

The Dawn of History – Abstract for the ESEMP conference 2025

Hanno Sauer has recently argued for an “end of history” in philosophy, claiming that studying its history undermines philosophy’s epistemic aims. I defend the opposite view: engaging with the history of philosophy advances those aims by revealing the genealogy of our moral intuitions. Historical arguments therefore have a distinct role within what contemporary philosophers call reflective equilibrium, a state in which the implications of moral principles align with our considered judgments about particular cases. Tracing the historical roots of our intuitions allows us to recalibrate their relative weight and intuitive pull in that process. This task is not straightforward: it is as easy to overestimate as to underestimate the differences between the early modern and modern periods. I show how my view is motivated by historical arguments about the status of moral intuitions in normative theorizing, for example William Paley’s (1743–1805) critique of Francis Hutcheson’s (1694–1745) moral-sense theory. In short, I argue for a “dawn of history” in contemporary moral and political philosophy.