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# Rationality and Reasonableness in Ethics

Stephen Toulmin

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# Rationality and Reasonableness in Ethics

## **Cover Page Footnote**

Stephen Toulmin is the Henry Luce Professor of International Relations and Anthropology at the University of Southern California. This talk was delivered at Sacred Heart University on January 30, 1997, sponsored by the Hersher Institute for Applied Ethics and the Center for Christian-Jewish Understanding.

STEPHEN TOULMIN

*Rationality and Reasonableness in Ethics*

I hope I can provoke Jack Bemporad into a response, because Jack and I have collaborated at a distance and I much admire his work in the Center for Christian-Jewish Understanding here at Sacred Heart. I think he's lucky to be with you and I think you're lucky to have him. In any event, we're not like those people in the Congress who were denounced by Speaker Reed long ago: "The Honorable Gentlemen never contribute to debate without subtracting from the total of human knowledge."

Yesterday I was in Florida overnight to attend a meeting of a group that's interested in intellectual questions about, of all things, marketing. These are people, big people, both in advertising agencies and in major corporations and organizations like the U.S. Post Office: people who can learn from a two day seminar. A colleague of mine was giving a very interesting lecture. I went precisely because I wanted to hear what he had to say in this case, which proved very profitable in a quite unexpected way: gave me a kind of opening line for what I wanted to talk about today.

What he was concerned with, and what he was warning people about in the whole business area, was an issue which was not specifically to do with business ethics but to do with how people engage in public affairs and business: in particular, how they should think about the problems that they have and the errors that they can make. What he was doing was saying, Well you know, any of you who study statistics will have been told about the two different kinds of technical errors that exist in statistics. But I'm going to tell you about a third type of error. The third type of error is the pervasive danger of spending your time finding the *right* answer to \_\_\_\_\_

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the *wrong* question. And what he did was to produce a string of very interesting examples of cases in which problem-solving in business and

the management of business went astray because people gave an enormous amount of effort to getting very precise and exact answers to questions which didn't really meet the situation they were actually concerned with. At the end of the meeting he got them to fill out forms to try to show that they understood the different ways in which by insisting on a precise answer to the wrong question you can in fact get yourself entirely off the rails.

He told a very nice story, which I'll begin with if I may. There was a skyscraper down in Manhattan where the offices were rented out to a whole lot of different people and after a while there started being all these complaints about the elevator service. These became so frequent that the owners had to do something about it, so they decided that they must bring in a consultant. So who did they get as a consultant? They got an elevator man who designed and ran elevators, and he came in and studied the matter as best he could, and came back with a report that probably what they really needed to do was to replace the whole elevator system, that there were the following techniques that they could use for making the running of the elevators more uniform, etc., etc., and for accommodating more people in the elevators and the rest. What was the estimate of the repairs that they needed? Five million dollars. It would be cheaper, really, to replace the entire elevator system, but you could do a kind of band-aid job for a couple of million.

The question was: What were they to do? This was really out of proportion to the rental income and the rest. Then one of the tenants who happened to be a psychologist came to them and said, Look, I think you may be getting hold of this problem by the wrong end. Actually, the amount of time that the people spend waiting for the elevator in this building is not out of proportion different to the amount of time they spend waiting for the elevator in other buildings. The trouble is, the places where they wait are so unattractive and so featureless. If you install mirrors in each of the places where they wait for elevators, they'll be able to look at themselves and adjust their ties and feel more at home and the rest. Estimate: fifty grand to equip the whole building with new mirrors.

Now, the question my friend was raising, the question I want to get in the middle of your mind to begin with, is the following: It's not that I'm saying that one solution was better than the other solution, that one

## RATIONALITY AND REASONABLENESS IN ETHICS

3

person saw the point while the other person didn't see the point. The important thing was to be prepared to recognize that when you find yourself in a problematic situation, you have to go and see what's going on. You have to go into the situation. You have to ask not only technical questions but also human questions; you have to ask human questions of unexpected kinds; and your fundamental error may be the error of taking it for granted before you start that you know what the problem is. Of course, if you know what the problem is, you can find an exact solution to it very quickly. But that's not where human wisdom lies. Human wisdom lies in being open to the idea that we're not yet clear in our heads what the human problem really is, and then the error of the third kind is one of a number of different ways in which we can distract ourselves from understanding what's the way of handling the situation. The task is not the task of answering a technical question: the task is the task of handling a situation in which technical problems may or may not be involved. And the curious thing is – and this is a general comment on the way in which we conduct our public affairs – the curious thing is how much of the time we spend looking for the dime under the lamppost because that's the only place we can see. You know the old story.

For instance, it may not appear that this is true of me, but there are some things which irritate me quite out of proportion, and four times a year I'm irritated when the weather forecast man will say things of the form, "Spring begins at 3:36 P.M. Eastern Standard Time this afternoon." This is a perfect example of a precise answer to the wrong question, a precise statement about an irrelevant fact. If it were really true that spring were something that could begin to the minute at 3:34 rather than 3:35, then it would be impossible for us to say such things as "Spring came late that year." The fact is that anybody for whom the names of the seasons are tied up with the whole way in which their lives go, whether they're farmers, or tourists, or travel agents, or children wanting to play games, or whatever it may be, so far as the names of the seasons are tied into the fabrics of our lives, the question of putting an exact date and an exact moment to the minute at which one season or another begins, is missing the point. But of course what it does do, and this is a point that I shall come back to later on, is to remind you of the extent to which our whole way of thinking about the world we live in and the whole way in which we think about the ways

the world we live in are to be understood, has become for two or three hundred years now – we can argue about exactly how long – has become during what we are pleased to call the “modern period” dominated by a particular astronomical picture.

I was visiting a friend in Toronto and found myself in the family's spare bedroom and looked around the shelves for something to read and I found a very nice quality paperback edition of Adam Smith's book, *The Wealth of Nations*. And I was very interested because in this book is reprinted, of all things – it was the last thing you would expect to find there if you didn't know – a copy of an essay that Adam Smith wrote on the subject of astronomy. Now why was Adam Smith writing about astronomy? He was writing about astronomy because he had invented a new way of thinking about human social affairs and he wanted to be able to do this systematically, and he wanted to be able to show people what it was to have an intellectual system and to build a new discipline into the form of an intellectual system, so he wrote about astronomy: he wrote about Newton's intellectual system in the *Principia*, in which he organized the theory of motion and the theory of planetary attraction and the rest into this beautiful intellectual system, and said, So you see this is the kind of theory that my new science of *The Wealth of Nations* should fit into.

I have another pet peeve – not about Adam Smith, whom I admire enormously because he also wrote a wonderful book called *The Theory of the Moral Sentiments*, which you have to read in conjunction with the *Wealth of Nations*. But I do have a pet peeve about things that have happened within economic theory since Adam Smith which oversimplify and over-codify what he did. As with the case of giving the term “spring” an astronomical interpretation, in the same way it seems to me that in our public affairs we continue to prefer to discuss problems for which *calculated* solutions can be found over problems about which our understanding has essentially to be qualitative, that is, concerned with the qualities of life, the qualities of experience, and the qualitative aspects which are involved in problems. For instance, we have all come across reading the newspaper, especially the *Wall Street Journal*, the phrase “gross domestic product.” I'm sure you all understand the following point. Suppose I get in my car and I drive home and in the course of driving home in my car I have an accident and I total the car. Then I call the tow-truck,

## RATIONALITY AND REASONABLENESS IN ETHICS

5

I get in touch with my insurance company. If the car is truly totalled, I buy a new car. You know, of course, that in all these ways, I am contributing to the gross domestic product. If I drive my car home carefully and park it in the garage without damaging it, I am depriving the national prosperity of the contribution that I would make by having an accident. We can giggle, but it's true: this is the way the standard national statistics are computed.

It's only monetary transactions which are counted. So the contribution that parents make, especially women, to the social fabric by the work they do at home, for which no payment is made, don't count in the sense that they are *not counted*. Therefore, when people ask about how the welfare of the family is to be evaluated and included in our national accounting and in the ways we think about public affairs – the crucial actions by which the members of one family contribute to the health of that family and the members of another family let the whole place run in a slovenly way – there is no allowing for this in the way the accounts are managed. So that the fact is that where we have suitable technical abstractions, where we have formal mathematical calculations, we are tempted to pay serious attention to those from the standpoint of public policy and if the results appear to us in certain respects bizarre, this is something which should make us look again more carefully at the role of theory in the evaluation of our actual situation and the importance of understanding not just how technical problems can be solved by calculations but also how things truly impact in a non-quantifiable way on human life.

I spent a good deal of time working with doctors and others in the field of medical ethics, and I spent quite a number of years working with a Congressional commission concerned with, in particular, the ethics of human experimentation, the ethics of biomedical experiments in which human beings were the research subjects, and the rest. And one of the things I came to understand about ethics as a result of this work led me back to the most enormous appreciation of the work of Aristotle – Aristotle who was himself a doctor and the son of a doctor and came from a real medical family. One of the things that led me to this conclusion was finding myself really confronted with the question what the relationship is between the biomedical sciences and the arts of clinical medicine. Because indeed we have been through a period of about fifty years, from just before the first World

War right through to the early 1960s, during which the main effort of policy, both within the medical profession and in the country at large with regard to medicine, had been with increasing the *scientific* content of medical practice, the *scientific* content of medical training.

From a time when for many physicians all you said when scientists came along, was "Well, that's all very well in theory but . . ." from this time around the turn of the twentieth century on through to the sixties, education in medicine had been increasingly concerned with improving the scientific knowledge of physicians, which was of course extremely important. (Nothing that I'm going to say is in any way intended to suggest anything else.) But what happened along the way is that many of the traditional maxims and arts of the clinical physician, of the bedside doctor, we lost the sense of the doctor as the person at the bedside, the person who was essentially committed to the person of the patient. All good doctors, like our joint friend Eric Cassell and so on, will speak very eloquently about the toting of the balance in favor of the technical content of medicine at the expense of the personal care, how this had developed and how hard it was to push the balance back into a healthier balance.

Now, the point I want to make is the following. In recent years — and I regard this basically as absolutely desirable, absolutely admirable — in recent years, while the technical improvements in medicine have gone on absolutely apace, there has been a very conscious effort to do two things. Firstly, to revive in medical education the component of clinical ethics, of clinical understanding, an awakening in the minds of the medical profession of the extent to which traditional medical practice embodied a certain kind of human value which is just as important and just as central to the practice of the medical arts as the scientific component, indispensable as the scientific component may be. And the second new thing is that instead of the practice of medicine being simply the concern of the doctor and of the doctors as a profession, it has been necessary to open up the channels of communication between doctors and their patients and the patients' families and the patients' spiritual advisors and the public at large and community representatives, and this whole dialogue, triologue, polylogue has opened up between people engaged directly in the clinical practice of medicine and all those other human beings whose presence on the scene forms a part of the overall constellation of



## RATIONALITY AND REASONABLENESS IN ETHICS

7

persons, of humans, which defines the problem.

I have in mind the traditional complaint that the purely scientific doctor isn't interested in the patient, he is interested in the disease. The patient in the bed is a very interesting case of meningitis. So that what has been happening in the past thirty years, and this seems to me to be one example of a remarkable shift which has been taking place and which I'll come back and say a bit more about in a few minutes, what has happened is that we see a situation in which the clinical problems of medicine are once again recognized as problems which inescapably have both a technical component and a moral component, both a scientific component and a human and a humane component, and that the merits, the virtues of the medical art — and you can substitute any other profession you like: I'm just taking medicine as a convenient example — the virtues of the professional arts are the virtues of seeing how to balance the claims on the practitioner which come from his special technical knowledge and the claims which come to him as a person who has a particularly intimate relationship with a person, with the people with whose welfare it is his business to be concerned with.

Now, I will finally come around to saying something which actually connects with the title I gave for this lecture, namely, "Rationality and Reasonableness in Ethics." Many of us, for quite a number of years, have felt that there are plenty of situations in which somebody who has as near passed away as makes no difference, is having their metabolism maintained, having their bodily functions maintained by artificial means beyond the point at which any meaningful contribution can be said to be being made to that individual's welfare in any sense. Now, what is the nature of the complaint? The nature of the complaint is certainly not that it's *irrational* to keep the person on life-support. To the extent that rationality is concerned with efficiency and technical competence and doing the best one can, there's nothing on the face of it irrational about it. On the other hand, one does want to say that if it's not doing the patient any good, it's quite unreasonable to keep this artificial respiration machine pumping away or whatever it is. So this is a first example I want to give you of a way in which already in our common-sense ways of thinking and speaking we show the feeling we have for the need to balance the technically skilled against the humanly perceptive into the correct way or a desirable way of handling the profession.

I have a good friend at Holy Cross, Father John Paris, who's a Jesuit with the proverbially sharp Jesuit mind. He tends to precipitate himself into politically sensitive situations, especially if they have to do with this life-support system. He likes to tell a story, he likes to use an image to capture people's minds. Supposing you are in the hollows of West Virginia and granny is dying and she's sitting up comfortably in bed and the family is gathered around and they are ready to have the last rites or whatever their particular spiritual counterpart is, and somebody bursts in with a life-support machine and starts wanting to shove tubes down. The family will say, "What are you up to? Leave Granny alone." You may be able to make out a technical case for doing this, but she's ready to go, the family is with her, things couldn't be better for her, all told. The family doctor's here. He and his colleagues are well satisfied; no more palliation will serve a useful purpose. This is a nice example, and when John Paris tells this kind of story in his eloquent way, I think you have some feeling for how some action can be both highly rational and yet quite unreasonable, and remind us of this task that we continue to have of balancing them off against one another.

What I really wanted to talk about, and this I'll come onto very quickly: Something very strange happened to ethics in the course of the seventeenth century. In my *Cosmopolis* book I've tried to explain something about the historical situation in which this happened. Suddenly in the middle of the seventeenth century people wanted to make ethics technical, wanted to turn ethics into a theory, and when you start thinking in a comparative kind of way about all the great religions that there are and have existed in the world, and about the history of our own faith, the history of our own beliefs, the thing you realize is, this is the only time in the history of the world when people have seriously tried to make ethics a matter for a highly formal hypothetico-deductive or what-not kind of theory. And what I think is more important is that for seventy-five percent of the history of Christianity to date, the concern of ethics was pastoral and practical and case-based, just as it is in all the other great religious traditions: Confucianism, Judaism, the best of Islam, Buddhism. I'm not talking against abstract theory as an intellectual exercise for philosophy departments; I'm talking about the attempt to make abstract theories applicable in practical situations. I think this is the first time that it

## RATIONALITY AND REASONABLENESS IN ETHICS

9

happened. And historically in certain important respects it came to divide those who followed this line from the whole history of human endeavor in the ethical field.

Now let me immediately say something which is extremely important. I'm not making a point about either Catholicism or Protestantism or any other denomination. This was a historical phenomenon which covered the waterfront and which I still find historically rather strange. If you go back to the high Middle Ages and look at the state of ethics at its greatest point of development – both moral theology and moral practice – I think one of the wisest things that you find in Aquinas is the explanation of what he calls *ratio naturalis*, or natural reason, the understanding that in all essential respects ethics is concerned with our ability to recognize and deal with human situations that arise equally for people of different kinds from whatever community they come. And in fact the great Catholic moral theologians in the Middle Ages were true to their understanding in this respect. For instance, one of the major sources of examples that they discussed was Cicero's great essay, *De Officiis*, "On Duties and Obligations." So Cicero and Aristotle, neither of whom were . . . of course you could say that they were hidden Christians, but this is simply a rhetorical dodge. The fact is that for Aquinas that, as with the Noachic code in Judaism, there was a clear understanding for Aquinas that except where specifically religious obligations were concerned, for most of these things, the issues were ones which were the concerns of people from all backgrounds in the same kind of way.

So the question as I want to ask is, How it was that ethical theory, which was basically invented in the middle of the seventeenth century, in its modern form, as a result of a correspondence between Henry More in England and René Descartes in France, the beginning of what was known as the school of the Cambridge Platonists, how this came to be taken up and came to shape the ways in which public debate about ethics was carried on. And here it does seem to me what I have to say is that something of the same kind happens here as happens, for instance, in the case of the car crash and the gross domestic product. Because there are ways in which, whether as utilitarians or deontologists or consequentialists or whatever, that because there are these technical discussions which philosophers can very properly engage in and make as sophisticated as they please, we have a feeling

that these theories ought to be applied in actual practice, even where their effect is to override human wisdom and our human sensitivity: even where, as in economics, they lead us to counter-intuitive results which offend our natural sense of what's reasonable.

Now of course within the Roman tradition for many years these two traditions continue to coexist in parallel with one another, and indeed some of the most subtle and highly respected work in case ethics in pastoral theology was done in the eighteenth century after the casuistical enterprise that I wrote about with my friend Al Johnson, after this tradition had been exposed to hostile attacks by Pascal. So moral theology continued, but what happened after a while was that the theoretical contributions, the attempt to produce very sharp and strongly deductive arguments, entered the field of apologetics in a way in which it had not previously won a place within moral theology itself. And I'll give you a kind of index about this which I think shows you what for me is terribly close to the bone. I listen to NPR. I'm full of admiration for your NPR station. I think It's a great thing that Sacred Heart has this established place in what seems to me a very important national institution. I listen to NPR. I listen to other broadcasts, other television networks, and so on, and you keep hearing these journalists and politicians who are terribly much concerned with whether something is right or whether it's wrong. And I want to say that a preoccupation with the question, "Is this right or is this wrong?" is a preoccupation which may be appropriate in arithmetic – I mean, the question is, Did you get the right answer or not? Did you do the calculation right? – but really it stands in the way of human understanding in the field of ethics.

If you think about how you evaluate the actions of your friends, the situations that your friends find themselves in, surely the better you understand the people who are involved the more likely you are to end by saying something like, What she did was understandable, but regrettable. Or you say, Well of course what she did was terribly admirable, but it was rather overdoing it. Or we say – I quote today's *USA Today*, from the editorial that they report from the *New England Journal of Medicine* – that the administration's stance against the medical uses of marijuana is "misguided, heavy-handed, and inhumane." Or you say, just once in a while you say of something somebody has done, that it was quite unpardonable. The adjectives,

## RATIONALITY AND REASONABLENESS IN ETHICS 11

the evaluations which enter into our lives are not right and wrong; that's turning human relations into arithmetic. What we are concerned with is: Was it admirable? Was it overdoing it? Was it inhumane? You can make a long list of these evaluations and our moral understanding and the sensitivity of our moral understanding is measured by our ability to recognize and to apply all these different terms to the kind of human situations in which they're appropriate. And it seems to me that just as in medicine the humane clinician is one who truly understands what the impact of the technical treatment that he is recommending for a patient – what the impact of this will be on the patient's human situation, given who they are, what their relatives are, what family background they come from, what the consequences of a particular treatment would be, and so on – so in the same way, when we are dealing with a personal situation, we need to understand the character of these situations with all the sensibility and appreciation of complexity that are associated with clinical medicine.

I want to say a little bit not only about personal ethics, where I believe that the way of charity is the way of understanding cases, rather than the way of charity as contrasted with the way of dogmatism, comes from understanding in detail human situations. I want also to talk a little bit about the changing role of the professions in the world. Your president was explaining to me that Sacred Heart dates from 1963. This is a date that resonates in my mind because it's a date immediately after the time when Rachel Carson had published her book *Silent Spring*. I mention *Silent Spring* because in the early 1960s, when Rachel Carson was writing that book, ecology and the environment had no effective political significance at all. The local, the regional, the national, the international aspects of the environment were just not part of people's, not part of politicians', not part of public administrators' imagination.

In thirty five years, how the scene has changed. In thirty five years, how we have come to understand the importance not of cutting back on our technical development – the improvements of technology, whatever Heidegger may say, are in their many ways extraordinary contributions to human life – but what we have come to understand is that technology as applied, is always applied, *in situations* and that it's as important to understand the way in which this technology is being put to use in a particular situation as it is to be skilled at the

development and use of the technology itself. The technological imperatives have to be balanced against the human impact again in the same way that the technical skills of the physician have to be handled, balanced against their human impact.

I have a good friend in Tokyo, from whom I've learned a lot. He was in charge of the construction of the artificial island in Osaka Bay which is now the foundation for Kansai International Airport. He has a good sense of the importance of understanding what his work as a clinical engineer does to the people who he is involved with. And in fact out of the conversations we've had together he's developed a kind of whole movement in Japan among his fellow engineers concerned with what he calls "humanizing technology," which is a phrase which I'm very happy to sign on under.

When the airport was beginning to be designed, there were all kinds of complaints from local groups, including environmental groups, who were quite sure that this airport was going to ruin the habitat for the fish of Osaka Bay, and one of the things that he carried away from that whole experience of building that airport was the following. When they started building it, afterward, really quite quickly, they discovered that the fish loved it. The fish loved it. The more they built the foundations, and so on, the more the fish decided that there were wonderful new habitats for them to go to inhabit. So he became, simply on the basis of this experience, convinced that his task as an engineer was not just to calculate how many piles he needed or what dimensions and how deep they should be thrust into the subfloor: he also had to think of what he was producing as a contribution to the ecology of the habitats in Osaka Bay, so that again the technology and the impact went hand in hand.

I want to end by saying why, in this situation, I think it's no accident that Aristotle was a doctor and the son of a doctor, because what he says and what I think is still the key sentence in Book 1 of the *Nicomachean Ethics* is that you have to understand the difference between mathematical problems, for which you can generate timeless solutions, and the respect in which all the decisions we make of a moral or practical kind have about them the essential aspect of timeliness. He says that the two disciplines, the two exercises in which one sees how much timeliness enters into actions are medicine, but also, as he says, helmsmanship. The steersman in a boat. I've sailed

through the Greek islands, one of the things I've been lucky enough to do. I know very well from having been sailing in Greece and elsewhere: you tack towards the shore, you don't know how fast the land is shoaling — that is, getting shallower — you just have to be looking at the surface of the water and what you can see below the surface of the water, and you change tack where you judge that if you go any further, you'll run aground. There's no algorithm: true, if you have one of these electric pulse depth meters, that helps, but in the last resort the decisions you take are decisions which are taken on the basis of the technical characteristics of your boat together with your sense of the precise situation you find ourselves in, and this situation is one which whether you are a steersman in a boat or a clinician at a bedside, which you can only take if you think of them not just as a matter of technical calculation but of human judgment, human judgment of a kind which is essentially concerned with exactly where you are, exactly when you have to act, exactly who you are dealing with, and all the different interactions between these factors. I say this as one who began as a physicist, who still loves physics, but who has made it his life's business to try to understand what physics is there for and therefore how we can be sure not to make my friend's third kind of mistake, how we can avoid spending our time getting the right answer to the wrong questions, applying an admirable theory to a situation to which it doesn't really apply.