

II What's Special About Ethics?

A. The Is/Ought (Fact/Value) Distinction

Here is Hume:

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.

David Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature*, Bk III, Part i, Section I

Here the claim is that you cannot arrive at an 'ought' conclusion from 'is' premises. Sometimes this is stated in terms of facts and values: that you can't get a conclusion about values from a set of premises that are about facts. But that is a stronger claim. You might think that, say, breaking a promise is always a bad thing to do, but still not think that that shows that you ought not to do it (we'll come back to this shortly).

This barrier between 'is' and 'ought' is one of a number of alleged 'barriers to inference'. For instance, from Hume again, we get the idea that statements about the past cannot entail statements about the future; from Russell we get the idea that existential statements can't entail universal ones; from Kant we get the idea that statements about actuality don't entail statements about necessity. (Of less philosophical interest: you might think that no statement entirely about chickens implies any statement entirely about cats.)

Searle and Prior have proposed some counterexamples to the thesis that you can't infer an 'ought' from an 'is'.

Searle's example:

- (P) Jones uttered the words 'I hereby promise to pay you, Smith, five dollars'.
- (C₁) Jones promised to pay Smith five dollars.
- (C₂) Jones placed himself under (undertook) an obligation to pay Smith five dollars.
- (C₃) Jones is under an obligation to pay Smith five dollars.
- (C₄) Jones ought to pay Smith five dollars.

There are various worries with this. The move from (C₁) to (C₂) (or perhaps from (C₃) to (C₄)) looks as though it may well require a separate 'ought' premise, something along the lines of 'You have an obligation to [or ought to] keep your promises'. And does (C₄) really follow? What if Jones knows that Smith will use the five dollars to poison White, who is wholly innocent and totally undeserving on being poisoned? (This plausibly provides a defence of the is/ought distinction without providing a defence of the fact/value distinction. Breaking a promise is a bad thing to do; but in this case you ought to do it.)

Prior's examples:

- P Tea-drinking is common in England
- C Tea-drinking is common in England or All New Zealanders ought to be shot (vI)

Or, if you are sceptical that the conclusion of that argument counts as an 'ought' statement, treat it as an 'is' statement, and then consider this argument:

- P₁ Tea-drinking is common in England or All New Zealanders ought to be shot
- P₂ Tea-drinking is not common in England
- C All New Zealanders ought to be shot (DS)

More broadly, there are various other moves within classical logic that look to take us from 'is' sentences (I) to 'ought' sentences (O). These are from Gillian Russell:

- | | | |
|-------------|---------|------------------|
| I and not-I | entails | O |
| I | entails | O or not-O |
| I | entails | If not-I, then O |

Two things to say about this. First, note that these strategies apply to *all* possible barriers to inference. So they would mean that statements about the future could be inferred from statements about the past; statements about necessity from statements about actuality; statements wholly about cats can be inferred from statements wholly about chickens; and so on. And that makes the strategies look suspect.

Second, the strategies seem to turn on logical tricks. Getting round logical tricks is always hard; we might need to reformulate the barrier theses. Working out quite how to do that is not easy matter (for an attempt to do it see the Russell and Restall piece on the webpage — it's quite complex) but might think that we have put the burden of proof in the wrong place if we instead conclude that there is no useful is/ought distinction to be drawn.

There is a further point here. Some barriers work because the world can be partitioned into different bits of reality, which are independent of each other. The cats can be partitioned from the chickens; the past can be partitioned from the future. Fix the past facts, you still haven't fixed the future facts. Fix the chicken facts, you still haven't fixed the cat facts. One way of thinking about this is in terms of supervenience: the future doesn't supervene on the past; the cat facts don't supervene on the chicken facts. What should we think about ethics? It feels different. Once you've fixed all the 'is' facts about the world, hasn't that determined what people ought to do? As people frequently put it, *the moral supervenes on the natural*. But if that is right (and you might wonder whether it is right in any interesting way: mightn't it just be that the moral is unchanging, and so the moral supervenes on the physical in same way that the mathematical supervenes on the physical), then the striking fact is not that you can't get an 'ought' from an 'is'; but that you can't get it, even though the 'ought' supervenes on the 'is'.

B. Moore's Open Question Argument

Here's Moore:

The hypothesis that disagreement about the meaning of good is disagreement with regard to the correct analysis of a given whole, may be most plainly seen to be incorrect by

consideration of the fact that, whatever definition be offered, it may be always asked, with significance, of the complex so defined, whether it is itself good ... it may easily be thought, at first sight, that to be good may mean to be that which we desire to desire ... 'That we should desire to desire A is good' is not merely equivalent to 'That A should be good is good.' It may indeed be true that what we desire to desire is always also good; perhaps, even the converse may be true: but it is very doubtful whether this is the case, and the mere fact that we understand very well what is meant by doubting it, shews clearly that we have two different notions before our minds.

G.E. Moore, *Principia Ethica*, pp. 67–8

Moore is arguing that there can be no definition of the ethical (or terms like 'good') in terms of the natural (to say that there is is what he calls the 'Naturalist Fallacy'). How convincing is this? It might seem to radically overgeneralise. Take any analysis of any concept whatsoever. Suppose one thought that the right analysis of carbon is as the element with atomic number 6. So now consider the sentences:

Carbon is the element with atomic number 6

It seems that we might doubt that sentence; it's certainly not as trivial as the sentence

Carbon is carbon.

Perhaps the thought is that once you've done chemistry for a while you won't be able to doubt it; or that we wouldn't understand what someone meant by doubting it (expect to show that they really didn't understand much chemistry).

Is ethics different? Certainly no one has come up with a definition of any ethical term in natural terms which has become so established that no one doubts it. Do we have any reason to think that they *couldn't*? Perhaps there is just induction: we have tried since Plato, so if one were forthcoming you'd think we'd have reached it by now. But perhaps more than that is the thought that you can always come up with putative counterexamples to any attempted reduction, and it remains an open question whether they will work. In contrast, it's hard to get a grip on how you would get genuine doubts going about the carbon definition.

How can we make sense of this: one possibility is that thinking ethically has a radically different cast to it than thinking naturalistically. But if so, what is that? In trying to think about it we'll turn to Mackie.

C. Mackie's Arguments from Relativity and Queerness

Mackie gives us two sort of argument:

Relativity

Mackie thinks that the anthropological and historical fact that there has been great divergence of human belief about ethics provides evidence that there is no moral objectivity. Is there really such great relativity? Some prohibitions are pretty much universal, for instance on in-group

killing and in-group theft. Some topics do see great variability, for instance around sexual morality, religious morality, eating taboos, etiquette. And there is widespread variability on the scope of moral claims. So, for instance, who should core moral protections apply to: Favoured men? People of the same nationality? People of the same race? All people? All sentient creatures?

There is widespread divergence in non-moral beliefs too—people have had all kinds of explanation of illness—but here there is some hope of convergence over time. Is it hopelessly naive to believe in convergence over time in the case of ethics? Certainly there has been an expansion of the scope of concern over time, at least in rhetoric, if not always in practice. (Peter Singer talks about widening the moral circle.) And perhaps what variability there is could be explained by upbringing. Of course, if this is right, the appeal to upbringing had better not explain away all the moral beliefs, or we will lose any notion of objectivity, except perhaps a very local one. Clearly this is a difficult area that needs serious empirical investigation.

Queerness

This in turn covers two issues. First Mackie is concerned about how ethical statements could fit into a naturalistic world: there is no space for them there. Second, he is concerned that ethical statements have features that makes them very different to the features of the natural world.

On the first: the worries are both metaphysical and epistemological: what could moral features be like so that we could locate them in a physical world, and how would we know about them? But there is an obvious response as Mackie acknowledges: it is hard to see how the subject matter of a discipline like mathematics fits into the world (where are the numbers?) and it is hard to say how we know about them. People sometimes talk about intuition; but then we can say the same about ethics. Mackie calls disciplines like these ‘companions in guilt’, but that is a rather misleading characterisation. They are more like companions in legitimacy.

The second is less easily answered. Mackie says that ethical statements have a ‘to-be-persuadness’ or conversely a ‘not-to-be-doneness’ built into them. This is clearly linked to the idea of motivational internalism that we looked at last week. Might this explain why we might get supervenience without reduction? Given the same factual base, our motivational attitudes will be the same, but they will not be part of that base. And might this also explain why the open question argument looks convincing? Any natural description of a state of affairs is one which, in some way, leaves out our motivational attitudes.