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## The Is–Ought Gap

### *Subjectivism’s Technical Retreat*

As we have seen, subjectivism—whether “supernatural,” social, or personal—fails to provide proper guidance for human action, because each version calls for human sacrifice and leads to human suffering. If we want to live and achieve genuine happiness, we need a non-sacrificial alternative that is grounded in the facts of reality. But in search of such an alternative, we are faced with a big problem: The world is *full* of facts.

In fact, facts are all there are out there: Paris is a city in France. The Earth revolves around the Sun. Men are mortal. Acorns are potential oak trees. Computers are man-made objects. For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. Electrons surround the nucleus of an atom. Fire is hotter than ice. Some grass is green. People make choices. Mountains are bigger than molehills. A bush cannot speak. “Think” is a verb. The stock market rises and falls. The list goes on and on.

But where among all the facts is morality? Behind a tree? Up in the sky? On the Web? In a crystal? Where?

The problem is that in just looking around, facts appear to be everywhere, but morality does not appear to be anywhere. Our task is to discover moral principles in a world full of facts.

To begin, note that we can identify facts on several levels. Some are directly perceivable (fire is hotter than ice; some grass is green; the Sun rises). Others must be logically inferred (heat is

a function of the motion of atoms; color is a function of the wavelengths of light; the Earth revolves around the Sun). With our five senses, we can observe countless facts at the concrete, *perceptual* level. And with the power of our minds, we can infer even more facts on the abstract, *conceptual* level. The faculty that enables us to advance from the perceptual level (which we share with other animals) to the conceptual level (which is distinctive to human beings) is: reason.

Reason enables us to form concepts, to use language, to discover causal relationships, and to make the logical connections necessary for the achievement of our goals. It is our means of understanding the world in ever deeper and wider ways and of applying our discoveries to our chosen ends. But reason allows us to identify facts and *only* facts, which alone do not seem to tell us anything about what we morally ought to do. There simply is no *fact* labeled “ought” out there.

This is a serious problem. As human beings, we *need* moral guidance. Without moral guidance, how do we know the right way to spend our time or where best to put our effort? How do we know whether we should work for a living or steal from others or beg for handouts? How do we know whether we should tell the truth always or sometimes or never? How do we know if we should befriend someone, do business with him, trust him with our children, support his campaign, or grant him our vote? And how do we know the proper way to deal with criminals, tyrants, or terrorists?

In order to live and achieve happiness, we need to know how to evaluate our alternatives; we need to know how in principle we should act. In order to establish and maintain relationships conducive to our life and happiness, we need to know how in principle we should evaluate and respond to the actions of other people. And in order to define and defend the social conditions necessary for a life of happiness, we need to know what in essence they are.

So, since facts are all there are out there, and since reason is our means of discovering and understanding facts, the question we must answer is: How can we use reason to derive moral principles—principles regarding what people *ought* to do—from the facts of reality—from what *is*?

Now, at first blush an answer might seem pretty straightforward: Pick a goal, determine what you have to do in order to accomplish it—and there's your "ought." But not so fast. The *moral* question is: How does one choose a *proper* goal? If morality were a matter of picking and accomplishing any old goal, then a bank robber would be "moral" if he successfully robbed a bank; a swindler would be "moral" providing he never got caught; the Nazis, Communists, and priests of the Inquisition would have to be considered "moral" because they successfully tortured and slaughtered the people whom they chose to torture and slaughter; and the terrorists of Black Tuesday would have to be considered "moral" because they succeeded in *their* mission.

Logically, morality cannot be a matter of doing whatever one chooses to do; it cannot be a means of achieving arbitrary goals or ends. If moral ends were arbitrary, there would be no such thing as "good" and "evil"; there would be only "works" and "doesn't work." As in: If you want to have a lot of unearned money, robbing a bank works; robbing a parking meter doesn't. Or: If you want to suppress rational thought on a grand scale, theocracy works; mere scolding from the pulpit doesn't. Or: If you want to murder millions of innocent people, gas chambers, killing fields, and anthrax-loaded crop dusters work; a lone gunman doesn't. In other words, if moral ends are arbitrary, there is no such thing as morality—"anything goes."

If there *is* such a thing as morality, it is not merely an issue of effective means; it is also—and more fundamentally—a matter of proper ends. The concept of "morality" logically presupposes a proper end; without such an end, morality cannot exist. So the question is: What is a proper end?

An *end* is a goal toward which one acts; a *means* is the action one takes toward a goal. For instance, if a student studies in order to get an education, the education is an end toward which his studying is the means. Likewise, if a person works in order to earn a paycheck, the paycheck is an end toward which his work is the means. But notice that such goals are not ends in themselves. A student gets an education so that he can pursue a career—which he pursues in order to support himself and earn a paycheck—which he earns in order to buy things—which he buys in order to

use for various other purposes—which he pursues in order to accomplish still other goals—and so on. Each end presupposes another. So where does it all end?

If we are to establish an objective, fact-based morality, we need to discover a *final* end—one toward which all of our other goals and values are properly aimed. Such an end is by that fact our standard of moral value—the standard against which we can objectively assess the value of all our choices and actions. So the question becomes: What is our *ultimate* goal?

Now, one would hope that we could turn to philosophers for some assistance here; after all, it is their job to answer such questions. But, alas, most philosophers hold that an ultimate goal or standard of moral value cannot be rationally justified. Philosophy professor Lionel Ruby explains the essence of this popular position as follows:

[Goals] are like standards, in that some are more basic than others. Any goal short of the “ultimate” can be justified by a more basic goal. But a truly ultimate standard or goal cannot be justified by logic, for a proof requires a premise—in this case a value premise—and “ultimate” means “nothing more basic.” . . . [Thus] truly ultimate standards or ends . . . are beyond the scope of logic and scientific evidence.<sup>1</sup>

This widespread belief underlies and gives rise to the problem known as the “is-ought” dichotomy, according to which it is impossible to move logically from the facts of reality—from what “is”—to moral principles—principles about how people “ought” to act. As Professor Ruby states the problem:

Every value conclusion must rest on value premises. The “ought-to-be” can be deduced only from another “ought-to-be,” and never from a mere “is” or statement of fact. A premise that merely states that something is or is not the case cannot yield a value conclusion.<sup>2</sup>

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1. Lionel Ruby, *Logic: An Introduction* (Chicago: Lippincott, 1960), p. 498.  
2. *Ibid.*, p. 496.

This dual claim—that ultimate ends cannot be justified by logic and, thus, that moral principles cannot be grounded in facts—was first made in the eighteenth century by the Scottish philosopher David Hume (from whom we will hear shortly).<sup>3</sup> “The essence of Hume’s view,” explains Cambridge professor C. D. Broad, “is that Reason is wholly confined to matters of fact.”

It will help us to analyse a situation, to choose means for a given end, and to infer probable consequences of various alternative courses of action. But it has nothing whatever to do with our choice of ends as distinct from means. We desire things as ends only because they move some emotion in us, and not because of any objective characteristic in them which Reason can recognise.<sup>4</sup>

Not surprisingly, this notion breeds moral subjectivism. And unfortunately, it is almost universally accepted among intellectuals today.

Princeton professor Peter Singer declares that “The gap between facts and values remains as unbridgeable as it was when David Hume first drew attention to it in 1739. . . .”<sup>5</sup> UCLA professor James Q. Wilson tells us: “I learned from Hume, as did legions of my fellow students, that this transition is impossible; one cannot infer an ‘ought’ statement from an ‘is’ statement; in modern parlance, one cannot infer values from facts. It is logically untenable.”<sup>6</sup> And in a textbook titled *Attacking Faulty Reasoning*, Professor T. Edward Damer writes: “It is not logically sound to move in an argument from a factual claim, a so-called ‘is,’ to a

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3. See David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), Appendix I, esp. pp. 287–89, 292–94; and *Treatise of Human Nature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), Book III, esp. pp. 457–59, 462–70.

4. C.D. Broad, *Five Types of Ethical Theory* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1934), p. 107. Cf. Bertrand Russell, *Human Society in Ethics and Politics* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1955), pp. vi–vii.

5. Peter Singer, *A Darwinian Left* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 12.

6. James Q. Wilson, *The Moral Sense* (New York: Free Press Paperbacks, 1993), p. 237.

moral claim, a so-called ‘ought.’ To do so is to commit the well-known ‘is–ought’ fallacy.”<sup>7</sup>

On this view, to recognize the facts of a given situation, and to try to use those facts in order to discover and take a moral course of action, is to commit a “logical fallacy.” Apparently, to be moral, one should disregard everything one knows to be true and act solely according to one’s unfettered desires or the norms of one’s tribe. Some advice.

The is–ought problem may seem silly, but if left unsolved it has serious consequences. If facts have no bearing on what a person morally ought to do—if reason is merely a means of achieving subjectively chosen ends—if morality cannot be grounded objectively in reality—if there is an unbridgeable gap between “is” and “ought,” between facts and values—then, as Professor Ruby notes, we have only “personal preference or the approval of our group as the ultimate basis for our value-judgments.”<sup>8</sup> And we know what that means.

The is–ought gap is the secular subjectivists’ technical retreat. It serves as their linguistic asylum from the imposition of any moral standards. It is their ticket to “get away” with whatever they (or their group) *feel* like doing. And it is why no one can answer them when they say: “There are no moral absolutes” or “Morality is not black and white” or “Who’s to say what’s right?”

People who make such claims are counting on our inability to name a fact-based, logically provable, *objective* standard of moral value. Consciously or not, they are relying on the is–ought dichotomy to defend moral subjectivism. And, consciously or not, they are supported by the likes of David Hume and the legions of subjectivist college professors who each year teach another batch of future intellectuals that moral principles cannot be derived from the facts of reality.

What do Hume and company propose as an alternative? How, in their view, are people supposed to determine what is morally right and wrong? How are we to distinguish virtue from vice?

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7. T. Edward Damer, *Attacking Faulty Reasoning*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Belmont: Wadsworth, 1995), p. 10.

8. Ruby, *Logic: An Introduction*, p. 498.

Their answer: By reference to a “moral sense,” which they also call “sentiments of pleasure and uneasiness” and, you guessed it: “feelings.”

According to Hume, if you see a man raping a woman, you cannot say that what you are witnessing is *factually* immoral; you cannot say that as a matter of fact he should not be doing that. No matter how you view the situation, all you can say in terms of facts is: There is a woman kicking and screaming furiously while a man is eagerly trying to have sex with her; the man has made a choice, and the woman appears to think differently about it. As to a moral judgment—as to whether the man is being virtuous or vicious—that, says Hume, depends solely on how it makes you *feel* inside.

Lest it seem that I am exaggerating Hume's position, here it is in his own words: “An action, or sentiment, or character is virtuous or vicious; why? Because its view causes a pleasure or uneasiness of a particular kind.”

Take any action allowed to be vicious: Wilful murder, for instance. Examine it in all lights, and see if you can find that matter of fact, or real existence, which you call *vice*. In whichever way you take it, you find only certain passions, motives, volitions and thoughts. There is no other matter of fact in the case. The vice entirely escapes you, as long as you consider the object [the observable facts]. You never can find it, till you turn your reflexion into your own breast, and find a sentiment of disapprobation [moral disapproval], which arises in you, towards this action.<sup>9</sup>

Disturbed by that, you might demand a firm answer: Tell me, Mr. Hume, is it your position that rapists and murderers are vicious or not! His answer: “When you pronounce any action or character to be vicious, you mean nothing, but that from the constitution of your nature you have a feeling or a sentiment of blame from the contemplation of it.”<sup>10</sup> In other words, to condemn

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9. Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature*, Book III, pp. 468–69, spelling modernized.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 469.

murderers and rapists as immoral is merely to express your emotional discomfort at the thought of what they do.<sup>11</sup>

If moral judgments cannot be grounded in the facts of reality, then we are in a moral vacuum; logic is merely a means to achieving arbitrarily chosen ends; swindlers, hoodlums, Nazis, communists, terrorists, and religious “inquisitors” are neither moral nor immoral—only successful or unsuccessful. If so, human sacrifices of any kind and degree can be “justified” by the decree of any common criminal, any collective, any dictator, any “prophet,” or any pope.

The problem is not: “If there is no God, anything goes.” The problem is: If there is no objective standard of value, anything goes. If there is no rationally provable standard of value, there is no way to defend with moral certainty what is right or to condemn with moral certainty what is wrong. The alternative is not religion versus subjectivism, but *reason* versus subjectivism—and the secular subjectivists know it.

Hitler did not fear religion or faith; he feared reason and logic. He saw the Church not as an enemy but as a *mentor*, because of its remarkable ability to get people to believe in a creed full of contradictions. Here, in his own words, is Hitler acknowledging his heartfelt debt to religion:

The Church has never allowed the Creed to be interfered with. It is fifteen hundred years since it was formulated, but every suggestion for its amendment, every logical criticism or attack on it, has been rejected. The Church has realized that anything and everything can be built up on a document of that sort, no matter how contradictory or irreconcilable with it. The faithful will swallow it whole, so long as logical reasoning is never allowed to be brought to bear on it.<sup>12</sup>

Hitler’s plans *required* that people have faith; thus, he had nothing but contempt for logic. And he was neither the first nor the last to feel this way. David Hume was as explicit about his hatred of reason as he was about his love for feelings. Just as he in-

11. Cf. Gilbert Harman, *The Nature of Morality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), esp. pp. 11, 27–28, 32–33.

12. Adolf Hitler, quoted in Hermann Rauschning, *The Voice of Destruction* (New York: Putnam, 1940), pp. 239–40.

sisted that feelings are our only moral guides, so he insisted that “Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them.” What does that mean? Hume tells us: “It is not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger.”<sup>13</sup>

Now, we know what Hitler's hatred of reason led to, but what about Hume's? After all, he was not a maniacal mass murderer, but a peaceful philosopher who merely taught legions of other philosophers that moral principles cannot be derived from the facts of reality. What harm could that do?

Well, ideas have consequences. And Hume's ideas have made their way from the minds of ivory-tower philosophers into the minds of regular people. They have even made their way into the minds of children. Recall who said this: “My belief is that if I say something, it goes. I am the law, and if you don't like it, you die. If I don't like you or I don't like what you want me to do, you die.” It was Eric Harris of the Columbine massacre. Is it any wonder what ideas got into his head? How far is his philosophy from this one: “It is not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger”?

Subjectivism—whether personal, social, or “supernatural”—wreaks havoc on human life and happiness. Until we can answer it with (genuine) moral certainty—that is, until we can *show* that morality is based on facts—it will continue to do so. From muggings and rapes, to school shootings and truck bombings, to concentration camps and gulags, to religious “inquisitions” and divinely inspired acts of terrorism—all such mayhem is caused by subjectivism. And the is–ought dichotomy is what makes subjectivism seem plausible.

The is–ought gap represents a moral abyss. If we care about human life and happiness, we need to bridge it. We need to ground morality in reality; we need to discover a rationally provable ultimate end—a standard of value derived from observation and logic.

Fortunately, the problem has been solved; the gap has been bridged; morality has been tied to reality. An objective standard of value has been rationally proved, and it is the subject of our next chapter.

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13. Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature*, Book II, pp. 415–16, spelling modernized.