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978-0-521-80921-4 - Real Ethics: Reconsidering the Foundations of Morality

John M. Rist

Excerpt

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The present book is in part, and necessarily, a reflection on topics in the history of ethics from the time of Socrates and even earlier, but its core concern is what is widely admitted to be a crisis in contemporary Western debate about ethical foundations. *Discussion* of this crisis – including the status of older claims that coherent moral propositions must be grounded in metaphysical truths, and the consequences for all of us if they cannot – is at present carried on largely within academic departments of philosophy, where it is widely believed that not only transcendental realism – the belief in an absolute good – but even much weaker forms of moral objectivism have already been emasculated if not killed off outright. We – whoever ‘we’ may be, and here too anti-realism soon raises its head¹ – must now resort for ‘meaningfulness’ and ‘fulfilment’ to some sort of critical *choice* among what we see as goods and ourselves rationally ‘construct’ the values on which moral theorizing will rest.² The *effects* of this crisis in ethical theory are already visible in the world outside the universities as well as inside: in reassessments of our responsibility for the poor in Western states (not to speak of those in the Third World), in arguments over the ‘ethics’ of the market economy or of modern warfare or arms trading, in debates about what, if any, public policies should be adopted to control research in genetics and about the increasing number of ‘quality of life’ issues which arise in the practice of medicine.

The perception in many academic and professional circles of the seriousness and ramifications of the theoretical crisis, combined with the ignorance of ordinary people, makes way for deceptions, equivocations

¹ See for example O. Flanagan and A. O. Rorty (eds.), *Identity, Character and Morality* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990), 3, where we are told that we need a ‘more robust conception of identity’ but that ‘the trouble is that the objective point of view may assume an unwanted metaphysical realism’.

² *Ibid.*: ‘A life lived according to . . . ideals might be meaningful because it is a self-chosen life or because there is a certain consonance and consistency between a person’s ideals and her character and mode [*sic*] of life.’

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

and outright lying and humbug in public debate. For the public always lags behind the opinion-makers in its *underlying* ‘moral’ attitudes, as well as in its self-awareness concerning them. In Western societies, despite ubiquitous and ill-defined appeals to rights and to the priority of choice and ‘freedom’, the ethical hangover from a more homogeneous Christian past is still relatively influential outside élite circles, and that fact still, though diminishingly, restrains academics, media people and lawyers from making unabated statements (say in defence of direct lying or misinforming) which, even if plausible, would as yet be widely considered unacceptable among non-professionals. Most people are still largely uninformed or apathetic about the possible practical effects of the insights now claimed by our intellectual élites, except where these may seem to entail an increase in crime – especially against the person – or where some underlying intellectual trend is seen as promoting (perhaps via prominent figures from Hollywood or the music industry) a too blatantly hedonistic or manipulative sexual behaviour, or – and more commonly as a source of concern – a decline in basic educational skills. Even in these debates, however, deception is already rife, as when it is asserted that there can be no connection between unwanted teenage pregnancies and contempt for ‘Victorian values’.

At the beginning of recorded moral enquiry in the West, Plato identified analogous problems about the foundations of ethics and about the serious effects if it were widely believed that nothing religiously or metaphysically substantive lies beneath current moral fashions and orthodoxies – themselves rationally – even, if need be, irrationally – replaceable by radically different alternatives. He came to believe that if morality, as more than ‘enlightened’ self-interest, is to be rationally justifiable, it must be established on metaphysical foundations and in the *Republic* he attempted to put the nature of these foundations at the centre of ethical debate. His book was too challenging for its day and in the short term this project foundered.

Part of Plato’s failure – which I shall begin to consider in chapter 1 – can be attributed to his deliberately unsystematic approach to philosophical questions, to his wish to instruct without inducing parrot-fashion learning of the ‘right’ answers, and to the fact that the apparent connections between moral philosophy on the one hand and theories of the person and personal identity on the other are approached in Platonic dialogues by indirection rather than by statement, justification and accompanying argument; the Greeks were but little disposed to write treatises on methodology. A further factor was that many of Plato’s own followers

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: Ethical crises old and new*

3

became so engrossed in his metaphysics that they inclined to forget that this was originally developed to provide the groundwork for ‘the best life’, for the good of the soul. As for his opponents, they so concentrated on what they saw as his metaphysical inadequacies that they overlooked or misconstrued the consequences for ethics if his apparently defective foundationalism is set aside, or they surreptitiously appropriated parts of that foundationalism while rejecting other essential elements needed to make the theory coherent.

There is reason to believe that in our times, as in those of Plato, the theoretical crisis about moral foundations underlies many of the immediate disagreements about personal and political decision-making, and that the confusion in much contemporary moral debate depends in part on a systematic unwillingness outside academia – and often within it – to look squarely at this crisis. A good example of such ‘ostrichism’ can be recognized in the fact that even many religious writers seem to wish to explain away, if not merely to ignore, the radically ‘foundationalist’ threat to their entire ethical belief systems, and that even when they are themselves highly skilled in the techniques of contemporary – and especially Anglo-American – philosophy.

Some of them suppose that by making a few compromises, by broad-mindedly supping with the devil, they can beat their opponents at their game; others expect that *principled* agreement on the foundations of morality between theists and atheists is possible. One of the conclusions of the present study will be that however much the two groups may agree on the practical implementation of their theories, at the level of theory itself agreement can only be reached if one group – and it is invariably the theists – gives away most of its position at the outset: a ‘Catch-22’ effect of the Christian ethic is that ‘charity’ may seem to imply an exaggerated deference to one’s opponent! In thus combining an apparently secular, often nominally Kantian, moral theory with a strict religious code of practice, our theists prop up an attempted rationalism in philosophy with a fideism in theology, thus indulging in a moral absolutism for which their account of human nature, human circumstances and human reason provides inadequate support. It is then hardly surprising that they fail to convince their secular debating partners of the coherence of their philosophical claims.

The distinction between theists and secularists or de facto atheists, even if not recognized by the theists, is often clear to their opponents, and not merely to those – such as ‘emotivists’ and other ‘non-cognitivists’ – who hold that truth and falsehood have no place in moral discourse. It is not

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

only among consequentialists, who identify the good solely in effects, but also among ‘Kantians’, who think that a working morality can be ‘constructed’ through examination of the concept of rational agency, that it is widely held that attempts to identify the ‘essence’ of humanity, dependent as they must be on theism or some ‘realist’ metaphysics, have failed, and hence that in our Brave New World ‘deep’ claims of theoretical reasoning must be replaced by purely practical and secular reflection on our capacities, capabilities and activities.³

That might seem a discouraging prospect, yet secular humanists, unless ambushed by post-modernism, are necessarily optimists. Derek Parfit, a bold contemporary thinker who has done much to expose the nature of the current chaos in ethics, is unambiguously hopeful in his conclusions, not only holding that the crisis about foundations in ethics is already in process of resolution (or dissolution), but maintaining it a mark of philosophical progress that we can now see reflection on moral questions as still in its infancy. At the end of *Reasons and Persons* he writes:⁴

Belief in God, or in many gods, prevented the free development of moral reasoning. Disbelief in God, openly admitted by a majority, is a very recent event, not yet completed. Because this event is so recent, Non-Religious Ethics is at a very early stage. We cannot yet predict whether, as in Mathematics, we will all reach agreement. Since we cannot know how Ethics will develop, it is not irrational to have high hopes.

Our present chaos in ethics has no single begetter but, both developing and subverting Kant and Bentham, Nietzsche, with his assault on ‘Enlightenment values’ can claim to have played a major role in its genesis – though at times he saw himself merely as the enthusiastic chronicler of stupendous events. A second contemporary philosopher, David Gauthier – no reconstructed utilitarian like Parfit but a neo-Hobbesian – has cited him as the prophet of our times: ‘As the will to truth thus gains self-consciousness – there can be no doubt of that – morality will gradually perish now: this is the great spectacle in a hundred acts reserved for the next two centuries in Europe – the most terrible, most questionable, and perhaps also the most hopeful of all spectacles.’⁵

³ Note the perceptive summary of O. O’Neill, *Towards Justice and Virtue* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), 95: ‘Without a more explicit vindication of some background perfectionism, or more generally of the necessary metaphysics, it may quite simply be impossible to establish necessary and sufficient conditions for qualifying as an agent (or person), or as a subject (or holder of rights). Yet most contemporary universalists are uninclined [*sic*] to argue for this type of background position.’

⁴ D. Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford University Press, 1986), 454.

⁵ *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York, 1967), third essay, section 27, p. 161; cf. D. Gauthier, ‘Why Contractarianism?’ (unpublished lecture).

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: Ethical crises old and new*

5

Prescind from Parfit's claim that most of mankind is now sufficiently enlightened as to admit to open disbelief in God (for Parfit – not alone in this – seems to identify mankind with a self-anointed vanguard group of middle-class European and North American intellectuals and opinion-formers) and concentrate on his observation that philosophical enquiry into matters ethical is now at a new and crucial stage. This part of his claim is true, even though, as noted, many of the more traditionally minded moral philosophers he controverts are – to judge at least by their writings – hardly aware of the significance of what is happening around them. Certainly puzzled and often appalled by what they see in political and moral *behaviour*, and hence tempted to various types of moral fundamentalism, they yet fail to recognize the relation of such public changes to the debunking of any form of intellectual objectivism not only in ethics but throughout the humanities as a whole – unless perhaps they notice the morass of contemporary New Testament studies or the hypothesized absence of an author from their favourite works of literature.⁶

That is not to say nor to imply that the 'post-modern' world has come upon us out of the blue; that world is in important respects merely a late stage of the world of 'modernity'. Yet it is now easier for Westerners, after many years of attempted self-delusion, to come to an awareness of the extent of the change in their personal outlooks and behaviours to which unchecked anti-transcendentalism (whether nominally naturalist, emotivist, constructivist, perspectivist or more traditionally relativist) has given birth: not, of course, parthenogenically, but coupled first with industrialization and the development of technology, and more recently with economic globalization. Just as it is apparent from any Western campus cafeteria or from any 'quality' newspaper that the language and images of Parfit's 'mankind' have become proletarianized⁷ – no need now to look in the public lavatory for the lowest common denominator – so the habits of what was 'low-life' morality (often under high-sounding

⁶ Cf. M. Foucault, 'Qu'est-ce un auteur?', *Bulletin de la Société Française de Philosophie* 63 (1969). An interesting examination of the seriousness of the challenge of this kind of writing is offered by G. Steiner, *Real Presences* (London: Faber, 1989).

⁷ N. Boyle, *Who Are We Now?: Christian Humanism and the Global Market from Hegel to Heaney* (Notre Dame University Press, 1998), stresses the role of economic globalization in our being proletarianized (as producer/consumers). No-one now is just a bourgeois or an official, an owner or a regular employee, or possessed of an old-style vocation or profession. Boyle's analysis (except insofar as it leads to economic determinism in a stronger sense than I would allow) is often compatible with mine. An issue between us, however, might be the full range of characteristics of the new 'proletarians'. I shall return to the social and economic aspects of our current moral chaos, and their interaction with the ascendancy of anti-transcendentalism, in my political chapter 8.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

names) fast become the norms of moral and political discourse. In the wake of the loss of any clear sense of what 'low-life' might suggest, intellectuals are becoming 'downwardly mobile', and while losing their grip on an overall concept of virtue, often see such a direction as in itself virtuous and high-minded, or sentimentally as solidarity with the marginalized or dispossessed.

Thus Western philosophers and their opinion-forming disciples have come to resemble midwives – to borrow Plato's metaphor – to the birth of a class of intellectual lager-louts. What deserves consideration is whether, personal comfort, expediency and even safety apart, there is anything 'inappropriate' (if not 'wrong') about the changes in the fundamental moral beliefs and attitudes of such opinion-formers – changes visible equally on the 'left' and on the 'right' of what used to be the conventional spectrum – or whether we are merely growing wiser about the illusionless 'truths' to which intellectual integrity demands we acclimatize ourselves. If where I have normally spoken of 'moral', as in 'moral agents', perhaps I should have highlighted the seriousness of the problem by using the apparently broader term 'spiritual', it is that, bowing to the *Diktat* of our liberal times, I have myself preferred to speak, at least in the first instance, in current parlance. However, I shall argue not only that 'moral' is an insufficiently broad notion but that the concept of agency suggests a Procrustean diminution of human nature which has proved a convenient means both of diminishing the problems of ethics and of giving a spurious impression of success in solving them.⁸

Exception may be taken to Plato and the Greeks more generally being given priority in this book. If that objection were sustainable, the book would fail. Throughout his life Plato thought that 'How should I live?' is *the* philosophical question and that in theory and in practice there are only two honest answers to it, attempts to mediate between these two being but ignorant, incoherent, trivializing or all of these. In his last work, the *Laws*, he was still attempting to describe how, in the absence of an incorruptible philosopher-king – by then relegated to wishful thinking – the implications of the answer to 'How should I live?' could best – albeit often tragically – be given a practical and inevitably institutional form.

The philosophical thrust of the present work does not depend on whether my reading of Plato is historically correct. Plato's use of the dialogue form can make it peculiarly difficult to determine which views

⁸ Despite its perhaps still excessive (or misleading) emphasis on human *action*, the phrase 'acting person' has its attractions, but I prefer to avoid as far as possible the definitional problems which arise when we speak of 'persons'.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: Ethical crises old and new*

7

of his characters are those of their creator.⁹ Yet although philosophically I am not committed to the historicity of my account, I believe the views I attribute to Plato to be indeed his own. It will require a further book to explain why this is so, but a brief, unargued introduction to my reasons is not out of place here.¹⁰

The best interpretation of Plato's dialogues will accept that their author held philosophical truth to be a way of life and irreducible to any set of propositions. Any defender of that way of life must defend it propositionally, that is by analysis, argument and reference;¹¹ yet all of these methods involve pulling material out of the life context in which it is embedded, and hence will be reductionist at least in the sense of being incomplete. If some of the positions of, say, Socrates are the positions which Plato himself would have always attempted to defend, he would also have known that his defences would be limited. Though they would be effective in the context of the arguments he is from time to time controverting and as a reply to the type of individual who would mount rival positions of particular sorts, they would stand in need of substantial restatement in differing social and intellectual circumstances.

Consider a parallel case. Francis of Assisi would have denied that living a Christian life is merely the equivalent of knowing and accepting the decrees of the Church as formulated in its creeds and by its Councils, yet he would have appealed to creeds, Councils and other theological sources if asked to provide an explanation of his Christian life. While refusing to equate such sets of theological propositions with being a Christian, he could maintain that they had been arrived at in the hope of resolving particular problems. The parallel can help us to see why Plato would not wish to identify living a philosophical life with whatever propositions Socrates, or any other character of his dialogues, might successfully defend; hence his proper cautions about *writing* philosophy. Plato's view would be that certain basic propositions, often but not always defended or advanced by Socrates himself, help to move the reader in the right direction, and that anyone who would reject (rather than

⁹ For a challenging recent treatment see C. H. Kahn, *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue* (Cambridge University Press, 1996).

¹⁰ I made a tentative beginning in 'On the Aims and Effects of Platonic Dialogues', *Iyyun* 46 (1997), 29–46.

¹¹ Reference is particularly important since Plato conspicuously refers to the Good (especially in the *Republic*) while refusing to describe it, allowing himself only to identify it via its effects, and also by analogy, his very claims about the Good implying that it cannot be defined. It is, of course, possible to refer to things without knowing what they are (whether essentially or in some other way); I do not need to 'know' the physical qualities and structure of iron to recognize and point out a piece of iron.

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[More information](#)

amend and improve) those propositions is moving in the direction of metaphysical and – here I will venture the word – spiritual error.

The present book is about foundationalism in ethics, and discussions of foundationalism were often deeper, more perceptive and more honest among the ancients, operating without Jewish or Christian theological *assumptions*, though not necessarily without what I would call theological *conclusions*. However, I do not wish merely to retrieve ancient philosophical theses, even those of Plato and the Platonists; my purpose is to build on those theses and those of their continuators, in our present revived and revised debate. For all its ancient material, this is offered as a book about ethics and politics, not about the history of philosophy. Only it is futile to expect to do ethics if we refuse to remember what we have been taught; thus if Plato is fundamentally right about transcendental moral realism, any ‘modern’ reconstruction of ethics must reduce to some form of ‘choice theory’, tied to relativism or perspectivism. The major issues in moral philosophy, as Plato realized, are comparatively simple and cannot be fudged. Much of the sheer complication and difficulty of contemporary moral philosophy serves to blur this simplicity.

There is a further way in which the historical material in this book is intended directly as a contribution to philosophy itself. The history of Western thought is not to be drawn in a continuous line from Thales to the late twentieth century. There are many radical breaks in the continuity – not least that associated with Kant – but the most radical of all, and the most enduring, is to be located between the fourteenth and the seventeenth centuries. The scientific and other objective advances of that period were achieved at the price of enormous philosophical setbacks, some of which – not least the gradual sacrifice of teleology in the pursuit of the ‘how’ to the exclusion of the ‘why’ both in physics and in ethics – are gradually being recognized. Much of ‘antiquity’ was lost and needs to be retrieved as a corrective to the emphases and directions of ‘modernity’ and its ‘post-modern’ entail, and nowhere is this more apparent than in the metaphysics of morals and in moral philosophy itself.

Thus this book is also intended to further the process of setting straight the historical record and returning us, chastened, to earlier and more promising journeyings. And in so proceeding I must emphasize another tactic in which throughout the present study I am systematically following a Greek path: not, in this case, that of Socrates and Plato, but that of Zeno, the disciple of Parmenides of Elea. Opponents of Parmenides’ claim that ‘being is one’ argued that his views are wildly counter-intuitive, and that,

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: Ethical crises old and new*

9

if true, they would offer us an extraordinary world. On Parmenides' behalf Zeno countered that if he is wrong the world is very much *more* extraordinary and paradoxical. I shall similarly suggest that Plato's moral realism is strange, and makes striking demands on us, but that if he and his more developed philosophical successors are radically mistaken, the world is far stranger – and I mean unintelligible as well as more dreadful – than some of us find conceivable.

Finally, the present work being a discussion both of ethics and of its political entailments, I shall follow Plato's strategy in the *Republic* in a further particular sense: chapters 1–7 are partly historical and largely directed to ethical theory; chapter 8 turns to political implications of ethics, while foundational issues, in a more directly theological context, return in the concluding chapter 9. Within chapters 1–7 I shall first explicitly consider the two essential aspects of any 'Platonizing' position: (1) Plato's theory of the Good and its subsequent adaptations (1–2); (2) Plato's theory of love and the 'divided soul' (3–4). Chapters 5–7 will treat of the more interesting and promising contemporary alternatives to 'Platonic' realism.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

CHAPTER I

Moral nihilism: Socrates vs. Thrasymachus

The raw material of ethical reflection is provided by human behaviour as we experience and observe it and as it is recorded directly by historians, journalists, TV cameramen and film-makers, writers and, less directly, by other sorts of 'creative' artists. An argument might be developed that it is preferable that such people not be philosophers, for the more philosophical they are, the more they are likely to overlay their observations with theory, and theories have a way of bending facts to their own convenience. A possible reply would be that a philosopher might approach historical or descriptive writing more conscious of such dangers, and thus take more precautions to be dispassionate.

Many people believe that it is vain to hope to produce narratives of the past or present unburdened by theory, and thus conclude that the only significant difference between the 'philosophical' observer and his lay counterpart is that the former will produce more self-conscious, more sophisticated and even novel theories with which to wrap up the 'facts', while the latter is more likely to reproduce the 'ordinary' prejudices of his time. Such a conclusion is premature and simplistic. While the historian or other direct assembler and assessor of the raw material of ethical enquiry cannot entirely avoid a limited and personal point of view (though he can certainly avoid crude propaganda), the literary artist, especially the tragedian, is able to present moral dilemmas the more poignantly – or the more unfairly – since he enjoys the luxury of not having to argue, or even perhaps insinuate, any resolution in moral terms; he need only describe an example of human chaos, perhaps from different perspectives, thereby evoking our sympathy, hatred or contempt, though not always our rational judgement.¹

Contemporary perspectivism, however – advancing beyond the view that we can only describe 'events' partially, and that our viewing is

¹ See the discussion of Sophocles' *Philoctetes* in A. MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (London: Duckworth, 1988), 58–62.