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Anti-Autonomism Defended: A Reply to Hill

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Abstract In the current issue of this journal, Scott Hill critiques some of my work on the "is"-"ought" controversy, the Hume-inspired debate over whether an ethical conclusion can be soundly, or even validly, derived from only non-ethical premises. I've argued that it can be; Hill is unconvinced. I reply to Hill's critique, focusing on four key questions to which he and I give different answers.

Keywords "Is"–"ought" problem · Philosophical taxonomy · Ethical nihilism · Moral properties · Hill, Scott · Hume, David · Karmo, Toomas · Prior, A. N.

Introduction

In his interesting current article,[1] Scott Hill critiques some of my work on the "logical autonomy of ethics," the Hume-inspired issue of whether an ethical conclusion can be soundly, or even validly, derived from only non-ethical premises. This issue is more popularly known as the debate over deriving "ought" from "is," although that label for it won't thrill the many philosophers who hold that ethical facts and obligations belong just as much to reality—to what *is*—as do non-ethical facts and relations that aren't obligations. Regardless, however, of which label we choose for this issue, Hill's critique helps advance the debate, and I thank the editor of *Philosophia* for giving me the opportunity to reply.

Among those who assert the logical autonomy of ethics—call them "autonomists," for short—some assert that no ethical conclusion can be derived from only non-ethical premises in a deductively valid way. Other autonomists concede that deductively valid "is"–"ought" derivations exist but insist that none of those derivations possess the additional virtue of being *sound*, i.e., the virtue of being valid and having only true premises.[2] I've argued against both kinds of autonomists. I've

[1] Scott Hill (2008, pp. 545–566), critiquing my (1998), and my (2006). Parenthetical page-references in the text are to Hill's article.

[2] See, for example, Toomas Karmo (1988). Hill discusses Karmo's argument at length.

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offered what I claim are sound derivations of the ethical from the entirely non-ethical, along with a taxonomic principle—specifically, a principle for identifying non-ethical propositions—that explains why my derivations succeed as counter-examples to autonomism. My task has always seemed to me easier than the task facing the autonomist: I need only produce a single example of an ethical conclusion soundly, or perhaps just validly, derived from only non-ethical premises, in order to show that such derivations are possible. Autonomists, by contrast, have to "prove the negative," the claim that no such derivations can ever be had. Given the universal scope of their position, they must stay constantly on guard against the prospect of successful counterexamples. And the counterexamples keep coming.[3] For us anti-autonomists, on the other hand, one successful counterexample and our work is done.

Hill's article critiques not only two of my attempts to refute autonomism but also the much more famous attempts by A. N. Prior and John Searle. It's an honor to be attacked in such company, and while I could quibble here and there about Hill's treatment of their counterexamples, those giants need no help from me. I'll focus instead on Hill's objections to my own work, and I'll center my reply on four questions on which Hill and I evidently disagree: (1) What makes a proposition[4] count as ethical? (2) Is ethical nihilism a coherent position if understood as the proposition that all ethical propositions are false? (3) Does my taxonomy misclassify some clearly ethical propositions? (4) Does my taxonomy make it too easy to derive the ethical from the non-ethical?

What Makes a Proposition Count as Ethical?

In the articles of mine that Hill discusses, I argue that a proposition counts as ethical only if it entails that a given moral property is instantiated by at least one thing. Hill twice acknowledges (553, 555 n. 14) a point I've tried to emphasize: the taxonomic principle I've offered provides only a necessary condition for a proposition's counting as ethical, not a sufficient condition. I think it's easier to tell when a proposition *isn't* an ethical proposition—easier to tell when a necessary condition for being an ethical proposition isn't satisfied—than it is to specify a condition that's always sufficient for a proposition's counting as ethical. For that reason I've never spelled out a condition that suffices to make a proposition count as ethical, only a condition the failing of which suffices to make a proposition count as non-ethical. For the ethical conclusions of my own "is"-"ought" derivations, I've chosen propositions that not only satisfy my necessary condition for being ethical propositions but, what really matters, are ethical propositions in such an intuitively obvious way that no plausible taxonomy, and no interesting defense of autonomism, could deny them that

[3] Among recent sources of counterexamples is Nelson (2007), an article also cited by Hill.

[4] I prefer to talk in terms of ethical propositions rather than ethical sentences, whereas Hill, like some others in this debate, talks in terms of sentences rather than propositions. In "Closing the 'Is'–'Ought' Gap," I too talked in terms of sentences, deliberately following Karmo's usage in "Some Valid... Arguments," but I explicitly assumed that all sentences are being "standardly construed," i.e., construed as expressing the propositions we normally take them to express. We might as well cut to the chase, then, and simply talk in terms of propositions in the first place, as I'll continue to do in this response.

status. I've then applied my necessary condition to show that the premises of these derivations count as non-ethical because those premises fail the condition.

At one point Hill reads my condition as if it were also sufficient but then in a footnote immediately, although somewhat obliquely, retracts that reading. He characterizes his reading as "exaggerating a little bit," when in fact he simply misapplies my test. But more important than this exegetical inaccuracy is the deeper mistake in Hill's reasoning that I think it reveals. He writes, "According to Maitzen's taxonomy, [proposition] (5) is ethical. The truth conditions of (5) are identical to the truth conditions of 'Jones is obligated to pay and Jones ought to pay'.... So for Maitzen, (5) is ethical" (555). Hill's reasoning seems to rest on this assumption:

(C) If two propositions have identical truth-conditions, then both are ethical propositions or neither is.

In fact, as I'll argue shortly, C is false, and elsewhere Hill's article contains evidence that he himself rejects C.

It's not just exegetically inaccurate but, more important, dangerous to interpret my necessary condition as if it were also sufficient. While I hold that the ethical proposition

(S) Slavery is unjust

is true only if injustice is instantiated by at least one thing, notice that it's also the case that the *non*-ethical proposition

(R) Some red things are colorless

is true only if injustice is instantiated by at least one thing, for the simple reason that R is impossible and thus (trivially) true only if *p*, for any proposition *p*. Both S and R satisfy my necessary condition, but clearly only S is an ethical proposition. Thus, interpreting my necessary condition as if it were a sufficient condition gives plainly wrong results.

Furthermore, if you believe, as Hill does, that there are necessary or impossible ethical propositions,[5] then you ought to reject C, the assumption on which I've said Hill's reasoning depends. Any necessary ethical proposition will have the same truth-conditions as the non-ethical, necessary proposition ~R (namely, true under all possible conditions), and any impossible ethical proposition will have the same truth-conditions as R (namely, true under no possible conditions). No plausible taxonomy classifies R and ~R as ethical propositions. So C is false, or at any rate Hill can't consistently rely on it.

Hill correctly observes that the "is"–"ought" debate owes its longevity to the fact that "There are sentences whose status as ethical or non-ethical is difficult to determine." He then says that he finds my taxonomic principle unhelpful in classifying

[5] Hill, 563, 564, citing P. T. Geach and Michael Huemer as others who accept the existence of necessary and impossible ethical propositions. As I remarked earlier (see note 4), Hill writes in terms of necessary and impossible ethical *sentences*, but I take it he means "propositions," for two reasons. First, no sentence—no item of such a contingent production as a language—exists in every possible world, so no sentence is true (or false) in every possible world, even if some propositions are. Second, for any sentence whose *actual* propositional content (its content in the actual world) has a particular truth-value in every possible world, there is a possible world in which that sentence has a different truth-value in virtue of having a *different* propositional content in that world. So no sentence has the same truth-value in every possible world even if, contrary to what I've said about the contingency of language, some sentences exist in every possible world.

such problematic sentences, objecting to it on the grounds that it "defines ethical sentences in terms of something that is equally problematic—moral properties" (561, n. 19). I find Hill's objection puzzling for three reasons.

First, it's easier to classify as moral the kinds of properties that standardly get discussed in the "is"-"ought" debate than it is to classify the contrived and convoluted sentences that often get discussed. Surely it's easier for all sides of the debate to agree that *being unjust* or *being morally obligatory* are moral properties—the sort of properties that ethical nihilists like J. L. Mackie[6] say are never instantiated—than it is for them to agree on the classification of a bizarre disjunction such as Prior's "Either tea-drinking is common in England or all New Zealanders ought to be shot."[7] It's partly for this reason that my own taxonomic principle refers to moral properties: compared to sentences such as Prior's disjunction, moral properties are *less* problematically identified as moral.

Second, and strangely for someone who criticizes the notion of moral properties, Hill himself relies on the notion repeatedly in his article. In rejecting my definition of ethical nihilism, he instead defines it as "the idea that nothing is good or evil or right or wrong. Nothing has any moral properties" (560). "I propose," he writes, "that we understand Ethical Nihilism in terms of moral properties rather than in terms of which sentences are true and which sentences are false" (560, n. 18). If moral properties are problematic, then, by Hill's own lights, so is his definition of ethical nihilism. Hill also seems to conclude that "The only way to make [the sentence 'The Holocaust was evil'] true is to make [the property of] evil instantiated by the Holocaust" (561), a conclusion that likewise assumes that moral properties aren't too problematic for us to use after all. I think he's entirely correct to help himself to the notion of moral properties (that is, when he's not busy rejecting the notion as too problematic).

Third, the contributors to the "is"–"ought" debate who (unlike Hill, apparently) avoid all reference to moral properties end up providing taxonomies that are unhelpful, cumbersome, and otherwise deeply flawed. Perhaps the best-known example of a taxonomy avoiding all reference to moral properties is Toomas Karmo's.[8] Hill knows about Karmo's proposal and my objections to it,[9] and indeed he offers his own objections to Karmo in the article to which this is a reply. Because Hill is so familiar with the pitfalls of taxonomies that abstain from invoking moral properties, his occasionally professed skepticism about moral properties is puzzling.

Is Ethical Nihilism a Coherent Position?

In defending my candidate "is"–"ought" derivations and in critiquing taxonomies such as the one offered by Karmo, I've needed to claim this: ethical nihilism is a *coherent* position even if it is construed as the proposition that all ethical propositions are false. As it happens, I accept that claim on grounds that have nothing to do with the

[6] J. L. Mackie (1977), especially Chapter 1 ("The Subjectivity of Values").

[7] A. N. Prior (1960); 202.

[8] Karmo (1988).

[9] My objections appear in my (1998), one of the two articles of mine to which Hill is responding. Further objections to Karmo appear in Nelson (2007).

"is"–"ought" debate. In defending Karmo against my critique, however, Hill disputes the claim: he argues that ethical nihilism "should not be formulated" as the proposition that all ethical propositions are false because, in his view, the proposition that all ethical propositions are false is self-refuting and therefore incoherent (559, 560).

But is it? Elsewhere I've defended the coherence of ethical nihilism by analogy to nihilism about other domains of discourse, such as astrology. Surely it's at least coherent to deny that any distinctively astrological propositions[10] are true, to deny that there is "anything to" the astrology game in regard to truth. If so, then of course such astrological nihilism can't *itself* count as an astrological proposition or it would be self-refuting. No one disputes that we can coherently deny any number of individual propositions from the domain of astrology; why, then, couldn't we deny all of them? If astrologers tell me "You're cautious because your Mars is in Leo," surely I can reply "Not so; that's false" without thereby joining them at their own game. I can coherently reply that way because the following rationale for replying that way is itself coherent: the whole astrological enterprise is hogwash because it's based on the false presupposition that the positions of distant planets and stars at the time of your birth influence your personality.

Or think of it this way: merely *identifying* a domain of discourse, whether astrology or ethics, doesn't by itself ensure that the domain contains truths. Consider, after all, the domain of false propositions. Hence there's no reason people can't say the following about the domain of ethics without self-refutation: "Ethics is all hogwash, since there are no ethical truth-makers to make any ethical propositions true." Any taxonomy, such as Karmo's, that implies they can't do so is an implausible taxonomy.

The key to recognizing the coherence of ethical nihilism is to recognize the invalidity of inferences such as these:

It is not the case that doing A is wrong; therefore, doing A is right.

It is not the case that doing A is right; therefore, doing A is wrong.

Ethical nihilists accept the premise in each inference while denying the conclusion; they avoid incoherence because it's at least coherent to claim that nothing is right *or* wrong, that nothing instantiates either of those moral properties.[11] More generally, it's important to recognize the following fact implied by my taxonomy: the wide-scope negation of an ethical proposition is never itself an ethical proposition. The proposition

(~S) It is not the case that slavery is unjust

doesn't imply that slavery is just and, indeed, doesn't imply that slavery instantiates any moral properties at all. It's a non-ethical proposition. The sentence "Slavery isn't

[10] In my (2006), I offered this clarification of the phrase "distinctively astrological": "The proposition 'There are planets', while accepted by astrologers, is not a distinctively astrological proposition, because orthodox astronomy (among many other discourses) also contains it. By contrast, 'Your Sun sign influences your personality' is distinctively astrological, because other kinds of discourse do not contain it" (456, n. 9).

[11] These inferences are called "reinforced Doppelganger principles" in Pigden (2007), at 452, an article cited by Hill. Pigden sees why we ought to reject such principles: "[T]o say that nihilism is impossible—that it is absolutely inconceivable that neither moral rightness nor wrongness attach to actions—is to make a large and implausible claim" (453).

unjust" is therefore ambiguous: depending on the speaker's intentions, an utterance of that sentence might express the ethical proposition that slavery is just, or it might express the non-ethical proposition ~S.

In discussing the formulation of ethical nihilism, Hill seems to me to underestimate the depth, or seriousness, of the disagreement between Karmo's taxonomy and my own. I've been arguing, here and elsewhere, that nihilism, whatever else we might think about it, isn't *analytically or conceptually false*. Karmo's taxonomy makes nihilism obviously self-refuting and so analytically or conceptually false, a charge that even opponents of nihilism ought to find excessive. Contrary to what Hill claims, any taxonomy that has nihilism come out analytically or conceptually false isn't "somewhere in the neighborhood of Maitzen's version" (559). It's nowhere near the neighborhood, and isn't a plausible taxonomy anyway.

Does My Taxonomy Misclassify Some Clearly Ethical Propositions?

Hill says that it does. He claims, first, that my necessary condition for a proposition's counting as ethical will classify as non-ethical the proposition

(T) Torturing babies is wrong.

He correctly observes that T is a substantive ethical proposition and that T can be true even in worlds in which no one ever tortures babies or does anything wrong. He claims that my taxonomy can't accommodate those facts because it requires that the property of wrongness be instantiated by acts of baby-torture in any world in which T is both ethical and true. On the contrary, however, my taxonomy accommodates those facts. The key is to interpret T as attributing the property of wrongness to the *action-type* of torturing babies and only derivatively to any tokens of that action-type there might be.[12] On this interpretation of T, the action-type of torturing babies is wrong—it instantiates the property of wrongness—even in worlds in which (fortunately for babies) there are no tokens of that type. Moreover, Hill himself apparently accepts this interpretation when he writes, "It seems like 'Torturing babies is wrong' is true at *W* regardless of whether anybody does it" (560). Right, but how could "Torturing babies is wrong" be true in a world lacking acts of baby-torture unless the wrongness attached to the action-type rather than the action-token? Given an interpretation of T that Hill and I apparently share, my taxonomic principle allows T to be classified as an ethical proposition after all.

Hill's second example is the taxonomically interesting sentence "Either the Holocaust was good or the Holocaust was evil" (561). He's right that the proposition

(H) Either the Holocaust was good or the Holocaust was evil

fails my test and so, on my view, counts as non-ethical. How worrisome is that result? It seems to me obvious that any proposition the ethical nihilist can

[12] On p. 561, n. 19, Hill considers something like this reply, but he objects to it on the grounds that it presupposes the problematic notion of moral properties. As I argued earlier, this objection strikes me as peculiar given Hill's own repeated use of that very notion.

consistently accept is a non-ethical proposition. But it doesn't follow from that fact that every proposition an ethical nihilist *can't* consistently accept—such as H—is an ethical proposition. There are plenty of non-ethical propositions, such as the proposition that some red things are colorless, that neither ethical nihilists nor anyone else consistently accept. As I've written elsewhere, "A domain *excludes* every proposition *compatible* with nihilism [about that domain], but it does not *include* every proposition *incompatible* with nihilism."[13] So the fact that ethical nihilism rules out H doesn't imply that H is an ethical proposition.

Part of the trouble with H may be that the plausibility of its second disjunct exceeds the plausibility of its first disjunct to a distracting degree. So consider a less lopsided example:

(F) Either factory-farming of chickens is morally permissible or factory-farming of chickens is morally wrong.

This disjunction likewise fails my test for counting as an ethical proposition, but it's not at all clear to me that it *ought* to count as one. Again, ethical nihilists can't consistently accept F, but that fact by itself doesn't make F an ethical proposition. Granted, my taxonomy also makes non-ethical the proposition

(H*) The Holocaust was evil or nothing is evil,

because ethical nihilists can consistently accept H* by accepting its second disjunct. However, it's important to distinguish the taxonomic status of the proposition H* from the pragmatic or conversational *purpose* that an utterance of the sentence "The Holocaust was evil or nothing is evil" might serve: namely, to assert the first disjunct in H*, the different (and ethical) proposition that the Holocaust was evil. The temptation to misclassify H* as an ethical proposition may well stem from mistaking the pragmatic function of an utterance for the semantic content of the sentence uttered.

Does My Taxonomy Make it Too Easy to Derive the Ethical from the Non-Ethical?

In what is perhaps his most puzzling objection, Hill complains that my taxonomic principle makes valid "is"–"ought" derivations "too easy" to produce (561, 562). But how easy is *too* easy? Hill never says. More important, why should a type of logical derivation be difficult or rare if it's possible in the first place? Still, one might wonder how the "is"–"ought" debate can have persisted for so long if producing valid and potentially sound "is"–"ought" derivations is as easy as my recipe for producing them implies. On my view, the persistence of the debate stems in large measure from four mistaken assumptions on the part of many of those engaged in the debate, assumptions I've already criticized: (1) the assumption that propositions having identical truth-conditions always have the same classification as ethical or non-ethical; (2) the assumption that the wide-scope negation of an ethical

[13] Maitzen (2006), 461, italics in original.

proposition is sometimes or always itself an ethical proposition, when in fact it never is; (3) the assumption that any proposition incompatible with ethical nihilism must be an ethical proposition; and (4) the assumption that an utterance's pragmatic function in asserting an ethical proposition implies that the utterance's literal propositional content is likewise ethical. The less prevalent those mistaken assumptions become, the closer we'll get to settling the "is"–"ought" debate and to recognizing that ethics isn't logically autonomous.

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