FAITH AND GOODNESS: A REPLY TO HOCUTT

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ABSTRACT: Professor Hocutt and I agree that David Hume first pointed out that “ought”—what should be done—cannot be derived from “is”—what is the case. Hocutt goes on to claim that “ought,” in fact, derives from factual observation of “what we care about,” which amounts to saying “you should do what you want to do.” This seems to me unsatisfactory as moral philosophy.

Key words: Hume, Moore, naturalistic fallacy, evolution, Fodor, moral

In debate about “the good” one thing is pellucid: it is not good to tangle with a philosopher, especially one as tough-minded as Max Hocutt (Jacques Derrida—or even Jerry Fodor [Staddon, 2008])—would have been easier to dismiss!). But, having inadvertently done so (Staddon, 2004), I must take my medicine and fight my way out as best I can.

First, let me say that Hocutt and I agree on most things. For example, I agree that “An implication...is that the good and the right are relative, the first to persons, the second to societies” (p. 171) where this is interpreted not as a moral claim but as a description. On the other hand, when he says “In the final reckoning, nobody can tell us what to value” (p.179) meaning (I presume) that one person’s values are as good as another’s, it does sound rather like a moral claim, albeit one of neutrality.

But the key issue is action. Is does not impel us to action—ought does. Yes, as Hocutt notes, G. E. Moore argued that “the good” has no defining “natural” properties (the naturalistic fallacy). I also agree that to David Hume (peace be upon him!) must go the credit for breaking the link between “ought” and “is,” that is, between a statement like “That runaway cart is about to hit that child” to “Someone ought to push the child out of the way”—although I do believe that Moore’s critique points in the same direction.

But “ought/is” is clearly where we differ. Here the distinction between instrumental and intrinsic goods is helpful, as Hocutt points out. A statement such as “If you wish to avoid dying by a smoking-related disease, don’t smoke” tags non-smoking as an instrumental good by which the intrinsic good, (extended) life, can be attained. Instrumental descriptions are factual statements and involve no value judgment and no motive. Hocutt and I agree, I think, that science—naturalism—has a role as an instrumental good: “Science...cannot tell us what to value [JS & MH may not agree], just how to get it [JS & MH concur]” (p. 165). Any statement of the form “In order to achieve X you must first do Y” implies a

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role for science in the matter of Y. For example, if you wish to fly, it helps first to respect the laws of physics and construct an airplane. But, I contend, science—naturalism—cannot tell you that your flying is a great idea, that flying is an intrinsic good.

Hocutt’s solution is biology and the science of behavior: “the good” is what we say it is: “Pointing to something we care about is the only way to explain why we should do something. Therefore, it cannot be a fallacy” (p. 166) and “. . .to justify premising ‘ought’ on ‘is,’ you need to specify a motive. Once that is done, however, talk of fallacy has been deprived of basis” (p. 166), and finally:

What about the ends themselves? Ultimately, these are given; not chosen. They come with the genes. What is left to us is to find the means to achieve them. The scientists can tell us how to do that. In other words, they can tell us how to get what we value. In the final reckoning, nobody can tell us what to value. Could that be the point Professor Staddon is trying to make? (p. 179)

Well, yes and no. Yes, identifying a motive—“what we care about”—is science and is not itself a fallacy. But no, a motive is not the same thing as a good. There are, after all, good and bad motives. A science of behavior is not a moral philosophy. In other words, explaining why people do things—the causes of their behavior—is most emphatically not the same as saying what they should do. As for whether anyone can tell us what to do, by which I think Hocutt means the problem of absolute or real values, that’s where faith comes in; I return to faith in a moment.

Skinner and E. O. Wilson deal with the problem of right action in slightly different ways. Skinner’s off-handedly arrogant aside “To confuse and delay the improvement of cultural practices by quibbling about the word improve is itself not a useful practice” (Skinner 1955/1961, p. 6) gives no hint of doubt about what should be done. He knows. He doesn’t tell us the details because he assumes that we know too. And for the most part, he was correct—about his intended audience, at the time he wrote. In other places, as Hocutt points out, Skinner identifies “the good” and “the right” with whatever is reinforcing or whatever is reinforced by society (Staddon, 2001). And like Wilson, all is eventually traced to evolution: “Things are good (positively reinforcing) or bad (negatively reinforcing) presumably because of the contingencies of survival under which the species evolved” (Skinner, 1981, p. 502). Descriptive? Yes. Prescriptive? Possibly.

Hocutt thinks I am unfair to Wilson by accusing him of scientific imperialism, of believing that science can provide all the values we need. But I don’t think I’m being unfair at all. In my article, I quote Wilson as saying “If the empiricist world view is correct, ought is just shorthand for one kind of factual statement. . .” (1998, p. 251), which seems pretty clear. And in a recent Esquire interview (Junod, 2009) Wilson put it even more forcefully:

One by one, the great questions of philosophy, including “Who are we?” and “Where did we come from?” are being answered to different degrees of solidity. So gradually, science is simply taking over the big questions created by
philosophy. Philosophy consists largely of the history of failed models of the brain.

I see no trace of doubt that science will eventually take care of all the philosophical questions that are worth asking, moral questions included.

Wilson himself, as Hocutt mentions, has become a passionate advocate of biodiversity, but Wilson does not tell us to what “factual statement” this faith corresponds, other than “biodiversity is decreasing.” But that statement by itself contains no impetus to reverse the trend. “Polio is decreasing” also, but few are impelled to stem the decline. The difference is the value we attach to polio vs. biodiversity. And that value difference comes from...where?

So, are we to give up on the idea of value entirely and just settle for a naturalistic science of behavior that provides little ethical guidance other than our own impulses? That seems to be what Hocutt is advocating. But almost every human society, past and present, has found such a view deficient. Only the short-lived hippy culture seems to have endorsed it in recent times—“whatever turns you on” (i.e., if it feels good, do it). For most successful cultures, values must have some other basis, no matter how unfactual or even unreasoning it may seem to be.

The practical problem is that if values are just motives by another name—“what we care about” in Hocutt’s words—there is no room for argument and little possibility of agreement. A good Islamist thinks that apostates should be executed and that women should dress like pillar boxes and not be allowed to drive or go out alone. I disagree. Argument will move neither of us; no agreement is possible.

Perhaps that is the best we can do; perhaps conflict—eternal, or at least until there is a winner or we destroy ourselves—is a law of nature. That’s a depressing conclusion, so, happiness being a good for most of us, I suggested that evolution may provide, if not a solution, at least a way to think about the problem.

Evolution can be applied in two ways. Hocutt avers that “E. O. Wilson and his colleagues in evolutionary psychology have a better explanation of why some things and not others are valued: These things have contributed to reproductive fitness” (p. 173). Once again, explaining a motive (in evolutionary terms or any other) does not justify it unless we accept the hippy principle. More damning is the fact that what worked in our evolutionary past may well not work in the future. As the recent financial crisis reminds us, “past performance is no guarantee of future results”! Addiction to sweets and fats are traits that were once adaptive, as Hocutt points out. But now, of course, in affluent societies they are not.

Here’s another example: in a pre-scientific era, aggressive instincts were adaptive. Darwin himself puzzled about how warriors’ willingness to give their lives in battle could be selected for and came up with a satisfactory conclusion. Aggressive self-sacrifice then posed no threat to the planet. But now, combined with nuclear technology and belief in a mythical afterlife that is an improvement on this one, these instincts threaten our very existence.

There is another way to think about evolution as a moral basis, although it also leads to some uncomfortable conclusions. I pointed out, as have others (including Skinner), that the competition between cultures is basically an
evolutionary process. Perhaps cultural persistence, success in the evolutionary race, is a value on which all can agree? At least we might all agree that a moral principle that clearly dooms the culture that upholds it is bad. For example, the Shakers (United Society of Believers in Christ’s Second Appearing) believed in celibacy, hence could renew themselves only through conversion, a task not made easier by the belief that made it necessary. The Shakers, needless to say, are no more. I cited a number of other beliefs that might seem inimical to cultural survival—individualism, that smoking is bad (it’s bad for the smoker, probably not for the culture), and that democracy is good. Denying individualism, democracy, etc. violates strongly-held Western principles, which should perhaps raise a red flag about this line of thought.

And here is another disturbing example. In the October 19, 2009 issue of Newsweek is a graphic entitled Where Do Babies Come From?, which depicts not childbirth but demography: population growth across the world. The data are striking. Replacement growth is 2.1. Developed nations—Europe, the United States, Russia, China, and Japan—have growth rates between 1.4 (Russia) and 2.1 (United States). In other words, with the exception of the United States they are not even replacing their populations, generation on generation. At the other extreme is Africa (2.8 to 6.1), with South Africa, the only first-world African nation, at the lowest rate. The Middle Eastern nations are all above 3. Add the final facts that the low-demographic-growth nations of Europe and the United States are now the primary or secondary source of income (usually in the form of aid) for all the sub-Saharan nations except South Africa and that Western medical science is directly responsible for much of the increase in third-world population growth in the past century.

One practical consequence of the disparity of wealth that favors the West and the disparity of population growth that favors so-called developing nations is, of course, a huge problem of human migration from high-growth to high-wealth countries, with all its attendant social problems. But from an evolutionary point of view, the fact that the population growth of Africa is, in effect, being subsidized in cash and medical care by the shrinking populations of the West begins to make Westerners look more like the Shakers than the expansionist colonizers they once were. Unless reproductive patterns change or non-Western immigrants assimilate, it looks as if what Bertrand Russell once called the “noonday brightness of human genius” (Russell 1902/1918) in the West is likely to vanish within a few generations.

Should we worry about this? Probably not, and I end by restating the main point of my article. Evolution, biological or cultural, is unpredictable in a profound way. There are no “laws of history”; Karl Marx was wrong and Karl Popper was right. On the other hand, there can be no doubt that certain features of a culture are critical to its success or demise. Post hoc, we can see that science has favored the West, just as celibacy torpedoed the Shakers. The problem is that we cannot know in advance what all these critical features are. Some of them, like the charitable impulse that moves so many people in developed countries to aid their non-relatives in Darfur or Rwanda, seem quite opposed to obvious evolutionary self-
interest. And yet they may not be. But since we cannot know, and since the values that impel charity like this seem “right” to very many people, perhaps the best we can do is have faith—faith that they are right and faith that the culture that gave rise to them will not fall in the evolutionary race.

Perhaps values are “what we believe,” and that’s all there is to it. And perhaps that’s what Max Hocutt thinks too.

References