



An Examination of the Place of Reason in Ethics.

Review Author[s]:
R. M. Hare

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latter idiom might mislead by calling up the inappropriate picture of a sort of Webb partnership, a corporeal Sidney mated to an incorporeal Beatrice. Again many philosophers, insensitive to ordinary language, tend to ask questions which have been given no sense. The philosopher who asks, when he can actually see a table, what evidence he has for inferring that it is there, makes this mistake; for, in *this* situation, inference is not in point and evidence is not required. He makes no inference and needs no evidence: he has what is better than any inference and removes all need for evidence. He can actually see the table. He has, and there is paradox in the phrase, 'the evidence of his own eyes'. Considerations of this sort have in recent years utterly transformed epistemological discussion. They have been very largely responsible for the widespread rejection of the sense-datum terminology and the spread of what might be called a Sophisticated Naïve Realism. (Professor Barnes himself takes no note of this onslaught against sense-data). Philosophers also permit or commit solecisms which obscure philosophical points: Professor Barnes mentions 'I am hearing a bell' without protest, and even uses 'I am knowing that this is a table' (p. 75). Such improper uses of the continuous present suggest, what is not the case, that 'I can hear' and 'I know' have the same logic as 'I am listening' and 'I am enquiring'. Of course not all distortions of ordinary usage have philosophic interest. Of course language grows mainly by corruptions: 'The history of language . . . is little other than the history of corruptions' (Lounsbury). And Professor Barnes is kinder than those who have regarded the appeal to ordinary language as an instance of the nagging pettiness of minds unable or unwilling to survey the great vistas of all time and all existence; for he takes it rather as a fussy fad, to be humoured and evaded (*cf.* pp. 42 ff.). Nevertheless he has thereby thrown away the key to a whole new arsenal of critical and interpretative weapons.

A fifth, and comparatively trivial, point. The singular of *sensibilia* is *sensibile* not *sensibilium*. Such Latin technical terms are perhaps out of place in a book which the dust jacket says is aimed at the general reader. But if we are to have them, let us have them right. *Sensibilium* occurs repeatedly on pages 72 and 73, and is explained as referring to something that 'would be a sense datum if anyone were aware of it'.

There are many good things in this book: the comparison of the idealist doctrine of 'original falsity' (p. 90) with the theological doctrine of original sin, and the comparisons of the way you see an electron with the way you see, *inter alia*, a distant skier when you cannot pick out the man or the skis (p. 148) are helpful and illuminating. The subject, which is, as we have argued, the nature of philosophical enquiry, is both important and topical. It is therefore with regret that, for the reasons given among others, I feel I must conclude by saying that this seems to me to be a hasty and a disappointing book.

ANTONY FLEW

An Examination of the Place of Reason in Ethics. By STEPHEN EDELSTON TOULMIN. (Cambridge University Press. 1950. Pp. xiv + 228. Price 16s.).

This is a book which deserves kindly treatment from the reviewer; for there are two factors which are likely to prejudice philosophical public opinion unfairly against it. The first is that, in the two and a half years' interval between writing and publication, the subject has, as a result of published and unpublished discussion, advanced somewhat beyond the stage which the book was intended to illuminate; the second is that the style, with its too self-conscious striving after urbanity, may have on some readers an effect the reverse of that aimed at. If, however, any reader is put off by these superficial defects, he will miss much that is of great value; for the book is the first attempt to set forth at length and in a readable form some of the results, for ethics, of the recent developments in logical method associated with the names of Wittgenstein and Wisdom. This makes it one of the very few valuable books on ethics that have appeared in recent years.

'We still need to know what to do, and we still have to choose between the conflicting courses and arguments with which we are presented'. Thus on p. 2 Mr. Toulmin, unlike so many writers on ethics, squarely faces the problem with which he has to deal. To solve it, he thinks he has to say 'Which of all these arguments should we accept? Which of the reasons are good reasons? And how far can one rely on reason in coming to moral decisions? Is there always a place for reasons and further reasons or does "giving reasons" sometimes become supererogatory? What, in short, is the place of reason in ethics?' (p. 3). To ask this sort of question, he thinks, is more profitable than asking questions like 'What is goodness?' or 'What is the analysis of "right"?'.

Let us confine ourselves to the first two proposed questions. By proposing them, Mr. Toulmin seems to indicate that in his opinion we can solve the basic problem (how to 'know what to do') indirectly. First we have to learn to choose between conflicting

arguments, and this will enable us to choose between conflicting courses of action. And we choose between conflicting arguments by learning to recognise which of them constitute 'good reasons'. Now how are we to do this? Mr. Toulmin thinks that we can do it by studying what he calls the 'function' of ethical judgments, just as we find out what are 'good reasons' in science by studying the 'function' of scientific judgments, which is 'to alter expectations' (p. 129). The function of ethics is 'to correlate our feelings and behaviour in such a way as to make the fulfilment of everyone's aims and desires as far as possible compatible' (p. 137). The conclusion that this in particular is the function of ethical judgments seems to be reached as a result of a study of linguistic usage; that is to say, we observe 'the occasions on which we are in fact prepared to call judgments "ethical" and decisions "moral", and the part which reasoning plays on such occasions' (p. 160; cf. pp. 131, 144). Having thus established what the function of ethics is, we are able to give criteria for determining what are good reasons for ethical conclusions and what bad.

The criteria suggested form a two-tiered structure. When we are wondering about the morality of a particular act, the sort of reason that we should be after is 'one which relates the action in question to an accepted social practice' (p. 146). At this level, it is a complete justification for doing something to say, for example, 'I ought to, because it was a promise'. Thus the justification is here deontological. But when, on the other hand, we are wondering about the morality of social practices, which we are bound sometimes to do, we are asking a higher-level question, which can no longer be answered by appeal to the practices themselves; and here the reasons which we should look for are teleological—'The answer to be given will (remembering the function of ethics) be reached by estimating the probable consequences (i) of retaining the present practice, and (ii) of adopting the suggested alternative' (pp. 149 ff.). The sorts of consequences which are relevant are those bearing on human happiness; the ideal which the moralist must keep before him in criticising the current morality and institutions 'is that of a society in which no misery or frustration is tolerated within the existing resources and state of knowledge' (p. 223).

Let us review the suggested procedure. In order to discover how, by reason, to answer questions of the form 'Which of these courses of action shall I choose?', we first discover what ethics is, by seeing how the word is used; to discover what ethics is, is at the same time to discover what its function is; to discover what its function is, is at the same time to discover what are good reasons in ethics. (Note here the passage from a descriptive to an evaluative use of the word 'function'—we find out what the function is by observation, but to discover the function is to discover what are good reasons). All we have to do, then, in choosing between courses of action, is to see for which course there are 'good reasons', and to choose that one. Thus our moral decisions are to be made, according to this suggestion, on the basis (given knowledge of the material circumstances) of nothing else but our observation of the current usage of the word 'ethical'.

This advice is so odd that I can scarcely believe that it is what Mr. Toulmin intends. Its oddity can be brought out by asking a question. On p. 224, in his summary at the end of the book, we find:

Of course 'This practice would involve the least conflict of interests attainable under the circumstances' does not *mean* the same as 'This would be the right practice'; nor does 'This way of life would be more harmoniously satisfying' mean the same as 'This would be better'. But in each case, the first statement is a *good reason* for the second: the 'ethically neutral' fact is a *good reason* for the 'gerundive' moral judgment. If the adoption of the practice would genuinely reduce conflicts of interest, it is a practice *worthy of adoption*, and if the way of life would genuinely lead to a deeper and more consistent happiness, it is one *worthy of pursuit*. And this seems so natural and intelligible, when one bears in mind the function of ethical judgments, that, if anyone asks me *why* they are 'good reasons', I can only reply by asking in return 'What better kinds of reason could you want?'

Now, ignoring for the moment the question whether 'conflict of interests,' 'harmoniously satisfying' and 'genuinely lead to deeper and more consistent happiness' really are 'ethically neutral' expressions, let us ask: In the sentence 'But in each case the first statement is a *good reason* for the second', is Mr. Toulmin himself making a moral judgment, or is he not? I am inclined by a passage on p. 3 to think that he does not consider a judgment that something is a good reason for a moral conclusion to be itself a moral judgment; for there he says:

In talking about 'a good reason', I am not talking about ethics: we can equally well (and frequently do) talk of a 'valid argument' instead, and this has far less of an ethical sound.

Also, Mr. Toulmin seeks to establish that certain sorts of reasons are good reasons by studying usage; and this would hardly be appropriate if what he were establishing were a moral judgment. But let us leave the question open, whether or not he thinks

he is making a moral judgment, and put to him the following dilemma. If he thinks he is *not* making a moral judgment, then what are we to make of the relation between the sentence in question and the one that follows it? For the second sentence, unlike the first, is unambiguously the expression of a moral judgment ('If the adoption of the practice would genuinely reduce conflicts of interest, it is a practice *worthy of adoption*'). But the second sentence seems to be inserted by Mr. Toulmin as an explication of the first, which (on the horn of the dilemma which we are now taking) does not express a moral judgment. And the second sentence does indeed seem to be an explication of the first; which makes it strange to say that the first is not also a moral judgment. But if the first *does* express a moral judgment (and this is the other horn of the dilemma) then it would seem impossible to reach it by any other means than the making of a moral decision—and this Mr. Toulmin does not seem to think he is doing. It certainly cannot, if it is a moral judgment, be established by an appeal to usage.

Suppose, for instance, that we were maintaining that 'This practice would involve the least conflict of interests attainable under the circumstances' was a good reason for 'This would be the right practice'; and suppose that someone were disputing this, by saying 'Without conflict, the full development of manhood is impossible; therefore it is a bad reason for calling a practice right to say that it would involve the least conflict of interests'. We might reply, as Mr. Toulmin does here, 'This seems so natural and intelligible. . . . What better kinds of reason could you want?'. And if we said this, and the other man replied, 'I don't find it natural or intelligible at all; it seems to me that the development of manhood is a cause superior to all others, and provides the only good reason for any moral conclusion', then it would be clear that what was dividing us was a moral difference. To say that all we were differing about was the meaning of the word 'ethics' would be unplausible.

This point can be put more formally. Mr. Toulmin speaks from time to time (*e.g.* pp. 38, 55f.) of a sort of inference called 'evaluative', whose virtue is to enable us to 'pass from factual reasons to an ethical conclusion'. It seems to be the chief aim of the book to give us rules for making such inferences. Thus we might represent his view of moral reasoning by means of the following schema:

F

—
E

where F is a conjunction of statements of 'ethically neutral' fact, and E is a moral conclusion. If this is to be a valid inference, there must be a rule of inference (say R) to the effect that inferences of this form are valid. (R might be "'This practice would involve the least conflict of interest attainable under the circumstances" is a good reason for "This would be the right practice"'). Now I have given reasons for holding that R expresses a moral judgment. But if it does, then it is in the nature of a general moral rule, and the inference consists in nothing more novel than the subsumption of a particular set of circumstances under this rule. We have, in fact, nothing more startling than a recognisable variant of the familiar Aristotelian practical syllogism:

R

F

—
E

where R is a general moral rule, F a statement of fact subsuming some particular circumstances under the rule, and E a particular moral conclusion. This type of inference requires no special rule of inference beyond those familiar in deductive logic.

Now if Mr. Toulmin were merely, by changing a major premiss into a rule of inference, dressing up a familiar type of deductive inference in an unfamiliar form, and calling it 'evaluative', this would be harmless enough. The danger comes from two sources. The first is that, having called it a rule of inference, he seems to forget that it is a moral judgment in its own right, and seeks to establish it by means that are inappropriate to a moral judgment. The second is that by dressing up the inference in this way, he suggests to the reader that, what logic cannot do, Mr. Toulmin can, namely infer a moral conclusion without having a moral premiss. The trick is performed only by smuggling in the essential moral premiss disguised as a rule of inference; and this is to commit in reverse an error often attributed to Kant—the rule, which should be a purely formal principle, is prevented from being so by the moral content which it has.

I have dealt at some length with what seems to me to be Mr. Toulmin's central thesis, and in trying to subvert this, have had no time to do justice to the book's many merits. These include a devastating, though brusque, exposure of traditional objectivism and subjectivism; a penetrating, though brief, study of scientific method; a lively descriptive account of some of the ways in which we do arrive at moral conclusions, and a stimulating, though many will say incomplete, account of religious faith. Some minor inaccuracies must also be noticed: on p. 16 there is a quotation, ostensibly from Socrates, which seems actually to come, not even from Plato, but from Professor Popper; more serious is the confusion (pp. 46 ff.) between the imperative function of

language and its emotive function; this, though we have grown hardened to it, is an error (cf. R. C. Cross, *Ar. Soc. Supp.* XXII p. 139, and my own article in *Mind* 1949, pp. 21 ff., both of which appeared while the book was in the press). It is symptomatic that throughout the book, so far as I can discover, when Mr. Toulmin uses an imperative sentence himself, he writes it correctly without a mark of exclamation; but when he mentions one in inverted commas, he generally puts in this much-abused mark, which belongs more properly to interjections. On pp. 52 and 129 (note) the two usages are juxtaposed. But these are superficial defects and they do little to diminish the value of the book, which no student of ethics should fail to read.

R. M. HARE

Can We Agree? A Scientist and a Philosopher Argue about Ethics. By CHAUNCEY D. LEAKE and PATRICK ROMANELL. (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press. 1950. Pp. xiv + 110).

This book is similar to C. H. Waddington's *Science and Ethics*. Mr. Leake, a pharmacologist, sets out an evolutionary theory of ethics. Mr. Romanell criticizes it from a particular philosophic standpoint. Both the initial essays, together with Mr. Leake's brief reply, were originally published in a scientific journal; for the present book Mr. Romanell has added a short counter-reply to round off the discussion. (There is appended a more general paper by each symposiast, originally written for other purposes and only marginally relevant to their discussion of ethics.) Mr. Leake follows the familiar thesis of Herbert Spencer, Julian Huxley, Waddington, *et hoc genus omne*, but he claims to supplement it with a principle destined to be for the science of ethics what the principle of the conservation of energy is for physics: 'The probability of survival of a relationship between individual humans or groups of humans increases with the extent to which that relationship is mutually satisfying'. This was solemnly 'induced from the plethora of examples in universal experience' by a group of biologists gathered together in a redwood grove, and was later 'subjected to considerable analysis' at a meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. As usual in this type of ethical theory, Mr. Leake takes for granted that survival is the sole end to be attained, but in one place he gives an argument (neglected in Romanell's reply) for the goodness of survival: 'The operation of the second law of thermodynamics makes it impossible, *i.e.* highly improbable, for living species now extinct ever to emerge or to appear again in this environment. Survival is "good", therefore, in the very significant sense that if the species fails to survive, "goodness" has no further meaning for that species'. Any adjective could be substituted for 'good' in the second sentence, so as to 'prove' that survival is 'bad', 'absurd', or 'frabjous', and presumably all these words, including the last, would thereby acquire 'a very significant sense'. Mr. Romanell is stung by the charge that most philosophic discussions of morals are 'metaphysical irrelevance', and though he sets out clearly the fallacies of Mr. Leake's essay and touches on the difference between a scientific and an ethical discussion of human behaviour, he is chiefly concerned to defend metaphysics (of a non-transcendental character). In this last task he has some success in convincing Mr. Leake, who, having heard of semantics, thought metaphysics was consigned to the dustbin. On ethics, however, Mr. Leake is quite unmoved by Mr. Romanell's normative values.

Why are they unable to agree? Because, like most of us, they have *idées fixes*, favourite ideas that have been too stimulating to be coldly scrutinized. Is not philosophy a solvent of *idées fixes*? Yes, but the process is usually slow and unnoticed, like the gradual wearing away of a stone by a constant drip of water, until suddenly one day a man finds he no longer believes what he did. If the change seems to him abrupt and entirely due to a single experience, which 'rouses him from dogmatic slumber' or 'causes the scales to drop from his eyes', the new idea which he has adopted soon forms new scales on his eyes and those of his followers, scales which it is the devil's own job to remove. Still, in disagreements between philosophers, the disputants can usually take the measure of each other's arguments and acknowledge fallacies, even if they are unwilling to abandon their presuppositions. In a book like this one or Waddington's, the scientist (and in his sight, doubtless the philosopher) is not equipped to understand what his opponent is driving at. Mr. Leake knows a bit about philosophy (like Waddington, who had met Wittgenstein and could quote in German the last sentence of the *Tractatus*), but not enough. He purrs like M. Jourdain when told he has been talking positivism. A little philosophy is a dangerous thing. We all know that a little science is, too. Deep draughts of a thorough mixture would be salutary all round, but in the prescription for ethics the stimulants that can usefully be added to philosophy do not include biology.

D. DAICHES RAPHAEL