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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*?

