



## **My Dinner with David: Naturalistic Metaethics, Politics, and Psychology**

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**ABSTRACT:** According to the views expressed in this paper, influences unrelated to the conclusions of Immanuel Kant and G. E. Moore respecting what they saw as the appropriate foundation for moral systems seems to have been at work in the reactions of both to the earlier criticisms of David Hume. Building on a "recent meeting" with Hume in a pub on Princes Street in Edinburgh, I develop the suggestion that both Kant and Moore were loyal to traditional notions of an intuited, non-prudential basis for ethical injunctions. Kant, by his insistence that any morality linked only to hypothetical imperatives cannot be truly "moral," and Moore by his refusal to see the emptiness of his posited "good as simply good" which he felt must be kept free of any corrupting reference to real-world prudential constituents, thus support the foundation of ethical systems in an inner, unanalyzable moral impulse. And they do so in obedience to commitments that antedate their moral philosophies. I also claim that Hume has been misunderstood in that he did not mean to oppose the naturalistic grounding of moral systems in his famous statement disjoining *is*-statements from *ought*-statements; what he really intended was to point out the illogic of moralists who improperly pretend to derive categorical or intuited moral imperatives from real-world *is*-statements while denying any prudentiality or *a posteriority* to the transaction. Because both maintain that this simple inner moral impulse must be independent of prudential considerations in making moral decisions and judgments, Kant and Moore oppose naturalistic ethical systems which, like J.S. Mill's, suggest that this-worldly welfare and happiness are in large part coexistent with the true meaning of morality. Their position, therefore, places both of these proponents of intuitionist metaethics at odds with the principle of political social democrats that a respectable moral system must place worldly satisfactions and happiness above obedience to any putative "higher" moral law and its intuited imperatives.

I had a talk with David Hume one rainy night recently in a pub in Edinburgh, over—naturally—kippers with brown bread and a pint of stout or two. He let me in on a secret and gave me leave to whisper it in turn to a few friends. Which is why I jotted down this account of our meeting and am presenting it to you here.

Remember what that great analyst wrote to set in motion the train of thought that culminated in G. E. Moore's definition of the so-called Naturalistic Fallacy? Hume said, in effect, that he didn't see how the moralists of his day could justify their slippery transitions from *is* and *is-not* to *ought* and *ought-not*. From talking about how things are, that is, to

urging courses of conduct. Nipping this tendency to illogic in the bud, he told me (reprising his point in the *Treatise of Human Nature* (1) ), would subvert what he called "all the vulgar systems of morality."

And so it would, if you grant Hume's main presupposition. "What I meant by 'vulgar systems,'" he said, "are those which make that unwarranted jump—today you might call it a quantum leap—from *is* to *ought* yet deny *oughts* their only possible rational foundation, namely a foundation in *is*. And," he stipulated gravely, dabbing at his lips with a silken kerchief, "meaningful discussion of virtue and vice must be carried on on one side or the other of that chasm, but without venturing at that quantum leap.

"The moral system builders, largely churchmen, who put forward their endless *oughts* and *ought-nots*, having renounced what they see as dependence on mere prudential concerns—they were my target. It was *their* intimations of immortal morality that I intended to condemn. Do ye see the distinction?"

I wasn't sure I understood him. "Are you saying, I asked, "that you favor an ethics based in reality, with *is*-founded *oughts* and *ought-nots*, instead of the . . . the . . . let me call it the clairvoyance or divination that Immanuel Kant and G. E. Moore seem to prefer? But how . . .?"

"How?" he interrupted. "Simply by defining virtue and vice in terms of *is* and by ceasing to pretend that *oughts* can have any but extra-worldly meaning without such prudential definition. End the make-believe," Hume concluded with a frown. But then he smiled, an expression clearly more suited to his face and to his nature. "You called it 'clairvoyance.' Amusing, but true. It's time to 'get real,' as you Americans like to say. *Oughts* and *ought-nots* without referents in the sensible world are phantasms, nonsense."

I was shocked. *Shocked*, as you can well imagine. But before I could ask for further clarification, Hume forged ahead.

"Moore misunderstood me," he confided in that pub on Princes Street. "Clever though he undisputably was, Moore came to the question with a serene, unshakeable faith in an interior moral compass. Probably," and here Hume leveled an index finger in my direction, "because he felt so strongly his own impulse to be a good man. He *believed* before he resolved to inquire, and his enquiry—such as it was—hence was designed to support his belief. But in that failing he was, I suppose, not so much worse than many of the rest of us. Many of us—with myself *unexcluded*—have fallen under the spell of facile intuitionism."

"Facile?" I think my eyebrows must have risen a little. "You?"

"Of course. Facile and primitive. Intuitionism, like flat-earthism or geocentric astronomy, is self-evident, but self-evident only to the uncritical. One great appeal of intuitionist ethics is that it's the first ethics we know as children. Just as we *see* that the earth is flat and we *watch* the sun go around the earth, we *know* right from wrong because we—most of us, that is—have absorbed intimations of intuitionist morality virtually from the time we were suckling babes at our mother's teat."

"And we're loath to let go of such well-fixed notions?" I volunteered.

"Notions that date back to the very formation of notions in our little heads. Exactly. Look at even poor Bertrand Russell. At the age of eighty, he was still so encumbered by his intuitionist origins—and his respect for his colleague G. E. Moore's *Principia*, in whose views he had acceded earlier, I might add—that he had to confess, 'I am not . . . quite satisfied with any view of ethics I have been able to arrive at, and that is why I have

abstained from writing again on the subject.' (2) Writing again, that is, after his "Elements of Ethics," published in 1910! If a critical analyst of Russell's calibre found it difficult to shed early intuitionist doctrine, small wonder that the balance of humanity has trouble extricating itself from its toils."

"Small wonder," I repeated, not very originally.

"Perhaps," Hume went on, "it's a matter of *Le coeur a ses raisons, que la raison ne connaît pas*. One of your contemporaries, Peter Strawson, citing this old saw in an article in which, incidentally, I found it difficult to discern any clear leaning on this issue, suggested that 'this is the whole truth of the matter.' (3) The heart governing the mind isn't so very different from the effects of childhood indoctrination on our adult behaviour-our choices, including our choice of which metaethical positions we'll defend. As the twig is bent . . ."

I simply nodded and listened, sipping my stout, which was beginning to have its mellowing effect.

He continued, "Why, to posit seriously such a universal moral sense is to presume in the Hottentot and the Dervish the selfsame moral intuition as we see in the Scot, and what we know of the diverse moral training of those races compels only ridicule of such a presumption, it seems to me."

Hume watched as a double decker lumbered by on the glistening pavement outside the pub window. "And another thing," he began, "You'll recall that I wrote in my Book Three, 'Of Morals . . .'"

"In the *Treatise*?" I asked.

"Precisely. If I may be permitted immodestly to cite my own words: 'To suppose that the mere regard to the virtue of the action may be the first motive which produced the action and rendered it virtuous is to reason in a circle.'" And here he looked at me rather archly. "Which is what Kant did, with his motiveless morality, his morality for morality's sake, his infuriating quest for hyperhuman purity in morals." Here Hume paused, as if to collect his thoughts.

"Human welfare—I dared not in my day call it *happiness*—that's the nub. As I believe I clearly stated a decade later in my *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, 'If we examine the particular laws, by which justice is directed . . . we shall still be presented with the same conclusion. The good of mankind is the only object of all these laws and regulations.' (4) Seems almost a prelude to John Stuart Mill, doesn't it? At any rate, whether it's *lex scripta* or the codifications of moral systems, I see little difference."

"And categorical imperatives?" I suggested. "Do you include them as well?"

"Kant's favorite hobbyhorse," he said, nodding. "All of a piece with Moore's imaginary good-in-itself. *Hypothetical* imperatives—those are the only meaningful moral injunctions and the only ones that deserve our respectful attention if we're to construct an ethics that is to be of any utility to mankind." Slapping the tabletop, he picked up his glass and drained it with a flourish. "Kant was God-intoxicated, and cared little for human welfare except in the abstract and in relation to the Eternal."

Then Hume sat silent, studying the empty tumbler for a moment. "I admit I could have been clearer, less diffuse, in my explication. My aim was not to destroy the impulse to devise ethical systems but to make them more rational, better founded in critical good sense." And here he seemed almost plaintive. "You do see, don't you, that this has been my

goal in all my writings in philosophy? To cut through ill-founded but durably revered errors so prevalent in established opinion."

"Yes, certainly," I said. "Just as you demolished the old notion of a necessary connection, a nexus, between cause and effect."

"Ah, yes," Hume sighed. "But there, too, I was misinterpreted in some quarters as wanting to destroy the possibility of science, to destroy a belief in the dependable uniformity of universal causality that underlies all our knowledge of the external world and allows us to live in it without going mad. *Science*," he repeated, scowling. "I was accused of being anti-science!"

"Just as you were taken as being opposed to the possibility of a naturalistic ethics," I volunteered.

"Very nearly the same," he said. "Unfortunately."

"But didn't you write, sir, in Book Three, Part One, if I may quote from my copy of your *Treatise* here in my book bag? 'Tis impossible that the distinction betwixt moral good and evil can be made by reason."

"Yes, of course I did. And worse, within a single paragraph, later in Section One of the material you cite, I seem to have sent Moore off on his notorious color analogy and suggested to your Charles Stevenson yet another direction when I declared moral judgments to be no more than objects of feeling and not of reason. Flattering, but most infelicitous. You recall the passage?"

"I do," I said. "Just before your warning about *oughts* and *ises*."

"But I cannot deny that I also wrote later, In Section Two, that virtue and vice are distinguished precisely by the pleasure and pain present in any action, the very idea that J. S. Mill, following the Epicureans, took unto his own." And here Hume sighed. "Ah, would that I had not been so diffuse. And self-contradictory. I admitted as much later: In advertising my *Enquiry*, I called attention to my 'juvenile . . . negligencies . . . in reasoning and more in expression.' (5) Remember, when I wrote the *Treatise*, I was but a lad of twenty-odd and eager to impress and confute."

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I came away from that fateful encounter—fateful for me, at least—with a new view of the commonest interpretations of what Hume had written. Specifically, it now seemed to me that what G. E. Moore, among others, did with Hume's incisive observation about *ought* and *is* was to tweak it somewhat—just enough, in fact, to support his own intuitionist metaethics and strew in its wake a century of disputatious uproar for philosophers all over the English-speaking world. Moore believed in each person's power to discern "the good," as he nominalized it, and to distinguish this good from its antitheses in making decisions of personal morality and judging the moral quality of decisions made by others. In this faith, Moore was not a great deal different from any medial man among, say, members of the mainstream Christian clergy in the United States today.

Inimical to the comfort of Moore in his faith were attempts by more empirically minded metaethicists to establish a basis for morality in something less diaphanous, as they saw it, than personal intuition. Social anthropology, after all, had been making great strides during Moore's lifetime, and intuitive "knowledge," varying widely as it does from culture to

culture, must have seemed increasingly shaky as an underpinning for anything pretending to be a universal morality.

What was a true believer like Moore to do, faced with this subversion of the eternal traditions in which he was so thoroughly enmeshed? Equally well-grounded as he was in the classics, Moore perhaps had in mind Livy's preference for attack over defense when he developed his famous strategy of the Naturalistic Fallacy.

Taking Hume's quite limited critical observation that moralists were characteristically eliding the conspicuous gap between the world of description and the world of injunction, Moore, crafting this gap into an eternal principle, sought to elevate it to a virtual law of nature: *No ought from any is may derive*. But, moreover, he reassured us, no *ought need* be derived from *is*, no moral truth from any mundane reality, because moral knowledge is already ours by means totally distinct from our perceptions of the world of *is*. *Voilà!* We know what's morally good simply by consulting our inner moral voice and, therefore, any appeal to mere experientially based moralities is not only superfluous but foolish. We know the good. We need not flail about amid the petty corruptions of mere human experience to try to determine what the good consists in.

"Good has no definition because it is simple and has no parts," (6) Moore insists in *Principia Ethica*. But if *good*, the aim of moral conduct and the *sine qua non* of morality itself, is undefinable, unanalyzable, and inaccessible except to intuition, the famous question, "What is to be done?" (even more urgent today in attempting to chart a direction in ethical theory than it was in deciding a course of action in revolutionary Russia) must be answered simply by the reply, "Nothing." This, it seems fairly clear, is what is promoted and defended by Moore and his conservative continuators in moral philosophy. If we do nothing to develop a naturalistic metaethics upon which to build moral systems more nearly attuned to what human beings need and want, we serve the interests of the privileged few, the haves of this world, whose agents throughout history have formulated the acculturating moral standards most of us have been taught to, and grow up to, "intuit." And we thereby, of course, frustrate, by our acquiescence in such received systems, the aspirations of the many, the have-nots. Does this begin to sound like an impulse toward the democratization, the social and economic levelling, of ethical theory? Perhaps so, although I'll confidently claim that this approach would very likely yield moralities not only more consistent with democratic ideals but more internally consistent and defensible logically and empirically verifiable in the bargain.

Moore's stance on this purported *is/ought* incompatibility really expresses a metaethical version of a much older, broader conflict, one that exhibits the same positions on left and right as others precursing it in diverse fields. Whether (1) ethical knowledge is reducible to verifiable experience and experience in turn to sense perceptions (and their technological substitutes in instrumentation), like knowledge in more clearly descriptive areas such as paleontological anthropology and astronomy, or whether (2) that knowledge is to be confined to a special realm apart from sensation and the experience and verifiability built upon it: These are the essential questions the answers to which divide and characterize intuitionists and naturalists in metaethics. And they are questions only slightly different from their counterparts throughout the history of the warfare between religion and science, royalty and democracy, privilege and want, capital and labor.

What Moore thwarts in endeavoring to erect the roadblock called the Naturalistic Fallacy in the path of progress in ethical theory—and especially in the way of those whose goal is a naturalistic ethics—is science itself. As adamantly as Pope Clement VIII opposed Giordano Bruno's Copernican heliocentrism, Moore opposed the notion of introducing scientific inquiry into the analysis of moral reality, and, I suggest, for similar reasons. Both Clement and Moore had profound investments in the received wisdom of their respective times and

in the sociopolitical structures based in part on that wisdom. And both, because of their investments, could not allow them to be threatened by imposing the criteria of scientific problem solving so succinctly summarized recently by R. S. Lewontin: (7)

[Science demands] certain canons of evidence and argument . . . ; a two-valued logic, in which every proposition must be true or false, but not both; the truth table of Whitehead and Russell . . . ; the logic of statistical inference; the power of replicating experiments; the distinction between observations and causal claims . . . , necessary conditions of science, underlying all valid claim about the material world.

We and what we do—our actions, that is—are part of the material world. Moreover, once psychological reductionists have satisfied the rest of us that our thinking can be fully and adequately unfolded in descriptions of cerebral electrochemistry and neuromuscular phenomena, even our thought processes must be taken to be part of the natural world. In view of the psychologists' seemingly relentless advance toward that uncomfortable outcome, it seems to me perverse to continue to shrink from accepting the inevitable application of science and the techniques of scientific analysis to the activities we subsume under the heading "ethical valuing," especially by invoking the dubious tenets of intuitionism as justification for the exclusion.

Science is vulgarly celebrated for bringing us lasers and silicon chips and space travel. But its most profoundly influential gift, still largely underappreciated and underutilized, particularly in ethics, economics, and the other "soft" sciences, is its insistence (1) that we continually question old beliefs and received wisdoms, (2) that we replace these with principles that prove to be superior in their interrelatedness with principles whose verifiability has already been established, and (3) that when we substitute new beliefs for old, we hold them only until they in turn are questioned and superseded by better ideas, always based upon verifiable evidence.

At bottom, the root of the differences between metaethical intuitionists whose views I have disputed and metaethical naturalists with whom I ally myself is epistemological. The question whether genuine, reliable knowledge in this realm can be achieved by means other than empirical is answered affirmatively by intuitionists, negatively by naturalists. The origins and nature of knowledge, generally, and not only of ethical cognition, are problems giving rise to metaethical disputes but also to social, economic, and political convictions of radically diverse coloration, as well.

Growing in my mind for some time has been the suspicion that there are those who might have a stake in diverting humankind's attention away from the idea that a more bearable, less unpleasant life might be somehow linked to—or even be to an appreciable extent coextensive with—a naturalistic morality, because plodding resignation in the hearts of the have-nots of this world is a mind-set much less dangerous to the tranquillity of the haves. How upsetting and potentially destabilizing to the way things are, comfortable to the few, if the many were to associate their own earthly happiness with the idea of a moral social order. How much more stable and unthreatening to the present inequitable apportionment of mundane rewards and satisfactions if the many were to continue to associate morality with obedience, self-denial, and unembittered passive resignation, as the non-naturalistic moralities almost universally encourage them to do. How much more dangerous to the fragile surface calm of our present social order to link morality to a principle like John Stuart Mill's, which values happiness for the many over obedience to an inner voice that we know today is merely an imprint of acculturation.

*Happiness*, and all it entails, including adequate food, shelter, and the other basic satisfactions denied to the many by socioeconomic structures embraced by the purveyors of

most non-naturalistic moral systems: What a radical idea, in both major senses of the term! Hume, Tory though he may have been on some of the issues of his day, was nothing if not radical. *Vox populi*, admittedly, resounded only dimly, if at all, in his ears. But every man is a prisoner of his times, and Hume died, after all, in 1776, before our own North American experiment in self-determination and social leveling had had its profound impact on human happiness and fulfillment and before it could have had its expected influence on a critic so open to the impress of new realities.

Hume shrank from shattering few unexamined intellectual conceits of which he was then aware, as his writings so strikingly attest, and I know he'd have been a bull in today's well-stocked china shop of pretentious nonsense. The Invisible Hand of his good friend Adam Smith comes to mind, for Nobel laureates in economics still seriously invoke this myth to the approval of credulous multitudes today.

Hume was not one to cling to notions so susceptible of analytical demolition as many of the present-day credos protecting privilege and *droit du seigneur*, in all its modern vestiges. Knowledge advances, and not only in the physical sciences.

It's probably safe to guess that his formidable analytical powers would have made hash of many of the treasured creedal shibboleths of royalty, religion, plutocracy, and capital-weighted economics, had he been here today to survey their contemporary manifestations and appraise their claims to our reverence.

I invited him to return for a longer visit and to bring Mill with him, but he demurred. Picture it: Hume and Mill, the iconoclast and the meliorist, in heated discussion, the one threshing our conflated harvests of fact, myth, and ideology, and the other baking loaves for the many from the yielded grain.

I didn't retain the presence of mind during our brief supper meeting to ask David Hume directly what he thought of some of our other current controversies in philosophy, economics, and politics, and I doubt very much that I'll run into him again. But if I do, and if he shares any more views, I'll try to get back to you.

## Notes

(1) *Treatise of Human Nature*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960, pp. 469-470.

(2) Russell, in his note appended to a reprinting of "The Elements of Ethics," (from his *Philosophical Essays*, London: Allen and Unwin, 1910) in Sellars and Hospers, *Readings in Ethical Theory*, New York: Appleton-Century Crofts, 1960.

(3) Strawson, "Ethical Intuitionism," *Philosophy*, XXIV, 1949.

(4) Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, Section III, Part II.

(5) Author's advertisement for the *Enquiry*, 1752.

(6) Moore, *Principia Ethica*, Cambridge: University Press, 1922, page 3.

(7) Lewontin, "The Politics of Women's Biology," *New York Review of Books*, XLI, No. 7 (April 7, 1994), 31-35.