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The last 30 years or so has been a period of considerable activity in the discipline of moral philosophy, as readers of this book will no doubt be aware. In my view the most important advance, and certainly one which stimulated much of the growth of interest in the subject, was the development of a variety of positions and arguments aimed at overthrowing what was seen by their proponents as the excessively rationalist orientation of Anglo-American moral philosophy as it had been practised hitherto. Attacking what they saw as the narrow, dry and rule-fetishistic focus of the deontology and consequentialism that dominated the subject at the time, both of which largely proceeded as if the permissibility or otherwise of actions was the only important or even legitimate question in ethics, these critics charged that moral philosophy had allowed itself to impoverish its own subject matter, by ignoring the emotions, qualities of character, and what makes a human life a good one, which were all once considered to be central concerns. Of course, the rise of contemporary virtue ethics was the most visible of these developments.

This period also largely coincides with that in which John Cottingham has been writing on the subject, to which he has made some seminal contributions. Cottingham was in the vanguard of the emerging critique of moral philosophy earlier in the twentieth century, focussing his efforts in particular on exposing the shortcomings of the widespread assumption that morality requires from each of us that we adopt maximally impartial perspectives upon the world and our actions within it when reasoning about what to do.¹ His distinctive claim was that not only did deontology and consequentialism ignore the question of the good life, but their joint insistence that the moral outlook must be a
maximally impartial one also ensured that the moral life and the good life could not coincide, since the moral life so conceived was deeply distorting of human flourishing. Human beings cannot reasonably be expected to take up the impartial perspective in their practical dealings with the world, because the value of life for us lies in various personal relationships and projects, which from that perspective can at best be of derivative importance. These observations led Cottingham to conclude that the conceptions of morality descended from the philosophies of Kant and Bentham were deeply flawed, and that the eudaimonist model of the ancients, in particular Aristotle’s, was a much more fruitful one for ethical understanding.

In an important book published more recently, however, Cottingham has taken a substantial step towards a more radical critique of contemporary ethics.² This time his major influence is not Aristotle; indeed, the charge is one which now also cuts the ground from beneath the broadly Aristotelian position Cottingham himself once occupied. This time it is Freud, and in particular his understanding of human behaviour as in large part governed by the operation of unconscious forces opaque to reason, the nature and indeed even the existence of which we are frequently quite unaware. Cottingham has become convinced that the general picture of the human being advanced by Freud is in large measure an accurate one, and that this has profound implications for moral philosophy, implications that have been little appreciated by its practitioners up to now. Noting that the modern era has seen a profound loss of confidence that the good human life is one directed by reason,³ Cottingham charges moral philosophy with having nevertheless blithely proceeded as if the last two centuries’ developments in sceptical post-Kantian philosophy and psychoanalysis had never happened, largely just ignoring rather than engaging their profoundly subversive claims. Nor is there any possibility of overcoming the problem through a recovery of neglected older resources from the philosophical tradition itself, as was done when the first wave of critics looked back to Aristotle, since the ancient world was just as ignorant of the phenomena identified by Freud as Cottingham takes unreconstructed contemporary moral philosophers to be complacent about them.

Cottingham coins the term ‘ratiocentrism’ to denote the problematic set of assumptions he sets out to attack in the book. Although he focuses on the vulnerability of the eudaimonist approach to the Freudian critique, it is clear that all of the main currents in contemporary ethics are targeted by it; indeed, Cottingham thinks that ratiocentrism is the predominant outlook of the whole western moral philosophical tradition.