Mailbag Monday: Is-Ought Problem

Monday, January 9, 2012

Mailbag Monday: A weekly segment that covers readers' questions and concerns about all things Philosophy, Bro, and Philosophy Bro that don't quite fit anywhere else. Send your questions to philosophybro@gmail.com with 'Mailbag Monday' in the subject line.

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Alexander writes,

will you explain the is-ought problem and its implications?

Thanks bro.

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We're going to talk about the is-ought problem today.

The is-ought problem arises because of a particular property of logic called conservation. This property says that whatever your conclusion is, it has to be in your premises in some form or another. It doesn't have to be obvious - in fact, often it isn't - but it is in some form, lurking down there. (This is a really rough gloss on conservation, so bear with me here.) It's a feature that makes logic really fucking great - it tells us exactly what is and isn't supported by our premises. We want conservation in logic - it tells us whether a conclusion is valid, whether it's true or false, and whether it's supported by our premises. Conservation is our friend. When someone objects, "Wait, your conclusion isn't supported by your premises!" she is actually objecting that I've snuck something into my conclusion that isn't anywhere in my premises, which is a no-no.

The is-ought problem is a problem because of a particular property of logic called the is-ought problem. This property says that whatever your conclusion is, it has to be in your premises in some form or another. It doesn't have to be obvious - in fact, often it isn't - but it is in some form, lurking down there. (This is a really rough gloss on conservation, so bear with me here.) It's a feature that makes logic really fucking great - it tells us exactly what is and isn't supported by our premises. We want conservation in logic - it tells us whether a conclusion is valid, whether it's true or false, and whether it's supported by our premises. Conservation is our friend. When someone objects, "Wait, your conclusion isn't supported by your premises!" she is actually objecting that I've snuck something into my conclusion that isn't anywhere in my premises, which is a no-no.

So if you start with only descriptions of how things are right now, then you can't decide anything about the way things should be. You need oughts in your premises to get them in your conclusions.

Occasionally, bros invoke the is-ought problem to argue that there is no morality at all or some similar such claim. Those bros are fucking doing it wrong. It turns out that ethical theories just are attempts to provide ways to move from is to ought. For example, utilitarianism says, at bottom, that we ought to act such that...

...Wait, what?

But that's an is-statement. It just describes something about Ice and the thing he's about to do. Maybe you've heard about, but you don't have the time to wade through the text yourself. Whatever, bro, I don't judge.

Just email your requests to philosophybro@gmail.com.
As usual, the Wikipedia page is pretty helpful, both in explaining and knowing where to go next. Hume originally proposes the problem in Book 3.1 of the Treatise.

36 comments:

Brett January 10, 2012 at 12:23 AM
Enjoyed reading this. Glad to have you back, PB.

Reply

Rawrawr January 10, 2012 at 1:59 AM
Ooh, nice. I've always kinda dismissed the Is-Ought problem out of hand with a simple, "the fuck is Hume talking about anyway?... So I guess that's what Hume was talking about. Pretty awesome stuff :D

Reply

Michael H January 10, 2012 at 5:08 AM
Nice intro to a tricky subject. Keep it up.

Reply

Anonymous January 10, 2012 at 10:18 AM
I think this is the example I will use when trying to describe this problem to my 2nd year Kant students! Thanks again philosophy bro

Reply

Yaojin January 10, 2012 at 12:22 PM
Right on!

What about the evolutionary psych view?

Is: Humans have certain evolved traits.

Is: These traits include some vague sense of social ethics and of pleasure and empathy and lots of other shit I don't have time to go through and that I don't even understand yet.

Is: We are human.

Is: We will have innate tendencies toward certain judgments of what we ought to do without first posting an ethical judgment?

Reply

Yaojin January 12, 2012 at 7:30 AM
The ethical judgement occurs right when you said "we should accept our system of ethics... because we can't..."
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It is not necessary that just because we can't change it anymore that we should accept our ethical positions. One could just as easily try and change things even if they seemed fixed.

That Sartrean will never get the boulder to the top of the hill does not mean that he "should" stop. It is our own "passions" which drive us to say what we "should" or "should not" do according to Hume.

RJH January 12, 2012 at 8:58 PM
and we "ought" to imagine his happy.

Anonymous February 10, 2012 at 12:16 PM
I think Aaron was saying that you can’t change our biological make-up, not our system of ethics.

Stuart Smith January 14, 2012 at 11:56 AM
I haven’t found it especially convincing to others, but my take on the is-ought problem is that it is making an assumption I find unsurpassed - that our "ought" experience should be considered less empirically respectable than our "is" experience.

This results from the false idea at the time about how the eyes and brain work - the idea that light hits the eyes kind of like light hitting a camera, creating an image that our brain studies and identifies items from.

In fact, the way our brain builds our world is much more complex and organic than that, much closer to how a video game works like a movie - our brain appears to pick out relevant objects individually, build a landscape out of those, and then fill in the background with a vague wash.

Under such a picture, there is no reason to find our moral experiences any less respectable than our other experiences - everything has gone through the same filters, and has been picked out by our brain as relevant and important, or we wouldn’t have evolved the capacity to have that experience.

So, if we feel that something is wrong, that should be considered sufficient justification to say people ought not to do that. They can disagree, and such disagreements are pretty intractable - but anyone who’s ever argued about whether a paint colour is brown or green knows that arguments about basic, empirically derived facts are always intractable.

If we are to believe you, then we would have to accept that judgment, because empirically speaking, that is what most of humanity automatically feels.

Umibozu January 12, 2012 at 3:31 PM
If we are to believe you, then we would have to accept that judgment, because empirically speaking, that is what most of humanity automatically feels.

Yes, I suppose that is possible if you really want to divide it in that way. I wasn’t saying, however, that morals and ethics are useless or that they don’t make sense. It’s just that you cannot observe a specific occurrence and derive an ought simply out of reason.

I guess what I’m really saying is that ought statements are just another kind of is statement - that the whole distinction between the two types of claim is a mistake. Ought claims are just claims about what it is that we ought to do, and you may as well talk about the animals/cats distinction. It’s certainly broad enough that animal claims that aren’t about cats will tell us nothing about cats without the addition of a cat centered claim, but that fact does not create an animalistic distinction of the type Hume seems to intend.

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Perhaps a better analogy would be that two or more people can read the same book and have different interpretations of what is important. Not a perfect analogy, however, since there is the matter of author’s "intent" in writing, but it’s basically the same matter. We humans have differing "passions": How would we determine, exactly, which passions are more valid than others?

For instance, I can debate whether or not to eat food and make it a moral case. Should I eat food or should I not? I suppose I should eat the food I want to survive, but why should I want to survive? All sorts of arguments for and against can pop up in such a consideration without any definitive case so that it ultimately comes down to how someone feels about the matter. There is no "fabric of reality" which necessitates that I have to survive or pursue my goals even if I take them into account.

Umibozu May 14, 2012 at 5:14 AM
So, if we feel that something is wrong, that should be considered sufficient justification to say people ought not to do that.

This is exactly the reason why emotionism succumbs as an ethical theory. An example: Suppose I have a very strong feeling of repulsion towards homosexuals. Also, suppose I have a strong feeling of repulsion towards white people (I’m half Hawaiian). These feelings are violently shared by a lot of people - I’m pretty confident that the large majority of humanity doesn’t like homosexuality and given our colonial history, I can also safely assume that the largest part of humanity doesn’t like white people.

If we are to believe you, then we would have to accept that judgment, because empirically speaking, that judgment is what most of humanity automatically feels.

For the record: I don’t really detest homosexuals or whites, this is just an illustration.

Stuart Smith January 17, 2012 at 3:33 PM
Surely such an intent stands in the place of ontological reality in your metaphor. Actually, it’s a pretty much perfect fit. The world of our experiences is like a novel in a lot of ways, really - both that different people take different things away from it, and that none of them can directly access the author’s intent through reading.

As to which passions are more valid, you may as well be saying which is the more valid position - my belief that the dining room table is appropriately sized for the dining room, or my wife’s belief that it is too large and “talks over the room.” Both of us (probably) experience the same reality, yet we clearly experience it differently. And don’t get me started on “That’s brown!” “No, it’s green!” “You’re blind.” “No, you’re crazy!”
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We can not assign truth values to such things. There are basically two places we can look – consequence and consensus. If we can build a strong consensus on something, particularly if that consensus crosses cultural boundaries, then that is a good reason to be confident about it. If believing something produces strong negative consequences, particularly if those consequences are delivered without human intervention, then that is a good reason to re-consider it very carefully.

My point is simply that we tend to treat the passions as if they are internal, and most of our other experiences as if they are external, and to privilege the latter over the former. I am asserting that this is simply a false view – all of our experiences are internally generated, and that we have no way of conclusively determining veridicality, and therefore no reason to consider ought statements any less empirically respectable than is statements.

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Badyanisimo January 21, 2012 at 10:25 AM

Thank you both for the debate. I found myself agreeing with Stuart but it was very interesting to read both of your sides.

Jabir January 31, 2012 at 7:27 PM

Stuart, are you trying to say that we should do whatever feels good or brings positive consequences, as opposed to doing what we think is right? Because that seems like just another attempt (unsuccessful, imo) to bridge the is-ought divide.

It seems your reason for supporting this moral theory is that it is true by definition, as when you say: “It is intrinsic to the whole concept of a negative outcome that we want to avoid it.” But as Yoo-jin mentions above, that doesn’t explain why we should avoid negative consequences. It only equates a negative judgment with a tendency to
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but why should someone act according such tendency as opposed to going against it, assuming we have the free will to act by avoiding or approaching things we judge negatively or positively? Or, so I suspect, do you not believe we have such free will?

Stuart Smith  April 29, 2012 at 2:26 PM
People with some kinds of brain damage do stop seeing colours entirely. Others are unable to discern some colours, but see others normally. Some are blind, but can still respond to thrown objects as if they could see. And of course even in a normal person in a constant emotional state, colours can be pretty sketchy, our eyes and brain working together to figure out what colour things are from a remarkably limited amount of data and often making mistakes or guesses. Colour based optical illusions are easy to find.

Our colour vision, like all of our senses, evolved to be useful - not to discern objective reality. It might approximate the latter (we have no way of knowing) but we are damned near certain it doesn't accurately depict it.

Reply

Unknown  January 19, 2012 at 1:07 PM
This post came just in time. I'll borrow your drunken bro example for my intro to ethics course. Great work PB!

Reply

Benevolentshark  January 19, 2012 at 5:58 PM
Finally, a real-world application that addresses the moral implications of is-ought! These "ought" conclusions are not ends but simply means to other moral/ethical interpretations. Solid post.

Reply

Aaron  January 26, 2012 at 5:53 PM
Excellent! Love you summaries, bro and glad to have you back! I only recently discovered your site and have been glued to it ever since. I am a history major who has found a love of philosophy and its applications in larger historical contexts. More specifically, I love guys like Nietzsche and Hegel affected the thought processes and actions of the people living during their particular time with the philosophical bombs they dropped on society. Great stuff and please keep it coming!

Reply

Anonymous  February 14, 2012 at 6:45 PM
Ag

Reply

Bradley Turner  February 15, 2012 at 12:15 PM
Great read, bro.

I think the philosopher of economics Mark Blaug (1976: 354/4) has something interesting to say about the question:

"No doubt, Hume's Guillotine tells us that we cannot logically deduce 'ought from is' or 'is from ought' (i.e., we cannot deduce a prescription from a statement of fact, or vice versa). According to this position, the problem is one of incomplete knowledge of the facts. How can an action be right or wrong unless there is some knowledge of the facts?

But is there not a more important question: What kind of warrants would support such a transfer of knowledge from is to ought? The problem is that when a couple can largely agree on the "is" statements, but have a number of theoretical or ethical disagreements on the "ought" statements, do the ought statements become less valuable in favor of relations of the two statements? We can, however, influence "ought" by "is" and vice versa: moral judgments may be altered by the presentation of facts and facts may be theory-laden so that a change of values may alter our perception of the facts."

Reply

nextTF  February 15, 2012 at 6:59 PM
What, wait a minute bro. You say the is-ought problem doesn't mean there's no morality, then go on to show how everyone who tries to overcome it resorts to hand-waving? If there's morality, none of them seem to have shown it yet. I'll wait until these bros can sort it out. Could be a long time, since they've been trying for millennia.

Reply

Anonymous  February 29, 2012 at 11:19 AM
As with any discussion I just had an argument with my girlfriend about some random shit. Both of our arguments were made up of is-ought statements. The problem is that when a couple can largely agree on the "is" statements, but can fundamentally disagree on the "ought" statements, do the ought statements become less valuable in favor of relationship preservation? (i.e. we love each other so sth statement holds) or is this a subjective decision which has to be made? (whether or not to stop together based on fundamental disagreements on oughts) or is there a process/structure for forming a statement that connects ought statements so we can facilitate the merging of our ideas about what is, and ultimately, what ought?

Reply

Anonymous  March 5, 2012 at 12:17 AM
Is Philosophy Bro on another hiatus? Almost two months bro without new content.

Reply

Anonymous  March 6, 2012 at 1:39 AM
You are my lifeblood, where is the new content?

Reply

Argumentitus May 18, 2012 at 7:12 PM
Welcome back!

There's also the epidemiological question that is attached to it. Sure, the main focus is on the moral, ethical and linguistic sides but some terrible thorny question has always been: what kind of warrants would support such a transfer, what kind of knowledge is produced by an is-ought conditional, how reasonable should they be seen in conversation etc.

keep up, bro

Reply

Anonymous  March 23, 2012 at 3:40 PM
"Is is a thing that ought not be done? Surely this is just a combination of the two premises "X is this" and "X ought not to happen". It's like soft denmarks's pastry cup stuff of "It looks X to me", it isn't helpful in its just meaning about with language.

Reply

bubula muddin  March 27, 2012 at 11:57 AM

Our beliefs, moral or otherwise, in order to be knowledge, must be 'both' justified (ought) by reasons 'and' true (is) to reality, satisfying both Plato and Hume.