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Prescriptivism, Descriptivism, and Hume's Is-Ought Problem

Jeremiah Joven Joaquin
De La Salle University

Abstract: In this paper, I rehearse and criticize two familiar solutions to Hume's is-ought problem, viz. R.M. Hare's version of prescriptivism and Philippa Foot's version of descriptivism. I argue that both solutions fail to recognize the underlying motivation behind Hume's original problem.

Keywords: Hume; prescriptivism; descriptivism; R.M. Hare; is-ought problem; G.E.M. Anscombe; Philippa Foot

1. INTRODUCTION

We make moral judgments every day; judgments concerning whether or not something is morally good, morally right, or morally obligatory. For example, some of us will judge that abortion is morally wrong; others will judge that telling the truth is morally obligatory. But we often take it for granted the manner by which we arrive at these judgments; i.e., we do not often reflect the reasoning process that lead to these moral judgments. If we were to do this, then we would be led to an interesting and important philosophical problem about moral reasoning, viz. "is-ought problem."[1]

[1] W.D. Hudson, *The is-ought Question* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1969).

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The clearest formulation of the is-ought problem was given by Hume in the final paragraph of Book III, Part I, Section I of *A Treatise on Human Nature*:

> In every system of morality which I have hitherto met with, I have always remark'd that the author proceeds for some time in the ordinary way of reasoning, and establishes the being of a God, or makes observations concerning human affairs; when of a sudden I am surpriz'd to find, that instead of the usual copulations of propositions, *is*, and *is not*, I meet with no proposition that is not connected with an *ought*, or an *ought not*. This change is imperceptible; but is, however, of the last consequence. For as this *ought* or *ought not*, expresses some new relation or affirmation, 'tis necessary that it should be observ'd and explain'd; and at the same time that a reason should be given, for what seems altogether inconceivable, how this new relation can be a deduction from others, which are entirely different from it. But as authors do not commonly use this precaution, I shall presume to recommend it to the readers; and am persuaded that this small attention wou'd subvert all the vulgar systems of morality, and let us see, that the distinction of vice and virtue is not founded merely on the relations of objects, nor perceiv'd by reason.[2]

There have been numerous interpretations of this particular passage.[3] But we could take it as what Restall and Russell have dubbed as an entailment barrier thesis.[4] The common feature is the thought

[2] David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Adelaide: University of Adelaide, 1739). http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/h/hume/david/h92t/.

[3] For example, see R.M. Hare, *The Language of Morals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959); A.N. Prior, *Logic and the Basis of Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1949); P.H. Nowell-Smith, *Ethics* (London: Penguin, 1954); J. Searle, "How to derive 'ought' from 'is'," *Philosophical Review* 73, no.1 (1964): 43-58; S. Toulmin, *An Examination of the Place of Reason in Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1950); G.E.M. Anscombe, *Intention* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1963), and P. Foot, "Moral arguments," *Mind* 67, no. 268 (1958): 502-513.

[4] G. Restall and G. Russell, "Barriers to Implication," in *Hume on Is and Ought,* ed. C. Pigden (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

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that from a set of descriptive facts, no conclusion can necessarily be derived. To formulate it in current ethical discussions, there can be no "ought" from an "is."[5] The following example may suffice to show what the problem is all about. Consider the facts about human fetal development. We do have adequate scientific data about the process by which a human being comes into being. We know about fertilization, the stages of pregnancy, etc. But given only these data, can we arrive at a moral conclusion that "Abortion is morally wrong," or "We ought not to commit abortion"? That is, can we derive a judgment about the morality of abortion from descriptive facts about human fetal development?[6]

In this paper, I criticize two distinct solutions to this problem: R.M. Hare's version of prescriptivism and Philippa Foot's version of descriptivism.[7] I argue that these solutions fail to recognize the main motivation behind the is-ought problem. That is, I argue that the issue at stake is not about whether a moral judgment can be derived from a set of descriptive facts; rather, it is about how we ought to make *reasonable* moral judgments.

2. PRESCRIPTIVISM AND THE IS-OUGHT PROBLEM

R.M. Hare presents a version of prescriptivism according to which moral judgments are nothing more than prescriptions of actions.[8] As prescriptions, we cannot be concerned with their truth, since they are not truth-evaluable; our main concern is whether they could be applied universally.

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[5] Campbell Brown offers two versions of Hume's is-ought. See C. Brown, "Two Versions of Hume's Law," in *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy* 9, no.1 (2015): 1-8. http://jesp.org/articles/download/two-versions-of-humes-law.pdf. I will set that aside in this paper.

[6] J. Joaquin. "An Introduction to Metaethics," in *Exploring the Philosophical Terrain*, ed. Leni Garcia (Manila: C&E Publishing, Inc., 2013).

[7] I do not claim that these two exhaust all possible solutions to the is-ought problem. There are many others. For example, see Searle (1964), Anscombe, (1963), and Toulmin (1950). Though this is the case, I think that the main point of this paper generalizes to these other solutions.

[8] See Hare, R.M. *The Language of Morals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), 86.

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In evaluating moral arguments, we should start with the facts concerned. But these facts do not necessarily entail moral judgments. And since these facts do not necessarily entail moral judgments, to evaluate such arguments, we need to see the underlying moral judgment that is either implied or assumed in the argument.

Accordingly, moral judgments are not descriptions of the world. Whenever we say that some particular course of action is morally good, we are not attributing a moral property of goodness to a particular action. We are, rather, prescribing that that action should be applied universally. Given the case that moral judgments are of this form, then it is obvious that whatever facts can be given about anything whatsoever would not necessarily imply an imperative statement. To achieve the validity of a moral argument, we need to see the hidden moral claim embedded in the set of factual statements. And this is how we derive an imperative statement.

What is curious about this solution to the "is-ought problem" is the manner by which it solves the problem. The demand of Hare's first point above asks us to accept a sort of anti-natural ontology of moral properties.[9] But this problem is only peripheral to what is at stake here. The issue here is whether Hare's solution can help us evaluate moral arguments. The problem apparently is that even if we accept Hare's first point that moral judgments are nothing but prescriptions, the solution still lacks the evaluative tools for validating moral arguments. But this issue is easily settled by Hare.

Hare pointed out the fact that since we have to find the implicit or explicit moral premise inside a moral argument, we should therefore see it as part of that argument. If we follow this, then we can see that the whole argument is nothing more than a syllogism, with the moral premise as the major premise, the factual premise as the minor, and the conclusion as the moral judgment. In having this, we could evaluate the argument's validity as if we are evaluating an ordinary

[9] That is, the concept of "good," "right," and "ought" are *not* natural properties; they are, rather, at least for Hare, terminological substitute for prescriptive words. Of course, there is a larger debate here concerning moral ontology, but that is already the scope of this paper.

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syllogism. We can show how effective this strategy is by applying it to an example:

Given that "Ax" represents "a particular act," "Kx" represents "killing," and "Mx" represents "morally wrong," and the factual statement that "(Ex) (Ax.Kx)" how can we arrive at the imperative statement that "(Ex) (Ax.Mx)"? Hare's solution is simply to see the hidden premise that "(x) (Kx→Mx)". Of course it is evident that the hidden premise is a moral claim. Given the two premises, viz. "(x) (Kx→Mx)" and "(Ex) (Ax.Kx)", we could surely see that the conclusion, "(Ex) (Ax.Mx)" would necessarily follow. Hence, this moral argument is seen to be valid.

3. DESCRIPTIVISM AND THE IS-OUGHT PROBLEM

Philippa Foot's strategy[10] is quite different from Hare's. She holds the position that one may derive an "ought" from an "is" provided that certain conditions apply. In her article, "Moral Arguments," Foot discussed how this can be done:

Moral judgments are not always prescriptions of actions; they may be evaluative judgments as well. At least, for this subset of moral judgments we can have evaluative conclusions inferred from certain factual statements. These factual statements could serve as evidence to support the moral conclusion. It is not always the case that an "ought" cannot be derived from an "is".

At the onset, we could ask whether what Foot asserts as the transition from prescriptions to evaluations can be done without stepping outside the "is-ought problem." A solution may be offered to this problem to the effect that the "is" and "ought" distinction is akin to the "fact" and "value" distinction. The latter being a product of G. E. Moore's analysis of the concept of the "good".[11] So, it would seem that Foot's first point is not problematic at all since we could accept that evaluative judgments are included in the larger class of moral judgments. But the problem now is whether Foot's strategy would really produce the results that she claimed to produce. To see the

[10] Philippa Foot, "Moral Arguments," *Mind* 67, no. 268 (1958): 502-513.
[11] G.E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

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answer to this question, we would need to borrow Foot's example of how the concept of "rudeness" is properly attributed.

Consider the statement "Jim is rude." This evaluative claim may or may not have some meaning depending on how it is used in a given context. So let us consider the following factual statements as the context of the value claim:

1) Jim is in the company president's office.
2) Jim is there for a job interview with the company president.
3) Jim and the company have no prior relations.
   ... (This signifies other things to be considered.)
4) Jim is wearing a cap.

The "is-ought problem" in this example is transformed into a question of whether or not we should consider Jim to be rude given the three facts (and other things to be considered) above. Of course, given this context, and all other things being equal, we can say that indeed Jim is rude.

Foot simply pointed out the fact that without certain factual conditions, evaluative statements would make no sense. It is clear that if the given facts change, or if additional facts are put into consideration, moral judgment could be altered. This can be shown when we consider again Jim's rudeness in our example above. This time we put in an additional fact to the effect that in Jim's country the practice of wearing caps during formal meetings is admirable. If we grant this fact, and all other things being equal, then the statement that "Jim is rude" would not apply. This shows that factual conditions give evidence for evaluative judgments. Thus, deducing moral judgments, at least of the evaluative kind, from a set of facts is possible.

4. CRITICISMS OF THESE SOLUTIONS

Hare's and Foot's strategies can be taken as two different solutions to the problem of deriving an imperative (evaluative) statement from a set of factual statements. Both attempts have their merits, and they also have specific problems. However, there is a way to criticize both

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their attempts in one single blow, and that is by pointing to a crucial question concerning the nature of the "is-ought problem" itself.

It would seem that, given Hume's passage above, the problem is concerned with moral reasoning. But moral reasoning can be understood in two ways. The first is what I shall call the top-down way. And the second is what I shall call the bottom-up way.

The top-down way is to see moral arguments as derivations or deductions. That is, to see moral arguments as purporting to arrive at a moral claim from a set of factual statements (or, in Hare's case, with an addition of at least one moral premise). This way of looking at moral arguments makes morality as a strict calculating machine for formulating moral principles that would serve as evaluative tools for moral actions. But, is morality really about this?

Aristotle's formulation of the "is-ought problem" has generally been overlooked in current discussions of the problem. I think one reason for this, although it may seem too trivial, may be the fact that his formulation is not found in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, where it should have been formulated. It is, rather, found in one of his physical treatises, *On the Motion of Animals*. In chapter 7 of this book, Aristotle has written the following observations:

> But how is it that thought (viz. sense, imagination, and thought proper) is sometimes followed by action, sometimes not; sometimes by movement, sometimes not? What happens seems parallel to the case of thinking and inferring about the immovable objects of science. There the end is the truth seen (for, when one conceives the two premises, one at once conceives and comprehends the conclusion), but here the two premises result in a conclusion which is an action.[12]

What Aristotle shows is something akin to Hume's point since both of them point to two distinct ways of presenting an argument. The first is the logical or scientific way. The second is the practical way.

[12] Aristotle. *On the Motion of Animals*. Adelaide: University of Adelaide. http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/a/aristotle/motion/.

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The first way is really nothing more than presenting a deduction. We may ascertain the truth of a conclusion if it follows from the premises. But, the practical way does not prove the truths; it shows why a particular action is done. This is argued by Aristotle as follows:

> In this way living creatures are impelled to move and to act, and desire is the last or immediate cause of movement, and desire arises after perception or after imagination and conception. And things that desire to act now create and now act under the influence of appetite or impulse or of desire or wish.

It is the desire or intention of a person that pushes that person to act. It is not merely the moral premises or factual premises that lead one to do moral actions. Rather, it is the underlying human psychology. Anscombe tells us that "it is not profitable for us at present to do moral philosophy; that should be laid aside at any rate until we have an adequate philosophy of psychology."[13] MacIntyre also aired the same sentiment when he wrote:

> One cannot, for Aristotle, do ethics without doing moral psychology; one cannot understand what a virtue is without understanding it as something a man could possess and as something related to human happiness. Morality, to be tangible, must be understood as grounded in human nature.[14]

The point of the "is-ought" problem as formulated by Aristotle and Hume is the fact that we can never understand moral arguments simply by seeing them as dead syllogisms. We human beings act according to some capacity (natural or otherwise). This does not mean that we can't have moral reasons for these actions. But the fact that we can have moral reasons for actions would not mean that we could

[13] G.E.M. Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," *Philosophy* 33, no. 124 (1958): 1.

[14] A.C. MacIntyre, "Hume on "is" and "ought," *Philosophical Review* 67, no. 4 (1959): 467.

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necessarily derive actions from reasons. All that we could have is a bottom-up evaluation of moral reasoning.

A bottom-up evaluation of moral reasoning amounts to starting with our (cherished) moral claims. We then evaluate whether our moral claims are reasonable given certain situations. It may happen that our claims are not reasonable, so we should be knowledgeable and humble enough to accept that we could be mistaken. There are no clear-cut formulas for evaluating moral claims and actions. It is a steady process of assessing and counter-assessing our moral lives. This brings us back to Hume: "...the distinction of vice and virtue is not founded merely on the relations of objects, nor is perceiv'd by reason."

The "is-ought problem" in this interpretation is no longer stated as "Can we *derive* an imperative statement from a set of factual statements?" It is no longer concerned with demonstrations. It is now stated as: "How can we affirm that we are moral individuals through our reasoning about practical (moral) matters?" This restatement captures the essential fact of being human, i.e. we commit mistakes. But this facet of being human should not be taken negatively, since because of this we could aspire to perfect ourselves (to achieve happiness). We are no longer concerned with the validity of our deductions, we are now concerned with how we ought to live.

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