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Forthcoming in Pigden ed. *Hume Is and Ought***Snare's Puzzle/Hume's Purpose:****Non-Cognitivism****and****What Hume Was Really Up to with No-Ought-From-Is**

By

Charles Pigden**1. Snare's Puzzle: How to Argue *from* No-Ought-From-Is to Non-Cognitivism?**

Frank Snare had a puzzle. He construed Hume as a non-cognitivist, indeed, as *the* non-cognitivist, the fount and origin of contemporary non-cognitivism. Taking Hume to be a non-cognitivist, Snare devoted a great deal of time and effort to the Motivation Argument, or as he called it, the Influence Argument, which he took to be the chief weapon in Hume's non-cognitivist armory. But he could not see how the No-Ought-From-Is passage was supposed to fit in. Hume seems to think it important and that 'a small attention' to this point would 'subvert all the vulgar systems of morality'. But so far as Snare could see, No-Ought-From-Is is impotent against the vulgar systems of morality if vulgarity consists in being cognitive. Why so? Because No-Ought-From-Is *follows* from non-cognitivism but not vice versa. Now it may be that Hume did not suppose himself to be developing a fresh argument for non-cognitivism. Maybe Hume regarded No-Ought-From-Is as consequence of non-cognitivism 'for which he had already given the influence and empiricist arguments'. 'Perhaps his observation then was that this further consequence of his non-cognitivism shows that many authors of works on morality have made illegitimate transitions from "is" to "ought". This claim of course would be no better than the two arguments already given for non-cognitivism. But if Hume *did* suppose himself to be giving a new and distinct argument it would be a 'particularly question-begging' affair, 'making Hume himself the first of the dogmatic Humeans' 'Thus Hume seems to argue that a new "ought" relation (or affirmation) cannot be deduced from others "entirely different from it". But is it so clear that "new" relations or affirmations cannot be deduced from "old"?' And even if it is 'then to assume moral affirmations are "new" in this sense is

just to beg the issue'. (Snare, 1991, p 39.) So *either* No-Ought-From-Is affords no argument at all for non-cognitivism (but simply draws an interesting consequence) *or* the argument it affords is flagrantly question-begging.

The problem persists if we forget about Hume and his intentions and concentrate on recent and contemporary non-cognitivists. *They* seem to think that No-Ought-From-Is somehow supports non-cognitivism, but if No-Ought-From-Is follows from non-cognitivism but not vice-versa, how is this supposed to work?

The first point to note however, is that No-Ought-From-Is doesn't follow from non-cognitivism *by itself*. As Snare's rhetorical question reveals, another premise is required. 'Is it so clear,' he asks, 'that "new" relations or affirmations cannot be deduced from "old"?' The claim is that logic or deductive reasoning is *conservative*, that in a valid argument you don't get out what you haven't put in. If we add in this premise, then we can reconstruct the argument *from* non-cognitivism *to* No-Ought-From-Is.

- 1) Deductive logic is conservative: in a valid inference you can't get out a new relation or affirmation that you haven't put in.
- 2) Since moral judgments are not designed to state facts but to express emotion or prescribe action [insert non-cognitivist theory of choice] moral words always express 'a new relation or affirmation'
- 3) You can't derive an *Ought* from an *Is*, a moral conclusion from non-moral premises

This suggests a solution to Snare's Puzzle. If logic is conservative and non-cognitivism correct, then you can't get an *Ought* from an *Is*, a moral conclusion from non-moral premises. But, by the same token, if you *can* get an *Ought* from an *Is*, then either logic is not conservative or non-cognitivism is not correct. And, since the conservativeness of logic is widely taken for granted, it looks as if it is non-cognitivism that would be struck down if the arrow of *modus tollens* flew. For if logic is conservative and you *can* get an *Ought* from an *Is*, then non-cognitivism is false. This suggests a solution to Snare's puzzle, at least as regards the recent non-cognitivists. Perhaps they are *not* trying to argue *from* No-Ought-From-Is *to* non-cognitivism. Rather they are trying to vindicate No-Ought-From-Is in order to rescue non-cognitivism from a possible refutation.

Well maybe, but this does not sit well with the triumphalist tone of the non-cognitivists' rhetoric. For them, No-Ought-From-Is is not an outpost to be defended in order to avert defeat, but

a forward base from which they hope to launch an offensive operation. They are not nervously insisting on No-Ought-From-Is in order to fend off a disproof - they are using No-Ought-From-Is to prove, or at least to argue, that non-cognitivism is correct.

2. The Puzzle Persists

So the puzzle persists: how can we construct an argument *from* No-Ought-From-Is *to* non-cognitivism? To some extent this is a particular instance of a general problem. Over the years I have found it surprisingly difficult to formulate *any* clear arguments for non-cognitivism. Not much help is to be derived from the foggy ruminations of Nowell-Smith or Stevenson or the schoolmasterly expositions of an R.M Hare. They tend to see non-cognitivism as an obvious truth to be expounded, not a contentious thesis to be argued for. (It is significant, I think, that one of Hare's chief arguments for prescriptivism is that it does not have the same irrationalist consequences as emotivism and thus that it is a better brand of the same non-cognitivist product. But we need a reason to buy the non-cognitivist product in the first place, before bothering our heads about which is the better brand.) Perhaps, as more-or-less Wittgensteinian philosophers, the mid-century non-cognitivists conceived themselves to be assembling reminders for a particular purpose. But the trouble with assembling reminders (especially in the therapeutic context) is that, in philosophy, as elsewhere, it is possible to 'remind' people of things which ain't so. Witness the work of Elizabeth Loftus.

3. Epiphany: Inference to the Best Explanation

However, about a decade ago it struck me with the force of revelation that most of the key arguments for non-cognitivism are best construed as inferences to the best explanation. That way they can be formulated in a clear and intellectually respectable manner. (Of course, they won't be deductively valid, but then if we relied on deductive logic alone, we would not get beyond Cogito Ergo Sum, and maybe not as far as that!) The No-Ought-From-Is argument is no exception. We take No-Ought-From-Is as a datum and reason backwards to the non-cognitivism that implies it. The argument goes something like this:

- 1*) You can't derive an *Ought* from an *Is*, moral conclusions from non-moral premises.
- 2*) The best explanation of 1*) is
 - a) that logic is conservative: in a valid inference you can't get out a new relation or affirmation that you haven't put in;
 - and

b) that since moral judgments are fundamentally different from non-moral propositions [insert non-cognitivist theory of choice] moral words represent a ‘new relation or affirmation’

Therefore, probably:

3*) Moral judgments are fundamentally different from non-moral propositions [insert non-cognitivist theory of choice].

I call this the *Generic Argument* for non-cognitivism, since it is not so much an argument as an argument schema, which can be deployed by different kinds of non-cognitivists with more or less plausibility. In so far as there is one, this seems to be the argument of Hare’s *Language of Morals*. According to Hare, the ‘basis’ of ‘Hume’s celebrated observation on the impossibility of deducing an ‘ought’-proposition from a series of ‘is’-propositions’ is the logical ‘rule’ that *no imperative conclusion can be validly drawn from a set of premises that does not contain at least one imperative* (Hare, 1952, pp 28-29)¹. And what is the basis of *that*? The principle, ‘now widely regarded as true by definition that (to speak roughly at first) nothing can appear in the conclusion of a valid deductive inference which is not, from their very meaning, implicit in the premises’. (Hare credits this hoary old platitude to ‘Wittgenstein and others’, which rather suggests that the history of philosophy, let alone the history of logic, were not his strongest suits.) It follows that if there is an imperative in the conclusion, not only must *some* imperative appear in the premises, but that very imperative must be implicit in them’ (Hare, 1952, p 32). Thus in so far as we have an argument *to* prescriptivism *from* No-Ought-From-Is, it would appear to be an inference to the best explanation. The ‘basis’ for Hume’s celebrated observation (No-Ought-From-Is) is the principle that you can’t get an imperative from a set of indicatives, and this in turn follows from the thesis that in a deductive inference you cannot get out what you haven’t put in. If you put these together with the central thesis of prescriptivism - that moral judgments generally, and ought-judgments in particular typically contain an imperative component - it is possible to derive No-Ought-From-Is. But Hare takes No-Ought-From-Is to be a datum. (He uses the term ‘observation’, and since ‘observe’ is a success-word, you cannot observe what is not supposed to be the case, at least, not without aid of heavily ironic inverted commas.) And if it is an obvious fact that you can’t get an *Ought* from an ‘*Is*, and if prescriptivism plus the conservativeness of logic can *explain* this obvious fact, then this affords an argument for prescriptivism.

Hare’s disciple W.D. Hudson (who tries, without much success, to maintain a certain critical distance from the Master) seems to have something similar in mind, though in his case the argument is less clear. Certain ‘considerations have convinced many moral philosophers [such as Hare and Nowell-Smith] that it is quite mistaken to suppose that moral judgments are a sub-class

of factual statements'. Thus 'it became fashionable ... to say that there is really a logical divide - a radical difference of meaning - between "is" and "ought" (Hudson 1969a, p. 12.). Here No-Ought-From-Is seems to follow from non-cognitivism. But Hudson seems to think that the support is mutual, that No-Ought-From-Is gives us reason to subscribe to non-cognitivism as well as vice versa. And it is hard to see how No-Ought-From-Is *could* provide intellectual support for non-cognitivism except via an inference to the best explanation.

Nowell-Smith quotes Hume's famous paragraph and provides a paraphrase which concludes that is-ought inferences must be 'illegitimate' since 'the conclusion of an argument can contain nothing which is not in the premises, and there are no "oughts" in the premises' (Nowell-Smith, 1954, p. 37). Moreover Hume's dictum affords an 'unanswerable criticism' of some kinds of ethical theory. Thus Hume is right: you can't get an *Ought* from an *Is*. But how is this supposed to support non-cognitivism? Well, the point of his meandering discussion seems to be that the non-cognitivists are better placed to *make sense* of No-Ought-From-Is than their intuitionist rivals. Again, an inference to the best explanation.

Flew, to his credit, is a bit more explicit. No-Ought-From-Is 'states a simple but vastly important logical truth' and is a 'consequence of Hume's fundamental insight about values' (Flew, 1983, p. 145). What is that insight? That 'there is a categorical difference between pure calculating or detached describing and ... engaged preferring or practical prescribing; and that we cannot therefore, validly deduce conclusions about the latter from premises referring exclusively to the former' (Flew, 1983, p. 149). Thus No-Ought-From-Is is true, indeed a truth of logic. And what makes it true is 'Hume's fundamental insight about values', pretty much that they are non-cognitive in character (together with the thesis that in logic you don't get out what you haven't put in). But if Hume's 'great insight about values' helps to explain 'a simple but vastly important logical truth', that suggests that it is a *genuine* insight and hence that some kind of non-cognitivism is correct. Again, an inference to the best explanation.

4. An Improvement on the Argument?

In the case of Hare, and his disciples it is perhaps possible to improve upon the argument. One of Hare's greatest claims to fame is his simple insistence that there are logical relations between imperatives (for instance that they that can contradict each another) and hence that the notion of an imperative logic makes sense. But what is conspicuously absent from his work is a developed conception of imperative consequence. (It is significant, I think, that he hardly ever mentions Tarski, and then only in connection with his work on truth, never in connection with the consequence relation.) Thus Hare rightly insists that one order can *follow from* others, and that imperative inferences can be *valid* without ever giving an account of what *validity* or *following*

from amount to when the premises and the conclusion are both in the imperative mood. (Indeed he displays a certain well-mannered hostility to writers who might have helped him out by developing concepts of satisfaction for imperatives analogous to that of truth-conditions for indicatives. See Hare, 1971, pp. 42-43 & 62-73.) He does say that ‘a sentence P entails a sentence Q if and only if the fact that a person assents to P but dissents from Q is a sufficient criterion for saying that he has misunderstood one or other of the sentences’ (Hare 1952, p. 25). But if P entails Q, assenting to P but dissenting from Q is not a sufficient criterion for incomprehension as the person involved may be knowingly inconsistent or dishonest, or (if P is sufficiently complex) simply lacking in logical acumen. (Indeed Hare’s characterization of entailment appears to imply that if a theory turns out to have surprising consequences, that proves that nobody can have understood it in the first place - which makes it difficult to see how anyone could have drawn the surprising consequences!) Thus Hare does not have a viable account of logical consequence for either indicatives or imperatives. As a professed logician (albeit with meta-ethical interests), he is a bit like a biologist who vehemently insists that there is this terribly important relation between mothers and their offspring, though he can’t say what it is, except that it rather like the relation that holds between fathers and *their* offspring (which, by the way, he can’t explain either). But perhaps with the aid of J.J.C. Smart we can do a little better on Hare’s behalf.

The basic idea behind imperative consequence is that an imperative **X** is the consequence of a set of imperatives **K** iff the premises **K** cannot be obeyed without obeying the imperative that constitutes the conclusion **X**. More formally, an imperative sentence **X** is the logical consequence of a set of imperative sentences **K** and a (possibly empty) set of factual sentences **C**, if and only if, however the non-logical vocabulary is interpreted, the imperatives expressed at **K** cannot be obeyed under the circumstances described in **C** unless the imperative expressed by **X** is obeyed too. (See Smart, 1984, pp. 14-19). (We ignore the semantic content of the non-logical vocabulary because we want to characterise a *formal* relation.) But this won’t quite do as it stands, for it has the bizarre consequence that any command whatsoever is a consequence of a set of commands **K** if that set is empty. Since it is impossible to obey a set of non-existent commands, it is impossible to obey the commands in such a set without obeying any command whatsoever. Furthermore, the definition implies that any command whatever follows from an inconsistent set of commands (or a set of commands which cannot be obeyed under the circumstances **C**). For if it is impossible to obey a set of commands (either because they are inconsistent or because they are ‘inconsistent’ given **C**) it is impossible to obey them without obeying any command whatsoever. (If it is impossible to do **A**, it is impossible to do **A** and not do **B** for arbitrary **B**.) Of course this absurdity parallels a similar absurdity that holds within classical indicative logic - that any indicative whatsoever follows from a contradictory set of premises - but this does not make it any the less

absurd. To solve these problems I suggest adding the proviso that a set of imperatives **K** only implies another imperative **X** if it is logically *possible* (under the circumstances **C**) to obey the commands **K**. Given this proviso, an empty set of commands has no consequences, nor does a set which is formally inconsistent or ‘inconsistent’ given **C**.² The proviso has another advantage. It excludes some more absurdities that might otherwise creep in. It is impossible to obey a command either to bring about the necessary or to bring about the logically impossible. There is no action that can count as doing either of these things, no state of affairs that consists in making them so. Which means that commands like ‘Bring it about that $P \ \& \ \sim P!$ ’ or ‘Bring it about that $\sim(P \ \& \ \sim P)!$ ’ cannot be obeyed. Since such commands cannot be obeyed, it is not the case that any obeyable set of commands cannot be obeyed without obeying the command to bring about the truths of logic. In my view we should add another proviso: that a command **X** is only the consequence of a set of commands **K** and a possibly empty set of indicative conditions if **X** is deemed to be within the agent’s power. Consider, for example, inference **A**:

- 1') If the weather is fine, attack at dawn!
- 2') Don't attack at dawn!
- 3') *Make it so* that the weather is not fine!

I suggest that the conclusion 3') is *not* the consequence that a sensible person would draw from premises 1') and 2'). The correct conclusion is the indicative thesis:

- 3'') The weather is not fine.

Why so? Not because it is *logically* impossible to influence the weather (consider a command addressed to the human race to make the world warmer place or a prayer addressed to a weather god like Thor or cloud-compelling Zeus) but because of an unstated background assumption, namely that (whatever Zeus can do) it is not within the platoon commander’s power to compel the clouds. Because of this background assumption, the relation of imperative consequence is, so to speak, disabled, and a new relation of imperative-to-indicative consequence is called into play. An indicative conclusion **Y** is the consequence of a set imperative premises **K** with respect to some agent (or agents) **P** if and only if i) it is logically possible to obey the imperatives in **K**, and ii) the imperatives in the premises **K** cannot be obeyed unless the indicative **Y** is true and iii) it not deemed to be within the agent’s power to bring about the indicative conclusion. Conversely, an imperative conclusion **X** is the consequence of a set of imperatives **K** with respect to some agent (or agents) **P**, and a possibly empty set of indicative premises **C**, if and only if i) the premises **K**

cannot obeyed under the circumstances **C** without obeying the imperative that constitutes the conclusion **X**, ii) it is logically possible to obey the commands **X** under the circumstances **C**, and iii) obeying **X** is deemed to be within the power of the agent or agents **P**. Given this definition of imperative consequence, inference \mathcal{A} is not valid since it is not deemed to be within the agent's power to compel the clouds. The following inference \mathcal{B} , however, *is* clearly valid:

- 1^) If you have not captured the ridge by 1600 hours, don't attack the supply dump at 16:00 hours !
- 2^) Attack the supply dump at 16:00 hours!
- 3^) Capture the ridge by 16:00 hours!

And the reason for this is obvious. It is a background assumption that it is within the platoon's power to take the ridge by 16:00 hours. Hence the colonel is not predicting that this *will* happen but is telling the platoon commander to *make it* happen.

We now have an (admittedly sketchy) conception of imperative consequence that underwrites Hare's 'rule' that *no imperative conclusion can be validly drawn from a set of premises that does not contain at least one imperative*. For since the empty set of imperatives cannot be obeyed, it cannot be the case *both* that an empty set of imperatives **K** cannot be obeyed without obeying some imperative 'conclusion' **X** *and that the set of imperatives K can be obeyed*. Furthermore, we have managed to underwrite Hare's rule without appealing to the dubious and distressingly metaphorical principle that in logic you don't get out what you haven't put in. The rule is itself a consequence of our conception of imperative consequence, which does not appeal to hazy notions of content or containment. Now, if we also suppose, as Hare does, that moral judgments contain an imperative element (here the metaphor of containment comes creeping back in!) we can derive the conclusion that you can't get an *Ought* from an *Is*. If *Oughts* are essentially imperative, and if you can't derive imperatives from indicatives, then you can't derive an imperative *Ought* from an indicative *Is*. Thus if we take No-Ought-From-Is as a datum, we can develop a new and improved inference-to-the-best-explanation for prescriptivism:

- 1*) You can't derive an *Ought* from an *Is*, moral conclusions from non-moral premises.
- 2**) The best explanation of 1*) is

a) that *no imperative conclusion can be validly drawn from a set of premises that does not contain at least one imperative* (which is in turn explained by our conception of imperative consequence);

and

b) that moral judgments typically contain an imperative element.

Therefore, probably

3**) Moral judgments typically contain an imperative element (i.e. prescriptivism is true).

Call this the *Specific Argument* since it can be deployed by prescriptivists but not necessarily by emotivists or non-cognitivists of other kinds.

5. Inference to the Best Explanation: Ways to Go Wrong

Now there are four ways that an inference to the best explanation can go wrong: A) The premises can be true and the conclusion false. The best explanation by our epistemic lights can turn out to be mistaken. Which is simply to say that abduction is not deduction and that the world is sometimes an epistemically cursed sort of place. B) All the available explanations can be so bad that it is better to sit down in undeluded ignorance than believe the best of a really bad bunch. Where the available theories are stupid enough, it is better to have no theory at all than to adopt a real stinker. (For this reason I am inclined to think that if it weren't such a mouthful, 'inference to the best explanation' would be better dubbed 'inference to the best of the acceptable explanations'.) C) The 'facts' to be explained can turn out not to be facts at all. The best explanation of a falsehood has no claims to be believed. Indeed if the falsehood is a *consequence* of the explanation, then the explanation taken as a totality must be false (though some of its components may be true). D) A better explanation may be available. For present purposes we can ignore A) and B) and concentrate on C) and D).

6. No Fact to Be Explained? Naturalism and Entailment.

What would Snare have said to my rational reconstruction? He would surely have said that it is question-begging. Why should the descriptivist concede that you can't get an *Ought* from an *Is*? Indeed, some philosophers have gone one better. They have tried to argue that the alleged fact to be explained is no fact at all since you *can* get an *Ought* from an *Is*. Some of these polemics seem to me misconceived. Some have tried to argue that non-moral premises sometimes *entail* moral conclusions. I don't think that they succeed, but in this context entailment is not the issue. **K** entails **X** iff **X** can be logically derived from **K** with the aid of certain analytic truths. Thus (if

logic is conservative) non-moral premises can only entail moral conclusions if there are what Schurz calls ‘analytic bridge principles’ connecting the moral and the non-moral. These connections hold in virtue of the meanings of words, which suggests *semantic naturalism*, the idea that the moral can be (at least partially) *defined* in terms of the non-moral. But naturalism, semantic or otherwise, is a form of moral realism and thus a form of cognitivism or descriptivism. For naturalism is the view that moral judgments are truth-apt (which amounts to cognitivism of descriptivism), that some of them are true (and thus that the error theory is false), but that their truthmakers are unobjectionable natural facts of some kind, not non-natural facts involving the kinds of spooky non-natural properties postulated by the likes of G.E. Moore. But if there are such analytic bridge principles, then non-cognitivism is false and some kind of semantic naturalism is true. In which case what are semantic naturalists doing, going all round the houses trying to disprove No-Ought-From-Is, when they should be arguing directly for their analytic bridge principles? If non-cognitivism can be disproved on the basis of analytic bridge principles, the sensible thing to do is to disprove it by producing the principles, thus preempting any inference to the best explanation. Besides, No-Ought-From-Is, to my mind, is not a thesis about *entailment* at all, but a thesis about *consequence*. It is the claim that no moral conclusion can be the *logical* consequence of non-moral premises, not the claim that no moral conclusion can be the logical consequence of non-moral premises *plus analytic bridge principles*. And this could be true even if there *were* analytic connections between the moral and the non-moral, since logic is officially blind to such connections. So I shall assume that No-Ought-From-Is is a strictly logical thesis, *not* the claim that No-Ought-is-Entailed-by-an-Is, though I shall also assume that the existence of analytic bridge principles of the right kind has not been demonstrated, and thus that the truth or otherwise of non-cognitivism remains an open question.

7. No Fact to Be Explained? Prior’s Challenge

Now, one philosopher, namely Arthur Prior, has argued in effect for option C) even though he takes No-Ought-From-Is to be a thesis about consequence rather than entailment. No-Ought-From-Is is false not because some Is *entails* an Ought, but because logic is not conservative since it is sometimes possible to deduce a new relation or affirmation from others which are entirely different from it. Let us focus on the most politically incorrect of Prior’s three counterexamples:

1. Tea-drinking is common in England.

Therefore:

2. Either tea-drinking is common in England or all New Zealanders ought to be shot.

That this is a challenge to the conservativeness of logic should be obvious when we consider the parallel inference:

1. Tea-drinking is common in England.

Therefore:

2. Either tea-drinking is common in England or all New Zealanders are hedgehogs

In the second inference, as in the first, we have a new affirmation or relation (an affirmation about hedgehogs) which is a deduction from others which are entirely different from it. And of course, Prior has two other counterexamples making much the same point.

8. Prior's Challenge Met: There is Still a Fact to Be Explained

My solution to this problem is to redefine conservativeness and then to prove it in an amended version. First I develop a concept of *inference-relative vacuity*. A (non-logical) expression occurs vacuously in the conclusion of a valid inference if it can be uniformly replaced with any other expression of the same grammatical type *salva validitate*, without prejudice to the validity of the resulting inference. In the above inferences the two subsentences 'all New Zealanders ought to be shot' and 'all New Zealanders are hedgehogs' are both vacuous in this sense. Each can be replaced by any grammatical equivalent (for instance by each other) without prejudice to the validity of the resulting inference. Then, instead of the rather vague formula that in logic you don't get out what you haven't put in, I suggest the following: In logic (first-order predicate logic at any rate) no predicate or propositional variable can appear non-vacuously in the conclusion of a valid inference unless it appears in the premises. In other words, you can't get any non-vacuous, non-logical symbol out that you have not put in. (For the proof, see Salwen's essay and the Introduction). Indeed, to logicians the proof is trite and obvious since it follows from the uniform substitution theorem.

Now Prior's counterexamples were counterexamples *both* to the conservativeness of logic *and* to No-Ought-from-Is. And just as the conservativeness of logic had to be redefined to be saved, so too does No-Ought-from-Is. Instead of that simple-minded slogan we have the admittedly less pithy No-Non-Vacuous Ought-from-Is. This too can be proved and that for an obvious reason. It is simply an instance of the conservativeness of logic, more precisely, a substitution instance of the general formula. And since the one is provable so too is the other (with the important proviso that 'ought' is not a logical word).

9. The Non-Cognitivist Argument Reformulated.

This brings us back to the inference to the best explanation. The third way such an argument can go wrong is if the fact to be explained is a non-fact. Prior's counterexamples suggested that this might be the case with No-Ought-from-Is. But this is not so. In its amended form and given a certain proviso it is not only true but demonstrable. The fact to be explained would appear to be a genuine fact. However, the argument needs to be reformulated:

1**) You can't derive a non-vacuous *Ought* from an *Is* - that is, you cannot non-vacuously derive moral conclusions [conclusions containing moral words] from non-moral premises [premises which don't contain moral words].

2***) The best explanation of 1**) is

a) that logic is conservative – a new relation or affirmation cannot appear non-vacuously in the conclusion of a valid inference unless it appears in the premises;

and

b) that since moral judgments are not designed to state facts but to express emotion or prescribe action [insert non-cognitivist theory of choice] moral words always express 'a new relation or affirmation'

Therefore (probably):

3*) The role of moral judgments is not to state facts but to express emotion or prescribe action [insert non-cognitivist theory of choice].

10. A Better Explanation: The Argument Fails

Does this argument work? No. Because the fourth way that an inference to the best explanation can go wrong is if a better explanation is available. And in this case a better explanation of 1*) - our modified version of No-Ought-From-Is - is staring us in the face. It is this:

2****) a) Logic is conservative – that is you cannot non-vacuously derive F-conclusions [conclusions containing the predicate 'F'] from non-F premises [premises which don't contain predicate 'F']

This is a better, because a simpler, explanation. It accounts for the facts without dragging in what Geach describes as the 'dubious semiotic theories' of non-cognitivism. But if you can account for the truth of No-ought-From-Is without appealing to the dubious semiotics, *then No-Ought-From-Is provides no evidence for non-cognitivism*. The inference-to-the-best-explanation argument may be formally respectable but it just doesn't work. For the crucial premise 2****) is simply false. The

best explanation of 1**) - No-Non-Vacuous-Ought-from-Is - is *not* a) that logic is conservative (since you can't get anything out that you haven't put in unless it suffers from inference-relative vacuity) and b) some kind of non-cognitivism. The best explanation of 1**) is simply the thesis that logic is conservative. Non-cognitivism is quite redundant. Thus we cannot argue for some kind of non-cognitivism on the grounds that non-cognitivism plus the conservativeness of logic affords the best explanation of No-Ought-from-Is, since, in so far as No-Ought-from-Is is a defensible thesis, it can be explained without the aid of non-cognitivism.

11. The Specific Argument: a Problem for Prescriptivism

That disposes of the Generic Argument but it leaves the Specific Argument standing. The Generic Argument failed because it paired non-cognitivism with the conservativeness of logic in the 'best explanation' of No-Ought-from-Is. And once you have got conservativeness, a better explanation of No-Ought-from-Is becomes available which relies on conservativeness alone. But there is no explicit mention of conservativeness in the Specific Argument (though Hare's 'rule' might be regarded as an instance of it). So it is not so obvious that an explanation of No-Ought-from-Is which relies on conservativeness alone is better than an argument which relies on a) Hare's rule (which in turn is derived from a conception of imperative consequence) plus b) the prescriptivist thesis that moral judgments typically contain an imperative element. But the Specific Argument suffers from a different defect. The version of No-Ought-from-Is that prescriptivism helps to explain is in fact false. Indeed it was refuted by Prior. Thus the fact that the prescriptivist thesis plus Hare's rule 'explains' this version of No-Ought-from-Is provides no evidence for prescriptivism. Indeed it is worse than that. What implies a falsehood is itself false. The conjunction of prescriptivism plus Hare's rule implies a falsehood. And since Hare's rule follows from a sensible conception of imperative consequence, it is the prescriptivist conjunct that has to go. My argument can be summarized thus:

1#) If a) no imperative conclusion can be validly drawn from a set of premises that does not contain at least one imperative; and b) moral judgments typically contain an imperative element, then Prior's 'counterexamples' to No-Ought-from-Is are invalid.

But

2#) Prior's 'counterexamples to No-Ought-from-Is are *not* invalid (rather we have to reformulate No-Ought-from-Is).

Therefore

3#) Either c) an imperative conclusion *can* be validly drawn from a set of premises that does not contain at least one imperative, or d) moral judgments do not typically contain an imperative element.

But

4#) no imperative conclusion can be validly drawn from a set of premises that does not contain at least one imperative (this follows from our Hare-based conception of imperative consequence).

Therefore:

5#) Moral judgments do not typically contain an imperative element (and prescriptivism is false).

The argument is valid, but is it sound? That all depends on premise 1#) since 4#) is common ground and 2#) is obviously true.

12. Prior Refutes Prescriptivism

What is the imperative content of ‘All New Zealanders ought to be shot’ according to prescriptivism? Something like ‘Shoot all New Zealanders!’ (addressed to the world at large). There may be more to it than that, such as indicative component expressing the shoot-worthy characteristics shared by New Zealanders, but it means at least that. Armed with this elevating imperative, let us examine Prior’s inference:

1. Tea-drinking is common in England.

Therefore:

2. Either tea-drinking is common in England or all New Zealanders ought to be shot.

Under prescriptivism the conclusion metamorphoses into the somewhat quaint disjunction:

2’. Either tea-drinking is common in England or shoot all New Zealanders!

Now what is the semantic status of 2’? One disjunct is indicative and the other imperative. But what is the status of the disjunction as a whole? We need some kind of principled method to adjudicate such questions since, if prescriptivism is correct, Prior’s conclusions are mostly complex sentences with imperative and indicative components. The right rule seems to be this. A complex sentence qualifies as an indicative if it is either logically true or logically false or if it is logically possible *both* for it to be true *and* for it to be false (though not both at the same time). It qualifies as

an imperative if it is possible *both* for it to be obeyed *and* for it to be disobeyed. This leaves open the possibility that some sentences are both imperative *and* indicative with respect to the same content (as opposed to decomposing into two sentences one of which which is indicative and the other imperative). I suspect that this possibility is never realized, but it does not do to be dogmatic and I would not want to exclude the possibility by conceptual fiat. Now what about 2'? Is 2' semantically capable *both* of being true *and* of being false? Perhaps it can be true if the first disjunct is true (though this sounds very odd to me). But if the indicative disjunct were *false*, the disjunction *as a whole* would not be false. Indeed it is precisely under these circumstances that its imperative status becomes evident. For if tea-drinking were not common in England we could either obey 2' by shooting all New Zealanders or disobey it by letting some live. And since it can be obeyed *and* disobeyed (at least under these circumstances) it qualifies as an imperative. Indeed 2' is equivalent to:

2'': If tea-drinking is not common in England, shoot all New Zealanders!

which despite its indicative antecedent, is clearly in the imperative mood. Now does 2' follow from 1? Not if Hare is right, and *no imperative conclusion can be validly drawn from a set of premises that does not contain at least one imperative*. For the set of premises consisting of 'Tea-drinking is common in England' does not contain any imperatives. Not if I am right, and an imperative **X** follows from a set of premises **K** only if i) **K** cannot be obeyed without obeying **X** and ii) **K** can be obeyed. For premise 1 - 'Tea-drinking is common in England' - cannot be obeyed since it is not an imperative. Thus if prescriptivism were correct, Prior's Tea-drinking Inference would not be valid. But it is valid. So prescriptivism is not correct.

What about the Chair Inference?

3. There is no man over 20 feet high.

Therefore:

4. There is no man over 20 feet high who is allowed [morally permitted] to sit in an ordinary chair.

More perspicuously, we can state 4 as follows (confining the domain of discourse to persons):

4'. For anyone if they are a man over 20 feet high then they ought not to sit in an ordinary chair.

If prescriptivism were correct, what would be the imperative content of 4'? Surely this:

4'': For anyone if you are a man over 20 feet high, then do not to sit in an ordinary chair!

Now 4 and 4' follow from 3. But 4'' does not. To begin with 4'' is not an *indicative* consequence of 3, since it is not itself an indicative. But neither is it an imperative consequence of 3. For, according to Hare himself, *no imperative conclusion can be validly drawn from a set of premises that does not contain at least one imperative* and the singleton set containing Premise 3 does not contain an imperative. And according to my conception of imperative consequence (from which Hare's principles can be derived) an imperative **X** only follows from a set of premises **K** if i) **K** cannot be obeyed without obeying **X** and ii) **K** can be obeyed. But since 3 is an indicative the purported inference fails condition ii). Now, if 4 and 4' follow 3 but 4'' does not, 4'' cannot be part of the meaning of 4.

What about the Undertaker inference?

5. Undertakers are Church officers

Therefore

6. If all Church officers ought to be reverent, undertakers ought to be reverent.

If prescriptivism were correct, what would be the imperative content of 6? That's a hard one, and the very fact that it is a hard one seems to me a problem for prescriptivism. My best guess is:

6'. If (be reverent Church officers!) then (be reverent undertakers!)

But we really don't need to decide. For on Hare's showing it must *have* imperative content, since a) it can be derived from an entirely moral premises ('Undertakers ought to do whatever all church officers ought to do') and b) it can be used in conjunction with another moral premise to derive an obviously moral conclusion, thus:

6. If all Church officers ought to be reverent undertakers ought to be reverent.

7. All Church officers ought to be reverent

Therefore

8. Undertakers ought to be reverent.

A thesis that can be derived from an entirely moral premise and can be used (in conjunction with another entirely moral premise) to derive an obviously moral conclusion (which cannot be derived

from the other premise alone) bids fair to being a moral proposition. Hence if prescriptivism were correct it would have to have imperative content. But if it had imperative content it would not follow from the indicative premise 5 - that undertakers are Church officers. But it *does* follow from that premise. Therefore it does not have imperative content and prescriptivism is false.

13. Taking Stock

Snare construed Hume as a non-cognitivist but was puzzled as to how No-Ought-From-Is could provide an argument for non-cognitivism, No-Ought-From-Is follows from non-cognitivism (with the aid of the assumption that logic is conservative). But vice is not versa - non-cognitivism does *not* follow from No-Ought-From-Is. So it is hard to see how No-Ought-From-Is can provide argumentative backing for non-cognitivism. But perhaps an inference to the best explanation can be constructed which takes No-Ought-From-Is as a datum and reasons backwards to non-cognitivism via the conservativeness of logic. Unfortunately, in so far as No-Ought-From-Is is true - which it only is in a the modified form of No-Non-Vacuous-Ought-From-Is - a better (because simpler) explanation is available, namely that logic is conservative, i.e. that you cannot non-vacuously derive F-conclusions (conclusions containing the predicate 'F') from non-F premises (premises which *don't* contain the predicate 'F'). So Snare was basically correct. All those philosophers - from Hare and Nowell-Smith through to the middle Flew - who seem to be arguing *from* No-Ought-From-Is *to* non-cognitivism were making a ghastly mistake. You can't do it deductively (since No-Ought-From-Is follows from non-cognitivism but not vice versa) and you can't do it abductively either, since the best explanation of No-Ought-From-Is - that logic is conservative - does not include non-cognitivism. That is bad enough. But the inference-to-the-best-explanation *from* No-Ought-From-Is *to* prescriptivism turns out to have been a disastrous *faux pas* on the part of R.M.Hare. For prescriptivism implies a variant of No-Ought-From-Is that turns out to be false - a point proved long ago by Prior. And since what implies a falsehood is itself false, we can see, retrospectively, that by 1960 Prior had refuted prescriptivism in - three years before the publication of *Freedom and Reason* in 1963. Hare's intellectual baby was still-born.

14. A Puzzle Renewed: What is the Point of No-Ought-From-Is?

But if we cannot argue *from* No-Ought-From-Is *to* non-cognitivism and if we don't need non-cognitivism to *derive* No-Ought-From-Is (which is why the abductive argument fails) the non-cognitivist interpretation of Hume. begins to look a lot less plausible. Of course, Hume was not infallible, any more than his would-be disciples, and he *might* have been putting forward a fallacious argument for something like non-cognitivism without realizing that it was fallacious. But we should at least consider the possibility that Hume was *not* arguing fallaciously to (or from) non-

cognitivism, but that he had a respectable argument for some other thesis. After all Hume never commits himself to non-cognitivism in print; indeed his explicit meta-ethical pronouncements suggest that he thinks of moral properties as akin to secondary properties, (of which he admittedly takes a subjective view). ‘Vice and virtue, therefore, may be compar’d to sounds, colours, heat and cold, which, according to modern philosophy, are not qualities in objects, but perceptions in the mind’ (T, 3.1.1.26/469). We don’t attribute to Hume a non-cognitive theory of colors. Why then should we attribute to him a non-cognitivist theory of vice and virtue? The reason, in so far as there is one, is that the two chief arguments of in *Treatise* 3.1.1 - No-Ought-From-Is and Motivation Argument - *seem* to support non-cognitivism rather than a dispositional theory of value. With No-Ought-From-Is this has proved to be an illusion. No-Ought-From-Is neither implies nor presupposes non-cognitivism. But what about the Motivation Argument? ‘Morals excite passions, and produce or prevent actions. Reason of itself is utterly impotent in this particular. The rules of morality, therefore, are not conclusions of our reason’ (T, 3.1.1.6/457). Now, if ‘reason’ is construed as our belief-forming faculty - which is the way that Hume is commonly read - what can it mean to say that ‘the rules of morality are not conclusions of our reason’ *except* that moral judgments are not genuine beliefs? Nothing perhaps. But if ‘reason’ is *not* (for Hume) our belief-forming faculty - if some of our beliefs are *not* derived from reason - then to say that moral distinctions are not derived from reason *need not* be to say that moral judgments are not genuine beliefs. So what does Hume mean by ‘reason’? He seems to use ‘reason’ as a synonym for what his logic professor Colin Drummond called ‘discursus’, an operation of the mind that consists in ‘running around’ from the premises to the conclusion of an inference (where the inferences are deductive in the first part of the *Treatise* but deductive *or* inductive thereafter). .

Q What is the third operation of the mind?

R Discursus.

Q What is Discursus?

R It is the operation of the mind by which one [?] statement is inferred from another.

Q Why is this operation of our mind called ‘discursus’ [literally ‘running’]?

R It is a metaphor drawn from the motion of animals, for just as they run from one place to another, when the mind draws conclusions from truths it proceeds to something fitting. (Drummond, 1724, *Compendium Logicae*)

In the words of Don Garrett ‘reason’, for Hume, ‘specifically designates the faculty of making inferences’. So when Hume denies that moral distinctions are derived from reason, what he is denying is that moral beliefs are ‘the product[s] of inference operating on representations of the

objects of evaluation'. He is insisting on some 'noninferential element' in the formation of our moral opinions. (Garrett, 1997, p. 193). And this is what we should expect if virtue, for Hume, is analogous to violet. For Hume, a practice or a trait is a virtue if (given the actual configuration of the moral sense and under the right conditions) it tends to arouse a sentiment of approbation in human beings, just as a flower is violet if (given the actual configuration of the *visual* sense and under the right conditions) it tends to arouse *violet* sensations in human beings. In the case of violet the right conditions consist in viewing the flower under some approximation to ordinary daylight and without the interference of rose-tinted spectacles. It is only when we contemplate the object under such conditions that our visual sense informs whether it is really violet. In the case of virtue, the conditions consist in being informed, dispassionate and disinterested (taking the general point of view and discounting the effects of partial passions). It is only when we contemplate a practice under these conditions (and thus without 'the delusive glosses of superstition or false religion'[EPM, 9.1.3/270]) that our moral sense informs us whether it is really a virtue. But, generally speaking, we do not *reason* our way to the opinion that an object is violet - we arrive at this belief by contemplating the object under the correct conditions and *seeing* that it is so. Similarly we do not *reason* our way to the opinion that a practice is virtuous - we arrive at this belief by contemplating the practice under the correct conditions and *feeling* that it is so. We may have to reason our way to the correct conditions, that is to becoming relevantly informed. (For example, it typically takes some intellectual effort to purge oneself of the 'delusive glosses of superstition and false religion'!) 'But after every circumstance, every relation is known, the understanding has no farther room to operate, nor any object on which it could employ itself. The approbation or blame, which then ensues, cannot be the work of the judgment, but of the heart' (EPM, App. .11/290). This is the 'noninferential element' that in Hume's opinion is vital in arriving at moral distinctions. As Hume insists, there *is* a 'matter of fact' here 'but it is the object of *feeling*, not of reason' (T, 3.1.1.26/468)³.

' Thus the general aim of *Treatise* 3.1.1 is to prove that our moral opinions are not based on reasoning or inference but are due to the operations of the moral sense. Hume is out to establish the primacy of feeling over argument. Snare himself had it right with a thesis he dismissed as too weak to be what Hume had in mind⁴:

N2. Moral judgments are not *inferred* (deductively inductively or whatever) beliefs.

But as Snare himself notes, N2 implies the even weaker claim

N3. Moral judgments are not *deductively inferred* beliefs. (Snare, 1991, p. 14.)

And this is the specific point that Hume is trying to prove with the aid of No-Ought-From-Is.

15. No-Ought-From-Is: What Hume was Really Up To

Hume makes large claims for No-Ought-From-Is. He professes to be ‘persuaded’ that a ‘small attention’ to this point, ‘would subvert all the vulgar systems of morality’, But since he does not deign to identify the vulgar systems, let alone the vulgarians who promoted them, this isn’t much help. Who was he talking about? And how were their systems supposed to be subverted?

Hume is being cheeky. He is coyly dismissing some of the most famous philosophers of the day as intellectual riff-raff. He identifies his targets a few pages back: ‘There has been an opinion very industriously propagated by certain philosophers, that morality is susceptible of demonstration; and tho’ no one has ever been able to advance a single step in those demonstrations; yet ’tis taken for granted, that this science may be brought to an equal certainty with geometry or algebra. (T, 3.1.1.18/463)’ These industrious propagators (or a sub-class of these propagators) are the vulgar philosophers that Hume had in mind, since these are the systems that No-Ought-From-Is is designed to subvert. In the late 17th and early 18th centuries, demonstrative systems of morality were all the rage. Some of the most illustrious philosophers of the age as well as many lesser lights - Descartes and Malebranche, Hobbes and Spinoza, Locke and Pufendorf, Cumberland and Clarke, Burnet and Balguy - were either claiming to demonstrate the truths of morality or arguing that morality is (at least in part) demonstrable. (See Kraye, 1998, pp. 1301-1308, James 1998, and Norton & Norton, 2007, pp. 884-893, and Raphael, 1991, 104-118, 119-153, 224-261, 436-461) If they weren’t trying to get in on the act themselves, they were arguing (often ferociously) that demonstrating morality is an act that it is possible to get in on. (In Clarke’s case, in particular, the rhetoric of demonstrability threatens to overwhelm the demonstrations themselves. See Raphael, 1991, 224-261.) But the demonstrative moralists fall into two classes: the naturalists and the non-naturalists. The naturalists purport to derive the truths of morality from self-evident but *non*-moral premises whereas the non-naturalists typically include some moral principles amongst their axiom set. The distinction is a little difficult to draw in practice since, despite the rhetoric of logical and geometric rigor, it is often hard to tell what is supposed to follow from what. Nevertheless some philosophers, such as Cudworth, Clarke and Balguy, seem happy to take moral propositions as basic⁵ whereas others, such as Hobbes, Locke and Spinoza want to derive morality from something *else*, such as facts about God or human nature⁶. Thus Locke:

The idea of a supreme being, infinite in power, goodness, and wisdom, whose workmanship we are, and on whom we depend; and the idea of ourselves, as

understanding rational beings; being such as are clear in us, would, I suppose, if duly considered and pursued, afford such foundations of our duty and rules of action, as might place morality amongst the sciences capable of demonstration; wherein I doubt not but from self-evident propositions, by necessary consequences, as incontestable as those in mathematics, the measures of right and wrong might be made out to any one that will and attention to the one, as he does to the other of these sciences. (*Essay*, 4.3.18/549.)

It is clear that this ‘demonstration’, if were to be constructed, would be precisely the kind of thing that Hume makes fun of in the Is/Ought passage. It would start off with ‘the being of a God’ and ‘observations concerning human affairs’, and would then progress via ‘deductions’ or ‘necessary consequences’ to claims about what we ought to do. Philosophers like Clarke seem to have something similar in mind except that in their case *some* of the self-evident propositions from which morality is to be derived appear to have moral content. Even Locke seems to think that there might be self-evident propositions involving distinctively moral notions. He goes on to say:

"Where there is no property, there is no injustice," is a proposition as certain as any demonstration in Euclid: For the idea of property being a right to any thing, and the idea to which the name injustice is given, being the invasion or violation of that right; it is evident, that these ideas, being thus established, and these names annexed to them, I can as certainly know this proposition to be true, as that a triangle has three angles equal to two right ones. (*Essay*, 4.3.18/549.)

Since demonstrative inferences are a kind of reasoning and since the object of 3.3.1. is to show that moral distinctions are *not* derived from reason, Hume is obviously opposed to such claims. Indeed he is quite explicit: ‘If you assert that vice and virtue consist in relations susceptible of certainty and demonstration ... you run into absurdities from which you will never be able to extricate yourself’ (T, 3.1.1.20/363). For Hume *substantive* truths about vice and virtue are not ‘susceptible of certainty and demonstration’.

Here’s an argument that would (if sound) dispose of *both* sets of demonstrative moralists, (the naturalists and the non-naturalists) in which No-Ought-From-Is plays a crucial role. If we take this to be Hume’s underlying argument, the role of No-Ought-From-Is becomes clear. The point of the principle - Premise iii) of my reconstruction - is to dispose of the naturalists whilst another premise - Premise ii) - is needed to skewer the non-naturalists.

- i) For a moral proposition to be demonstrable it would have to be either a) self-evident or b) deducible from self-evident propositions.
- ii) No [non-trivial] moral proposition is self-evident (such that its negation implies a contradiction).
- iii) You can't get an *Ought* from an *Is*. No moral proposition - that is no proposition involving distinctively moral notions - can be deduced from non-moral propositions - that is, propositions innocent of moral content. [This follows from the principle, widely accepted in Hume's day, that the conclusion of a valid inference is contained within the premises. If the premises contain no *oughts* then there should not be any *oughts* in the conclusion.]
- iv) Triviality is closed under deduction. That is, if **K** is trivial and **X** can be deduced from **K**, then **X** is trivial too.
- v) Therefore no [non-trivial] moral proposition is demonstrable

I submit that Hume subscribes to each of the premises as well as the conclusion, so it is reasonable to ascribe him this argument.

Premise i) is simply a commonplace of early modern logical theory. For a proposition to be demonstrable it must be either self-evident or derivable from self-evident propositions by 'necessary consequences' in which the premises can't be true and the conclusion false.

Premise ii) was defended by Hume's sometime philosophical hero Hutcheson, and is defended by Hume himself at *Treatise* 3.1.1.18-25. Hume assumes that only propositions involving the four relations of '*resemblance, contrariety, degrees in quality, and proportions in quantity and number*' are self-evident, and then endeavors to prove, with a rather lame and confused argument that these cannot provide the basis for any moral propositions. In the *Treatise* he seems to deny the existence of *any* self-evident moral propositions but in the ECU he relents and in effect concedes that *some* moral propositions are self evident, but that the propositions in question are trivial.

It seems to me, that the only objects of the abstract sciences or of demonstration are quantity and number, and that all attempts to extend this more perfect species of knowledge beyond these bounds are mere sophistry and illusion. As the component parts of quantity and number are entirely similar, their relations become intricate and involved; and nothing can be more curious, as well as useful, than to trace, by a variety of mediums, their equality or inequality, through their different appearances. But as all other ideas are clearly distinct and different from each other, we can never advance

farther, by our utmost scrutiny, than to observe this diversity, and, by an obvious reflection, pronounce one thing not to be another. Or if there be any difficulty in these decisions, it proceeds entirely from the undeterminate meaning of words, which is corrected by juster definitions. That *the square of the hypotenuse is equal to the squares of the other two sides*, cannot be known, let the terms be ever so exactly defined, without a train of reasoning and enquiry. But to convince us of this proposition, *that where there is no property, there can be no injustice*, it is only necessary to define the terms, and explain injustice to be a violation of property. This proposition is, indeed, nothing but a more imperfect definition. It is the same case with all those pretended syllogistical reasonings, which may be found in every other branch of learning, except the sciences of quantity and number; and these may safely, I think, be pronounced the only proper objects of knowledge and demonstration. (ECU 12.3.2/163)

In other words, Locke's vaunted self-evident truth - *that where there is no property, there can be no injustice* - is, in Locke's own terminology, a 'trifling proposition' (*Essay*, 4.8/609-617). I think that Hume is right about this and that Locke's demonstrable truth is indeed a trivial analyticity, a mere truth of language. But Hume's concession still entails that there are *some* self-evident propositions that *don't* involve the four relations of '*resemblance, contrariety, degrees in quality, and proportions in quantity and number*' (at least not in any obvious sense). And he needs a proof - or at least an argument - that all such propositions are trivial.

In fact, Hume subscribed to a principle that would have gotten him at least part of the way. He thought that a proposition is only self-evident if its negation entails a contradiction. This trait is inherited by propositions which are not themselves self-evident but are derived via deductive inference from premises which are. It is therefore a trait shared by *all* demonstrative propositions. 'When a demonstration convinces me of any proposition, it not only makes me conceive the proposition, but also makes me sensible, that 'tis impossible to conceive any thing contrary. What is demonstratively false implies a contradiction' (*Abstract* 18/652-653). It follows that any proposition whose negation does not entail a contradiction is not self-evident (a principle of which he makes ample use elsewhere). But given the principle that a proposition is only self-evident if its negation entails a contradiction, Hume could have argued that no non-trivial moral claim would be likely to meet this condition.

Indeed, part of the point of Hume's polemic against Wollaston might have been to suggest precisely this. Wollaston (1724) believed that the essence of wrong-doing consists in deceit. If I have sex with somebody else's wife, I falsely suggest that she is not his wife but mine. Hume

joked that I might avoid the sin by closing the window and drawing he blinds, which would prevent anyone getting the wrong idea: ‘If I had used the precaution of shutting the window while I indulged myself in those liberties with my neighbour's wife, I should have been guilty of no immorality; and that because my action, being perfectly concealed, would have had no tendency to produce any false conclusion (T, 3.1.1.15n/461).’ But his real point was that Wollaston’s theory presupposes the moral principles that it purports to explain. ‘A man that is ungrateful to his benefactor, in a manner affirms that he never received any favors from him. But in what manner? Is it because it is his duty to be grateful? But this supposes that there is some antecedent rule of duty and morals (T, 3.1.1.15n/462).’ Jenny is not my wife but Johnny’s and by conducting an affair with her I perpetrate an expressive act which suggests that she is my wife not his. My action contradicts the way things are, and it is in this that its wrongness consists. But my action only contradicts the way things are if we presuppose the principle that we ought not to have sex with other people’s spouses. For if this were not so, neither Jenny nor I would be suggesting a falsehood if we decided to make the beast with two backs.

Now suppose someone were to suggest that it is self-evident that *we ought not to commit adultery*, claiming that the negation of this proposition entails a contradiction. Hume might reply that although you can derive a contradiction from its negation – that it is *not* the case that we ought not to commit adultery – you can only do this by assuming either that we *ought not* to commit adultery or some stronger thesis (or set of theses) from which the claim *that we ought not to commit adultery* can be derived. Similarly my adulterous actions only constitute an expressive act which contradicts the facts on the assumption *that we ought not to commit adultery*. Thus the negation of this supposedly self-evident proposition - *that we ought not to commit adultery* - does not entail a contradiction *by itself* - it only entails a contradiction when conjoined with the claim *that we ought not to commit adultery*. And every proposition, whether necessary, contingent or false, entails a contradiction if conjoined with its own negation. Thus Hume seems to think that although you can derive a contradiction from a moral principle and its negation, it is impossible to derive a contradiction from the negation of such a principle by itself. Or at least, you can only do so if the principle in question is a ‘trifling proposition’ , and thus devoid of substantive content.

As for Premise iii) that is simply the No-Ought-From-Is thesis which is itself a trivial consequence of another commonplace of early modern logical theory - that in a deductive inference ‘although the form of the syllogism be never so irregular ... the premises do really contain the conclusion that is deduced from them, which is a never-failing test for true syllogisms’ (Watts, 1996, p. 284 [originally published 1724]). Thus if there is no ‘ought’ in the premise it is indeed ‘altogether inconceivable’ that this ‘this new relation [could] be a deduction from others, which are entirely different from it.’

Premise iv) would appear to be implied by the passage from the EHU that I have quoted already. It is clearly Hume's opinion that 'pretended syllogistical reasonings' from premises that are little more than 'imperfect definitions' will lead to conclusions which are as trivial in themselves as the premises from which they are derived.

Thus we have an argument leading from premises Hume accepted to a conclusion that he believed; an argument which explains the function of No-Ought-From-Is. The systems it is designed to subvert are those of the demonstrative naturalists a group which included the leading philosophers of Hume's era.. If, as Hume probably believed, demonstrative non-naturalism is non-starter then a 'small attention' to No-Ought-From-Is would indeed tend to show that the distinction of vice and virtue is not founded merely on the relations of objects (as the demonstrative moralists like to think) and that is is not 'perceived by [demonstrative] reason'.

16. A Final Puzzle: Whatever Happened to No-Ought-From-Is?

But a final puzzle remains. Why does Hume banish No-Ought-From-Is from the *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* after trumpeting it in the *Treatise*? In the EPM, as in the *Treatise*, Hume argues that moral distinctions are not derived from reason but are the products of a moral sense (though again we must use reasoning to determine the facts before the moral sense comes into play). Furthermore he redeploys the Motivation Arguments in order to establish this conclusion:

The end of all moral speculations is to teach us our duty; and, by proper representations of the deformity of vice and beauty of virtue, beget correspondent habits, and engage us to avoid the one, and embrace the other. [That is, our moral beliefs *motivate* us.] But is this ever to be expected from inferences and conclusions of the understanding, which of themselves have no hold of the affections, nor set in motion the active powers of men? They discover truths: But where the truths which they discover are indifferent, and beget no desire or aversion, they can have no influence on conduct and behaviour. [Beliefs derived from reason do not motivate without the aid of some pre-existing passion.] (EMP,1.7/172.)

But the Is/Ought argument has completely disappeared. The argument which was supposed to subvert all the vulgar systems of philosophy has now been quietly burked. Why did Hume suppress an argument of which he had formerly made so much? Perhaps because he no longer needed it. For by the end the ECU, he seems to have embraced the following principle:

ii') No non-trivial proposition (with the possible exception of the truths of arithmetic and geometry) is self-evident (such that its negation implies a contradiction).

This, I take it, is part of what Hume is trying to establish in the passage I have cited already, ECU. 12.3.5/163:

...the only objects of the abstract sciences or of demonstration are quantity and number, and that all attempts to extend this more perfect species of knowledge beyond these bounds are mere sophistry and illusion. [For example] to convince us of this proposition, *that where there is no property, there can be no injustice*, it is only necessary to define the terms, and explain injustice to be a violation of property. This proposition is, indeed, nothing but a more imperfect definition. It is the same case with all those pretended syllogistical reasonings, which may be found in every other branch of learning, except the sciences of quantity and number; and these may safely, I think, be pronounced the only proper objects of knowledge and demonstration.

But once he has ii') Hume can prove that morality is not demonstrable without the aid of No-Ought-From-Is.

i) For a proposition to be demonstrable it would have to be either a) self-evident or b) deducible from self-evident propositions

ii') No non-trivial *proposition* (with the possible exception of the truths of arithmetic geometry and - Hume should say - logic⁷) is self-evident (such that its negation implies a contradiction).

iii) Triviality is closed under deduction. That is, if **K** is trivial and **X** can be deduced from **K**, then **X** is trivial too.

iv) No non-trivial *moral* proposition is demonstrable.

Thus, given a principle which is useful, if not vital, if the No-ought-From-Is argument is to do its business - that with the possible exception of the truths of arithmetic, geometry (and maybe logic), *no* non-trivial truths, whether moral or otherwise, are self-evident – Hume can derive the conclusion

that he is arguing for – that no non-trivial *moral* proposition is demonstrable. Hence No-Ought-From-Is could be safely suppressed since it had proved to be redundant.

¹ Hare espouses but does not discuss another rule: *No indicative conclusion can be validly drawn from a set of premises which cannot be validly drawn from the indicatives among them alone.* But as Geach pointed out (Geach, 1980, pp .273-274) this is clearly false. If the King says ‘If you are a faithful subject, rise up Sir George - but do not rise up, stay on your knees fellow!’, it is a consequence of the King’s two commands that the unfortunate George is not a faithful subject. For the King can only consistently issue the two commands on that assumption. Furthermore it is possible to construct a conception of consequence for imperative-to-indicative inferences that explains why this is so. At first sight this looks very easy. An indicative **X** is the consequence of a set of imperatives **K** if **K** cannot be obeyed unless **X** is true. But this won’t do. For it has the unfortunate implication that every command has the consequence that it is obeyed (since it cannot be obeyed unless the proposition *describing* its obedience condition becomes true.). Thus an extra dash of sophistication is required. Imperatives are typically addressed to agents or sets of agents. And the context presupposes a set of possibilities with respect to the agent, states it is deemed possible for the agent to affect. (Of course the wicked Queen in the fairy story may command the Prince to perform a task that she believes to be impossible (such as slaying an invulnerable dragon) but with respect to his commands she is officially deeming the impossible task to be possible in order to send the unfortunate Prince to his doom.) A set of imperatives **K** implies an imperative **X** iff a) the imperatives in **K** can be obeyed, b) the imperatives in **K** cannot be obeyed without obeying **X**, and obeying **X** is deemed possible with respect to the agent. A set of imperatives **K** implies an indicative **X**’ iff a) **K** can be obeyed b) **K** cannot be obeyed unless **X**’ is true and c) bringing about the state of affairs described by **X**’ is *not* deemed to be possible for the agent. Given this amendment, it is not a consequence of any command that the command is obeyed, for the command is deemed to be possible wrt the agent (otherwise there would be no point in issuing the command). It *is* a consequence of the King’s commands that George is not a true and faithful subject since *becoming* unfaithful is no longer within George’s power, as whether he is unfaithful or not depends upon what he has already done, not on anything he can do in the immediate future. And this in turn means that George is not commanded to be unfaithful. So Hare’s principle is false. An indicative conclusion *can* be validly drawn from a set of premises which cannot be validly drawn from the indicatives among them alone. But since Hare’s principle follows from the conservativeness of logic, its falsehood calls conservativeness into question at least as Hare conceives it. It is *not* in general the case that a sentence with a certain *force* can only appear in the conclusion of a valid inference if a sentence implying it appears with the same force in the premises.. But the inference manifests conservativeness of a kind - conservativeness with respect to *content*. This is obvious if we give a formal presentation of the inference:

Context: **P** & **~P** are not possible wrt the agent.

- 1) ! (**P** → **Q**)
- 2) !(**~Q**)
- 3) **~P**

(The expressions **in bold** represent indicatives though they may occur in the larger context of imperative formulae.) Here the propositional variable which appears as part of an imperative conditional in the first premise reappears negated in the conclusion. (The initial premise is indeed an imperative despite its apparently hybrid character since it cannot be true but can be obeyed: what has obedience conditions but not truth-conditions is not truth-apt.) Thus there is no new content as regards the variables though there is new content as regards force. But there is a complication that needs to be remarked. The King is not commanding the (in his view) traitorous George to make it the case that either he is not a

faithful subject or that he arises. He is commanding George to arise if a certain condition (his being a faithful subject) is met. That's why when he countermands the consequent, he is, in effect, asserting the negation of the antecedent (that the condition has not been met). For this reason I did not use the horseshoe to symbolize the 'if--then', as in this instance it appears *not* to be the imperative analogue of the truth-functional operator.

Someone might object that Geach and I have misconstrued the conditional premise. It is not in fact an imperative conditional but a hybrid with an indicative antecedent ('If you *are* a true and faithful subject') and an imperative consequent ('then *rise up* Sir George!'). It would be better symbolized thus: $1) P \rightarrow !Q$. Be it so. Then we still have a counterexample to Hare's Rule 1). For we have an indicative conclusion - that George is not a true and faithful subject - which can be validly drawn from a set of premises but which cannot be validly drawn from the indicatives among them alone. For it certainly does not follow from the alleged indicative component in 'If you are a faithful subject, rise up Sir George!' (namely 'you are a faithful subject') that George is not a faithful subject. Nor does it follow even if we bring in the contextual claim that being or not being a faithful subject is no longer within George's power.

² Thus the consequence relation for my imperative logic is non-monotonic. If a command $!X$ follows from a consistent set of commands K , it will not follow from the inconsistent set of commands $K \cup \{!\sim X\}$, though consistent *subsets* of $K \cup \{!\sim X\}$ will have imperative consequences. Furthermore if a command $!X$ follows from a set of imperative premises K , it may not follow from the set $K \cup C$ where C is a set of factual premises. Thus the set of imperatives {'Kill your father's murderer!' and 'Don't kill your mother!'} has the trivial consequence 'Kill your father's murderer!', Not so the set of premises {'Kill your father's murderer!', 'Don't kill your mother!' and 'Your mother is your father's murderer.'} which on my conception implies nothing at all. Thus on this conception of imperative consequence, the reason for the famous proverb 'Order, counter-order, disorder' is not that an inconsistent set of commands implies anything whatsoever, but that the set consisting of the order and the counter-order implies *nothing* whereas the order and the counter-order considered separately, imply *different* things. That, I submit, is the right result. The problem people have when trying to cope with inconsistent commands is that there is *nothing* they can do which counts as obeying them all, not that *anything* they can do counts as obeying them all.

This conception of imperative consequences has interesting analogies and disanalogies with the adaptive logics of the Ghent school of para-consistent logic (led by Diderich Batens and Joke Meheus). In an adaptive logic you will typically have an upper limit logic of close to classical strength and a lower limit logic which is para-consistent and therefore weak. We reason in accordance with the upper limit logic until we hit a premise which is inconsistent (or inconsistent with the premises assumed so far) at which point, we revert to the lower limit logic. Thus adaptive logics are non-monotonic. What follows from a set of premises K does not necessarily follow from every set of premises $K \cup \{Z\}$. However, an inconsistent set of premises will typically *have* consequences in an adaptive logic, namely whatever they imply in the lower limit logic. Given my conception of imperative consequence an inconsistent set of premises implies *nothing*, or at least nothing of an imperative nature.

³ Note that it is in principle *possible* to arrive at moral beliefs by reason. I can know on inductive grounds that I *would* approve of an action under certain conditions and thus that it would be virtuous without actually activating my moral sense. Indeed, an alien psychologist could know on the basis of anthropological data that human beings would approve of a certain practice and thus that it would be virtuous, whilst remaining a total stranger to the sentiment of approbation. But though we can arrive at moral knowledge without activating or even possessing a moral sense, the distinction between vice and virtue is not derived from reason but from feeling, though we can reason our way to moral knowledge from a knowledge of these feelings.

⁴ Snare dismisses N2 as too weak to be what Hume had in mind because he thinks that the Motivation or Influence Argument ‘seems to support ... some highly subjectivist meta-ethic’ (Snare, 1991, p. 23). But this is because he tends to interpret ‘reason’ as our belief-forming faculty rather than our inferential organ thereby excluding the possibility that some of our beliefs might be based on impressions. If reason is *not* our belief-forming faculty then Hume’s famous arguments of *Treatise* 2.3.3 do not deprive such beliefs of their motivating power.

⁵ Although I think Clarke is a non-naturalist who takes certain moral propositions as basic there are certainly passages where he seems to be arguing from *is* to *ought* without the aid of any intervening moral premises. See Raphael, 1991, 245.

⁶ So far as I can see there are *no* explicitly moral axioms in Spinoza’s *Ethics*. See Spinoza, 2002, pp. 213-383. Hobbes’ Laws of Nature are supposed to be *theorems*, things *demonstrated* not things *assumed*. See Hobbes, 1994 [*Leviathan*], ch. 14.

⁷ Hume needs this qualification avoid pragmatic self-refutation. The argument employs principles of a broadly logical kind to arrive at substantive conclusions about the nature of morality

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