ON PHILOSOPHICAL NIHILISM

Daniel R. Wilson

A number of competent philosophers have put forth the view that the metaethical problem of the justification of morality is merely a pseudo-problem. To "justify morality," on the standard treatment, is to provide an answer to the question, "Why should I be moral?" or to some other question very like it; but, it is claimed, this is an illegitimate, meaningless or circular question: it is impossible in principle to answer it -- and (hence) also unnecessary. "There can be no answer to an illegitimate question, save that the question is illegitimate."[1]

According to H.A. Prichard, for example, to ask "Why should I be moral?" is to ask for a proof of morality, a proof of "the truth of what...we have prior to reflection believed immediately or without proof."[2] Prichard disposes of the problem by taking an intuitionist tack: it is neither possible nor necessary to give a proof of morality, because the truth or untruth of moral claims is self-evident and "immediately" perceived or intuited. "The sense of obligation to do, or of the rightness of, an action of a particular kind is absolutely underivative or immediate...We do not come to appreciate an obligation by an argument, i.e., by a process of non-moral thinking."[3] Toulmin, on the other hand, says of the question "Why ought one to do what is right?" that

> There is no room within ethics for such a question...It is a self-contradiction (taking 'right' and 'ought' in their simplest senses) to suggest that we 'ought' to do anything but what is 'right.' This suggestion is as unintelligible as the suggestion that some emerald objects might not be green...We can therefore only parry it with another question -- 'What else "ought" one to do?'[4]

Thus, if we think that we must somehow "justify" ethics, we put before ourselves the task of answering a literally meaningless question; for to ask "Why ought we to do what is right?" is like asking "Why ought we to do what we ought to do?" Toulmin calls such questions "limiting questions" --by which he means that they are illegitimate extrapolations of a kind of question which is meaningful in certain contexts. Questions of the form "Why ought we to do x?" make perfectly good sense when we are inquiring about

alternative courses of action -- e.g., "Why ought we to pay our bills?" It is just because such questions do make sense in contexts like these that we come to think they will still make sense when applied beyond their proper contexts -- "Why ought we to do what is right?," "Why should I be moral?," etc. And Prichard is making somewhat the same sort of point when he compares the asking of the latter question to a "parallel mistake" which, in his view, underlies the theory of knowledge.

> ...At some time in the history of all of us, if we are thoughtful, the frequency of our own and of other's mistakes is bound to lead to the reflection that possibly we and others have always been mistaken in consequence of some radical defect in our faculties.[5]

Now, Prichard is right in saying that the doubts raised by Descartes "could, if genuine, never be set at rest";[6] but his conclusion, that we must come to "realize the inevitable immediacy of knowledge"[7] and dispense entirely with epistemological inquiry, is grotesque. Still, it would seem possible for "limiting questions" to be asked in epistemology -- e.g., of an empirical scientist by a Berkeleyan idealist -- and there would seem to be an analogy between such questions and "Why should we be moral?" Even Kurt Baier, who finds this last question to be meaningful (when translated as "Why should we let our moral reasons take precedence over others?") still finds a "limiting" question at the very roots of the problem of the justification of morals: Why should we follow reason?

> ...the question 'shall (should, ought) I follow reason?' must be paraphrased as 'I wish to do what is supported by the best reasons. Tell me whether doing what is supported by the best reasons is doing what is supported by the best reasons.'[8]

From these and other selections, I feel safe in inferring that it is a common feature of most treatments of the problem of moral-justification (whether the author believes it to be a pseudo-problem or not) that this problem has been tied to some such question as "why should I be moral?" And there is indeed something very odd about these questions -- an oddness best exhibited in the Toulmin version: "Why ought we to do what is right?" The oddness of the question is not wholly brought out by showing that it can be paraphrased in such a way as to make it circular:

what is more important, the question clearly seems to presuppose that there is something that is right -- that there really are right acts -- and yet still asks whether we ought to do them. Toulmin is quite correct in pointing out that this question is circular -- if there really are right acts, it follows analytically that we ought to do them; but it is passing strange that he should construe the problem of moral-justification as the problem of finding an answer to this question. "Why should we be moral?" is similar in character: we are not denied the presupposition that there are certain lines of conduct which really are "moral," but we are still asked whether we should pursue these lines of conduct. All such questions -- Toulmin's "limiting" questions about morals -- share this feature in common: that they presuppose, or allow us to presuppose, the truth of moral claims about the rightness of actions or the goodness of ends, and yet ask the (hence foolish) question whether we ought to follow the courses of action which, if our afore-mentioned presupposition were correct, we consequently ought to follow.

The philosophers who have tackled the problem of moral-justification have, it seems, invariably been men who themselves subscribed to the "moral point of view" -- invariably, they find either that the problem is soluble and that ethics can be justified, or that the problem is a psuedo-problem and that ethics requires no justification; furthermore, they write for an audience which (they can presume) is similarly disposed toward the fate of ethics. The result is rather like watching an early Christian zealot try to do apologetic theology for the benefit of his fellow early Christians. Since questions like "Why should we be moral?" do not really challenge the truth of the fundamental moral claims, and consequently give one only the dimmest and most confused of insights into the problem that we are really trying to get at when we speak of "justifying" morals, it is no wonder that moral-justification has never really become a live question, and that one eventually comes to

> ...feel a vague sense of dissatisfaction with the whole subject [of Moral Philosophy]...'What are books on Moral Philosophy really trying to show, and when their aim is clear, why are they so unconvincing and artificial?'[9]

It is Toulmin who quite inadvertently gets to the very heart of the matter when he says this:

> Ethics may be supposed to 'justify' one of a number of courses of action, or one social practice as opposed to another; but it does not extend to the 'justification' of all reasoning about conduct. One course of action may be opposed to another; one social practice may be opposed to another. But to what are we expected to oppose ethics-as-a-whole?[10]

Now, this is really the central question that must be answered before we can properly lay out the problem of moral justification; in order to make sense of the problem we must be able to conceive of some real alternative to the moral point of view. Typically, whenever such an "alternative" has been offered, it has been merely self-interest. The demand for a justification of morals, says Prichard, first arises from the conflict between self-interest and morals; and the limiting question has sometimes been asked this way: "Why should I do what is right when it is against my self-interest to do so?" Again, it is Toulmin who gives the best <u>coup de grace</u> to this way of thinking:

> ...If those who call for a 'justification' of ethics 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 <u>want to</u> do what you ought to do is another, and <u>not</u> a philosopher's task.[11]

Obviously, what we have in mind when we speak of "justifying" morals is neither (1) the task of convincing you that you ought to choose this or that action over its alternatives, nor (2) the task of making you want to do what you ought to do. But these two alternatives are, after all, not necessarily exhaustive. There is a third alternative -- for in order to convince you that you ought to perform this or that action, we must apply certain criteria to distinguish the acts we ought to do from those we ought not to do. We must apply these criteria, and this gives us another task: that of showing that the criteria we apply are in truth the <u>correct</u> criteria -- or, failing that, that at least there <u>are</u> such correct criteria (though they may not have previously been ours) for evaluating actions as good or bad. To do this would be to show that some acts <u>really are</u> good, and that others <u>really are</u> bad; this is the

sort of enterprise that we actually have in mind when we speak of "justifying" ethics. In this context, the proper alternative to the moral point of view is not the private policy (as Kai Nelson would say) of self-interest, but the counter-doctrine of philosophical nihilism. The question we really should be asking is not "Why ought we to do what is right?" but "Ought we to do anything?"

Philosophical nihilism may be characterized simply as the view that reality is morally neutral. Unlike emotivism, it does not hold that moral statements are meaningless, non-cognitive, incapable of being either true or false, etc.; rather, nihilism insists that moral statements must be meaningful, must express propositions, but that these propositions are (also) all false. This is possible because the denial that x is good does not entail the assertion that x is bad, nor vice versa; a state of ethical neutrality may be envisioned, such that acts are neither right nor wrong, and ends or consequences are neither good nor bad. It is, in others words, logically possible for all positive ethical assertions ("x is good," "y is bad," "a is right," etc.) to be false. Of course, when we deny the proposition "This act is right" we are affirming the proposition "This act is not right"; and within the bounds of the moral point of view, when people say that something is not right, they usually mean that it is wrong. However, I must emphasize that this only happens within the ethical framework, where the expression "This is not right" has come to be a cautious way of condemning. Likewise, on the opposite usage, when we deny "This act is wrong," we affirm "This act is not wrong"; when people say that something is not wrong, they typically mean that it is merely "all right" (i.e., morally permissible) rather than right (i.e., obligatory). It would, I think, be a very great mistake to conclude here that the expression "This act is not right" has two senses, one moral and one non-moral or extra-moral -- i.e., that the contradictories of positive moral assertions have a different meaning when used outside the context of the moral point of view than they have when used within that context. We are speaking here of the sense of sentences -- which is to say, we are speaking of the propositions that sentences express; and I am sure we would not want to say that the nihilist expresses a different proposition by "This act is not right" than the ethicist does. After all, we would not want to say that the sentence "This act is right" expresses different propositions for the

nihilist and the ethicist respectively, for we want the nihilist to be able to deny the same proposition that the ethicist affirms -- the nihilist holding that it is always false, while the ethicist contends that it is sometimes true. Rather, what we should say is this: that the contradictories of positive moral assertions, when used within the framework of the moral point of view, tend to convey an additional message that they do not convey when used outside that framework. For when within the ethical framework, we claim that such-and-such an act is not right, we have gone a long way toward claiming that it is wrong; because there are very few possibilities, and we shall have eliminated at least one of them. The moral point of view involves the presupposition that every conceivable human action is either obligatory, permissible or impermissible, and when within the framework of this point of view we say that a given act is "not right" or "not wrong," we have eliminated at least one (and often, in the former case, two) of these alternatives. We are accustomed to thinking within this framework; thus, it may seem to us that if a man asserts the truth of propositions like "This act is not wrong," he has thereby committed himself to the moral point of view -- for in granting that some particular act is not wrong, one seems implicitly to be recognizing that some actions are wrong. But this is an illusion, which persists only as long as we focus upon the atomic propositions ("x is not right," "x is not wrong," "y is not right," "y is not wrong") which the nihilist (in order to be consistent) must affirm; it is the logical crux of nihilism that all possible actions are neither right nor wrong. It would logically follow from this "first premiss" of nihilism that an infinite host of "atomic" propositions (about particular actions) are false -- namely, all positive moral assertions; and owing to the intimate logical relations between a proposition and its contradictory, it would follow that another host of atomic propositions would be true -- namely, the contradictories of all positive moral assertions. But the nihilist is not ordinarily concerned with affirming the truth of individual atomic propositions of the latter sort, as it would tend to be not only pointless but even somewhat misleading for him to do so -- what is important is that they are all true, and that the positive moral assertions of which they are the contradictories are all false. (The same can of course be said about the positive moral assertions of the "goodness" or "badness" of the consequences of acts.)

Now, on the moral point of view, as I have said, every possible action must be either impermissible, permissible, or obligatory; and it may seem that what I have done in the foregoing account of the logical nature of nihilism is merely to extend the category of permissibility, so as to take in all possible actions: "All is permitted," would thus be the nihilist slogan par excellence. And it is true, in an odd sense, that this is what the nihilist maintains -- that all is permitted, i.e., that nothing is forbidden; but it is a very odd sense indeed, since it is the nihilist's view that there is nothing or no one to do the permitting. The idea of "permissibility" has little meaning if there are not some acts that are impermissible; and to say that all acts are "permissible" is entirely too much like saying that all possible actions have the sanction of some rather bizarre moral doctrine. Thus, it is not really proper nihilism to say "All is permitted"; nothing has to be permitted. If a nihilist occasionally does have to resort to the expression "All is permitted" in order to get his point across, we may perhaps regard this as a metaphorical use of the word "permissible."

But I digress; the important point to be grasped in the foregoing is that there is no logical impossibility about the doctrine of nihilism -- it is logically possible for all positive moral assertions to be false. In order for these assertions to be false, they must be meaningful. And this is another important point about the doctrine of nihilism: it holds morality to be a delusion, but a cognitive delusion. Thus, curiously enough, the doctrine of nihilism at certain crucial points is in agreement with the moral point of view; the nihilist takes as his point of departure the same metaethical doctrines that the sounder sort of moral theories presuppose. Morality is cognitive -- that is to say, moral statements are meaningful, they express propositions which must be either true or false and which give one information about something. But if these statements are cognitive, how do we cognize them? And what are they about?

Emotivism and subjectivism often seem like covert forms of nihilism. Emotivism is, as we have seen, the view that moral statements are literally meaningless, that they are not really statements at all but mere expressions of our attitudes of approval or disapproval; subjectivism, a near cousin, holds that moral statements are meaningful, but that they are merely statements about our attitudes of approval or disapproval. But the nihilist is no more a

subjectivist than he is an emotivist; he would be the first to admit that moral statements purport to be about something besides merely our attitudes toward the things we commend or condemn. And most moralists would, I think, be in agreement here: the truth value of "John did wrong in shooting Helena" is not the same as the truth-value of "I disapprove of John's shooting of Helena." If I say "John did wrong in shooting Helena," I am not talking merely about my own or anyone elses disapproval of John's shooting of Helena. But what, then,am I talking about? Well, to begin with, the proposition "John was wrong in shooting Helena" is about John, and Helena, and John's act of shooting Helena; but it is also about something else. Now, it has been presupposed that moral statements, being meaningful, must be either true or false; and I trust that most of us (at least in our unphilosophical moments) subscribe to the correspondence theory of truth. It is a necessary condition for the truth of the proposition "John did wrong in shooting Helena" that there is a John, and that there is (or was) a Helena, and that the former did in fact shoot the latter; but the sufficient condition for the truth of "John did wrong in shooting Helena" is that the shooting of Helena was wrong. This "wrongness" is a radically different kind of entity from the others mentioned, and one about which we are entitled to have some doubts; it is neither an empirical predicate nor a physical entity. If this were an actual case, instead of an hypothetical one, those of us who had known John and Helena would surely entertain no doubts as to their respective existences,having been in their presence a number of times; Berkeleyan idealism, sense-data theory, and skepticism about other minds are really very little help in convincing us that our own acquaintances do not exist, even should we want to -- in their presence, we would hardly think of viewing what we were seeing and hearing as logical constructions out of sense-data, or as automatons, or indeed as anything but the corporeal bodies of living persons. Likewise, if apprised of the ugly fact by a suitably reliable informant, we would have little doubt that John actually had shot Helena, or at least that Helena had been shot by someone; and we would have no doubt that, had we been present at the scene of the shooting, in a privileged position and undetected, we could have empirically ascertained what actually took place, and in such a way as to give conclusive evidence at the trial. We would be able to see who the assailant was, what kind of gun was used, how many shots were fired, etc.; we might even be able to

ascertain empirically whether the act was intentional or inadvertent, whether it was premeditated, and whether it took the victim by surprise. One thing we would definitely not have been able to perceive or ascertain emprically, however, would be the wrongness of the act.

Let me make myself clearer here. If we were to hear that John had shot Helena, and that John was being held on suspicion of murder, we would probably think that John was guilty of wrongdoing; but if it subsequently came out at the trial that John had shot Helena inadvertently, or in self-defense, we would abruptly change our opinion. There are a number of such considerations, which in our actual moral practice could either extenuate or confirm the presumed moral guilt of persons who commit acts like John's: whether the act was intentional or inadvertent; whether it was deliberate and premeditated or committed in a moment of passion; whether it was done for personal gain or as a mercy-killing; and so on. All of these things are empirically ascertainable in principle -- at least to the satisfaction of a judge and jury -- and if our hypothetical watcher-from-the-shadows were to appear at the trial and give evidence that John had loaded the gun forty-five minutes before the shooting and secreted it in the room where the shooting was to take place (indicating premeditation) we would, in the absence of any extenuating circumstances, have our opinion as to the wrongness of John's act confirmed. Yet all our hypothetical witness has empirically ascertained is, that the act was premeditated; he has not empirically ascertained that the act was wrong. Such features of an act as are empirically ascertainable I shall call the "E-predicates" of the act; such features as an act is alleged to have, but the presence or absence of which cannot be empirically ascertained, I shall call "M-predicates." One who wanted to maintain the essential privacy of mental states might want to quibble with my calling intentions, premeditation, etc., "empirically ascertainable" since these are mental states -- "You can never *really* know what I intend to do," etc. However, I *cannot* doubt the existence of mental states in the way that I can doubt the existence of God and ghosts or the truth of moral assertions. I am too sure of my own mental states to doubt the existence of this *kind* of entity; and although one can always be mistaken in imputing such states to other people, I do not think this is terribly important. There is a hierarchy among

skepticisms, with different levels of unlikelihood: it is more plausible to doubt the existence of other minds than to doubt the existence of the external world; and by the same token, it is more plausible to doubt the existence of God than the existence of other minds. The nihilist and the atheist doubt only what they cannot see; the Berkeleyan idealist contrives to doubt the existence of what he can see. Thus I shall stick with my taxonomy of E-predicates and M-predicates of acts; ethics, if it is to meet the nihilist challenge, must show how these two sorts of predicates are connected. Obviously, the connection cannot be verified empirically. Intuitionism, it is clear, is an attempt to supply this connection from a source that is technically non-empirical, but strangely reminiscent of empirical verification, as the term "moral sense" would seem to show. According to the intuitionist, the wrongness of an act or kind of act is self-evident, and is presented to us through intuition -- a burst of insight or revelation which comes to us when we carefully consider the act. Now, an intuition, really, is a kind of experience -- to be painfully blunt, a feeling -- and apparently the only thing that entitles us to call the resulting cognitions a priori instead of a posteriori is that moral intuitions belong to emotional or mystical experience rather than sense-experience. The intuitionist doctrine is convincing only if we think we recognize such mystical experiences in ourselves; if we are so convinced, we will likely be impervious to the nihilist assault -- if the truth of moral claims is "intuitive and immediate," then (as Prichard would say) it is neither possible nor necessary to give a "proof" of morality. However, G.E. Moore, himself an intuitionist, had something very damaging to say about this last claim:

> Still less do I imply (as most intuitionists have done) that any proposition whatever is true <u>because</u> we cognize it in a particular way or by the exercise of a particular faculty: I hold, on the contrary, that in every way in which it is possible to cognize a true proposition, it is also possible to cognize a false one.[12]

Furthermore, (a nihilist could say) there is something intellectually very dishonest about intuitionism, for what the intuitionists profess to recognize as moral intuitions always turn out to be what the rest of us can clearly recognize as the influences of upbringing. Intuitionists such as Prichard make much of the fact

that a large part of our moral experience bears little resemblance to the weighing and calculating of painful versus pleasurable consequences envisaged by utilitarianism: e.g., we ordinarily keep our promises and pay our debts, not with an eye to the consequences, but merely because we feel it is right to do so. But given the nature of our moral upbringing, this is only to be expected; we learn our duties more by rote than by reason. Where the intuitionist would say "It is intuitively obvious to me that John did wrong in shooting Helena," the more honest man would say "I was brought up to think murder a most heinous crime, and my upbringing worked." The truth of one's inherited prejudices is "intuitively obvious" to oneself; this is about all that the phrase "intuitively obvious" seems to mean, on close inspection, although it purports to mean more.

Besides intuitionism, there is the attempt to establish an analytic connection between E-predicates and N-predicates. "You say he shot her deliberately, with premeditation and malice aforethought, and solely for motives of gain? But that is just the sort of thing we mean by 'murder'; read the legal definition! And we all know that murder is wrong, by definition." Then again, there is this more plausible version: "good" just means "pleasurable" (or "relatively painless"). A right act is an act with good consequences; and the consequences of an act are good if they are more pleasurable or less painful than the consequences of any alternative act. The good is happiness; and "happiness" means "pleasure, and the avoidance of pain." And this of course is the sort of thing that G.E. Moore put a stop to long ago: to say that "good" just means "pleasurable" is to commit what Moore would call the "Naturalistic Fallacy." There are some flaws in this notion of a Naturalistic Fallacy; Moore evidently thought the reason it is wrong to say that "good" just means "pleasurable" is that "good" cannot be defined in any other terms than itself, that "good" names a property which is simple and unanalyzable, and so good is itself undefinable. To give a definition of good in terms of any other word or words would be to confuse two distinct concepts, e.g.goodness and pleasure. Now, as one of Moore's detractors has pointed out, this kind of reasoning would make any definition impossible. It is clear, however, that what Moore is trying to do here is to show the impossibility of drawing analytic connections between what I have called E-predicates and N-predicates. When we have salvaged what is worth salvaging of Moore's doctrine, we will have the

foundation both for a rational theory of ethics and a rational doctrine of nihilism.

Moore states the crux of the salvagable part of his doctrine when he says that:

> ...propositions about the good are all of them synthetic and never analytic...And the same thing may be expressed more popularly, by saying that, if I am right, then nobody can foist upon us such an axiom as 'Pleasure is the only good' or that 'The good is the desired' on the pretence that this is 'the very meaning of the word.'[15]

This may be interpreted in part as implying that all positive moral assertions which are informative, which tell us something about the world, are also synthetic. This does not mean, however, that "good" cannot be defined. We can have analytic relations between moral terms, between the moral parts of speech; what we cannot have is analytic relations between moral and non-moral terms, between E-predicates and N-predicates. When we consider what we mean by "good," it is clear that we may define it thus:

"good"------"intrinsically valuable"
(or, more properly)
"good"------"having, or leading to, intrinsic value"

We commit no fallacy if we say that, by "good," we just mean "intrinsically valuable." Moore claims that while "good" is indefinable, "the good" can be defined -- and we would concur with the latter claim; thus:

"the good"-----"that empirically ascertainable property to which intrinsic value is assigned"

Thus, when utilitarianism is properly reconstructed, what lies at the heart of it is not a definition ("the good"----"happiness") but an assignment of intrinsic value to some entity or quantity x (x = happiness: "the good, it so happens, is happiness"); this assignment of intrinsic value takes the form, not of an analytic truth, but rather of a universal synthetic statement which may be either true or false. The sense of "good" is analytically connected only with the concept of intrinsic value, and also with the

concepts of "rightness" and "obligation"; thus:

"right act"------"act which maximizes the good"

"wrong act"------"act which minimizes the good"

It is of course an analytic truth that we ought to do right acts, and refrain from wrong ones. And now we see how it is that intelligent men were driven to such a grotesque doctrine as intuitionism; for if we cannot be intuitionists, then it appears we must admit that we can have no way of knowing whether our particular assignment of intrinsic value is true or false, and we are free to assert the latter and be nihilists, if we choose. Of course, we might always turn out to be wrong in having done so, if a connection between E-predicates and N-predicates ever becomes manifest -- as on the Judgment Day. However, it would be most interesting to see how even God could make the connection except by fiat. The point is, there may be such a connection and it may lie in something less capricious than divine fiat; but if so no one has as yet succeeded in demonstrating it -- and it is this task that moral philosophers should be about, rather than asking themselves such straw questions as "Why should I be moral?" The nihilist challenge to ethics is more fruitful -- it requires us to give an account of the truth conditions of positive moral assertions, and show why this account is better than all other accounts.

University of Kansas

NOTES

[1]H. A. Prichard, "Does Moral Philosophy Rest on a Mistake?," Readings in Contemporary Ethical Theory, ed. Kenneth Pahel and Marvin Schiller (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1970), p. 414.

[2]Ibid., p. 402.

[3]Ibid., pp. 407-408.

[4]Stepehen E. Toulmin, "The Logic of Moral Reasoning and Reason and Faith," Readings in Contemporary Ethical Theory, ed. Kenneth Pahel and Marvin Schiller (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1970), pp. 416-417.

[5]Prichard, p. 413.

[6]Ibid., p. 414.

[7]Ibid., p. 417.

[8]Kurt Baier, "Why Should We Be Moral?," Readings in Contemporary Ethical Theory, ed. Kenneth Pahel and Marvin Schiller (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1970), p. 440.

[9]Prichard, p. 402.

[10]Toulmin, p. 417.

[11]Ibid.

[12]G. E. Moore, "Preface," and "The Subject Matter of Ethics," from Principia Ethica in Readings in Contemporary Ethical Theory, ed. Kenneth Pahel and Marvin Schiller (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1970), p. 12.

[13]Ibid., pp. 16-17.