

REAL ETHICS

Reconsidering the Foundations of Morality

JOHN M. RIST



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, VIC 3166, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

<http://www.cambridge.org>

© John M. Rist 2002

This book is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception
and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,
no reproduction of any part may take place without
the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2002

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeface Baskerville Monotype 11/12.5 pt. *System* L^AT_EX 2_ε [TB]

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Rist, John M.

Real Ethics: Reconsidering the Foundations of Morality / John M. Rist.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0 521 80921 5 (hc) – ISBN 0 521 00608 2 (pbk.)

1. Ethics. 2. Realism. 3. Ethics – History. I. Title.

BJ1 O12. R53 2001

170 – dc21 2001035254

ISBN 0 521 80921 5 hardback

ISBN 0 521 00608 2 paperback

Contents

	<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>page vii</i>
	Introduction: Ethical crises old and new	1
1	Moral nihilism: Socrates vs. Thrasymachus	10
2	Morals and metaphysics	27
	Plato's metaphysical grounding of morality	27
	From Plato to Augustine	38
	Towards alternatives to Platonic realism	45
3	The soul and the self	61
	Multiple selves	61
	Core self or future soul?	72
	Moral vs. ontological accounts of man	83
	Agent-relative reductionism	88
	Morality, humanity and the soul	92
4	Division and its remedies	95
	Psychological incompleteness	95
	Towards integration: love and reflection	100
	Towards integration: love and friendship	108
	An alternative proposal: politics and virtue without metaphysics	110
5	Rules and applications	119
	Some uses of rules	119
	Dirty hands	130
	The limits of fairness	135
6	The past, present and future of practical reasoning	140
	Post-realist moral debate	140
	Aristotle's ethics: between Platonism and 'practical reasoning'	142
	Aristotle, Aquinas and the goals of life	151

	Old battles transformed: Hume and naturalism	156
	Kant and post-Kantian practical reasoning	163
7	Autonomy and choice	178
	Rights, needs and wants	178
	Choice: history and prospects	188
	Choice, continuing moral identity and responsibility	194
	Freedom, habit and the good life	199
8	Ethics and ideology	205
	Responsibility, correction and community	205
	Realism or ideological deception?	222
	From ethics to politics	228
	The end of history and the ahistorical individual	241
9	God and ethics	257
	Realist ethics and divine commands	257
	God, 'dirty hands' and the possibility of politics	264
	Philosophy and theology: tactics and honest traditions	271
	<i>Bibliography</i>	285
	<i>Index</i>	292

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.

irremediably determined by our subjective stance, its history and the tradition to which it belongs – is more than a powerful description of the difficulties of historiography and of ‘unbiased’ thinking. It is a philosophical theory that ‘truth’ itself, in history as in morality, is unobtainable and therefore an illusion; indeed that the past itself is to be collapsed into the present or constructed out of our desires and wishes for the future. Such bold inferences, of course, are far from self-evident and face dialectical threats – as can be recognized if we deconstruct the project itself. The claim that, since our knowledge is limited by our perspective as viewers, any complete and overarching ‘truth’ is impossible to attain, let alone that it does not exist, cannot itself be treated as ‘neutral’ or ‘context-free’: *ex hypothesi* perspectivism is a thesis with a history and the perspectivist (whether he admits it or not) is himself an agent with a history whose own views cannot be privileged, however immediately attractive they may seem – and they attract because they contain a degree of truth.

Perspectivism is a post-modern theory claiming to transcend its own limitations and intended to bolster prior insights about the impossibility in principle of objective knowledge, metaphysical truth, historical fact, and especially of objective values in morals and aesthetics. It is a form of special pleading for seeing man, and each man, as a timeless will, and like all special pleading it can hardly avoid overstating its case, thus using the ‘facts’ it reveals to insinuate a greater degree of applicability than they warrant. For quite apart from the irrationality of any privileging of the perspectivist as a historical critic, a claim that our understanding is limited by our perspective says nothing compelling about the more interesting questions of whether some perspectives are more informative and ultimately more fruitful – ‘truer’ even – than others, or how, if they are more informative, fruitful or true, they might be recognized as such. To be a perspectivist about the *means* of discerning truth does not commit me to believing truth an illusion, nor to the Nietzschean claim that we cannot distinguish facts from images or metaphors from literal truths.

Nevertheless, there are ways in which perspectivist ideas, misleading though they often are, can be put to good use. They may for example challenge the cosy, contemporary perspective whereby philosophers are assumed to have always been concerned with the same questions, even if they have approached them from differing starting-points and with more or less skill. At a broad level of generality there is truth in that, but to make the point at such a level is of little practical help, and it is actually harmful if accompanied by uncritical claims as to the steady and unchanging meaning of philosophical terms (and concepts)

across centuries of reflection: whether these terms exist within some single language and culture, or whether they or their translated ‘equivalents’ are held to persist as we move from one language and culture to the next.

It is easy to forget that significantly different philosophical enquiries may make use of similar ‘technical’ terms: famously, words like ‘being’ (which in classical Greek refers to *finite* being, though it is not so restricted in English) and ‘reason’ (which can refer merely to discursive reasoning in English but may include ‘intuition’ in classical Greek) are of this sort. Such examples would suggest that from whatever perspective we view the history of philosophy we can increase the depth and seriousness of our enquiries by considering, so far as possible, not merely how we believe we rightly deploy words and concepts, but how they were deployed in those other historical epochs relevant to our subject-matter. While granting to the perspectivist that for such a work we cannot entirely remove our own distorting spectacles, we have no need to grant either that we are unaware that we are wearing them or that we cannot begin to correct the distortions they produce. That is, there is no need to concede that old-fashioned philology does not have its uses – not least because, thanks to the perspectivist, we can be more aware of its limitations.

Supported by such generally consoling awareness of the difficulties confronting those who essay to interpret alien cultures, whether contemporary or of the past, let us turn to the Greek origins of Western philosophy. Though not the first ethical thinker in Greece – indeed a thinker already reacting both to the often explicit practices of his own society and to the boldly subversive views of the Sophists – Socrates, a practical man and a craftsman both by upbringing and by philosophical profession, has a good claim, as Aristotle recognized, to be hailed if not as the founder, then at least as the re-founder, of Western moral debate – though not, of course, of Western moral belief. Socrates apparently wanted to be as clear about what kinds of acts are good and just and about how to perform them as shoemakers are about what shoes are and how to make them. He wanted to be able to identify who knows how to act justly, what kind of knowledge such a man possesses and the kind of acts he will typically perform. He looked for some kind of identifying mark on bits of behaviour by which he could recognize unerringly a morally good act when he saw it, and hence posit a good class of acts. He accepted (perhaps for the sake of argument) that in the good old days an Athenian gentleman knew how to behave, knew his code of behaviour, in the same way as an eighteenth-century English gentleman knew that he should pay his card debts and make ‘calls’.

By the time of Socrates such assured awareness of a code of behaviour, albeit a narrow one, could not pass without challenge. In his comedy *The Clouds* Aristophanes presents a character who, when charged with adultery, is able to say 'What's wrong with that?' Or, anticipating Moore's 'open question' argument, when charged with beating his father and mother, something like: 'I know that this stick is striking father's back and hurting him, and that a lot of people, including father, find that offensive, but what's *wrong* with it?' In a notorious line of Aristophanes' contemporary Euripides, a character asks, 'What's wrong except what the audience think to be wrong?' Rightly or wrongly, such attacks on the traditional moral code were associated with those called 'sophists', professional teachers, sometimes of rhetoric, who often claimed to distinguish between what is conventionally wrong and what, if anything, is really or 'naturally' wrong. Some of them were inclined to encourage clever politicians or other opinion-makers to play on such antitheses. They could persuade people that what they had always been taught to think wrong is only wrong by convention, by man-made law or custom, and they might add that such customs and laws are worth no more than the interests or wills or wisdom of their makers. Thus if a law or custom could make parricide a vice, a new version, if accepted through force, fraud or deliberate choice of some or more human beings, could make it a virtue. Once it is widely accepted that the significance of moral terms can fluctuate in this way, a traditional society has collapsed. Socrates seems to have divined such a collapse, actual or impending, and his pupil Plato to have characterized it in detail.

The *Republic* is Plato's most ambitious attempt to explain the seriousness of the issues at stake if moral words (and therefore moral concepts) are freed from their traditional moorings, though, as we have seen, he was not the only or even the first observer of the phenomenon as it appeared in its Greek setting. After the fictions of Aristophanes, consider the historian Thucydides describing (3.82.4) the effects of civil war in Corcyra (Corfu): the struggle of oligarch against democrat, which is to say of those who advocated a dictatorship of the few against those favouring a dictatorship of the majority:

Men changed the ordinary accreditation of words to things at their own discretion. Mindless audacity was considered to be the courage of a true party-man, thoughtful hesitation to be specious cowardice, restraint an excuse for lack of virility . . . careful planning a plausible pretext for failing in one's responsibilities . . . The political leaders on each side took up pretty slogans, one speaking of equal civic responsibilities and obligations for the people under the law, the other of a moderate aristocracy.

Thucydides has reduced the world of politics and public policy to that of the gang boss who, observing one of his men unwilling to cut the throat of a bystander whose mistake is to have seen too much, taunts him with 'lack of guts'. He merely *narrates how* moral language can be twisted by demagogues and military adventurers to their own purposes, for who can say what is correct usage? In the *Republic*, Plato himself, apprenticed by a political background on both sides of his family, develops the Thucydidean theme for his own purposes. There is no immediate context of civil war, in Corcyra or anywhere else, nor is he merely drawing attention to the manipulation of the public by demagogues and adventurers; Plato makes the subtler point that demagogues fall victim to their *own* propaganda. In deceiving others, they cannot but diminish their identity by being themselves deceived. The example shows something of the nature of the world in which we must live if the abuse of moral language becomes endemic: though that world will not arise from nothing, and Plato rehearses a version of the stages of the degeneration of society from the rule of aristocrats holding office to serve others and lead them towards the Good to that of the 'tyrannical' man whose only aim is to use others to promote what he takes to be his own advantage. Plato holds that the tyrant is the last person to know what that advantage is.

Before composing the *Republic*, Plato had published a number of smaller and slighter dialogues treating of how to recognize a virtue (such as self-control or courage) when you see it. The more basic challenge to morality as such – put in the mouth of Thrasymachus in the *Republic* – was still in the future. In the *Gorgias*, in some respects a trial run for the *Republic*, we find that Callicles, judged by Nietzsche to get the better of Socrates,² believes that there is an objective 'natural justice'

² Cf. E. R. Dodds, *Plato's Gorgias* (Oxford University Press, 1959), 387–91. But Nietzsche's account of the Nietzscheanism of Callicles is misleading. He failed to notice that Callicles shows no interest in the creativity on which he himself placed such emphasis. Nietzsche's primary hero was – eventually – Goethe, not Napoleon; Callicles admires not literary figures as creative artists, but politicians as direct wielders of power.

Nevertheless, we should recognize Nietzsche's perspicacity in identifying Socrates and Plato as his greatest philosophical foes, and the tradition which they inaugurated as a supreme challenge to his own position. For Socrates and Plato established much of the framework – including much of the metaphysical framework – within which Greek ethics was constructed and without which most of it is unintelligible. Which makes it the more surprising that J. Annas, *The Morality of Happiness* (Oxford University Press, 1993), especially 17–20, declines to discuss Plato in five hundred pages of small print on ancient ethics. Her reasons, however, become clearer in light of her more recent study, *Platonic Ethics, Old and New* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), a book concerned largely with Middle Platonic readings of Plato, but where, in chapter 5, she denies – in what seems to be an atomizing of the text, an unwillingness to consider the structure of the *Republic* as a whole – that the metaphysics of the *Republic* is intended to sustain the ethics.

recognizable by the strong and taking the form of a law that the superior pursues and should pursue his own will. Not only does Callicles hold to this claim about the objectivity of justice, thus appearing less radical than Thrasymachus, but he allows himself to concede to Socrates that there are certain sorts of behaviour (such as that of passive homosexuals) which are simply shameful. That is a fatal admission analogous to that of the would-be relativist or perspectivist who nevertheless allows himself to say and believe, for example, that the Holocaust was simply wrong.

The *Republic* is a complex book with many themes; it is arranged like a set of Russian dolls, one inside the other such that the innermost doll, the 'metaphysical' claims about the Good in books 6 and 7, is the core of the work. As we move from book 1 towards book 6, Plato progressively opens up the stronger and eventually metaphysical claims he believes to be necessary if the position of 'his' Thrasymachus – that 'justice is nothing other than the advantage of the stronger' – is to be rebutted.³

It is not clear from what we know of the historical Thrasymachus why Plato has selected him to present – if ultimately incoherently – the position of the moral nihilist,⁴ the man who believes that, since the sense of all moral terms is determined by the social and political context in which they are uttered, it is only fools (and especially fools duped by those more astute in the 'propaganda' struggle) who take them seriously in the sense of believing themselves to be not merely imprudent in breaking the rules and acting 'unjustly', but objective evil-doers. Views rather like that of Thrasymachus can be found in the extant fragments and citations of the sophist Antiphon – who might thus seem to have been a candidate for enhanced fame through a personal appearance in

³ Not least because of the nature of his earlier arguments for the existence of Forms (especially the 'one-over-many' argument: if a, b and c are good, then there is a Form of Goodness; if x, y and z are men, then there is a Form of Man), Plato developed a broader metaphysical realism than he needed to defeat his ethical opponents. His view that there are realities answering to every sort of general term is unnecessary – and depends on (at least) two false propositions: (1) that general terms of 'fact' and 'value' can be treated similarly, and (2) that there is no need to introduce a 'bearer' of moral terms (who would need only be a *maker* or *creator* of physical objects). A Fregean realism limited to non-moral and non-evaluative terms would resolve some of the difficulties of proposition (1) in exactly the opposite way to that required for a successful defence of the foundations of ethics. Proposition 2, as I shall argue in chapter 2, was corrected by later Platonists.

⁴ A version of what follows in this and the following chapter on the *Republic* was tested at a meeting of the Boston Area Colloquium on Ancient Philosophy meeting at Holy Cross College, Worcester, Mass., and appears as 'The Possibility of Morality in Plato's *Republic*', in J. Cleary and G. Gurtler (eds.), *Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy* 14 (1999), 53–72, together with a thoughtful (but, I think, ultimately unsuccessful) critique by Rachel Barney: 'Is Plato Interested in Meta-Ethics? Commentary on Rist', *ibid.*, 73–81.

the *Republic*.⁵ Plato may have wanted to demonstrate that the historical Thrasymachus, author of writings on rhetoric, was retailing in systematic form the kind of education which, emphasizing persuasion rather than truth, must always lead (perhaps unbeknown to its professors) to nihilist attitudes and behaviour.⁶ Or Plato's selection of Thrasymachus for his notorious role could be an ironic parody or in-joke, the significance of which is now lost.

I turn to the text. After Socrates has given comparatively short shrift to Polemarchus' traditional and unthinking appeals, in an attempted account of justice, to notions like helping one's friends and harming one's enemies,⁷ Thrasymachus, snorting with indignation at the 'simplistic' attitudes of the speakers, is induced to make the cryptic remark that justice is the advantage of the stronger. He is not presented as offering this as a definition of justice, but as a truth about justice, and by justice he refers to a set of other-regarding attitudes *which are called* justice, for as he goes on to explain, he thinks justice is no more than the name for whatever the laws (and customs) prescribe as appropriate to our dealings with one another. Part of his position, it soon turns out, is clear and devastating: whatever type of régime happens to be in power, whether democratic, oligarchic or despotic, makes laws designed to profit itself, and mainly to keep itself in power. These laws it presents as just (338E1, cf. 2.359B3), and the gullible public – relying on the assumption that when the word 'just' is used, reference is made to something objective and prescriptive – is inclined to obey them. Thus Thrasymachus combines the brutal view that all law is positive law with the assumption that those astute enough to rule play on the folly (noble or otherwise) of the human race, and specifically on their supposition that 'law' indicates objective moral norms.⁸

⁵ Cf. D. Furley, 'Antiphon's Case Against Justice', in *Cosmic Problems* (Cambridge University Press, 1989), 66–76. Furley is right to argue that (despite his use of the notion of 'nature') Antiphon's view is closer to that of Thrasymachus than to that of Callicles.

⁶ The *Phaedrus* lends colour to this possibility.

⁷ Polemarchus fails to think his position through in at least the following ways:

1. Like characters in earlier dialogues, he starts from too restrictive an account of the kind of behaviour that is just.
2. In allowing himself to be led into accepting that the good guard is the good thief, he fails to understand the moral force of 'cannot', as in 'I cannot bring myself to do that.'
3. He uses, rather than makes sense of, the notion of helping your friends and harming your enemies.
4. He fails to distinguish between 'punish' and 'harm'.

⁸ Thus my account of the position of Thrasymachus is nearest to that of T. J. D. Chappell, 'The Virtues of Thrasymachus', *Phronesis* 38 (1993), 1–17. Cf. also A. Flew, 'Responding to Plato's Thrasymachus', *Philosophy* 70 (1995), 436–47, e.g. 443.

Plato's genius as an observer of the human scene is literary as well as philosophical: he presents Thrasymachus as claiming that such objective and non-arbitrary justice is a fiction, and yet as unable to express himself about 'justice' (the fiction) without using the language of justice (the reality) (347, 352A ff.). This ironic depiction is certainly one of the causes of the disagreement among scholars as to what exactly Thrasymachus is trying to propose – though this is less obscure if his claims are viewed in the light of the project of the *Republic* as a whole.

That project is to show – and it is also my project here – that a position roughly similar to that of Thrasymachus is one of only two coherent attitudes to the first principles of 'morality': a position which itself may appear in two different forms. The more inchoate version will be recognizable when its advocate is too good-natured or confused to see the full implications of his approach – not least concerning the 'shocking' language in which human behaviour should properly be discussed. The clear and unambiguous version, on the other hand, will be expressed in terms which the ordinary public will find hard to stomach, or perhaps unacceptable. Hence, Thrasymacheanism is of only limited *direct* concern to the observer of the surface of the *practical* world of power politics, though of paramount importance in any theoretical account of the nature of morality.⁹ For what philosophers can debate more or less unashamedly among themselves can be introduced only gradually into publicized policies. Except in such brutalized conditions of society as obtain, as Thucydides noted, in times of civil war or other fundamental social upheaval, the public needs to be softened up (deliberately or otherwise) to accept the 'unacceptable'.

Since it is impossible to defend an irrational position rationally, Plato probably thought of Thrasymachus' position as rationally indefensible. That may be why he both allows Thrasymachus to be discomfited by Socrates' use of arguments which – unless recognized as in part necessarily *ad hominem* – seem often less than compelling (though Thrasymachus himself, being the sort of character who would hold the sort of theory he holds, lacks the wit or skill to see through them), and why he also admits that Thrasymachus has let Socrates off too lightly and could have done a good deal more for his own position.¹⁰ For that position, Plato knows, wins support not merely because of what can rationally be said

⁹ Cf. Flew, 'Responding', 443.

¹⁰ Thrasymachus unnecessarily weakens his position by ignoring a specifically instrumentalist account of reason (though Glaucon and Adeimantus correct him) and by tending to suggest that the 'stronger' will *always* act 'unjustly' (e.g. at 349CD).

for it, but because of its all-too-human, albeit not ‘moral’, attractiveness – especially to half-educated sophisticates and those who admire political goals they conventionally dread to espouse and political crimes they lack the boldness to attempt.

The claim of Thrasymachus that particular political régimes use ‘moral’ language and promote ‘moral’ beliefs as a means of ensuring their own survival is a special version of the broader claim that the will of any individual or group of individuals, however arrived at, is sufficient to determine the reference of a prescriptive ‘moral’ term. When Thrasymachus observes that justice (that is, what people hold or believe to be justice in some prescriptive sense) is the advantage of the stronger, he is drawing a legitimate conclusion from the claim that the dominant elements in any society, be they groups or individuals, will legislate about what is ‘just’ with their own interests (however defined) in mind – unless they believe that there is some superior ‘moral’ reason why they should not do so. This broader claim is perhaps less self-evident than Thrasymachus believes. Most people, as Hume recognized, do seem to have limited reserves of generosity, and of course it may also turn out that our own interest is also the interest of some (or even of all) members of our society, even if that is a matter of chance.

Thrasymachus holds that there are no non-arbitrary values (‘goods in themselves’), and that we are free, if we wish, to work out, determine or construct whatever ‘values’ will please and profit ourselves from time to time – including a system of morality to which other people can be induced to subscribe. What can the Platonic Socrates say in reply? The main point of the ensuing books of the *Republic* – down to the core books 6 and 7 – is that unless claims about the proper application of terms like ‘just’ and ‘good’ can be grounded in the transcendent reality of something perfectly good and just (which Plato calls a ‘Form’), then Thrasymachus has won an important argument: not perhaps the argument that what is conventionally called injustice makes one happier than what is conventionally called justice, but that we are deluded if we believe that justice and goodness (or, to give it a modern context, ‘human rights’) enjoy any objectively prescriptive status, in the sense of existing outside the human mind (where they are more or less rational possibilities) or apart from the human will (where they are practices or conventions, whether beneficial or the reverse). We may be *useful* idiots in subscribing to moral objectivism, and in particular to transcendental realism, but philosophically we are still idiots.

In the interests of historical verity we should disarm a lurking objection to this reading of the *Republic*. In refutation of the view that Plato offers (through his account of the Good) a thesis that a transcendental meta-ethics is required if moral nihilism is to be defeated, it might be objected – especially if book 1 is read in comparative isolation – that the argument with Thrasymachus has nothing to do with meta-ethics at all; Socrates and Thrasymachus simply represent two radically different approaches within the parameters of normative ethics. They agree that we all seek happiness (*eudaimonia*), but they disagree about how such *eudaimonia* is to be attained.

The argument between Socrates and Thrasymachus is not primarily about how *eudaimonia* is to be attained, but whether Thrasymachus rightly denies the objectivity of moral values. Socrates (eventually) comes to suggest that no search for *eudaimonia* can possibly be effective if there are no man-independent realities or Forms to make talk either of happiness or of morality coherent and intelligible. If that is right, although Thrasymachus *talks* about *eudaimonia*, he not only does not know what is conducive to *eudaimonia*; he is simply inadequately equipped to consider the matter at all. It is not that Socrates and Thrasymachus are ‘eudaimonists’ who disagree how to secure their end; rather Thrasymachus will not admit the world of discourse in which, for Socrates, *eudaimonia* must be located. Since he will know nothing of that universe, he repels consideration of how values, including those he thinks his own, can be secured, and any coherent notion of what we *ought* to do if we want to be happy.

The debate between Socrates and Thrasymachus cannot then be characterized as between two realists, one of whom – Socrates – later shows that he thinks that *eudaimonia* has a strong connection with the harmony of the psyche, while the other denies that; it is a debate between a transcendental realist and an anti-realist who disagree about the possibility of morality, and therefore, necessarily, its connection with happiness. It is not merely that Thrasymachus wants judgements of right and wrong to be arbitrary; the implication of his view – to which Socrates eventually offers transcendental realism as the only adequate reply – is that ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ are the result of human confusions and human manipulations and that therefore happiness (if distinct from ‘success’) is unreal.

In both its origins and its goals the *Republic* is pre-eminently a practical book: Plato fears what follows if he cannot show that Thrasymachus is wrong. For Plato, the tyrant is the Thrasymachean anti-hero at his most fully developed – we notice how astutely Thrasymachus speaks of

our hidden or less hidden admiration of crime on a grand scale – with the shreds of ‘bourgeois’ or other ‘virtue’ removed. Thus Plato makes two claims, which together produce a paradoxical scenario. The first is that unless transcendental realism and the corresponding sense of moral language can be established, there is no logical reason, but only the residue of a discredited world-view – or in each new generation the rebirth of a purely pre-philosophical morality – in the way of the full-blooded pursuit of tyranny (or anything else) as the goal of human nature. The second is that with the loss of such an objective morality, any sense even of what is useful to us as we happen to be constituted must also be lost. Epicurus, an ardent anti-Platonist who supported the first of these claims, attempted – perhaps indeed under the influence of the speeches of Glaucon and Adeimantus in the *Republic* – to deny the second, thus resolving the paradox. Plato offers only limited comment on the second point – though what he says is of much interest – his main aim in the *Republic* being to see what philosophical claims are necessary to establish the first.

Plato thus sets up the problem of the objectivity of morality in the starkest possible terms. In the end, he holds, we have to decide between (an improved version of) the moral nihilism of Thrasymachus, for whom goodness is (objectively) whatever we are fool enough to believe if we believe it to be any other than made by man or some men, and the view of Socrates that moral terms, since and only since they have a fixed and transcendental point of reference, cannot be made to mean whatever we like, whatever is convenient, whatever seems to make sense at the moment or whatever we can get people to agree to. They refer to, and derive their force from, some primary ‘reality’ in the world (or ‘beyond’ it). For Socrates, if members of traditional societies have accepted a crude, simplistic and initially indefensible morality, their critics have merely shown them to be wrong in detail and application, not in principle. They – and in our pre-philosophical selves we are like them – have merely not understood what they are trying to formulate.

Little of substance can be added to a tightened-up version of the radical challenge which Thrasymachus throws out, but there is now a fashionable corollary which indirectly sheds further light on it. Even if moral ‘realism’, in the shape of belief in an ultimate moral standard like a Form, is a superstition, it may be a valuable superstition not only for the stronger or dominant party in society but for everyone. That would certainly be so if the alternative *non-realist* theories of moral objectivism were inadequate to save our moral foundations and, in that case, it would

follow that it is best for us to believe the lie that there are objective, indeed realist, standards, and to believe it with full emotional commitment. Any alternative would lead to 'moral' and social anarchy – and in the paradox inherent here lies the 'realist's' securest foundation. In our contemporary society failure so to 'believe' would be to encourage terrorism in social and political life, and an inability on the part of anyone to condemn – unless on grounds of expediency – crimes ranging from genocide to the threat and use of chemical, biological or nuclear weapons in international disputes.

Plato would hold that this kind of 'virtual' or 'as-if' morality¹¹ falls on the Thrasymachean side of the divide which the *Republic* has identified. It might be expedient that many, if not all of us, should believe 'emotionally' that some acts (e.g. genocide) are just wrong, even if there is no such category and they can only be deemed horrifying or inconvenient, but Thrasymachus would still be telling the truth. Plato would also mention that Thrasymachus might be happy to see such deception practised and encouraged by everyone other than himself. And we shall note that Sidgwick and several other recent philosophers have proposed varying forms of the thesis that the generality of men are better off ignorant of certain seeming truths and consequently reasoning in the dark.¹²

Plato is aware of the social threat if moral language is allowed, and especially if it is known to be allowed, to float free. It would not follow that, if he were right about the starkness of the alternatives confronting us, he would be right about 'realism' itself, but whether or not a philosophical account of transcendental moral realism is finally defensible, he would claim that any such theory must either subsume or reassert the arguments of the *Republic*. Nor, of course, even if his strongest claims are more or less correct, will that alone make it simple to determine in any instance whether this act is better or more just than that, less still to know more generally how to act rightly. What he would have shown is that there exists, at least in principle, a canon or measuring stick by which to test such determinations.¹³

¹¹ S. Blackburn, *Spreading the Word* (Oxford University Press, 1984), supplies a contemporary version of which Hume is an ancestor. For more on such positions see chapter 6 below.

¹² B. A. O. Williams, in J. J. C. Smart and B. A. O. Williams, *Utilitarianism: For and Against* (Cambridge University Press, 1973), 16, comments on this kind of 'Government House Consequentialism'.

¹³ Aristotle and other virtue-ethicists often seem to suggest that there will be times when only when confronted by the need for a particular decision will the good man know what he should do. Such a view need not be mere intuitionism, only a claim that the good man cannot always predict how his 'disposition' will instruct him to act. Obviously such difficult situations will be rare. In any case Aristotelian 'intuitionism' – as distinct from more recent versions – depends on the cultivation of 'virtue' over many years of disciplined life.

The debate between Socrates and Thrasymachus – and its ramifications in the rest of the *Republic* – not only dramatizes the problem of the objectivity of moral judgements and the possible realism of moral truths; it also links such questions closely with those of power and its rewards in human affairs. To be noticed too is a significant parallel between Platonic theorizing and the procedures of contemporary perspectivism. Though the latter as such demands no such necessary linkage, many of its advocates (simultaneously following and subverting Nietzsche) are inclined to turn Hobbesian in reducing all the social attitudes and behaviours which are the context within which traditional moralities develop to functions of power, and hence to insist on the ‘politicization’ of all aspects of human behaviour. Plato would agree that politics is fundamentally concerned with the nature, uses and abuses of power, and that, given man’s social nature, any power relationships are ‘political’.

There is a certain difference, however, of at least historical importance, between contemporary talk of all social relations being ‘political’, and the views Plato attributes to Thrasymachus himself. Speaking the language of Greek culture, Thrasymachus has no view of the private sphere as a mere *part* of the public, a part where public power relationships work themselves out through social institutions, including the family. Those modern critics are right who hold that much of the separation of public and private spheres is constructed arbitrarily by convention and legislation, and that the practices of public life, including assumptions about domination and subordination, frequently carry over into the private sphere and the family – and are reinforced in their turn by similar practices which have grown up within that sphere.¹⁴

Insofar as Thrasymachus separates the public and the private, his ‘ideal’ world is less ‘totalitarian’ than would be the case were he to redesign it for the twenty-first century. He allows a little ‘low-grade’ autonomy to the family world of private life and, despite the example of contemporary Sparta, is less aware than his latter-day avatar of the risks to the ‘real ruler’ if the private sphere – ‘woman’s’ world, as he would contemptuously note it – is allowed as much autonomy over against the public as he seems prepared to concede. But a reconstructed Thrasymachus need admit only to having made a mistake in

¹⁴ That is not to admit, however, that even were impersonal justice of necessity the most basic condition of sound public life, the relationship between love and justice in family life should merely reflect this public necessity. Insofar as justice is necessarily impersonal, I shall argue (especially in chapters 5 and 6) that it can and should be transcended: at least in private life, and where possible in public life as well.

social psychology:¹⁵ not about the rational principles of politics but about their application.

Despite the differences between Thrasymachean and modern views of moral nihilism, the similarities are far greater: as much as any contemporary deconstructionist Thrasymachus would found every rational version of 'morality' (whether public or private) and every rational account of the nature of moral language on power relationships, in particular on the type of constitution and social structure (dictatorial, oligarchic or democratic) which happens to be desirable or in place at any given time. And as much as any contemporary political operator Thrasymachus holds those who believe in any objective basis for concern for others to be good-natured fools. In the *Gorgias* too, we find Callicles, the pre-Thrasymachean advocate of the pursuit of personal satisfaction by the effective use of force and fraud, alluding to such fools and reproaching Socrates with immaturity.¹⁶ Talking political philosophy and ethics is kids' stuff; if you 'grow up and live in the real world' you can join the struggle and, if you combine strength of purpose with the appropriate ruthlessness, you can dominate. What other goal makes sense?

Plato has identified in broad terms what he believes to be the only two possible coherent attitudes in the debate about moral foundations. Either moral language is more or less stable and the proper and transcendent referents of moral terms can be inferred, or it is free-floating and ultimately arbitrary in its prescriptions, moral terms signalling only the rationalized expression of (someone's) perceived (and even genuine) needs, desires, wishes and preferences. If the latter alternative is to be upheld, users of moral language can be divided into two groups: those 'stronger' people, the 'movers and shakers' (including the 'as-if' moralists) who invent or exploit it to support their own preferences, wants and needs – whether or not objective or basic – and those who uncritically accept the evaluations which others, whether or not in good faith, hand out to them.

¹⁵ Thrasymachus would quickly see his 'error', if he read a few pages of S. Talmon's *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986) on the advantages to the powerful of an all-embracing reduction of the private to the public during the French Revolution and later. He would similarly profit from S. Schama's *Citizens* (Toronto: Random House, 1989).

¹⁶ As already noted, the positions of Callicles and Thrasymachus differ in that Callicles thinks that 'might' (as he understands it) really is right, while Thrasymachus holds that claims about what is naturally right are as naive as claims about what is naturally good. The two anti-Socratics are identical in the importance they place on power and the advantages it brings, but for Thrasymachus Callicles is at bottom just another type of misguided objectivist, even if the effects of his 'natural' objectivism are more rational.

In later chapters we shall consider whether Plato's basic alternatives form the complete set of possibilities, but two currently popular attempts to circumvent the starkness of the choice he offers can be immediately rejected. The reflex has developed among many professional philosophers – presumably under the influence of Wittgenstein – of proscribing as impossible the discussion of such 'Thrasymachean' claims as that 'dishonesty is good' under pain of being excluded from the community of moral reasoners. Such fiats and delimitations certainly enable foundationalist questions to be dismissed, but at the price of *assuming* some sort of 'reality' for that very morality with which the community of moral reasoners is here supposed to be concerned: in other words of 'begging the question'. But the challenge of Thrasymachus is precisely the radical one that morality is a foolish assumption and the community of moral reasoners a mere assembly of fools, and none the less foolish even if they comprise the vast majority of the human race.¹⁷

A second way of evading Plato's stark options is commonly found among contemporary 'communitarians' in the wake, perhaps consciously, of the followers of Leo Strauss. These start out by assuming that we learn our morality within moral traditions normally embedded in socio-political structures, perhaps preferably in nation-states. Since all our moral thinking occurs within the limitations of these structures, we cannot transcend or – the extreme view – legitimately criticize moral items within them, but must wait until defective traditions, confronted by superior alternatives, lose confidence in themselves and die out. Objections to this are that without such piecemeal criticism – normally from hostile sources – any tradition, however vicious, is likely to perpetuate itself, and more fundamentally that it is folly to encourage people to suppose their particular tradition morally complete and perfectly defensible – not least because most of us are content, while assuming unexamined foundations, to embed our traditions in apparently unchallengeable socio-political institutions.¹⁸

Such attitudes among 'communitarians' seem to arise from a failure to integrate two common features of 'communitarian' schemata: an

¹⁷ I adapt the example of a Thrasymachean treatment of dishonesty from E. L. Pincoffs' *Quandaries and Virtues* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1986), 248: not because Pincoffs' book is generally typical of the type of moral thinking I like to repudiate; indeed insofar as Pincoffs polemizes against the ethics of problem-solving and advocates an ethics of dispositional development I find his approach sympathetic. Rather I cite him to indicate that even among those most critical of what I believe to be unhelpful features of much modern ethics, this particular question-begging approach to foundationalism is widespread.

¹⁸ See the interesting comments of N. K. Badhwar, 'Social Agency, Community and Impartiality', *Social Philosophy and Policy* 13 (1996), 1–26.

anti-individualist emphasis on tradition and the naive belief that traditions develop 'legitimately' over time. The first element may induce a cavalier attitude about objectively secure foundations, the second a failure to differentiate between essential and incidental features of individual traditions. To which Plato would add what communitarians can only ignore or deny:¹⁹ that in the absence of a transcendental metaphysics of morals, secure foundations for the ideals of communitarianism *cannot* be established – from which it follows that our communitarians should limit themselves to identifying the flaws in and evil effects of liberal individualism rather than pretending to offer a viable alternative.²⁰

It is reasonable to assume that Plato was unaware of the magnitude of the task he had set himself and the number of subsidiary problems which must arise if his original 'Socratic' defence against Thrasymachus is eventually to be sustained. That in no way diminishes the importance of his challenge that, unless some sort of transcendental theory of moral values can be defended, it is impossible to identify or adequately to motivate and justify the pursuit of a good life. It is with the problem of justification that the *Republic* in general, and specifically its account of the Form of the Good, is concerned. Plato is not wanting to claim that it is impossible to live – at least given what he called a 'divine dispensation', what Christians call 'grace' or providence and pagans *fortuna* or just luck – what in appearance and even in reality is a good life in 'good faith'; what he does want to urge is the impossibility of the non-realist's offering a compelling rational justification of such a life. Yet justification of behaviour is a primary concern of ethics, at least in the sense that when we think about why what is 'wrong' is wrong, we may be less immediately concerned with our own ability to live a good life (though our reflections may sometimes help with that) than with our ability to persuade or influence others *to* that life and to defend it against intellectual challenge.

Our discussion thus far has been limited to a partial set of 'values', namely moral values. Plato hardly distinguishes between moral and

¹⁹ Typical are the remarks of M. Walzer, *Spheres of Justice: A Defence of Pluralism and Equality* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), xv ('Justice is relative to social meanings'); cf. 312–13.

²⁰ We shall return to this uncomfortable corollary in the final chapter. Liberals sometimes claim that they can operate from uncontroversial foundations: cf. J. Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993). That such claims are normally tendentious is argued by J. Haldane, 'The Individual, the State and the Common Good', *Social Philosophy and Policy* 13 (1996), 59–79. That they trivialize differences of opinion in the interest of securing a 'democratic' consensus is certain. For Rawls' influential distinction between 'comprehensive' and 'political' liberalism (and the latter's emphasis on the neutrality of the state) see recently J. Skorupski, 'Liberty's Hollow Triumph', in J. Haldane (ed.), *Philosophy and Public Affairs* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), 66.

aesthetic evaluation, and would certainly accept that if his case about objectivity fails in the case of ethics it also fails in aesthetics. Whether, if it can be preserved in ethics, it will necessarily also be saved in aesthetics is another, more difficult matter. Plato himself would have wished to argue to that effect, and there is no doubt that he could construct a powerful case, elements of which will become apparent as we proceed.

In the *Cratylus*, a dialogue perhaps slightly earlier than the *Republic*, Plato considered problems of the ‘correctness’ of names. The chief points he had tried to establish are first that if names are ‘applied’ in any sense correctly, such ‘correctness’ can only be determined by an investigation of the things named and not merely of the words which name them. His second point is that it is the man who can think straight (the ‘dialectician’) who will best be able to determine the fit between words and things, or rather the firmness of the bond between various conventional linguistic signs, differing from language to language (Plato toys with, and presumably rejects, the possibility of an ‘ideal’ language), and the objective items, including moral ‘items’, to which these words refer. His implicit conclusion here too is that only a free-standing moral universe, not a set of man-made moral concepts, can supply any basis for moral discourse as for morality itself.

Such Platonic themes will recur in the present discussion, as they do in other contemporary discussions, more or less overtly: a good example of the broad and reassuring claim that in philosophy we less often discover new problems than review old ones. What is more challenging, however, is that we review them from different starting-points, as we meet them in different surroundings and from different perspectives. We may find further reasons for accepting or rejecting long-current theories after going down new and exciting alleys, and learning – in a way we could hardly have imagined without the experience of trying them out – that they are ultimately blind. So as we go down the road of investigating the contemporary crisis in ethics, we shall come surprisingly often to remember that Plato and those who developed his insights were there before us.