

HUME ON IS-UGHT: A REINTERPRETATION

ARYEH BOTWINICK
Temple University

In the final paragraph of Section One, Part One, Book Three of the Treatise--the famous 'is-ought paragraph'--Hume appears to impose a non-naturalistic constraint on any adequate theory of moral judgment. The paragraph reads:

I cannot forbear adding to these reasonings an observation, which may perhaps be found of some importance. In every system of morality which I have hitherto met with I have always remarked 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 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 observed and explained; 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 readers; and am persuaded that this small attention would subvert all 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 is perceived by reason.¹

The traditional interpretation of this paragraph² takes Hume as arguing for an unbridgeable logical gap between descriptive premises and an evaluative conclusion. It is not irrational for a disputant

according to Hume to concede the factual premises of his opponent while denying the evaluative conclusion. In order for the descriptive premises to entail the conclusion, some intervening premise would be required, the nature of which Hume does not specify.

The difficulty with the received interpretation, however, is that Hume's own version of a valid moral argument--even as he summarizes it briefly in the paragraph preceding the 'is-ought paragraph'--seems to conflict with the logical canon enshrined by the classical reading of 'is-ought'. In the penultimate paragraph of Section One, Hume says that

The vice entirely escapes you as long as you consider the object. You never can find it, till you turn your reflexion into your own breast, and find a sentiment of disapprobation which arises in you towards this action. Here is a matter of fact; but 'tis the object of feeling, not of reason. It lies in yourself, not in the object. So that when you pronounce any action or character to be vicious, you mean nothing but that from the constitution of your nature you have a feeling or sentiment of blame from the contemplation of it. Vice and virtue therefore may be compared to sounds, colors, heat and cold which according to modern philosophy are not qualities in objects, but perceptions in the mind: And this discovery in morals, like that other in physics, is to be regarded as a considerable advancement of the speculative sciences; tho' like that too it has little or no influence on practice. Nothing can be more real or concern us more than our own sentiments of pleasure and uneasiness; and if these be favorable to virtue, and unfavorable to vice, no more can be requisite³ to the regulation of our conduct and behavior.

In apparent contradiction of the 'is-ought paragraph' which immediately follows, Hume in the above passage seems to derive moral judgments directly from a statement indicating the presence of certain feelings of pleasure or pain in man.⁴ To make the 'is-ought paragraph' accord with Hume's philosophical practice has therefore been the object of many of the modern reinterpretations of the paragraph. Alisdair MacIntyre,⁵ in an article entitled "Hume on 'Is' and 'Ought'", turns the received interpretation on its

head and reads Hume as saying that a deduction from factual premises to an evaluative conclusion is possible. The crucial words which he regards the traditional interpretation as misconstruing are: "for what seems altogether inconceivable, how this new relation can be a deduction from others". The first phrase was read ironically--the word 'seems' was not taken literally--and the second phrase was read literally--'deduction' was taken to mean strict entailment. MacIntyre argues that the reverse should be the case that 'seems' should be read literally and 'deduction' should be interpreted broadly to mean simply inference. Read in this way, Hume would be understood as saying that an inference from a factual premise to an evaluative conclusion can be drawn if one abandons the model of strict entailment. A nonevaluative middle premise that can support an evaluative conclusion according to MacIntyre's reading of Hume would be one that stated that a particular course of action represented what the common consensus regarded as furthering the public interest. MacIntyre says that the requirement of an additional evaluative premise to the effect that whatever is in everyone's long-term interest should be done would be redundant for Hume, because the notion of consensus of interest just forms an essential part of what the word "ought" means.

A major flaw in MacIntyre's account consists, I think, in his ignoring the literal import of the 'is-ought paragraph'. Read literally, the paragraph states that one cannot move from a factual premise to an evaluative conclusion without introducing some intervening non-factual premise. That this is not an isolated belief on Hume's part but forms an integral part of his case against the rationalists is evidenced by his utilizing the argument against Wollaston in a famous footnote. There Hume pointed out that there was a circularity in Wollaston's account of morals, since in order to show that giving rise to a falsehood was at the root of all our designations of things as evil Wollaston would first have had to show that lying itself is evil. The proper form of moral argument that seems to emerge from Hume's critique of Wollaston is the following:

Falsehoods should not be perpetrated.
 This particular action gives rise to a falsehood.
 Therefore, this particular action should not be done.

A second major reinterpretation of the 'is-ought paragraph' has been given by Geoffrey Hunter, who follows the lead of Professor Gilbert Ryle.⁷ Hunter allows the two phrases that MacIntyre reinterpreted to stand exactly as they were in the traditional view, while claiming that the context of Hume's moral philosophy makes clear his intention in the 'is-ought paragraph'. The logical gap between factual premises and evaluative conclusion that the received interpretation points to makes moral judgment impossible only if one believes that to utter a moral judgment is to make a non-factual statement. The whole point of Hume's moral philosophy, however, is to indicate the factual basis of moral judgments, that all they simply do is report a particular agent's feelings concerning certain objects or states of affairs. What the paragraph underscores is the logical problem that religious moralists, say, face when they regard moral judgments as something other than an agent's starting his feelings when confronted by a particular situation.

Hunter himself voices a most serious criticism against his analysis of Hume's theory of moral judgment when he says that according to his account Hume becomes incapable of explaining ethical disagreement.⁸ If all one does in making a moral judgment is report on his emotional reaction to a contemplated course of action, say, then it is entirely possible for two disputants to admit to each other that their opponent's feelings move them in ways directly contrary to their own feelings, thus effectively preventing ethical disagreement from ever getting off the ground. Also, Hunter, like MacIntyre, in ignoring the literal import of the paragraph, fails to do justice to a key element in Hume's argument against the rationalists.

In trying to determine to what extent the account of morals in the Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals diverges from or expands upon the argument found in the Treatise, we are afforded an insight, I believe, into how to construe the 'is-ought paragraph' in a way that will both accommodate Hume's criticism of the rationalists as well as render intelligible his own theory of moral judgement. The second Enquiry, as far as I can tell, refines the argument in the Treatise mainly in two ways. First, though Section Two, Part One, Book Three of the Treatise is entitled, "Moral Distinctions Derived from a Moral Sense", the notion of a separate moral sense practically disappears from view once we get into the body of the argument. What Hume argues for in the Section itself is the equation of the

feelings we experience in disinterestedly contemplating the harmful or beneficial results of certain tendencies of character or states of affairs with the moral distinction between good and evil. In Section One of the second Enquiry, on the other hand, Hume is quite explicit about the independent status of the moral sense. He says that "this final sentence [of approbation or censure] depends on some internal sense or feeling, which nature has made universal in the whole species. For what else can have an influence of this nature?"⁹ Apparently, in order to satisfy his readers, and perhaps himself, of the truly scientific, i.e., universal, character of his explanation of the foundation of moral judgment, Hume felt compelled in the second Enquiry to regard the mechanism of approval and disapproval described earlier in the Treatise as the manifestation of a special moral sense implanted in the species by the Designer of Nature.

A second elaboration, which emerges in the second Enquiry occurs in Appendix I and is contained in the following two paragraphs:

It appears evident that the ultimate ends of human actions can never, in any case, be accounted for by reason, but recommend themselves entirely to the sentiments and affections of mankind without any dependence on the intellectual faculties. Ask a man why he uses exercise; he will answer because he desires to keep his health. If you then enquire why he desires health he will readily reply because sickness is painful. If you push your enquiries farther, and desire a reason why he hates pain, it is impossible he can ever give any. This is the ultimate end, and is never referred to any other object.

Perhaps to your second question, why he desires health, he may also reply, that it is necessary for the exercise of his calling. If you ask why he is anxious on that head he will answer because he desires to get money. If you demand Why? It is the instrument of pleasure says he. And beyond this it is an absurdity to ask for a reason. It is impossible there can be a progress in infinity; and that one thing can always be a reason why another is desired. Something must be desirable on its own account, and because of its immediate accord, or agreement with human sentiment and affection.¹⁰

Hume's argument here, I believe, is crucial for an understanding of his views on moral judgment, and indeed of the structure of argument in his philosophy as a whole. It is very easy to misinterpret Hume in this passage. One might think that he is making the rather innocuous-sounding logical point that in order to avoid an infinite regress an argument must stop somewhere, and he has found it most plausible to rest his argument in morals with a statement to the effect that a particular type of character or state of affairs is most conducive to pain or pleasure. Viewed in this light, the argument is singularly unpersuasive, because we are not told why we should stop at this particular resting-place. We have escaped an infinite regress only at the cost of an arbitrariness that may leave us equally dissatisfied.

I believe that if read correctly Hume in this passage does meet the charge of arbitrariness by moving the argument on to a different level. The crucial phrases in the passage in my view are "but recommend themselves entirely to the sentiments and affections of mankind, without any dependence on the intellectual faculties", in the first paragraph, and "Something must be desirable on its own account, and because of its immediate accord or agreement with human sentiment and affection" in the second. These words should be construed entirely literally. The reason why a statement concerning an object's conduciveness towards pain or pleasure can serve as an ultimate statement in an argument is because when we speak the language of pain or pleasure we are no longer speaking the pure language of reasons, but have introduced the idiom of causes, i.e., the idiom of universal connection. We are so constituted that we want to avoid pain and seek whatever affords us pleasure. The feelings of pleasure and pain that precede and accompany the utterance of a moral judgment conform to the general rules Hume lays down for distinguishing genuine causal relations from mere haphazard connections in nature.¹¹ The feeling of pleasure and pain are contiguous in time with the judgment and are always experienced prior to it. A constant union is evident between the cause and the effect, and we can say with pragmatic certainty that the same cause always produces the same effect and the same effect never arises but from the same cause. Thus, according to Hume, without experiencing the conjunction on any particular occasion, we are licensed to predict, on the basis of past evidence, that the feeling will occasion the judgment.

The object of Hume's criticism in the passages quoted above from the second Enquiry is any justificatory mode of argument which seeks to base itself on the language of reasons. The inevitability of an infinite regress does not undermine any particular set of reasons, but the very language of reasons itself. One cannot offer a decisive argument in morals, or elsewhere, simply by citing reasons for the choice one is defending, because one's choice of reasons is always open to the further question 'Why?' which can never logically be foreclosed. To avoid this regress one must shift the level of argument to a plane which precludes the intrusion of personal judgment, desire or reasons. This is the plane of scientifically ascertainable causes, which exhibit a universal correlation between certain sentiments in man and particular states of affairs. This is a case of science forstalling the endless disquisitions of reason by pointing to what is objectively verifiable and universally present.

All ingredients are present in Hume on moral judgment, I believe, for an interpretation of his thought along strictly causalist lines--in fact of a particular kind of causal explanation, Hempel's deductive-nomological model.¹² Let us take as an example the moral duty of gratitude, which Hume himself utilizes in his arguments against Wollaston. How does this duty arise for Hume? First there are certain facts to be considered, what one might describe as initial conditions. Mr. Jones has been X's benefactor. He has generously endowed X's entire education, making it possible for X to achieve whatever economic or social status he has. He has now asked a special favor of X, to serve as a tutor to his grandchild, and advise him on his education needs. According to Hume, once these initial factors are given, an almost automatic process ensues. X feels a sentiment of approbation well up within him at the thought of showing gratitude towards his benefactor. An element of conscious reflection enters for Hume in the fact that this sentiment arises when X considers the virtue of gratitude in a relatively disinterested fashion--i.e., the overall benefits to be reaped from a widespread adoption of the social practice of showing gratitude. When X pursues this thought--and according to Hume we are so constituted by the operation of sympathy that we cannot help entertaining this thought if we have been properly socialized and educated--a sentiment of approval follows. This sentiment of approval

undergirds the moral judgment that the act of gratitude in question ought to be performed.

We may now translate Hume's theory of moral judgment into the following neutral covering law schema:

(1) Event to be explained: Y's moral judgment that X's account of gratitude should be performed.

(2) Initial Conditions: X knows that Jones is his benefactor.

(3) Covering Law: When Y considers disinterestedly the effects of performing the act of gratitude in question, a sentiment of approbation wells up within him; when he finds someone refraining from performing such an act of gratitude, he is overcome with disapproval.

(This law of course would apply to any human being whose vantage point was similar to Y's, since we all possess a similar capacity for sympathy.)

We are now in a position to grasp the true import of the 'is-ought paragraph'. Neither the descriptivist¹⁵ interpretation offered by MacIntyre, nor the subjectivist interpretation advanced by Hunter, is correct. MacIntyre's interpretation is predicated upon the assumption that a deductive account is ruled out, and he is chiefly preoccupied with discovering what other sorts of bridge notions between a factual statement and a moral imperative are possible for Hume. Hunter by offering a subjectivist interpretation makes it impossible for Hume to account for ethical disagreement. In contrast to both MacIntyre and Hunter, I believe that the context of Hume's chapters on moral judgment in both the Treatise and the second Enquiry indicate that he believes that his interpretation of moral judgment succeeds where others have failed precisely because it is a deductivist explanation of a special sort, which takes the laws of human nature into account.

Hume's argument against Wollaston, for example, is not simply that he fails to recognize the need to justify the additional premise that acts of lying are wrong. If my interpretation of Hume in Appendix I to the second Enquiry is correct, then he wishes to level the additional argument against Wollaston that no

matter what one's ultimate premise is--whether lying is one's summum malum or something else--one could never meet the charge of arbitrariness. Any purely justificatory account of moral judgment would have to fail because it could not meet this charge. Only a causal, deductivist account of moral judgment would remedy the deficiencies that Hume finds in the arguments of his predecessors--that they arbitrarily take certain ends of human nature for granted, thereby falsifying the relationship between reason and the passions; that they fail to realize that a middle premise is needed linking together a statement of a particular state of affairs with the utterance of a moral judgment; that they overlook the fact that no matter what particular factual or evaluative middle premise they choose their attempt is bound to founder on the charge of arbitrariness. Only a deductivist account of moral judgment, which deduces moral judgments from certain universal psychological laws concerning human nature, could fill the breach created by Hume's attacks on his predecessors and contemporaries.

Considering the particular constraints that Hume has placed on an adequate theory of moral argument, his non-cognitivism and non-naturalism, he faces an especially acute dilemma at this point in outlining his own theory of moral judgment. If the only logically proper form of moral argument is couched in the idiom of universal law, then the conclusion of such an argument can only be stated in third-person discourse: So-and-so will judge such-and-such on a particular occasion. No implication, of course, follows from this concerning the correctness of the judgment. In the logical rigor which he imposes on the proper form of moral argument, the most essential feature of such an argument, its conclusion that a particular judgment is correct, seems to have eluded Hume's grasp. How does Hume make the move from his discussion of the logical constraints upon moral argument to a delineation of a particular form of argument that would entail the conclusion, "And the moral judgment is correct?"

The correctness of the moral judgment that the conclusion of the argument in third person discourse yields is already guaranteed, I think, in the premises of the argument. By referring to the mechanism of sympathy in his premises, the spectator is already making a covert reference to the correctness of the judgment, since what attests to its correctness for Hume is just the fact that it is motivated by sympathy.

Reference to the human capacity for sympathetic identification with judgments rendered by a relatively disinterested spectator serves as the only legitimate bridge premise between a statement of initial conditions of a situation (a factual premise) and an evaluative conclusion. The human capacity for sympathy vindicates a particular moral judgment arising in a specific factual context by grounding the judgment in a permanent feature of man. While reference to a universal capacity for sympathy seems the only premise capable of satisfying Hume's strictures concerning 'is-ought', it also ensures that the scientific generalizations pronounced by a spectator will reflect the ethically correct judgment applicable in a particular situation.

NOTES

¹David Hume, A Treatise of Human Nature, Selby-Bigge, ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), pp. 469-70. All Future references to the Treatise will be to this edition.

²See, for example, Amelie Oksenberg Rorty, "Naturalism, Paradigms and Ideology", The Review of Metaphysics 24 (June 1971), p. 640.

³Treatise, pp. 468-69.

⁴What mainly motivates at least some of Hume's modern interpreters to offer a revised reading of the 'is-ought paragraph' is not just Hume's derivation of moral judgments from the presence of feelings of pleasure and pain in man, but from particular kinds of pleasurable and painful feelings--those which a relatively disinterested observer would experience in surveying man's situation with regard to his fellows. I offer an account of the sorts of feelings that are central to Hume below, pp. 12-13.

⁵The Is/Ought Question, W. D. Hudson, ed., (London: MacMillan, 1969), pp. 35-51.

⁶Treatise, pp. 461-62.

⁷Geoffrey Hunter, "Hume on Is and Ought", in The Is/Ought Question, W. D. Hudson, ed., (London: MacMillan, 1969), pp. 59-64.

⁸Ibid., pp. 62-63.

⁹David Hume, Enquiries Concerning the Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals, Second Edition, Selby-Bigge, ed., (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1902), p. 173.

¹⁰ibid., p. 293.

¹¹Treatise, pp. 173-76.

¹²Carl G. Hempel, "The Function of General Laws in History", and "Aspects of Scientific Explanation", in Aspects of Scientific Explanation (New York: The Free Press, 1965), pp. 231-44; 331-496.

¹³The descriptivist ethical philosopher is committed to the following two views: (1) It is not always logically possible to separate the descriptive and evaluative meanings of a moral judgment; (2) The criteria applied in moral judgment are not, in the last analysis, merely a matter of free choice. See W. D. Hudson, Modern Moral Philosophy, (Garden City: Doubleday and Co., 1970), p. 295.

¹⁴For a fuller discussion of Hume's concept of sympathy see my unpublished dissertation, Ethics, Politics and Epistemology: A Study in the Unity of Hume's Thought (Princeton University, 1973), pp. 36-61; and "A Case for Hume's Nonutilitarianism", The Journal of the History of Philosophy 15 (October 1977), pp. 423-35.