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L'etica moderna. Dalla Riforma a Nietzsche

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Modern Ethics. From the Reformation to Nietzsche

This book tells the story of modern ethics, namely the story of a discussion which, after two centuries of truce, or warlike coexistence between more than one paradigm – that is, Scholastic of natural law doctrines, humanistic ethics as therapy of the passions and art of living, Reformed supposedly philosophy-free moral theology, casuistry as a kind of applied ethics – went through a methodological revolution that gave birth to Grotius's and Pufendorf's new science of natural law, leaving room for two centuries of explorations of the possible developments and implications of this new paradigm, up to the crisis of the Eighties in the eighteenth century, a crisis that carried a kind of mitosis, the act of birth of both basic paradigms of the two following centuries: Kantian ethics and utilitarianism.

The new science of natural law carried a fresh start for ethics, resulting from a mixture of the Old and the New. It was, as suggested by Schneewind, an attempt at rescuing the *content* of Scholastic and Stoic doctrines on a *new methodological basis*. The former was the claim of existence of objective and universal moral laws; the latter was the self-aware attempt at justifying a minimal kernel of such laws facing sceptical doubt. What Bentham and Kant did was precisely carrying this strategy further on, even if restructuring it each of them around one out of two alternative basic claims. The nineteenth- and twentieth-century critics of the Enlightenment attacked both not on their alleged failure in carrying out their own projects, but precisely on having adopted Grotius's and Pufendorf's project. What the counter-enlighteners have been unable to spell out is which alternative project could be carried out facing the modern condition of pluralism, while on the contrary, if we take a closer look at developments in twentieth-century ethics or at on-going discussions on practical issues, we might feel inclined to believe that Grotius's and Pufendorf's project is more up-to-date than ever.

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