Hume's Problem: Can Ought Be Derived from Is?

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ABSTRACT: *This paper discusses the problem of deriving OUGHT statements from IS statements. Hume argues that it is impossible to derive OUGHT statements from IS statements. In this paper the problem is analysed on three levels. One, how to derive an OUGHT from a world of objects. Two, how to derive a personal OUGHT from the world of IS. Three, how to derive what is GOOD from a world of IS. The conclusions are that for the world of objects, Hume is correct, no OUGHT can be derived. However, for MAN-IN-THE-WORLD we can make simple OUGHT statements. Furthermore, for LIVING-MAN, since he has goals, he OUGHT to act in a way that will realize his goals. Finally, in terms of specifying what is the GOOD, we present a preliminary discussion by analysing two opposite modes: the INWARD mode defines actions by their effect on the SELF and the OUTWARD mode defines actions by their effect on the WORLD.*

I.   INTRODUCTION

Hume [1] posed the problem of the derivation of OUGHT from IS. He argues that it is "altogether inconceivable that this new relation [ought or ought not] can be a deduction from others [is or is not] which are entirely different from it."

The problem can be analyzed on three levels, which form the structure of the paper:

(1) How to derive an OUGHT from a world of IS. In different words, it is possible to derive concepts related to the verb IS from the world of things -- for instance, concepts of color, of motion -- but how can the *concept of good* be derived, since good is related to the verb OUGHT.

(2) Even if one could derive a concept of GOOD or OUGHT, the individual may still ask, "Why OUGHT I do the GOOD?" In other words, the question is how to derive a *personal* OUGHT from the world of IS.

(3) The problem of deriving a specific GOOD from the world of IS. In other words, how to derive *what* is GOOD from a world of IS.

Section 2 discusses the problem in the World of Objects. Section 3 discusses the problem for Man-in-the-World. Section 4 presents the difficulties of deriving a Personal Ought. Section 5 is a preliminary discussion of deriving what is Good. The final section presents the conclusions.

II.   THE WORLD OF OBJECTS

Answering these questions requires an analysis of the world. Consider a stone. Is there a concept of GOOD in the stone? How can a concept of OUGHT, a vector directed towards the future, be derived from a stone, a mere stationary point? Consider all objects and all events. Again, it is impossible to derive GOOD or OUGHT from the physical universe. If a stone gave rise to an OUGHT, it would be odd. An OUGHT verb implies the existence of a free agent. A stone or even the whole world of objects and events is not a free agent. In summary, given the analysis of a world of things, Hume is right, an OUGHT cannot be derived from a world of IS.

However, Hume's analysis of the world is an analysis of what Kant called the Noumena (the thing-in-itself). It is a world of OBJECTS. When one starts with a world like Hume's, one has great problems deriving concepts of *SELF*.

III.   MAN-IN-THE-WORLD

An alternative is to take Man into account, since it is Man who is the moral agent about whom one can say OUGHT. Start the analysis with MAN-IN-THE-WORLD. This concept of MAN-IN-THE-WORLD implies an analysis of the interaction of MAN and WORLD. This concept is much richer than Hume's, which started with a WORLD and never did get to MAN.

The primal relationship of Man to the world is perception. But Man's perception is only of differences. For instance, if everything is one color, people would have no idea what the word color means. In a world without motion, people would not comprehend the concept of motion. It is the changes in the world which stimulate Man

to form conceptions. But it is not the changes in the world alone which stimulate conceptions. It is Man's expectations of change that make Man focus on change. It is quite possible that perception only begins when there is a gradual dawning that certain phenomena keep recurring. This gives rise to the belief that these phenomena will recur in the future. Only after this belief has been established will perceptions begin to focus on the recurring phenomena the next time it appears.

If one accepts this, then the World, of the MAN-IN-THE-WORLD relationship, is perceived by Man, not as in Hume's philosophy as a stationary point, but rather as a vector directed towards the future. And it is the world qua future directed vector which is the OUGHT (a concept of future directed vector) which stimulates Man's perceptions.

Even if one does accept the premise that perception, even in its primitive state, is built on the expectation that the past will recur in the future; still, clearly it is the changes in the world which stimulate perceptions. This stimulus is an OUGHT. And just as changes in the World stimulate Man in his perceptions, the changes stimulate Man in his actions.

Furthermore, in the sphere of actions, the expectation that the World will act or exist in a certain way stimulates Man's actions. The proof is simple. Imagine that a person believed that the World would end in a second. He would do nothing. On the other hand, if a person does a certain action, he is concerned with the results of the act. A person gives money to the poor man so that the poor man may buy bread with it. A person defuses a bomb so that it will not explode. In other words, since the World is so constructed that this bomb will explode and kill anyone nearby, therefore, the person defuses it. The World of the MAN-IN-THE-WORLD, that is the World as Man *perceives* it, is the stimulus to Man's actions.

To summarize, we see that the World in its relationship to Man is always an OUGHT. It is a river in which Man finds himself, a river which drags him along, carrying him ever forward into the future.

IV.   DERIVING A PERSONAL OUGHT

But now there is the second question. "True, the world may be this raging blind force of OUGHT, but why OUGHT I listen to it? I will ignore it."

Although it may not be possible to absolutely derive a personal OUGHT from the world of IS, a partial derivation is possible.

Start with an analysis of the individual Man of MAN-IN-THE-WORLD. Before birth, the world of Man is more or less a ONE, changes are minor and gradual, not very perceptible. At birth there is a sudden violent change of environment. From a little quiet garden, MAN gets thrown into a river of perceptions which are an almost complete change from all previous experiences, and which are constantly changing. Here the choice must be made: to perceive and start to develop conceptions, or not to perceive. To perceive one must, as Hegel said, focus on situation A, then focus on situation B, and focus on the identity in difference between the two. For instance, assume that one sees a) just red, then b) just blue, then c) just green, then d) one hears sound. Slowly, one can distinguish a, b, c from d and form a conception of color and of specific color. Note, this perception requires a very active role on the part of MAN.

What is the alternative to this active role of perceiving? It is the still-born child. The only alternative is the ethics of the STILL-BORN CHILD, the ethics of absolute passivity. It is the sinking of a dead body in a river of life.

But it is not only at birth that MAN can choose to not react. During one's lifetime one may be pushed into a variation of the ethics of the STILL-BORN CHILD, the fully paralyzed catatonic. In either case, it is important to sharply distinguish the ethics of the STILL-BORN CHILD from the ethics of SUICIDE. Suicide is an active choice one makes. It is a way of dealing with life. It is a short, decisive, positive action. The ethics of the STILL-BORN CHILD is the paragon of passivity.

And why does someone who refuses to react to life sink? Because life is like a raging river. If one likes a more modern example, it is a moving car where each person is the driver. Falling asleep is dictated by the ethics of the STILL-BORN CHILD.

Without metaphysics, a personal OUGHT which will deny the ethics of the STILL-BORN CHILD cannot be derived. However, the ethics of the STILL-BORN CHILD can be discarded by defining the condition of MAN-IN-THE-WORLD to exclude it; i.e. by defining LIVING-MAN.

To summarize the argument up to this point, the world of IS is really a world of OUGHT and how LIVING MAN is forced, by definition, to align himself with the life force. This is comparable to Sartre's concept of being FORCED to be FREE, the difference being that Sartre is playing on the word free since the word freedom usually means freedom from and thus the play on FORCED to be FREE. FREEDOM is a freedom to, a freedom to align oneself with the vital life force of active awareness.

V.   DERIVING WHAT IS GOOD

The third problem is deriving what is GOOD. This can be done in two ways. One way is to legislate rules from the outside onto MAN. The second way is to derive the GOOD from an analysis of LIVING-MAN.

When rules are legislated, the first question to be raised is why they are GOOD, why OUGHT they be done. The answer must be an appeal to an ultimate arbitrary principle. But there is also a practical difficulty. The application of any rule will generally have unintended, undesirable consequences unless it is legislated by an infinitely wise power. This is because any outside rule will be like a Procrustean Bed imposed on a multifarious world, full of many different peoples and situations. Furthermore, the question remains, "Why OUGHT I, the individual, do the GOOD?" If the ultimate principle is accepted by the individual, the question is answered. If he does not accept the ultimate principle, the answer would be, "We will punish you if you do not do it." Is this answer enough to establish a personal OUGHT? At first blush, it is. The argument is: if you do not do GOOD, we will punish you; you do not want to be punished; therefore, you want to do the GOOD. On deeper analysis, the external reinforcement of punishment only establishes the OUGHT related to the enforcement, not to the act. The conclusion should read, "Therefore you OUGHT to try and avoid punishment, you may do this by doing the GOOD or by not getting caught when doing the bad." There is a failure to establish a personal OUGHT. This was to be expected; just as no OUGHT can be derived in the WORLD alone, so no personal OUGHT can be found without an analysis of MAN.

GOOD must be derived from an analysis of LIVING-MAN. The first thing is to realize that men are unique. Of no two men, A and B, can we say that $A \equiv B$. Furthermore, it is even questionable whether we can say $A_1 \equiv A_2$, where A_1 is A today and A_2 is A tomorrow. The reason A_1 may not be identical to A_2 is that MAN is constantly changing and may be at different stages of ethical development at different times. To give an extreme example, an analysis of LIVING-MAN when A is two years old will differ radically from an analysis of LIVING-MAN when A is thirty years old. This dooms any attempt at easy derivation of simple universal rules. To develop a personal OUGHT for A_1, one would have to analyze LIVING-MAN$_1$. For A_2, the analysis must be restarted. And then there will have to be a new analysis for B, C, . . ., ad infinitum. One method of extricating from the dilemma is to search for common, universal characteristics of *all* MEN at *all* times. However, it is questionable whether any universal characteristics would turn up in such a search.

A different approach is to derive modes of ethical behavior. The MODES, which will follow directly from basic principles, will be different manifestations of the basic personal derived OUGHT. They will be streams in which an individual may align himself with the basic LIFE-FORCE.

Two basic simple MODES of expression open to LIVING-MAN are the INWARD and the OUTWARD. The INWARD is the MODE that is concerned with the SELF; the OTHER, the whole outside WORLD, is only of importance insofar as it relates to the SELF. The SELF is paramount. The system growing from the INWARD may be one of developing the SELF to higher levels, or pampering the SELF, or negating the SELF, or legislating for ONESELF. Each of these systems appears and reappears in the history of philosophy. The OUTWARD is a concern with OTHERS, with the WORLD, for the sake of OTHERS. The SELF is of no import. The philosophical systems of humanism spring from the OUTWARD. It seems safe to assume that there are many other MODES of PERSONAL OUGHT.

VI.   CONCLUSIONS

In summary, there are several conclusions:
- From the physical universe, Hume is correct, no OUGHT can be derived.
- MAN-IN-THE-WORLD perceives the world, forms expectations, and acts based on these expectations. Therefore, based on his expectations, we can make simple OUGHT statements. For instance, since it is raining outside, if you do not want to get wet, you OUGHT to take an umbrella.
- LIVING-MAN, by choosing to live, focus and have goals, rejects the ethics of the STILL-BORN CHILD. Since he has goals, he OUGHT to act in a way that will realize his goals.
- In terms of specifying what is GOOD, we present two opposite modes, which will lead to very different behaviors. The INWARD mode defines actions by their effect on the SELF. The OUTWARD mode defines actions by their effect on the WORLD. For instance, the INWARD mode might dictate that a person OUGHT to eat healthy and exercise. The OUTWARD mode might dictate that a person OUGHT to act in a way that will increase peace or justice in the world.

REFERENCES

[1].   David Hume, "Treatise of Human Nature, in *Approaches to Ethics*, ed. W.T. Jones et. al. (New York, 1969), p. 263.