

Assorted Illustrations of The Problems

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In this message, I'd just like to list several recent illustrations (as well as one early definition) of the various problems/issues that my work helps to resolve in a substantial way.

In other words, using some ranging illustrations, this message can be seen as a loose and illustrative "statement of the problem", or rather as illustrations of the problems.

Consider the following two back-to-back passages that appeared in a major article in the Tuesday *Science* section of *The New York Times* regarding the work of primatologist Frans de Waal, titled "Scientist Finds the Beginnings of Morality in Primate Behavior", by *Times* science reporter Nicholas Wade (March 20, 2007):

Philosophers have another reason biologists cannot, in their view, reach to the heart of morality, and that is that biological analyses cannot cross the gap between "is" and "ought," between the description of some behavior and the issue of why it is right or wrong. "You can identify some value we hold, and tell an evolutionary story about why we hold it, but there is always that radically different question of whether we ought to hold it," said Sharon Street, a moral philosopher at New York University. "That's not to discount the importance of what biologists are doing, but it does show why centuries of moral philosophy are incredibly relevant, too."

Biologists are allowed an even smaller piece of the action by Jesse Prinz, a philosopher at the University of North Carolina. He believes morality developed after human evolution was finished and that moral sentiments are shaped by culture, not genetics.

As with many articles in *The New York Times*, and in the broader media, there are some aspects of the article and quote mentioned above that are hard to interpret or that can only be partly interpreted, lacking further context. My point in this message is not to use this particular quote to make any precise point, but rather

to use it to help illustrate one facet of the broad matter, with which we are probably all at least somewhat familiar.

For additional context, consider also this passage from a summary by the highly-respected scientific journal *Nature*, titled "Evolution and the brain", which appeared in the 14 June 2007 issue:

Moral philosophers often put great store by their rejection of the 'naturalistic fallacy', the belief that because something is a particular way, it ought to be that way. Now we learn that untutored beliefs about 'what ought to be' do, in fact, reflect an 'is': the state of the human mind as an evolved entity. Accepting this represents a challenge that few as yet have really grappled with.

And here, of course, is the original quote by Hume, from his *Treatise of Human Nature*:

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 surprized 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 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 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 is perceived by reason.

(I'm a great admirer of Hume, who was of course a brilliant and insightful person, and that's putting it mildly. But, of course, he wrote his *Treatise* without an understanding of many things that we now understand to a greater degree. For example, he wrote well over a century before Darwin published his works, and scientific understanding has progressed for over 150 years beyond Darwin's initial ideas.)

As another more recent illustration, I recently bought a book, on discount, called "50 philosophy ideas you really need to know", by Ben Dupre. Item 12 in the book is "Hume's guillotine". In that section, after including Hume's quote, Dupre writes: "In this celebrated passage from his *Treatise of Human Nature*, the Scottish philosopher David Hume gives, in his usual laconic manner, the classic formulation of what has since remained one of the central questions in moral philosophy."

(Dupre also quotes Karl Popper as saying: "Perhaps the simplest and most important point about ethics is purely logical. I mean the impossibility to derive non-tautological ethical rules ... from statements of facts." I'm not an expert on Popper, nor do I know where the quote comes from or what Dupre left out. But, I include it here just FYI.)

There are also some very helpful quotes, that illustrate different aspects of these and related problems, in a helpful paper by Oliver Curry, titled "Who's Afraid of the Naturalistic Fallacy?", which ran in *Evolutionary Psychology*, Vol. 4, 2006.

Finally, consider the following helpful—and open-minded—comment from Peter Railton:

[The] 'is'/'ought' gap, and the naturalistic fallacy are perhaps better seen as warnings than as outright barriers, reminding us of ways in which the project can fail, and indeed often has failed. But they should not warn us off the project altogether, since the need to ask how morality fits with our best empirical understanding of ourselves and our place in nature and history arises from within normative moral thought itself.

I'll follow up with another message, in the next day or so, explaining the relationship between the present message and my earlier messages.

Be Well,

Jeff

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