

The Nature of the Relationship Between Is and Ought

By Jeff Huggins
Author, *The Obligations Of Reason*

Empty is the argument of the philosopher which does not relieve any human suffering.

– Epicurus

Note to readers — Thank you for your interest in the nature of the relationship between *is* and *ought*. This essay assumes that readers will have an understanding of certain terms as clarified in *The Obligations Of Reason*. (See pages 40-46 of the book.) In order to optimize understanding, you will also benefit from other discussions in the book. For people already familiar with scientific findings and theories linking human social-moral dynamics with evolution and other aspects of nature, if you have not yet read *The Obligations Of Reason*, you may benefit from reading my essay, *The Nature Of Morality*, before reading the following material. Thank you again for your interest!

* * *

The Nature of the Relationship Between *Is* and *Ought*

Many philosophers—and many other people—have noted an important distinction between *is* and *ought*. Put simply, just because something *is* a certain way doesn't necessarily mean that it *ought* to be that way. For example, the fact that President John F. Kennedy was assassinated certainly doesn't mean that he should (ought to) have been assassinated! More broadly, just because murder exists among humans doesn't mean that it ought to exist. And, perhaps more subtly, just because a particular natural stream in Northern California is pure and is, so far, undeveloped by humans does not *necessarily* mean that a dam shouldn't be built at some point (perhaps to prevent flooding of a nearby community) or that some of the stream shouldn't be used to supply drinking water to the community. This substantial distinction between *is* and *ought* causes many people to conclude that we can never derive an *ought* from what *is*.

On a broader, more philosophical level, one could ask, “Just because the human species exists, does that mean that it *ought* to exist? Does it mean that, as a species, we should try to continue to exist?”

Similarly, just because something is “natural” doesn’t necessarily mean it’s “good” in the way that many people use those terms. For example, leprosy, cancer, Alzheimer’s disease, and many other diseases are apparently natural but not things that most people would consider “good.” Earthquakes and hurricanes are also natural. Rape is, unfortunately, natural in some sense, among some portion of any large human population. Yet these are not considered “good,” of course. The idea that the fact that something is natural doesn’t necessarily mean that it’s good, is not quite the same as the distinction between *is* and *ought*, but is related in some ways.

Finally, there is another, different-but-related, logical fallacy that philosophers recognize: the fallacy of assuming the equality of “good” (i.e., the very definition of “good”) with some other natural or human concept, for example, with pleasure, happiness, beauty, or justice. For example, saying “happiness is good” is not the same as saying that happiness *equals* “good,” or that “good” *equals* happiness. Identifying “good” as being *equivalent* to one of these qualities or concepts, merely by assumption, is a logical error—unless a valid argument is provided that justifies the identity. Just because happiness *feels* good, and *seems* like a good thing, does not mean that we can define “good” by the statement “good equals happiness” or even by the statement “what is good is whatever maximizes total happiness,” at least not without considerable discussion and more convincing evidence.

These philosophical-logical observations have been called the “is-ought problem,” the “appeal to nature,” and the “naturalistic fallacy,” respectively. The is-ought problem—sometimes called the fact-value distinction—was identified by Scottish philosopher David Hume (1711-1776) and discussed in his *A Treatise of Human Nature*. The so-called “appeal to nature” is a common misconception that most, if not all, of us have felt at times because of our natural tendency to appreciate healthy and beautiful aspects of nature. Identification of the “naturalistic fallacy” is typically credited to British philosopher George Edward Moore (1873-1958) and his work, *Principia Ethica* (1903).

These philosophical problems and principles have been around for some time and have very real implications. As a matter of practicality, I’ll try to briefly point out their importance as ideas:

- If people felt that the world should remain exactly as it *is*, in *all* respects, then we wouldn’t try to improve our own lives, our communities, or the world at large. In other words, if there were no such thing as “ought,” there would be little meaning in striving for anything beyond the status quo.
- On the other hand, if people believe that what *should* be—i.e., what “ought to be”—is *completely* unrelated to what *is*, then two problems occur: First, we risk severing our ties to any sense of reality (including the realities and limits of nature

herself). Second, in so doing, we remove any real and solid basis for setting goals, finding “common ground,” and moving forward cooperatively.

- If people think that all things “natural” (in the narrow sense of the word) are good, and that anything *unnatural* is bad, then we wouldn’t try to cure diseases, and we would come into conflict with many of our other healthy advances.
- If people (including those in relevant disciplines who recognize the importance of the matter) could simply *assume* a definition for “good”—i.e., that “good” is the same as happiness, or whatever creates happiness, or pleasure, or justice, and so forth—then we would end up with a bunch of very different definitions, each no more valid than another, with little common basis to move forward. Furthermore, even if we happened to agree on a definition for “good”, but one that was not commensurate with realities of the natural universe, we could set unhealthy or even impossible goals. For example, if we defined “good” as “growth” (for the sake of growth), we might well exhaust our planet. As other examples, if we defined the highest “good” as being economic growth, or complete personal freedom (unencumbered by responsibilities toward others), or democracy, or even happiness, we would be missing a vitally important part of the broader picture. (What matters, of course, is not whether most people engage in philosophical debates about the definition of “good.” Indeed, what matters is not whether a *precise* definition of “good” is shared among a broad segment of the population. Instead, what matters are *decisions* and *actions* and the views—paradigms, ideologies, values, etc.—that influence them: Do most people in a given culture *act* as if they believe, either consciously or subconsciously, that the greatest good is growth, or economic growth, or personal wealth, or personal freedom, democracy, happiness, or other goal? Do they disregard or diminish other responsibilities, considerations, ideals, or potential sources of genuine fulfillment in the process?)

Much Ado About Nothing?

These questions and ideas are immensely relevant to the world’s problems and possibilities. When combined with other aspects of philosophical thought—other reigning philosophical paradigms—they shape how we see and think about important (and very real) problems.

Consider this statement about the is-ought problem from a recent article by *New York Times* science reporter Nicholas Wade, titled “Scientist Finds the Beginnings of Morality in Primate Behavior” (ref. *The New York Times*, March 20, 2007):

Philosophers have another reason biologists cannot, in their view, reach to the heart of morality, and that is that biological analyses cannot cross the gap between “is” and “ought,” between the description of some behavior and the issue of why it is right or wrong. “You can identify some value we hold, and tell an evolutionary story about why we hold it, but there is always that radically different question of whether we ought to

hold it,” said Sharon Street, a moral philosopher at New York University. “That’s not to discount the importance of what biologists are doing, but it does show why centuries of moral philosophy are incredibly relevant, too.”

A bit later in the article, referring to Dr. Frans de Waal, a leading primatologist, Mr. Wade writes:

Dr. de Waal does not accept the philosophers’ view that biologists cannot step from “is” to “ought.” “I’m not sure how realistic the distinction is,” he said. “Animals do have ‘oughts.’ If a juvenile is in a fight, the mother must get up and defend her. Or in food sharing, animals do put pressure on each other, which is the first kind of ‘ought’ situation.”

To avoid quoting or (possibly) misquoting any particular person, I will state, albeit in oversimplified form, a few themes that seem to exist in the views of many philosophers and scientists:

- Many philosophers argue that it is impossible, or at least very difficult, to derive any *oughts* from what *is*. Thus, they believe that biologists, evolutionary psychologists, neuroscientists, and other scientists cannot add much to the central moral concerns of what *ought* to be and how humans *ought* to aspire to behave (rather than merely observing how humans *do* behave).
- Meanwhile, a vocal number of scientists and philosophers argue that human behavior is largely automatic or, to put it another way, that certain aspects of *is* are much more powerful than our capacity for free choice (which we *think* we have) and our ideas about *ought*. For example, some question the degree to which many criminals are morally responsible for their own behaviors: They argue that, in many—perhaps most—cases a criminal’s behavior may have been the result of his genetic background, childhood environment, and largely *automatic* responses to whatever circumstances he faced.
- Although the gap between *is* and *ought* is widely respected among philosophers—and many consider it virtually insurmountable—some philosophers (and many scientists) have expressed concern regarding its degree and implications. For example, as Nicholas Wade wrote, primatologist Frans de Waal expressed his doubt about “how realistic the distinction is.” Others critique the “practicality” of the is-ought distinction, at least when it’s seen as preventing any reconciliation between *is* and *ought*. Yet, arguments that the is-ought distinction is not “realistic” or “practical” are not, of course, philosophically (logically) complete and compelling if they end where they begin, i.e., simply with an expression of those concerns.

Of course, many of our greatest heroes and most respected leaders are those who take steps to change the status quo and improve the world in directions that most people

acknowledge as positive: George Washington. Thomas Jefferson. Susan B. Anthony. Abraham Lincoln. Mahatma Gandhi. Martin Luther King Jr. Rosa Parks. etc. This suggests and affirms, of course, that the world's condition *can* be improved in many ways—albeit often slowly, with tensions and bumps, and in ways that sometimes create new problems while addressing older problems. In any case, most people seem to agree that some things can be improved, that the word *ought* means something, and that some *oughts* can indeed be realized.

Key Questions

In my book—*The Obligations Of Reason: Exploring the existence, nature, dynamics and implications of the Natural Moral System*—I discuss the origins and nature of morality from a scientific and philosophical standpoint, as well as related themes. In that context, I briefly discuss the is-ought problem and related issues on pages 206-210. Some aspects of the difference between *is* and *ought*, the appeal to nature, and the naturalistic fallacy are beyond the scopes of the book and this paper. The specific purpose of this paper is to discuss several aspects of the relationship between *is* and *ought* in order to help people address a few very important questions, namely:

- Does the distinction between *is* and *ought* compel us to conclude that a scientific understanding of the natural universe cannot explain the existence, origins, and dynamics of human morality?
- Does the difference between *is* and *ought* contradict the whole idea of a *natural moral system*?
- Does the difference between *is* and *ought* mean that scientists cannot discover the nature of morality and that philosophers are privileged or doomed (depending on how you look at it!) to debate the idea of morality and the definition of “good” forever, without recourse to scientific understanding or *any* of the limits of what *is*?

To answer these questions, one must understand the nature of the relationship between *is* and *ought*.¹ Clearly, the two are not identical—and they are very different in important ways. But, are they *completely* separate, unrelated, mutually-exclusive ideas, existing in two separate universes? Or are they related in important ways that can help provide answers to the questions listed above?

Ought, Humans, and A Natural Birth

The word “ought” is, as far as we currently understand, a result and discovery of the human mind. In other words, long before humans existed, and thus before we could think and speak as we do, the word “ought” didn’t exist. As far as we know (scientifically and

philosophically speaking), no earthly being, prior to humans or perhaps our recent evolutionary ancestors, sat around and consciously thought to itself, “Gee, I probably *should* do that—but do I really *want* to?”

Of course, many non-human animals have sensual, emotional, and/or cognitive capacities that allow them to sense and respond to certain situations in ways that further their interests, including (of course) their direct individual interests but also, in some cases, the interests of their children, their families, and their communities. As Dr. de Waal points out in the *New York Times* article, referring to some non-human animals, “If a juvenile is in a fight, the mother must get up and defend her. Or in food sharing, animals do put pressure on each other, which is the first kind of ‘ought’ situation.”

The ability to sense a situation and be prompted in some way (by some direct reflex, emotion, or cognitive spark) to act in order to make the situation better, is, in varying degrees, a part of every organism. Even trees—I say “even,” as much as I love them!—sense where moisture is, and which direction sunlight comes from, and tend to grow their leaves and roots preferentially to gather water and light. Do trees *think* they should (ought to) grow their roots and leaves in those directions? Not as far as we know, and certainly not in the same sense as humans can think. Nevertheless, many plants grow towards sunlight. Most animals search for food. Primates (and many other animals) protect their young. Beavers build dams. Birds and many other animals hide food in the ground for later retrieval. And so forth.

Of course, the natural abilities of animals other than humans don’t give those animals the same sense and ability of *choice* that we humans have, at least as far as we can tell. Choice, in the sense (and to the degree) that humans have it, is an emergent property of human evolution.

The cognitive component associated with the concept “ought,” and the word “ought,” in the full sense that we know them, are human capacities and inventions. They live within our brain-minds, our neural networks, and our imaginations. They suggest the possibilities of what we can discover, accomplish, or imagine. And they prompt us to behave—or at least to *consider* behaving—in ways that further the interests of kin, friends, community, and species (albeit in imprecise and sometimes misinformed ways).

Nevertheless, they are also *within* the scope of the natural universe. The word “ought” expresses a natural, evolved concept that is a result of our natural, evolved capacities. Put another way, *ought* does not exist totally separate from the natural universe, as if it came about magically, or as if it exists in an entirely different dimension, at least not from a scientific standpoint. The capacity to think *ought* is part of, and a result of, the natural universe, not outside the natural universe.

Our human capacity to think and/or feel *ought* is an emergent property of evolution. It has, of course, both emotional and cognitive components which are intimately interrelated and act in different proportions in different types of situations. The subconscious emotional dimension of *ought* is the oldest part of the mix and shares the

greatest degree of evolutionary continuity with that of our biological ancestors and relatives. The conscious portion of the cognitive aspect of *ought* is (as far as we know) a much more recent evolutionary development and is only “fully” developed in humans—though it’s not truly *fully* developed even in humans, of course. Nevertheless, even the development of this cognitive aspect of *ought* has its roots in our primate ancestors. Although we have yet to fully understand the path and continuity of this development, as well as what portion of our “ought capacity” is shared by our nearest primate relatives, scientists from a range of disciplines are working on those very questions (including Dr. de Waal, I believe).

In sum, then, *ought* comes from, and is within the scope of, nature. One does not *have to* believe that *ought* came about magically or from a dimension science cannot understand. Put another way, there are credible scientific ways to explain *ought*.

Possibilities and Limits

Not only does the capacity for *ought* result from nature, but the possibilities of *ought*—at least those with some possibility of actually being realized—are governed by nature. Thus, in more than one sense, *ought* is part of the natural universe and is intimately linked with the realities of nature.

In case that sounds overly limited, closed-minded, or unimaginative, please allow me to remind readers of *The Obligations Of Reason* what I mean by the natural universe and the realities of nature—and to briefly restate for new readers. (Please refer to more specific definitions on pages 40-46 of *The Obligations Of Reason*.) When I say “natural world” or “natural universe”, I mean *everything* in the natural universe, including its most fundamental principles and mechanisms as well as its warp and woof.

Thus, *ought* is not a completely separate and unrelated concept from *is*. They are not from mutually-exclusive dimensions of existence. Instead, *ought* is *part of is*. I don’t mean this in the sense of the statement, “Because murder exists, murder ought to exist.” Nor do I mean it in the sense of what many people would have said 150 years ago, “Man cannot fly, and it is impossible to create machines that will fly.” Nor do I mean it in the sense of the statement, “Many people will always be biased against people of different religions (or race, or gender, or . . .), so we should simply accept that aspect of life the way it is.”

When I say that *ought* is part of *is*, I use the word “is” to mean the true fundamental properties and principles of nature. Of course, we don’t fully understand all of these properties and principles just yet. There are many aspects of nature that we don’t fully understand—and some of them probably escape even our *awareness*. We may never understand *all* of nature’s principles in *all* senses. But one thing we can bet on—at least from a scientific perspective—is that, whether we ever understand all of nature’s principles or not, everything we currently *are* is enabled by those principles, and

everything we can accomplish in the future will be enabled and limited by those principles.

As discussed, our ability to think *ought* is an emergent property of evolutionary development. Our ability to *do* what we think we ought to do (when we do!) is enabled and constrained by fundamental principles. Even our ability to *imagine* oughts that are *beyond* nature's most fundamental principles is a product of our evolutionary development, and, if and when we try to accomplish those fantasies, we run up against the fundamental limits of nature sooner or later. Will a person ever be able to travel back in time, to a time even before her birth? Will a person ever be able to enter a black hole, save a friend who has fallen in, emerge alive, and receive a warm ticker-tape-parade welcome in New York for his heroism? I don't know for sure. But, if the answer is "yes," we will do so by understanding and utilizing the fundamental properties of nature, not by defying them.

Knowing The Question

Why is this "philosophical" point important? Because in order to apply the is-ought relationship accurately, a person must first understand the specific question he or she hopes to address. If someone says, "John F. Kennedy was assassinated, so he ought to have been assassinated," most of us believe (to a high degree of probability) that such a statement doesn't make sense. If someone else says, "I ought to live on Jupiter," most of us believe (to a high degree of probability) that such a goal is probably beyond possibility for the average person in the foreseeable future. On the other hand, what if someone asserts . . .

"The distinction between *is* and *ought* forces us to conclude that a scientific understanding of the natural universe cannot explain the existence, origins, or dynamics of human morality, because morality is mainly concerned with *ought* rather than *is*." ?

Well . . . not so fast! *Why* must we conclude that science can't explain morality? Is the person who makes such a statement arguing that the *is-ought problem* itself is what forces us to separate science from morality? Or, is the person who makes such a statement perhaps raising (implicitly rather than explicitly) the belief, or possibility, that God exists and that morality and *ought* are direct creations of God that are beyond the potential of scientific understanding?

Similarly, what if someone states, "The difference between *is* and *ought* undermines the whole idea of a natural moral system"? Such a person might say, "Science is the understanding of what *is*, while morality is the contemplation of what we *ought* to do, and what *ought* to be. Thus, never the twain shall meet."

I think we have addressed an important aspect of that question already, and we will consider another aspect of the answer shortly.

Survival — Context and Reminders

A key aim of *The Obligations Of Reason* is to discuss the existence, nature, dynamics, and implications of the *natural moral system*. As readers will know, in the book I explore morality from scientific and philosophical standpoints. The book aims to explain the origins, nature, and dynamics of morality on the basis of what we humans can scientifically observe, discern, and understand about the “observable natural universe.” (See the context and definitions on pages 37-48 of the book.) By “observable natural universe,” I mean all aspects of the natural principles and mechanisms that govern the universe—including the principles that enable and govern life, including human life—that are currently within, or at least eventually within, the scope of human discovery and understanding. When I use the term “nature” or “natural,” I don’t normally use it in the more narrow sense, that is, to designate only things that have not been altered by humans. Nor do I use it to define a scope that humans are *not* part of, i.e., that humans are somehow “above.”

As *The Obligations Of Reason* explains, human morality is a result of evolutionary development. For purposes of this essay, I won’t repeat the discussions and explanations contained in the book, some of which are also contained in skeletal form in my essay, *The Nature Of Morality*. For purposes here, I will summarize one of the central themes of the book so we can then continue our discussion of the is-ought problem: That is, that the central effective function of evolved human morality (e.g., our moral capacities, emotions, tendencies, and dynamics) is to support and further the survival of our genes and, through genes, of the human species. (Please see the book for more complete context and discussion.)

Please allow me to restate (and at the risk of oversimplification): Human morality, and the natural moral system, support and facilitate the survival of our genes and, through our genes, of our species. Put another way, at its core, morality is “about” survival—of genes and species, *not* primarily of individuals (relatively speaking).²

Another Aspect of the Relationship

With that context, in order to address another important aspect of the relationship between *is* and *ought*, I include, below, a three-page excerpt from a Q&A section at the end of chapter 2 of *The Obligations Of Reason*. From pages 207-210 of the book:

* * * *

Q. Just because something *is*, does that mean it *ought* to be?

A. *No.* Philosophers frequently point out the is-ought problem when an assumption is made that something *ought* to be a certain way just because it *is* that way.

Consider specific behaviors such as killing (when the killing is not justified by circumstances and clearly detracts from the goal of species survival). It is easy to see that in the case of murder, just because it *is* doesn't mean it *ought* to be. Just because it happens doesn't mean it ought to happen.

On a broader level, however, one might ask, "Just because the human species *is*, does that mean it *ought* to be?" (On some days, this seems a reasonable question.) "Just because nature acknowledges our survival—our existence—and just because we would *prefer* to survive ... does that mean we *ought* to survive, or at least try to?"

In answering this question, we must keep in mind the difference between a focus on what we can discern and understand scientifically based on observable nature (as in the premise of this book) and the question of whether a higher being exists. If God (or another higher being) exists, and if we assume that we *can't* clearly discern what God wants from us, there could indeed be a grander purpose in the universe—a higher *ought*—than we are capable of understanding. In that case, it is possible that we would be incorrect (and even presumptuous) in assuming that the human species *ought* to strive for sustainable survival. Put another way, under those circumstances, we might be incorrect in assuming that the best quality nature acknowledges in things (rocks, bugs, plants, air, humans, and so on) is their continuing existence. If a supreme being exists, it's at least possible that such a being doesn't want us to survive as a species.

However, if we maintain our focus on scientifically observable nature, we realize (or remember) two things. One is that the relevant *end* of the natural moral system is species survival, according to the logic and terms used in chapters 1 and 2. The second is that we humans are the ones asking the *ought* question, and the concept of *ought* would not even exist if not for our evolved human capabilities. Consequently, assuming we stick to our scope and focus based on the scientific understanding of observable nature, we can conclude with reasonable confidence that we are justified in believing that the human race *ought* to try to survive *and* that the natural moral system is the most valid reflection of natural human moral principles inherent in our evolved human nature.

Thus, when philosophers raise the is-ought issue, in order to have a meaningful discussion we should first agree on whether discussion will occur in a context that grants the possibility of (or assumes belief in) the existence of a higher being, or in a context based purely on scientifically observable nature.

Of course, one can (and should) still ask the question, "Just because the natural moral system exists, *ought* we to follow it, or can we rise above it?" The answer to this question is that we should *try* to do as well as we can. We should aspire to achieve the intent and higher ideals of the natural moral system in the sense of behaving in ways that achieve not only sustainable survival for ourselves, but for all species (or as many other species as possible) as well as protect the environment and facilitate health and happiness.

That said, readers should note that it isn't necessary to "rise above" the natural moral system to behave caringly, responsibly, humanely, sustainably, and well. Indeed, these are many of the *ideals* and prescriptions of the natural moral system itself. Put another way (and once again), the natural moral system doesn't suggest or condone *any* behavior just because that behavior exists in nature. The natural moral system does *not* imply that all behaviors are equally good simply because they fall within nature's vast scope. The natural moral system reflects an effective end, is directional, offers ideals, and differentiates among behaviors. In this sense, the natural moral system is not *identical* to everything *in* nature. It's selective.

Also in this sense, the natural moral system itself substantially addresses the is-ought issue as long as discussion remains within the context of scientifically observable nature—and, thus, *as long as we can reasonably conclude that the human species is justified in seeking to survive as a species*. In other words, as long as it is correct for us to conclude or assume that our species ought to survive, or at least try to survive, the natural moral system helps us differentiate between the “is” and “ought” of specific behaviors within itself. The natural moral system fails to address the is-ought question only if we discover that a supreme being has a goal in mind for us contradictory to species survival, or if a scientific discovery forces us to conclude that we ought *not* to survive.

Realistically speaking, humans aren’t quite angels. We can each personally aspire to behave in accordance with natural-moral-system principles and ideals, and with happiness-facilitating enhancements (to be discussed in chapter 4), and “rise above” as far as we can. One of the main functions of human social-moral nature (and of the natural moral system) is to help communities encourage positive behavior—and discourage negative behavior—among as many members as possible, while preserving freedoms as well. There are admirable ways to rise above the system in the sense of going *beyond* what the system might reasonably expect of average humans. On the other hand, rising above the system is not always what one might imagine. For example, as we have seen, if a person passively ignores and forgives the harmful behavior of another—even when that behavior is substantially harmful to the community—based on the notion that doing so is a form of rising above the system (or even of rising above human nature), such a person should consider that his repeated passivity and forgiveness may well be contributing to the degradation of the society’s health ... and could even get one of his neighbors robbed, cheated, or killed.

Just because something is natural (in the sense of being original to nature and unadulterated) doesn’t mean that humans must accept that it should always be exactly that way. We can choose to try to improve upon some things. But we should remember several realities of who we are and of our situation: Human nature has evolved within nature’s context. Thus, to a substantial degree, we are most healthy when nature is healthy. Furthermore, the sustainability of human life is also dependent on the sustainability and health of many aspects of the natural world. And, because of our human nature, we are often most *happy* when in healthy natural surroundings. In fact, as soon as I finish writing today, I’m heading for the beach.

Finally, we should keep in mind an important point when considering the relationship between *is* and *ought*. It is true—and very relevant to many human problems—that just because something is a certain way doesn’t necessarily mean it ought to be that way. This is the aspect of the *is-ought* relationship most discussed by philosophers. Nevertheless, it is also true that the things we decide *ought* to be —conditions of life we aspire to create, ideals, principles, behaviors, solutions, and so on—must come from what *is* or *is possible* within the vast realm of nature.

For example, although it would be a nice hope that life on Earth for all humans could fully achieve the pure and perfect conditions of love, peace, and justice that many people believe exist in Heaven (not to mention the ability to fly around and live among our departed relatives and friends), Earth is not Heaven. The *oughts* that we aspire to achieve in our earthly conditions of life, behaviors, and communities must come from what *is* or at least *is possible* in nature. I am not suggesting, of course, that we set our sights low. Instead, I am simply pointing out that *ought* is not entirely separable from *is* (or *is possible*), at least in scientific terms.

Q. What about *choice*? How does all of this change if humans don't really have reasonably free choice (i.e., if our fates are predetermined, or if we are basically robotic automatons)?

A. If our individual fates and actions are *entirely* predetermined, and if we are robotic automatons, the entire subject of morality becomes irrelevant, along with most of the way we think about our lives. Of course, the idea that every action is predetermined and beyond choice or chance is not consistent with our understanding of evolution and natural selection, the Uncertainty Principle, chaos theory, general relativity, quantum physics, or the logic of giving executives stock options to motivate them. We have to throw a lot of our thinking out the window if that's the case.

At this moment, you could choose to put this book down and stop reading, to recommend it to an interested friend, to be more kind this evening to your companion, or to pick up your phone and finally make that contribution to National Public Radio! We all know the feeling associated with choice, and it is hard to imagine that we *don't* have it or that our choices *don't* matter.

* * * *

In summary of several of the key points made in the above excerpt (along with slight expansion):

- There are three situations in which we can't necessarily assume that we are 100% justified in concluding that we, the human species, *ought* to survive—or at least ought to *try* to survive. They are:
 - If we assume that God exists or allow for that possibility, *and* if we assume (or allow for the possibility) that he *doesn't* want us to strive for survival as a species. In other words, if God exists, maybe he doesn't want us to survive as a species? ³
 - If we assume (or allow for the possibility) that some aspect of the universe, with more authority than ourselves over the matter, doesn't want us to strive for survival as a species, or offers us a better longer-term state if we *don't* strive for survival, and if such an aspect of the universe is beyond scientific reach.
 - If we scientifically discover some aspect of the universe that compels us to conclude that we should *not* survive as a species.
- Consequently, before any rigorous discussion of the is-ought question can take place, participants should first discuss—and ideally agree on—the scope of discussion: Which, if any, of the above assumptions will be included in the basis of discussion? If discussion is to take place solely in the context of principles of the natural universe (i.e., aspects of the natural universe that *are* known scientifically or can eventually be discovered and understood scientifically), then we can come to certain conclusions or, at least, to likely but tentative

conclusions—that is, conclusions that we can consider as “most probable” unless or until they are disproved. If, on the other hand, the discussion makes, or allows for, any of the assumptions outlined above, then we must conclude that there is at least a *possibility* that God (or other authoritative aspect of the universe, beyond the reach of science) does *not* want us to strive for species survival and, indeed, may have a higher goal for us than species survival.⁴

- If discussion is to take place solely in the context of the scope and principles of the natural universe, we can reasonably conclude, *at least tentatively*, that we are justified in our quest to achieve species survival—ideally in a sustainable way. For a more complete and interesting discussion of the relationship between morality and survival, refer to chapter 1, *Existence of the Natural Moral System*, in *The Obligations Of Reason*.
- Upon concluding that we are justified in aspiring to survive as a species—in other words, that survival of the human species is a “good” thing worth striving for—we can (and should) look to the dynamics of the *natural moral system* to understand our natural universal social-moral toolchest to achieve survival. Doing so will help us understand the *oughts* (as well as the “*ought not*s”) of individual types of behavior. In other words, from a scientific and philosophical standpoint, there are two important steps in the logic: The first is to realize that we are reasonably justified in concluding that we *ought* to survive as a species as well as reasonably justified in actually *trying* to survive as a species. Having arrived at that conclusion, the second step is to realize that our evolved human social-moral capacities and dynamics—reflected in the natural moral system—comprise our universal human toolchest for guiding social-moral behaviors in our survival quest. Put another way, the natural moral system (the effective function of which is survival of genes, and through genes, of species) helps us determine the *oughts/nots* of individual types of behavior.^{5,6}

In some senses, these two logical steps roughly correspond to the *why* and *how* of morality, respectively. That said, they are intimately interrelated and shouldn’t be thought of as being separate in the natural universe (rather than merely in our human ability to simplify things and think things through).

- As suggested in the excerpt above, and as discussed elsewhere in *The Obligations Of Reason*, we can make decisions and choose actions that not only satisfy the natural moral system but also help optimize our human quest for happiness, or help us achieve other noble human ideals. We shouldn’t incorrectly think of the natural moral system as setting a low standard. This notion is explained in the book, in particular in chapter 4, titled *Can We Do Better?*

Knowing The Question, Part II — Avoiding Absurd Conclusions

Given the reasoning presented above, we should not only realize that there are important differences between *is* and *ought*, but that there are important *relationships* as well. To state that, “Just because diamonds are hard doesn’t mean they should or shouldn’t be hard,” isn’t quite the same as to assert that, “Because the dam has already been built and is already blocking the river, I can’t hope to say anything meaningful about whether it should have been built or shouldn’t have been built.” It’s also not the same as saying, “Faced with the decision of whether I should kill my neighbor’s only cow, I have no idea whatsoever whether I should or not.” It’s also not the same as concluding that, “It is impossible for anyone else to say, with reasonable confidence, whether or not I should kill my neighbor’s cow—whether that other person is a philosopher or (especially) if he is a scientist.” And it’s also not the same as the ultimate conclusion of that particular line of reasoning, absurd as it may sound, which might go something like this: “*I* am the only person who can say whether I should or shouldn’t kill my neighbor’s cow, and nobody else has a right to react if I do kill it, and (by the way) I have no real basis for making my own decision!” If someone says that to you, you may not want to adopt it as your own view—and, if he really *acts* according to this statement, it may not be healthy to be his neighbor.

Importance Revisited

Of course, most people know the differences—and have a sense of at least *some* of the relationships—between *is* and *ought*. This isn’t surprising. Animals, primates, and human beings came long before there were professional philosophers or scientists. Only a relatively small number of people are concerned with questions like, “Given the is-ought problem, can biologists, neuroscientists, evolutionary psychologists, and other scientists ever really have anything important to say about morality?” Yet, those of us who do think about such questions realize how important the answers ultimately are.

I am reminded of two quotes I came across recently, one of them made long ago and one of them fairly recently. They are both relevant, in different ways. In a recent column in *The New York Times*, titled “What We Can Do” (March 27, 2007), guest columnist Rory Stewart wrote about the limits of the possible: “We must acknowledge the limits of our power and knowledge in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere and concentrate on what is achievable.” I don’t know for sure, but I doubt Mr. Stewart was saying that, in general, we should have no imagination, ideals, or goals, or that we shouldn’t take practical steps to achieve them. But, in his own way, he was probably acknowledging one of the relationships between *ought* and *is*: They aren’t completely separable.

The other quote comes from the economist John Maynard Keynes, who famously wrote:

“Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influence, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist.”⁷

Although this statement is not meant to be taken literally, of course, there is some truth in it. And, it applies to philosophical and scientific (in the sense of the natural sciences) ideas as well as to ideas of economists. Even though the vast majority of people don't consider the various implications of the is-ought problem, and most are not even aware of it in those terms, the views of philosophers on this question—whether accurate or not— influence cultural ideas and, in turn, influence how many of us live. The notions that *ought* is entirely *unrelated* to *is*, that people can never derive an *ought* from an *is*, or that science cannot have anything *vital* to say about morality, have been expressed in a variety of ways that ultimately influence cultural views.

What are those views? Well, one is the fairly common view that morality isn't even "real" but, instead, is an invention of the human imagination. Another is that morals of any sort are completely relativistic or largely random. Another is that God *must* exist because, aside from other arguments in his favor or not, morality cannot possibly come from nature, because nature can't possibly have anything to do with *ought*.

So, if Keynes is correct, and if his observation applies to philosophers and scientists as well as to economists, then the views of philosophers and scientists (including the accuracy of those views) on the is-ought question—and on the larger topic of morality—matter a lot.

Epilogue

The question arises, *Why* do many people oversimplify—often inaccurately—the is-ought problem? *Why* do many people think that the two are totally separate, and *unrelated*, and that we can never go logically from one to the other?

I think there are four answers, worth mentioning briefly.

First, for a long time, many humans have thought of themselves as being distinct from the world of nature, separate from nature, and "above" nature. With this view, it is often easy to think that our human ability to feel and think *ought* is one of those things that prove the separation. Thus, according to this view, nature can have nothing to do with the idea of *ought*.

Another confusion in the mix is the way we often use the term "natural." In a narrow but common sense, we use it to refer to things that belong to the original natural environment, to things that are unadulterated by humans, to things that are not man-made. We don't often use the term to describe the entire universe and everything in it, ourselves included. So, again, the idea that nature can have anything to do with *ought* is foreign to many.

There is also a view, already mentioned, that *ought* is a highly proprietary realm of God. Thus, many people don't want to acknowledge, or even consider, the relationship between *ought* and nature—that is, between *ought* and *is*. Of course, if God exists, then

God probably created nature too! So, the view that *ought* and nature are wholly unrelated, or that nature could not have given rise to *ought*, even in a universe that may have been created by God, doesn't seem logically sound.

Finally—and I think this may be the most significant reason behind the common misunderstanding of the is-ought problem—there is a difference between thinking in is-ought terms with respect to common everyday experiences, and using the is-ought problem to address (or not address!) larger questions. It is easy to see that, just because a steel ball rolls down a ramp (a matter of scientific understanding), we can't necessarily say that the ball *should*, or *should not*, have rolled down the ramp in a *moral* sense. And certainly, just because cancer exists doesn't mean that it *ought* to exist. So, based on these types of common experiences, and given the understanding many people have of "science" and of the "natural sciences," it's easy to see how people can form the conclusion that *is* and *ought* have nothing to do with each other. When we approach the larger questions, we typically make the same assumption. Because *is* and *ought* are very different, we often don't acknowledge or understand their vital relationships and the fact that they *do* live in the same universe.

Our tendency to let our daily human experiences selectively influence our basic assumptions on a much larger scale—a practical human tendency in many contexts—not only confuses us with respect to the is-ought problem, but also led us to believe for many years that Earth is flat, that it is the very center of the universe, and that the U.S. Olympic basketball team could not possibly lose in international competition.

* * *

Thanks once again for your interest in the subject of morality. Please provide any input you might have—questions, comments, critiques, additions, good jokes, or simply an interest in connecting—using the CONTACT AUTHOR page of the web site, www.ObligationsOfReason.com.

I plan to post future essays, answers to FAQs, and other material in this space on the web site as time progresses.

Thanks again!

Jeff Huggins
Author, *The Obligations Of Reason*

Notes

1. The purpose of this essay is not to directly or explicitly address the three questions listed here. Instead, it is to discuss the nature of the relationship between *is* and *ought* in ways that shed light on the topic and help people, in other forums, arrive at reasonable conclusions. Although I don't take up the questions specifically in this essay, I would answer each of the three questions listed above (that is, above the reference to this note in the text) with a "no."
2. For a more complete discussion, see *The Obligations Of Reason*, in particular, chapter 1, *Existence of the Natural Moral System*. Of course, the survival of genes is ultimately related to the survival (and reproduction) of individuals as well as to their families, children, friends, and communities in a variety of ways. Our quest for happiness is also, of course, an important aspect of human life. And, this quest is related to survival as well. For more on happiness and these relationships, see *The Obligations Of Reason*, pp. 62-66, pp. 72-73, p. 77, pp. 184-186, and chapter 4, *Can We Do Better?*—dedicated primarily to the topic of happiness.
3. If God exists and wants us to survive as a species, or hopes that we do, then we can still support our quest for species survival. It is only in the situation that God exists *and doesn't want us to survive as a species* that our assumption that we ought to survive could be unjustified or inaccurate.
4. Of course, in any of these situations—i.e., in concert with any of these sets of assumptions—people can assign their assessments of probability to each assumption in order to arrive at their view of what is "most likely," their own assessment of risks, and whether they feel that the human species is justified in a quest to achieve (ideally) sustainable survival.
5. For a more complete discussion of the natural origins and dynamics of morality, the natural moral system, and the ways in which these inform our *oughts* and "*ought nots*", see *The Obligations Of Reason*.
6. When I mention the "survival" of genes in this essay, I am referring to the successful transmittal of copies of genes into future generations. For more complete discussion, see pp. 18-22, pp. 58-62, all of chapter 1, and pp. 349-352 of *The Obligations Of Reason*. For a more complete, detailed, and foundational discussion, see Richard Dawkins's groundbreaking book, *The Selfish Gene*.
7. From Keynes's *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money* (1935), according to Wikiquote. As quoted from Wikiquote.