Philosophy and Religion:
Why Human Reason Is Important — I

A Brief Dialogue on Why Human Reason Might Be
Important in Moral and Ethical Problems

Jaimin L. Symonds Patel

July 13, 2023

Contents

1 Introduction

Here I will attempt to answer the question on whether human reason is important or not, and if it is important, why it is important. I'll do this through the use of a dialogue. This dialogue, besides the rather overly casual aspects (for entertainment), is essentially an expression of my line of thinking, and the two characters are close to being, in actuality, me talking to myself in a to and fro sort of way.

Take note that what is said in this dialogue is slightly unstructured, and so not as concrete as I would like, but is simply a snapshot of what I have come to think up unto the time of writing, nonetheless holding hopefully valuable insights. Furthermore, in the same way that a normal conversation might drift off-topic, this dialogue – even though being artificial – also may at times drift off-topic. Not least because this is the first time I am writing in this way, things might be a bit hard to follow, so apologies for that.

2 The Dialogue

FINCLEAH: Welcome! Come in – sit down, I've got the tea all ready. I have to say though, I've run out of Digestives, so it's the Rich Teas for us unfortunately.

ACTUN: Ah, thank you thank you, and no worries, if it's a biscuit I'll eat it, and if it's tea I'll drink it. Sitting here's alright?

FINCLEAH: Ha! Nice. Yeah sure.

ACTUN: Cheers.

> ***Both take a sip of their tea.***

FINCLEAH: So, you said you wanted to talk about something right?

ACTUN: Yh, essentially I've met a fair few people, and have heard it said generally, that reason is not what matters most when solving problems. Or, at the very least, this has been implied, as some seem to hold whether a person is offended or not as the bottom line of what matters. In other words, the treading on other's opinions and/or experience seems to matter more than reason to these people.

FINCLEAH: Just to be clear, are you sure this is an accurate observation of those people that you say you have heard this from?

ACTUN: Hmm, well, I may be exaggerating it in some way, but I do

think a fair few might at least subconsciously have the opinion that having opinions be liked is more important that whether they have sound reasoning. Frankly, such assumptions worry me.

FINCLEAH: Okay, well let's work with what we got. First of all, we can look at the Cambridge dictionary and see that an opinion is "a thought or belief about something or someone". I would probably add furthermore that such a belief or opinion could have good or bad reasons behind it. Would you agree with this?

ACTUN: Yes I think so.

FINCLEAH: Would you also say that opinions can be true or false?

ACTUN: What do you mean, just to be clear?

FINCLEAH: So, if I believe that you haven't eaten any biscuits yet, would that be a true belief?

ACTUN: Yes. Although is that not a fact instead of a belief?

FINCLEAH: Good question. First, what is a fact in your eyes?

ACTUN: Well, for something to be a fact, I would say it must be present in reality to its full extent. In other words, for a statement to be a fact, it must exist or be reflected in reality.

FINCLEAH: That seems to make sense, yes, I would agree. So then, is a belief a statement that may or may not be reflected/manifested in reality?

ACTUN: That seems to be true, yes.

FINCLEAH: Right, so then there are probably two things here. Firstly, since a fact is something that is 100% reflected in reality, and a belief is just something that may or may not be, then can facts be a subset of beliefs? After all, some beliefs turn out to be true. So then would facts simply be beliefs that just work in reality?

ACTUN: Sure, that seems to work, but aren't we forgetting that a belief is not known at the time to be reflected or not in reality? So then, isn't a belief a statement with a kind of uncertainty attached? So then facts are those beliefs with uncertainties of existing in reality that have a value of 100%?

FINCLEAH: Ah I see, so it's that beliefs become facts after their uncertainties are made concrete, and known to be 100% reflected

in reality. That makes sense. But that brings me onto my second thing: can we ever really know 100% for sure whether a statement is always reflected in reality, or if it is at all reflected at any one time in reality?

ACTUN: What do you mean?

FINCLEAH: So, if a belief is like a hypothesis before an experiment, then is the experiment eventually carried out guaranteed to have complete results free of all error? For example, if I believed that the acceleration due to gravity is 10 ms^{-2} instead of 9.81 ms^{-2}, and I wanted to test my belief, is there any experiment that will give me a conclusion free of any uncertainty?

ACTUN: I've only done an engineering degree, so I don't know much about probability theory or how it relates to experimentation thoroughly like in experimental physics, but I don't think there is any experiment on earth that can guarantee results without uncertainty. It seems there is always some chance that any conclusion drawn from experiments could be wrong.

FINCLEAH: Right, you could say that any experiment is only as accurate as our own senses are accurate observation tools of reality. I doubt we can ever know whether our senses are accurate or not, since we can only use our senses to measure our senses, which doubly applies the same inaccuracies, cancelling any observable error. So in order to trust an experiment, we have to believe that our senses are not fooling us. Maybe then, the scientific method could be said to be based on a belief – but that's going off topic.

Would you agree though that since no experiment can with 100% certainty make concrete any uncertainty of a belief/hypothesis, the line between a fact and a belief begins to blur? In the most extreme case, wouldn't it seem also that a statement, never truly known to be 100% reflected in reality, could never become a fact, and remain always a belief?

ACTUN: It seems that way yes.

FINCLEAH: Nice, let's go back a bit to the core issue. If there is some unresolved problem in society that people are arguing about, is it safe to say that people are either looking for, or are pushing what they think is a good solution?

ACTUN: Surely yes, otherwise there is no point in arguing about different solutions with other people.

FINCLEAH: What exactly does it mean for a solution to be good?

ACTUN: Well, it is one where all other solutions are less effective at solving the problem. Although, that might define the best solution, so maybe a good solution is simply one that solves the problem, as being the most key defining factor.

FINCLEAH: Sure, that makes sense. So then, what must a solution have for it to be able to solve the problem?

ACTUN: Maybe a solution must simply be based on the same factors as the problem, and the formation then reversed.

FINCLEAH: What do you mean?

ACTUN: For example, if you cannot cross a river, then the problem is that there is no land to walk on. We can say a core factor of this problem is the lack of land. And so, reversing the state of this factor in the problem, the solution becomes creating a presence of land over or in the river.

In a similar way, the core factor of the problem can be taken more fundamentally to be the fact that you cannot travel to the other side. So reversing this factor, the solution is to find a way of travelling to the other side of the river. This includes building new land (a bridge), but also putting yourself in a canon.

FINCLEAH: What factors then in your example problem would be needed to determine whether the solutions needs to be a bridge or a canon?

ACTUN: Well, maybe that's where constraints come in. If I want to keep my bones unbroken, and I want to walk over the river many times, then the bridge solution is a good one. The canon solution then becomes bad because it doesn't satisfy my constraints.

FINCLEAH: What if I proposed the solution of making a full English breakfast in a caravan and sipping tea?

ACTUN: Ha! What do you mean!? No way you can cross a river by doing that.

FINCLEAH: Indeed, but is that because making breakfast doesn't negate the core factor of the problem? The core factor being that there is no land over/through the river.

ACTUN: Sure, that's the way we seem to be looking at it, and it makes sense with what I've said.

FINCLEAH: Furthermore, do you think that it is safe to ignore constraints? For example, what if the real factor of the problem in your example would be that there is no land over/through the river *and* that if it is crossed at that time, the person would die? In such a way, what was a constraint is now a part of the problem's core factor.

ACTUN: Ah I see, so like if the negation of constraints are also part of the problem?

FINCLEAH: Yes exactly. So instead of "I must not break any bones" as being a constraint in crossing the river, the factor of breaking bones by crossing the river without help/solution can be part of the problem itself to begin with. In both cases, crossing the river via a canon is outruled as a solution, and cooking breakfast, although negates the factor of breaking bones, does not negate the factor of there being no land over the bridge. The good solution here, is one that negates the factors fo the problem, those being "I cannot travel to the other side, and if I try swimming, I will break my bones and die". So the solution is a way where the person can travel to the other side, and not break their bones and die.

Therefore, constraints don't seem to be necessary as an explicit add on to a problem, if they are part of the factors of the problem.

ACTUN: Yes, that does seem to make sense.

FINCLEAH: So, to summarise, is it safe to say that we have come to a conclusion about the nature of problems and solutions? That being that a problem has undesirable factors, and that a good solution is one that negates all of those factors?

ACTUN: Yes, I would think that is correct.

FINCLEAH: Nice. Let us go back to what we said about the difference between facts and beliefs.

ACTUN: Sure

FINCLEAH: We seemed to agree that no belief could every be called a fact in the measure that we are 100% certain that the belief in question is reflected in reality. Frankly this doesn't sit quite right left alone, since it might imply that we should not care about facts. Let's begin with a kind of fact that is basic. Tell me, is it a fact that the acceleration due to gravity on earth 9.81 ms^{-2}?

ACTUN: Well, as we have said before, it would seem that such a

statement cannot be 100% known to be reflected in reality, but I must say that with our experimentation via the scientific method, we can be pretty sure that it is a fact. So in other words, we probably should see it as a fact in the measure that it passes a threshold of certainty in being reflected in reality.

FINCLEAH: That does make sense. So then, would most facts that are deduced by the scientific method be those with quite a high chance of being reflected in reality due to experimentation? So instead of the 100% threshold we had before, a fact would be something that has a certainty of being reflected in reality of around 95∼99%?

ACTUN: Right yes, so then we can still have facts in an arbitrary sense even though we know that we cannot ever know with 100% certainty that any statement is fully reflected in reality. Essentially, facts are beliefs which are in the end, good enough.

FINCLEAH: Great. So now, let us look at typically moral or ethical statements and apply the same reasoning. Would you agree that a moral statement is one that proposes whether something is, simply put, good or bad?

ACTUN: That seems to be the case yeah.

Fincleah grabs a rich tea biscuit and takes another sip of tea, which reminds Actun as he follows suit.

FINCLEAH: So then, would you say that the statement "murder is bad" is a fact or not, according to everything we have said before?

ACTUN: Well, if I were to answer, I would have to say that it is a fact.

FINCLEAH: Why? What is the chance of it being reflected in reality?

ACTUN: Unlike before, experimentation obviously is out of the question to test whether this statement is reflected in reality. But nonetheless, I think I can say with 100% certainty that murder is bad. I sure hope no one has carried out any experiments to test it, but it just seems reasonable to say it.

FINCLEAH: Why can you say that it is 100% reflected in reality that murder is bad?

ACTUN: Well, if I were to be killed, I would feel betrayed, and that doesn't seem like a good result to me, and so I think it is bad – although there is more to it of course, but this is the first thing that comes to mind.

FINCLEAH: Sure, although because you haven't been killed, thankfully – but please don't be killed any time soon, I do enjoy these talks we have – you cannot really be sure that it would be bad for you to die with 100% can you?

ACTUN: I guess I can't be 100% sure from any existing evidence that me being killed would be a bad thing, since any evidence would require me to be killed. But nonetheless, I stick to my proposition – it would be 100% bad for anyone to be murdered. Maybe I just deduce or imagine that if one were to be murdered, that it would be bad. I just cannot imagine it being a good thing.

FINCLEAH: Right. So we come to a bit of a problem here, but first of all I'll just insert a few definitions here. We initially said that a fact is something that is fully reflected in reality. Now of course, we also said as a compromise that a classified fact must cross a high enough threshold to be roughly fully reflected in reality, because we cannot with 100% certainty known if something is fully reflected in reality or not. Ignoring this second point, do you think it is sound to say that a truth is also a pure fact?

ACTUN: Yes that makes. So that a falsity is something that is not a pure fact, in other words, something that is not fully reflected in reality?

FINCLEAH: Exactly. Good, so we have a definition of what is true and what is false as being basically the same thing as a fact and opposite of a fact, at least for now. So, a true thing is something that is reflected fully in reality.

The problem I mentioned earlier is this. With the scientific method, we can be quite sure that a statement/hypothesis is true by carrying out experiments, and ascertaining whether it is highly likely or not for that hypothesis to be reflected in reality (true). Do you agree?

ACTUN: Yeah, we said this before so it seems good.

FINCLEAH: Now, with moral statements, it seems that experiments cannot be run for a few reasons. One, because the judgement of whether a thing is good or bad can differ between people which gives inconsistent data so to speak, and second of all because such experiments would be far to risky to carry out, naturally. After all, if the thing being tested in any experiment is actually bad, then we would have committed those very evil acts. Does this sound right?

ACTUN: Yeah it does.

FINCLEAH: So, here is the problem with moral issues. If, as I have just said, experimentation and the scientific method cannot be applied, how is it that you can say, rightfully though I would add, that murder is bad as being true? There must be some other means that you use to say this, and all the more since it seems right for us to say with 100% certainty that murder is bad as being a truth. This is an instance of a certainty higher than even the scientific method can afford, as we have said before that typically scientific facts cannot be really known to be 100% true or not. Although of course we can know to a good and useful degree.

So anyway, by what means can you say that murder is bad, with a 100% certainty of being reflected in reality, and so as being true?

ACTUN: Well, if I had to say, it just seems reasonable. I have every reason to say that murder is bad, and every reason to trust that reasoning. This is a bit annoying though, because this is hard to dig any deeper.

Although of course, I can think that murder is bad because betrayal is bad, or because malicious harm is bad, but the result is the same. At some point I have just reasoned or deduced that these things are bad, and that these statements are true. And it just seems furthermore good to trust my reason here.

FINCLEAH: So, would you say that it is by reason alone that you are able to say that "murder is bad" is true?

ACTUN: Yes, I think so.

FINCLEAH: Why?

ACTUN: Well, I feel like it is implied throughout my life. In a sense it seems like I have deduced it with reason from living in reality, and so I find it reasonable to say that the badness of murder is 100% reflected in reality, and so is true.

FINCLEAH: So then, would you say that reason has been the tool which allows you to make or settle on moral judgements, facts, or truths?

ACTUN: I think so, yes. I cannot think of any other means by which we can reach moral truths.

FINCLEAH: Me neither. Would you say that this reason you speak of is like mathematical reasoning?

ACTUN: If you mean a kind of logic, I would say it is similar, but I

can't bring myself to say it is the same as purely mathematical logic. The similarity maybe comes from the stringing together of smaller pieces of evidence I have gathered by living in reality. Maybe the difference comes from mathematical logic not being able to show whether its own quantities are true. For example, I don't think mathematical logic can be used to show that the quantity 1 is true (in other words that it is reflected in reality).

The extra bit of reasoning seems to be of a human quality, in that we can reason about human life as we live it in reality. I'm not sure this makes much sense, but I think that this reason isn't purely mathematical logic, nor just human intuition, but both. Therefore, I would call the tool which we use to make moral judgements, human reason. Maybe all reasoning is human, but I mean human here in the sense that not all of it can be explained, leaving room for basic intuition.

FINCLEAH: So then are you saying that this human reason can be used to make moral judgements that cannot be explained?

ACTUN: More or less, but maybe closer to being just hard to explain. I don't mean to contradict myself here either. I don't think that this human intuition part of human reason is at odds with its other more logical component, but is simply another kind of logic, based on human experience.

FINCLEAH: I see. Let's go back to what we said about problems and solutions. We agreed on the idea that a good solution is one that contains negated factors of a problem, so lets apply this to moral matters.

ACTUN: Okay.

FINCLEAH: Let's use an example that is quite at the forefront in the modern world. That is, whether homosexual acts are good or bad. Since we agreed that a moral statement is one that proposes whether something is good or bad, it comes naturally that a moral matter is something that is to do with whether something is good or bad. And so, whether homosexual acts are good or bad is a moral matter, right?

ACTUN: Yeah that makes sense.

FINCLEAH: Today, what do you think people say is the problem within this moral matter?

ACTUN: Well, it seems that many people don't see that there is a problem with whether homosexual acts are good or not. It seems most people think that such acts are good, at least in the measure that they aren't bad. But then of course, these

people would see the problem as being that some other people don't think homosexual acts are good. Therefore, there is a conflict of interests.

FINCLEAH: So, what would be the societal problem here?

ACTUN: Well, I guess the problem is that we aren't in agreement on whether homosexual acts are good or bad in this particular case. After all, it seems like there would be no problem if we all agreed one way or the other.

FINCLEAH: I'll try and use here what we said before. Let's say therefore that the problem is the lack of agreement of people on whether homosexual acts are good or bad. And so, it would seem that one group of people sees the core factor of the problem as being that everyone doesn't think homosexual acts are good, and another group of people sees the opposite as being the core factor of the problem.

Since we said that a problem's solutions are the same as the negated factors of a problem, then we have opposite solutions. In other words, one group thinks the solution is to have everyone think that homosexual acts are good, and the other group thinks the solution is the opposite. Would this be correct?

ACTUN: Yeah sounds right.

FINCLEAH: How can this be resolved?

ACTUN: Well, If what we have said before is accurate, then since we said that human reason is the only tool we can use to solve moral matters, then I would guess we have to use human reasoning.

FINCLEAH: Right. But of course, the main problem here with moral matters in the first place is that people differ in what they judge as being good or bad morally, as is the case in this example.

ACTUN: Right.

FINCLEAH: So then, can we here agree that in order to solve such a societal problem and others like it, two things are necessary. Firstly, that we use our human reason, since we cannot use any other method it seems to deduce whether a moral statement is true or not. And secondly, that we must discuss these moral matters, since if we think that either one or the other answer is true, then there is a rightful assumption here that in actual fact a moral truth exists and is worth finding. Here, call to mind the definition of truth I said before. Does this make sense? And

so, can we then say that human reason seems to be one of the most important things when considering moral matters?

ACTUN: It definitely seems so.

FINCLEAH: On the note of problems also, it would seem that there are many real problems, meaning that their issues exist in reality. An example would be on the aforementioned moral matter of whether homosexual acts are good or bad. Here, we can say that this moral problem is actually a real problem. Using what we said before, we can then say that the factors of this problem also lie within reality. The factor of this problem and all such problems is probably a kind of "I don't know the truth of the matter". And so, the key problem behind all moral matters might seem to be that the answer is not known, hence it is a matter of a kind of knowledge, or lack of it.

Anyway, what this must mean is that, if the problem is a real one, with real factors, then so too the negation of those real factors must also be concretely real. In other words, the solution must be real, and unchangeable, since reality is unchangeable. Hence, there would seem to be an actual true answer to the moral matter of whether homosexual acts are good or bad, if the problem is a real one. This applies to all moral problems.

ACTUN: I can't see why this wouldn't be the case, so it seems to be right.

FINCLEAH: I'll add one last thing. You're original worry seemed to come from people possibly ignoring their reason in favour of pushing and caring more about opinions and personal experience being appealing. Throughout this discussion, it seems that no matter how unfounded a belief or opinion may seem, it is always based upon some kind of reason, this human reason as you put it – the reason by which you are able to say that murder is bad. And so, maybe your worry can be more accurately put as people not caring about reason, but using it unknowingly anyway in a rather blunt way.

Maybe the worry really is that because these people you talk of may not care explicitly about their reasoning, they do not care to talk about their reasoning or question it. And so, maybe the worry is simply the same as the crudest thorn in the side of every age in history: arrogance. Arrogance seems to be the natural result of ignoring reasoning, particularly your own, since only then does every thought you have become an unquestionably good reason in itself. But of course, the thoughts we have could easily be unquestionably bad reasons for anything.

When we hold bad reasons in an arrogant way, that is when our actions cause disorder. Bad reasons seem to be the cause of all bad acts, because it would seem anyone who does an unknowingly bad act, does it for what they think are good reasons, but in fact they are bad reasons. I can't think of a single time when I thought that what I was doing wasn't for a good reason. Everything I do seems to be for what I think is a good reason, even if I later know the reason and act is actually bad. At the root of it all is our reasoning, and maybe that's why it's so important for it to be true.

ACTUN: Bloody fair point there, I think you might be right about that being my real worry. I'll think on it some more and maybe come back again.

FINCLEAH: Nice, good stuff.

ACTUN: Blast, the tea's going cold.

FINCLEAH: Oh crap yeah.

Both down their tea quite quickly.

ACTUN: Well, thank you for talking, I'm not sure if my worry has been completely calmed, but things seem at least a bit clearer anyway.

FINCLEAH: No worries, cheers. Oh, also please do take these biscuits with you, I'm not a fan I must say.

ACTUN: Well, I'll happily take them – your loss I say.

FINCLEAH: Well, not with Rich Teas I find.

Thank you for reading.

END