



Håkan Salwén. *Hume's Law: An Essay on Moral Reasoning*

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HÅKAN SALWÉN. *Hume's Law: An Essay on Moral Reasoning*. Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 2003. Pp. 154. ISBN 91-22-02044-6, paper, \$62.50.

Much has been written about Hume's infamous statement that an "ought" cannot be derived from an "is," leading many readers to wonder whether there is anything new to say about it. Salwén's discussion of "Hume's Law" shows that not only is there something new to say about the topic, but also that there is much more work to be done on it. His stated purpose is "to assess the tenability and significance of Hume's law" (10) by exploring the different ways it can be interpreted and the implications each interpretation has for broader issues in meta-ethics, epistemology, and the philosophy of language.

Readers of *Hume Studies* will notice that nowhere in this stated purpose is an attempt to analyze Hume's own position, and Salwén makes no pretenses about doing so. He dutifully quotes Hume's is/ought passage in the introduction and moves very quickly to a discussion of contemporary interpretations of Hume's law, which constitute his primary focus. This is thus not a book on Hume. It is, however, a detailed and technical analysis and defense of Hume's law. While I do not think his project succeeds, many parts of his discussion are worthwhile. In addition to giving very concise summaries of many different positions people have taken on the debate surrounding Hume's law, Salwén raises a number of important issues concerning the connection between Hume's law and various epistemological positions. Of particular interest is his approach to defending Hume's law: while most people tend to accept or reject Hume's law on its own, and then explore the implications of this acceptance or rejection for their other philosophical commitments, Salwén looks first to our prior commitments in logic, meta-ethics, epistemology, and philosophy of language, and then uses these commitments to determine the truth of Hume's law. His discussion of these issues—while at times problematic - stand to give the reader new insight into the question of how moral claims are related to non-moral ones, even if Salwén's own answer to this question is unsatisfactory.

Salwén takes as his starting point Brink's formulation of Hume's law: "Moral claims cannot be inferred from non-moral claims" (10). From here, he gives three different, and, I think, previously underappreciated, interpretations of the sort of inference implied by Hume's law. The first is a formalized interpretation, labeled HL(F). HL(F) is the claim that "a moral expression (no matter what expression counts as moral) cannot occur non-vacuously in the conclusion of a valid inference unless it appears among the premises" (17). The second is a conceptual interpretation, labeled HL(C). HL(C) is the claim that "there is no analytic bridge premise"

that connects non-moral premises, such as “Jones has promised to pay Smith five dollars” to moral conclusions, such as “Jones ought to pay Smith five dollars” (18). The third interpretation is the epistemological interpretation, labeled HL(E). HL(E) is the claim that “A non-moral belief constitutes an epistemic reason for a person, \underline{P} , at a certain time, \underline{t} , to hold an atomic moral belief only if \underline{P} at \underline{t} accepts a moral principle connecting the two beliefs” (76).

Of these three interpretations, HL(F) receives the least amount of discussion, as, for reasons not entirely clear, the bulk of the text devoted to this interpretation is relegated to the Appendix. In his Chapter One introduction to HL(F), Salwén discusses Pigden’s proof, and concludes that, on conservative interpretations of logic, HL(F) is true. He goes on to discuss the implications of HL(F), and claims that it is neutral with respect to either cognitivism and non-cognitivism, and does not imply that naturalism is false. These implications, Salwén argues, goes against what most people take to be the central implications of Hume’s law, namely, that non-cognitivism is true, and that naturalism is false. Thus, without rejecting HL(F) as a viable interpretation of Hume’s law, he nonetheless suggests that there must be a more fruitful interpretation of a law, and this turns out to be HL(C).

In this discussion and elsewhere, Salwén makes intriguing use of the relationship between Hume’s law and various meta-ethical positions. He starts by assuming that those who accept Hume’s law also accept non-cognitivism and reject naturalism, and, as we see above, uses this assumption to help him evaluate interpretations of Hume’s law. For example, he also rejects Kalderon’s analysis of Hume’s law on the grounds that “the truth of this version of the law shows that non-cognitivism is false. Yet, non-cognitivists are typical adherents to a conceptual version of Hume’s law” (27). Remarks like this continue until the final chapter, where, in reflecting on his preferred interpretations of Hume’s law, Salwén concludes, “the relationship between Hume’s law and meta-ethical hypotheses is not obvious” (94). I agree. However, since the connection between Hume’s law and meta-ethical positions is not obvious, I think Salwén goes wrong earlier in using the connection to justify particular interpretations, and, in particular, shortchanges his discussion of HL(F) because he believes it, as a formal thesis, is “irrelevant with regard to meta-ethical theories” (21).

Salwén’s discussion of HL(C), on the other hand, is thorough as well as suggestive, although not without its share of problems. In Chapters Two and Three, he considers in detail whether or not there are analytic bridge premises; that is, whether there are any analytic statements relating the possession of moral and non-moral properties (24). His goal is to provide an account of analyticity from which HL(C) can be shown true in a meaningful sense. His worry is that “if there are no analytic sentences, HL(C) is simply an instance of this general truth” (46). If, on the other hand, there are analytic sentences, then to defend HL(C), Salwén needs to show that among them are no analytic bridge premises. Salwén’s first

major step in defending the truth and meaningfulness of HL(C) is to consider and critique Quine's argument that there are no analytic sentences. Here Salwén argues that the issue at stake should not be sentences, but rather the beliefs that those sentences express. And, he argues, once we examine HL(C) at the level of beliefs, we will see that (a) there are analytic beliefs; and (b) HL(C) is true in a meaningful way. This move to discussion of the analyticity of beliefs is an interesting one and worthy of consideration, although I have some worries about whether or not it constitutes a reasonable defense of analyticity against Quine's objection. Yet, even if we accept his move to talking about analyticity of beliefs, I think there are more substantive problems that arise for Salwén.

Here's the problem: According to Salwén, a belief is analytic "only if it is the case that if P were to reject it, then P's belief would cohere very badly with the rest of P's beliefs" (64). Plugging this notion of analyticity into HL(C), HL(C) becomes true on the assumption that "nothing prevents us from attributing beliefs to P that would make it plausible for P to reject bridge commitments" for it follows from this assumption that there are no analytic bridge commitments (64). Salwén thinks that, given holism, the negation of any bridge premise can be made to cohere with the rest of one's beliefs. I worry that this stretches the principle of charity too far, and thus have reservations about the success of his defense of HL(C).

Salwén's discussion of the final interpretation, HL(E), is more plausible; then again, HL(E) is itself rather uncontroversial. Now, it is with HL(E) in particular that I find myself wondering about the connection between this claim and *Hume's law*, and so wondering why Salwén feels the need to distinguish and discuss it at length as an interpretation of Hume's law. There are, of course, similarities between the idea that "is" does not imply "ought" and HL(E)'s claim that moral principles are needed to complete the deduction, but my question remains: at its heart, Hume's law is a claim about the impossibility of deriving moral premises—be they atomic moral premises or moral principles—from any factual statement. I just don't think that HL(E) captures this basic idea, and wish that Salwén had spent a little more time motivating his discussion.

This need for more development of the larger issues at stake carries over to Salwén's discussion concerning the implications of Hume's law(s), a topic raised only in the final chapter, where it gets lost in favor of more focused arguments against particular authors—in this case, in an argument against Schurz. Salwén's tendency to focus on the technical aspects of arguments, as opposed to the larger questions they address, comes with both a cost and a benefit: the benefit is a series of small, detailed discussions of particular issues such as Moore's open question argument and Smith's defense of naturalism in which Salwén draws important connections to Hume's law. The cost, however, is large: Salwén misses out on the opportunity to address the larger questions raised by Hume's law(s), and the implications of his very project for morality: Which of the three interpretations

is the *right* one? Are they mutually exclusive? How should Salwén's endorsement of HL(C) affect our moral reasoning?

Larger questions such as these go largely unanswered by Salwén. While this is unfortunate, his book prompts further research and investigation into the many facets of Hume's law. It will be of particular use to those exploring the surrounding epistemological issues—an area that Salwén has convinced me is in need of further exploration. Given Salwén's extensive research and knowledge of the literature, it will also be a useful starting point for anyone researching contemporary analytical discussions of Hume's law.

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