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Socratic Metaethics Imagined

Steve Ross and Lisa Warenski

A time machine mysteriously appeared one day in ancient Athens. Curious about the future of philosophical dialogue, Socrates entered the device and traveled to the 21st Century. He spent several months in the United Kingdom and United States discussing metaethics before returning to Athens, now a devoted and formidable quasi-realist moral expressivist.

Upon his return to Athens, Socrates went down to the Piraeus to see the festival for the Thracian goddess Bendis. On his way back toward town, he met up with Polemarchus, who entreated him to join him and several others in his company for dinner at his home, where Socrates could also visit with Polemarchus's aged father, Cephalus.

Socrates accepted the invitation. Upon their arrival, the group and some guests who were already there sat in a circle beside Cephalus. Socrates and Cephalus entered into a conversation about the burdens of old age. The conversation turned to the value of having lived a just and pious life, and quite naturally, to the question of justice itself. At that point, Socrates challenged the guests to say what justice *is*, and after several failed attempts on the part of Polemarchus, Thrasymachus jumped into the conversation.¹

Thrasymachus: Listen, then. I say justice is nothing other than what is advantageous for the stronger. Well, why do you not praise me? No, you are unwilling.

Socrates: First, I must understand what you mean. For, as things stand, I do not. You say that what is advantageous for the stronger is just. What on earth do you mean, Thrasymachus?

¹ Remarks in the opening section of the dialogue are based on the 2004 C.D.C Reeve translation of the *Republic*. Views similar to those attributed to Socrates here are found in Blackburn (1993, 1998 and 2009: §2) and Gibbard (2003). We note that Paul Bloomfield (2003: 524-25) has also observed the analogy between some of the views expressed here by Socrates and those of Thrasymachus. We are grateful to Nickolas Pappas and the editors of this journal for helpful comments, especially on matters pertaining to Ancient Greece and Plato's *Republic*.

Thrasymachus: Some cities are ruled tyrannically, some democratically, and some aristocratically. And each ruling group sets down laws for its own advantage. In each city, the ruling group is the stronger one. And each type of government makes the laws that are advantageous for itself. In legislating, each declares what is just for its subjects. But this is simply what is advantageous for itself. Justice is the same thing in all cities, and it this: what is advantageous for the established rulers.

Socrates: Now I see what you mean. But justice cannot be that which is advantageous for the stronger. Justice is not a set of facts about what is advantageous for some particular group. You are mistaking a normative term for a descriptive one. When we judge that a ruler or ruling body is just, we do not describe some segment of reality; rather, we express an attitude or plan.

Thrasymachus: You are so far from understanding justice that you do not realize that justice really is the good of another, what is advantageous for the stronger and the ruler, and harmful for the one who serves and obeys. So as I said from the beginning, the stronger party *says* what is right. And what is said is whatever is in fact in the stronger party's interest. One might put it this way: Might makes right. Or: The one with political power determines what is just in each particular case.

Socrates: Might does not make right, Thrasymachus. You suppose, falsely, that there are truthmakers for moral claims. But moral claims are not like that. Moral claims do not match or fail to match any facts that would make them true or false, right or wrong.

Thrasymachus: Since I do not suppose that justice is a moral virtue at all, I do not begin to make the mistake that you accuse me here of making. But Socrates, your answer puzzles me. Are you saying that moral claims cannot be true or false? Or that moral judgments cannot be correct or mistaken? If so, it sounds like you are agreeing with me, because I deny that there is such a thing as genuine moral virtue.

Socrates: No, Thrasymachus. Moral claims *are* truth apt, but not because they correspond to *facts*. When we make a moral judgment and then say of our moral claim that it is true, we use the truth predicate disquotationally; no spooky moral facts are required. Let me illustrate what I mean here. We spoke the other day about apartheid, a system of racial segregation and discrimination that I learned about in my travels. But we do not accept this practice. If a man from

North Africa were to come to Athens, settle here and have a family, he could be a full and equal citizen of the *polis*; the color of his skin would not matter. So apartheid must be wrong.

When we say, “Apartheid is wrong,” our judgment is made from within a morally engaged standpoint. When we say, “It is *true* that apartheid is wrong,” this, too, is made from within a morally engaged standpoint. The sentence ‘Apartheid is wrong’ is true just in case apartheid is wrong – which of course it is.

Thrasymachus: I am very puzzled by this talk of yours, Socrates. To say that the sentence ‘Apartheid is wrong’ is true if and only if apartheid is wrong seems to leave us exactly where we were, which is, of course, wondering whether it is indeed the case that apartheid is wrong.

And this leads me to another question. To whom do you mean to refer by this “we” when you talk this way, Socrates? Do you mean just those of us here in Athens? In Sparta? Or do you mean everyone everywhere?

Socrates: I mean anyone who judges from within a normative perspective that is admirable. We must reject apartheid, for it is an abominable practice.

Thrasymachus: But how is this an answer to my question? Is not what is admirable in the eye of the beholder? The rulers in an apartheid state might find that the system of discrimination and segregation that you speak of protects their interests. And what is to stop them from adopting such a system? Apartheid allows each group to continue its practices and customs separately, and so may be said to preserve the stability of the *polis*.

Do you not think that apartheid is “admirable” by the lights of those who advocate it? Isn’t the acceptability of apartheid going to be relative to the engaged normative perspective of the speaker?

Socrates: Of course. Apartheid may be admirable by the lights of those who advocate it; this is undeniable. But that doesn’t make the acceptability of apartheid relative to the outlook of some individual or group. When I judge that apartheid is wrong, I judge from my own perspective. But I judge *categorically*. I do not think that the perspective of the advocate of apartheid is equally justified. And so I can rightly and legitimately say: Anyone who thinks apartheid is acceptable is mistaken!

Thrasymachus: So you judge that apartheid is wrong, and you think that anyone who judges otherwise is making a mistake. But the rulers of a society

may think it necessary to practice apartheid in order to maintain their domination and control. Consider the Spartans. In Sparta, the Helots reside in their ancestral villages and are not allowed to be members of Spartan society. The Spartans subjugate the Helots and harness their labor, which in turn supports the Spartan economy. They dominate the Helots in all sorts of other ways too, as you know. Spartans may find the practice of apartheid quite natural and unobjectionable, for, after all, it closely aligns with what they do to others in their own *polis*.

That some will think they are being perfectly reasonable in advocating a practice you think wrong must be granted from the start. So now tell me clearly: What mistake do you think the advocate of apartheid is actually making? What is your account of moral error here?

Socrates: Mine is an account of moral *judgment*. Instead of giving an account of moral error, we should ask what it is that we are doing when we judge that a particular claim that connects with ethics is mistaken. And, as I just explained, we are expressing a normative perspective. I offer no account of moral error except what follows from what I said before about truth. Moral *p* is mistaken if and only if not-*p* – and that is all that should be said. What it would be for it to be a mistake to think that apartheid is always wrong would be for it to be the case that apartheid is sometimes just fine.²

Thrasymachus: But this is just logic, Socrates. You have told me that if *p* is true, then not-*p* must be false. No doubt this is so. But you have not told me why *p* is true or why not-*p* is false. When you talk about it “being the case” that some moral not-*p* is so, it certainly sounds like you think there are moral facts. Yet earlier, you assured me that there are no moral facts.

Socrates: Very good Thrasymachus, you are right about both. It does sound that way, and there aren't any moral facts. It is perfectly fine to talk *as if* there are moral facts. There is nothing wrong with realist-sounding talk in ordinary moral practice. When we *talk* as if there are moral facts, this is innocent enough. But when, from within a morally-engaged standpoint, I judge that such and such is a moral fact, I am not detecting any strange *thing*. I am simply making a normative judgment.

Thrasymachus: Are you? Well then, tell me more. It sounds to me as if you are just saying what you please. Is this judgment a recognition of some mind-

² Blackburn 1998: 318 and 2009: §2.

independent fact, or is it constrained by some fact, such that the contrary judgment would be mistaken? If so, tell me what these facts are or how this constraint would work.

Socrates: To say that normative facts are out there, subsisting independently of us, might just be a fancy way of putting an aspect of a plan for living. When I accept something as a normative fact, for example, that it is wrong to kick dogs for fun, I accept a plan to avoid kicking dogs for fun, regardless of what attitude toward the practice I have or might come to have, and regardless of whether I am surrounded by people who approve of kicking dogs. The claim of independence, then, turns out to be internal to normative thinking – though arrayed in sumptuous rhetoric.³

Thrasymachus: To say that this idea of mind independence is woven into the project of normative thinking would seem to fly in the face of the very conversation we are presently having, Socrates. I do not see how you can simply stipulate that this is so when my conception of normative judgment and disagreement, the conception with which we began when talking about justice, is so dramatically different from the one you are putting forward here. So answer me this: Let us imagine a person who thinks that kicking dogs for fun is always fine. He makes a judgment that is structurally the same; it, too, is a normative judgment, but with a different content. Will there not then be alternative moral facts?

Socrates: No, no, no, Thrasymachus. You are confused. Moral value is mind-independent. Even if we had different attitudes, it would still be wrong to kick dogs for fun. Similarly, even if we approved of apartheid, apartheid would still be wrong.

Thrasymachus: So you say. But I remain unconvinced. Perhaps you secretly believe your moral judgments are constrained by some mind-independent facts after all? I cannot see what else you might have in mind.

Socrates: I would never say such a thing; that would violate my commitment to naturalism. When I say that moral value is mind-independent, I simply mean that genuine moral claims do not alter because of any changing attitudes. Moral value does not vary with what attitudes or plans we happen to have; that it does not is the nature of how we, conceptually, understand moral value. There are

³ See Gibbard 2003: 186. See Dreier 2012 for discussion.

normative facts, within the world of normative judgment, but it is our sensibilities that do the foundational explanatory work here and that make such facts seem to be. There are no robustly realist normative facts that are “out there” independently of us that we search for and then grasp. On the contrary, normative facts are “thin” because they do not involve ontological commitment. As I said before, moral facts do not belong to some sector of reality.

Thrasymachus: I think I understand. You say that your judgment that apartheid is wrong is correct because it is a kind of thin normative fact that apartheid is wrong. But how do you know that it is a fact that apartheid is wrong? How do you rule out the view of your opponent who makes a contrary normative judgment, which also seems to posit thin normative facts, but now with opposing content?

Socrates: “It is a fact that apartheid is wrong” is just a fancy way of saying “Apartheid is wrong.” So how do I know that apartheid is wrong? I judge that apartheid is cruel and dehumanizing. Moreover, my judgment would not be altered by further acquaintance with facts about apartheid or upon any further reflection on its merits or lack thereof. Someone who favors apartheid poses no threat to my values. I condemn the practice. A civilized society does not practice apartheid.

Thrasymachus: But Socrates, to say it is “cruel” or “dehumanizing” is very close, as far as I can see, to saying, in a slightly different way, simply that it is wrong, which is exactly where we began. We have just travelled within a circle of related moral terms. Can you say, in non-moral terms, what it is *about* apartheid that makes it cruel, or dehumanizing, and so wrong? What non-moral description of the practice justifies this moral one? I cannot see how you can legitimately claim to know that any of these moral attributions are genuine unless you can answer this question.

Socrates: To ask for a non-moral description of a practice that justifies our moral assessment of it is to ask a misplaced question. The judgment that apartheid is cruel and dehumanizing, and hence wrong, is a substantive moral judgment that is made from within a normative perspective. As I said before, we judge that apartheid is wrong from a morally engaged standpoint, namely a perspective within which we have adopted some moral values.

Thrasymachus: I do not see why I must agree with what you say about moral justification. Why is it that to ask for some fact about a practice is to take a

perspective external to morality? This seems mere stipulation on your part; moral argument does not seem to work that way to me at all. Surely the fact that every citizen speaks his mind in a democracy will be rightly pointed to by those who wish to defend democracy. And anyway, even if I accept all you say here, I still do not have a good answer to my earlier challenge. You have not been able to say anything as to why your engaged standpoint is right, and that of your rival is wrong.

Socrates: Of course we appeal to facts when justifying a moral claim. What makes it wrong to torture dogs for fun is that torturing dogs causes them pain. No one would deny this. But no set of descriptive facts can justify a normative perspective itself. So the answer to your challenge can only be given from within a moral standpoint. No facts alone can do that work.

Thrasymachus: But surely you mean, “Torturing dogs causes them unjustified pain.” It is the infliction of *unjustified* pain that makes torture wrong. After all, causing pain to those guilty of crimes may be perfectly fine, as I think you would agree. But doesn't this show that we need an account of what is a good reason, when defending our judgments in moral life? Don't we need to say what morality aims at, and so which facts will count, and why? After all, some facts count in military strategy, and very different facts count in medicine. Will it not be the same way here? I would have thought that was just the sort of argument that you would pursue, Socrates.

But now I think that you deny that the question of moral justification can be answered in a general way. You tell me that it is only when we are within some engaged perspective that we can say which facts count, and why. But if that is so, then I still cannot see how you can say why you are right and your rival is wrong. If a rival says, “But from MY engaged perspective, I don't think the pain of dogs should count at all,” other than to deny his position, what can you say?

So then it seems that you must agree, for I find in your arguments no counter to my view: Justice, or the morally good, is nothing other than what is advantageous for the stronger!

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