

Moral Drill For The School Room: Being A Short Treatise On Elementary Ethics Taking The Ten Commandm

Practical Ethics

I take as overwhelmingly important some non-universalisable principle like 'I ought to do whatever benefits me?' If we define ethical principles as whatever principles one takes as overriding, then anything whatever may count as an ethical principle, for one may take any principle whatever as overwhelmingly important. Thus what we gain by being able to dismiss the question: 'Why should I act morally?' we lose by being unable to use the universalisability of ethical judgments – or any other feature of ethics – to argue for particular conclusions about what is morally right. Taking ethics as in some sense necessarily involving a universal point of view seems to me a more natural and less confusing way of discussing these issues.

Other philosophers have rejected 'Why should I act morally?' for a different reason. They think it must be rejected for the same reason that we must reject another question, 'Why should I be rational?' which like 'Why should I act morally?' also questions something – in this case rationality – normally presupposed. 'Why should I be rational?' really is logically improper because in answering it we would be giving reasons for being rational. Thus we would presuppose rationality in our attempt to justify rationality. The resulting justification of rationality would be circular – which shows, not that rationality lacks a necessary justification, but that it needs no justification, because it cannot intelligibly be questioned unless it is already presupposed.

Is 'Why should I act morally?' like 'Why should I be rational?' in that it presupposes the very point of view it questions? It would be, if we interpreted the 'should' as a moral 'should'. Then the question would ask for moral reasons for being moral. This would be absurd. Once we have decided that an action is morally obligatory, there is no further moral question to ask. It is redundant to ask why I should, morally, do the action that I morally should do.

There is, however, no need to interpret the question as a request for an ethical justification of ethics. 'Should' need not

316

Why Act Morally?

mean 'should, morally'. It could simply be a way of asking for reasons for action, without any specification about the kind of reasons wanted. We sometimes want to ask a general practical question, from no particular point of view. Faced with a difficult choice, we ask a close friend for advice. Morally, he says, we ought to do A, but B would be more in our interests, while etiquette demands C and only D would display a real sense of style. This answer may not satisfy us. We want advice on which of these standpoints to adopt. If it is possible to ask such a question we must ask it from a position of neutrality between all these points of view, not of commitment to any one of them.

'Why should I act morally?' is this sort of question. If it is not possible to ask practical questions without presupposing a point of view, we are unable to say anything intelligible about the most ultimate practical choices. Whether to act according to considerations of ethics, self-interest, etiquette, or aesthetics would be a choice 'beyond reason' – in a sense, an arbitrary choice. Before we resign ourselves to this conclusion we should at least attempt to interpret the question so that the mere asking of it does not commit us to any particular point of view.

We can now formulate the question more precisely. It is a question about the ethical point of view, asked from a position outside it. But what is 'the ethical point of view?' I have suggested that a distinguishing feature of ethics is that ethical judgments are universalisable. Ethics requires us to go beyond our own personal point of view to a standpoint like that of the impartial spectator who takes a universal point of view.

Given this conception of ethics, 'Why should I act morally?' is a question that may properly be asked by anyone wondering whether to act only on grounds that would be acceptable from this universal point of view. It is, after all, possible to act – and some people do act – without thinking of anything except one's own interests. The question asks for reasons for going beyond this personal basis of action and acting only on judgments one is prepared to prescribe universally.

317

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