COMMENTARY ON RIST:

IS PLATO INTERESTED IN META-ETHICS?

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The project of Rist's paper is an ambitious one: to interpret and appropriate the strategy of Plato's Republic as a whole. His starting-point is a stark dichotomy. Moral philosophers divide into those who reaffirm Morality, by articulating and defending moral realism—call them the Moralists—and those who aim to attack Morality by exposing moral language as fraudulent: call them nihilists or Debunkers. (I will use 'Morality' as I take it Rist does 'morality,' for a putative traditional universal morality as standardly understood.) Of course, most moral philosophers attempt neither of these projects, but so much the worse for them. Like Parmenides' goddess, Rist admits no third way. Between Realism and Debunking there can only be the backwards-turning path of 'quasi-moralities' or 'morality substitutes.' All are futile as responses to the Debunkers; so, indeed, are any non-foundationalist versions of moral realism. Within this framework, Rist offers an interpretation of the Rep. as a paradigm case of the Moralist project, its point of departure a Debunker par excellence in the person of Thrasymachus.

Rist's Parmenidean dichotomy seems to me hopelessly procrustean as a general basis for discussion of moral philosophy; but as a framework for reading the Rep. it has more promise. It is hard to read the Rep. without sensing that for all their subplots, curlicues and apparent digressions, its arguments are harnessed to a single agenda, and that this agenda is for Plato a matter of enormous practical urgency. Rist can offer a plausible explanation of what Plato’s agenda is and why he thinks it matters so much. And Rist’s strategy of appropriation brings out a way in which this agenda might have considerable contemporary interest. Mackie’s powerful and influential arguments against moral realism, to which Rist alludes, take Platonic realism as a canonical target; for "Plato's Forms give a dramatic picture of what objective values would have to be" (Mackie 1977, 40). It certainly seems worth investigating what Platonic realism has to offer by way of counterattack, and whether Mackie's critique of Plato might not have been anticipated by Plato's critique of Mackie.

However, it seems to me that a closer look at some of Rist's own observations suggest a rather different view of just what Plato's project in
the Rep. was. I do not intend to call into question Plato's moral realism; nor will I dispute that in some sense his primary agenda in the Rep. is to vindicate Morality—to show Glaucon and Adeimantus that the claims of Morality should be seen by them as claims of nature and reason. What I do want to question is whether anything we can reasonably identify with the meta-ethical thesis of moral realism is doing the argumentative work.¹

It might be objected that there is no room for debate about the agenda of the Rep. Socrates is, after all, perfectly explicit about what he is doing, namely showing what justice is and how it is in itself beneficial to the just person (Rep. II, 367c-8c). Moreover, this undertaking, and therefore the Rep. as a whole, takes for granted a framework of eudaimonism—and with it, arguably, a certain realism about value in general, if not what we would normally think of as moral realism.² However, it seems to me that Socrates' explicit undertaking still leaves interpretation of the project of the Rep. broadly open. For his subsequent argument involves such substantially new accounts of justice and happiness (not to mention the soul, reason and the other virtues) that we can hardly take the terms of the discussion to have been foreclosed by the egoistic and eudaimonistic terms in which it is introduced. As Bernard Williams has put it of Plato and Aristotle both:

their outlook is not egoistic in the sense that they try to show that the ethical life serves some set of individual satisfactions which is well defined before ethical considerations appear. Their aim is not, given an account of the self and its satisfactions, to show how the ethical life (luckily) fits them. It is to give an account of the self into which that life fits.” (Williams 1985, 32)

The question I want to raise, then, is what role meta-ethical arguments have to play in such accounts of the self; specifically, whether in the case of the Rep. they play the central and foundational role Rist claims.

A good place to start is with the precise nature of the challenge to which Socrates is responding, and with Rist's valuable observation that the positions of Thrasymachus and Glaucon are by no means interchangeable. Glaucon's claim that he is going to 'renew' the argument of Thrasymachus is in fact highly misleading (358b8-c1). Thrasymachus portrayed a society

¹ In discussion, Professor Rist noted that to treat ‘meta-ethics’ as distinct from first-order ‘normative’ ethics, as I will do here, is a possibly distorting anachronism. Fair enough. As will emerge, however, my point can be stated in other terms: it is that Plato's central concern in the Rep. is not with whether or how Morality is grounded in reality but simply with how it contributes to the happy life.

² I owe this objection to an anonymous reader for BACAP.