**Has the Greatest Problem in Moral Philosophy Just Been Solved?**

Cullercoats, England, Month 2015 — In January, in a little-known academic journal, a peer-reviewed article was published by a non-academic philosopher that claims to have found an objective basis for morality. This is almost certainly the greatest problem in the history of moral philosophy. It’s a big reason why religion has never been replaced by a wholly rational system, and why people around the world do not agree on what is good or bad or right or wrong. This is a problem with a famous and very long history.

Around 400 BC, Plato described the Euthyphro dilemma, which asked, ‘Why are pious things pious?’ Is it because they just are, or because the gods say that they are? In other words, is there an independent source for morality, or do we just accept what the gods and priests say as fact? No one has ever satisfactorily answered this question. In 1739, Scottish Enlightenment philosopher David Hume definitively stated why it hasn’t been answered—because no acceptable link has ever been made between objective descriptions of the world (‘*is*’ statements), and subjective prescriptions of morality (‘*ought*’ statements), and you cannot get from one to the other using logic alone. This argument from Hume came to be known as the is-ought divide and for over 275 years it has never been crossed. In 1903, one of the British founders of analytic philosophy, G.E. Moore, further entrenched this divide by calling all attempts to cross it a naturalistic fallacy. And no philosopher—dedicated to logic as they are—dared to go this way and risk committing a fallacy, even if the precise meanings Moore and Hume had in mind weren’t always clearly understood. For a long time now, committing a naturalistic fallacy has, as philosopher Oliver Curry wrote, “become something of a superstition. It is dimly understood and widely feared, and its ritual incantation is an obligatory part of the apprenticeship of moral philosophers and biologists alike.”

Into this breach, however, comes the paper *Bridging the Is-Ought Divide* by author and self-described evolutionary philosopher Ed Gibney who runs the website evphil.com. The paper was published in the January 2015 edition of the journal for the Association for the Study of Ethical Behavior and Evolutionary Biology in Literature (ASEBL). In it, Gibney takes Hume’s starting point that “reason is the slave of the passions” and agrees with his argument that we get from *is* to *ought* all the time, but only ever by using *wants*. If there is a cookie in the cupboard, and you want a cookie, you ought to go to the cupboard. If there is a train to Poughkeepsie at 8am, and I want to visit my sister in Poughkeepsie, then I ought to take the 8am train. Hume himself didn’t think his is-ought divide for morality was uncrossable, he just never managed to find a *want* to bridge the gap.

Hume later performed a root-cause analysis on our moral motivations by attempting to ask ‘why?’ until he found a universal want. Why exercise? To have health. Why desire health? Because sickness is painful. Why avoid pain? … Hume had no answer to this. He was writing 80 years before Darwin published *On the Origin of Species* so he never got further than identifying personal desires as the root cause of our actions. Hume probably never dreamed that our genes or our dependence on other forms of life for survival might lurk even further down in the recesses of things that cause our desires. Had he done so, he might have come up with Gibney’s final argument, which relies on the fact that the one universal thing we all have in common is that we are alive and the survival of life must be ensured before any other goal can be discussed. This is the *want* that must be met by any ethical system for its list of *oughts* to remain an *is*.

But which life? An individual? A family? A tribe? A race? A nation? The human species? Is that consideration even enough? Philosopher Peter Singer wrote *The Expanding Circle: Ethics and Sociology* in 1981, which explained how a rational regard for the self could logically lead to taking the views of others into account, which Singer was able to expand until ‘others’ encompassed all of humanity. In later works, Singer has attempted to push this consideration to all sensitive species. But is this even enough?

In 1998, biologist E.O. Wilson published the book *Consilience*, which sought a grand unification for the study of biology. He believed an understanding of scale was the means by which all the separate biological sciences could become whole. According to the magnitude of time and space used for analysis, the basic divisions of biology from the bottom to the top were therefore:

(1) Biochemistry -> (2) Molecular Biology -> (3) Cellular Biology -> (4) Organismic Biology -> (5) Sociobiology -> (6) Ecology -> (7) Evolutionary Biology.

Gibney argues that these are also the divisions that can be used to understand morality. Biology is literally ‘the study of life.’ Morals are rules for living. For morals to be universal, they must take all of life into account. The lack of free will at the lower ends of the spectrum make them uninteresting for studying moral decision-making, and the emergence of complex states at the upper ends of the spectrum from individual actions below make them difficult to understand, but the needs of all of life across its entire spectrum must be considered if we are to find a comprehensive solution for its survival. So the final bridge across the is-ought divide, according to Gibney, goes like this:

Life is. Life wants to remain an is. Life ought to act to remain so.

With life defined as all life over evolutionary timeframes, all moral conflicts can be understood as conflicts between different elements of the spectrum of life. These conflicts must sometimes weigh the needs of one sphere over another—e.g. an individual organism’s needs over societal desires one time, ecological needs over individual freedoms another time—but the end goal must always be the survival of life over evolutionary timeframes. No other moral rules will survive over the long term. That is an objective fact upon which Gibney argues all moral rules *ought* to be built. He acknowledges we *can* choose otherwise. Nothing in this universe says we *must* choose this path. But the blind and unsympathetic arbiter of the selection process within our universe means that this *is* the ultimate judge of all actions.

What sort of traits will lead to survival over the long term? Gibney offers a representative sample of them from our best empirical scientific studies to date: Suitability to an environment. Adaptability to changes in the environment. Diversity to handle fluctuations. Cooperation to optimize resources and reduce the harm that comes from conflict. Competition to spur effort and progress. Limits to competition to give losers a chance to cooperate on the next iteration. Progress in learning, to understand and predict actions in the universe. Progress in technology, to give options for directing outcomes where we want them to go. These are the virtues and outcomes Gibney argues that we must cultivate to face our existential threats and remain determined to conquer them. Traditional moral rules supporting concepts such as charity, honesty, freedom, justice, etc., may also lead toward these survival traits, but Gibney notes we should only accept them where they align with the end goal of morality, which is survival. Wherever they do not support that goal, they must eventually be rejected.

Will the field of moral philosophy, let alone the wider public, accept these arguments? “Of course not,” says Gibney. “At least not fully or anytime soon. There are still skeptical philosophers who believe there are no objective truths, let alone an objective morality. But, to paraphrase Neil deGrasse Tyson talking about science, that’s the thing about this universal goal of survival—life will be judged by it whether you and your morality believe in this or not.”

Gibney closes his paper with a word of caution. Even though an objective basis for morality can be agreed upon, we won’t always know the right path towards this goal. In realms of uncertainty, he notes that we must take a page from *The Black Swan* by Nassim Taleb and act with humility, using limited trial and error to navigate minefields of existence, especially where wrong decisions could have particularly terrible consequences. That’s not just what humanity could do; it’s what we objectively *ought* to do.

To read *Bridging the Is-Ought Divide* in full, see the original journal from ASEBL for free at: <http://www.sfc.edu/uploaded/documents/publications/ASEBLv11n1Jan15.pdf>

***End of Press Release***

*Bridging the Is Ought Divide* by Ed Gibney

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