The Strangeness of "Ought" (20180127)
Alonzo Fyfe

This document is aimed at skeptics – people who deny the existence of things based on the fact that there is no physical evidence for their existence – things like God, ghosts, demons, magic, miracles, and the like.

I have noticed a strange inconsistency in the claims that many of these people make.

Even though they are skeptical of the existence of these things, they seem to have no trouble with the idea of an "ought" distinct and separate from "is" – insisting on its existence and the absurdity of believing that it is possible to ever derive any type of moral "ought" from a set of purely factual premises.

The Scottish philosopher David Hume is famous in part for having 'proved' – according to a great many of these skeptics – that it is impossible to derive "ought" from "is".

> 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 shou'd 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 … [I] am persuaded, that a small attention [to this point] 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 is perceiv'd by reason. (Treatise on Human Nature 3.1.1)

But his proof is nothing more than an argument from ignorance. He asserts, "I cannot conceive how it is possible," as if we are to accept as a good argument for a position:

> (1) If Hume cannot conceive of how it is possible to do X, then X cannot be done.
>
> (2) Hume cannot conceive of how it is possible to derive "ought" from "is".
>
> (C) Therefore, deriving "ought" from "is" cannot be done.

This is not the type of argument that I would expect a skeptic to take seriously.

This is the same type of argument from ignorance that skeptics reject immediately in other cases, such as, "I cannot conceive of how it is possible that something as complex as a human eye could have come into existence without a designer?"

In fact, many of the things that the skeptic rejects are, at least, things that others claim to be a part of the "is" universe. Ghosts, demons, and gods, at least, "are".

This is/ought distinction that many skeptics hold on to says that "ought" exists completely outside of the realm of "is". The person who holds that this makes sense is actually saying, "There is more to reality than 'is' and 'is not'. I am going to say that there is a third category. I will call this category 'ought', and I will hold that it is distinct and separate from 'is'. And I will hold that this 'ought' universe describes whole and different types of relationships from 'is' relationships. Even if we reach the very limits of science and come to know everything about the 'is' universe there is to know, we will know nothing about 'ought'. This is because no set of 'is' propositions can imply an 'ought' proposition. 'Ought' sits beyond science, beyond observation and experiment, beyond – even – all that 'is'."

The skeptic – the person who denies the existence of Gods, souls, ghosts, intrinsic values, free will, heaven, and hell because *they are just too weird* – this is supposed to be comfortable with this, and even insist that it is the height of folly to deny it.

I am baffled as to why, for 300 years, skeptics have not gotten into the habit of saying to Hume, "I do not care how *inconceivable* it is for you that 'ought' relationships might fit in the 'is' universe – it is far more conceivable than the idea that there is some other sort of relationship – something outside of 'is' relationships – that remains outside of our grasp even if we were to have complete and total knowledge of every *fact* in the *real world*."

Of the two views – the view that 'ought' is somehow linked to 'is', versus the view that 'ought' will allude even a person who knows every fact about the real world – I seriously hold that the second is the hardest to conceive.

We have one universe – the 'is' universe – the universe of *fact*. Something either 'is' or it 'is not'. That which is not *fact* is *fiction*.

Hume said that we can find the wrongness of an object by turning our attention to our own sentiment.

> Take any action allowed to be vicious: Willful 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. You never can find it, till you turn your reflection into your own breast, and find a sentiment of disapprobation, which arises in you, towards this action.

However, what is it when we find when we turn our attention inward and look at our own sentiment? We find something that exists squarely and firmly in the 'is' universe. Our own sentiment exists in the world of the "is". If we use that sentiment to derive a conclusion about the ought-not-ness of murder, we are deriving an 'ought' from an 'is'. It is just that one of the 'is' statements we are drawing the conclusion from happens to a statement about sentiments.

Hume thinks that this derives 'ought' from 'is'.

This is another surprise for me – that so many people who quote the above passage as if it is some form of gospel of moral philosophy fail to read *the very next sentence* - where Hume writes,

> *Here is a matter of fact . . .*

Here, according to Hume himself, we have an instance of inferring 'value' from 'fact' – an instance of inferring 'ought' from 'is'. Because, Hume is doing nothing less than drawing an inference from a *fact* about having a sentiment to the *value* of willful murder.

Hume does not have any trouble deriving 'ought' from 'is'. Hume is not saying that – to use a phrase that showed up in my inbox yesterday – "Ethics questions are not fact questions..."

Ethics questions *are* fact questions. It is just that those fact questions *must include the fact of human sentiments*.

Or, as Hume put it:

> *Here is a matter of fact, but it is the object of feeling, not of reason. It lies in yourself, not in the object. So that 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 sentiment of blame from the contemplation of it. (David Hume, A Treatise of Human Nature).*

I dispute Hume's claim that it is possible to derive a moral 'ought' from the 'is' of a personal sentiment. If you step into an alley and discover a body, you cannot tell just from the sentiment that you feel if it is, or is not, a murder. You might come to think of it as a murder, and yet learn a short while later that the individual fell off of the roof. Your sentiment tells you nothing, until you have also been made aware of the relevant facts.

In a second form of argument from "ought" to "is," Hume makes the link between 'ought' and 'is' a little more distant. "Ought" is not determined by your sentiment. It is determined by the sentiment you would have if you (1) knew every relevant fact of the case, (2) imagined that the case touched upon no interest of yours, (3) imagined that the case touched upon no interest of somebody that you cared for, and (40 were aware of all of the relevant facts of human nature itself. Then, and only then, could you draw an 'ought' conclusion. Yet, this 'ought' conclusion still came from factual 'is' premises.

Then, in the *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, Hume makes further revisions to his theory about how we derive 'ought' from 'is'. It no longer comes from our sentiments. Our sentiments determine what has value. However, to determine the value of a sentiment itself we must look at whether the sentiment is one that is (1) is pleasing to self, (2) is useful to self, (3) is pleasing to others, and (4) is useful to others. Again, these four relevant facts are facts. They involve claims about what IS useful and pleasing to self and others.

From these 'is' statements it is possible to derive 'ought,' according to Hume, with the 'ought' being stronger according to the number and the degree to which these four factors apply.

This is what I turn into the formula, "Is such as to fulfill, directly (pleasing) or indirectly (useful), the desires of self and others," giving precise definitions to the concepts of 'desire' (a mental state whereby the agent is disposed or make or keep true a proposition that is the object of the attitude), and 'fulfull' (a state of affairs in which the proposition that is the object of a desire is true).

However, this dispute is irrelevant to the point that I am making here.

My point here has to do with how odd it is that one should postulate a 'value' universe that is completely inaccessible to an individual who is fully aware of every fact there is to know – of an 'ought' relationship that is unavailable even to a person who knows absolutely every 'is' relationship there is to know.

And, what is even more bizarre, at least to me, is that a group of people who pride themselves on their skepticism and with doing away with false Gods, can look at the claim that there is a realm of 'ought' completely distinct from the realm of 'is' and say, "Yeah. Sure. What could be more obvious?"

Then, to add to this, to discover that many of these people hold in contempt those who adopt strange beliefs in Gods and ghosts – when, at least Gods are ghosts are still asserted to be a part of the 'is' universe. At least such people are not trying to invent a type of relationship separate and distinct from what 'is' – even if they are wrong about what those relationships are.