

Rand on Hume's Moral Skepticism¹

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In her essay, "The Objectivist Ethics," Ayn Rand claims to argue against Hume that moral judgments can be shown to be well founded. She rejects Hume's passage in which the famous empiricist philosopher denies that one can *deduce* statements about what one ought to do from statements about what is the case. Rand goes on to develop her case that human life is normatively pregnant, as it were, meaning that it is bound up, through and through, with a normative dimension. The concept of value, she argues, is tied intimately to the concept of life, so when something is a living being there is no escaping certain normative considerations about such a being. Living beings, for example, do well or badly. (This, by the way, is a point made also by Nussbaum 1994 and by Foot 2001.) Because of the human capacity for choice, however, this normative component is transformed into an ethical or moral one; not only is it possible to consider whether human beings are doing well or badly but also whether they are acting responsibly by doing well or badly.

The point of my presentation, however, is that, in fact, Rand does not establish that one can *provide deductive arguments* for moral judgments. She does show, however, that moral judgments *can be derived* from other judgments that are not explicitly moral. These derivations are not deductions but inferences, more akin to inductions or conceptual implications than to deductions. This is how best to understand what Rand proposes in opposition to Hume, based on her understanding of the nature of concepts and definitions and how they work in propositions and arguments.

The "Is-Ought" Gap

The famous "is-ought" gap that Hume identifies expresses the

philosophical claim that a conclusion that contains moral terms such as “ought to” or “ought not to” cannot be *deduced* from premises that lack those moral terms because valid deductive arguments can only have in their conclusions components that are fully supported by their premises. If the premises fail to give complete support to the conclusion, the conclusion is not valid. Here is how Hume (1961, 423) put the point:

In every system of morality which I have hitherto met with, I have always remarked, that the author proceeds for some time in the ordinary way of reasoning, and establishes the being of a God, or makes observations concerning human affairs; when all of a sudden I am surprised to find, that instead of the usual copulation of propositions, *is*, and *is not*, I meet with no proposition that is not connected with an *ought*, or *ought not*. This change is imperceptible; but is, however, of the last consequence. For as this *ought*, or *ought not*, expresses some new relation or affirmation, it is necessary that it should be observed and explained; and at the same time that a reason should be given, for what seems altogether inconceivable, how this new relation can be a deduction from others, which are entirely different from it . . .

Hume discredits all rationalist efforts to prove moral judgments true. He does this by arguing that they beg the question, because such a proof would have to have premises that already contain the crucial term, *ought* or *ought not*, thus simply pushing the problem back a step in each case, and leaving the moral judgment ultimately unprovable.

In response to Hume’s passage, Rand (1997, 863) says that “It purports to mean that ethical propositions cannot be derived from factual propositions—or that knowledge of that which is cannot logically give man any knowledge of what he ought to do. And wider: it means that knowledge of reality is irrelevant to the actions of a living entity and that any relation between the two is ‘inconceivable.’”

However, what Hume actually appears to have complained about is not what Rand claims, namely, that “knowledge of reality is irrelevant to the actions of a living entity and that any relation between

the two is ‘inconceivable.’” Rather, what Hume asserted is that it is futile to try to *deduce* what one ought and ought not do from what is or is not the case. The difference is not at all negligible.

A deduction is deemed by many philosophers to be a formal logical operation, capable of involving only concepts with closed, final definitions. Such philosophers treat deductions as timeless proofs. This is a tradition of thinking about knowledge along lines suggested by Plato, with his theory of Forms or the natures of things, and continued, especially, by Descartes. Both of these major and very influential philosophers appeared to suggest that for us to have knowledge of anything, this knowledge must be capable of being stated as a *necessary* truth. That, in turn, suggests that whenever reasoning is performed invoking facts that human beings know, this reasoning must amount to a species of logical deduction comparable to that which occurs in formal logical—indeed, symbolic—operations. In such reasoning, the operative terms and propositions are symbolic of closed, final definitions, and propositions that are composed of terms with such definitions. Such reasoning is, in consequence, timelessly valid and whatever truth might be achieved by means of it—that is to say, whatever conclusions it might lead to—would also amount to timeless, necessary truth.

However, when logic is deployed to produce proofs involving facts that may imply other facts, this is not a formal, let alone a symbolic deduction, but another type of proof—another way to *derive* a factual proposition from others. Hume didn't discuss the difference and, as I argue in my book (Machan 2001), Rand's Objectivist epistemology holds out a credible promise for the success of such a derivation. But it does not establish—nor does it appear to aim at establishing—that the strict formal deduction Hume thinks is inconceivable is actually available in establishing or proving the truth of any moral propositions.²

Conceptualization versus Deduction

The idea of concept formation clarifies why Rand does not accept Hume's idea of what it is to know something and to define a concept. Put plainly, what is at issue here is the claim that the way we acquire knowledge is to develop and organize our ideas based on awareness we have of the world for the time being, by means of our perceptual

organs, guided by axiomatic concepts (which I discuss in Machan 2001).

In a bit more detail, the process goes on roughly as follows: One detects various similarities and differences by means of the sensory organs; one recognizes that nothing like that is possible unless something exists that is being perceived, and then one carefully, parsimoniously, arranges a system of ideas that observes the principles of logic as well as keeps in continued focus the initial differences and similarities, thus learning what it is that exists. The result is a system of sound—well-grounded—ideas that best (but not necessarily finally) capture or identify reality.

When we know reality, moreover, we do not know by grasping it for all times. We know it at a time, not for all times. Knowing reality is not easy to spell out because it isn't like other things we are familiar with: human beings are unique in knowing as they know, so human knowledge has to be identified without simple analogies or comparisons to processes elsewhere in nature. But some comparisons come closer than others: We know as we might grasp something as well as we can, but not without the possibility of improvement.

In any case, almost anything that we do when we draw conclusions—about whether to open a door when trying to go through it, or how to construct a bridge or build a helicopter or space ship—the conclusion is not strictly speaking deduced, as formal logicians would characterize deductions, but conceptually inferred from successive facts that are known in the fashion just alluded to. (For the details, one needs to consult Rand 1967; it is also what is suggested in Austin 1961.) Because one might learn, later, that what one knew before can be known a bit differently now, it is also possible to imagine that later it will be known differently.

The reason this kind of inference is different from pure logical deduction is that such deductions are formal, symbolic and thus not dependent on actual concepts, only on symbols of concepts. As such, strictly logical deductions are timeless. Let us first look at a simple syllogism from term logic, then at one from propositional logic. We will see why they can mislead us about the nature of logical argumentation about substantive matters.

All As are Bs,
 all Bs are Cs,
 so, all As are Cs,

This “argument” does not pose the problem that “A” is open ended, not finally identified—or, to put it slightly differently, that the “concept of A” (unlike the concept “human being” or “apple” or “lion”) isn’t finally closed. Now let’s consider an “argument” from propositional logic:

P \rightarrow Q
 Q \rightarrow R
 \therefore P \rightarrow R

“A” (or “B” or “C”) is not a concept but a symbol for one. The way the symbol behaves in formal arguments must not be confused with the way actual concepts would. Nor are “P,” “Q,” and “R” propositions—they simply stand in for them. To appreciate the nature of reasoning, it is necessary to explore the nature of propositions, not their symbolic representations in formal logic texts.

Compare the formal symbolic syllogism with the following: “All human beings are biological entities, all biological entities are mortal, so all human beings are mortal.” The concepts here are not finally locked in, so it is “intelligible” to propose that the conclusion does not follow since the second premise might be false. The mortality of animals is not a logical truth, as one might put it in terms of contemporary analytic philosophy. For it to be a logical truth it would have to amount to a purely formal statement, backed by purely formal arguments, much as we witness this in, for example, Ludwig Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* (1961). But so what?

Indeed, science fiction writers create plausible enough stories by often imagining scenarios that are unhinged from reality; that is to say, the concepts deployed are imagined to be well grounded but often are not. The imagined events and stories in science fiction do not produce a true account of anything but they can be plausible because we all suspend disbelief and settle on various statements of, say, what some imagined animal or other entity is (as in a Disney story). The result tends to be something loose, open to speculative conceptions

of how things turn out.

Purely formal deductive arguments have no problems like this—which is why what is involved in most reasoning is not formally deductive but conceptual (logical) inferences, in which a very significant role is played by theories and definitions. Rand made definitions a central part of her epistemology but did not treat them as timelessly true! (All this could take us into numerous interesting areas of not only Rand's thought but epistemology in general, but let's leave that for another time.)

In any case, Hume's view was about our inability to deductively prove ethical claims or judgments. Most, however, took him to be arguing against the idea that reasoning can establish moral truth. And this interpretation of Hume has made an enormous impact on the social sciences and moral philosophy. In fact, however, Hume himself didn't seem to embrace the skepticism to which his argument seems to have given rise. Hume, after all, argued forcefully in support of many normative claims, such as the prudence of the system of private property and the value of economy and commerce. What he didn't do, however, was lay out a cogent explanation for how such support could be provided apart from deductive inferences. That is, I would argue, due to Hume's—as well as many other philosophers'—embrace of the idea that unless something is necessarily true, it cannot count as bona fide human knowledge. So, by affirming what to many appeared as an unbridgeable gap between factual and value judgments, Hume's antirationalism laid the foundation for positivism. This is the view that while what are called empirical facts are something we can know about, moral or ethical values are not within the province of the knowable.

This may be said to be a major reason the social sciences have mostly kept away from making value judgments. They invoke the "is-ought" gap, saying, "Therefore handling values would be unscientific, inaccessible to factual confirmation." Since the hard sciences had been closely associated with the idea that factual judgments can be confirmed, the social sciences, to carry "the mantle of science," were fashioned to mimic them. The method by which the evidence and reasoning of the hard sciences is supposed to proceed—data gathering and unbiased analysis—needed to be followed and this precluded dealing with values, including those of morality and politics.

Rand, not unlike many other philosophers, didn't seem to give evidence of taking into account the distinction between Hume's claiming we cannot *deduce* moral conclusions and the possibility that he left open our ability to *derive* them in some other way from factual premises. She took the former claim to affirm the impossibility of rational moral judgments—thus showing a tendency toward rationalism, even though in her epistemological works she disavowed it. Was Rand more of a rationalist, say *à la* Spinoza, than she admitted to being? I leave this question to be answered at a different time and place.

Notes

1. The thesis in this paper is one I present in Chapter 3 of Machan 2001.

2. Rand can be interpreted as holding that the kind of strictly formal deductions others think exclusively deserve the term are simply very broad, *symbolic models* of logical reasoning. So she would argue that deductions do, in fact, obtain between judgments of facts involving concepts that are themselves contextually—as distinct from timeless—defined, possessing essential attributes that make logical deductions possible. So her objection to Hume is that Hume failed to see that concepts such as “ought to” and “ought not to” can be derived from definitions of “human goodness” as, in part, essentially involving choices and ultimate values. In other words, Rand would argue that a sound, valid theory of human goodness deductively yields moral conclusions, what one ought to do, so long as by “deduction” is not meant logical arguments involving closed definitions of concepts. (Some of the points touched on in this discussion have, of course, been discussed by students of Rand's ideas but my concern here has been solely with Rand's and many others' misunderstanding of Hume's famous passage, one that has influenced a great deal of metaethics in modern and contemporary philosophy.)

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