



## Humes' is-ought problem

### Description

The is–ought problem, as articulated by the Scottish philosopher and historian [David Hume](#), arises when one makes claims about what *ought* to be that are based solely on statements about what *is*. Hume found that there seems to be a significant difference between descriptive or positive statements (about what is) and prescriptive or normative statements (about what ought to be), and that it is not obvious how one can coherently move from descriptive statements to prescriptive ones. Hume's law or Hume's guillotine, is the thesis that, if a reasoner only has access to non-moral and non-evaluative factual premises, the reasoner cannot logically infer the truth of moral statements.

A similar view is defended by [G. E. Moore](#)'s [open-question argument](#), intended to refute any identification of [moral](#) properties with natural properties. This so-called [naturalistic fallacy](#) stands in contrast to the views of [ethical naturalists](#).

The is–ought problem is closely related to the [fact–value distinction](#) in [epistemology](#).

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## Further References

Mooya, M.. (2022). Hume's guillotine – the 'is-ought' problem in property valuation theory. Journal of Property Research

Plain numerical DOI: 10.1080/09599916.2021.1918222

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## Show/hide publication abstract

"This paper introduces hume's law (the fulcrum of the 'is-ought' problem of moral philosophy) into the property valuation literature, and uses it as a prism to reflect on the nature and limitations of standard valuation theory. the paper shows how a consideration of hume' thesis can help to clarify and solve some specific practical problems in property valuation. the opportunity presented by the subject of property valuation is, in turn, used to reflect back on hume's thesis itself, to show conditions under which hume's law may be said to be false. the paper makes important contributions both to the property valuation literature and to the literature on moral philosophy. with respect to property valuation, it proposes a change in the manner conclusions of valuations are reported, and the replacement of the notion of valuation accuracy by the wider and more socially appropriate concept of reasonableness."

Spielthener, G.. (2017). The Is-Ought Problem in Practical Ethics. HEC Forum

Plain numerical DOI: 10.1007/s10730-016-9318-8

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## Show/hide publication abstract

"This article is concerned with the role empirical research can play in normative practical ethics. there is no doubt that ethical research requires some kind of collaboration between normative disciplines and empirical sciences. but many researchers hold that empirical science is only assigned a subordinate role, due to the doctrine that normative conclusions cannot be justified by descriptive premises. scientists working in the field of ethics commonly hold, however, that the empirical sciences should play a much bigger role in ethical research. the aim of this paper is to show that empirical sciences can play a substantive role in normative ethics, with no illicit inferences from is to ought. to achieve this aim, i explain (in 'the is-ought problem explained' section) hume's thesis. in the following sections, i am concerned with different uses of empirical data that do not imply an illicit inference from descriptive premises to a normative conclusion. the article demonstrates that there are many modes of ethical reasoning that allow for a substantive use of empirical data, and it also shows the importance of hume's thesis for clarifying ethical reasoning."

Hapla, M.. (2020). Justification of human rights and is-ought problem. Casopis pro Pravni Vedu a Praxi

Plain numerical DOI: 10.5817/CPVP2020-1-3

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"Clarifying the transition from facts to norms is one of the key issues of legal philosophy and ethics. in the article, the author analyzes how various theories of justification of human rights attempt to solve it. he first characterizes human rights as critical moral rights and clarifies in what sense we can say that they exist. he then describes the is-ought problem and analyzes why some approaches cannot deal with him adequately. at first, he focuses on human rights justification through the concept of basic needs and capabilities, later on robert alexy's explicative-existential justification. however, the greatest

attention is paid to the justification theory, which was constructed by alan gewirth, one of the main representatives of ethical rationalism. according to the author, this is the most sophisticated attempt to deal with this problem in the field of human rights. in the last part of the article, the author formulates his own opinion on it. according to him, the solution is to stop imposing absolute demands on the justification of these rights, but to start assessing its strengths and weaknesses in relation to the concepts that compete with it."

Pigden, C.. (2001). The Is-Ought Problem: An Investigation in Philosophical Logic. Australasian Journal of Philosophy

Plain numerical DOI: 10.1080/713659291

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"Book information the is-ought problem: an investigation in philosophical logic. by gerhard schurz. kluwer. dordrecht. 1997. pp. x + 332. {&#x2013;}textsterling92.25."

Iwasa, N.. (2011). Sentimentalism and the is-ought problem. Croatian Journal of Philosophy

### Show/hide publication abstract

"Examining the moral sense theories of francis hutcheson, david hume, and adam smith from the perspective of the is-ought problem, this essay shows that the moral sense or moral sentiments in those theories alone cannot identify appropriate morals. according to one interpretation, hume's or smith's theory is just a description of human nature. in this case, it does not answer the question of how we ought to live. according to another interpretation, it has some normative implications. in this case, it draws normative claims from human nature. anyway, the sentiments of anger, resentment, vengeance, superiority, sympathy, and benevolence show that drawing norms from human nature is sometimes morally problematic. the changeability of the moral sense and moral sentiments in hume's and smith's theories supports this idea. hutcheson's theory is morally more appropriate because it bases morality on disinterested benevolence. yet disinterested benevolence is not enough for morality. there are no sentiments the presence of which alone makes any action moral."

de Vries, R.. (2011). The Uses and Abuses of Moral Theory in Bioethics. Ethical Theory and Moral Practice

Plain numerical DOI: 10.1007/s10677-011-9290-y

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"Moral theory is an important guide to bioethical decision-making, but it can confuse and mislead those who offer ethical advice to clinicians and researchers, delaying decisions that must be made in a timely fashion. in this paper i examine the ways moral theory can lead bioethicists astray. absent a sensitivity to the empirical realities of ethical problems, moral theory 1) contributes to the disappearance of the persons caught in an ethical quandary, 2) focuses on the puzzle-solving rather than examining the conditions that generate moral problems, and 3) universalizes ethical dilemmas, overlooking local

processes for resolving moral questions. taken together, empirically informed moral theory and theoretically informed empirical research can help bioethicists transcend the is/ought problem in ethical work. © 2011 springer science+business media b.v.”

Sisk, B. A., Mozersky, J., Antes, A. L., & DuBois, J. M.. (2020). The “Ought-Is” Problem: An Implementation Science Framework for Translating Ethical Norms Into Practice. *American Journal of Bioethics*

Plain numerical DOI: 10.1080/15265161.2020.1730483

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“We argue that once a normative claim is developed, there is an imperative to effect changes based on this norm. as such, ethicists should adopt an ‘implementation mindset’ when formulating norms, and collaborate with others who have the expertise needed to implement policies and practices. to guide this translation of norms into practice, we propose a framework that incorporates implementation science into ethics. implementation science is a discipline dedicated to supporting the sustained enactment of interventions. we further argue that implementation principles should be integrated into the development of specific normative claims as well as the enactment of these norms. ethicists formulating a specific norm should consider whether that norm can feasibly be enacted because the resultant specific norm will directly affect the types of interventions subsequently developed. to inform this argument, we will describe the fundamental principles of implementation science, using informed consent to research participation as an illustration.”

### Category

1. General

### Tags

1. David Hume
2. ethics
3. philosophy

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