

involve showing that not even a theory that makes reference to these items can explain how we determine what a speaker meant.

We do sometimes tell when what was said isn't what was meant. Why, a priori, believe that a theory of what we do is impossible?

University of Arizona

'IS MORALITY A SYSTEM OF HYPOTHETICAL
IMPERATIVES?' A REPLY TO MR. HOLMES

By PHILIPPA FOOT

IN ANALYSIS 34.3 Robert Holmes criticizes 'Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives'¹ where I argue that moral judgements are not categorical imperatives. Am I, he wonders, denying the intelligibility of the categorical/hypothetical distinction, so making nonsense of my own title? The answer to this is that although I find unintelligible some of the things people say in trying to separate moral injunctions from hypothetical imperatives, as for instance that they have a special necessity or binding force, there is one version of the doctrine which seems to me to rise to the level of falsity. I mean the idea that moral judgements, unlike hypothetical imperatives, have an automatic reason-giving force. As Frankena put it, quoting from G. C. Field, '... it is "one of the most deeply recognized characteristics of the moral fact" that it is in itself and necessarily "a reason for acting".'² This is what I am denying when I deny that moral judgements are categorical imperatives: in my view moral considerations give reasons for acting only when relevantly related to the agent's interests or to his (altruistic and non-altruistic) desires.³ Mr. Holmes is prepared to accept this, the rather obvious, interpretation of my article, but thinks that it must be a trivial point that I am making, hardly one from which so momentous a conclusion could be derived. For of course I cannot be denying that in *one* sense of the word 'reason' moral considerations necessarily give reason for acting. I seem to have overlooked the distinction between 'justifying reasons' and 'motivating reasons', and moreover to have forgotten that reasons give reasons from different points of view. What a moral consideration necessarily gives is, says Mr. Holmes, a justifying reason from the moral point of view: no

¹ *Philosophical Review*, 1972, pp. 306–316.

² W. K. Frankena, 'Obligation and Motivation', in A. I. Melden (ed.), *Essays in Moral Philosophy*: Univ. of Washington Press, Seattle.

³ Whether a man necessarily has reason to do what it is in his interest to do is a matter of controversy. Nothing that I say in this rejoinder depends on this point.

one judging the omission of an act to be morally bad can deny that he has 'a morally sufficient reason for doing that thing' (p. 99).¹

Let us consider these points separately, and first the distinction—spoken of as if it were well established—between 'justifying reasons' and 'motivating reasons'. So far as I know this piece of terminology was given its present currency by Frankena, in the article already cited, and I find the same confusions in Frankena and Holmes. There is confusion, first, between giving reason for a judgement (e.g. a moral judgement) and giving reason for an action (the one mentioned in the judgement), and secondly between justifying the judgement and justifying the action. By using 'justifying reason' indiscriminately for each of these things it is made to look as if they were inseparable. But I had said that the reasons that establish the moral judgement may not establish a reason for acting. Mr. Holmes is simply begging the question when he uses the same term 'justifying reason' for 'a reason to support the judgement *that* one should do *x*' (p. 98), i.e. 'a justification of a moral judgement' (ibid.), and also for 'a justification for following that course' (ibid.) and a 'reason for doing that thing' (p. 99).

That the transition from 'reason for the judgement' to 'reason for the action' is illicit, and in the context question-begging, is obvious. The manoeuvre which involves *action justification* needs a little more sorting out. Here one moves from the justification of the judgement to the justification of the action, and from there to reasons for doing the action. Once again the transition is illicit, for either justifying the judgement does not count as justifying the action, or else justifying the action is not necessarily showing reason for doing it. That it is not immediately obvious where the break comes is due, partly, to some complications connected with the meaning of 'justifying an action'. They are not really important here, but I must try to get them out of the way.

In the first place only some judgements of morality, law or etiquette (which are all examples used by Mr. Holmes) could possibly be taken as providing justification for actions. Strictly speaking justification belongs where there has been some objection which the judgement overrules. And while no unfavourable judgement could give an act justification, it is not clear that a justification implies that law, morality, etiquette or some other such system is positively in its favour. It seems enough for justification if the action is shown to be innocent according to that system—always supposing that some objection appeared to lie. So, if a policeman finds me climbing through my neighbour's window, or destroying his property, the neighbour's prior permission justifies my action in the eyes of the law.

¹ I do not follow Mr. Holmes in taking 'ought' statements as my examples of moral judgements because I see some unresolved philosophical issues here. It is possible that 'ought' does imply reasons for acting, and if so I would challenge the propriety of making these particular moral statements unless such reasons have previously been established.

These considerations suggest that those who talk about justifying reasons, and want to link them with the justification of actions, are operating with a somewhat artificial version of this concept. But this does not matter, except in so far as it makes it more difficult to see things clearly. To bypass such difficulties I shall use examples such that there, if anywhere, the justification of a judgement would also be the justification of an action, and the justification of the action would provide a reason for doing it. I shall suppose that the judgement is strongly favourable to the action; it might even say that it would be morally wrong, illegal, or not *comme il faut* to leave the action undone, so that it would actually be required by morality, law or etiquette. And to make it natural to speak of justifying the action I shall suppose that it was alleged to be objectionable from one of these points of view.

I said that there must be a break either between justifying the judgement and justifying the action or between justifying the action and showing that there is reason to do it. Where does it come? Perhaps it does not matter very much whether we bracket the justification of the action with the justification of the judgement or with the giving of reasons for doing it. But the following example suggests that it is more natural to do the latter. We start with a man who denies, as many people do, that he has reason to do something simply because it is required by law. We suppose that he is told that he is doing something illegal, but that in fact it is not illegal: he would be able, if he chose, to show that the action was legally unobjectionable, or even, in the circumstances, required by law. The relevant question from our point of view is as to whether, if he were really indifferent to considerations of legality, he would describe himself as *justifying* his action? It seems to me that this would be strange language to hear from a hardened criminal, unless he were putting on an act before the police. To talk about justifying an action is, to imply reasons on one side or the other, and this, by our hypothesis, is being denied.

Let me turn now to the other concept which Mr. Holmes introduces in asserting that moral judgements necessarily give reasons for acting. He had said that they give justifying not motivating reasons and he adds that they give reasons *from a moral point of view*. This he supposes that I cannot deny—that moral considerations give reasons from a moral point of view—and thinks I must be making the trivial point that they need not give reasons from some *other* point of view. Before I can say whether or not I deny that moral considerations give reasons at least from the moral point of view, I must ask about the meaning of the expression 'reason from the P point of view'. I want to ask 'Is a reason from a point of view a reason?' meaning 'Is the assertion that I have a reason from point of view P to do x inconsistent with the claim that I have no reason for doing it?' If the answer is that it is inconsistent it will be proper for some to deny that they have any reason from the point of view of etiquette to

do 'what's done', and others will say that they do not have reason from the point of view of law to do what the law requires. The same will go for morality unless my challenge—to show how this is different—is met. And this is a challenge that Mr. Holmes does not take up. Indeed he is just as insistent that there are reasons from the point of view of etiquette to follow the rules of etiquette as he is that there are reasons for acting morally from the moral point of view.

What I am suggesting is, of course, that either one may accept 'reason from a point of view' but deny 'reason', or else one may deny 'reason from a point of view'. The interesting question is whether in accepting 'reason from a point of view' and denying 'reason' one is, as Mr. Holmes suggests, merely denying a reason from some *other* point of view. The implication of such a suggestion would be that all considerations can equally be denied the status of reasons. And it is this implication which seems to me absurd. For suppose we do say that all reasons are reasons from a point of view and apply this not only to 'moral reasons', 'reasons of law' and 'reasons of etiquette' but also to reasons based on the agent's desires. We invent a name for this last 'point of view' and imply that there is nothing odd about denying that a man has reason to do the things that will get him what he wants. But what in fact would we say of someone who wanted to get out of a miserable situation, thought that action A would get him out of it, but denied that he had any reason, even other things being equal, to do A? Or suppose him to want something for someone else, and yet to deny that he had any reason at all for doing what would get it for him. That we should call such men irrational is just one pointer to the closeness of the connexion between reason and desire. Another, from the same network of concepts connected with the explanation of human conduct, is to be found in the conceptual connexions between motives and reasons. Whether or not reasons imply motives it seems that motives *by and large* imply reasons. And as one has a motive for doing an action that will further desired ends it follows that *by and large* one has reasons for doing these actions. One of these connexions must be broken by those who think it possible to sever reason and desire.

I conclude that in denying that considerations of law, morality or etiquette necessarily, and in themselves, give reasons for acting I am not making a merely trivial point. This does not matter very much, except in so far as concerns the survival of the worn out doctrine of the categorical imperative. I should like to see that disappear from the scene, and I wish it would take with it the 'justifying reason', a shady character of no fixed address.

Somerville College, Oxford, and The University of California, Los Angeles