



IS IT POSSIBLE TO DERIVE A “MORAL” OUGHT FROM A STATEMENT OF FACT?

Antonio T. Piñón

When men gather to frame laws, or to suggest measures for enactment into law—e.g., a code of medical law to govern the practice of medicine—may they proceed with absolute freedom from any prior constraints, or are they obligated to proceed with due regard for, and obedience to, natural human rights? What is at issue here is whether all law is a matter of convention or there exists a higher and fundamental moral law binding on lawgivers themselves.

The widespread phenomenon of permissiveness, the sustained and intensified campaigns for divorce, birth control, abortion, and euthanasia have predictably and inevitably led to the questioning of the existence of such a fundamental moral law.

David Hume is said to have been the first to record explicitly the basic argument against the existence of a natural moral law in the following passage:

«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 surpris'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 explaine'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.»¹

In short, logic says that it is impossible to infer in the conclusion more than what is contained in the premises. Therefore, from *is*-statements that assert *facts* it is impossible to derive *ought*-statements that assert *moral values* or *obligations*. Since G. E. Moore the fallacy Hume claims to underlie every system of morality has been labeled the *naturalistic fallacy*.

I submit that the naturalistic fallacy, far from being a valid criticism, is itself a glaring fallacy. I propose to show: (1) That there is no logical objection in principle to deriving *ought* from *is*; (2) That it is possible, in general, to derive *ought*-statements from a certain type of *is*-statements; and (3) that a *moral ought* can be validly derived from an *is*.

I

Is there, in principle, an objection to deriving *ought* from *is*? Hume says there is. And at first glance he seems to be correct. To show that he is not, the point at issue must be sharply defined, and this requires taking stock of the conditions governing the deduction of conclusions from premises.

The conditions are the following: (1) It is impossible to draw out in the conclusion more than is contained in the premises. (2) The conclusion may not state explicitly what the premises state explicitly. To do otherwise is to fall into the fallacy of begging the question. (3) The conclusion asserts explicitly what is contained implicitly in the premises. (4) Nothing that is not implicit in the premises can be deduced as a conclusion.

The naturalistic fallacy seems to violate the first canon of deduction. It draws out more than is contained in the premises: it draws *ought*, whereas the premises contain only *is*. Thus the conclusion asserts more than is contained in the premises. However, the true meaning of condition (1) appears only when taken in conjunction with the other conditions. Condition (2), e.g., says that the *explicit* content of the conclusion may not be the same as the explicit content of the premises under pain of begging the question. In other words, the con-

1. *Treatise*, L. S. Selby-Biggles ed., pg. 569.



clusion must state explicitly *more* than what the premises state explicitly. Thus the conclusion interpretation of condition (1) is the following: the conclusion may not explicitly state *more* than what is implicitly contained in the premises.

The point at issue, then, is this: It is obvious that *ought* is not explicitly contained in *is*, but it is not obvious that *ought* is not contained IMPLICITLY in *is*. If *ought* is not contained implicitly in *is*, then we must grant *ought* cannot be derived from *is*. On the other hand, if *ought* is IMPLICIT in *is*, then there is no logical objection to deducing *ought* from *is*.

At this stage Hume and his followers are left with four alternatives: (1) Issue a blanket denial to the effect that no *is* implicitly contains *ought*; (2) Establish by examination of particular *is*-statements that no *ought* is implicit in *is*; (3) Claim that any *is* that implicitly contains *ought*, is not a genuine *is*, but an *ought* in disguise; (4) Concede that the possibility of deriving *ought* from *is* is in principle an open question.

Hume, of course, cannot accept alternative (4). Neither can he opt for alternative (2). The examination of particular *is*-statements can only yield a particular conclusion, not a universal assertion that no *is* implicitly contains *ought*.

Actually Hume adopts alternative (1). In the above quoted passage he says that *ought* or *ought not* expresses a new affirmation, and it seems altogether inconceivable how this new affirmation can be a deduction from others that are entirely different from it.

It must be admitted that *ought* expresses a new assertion. If new, therefore different from the assertions in the premises. So far so good. And if Hume had asked to be shown how this new assertion is deduced from others that are different from it, he would have been entirely within his rights. But Hume did not say «different», what he said was «entirely different». That *ought* is different from *is* is shown by the fact that what ought to be sometimes is not. But that *ought* is not entirely different from *is* is also shown by the fact that what ought to be some times *is*. By gratuitously adding that *is* is *entirely* different from *ought*, Hume defines *is* in a way that excludes *ought*, and then triumphantly claims that he has shown that *ought* cannot be deduced from *is*. A plain case of begging the question².

2. «Hume defines 'truth' in such a way as to exclude ethical judgements from it, and professes that he has proved that they are so excluded. ... The fea-



An instance of alternative (3) is R. N. Hare of Oxford.

«I am going to give reasons for holding that by no form of inference, however loose, can we get an answer to the question ‘What shall I do?’ out of a set of premises which do not contain, at any rate, implicitly, an imperative... To hold that an imperative conclusion can be derived from purely indicative premises leads to representing matters of substance as if they were verbal matters»³.

Note the significant admission that indicatives might implicitly contain an imperative. Observe, next, how he backtracks from his admission by talking of «*purely* indicative premises». How and why has that «*purely*» (so reminiscent of Hume’s «*entirely*») been smuggled in? If Hare admits, as he does, that some indicatives might implicitly contain imperatives, then he is admitting that those indicatives are not *purely* indicatives. Then what can talk of «*pure* indicatives» mean at this juncture save to imply that no statement deserves to be called indicative unless it is *purely* so. Which is tantamount to saying that no indicative implicitly containing an imperative is a bona fide indicative, but an imperative in disguise.

Against Hare I wish to point out that the premises and the conclusion do not differ in their *implicit* content. They differ in their *explicit* content. Hence, premises and conclusions are to be characterized by their *explicit* content. Therefore, when Hare takes account of the *implicit content* of the is-premise in order to characterize it by implication as an *imperative* in disguise, his claim is a *self-serving* claim and a *petitio* in disguise, exactly like Hume’s.

It, thus, appears negatively that there is no logical objection to

tures of Hume’s philosophy which I have mentioned, like many other features of it, would incline me to think that Hume was a mere —brilliant— sophist; and his procedures are certainly sophistical. But I am forced, not to reverse, but to add to, this judgement by a peculiarity of Hume’s philosophising: namely that although he reaches his conclusions —with which he is in love— by sophistical methods, his considerations constantly open up very deep and important problems. It is often the case that in the act of exhibiting the sophistry one finds oneself noticing matters which deserve a lot of exploring: the obvious stands in need of investigation as a result of the points that Hume pretends to have made. ... Hence he is a very profound and great philosopher, in spite of his sophistry». (G. E. M. ANSCOMBE, *Modern Moral Philosophy*, in *The Is/Ought Question*, ed. Hudson, Macmillan, 1969, pgs. 176-177.

3. *The Language of Morals*, I, 3.4-3.5, Oxford University Press, 1961, pgs. 46-47.



deriving ought from is, provided that it can be shown that certain is-statements are such as to contain ought-statements *implicitly*.

II

We are now in a position to take a second step forward. *Ought* is an auxiliary modal verb. Its auxiliary nature appears from the fact that it can never be employed alone, but always as an adjunct to another principal verb. Its modal meaning appears in contraposition to *may* and *might*. These two auxiliaries in general express the idea of contingency and freedom. *Ought* (together with *should*, and *must*), on the other hand, expresses the idea of determination and necessity. Thus the question «Is it possible to deduce ought from is?» can be restated as follows «Can a statement of necessity be implicit in a statement of fact?».

A factual statement is one that describes the state of affairs, the way things are and behave. Now, there are two outstanding facts about this world. If we take it as true that the only simple physical entities are the subatomic particles, then it is plain that in our daily lives we never deal with simple entities singly, but with composites or *wholes* arising out of them, with a dog, a cat, a piece of wood, etc. Now, a whole is not a mere heap. A whole is an *organized*, or *structured* thing. The other outstanding fact is that the numberless things in this world do not exist in isolation, but act and react with one another along regular lines or patterns. It is not only things that are wholes, but also *processes*. The difference between the two lies in the fact that in the case of things, the component parts coexist simultaneously; in the case of a process, its components are spread out in time. But this characteristic only stresses all the more the need for a pattern on which the unity and the intelligibility of the whole process depend.

Factual or is-statements, therefore, are of two kinds: (1) descriptions of parts separately; and (2) descriptions of the patterns in accordance with which the parts are structured into a whole. The second type is as much, if not more, a factual statement as the first type. We need only remind ourselves of Hume's criterion for factual statements, viz. that we learn of matters of fact in one way, through observation or experience. That is exactly the way we come to know the pattern or structure, in the absence of which the parts might exist, but the whole does not exist.



Now, a necessity of some kind, of greater or lesser degree, is *built-in* in any pattern or structure. In other words, statements of pattern or structure are *is*-statements that *implicitly* contain *ought*. The alphabet pattern tells us the *factual* sequence of the letters; but in telling us this, it also tells us the place a given name ought to occupy in a list of names. The schematic of a TV set gives us the *factual* organization of the parts, but in pointing out how the parts are related to each other, it also tells us, when the set breaks down, the parts that *ought* to be replaced, and the place where they *ought* to be connected. The pattern of the solar system, plus the pattern of Apollo's flight not only describe the actual paths of the moon and the space vehicle, but also tell us the day, hour, and position at which they *ought* to intersect. From the pattern of electrons in the atom, scientists have deduced the theory of valences that tells us which elements ought to be capable of combining with which other elements. Only after diagnosing the malady (*is*, indicative), is the physician able to prescribe (imperative) the required (necessary, *ought*) therapy.

Implicit, too, in statements of pattern is a rough and rudimentary notion of *right* and *wrong*. Whatever is positively in accordance with the pattern or structure is right. Whatever is positively contrary to the pattern is wrong.

No special philosophical acumen is needed to see that *ought*, right, and wrong, in a general sense are implicit in principle in factual statements of pattern⁴. What it takes is simple, honest common sense available even to the humblest unlettered farmer who knows exactly what his crops and livestock need, and consequently what he ought to do that is right for them, and what he ought to avoid that is wrong for them.

In a nutshell: the pattern and structure of things and processes is something we learn through observation and experience, i.e., a matter of fact. Statements of pattern or structure, therefore, are *is*-statements. But our understanding of the pattern gives us to understand what is necessary, fitting (*right*) or unbecoming (*wrong*). Therefore, in principle, *ought* can be deduced from a certain type of *is*.

4. Anyone who has attempted to put together a jig-saw puzzle has experiential insight into the implicitness of *ought* in pattern. The first tries are characterized by *hit-and-miss* or *trial-and-error* procedures. In the absence of any recognizable pattern the efforts are purely random. It is only when the pattern begins to emerge that one can institute a systematic hunt for the missing pieces. The recognition of pattern enables the problem solver to tell what *ought* to be where.



III

Up to this point the *moral* ought has not entered into the picture. To see how it enters we must make a fresh start by looking into the notion of the *good*. What is meant by the good? This is a question that has bedevilled philosophers of the analytic tradition, who make a fetish of seeking accurate and precise definitions—which is altogether valid, up to a point. But they met their nemesis in the *good*. G. E. Moore figuratively threw up his hands in desperation and said.

«If I am asked 'What is good?' my answer is that good is good, and that is the end of the matter. Or if I am asked 'how is good to be defined?' my answer is that it cannot be defined, and that is all I have to say about it»⁵.

Moore gave the correct answer, but for the wrong reason. Good is indeed undefinable because it is a transcendental term. Good is one of those terms that can be predicated of any and all things howsoever they may differ among themselves: good man, good thief, good horse, good cactus, good shoes, etc. Transcendental terms are *analogical* terms. Some terms are employed in only one and the same meaning, e.g., mammal. They are called *univocal*. Other terms are employed in totally different meanings, as when I say «I need a *pen* to write» and «Bring the sheep to the *pen*». These are called *equivocal*. Some other terms have neither one and the same, nor totally different meanings, but a meaning that is at once *similarly dissimilar*; e.g., *sharp* cry, *sharp* knife, *sharp* wine, *sharp* word. These are called *analogical* or *analogous*. Univocal terms have one definition. Equivocal terms have many definitions. But analogical terms have no definition; they are strictly undefinable. It is impossible, e.g., to give a definition of *sharp* that will include cry, knife, wine, and word.

The problem, then, is not how to define *good*. It is undefinable. The problem is how is *good* intelligible. Just as it is impossible to define whole and parts separately, but they are made intelligible by relating them to each other, so the good is made intelligible by referring it to desire, and vice versa. The good is that which *fulfills* or *satisfies*, or *quiets* desire. And desire is that which *aims at*, or *seeks*, or *tends to* the good. This relationship between good and desire is usually shortened to one single word: *desirable*. But that one word has itself

5. *Principia Ethica*, chap. I, n. 6; Cambridge University Press, 1968, pg. 6.

spawned ambiguities and given rise to two radically different schools of ethics, which, surprisingly, come round eventually to the same result.

Desirable can mean either: (1) What *can be desired*; (2) what deserves to be desired or is *worthy of desire*. J. S. Mill took the first meaning and argued: desirable is like visible. Now the only proof that a thing is visible is that some one actually sees it or actually has seen it. So the only proof that any thing is desirable is that it has been or is actually desired by somebody. This is the fundamental tenet of the empirical or positivistic or naturalistic school of ethics. It inevitably leads to moral relativism. G. E. Moore argued against Mill as follows: desirable is more like admirable than like visible. Now, admirable properly does not mean can be admired, but rather worthy of admiration, whether anyone admires it or not. Hence good means worthy of being desired, independently of whether anyone desires it or not. Whereas the positivistic school reduces ethics to matters-of-fact, this other school called antinaturalist and sometimes intuitionist, completely divorces ethics from empirical facts.

The truth here, as in many other cases, lies not in the either-or, but in the full acceptance that desirable is both what can be desired and what is worthy of desire. But here we come up against another difficulty. If we accept both meanings at once, then it should logically follow that whatever can be or is desired is at the same time worthy of being desired, which is patently false. For there are things that can be and are actually desired which are not worthy of desire, or ought not to be desired. Stealing, narcotics are desirable in the first sense, they can be and are actually desired by many people. But they ought not to be desired, and thus they are punishable crimes. Or as G. E. Moore argues: of anything that is actually desired, one can always ask the question: Is this thing *really* good? Or as Spinoza puts the question: is a thing good because I desire it, or do I desire it because it is good?

The question is unanswerable and a source of riddles to contemporary philosophers because they always understand «desire» in only one univocal sense. They mean by desire the *felt or conscious want or need* of something, the seeking or the tendency to something *as the result of an experience*. The key factor in this description is «felt» or «conscious» or «the result of an experience». Earlier philosophers understood that desire could be validly taken in a deeper analogical sense. Want and tendency may not be conscious without being one with the less real. One, e.g. may need something without even being aware of



it, without even desiring it, but the unawareness or the absence of actual desire does not make the need less real. Thus psychologists and psychiatrists talk of needs that are built-in in the psyche itself at the subconscious or even unconscious level. Further down, way below the psyche there are needs built-in the biological organism as such, needs that even take the form of actual movement or search. We are all aware of the fact that roots strain towards water, and leaves towards sunlight. And even below the level of organisms there is the fundamental tendency in all things towards the preservation of their own existence. I need not cite here how tenaciously life adapts itself and clings to the harshest and most adverse conditions of soil and climate. I need but cite the all-pervading fact that it takes energy to destroy anything, and that can only mean that everything *resists* its destruction.

Desire, then, can be understood genuinely albeit analogously on two different levels: (1) on the *psychological* level of *felt need* or *conscious* desire, and (2) on the *ontal* level of *inherent, built-in, natural needs* or *capacities* or *tendencies*. The analogy of desire was current tender among earlier philosophers. This fundamental insight is not disproved but corroborated by modern findings. It is most unfortunate that modern philosophers seem abysmally ignorant of it.

The analogy of desire entails correspondingly the analogy of the good. The good can now plainly be seen to cover two types of good: (1) the good which *felt need* or *conscious* desire seeks as its fulfillment; and (2) the good which *natural* need or tendency seeks as its fulfillment. How do we characterize these two types?

We consciously desire or seek something if—and *only if*—we *deem* it good. The necessary and sufficient condition is that it *appear* good to us. Thus, the good correlated to felt need for conscious desire is the *aparent* good. On the other hand, natural need or capacity tends to that which does *in fact really* satisfy or fill it up. Lungs need oxygen. You can physically fill them up with any other thing, but the need will not be satisfied. Hence, on the ontal level of natural need or capacity, nothing will do except the *real* good.

We are now in a position to solve Spinoza's puzzle. Is a thing good because we desire it, or do we desire it because it is good? To say that a thing is good because we desire it is true on the level of conscious desire and apparent good. Anything can be called good, at least apparently, simply because someone wants or desires it. Similarly to say that we desire a thing because it is good is true on the level of natural need/capacity and real good. Natural needs and ca-



pacities are oriented towards that which really satisfies or fulfills them, and to nothing else. We are also able now to understand the meaning of Moore's question. Of anything that is actually desired we can ask: is this thing really good? That is to say, on the level of conscious desire, we can ask of anything consciously desired whether it is really good, i.e. whether it corresponds to and fulfills a need/capacity in us. However, on the level of natural need/capacity, the question is meaningless. Of anything that satisfies or fulfills a natural need/capacity, it is meaningless to ask whether it is really good. (But, it would be meaningful to ask, does it *appear* good to us?).

And this brings us to the problem correlating these different modes of good with the different modes of desire. There are the following possibilities: (1) What is really needed is also consciously desired. In which case the real good is also an apparent, good. (2) What is really needed is not consciously desired, and what is consciously desired is not really needed. In this case the real good, is not an apparent good, and the apparent good is not a real good. (3) What is consciously desired is contrary to, or prevents the fulfillment of a real need. In this case the apparent good is not only not a real good, but furthermore it is a *real evil*. (4) What is really needed is consciously refused. In this case the real good is not only not an apparent good, but it is an apparent evil.

We are now in a position to see how and where the *moral ought* comes into the picture. If we were to correlate the real good only with the mode of desire called natural need, it at once becomes obvious that there is here no question of *ought* at all, but only of *is*. The real good is not what we ought to need, it is what we as a matter of fact actually need. Similarly, if we were to correlate the apparent good only with conscious desire, it is also plain that there is no room for *ought*, but only for *is*. The apparent good is not what we ought consciously to desire, it is what as a matter of fact we do consciously desire.

It is only when we cross-correlate the real good, or that which fulfills a built-in need, with conscious desire that *is* suddenly becomes inadequate and insufficient. It is then that *ought* suddenly springs into view and asserts itself with the force of self-evidence. We may or may not consciously desire that which fulfills a built-in need, but it is what we *ought* consciously to desire. In other words, the real good is what we *ought* consciously to desire, whether we do so or not. Similarly, what is contrary to real need—real evil—is what we *ought not* consciously to desire, whether we do so or not.



That the real good ought to be desired, and the real evil ought not to be desired, on the conscious level that is, is a self-evident axiom. Any man who asks «Why is it that the real good ought to be consciously desired»? merely shows that he has not really understood, he has not really sunk his teeth into the meaning of *real good*. And the thrust and effect of this axiom is to heal the division within man himself, by integrating his needs and his desires. Thus is man made whole, made one, put at peace with himself.

Thus, too, are two senses of desirable earlier mentioned: (1) can be desired, as evidenced by actual desire; and (2) worthy of desire, perfectly distinguished but not divorced. And thus is the insight of common sense rationally vindicated, when the man in the street asserts paradoxically that many desirable things are not desirable. E.g., heroin, is desirable in the first sense, and at the same time undesirable in the second sense. Desirable and apparently good, i.e. «deemed» good because it is as a matter of fact consciously sought for. And undesirable, or not worthy of desire, when referred to that deeper mode of desire which is natural need.

The following four considerations will, I hope, throw further light on these fundamental distinctions between real good and apparent good, between the mode of conscious desire and the mode of desire as natural need or capacity. (1) Needs can be either felt or not, i.e. conscious or unconscious. In other words, our natural needs may or may not be accompanied by an awareness of the things that fulfill or satisfy those needs. (2) Natural needs *can become* objects of awareness. And it is precisely when they become objects of awareness that they *ought* to be objects of conscious desires. (3) Our conscious desires have a broader scope than our natural needs. We not only can, but we actually desire many more things than we need. We can even desire things that are contrary to our needs. (4) Conscious desires are always spurred by our awareness of things, they are always the result of our experiences. On the other hand, whether or not we are conscious of our needs, these needs are never the result of our experiences, they are inherent or built-in into our make-up or structure as human beings.

It is true that some economists speak of needs created by the arts of propaganda and persuasion. But they qualify these needs as *artificial*, or *stimulated*, or *induced* in contrast to *real* or *natural* needs. They do not weaken but buttress the point being made here. Because the thrust of their language is quite plain. There are certain wants that are there from the beginning since they are part and parcel

of being human; there are other wants that come into existence only as a result of factors impinging on human awareness, wants formed in us in the light of our experiences. The former are needs in a straightforward sense. We can call them needs without qualification. The latter cannot be called needs unless we qualify the term, unless we enclose the term within quotation marks.

It should be clear by now that the *ought* which has entered into the picture is of a quite different sort from the *ought* in statements such as «Castillo ought to be listed after Cariño», or «There ought to be a solar eclipse tomorrow», or «Fish ought to be in water». In these statements the *oughts* follow from the pattern of the alphabet, from the structure of the solar system, from the structure of fishes—all matters of fact. But they are not *moral* oughts. The first is a conventional ought; the second, a physical ought: the third, a biological ought.

But when I say «The real good ought to be desired, or «This is a real good, therefore it ought to be desired», these *oughts* in the first place have to do with my free will, with what I will or will not consciously desire. In the second place, the statements tell me that, even if as a matter of fact I do not desire the real good, still I ought to desire it, In other words, they are *normative* oughts, oughts that *prescribe* the kind of behaviour expected of me. In the third place, the axiom «The real good ought to be desired» is not hypothetical, but *categorical*. The meaning of the axiom is not «You ought to desire it, if you need it». There are no «ifs» and «buts» about the need. It is not an artificial or induced need; it is a built-in, or natural, need. The need is there independently of whether we will it or not. It is a categorical need.

Plainly, therefore, we have here a genuine *moral* ought. And this moral ought stems from the fact that the thing which ought to be desired is, as a matter of fact, a real good, or fulfills as a matter of fact a need or capacity inherent in man. In other words, it seems plain to me that a statement of fact about whether something does in fact fulfill a natural need or capacity contains implicitly a normative statement as to what I ought or ought not consciously to desire and do. In other words, that a moral ought is implicit in a certain type of is-statement, and therefore can be drawn from it.