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## THE SPIRIT OF LAW BEGINS WITH “WHY”

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### ABSTRACT

This research paper explores how the simple question “why” plays a powerful role in shaping legal reasoning and judicial thinking. Instead of viewing law as a fixed set of rigid rules enforced mechanically by institutions, it suggests that law is better understood as a living, evolving system. It grows and adapts through continuous questioning, reflection, and evaluation of whether legal principles still serve their intended purpose in society. At the heart of this system is a basic but essential question: “Why?” This question drives legal development and helps ensure that justice remains fair, logical, and accountable. Without it, legal reasoning risks becoming mechanical, where decisions are made without proper justification. Using a qualitative and doctrinal approach, the study draws on statutes, academic writings, landmark judgments, and legal theory. When these sources are read together, a clear pattern emerges: strong legal reasoning always depends on explanation and justification. In other words, no legal decision whether interpreting a law or delivering a judgment can stand on its own without a clear “because” behind it. The paper also engages with classical legal philosophers who emphasise the importance of reason in law. Their ideas highlight a key concern: once a legal system stops asking questions, it begins to lose its strength and legitimacy. Constant questioning is therefore essential for transparency, accountability, and public trust in the justice system. The study further looks at how this habit of questioning influences constitutional interpretation and legal reform. Many important legal changes happen when courts revisit existing rules and ask whether those rules still make sense in today’s social context. Landmark judgments show how this process of inquiry can reshape and modernise the law over time. The paper also briefly considers how legal reasoning appears in literature. Works of literature often reflect moral questioning and concerns about justice, helping readers understand law in a broader human and ethical context. This shows that legal reasoning is not only technical, but also deeply connected to values and lived experience. In conclusion, the paper argues that the question “why” sits at the core of law itself. It prevents the legal system from becoming rigid or arbitrary and keeps it responsive to society’s changing needs. When legal reasoning is guided by continuous inquiry, law becomes more than a set of

rules it becomes a thoughtful, structured process aimed at fairness and justice. This approach ensures that judicial analysis goes beyond surface-level interpretation. It encourages deeper reflection on why a rule exists, how it should be applied, and whether it truly serves justice in a given situation. Over time, this strengthens jurisprudence by making it more thoughtful, adaptive, and ethically grounded.

**Keywords:** Legal Reasoning, Judicial Analysis, Rational Inquiry, Jurisprudence, Philosophy of Law, Constitutional Interpretation, Justificatory Reasoning, Judicial Accountability, Legal Evolution, Natural Law Theory, Sociological Jurisprudence, *Brown v. Board of Education*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

## RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To examine the significance of the term “why” as the intellectual foundation of legal reasoning and judicial analysis.
2. To analyze the relationship between law and rational inquiry through philosophical and jurisprudential perspectives.
3. To evaluate how reasoning and justification contribute to the legitimacy, transparency, and accountability of legal systems.
4. To study the contributions of major legal thinkers such as Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, Edward Coke, Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., and Roscoe Pound in establishing the role of reason in law.
5. To explore the role of critical questioning in constitutional interpretation and the evolution of legal principles.
6. To examine the importance of inquiry in achieving justice through the analysis of *Brown v. Board of Education*.
7. To analyze the literary representation of legal reasoning and moral inquiry in Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*.
8. To demonstrate how the question “why” prevents law from becoming arbitrary and transforms it into a system based on fairness, logic, and justice.

9. To highlight the role of rational inquiry in adapting law to changing social realities and constitutional values.
10. To establish that continuous questioning and justification are essential for the development, legitimacy, and moral authority of law.

### **Research Methodology**

This study uses a doctrinal and analytical research approach and is mainly qualitative in nature. It focuses on understanding legal reasoning at a conceptual and theoretical level, with particular attention to the role of the question “why” in law and justice. The research relies entirely on secondary sources. These include textbooks, academic research papers, scholarly journals, judicial decisions, and reliable online academic resources. No primary data such as interviews, surveys, or field-based observations has been collected. The study critically engages with the writings of leading legal philosophers, jurists, and scholars, along with important judicial decisions, to trace how justificatory reasoning has developed within legal systems. It also draws on selected literary works as interpretive tools to illustrate and deepen the understanding of legal reasoning and the concept of justice. Overall, the methodology is library-based, interpretive, and analytical. It aims to explain how the idea of “why” operates as a foundational element in legal reasoning, judicial decision-making, and the broader philosophy of law.

### **Introduction**

Among all terms in human language, the word “why” occupies a distinctive intellectual and philosophical position. It is not merely an interrogative expression but a reflection of humanity’s enduring search for reason, explanation, and meaning. The Online Etymology Dictionary traces “why” to the Old English “hwȳ” or “hwi,” meaning “for what reason” or “by what cause.” Its roots extend further to Proto-Germanic “hwi” and the Proto-Indo-European base “kwo-/kwi-,” which also gave rise to interrogative words such as “who,” “what,” and “where.” This shared linguistic ancestry highlights something deeply human: our instinct to question the world rather than accept it at face value. In everyday life, “why” often appears simple, even childlike. Yet it is one of the most powerful tools of thought. Children use it endlessly, not out of defiance but curiosity, and in many ways, that same curiosity remains at the heart of advanced intellectual inquiry. Philosophy, science, and law all begin with “why” why something happens, why a rule exists, or why a decision is justified. In legal thought, this

impulse toward inquiry becomes especially important. Law is not just a system of commands imposed by the State; it is a structured and reasoned framework designed to uphold justice, order, equality, and social stability. Judicial reasoning, statutory interpretation, and constitutional analysis all depend on the continuous need to justify conclusions. Courts are not only expected to decide cases but also to explain the reasoning behind their decisions in a clear and accountable manner. Within this framework, the question “why” becomes the foundation of legal reasoning. It ensures that decisions are not arbitrary exercises of power but reasoned outcomes grounded in evidence, precedent, and principle. When courts explain “why,” they also build trust in the legal system, reinforcing the idea that justice is not only done but also seen to be done. Moreover, legal systems evolve through constant questioning and interpretation. As societies change, courts revisit earlier understandings and reassess the reasons behind legal principles. This ongoing dialogue between past reasoning and present realities keeps the law relevant and responsive. Ultimately, the question “why” is more than a linguistic tool; it is the intellectual engine of law. It gives legal reasoning its legitimacy, coherence, and moral depth, ensuring that law remains connected to the very society it serves.

## **Literature Review**

### **From Natural Law to Social Engineering: The Centrality of Inquiry in Judicial Interpretation**

Legal reasoning extends beyond the mechanical application of rules; it is fundamentally an exercise in interpretation, justification, and critical reflection. Across philosophical, jurisprudential, and literary traditions, law is shown to evolve through sustained interrogation of its own principles and social consequences. Within this intellectual tradition, the **interrogative impulse** the fundamental question of "why" functions as a guiding force that compels courts and theorists to examine the legitimacy, purpose, and effects of legal norms. This review traces a trajectory in which legal thought progressively deepens its engagement with justificatory reasoning, moving from formal logic to social responsibility.

### **Aristotle and the Foundations of Rational Legal Thought**

Aristotle provides one of the earliest systematic accounts of rational legal reasoning. His theory of **sylogistic logic** laid the groundwork for deductive legal analysis, wherein general principles

are applied to specific facts to reach reasoned conclusions<sup>1</sup>. For Aristotle, human distinctiveness lies in rational capacity; justice must therefore be anchored in reason rather than authority alone.

Within this framework, legal rules are not self-justifying commands; they require rational explanation. The implicit demand for justification ensures that law remains aligned with reasoned judgment rather than arbitrary power. Thus, early legal rationality is grounded in the expectation that legal outcomes must be defensible through coherent reasoning.

### **Thomas Aquinas and Natural Law Theory**

Thomas Aquinas extends classical rationalism into moral and theological dimensions through his formulation of **Natural Law**. He defines law as “an ordinance of reason for the common good,” embedding legality within a framework of moral intelligibility<sup>2</sup>. For Aquinas, validity is inseparable from ethical purpose; unjust laws, lacking rational orientation toward the common good, lose their binding moral force.

This conception introduces a deeper form of justificatory inquiry:

- **Logical Consistency:** Is the law coherent?
- **Moral Legitimacy:** Does the law serve a substantive sense of justice?

### **Edward Coke and the Common Law Tradition**

Sir Edward Coke’s jurisprudence marks a decisive institutionalization of reason within the common law. His assertion that “**reason is the life of the law**” reflects the principle that law is not a fixed command structure but a living system of reasoned interpretation.<sup>3</sup>

Coke’s idea of “**artificial reason**” the specialized reasoning of judges developed through legal training and precedent positions judicial interpretation as an ongoing evaluative process. Legal authority is sustained not by rigidity, but by its capacity to remain rationally defensible over

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<sup>1</sup> Aristotle. (1999). *Nicomachean Ethics* (T. Irwin, Trans., 2nd ed.). Hackett Publishing. (Original work published ca. 350 B.C.E.)

<sup>2</sup> Aquinas, T. (1947). *Summa Theologica* (Fathers of the English Dominican Province, Trans.). Benziger Bros. (Original work published 1265–1274)

<sup>3</sup> Coke, E. (1628). *The first part of the institutes of the laws of England; or, a commentary upon Littleton*. Society of Stationers..

time.

### **Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. and Legal Pragmatism**

In *The Common Law*, Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. reorients legal analysis away from abstract logic toward lived experience. His claim that “**the life of the law has not been logic: it has been experience**” signals a shift from formal deduction to empirical reality.<sup>4</sup>

In Holmes’ framework, legal reasoning becomes predictive and **consequentialist**. The justificatory question is transformed: instead of asking whether a rule is logically consistent, courts must consider how it functions within society and what practical effects it produces.

### **Roscoe Pound and Law as Social Engineering**

Roscoe Pound advances sociological jurisprudence by conceptualizing law as a form of “**social engineering**.” In this model, law is an instrument for managing and balancing competing social interests.<sup>5</sup>

Legal reasoning requires a continuous evaluation of whether doctrinal structures effectively serve social needs. This perspective reframes legal justification as an institutional responsibility: law must constantly justify itself through its effectiveness in organizing and harmonizing social relations.

### **Literary Representations: Harper Lee**

Legal reasoning is also powerfully represented in literature. In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Harper Lee illustrates the moral dimensions of advocacy through Atticus Finch, who embodies principled reasoning in the face of entrenched prejudice<sup>6</sup>. By exposing the irrationality of racial bias, the novel demonstrates how legal injustice persists when critical questioning is suppressed. Interrogating social assumptions becomes the mechanism through which ethical clarity is restored.

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<sup>4</sup> Holmes, O. W. (1881). *The common law*. Little, Brown, and Company..

<sup>5</sup> Pound, R. (1921). *The spirit of the common law*. Marshall Jones Company.

<sup>6</sup> Lee, H. (1960). *To kill a mockingbird*. J. B. Lippincott & Co.

## The Culmination of Inquiry: *Brown v. Board of Education*

The trajectory of justificatory reasoning finds a decisive expression in *Brown v. Board of Education*. The case challenged the “separate but equal” doctrine of *Plessy v. Ferguson*, marking a departure from formalistic equality toward **substantive constitutional interpretation**.<sup>7</sup>

In *Brown*, the Court drew on sociological evidence to conclude that segregated facilities are inherently unequal due to psychological and structural harms. This reflects a shift where interpretation must engage with empirical reality and social meaning, not merely doctrinal form.

### Conclusion

The development of legal thought reveals a movement toward **justificatory depth**. From Aristotle’s logic and Aquinas’s moral rationalism to Holmes’ pragmatism and Pound’s sociological analysis, legal reasoning evolves through the interrogation of its own purposes. Inquiry operates as a structuring force, compelling the law to defend its legitimacy in relation to reason, morality, and social consequence.

## MAIN BODY

### The Role of “Why” in Legal Reasoning

Law does not function only through rules, statutes, or the authority of courts. Its real strength lies in reasoning and justification. The question “why” plays a very important role in this process because it helps transform law from a system of commands into a system based on logic and fairness. In legal practice, no fact, argument, or judgment is accepted without proper reasoning. Because of this, “why” becomes the foundation that keeps the legal system rational, legitimate, and connected to justice. Every legal system depends upon explanation and justification. Judges are not expected to simply announce decisions; they are also required to explain the reasons behind those decisions. Courts regularly examine questions such as why a particular law applies, why one interpretation is preferred over another, and why a person should be held legally responsible. This process ensures that legal decisions are not arbitrary

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<sup>7</sup> *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163 U.S. 537 (1896).

or based only on authority. If courts gave judgments without reasons, the legal system would appear mechanical and unfair. Therefore, the legitimacy of law depends not only on the final result but also on the reasoning used to reach that result. The importance of “why” becomes even clearer in judicial decision-making. Courts constantly justify findings of fact, interpretation of statutes, and application of precedents. In many ways, every judgment is an answer to several “why” questions. A significant example of this can be seen in *Brown v. Board of Education*. Before this judgment, racial segregation in schools was accepted under the doctrine of “separate but equal.”<sup>8</sup> However, the Court eventually reconsidered the deeper issue of why segregation should continue in a constitutional system that promises equality. By questioning the reasoning behind segregation, the Court recognized the social and psychological harm it created. This decision showed that legal progress often begins when courts challenge existing assumptions instead of blindly following precedent. The role of “why” is also important in the interpretation and development of law. Law is not static because society itself keeps changing over time. Legislations cannot provide direct answers for every future situation, which means courts must interpret the purpose behind legal provisions. While interpreting laws, judges often ask why a law was enacted and whether its purpose remains. The idea of “why” is at the heart of how law actually works in real life. It keeps legal systems from becoming stuck in old thinking and allows them to adjust as society, politics, and technology evolve. Without this habit of asking and answering “why,” law would risk becoming outdated and disconnected from the world it is meant to regulate. In that sense, “why” acts like a bridge between the original purpose of a law and how it is applied in today’s changing circumstances. “Why” is also important because it makes the legal system more accountable. Courts, governments, and other authorities are expected to explain the reasons behind their decisions. When decisions are properly reasoned, people are more likely to trust them because they can see that power has been used fairly and with care. But when there is no explanation, decisions can easily feel random, biased, or unfair. That is why reasoning is not just a formality; it is a key part of maintaining public confidence and preventing misuse of authority. There is also a very human side to this idea. People naturally want to understand what affects their lives. A legal decision without reasons often leaves people confused or frustrated, even if the outcome is legally correct. But when a decision is explained clearly, it becomes easier to accept, even if it goes against someone’s interests. In criminal cases, for example, courts don’t just look at what happened, but also why it happened, because intention and motive matter in determining

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<sup>8</sup> *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954).

responsibility. Victims, too, often look for explanations, not just punishment, because understanding the reasons behind an event can bring a sense of closure. Questioning “why” is also what drives legal development. Many important changes in law have come from people challenging existing rules and asking whether they still make sense or serve justice. This kind of questioning prevents the law from becoming rigid and helps it stay aligned with modern constitutional values and social expectations. Over time, it is this constant re-evaluation that leads to legal reform and progress. In the end, “why” is not just a simple question it is central to legal thinking itself. It shapes how laws are interpreted, how decisions are justified, and how trust is built in the justice system. It turns law from something purely authoritative into something reasoned and fair. Cases like *Brown v. Board of Education* show how asking “why” about long-accepted practices can lead to major legal and social change. Ultimately, without “why,” law becomes mechanical; with it, law remains alive, evolving, and connected to the idea of justice.

## CONCLUSION

The analysis of the term “why” in legal reasoning demonstrates that it is not merely a linguistic or grammatical device, but the very foundation upon which law derives its legitimacy, coherence, and moral authority. Across philosophical traditions, jurisprudential theories, and literary illustrations, a consistent theme emerges: law survives and evolves only through rational justification. From Aristotle’s emphasis on reason as the basis of structured thought, to Aquinas’s insistence that law must serve rational justice, and from Coke’s assertion that reason is the life of the law to Holmes and Pound’s recognition of law’s evolving, socially responsive nature, the centrality of inquiry remains constant. Even literary and constitutional perspectives, particularly in *To Kill a Mockingbird* and the landmark judgment in *Brown v. Board of Education*, reinforce that justice is achieved only when existing norms are critically questioned and tested against principles of fairness and equality. The discussion further establishes that “why” functions at multiple levels within the legal system. It is the foundation of judicial reasoning, ensuring that decisions are not arbitrary but are grounded in explanation and evidence. It is also the driving force behind legal interpretation, enabling courts to adapt static statutes to dynamic social realities. Moreover, it ensures accountability and transparency by compelling legal actors to justify the exercise of power. On a human level, it aligns legal outcomes with the natural human demand for understanding and fairness. Ultimately, the study confirms and strongly emphasizes that law is not sustained, preserved, or maintained merely

by the existence of rules alone, but rather by the underlying reasons, principles, and justifications that support those rules. The simple yet profound question of “why” plays an essential and transformative role in the functioning of every legal system. It changes law from being viewed as a purely mechanical structure made up only of commands, obligations, and rigid procedures into a living, evolving, and meaningful framework of justice. This framework is capable not only of enforcing order but also of encouraging reflection, allowing correction of mistakes, and promoting continuous social and moral progress within society. The demand for reasons and justifications ensures that law does not become arbitrary, oppressive, or disconnected from the people it is meant to serve. By constantly asking “why,” individuals, judges, lawmakers, and society itself are able to examine whether laws are fair, reasonable, and morally acceptable. In this sense, the process of questioning strengthens accountability and prevents the misuse or blind application of authority. It encourages legal systems to remain responsive to changing social values, human needs, and evolving standards of justice.

Furthermore, the importance of justification preserves the legitimacy and credibility of legal institutions. A legal system that can explain the reasons behind its rules gains greater trust and acceptance from society because people are more willing to obey laws that they understand and consider rational. The act of reasoning therefore becomes the foundation upon which justice is built and maintained. It allows law to adapt over time instead of remaining fixed, outdated, or incapable of addressing new challenges and circumstances. Without the guiding force of the question “why,” law would gradually lose its rational spirit and moral foundation. It would risk becoming nothing more than a strict and inflexible collection of commands lacking humanity, fairness, and purpose. However, with continuous reasoning, explanation, and justification, law becomes much more than a system of control. It transforms into a dynamic and evolving instrument of justice, legitimacy, equality, and moral development. Therefore, the enduring strength and integrity of law ultimately depend not only on rules themselves but also on the constant search for the reasons that give those rules meaning, value, and authority.

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