

The Is-Ought Problem Stems from Morality as a Simplifying Framework

31 October 2016

The is-ought problem, articulated by David Hume, questions whether normative statements can be derived from descriptive statements. People seemingly do so regularly in normal discourse, yet upon closer examination the two types of statements appear to be categorically different. We know the meaning of descriptive statements, at least in common cases: they correspond to something in the world. But adding the term 'ought' to a statement seems to remove this correspondence. This doesn't apply to all 'oughts', though. We use the term unproblematically, when we say things like 'he ought to be here any minute'. In these cases, we are stating an expectation, based on deduction. (In this instance, we are deducing from implicit beliefs about departure time and traffic.) It's only a subset of 'ought' statements that are problematic.

If we assume, as I think is reasonable, that these statements are *also* statements of expectation based on deduction, then we can redefine the problem. It's not about the 'ought', it's about the beliefs from which we are deducing our expectations. So when we say 'you ought to be truthful' the problem isn't the 'ought', it's the implicit beliefs that the 'ought' is deducing from. These are commonly known as moral (or ideal or normative) beliefs. The distinction between the moral and non-moral 'ought' is not always clear, however, as statements like 'you ought to be truthful' seem to deduce from a mixture of moral and practical beliefs. Practical beliefs are unproblematic, as they can be viewed as statements of contingency and are therefore descriptive. (For example: people who lie often get caught.) Nevertheless, we can't assume that *all* moral statements are statements of contingency, because this leads to an infinite regress. We need a noncontingent object.

Historically, the solution is to posit a set of moral first principles. This then allows a teleological approach to morality, where moral particulars are derived from these principles through the addition of practical contingencies. But this leads to a problem: by making moral statements supernatural, deep moral disagreements become unsolvable. If, say, a liberal and a libertarian are arguing over a government programme, they may be able to debate a few practical issues, but if the liberal's first moral principle is based on alleviating suffering, and the libertarian's is based on non-coercion, there's no way to resolve their disagreement.

A better approach, I believe, is to look more closely at morality. What we find is that moral terms like 'right' and 'wrong', 'justice', 'responsibility', 'guilt', and 'rights' all have something in common: they are legal terms. Morality is a *framework* based on the analogy of a human court, one that dates to prehistoric societies. A cosmic court doesn't exist, we know that now, it serves as a simplifying framework for a functional description of human behaviour and its relation to nature, informed by evolutionary theory¹. Realising this, we can replace morality with functional descriptions. We don't lose anything by removing morality, because it was never there to begin with; it was just a framework to simplify the most general patterns in human behaviour, prior to the discovery of evolutionary theory. This is analogous to how we don't lose anything by removing theism; gods never existed, they were just simplifying models for natural laws.

While it seems straightforward to then say 'the highest moral good is species survival, how do we achieve it?', this misses the point. We don't want to assume evolutionary theory as our new teleological principle, we want to *replace* teleological descriptions with functional descriptions. It so happens that evolutionary theory appears to provide the answer to the broadest pattern in human behaviour and its relation to nature, but it does so through evidence, and new evidence could in principle disprove it. There's no reason to assume anything teleologically. We can work unproblematically through contingent statements without it leading to an infinite regress, because the conditionals are anchored in our individual states (desires, emotions, biological processes). We have now put human behaviour on equal footing with science. Science doesn't need to work from first principles because it is anchored in individual observations. It works bottom-up by identifying patterns in individual observations, unlike philosophy which attempted to work top-down. And likewise, our understanding of human behaviour can work bottom-up, based on patterns in the states of individuals; there is no need to work top-down through supernatural first principles.

How does this work in practice? We would treat crude moral statements such as 'stealing is wrong' as anachronistic; they are appealing to a cosmic court that doesn't exist. Instead, we would replace them with a mixture of three things: 1) statements about individual states (desires, emotions, biological processes), 2) statements about existents (people, cars, houses), and 3) statements about contingent relations (stealing often leads to getting caught, alcohol abuse

correlates with poverty). Instead of attempting to answer the question 'what ought I do' by looking for a first moral principle, we answer it by looking at our desires and comparing them to facts and contingent relations. Of course, people often don't know what their own desires are, desires are often complex, and they are heavily interrelated with other people's desires, so it might *look like* a search for a moral principle, but it's really a search for a satisfying action for that person's desires. And thus we have solved the is-ought problem. The 'ought' is now anchored in both our individual states and the facts, and is thus pointing to something in the world; it is descriptive.

1 Please read my article [Morality is Neither an External Object nor a Personal Preference, it's a Simplifying Framework](#), published on [Phil Papers](#) on 27 October 2016, and my article [The Amoral Society](#), published on [Phil Papers](#) on 25 October 2016, for a more detailed examination of these issues. As evidence, I examine areas where morality breaks down and where a functional framework based on evolutionary theory does not. I must warn, though, that I cover controversial issues.