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## “Return of Virtue” Motif: How Historically Plausible Is It?

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Herman Paul (Leiden)

Scholars often talk about a “return,” “resurgence,” “recovery,” or “renewal” of virtue in fields like ethics, epistemology, and political philosophy. Insofar as these phrases denote a steep increase in the past few decades in the number of books and articles devoted to virtues, they make perfect sense. To the extent, however, that a “return” presupposes a period of absence and “renewal” a phase of neglect, there are reasons to wonder how accurate these metaphors are. This paper will assess the historical plausibility of the “return of virtue” motif through a literature survey on virtues in the history of philosophy and the history of the humanities more broadly. While some versions of the decline-and-revival narrative appear to be more convincing than others, the paper’s main finding is that the absence of virtue in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has been notably exaggerated. This is true not only for the field of philosophy but especially also for other disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, where scholars until well into the twentieth century invoked notions of virtue and vice in teaching their students or assessing the work of their peers. Arguably, this finding is of more than antiquarian interest: it raises the question why, for instance, virtue approaches to research integrity engage so little with scholars’ own centuries-long tradition of thinking and talking about virtues.

**Herman Paul** is Professor of the History of the Humanities at Leiden University, where he currently directs a five-year research project entitled “Scholarly Vices: A Longue Durée History.” He is the author, most recently, of *Historians’ Virtues: From Antiquity to the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge University Press, 2022).

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iz1@uni-wuppertal.de



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