THE IS-OUGHT PROBLEM:

WHAT GOVERNMENT DOES IS WRONG

BRYAN CAPLAN

What is the Is-Ought problem? It is usually stated as the problem of whether it is possible to derive normative statements from descriptive statements; but to state the problem at its most general level, it is the problem of whether *any* moral statement can be literally true, and hence potentially knowable. It is the problem of whether there exist any moral *facts* in exactly the same sense as there exist chemical facts, historical facts, or mathematical facts.

Since libertarianism is a normative political theory, it is only natural to expect that great libertarian thinkers would grapple with the Is-Ought problem; after all, if there are no moral facts to be known, then any normative theory would be senseless. It would be akin to a theory about unicorns. Of course even if the Is-Ought problem were solved, it would hardly establish any particular moral doctrine; solving the Is-Ought problem is a necessary condition for libertarian moral theory to be established, not a sufficient condition.

Interestingly, libertarian political philosophers have spent even more time on the Is-Ought problem than you would expect. Rand, among others, popularized the problem. She certainly stirred my initial interest in the question, but I found her answer to be quite unsatisfactory. After several years of thinking about the problem, I now think that I have a very promising solution which I will presently expound.

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NON DEDUCTIVE MEANS OF KNOWING

Now it is very widely believed that there are only two sources of knowledge: observation and deductive reasoning. This is perhaps one of the few premises shared by philosophers as diverse as Rand and Hume, though naturally they put different spins on it. Now it is not too hard to show that *if* these are the only two sources of knowledge, then moral knowledge is impossible. (Of course, just because we are totally ignorant about something, we could not infer that the thing did not exist; but, as with astrology, if a field is shown to have no valid methods, then the validity of the field itself falls into question.)

So why can't observation yield moral knowledge? Simply put, no matter how long you look at something, listen to it, smell it, taste it, or touch it, no moral conclusions arise. That seems fairly obvious, but it has wide-reaching ramifications. For suppose that we try to justify a moral conclusion with deductive reasoning. The problem here is that deductive reasoning merely shows that *if* the premises are true, *then* the conclusions are true, *without establishing whether or not the premises are true.* Therefore, for a deductive argument to yield a true conclusion, we must know that the premises are true, and must therefore have some non-deductive means of knowing this if we are to avoid an infinite regress. Normally this is no problem, since we can use observation to establish the truth of the premises. But as we noted at the outset, moral conclusions can't be reached by observation.

But couldn't premises verified through observation coupled with deductive reasoning yield a moral conclusion? I answer that they could not. As a general rule, a deductive argument can only reach a conclusion within the basic subject matter of the premises. You can't start with a premise about geometry and wind up with a conclusion about history; nor can you take an historical premise and yield a geometrical conclusion. Deductive reasoning may yield new and interesting results, but not about a totally distinct field of study than that of your initial premises.

THERE IS ALSO DIRECT REASON

So we seem to be in a quandary; neither observation nor deductive reasoning can yield moral knowledge. Fortunately, the quandary is self-created by the initial premise. If we take the premise seriously, we will notice that many *non*-moral items of knowledge also fall into question. Take, for three examples, the following propositions:

1. Every effect has a cause; the same cause always produces the same effect.
2. The argument *ad hominem* is a fallacy.
3. 2 + 2 = 4

Notice: all three are non-moral; and none of them could be known merely through observation or deductive reasoning. We surely do not observe every effect and every cause, then conclude that they always come in pairs. But neither do we deduce the law of cause-and-effect from another, more basic premise. So too with the logical principle that the argument *ad hominem* is a fallacy; it is not that we learn it by carefully staring at it; but neither is it the product of a deductive argument. Or to take the final case, we don't learn that two and two must always make four by observing groupings of twos (though doing so might surely help us grasp the principle), nor by deducing it from anything else.

But if we don't learn any of these propositions by observation or deductive reasoning, how do we learn them? I answer that the previous account of knowledge makes a critical sin of omission: it assumes that deductive, indirect use of reason is the entire faculty. I say that there is also *direct* reason, which we may also call intellect or intuition. We use our direct reason when we simply turn our intellects to a proposition and think about it as honestly and critically as we can; and coupled with sufficient intelligence, *sometimes* we can immediately see that the proposition under consideration is true or false. Thus, to validate the law of cause and effect, I turn my intellect to the proposition and think about it to the best of my ability; and eventually its truth becomes evident. So too with the fallacy *ad hominem*: I think about the fallacy, turning my intellect directly upon the issue, and see that it is false. The same goes for 2 + 2 = 4. To sum up, the problem with the theory that all knowledge comes from either observation or deductive reasoning is that it ignores the more basic faculty of direct reason; and the best argument for this faculty of direct reason, besides the introspective one, is that unless we allow for a faculty of direct reason, almost everything that we call knowledge turns out to be unjustified. I'd call that a *reductio ad absurdum* if I ever saw one.

APPLYING DIRECT REASON

Now how does this help solve the problem of moral knowledge? I claim that *some* moral propositions are learned by means of direct reason. That is, we simply think about the propositions, turning our intellects to them as honestly and critically as we can, and then sometimes we immediately grasp their truth. For example: Consider the proposition "Murder is wrong." Turn your intellect to it as honestly and critically as you are able. I claim that when I carry out this thought experiment, the wrongness of murder becomes evident to me. So too with other simple moral propositions. When I wonder whether racism is wrong, or whether Hitler was a bad man, when I apply my direct reason to the problem, the answer is all too clear. Now of course, it needn't be the case that *all* moral knowledge is direct. In fact, I could only learn that Hitler was a bad man by the cooperative use of all of my faculties:

1. Murder is wrong. (Premise supplied by direct reason.)
2. Hitler was responsible for many murders. (Premise supplied by observation of incriminating evidence, testimony, etc.)
3. Someone who deliberately commits many wrong acts is a bad person. (Direct reason.)
4. Therefore, Hitler was a bad man. (Deductive reason)

The point is that for the argument to even get off the ground, direct reason was necessary. It might be that direct reason supplies only a tiny number of valid moral principles, from which valid conclusions must be deduced. My opinion is that the use of direct reason is more frequent, but that is not the critical part of the theory. The critical part is the admission that we *sometimes* use the faculty of direct reason to come to know a moral proposition as literally true.

THE FINAL INFERENCE

Now as I said at the outset, this theory is consistent with any substantive moral views. Nevertheless, it is peculiarly consonant with libertarian moral theory. Why? Well, it is a common observation among libertarians that everyone follows libertarian principles in his or her private life; it is only where government is concerned that they grant a moral sanction to the initiation of force. And if you asked your average person why it was wrong to commit murders, or rob, or defraud others, one popular answer would be: "That's just common sense." Indeed it is; the principle of non-initiation of force is just common sense; which is to say, that even the simplest mind, if it honestly and critically turns itself to the proposition that it is wrong to use violence against peaceful persons, or rob them of what they have produced, can immediately grasp its truth. All that would then be required to establish libertarian moral theory would be to couple this everyday insight of direct reason with the premise, derived from observation, that governments habitually violate the non-initiation of force principle, and then use deductive reason to draw the final inference that most, if not all, of what government does is wrong and must be stopped at once.

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