Two Puzzles in Metaethics

Susana Nuccetelli

Contemporary metaethics has, in part, grown out of attempts to solve two logical puzzles about the logical relation between moral judgments and purely factual judgments. Whatever we may conclude about whether moral judgments represent the facts and therefore are 'truth-apt,' there is something special about them that generate two puzzles, one pointed out by David Hume, the other by G. E. Moore. [1] Here I'll suggest that the solutions to both puzzles resides in the normativity of moral judgments, a distinctive feature that's absent in purely factual judgments. By 'normativity' I mean something akin to what J. L. Austin called 'illocutionary force': the force moral judgments have in prescribing that certain actions ought (or ought not) to be done, or in endorsing (or criticizing) some things as having features that deserve praise (or blame).

The Humean puzzle arises given the apparent impossibility of deducing a judgment's having such Ought-force from purely factual judgments, often called 'Is-sentences.' This Is/Ought logical gap seems to affect any piece of moral reasoning, even moral arguments that include Ought-sentences among their premises. Moral arguments often have a general moral principle as a premise, which is a generalization about what one ought or not to do, or what counts as right or wrong, good or bad--for example, the principle that an action with both good and bad effects is justified, provided the agent is doing his best to bring about the good results and to avoid the bad that are foreseen but unintended (the so-called Principle of Double-effect).

---

[1] See David Hume, [1739] *A Treatise of Human Nature.* London: Penguin, 1985; and G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* [1903] (T. Baldwin, ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

But since a principle of this sort is an Ought-judgment, if there is an Is/Ought gap of the sort Hume had in mind, it could not be deduced from Is-premises alone. That is, any argument offered to deduce a moral principle from Is-sentences alone would lack entailment, which amounts to saying that the argument could have true premises and a false conclusion. It would be possible to accept such an argument's premises and reject its conclusion without logical contradiction. Consider the following argument:

1. Punishing those who most people think are guilty of a certain crime increases the total amount of pleasure for those aware of that crime.

2. *Therefore,* punishing those who most people think are guilty of a certain crime is always morally right.

Assuming that there is a clear divide between fact and norm, 1 comes out as an Is-premise (after all, whether or not punishment increases the total amount of pleasure for those aware of the crime amounts to a claim about the facts) while 2 as an Ought-conclusion (for to say that an action is morally *right* is to say, at least, that it deserves praise, and perhaps also that it *ought* to be performed). Could premise 1 be accepted and conclusion 2 rejected without contradiction? If so, that would generate what I'm calling here 'the Humean puzzle': namely, that of explaining why Ought-judgments cannot be deduced from Is-judgments alone.

To show that this puzzle does arise, imagine Betty, who is not only a hedonistic consequentialist but also a transitionalist about justice. Given her hedonistic consequentialism, she believes that an action is right to take only if it produces, for all those affected by it, more overall pleasure or less overall pain than some alternative action would. Therefore, for a punishment to be right, whatever increase in pleasure it produces for the aggrieved populace must be greater than the pain involved in it. As a transitionalist, Betty thinks that, for the sake of

national reconciliation in a country formerly ruled by a despotic regime, some criminals of the

deposed regime should be permitted to go unpunished in the interests of facilitating national

concord and democracy (both of which would produce a greater increase of pleasure in the world

on the whole than the punishment of a handful of despots and their henchmen). She holds, for

example, that not all of the military responsible for brutal crimes in Latin America in the

dictatorships of the 1970s ought to be punished, for punishing them, she thinks, would

undermine the subsequent efforts to reinstall democracy in the region.

The rationale for her view is, of course, that in the current political circumstances the

punishment of the guilty might reignite violence.[2] So, after calculating increases and decreases of

pleasure on the whole, Betty accepts the argument's premise: punishing those who most people

think are guilty of crimes increases the total amount of pleasure *for those aware of the crime*. But

she rejects its conclusion, since she thinks that *on the whole,* the increase in total amount of

pleasure in the world would be greater without punishment in some cases. Those who disagree

with her could muster a number of reasons against her views (retributivists would present a box-

car load of them). But the one thing they cannot do is charge that her position is contradictory.

The Humean puzzle could be regarded as part of a larger, Moorean puzzle that arises

when some moral and some purely factual expressions are taken to have exactly the same

content. Mooreans agree that there is an Is/Ought gap, so that no Is-judgment could entail an

Ought-judgment. But they do not argue for existence of that Gap. They offer instead the Open

Question Argument (OQA) for their view that *no* moral sentence or term could be equivalent in

its content to purely factual sentences and terms.[3] They thus attempt to refute *content*

naturalism, which is the doctrine that some such sentences and terms are equivalent in their

---

[2] For a position of this sort, see Nir Eisikovits, "Transitional Justice," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2009.
[3] G. E. Moore 1903, chapter 1, §12.

content. A content naturalist may claim, for example, that the moral term 'good' is content-equivalent to the descriptive expression 'increases happiness in the world.' OQA charges that if so, then the question, 'Granted, this action increases happiness in the world, but is it good?' would be closed (meaning, it would make no sense to ask, since it would be precisely equivalent to 'Granted, this action increases happiness in the world, but does it increase happiness in the world?'). Yet the question is open (i.e., makes sense to ask). Therefore, 'good' is not *synonymous* with 'increasing happiness in the world.' Moreover, according to OQA, the steps of the argument could be iterated for *any other* purported content-naturalist equivalence, which would show that *no* moral expressions are synonymous with purely descriptive expressions. Naturalism is thus taken to be refuted.

But there is now consensus that a Moorean strategy along these lines fails to refute all versions of what has been called 'ethical naturalism,' a broad set of metaethical doctrines that attempt to account for moral value by invoking only natural, and even physical, phenomena. Some naturalists claim that there is content-equivalence between moral and factual expressions, but for others the equivalence is restricted to the referents of moral and the factual expressions. These naturalists may, for example, claim that 'good' and 'increasing happiness in the world' refer to the same natural *property,* as do 'heat' and 'molecular motion.' Although this type of *metaphysical* naturalism is unaffected by OQA, the argument has force against content naturalism, a doctrine not without supporters today.[4] Content naturalists commonly dismiss OQA by invoking some common objections to it. Prominent among them is W. K. Frankena's,

---

[4] Contemporary content naturalists include Frank Jackson (*From Metaphysics to Ethics: A Defence of Conceptual Analysis*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), and Michael Smith ("Moral Realism," pp. 15-37 in H. LaFollette ed. *The Blackwell Guide to Ethical Theory*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2000).

according to which the argument begs the question.[5] Other objections are that OQA faces the

paradox of analysis, or that it makes at best a calculated guess when it claims that its steps could

be iterated for *any* purported naturalistic equivalence of moral and descriptive terms.[6]

In spite of such objections, the argument has had a persistent appeal as a refutation of

content naturalism.[7] And there is no denying that it raises a puzzle about moral judgments that,

like Hume's Is/Ought gap, can be resolved only by pointing to their normativity: a special force

in moral judgments that purely descriptive judgments lack. I submit that normativity accounts for

both the reason why Ought-conclusions resist derivation from Is-premises alone (Hume's claim),

and the reason why moral terms and sentences are not content-equivalent to purely descriptive

terms and sentences (Moore's claim). Whether one accepts all the conclusions that Humeans and

Mooreans attempt to draw from their arguments, it is beyond denying that each of these lines of

reasoning has contributed decisively to shaping the current landscape in metaethics and that

lurking behind both is the semantic phenomenon of normativity.

---

[5] To Frankena, OQA's contention that naturalistic equivalences are open questions is viciously circular. See his "The Naturalistic Fallacy," *Mind* 48, 192 (1939)**:** 464-77.

[6] See, for example, S. Nuccetelli and G. Seay eds., *Themes from G. E. Moore: New Essays in Epistemology and Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

[7] S. Nuccetelli and G. Seay "What's Right with the Open Question Argument?" (pp. 261-82 in *Themes from G. E. Moore*).