Dissolving the Is-Ought Problem: An Essay on Moral Reasoning[1]

> …the distinction of vice and virtue is not founded merely on the relations of objects, nor is perceiv'd by reason. (David Hume, *A Treatise on Human Nature*)

Preliminary Remarks

Before I proceed with my lecture this morning, I think that it is prudent that I should make explicit what my paper is all about. I shall do this by giving you now a little thought experiment, or, in Dan Dennett's vocabulary, an intuition pump:

Suppose that you will have an exam in philosophy. Suppose also that if you were to fail this exam, you would end up failing the course. Unfortunately, if you will have another failure, you will be expelled—since you have a poor accumulative GPA.

Having these considerations in mind, you opted to study your heart out, hoping that this effort would yield to a good result—i.e. passing the exam; hence passing the course and staying in school. But another problem arises. When you are now in your seat about to take the exam, the exam that was given you was not what you have studied on. And you said to yourself, "Heck, I'm going to die." You are now feeling tensed. Sweat is running in your brows. Before a total melt down, you see that there's a glimpse of hope that could end your misery.

You see that a classmate is whizzing through the exam. She does not seem to be bothered by the difficulty of the exam. And in fact, she seems to be so engrossed that she would not care whether someone, perhaps someone like you, could take a look at her answers. This is your chance. If you could only have a slight glimpse of her answers, then salvation will be found, and thus your misery will end.

But wait! A curious thought just went into your head: "Isn't this *wrong*?" "Isn't this cheating and it is really wrong?" It is as if a guardian angel is telling you what to think. But as you were trying to grapple with these questions, another thought bugged your "conscience": "Well, it is really wrong to cheat, *right*?" Now, you're in complete moral dilemma. As you were struggling with these thoughts, your sweet little demon (daimon) counters: "How does one *know* whether cheating is *really* wrong anyway?" And you said to yourself, as if you were making some rationalizations for your little demon's question: "Heck, if I don't pass this exam, I'm done for anyway. So I think it is wiser that I'll just take a little look at some of her answers and copy them; she would not know this anyway." And yet again, as you were about to take a glimpse, your guardian angel whispers a final question: "Am I *justified* reasoning this way?"

Of course when I speak about angels and demons here I am not speaking about religious (or spiritual) things. Rather, I am pointing to a very simple fact about our moral lives: the fact that we are confounded with these questions about what we ought to do and what things are good or right.

For now, let us consider once more the three "thoughts" that kept on bugging our would-be cheater. The first issue is: "Is there such a thing as wrongness (or for that matter, goodness) such that we can ascribe it to something or some action?" Now, this issue should not be confused with another closely related issue, which is: whether or not cheating is wrong.

It should be emphasized here that the first issue is about whether *in fact* it is wrong to cheat. What does this imply? We believe that some things are good and others bad; some things are right while others are wrong. But how do we judge whether one thing is or is not good? Is it a matter of personal opinion that some particular thing is good? Or is it more of what our culture dictates? Further still, is it the case that there really is such a thing as being good?

If we were to say that there is indeed such a thing as being good, then this brings us to the second issue: viz., "How does one know whether a particular action is right (or wrong)?" This question seems to imply that there is such a thing as a knowledge claim concerning what is good and right. What does this mean? It just means that we can judge whether it is true to say of something that it is good or right. Furthermore, since we can have a judgment of the goodness or rightness of something, then there is a procedure by which such judgments are possible.

If we can have such judgments, we can put them all into an argument, which in turn can be validated. This brings us to our third issue: viz. "Is there a way to justify our reasoning about what ought to be done or what is good?" These three issues are problems dealt with by a special field of moral philosophy, viz. metaethics.

My paper this morning belongs to the lot of philosophical problems in metaethics. But what is metaethics, and what are its concerns?

Metaethics is a "higher-order" philosophical discipline which belongs to moral philosophy. I'll explain what this means in a minute.

As we all know, moral philosophy or ethics is a branch of philosophy that deals with the ultimate questions of morality. There are two sorts of questions that moral philosophy tries to tackle. Harry Gensler (1998, 4-5) tells us that there are two key questions that we need to ponder in moral philosophy:

(1) What is the nature and methodology of moral judgments?
(2) What principles ought we to live by?

Answers to question (2) belong to normative ethics. Normative ethics studies the principles of morality that we ought to live by; it looks for grounding norms of what is right or wrong, virtuous, worthwhile, or just. In short, in normative ethics we want to study the nontautologous claims[2] about what is morally right, or morally good, or morally obligatory.

Answers to question (1) belong to metaethics. Metaethics is not about what actions are right or wrong, or good or bad. It is not even about the question, how we ought to live our lives. It is, rather, concerned with whether actions, institutions, people, situations and many more things are right and wrong, good and bad, in the first place. Roughly speaking, metaethics is dealing with a

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[2] Nontautologous moral claims are claims that are not mere definitions; they are claims that a particular action, or person, or policy have the property of being good or right (See Sinnot-Armstrong, 1996, 4). For example, the statement "Abortion is immoral" asserts that the act of abortion has a property of being immoral.

higher-order question, a meta-question, about the foundations of what we call "good" or "right." That is, whether what we call "good" is *really* good.

Notice that I put the first instance of the word: *good* in quotation marks. This is not a matter of writing style. Rather, it is a crucial point to the idea of what metaethics is concerned with. Metaethics is concerned with the meaning and use of our moral words in our moral talk. This is where the Greek word "meta" comes into play. When we go into metaethics we are going beyond our ordinary moral discourse; we are exposing the philosophical assumptions that hide behind our moral claims.

There are three important philosophical questions asked in metaethics. We have touched on them in our discussion of the moral story above. However, let us now label these questions according to the vocabulary of metaethics.

The first problem, which I think is of great historical importance, is moral ontology. It is of great historical importance since it instigated the move from dormant, and often dogmatic, normative moralizing to an active philosophical discourse about ethics.

Moral ontology deals with the ontological status of moral facts. The main problem here is whether *there is* such a thing as a moral fact akin to fact that there are trees, people, buildings et al. Let us further elucidate what this problem is all about: Since it would seem a commonplace that we use words like "good" and "right" in our moral discourse, (e.g. we have the habit of attributing goodness or rightness to any human action, policy, etc.),we could infer that we understand what we are really talking about.

Consider this: We *always* say that "cheating is not good." But what do we mean here? Are we saying that "goodness" is not a property that can be ascribed to the act of cheating? But what does this imply? Are we in fact saying that there is such thing as the Good? If we believe that there is such a thing, where is it then? Contrariwise, if we do not believe that there is such a thing as the Good, what do we mean then when we say, "Cheating is not good"? These questions, some would say, are beside the point—or, what is worse, miss the point. But, if we are to assert that something is good (or bad) or right (or wrong), we must answer first the question, "What makes them right or wrong in the first place?"

The second problem is concerned with our knowledge of moral concepts. Moral epistemology, as it is termed, deals with the issue of whether or not moral claims can be judged as true or false. This has a close affinity with moral psychology, which asks the question whether moral claims are expressions of belief or attitudes (emotions). These two questions are one and the same, for to express a belief about what one thinks as morally good or right is to ask whether or not it is true that they are. Contrary to this is when we see moral claims as mere expressions of attitudes. If moral claims were mere expressions of attitudes, then there would be no way to judge them as true or false.

In effect, these two issues can be rendered as the problem concerning our knowledge of moral claims. It is important to deal with this question because it exposes how we use moral words or concepts in our moral claims. Our answer to the epistemological question will show how we treat our moral claims.

The third problem is concerned with reasoning (either how we provide reasons for our moral claims or how we can *infer* moral claims from a set of factual claims). Moral reasoning deals with the question of whether or not we can *derive* a moral claim from a set of factual claims. Of the

three problems, this has a *direct* and *important* consequence to our moral lives. And this will be the subject matter of my lecture.

I

After the preliminary distinctions I made above, let us now move on the subject of my lecture this morning, viz. dissolving the "is-ought" problem.

A modest contribution that a philosopher can offer to our understanding of morality is to show how morality is in fact possible. An important facet of this is to understand how we reason about it.

It is an undeniable fact that we make moral judgments everyday of our lives; judgments concerning whether something is morally good, morally right, or morally obligatory. But we often take for granted the *manner* by which we arrived at these moral judgments. As such, we tend to confuse two distinct ways of presenting moral judgments, viz. as a conclusion of an argument or as a claim needing other supporting claims.[3] From this confusion arises a problem that would confound philosophers for millennia, which would later be known as the "is-ought problem."

Some earnest moral philosophers claim that the so-called "is-ought problem" is one of the most, if not the most, important problems, in moral philosophy.[4] But why is this problem so important? And why do many philosophers take great effort to resolve it? R. M. Hare tries to answer these questions by stating that "one of the chief incentives to the study of ethics (moral philosophy) has been the hope that its findings might be of help to those faced with difficult moral problems."[5] And since one of the topics in any study of moral philosophy today includes the "is-ought problem," it therefore follows that this problem has some practical importance. But this reason is not sufficient to warrant the claim that the "is-ought problem" is the central problem in moral philosophy.

Perhaps another reason why this problem gained a central role in the history of moral philosophy is the manner by which it has been formulated. Some historians of philosophy[6] noted that the clearest formulation of the "is-ought problem" was given by David Hume in the final paragraph of Book III, Part I, Section I of *A Treatise on Human Nature*:

> 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 should 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. But as authors do not commonly use this precaution, I shall presume to recommend it to the

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[3] I'll come back to this distinction later. But I am still in the process of developing these two modes of reasoning in a forthcoming article.

[4] W. D. Hudson furthered this claim by maintaining that this problem is "the central problem in moral philosophy." See W. D. Hudson, ed. 1969. *The Is-ought Question*. (London: Macmillan and Co.).

[5] R. M. Hare. 1963. *Freedom and Reason*. (Oxford: The Clarendon Press), 86.

[6] I am in full agreement with A. C. MacIntyre, when he complained that this passage has been quoted either in full or at least referred to over and over again by recent moral philosophers. Cf. A. C. MacIntyre. 1959. Hume on "is" and "ought." *The Philosophical Review* 67 (?).

readers; and am persuaded that this small attention 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 perceiv'd by reason.

There have been numerous interpretations of this particular passage.[7] But one thing is common in most of them, viz. the idea that from a set of factual statements no imperative statement can necessarily be derived. To formulate it in current ethical discussions, there can be no "ought" from an "is." From this idea, it follows that the "is-ought problem" is the problem of moral reasoning.

The following example may suffice to show what the problem is all about. Consider the facts about human fetal development. It is nomologically possible for us to assert that we have adequate scientific evidence that could show the process by which a human being comes into being. We can even include the findings of the recently completed human genome project as an additional source of information. Given all these data, can we arrive at a conclusion, to the effect, that prohibits abortion (or the intentional killing of an unborn human being)? Or a conclusion that states, "Abortion is morally wrong," or "We ought not to commit abortion"? There can be different strategies that address the "is-ought problem," either by solving or dissolving it. And since this problem is really about moral reasoning, giving a satisfactory account for it would also give as a clear picture of how moral reasoning works.

In this paper, I intend to do two things. First, I shall show two distinct strategies, viz. R. M. Hare's and Philippa Foot's, that tried to resolve the problem, and I shall evaluate them by showing each of their strengths and weakness.[8] Second, I shall propose a way to dissolve the problem by showing that the issue at stake is not about deducing an imperative statement from a set of factual statements. Rather, the issue should be about how to make reasonable moral judgments.

II

The debate concerning the proper way of understanding, and hence solving, the "is-ought problem" produced two mutually exclusive positions. One position claims that it is entirely impossible to deduce an imperative statement from a set of factual statements. The other position holds a contrary view to the effect that one can naturally derive an imperative statement from a set of factual statements under certain conditions. Although these two positions have opposing views concerning the problem, it should be evident that they both accept that the "is-ought problem" is concerned with the *deducibility* of imperative statements from factual statements. Later I will argue that this should not be our concern when we try to make sense of the way we reason about morality.

R. M. Hare is one of the proponents of the former position. In his book, *Freedom and Reason* (86-ff), he developed a solution to settle the 'no "ought" from "is" problem.' His strategy can be presented as follows:

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[7] See R. M. Hare. 1959. *The Language of Morals*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press); A. N. Prior. 1949. *Logic and the Basis of Ethics*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press); P. H. Nowell-Smith. 1954. *Ethics*. (London: Penguin); J. R. Searle. 1964. How to derive "ought" from "is". *The Philosophical Review* 73 (1); Stephen Toulmin. 1950. *An Examination of the Place of Reason in Ethics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; G. E. M. Anscombe. 1958. Modern Moral Philosophy. *Philosophy* 33 (124); and Philippa Foot. 1958. Moral Arguments. *Mind* 67 (268).

[8] It must be noted here that these two strategies are not the only strategies that tried to account for the "is-ought problem." There are many other strategies in the literature of the problem. John Searle's ideal speech situation strategy, G. E. M. Anscombe's under a description strategy, and Stephen Toulmin's good reasons strategy are other examples. I focused on Hare and Foot since they tried to resolve the is-ought problem head on. That is, they both tried to explain how moral reasoning works.

1. Moral judgments are nothing more than prescriptions of actions. As prescriptions, we are not concerned with whether they are true or not. Rather, we are concerned with how they can be applied universally.
2. In evaluating moral arguments, we should start with the facts concerned. But these facts do not necessarily entail moral judgments.
3. And since these facts do not necessarily entail moral judgments, to evaluate such arguments, we need to see the underlying moral judgment that is either implied or assumed in the argument.

Hare tried to solve the "is-ought problem" by pointing to the fact that moral judgments are not descriptions of the world. Whenever we say that some particular course of action is morally good, we are not, in fact, attributing the property of moral goodness to a particular action. Rather, we are prescribing that that action should be applied universally. Given the case that moral judgments are of this form, then it is obvious that whatever facts can be given about anything whatsoever would not necessarily imply an imperative statement. To achieve the validity of a moral argument, we need to see the hidden moral claim embedded in the set of factual statements. And this is how we derive an imperative statement.

What is curious about this solution to the "is-ought problem" is the manner by which it solves the problem. The demand of Hare's first point above asks us to accept a sort of anti-natural ontology of moral properties.[9] But this problem is only peripheral to what is at stake here. The issue here is whether Hare's solution can help us evaluate moral arguments. The problem apparently is that even if we accept the Hare's first point that moral judgments are nothing but prescriptions, the solution still lacks the evaluative tools for validating moral arguments. But this issue is easily settled by Hare.

Hare pointed out the fact that since we have to find the implicit or explicit moral premise inside a moral argument, we should therefore see it as part of that argument. If we follow this, then we can see that the whole argument is nothing more than a syllogism, with the moral premise as the major premise, the factual premise as the minor, and the conclusion as the moral judgment. In having this, we could evaluate the argument's validity as if we are evaluating an ordinary syllogism. We can show how effective this strategy is by applying it to an example:

Given that "Ax" represents "a particular act," "Kx" represents "killing," and "Mx" represents "morally wrong," and the factual statement that "(Ex) (Ax.Kx)" how can we arrive at the imperative statement that "(Ex) (Ax.Mx)"? Hare's solution is simply to see the hidden premise that "(x) (Kx $\rightarrow$ Mx)". Of course it is evident that the hidden premise is a moral claim. Given the two premises, viz. "(x) (Kx $\rightarrow$ Mx)" and "(Ex) (Ax.Kx)", we could surely see that the conclusion, "(Ex) (Ax.Mx)" would necessarily follow. Hence, this moral argument is seen to be valid.

Philippa Foot's strategy is quite different from Hare's. She holds the position that one may derive an "ought" from an "is" provided that certain conditions apply. In her article, "Moral Arguments," Foot discussed how this can be done:

1. Moral judgments are not always prescriptions of actions; they may be evaluative judgments as well.
2. At least, for this subset of moral judgments we can have evaluative conclusions inferred from certain factual statements.

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[9] That is, the concept of "good," "right," and "ought" are *not* natural properties; they are, rather, at least for Hare, terminological substitute for prescriptive words. Of course, there is a larger debate here concerning moral ontology, but that is already the scope of this paper.

3. These factual statements could serve as evidence to support the moral conclusion.
4. It is not always the case that an "ought" cannot be derived from an "is".

On the onset, we could ask whether what Foot asserts as the transition from prescriptions to evaluations can be done without stepping outside the "is-ought problem."

A solution may be offered to this problem to the effect that the "is" and "ought" distinction is akin to the "fact" and "value" distinction. The latter being a product of G. E. Moore's analysis of the concept of the "good." So, it would seem that Foot's first point in not problematic at all since we could accept that evaluative judgments are included in the larger class of moral judgments.

But the problem now is whether Foot's strategy would really produce the results that she claimed to produce. To see the answer to this question, we would need to borrow Foot's example of how the concept of "rudeness" is properly attributed. Consider the statement "Jim is rude." This evaluative claim may or may not have some meaning depending on how it is used in a given context. So let us consider the following factual statements as the context of the value claim:

1) Jim is in the company president's office.
2) Jim is there for a job interview with the company president.
3) Jim and the company have no prior relations.
… (This signifies other things to be considered.)
4) Jim is wearing a cap.

The "is-ought problem" in this example is transformed into a question of whether or not we should consider Jim to be rude given the three facts (and other things to be considered) above. Of course, given this context, and all other things being equal, we can say that indeed Jim is rude.

Foot simply pointed out the fact that without certain factual conditions, evaluative statements would make no sense. It is clear that if the given facts change, or if additional facts are put into consideration, moral judgment could be altered. This can be shown when we consider again Jim's rudeness in our example above. This time we put in an additional fact to the effect that in Jim's country the practice of wearing caps during formal meetings is admirable. If we grant this fact, and all other things being equal, then the statement that "Jim is rude" would not apply. This shows that factual conditions give evidence for evaluative judgments. Thus, deducing moral judgments, at least of the evaluative kind, from a set of facts is possible.

III

Hare's and Foot's strategies can be taken as two different solutions to the problem of deriving an imperative (evaluative) statement from a set of factual statements. Both attempts have their merits, and they also have specific problems. However, there is a way to criticize both their attempts in one single blow, and that is by pointing to a crucial question concerning the nature of the "is-ought problem" itself.

It would seem that, given Hume's passage above, the problem is concerned with moral reasoning. But moral reasoning can be understood in two ways. The first is what I shall call the top-down way. And the second is what I shall call the bottom-up way.

The top-down way is to see moral arguments as derivations or deductions. That is, to see moral arguments as purporting to arrive at a moral claim from a set of factual statements (or, in Hare's case, with an addition of at least one moral premise). This way of looking at moral arguments

makes morality as a strict calculating machine for formulating moral principles that would serve as evaluative tools for moral actions. But, is morality really about this?

Aristotle's formulation of the "is-ought problem" has generally been overlooked in current discussions of the problem.[10] I think one reason for this, although it may seem too trivial, may be the fact that his formulation is not found in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, where it should have been formulated. Rather, and this is really from my chance reading of Anscombe's *Intentions*, it is found in one of his physical treatises, *On the Motion of Animals*. In chapter 7 of this book, Aristotle has written the following observations:

> But how is it that thought (viz. sense, imagination, and thought proper) is sometimes followed by action, sometimes not; sometimes by movement, sometimes not? What happens seems parallel to the case of thinking and inferring about the immovable objects of science. There the end is the truth seen (for, when one conceives the two premises, one at once conceives and comprehends the conclusion), but here the two premises result in a conclusion which is an action.

What this Aristotle shows is something akin to Hume's point since both of them point to two distinct ways of presenting an argument. The first is the logical or scientific way. The second is the practical way.

The first way is really nothing more than presenting a deduction. We may ascertain the truth of a conclusion if it follows from the premises. But, the practical way does not prove the truths; it shows why a particular action is done.

This is furthered by Aristotle as follows:

> In this way living creatures are impelled to move and to act, and desire is the last or immediate cause of movement, and desire arises after perception or after imagination and conception. And things that desire to act now create and now act under the influence of appetite or impulse or of desire or wish.

It is the desire or intention of a person that pushes that person to act. It is not merely the moral premises or factual premises that lead one to do moral actions. Rather, it is the underlying human psychology. Anscombe brilliantly laid this as follows:

> …it is not profitable for us at present to do moral philosophy; that should be laid aside at any rate until we have an adequate philosophy of psychology.[11]

MacIntyre also aired the same sentiment when he wrote:

> One cannot, for Aristotle, do ethics without doing moral psychology; one cannot understand what a virtue is without understanding it as something a man could possess and as something related to human happiness. Morality, to be tangible, must be understood as grounded in human nature.[12]

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[10] I can name at least three contemporary philosophers that really took great interest in Aristotle's formulation, viz. G. E. M. Anscombe, Bernard Williams, and A. C. MacIntyre. Of course I do not deny that there are many others. But my point is that in order for us to understand Hume's point we have to see Aristotle. The connection may be blurry for now but I shall endeavor to make it explicit.

[11] Anscombe (1958b, 1).

[12] A. C. MacIntyre (1959, 467).

The point of the "is-ought" problem as formulated by Aristotle and Hume is the fact that we can never understand moral arguments simply by seeing them as dead syllogisms. We human beings act according to some capacity (natural or otherwise). This does not mean that we can't have moral reasons for these actions. But the fact that we can have moral reasons for actions would not mean that we could necessarily derive actions from reasons. All that we could have is a bottom-up evaluation of moral reasoning.

A bottom-up evaluation of moral reasoning amounts to starting with our (cherished) moral claims. We then evaluate whether our moral claims are reasonable given certain situations. It may happen that our claims are not reasonable, so we should be knowledgeable and humble enough to accept that we could be mistaken. There are no clear-cut formulas for evaluating moral claims and actions. It is a steady process of assessing and counter-assessing our moral lives. This brings us back to Hume: "…the distinction of vice and virtue is not founded merely on the relations of objects, nor is perceiv'd by reason."

The "is-ought problem" in this interpretation is no longer stated as "Can we *derive* an imperative statement from a set of factual statements?" It is no longer concerned with dead demonstrations. It is now stated as "How can we affirm that we are moral individuals through our reasoning about practical (moral) matters?" This restatement captures the essential fact of being human, i.e. we commit mistakes. But this facet of being human should not be taken negatively, since because of this we could aspire to perfect ourselves (to achieve happiness). We are no longer concerned with the validity of our deductions, we are now concerned with how we ought to live. The original problem is hence dissolved.

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J. J. Joaquin, November 28, 2008
De La Salle University, Manila

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