Regarding 'Directional Dynamics' and 'Normative Facts'

Jeff Huggins

[THE FOLLOWING is a note written in 2007 on the matter. It's very relevant to the topic and, in the interest of efficiency, I've included it here rather than rewriting it for a different audience.]

XXXX,

If I understood you correctly from our discussion Friday, one school of philosophical thought holds that we (humans) can become aware of key 'normative facts' by virtue of our *intuition*, aided (or cross-checked) by *reason*. I didn't ask—so it wasn't clear to me—just how many of such 'normative facts' there are (according to this view). Also, I didn't ask whether there is a single *primary* normative fact, or *most foundational* normative fact, in this view and, if so, what it is. Is it held to be aimed at *survival*, or *sustainable survival*, or *life*? Or, is it held to be aimed at something else, such as happiness, justice, peace, love, or etc.?

Of course, I agree with the existence of at least one big 'normative fact' as far as I currently understand the terminology (and depending on what, in particular, is considered to be a 'normative fact'). I also agree that intuition can be (and often is) *very* helpful and can shed light on normative questions.

That said, it seems to me that, if such a view sees intuition as the *deepest justified source* of 'normative fact', it would need to address a few questions, including but not limited to:

- Where do our brains and intuitions come from in the first place?
- How does the 'directionality' of the intuition and resulting 'normative fact' come about?
- Why does the 'directionality' of the intuition and resulting 'normative fact' come about?

The purpose of this note is to explain, in one way at least, the *path of connection* between 'normative fact' as you describe it and what, in my view, are the more foundational dynamics and bases contained in my view of morality. This note is quick, rough, and not very eloquent. (Sorry.) If it doesn't make sense to you, or if you have questions, we can discuss this at our upcoming get-together.

Science (as well as humans in general, on an everyday basis) observes—and tries to understand—what we may often think of as 'static' facts. In other words, many people (perhaps most) often think of facts as *static* things, as if a snapshot is taken of an instant

in time. A 'fact' often seems like something that is 'there *and* then.' The words 'is' and 'fact' are often equated or confounded in this sense, I think.

But science (and humans in general) *also* observes what might be called 'dynamic facts' or, more accurately, facts *of* dynamics—i.e., facts *about* dynamics. These describe dynamics, interrelationships, movements, and/or forces among things as time ticks forward. (Thus, by 'dynamic facts', I don't mean 'facts *that* change', but rather 'facts *about* change.') Indeed, physicists and chemists place most of their focus on interrelationships, dynamics, forces, interactions, changes, and etc. rather than on truly static (still) stuff.

If someone chooses to think of science as an understanding only of what 'is', then what 'is' includes not only 'static facts' (i.e., about *stuff*, as in mass *at rest*, if there is such a thing) but also these important 'facts about dynamics.'

Now, these dynamics, in some cases, are *not* random and *un*-directional in the sense of directionality. In these cases, the dynamics work in a *directional* way. For example, time moves forward, not backward (as far as we know). Heat flows from hot items to cold. Doing work (in the sense that physicists use the term) requires the expenditure of energy. People are born *before* they die. When biological beings are hungry, they need (or at least want) to eat: They don't eat first, and *then* promptly become hungry. Gravity (however that works) is a force or phenomenon of attraction, not repulsion. And so forth.

Important directionalities *inherent in* some of these most basic natural 'facts of dynamics' are ultimately translated or 'morphed' (via the biological requirements of life, variation, and natural selection, etc.) into the most basic directionalities of our *intuitions*. Put another way, directional 'facts about dynamics' ultimately lead to, translate into, and explain what people may call a 'normative fact' that we can become aware of by virtue of intuition.

Put yet another way, the *directionality* inherent in a key intuitive 'ought'—in a 'normative fact' made accessible via human intuition—is a result of deep, fundamental dynamics of nature (some of them *directional*) channeled, translated, and shaped in biological organisms by the process of evolution.

Consider: If we were to somehow eliminate (from the universe) the dynamics that these 'facts of dynamics' attempt to describe, the universe would perhaps be nothing but a big pile of 'dust' or would contract to some other still state that we can't imagine. If we were to eliminate all of the 'facts of dynamics' that have some *directional aspect* to their nature—for example: time moves forward; heat flows from hot to cold; and etc.—the universe would be completely *random* and would, perhaps, fall into that same pile of 'dust' or other hard-to-imagine state just mentioned (given that many of the most fundamental principles *do* have some directional aspect to them). And, to deny that the directional aspects of many of these fundamental natural dynamics 'translate' or morph into (or are shaped into) some of the key directional aspects of human intuition, tendency, and desire via the process of evolution—i.e., natural selection acting upon variation in the

context of biological beings—would amount to denying (or at least misunderstanding) the process of evolution and/or the requirements of biological life.

Also consider: In an important sense (but not in all senses, of course), saying that one cannot derive any 'ought' from what 'is' is a bit like saying that one cannot derive a butterfly from a caterpillar. Caterpillars and butterflies can *seem* like two entirely different *types* of things, and unbridgeable, until a person understands how one develops and morphs (biologically) into the other. This example involves observable, obvious, physical changes. But emotional and mental changes take place as well (if we choose to use those terms for caterpillars and butterflies). In any case, in the case of humans, 'mind' and 'brain' are, of course, intimately interrelated. The same evolutionary forces that helped shape our observable bodies also helped shape our brains, emotional equipment, minds, and deepest intuitions.

Similarly, in an important sense (but not in all senses), saying that one cannot derive any 'ought' from what 'is' would be a bit like saying that it is impossible to derive a log cabin from living trees, minerals, and a few humans. Log cabins and living trees seem like two entirely different *types* of things—and they are in one sense—but that doesn't mean that we can't 'go' from one to the other, in a very natural way that should not surprise us.

Of course, this much *explains* one aspect of one part of the argument, but it is not sufficient, by itself, to *justify* as valid whatever intuition tells us—whether we call that the key 'normative fact' or the 'macro ought.' Other parts of the argument are necessary. That said, the parallelism or symmetry between what I have called the 'bottom-up' and 'top-down' portions of the argument are, in my view, confidence-building and comforting.

I should probably mention one other point here, to avoid possible confusions: 'Ought' doesn't mean that we always actually *do* the thing that we ought to do, of course. The fact that we (think we) 'ought' to do something does not necessarily mean that we have the *will* to do it or that we actually *do* it. For purposes of the current discussion, it seems helpful to call attention to this distinction in order to eliminate a possible uneasy feeling associated with the fact that we know (or at least think we know) that, in many cases, we can choose to do almost whatever we like, even if we think we ought *not* do it. If science can explain our foundational normative intuition(s), and if reason itself validates one of those in particular, then why don't we all *act* in strict accordance with the 'macro ought' at all times? Doesn't the fact that we often *don't* act that way undercut the theory and explanation? Well, no. As mentioned, *ought* and *will* and *action* are not identical. Humans are imperfect and, in more than one sense, creative.

A social instinct is implanted in all men by nature …

- Aristotle, *Politics*

Necessity is the mother and teacher of Nature. Necessity is Nature's theme and its inventor, and it is the eternal restraint and rule.

- Leonardo da Vinci

Man was destined for society. His morality, therefore, was to be formed to this object. He was endowed with a sense of right and wrong, merely relative to this. This sense is as much a part of his nature, as the sense of hearing, seeing, feeling; it is the true foundation of morality, and not the [beautiful], truth, &c., as fanciful writers have imagined. The moral sense, or conscience, is as much a part of man as his leg or arm. It is given to all human beings in a stronger or weaker degree, as force of members is given them in a greater or less degree.

- Thomas Jefferson

The following proposition seems to me in a high degree probable—namely, that any animal whatever, endowed with well-marked social instincts, would inevitably acquire a moral sense or conscience, as soon as its intellectual powers had become as well developed, or nearly as well developed, as in man.

- Charles Darwin

The moral sense perhaps affords the best and highest distinction between man and the lower animals; but I need not say anything on this head, as I have so lately endeavoured to shew that the social instincts,—the prime principle of man's moral constitution—with the aid of active intellectual powers and the effects of habit, naturally lead to the Golden Rule, 'As ye would that men should do to you, do ye to them likewise;' and this lies at the foundation of morality.

- Charles Darwin

In fact the opposition of instinct and reason is mainly illusory. Instinct, intuition, or insight is what first leads to the beliefs which subsequent reason confirms or confutes; but the confirmation, where it is possible, consists, in the last analysis, of agreement with other beliefs no less instinctive. Reason is a harmonising, controlling force rather than a creative one. Even in the most purely logical realms, it is insight that first arrives at what is new.

- Bertrand Russell

Man 'possesses' many things which he has never acquired but has inherited from his ancestors. He is not born as a *tabula rasa*, he is merely born unconscious. But he brings with him systems that are organized and ready to function in a specifically human way, and these he owes to millions of years of human development. Just as the migratory and nest-building instincts of birds were never learnt or acquired individually, man brings with him at birth the ground-plan of his nature, and not only of his individual nature but of his collective nature. These inherited systems correspond to the human situations that have existed since primeval times: youth and old age, birth and death, sons and daughters, fathers and mothers, mating, and so on. Only the individual consciousness experiences these things for the first time, but not the bodily system and the unconscious. For them they are only the habitual functioning of instincts that were preformed long ago. 'You were in bygone times my wife or sister,' says Goethe, clothing in words the dim feelings of many.

- Carl Jung

When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe.

- John Muir

Look deep into nature, and then you will understand everything better.

- Albert Einstein

