

IS "WHY SHOULD I BE MORAL?" AN ABSURDITY?

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A

Can we ask, if we are clear that we are not asking for a *moral* justification, for a justification of ethics or morals as an activity? Or, to put it differently, is 'Why should I be moral?' a meaningful question in any context? I wish to argue here, against Toulmin and others, that 'Why should I be moral?' is an intelligible (logically non-absurd) question.¹ We can always ask for a justification for taking a moral point of view at all. This is so because not all questions about conduct (about what is to be done or about what should have been done, etc.) are moral questions. Morals, though a unique mode of reasoning, belongs to a larger mode of reasoning: practical reasoning (reasoning about conduct).

In examining the question of the justification of morals, we must be careful to separate this question from questions about the justification of any particular system of morals or ethics. Rather, we are concerned here with the justification of ethics (any ethics) as an *activity* or as a *mode of reasoning*. Secondly, we must be quite clear that in asking for a justification of morals we are not asking for a moral justification of morals, for to ask this latter question (as Kant pointed out to us long before Toulmin), is to ask for the absurd; for, in asking for a justification of morality, one has already put oneself beyond moral considerations altogether. I am asking here if one can intelligibly ask for a justification of morals itself as a rational activity. In asking this question, I am asking a question about morality for which morality itself cannot supply the answer.² In other words, this question is just not the sort of question we can ask from a moral point of view. Yet, may we not ask, in the manner of Bentham, "Well, now what's the good of all this business of morality anyway?"³ If we recognize that 'good' may have many uses (including non-moral ones), there seems to be no linguistic impropriety in Bentham's question.

¹ See Stephen Toulmin, *An Examination of the Place of Reason in Ethics*, pp. 160-5. My arguments here also apply against the argument used by A. I. Melden, "Why Be Moral?", *The Journal of Philosophy*, XLV (August 12, 1948), pp. 449-56. For an argument that in certain respects parallels mine see Henry Aiken, "The Levels of Moral Discourse," *Ethics*, Vol. LXII (July, 1952), pp. 245-7.

² Aiken, "The Levels of Moral Discourse," *Ethics*, LXII (July, 1952), 246.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 247.

In talking about the relation of religion to ethics, Toulmin claims that one can challenge *normatively* the propriety of the whole religious mode of reasoning.⁴ Now could we not say the same thing about the mode of moral reasoning? And, if not, why not? I am suggesting that it is just as possible, though perhaps not practically as feasible, to challenge any moral appeal normatively. The "ultimacy of the moral appeal" can be challenged either in the name of a higher authority (God, the State) or just on the grounds of expediency or personal inclination.

Toulmin seems to regard utterances that I allege are questioning the good of morality *as such* as being logically absurd. He takes the question, 'Why ought one to do what is right anyway?' to be a logically absurd one (taking 'right' and 'ought' in their "simplest senses") because 'ought' and 'right' originate in the same situations and serve the same purposes. In fact, Toulmin argues that such a suggestion is just as unintelligible as the suggestion "that some emerald objects might not be green". For Toulmin, "it is a self-contradiction . . . to suggest that we 'ought' to do anything but what is 'right'".⁵

Toulmin's answer needs qualification because of the evaluative meaning of 'ought' and 'right'; but Toulmin's contention about 'Why ought one to do what is right?' also needs qualification in another way, and in this respect it is even more seriously misleading. A moral sceptic asking, 'Why ought one to do what is right, anyway?' might well be questioning the good or the value of the whole activity of morals: the 'ought' in, 'Why ought one to do what is right anyway?' and the 'should' in 'Why should I be moral?' are evaluative expressions but they are not moral expressions.⁶ Understood in this fashion, 'Why should I be moral?' or 'Why ought one to do what is right, anyway?' are not unintelligible or logically absurd. Nor does it help Toulmin to argue, in this context, that the evaluative terms are to be taken in their simplest senses. They have many senses and if we are interested in understanding the full scope of the logic of justification in human conduct, we have no right to exclude any one of these natural *uses* as irrelevant. As Aiken points out:

"In emphasizing the limits of moral reasoning which govern the strictly 'ethical' applications of 'ought' or 'right,' they [certain linguistic analysts] forget that such limits are themselves man-

⁴ Toulmin, *The Place of Reason in Ethics*, pp. 219-21.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

⁶ Aiken, "The Levels of Moral Discourse," *Ethics*, LXII (July, 1952) 245-7.

made and that the autonomy which, as social beings, we normally grant to moral rules can itself be transcended by the raising of questions which require the whole enterprise of morality to justify itself before some *other* court of appeal. Finally, they forget that 'justification' is a many-sided process and that what, from one point of view, is an adequate justification is, from another standpoint, no more than the posing of a problem."⁷

However, if Toulmin is careful to remain true to his own arguments, he can still reply to such a question as this, although I doubt whether his reply would put an end to the questions of the moral sceptic or "despairing philosopher". His reply runs as follows:

"... if those who call for a 'justification' want 'the case for morality', as opposed to 'the case for expediency', etc., then they are giving philosophy a job which is not its own. To show that you ought to choose certain actions is one thing; to make you *want to do* what you ought to do is another, and not a philosopher's task."⁸

I am not certain that I understand Toulmin's point here; but if it is to point out the distinction between guiding and goading, between offering a justification for a moral judgement and supplying a motive to make a person behave morally, I agree with Toulmin that, at the level we are now discussing, the distinction between guiding and goading is essential. But I do not think such a distinction will help Toulmin in rejecting the above "post-ethical questions" as absurd. For, in demanding a justification of morality, we are not asking for a motive to behave morally, but are asking a justificatory question about morality as an activity. We want to know (as do Glaucon and Adeimantus) what justifying reasons (if any) there are for taking the moral point of view rather than appraising actions on the basis of whether they will serve our own self-interest.⁹ The moral sceptic need *not* be just asking for a motive in asking, 'Is any justification of ethics needed?'¹⁰ He may be asking why he ought (in some non-moral sense of 'ought') to do what he ought (moral sense of 'ought') to do? To think there is something logically absurd in the last question, is to forget that 'ought' has a variety of uses. Forgetting that 'ought' has these multiple

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 246, italics mine.

⁸ Toulmin, *The Place of Reason in Ethics*, p. 163.

⁹ I am assuming here that ethical egoism is not a possible *ethical* view. I have tried to offer some arguments in support of this contention in my article "Egoism in Ethics". See *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, forthcoming.

¹⁰ I am using 'justification' in the above context in a quite ordinary sense. I am not using it in the extended sense of "pragmatic justification" or "vindication".

functions in different contexts, 'ought' is treated as if it had only one use or meaning. A somewhat different error is arbitrarily to take 'ought' only in its full moral sense and to ignore other uses as illegitimate uses. But if we take the full spectrum of uses of 'ought', 'good', 'right', etc., as our basic *explicandum*, we cannot make the defence Toulmin suggests: that is, we cannot rule out Aiken's "*post-ethical*" question. And, in asking for a 'justification of ethics' these various uses, at different points, all become relevant.

However, it is difficult to make any positive comments about the odd question, 'Is any justification of ethics needed?'. Toulmin has certainly gone a long way toward showing what a queer sort of question it is, even though he has not shown it to be logically absurd. I will try now to point out a couple of contexts in which this admittedly odd question can naturally arise.

B

Let us first take a fictional example from a completely non-philosophical context. Huck Finn's moral crisis (Chapter XVI of *Huckleberry Finn*) arises around his relation with the runaway slave, Jim. Huck Finn is a sensitive youth. Though he is an "outcast", he is deeply, but yet ambivalently, involved in the Southern society of the middle of the last century. He feels that slavery is perfectly justifiable and hates abolitionists. He does not question this part of the moral code of his society at all, at least not consciously. When a steamboat boiler explodes and he is asked if anyone is hurt, he replies, "No'm, killed a nigger", and, of course, finds nothing wrong in the response, "Well, it's lucky, because sometimes people do get hurt."¹¹ By chance, Huck Finn travels with Jim in his flight to free territory. Huck, as the voyage progresses, begins to suffer pangs of conscience and resolves to turn Jim in; but, at the last moment, he cannot bring himself to do what he regards as unquestionably right and, by a neat trick, helps Jim escape. But Huck feels guilt rather than exaltation in doing this; and it would be a blatant ethnocentrism to assume that Huck, behind the facade of a conventionalized moral code, dimly discerned the true light of "the Natural Moral Law". Huck feels he did wrong and is conscience-stricken; but, he feels that the sanctions of non-moral dictates are simply stronger. He remarks just after he had set the men off Jim's trail:

¹¹ Requoted with Lionel Trilling's comment in Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination* (New York: 1953), p. 114. I might add that my interpretation here of Huck Finn's moral crisis is in a large measure indebted to Trilling.

"They went off and I got aboard the raft, feeling bad and low, because I knowed very well I had done wrong, but I see it warn't no use for me to try to learn to do right; a body that don't get *started* right when he's little ain't got no show—when the pinch comes there ain't nothing to back him up and keep him to his work, and so he gets beat. Then I thought a minute, and says to myself, hold on; s'pose you'd 'a' done right and give Jim up, would you felt better than what you do now? No, says I, I'd feel bad—I'd feel just the same way I do now. Well, then, says I, what's the use of you learning to do right when it's troublesome to do right and ain't no trouble to do wrong, and the wages is just the same? I was stuck. I couldn't answer that. So I reckoned I wouldn't bother no more about it, but after this always do whichever come handiest at the time."¹²

The rationalization here is obvious and so also is the realization by Huck that, in the words of Lionel Trilling, he will never "again be certain that what he considers the clear dictates of moral reason are not merely the engrained customary beliefs of his time and place".¹³ Of course, Huck's decision to do "whichever come handiest at the time" could be plausibly read not as a rejection of morality as an activity but only as the inarticulate rejection of a particular morality. If this is indeed the case, I do not have the case I want. On this last interpretation, 'right' and 'wrong' are being used in the passage quoted from *Huckleberry Finn* in a conventional or inverted comma sense. I am not concerned to dispute this interpretation, but only to point out that both psychologically and logically the above passage could be given the interpretation that I have given it.

Let us now look at an odd kind of rejection of the ultimacy of a strictly moral appeal. Crisis theologians (Barth, Tillich *et al.*), following Kierkegaard, give us a lot of vague talk about the "teleological suspension of the ethical".¹⁴ Kierkegaard, in *Fear and Trembling*, discusses with sympathy the biblical episode where Abraham is willing to sacrifice his son Isaac at God's command, though not questioning that his act would be immoral (i.e., not in accord with a moral point of view). Abraham is ready to sacrifice Isaac merely because God commands it. He reasons that our basic loyalty is to God and that God can, if he chooses, suspend the laws of morality. Now, of course, here I am only interested in the logic of the situation and not in the obvious

¹² *Huckleberry Finn*, ch. XVI.

¹³ Trilling, *op. cit.*, p. 114.

¹⁴ Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* (Princeton: 1941). Martin Buber, "The Suspension of Ethics", *The Moral Principles of Action*, Anshen ed. (New York: 1952), pp. 223-7.

psychological problems such a "stand" involves. Let us put ourselves in the context of a crisis theologian like Kierkegaard discussing Abraham's act with a rationalist like A. C. Ewing or H. J. Paton (C. T. = crisis theologian; R = rationalist):

C. T.: It was Abraham's Absolute Duty to sacrifice Isaac to God.

R.: But how could he know it was the voice of God speaking rather than the commands of the Devil or the promptings of his own *id*?

C. T.: It was directly revealed to him.

R.: But how so? How does he *know* 'it was directly revealed'?

C. T.: It is self-evident.

R.: Perhaps? But it is less clear to me that this "paradox of faith" is self-evident than that it is self-evidently certain that to sacrifice one's son in this fashion is morally wrong.¹⁵

C. T.: As a moral truth yes, but the validity of even a certain moral duty can at times be suspended by a higher Duty and Purpose—God's Purpose—the Highest Duty.

R.: But first one must know that God is a just God. We can make no conclusions from Theology until we have the power of moral discernment to intuit what is Good.¹⁶

C. T.: You're talking like "the Professor". You are only thinking in terms of "moral justice". God prescribes Duties that surpass our understanding—surpass our own weak power of moral discernment.

R.: But that just isn't reasonable or rational!

C. T.: No, of course not, it is a part of the absurdity of faith—the blind leap in the dark of the troubled human heart: the leap of faith that alone will save one from despair. But accepting this absurdity unquestioningly is just what it is to have faith. A "knight of Faith" must just accept this absurd paradox.

¹⁵ H. J. Paton actually remarks in criticizing Kierkegaard on this point: "If we look at this incident unhistorically, as Kierkegaard does himself, I sympathize with Kant's commonsense attitude—Abraham could not be sure that it was God who told him to kill Isaac, but he could be sure that to do so was wrong." Paton, *In Defence of Reason*, p. 220. See his whole article "Existentialism as an Attitude to Life", in *In Defence of Reason*, pp. 213-28. Note also his remarks about Barth and Kierkegaard in his *The Modern Predicament*.

¹⁶ A. C. Ewing, "Some Meanings of 'Good' and 'Ought'", *Readings in Ethical Theory*, ed. J. Hospers and W. Sellars, p. 224. The above argument (a paraphrase of Ewing's argument) is the traditional argument accepted (taking into account variants in the idiom), by almost all "secular philosophers", empiricists and rationalists alike, against such an "irrationalist position".

R.: But religion has no monopoly on absurdity. One can take a "leap in the Dark" to National Socialism too, *a la* Heidegger and Scheler.

C. T.: Precisely so! That is the paradox of faith. One can only have faith that one hasn't a false Absolute.¹⁷

Now, this is indeed an odd argument. I will not deny that it is nonsense of a kind; but it is not logical nonsense. Kierkegaard's "religious talk" (Toulmin's and Pascal's "method of the heart")¹⁸ must be accepted in its own mode of reasoning, although of course it is not empirical talk or even moral talk. Further, it is clear that, in that context, Kierkegaard is rejecting the autonomy and ultimacy of an "ethical appeal" without challenging in the slightest that, in terms of an ethical mode of reasoning, Abraham had the best of reasons for not killing Isaac. Now, whatever we think of this Kierkegaardian argument, we have no right to reject contexts like the above, and contexts like the one about Huck Finn, as unintelligible or logically absurd. We can, however, as logicians, point out their esoteric nature. But it does not deductively follow that because they are esoteric we must grade them down.

The questions "Why should I be moral?" and "Why be moral?" are both meaningful, logically non-absurd questions. We can reason about both of them and we can, with perfect linguistic propriety, ask if the attempts of Plato, and others, to uphold taking a moral point of view are justified. Genuine questions of value—of good and bad—arise around both of these questions, for "Why should I be moral?" is the Gyges-like question an individual might ask when he questions whether he (as an individual) ought always to take a moral point of view. He might answer this in the negative and at the same time assert that there ought to be a morality as a social practice. He is not going to abide by its dictates, but he will seek to make others believe he is a "pillar of the community". That is to say, "Why be moral?", when not functioning as a short-hand phrase for "Why should I be moral?", can function to question the good of the whole activity of morality as a social practice, and this is distinct from the individual's self-questioning about whether he ought to act morally. Someone might say, "There is no reason why I ought to be moral, but there is every good reason in the world why people generally ought to be moral". Glaucon and Adeimantus readily admit that Thrasymachus has been bested

¹⁷ Martin Buber, *op. cit.*, pp. 226-7.

¹⁸ See Toulmin, *The Place of Reason in Ethics*, p. 217.

and that morality is a socially useful device; but they want Socrates to go on and prove to them that the individual ought to be moral even in the limiting or "desert island" situation in which he would be perfectly safe in being immoral. "Why should I be moral?" and "Why be moral?" are clearly distinct in at least some of their uses. But here my crucial point has been to indicate that both of these questions are non-absurd questions requiring evaluative (but not moral) answers.

To sum up, my basic argument has been that there are contexts in which we can ask meaningfully for a justification of morals as an activity. Toulmin's analysis has not met that sort of case, nor do I see how Toulmin can rule out such cases as irrelevant to morals, even though he has shown they are not moral questions. The determined philosophical, moral sceptic either has something like the above considerations in mind or, because of the non-descriptive functions of evaluative terms, is unwittingly asking for justification where there can be no literal justification. In any event, an adequate meta-ethical theory must account for either situation.

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