Morality and the Senses

One Does Not Equal the Other

By Matthew Bixby

Critical Thinking and Writing Phil. 111

Mark McIntire

Thesis: By use of valid syllogistic reasoning and analytic proof for premises used, this paper will defend the conclusion that no scientific descriptions are descriptions that are able to tell us how things ought to be.

Scientific, and more specifically empirical observations, are incapable of deriving a cohesive moral theory based solely on those distinctions. What we find in the ethical world is far more complex than any one series of observations and scientific theories which could establish or break down existing moral theory. Definitions and ethical codes regarding behavior require a more robust and creative approach. The thesis of this paper is, then, no scientific descriptions are descriptions that are able to tell us how things ought to be. A valid standard form categorical syllogism can be formulated to demonstrate how this conclusion is arrived at by logical necessity.

CELARENT EAE-1

No descriptions of what exists are descriptions that are able to tell us how things ought to be.

All scientific descriptions are descriptions of what exists.

Therefore, no scientific descriptions are descriptions that are able to tell us how things ought to be.

The major categorical term of this argument is **descriptions that are able to tell us how things ought to be.**

The minor categorical term of this argument is **scientific descriptions.**

The middle categorical term of this argument is **descriptions of what exists.**

This is one of the valid standard form categorical syllogisms known by its Latin name, C**E**L**A**R**E**NT. Its' Venn diagram is configured thus;
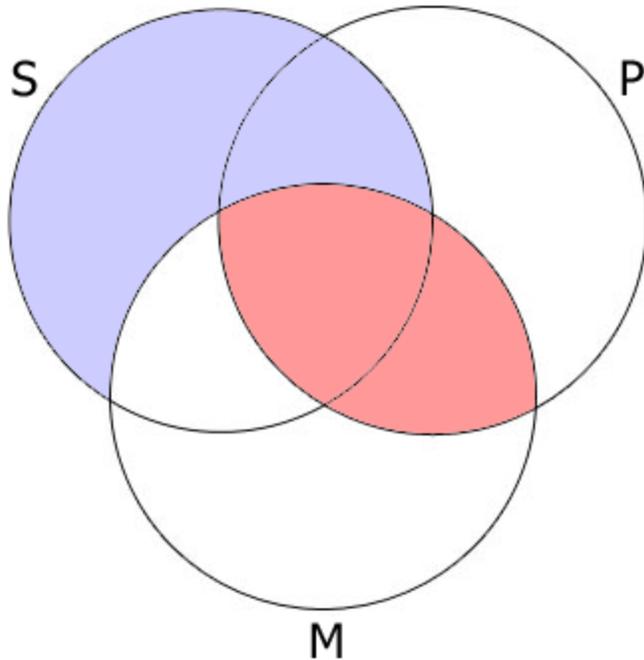
Validity here can also be proven by avoiding the six formal fallacies of any argument. The syllogism contains no explicit or implicit fourth term, and so obeys the first rule. The syllogism complies with the second rule because the middle term "what exists," has been distributed in the first premise. Both the major term "how things ought to be," and the minor term "scientific descriptions" are distributed in the first and second premise respectively. The syllogism also contains only one negative premise, its major premise, and has a negative conclusion which abides by the fourth and fifth rules. Finally, the conclusion in this syllogism is universal so the sixth rule does not apply.

First, to articulate the full measure of my argument I will define its three terms. The first "descriptions of what exists," is best understood in its most plain sense as reality. That is, all that we can sense and understand with the best available evidence from scientific and logical inquiry. The second term, "how things ought to be," is certainly more esoteric, but can be best apprehended as the idea that the entire world should be a way and is at least at certain points not exhibiting those traits. This can, and often does,

manifest as a complete notion of the world as a whole, and while that ideal is different

between humans the desire and notion itself is universally shared. Finally, "scientific

descriptions" are simply claims made by those within the scientific community as a

whole or in part which have existential import, or in some other way affect our view

reality, the first term.

Anthropologist Donald E. Brown in his book *Human Universals* contended, against

popular opinion, that there are as many as 400 human universals, which included

etiquette, fairness (more specifically equity), and the distinction of good and evil(bad).

The term "how things ought to be," can then be justified as being a reality for human

beings even if it cannot be understood exactly what that supreme OUGHT is. In fact to

contend that this existence produces a true moral code which is overriding and dominant

is fallacious but the human pursuit indicates a desire to attain this state of "how things

ought to be."

The famous skeptic David Hume first expressed this argument more simply by stating

that you cannot get an "ought" from an "is." What he meant by this was, the simple fact

that just because something is demonstrated to be true and occurring in the world, that

does not establish that, that action is right or good; it merely demonstrates its existence.

In point of fact there are many actions which we observe in nature, unaltered by human

presence, which we would find morally appalling in our own culture. The Barn Owl will

kill its own children if the roost is disturbed by a perceived intruder, and the Black

Widow spider kills its mate after mating.

The theory of the "selfish gene," most recently proposed by the evolutionary biologist

Richard Dawkins offers perhaps a more compelling way to solve this dilemma. He

proposes that moral thinking and behavior is an inherited genetic trait in human beings. Essentially, over the course of generations of humans and their evolutionary ancestors, certain genetic features which dictated our behavior promoted the notions of charity, care of family, the elderly, the unfortunate, and many of the other virtues which we espouse to this day. Why is this so? Natural selection favored this behavior because it helped to form functioning complex societies, and increase overall fitness in humans and their predecessors. This theory stipulates that our moral conduct thus must first and foremost be consistent with our genetic nature. Our neurological pathways, which seem to be the engine behind human thought, have been written out over eons to produce the ethics we have been searching for.

While a compelling analysis worthy of greater study, it suffers from several major problems. First of all Dawkins has failed to demonstrate that these attributes which we call virtuous are actually virtuous. Virtue is a value judgment placed upon actions, people, and ideas, but they cannot be proven to possess virtue only supposed that the do. For example, if I help an old woman cross the street most people would count that as a virtuous action. However, why is it virtuous? Is it because I helped another human being? If so, why ought I to help another human being? Does this woman possess some sort of value? If so, what value is it? And if you wish to be exceptionally irritating, even if she does have value why should I make an effort to preserve, enhance, or even just assist this value in this human being? Essentially, why is value valuable?

Then we can further complicate this notion by proposing an ethical dilemma. Say there are two old women ready to cross the street, one is 74 the other is 65. Both appear to otherwise be in perfect condition, which should I help? Here these theories of genetic

inheritance, at best can only show me that here I have a problem, I should help at least one, but which? Should I help the older one, why? Why not simply ignore them both. It is more convenient for me, and personal satisfaction is at least a simple way to understand my own motivations. Even if I do help one, have I demonstrated a greater ethical conduct as a result? How do we measure the ethical value of my actions? Does helping an older woman give me five points of virtue while the younger one is only worth three? The theory is confounded by the fact that we are left with nothing but a kind of moral sentiment.

There is of course an even more dreaded problem with this theory. It proposes a genetic reduction and determined nature to human behavior and thought. It is easy to recognize that if our moral behavior is an inherited trait, then it is reasonable to assume that many other such behaviors, like our passions, artistic appreciations, talents and abilities are also inherited. It would not be difficult to arrive at the conclusion in fact that all human decisions are predicated by our genetic coding, over which we of course have no control. If this is the case the source of ethical behavior has actually undone the notion altogether, because nothing we do is of our own volition, since in fact we have no volition. Without volition there is no choice, and without choice we cannot be held responsible for our actions. If this is the case what place left then for morality?

What is going unnoticed throughout all attempts to produce a cohesive ethical theory, both based on observation, and on *a priori* distinctions is that human morals are based on teleological distinctions or purposes. It is only after human beings establish their purpose that they begin to recognize moral distinctions. As children we are taught very simply to avoid punishment. The child caught with his hand in the cookie jar is spanked, confined

to his/her room, or a privilege once enjoyed is revoked. Our bodily reactions, and emotional tantrums, indicate to us that these are undesirable outcomes, and the lack of critical thinking skills at a young age prevent examination beyond the simple desire to make sure this does not happen again. As a result we establish a basic teleological distinction to avoid discomfort. By establishing this purpose children often become more cautious and polite, or get better at not getting caught but hey. This simple example demonstrates the foundation of human ethical behavior as being arrived at through the purpose which we see for ourselves. If we have no purpose why ought I, or ought not to do anything. Actions become irrelevant, without meaning morality has no place.

Meaning then becomes essential to ethical theory.   The creation of, and understanding of meaning is unfortunately a very complex and convoluted thing and it is highly probable that nothing short of an overt act of God will produce something more definitive by which human beings can base their lives. That being said, this speaks to the robustness and creativity which is needed for human beings to come to ethical conclusions, and provides an arena of endless discussion and development. Is it all bullshit? Maybe, but it sure is a lot more fun.

Bibliography

Human Universals, Donald E. Brown, 5/1/2007,

http://condor.depaul.edu/~mfiddler/hyphen/humunivers.htm

Wikipedia Donald Brown, Various authors, 4/30/2007,

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Donald_Brown

Philosophy, Mark McIntire, 4/20/2007,http://markmcintire.com/

Johnson, Phillip E. *The Wedge of Truth: Splitting the Foundations of Naturalism*,

Intervarsity Press, August 2002

Brockman, John (editor), *Intelligent Thought: Science vs. the Intelligent Design

Movement*, New York: Random House, May 9, 2006