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Analysis: An introduction to ethical concepts

'Is' and 'ought'

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Definitions of 'is' and 'ought'

Moral philosophy in the English-speaking world has been dominated during the present century by the controversy concerning the logical relationship between 'is' and 'ought'. These terms are, of course, to be understood in the present context as shorthand labels. By 'is' is meant any non-moral assertion, that is to say, any utterance which purports to be either true or false and which does not express a moral judgment. By 'ought' is meant any proposition expressing a moral judgment. The question which is at the centre of the controversy may be stated then as follows: Is it possible for a proposition expressing a moral judgment to be deduced from a proposition or set of propositions which do not express moral judgments? The answer would appear to be No, for it is a principle of logic that the conclusion of a valid deductive argument cannot assert something which is not at least implicitly asserted in the premises. Hence, if the conclusion of a deductive argument expresses a moral judgment and the premises do not, it follows that the argument must be invalid.

Hume's formulation of the problem

This problem was first formulated by David Hume (1711–1776) in what is perhaps the most famous passage in the history of moral philosophy. Unfortunately the passage is extremely brief and it is written in Hume's characteristically elusive style, so that it is not easy to be certain as to what its author intended it to convey. There are in fact considerable differences of opinion concerning its interpretation. However, the majority view is that Hume is asserting *a*) that 'ought' cannot logically be derived from 'is'; and *b*) that this is sufficient to show that moral judgments are incapable of asserting anything which is objectively true or false.

But why does Hume think that *b* follows from *a*? Even if we grant that 'ought' cannot logically be derived from 'is', why should this mean that moral judgments have no claim to objectivity? Hume does not explain this point himself, but we may plausibly represent his line of reasoning as follows. We normally try to justify our moral judgments by reference to supporting reasons. Thus someone who believes that abortion is morally wrong, for example, may attempt to justify his view by claiming that it involves the taking of innocent human life. The supporting reason is not just evidence for the truth of the moral judgment. It does not bear the same relationship to the moral judgment as does the presence of fingerprints at the scene of the crime to the guilt of the accused. The presence of the accused's fingerprints does not constitute his guilt, though it may indicate it, whereas a supporting reason for a moral judgment is understood to express the fact which constitutes the rightness or wrongness of the action whose morality is in question. Thus abortion is regarded by some as wrong because it involves the destruction of innocent human life; without this consequence it would not appear to them to be wrong. Stealing is rendered wrong by the fact that it involves the taking of another person's property, lying by the fact that it involves a deliberate attempt to deceive.

The important point, however, is that these supporting reasons are expressed in 'is', not 'ought', judgments. They are not themselves moral judgments even though they provide support for them. Consequently if 'ought' ~~cannot be~~ deduced from 'is', a moral judgment cannot be deduced from its supporting reasons. And this means that there is nothing illogical in accepting the truth of the supporting reason while rejecting the moral judgment. To put this in a slightly different fashion, the supporting reason for the moral judgment has the character of a supporting reason not because of the logical relationship between the two but because we have decided to treat it as such. And since the rightness or wrongness of the action is constituted by the supporting reason, it follows that morality is a matter of choice or convention rather than of objective truth or falsity. As Shakespeare succinctly put it, 'There is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so.'

After Hume – the moral philosophers' dilemma

Moral philosophers have tried to avoid the consequences of Hume's argument by claiming that the moral judgment follows not from the supporting reason alone, but from the conjunction of a sup-

porting reason and a moral principle. Thus the judgment that this particular action is wrong follows from the fact that it involves taking the property of another person and from the moral principle that one ought not to take someone else's property. Since there is an 'ought' in the premises as well as in the conclusion, the argument is logically sound. However, this is to postpone the problem, not to solve it. For now the question is, What reason is there for accepting this moral principle? To provide it with a supporting reason is again to create a situation where 'ought' is illogically derived from 'is': not to provide a reason is to leave the moral principle devoid of rational support. One might perhaps appeal to a still more basic principle but clearly this process cannot continue indefinitely. It must end with a moral principle which is accepted on non-rational grounds.

Some moral philosophers believe, however, that this argument is fallacious. Every proof, they point out, must begin with something which is left unproven. If this were sufficient to establish that moral judgments are lacking in objectivity, then it should also mean that all human knowledge is subjective. The most basic moral truths do not need proof or supporting reasons, since their truth is self evident. But there is a difference of opinion concerning the character of these basic moral truths. Rationalist-minded moralists believe that they have the same sort of self evidence as the truths of logic, that is, that they cannot be denied without involving oneself in self contradiction. Intuitionists, on the other hand, treat them as similar to descriptions of our immediate experience. Thus we do not need proof that certain things are right or wrong since their rightness or wrongness are obvious to us, just as we do not need proof that this object is yellow, since its yellowness is before our eyes.

The dilemma today

Neither of these solutions carries much appeal nowadays. There can be no doubt that certain moral principles are self evident in the sense that they cannot be denied without self contradiction, but they appear to owe this self evidence to the fact that they are lacking in any real content. One cannot reasonably deny, for example, that murder is immoral, but this is because the term 'murder' means 'the injustifiable killing of another person', so that the principle 'murder is immoral' means no more than that the unjustifiable killing of another person is morally injustifiable and is therefore an assertion about the meanings of words rather than about the morality of deeds. Clearly this type of moral principle cannot provide an answer to the problem posed by Hume. The intuitionist answer, on the other hand, seems equally ineffective, for an examination of the way in which terms such as 'right' or 'wrong' function in moral discourse makes it clear that they are different in character from observation terms such as 'red' or 'yellow'. The fact that we require reasons for moral judgments indicates this difference, since it would make no sense to demand a justifying reason for a judgment of the form, 'this object which is before me is red'.

A number of contemporary moral philosophers attempt to counter Hume's argument by claiming that it is based on an unreal dichotomy between non-moral or purely factual assertions on the one hand and moral judgments on the other. Certain aspects of human behaviour and experience, they believe, can be adequately described only by means of language that is undeniably factual and at the same time has a moral import. Thus, if I say that John has promised to lend me his car, for example, my statement is objectively true or false, since it is a description of a state of affairs, but it has also an in-built moral significance, since John has, other things being equal, a moral obligation to do what he has promised. Supporters of the Humean approach to ethics argue against this that while some assertions have both a moral and a factual content, these two elements may be separated from each other, and when they are, the moral aspect of the assertion is seen to be lacking in objectivity. This controversy is still in progress and it would be premature to predict its final outcome. What one can safely say, however, is that it has already enlarged our understanding of the nature of moral discourse.

Suggestions for further reading

Foot, P (editor) (1967). *Theories of Ethics*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Hudson, W D (editor) (1969). *The Is/Ought Question*. Macmillan, London.

Prior, A N (1949). *Logic and the Basis of Ethics*. The Clarendon Press, Oxford.