

Sometimes doing what is Right has No Right Answer: On Hilary Putnam's Pragmatism with Existential Choices

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I

This essay was inspired (or if 'inspired' is a too pretentious word for it, then say 'engendered') by a recent re-reading of Hilary Putnam's Gifford Lectures, *Renewing Philosophy* (1992), particularly his last chapter, and by his *Ethics Without Ontology* (2004), particularly his lectures "Ontology: An Obituary" and "Enlightenment and Pragmatism" contained in it. I was writing this quite unknowingly on the day he died and I learned of his death before I finished it. I was saddened to hear of his death because I greatly admired Putnam, both as a philosopher and as a morally engaged intellectual. I also cherished him as a friend. His influence will remain with us. It is no exaggeration or hyperbole to say of him what has often been said: he was a giant among contemporary philosophers and not simply, as has also been said, a highly distinguished philosopher. Moreover, Putnam was a markedly sensitive morally engaged person who was also a delight to be with. He was not at all a Kant's grandfather. We will not forget him. I shall now turn to what I was writing about Putnam at the time of his death.

II

It is one thing to say that you should never act irrationally; it is quite a different thing to say there is a reason for everything that occurs or is done. There may be and probably is *a cause* for everything but there is not always *a reason*—a rationale—for everything that is the case. It makes sense to ask for a reason to be moral; it does not make sense to ask why be rational or reasonable. It

is not plausible or perhaps even sensible to ask whether there is always a reason or rationale for everything that occurs or can obtain.

There is no sensible asking why, any why, without an understanding of the *practice* of giving and accepting reasons or questions as well as the rejections of some claimed reasons that are given. And this requires the having in the stream of life a form of rationality. There could be no forms of life without it. And for this to be so there must be something like a community, some things that are community affairs, a public community practice of reasoning and of something that counts as a warranted assertability.

But must there be a point where there is a situation where we must just say or think how we live and perhaps must live in some general way? But for some of these fundamental things for our forms of life there are no grounds, no justification for how we live. We just live in these ways. I speak of what Wittgenstein called the forms of life of we encumbered social animals. We come to recognize for some of the questions we try to ask that they have no singly correct answer. And that there are also situations where asking 'Why?' comes to an end. Not everything has a rationale or a reason. Such a rationalism needs to be seen to be an illusion.

Moreover, practicality and expense aside, in order to ask and expect a reason—a rational consideration—concerning everything that occurs or obtains there must be a *cause* but there may be no *reason (rationale)* for it or for them or at least many of them. To believe that there must be is a rationalist chimera. These are also matters that look like questions but are not. To ask *why* triangles have three sides is not in order. It is just a matter of discoursing how matters have come to be defined. There is no great metaphysical mystery or discovery here. We just would not call anything that was not a closed three-sided figure a triangle. We could not *discover*, after all, that there are some things that are triangles that are not three-sided figures. It is not like discovering that something can travel faster than the speed of light. By contrast, the claim that it is harder for people who are Mandarin writers to write in Mandarin than it is for people who are English writers to write in English is an

empirical claim resulting in an empirical question that has a right or wrong answer. But it will be determined, whatever the answer is, empirically but not definitionally or by conceptual analysis.

Is it not always in order to ask for and expect a reason or a rational consideration for everything? To think that is there just goes with a kind of unrecognized rationalism or even with an explicit one. It is the sort of unrealistic attitude that it is in order is like asking why triangles have three sides. You can speak of or understand that triangles must be three-sided without understanding why it is so. It may just be an implicit definitional matter for you. Whether I have a fever or not is a genuine question. And whether it is true or not that I have a fever is to be answered empirically. It is a genuine empirical question, though sometimes the answer is obvious. To ask whether a triangle is a three-sided figure is not a genuine question *unless* it is a question about how we happen to use language. It is not possible to reasonably ask for a *reason* for everything that is done or that obtains. Everything has a cause but not a ground or rationale. There are no causeless happenings. But there are reasonless happenings; happenings with no rationale or aim.

It is not possible to sensibly ask for a *reason* for everything. By this I mean a *ground* or a *rationale* for everything. If I get a fever or am tired I may not know what caused it, though I will know that something did. And I know these things have *causes*. It makes no sense to ask for the rationale for a fever or for being tired but it does make sense to ask for the rationale for a government policy or for why I exercise every day.

However, it does not make sense to ask for the reason (the rationale) for everything because some things have no rationale and even cannot have a rationale, not even a reasonable one or an unreasonable one. A hiccup, for example. But for some other things it may just be a matter of our not knowing what the rationale is. But we also may be mistaken here. It may only have a cause. There are no causeless happenings. A cause, yes; but not a rationale. He has a fever has no rationale but should the United States put boots on the ground in Syria has a rationale (though perhaps a mistaken one). Questions about causation are also in the background there but the crucial question is whether it as

a sound rationale. Questions about causality and rationality are often mixed. But still they are distinct. There are causes for an earthquake but no rationale for it. There are causes for an economic depression but reasons as well.

Whether I have a fever or a toothache has a cause and whether I have or not is a straightforward empirical question. Whether all triangles are closed three-sided figures is not an empirical question unless it is taken as a question about how the word 'triangle' is used.

It is not possible to ask for the *reason* for everything. By this I mean a *rationale* or a *ground*. If I get a fever or am tired I may not know what caused it but I do know it can't have a rationale and I know that the fever or the tiredness has some cause or causes. If the United States puts boots on the ground in Syria I know that it both has a cause and a rationale, though it may be mistaken one. If there is an earthquake in Chile I know that it has a cause or causes. But it is nonsense to say that it has a rationale.

III

We cannot always sensibly ask a justifying or warranting why question, though we can, though sometimes unnecessarily, ask a causal why question. However, for any kind of why question you can't ask it without understanding the practice of giving and accepting reason and with that assuming some form of rationality. Some practice that is rationale. There are questions where we need to make a choice or a decision where we can come to understand that there can be no *decisive* reason for making a choice or the decision that should be made. These are questions which Hilary Putnam, following Jean Paul Sartre, calls *existential questions* where the choice between one answer and another comes to just making an unwarranted choice between two answers with no rationale for making one rather than the other—even where the choice is momentous. It sometimes comes to just making a choice, a *sheer choice*. These are the existential choices. It does not mean these are or that there are any unanswerable questions. They are not difficult answerable questions but questions

for which there is no warrantable choice between the choices available. It is not that we can't choose but that we must, if we choose, without a justification or warrant one way or another between two demanding choices for which there are no grounds for choosing one way rather than the other and that it is crucial that we make here an ungrounded choice between such choices which are the only viable choices in that situation. But there are no grounds for making one or the other choice between them. Where these choices seem to be the only viable choices and we need to make a choice, as in such a situation we do, where we must just choose between them if we choose at all. We must just choose there without a grounding for our choice. These existential questions come unavoidably to being decisively reasonless questions. Rather than rationally embedded choices they become choices for which there is a determinate rationale. However, a choice that is a demanding one but still groundless. They are choices for which there is no right answer. Even why the choice is made cannot be shown to be warrantable. Between the choices that are available to this is not something that reasoning can give us answer as to which one is the right one.

We may be tempted to say there are 'unanswerable questions' but where something that is unanswerable, that has no possibility of an answer, it is not a question. But these existential choices are not warrantable choices. They are just choices we make without a warrant. We know in that situation that we must, *morally must*, make a choice but we as well see that we have no grounds, no good reasons, for making one choice rather than the other. There are good reasons for either choice but no good reasons for making one choice rather than the other. Our choice in such situations is always arbitrary. Yet we recognize that we must choose, morally must, though we know *that choice, whatever it is*, will be a groundless one and that reason there is empty-handed and that further reasoning, no matter how carefully, cannot cure such matters or show which way is the rational or reasonable way. But we shouldn't say we have 'unanswerable questions'. That is unintelligible.

That rationalism is impossible. The belief that there is always a reason for choice. Sometimes we must so choose but situations where existential choice is at issue are the only places where we

must choose between mutually desirable choices without any grounds for choice or decision between them. Contrariwise, the claim of sufficient reason is that in all cases there must be a determinate reason for such choices. It allows for no existential choices or decisions. If there are such choices the claim that the world embodies universally the governance or at least existence of sufficient reason is false. We do not have existential choices where we do not have that at all. Where there must always be at least some deeply grounded sufficient reason. We understand that we should choose but we also understand that for what we take to be the two viable alternatives or at least the only two alternatives we must just choose without reason. We have here a *sheer* choice. Neither choice is unintelligible or even mistaken but we do not know which one to choose. And careful reasoning does not yield an answer. They may both seem to be equally rational. But we have no good reasons to choose one rather than the other. Our back, so to say, is against the wall. Rather than unintelligibility we recognize we have clear reasons to see that we are faced with a choice that is not grounded in reason that is not answerable by rationality or answerable in any other way. Rationality or reasonableness does not guide us into which choices are to be made in such situations and concerning what is to be done. We must, if we choose at all, just choose without a rationale, not even a whisper of one. We must, morally must, just choose. But we also recognize that our choice, if we make one, is neither rational nor irrational but that all the same we must—or at least morally must—choose. But this choice will be a blind one. What we also realize is that such a choice will be arbitrary. Still, it is even worse not to make a choice at all. As human beings we must make a choice, arbitrary as it is. But it is still worse not to make a choice at all. Our choosing may be so demanding that arbitrary as our choice is it is still worse not to make a choice at all. As moral human beings we must make a choice. Our situation may be so demanding that arbitrary as our choice will inevitably be we still must choose. Morally speaking we must choose. This just is the name of the game where an existential choice is to be made. But it certainly is not like choosing between vanilla ice cream and chocolate ice

cream where we equally like both and both are equally unhealthy. And it is not like flipping a coin. It is instead an agonizing choice.

Beware here of the claim that there are 'unanswerable questions'. We never have a question that could at least theoretically be unanswerable. If something is unanswerable it isn't a question. It would be like asking whether we could have a non-three-sided triangle. We cannot have a *question* which could be an 'unanswerable question', though we have questions where we must just choose without a reason. However, there are questions where the choices or choice we need to make are between choices that are both unwarrantable choices. Where we are in a situation where our choice is an unwarrantable choice between two or more warranted choices where all of them are between equally demanding choices, their warrantability seems *at least* equal. Usually it is a choice between two equally warrantable choices where whatever choice we make is an unwarrantable choice between two warrantable choices. But whatever choice we make we still make in either event a warranted choice. But *between* the two warranted choices the choice is unwarrantable. There is no reason to make one choice rather than the other between the two warrantable choices.

That there must always be *the* or even *a* rational choice here is illusory. That there is *the* rational thing to do or *the* reasonable way to live are both non-starters and non-finishers. That that rationalism is so is impossible. Not everything is grounded. There is not a reason for everything though there is a cause or causes. To think otherwise is to be led down the garden path. Sometimes, if we wish to be non-evasive as well as decent, we must choose between mutually desirable choices without any ground at all for making one choice rather than the other. But where it is also evasive and sometimes immoral not to make any choice at all. The choices at issue there are often agonizing ones where either agonizing choice is equally cognitively on track. However, beware of the claim of sufficient reason that claims that there must always be a justifying *reason* for what we do. A *cause*, yes, but not necessarily a reason. There just isn't such a sufficient *reason* for everything that we do and for everything that obtains.

Putnam gives an account of an existential choice in his *Renewing Philosophy*. He exemplifies what this comes to be citing Sartre's paradigmatic example of an existential choice. It is the fictitious example given in Sartre's little book *Existentialism and Humanism* of Pierre depicted as a young adult in World War II faced with the agonizing choice between joining the resistance which, if he does, will come to his having to abandon care of his aged mother who would be left along on a farm or of not joining the Resistance and fighting the enemy and abandoning his mother. Pierre is agonizing over what is the right thing to do. There are two rights here without any rational way of choosing between them. Or perhaps we should say any way of choosing that one choice is the more warranted choice than the other; that is the right thing to be done.

Such existential choices—the only kind of existential choices there are—are not a rarity in our wonderful world, though perhaps not always or even obviously so. But they are there. But this does not come to a nihilism, a decisionalism, a subjectivism or even a relativism. But it will require an addition to a Deweyian or Peircean pragmatism. But not an undermining of it. But it will be a pragmatism with *some* existentialist characteristics.¹ Being rational or using a scientific method will not settle everything that needs to be settled.

¹ Here, as Putnam shows, William James is more existentialist than Dewey, Peirce, Hook or Ernest Nagel. Putnam, *Renewing Philosophy*, 190-200.

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