanced from the love of wisdom on, as transformative powers; the tension between ethics, on one hand, and morality, sociability and politics on the other, the former expected today but not necessarily associated with ethics as well living; and the limitations of philosophy to change or transform those who approach it. The argument about love is developed in *Introducing Transformative*

Philosophy, whose secondary title reads "Thinking, Loving, and Laughing Well" (Amir, forthcoming a).

On top of this list, htree additional factors have become clearer to me since I completed the Handbook. First, the grip of Christianity on transformative philosophy has not lessened in our contemporary culture. It has taken other forms: It is extraordinary to my mind that the former center for philosophy as a way of life was set in Notre Dame University, and that those interested in this new development in philosophy, whom I met in editing the *Companion to Living from Philosophy: Philosophy as a Way of Life* (contracted work in process) are more often religious than not; moreover, works on transformative philosophy often focus on epistemological issues, ignoring the claims to conceive philosophy as a way of life that the philosophers addressed did offer (Bacon, Descartes, Spinoza, are examples in Simone d'Agostino's book [2023]), or if transformation on other levels is involved, it is redescribed as religious (see Wild, 2024, on the Cartesian mediations as religious); furthermore, not only the history of philosophy has been read back through Christian eyes, also by Pierre Hadot, that is, not only Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, the Neo-Platonists, even Socrates were seen as steps toward Christianity, but recently the Christianisation of Pyrrhonism has been put on the map (Maia Neto, 1995) and even the history of doubt in the West has been redescribed as Christian (Erdozain, 2015); finally, a personal yet revealing experience is that my students at West Timisoara University wish to use philosophical practice to implement Christian virtues.

Second, whatever the reasons that hinder the recovery of autonomy of philosophy I thought I have found at the time, the very writing of the two chapters and the introduction to the Handbook, and the learning of new material that it necessitated, made me realize that an additional impediment is the internalization of Christian dogmas. Even allegedly liberated atheist existentialists exemplify these, and it haunts the unending era of Romanticism that continues past post-modernism through a secularized version of the fall and of salvation, which survives in it, as one example among others. The latter idea voiced by Northrop Frye who described Romanticism as "an encyclopaedic myth, derived mainly from the Bible" (Frye, 1968, p. 5), and Romanticism itself was disclosed by Russell B. Goodman as "a long process" which "began in late eighteenth-century Europe and in which "we are still engaged" (Goodman, 2008, p. 19). Evidence for the former idea, for the prevalence of religious themes in Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre is given elsewhere (Amir, 2016b).

Third, in the wake of Christianity an alliance has been made between therapeutic psychology, itself considered a replacement of the confessing priest by an object of transference, the therapist (see Rothenberg, 1994), and religion in a way that aims at making philosophy redundant, for example, in the pragmatism of William James, that influenced additional pragmatists. For James, psychological well-being becomes the determining factor of what is true, now that truth is

demoted to what agrees with you and to that which works; religion plays an important role in our sense of well-being and in keeping our allegiance to our sense of good and evil (see, for example, James, 1951, pp. 23, 53, 59-62, 104-105, 117-121), yet the religious person James extols is utterly different from the philosopher (1902, Ch. 2) and philosophy cannot justify or ground religious feeling (1902, Ch. 18). The alliance between psychology and religion that the first American lecturer in psychology advances, along with the repudiation of non-pragmatic philosophy by a person who prided himself on never studying philosophy, mingled with James's interest in mysticism and the occult, and his defense of Christian science's mind-cure gives us a fascinating panorama of the possibilities of self-transformation once philosophy as we know it is abolished.

Let me now turn to another field of Christian influence, on which the main argument of this paper turns, moral philosophy.

3. Moral Philosophy

The main field of philosophy on which there seem to be a prima facie consensus on its aim and potential to transform, the goal of many synoptic philosophies, ethics, has been taken over by moral philosophy. We should not assume that the situation there is homogenous, that moral philosophy has one goal in mind, and that this goal is to disengage philosophy from religion.

First, following Jerome Schneewind's impressive studies *The Invention of Autonomy: A History of Modern Moral Philosophy* (1998) and *Essays on the History of Moral Philosophy* (2010), we should note that moral philosophy is itself a discipline that emerged out of moral theology during the debates over its nature (Schneewind, 2010, p. 138 and note 21). Moreover, those who wish to advance the field often point to its transformative power as standing in the way: "Compare Aristotle's claim that moral philosophy should improve the lives of those who study it with Sidgwick's belief that 'a desire to edify has impeded the real progress of ethical science'" (Aristotle, 1900, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1179a35-b4; Sidgwick, 1907, p. vi; Schneewind, 1998, p. 549). Finally, an entire tradition has been discovered in moral philosophy which is built on revelation rather than the search on the truth in moral matters. The former tradition, for lack of a better name, has been named "Pythagorean," and the latter "Socratic." Further disagreement exists about the place of Immanuel Kant in this division, Schneewind making him a Pythagorean and Larry Krasnoff pointing to a third tradition in morality that follows the "Hobbes story" (Krasnoff, 2004), which Schneewind disregards and which would better explain the position of Kant, who his, after all, the pinnacle of his studies in autonomy.

I elaborate on these views below, but we can note at the outset that Schneewind may be right when arguing that moral philosophy is not a unified field, with a set of questions to be answered by all. And, let me add, insofar as the interests of this

article are involved, that the development of moral philosophy has taken it often far away of what a transformative philosophy may wish for, first, in discarding itself from edification, and second, in distancing itself from any search for the truth, thus reverting to the use philosophy had in the Middle Ages: to provide arguments for existing dogmas, now called intuitions. Moreover, the two distancing moves are differently connected to the practical import of moral philosophy, as both the Socratic and Pythagorean traditions want practical effects, yet contemporary moral philosophy usually does not.

This is all the more disturbing, as I believe that the following account is true of philosophy: Initially created as an alternative to established religion, philosophy has fulfilled the role as a guide for the perplexed until it was bereft of it, and has since striven slowly to disengage itself from its assigned role as a mere instrument for established dogmas (Schneewind, 1998; Gaukroger, 2020; Amir, 2017, and 2026b). It is the search for truth that makes philosophy transformative, insofar as truth leads us to reality and obliges us to live accordingly if we are to thrive first, by preserving one's integrity, and second, by enjoying all that follows from the integration of self around what is, and can be, known.

As noted above, however, also moral philosophy does not always leave philosophy free to look for truth wherever it might find it or not find it. Those who already have the truth when approaching philosophy make another use of it than is intended in the Socratic view of ethics, which we mostly take for granted as the tradition that moral philosophy serves; however, rather than establish with the help of reason what the virtues are, or more generally, trying to find out how we ought to live, as Socrates and this tradition proposed, moral philosophy has also created a notable second tradition, the Pythagorean tradition, in which the role of philosophy is to establish a pre-existent truth, the already given laws of morality (Krasnoff, 2004).

In the Epilogue to Schneewind's *The Invention of Autonomy*, the two traditions are differentiated. By following Socrates' claim that without definitions of the virtues the moral beliefs held by his interlocutors lacked rational grounding, moral philosophy proceeds from the thought that we are not in contact with moral truth until we have found a set of moral beliefs that could be given a systematic philosophical justification. Thus, according to this view, moral philosophy is just an ongoing Socratic search not necessarily for definitions of the virtues, but certainly for some kind of rationally grounded answer to the question of how we ought to live.

The view that enjoyed considerable influence throughout the history of philosophy, and especially in the early modern period, is very different: the question of how to live has been definitively answered by Judeo-Christian revelation as the ethical claims implicit in the Bible have already shown us what we ought to do. Moral philosophy, then, cannot search for some new set of moral principles, assuming, as Socrates seems to assume that the true set of principles is

yet to be found. What, then, is the moral point of the philosophical reasoning that was pursued by the ancient Greeks and is now pursued by their contemporary successors? According to Schneewind, moral philosophers committed to this second conception tend to point to human sinfulness, which has pulled us away from what we ought to know about what we ought to do. The Fall weakened not just the strength of our moral commitment but also our rational capacities themselves.

Schneewind amusingly reminds us, moral philosophers committed to this view had a historical problem: they needed to connect the seemingly secular (or even pagan) inquiries of the ancient Greeks with Jewish and Christian revelation. If the point of moral philosophy is to restore the moral clarity of the biblical text, it is hard to see how the Greeks could have engaged in moral philosophizing while being ignorant of that text. This problem was rather neatly solved by tracing the origins of Greek moral philosophy not to Socrates but back beyond him to Pythagoras, and then by citing the supposed fact that Pythagoras was, if not a Jew himself, a Greek who had an intimate acquaintance with Jewish doctrines. And so Schneewind comes to call this second account of the goal of moral philosophy "the Pythagoras story."

To take an example, G.W. Leibniz's understanding of the task of moral philosophy fits into what Schneewind calls the "Pythagoras story" model of moral philosophy. The fundamental task of the moral philosopher is to remove doubts and distractions. The good exists, and people are by nature oriented to it. They don't need to be told to orient themselves to it. But what about Kant, in whose thought the *Invention of Autonomy* culminates? What is the relationship between these two accounts and the substantive history of *The Invention of Autonomy*? Clearly Schneewind wants to disabuse us of the idea that moral philosophy has a single aim: The whole point of his history is to show that Kant's theory of autonomy was not an answer to some set of timeless philosophical questions, but a specific response to problems specific to the history of modern moral philosophy. But if we are to be open to this sort of view, we need to get beyond the idea that moral philosophy conceives itself in the same way at all places and all times. And this means that we need to free ourselves from the grip of the Socrates story as the only way of looking at moral philosophy.

Hence Schneewind needs to remind us of the prevalence of the Pythagoras story in the modern period, and he is especially concerned to show us that Kant himself accepted a version of that story. He argues that Kant helped us make the transition from a historical faith to a universal religion whose core is pure rational morality. Historical faith was available only to those who had access to its records; moral religion is universally available. By revealing, for the first time, that religion is basically morality, Christ started us on that "continual approach to pure religious faith," which will one day enable us to "dispense with the historical vehicle" that initially carried the message (Kant, 1996, pp. 105-6). The religion of reason, Kant

says, “is a continually occurring divine (though not empirical) revelation for all men” (p. 113). Kant has contributed to the progress of morality by showing that it rests on a purely rational principle, which itself dictates the essentials of religious faith.

Thus, Schneewind argues that moral philosophy does more than combat corruption. If it does not transform mere belief into knowledge by giving it foundations, it shows that the moral knowledge we have explicitly possessed since Christ revealed it is a matter of pure practical reason, and explains how such a morality is possible (Schneewind, 1998, p. 548).

Krasnoff challenges the view that Kant is committed to the Pythagoras story, as Schneewind argues, yet Kant obviously does not pertain to the Socratic tradition. For a long time, Kant thought that the task of moral philosophy was essentially theoretical, and the most familiar readings emphasize this point. That moral philosophy should have no practical effect is alien to both the Socrates and the Pythagoras stories, but Krasnoff argues that “it is hardly alien to moral philosophy in our time” (2004, p. 135). This is why it is not difficult to see why one might want to attribute it to Kant, despite the fact that it gets Kant wrong. To account for the practical effect of Kantian moral philosophy, we need to revisit Thomas Hobbes, which Schweenwind leaves out of his account. This makes way for what Krasnoff calls “the Hobbes story.” To recognize this third tradition, one need noticing the moral philosophy is impacted by developments in science, which Schneewind denies.

Krasnoff agrees with Schneewind that Kant cannot be understood as primarily committed to the Socrates story, however, the manner in which Kant rejects that story makes it rather difficult to attribute to him a version of the Pythagoras story. To deal with this difficulty, we will need to look much more closely at Kant’s conception of the role of moral philosophy than Schneewind is able to do in his epilogue. This takes us to a discussion of the practicality of Kant’s ethics, as for a long time he thought that the task of moral philosophy was essentially theoretical. But perhaps Kantian moral philosophy is not intended to have a practical effect. This thought may be problematic for the Pythagoras story, but it does not seem problematic for Kant, at least as he is standardly understood. On the most familiar readings of Kant, his moral philosophy is intended to have only a theoretical effect. This view is alien to both the Socrates and the Pythagoras stories, but it is hardly alien to moral philosophy in our time. Ultimately, Krasnoff believes the view gets Kant wrong, but it is not difficult to see why one might want to attribute it to him. For Krasnoff, the Hobbes story is crucial for understanding Kant not as a pure anti-Hobbesian, but as a thinker who takes the Hobbesian framework of social, conventional, and voluntary obligation and places it on a new, moralized foundation.

According to Krasnoff, the “Hobbes story” (the state of nature and the need for a sovereign) enlightens the practicality of moral philosophy for Kant by serving as

a negative model—a cautionary tale of what happens when moral reasoning is based solely on subjective, self-interested, and contingent factors. Krasnoff argues that Kant's practical philosophy is not solely an a priori exercise but is, in part, a response to Hobbes that transforms Hobbesian voluntarism (that the sovereign's will makes the law) into a Kantian "conventionalism" (that we, as rational agents, mutually agree to hold universalizable maxims as laws. The Hobbes story is important because it offers a secular, mechanistic, and, for some, a more realistic (albeit pessimistic) foundation for morality based on mutual self-interest and the avoidance of violent death, rather than on theological or metaphysical foundation. By showing that Kant shares these deep Hobbesian assumptions, he characterizes Kant as a kind of "radicalized Hobbesian," who replaces a prudential, fear-based contract with a rational, duty-based one. For Krasnoff, the Hobbes story is crucial for understanding Kant not as a pure anti-Hobbesian, but as a thinker who takes the Hobbesian framework of social, conventional, and voluntary obligation and places it on a new, moralized foundation.

Krasnoff highlights that Kant does not just reject Hobbes, but reframes him. Kant adopts the idea that moral obligation is produced by an "act of willing" (voluntarism), but in Kant's view, this is not the will of an absolute sovereign, but the public, collective agreement of citizens to respect universalizable, rational maxims. For Kant, the practical application of moral philosophy requires moving from the subjective state of nature to a civil condition, where rights are not just asserted (as in Hobbes) but are legally recognized and respected. Kant's moral law provides the objective, necessary framework for this, which Hobbes's contingent, self-interested system lacks. Krasnoff's interpretation reveals that Kant uses the Hobbesian story to show that a practical, usable, and stable moral system must be based on rational, universalizable rules (autonomous, collective, public) rather than on individual, selfish, and insecure one, and in relevance to our interest in this article, disengaged Kant from the Pythagorean tradition in moral philosophy, which assumed that the knowledge of morality was given in revelation and that the scope of philosophy in that matter is limited.

Beyond this point, the scope of this article needs us to leave this interesting discussion, as it is of no direct relevance to it. Suffice it to understand that moral philosophy seems to be the playground of Christianity more than any other field, even if Kant is cleared from part of this claim; and when it is not, as in contemporary philosophy, it is often bereft of its practical appeal, traditional called the edification process or in our terms its transformative impact.

Conclusion

Let me conclude this article with a few questions that the itinerary followed above may raise. Is it possible that philosophy's autonomy has not been regained, that Christianity continues to use philosophy for its own purposes, as in

scholasticism, divesting it from its power as a guide for the perplexed, as a guide for the good life? If it is so, what should we, as philosophers, do? Is there a we? Are Christian or Christianly educated philosophers unaware of this situation because the terrain seems familiar? However, the use to which religious philosophers put philosophy is different from those who do not pertain to an established religion; yet we do not require philosophers to be upfront about that; but we know that philosophy is supposed to be critical, even of primary assumptions, especially of primary assumptions. So, is the situation that obtains, which I hoped to describe in this article, a bona fide one? Lastly, if it is, who could benefit, if at all, from this article?

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