

ON THE NOTION OF GOOD REASONS IN PHILOSOPHY FOR CHILDREN

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Abstract:

The reasonableness is a basic ideal of a philosophical education. Such ideal is especially expressed in "Philosophy for Children" by the notion, still open to multiple interpretations, of "good reasons". "Being reasonable" means, in its widest sense, the trend, the finely cultivated habit, of *giving, asking and evaluating reasons* for our thoughts, feelings, actions, words, actions, or wishes. What is demanded of those who participate in a community of inquiry is the permanent effort of searching for the best reasons for what we are, feel, think, say or wish to do.

Why are good reasons necessary? How are those reasons to be evaluated? What allows us to distinguish between a good and a bad reason? What are the main characteristics of a good reason? These are some of the main questions I aim to examine in this paper. I begin by trying to clarify what gives rise to the need to give, ask and evaluate reasons. Then I try to answer the question I consider to be central: what is a good reason, or what does one consist of? I conclude my thoughts with some notes on the possibility and meaning of a "logic of good reasons" and on the role it plays in the P4C project.

I show the diversity of reasons that can be offered according to the circumstances and the circles of interest in which we move. Since we live simultaneously in different worlds (those of day-to-day life, theory, moral decisions, and who knows what more possible worlds we can create through fantasy), the kind of reasons we must offer in each case may be entirely different. Therefore, the criteria according to which we can evaluate the reasons offered in each context may also be very different.

I emphasize that good reasons are, in a great number, intuitive. They are immediate, that is, not mediated by long analysis, but 'emerge' in our minds rather 'spontaneously'. Though good reasons may show up in a rather intuitive way, in general they are supported by a long process of analysis. Good reasons would not be such if they were not timely; therefore, they cannot take too long to show up; pressing circumstances require them to show up swiftly.

Nonetheless, they are not produced casually or by chance. As a matter of fact, they are prepared in our permanent exercise of making good judgments, that is, careful, relevant and well enlightened judgments. This implies a process of decomposing a problematic situation into its constitutive parts (i.e. an exercise of analysis), which happens too fast in our minds and shows up finished in those who permanently strive to reason in a sensible and coherent way when confronted with different situations.

Key words: Reasonableness; Good Reasons; Criteria; Intuition.

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Sobre la idea de buenas razones em filosofía para niños

Resumen:

La razonabilidad es un ideal básico de una educación filosófica. Dicho ideal se expresa, en "Filosofía para niños" (FpN), especialmente a través de la noción, todavía susceptible de múltiples interpretaciones, de "buenas razones". "Ser razonable" significa, en su sentido más amplio, la tendencia, el hábito, finamente cultivado de *dar, pedir y evaluar razones* para lo que somos, sentimos, pensamos, decimos o deseamos hacer. Lo que se exige siempre de quienes participan en una comunidad de indagación es el esfuerzo permanente por buscar las mejores razones para lo que somos, sentimos, pensamos, decimos o deseamos hacer.

¿Por qué son necesarias las razones?, ¿cómo se evalúan dichas razones?, ¿qué nos permite distinguir entre una buena y una mala razón?, ¿cuáles son las principales características de una buena razón? Son éstos algunos de los principales interrogantes que pretendo examinar en este escrito. Empiezo por intentar clarificar cómo surge en nosotros la necesidad de dar, pedir y evaluar razones; a continuación intento responder al interrogante que considero central: ¿qué es, o en qué consiste, una buena razón? Concluyo mis reflexiones con algunas anotaciones en torno a la posibilidad y al significado de una "lógica de las buenas razones" y al lugar que ello tiene en el proyecto de FpN.

Muestro aquí la variedad de razones que pueden ser ofrecidas según las circunstancias y según los círculos de interés en que nos movemos. Y, dado que vivimos al mismo tiempo en diversos mundos (el de la vida cotidiana, el de la teoría, el de las decisiones morales, y quién sabe cuántos mundos posibles más que podemos crear con nuestra fantasía), el tipo de razones que debemos ofrecer en cada caso pueden ser enteramente distinto. En consecuencia, los criterios a la luz de los cuales podemos evaluar las razones que ofrecemos en cada ámbito pueden ser, además, también muy distintos.

Enfatizo en mi trabajo que las buenas razones son, en su gran mayoría, intuitivas; es decir, que son inmediatas, pues no aparecen mediadas por un proceso muy largo de análisis, sino que "surgen" en la mente de un modo más bien "espontáneo". Ahora bien, aunque las buenas razones se puedan manifestar de una manera más bien intuitiva, generalmente vienen respaldadas por un largo proceso de análisis. Las buenas razones no serían tan buenas si no fueran oportunas; por tanto, no pueden demorar demasiado tiempo en manifestarse porque las circunstancias apremiantes en que se hacen necesarias exige que se presenten con prontitud.

Sin embargo, no se dan de un modo puramente azaroso o casual. De hecho, se preparan en nuestro permanente ejercicio por hacer buenos juicios, es decir, juicios cuidadosos, relevantes y bien ilustrados. Y, en cuanto hacer buenos juicios implica un proceso de descomposición de una situación problemática en sus partes constitutivas (es decir, un ejercicio de análisis), dicho proceso se da muy rápidamente en nuestras mentes, pues aparece preparado en quien se esfuerza permanentemente por razonar de un modo sensato y coherente ante las diversas situaciones con las que se enfrenta.

Palabras clave: razonabilidad; buenas razones; criterios; intuición

Em torno da noção de Boas Razões em Filosofia para Crianças

Resumo:

A razoabilidade é o ideal básico de uma educação filosófica. Esse ideal é especialmente expresso no programa de “Filosofia para Crianças” (FpC) pela noção, ainda aberta à múltiplas interpretações, de “boas razões”. “Ser razoável” significa, num sentido amplo, a tendência, o hábito bem cultivado, de dar, perguntar e analisar razões para nossos pensamentos, sentimentos, ações, palavras ou desejos. O que isto demanda àqueles que participam da comunidade de investigação é o permanente esforço de pesquisar pelas melhores razões para o que somos, sentimos, pensamos, falamos ou queremos fazer.

Por que as boas razões são necessárias? Como podemos avaliar essas razões? O que nos permite distinguir entre a boa e a má razão? Quais são as principais características da boa razão? Essas são algumas das principais questões que eu pretendo examinar neste artigo. Eu começo tentando esclarecer o que nos leva à necessidade de dar, perguntar e analisar razões. Depois, tento responder à questão que considero central: o que é, ou em que consiste, uma boa razão? Concluo meus pensamentos com algumas notas sobre a possibilidade e o significado da “lógica das boas razões” e o papel que isso desempenha no programa de filosofia para crianças.

Mostro a diversidade das razões que podem ser oferecidas de acordo com as circunstâncias e os círculos de interesse nos quais nos movemos. Desde que vivemos em diferentes mundos (os do dia-a-dia, da teoria, da decisão moral e quem sabe quais outros mundos possíveis nós criamos através da fantasia), os tipos de razões que devemos oferecer em cada caso podem ser completamente diferentes. Portanto, o critério de acordo com o qual podemos analisar as razões oferecidas em cada contexto pode ser também muito diferente. Enfatizo que as boas razões são, em sua maioria, intuitivas; ou seja, não são mediadas por uma longa análise, mas “emergem” em nossas mentes, ao contrário, “espontaneamente”. Embora as boas razões possam surgir num sentido mais intuitivo, em geral elas são sustentadas por um longo processo de análise. As boas razões não poderiam ser assim se elas não fossem oportunas; portanto, elas não podem demorar muito para aparecer; circunstâncias que pressionam exigem que elas apareçam prontamente.

Contudo, elas não são produzidas casual ou acidentalmente. Com efeito, elas são preparadas no nosso exercício permanente de fazer bons julgamentos, isto é, juízos cuidadosos, relevantes e bem iluminados. Isso implica num processo de decomposição de uma situação problemática pelas suas partes constitutivas (ou seja, um exercício de análise), o que ocorre muito rápido em nossas mentes e mostra-se terminado naqueles os quais se esforçam permanentemente para raciocinar de modo sensível e coerente quando confrontados com situações distintas.

Palavras-chave: razoabilidade; boas razões; critério; intuição

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“Be reasonable” is one of the basic imperatives in life. We aspire to know that everything we do, feel, wish, decide or think will be, in a way, reasonable. Paraphrasing that beautiful sentence with which Aristotle begins the *Metaphysics*, we could even say that all men, by nature, aspire to be reasonable.¹

Those committed to the kind of thought and inquiry that an initiative such as Philosophy for Children (P4C) implies, know that one of the things continually reinforced in that program is to be reasonable, understanding reasonableness as the fundamental trait that is to determine all our social performances. This ideal of reasonableness is especially expressed by the notion, still open to multiple interpretations, of “good reasons.” What is demanded of those who participate in a community of inquiry is the permanent effort of searching for the best reasons for what we are, feel, think, say or wish to do.

I will not attempt to define what is meant by “being reasonable,” as there are very valuable existing contributions by contemporary philosophy on the subject.² I will simply say that “being reasonable” means, in its widest sense, the trend, the finely cultivated habit, of *giving, asking and evaluating reasons* for our thoughts, feelings, actions, words, actions, or wishes.

Giving, asking or accepting any kind of reasons, however, is not enough to be considered reasonable. Frequently we offer many reasons without being reasonable. Being reasonable does not then depend on the quantity of reasons offered, nor on the speed at which we can produce them, but with *the quality of the reasons we offer* as an explanation or justification of what we are and do. More specifically, being reasonable is being able to ask and give good reasons,

¹ The exact sentence is “All men by nature desire to know”, in *Metaphysics*, 980a 21. Cfr. *The Complete Works of Aristotle. The Revised Oxford Translation*, Edited by Jonathan Barnes, Volume Two, Princeton University Press, 1995, p. 1552.

² Cfr., among many others, the book by Dearden, Hirst and Peters *Education and Reason*, London, Routledge & Kegan, 1972. Specially valuable to us are the articles of D. Pole (“The Concept of Reason”), G. Ryle (“A Rational Animal”) and M. Black (“Reasonableness”).

or to recognize or discard them after an adequate evaluation.

Why are good reasons necessary? How are those reasons to be evaluated? What allows us to distinguish between a good and a bad reason? What are the main characteristics of a good reason? These are some of the main questions I aim to examine in this paper. I will begin by trying to clarify what gives rise to the need to give, ask and evaluate reasons. Then I will try to answer the question we consider to be central: what is a good reason, or what does one consist of? I will conclude my thoughts with some notes on the possibility and meaning of a “logic of good reasons” and on the role it plays in the P4C project.

1. The need to give, ask for, and evaluate reasons

Even the most common matters may present us with the need to give and ask for reasons. When we make claims, others may demand reasons to support or justify our points of view. Thinking about a problem implies, as well, looking for reasons that can help explain what is being thought. Our actions must also be justified, and that implies offering reasons that show why what we intend to do and, furthermore, what we have done, is good or fair. Moreover, even emotions entail the necessity of reasoning, for they are not irrational by definition. If we believe Aristotle on this point, an authentic wish is not a mere biological impulse to act in a determined way, but a “reasoned preference” about something, for a moral choice is a “deliberate desire of things in our own power”.³

What is true about day-to-day life also applies to the theoretical world. When we try to build a theory, it is evident that we need to give, ask for, and evaluate reasons. Moreover, the theoretical construction effort is precisely the effort of finding reasons that are the case, i. e. those that fundament what we try to show or demonstrate. From *ad hoc* theories that explain ordinary events, to scientific theories, we need to give, ask for and evaluate reasons; but in this last case, the need is more pressing and specific.

³ Aristotle works on this notion of “choice” or “reasoned preference” in the first three chapters of the Third Book of his *Nicomachean Ethics*. The definition we just quoted is at the end of the third chapter (1113a 10).

When we build a scientific theory, not just any reason is sufficient. We cannot, for example, appeal to mere feelings, subjective convictions or common opinions. Furthermore, though some consolidated knowledge is essential to the process of scientific research, it might be necessary that, as we proceed with research, we come to question that knowledge. To do that, we need reasons. But, as I have suggested, not any reason is valid in science. A scientist can only recognize value in that which is either a product of correct reasoning or is founded on some sort of empirical evidence. A good reason in science is founded on the authority of demonstration, observation or scientific experiments.

One's moral life is also a field where reasons are indispensable. It is not about mere reasons (such as the ones that are enough for many practical matters), nor about merely explicative reasons (such as those we hope to find in scientific knowledge). Let us suppose we are discussing the moral legitimacy of cloning human beings, and someone holds that we should go on with it because it is possible. To demonstrate his opinion, he provides an explanation of how genetic engineering would be able to produce a human clone. His reasons will surely be scientifically valid, since they explain the way in which the cloning would be done. However, they will not be necessarily valid from the moral point of view, since they do not justify that it should be done. And this is precisely the point we want to emphasize: reasons that are valid in a moral discussion are not the ones that *explain* something, but those that have enough force to *justify* that something should be done. An acceptable reason in moral matters is, then, that which justifies (that is, that makes something 'just', fair) an action, i. e. that shows that an action would be desirable and that it should be carried out.

The former reflection allows us to extract a first result that informs our reflection on the need for giving, asking and evaluating reasons (and good reasons). If it is true that we give and ask for reasons for many different things (defend an opinion, found a theory, justify a real or possible action, etc.), the kind of reasons adequate in each case depend on the nature of the context in

which we move.

What I tried to emphasize in the last few paragraphs is the diversity of reasons that can be offered according to the circumstances and the circles of interest in which we move. Since we live simultaneously in different worlds (those of day-to-day life, theory, moral decisions, and who knows what more possible worlds we can create through fantasy), the kind of reasons we must offer in each case may be entirely different. Therefore, the criteria according to which we can evaluate the reasons offered in each context may also be very different. If we move, for example, in a family circle (a community which supposedly relies on relations of fraternity and love), reasons invoking love and fraternity may have considerable weight, which surely does not happen in scientific discussions.

It is not certain that all we pretend to offer as a reason is actually a reason. How can we be sure what constitutes an authentic reason? Even if we could clearly identify what is and what is not a reason, we still would have to know if a given reason is good, since it could be, for some reason, a bad reason. How do we distinguish between good and bad reasons?

I now remember an anecdote that occurred in a philosophy seminar. Discussing a philosopher's text, a student began expressing opinions on the author's thought which the seminar director did not find justified. When he asked the student to explain why he was saying what he was saying, the student only answered "Because... yeah!". Evidently, he was being asked for reasons to justify his appreciations, and his answer could not be accepted as one. Moreover, not only was it not a valid reason, it was no reason at all.

As matter of fact, in our ordinary language there are a number of expressions that we use when asked for reasons, but precisely in order to avoid providing them: expressions such as the one mentioned above, or "because it is so," "I'm convinced that...," "I assure you that...," "believe me, I'm telling you," and many others. It is then necessary that in our daily-life conversations we do not get fooled by expressions whose meaning we have not examined. What do those expressions mean? That is, what is it we do when we utter

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sentences such as those? To answer these questions would require a more detailed analysis than the one we intend here.

To this point, nonetheless, the fundamental problem subsists: what is a good reason? We have suggested that good reasons depend on the context we move in, that they are not absolute, etc. We will now try to clarify what a good reason is, without pretending to exhaust the subject, since such a thing is not to be reduced to a simple definition.

2. What is a good reason?

There may be no better way to start exploring this problem than a common situation from our day-to-day life. For this purpose I will rely on a passage from chapter four of *Pixie*, a novel in the P4C program. In this section, Pixie and her sister have fought at the breakfast table and Pixie has hit her sister. Right after that, Pixie and her mother are talking:

Oh, there's something I forgot to mention. When Miranda kicked me because she said I kept looking at her, and my mother yelled at her, my mother said, "Miranda, that's no excuse!"

So I said, "Momma, it is an excuse, but it's *only* an excuse!"

"Pixie", my mother said, "it seems to me that if you have an excuse for doing something, then you have a *good reason* for doing it."

"But Momma", I told her, "if I hurt my finger a little bit in school, and I told the teacher I was hurt and needed to be sent home, everybody would know that I was using my hurt finger as an excuse. An excuse isn't a *good reason* -it's a *bad reason*!"

Miranda said, "Pixie, do you have to argue about everything?"

I said, "I'm not arguing. I'm just asking questions. Is that such a crime?"

That's when Miranda said I was always trying to bug her. As if anybody would believe *that* excuse for kicking me!⁴

These lines do not contain an explanation of what a good reason is, but

⁴ LIPMAN, Matthew: *Pixie*, Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children, 1981, pp. 25-26.

some of Pixie's comments suggest what bad reasons are by pointing out a peculiar and abundant type of reason: excuses. Understanding what excuses are, that is, what we do when we excuse ourselves, not only helps us clarify many issues in moral philosophy (as John L. Austin has suggested⁵), but can also help us to better explore what a good reason is.

Excuses normally are bad reasons, because with them we intend to evade responsibility. For example, let us suppose we arrive late to class and explain we are late *because* we overslept. Would that be a valid reason? It depends on how we address it. If we pay attention to its logical structure, we will find it correct, since it is as follows:

- If we oversleep, we will arrive late to class.
- We overslept.
- Therefore, we arrived late to class.

It is a well built argument. Should it be accepted as a (good) reason? It looks as if it is not enough. It appears that a valid formal structure alone is not enough to validate a reason; the context where that reason is expressed is also important. Let us look at it from that point of view:

1. Because I take part in a course, I have acquired the obligation to get to class on time.
2. Since I acquired that obligation, I am responsible for being on time.
3. Because I have to be on time, I have to wake up early.
4. If I oversleep (as well as if I do anything at all), I am responsible for the consequences.
5. The consequences of oversleeping are:
 - a. I will not wake up early.
 - b. I will not be on time for class.
6. Because I overslept, I am responsible for my tardiness.
7. Therefore, I am responsible for not fulfilling my obligation to

⁵ See John L. Austin: "A Plea for Excuses", in *Philosophical Papers*, Third Edition, Edited by J. O. Urmson and G. J. Warnock, Oxford University Press, 1979, pp. 175-204.

get to class on time.

Examined in this manner, it is clear that by excusing my tardiness (that is, asking not to be blamed for it) *because* I overslept, is not a good reason since:

1. I intend to evade a responsibility that is entirely my own and that I can not delegate.
2. It does not appear as a relevant argument, because there does not appear to be a necessary connection between sleeping and being late. After all, everyone who arrived on time has surely slept the night before.
3. The fact of being asleep does not justify the tardiness.
4. Instead of ex-culpating, it in-culpates; that is, instead of freeing us from the accusation of tardiness, it adds shamelessness, making the fault even worse.

Excuses can be, and in many cases they actually are, bad reasons.

Now then, is an excuse always a bad reason? To clarify this matter it might be useful to distinguish between excuses and apologies. What an excuse names is the act of freeing ourselves from an accusation, that is, of evading the imputation of having done something. We can even accept that it is bad thing to do, since what we seek is to assert we have not done it. What is deceptive about when someone says he arrived late *because* he fell asleep, is that he is trying to say that, though he knows it is a bad thing to be late, he has not arrived late: he is on time, even if he left home too late. There is usually something tricky, distorted, and even fraudulent in excuses.

Apologies are a very different thing. When I apologize, I do not intend to elude my responsibility or deny having done something. I simply intend to show that it was not wrong to do that, since there might be a strong reason for having done it and that might justify the acceptance of some of its undesirable consequences. I seek not to evade responsibility, but guilt. That is, even if I recognize having done what I am accused of and accept its consequences, I ask not to be blamed for it, since there were strong reasons for doing it.

Let us examine a case similar to the last one. Suppose that on a different day another student from the same class is late because, according to her, she

had to help someone who was badly hurt in a car accident. She accepts being late, and hopes it does not happen again. She apologizes, for she acknowledges being late, and that her obligation is to be on time. But the reason given will surely seem acceptable to all, since saving someone's life sounds like a very strong reason for being late. We could tell her she should have left earlier for class, but it is likely she left home with enough time to make it. Besides, it was an unforeseeable and accidental matter and, on the other hand, required immediate attention. It is clear, then, that there are many reasons according to which we cannot simply qualify this student as unpunctual. If the facts she reports are true, we can say she has offered us a good reason for being late to class.

Now then, excuses are ordinarily bad reasons, as Pixie pointed out. Apologies, instead, can in many times be good reasons. However, what is it that makes a good or bad reason? There are some general criteria that can be taken into account and that derive from the analysis of the past examples:

1. A good reason either *explains* why something happens or *justifies* that something be done or had to be done. If it is a purely theoretical discussion, it will be enough to explain why something has happened, without needing to go into why it should be that way (with its four basic laws, for example, Newton's theory explains very well how the universe works, but it does not need to say why the universe should always behave like that; a scientific theory is not prescriptive). When a practical matter is at hand, explanations are welcomed, but they are not enough, since what it is all about is trying to justify why something should be done. He who says he was late because he overslept explains very well the cause of his tardiness, but the fact of oversleeping is not a good justification for not fulfilling his obligation of being on time.

2. A good reason is *timely*. We all know from daily experience that an apology that might have been appropriate at a given time, when given at another time is a bad one. If I fail my job obligations because my mother has died, that is a very strong reason (as a matter of fact, it is a worker's

right not to show up to work due to a domestic calamity). But if I only say something about it two months later, all of that reason's force will be lost, for two months is not an appropriate time to notify the boss of our mother's death. Good reasons, as well as good decisions, have, as Aristotle would say, "a proper time".⁶

3. A good reason is *a sign of responsibility and prudence*. People who are able to provide good reasons for what they think, say, feel and do, as well as to adequately evaluate reasons given by others, can be properly qualified as "reasonable." Now, being reasonable is one of the basic elements of an ethical life, for it includes 1) being able to correctly discern between different conflicting options, 2) to do it based on the application of relevant criteria, 3) enlightened by tendencies in the person that can be considered good (what we usually call 'virtues') and 4) with care, sensibility and empathy for the needs of others.

4. A good reason is *coherent*. Not only does it not contradict itself (for any reason that does so invalidates itself), but can be expressed in a formal structure (a syllogism, for example) and follow the rules and general conditions of correct reasoning. Good reasons, then, obey a general coherence pattern.

True, it is impossible to evaluate *every* reason. But it is convenient to learn to take a closer look at them, because discourses of daily life are plagued by "good" reasons that are no such thing and bad reasons that pretend to be good ones. However, we do not always need to run a test to set them apart. *Good reasons are, in a great number, intuitive*. They are immediate, that is, not mediated by long analysis, but 'emerge' in our minds rather 'spontaneously'. This expression, nonetheless, is loosely used, as I will explain next.

Though good reasons may show up in a rather intuitive way, in general they are supported by a long process of analysis. Good reasons would not be

⁶ Cfr. in this regard the reflection on prudence that Aristotle makes in book VI of his *Nicomachean Ethics*.

such if they were not timely, as we have said. Therefore, they cannot take too long to show up; pressing circumstances require them to show up swiftly. Nonetheless, they are not produced casually or by chance. As a matter of fact, they are prepared in our permanent exercise of making good judgments, that is, careful, relevant and well enlightened judgments. This implies a process of decomposing a problematic situation into its constitutive parts (i.e. an exercise of analysis), which happens too fast in our minds and shows up finished in those who permanently strive to reason in a sensible and coherent way when confronted with different situations.

A simple example might help me clarify a bit more what has been said. For many years I have lived outside the city, and everyday I have to drive over a road filled with cyclists. One day, a truck hit one of them. Some cars just drove by and continued on their way. Since I was practically alone on the scene, some of the victim's friends asked for my help. I noted that the victim required immediate medical attention. I was, however, fearful of the consequences (legal, financial, practical, etc.) that could befall me by helping the victim. In a matter of seconds they asked me to take him to a hospital. I agreed, under three conditions: 1) they find a policeman to prevent the truck driver from leaving (I needed to be sure I was not going to be blamed for the accident), 2) that someone would accompany me and be responsible for the victim once we got to the hospital (I could not be held responsible for his life at the hospital), and 3) that both issues be resolved in a matter of minutes, since the victim's condition required it. The conditions were quickly met and we took the victim to a hospital. I had not previously prepared my train of thought, but it came spontaneously, for in some way I had always imagined the possibility of a similar situation. Finding good reasons is, then, something required under specific (and many times pressing) circumstances, and adequate reasons for each situation can only be given by who has cultivated the habit of coherent reasoning under the many different circumstances he faces.

Pascal once said "The heart bears reasons that Reason cannot understand." This is exactly the case: good reasons may also be, in some way,

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what Pascal called “reasons of the heart,” that is, reasons for which we cannot show the logical or psychological process through which we get to them. But they can, in a rather intuitive way, adequately interpret current circumstances and arrive at conclusions and points of view that, besides being reasonable, are very coherent with others. In this sense we could say that good reasons are formed in the heart of she who in one way or another keeps an interest and permanent care for what others feel, say, live or think.

We can then assert that it is not simply about offering some good reasons on a given occasion (there are situations so complex that it seems impossible to do so), but something more basic: *it is about being reasonable, about cultivating the habit of giving and asking for good reasons, and acquiring the tools to evaluate them.* Being reasonable is much more than being a skilled arguer. As A. M. Sharp and L. Splitter put it:

Reasonableness itself is a rich, multi-layered, concept. (...) as an educational ideal, reasonableness goes beyond rationality which is all-too-often rigid, exclusively deductive, ahistorical and uncreative. Reasonableness is primarily a social disposition: the reasonable person respect others and is prepared to take their views and their feelings into account, to the extent of changing her own mind about issues of significance, and consciously allowing her own perspective to be changed by others. She is, in other words, willing to be reasoned with⁷

But let’s go back to our central question, for we hope to have some new elements with which to answer it: what is a good reason? The question, however, as all basic philosophical questions, resists an easy answer. We cannot say *a priori* what a good reason is or should be. Based on our own experience we can only try to describe that which makes a given reason a good one:

1. *That it be logically acceptable.* This does not mean that a good reason has a demonstrative character, but conclusions that have a good level of acceptance since, at least at first sight, they do not incur grave reasoning errors. It is clear that something contradictory cannot be a good

⁷ SPLITTER, Laurance and SHARP, Ann Margaret: *Teaching for Better Thinking. The Classroom Community of Inquiry*, Melbourne, Australian Council for Educational Research, 1995, p. 6.
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reason. However, a good reason is not at first judged by its logical correctness, but by criteria of a social and communicative nature: its capacity to generate acceptance, its timeliness, etc. In that sense, we say there is a good reason not because we are sure that what we call a 'good reason' is necessarily correct from the point of view of formal logic (it is possible that, if submitted to a formal analysis, we find inference mistakes; if we find them, it will be questionable whether to consider it a good reason). A good reason does not incur evident fallacies, though we might not be sure if it would withstand a more detailed logical exam.

2. *A good reason is convincing.* Good reasons are the best reasons we can offer in specific communicative contexts such as conversation and discussion. In such contexts, our intention is to convince. We can, nonetheless, question the means to achieve such a goal: threatening or misinterpreting others, resorting to eristic strategies (and falling back on fallacies), making one's interlocutors look bad, are illegitimate means to convince. It is a very different thing to offer reasons that are relevant and comprehensible, and can be discussed by the audience I address. In this sense, we can say a reason is a good one when it has the force to generate acceptance. This 'force', however, is not a mere rhetorical force aimed to make others do or think what I want them to; it is rather the force an assertion has as long as it can be considered reasonable. Good reasons have the power to convict. A reason that does not convince cannot be considered a good one.⁸

3. *A good reason is sensitive to context.* What validates a reason offered in a communicative context is that it is adequate to the diverse circumstances in which it has been produced: the kind of people it is aimed at, the place where and the time when it is raised, etc. A great scientist explaining her theory to a group of children understands that she should not go into all the mathematical demonstrations needed, but to

⁸ What I intend to show, above all, is that a good reason should be convincing, and not only persuasive. This difference can be better examined in the Chaïm Perelman's work. See, for example...

adequate the explanations to the comprehension level of her audience. If to question X she were to offer a mathematical demonstration, we would not consider it a good reason, even if it were correct, because it is not sensible to the context. Anyone can see that a party where everybody wants to dance is not the best place for philosophical dissertations, no matter how soundly defended they are. If we carefully examine what we should do in a given situation and try to decide in a sensible manner, but our decision can no longer alter what in fact has happened, our reasons, no matter how brilliant they seem, will not be good ones, for they will be absolutely untimely. Good reasons are ruled by the context in which they are offered and, therefore, should be sensible to its needs and requirements.

Having established the existence of good reasons, as well as some of their characteristics, two issues remain. In the first place, what role does this matter of good reasons have in the P4C program? Secondly, are there any general rules that should be observed in order to offer good reasons? That is, is there a 'logic of good reasons'? We will take on these two questions in our last section.

3. The Logic of Good Reasons in P4C

When Matthew Lipman presents the logical assumptions of the P4C program, he speaks of the three meanings the word 'logic' can take in the program: 1) *Formal Logic*, i.e. the analysis of the rules that control the structure of propositions and the relations among them; 2) *Logic of good reasons*, which in many passages he also calls 'informal logic', which aims to find the criteria under which to seek and evaluate the reasons required in contexts of non-scientific, informal conversation and discussion; and 3) *Logic of rational action*, which examines the internal coherence of the reasons we have to act, and that seeks to establish when a reason is enough to justify a real or possible action.⁹ We will focus exclusively in the second type of logic: that of good reasons.

Lipman intends, in the first place, to establish when the need for a logic

⁹ To enter more deeply into this subject, I recommend chapter 8 ("Encouraging Children to Be Logical"), in LIPMAN, SHARP and OSCANYAN: *Philosophy in the Classroom*, Second Edition, Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1980, pp. 131-152.

of good reasons arise. Many might think formal logic is enough, since it has always been promised that it should help us think better, if by 'better' we understand 'correctly'. However, formal logic is limited, and its application is reduced to contexts in which the correction of arguments is to be determined and the necessary character of our conclusions is to be demonstrated. A good use of the traditional rules of formal logic can help shape a structured thought, but a good thought is not only a structured one: it is also an agile, versatile, and adaptable to the many situations life faces us with. There are many circumstances that require reasons from us, and in a great deal of them formal logic is not easily applicable, for it implies the expression of our reasoning in predefined forms (those of the different kinds of syllogisms, for example). But when talking or discussing we rarely use those forms. 'The good reasons approach' seeks to develop the possibility of reason to use criteria, rather than rules. In this regard Lipman says:

In contrast to the rules of formal logic, the good reasons approach has no specific rules, but instead emphasizes *seeking reasons* in reference to a given situation and *assessing the reason given*. Since reasons that can be brought to light in a given inquiry will largely depend on its context, what will make for a reasonable search and a good reason are also context-bound. As a consequence, the good reasons approach basically relies on an intuitive sense of what can count as a good reason. This sense is best developed by exposure to a wide variety of settings that call for the good reasons approach, (...). The main purpose of good reasons logic is to evaluate one's thoughts and the thoughts of the others in reference to actions or events.¹⁰

In this section, I have underlined the unique elements of this approach to logic. I want to insist on its intuitive character, not reducible to rules, context dependant and oriented towards the evaluation of reasons. We have previously considered many of these traits. I would now like to emphasize the idea of evaluation of reasons.

Evaluating reasons is not one of our mental habits. Nonetheless, if we want to develop better thinking--more efficient, structured, practical and

¹⁰ LIPMAN, SHARP and OSCANYAN: *Philosophy in the Classroom*, p. 139.

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deeper--we need to inquire into what we see, feel, are told, believe, think and do. To do this, we require reasons, but our inquiry will be better as we find better reasons. We need to be conscious of the implications of what we perceive (even as evident in a given context) and express. That is why we use reasons and hope they help us to improve our perception, expression or evaluation of things. Reasons can indeed do that, but what makes them improve on themselves?

The diversity of inference modes that we use in our daily life (association, analogy, induction, hypothetical, deductive, etc.) allows the offering of valid reasons for what we do, feel or think. Some are, however, better than others, for they help us to examine the problems we face in an orderly way, and allow us to take our discussions to higher levels of generality. Those 'better reasons' are what we have called 'criteria'. That is why a good judgment is based in varied and relevant criteria. A logic of good reasons is then one whose basic tools are criteria, since it is not a logic of rules, because it is intuitive and is governed by context. Since a logic of criteria has just begun to take shape, we cannot present it as systematic knowledge.

We can, nonetheless, see how a variety of criteria work in a specific field, for example, in that of ethical education. Here, as in many other fields, the notion of 'good reasons' is a basic tool for inquiry. In the first chapter of *Ethical Inquiry* (the teacher's manual that accompanies the philosophical novel of *Lisa*), where he tries to elaborate some basic tools for ethical inquiry, Mathew Lipman --considering 'good reasons' a key instrument in ethical education--offers four criteria to evaluate reasons: factual base, relevance, understanding and plausibility.

Strictly speaking, they are not criteria to determine which reasons are good and which are not, but to determine which reasons are better than others. They do clarify, nonetheless, how we can know which reasons we can consider good or, at least, better than other possible ones. Applying those criteria to the examination of reasons that emerge in conversational contexts can be a necessary exercise if we want to improve our reasoning ability. Its use,

however, deserves some clarifications:

1. Since reasons are neither good nor bad in an absolute sense, but only in comparison, we cannot expect that any of the reasons we offer wholly satisfies all four criteria. It will be enough if it satisfies them sufficiently, i.e. does not specifically contradict any of them. For example, a reason that is not comprehensible at all cannot be a good reason; but a reason that may be confused in some particular aspect might be improved as it is explained better.

2. It is very important to insist that it is not about rules (i.e. conditions that must be met, and whose violation is a sign of illegitimacy), but of criteria, that is, 'tools to judge'. As 'tools' they should be used flexibly and according to the context's needs.

3. It would be absurd to make others (such a group of students) memorize those criteria. Not being absolute rules, but criteria to be applied with intelligence, its value is better understood in the practice of making better judgments.

4. As long as it is about critical thinking (which involves the ability to use different and relevant criteria in specific contexts and, based on them, having the ability to autocorrect our mental processes), the important thing is to know which of those criteria are valuable in each specific context. But knowing this is something that cannot be achieved *a priori*: it depends on good judgment ability – on prudence.

A final matter is yet to be examined: is there a logic of good reasons? What we are trying to ask is if there are or can be some general rules that help us determine when a good reason is given. The mere existence of a couple of such rules, however, does not determine the existence of a 'logic', if by 'logic' we understand some kind of systematic agreement on what a good reason is and on the conditions that a given reason has to meet in order to be called a 'good reason'. In this sense, the answer to this question must be 'no': there is no such thing, no one has yet elaborated it.

But the question about the existence of a logic of good reasons can have

another meaning: that of its possibility. In some sense it is precisely this we are inquiring into: is it possible that such thing might come to be? Is it possible to discover it? What we have been exploring up to now points in that direction: trying to think the conditions that make a good reason possible. Many issues are left without examination: the difference that would exist between the logic of good reasons and other types of logic, the general rules that govern the production of good reasons, the ways of elaborating reasons in different contexts of conversation and discussion, the meaning of key notions such as relevance and plausibility, etc. Many thinkers in the 20th century could make significant contributions to these matters: Toulmin and his examination of good reasons in ethics; Grice and his study of conversational implicature; Sperber and Wilson and their reflection on the notion of relevance; and especially Matthew Lipman, who has strongly insisted on the idea of a logic of good reasons as one of the central bases of P4C. To occupy ourselves with these matters, however, would surpass the merely introductory intentions of this paper.

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