

"YOU CANNOT DERIVE AN OUGHT FROM AN IS" or can you?

FOREWORD - The famous philosopher David Hume attacked what is known as the naturalistic fallacy. The fallacy is anything that forgets that we cannot get a moral ought from an is. If we are naturally only meat-eaters that does not prove that eating meat is the a loving and just ie moral thing. If you make your own ought you are assuming an ought. An assumption has no authority to declare something moral.

A lot of discussion has taken place for people want to get from an is to an ought.

We can have oughts yes but we cannot get them from things that have nothing to do with morality. Nature makes us kind. Fact. But that does not mean we ought to be kind. Unfeeling nature may make us kind but nature cannot make us ought to be kind. It does not care. Nobody likes these truths for they mean that morality is made by us and comes from our preferences and the way we are. It amounts to saying the oughts are human constructs.

THE ARGUMENT IN DEPTH

The argument: If people have values that they consider to be moral that does not mean they should have them. An example, just because somebody is kind and great good results it does not mean they ought to be kind. An is does not give rise to an ought. In other words, a descriptive is not a prescriptive.

The reply: It depends on what an ought means. Some think an ought is simply responding to a duty set up by God or some person. Others see ought as a way of saying, "Do this action for it is attractive and intends wellbeing."

The argument needs translation. "Kindness is valuable. It's a moral value. You cannot argue that you should or ought to be kind because it is valuable. An is does not an imply an ought." The argument looks less convincing now. Suppose an ought exists. Then the ought is an is. If an is does not imply an ought the fact remains that it does in some cases. It depends. A tree is dying but that does not mean you ought to try and save it. The is does not give you an ought here. But if the tree seems to be the only source of medicine in its bark it is different. An is then becomes an ought.

If something is valuable then it is a fact that it is valuable and important. When you see the value in something and the value is really there then the human heart and human thinking power and the human will must be valuable too. Why? One benefit of value being a fact is how it demands confidence in human ability to grasp truth sufficiently. If human nature can value kindness or justice it must be valuable itself. Some say that another way to say this is to say that human nature has free agency and is more important and better than anything different and thus the good person will develop into the best a human can be and not harm her or his nature. The conclusion is that with values such as justice and love the values are facts and oughts both. Instead of trying to get an ought from an is you recognise that the ought and the is is one and the same.

If you cannot get an ought from an is then what? Morality is just subjective. If you cannot get an ought from an is then you cannot pass the buck. You cannot say there is a God who gets an ought from an is. If an ought and an is are two separate things and unrelated then God cannot help. And then you get back to where you started because you are the one saying you judge that God has got an ought from an is. It is back to you deciding that an ought can be got from an is after all!

It appears that asking the very question, "Can you get an ought from an is?" shows you don't understand that something that ought to be done or valued means it is a fact that it ought to be done or valued. If something is important then it is a fact that it is important. If something is needed then it is a fact that it is needed. If something is to be valued then it is a fact that it must be valued.

Matter is neutral or neither good or evil in itself which is why you cannot get an ought from an is.
There are different kinds of ought or should.

-Prudential for example you must give your job application to Anne to have the best chance of getting the job

-Probabilistic for example it will rain somewhere in the world tomorrow

-Moral for example you must not walk on by and leave your neighbour to die if she has a terrible accident.

If you want a moral ought and cannot get one you paradoxically do get one. You have to choose the other two. You have to

make do. Morality is based on not asking the impossible.

Thus we have absolute proof that thinking leads to proof that moral principles are irrevocable and real and true. It is not God that validates morality it is truth and even a God cannot turn the truth into non-truth.

Ought implies, "You must do this" and "You must suffer if you do not." It shows a desire to force.

All the oughts we have seen tell us what we ought to think.

Morality

Let us look at YOU CAN'T WORK OUT AN OUGHT FROM AN IS from a Utilitarian perspective,

- 1 Tim is starving.
- 2 Starving lessens happiness.
- 3 Happiness is the goal of humans.
- 4 You have a spare salad roll.
- 5 Giving away the salad roll will not decrease your happiness but will increase his.
- 6 You ought to increase happiness.
- 7 Therefore, you ought to give Tim your spare salad roll.

1 Tim is starving. THIS IS AN IS OR A FACT.

2 Starving lessens happiness. BUT MAYBE FOR SOME REASON IT WILL ACTUALLY IMPROVE THINGS FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS. FOR EXAMPLE, MAYBE ITS GOOD THAT TIM STARVES FOR HE MIGHT NEVER FATHER THE CHILD THAT BECOMES THE TRIGGER FOR THE FINAL WORLD WAR - ARMAGEDDON!

3 Happiness is the goal of humans. HAPPINESS NOW IS THE GOAL. THE TRULY BALANCED PERSON IS HAPPY TO BE HERE NOW AND DOES NOT HANKER AFTER FUTURE HAPPINESS. IF IT HAPPENS IT HAPPENS BUT SHE IS HAPPY TO BE ALIVE NOW. AND IF SHE CAN'T BE HAPPY NOW, IT MAY INDICATE THAT SHE LACKS THE POWER TO BE HAPPY AND IS WASTING HER TIME IF SHE TRIES TO DO THINGS TO BRING ABOUT THE DAY WHEN SHE WILL FINALLY BE HAPPY.

4 You have a spare salad roll.

5 Giving away the salad roll will not decrease your happiness but will increase his. GIVING AWAY THE SALAD ROLL CHANGES THE COURSE OF YOUR LIFE FOREVER. IT MAY MAKE IT WORSE THROUGH ITS SUBTLE RIPPLE EFFECT. YOU CAN'T SEE THE FUTURE SO YOU CAN'T SEE IF IT REALLY WILL MAKE YOU NO LESS HAPPY.

6 You ought to increase happiness *. IS TIM HAPPY BECAUSE YOU GAVE HIM THE ROLL OR BECAUSE YOU REACHED OUT TO HIM IN KINDNESS? IF IT IS BECAUSE OF THE ROLL, THEN IT FOLLOWS THAT MONEY REALLY DOES BUY HAPPINESS! IF HE IS THAT MATERIALISTIC THEN YOU CANNOT HELP HIM BECOME HAPPY!

7 Therefore, you ought to give Tim your spare salad roll. MAKING HIM HAPPY IS WHAT IS DECLARED IMPORTANT NOT FEEDING HIM. THIS OUGHT HERE IS TOTALLY OUT OF PLACE. TO TEACH THAT FEEDING THE STARVING IS NOT GOOD IN ITSELF BUT MAKING THEM HAPPY IS IS TO FORGE A LUDICROUS MORALITY THAT WILL SOON GIVE WAY TO HYPOCRISY AND CYNICISM.

*Note: David Hume denied that the fact that you can be happy means you ought to try to be. Thus Hume would not agree with point 6. Point 6 is to be linked with point 3. It says happiness is the goal of humans.

MORE ABOUT OUGHT

Sometimes you have two things on offer and there is no third option and both of them are in fact bringing collateral damage.

Arguments about how you can derive an ought from an is hover around the ought producing something good. But you can ought to do something neutral. If you see no great difference between doing a or b for the damage each one could do is unpredictable then all you can do is intend to be neutral and do one in the belief that it makes no difference.

Some think that being part of society means you implicitly promise to do right so the fact that society needs you to behave means you agree to if you accept being part of it. So the is of being in society gives you an ought.

John Searle in 1964 suggested that if you promise the promise is an is and it becomes an ought. This satisfies Hume's argument that an ought is not an is but the exception is if you can give a reason to connect the two. An ought is not an is but in theory you can connect the two. Custard is not strawberries but you can connect them by reason of having them in the one bowl. He is right that a promise is both an is and an ought. Ought by definition is at least an implied promise - people take it for granted that if you associate with them you are saying you are not going to help yourself to their property.

Sam Harris in *The Moral Landscape* is accused of making an is an ought by saying morality is basically and essentially all about "maximizing the well-being of conscious creatures." The problem is we are not told why creatures being conscious means they should be looked after.

Harris might answer that when you get a gift you do not ask who wrapped it up and who made the wrapping paper and so on but just accept that likewise it is moral just to stop somewhere. The stopping point is that creatures are conscious and if morality is right it demands a stopping point. And the stopping point is not arbitrary - one function of consciousness is that we can prolong it. We prolong it by eating and drinking and defending ourselves. Even if the face of death we are willing to try to live if there is a way.

If we need to connect is an ought as Harris says, then there are only two avenues to think about. Will science do it for us? Will the non-scientific (such as superstition, religion, magic, metaphysics) do it for us? It is obvious that the latter is a threat to morality if you define morality as "Do not hit babies for nothing" for they can tell you, "Do not hit babies for nothing unless God prompts you for that means you have to do it under the circumstances even if you don't know what these are." And it is immoral as in dangerous how that argument cannot be refuted. So even if science is a bad grounding for morality at least it is a grounding.

Not all oughts are about morality. We think nature ought to be opposed when it makes bad viruses. We are not accusing it of being morally bad but just bad. If we can't get a moral ought then all is not lost.

FINALLY: If somebody is hurt needlessly then why care why it is immoral? The thought of causing such pain should put you off causing it. Paradoxically morality should and will say is enough. Remember morality only asks for the possible so if that is the best you can do to be moral even if it is pathetic then it is moral. If we should love and find we can't we will still be counted loving if we keep trying. Doing your best counts as love. Its love of a moral kind but not ideal kind.

Morality is paradox and that is fine. Life is riddled with paradox. That is how the fact of pain shows you it should not happen. An ought does not come from an is directly but indirectly.

Harm is an is. It raises the question of the ought. That tells us a lot. It shows that morality is more about avoiding harm than justice and love.