

John Rist, *Real Ethics*, Cambridge University Press, 2002, pp.viii + 295.

Like Alasdair MacIntyre and Charles Taylor, John Rist believes moral theory cannot succeed without the supernatural. Like them, too, Rist underestimates moral theories in the mainstream of academic discussions. To his credit, he frames his discussion in terms of moral theory, making only limited—and warranted—excursions into political philosophy. His arguments, moreover, are grounded in an admirably sophisticated understanding of the history of philosophy.

Rist recognizes that he defends a form of ethical theory now out of favor amongst philosophers (p. 140 ff). He argues that “the only genuine alternatives” are “a realist theory of moral foundations, of a Platonic sort or (better) overtly theistic” or “an ultimately unintelligible view” that morality depends on choice (p. 271). He believes that either “Platonism is true” or “there is no moral universe” (p. 201) and we are left with Thrasymachean nihilism (p. 17) which is unable to criticize even the most heinous crime (p. 21). According to Rist’s “real”—read: “Christianized Platonic”—ethics, without a “transcendental aspect,” morality is manmade (p. 28). This, though, can mean that morality follows either from arbitrary fiat or the being of mankind; only the former seems Thrasymachean.

Rist recognizes that some will think a non-realist view can provide objectivity (p. 48), but believes that “every alternative to a morality of realism must be a variant on the claim that autonomy itself, expressed in choice, is the supreme, indeed the only ultimate value” (p. 186) and that all such theories are ultimately incoherent as they require that we are better off if we increase our choices (p. 188). He believes, moreover, that since a choice for rationality cannot be made rationally (p. 276), choice-based theories cannot have their foundations established (p. 45) and so are nihilistic (p. 58). Rist argues that without a known end practical reason is impossible and so we need to know what a good human life *needs* (pp. 181-2). A

choice-based account, though, may consider choice a constituent intrinsic good (using Raz's terminology) *because part of an autonomous life*. Since a person who continuously chooses for the sake of choosing (e.g., choosing X, -X, X, etc.) is not merely confused, but unable to act and so not autonomous, on such an account, his choice would be of no value. By contrast, Rist thinks choice is only ever instrumentally valuable so that if we were in heaven, it would have no value (p. 201; cf. p. 69). If the Good is an autonomous life, though, the value of choice is built-in.

Rist's concern with "what we are or could be" (p. 61), leads him to oppose any form of psychological reductionism (see, e.g., p. 45) which divide the self, take one of the divisions as primary, and show no concern with re-unification (he thinks such theories predominate (p. 67)). He takes the fact that we change to be evidence that we are not "complete," not unities (p. 102). and, moreover, doubts that we can attain full unity (p. 71). Still, Rist is firmly with the ancients in indicating we should seek to move from what we are (disintegrated; bad) to what we ideally can be (unified; good) (p. 75). The question, then, is how to pursue unity.

As seeking completion in other humans is apt to lead to disappointment, we should, Rist thinks, seek it in God—who would "not be thus unreliable" (p. 99). God alone can counter "our 'surd'-factor, our self-expanding capacity to lose sight of our 'desired' moral unity" (p. 263). Where others seek "personal correction" (p. 219) in community alone, Rist insists there must be a transcendental guarantor of soundness—preferably, God (pp. 108-125). This nonetheless requires a social context, for man is a social animal (p. 210) and so any self-directed activity must take place in a "framework of more or less coherent past practices, habits, and dispositions" that allow for non-random choices in pursuit of unity (p. 68). Community helps us move from our "present empirical (and divided) self" to something "beyond ... *what we are now*"—to our "'real' self" (pp. 221-222). (Rist fears "moral atomism" and "radical" and "anti-social" individualism, which he does

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not consider straw man views (pp. 217-219).) A social and political framework is necessary for responsibility and “taking or declining responsibility ... is a key to reducing or increasing the splitting of the self which indicates ... moral progress or regression” (p. 205). The next problem, then, is political—statecraft is soulcraft.

Platonists envision a specific risk of diversity: the democratic soul, “ever more multiform in his principles.” The fear is that by tolerating all ideas, the individual “comes to value none of them—unless the arbitrary choices of fascist fanaticisms—while at the same time he grows ever more homogenized.” Such individuals have no sense of their own traditions, accept everything, and thereby accept nothing. Citizens thus become “so homogenized in their banal desires and aspirations that they can be manipulated with ever greater success” (p. 234). This social commentary seems dead on. As our “Western tradition ... has found itself confronted by so many different traditions ... it has had no time to assimilate or reject them. The result is an uncritically respected cultural pluralism” (p. 236). This, in turn, leaves politicians thinking “the public must be soothed into believing that harmony can be achieved by some kind of non-divisive politics of healing or at least of caring” (p. 237). Rist thinks this democratic hell is the “political analogue to a world where ‘choice’ is the highest value.” Its a “world without any sense of the common good” which, he thinks, is dependent on God (p. 241).

At bottom, Rist deplores the rootlessness of both contemporary philosophy (see pp. 242-3) and the contemporary individual. He notes “the end of a tradition in a rootless individual who frequents (or haunts) our city streets, or in his often suicidal and frenetic avatars in contemporary literature and popular culture seeking to hide their isolation in mindless sex, drugs and whimpers about their alienation and how ‘screwed’ they have been by their parents and society” (p. 244). One can’t help but sympathize with these concerns. Still, Rist’s worship of the past is not necessarily better than the complete rejection of it he abhors and we’ve been given

no conclusive reason to believe, as he does, that Nietzsche was right “that after the ‘death’ of God there could be no foundation for morality” (p. 260). Those sympathetic to Rist’s theistic view—that “for morality to function God must function both as final and (at least in great part) as efficient cause of our moral life” (p. 257)—may find useful argumentative artillery in *Real Ethics*. Since, as Rist admits, debate between theists and non-theists regarding “the *foundations* and the *justification* of morality” is likely “to come to an abrupt halt before what is the effect of the theistic brick wall” (p. 260), non-theists may prefer to walk past it.