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The turn to reason: how human beings got ethical

> The History of every major Galactic Civilization tends to pass through three distinct and recognizable phases, those of Survival, Inquiry and Sophistication, otherwise known as the How, Why, and Where phases … the first phase is characterized by the question "How can we eat?", the second by the question "Why do we eat?" and the third by the question, "Where shall we have lunch?"
>
> (Douglas Adams, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, 1979: 159)

> Our argument is not about just any chance question; it is about the question *how life should be lived.* (Plato, *Republic* 352d7–8)

Long ago, human beings discovered that they could resolve specific technical questions – "How can I catch food?", "How can I keep warm in my cave at night?", "How can I avoid becoming food?" – by applying *reason*. They found they could answer these questions by thinking them through carefully, by generating and criticizing possible solutions, by trying out those solutions in practice and then refining them, and by remaining on the lookout for better solutions even when a given problem already had a passable solution.

We may call this discovery the *turn to reason*. It was a revolutionary move when it happened. The method of solving problems by applying reason to them quickly became a very successful competitor with older approaches such as brute force, or guesswork, or doing the first thing that comes into your head, or consulting the Juju, or copying others, or

mindless repetition of past practice no matter how unsuccessful. (Not that reason has ever entirely replaced these enduringly popular alternatives.)

Creatures like us, in a world like ours, face many different kinds of problems. Alongside specific technical problems such as "How can I catch food?", we also face some extremely general questions. Among the most general of all are those questions our answers to which shape our overall worldview:

- What is real?
- How can we know anything?
- What is life about?
- Why are we here?
- What is our place in the universe?

Over many centuries, the turn to reason spread in one way, as it was applied in more and more cultures by more and more people. It also spread in another way, as it was applied to more and more different sorts of questions, including, eventually, questions like the worldview-shaping questions just listed.

Among the first people to apply the turn to reason to these very general questions were the ancient Greeks of the sixth and fifth centuries BC. The distinctive achievement of the fifth-century Athenian Socrates (469–399 BC), whose words his pupil Plato (*c.*427–347 BC) claims to be reporting in the second epigraph above, was to apply the turn to reason to the most general question of all: how should life be lived?

Like the best tunes, the best inventions (including inventions of ideas) seem inevitable once they have happened. It becomes difficult to imagine life without them. The turn to reason, and the idea of applying the turn to reason to Socrates' question "How should life be lived?", are two of the best inventions of all time. It is hard for us who live in the world that these ideas have shaped to imagine life without them. We should not let that blind us to the fact that both inventions are anything but inevitable.

It was not *bound* to happen that human beings should hit on the use of reason as a problem-solving technique. In many other species, and for hundreds of millennia even in our own species, it *did not* happen. Nor was it bound to happen that human beings should even formulate

Socrates' question, let alone have the good idea of using reason to address it. There have been plenty of human societies where the turn to reason has barely happened at all. (On a bad day, you may wonder whether it has happened in ours.) There have also been plenty of human societies where reason is applied to some problems, but not to the sorts of problems that are raised by the question "How should life be lived?". There still are.

The application of the turn to reason to very general questions such as "What is real?" and "How can we know anything?" was the invention of philosophy. For that is what philosophy is:

> *Philosophy is the use of reason to answer worldview-shaping questions.*

And the application of the turn to reason to the most general worldview-shaping question of all, the Socratic question, was the invention of the part of philosophy that we call ethics. For that is what ethics is:

> *Ethics is the use of reason to answer the worldview-shaping question "How should life be lived?"*

This definition of ethics (or "moral philosophy" – I use the terms interchangeably) will be central to the argument of this book, so it is worth pausing over. My definition draws our attention straight away to four vital issues:

- *The demarcation question*. What makes something specifically an *ethical* concern? How do ethical concerns differ from other sorts of concern?
- *The why-be-moral question*. Ethics makes demands on us that it can be difficult or even dangerous to obey. When it does, what reason is there to obey these demands?
- *The question of reason*. Is it right to even try to apply reason to the question "How should life be lived?"? If it is, what *sort* of reason?
- *The question of objectivity*. Any assertion that "This is how life should be lived" prompts an obvious question: says who? What is the authority for any answer to the Socratic question, and how can we tell?

In Chapters 2–4, I take the first three of these initial questions one by one. The fourth question, about objectivity, requires more attention. It will be our focus in Chapters 5–7. Then, in Chapters 8–10, we shall focus on some important moral theories that philosophers of various sorts have offered to answer the question "How should life be lived?". In Chapter 11, in closing, we shall ask whether a systematic moral theory is the right kind of structure to answer that question, or whether we need something no less based on reason, but rather less systematic, instead.