REASONS, COMMANDS AND MORAL PRINCIPLES (1)

RIGOBERTO JUÁREZ-PAZ

According to Toulmin (2), the fact that objectivist, subjectivist and imperativist moral philosophers have assumed that if a sentence is cognitively meaningful, it ascribes a property to an item, accounts for their having paid little attention to the problem of moral reasoning, for having considered the problem trivial, and for having considered it nonsensical, respectively. So far as this thesis concerns objectivism, Professor Broad has pointed out by way of reply that the claim that objectivist philosophers have paid little attention to the problem of moral reasoning... is an historical statement against which, I should have thought, there is plenty of evidence... None of them (i.e. Moore, Sidgwick and Ross) has neglected to discuss seriously the question 'What makes right acts right ?', and 'What makes good things good ?'. But surely this is the form which Mr. Toulmin's question about valid and invalid reasons in morals takes, when formulated in terms of an objectivist view of the nature of moral indicatives» (3).

What shall we say to this ? Firstly, the question «What makes right acts right ?» can be taken to mean (a) 'What kind (or kinds) of action are right ?' or (b) 'What good reasons can be adduced for saying that an action is right ?'. It is plain that the first interpretation of the question requires an answer in terms of a property (i.e. a kind of action), whereas the second interpretation requires an answer in terms of a reason. Clearly, the objectivist is oriented towards the first interpretation, Toulmin towards the second. Yet the difference between them shrinks when it is remembered that for the objectivist, the fact that actions of a certain kind are right is not an empirical generalization. The term makes signifies that necessity or entailment is involved. Thus, an appropriate answer to the question, even on the first interpretation, would be «An action's being of kind K *entails* that it

(1) This paper is a revised version of a chapter from a dissertation written under the supervision of Professor Wilfrid Sellars, and submitted to the graduate faculty of the University of Minnesota. Most of its central ideas, particulary in sections III and IV, were suggested tome by Professor Sellars in his seminar on Moral philosophy or in private discussion.

(2) S. E. Toulmin, *An Examination of the Place of Reason in Ethics*, Cambridge, 1950.

(3) C. D. Broad, «Review of Toulmin's *An Examination of The Place of Reason in Ethics*», *Mind*, 1952.

is right». And this, to put it mildly, is a cousin of an appropriate answer to the question on the second interpretation, e.g. «An action's being K *is a good reason for saving* that it is right».

Surely, therefore, the difference between the objectivist and Toulmin is not that the latter recognizes the importance of reasoning in morals, whereas the former does not. It is rather that the objectivist conceives of this reasoning as being (to oversimplify) of the form.

> *All cases of promise-keeping are right*
> *A is a promise-keeping*
> *Therefore A is right.*

and since arguments of this form are not peculiar to morals, he says nothing more about it. Toulmin, on the other hand, appears to conceive the argument as having the form.

A is a promise keeping, therefore A is right. But there must be more to it than this. For as it stands, it is the difference between taking moral principles as «axioms» and taking them as principles of inference. The objectivist could well accept the latter formulation, and insist that even it requires that «A is right» asserts that A has a certain property. For otherwise how could «A is right» be true-or-false, and hence the conclusion of an argument ?

Although Toulmin's critique of objectivism is the point of departure rather than the theme of this paper, it will be helpful to dwell a moment longer on Toulmin's grounds for rejecting the objectivist approach to ethics. Thus he challenges the objectivist conception of uniquely ethical properties by appealing to a distinction between simple, complex and scientific properties, and by contrasting the methods by which we come to ascribe, and to justify our ascription, of properties of these three kinds to objects, with the characteristic features of moral debate. And it must indeed be granted that if the only kinds of property of which it is legitimate to speak were those illustrated by the examples he gives of his three categories, then there would, indeed, be no such things as uniquely ethical properties. For, as objectivists themselves have insisted, rightness and goodness cannot be construed on the model of observable or sense-qualities, nor as analysable into such, nor on the model of the theoretical constructs of science. Again, he is convinced that if ethical statements attributed ethical or prescriptive *properties* to actions or situations, these statements would have to be (in principle) matters of intersubjective agreement. He points out that statements attributing scientific properties to objects are derivable, other conditions being satisfied, from

scientific theories, and that these, in turn, are capable of intersubjective confirmation at the level of observation. But just what point is Toulmin seeking to make ? Does his argument have the following form ?

(A) *If* ethical statements ascribed prescriptive properties then they would (in principle) be matters of intersubjective agreement.
But ethical statements are not (in principle) matters of intersubjective agreement.
Therefore ethical statements do not ascribe prescriptive properties.

This can scarcely be his line of thought, for in the constructive part of his argument he insists (with the objectivist) that singular ethical statements are subsumable under ethical principles, and that these principles, in turn, can be supported by good, and intersubjective reasons. Perhaps his contention has the following form:

(B) *If* reasons cannot be given for ethical principles, then ethical principles cannot relate to ethical or prescriptive *properties*.
But the objectivist denies that reasons can be given for ethical principles.
Therefore the objectivist is committed to the denial of his central thesis, and is guilty of an absurdity.

But if *this* were his contention, we would expect Toulmin to express the conviction that the trouble with classical objectivism is that it is not *sufficiently* objectivist. Only after this ironical move would we expect to find him continuing the onslaught by claiming that the kind of intersubjective reason which *can* be given for moral principles is not the sort of reason which could be given for a proposition concerning what *properties* go with what other properties.

Now, it is certainly a *prima* facie disappointing feature of classical objectivism that it speaks of moral principles as 'selfevident' or 'intuitively known'. The demand for a *derivation* of moral principles from «more basic» moral principles must, of course, come to a halt somewhere. But need this mean that no rational means exists for deciding between the claims of rival candidates for the position of moral principle ? And if such a rational means exists, has Toulmin established that it is incompatible with the idea that ethical utterances ascribe ethical or prescriptive *properties* to actions ? Has he even established that if reasons cannot be given for ethical principles, then the latter cannot concern ethical or prescriptive properties (the major premise of argument (B) above) ?

Objectivist philosophers, while speaking of 'prescriptive properties' have made it clear that these properties belong to a class apart (4). This is not to say that they have been succesful in explaining just what it is that sets them apart. Toulmin's denial that there is room for such a class apart stems from his classification of properties into simple and complex empirical properties, on the one hand, and scientific (or theoretical) properties on the other. But that this classification is questionable is already suggested by an examination of modal statements. Thus, we seem to be «saying something of» a state of affairs when we say of it that it is *impossible,* or *possible (but not actual),* or *necessary,* or *probable,* or *believed to be the case by Jones.* In making such statements we are neither *commanding, questioning, exclaiming, exhorting,* but *asserting.* And our assertions are of the general form «... is». It does not even seem to be stretching ordinary usage to say that these statements attribute properties to states of affairs. Still less does it jar our linguistic sensibilities to say of «It is good that p» that it attributes the property of being good to the state of affairs p. Certainly, if one were to suppose that prescriptive properties are «just like» descriptive properties, one would be grievously mistaken. But equally if one supposed that modal properties are just like descriptive (or prescriptive) properties.

What is needed to clarify this debate is a clear understanding of «property talk» generally.

As far as we can see, Toulmin's attack on the idea that prescriptive terms designate properties is merely a rehearsing of the sound point that prescriptive terms do not designate descriptive properties in terms of the (mistaken) assumption that the only correct use of «property» is in connection with descriptive terms. Toulmin writes, (5) «When I asked the two people which course of action was the right

(4) Thus Moore wrote, in his essay *The Conception of Intrinsic Value (Philosophical Studies,* London, 1922, p.): «...No predicate of value is an intrinsic predicate in the sense in which yellowness, or being a state of pleasure, is intrinsic. Apparently certain predicates of value are the only attributes that share with intrinsic properties the characteristic of depending solely on the intrinsic nature of what possesses them. The fact that many people have thought that values were subjective points to some great difference between them and such attributes as yellow. What *is* the difference if values are *not* subjective? It may be vaguely expressed by saying that intrinsic properties *describe* the nature of what possesses them in a way which values do not. If you could enumerate all its intrinsic properties you would have given a complete description of the object.»

(5) Toulmin, *op.cit.,* p. 28.

one, I was not asking them about a property - what I wanted to know was whether there was any good reason for choosing one course of action rather than another». But surely te correct way of giving the requested information is by saying, e.g., «A is the right action», and is it absurd to say that thus reply attributes the property (though not the descriptive property) of being right to action A ?

II

Today we all believe that reasons, even *good* reasons, have a place in the evaluation and prescribing of conduct. Yet this agreement is far from amounting to a return to the intuitionism of *Principia Ethica* or *The Right and the Good*. What has happened is rather that as 'Emotivism' came of age, it began to appreciate more of the insights which had been trapped in the Platonic-Aristotelian metaphysics of Intuitionism. Ethical statements were no longer interpreted on the model of «Blast» or «Hurrah» It came to be seen that to make a prescriptive statement is to say, in some sense of «say», that there are good reasons either for acting in a certain way, or for having a certain attitude. Thus, whereas Stevenson took as his first model for the analysis of «x is good» «I approve of x, do thou likewise !» Toulmin writes, « ...in saying that anything is good you are of course saying that you approve of it or at any rate would like to be able to approve of it, and that you want your hearers to approve of it also. But you are not simply doing that — you are saying that it is really *worthy* of approval; that here is a valid argument (a good reason) for saying that it is good, and so for approving of it, and for recommending others to do so too» (6). Here Toulmin is granting that «x is good» says «I approve of x, etc...». He only wants to insist that it says *more* than this.

But what is this something more and in what sense is it said ? And how does it concern reasons ? By way of clearing out the underbrush, we should note that of course when a person honestly says « x is good» (and is making a prescriptive use of the statement) it must be true that he approves of x, and, presumably, that he expects others to approve of x also. There is the same kind of absurdity about « x is good, but I don't approve of it» as there is about «It is raining, but I dont'believe it». Thus, in *some* sense of «say», « x is good» says « I approve of x » just as «It is raining» says « I believe that it

(6) *Ibid.*, p. 39.

is raining». But need we suppose, indeed, is it correct to suppose, that « x is good» *asserts* « I approve of x », i.e. say it in the same way as «It is raining» says that it is raining ? Toulmin's use of «say» blurs certain distinctions which are essential to the clarification of the logic of ethical discourse. On the whole, however, he seems to be committed to the idea that «x is good» *asserts* that (the speaker) approves of x, and *asks* his hearers to approve of x as well.

On the other hand, Toulmin can scarcely have intended that «x is good» *asserts* what is asserted by « ...there is a valid argument (a good reason) for saying that it is good...» For clearly no statement *asserts*, that there are reasons for its use. What he probably wanted to say was that it is part of the logic of «good» that one who makes a prescriptive use of this expression commits himself to give reasons — reasons, indeed, of a certain sort — for his statement. Thus, even should Toulmin suppose that «x is good» *asserts* that the speaker approves, (and asks others to approve) of x, he would be claiming that to say «x is good» is to say «(I approve of x)^{r}; (do so too)^{r}» where the superscript « r » is the signal of a «dialectical commitment» ([7]) to show the reasonableness of the approval and the non-arbitrariness of the command, by giving reasons — of a certain sort — for them.

Of the problems with which the above analysis confronts us, namely, what is it to give the appropriate kind of reason for an attitude ? and what is it to give a reason for an imperative or command ? we shall, in this paper, limit ourselves to the latter. Indeed, we shall limit ourselves to some fundamental considerations which, though important, scarcely scratch the surface of the logic of ethical discourse.

III

Now, Toulmin would seem to have cut himself off from the above interpretation of his analysis of «x is good», by his contention that to give a reason for what one says is to give a reason for agreeing to its truth. For imperatives, being neither true nor false, would then be incapable of being defended by giving reasons (That they can be aided and abetted by providing motives is, of course, beside the point). Yet Toulmin only seems to have cut himself off from this interpretation,

([7]) For the use of this concept in another context, see Wilfrid SELLARS, *Presupposing* (*The Philosophical Review*, April, 1954, especially pp. 213-5).

for he offers a heterodox analysis of truth which (roughly) equates it with *warranted sayability* — a broader notion than the *warranted assertibility* of Dewey and the pragmatists. Since, however, we do not wish to chase this hare, we shall leave Toulmin at this point and take our text for the remainder of this paper from another source.

Can reasons be given for imperatives ? To deny that they can is tantamount to denying that imperatives can play roles in inferences. Now the view that imperatives neither entail nor are entailed by other expressions has been widely held, either explicitly or by implication. A strong and well-reasoned dissent, however, has recently been issued by R. M. Hare, who writes

> ... Now the word 'all' and other logical words are used in commands, as in statements. Il follows that there must also be entailment-relations between commands, for otherwise it would be impossible to give any meaning to these words as used in them. If we had to find out whether someone knew the meaning of the word 'all' in 'Take all the boxes to the station', we would have to find out whether he realized that a person who assented to this command, and also to the statement 'This is one of the boxes' and yet refused to assent to the command 'Take this to the station' could only do so if he had misunderstood one of these three sentences. If this test were inapplicable, the word 'all' (in imperatives as in indicatives) would be entirely meaningless. We may therefore say that the existence in our language of universal sentences in the imperative mood is in itself sufficient proof that our language admits of entailments of which at least one term is a command ([8]).

Now, there are *prima facie* two significantly different ways in which an imperative may be universal (1). It may tell *one* individual to do *all* of a certain class of actions (2). It may tell *all* individuals of a certain class to do a certain action or set of actions. Hare's box example is most naturally interpreted as an imperative of the first kind. As such it is equivalent to the conditional imperative, 'For all x, if x is a box (of an understood set of boxes), then take ye x to the station'. And to understand the logical force of such a mixed imperative — mixed because it contains both an imperative and an indicative component — we should first to come to terms with such simple conditional imperatives as «If it rains, wear your coat».

> *If it rains, wear your coat.*
> It is raining
> Wear your coat.

([8]) R. M. HARE, *The Language of Morals,* Oxford, 1952, pp. 25-6.

No sooner is the question raised, than we see that something is wrong. For the point of Smith's saying «If it rains, wear your coat !» to Jones is to cope with the case where, if it does rain, *Smith is not there to say «Wear your coat !»* Thus, there would be no use for this 'argument'. Thus we see that the conditional imperative has the role of bringing it about that when Jones is rained upon, he is confronted by the imperative «Wear your coat» *as though uttered by Smith in his presence.* And is not this all that needs to be said ? Do we not have in conditional imperatives, utterances which, so to speak, encapsulate other imperative utterance which are «released» if and when the antecedent condition is realized ? And while this role shows certain analogies to inference, it would be a mistake to assimilate it to inference. The application of these considerations to universal imperatives of the first kind is straightforward.

But what of universal imperatives of the second kind ? Here, it will be remembered, the universality rests not upon the plurality of the acts involved, but on the plurality of agents to whom it is adressed. Hare does not think that ordinary language contains universal imperatives which are strictly of this form. Let us suppose, however, that it does. Could we not take the same general line as above ? Would not all universal imperatives of the second kind also be conditional ? Thus «For all x, if x is a person and x is in circumstances C, then do A !». And could not this be interpreted as a conventional device for ensuring that all persons believing themselves to be in circumstances C are confronted by the imperative «Do A !» as though uttered in their presence by the person who formulated the universal imperative ? Once again, it would be misleading to assimilate the role of the universal imperative to that of an inference ticket. And the reason emerges even more clearly than before. For clearly the universal imperative will do its work only if it is heard (or seen) by all who might come to be in circumstances C. And in this respect it differs from a inference ticket, which is, as such, indifferent to the number of people who use it. Universal imperatives of the above form are, as before, utterances which encapsulate imperative utterances.

Are there any universal imperatives of the second kind which cannot be construed as universal conditional imperatives and interpreted in the above manner ? It does not seem so. By this we do not mean, of course, that all universal imperatives are *hypothetical imperatives* in the Kantian sense. For the latter would have the more specialized form «For all x, if x is a person and x wants X, then x do A !». And for an understanding of this form, one would first have to turn one's

attention to hypothetical imperatives addressed to a single person. The question would be, can «If you want X, do A !» be treated as we have treated «If it rains, wear your coat» above ? If so, it would be because it plays the role of bringing it about that when the hearer has decided to bring about X, as well as when, during the course of deliberation, he envisages himself as bringing about X, he is confronted by the imperative «Do A !». But while this is not implausible as a partial account of hypothetical imperatives, they clearly have another role. For «If you want X, do A !» carries with it the claim that when the hearer has decided to bring about X, he will have a reason for doing A other than the mere fact that one has been properly commanded to do so, and, indeed that this reason lies in the fact that doing A, if not necessary to the bringing about of X, is at least the best of the available ways of doing so.

Now the point of the above remarks has been to suggest though not to establish, that the rationale of logical words in imperative discourse can be understood without speaking, in the strict sense, of imperative *inference*. To put the same point in a somewhat different way, we are suggesting that one can grant Hare's claim that «a person who assented to this command 'Take all the boxes to the station', and also to the statement 'This is one of the boxes' and yet refused to assent to the command 'Take this to the station' could only do so if he had misunderstood one of these three sentences, while emphasizing the significant differences, to which we have called attention, between imperative 'inference' and indicative inference. For this enables one to appreciate that it might be sensible to speak of giving reasons (in a quasi-logical sense of 'reason') for an imperative, without being committed to the idea that imperatives can be conclusions of arguments. For even if one refuses to grant that it is proper to speak of an imperative as a logical consequence of premises, one can nevertheless grant that there are relationships pertaining to imperatives which are founded on the logical relationships among the correlated indicatives. Thus, it is self-frustrating to issue (sincerely) the simultaneous commands «Move all the boxes» and «Do not move this box !». These commands cannot both be fulfilled. For the function of «Move all the boxes !», is, as we have seen, to bring it about that Jones, on facing *this* box, is confronted by the command «Move it !», and to issue the command «Do not move this box !», is to place him in a position where he is commanded to do and not to do one and the same act.

Accordingly, if there is a good reason for standing by the command «Do not move this box !» there is, to that extent, a good reason

against issuing the command «Move all the boxes !». And if there is a good reason for standing by the command «Move all the boxes!» there is, to that extent, a good reason against issuing the command «Do not move this box !».

IV

When Jones commands Smith to do A, he is not making an autobiographical statement about his state of mind. He is not telling Smith, for example, that he wishes Smith would do A (though it must be noted, that «I wish you would do A» is often a polite way of commanding someone to do A, and *not* an autobiographical statement). On the other hand, if we were to ask Jones «Why (in the sense of *for what reason*) did you command Smith to do A ?» he may truthfully say «In order to bring about his doing of A» or, more usually, «In order to bring about X, which his doing of A will secure». And if we press him, we may well find that he «just likes to see Jones do A» or «just likes to know that X is the case». In other words, a person may issue commands in order to realize his wishes or desires. On the other hand, Jones may honestly say «I commanded Smith to do A, because it was my duty to do so. Thus, the sergeant who commands Private Smith to stand at attention need not desire that this be done. His reason for issuing the command is simply that he, in turn, has been commanded to issue this command in these circumstances, and he is conscientiously carrying out this command.

This brings us to the final, and, perhaps, most important point we wish to make. The use of imperatives, and, in particular, the issuing of commands, is not, so to speak, a promiscuous performance. It is no accident that where x speaks to y in the imperative mood, we usually discover some relation between x and y which conventionally «authorizes» the use of the imperative mood (or related devices). Where no such relation obtains, y properly say to x, «Who do you think you are to tell me to do that !». Parents *have the authority* (within certain limits) to issue commands to their children. Military superiors *have the authority* (within certain limits) to issue commands to their subordinates. Friends *have the right* (within certain limits) to *ask* each other to do this or that. Once this is appreciated, we are in a position to see that just as «making a promise» is a performance which «creates» a presumptive *prima facie* obligation to do A, *on the part of the person who says «I promise to do A»*

so issuing a command within the proper limits of one's authority «creates» a presumptive *prima facie* obligation *on the part of the recipient of the command* to do the action commanded. Promising is a way of binding *oneself*, commanding, and the use of imperatives generally, is a way of binding *others*. Both promising and commanding are institutions; they are performances which «create» obligations only because these institutions have as their formulas, in the one case «If x properly says 'I promise to do A' to y, then x ought to do A»; and in the other «If x properly says 'do A !' to y, then y ought to do A».

If the above analysis is correct — at least in its main lines — there would seem to be an absurdity in the idea that the fundamental principles of morality can be imperatives or commands, an absurdity which would parallel that of the idea that what makes moral principles binding is the fact that we (or our ancestors) have promised to conform to them. Just as there are no promises apart from the performance of promising, so there are no imperatives apart from the performances of telling someone to do something. Thus, two questions naturally arise concerning any imperative: (1) Who issues it ? and (2) By what right or authority did he do so ? Thus, if the idea that moral principles are imperatives is to be taken seriously, we are forced to ask «Who promulgated them ?» and «Why *ought* we to obey him ?». A standard answer is that God promulgated them, and we ought to obey Him because He is our Heavenly Father. The difficulties to which these answers lead are notorious, and we shall not pause to elaborate them. God would have to pull himself up by His moral bootstraps, jus as He must do so in the causal dimension when He is conceived as *Causa Sui.*

Are we entitled to conclude that moral principles are *not* universal imperatives ? This would be hasty. For, after all, it *might* be the case that moral consciousness *is* ultimately absurd. The absurdity would not be lessend if *Deus Imperator* is replaced by Society, or the Community or Whatever. Bur if moral consciousness is absurd, if it involves treating utterances as authorized imperatives which cannot be so construed, it does not follow that there is no good reason for having, encouraging furthering or supporting this practice. This reason, however, could not be that it is our *duty* to encourage, strenghten and inculcate this pratice, though, of course, once we have recognized certain principles as binding upon us, we readily come to recognize such a duty as a *derivative* obligation. But if the good reason could not be an *ought,* it would have to be a *purpose*. But that such a purpose might be, an in just what sense a *common* purpose, and

how it could be correct and proper for «us» to join in saying that it is good reason for encouraging, supporting and including the practice of treating moral principles as authorized imperatives, are topics which we shall raise only to pass on to our concluding remarks.

For there is another alternative. Instead of interpreting moral principles as imperatives, and, as a result, finding ourselves forced to the conclusion that moral consciousness is ultimately absurd, we can, correctly, we believe, interpret moral principles as sentences, roughly of the form «All men ought to do A in (circumstances) C» which have acquired the power (or, better, tendency) to cause actions conforming to them. «People ought to pay their debts» has the tendency to cause people in the English speaking community to pay their debts. But as *linguistic* causes of actions moral principles would differ from kicks as causes of actions in that a person caused to act by a moral principle could correctly say «I paid my debt *for the reason that* it was my duty to do so». For if Jones is moved to act by the *thought that* his action would be of a certain character, then it is correct to say that Jones did what he did *for the reason that* his action would be of that character. And if we construe thinking that this action would be a duty as a covert tokening of «I ought to do A» we can appreciate that the fact that Jones has argued (*in foro interno*) «All men ought to do A in C; the circumstances are C, therefore I ought to do A» might be (causally) responsible for the fact that he proceeds to do A. Can an action be the conclusion of a syllogism ? Yes, when (though not only when) the syllogism is a moral syllogism (9).

But while such an interpretation of moral principles as we have just sketched (or hinted at) would relieve them of the charge of absurdity or *irrationality,* would it not open them to the charge of *a rationality* ? Not if good reasons can be given for the practice of having in one's language motivating sentences of this general form. This brings us face to face with the issues we raised at the conclusion of our discussion of the imperativist interpretation of moral principles. And since these issues are difficult and complex, and since we have little that is new to say about them, we have good reason to bring this paper to a close.

The Pennsylvania State University.

(9) For an elaboration of this suggestion, see Wilfrid SELLARS, *Obligation and Motivation,* in *Readings in Ethical Theory,* edited by Wilfrid Sellars and John Hospers, New York, 1952; also *Some Reflections on Language Games* (*Philosophy of Science,* 21, 1954 pp. 204-228).