

Our philosophical science correspondent

Massimo Pigliucci asks:

Is Ethics a Science?

Is ethics, or can it ever be, in some sense of the word, a 'science'? This question has been debated at length by ethical theorists, and tends to divide them into two broad camps. According to the 'continuity' position, science and ethics share basic similarities, and even if ethics may not really be a science, there are many more points of congruence between the two than popularly acknowledged. The 'discontinuity' camp, on the other hand, assert that ethics and science are fundamentally different kinds of activity, and the two shall never meet.

To clear up a possible confusion, I am not talking here about the ethics of doing science. That is, of course, a perfectly legitimate branch of philosophy and ethical theory, and the controversies regarding it are of an applied nature, concerning specific instances of ethical or unethical behavior on the part of the scientific community. What the continuity-discontinuity debate is concerned with instead, is the very nature of ethical inquiry: can it be in any sense scientific?

The debate may seem bizarre and quite anachronistic: didn't Hume in *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739-40) clearly state that one cannot derive what *ought* to be (ie a moral answer) from what *is* (ie an empirical answer)? Well, first off, Hume didn't really say that you cannot do it, just that if you do do it, you had better be prepared to justify that move, not taking it as automatic, as apparently some of his colleagues at the time used to do. But the dispute that we are concerned with here is a bit more subtle: it is about whether ethicists may proceed about their business (ie finding ethical truths) in roughly the same way scientists do theirs – by discovery.

Let us begin with some exponents of the continuity between ethics and science. One way to think of it is proposed by A. Edel, who sees different fields as characterized by different degrees of 'scientificity',

with the hard sciences of physics and chemistry at one extreme, the social sciences in the middle, and ethics at the other end. Edel observes that science is not value-free, and hence involves some degree of judgment of a kind similar to moral decision making. Furthermore, the theory-ladenness of scientific investigations (ie the idea that 'facts' don't really have scientific meaning unless embedded within a particular theory, which in turn determines what counts as 'fact'), also contributes to making science much more like a humanistic discipline than scientists would like to admit. One crucial problem



faced by continuity theorists, however, comes from what sense, if any, one can give to the idea of testing ethical theories in a way analogous to scientific ones. For example, Virginia Held proposes that one can do just that using 'moral experience', analogous to empirical findings in science; but moral experience turns out to be a rather vague concept when compared to even a moderately post-modernist account of empirical investigation in science.

For discontinuity proponents like John Rawls on the other hand, moral 'facts' are of a very different nature than scientific facts, even though both are theory-laden. In moral theory, according to Rawls, it is indeed possible to reach a consensus about what constitutes a fact, but only because this fact is *constructed* by certain sections of humanity that share a similar background and view of the world. (The post-modernist, of course, might argue that the same is



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true for science, at least in broad terms.) Another prominent discontinuity theorist is Alan Gibbard, who says that facts in the natural sciences have an explanatory role that cannot possibly find an equivalent in moral theory. In the moral case, to say that something is wrong is to express an attitude, not an empirical finding.

As in most situations, however, there may be a happy middle ground between continuity and discontinuity in the science-ethics debate. Indeed, even discontinuity supporters such as Gibbard make heavy use of scientific information, for example from evolutionary biology (about the evolution of a moral sense, see E. Sober and D.S. Wilson, *Unto Others: the Evolution and Psychology of Unselfish Behavior*, Harvard Univ. Press, 1998), or game theory (see my article in *Philosophy Now*, Issue 33). The idea here seems to strike a good compromise: it is not that ethics is (or works like) a science; rather, modern ethical theory simply can't afford to ignore what the natural sciences tell us about human nature, about the neurological basis of moral decision-making, and about the evolution of morality itself. This seems the new route followed by authors like Peter Singer (in his book *A Darwinian Left: Politics, Evolution and Cooperation*, Yale Univ. Press, 1999). It is a position that calls for a cooperation between science and ethics. After all, human beings display a mixture of selfish and cooperative behaviours, at least in part as a result of their evolutionary ancestry. It doesn't seem productive for ethics to ignore such biological baggage and make pronouncements in an empirical vacuum; but only science can help fill that void.

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Further reading:

• S. Darwall, A. Gibbard & P. Railton, 'Toward *fin de siècle* ethics: some trends', in *Moral Discourse & Practice*. (1997) Oxford Univ. Press.