Nicholas White, Individual and Conflict in Greek Ethics. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002. pp. 368 + xv. $55.00, ISBN 0-19-825059-2 (cloth).

Differences between ancient Greek and modern ethics are familiar. In capsule form, modern ethical views are characterized by strong concern for universality and moral obligation, as seen in Kant, and the impartiality of utilitarianism. Greek ethics is widely viewed as distinctive in its focus on eudaimonia, according to White, that "the single, ultimate, rational aim" for an individual human being is his own happiness or well-being, which is pursued for its own sake, rather than as a means to other ends. With this unified focus, the Greeks are further believed to have rejected ends outside of eudaimonia, and so to have achieved harmony in their practical deliberation (pp. 5-6). The central argument of the Republic is of course that justice pays for the person who practices it, while concern with the person's own good is central to Aristotle's ethics. During the Hellenistic period, Epicurus firmly rooted his ethical system in the agent's own pleasure, while the Stoics attempted to find a basis for individual imperturbability. A familiar description of the contrast between ancient and modern ethics is provided by Henry Sidgwick, according to whom the Greeks concentrated on the notions of goodness and virtue, with the turn to the modern interest in ought and obligation attributed to the influence of Judaism and Christianity.[1]

[1] H. Sidgwick, Outlines of the History of Ethics, 6th ed. (Boston: Beacon, 1931), pp. 97-8, 110-13; cited by White, pp. 84-5.

White believes that a contrast along these lines is a gross oversimplification, which he traces back through two hundred years of scholarship to the influence of Kant and Hegel and their followers. Kantians castigated the Greeks for their insularity and lack of concern with other-regarding virtues. More important for contemporary moral philosophy, Hegelians, nostalgic for the polis and the thoroughly integrated life it is supposed to have made possible, turned away from the conflict between the dictates of reason and desire for one's own happiness postulated by Kant, seeking harmony and integration along ancient lines. Individual and Conflict in Greek Ethics is intended as "a piece of ground clearing," "something like a prolegomenon to the history of Greek ethics." (p. xiii) Believing Kantians and Hegelians passed on their shared misperceptions to contemporary scholars, White depicts "Greek ethics as diverse and mutifariously motivated, not a uniform whole to be contrasted with modern ethics." (p. xiv)

The book is impressive in scope. White discusses philosophers and literary figures of different kinds from all periods of Ancient Greece. But he claims not to provide a history of Greek ethics, which would require discussion of a still wider range of thinkers and broader coverage of the ones he does include. In addition, once again, his project is in large part "purely negative" (p. xiv).

White devotes separate chapters to his central concerns in the moral theories, of Plato and his predecessors, Aristotle, and the Hellenistic schools. These take up about half the book and are preceded by general chapters on the idea of Hellenic harmony, deliberative conflict, imperatives in Greek ethics, and the polis in Greek ethics. For most readers, discussions of the major theories are the most important

parts of the book. The four preceding chapters, and the first half of the one on Plato, provide a context in which the major theories are to be understood. White is especially illuminating on complexities of human ends, mainly various forms of "inclusivism," views according to which parts or components of an individual's well-being include the well-being of others and adherence to ethical standards (p.33), while he also sorts out various ways in which diverse ends can be harmonized.

For each of the major theories, White attempts to show that standard interpretations are overly simple. He of course recognizes that the main argument in the Republic is an attempt to demonstrate that justice pays. But, White argues, concentrating on this alone gives a distorted view of Plato. For instance, in the Apology and Crito, Socrates is not a simple eudaimonist. Narrow concern for his own good cannot explain his moral mission, carried on in service to the god. As White notes, Socrates says that a worthwhile person should not consider anything but whether what he is doing is just or unjust (Ap. 28b; White, p. 176). The obvious counter to these claims is Socrates' conviction that justice and happiness coincide, that no harm will come to a good man and his fortunes are not neglected by the gods (Ap. 41c-d). But as White says, these two works contain no real argument for these contentions (p. 178). It is difficult to disagree with his conclusions, that concern for Socrates' own well-being plays little role in the Apology and Crito, and there is little attention in the works to the relationship between people's concern for justice and their own well-being (pp. 178-81).

In the Republic, Plato attempts to fill these gaps. Although his demonstration that justice pays suggests straightforward eudaimonism, White argues that these

elements are compatible with others "that can oppose one's well-being and possibly override it." (p. 189) Non-eudaimonist elements play a significant role in rational deliberation in the work mainly in regard to the philosophers' decision whether to rule. It is central to Plato's political theory that, in ruling the just city, philosophers sacrifice their own happiness. Their sacrifice is required for the good of the city; for example, "the nature of the true ruler is not to seek his own advantage but that of his subjects" (Rep. 347d; quoted by White, p. 201). Such language indicates that the philosophers are to act in accordance with some conception of rational duty. White counters various harmonizing and eudaimonist explanations for the rulers' decision that have been proposed, and concludes that conflict between the need to rule and the philosophers' own greater good cannot be circumvented. This conflict also demonstrates that Plato did not advance a conception of pure deliberative harmony in the Republic. The fact that he recognized the conflict and did not attempt to eliminate it or explain it away "shows that his repertoire of concepts does not differ significantly from the modern one that creates the distinction between self-regarding and broader aims" (p. 210) However, White recognizes that in the Republic, non-eudaimonist considerations and deliberative disharmony are minor factors. These concerns are not discussed in regard to the practical reason of the vast majority of inhabitants of the just city who are not philosophers, or in that of the philosophers, except in regard to whether they should rule (p. 213). And so one can ask about the ultimate importance of these concerns for our understanding of the Republic--and Greek ethics more broadly--a question to which I will return.

White's discussions of the other major Greek thinkers follow similar patterns. He believes that Aristotle is widely viewed as "the quintessentially Classical writer on ethics" and that interpretation of him as a "harmonizing eudaimonist" is largely responsible for mistaken views of Greek ethics (p. 218). While of course recognizing the central role of eudaimonia in the Nicomachean Ethics, White claims that Aristotle was concerned with irresolvable conflict between this and goods that are inherently valuable. This class includes the good of others and of one's city. White's most important evidence is Aristotle's discussion of the contemplative life in Book X. In spite of various attempts to reconcile the contemplative and activist lives in an inclusive conception happiness, White argues for their incompatibility, which stems from limitations of human life, that people do not have adequate time and resources to pursue both. Similar conflicts are seen in Aristotle's account of friendship in Books VIII-IX. In addition to forms of friendship that are pursued for one's own good, Aristotle describes true friendship, in which one cares about the good of one's friend for its own sake, and so can confront circumstances in which the good of the friend can clash with one's own. White concludes that Aristotle's position is formally though not substantively eudaimonist. It represents conflict between incompatible ends as opposition between parts of happiness "presented… as clashes between partial aims which are included in the overall aim of one's own well-being." (p. 285) Aristotle's view also falls short of modern conceptions in that, while he recognizes goods outside the individual's narrow self-interest, these are far from universal concerns. For Aristotle, the goods in question are self-referential: concern for the good of one's city or for one's friends (pp. 286-88).

White believes the Hellenistic schools adhered more closely to standard views of Greek ethics than did Plato and Aristotle, who are normally viewed as the archetypal Greek figures. Both Epicurus and the Stoics propounded non-conflictual views of practical reason. White believes that both schools were motivated by concern to overcome the deliberative disharmonies in Plato and Aristotle. To accomplish this, theorists paid less attention to ordinary moral experience and worked to reconcile people's own good and wider considerations. Epicurus' view was a fairly straightforward form of egoistic hedonism, which provided more or less exclusive focus on one's own happiness. To the extent that other ends were recognized, they were essentially included in one's own happiness, while Epicurus' hedonism allowed for deliberative harmony.

The Stoics propounded a more complex view, rooted in their distinctive deterministic metaphysic. They were able to attain deliberative harmony through an "eliminative" strategy of redescribing all considerations that could conflict with virtue as indifferent rather than good. White believes the Stoics were concerned to fuse concerns for the individual's own good and the rational purposes of the universe and were willing to pay an "exorbitant price" in advancing a view that was strongly counterintuitive (p. 325). It is ironic, then, that the Hellenistic schools are generally viewed as declining from Classical heights, along with the decline of the polis with the conquests of Philip of Macedon and Alexander. White contends that in reconciling all moral concerns with the individual's own good and advancing deliberative harmony, the Hellenistic schools were actually closer than Plato or Aristotle to what we generally think of as the distinctive Greek view.

As a counter to widespread misinterpretations, White's book makes a significant contribution. He calls attention to an abundance of evidence that the standard views have trouble accommodating. But in the final analysis, he establishes only qualifications. White discusses the implications of his findings in the brief final chapter. Here, he appears to moderate his claims. He recognizes that even according to his more nuanced account, Greek ethics are still quite different from modern views. Although not wholeheartedly eudaimonist, the Greeks were far more so than most modern thinkers. Similarly, while they recognized deliberative conflict, they accorded this relatively little attention. A useful criterion White introduces is direct discussion of specific questions. While Greek texts recognize the existence of non-eudaimonist goods and deliberative disharmony, these subjects receive virtually no direct attention. There is virtually no abstract discussion of how to reconcile self-regarding and other-regarding goods--a problem that is notorious in the Republic[2]--or of how to reconcile conflicting aims in a harmonious account of practical deliberation. In the final analysis, what White leaves us with is not greatly different from discredited standard interpretations.

It is not surprising that White damages traditional interpretations relatively little. As a rule, views do not become established unless there is strong evidence for them. To some extent, the appearance of opposition between White and standard views is exaggerated because he focuses on extreme interpretations. The views of Hegel are

[2]See D. Sachs, "A Fallacy in Plato's Republic," Philosophical Review, 72 (1963), and the enormous spate or articles it inspired.

accorded sustained attention, as are those of modern proponents of extreme nostalgia, e.g., Alasdair MacIntyre.

My main criticisms of the book are along these lines. While one can quibble with specific details of interpretation and White's criticisms of particular scholars, my main criticisms are in regard to balance. On the whole, White focuses on evidence against what he regards as standard views, without placing this in a wider interpretive context. To some extent, this is to be expected in a purely negative exercise of "ground-clearing." But readers not thoroughly familiar with Greek ethics (for whom the book is also intended (p. xiv)) could be as misled by White as White believes they would be by Hegel. To some extent, misleading appearances in individual chapters are qualified in concluding remarks, and of the book as a whole in the final chapter. But significant portions of White's discussion lack nuance. For instance, White discusses a series of authors who were aware of deliberative conflict in the polis, including Sophocles, Thucydides, and Aristophanes. But the fact that this does not tell against standard interpretations would be clear if White had distinguished between actual and potential conflict. Plato's presentation of Thrasymachus, Glaucon, and Adeimantus in the Republic shows that he too was aware of deliberative conflict. But this is still consistent with what White views as a distorted interpretation of Plato, as Plato attempted to show how, in a properly governed city, such conflict could be overcome. His conception of justice of course centers on harmonious interaction between both people in the just city and the parts of just souls. One reason the philosopher's decision about ruling receives so much attention from White--and in the

literature more generally--is that it is perhaps the only instance of deliberative conflict in the Republic that Plato does not eliminate.

To cite another example, in Chapter 4, White discusses the polis and attempts to counteract prevailing views about the nature of the integrated, harmonious lives it allowed. As expected, he views such accounts as "radically simplified and deeply misleading" (p. 134), and presents evidence of conflict over different norms. It is notable that White says virtually nothing about Sparta in this chapter--or anywhere else in the book. Nostalgia for the polis was largely nostalgia for Sparta, in which values of the individual and the family were ruthlessly subordinated to the state. Spartan virtue exerted tremendous influence in ancient as well as modern culture. Sparta is of course the model for the best of the corrupt cities in the Republic, while in Book I of the Laws, the Athenian Stranger praises Sparta for employing the resources of the state to impose a conception of virtue on its inhabitants, even though its conception was unduly narrow. The timeless depiction of Sparta in Plutarch's life of Lycurgus is never mentioned. For proponents of Spartan virtue, fifth and fourth century Athens had declined from earlier and better times when Athens was more like Sparta.

I believe that something well short of a full history of Greek ethics could have provided a more balanced response to the questions White addresses. His valuable book would be even more valuable if he had sifted the ground more in addition to clearing it. But this is a small criticism of a large work. While I am not sure the book can be recommended to a wide audience, for students of Greek ethics, it is essential

reading. Although White succeeds only in qualifying established opinions, for such important views of such important theorists, this is an impressive accomplishment.

George Klosko

University of Virginia