VI.—CRITICAL NOTICES

An Examination of the Place of Reason in Ethics. By S. E. TOULMIN. Cambridge: University Press. Pp. xiv + 228.

IT is easy to state Mr. Toulmin's main problem and to formulate in general terms his attempted solution of it, but when one comes to details there are things in his book which I find obscure and puzzling. I will therefore begin with what is clear to me, and will then raise some questions about the parts which I do not fully understand.

The main problem may be put as follows. In the course of our private reflections and our discussions with others we seem *prima facie* to be constantly offering factual propositions as *reasons* for or against moral conclusions. Moreover, we constantly talk as if some of these reasons were *valid* and others were *invalid* for the purpose for which they are adduced. Thus, *e.g.*, a person might assert that he is under an obligation to pay a certain sum of money to another to-morrow, on the ground that he has borrowed that sum from him and that to-morrow is the agreed date for repayment. Another person might allege that he is under an obligation to challenge a certain man to a duel, because the latter has publicly insulted him. Most civilized men would consider the former to be a valid reason and most contemporary Englishmen would consider the latter to be an invalid one. Mr. Toulmin argues that such *prima facie* appearances must be accepted at their face-value, and his main problem is to determine what kind of factual premisses are valid reasons for moral conclusions.

In Chapter X Mr. Toulmin considers what *kind* of reasons (whether valid or invalid in particular cases) are regarded as *relevant* to specifically moral questions. He develops his answer further in Chapter XI. His conclusions may be summarized as follows. (1) There are three main cases to be considered. (i) Where what is under discussion is what ought to be done on a particular occasion, and where one of the alternatives is unambiguously in accord with a maxim commonly accepted in the community to which the persons discussing the question belong, whilst the other alternatives unambiguously conflict with one or another of these maxims. (ii) Where what is under discussion is again what ought to be done on a particular occasion, but where each of the alternatives seems to conform to some and to conflict with others of the maxims in question. This is the case of a 'conflict of duties'. (iii) Where what is under discussion is, not the rightness or wrongness of a particular action, but that of some rule in a particular code of morals or even of that code as a whole. (2) In the first case, and only in it, it is considered a sufficient reason to refer to the accepted maxim in question, and to argue that a certain alternative is the only one which would accord

with it. In the other two cases it is considered a sufficient reason to appeal to the principle that 'preventable suffering is to be avoided'. These are the only two types of reason which Mr. Toulmin finds to be generally admitted as relevant in specifically moral arguments. (3) It will be noted that the second type of reason is stated in a *negative* form, *viz.*, the prevention of avoidable suffering and frustration. Mr. Toulmin adds, however, that this is only a minimal requirement. We can, and often do, ask whether, if the accepted code were changed in certain directions, the members of the community would 'lead fuller and happier lives'. If there are good reasons for believing this, that would be a sound argument for making the change, even though no positive hardship were involved in the existing code. Nevertheless, he says, the *primary* application of the notions of 'ought', 'right', 'duty', 'morality', etc., is in reference to 'actions or institutions which may lead to avoidable misery for others' or even for oneself. It is an extension (though a very natural one) of these notions to use them where the question concerns the chance of deeper happiness for others or even for oneself. Mr. Toulmin describes the principle that preventable suffering should be avoided as the 'overall principle', and says that this cannot be rejected without abandoning the very idea of 'duty' and of 'morality'.

It would appear from the above that Mr. Toulmin's answer to his question is a form of a very old and highly respectable ethical theory, *viz.*, hedonistic utilitarianism. There is little, if anything, in it with which Sidgwick, *e.g.*, would have quarrelled, though Sidgwick argues his case with enormously greater detail and sublety, and combines it with the acceptance of certain very abstract principles of distribution which he regards as self-evident and does not attempt to base on utilitarian considerations. Notwithstanding the passages which I have quoted, which seem to support this interpretation, there are others which seem to suggest a different view. Thus, in Chapter X Mr. Toulmin says that morality never becomes *wholly* teleological, and states as his reason that the code current in a given society remains obligatory on its members in all cases in regard to which it is unambiguous.

He reverts to this point in Chapter XI. So far, he says, he has been considering only the question: How do we *in fact* profess to distinguish valid from invalid reasoning in moral questions? He now raises the question: What *makes* some such reasoning valid and some invalid?. I take it that this should mean: Can one explain satisfactorily why the arguments which pass these tests are valid and why those which fail to do so are invalid? From what Mr. Toulmin says in other parts of his book about similar questions which have been raised about the types of reasoning commonly accepted as valid by scientists in scientific reasoning I conclude that his answer would be that such a question is improper and meaningless. But what he actually discusses here is whether we can reasonably

ask for *a single* test for the validity of moral reasoning, which shall apply to all the three cases which he has distinguished. This is obviously a different question. Nor does he discuss even this directly. Instead he asks whether either of the two tests which he has mentioned could be dispensed with in favour of the other. This again would seem to be a different question.

Mr. Toulmin's answer to it is as follows. If we adopt conformity to a current moral code alone as our test, we shall never be able to question the rightness of any such code. In that case 'morality' will collapse into mere 'authority'. If, on the other hand, we adopt the utilitarian test alone, 'morality' will collapse into mere 'expediency'. Now we use the words 'moral' and 'morality' in such a way that neither arguments from mere authority nor arguments from mere expediency count as *moral*.

I should have thought that the utilitarian, at any rate, had an easy answer to this, and that Mr. Toulmin had in effect given it in other parts of his book which I have already quoted. The utilitarian would agree that, as a matter of fact, the feeling of obligation is *directly* attached to acts which accord with the moral code accepted in one's community, and that it is not in general mediated by any thought of utility. He could argue very plausibly that it is of the utmost utility that this should be so. But he would say that the only ultimately *valid* reason for the principles of any moral code is their general utility; and that the only *valid* reason for obeying them in particular cases where disobedience would have greater *first-order* utility than obedience is the various kinds of *second-order* disutility which arises from any breach of a generally accepted and generally useful set of rules.

Now, there are certain well-known theories as to the correct analysis of what I will call 'moral indicatives' which would seem to allow no place for reasoning in moral topics. Mr. Toulmin discusses the two main types of such theories under the titles of 'the Subjective Approach' and 'the Imperative Approach'.

The subjectivist allows that moral indicatives do, as their grammatical form suggests, express *judgments* about actions, intentions, motives, etc. But he alleges that what a person who makes such a judgment is asserting in any case is simply that the action in question evokes in him, or in some class of persons of which he is a member, a certain kind of emotional reaction towards it. It is obvious that on this view there can be no question of presenting reasons, valid or invalid, for or against a person's moral judgments. It is alleged by subjectivists that what are called 'arguments' on moral questions are really certain psychological techniques for altering men's emotional reactions. Since no question of truth or falsity can enter here, the subjectivist denies that we can talk of 'validity' or 'invalidity' in any literal sense. What a person calls a 'valid' type of moral argument is simply a technique for altering emotional attitudes, which happens to appeal to him.

I do not know that there is any way of answering such contentions except by pointing out that they are not in accord with common-sense and common usage and by asserting that the latter have a *prima facie* claim to acceptance. This, at any rate, is all the answer that Mr. Toulmin gives. His counter-assertions amount to the following. (1) We *do* in fact distinguish moral *arguments*, valid and invalid, from admonitions, threats, rhetorical propaganda, and so on. (2) We *do* in fact distinguish moral arguments as 'valid' and 'invalid', and we mean by these terms '*worthy* of acceptance' and '*unworthy* of acceptance', respectively. By calling such an argument '*worthy* of acceptance' we do *not* just mean that it is in fact effective when addressed to ourselves. (3) Again, in calling something 'morally good' or 'morally right' the speaker is *not* just recording the fact that he reacts favourably to it. He is asserting in the one case that it is *worthy* to be approved, and in the other that it is *worthy* to be adopted. (4) To say that something is worthy of approval is to say 'that there really is a valid argument (a good reason) for . . . approving of it and for recommending others to do so too'. (P. 39).

Mr. Toulmin gives the name 'imperativist' to those who hold that moral indicatives do not express *judgments* of any kind, but do serve to evince certain emotions or desires of the speaker and to evoke certain emotions or stimulate certain actions in his hearers. In discussing this type of theory he confines himself to the doctrine that moral indicatives express, in a grammatically misleading form, what would be more correctly expressed by uttering a sentence in the imperative. Now, as he admits, there is no doubt a perfectly good sense of 'reason' in which one can ask: 'What was *X*'s reason for giving that order?' or 'What reason is there why *Y* should obey that order of *X*'s?' But 'reason' here means *motive* for or against acting in a certain way, whilst Mr. Toulmin is concerned with 'reason' in the sense of *ground* for accepting something as true or rejecting it as false. In that sense it is plainly nonsensical to talk of reasons for or against a command, since the alternatives 'true' and 'false' do not apply to it. Now it seems to him to be a plain fact that in moral contexts we do give reasons, in the sense of grounds for accepting as true or rejecting as false, and that we do distinguish between those which are valid and those which are invalid. He concludes therefore that the imperativist analysis of moral indicatives cannot be correct.

There remains a third well-known analysis of moral indicatives, which Mr. Toulmin discusses elaborately and rejects. This is the doctrine that such sentences express judgments to the effect that an action or an experience, etc., has one or another of certain objective *properties*, of which such words as 'morally right', 'morally good', etc., are names.

Mr. Toulmin begins by distinguishing three types of property, *viz.*, simple, complex, and scientific qualities. Both simple and complex

qualities are 'directly perceivable'. A simple quality cannot be defined without circularity either in terms of simpler qualities or in terms of any standard set of operations. An example would be yellow, in the sense in which it is mentioned in the sentence: 'That looks yellow to me from here now'. A complex quality can be defined in terms of a certain standard operation, *e.g.*, counting, which must be gone through before it can safely be asserted or denied of a perceived object. An example would be the property of being heptagonal. A scientific quality is one which cannot be perceived *directly* and may not be perceptible at all, but whose presence or absence is detected by a certain standard operation. An example would be yellow, in the sense in which it is mentioned in the sentence: 'The sun is really yellow, though it appears red at sunset'.

Mr. Toulmin asserts that *all* properties fall under one or other of these three headings. He also asserts that this is true too of psychological properties, such as 'haughty' and 'meek'. (I do not see how this can possibly be so, unless 'perception' is extended to cover introspection.) He concludes that anyone who alleges that goodness, *e.g.*, is a property of the entities which are called 'good', *must* be asserting that it is a quality which falls into one or other of these three classes.

He then tries to show that goodness, rightness, etc., cannot be *directly perceived* qualities, whether simple or complex. Unless I am mistaken, he does not discuss the alternative that they are 'scientific qualities'. The course of his argument appears to be as follows.

(1) Suppose that P is a directly perceived quality (whether simple or complex), and suppose that A says 'S *is* P' and B says 'S *is not* P' where both are contemplating the same object. Then this difference *could* arise only from one or other of the following sources. In the case of a simple quality it must arise either (i) from deliberate or inadvertent misuse of the word 'P' by one party, or (ii) from the fact that 'P' has different meanings or different limits of application for the two, or (iii) from the presence in one of them of a relevant 'organic defect' such as colour-blindness. In the case of a complex quality the difference must arise either from one of these sources, or (iv) from incorrect application of the standard technique for ascertaining the presence of the quality, or (v) from the use of different and incompatible verbal definitions of the word 'P'. (2) It is *logically* possible that A should say: 'S is *good*' and B should say: 'S is *not good*' where both are contemplating the same object, even though *none* of these sources of difference existed. No doubt it might *in fact* be the case that any pair of persons would agree in their moral judgments under such conditions; but, if so, this would be purely contingent, like the fact that practically everyone dislikes the sensation which arises if you stick a pin into his body. (3) We may therefore conclude that words like 'good' and 'right' are not names of directly perceived properties.

What are we to say of this argument ? (1) It is of the same verbal form as the following argument. Every regular solid *must* be either a tetrahedron or a cube or an octahedron or a dodecahedron or an icosahedron. *This* has neither of these shapes. Therefore *this* cannot be a regular solid. But there is an important difference. The premiss in the above argument is a necessary consequence of the agreed definition of 'regular solid' and the axioms of Euclid; it is not a mere assertion about the sense in which the word 'regular solid' is commonly used. The corresponding premiss in Mr. Toulmin's argument is admittedly a mere assertion as to the way in which the word 'property' is commonly used. In such a case one is inclined to suspect that the exhaustive set of alternatives has been chosen by the author in such a way as to exclude the proposition which he wishes to reject. It is rejection by verbal legislation, and it is unlikely to appeal to any but the already converted. (2) If the phrase 'organic defect' in one of Mr. Toulmin's alternative sources of difference is taken literally, it is irrelevant to the case of 'good' or 'right'; for no-one supposes that these are names of qualities which are literally perceptible by any of our *senses* or by any conceivable extension of them. But, if it is interpreted more widely, the objectivist would be likely to say that, when all other sources of difference between *A* and *B* have been eliminated, the conflict between their moral judgments must arise from a moral cognitive defect *analogous to* colour-blindness, which he would describe as 'moral blindness' or 'moral insensitiveness'.

It is plain that Mr. Toulmin has the second of these contentions in mind in the argument which he uses on pp. 23 to 25. He imagines the case of a person who habitually exhibits good moral qualities, performs right actions, and gives what are admittedly valid moral reasons for doing them. He imagines such a person being asked whether, when considering what he ought to do, he is aware of any 'non-natural property of fittingness' in the alternative which he decides to enact. The person is supposed to answer that he does not, that he decides to enact a certain alternative because there is a *valid moral reason* for doing so, and that he is not interested in any additional 'non-natural property' of the alternative. Mr. Toulmin asserts that the objectivist would have to say of such a man that he may know what things are good but cannot know what goodness is, and that he is like a colour-blind man who has learned a technique for distinguishing red things from green ones but is missing an essential experience. This, Mr. Toulmin thinks, would be ridiculous. The reason that he gives is that we use the phrase 'to know what goodness is' in such a way that it is equivalent to 'being virtuous and upright and giving good reasons for one's actions'.

I should doubt whether this argument will produce much impression on those to whom it is addressed. In the first place, they might legitimately object that the supposed virtuous person is a puppet of Mr. Toulmin's creation, whose answer is put into his mouth by his

maker. We may safely assume that no Gallup poll has ever been taken of the answers of virtuous persons to Mr. Toulmin's question. Secondly, it might be objected that a plain man, however virtuous, could hardly be expected to return any very reliable answer to a question put to him in technical philosophical terminology ('non-natural properties') which is unfamiliar to him.

Mr. Toulmin alleges, not only that the objectivist account of moral indicatives is false, but also that it prevents those who hold it from paying adequate attention to the question which most interests him, *viz.*, the question of valid and invalid reasons for moral judgments. This is an historical statement against which, I should have thought, there is plenty of evidence. I suppose that Sidgwick and Moore and Ross may fairly be cited as distinguished exponents of the objectivist doctrine. None of them has neglected to discuss seriously the questions: '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.

Much more valuable than Mr. Toulmin's detailed arguments against the subjectivist, the imperativist, and the objectivist accounts of moral indicatives is his own estimate of the strong and the weak points in each of them and of the places of each in a correct and adequate account of moral phenomena. Leaving aside for the moment certain features which I find obscure. I think that his main points may fairly be summarized as follows.

(1) Moral phenomena in general, and the experiences which we express by moral indicatives in particular, are unique and peculiar. The only satisfactory way to investigate them is to do so *directly*. If we try to force them into moulds derived from reflecting on non-moral phenomena and the verbal expressions for these, we shall inevitably distort them. (2) The experiences which are expressed by moral indicatives resemble in certain respects judgments assigning an objective property to a thing, in certain respects judgments asserting an emotional reaction of the speaker towards an object, and in certain respects the experiences which are naturally expressed by uttering interjections or sentences in the imperative. But in each case there are unlikenesses which are as important as the likenesses. (3) Each of the three theories has arisen through concentrating on the resemblance to one of these non-moral parallels and ignoring the unlikenesses to it and the resemblances to the other non-moral parallels. (4) The two theories which admit that moral indicatives express *judgments*, *viz.*, the objectivist and the subjectivist theories, agree in making a certain tacit assumption. They both assume that two judgments about the same thing can logically conflict only if they refer to one and the same *property*, which one person assigns to the object and the other denies of it. Seeing that moral judgments can logically conflict, the objectivist concludes that the words

'good', 'right', etc., must be names for properties of a peculiar kind. Seeing that there are no such properties, the subjectivist concludes that moral judgments cannot logically conflict and therefore can only assert or deny that the speaker is reacting emotionally in a certain way to the object. (5) Mr. Toulmin rejects this common assumption. He holds that moral judgments *can* logically conflict, but that they do *not* assert or deny a property of an object. In order that they may logically conflict "all that is needed is a good reason for choosing one thing rather than the other. Given that, the incompatibility of 'This is good' and 'This is not good' is preserved. And that, in practice, is all that we ever demand" (p. 43). (6) Mr. Toulmin thinks that the imperativist makes the same tacit assumption as the objectivist and the subjectivist. But the imperativist's reaction is to deny both their alternatives and so to conclude that moral indicatives do not express judgments of any kind. (7) This line of thought is made plausible by concentrating upon singular sentences describing a concrete perceptible fact, like 'The cat is on the mat', and taking them as the type of all sentences which can possibly express judgments. Here and here only it is sensible to talk of a *correspondence* between the elements and the structure of the sentence, on the one hand, and those of a certain fact to which the sentence refers, on the other, and to say that truth or falsity consists in the concordance of discordance between sentence and fact. Since moral indicatives plainly do not answer to this pattern, it is assumed that they cannot be true or false, *i.e.*, that they cannot express judgments. But, then, it must be noted that the vast majority of sentences which admittedly express judgments obviously do not fit into this pattern.

I find myself in general agreement with much in Mr. Toulmin's position as thus summarized. What I do not clearly understand is his own positive account of what is expressed by moral indicatives. One aspect of this is stated in Chapter VI under the heading 'Gerundive Concepts'. These concepts fall under the general formula '*worthy* to be treated in a certain way'. Thus a 'true proposition' is one which is worthy to be believed, a 'valid argument' is one which is worthy to be accepted as making its conclusion worthy to be believed, a 'beautiful object' is one which is worthy to be admired aesthetically, a 'morally good disposition' is one which is worthy of moral approval, and a 'morally right alternative' is one which is worthy to be chosen for enactment. Mr. Toulmin states definitely that gerundive concepts cannot be identified with or defined wholly in terms of *de facto* subjective attitudes. To think that they can is the typical 'naturalistic fallacy'. There is nothing particularly new or startling in this aspect of the theory. It has been very fully developed by, *e.g.*, Sir W. D. Ross and by Dr. Ewing. 'Worthiness to be treated in a certain way' is in fact our old friend 'fittingness', and, as such, I have no quarrel with it.

The other aspect of Mr. Toulmin's theory is the identification of

'x is worthy of approval' with 'there is a *valid reason* for approving x'; and the repeated assertion that logical conflict as to the goodness of x or the rightness of y reduces to conflict as to the *validity of alleged reasons* for approving x or for doing y as the case may be.

Now this raises the following question. Does 'approving x' mean 'feeling a certain kind of emotion towards x' or 'judging that x is a worthy object of a certain kind of emotion'? On the first alternative the words 'valid reason' in the phrase 'valid reason for approving x' cannot be used in the sense in which they are used in the phrase 'valid reason for accepting so-and-so as true or rejecting it as false'. Yet it seemed to be an essential part of Mr. Toulmin's case against the view that moral 'arguments' are only a psychological method of altering or confirming men's emotional attitudes that such 'arguments' present 'reasons' in the sense of grounds for accepting something as true or rejecting it as false. Suppose, on the other hand, that we take 'approving x' to mean 'judging that x is a worthy object of a certain kind of emotion'. Then, no doubt, 'reasons' can be taken to mean 'grounds for accepting as true or rejecting as false'. But in that case I do not see how a conflict between 'x is good' and 'x is not good' can possibly reduce to a conflict as to the validity of the reasons alleged for approving x. Surely the conflict will be simply as to whether x is or is not a worthy object of a certain kind of emotion or not. It might be so, even though the alleged reasons for believing it to be so were invalid. And, whether they are valid or not, the question of their validity or invalidity is one thing, and the question whether the conclusion for which they are adduced is true or false is another.

In conclusion I must mention that quite a considerable proportion of Mr. Toulmin's book is taken up with discussions about the nature of reasoning and explanation in natural science, about the distinction between 'appearance' and 'reality' there and in ordinary life, and so on. These parts of the book contain much interesting matter, but I must pass them over here. Their relevance is supposed to be this. They support the view that the nature and the criteria of *moral* reasoning must be ascertained by a *direct* study of such reasoning and of the contexts in which it occurs. They do so by pointing out that the same is true *mutatis mutandis* of non-moral reasoning in pure mathematics, in natural science, and in the affairs of daily life.

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