HUME ON "IS" AND "OUGHT"

I

SOMETIMES in the history of philosophy the defense of a particular philosophical position and the interpretation of a particular philosopher become closely identified. This has notoriously happened more than once in the case of Plato, and lately in moral philosophy it seems to me to have happened in the case of Hume. At the center of recent ethical discussion the question of the relationship between factual assertions and moral judgments has continually recurred, and the nature of that relationship has usually been discussed in terms of an unequivocally sharp distinction between them. In the course of the posing of this question the last paragraph of Book III, Part i, Section 1, of Hume's *Treatise* has been cited over and over again. This passage is either quoted in full or at least referred to—and with approval—by R. M. Hare,[1] Professor A. N. Prior,[2] Professor P. H. Nowell-Smith,[3] and a number of other writers. Not all contemporary writers, of course, treat Hume in the same way; a footnote to Stuart Hampshire's paper, "Some Fallacies in Moral Philosophy,"[4] provides an important exception to the general rule. But very often indeed Hume's contribution to ethics is treated as if it depended largely on this one passage, and this passage is accorded an interpretation which has acquired almost the status of an orthodoxy. Hare has even spoken of "Hume's Law."[5]

What Hume says is:

In every system of morality which I have hitherto met with, I have always remark'd, 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 of a sudden I

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[1] *The Language of Morals* (Oxford, 1952), pp. 29 and 44.
[2] *Logic and the Basis of Ethics* (Oxford, 1949), pp. 32-33.
[3] *Ethics* (London, 1954), pp. 36-38.
[4] *Mind*, LVIII (1949), 466.
[5] *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, LV (1954-1955), 303.

am surpriz'd to find, that instead of the usual copulations of propositions, *is*, and *is not*, I meet with no proposition that is not connected with an *ought*, or an *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, 'tis necessary that it should be observ'd and explain'd; 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. But as authors do not commonly use this precaution, I shall presume to recommend it to the readers; and am persuaded that this small attention wou'd subvert all the vulgar systems of morality, and let us see, that the distinction of vice and virtue is not founded merely on the relations of objects, nor is perceiv'd by reason.[6]

The standard interpretation of this passage takes Hume to be asserting here that no set of nonmoral premises can entail a moral conclusion. It is further concluded that Hume therefore is a prime opponent of what Prior has called "the attempt to find a 'foundation' for morality that is not already moral." Hume becomes in this light an exponent of the autonomy of morality and in this at least akin to Kant. In this paper I want to show that this interpretation is inadequate and misleading. But I am not concerned with this only as a matter of historical interpretation. The thread of argument which I shall try to pursue will be as follows. First, I shall argue that the immense respect accorded to Hume thus interpreted is puzzling, since it is radically inconsistent with the disapproval with which contemporary logicians are apt to view certain of Hume's arguments about induction. Second, I shall try to show that if the current interpretation of Hume's views on "is" and "ought" is correct, then the first breach of Hume's law was committed by Hume; that is, the development of Hume's own moral theory does not square with what he is taken to assert about "is" and "ought." Third, I shall offer evidence that the current interpretation of Hume is incorrect. Finally, I shall try to indicate what light the reinterpretation of Hume can throw upon current controversies in moral philosophy.

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[6] L. A. Selby-Bigge's edition, p. 469.

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II

To approach the matter obliquely, how can we pass from "is" to "ought"? In Chapter iv of *The Language of Morals*, Hare asserts that a practical conclusion and a fortiori a moral conclusion is reached syllogistically, the minor premise stating "what we should in fact be doing if we did one or other of the alternatives open to us" and the major premise stating a principle of conduct. This suggests an answer to our question. If you wish to pass from a factual statement to a moral statement, treat the moral statement as the conclusion to a syllogism and the factual statement as a minor premise. Then to make the transition all that is needed is to supply another moral statement as a major premise. And in a footnote to Chapter iii of *Ethics* we find Nowell-Smith doing just this. He quotes from Bishop R. C. Mortimer the following passage: "The first foundation is the doctrine of God the Creator. God made us and all the world. Because of that He has an absolute claim on our obedience. We do not exist in our own right, but only as His creatures, who ought therefore to do and be what He desires."[7] On this Nowell-Smith comments: "This argument requires the premise that a creature ought to obey his creator, which is itself a moral judgment. So that Christian ethics is not founded solely on the doctrine that God created us."[8] That is, he argues that the inference, "God created us, therefore we ought to obey him," is defective unless and until it is supplied with a major premise, "We ought to obey our creator."

I can only make sense of this position by supposing that underlying it there is an assumption that arguments must be either deductive or defective. But this is the very assumption which underlies Hume's skepticism about induction. And this skepticism is commonly treated as resting upon, and certainly does rest upon, a misconceived demand, a demand which P. F. Strawson has called "the demand that induction shall be shown to be really a kind of deduction."[9] This is certainly an accurate way of

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[7] *Christian Ethics* (London, 1950), p. 7.

[8] *Op. cit.*, p. 51.

[9] *Introduction to Logical Theory* (London, 1952), p. 250.

characterizing Hume's transition from the premise that "there can be no *demonstrative* arguments to prove, that those instances of which we have had no experience resemble those of which we have had experience" to the conclusion that "it is impossible for us to satisfy ourselves by our reason, why we should extend that experience beyond those particular instances which have fallen under our observation."[10] Part of Hume's own point is that to render inductive arguments deductive is a useless procedure. We can pass from "The kettle has been on the fire for ten minutes" to "So it will be boiling by now" (Strawson's example) by way of writing in some such major premise as "Whenever kettles have been on the fire for ten minutes, they boil."But if our problem is that of justifying induction, then this major premise itself embodies an inductive assertion that stands in need of justification. For the transition which constitutes the problem has been justified in the passage from minor premise to conclusion only at the cost of reappearing, as question-beggingly as ever, within the major premise. To fall back on some yet more general assertion as a premise from which "Whenever kettles have been on the fire for ten minutes they boil" could be derived would merely remove the problem one stage farther and would be to embark on a regress, possibly infinite and certainly pointless.

If then it is pointless to present inductive arguments as deductive what special reason is there in the case of moral arguments for attempting to present them as deductive? If men arguing about morality, as Bishop Mortimer is arguing, pass from "God made us" to "We ought to obey God," why should we assume that the transition must be an entailment? I suspect that our inclination to do this may be that we fear the alternative. Hare suggests that the alternative to his view is "that although, in the strict sense of the word, I have indeed shown that moral judgments and imperatives cannot be *entailed* by factual premises, yet there is some looser relation than entailment which holds between them." I agree with Hare in finding the doctrine of what he calls "loose" forms of inference objectionable; although I cannot indeed find this doctrine present in, for example, Professor S. E.

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[10] *Treatise*, I, iii, 6; Selby-Bigge, pp. 89, 91.

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Toulmin's *The Place of Reason in Ethics* which Hare purports to be criticizing. And certainly entailment relations must have a place in moral argument, as they do in scientific argument. But since there are important steps in scientific argument which are not entailments, it might be thought that to insist that the relation between factual statements and moral conclusions be deductive or nonexistent would be likely to hinder us in elucidating the character of moral arguments.

How does this bear on the interpretation of Hume? It might be held that, since Hume holds in some passages on induction at least that arguments are deductive or defective, we could reasonably expect him to maintain that since factual premises cannot entail moral conclusions—as they certainly cannot—there can be no connections between factual statements and moral judgments (other perhaps than psychological connections). But at this point all I am suggesting is that our contemporary disapproval of Hume on induction makes our contemporary approval of what we take to be Hume on facts and norms seem odd. It is only now that I want to ask whether—just as Hume's attitude to induction is much more complex than appears in his more skeptical moments and is therefore liable to misinterpretation—his remarks on "is" and "ought" are not only liable to receive but have actually received a wrong interpretation.

III

The approach will still be oblique. What I want to suggest next is that if Hume does affirm the impossibility of deriving an "ought" from an "is" then he is the first to perform this particular impossibility. But before I proceed to do this, one general remark is worth making. It would be very odd if Hume did affirm the logical irrelevance of facts to moral judgments, for the whole difference in atmosphere—and it is very marked—between his discussion of morality and those of, for example, Hare and Nowell-Smith springs from his interest in the facts of morality. His work is full of anthropological and sociological remarks, remarks sometimes ascribed by commentators to the confusion

between logic and psychology with which Hume is so often credited. Whether Hume is in general guilty of this confusion is outside the scope of this paper to discuss. But so far as his moral theory is concerned, the sociological comments have a necessary place in the whole structure of argument.

Consider, for example, Hume's account of justice. To call an act "just" or "unjust" is· to say that it falls under a rule. A single act of justice may well be contrary to either private or public interest or both.

But however single acts of justice may be contrary, either to public or to private interest, 'tis certain, that the whole plan or scheme is highly conducive, or indeed absolutely requisite both to the support of society, and the well-being of every individual. 'Tis impossible to separate the good from the ill. Property must be stable, and must be fix'd by general rules. Tho' in one instance the public be a sufferer, this momentary ill is amply compensated by the steady prosecution of the rule, and by the peace and order, which it establishes in society.[11]

Is Hume making a moral point or is he asserting a causal socio-logical connection or is he making a logical point? Is he saying that it is logically appropriate to justify the rules of justice in terms of interest or that to observe such rules does as a matter of fact conduce to public interest or that such rules are in fact justified because they conduce to public interest? All three. For Hume is asserting both that the logically appropriate way of justifying the rules of justice is an appeal to public interest and that in fact public interest is served by them so that the rules are justified. And that Hume is clearly both justifying the rules and affirming the validity of this type of justification cannot be doubted in the light of the passage which follows.

And even every individual person must find himself a gainer on ballancing the account; since, without justice, society must immediately dissolve, and everyone must fall into that savage and solitary condition, which is infinitely worse than the worst situation that can possibly be suppos'd in society.

Moreover, this type of argument is not confined to the *Treatise;* elsewhere also Hume makes it clear that he believes that factual

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[11] *Ibid.,* III, ii, 2; Selby-Bigge, p. 497.

considerations can justify or fail to justify moral rules. Such considerations are largely appealed to by Hume in his arguments in the "Essay On Suicide" that suicide is morally permissible.

To return to the justification of justice: Hume clearly affirms that the justification of the rules of justice lies in the fact that their observance is to everyone's long-term interest; that we ought to obey the rules because there is no one who does not gain more than he loses by such obedience. But this is to derive an "ought" from an "is." If Hare, Nowell-Smith, and Prior have interpreted Hume correctly, Hume is contravening his own prohibition. Someone might argue, however, that Hume only appears to contravene it. For, if we ignore the suggestion made earlier in this paper that the attempt to present moral arguments as entailments may be misconceived, we may suppose that Hume's argument is defective in the way that Bishop Mortimer's is and attempt to repair it in the way Nowell-Smith repairs the other. Then the transition from the minor premise, "Obedience to this rule would be to everyone's long-term interest," to the conclusion "We ought to obey this rule" would be made by means of the major premise "We ought to do whatever is to everyone's long-term interest." But if this is the defense of Hume, if Hume needs defense at this point, then he is indefensible. For the locution offered as a candidate for a major premise, "We ought to do what is to everyone's long-term interest," cannot function as such a premise for Hume since in his terms it could not be a moral principle at all, but at best a kind of compressed definition. That is, the notion of "ought" is for Hume only explicable in terms of the notion of a consensus of interest. To say that we ought to do something is to affirm that there is a commonly accepted rule; and the existence of such a rule presupposes a consensus of opinion as to where our common interests lie. An obligation is constituted in part by such a consensus and the concept of "ought" is logically dependent on the concept of a common interest and can only be explained in terms of it. To say that we ought to do what is to the common interest would therefore be either to utter an aphoristic and misleading truism or else to use the term "ought" in a sense quite other than that understood by Hume. Thus the locution "We ought to do what is to everyone's long-

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term interest" could not lay down a moral principle which might figure as a major premise in the type of syllogism which Hare describes.

The view which Hume is propounding can perhaps be illuminated by a comparison with the position of J. S. Mill. On the interpretation of Mill's ethics for which Professor J. O. Urmson has convincingly argued,[12] Mill did not commit the naturalistic fallacy of deriving the principle that "We ought to pursue the greatest happiness of the greatest number" from some statement about what we ourselves or all men desire. He did not commit this fallacy for he did not derive his principle at all. For Mill "We ought to pursue the greatest happiness of the greatest number" is the supreme moral principle. The difference between Mill's utilitarianism and Hume's lies in this: that if we take some such statement as "We ought to do whatever is to the advantage of most people," this for Mill would be a moral principle which it would be morally wrong to deny, but which it would make sense to deny. Whereas for Hume to deny this statement would be senseless, for it would detach "ought" from the notion of a consensus of interest and so evacuate it of meaning. Roughly speaking, for Mill such a principle would be a contingent moral truth; for Hume it would be a necessary truth underlying morality.

Moreover, Hume and Mill can be usefully contrasted in another respect. Mill's basic principle is a moral affirmation independent of the facts: so long as some course of action will produce more happiness for more people than alternative courses will, it provides at least some sort of effective moral criterion. But at any rate, so far as that part of his doctrine which refers to justice is concerned, it is quite otherwise with Hume. We have moral rules because we have common interests. Should someone succeed in showing us that the facts are different from what we conceive them to be so that we have no common interests, then our moral rules would lose their justification. Indeed the initial move of Marx's moral theory can perhaps be best understood as a denial of the facts which Hume holds to constitute the justification for

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[12] *Philosophical Quarterly*, III (1953), 33.

social morality. Marx's denial that there are common interests shared by the whole of society in respect of, for instance, the distribution of property meets Hume on his own ground. (We may note in passing that the change from Hume's characterization of morality in terms of content, with its explicit reference to the facts about society, to the attempt by later writers to characterize morality purely in terms of the form of moral judgments is what Marxists would see as the significant change in philosophical ethics. Since I would agree with Marxists in thinking this change a change for the worse—for reasons which I shall indicate later in the argument—I have been tempted to retitle this paper "Against Bourgeois Formalism in Ethics.")

One last point on the contrast between Hume and Mill: since Mill's basic principle in ethics is a moral principle, but Hume's is a definition of morality, they demand different types of defense. How does Hume defend his view of the derivation of morality from interest? By appeal to the facts. How do we in fact induce someone to do what is just? How do we in fact justify just actions on our own part? In observing what answers we have to give to questions like these, Hume believes that his analysis is justified.[13]

IV

What I have so far argued is that Hume himself derives "ought" from "is" in his account of justice. Is he then inconsistent with his own doctrine in that famous passage? Someone might try to save Hume's consistency by pointing out that the derivation of "ought" from "is" in the section on justice is not an entailment and that all Hume is denying is that "is" statements can entail "ought" statements, and that this is quite correct. But to say this would be to misunderstand the passage. For I now want to argue that in fact Hume's positive suggestions on moral theory are actually an answer to a question posed in the "is" and "ought" passage, and that that passage has nothing to do with the point about entailment at all. The arguments here are twofold.

First, Hume does not actually say that one cannot pass from an

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[13] *Ibid.*; Selby-Bigge, p. 498.

"is" to an "ought" but only that it "seems altogether incon-
ceivable" how this can be done. We have all been brought up
to believe in Hume's irony so thoroughly that it may occasionally
be necessary to remind ourselves that Hume need not necessarily
mean more or other than he says. Indeed the rhetorical and
slightly ironical tone of the passage renders it all the more am-
biguous. When Hume asks how what seems altogether incon-
ceivable may be brought about, he may be taken to be suggesting
either that it simply cannot be brought about or that it cannot
be brought about in the way in which "every system of morality
which I have hitherto met with" has brought it about. In any
case it would be odd if Hume thought that "observations concerning
human affairs" necessarily could not lead on to moral judgments
since such observations are constantly so used by Hume himself.

Second, the force of the passage as it is commonly taken depends
on what seems to be its manifest truth: "is" cannot entail "ought."
But the notion of entailment is read into the passage. The word
Hume uses is "deduction." *We* might well use this word as a
synonym for entailment, and even as early as Richard Price's
moral writings it is certainly so used. But is it used thus by Hume?
The first interesting feature of Hume's use of the word is its
extreme rarity in his writings. When he speaks of what we should
call "deductive arguments" he always uses the term "demonstra-
tive arguments." The word "deduction" and its cognates have
no entry in Selby-Bigge's indexes at all, so that its isolated
occurrence in this passage at least stands in need of interpretation.
The entries under "deduction" and "deduce" in the Oxford
English Dictionary make it quite clear that in ordinary eighteenth-
century use these were likely to be synonyms rather for "inference"
and "infer" than for "entailment" and "entail." Was this Hume's
usage? In the essay entitled "That Politics may be Reduced to
a Science," Hume writes, "So great is the force of laws, and of
particular forms of government, and so little dependence have
they on the humours and tempers of men, that consequences
almost as general and certain may sometimes be deduced from
them as any which the mathematical sciences afford us."[14]

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[14] Essay III, in Hume, *Theory of Politics*, ed. by F. Watkins (London, 1951),
p. 136.

Clearly, to read "be entailed by" for "deduced from" in this passage would be very odd. The reference to mathematics might indeed mislead us momentarily into supposing Hume to be speaking of "entailment." But the very first example in which Hume draws a deduction makes it clear how he is using the term. From the example of the Roman republic which gave the whole legislative power to the people without allowing a negative voice either to the nobility or the consuls and so ended up in anarchy, Hume concludes in general terms that "Such are the effects of democracy without a representative." That is, Hume uses past political instances to support political generalizations in an ordinary inductive argument, and he uses the term "deduce" in speaking of this type of argument. "Deduction" therefore must mean "inference" and cannot mean "entailment."

Hume, then, in the celebrated passage does not mention entailment. What he does is to ask how and if moral rules may be inferred from factual statements, and in the rest of Book III of the *Treatise* he provides an answer to his own question.

V

There are, of course, two distinct issues raised by this paper so far. There is the historical question of what Hume is actually asserting in the passage under discussion, and there is the philosophical question of whether what he does assert is true and important. I do not want to entangle these two issues overmuch, but it may at this point actually assist in elucidating what Hume means to consider briefly the philosophical issues raised by the difference between what he actually does say and what he is customarily alleged to say. Hume is customarily alleged to be making a purely formal point about "ought" and "is," and the kind of approach to ethics which makes such formal analyses central tends to lead to one disconcerting result. The connection between morality and happiness is made to appear purely contingent and accidental. "One ought to . . ." is treated as a formula where the blank space might be filled in by almost any verb which would make grammatical sense. "One ought occasionally to kill

someone" or "One ought to say what is not true" are not examples of moral precepts for more than the reason that they are at odds with the precepts by which most of us have decided to abide. Yet if ethics is a purely formal study any example ought to serve. If a philosopher feels that the connection between morality and happiness is somehow a necessary one, he is likely to commit, or at least be accused of, the naturalistic fallacy of defining moral words in factual terms. It is obvious why philosophers should seem to be faced with this alternative of committing the naturalistic fallacy or else making the connection between morality and happiness contingent and accidental. This alternative is rooted in the belief that the connections between moral utterances and factual statements must be entailments or nothing. And this belief arises out of accepting formal calculi as models of argument and then looking for entailment relations in nonformal discourse.

To assert that it is of the first importance for ethics to see that the question of the connection between morality and happiness is a crucial one is not, of course, to allow that Hume's treatment of it is satisfactory. But at least Hume did see the need to make the connection, whereas the "is" and "ought" passage has been interpreted in such a way as to obscure this need.

Second, the reinterpretation of this passage of Hume allows us to take up the whole question of practical reasoning in a more fruitful way than the formalist tradition in ethics allows. If anyone says that we cannot make valid inferences from an "is" to an "ought," I should be disposed to offer him the following counter-example: "If I stick a knife in Smith, they will send me to jail; but I do not want to go to jail; so I ought not to (had better not) stick a knife in him." The reply to this may be that there is no doubt that this is a valid inference (I do not see how this could be denied) but that it is a perfectly ordinary entailment relying upon the suppressed major premise "If it is both the case that if I do x, the outcome will be y, then if I don't want y to happen, I ought not to do x." This will certainly make the argument in question an entailment; but there seem to me three good reasons for not treating the argument in this way. First, inductive arguments could be rendered deductive in this way, but, as we have already noted, only a superstitious devotee of

entailment could possibly want to present them as such. What additional reason could there be in the case of moral arguments that is lacking in the case of inductive arguments? Moreover, a reason akin to that which we have for not proceeding in this way with inductive arguments can be adduced in this use also, namely, that we may have made our argument into an entailment by adding a major premise; but we have reproduced the argument in its nonentailment form as that premise, and anything question-able in the original argument remains just as questionable inside the major premise. That premise itself is an argument and one that is not an entailment; to make it an entailment will be to add a further premise which will reproduce the same difficulty. So whether my inference stands or falls, it does not stand or fall as an entailment with a suppressed premise. But there is a third and even more important reason for not treating the transition made in such an inference as an entailment. To do so is to obscure the way in which the transition within the argument is in fact made. For the transition from "is" to "ought" is made in this inference by the notion of "wanting." And this is no accident. Aristotle's examples of practical syllogisms typically have a premise which includes some such terms as "suits" or "pleases." We could give a long list of the concepts which can form such bridge notions between "is" and "ought": wanting, needing, desiring, pleasure, happiness, health—and these are only a few. I think there is a strong case for saying that moral notions are unintelligible apart from concepts such as these. The philosopher who has obscured the issue here is Kant whose classification of imperatives into categorical and hypothetical removes any link between what is good and right and what we need and desire at one blow. Here it is outside my scope to argue against Kant; all I want to do is to prevent Hume from being classified with him on this issue.

For we are now in a position to clarify what Hume is actually saying in the "is" and "ought" passage. He is first urging us to take note of the key point where we do pass from "is" to "ought" and arguing that this is a difficult transition. In the next part of the *Treatise* he shows us how it can be made; clearly in the passage itself he is concerned to warn us against those who

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make this transition in an illegitimate way. Against whom is Hume warning us?

Hume himself identifies the position he is criticizing by saying that attention to the point he is making "wou'd subvert all the vulgar systems of morality." To what does he refer by using this phrase? The ordinary eighteenth-century use of "vulgar" rules out any reference to other philosophers and more particularly to Wollaston. Hume must be referring to the commonly accepted systems of morality. Nor is there any ground for supposing Hume to depart from ordinary eighteenth-century usage on this point. Elsewhere in the *Treatise*[15] there is a passage in which he uses interchangeably the expressions "the vulgar" and "the generality of mankind." So it is against ordinary morality that Hume is crusading. And for the eighteenth century ordinary morality is religious morality. Hume is in fact repudiating a religious foundation for morality and putting in its place a foundation in human needs, interests, desires, and happiness. Can this interpretation be further supported?

The only way of supporting it would be to show that there were specific religious moral views against which Hume had reason to write and which contain arguments answering to the description he gives in the "is" and "ought" passage. Now this can be shown. Hume was brought up in a Presbyterian household and himself suffered a Presbyterian upbringing. Boswell records Hume as follows: "I asked him if he was not religious when he was young. He said he was, and he used to read the *Whole Duty of Man;* that he made an abstract from the Catalogue of vices at the end of it, and examined himself by this, leaving out Murder and Theft and such vices as he had no chance of committing, having no inclination to commit them."[16] *The Whole Duty of Man* was probably written by Richard Allestree, and it was at once a typical and a popular work of Protestant piety, and it abounds in arguments of the type under discussion. Consider, for example, the following: "whoever is in distress for any thing, wherewith

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[15] *Treatise*, I, iv, 2.

[16] Boswell, "An Account of My Last Interview with David Hume, Esq.," reprinted in *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. by Kemp Smith (2nd ed., New York, 1948).

I can supply him, that distress of his makes it a duty on me so to supply him and this in all kinds of events. Now the ground of its being a duty is that God hath given Men abilities not only for their own use, but for the advantage and benefit of others, and therefore what is thus given for their use, becomes a debt to them whenever their need requires it..."[17] This is precisely an argument which runs from "the being of a God" or "observations concerning human affairs" into affirmations of duty. And it runs into the difficulty which Hume discusses in the section preceding the "is" and "ought" passage, that what is merely matter of fact cannot provide us with a reason for acting—unless it be a matter of those facts which Hume calls the passions, that is, of our needs, desires, and the like. Interestingly enough, there are other passages where Allestree provides his arguments with a backing which refers to just this kind of matter. "A second Motive to our care of any thing is the USEFULNESS of it to us, or the great Mischief we shall have by the loss of it . . . 'Tis true we cannot lose our Souls, in one sense, that is so lose them that they cease to Be; but we may lose them in another . . . In a word, we may lose them in Hell . . ."[18] That is, we pass from what God commands to what we ought to do by means of the fear of Hell. That this can provide a motive Hume denies in the essay "Of Suicide": obviously in fact, though he does not say so very straightforwardly, because he believes that there is no such place.

The interpretation of the "is" and "ought" passage which I am offering can now be stated compendiously. Hume is not in this passage asserting the autonomy of morals—for he did not believe in it; and he is not making a point about entailment—for he does not mention it. He is asserting that the question of how the factual basis of morality is related to morality is a crucial logical issue, reflection on which will enable one to realize how there are ways in which this transition can be made and ways in which it cannot. One has to go beyond the passage itself to see what these are; but if one does so it is plain that we can connect the facts of the situation with what we ought to do only by means of one of those concepts which Hume treats under the

[17] Sunday XIII: Sec. 30.
[18] Preface.

heading of the passions and which I have indicated by examples such as wanting, needing, and the like. Hume is not, as Prior seems to indicate, trying to say that morality lacks a basis; he is trying to point out the nature of that basis.

VI

The argument of this paper is incomplete in three different ways. First, it is of a certain interest to relate Hume's argument to contemporary controversies. On this I will note only as a matter of academic interest that there is at least one recent argument in which Hume has been recruited on the wrong side. In the discussion on moral argument between Hare and Toulmin,[19] Hare has invoked the name of Hume on the side of his contention that factual statements can appear in moral arguments only as minor premises under the aegis of major premises which are statements of moral principle and against Toulmin's contention that moral arguments are nondeductive. But if I have reread Hume on "is" and "ought" correctly, then the difference between what Hume has been thought to assert and what Hume really asserted is very much the difference between Hare and Toulmin. And Hume is in fact as decisively on Toulmin's side as he has been supposed to be on Hare's.

Second, the proper elucidation of this passage would require that its interpretation be linked to an interpretation of Hume's moral philosophy as a whole. Here I will only say that such a thesis of Hume's as that if all factual disagreement were resolved, no moral disagreements would remain, falls into place in the general structure of Hume's ethics if this interpretation of the "is" and "ought" passage is accepted; but on the standard interpretation it remains an odd and inexplicable belief of Hume's. But to pursue this and a large variety of related topics would be to pass beyond the scope of this paper.

Finally, however, I want to suggest that part of the importance of the interpretation of Hume which I have offered in this paper

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[19] *The Language of Morals,* p. 45; *Philosophical Quarterly,* I (1950-1951), 372; and *Philosophy,* XXXI (1956), 65.

lies in the way that it enables us to place Hume's ethics in general and the "is" and "ought" passage in particular in the far wider context of the history of ethics. For I think that Hume stands at a turning point in that history and that the accepted inter- pretation of the "is" and "ought" passage has obscured his role. What I mean by this I can indicate only in a highly schematic and speculative way. Any attempt to write the history of ethics in a paragraph is bound to have a "1066 and All That" quality about it. But even if the paragraph that follows is a caricature it may assist in an understanding of that which it caricatures.

One way of seeing the history of ethics is this. The Greek moral tradition asserted—no doubt with many reservations at times—an essential connection between "good" and "good for," between virtue and desire. One cannot, for Aristotle, do ethics without doing moral psychology; one cannot understand what a virtue is without understanding it as something a man could possess and as something related to human happiness. Morality, to be intelligible, must be understood as grounded in human nature. The Middle Ages preserves this way of looking at ethics. Certainly there is a new element of divine commandment to be reckoned with. But the God who commands you also created you and His commandments are such as it befits your nature to obey. So an Aristotelian moral psychology and a Christian view of the moral law are synthesized even if somewhat unsatisfactorily in Thomist ethics. But the Protestant Reformation changes this. First, because human beings are totally corrupt their nature cannot be a foundation for true morality. And next because men cannot judge God, we obey God's commandments not because God is good but simply because He is God. So the moral law is a collection of arbitrary fiats unconnected with anything we may want or desire. Miss G. E. M. Anscombe has recently suggested that the notion of a morality of law was effectively dropped by the Reformers[20]; I should have thought that there were good grounds for asserting that a morality of law-and-nothing-else was introduced by them. Against the Protestants Hume reasserted the founding of morality on human nature. The attempt to make

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[20] "Modern Moral Philosophy," *Philosophy*, XXXIII (1958), 1-19.

Hume a defender of the autonomy of ethics is likely to conceal his difference from Kant, whose moral philosophy is, from one point of view, the natural outcome the Protestant position. And the virtue of Hume's ethics, like that of Aristotle and unlike that of Kant, is that it seeks to preserve morality as something psychologically intelligible. For the tradition which upholds the autonomy of ethics from Kant to Moore to Hare moral principles are somehow self-explicable; they are logically independent of any assertions about human nature. Hume has been too often presented recently as an adherent of this tradition. Whether we see him as such or whether we see him as the last representative of another and older tradition hinges largely on how we take what he says about "is" and "ought."

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