



### **On Hume's Is-Ought Thesis**

David C. Stove

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## ON HUME'S IS-UGHT THESIS

The famous thesis of Hume about "is" and "ought" I take to be, as I believe it has generally been taken to be:

- (1) For any factual statement e and any ethical statement h, h is not deducible from e.

My object in these brief notes is neither to defend nor to attack (1), but just to point out certain mistakes which have been made, or are apt to be made, about (1), or about what Hume's thesis is.

A. Max Black has taken Hume's thesis to be that "only statements of fact can follow from statements of fact": a thesis, Black thinks, which Popper and "many other philosophers"<sup>1</sup> believe. That is, Black took Hume's thesis to be:

- (2) For any factual e and any non-factual h, h is not deducible from e.

It is certain, however, that Popper does not believe (2), and I hope it is untrue that many other philosophers believe it. For (2) is obviously false, and on the contrary, every factual statement has at least one non-factual consequence; since from any factual statement 'f', the statement 'f or not-f', which is not factual, is deducible. But this leaves Hume's thesis (1) untouched, since there is no excuse for confusing it with the foolish thesis (2).

B. If a statement h is not deducible from a statement e, then given e, the falsity of h is possible; or in other words, h has less than maximum probability in relation to e. So part at least of the content of Hume's thesis (1) is:

- (3) For any factual e and ethical h,  $P(h/e) < 1$ .

Several things dispose us to confuse (3) with another proposition which is really quite different from it, and which it is important not to confuse with it. This is the proposition:

- (4) For any  $e'$ , any factual  $e$  and any ethical  $h$ ,  $P(h/e'.e)=P(h/e')$ .

To grasp the difference between (3) and (4), the best way is to consider their analogues, where the arguments from  $e$  to  $h$  are not factual-to-ethical arguments, but instead are inductive ones: that is, arguments from observed to unobserved instances of empirical predicates.

The inductive analogue of (3) is:

- (5) for any  $e$  and  $h$  such that the argument from  $e$  to  $h$  is inductive,  $P(h/e) < 1$ .

Now this is simply a judgment of non-deducibility, or of non-maximal probability. It says, of any inductive argument, just that, in relation to the premiss  $e$ , the falsity of the conclusion  $h$  is possible. (5), therefore, asserts no more than the fallibility of every inductive argument. With (5), consequently, everyone will agree.

For the inductive analogue of (4), it will be simplest, and sufficient, to consider the special case where  $e'$  is tautological. Here, writing ' $t$ ' for some tautology, the analogue is:

- (6) For any  $e$  and  $h$  such that the argument from  $e$  to  $h$  is inductive,  $P(h/t.e)=P(h/t)$ .

Now this is not a judgment of non-deducibility, but a proposition of the kind which Keynes aptly called a judgment of irrelevance. It says, of any inductive argument, that in relation to the premiss  $e$  conjoined with a tautology, the falsity of the conclusion  $h$  is no less probable, or more, than it is in relation to the tautology alone. Hence, whereas (5) is a thesis of inductive fallibilism merely, (6) is a thesis of inductive scepticism; for it says, inter alia, that inductive evidence never raises the probability of a hypothesis above its value prior to all experience, or in relation to a tautology. With this thesis, unlike (5), few will agree; although Hume maintained a sceptical thesis about induction which, if I have elsewhere interpreted him rightly,<sup>2</sup> was precisely (6).

The difference between (5) and (6) should now be manifest. Well, the difference between (3) and (4) above is exactly the same; only more so, since (4) asserts the irrelevance of factuais to ethicals, not in relation to tautological e' only, but to any e'.

What are the things which dispose us to confuse (3) with (4)? One is the currency of vague phrases such as "the autonomy of ethics". For the judgment of irrelevance (4) has at least as good a claim as the judgment of non-deducibility (3), to be described as asserting the autonomy of ethics. Another thing which links (3) to (4) in some minds is the currency of the thesis of deductivism:

$$(7) \text{ For any } e \text{ and } h, \text{ if } P(h/e) < 1 \text{ then} \\ P(h/t.e) = P(h/t).$$

For (3) conjoined with (7) does entail, not indeed (4), but its important special case for tautological e':

$$(4a) \text{ For any factual } e \text{ and ethical } h, \\ P(h/t.e) = P(h/t).$$

(This last proposition corresponds exactly, of course, to the inductive scepticism (6) above.)

But deductivism (7) is false, as I have elsewhere shown.<sup>3</sup> Unless conjoined with this falsity, (3) does not entail even (4a). Hence (3) does not entail (4). Nor does (4) entail (3). Hence (3), the non-deducibility of ethicals from factuais, and (4), the irrelevance of factuais to ethicals, are independent theses in the sense that neither entails the other.

Yet even Moore, for example, gives strong evidence of having confused the two theses, and even of having thought that (3) entails (4).<sup>4</sup> And, with a solitary exception<sup>5</sup>, no writer known to me has until now distinguished with any clearness between these two very different "autonomy of ethics" theses, (3) and (4).

C. Although (3) and (4) are independent, anyone who finds (3) plausible is likely to find (4) plausible too. And Hume for one is committed at least to the special

case (4a) of (4), if, as I have elsewhere tried to show<sup>6</sup>, he maintains the deductivist (7), as well as (3). For these reasons it will be worthwhile to show that (4a), like its inductive analogue (6), can be very easily refuted; and hence that (4) too is false.

The general conjunction-principle of probability is:

$$(8) \quad P(p.q/r) = P(p/r) \times P(q/p.r) = P(q/r) \times P(p/q.r).$$

From this it follows that:

$$(9) \quad \text{If } P(q/p.r) = P(q/r) \text{ then } P(p/q.r) = P(p/r).$$

This says that if, in relation to  $r$ ,  $p$  is (in Keynes's sense) irrelevant to  $q$ , then, in relation to  $r$ ,  $q$  is also irrelevant to  $p$ . In short, irrelevance in relation to  $r$  is symmetrical. Now (4a) asserts that, in relation to a tautology, any factual statement is irrelevant to any ethical one. If this were true, then the symmetry of irrelevance (9) would ensure that conversely, in relation to a tautology, any ethical statement is irrelevant to any factual one. But that is not so. Writing as before 't' for some tautology, it is true that

$$(10) \quad P(\text{Socrates is a man}/t) < 1.$$

But it is also true that

$$(11) \quad P(\text{Socrates is a man}/\text{Socrates is a good man.}t) = 1.$$

Whence the ethical "Socrates is a good man" is not irrelevant, but on the contrary favourably relevant to the factual "Socrates is a man", in relation to a tautology. So (4a) is false. Hence a fortiori (4) is false.

D. (1) and (3) are non-deducibility theses, and are controversial. Many other non-deducibility theses, however, are non-controversial, and even obvious. For example, the thesis that 'undistributed middle' is a fallacy:

$$(12) \quad \text{For any logically-independent predicates } F \text{ and } G, P(x \text{ is } F/\text{All } F \text{ are } G.x \text{ is } G) < 1.$$

Another example is inductive fallibilism (5) above. Another is Hume's "there can be no demonstrative arguments for a

matter of fact"; that is,

- (13) For any necessary truth  $e$  and any contingent  $h$ ,  $h$  is not deducible from  $e$ .

Another non-deducibility thesis which seems obvious to me, and which will, I think, seem so to others as well, is:

- (14) For any logical truth  $e$  and any ethical  $h$ ,  $h$  is not deducible from  $e$ .

If (14) were false then ethics, or part of it at least, would be simply a branch of logic; so that ethical disputes - for example, about  $h$ , "Abortion is wrong" - could sometimes be decisively settled simply by finding out that  $h$ , or its negation, is among the theorems of logic. It seems obvious that this is an idle fantasy.

But now, a judgment of non-deducibility, if true, is true not in virtue of the relation of any statement to the actual universe; but just in virtue of the relation between the two statements which the judgment of non-deducibility mentions. Hence a judgment of non-deducibility, if true, is a logical truth.

It follows that (1) and (3) above, if true, are logical truths. And then, in view of (14), it further follows that these non-deducibility theses of Hume, if true, have no ethical consequences. In short,

- (15) For any ethical  $h$ ,  $h$  is not deducible from (1):

and

- (15') For any ethical  $h$ ,  $h$  is not deducible from (3).

These conclusions are important, because beliefs inconsistent with them are widespread. A few years ago I read in an undergraduate essay words to this effect, (unfortunately I did not make a copy of the exact words): "Since no ethical statement can be deduced from a factual one, it follows that we can do what we like." Now clearly, the second "can" here was an ethical one: "we can do what

we like" was a version of the 'universal permission':

(16) Anything is morally permissible.

And (16) is clearly an ethical statement; indeed, it is only an extreme expression of an ethical attitude which has recently been quite common in the west, viz. liberalism or permissiveness.

In believing that (1) entails (16), this student, in view of (15), was wrong. But he erred in good, or at any rate numerous, company. For it has been quite widely believed, or at least vaguely felt, that Hume's non-deducibility thesis (1) does have (16) as a consequence. It is in this way, I believe, that in the west in this century, Hume's philosophy has helped to bring about the loss of moral confidence which is expressed in (16), and which is one aspect of the phenomenon of "modern nervousness".<sup>7</sup>

Since 1965, ethical liberalism has been to a considerable extent replaced in the west by the ethical fanaticism of left-revolutionaries. Some of these revolutionaries reject Hume's (1) because they reject the liberal (16). This suggests that they share with many liberals the erroneous belief that (1) entails (16).

I have maintained in effect that:

(17) For any ethical  $h$ ,  $P(h/(1)) < 1$ ,

and that:

(17') For any ethical  $h$ ,  $P(h/(3)) < 1$ .

But I would go much further than these mere non-deducibility theses. It seems to me obvious that the following irrelevance thesis is true:

(18) For any  $e'$ , any logical truth  $e$  and any ethical  $h$ ,  $P(h/e'.e) = P(h/e')$ .

If so, then since, again, (1) and (3) are logical truths if true, it follows that:

(19) For any  $e'$  and any ethical  $h$ ,  $P(h/e'.(1)) = P(h/e')$ ;

and that

(19') For any  $e'$  and any ethical  $h$ ,  $P(h/e'.(3)) = P(h/e')$ .

That is, Hume's non-deducibility theses (1) and (3) not only have no ethical statements among their consequences, but are even irrelevant to every ethical statement.

E. The thesis of 'non-cognitivism' in moral philosophy I take to be:

(20) Ethical statements cannot be true or false. This thesis has sometimes been held in conjunction with (1), if, indeed, the two have not been thought to be positively connected in some way. For this reason it will be worthwhile to point out that (1) is inconsistent with non-cognitivism (20).

If a statement *h* is not deducible from a statement *e*, then if *e* is not self-contradictory, then the conjunction of *e* with not-*h* is not self-contradictory. Where *e* is factual, it is not self-contradictory. Hence if *h* is not deducible from a factual statement *e*, then *e*-and-not-*h* is not self-contradictory; whence it is possible for *e* to be true and *h* false. Hence if (1) is true, then, wherever *e* is factual and *h* is ethical, it is possible for *e* to be true and *h* false. If it is possible for *e* to be true and *h* false, then it is possible for *h* to be false. If it is possible for *h* to be false, it is possible for it to be false or true. Hence if (1) is true then it is possible for an ethical statement to be false or true; that is, (20) is false.

Theses (1) and (20) are inconsistent, then, at least if in (1) the words "h is not deducible from e" have their usual sense: the sense, that is, that it is possible for *e* to be true and *h* false. Yet I am not sure that this italicised addendum is really needed here. For if it is, then a similar addendum would be needed wherever two statements are asserted to be inconsistent. (Even "not-*p*", after all, is not inconsistent with "*p*", unless the word "not" has its usual sense.) And this consequence seems absurd.

Still, one who subscribes to (20) can consistently maintain (1), as long as he attaches a sufficiently unusual

sense to "h is not deducible from e". But by adopting this course a non-cognitivist, while he avoids inconsistency, incurs another disadvantage. This is that he no longer affirms, by affirming (1), what most naturalists have denied by denying it: for they have thought that some ethical statements are deducible from factual ones, in the usual sense of "deducible".

Besides, whatever the truth may be about the deducibility or otherwise of ethical statements from factual ones, factual statements are deducible from ethical ones, in the usual sense of "deducible". (Such examples as the deducibility of "Socrates is a man" from "Socrates is a good man" show this.) And this fact will not be easy to reconcile with non-cognitivism (20).

D. C. Stove  
Department of Traditional and  
Modern Philosophy,  
University of Sydney.

1. These quotations are from p.99 of Hudson (ed.) The Is-Ought Question, (Macmillan, 1961), where Black's article, originally in The Philosophical Review, 1964, is reprinted.
2. See my Probability and Hume's Inductive Scepticism (referred to hereafter as Probability), (O.U.P., 1973), chs. 1 - 4.
3. Probability, ch. 6, section (iv).
4. Moore says, for example, that it is committing the naturalistic fallacy to hold that from a factual statement "we can infer, or obtain confirmation for", an ethical statement. Again, he says that an ethical statement "cannot be reduced to any assertion about reality, and therefore must remain unaffected" any such assertion. (Principia Ethica, p. 114. Italics not in text in either case.)
5. Mr. R. F. Atkinson, (in a valuable article in The Philosophical Review, 1961, reprinted in the Hudson volume referred to in footnote 1 above); but even he suggests what is false, that (4) entails (3).

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6. Probability, ch.3, section (iv), and ch.4, section (v).
7. This effect of (1) is all the more curious because, when Moore revived this Humean thesis, its first effect was rather to increase moral confidence. The autonomy of ethics, in the form of (1), was clearly thought of, by Moore and the other intuitionists, as setting their own ethical knowledge, for the first time, on solid ground. Only later did (1) come to be thought of as implying that ethical 'knowledge' is groundless.