

## Chapter One

### Hume's view on is-ought Dichotomy

Historically David Hume was not considered as an ethicist. He was regarded as an absolute empiricist. However, careful study would reflect that his contribution to moral language was immense. In fact, it was Hume who in his *Treatise* explored the 'is-ought' dichotomy. Here he explored the autonomy of morality by claiming that no non-moral statement entails moral statement. In the last paragraph of his book III, part i, section i of *Treatise*, Hume repeatedly mentioned the gulf between 'is- ought' problem. Many ethicists like R.M.Hare, Professor A. N. Prior, Professor Nowell-Smith and a number of other writers drew their philosophical reflection on this passage. It would not be an exaggeration if we adhere to the view that the clue of Hume's moral philosophy actually lies in the inner meaning of this paragraph. 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 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, not is perceiv'd by reason."<sup>5</sup>

What Hume has asserted in his above paragraph is that it is the philosophers' predisposition to start with common sense as the starting point of philosophy and then move gradually to somewhere where there is no relevance of common sense or empiricism in Hume's phrase and ultimately take the asylum of God. This would equally be true even in the case of morality where the role of invisible God comes into being. The genesis of Hume is that he was not against morality, but he was against the 'vulgar system of morality' where the role of God is immense. Being a radical empiricist Hume does not agree with such vulgar system of morality. His own contention is that such vulgar system of morality where the distinction of vice and virtue is made up, is not founded merely on the relation of objects, nor is perceived by reason.

Whatever the Humean position may be, philosophers of ethical persuasion have considered the above passage as the 'standard interpretation' of Hume regarding morality. Such standard interpretation actually leads Hume to foresee that no set of non-moral premises can entail a moral conclusion. By upholding this view Hume not only denies the philosophical position of Prior who once attempted to find out a foundation for morality that is not already moral, he also conceives morality as an autonomous discipline. Hume becomes in this

---

<sup>5</sup> Hume, David. *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Book III



**271080**

07 JUN 2014

light an exponent of the autonomy of morality and in this regard Hume at least akin to Kant. There was no question of doubt that Hume was skeptical regarding the unassailability of inductive argument. To assume that 'an ought-statement' is deduced from 'is-statement' actually means to say that it would must be either deductive or inductive. According to Hume certainly it would not be deductive because deductive argument is based on the principle of *entailment* and it has been fulfilled the principle of universality and necessity. Hume being an extreme or radical empiricist does not admit universality and necessity because such principles cannot be established through sense-experience. At the same time Hume was very skeptical regarding the authenticity of inductive argument. According to Hume inductive argument is defective. However, modern commentators have criticized Hume on this ground. Philosophers like P. F. Strawson criticizes Hume by saying that Hume's skepticism about induction actually based on a misconceived demand what Strawson has called "the demand that induction shall be shown to be really a kind of deduction."<sup>6</sup> This is certainly an accurate way of 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 observations'.<sup>7</sup> According to Hume 'is-statement' is a form of deductive argument and 'ought-statement' being evaluative in nature, is a form of inductive argument. Therefore, any attempt to deduce an

---

<sup>6</sup> Strawson, P. F. *Introduction to Logical Theory*, 1952, p.91.

<sup>7</sup> Hume, David. *Treatise*, I, iii. 6; Selby- Bigge, op. cit. pp. 89, 91.

'ought-statement' from 'is-statement' is just like to have an inductive argument from a deductive argument. But such deduction is not tenable because both these kinds of deduction are different in nature. Part of Hume's own point is that to render inductive arguments deductive is a useless procedure. To say that an 'ought statement' is logically deduced from 'is-statement' is just like in saying that 'The kettle has been on the fire for ten minutes' logically deduces the conclusion that 'the kettle will be boiling now'. This again paraphrases as: "Whenever kettles have been on the fire for ten minutes, they boil." According to Hume here the question of justification comes into being. In the above cited argument as the major premise itself embodies an inductive assertion that stand in need of justification. Hume raises a question by saying that how can we establish the validity of the major premise by observing a few instances or a limited numbers of instances. What we can at best be said that so far we have examined a number or series of instances; we do not find any contrary instances. However, from this it does not establish at least conclusively that the major premise under consideration is valid. We can justify Hume's position by making a distinction, though in brief, between entailment and presupposition. In fact the historical debate between Russell and Strawson lies submerged in the philosophical concept of entailment and presupposition. As far as entailment is concerned there is no entailment-failure. Contrary to this, in the case of presupposition there underlies the possibility of presupposition-failure. We think in the above case Hume definitely supports Strawson. That means the major premise of the above argument is based on the presupposition and there remains a possibility of presupposition-failure, i.e. there may be cases where the above argument may not hold

good. Such argument, opines Hume, actually deserves an infinite investigation which ultimately leads us to *regress or retreat* and therefore in assuming or anticipating the validity of such argument is entirely pointless.

Hume perhaps would like to say that to present inductive argument as deductive is just like to conceive 'ought-statement' in terms of 'is-statement'. He holds in some passages on induction that arguments are either deductive or inductive. Hume was of the opinion that factual premise cannot entail moral conclusions, because they are in different nature. Therefore there can be no connection between factual statements and moral judgments. If there be any connection, it would perhaps be the psychological connections. Many thinkers criticized Hume on this issue. For example, Hare would like to say that there may be a weak sense or loose sense of entailment which perhaps Hume failed to grasp. Hume perhaps committed a mistake by sensing entailment in the true logical sense in the case of derivability of 'ought-statement' from 'is-statement'.

Even though Hume rules out the possibility of deducing an 'ought-statement' from 'is-statement', he however derives 'ought' from 'is' in his account of justice. Here Hume defends himself by saying that the justification of the rules of justice lies in the fact that their observance is to everyone's long-term interest. Accordingly here we ought to obey rules because there is no one who does not gain more than he loses by such obedience. Does it then lead us to say that by deducing 'ought' from 'is' Hume contradicts himself? Many philosophers would like to say that here Hume involves into a contradiction. Hare, Nowell-Smith and Prior would like to say that here Hume is contravening his own

embargo. In the case of 'justice', 'ought' is deduced from 'is' in the following argument:

We ought to do whatever is to everyone's long term interest.

Obedience to this rule would be to everyone's long-term interest

Therefore, we ought to obey this rule.

What is the basis of this argument? Is there entailment relation? According to Hume in the above argument the first proposition or judgment cannot function as a major premise as it could not be *a moral principle at all* rather it is at best a kind of *compressed definition*. Hume, in fact, inclines to say that the notion of 'ought' is 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. According to Hume, an obligation is constituted in part by such a consensus and the concept of 'ought' is logically dependent on the concept of the common interest and can only be explained in terms of it. We think Hume's position would be made clear if we contrast Hume with Mill in this regard. It has been argued by Urmson that Mill did not, in fact, commit naturalistic fallacy of deriving the principle that 'We ought to pursue the greatest happiness of the greatest number' from some statement about what we all desire. Here Mill 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 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*. Alternatively, it can be said that whatever for Hume for denying this statement would be senseless, for it would detach 'ought' from the notion of a *consensus of interest* and so relinquish it for meaning. More succinctly, it can be said that for Mill such principle would be a contingent moral truth and for Hume it would be a necessary truth underlying morality. Secondly, Mill's basic principle is a moral affirmation independent of the facts. According to Mill as long as some course of action will produce more happiness for more people than alternative courses will, it would at least give rise to some sort of effective moral criterion. However, it would be otherwise to Hume as Hume, unlike Mill, inclines to say that we have moral rules because we have common interests. According to Hume moral rules and principles have lost their justification if the so-called common interests ignored. What has been observed from the above is that Mill's basic principle in ethics is a moral principle, but Hume's basic principle in ethics is a definition of morality.

Even though Hume in his famous passage of *Treatise* as cited above denies the possibility of deducing an 'ought-statement' from 'is-statement', he however derives 'ought' from 'is' in his account of justice. Does it then lead us to say that by way of doing this Hume involves into inconsistency? The proponents of Hume would like to say that what Hume in fact denies in such a derivation is the rule of entailment. That means, what Hume denies is that 'is' statements can *entail* 'ought' statements. When Hume derives 'ought' from 'is' in terms of justice, there is no point of entailment. MacIntyre thinks the other way round. For him Hume's interpretation of 'is' and 'ought' passage has nothing

to do with the point about entailment. What Hume actually says is that we cannot pass from an 'is' to an 'ought' because such derivation 'seems altogether inconceivable.' For Hume such derivation cannot be brought about in the way in which 'every system of morality which I hitherto met with' has brought it about. Hume, in fact, understands deduction not in terms of *entailment*; but in terms of *inference*. In his celebrated passage what Hume does is to ask how moral rules may be inferred from factual statements. The other important thing is that in his celebrated passage Hume does not assert the autonomy of morals in the sense of something as self-explicable and guided by moral principles. In fact, the attempt to make 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 of the Protestant position. 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. The autonomy of ethics as founded in Moore to Kant to Hare is somehow self-explicable as it would be logically independent of any assertion about human nature. Hume is not making a point about entailment as he does not mention it. Rather he was searching how the factual basis of morality is related to morality, how the transition can be made possible. Hume unlike Prior does not assert that morality lacks a basis, rather he is trying to point out the nature of that basis.

Hume elsewhere in his *Treatise* uses the phrase 'autonomy of morality'. By the phrase or term 'autonomy of morality', Hume actually means to say that no set of non-moral premises can entail a moral conclusion. In other words, it can be said that by using such phrase Hume actually opposes non-moral foundation for morality. Unlike Kant and many

others, Hume inclines to say that morality is founded on sentiment and sentiments of mankind are uniform to a high degree.

### **An alternative Interpretation**

What has been observed from the above is that Hume does not rule out the possibility of deriving an 'ought' statement from an 'is' statement. In fact, he anticipated such a derivation in the case of justice as we have already stated. Hume says, "When you pronounce my action or character to be vicious, you mean nothing, but that from the constitution of your nature you have a feeling or sentiment of blame from the contemplation of it."<sup>8</sup> What Hume is saying here is that the action is vicious just means contemplation of this action causes a feeling or sentiment of blame in me. According to Hunter 'Contemplation of this action causes a feeling or sentiment of blame in me' is a statement of fact and Hume obviously thinks that a similar sort of analysis holds good for all moral judgments, including statements of moral obligation. Thus for Hume all morality depends upon our sentiments and we lie under an obligation to perform it. For Hume morality is determined by sentiment. It defines virtue to be wherever mental action or quality gives to a spectator the pleasing sentiment of approbation. We then proceed to examine a plain matter of fact.

The new interpretation suggests that it is the central part of Hume's moral theory that moral judgments are statements of facts<sup>9</sup>, namely statements to the effect that there is a causal relation between the speaker's contemplation of some actual or imagined state of affairs and his feeling certain 'peculiar' sub-class of 'is-propositions', namely 'is-

---

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p.498.

<sup>9</sup> Hume, David. *Inquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, edited by Silby-Bigge. P.289.

propositions' about the causation of certain sorts of feelings. This clearly suggests, Hunter claims, that Hume thinks that 'ought-propositions' are logically equivalent to certain 'is-propositions'. If this has been taken into account, then it would certainly be absurd to uphold the view that Hume denies that no-set of 'ought-statement' can logically be deduced from 'is-statement'. Hunter says, "...it is absurd to attribute to him (Hume) the view that no is-proposition can by itself entail an ought-proposition, or that no statement of fact can by itself entail a moral judgment."<sup>10</sup> Hunter inclines to say that the earlier interpretation of Hume's celebrated passage of *Treatise* does not reflect his own position. Therefore, in order to explicate the actual position of Hume regarding 'is-ought' dichotomy, it would be prerequisite to open up his actual position. In this regard, Hunter suggests two possible interpretations.

### First Interpretation

'It *seems* inconceivable that *ought*-propositions should be deducible from *is*-propositions, but it is *not* in fact inconceivable'. According to Hunter, Hume writes 'seems inconceivable' but not writes 'is inconceivable'. Following Hunter what we can say is that even though in *normal or usual* circumstance, there is no point of claiming that an 'ought' statement can be logically deduced from an 'is' statement, but still there remains a distance possibility that in some situation an 'ought' statement can be logically deduced from an 'is' statement. The earlier interpreters have failed to understand Hume. In fact, Hume does not want to say that *an -ought* cannot be deduced from 'is'. Contrary to this, Hume rather sets out to explain how it is possible to derive an 'ought'

---

<sup>10</sup> Hunter, G. "Hume on *is* and *ought*" included in *The Is-Ought Question*, edited by W. D. Hudson, Macmillan, 1969, p.60.

from 'is'. Accordingly, it would certainly be a mistake to claim that Hume in fact rejects the possibility of deriving an 'ought' statement from an 'is-statement'.

### **Second Interpretation:**

'Ought-propositions cannot ever be deduced from is-propositions. But the reason for this is that sentences expressing ought-propositions are paraphrases of certain sentences expressing is-propositions, and paraphrasing is not deducing. To give a paraphrase is not to make any deductive move or inference, but only to say the same thing over again.'

If we carefully study the above interpretation, it seems clear to us what has been said above has a close proximity with his earlier remarks such as 'We do not infer a character to be virtuous because it pleases: But in feeling that it pleases after such a particular manner, we in effect feel that it is virtuous'. If this is how Hume should be interpreted, then his rationale for saying that 'ought' cannot be deduced from 'is' is not that there is a huge gulf underlying between 'is-propositions' and 'ought-propositions', rather it would be better to say since ought-propositions are identical with certain is-propositions, it is absurd to talk of *any sort of inferential move* from one to the other. Importantly, what rules out the inference of 'ought' from 'is' is not that 'ought' is too far from 'is', but that it is too close. As far as the second interpretation is concerned, we can say that 'ought' statement would be the sub-class of 'is' statement. In this sense 'ought' statement in some way or other underlies in 'is' statement. Accordingly, the question of logical deduction from one to other simply does not arise. Rather what is relevant here is to set out

how an 'ought' statement would be logically deduced from an 'is' statement.

According to Hunter the first interpretation is right. He, however, does not rule out the other possible readings of Hume's passage. Whatever the interpretation may be, it would be wrong to suggest that Hume rules out the view that moral judgments are not statements of fact. According to Hunter, any interpretation which anticipates the view that there is a logical gulf between moral statement and a statement of fact would be altogether impossible. James Ward Smith, however, claims that Hume in his *Treatise* in fact differentiates moral judgments from causal judgments. However, Hunter denies Smith in this regard. In fact, Hume inclines to say, Hunter claims, that in order for a moral judgment to be true, there must be a causal connection between something and a sentiment. For Hume such sentiment is not discoverable by the understanding, since, 'it is the object of feeling, not of reason'. Accordingly, it can be said that the truth of moral judgment is not discoverable by the understanding alone. What Hume is doing in the second part of the passage of differentiating moral judgments, not from causal judgments as Smith conceived, but from truths of fact, whether causal or not, that can be discovered by the understanding alone.

So far our investigation goes, we have observed various interpretations regarding the celebrated passage as cited above. Some would like to say that Hume rules out the possibility that an 'ought' statement can be entailed from 'is' statement. Some other has claimed that Hume admits the possibility of deducing an 'ought' statement from an 'is' statement in the case of justice. Some other would like to say that as 'ought' statements are the sub-class of 'is-statements', the question of deduction

one from the other simply does not arise. Thus, it seems to us that commentators' interpretation of Hume famous passage of *Treatise* is a mix-bag. Therefore it would be difficult to surmise whose view actually represents Hume authentically. Anthony flew in his article "On the interpretation of Hume" has attempted to synthesis the apparent contradiction of Hume's position as propounded by different philosophers and commentators. So far we have three diametrically opposite interpretations regarding Hume's standard passage. One view holds that there underlies a logical gulf between 'is' and 'ought' statement and the question of deducing an 'ought' statement from an 'is' statement simply does not arise. This view is known as '**the Brief Guide interpretation**' in short **BGI**. A. K. MacIntyre has approached this theory. The second view holds that in some particular case, such as statement of justice, an 'ought' statement can be logically deduced from an 'is' statement. The reason behind this is that in the case of statement of justice there is no function of the rule of entailment. According to this view where the rule of entailment holds the key, the derivation of 'ought' statement cannot be logically deduced from an 'is' statement. In the case of justice there is no function of the rule of entailment. There we find a third view as proposed by Hunter. According to Hunter 'ought-statements' are nothing but the sun-class of 'is-statements'. As 'ought-statements' are not logically equivalent to certain 'is-statements', it would be absurd to talk of any sort of inferential move from one to the other.

Flew in his article cited above has claimed that even though Hunter has rejected the BGI, he has not given us sufficient grounds for rejecting it. Accordingly, Flew rejects Hunter position regarding BGI. Hunter,

perhaps, would puzzle regarding the apparent contradiction of Hume's position. Therefore, Flew has attempted to unearth the apparent contradiction of the standard interpretation of Hume. What Hume has clearly suggested is that moral judgments are not statements of either logically necessary truth or facts about the natural universe around us as like as factual statements or statement of facts. Unlike factuality all morality depends upon our sentiments.

Accordingly, Hume's concern was not with the idea that moral judgments report some sort of fact about us, but with the contention that they cannot be analysed in terms simply of any sort of statement about some objective reality completely independent of human sentiments and human desires. In the first appendix to the second *Inquiry* Hume writes, "The hypothesis which we embrace is plain. It maintains that morality is determined by sentiment. It defines virtues to be *whatever mental action or equally gives to a spectator the pleasing sentiment of approbation*; and vice the contrary. We then proceed to a plain matter of fact – to wit, what actions have this influence.' This clearly suggests that when Hume was talking of the question under consideration, his main concern was not with a question of logical analysis, but with the issues of psycho-social fact. Accordingly, Hume seems to have believed that the admiration or blame cannot be worked of the judgment, but of the heart; it is not a speculative proposition or affirmation, but an active feeling or sentiment. What Flew intends to say is that Hume in his *Treatise* has given many overlapping remarks which apparently look inconsistent. However careful analysis would reflect that there underlies no apparent contradiction. Philosophers, however, over the years actually misinterpreted Hume by abstracting his view as

Hunter does when he falsely claims that 'it is the central part of Hume's moral theory that moral judgments are statements of fact'. Hume's *Treatise* further suggests that when we pronounce any action or character to be vicious, we actually mean nothing but a feeling or sentiment of blame from the contemplation of it. Therefore, vice and virtue, for Hume, is nothing but something to be compared to sounds, colours, heat and cold etc., which are not qualities in objects, but perceptions in the mind. Thus, Hume's understanding of morality actually turns towards psychological and other non-linguistics facts rather than the favoured inquiry as done by the current linguistic philosophers in terms of what the words actually mean. Flew narrates Hume by saying, "You pronounce...., but 'you mean nothing but that....". It actually means "not that this is what your actual words do actually mean; but rather that this is what, if you would only face the facts and be entirely honest, you would have to admit. It is this sort of brilliant harshness which sometimes makes one want to describe the *Treatise* as Hume's *Language, Truth and Logic*"<sup>11</sup>

What we can say at this juncture is that Hume does not entertain the view that an 'ought statement' can be logically deduced from an 'is-statement' where the derivation is made possible in terms of *entailment* as conceived by the logicians. That means Hume rules out the role of entailment while discussing the 'is-ought dichotomy'. Accordingly, we can draw the conclusion after Hume that no set of ought -statement can logically be entailed from is -statement. However, this does not lead us to say that *the concept of logical entailment* holds the key to make the deduction possible. Hume, of course, does agree with us that there

---

<sup>11</sup> Flew, Antony. "On the Interpretation of Hume" included in *The is-Ought Question* edited by W.D. Hudson, Macmillan, 1969, p.69.

remains other possible means through which the derivation of 'ought-statement' from 'is-statement' is made possible. Elsewhere he tells us that ought-statement is the sub-class of is-statement and hence the question of deducing one from the other simply does not arise. Having said this, Hume, in fact, gave much importance not on the dichotomical aspect of the 'is-ought question', rather he concentrated more on the root cause what makes a question 'is-related question' and what makes a question 'an ought-related question'. If such investigation is philosophically made possible, the long-run debate between 'is-ought question' would perhaps be resolved without retaining further philosophical seeds. For Hume moral objectivism, egoism, social contact theory, natural law theory and religious morality began by observing specific facts about the world and then concluded from those statements something about moral obligation. As moral assessments are not rational inferences and as moral assessments are feelings or emotional reactions, therefore from any type of rational or factual inference we cannot derive *ought* statement.

Hume states that all morality depends upon sentiments and performing a moral action is a matter of moral obligation. In his *Treatise* Hume says, "The distinction of moral good and evil is founded on the pleasure or pain, which results from the view of any sentiment, or character; and as that pleasure or pain cannot be unknown to the person who feels it, it follows, that there is just so much vice or virtue in any character, as everyone places in it and that 'tis impossible in this particular we can ever be mistaken."<sup>12</sup> According to Hunter the central part of Hume's moral theory is that ought-statements is a sub-class of is-statements and

---

<sup>12</sup> Hume, David. *Treatise iii*, p.546-47.

in this sense moral judgments are statements of facts. To say that ought-statement is a sub-class of is-statement is to say that there is a causal relation between the speaker's contemplation of some actual or imagined state of affairs and his feeling certain 'peculiar' feelings or sentiments. As Hume thinks that ought-propositions are logically equivalent to certain is-propositions, it would not be fair to acclaim after Hume that no is-proposition can by itself entail an ought-proposition or that no statement of fact can by itself entail a moral judgment. Hunter, therefore, inclines to say that the celebrated passage about *is* and *ought must* be interpreted very differently from the way it has already been interpreted in the past. In this regard, Hunter proposes two possible interpretations. These are as follows:

- (a) It seems inconceivable that ought-propositions should be deducible from is-propositions, but it is not in fact inconceivable. In this regard Hume writes 'seems inconceivable', but not 'is inconceivable'. On this interpretation, what Hume is objecting to in the work of earlier writers is their *failure to explain* the relation expressed by 'ought'. He is not saying that 'ought' cannot be deduced from 'is', only that earlier writers have failed to explain how the deduction is possible. He himself sets out to explain how it is possible. On this interpretation, Hunter opines, Hume is certainly not rejecting all theories in which 'ought' is deducible from 'is'.
- (b) 'Ought-propositions cannot ever be deduced from is-propositions'. But the reason for this is that sentences expressing *ought-propositions* are paraphrases of certain sentences expressing *is-propositions*, and *paraphrasing is by no means deducing*. According

to Hunter to give a paraphrase is not to make any deductive move or inference, but only to say the same thing over again. We think that Hunter's observation is worthy of philosophical attention. In fact if it will assume that the philosophical foundation of *is-proposition* and *ought-proposition* is altogether different then just by paraphrasing one in terms of another does not ensure that one is logically entailed from another. Paraphrasing is a matter of linguistic analysis. To say that *is-proposition* is paraphrased in terms of *ought-proposition* or vice-versa is equal to say that one form of proposition is linguistically analyzed in terms of another. But from this it does not follow that one is logically entailed from another.

We think that Hunter's interpretation of Hume finds some support in a passage already quoted. We do not infer a character to be virtuous because it pleases. But in feeling that it pleases after such a particular manner, we, in effect, feel that it is virtuous. If this is how Hume should be interpreted, then his reason for saying that 'ought' cannot be deduced from 'is' is not, as the BGI has it, that there is a great gulf fixed between *is-proposition* and *ought-proposition*, but rather that since *ought-propositions* are *identical* with certain *is-propositions*, it is absurd to talk of any sort of inferential move from one to the other. What rules out the inference of 'ought' from 'is' is not that 'ought' is too far from 'is', but that it is *too close*.

Regarding the above two interpretations, such as, (a) and (b), Hunter prefers (a) unlike (b). According to Hunter interpretation (a) is the right one. Keeping the possible alternative interpretations of Hume's passage in mind, Hunter still bushes with the view that there remains a logical

gulf between a moral judgment and any statement of fact or the view in short that moral judgments are not statements of fact seems to be altogether impossible. Even Hunter differs from James Word Smith. According to Smith, Hume persistently differentiates moral judgments from causal judgments and in this regard Smith refers to sections II.iii of *Treatise* in support of his claim. Hunter disagrees with Smith in this regard. According to Hunter he does not find anything from the referred passage quoted by Smith. Against Smith, Hunter interprets Hume by saying that morality consists not in any relations that are the objects of science in the Humean sense of 'science' in which science has to do only with relations of ideas. Reason or science is nothing but the comparing of ideas and the discovery of their relations. What Hume has thought is that moral judgments are not analytic and that the truth of moral judgments cannot be discovered by the understanding alone. According to Hume, in order for a moral judgment to be true, there must be a causal connection between something and a sentiment which is not discoverable by the understanding as it is the object of feeling but not of reason. Accordingly, it can be said after Hume that the truth of moral judgment is not discoverable by the understanding, i.e. by the understanding alone. So what Hume has done in the second part of the passage is that here he has differentiated moral judgments, not from causal judgments, but from truths of fact, whether causal or not, that can be discovered by the understanding alone.

What has been conceived from the above is that the distinction of vice and virtue is not founded *merely* on the relations of *objects*, because it is founded on the sentiments felt by people contemplating relations of objects. It is not perceived by reason alone, because these sentiments

themselves are the objects not of reason but of feeling. Hunter basic idea is that BGI cannot be correct. Hunter, for instance, points out Humeian position by saying that when you pronounce any action or character to be vicious, you mean nothing but that, from the constitution of your nature, you have a feeling or sentiment of blame from the contemplation of it. With this pronouncement Hunter goes on to conclude that since Hume thinks that ought-propositions are logically equivalent to *certain* is-propositions, it is absurd to attribute to him the view that no is-proposition can by itself entail an ought- proposition, or that no statement of fact can by itself entail a moral judgment . Thus, according to Hunter that the celebrated passage of Hume about *is* and *ought* must be interpreted very differently from the way it has already been defined. Hunter maintains that it is the central part of Hume's moral theory that moral judgments are statements of fact, namely, statements to the effect that there is a causal relation between speaker's contemplation of some actual or imagined state of affairs and his feeling certain peculiar feelings or sentiments. Our own sense is that as Hume understands and interprets statements of fact in terms of sentiments of the concerned speaker, it would be so much better to say that Hume's central insight was that moral judgments are not statements of either logically necessary truth or facts about the natural universe around us. In this sense Hume's view of *Treatise*, such as, all morality depends upon our sentiments, would be justified. In fact, we think that Hume's first concern was not with the idea that moral judgments report some sort of fact about us, but rather with the contention that they cannot be analyzed in terms simply of any sort of statement about some objective reality entirely independent of human sentiments and human desires.

According to Hume, when we say *This is wrong*, we are not stating anything, nor even that we have certain feelings; or that when we say *He ought to resign*, we are again not stating anything, but instead of we are uttering some devious sort of cryptic-command. We think that Hume's main concern here is not with a question of logical analysis but with the issue of *psycho-social fact*. The approbation or blame which then ensures cannot be the work of the judgment but of the heart and it is not a speculative proposition or affirmation, but an active feeling and sentiment. Hume gives due importance on the alleged psychological and other non-linguistic facts rather than on what the words actually mean. We think that Flew's understanding of Hume in this regard is particularly relevant. Flew says, "You pronounce...but 'you mean nothing but that ...'. When phrases of this sort are employed the point usually is: not that this is what your actual words do actually mean; but rather that this is what, if you only face the facts and be entirely honest, you would have to admit. It is this sort of brilliant harshness which sometimes makes one want to describe the *Treatise as Hume's Language, Truth, and Logic*." <sup>13</sup>

We have observed different criss-cross and overlapping views regarding Hume's position of *is-ought dichotomy*. However, on the basis of the above observation, we can draw a few observation about Hume's position of *is-ought dichotomy*.

We think that Hume in a passive manner admits a transition from *is* to *ought*. According to Hume moral objectivism, egoism, social contact theory, natural law theory and religious morality began by observing specific facts about the world and then he concluded from those

---

<sup>13</sup> Flew, Anthony. "On the Interpretation of Hume" included in *The Is-Ought Question* edited by W.D. Hudson, Macmillan, 1969, p.69.

statements something about moral obligation. Thus, he has intended to draw *is* from *ought*. Hume further contends that moral assessments are not rational inferences at all. In this regard, he would perhaps be differentiated from Putnam who does not think that moral assessments lack of rationality. According to Hume, moral assessments are feelings or emotional reactions. The world for Hume consists of many people with many different perspectives on religion. Therefore, it would be wrong to judge any view and deny the others. For example, a priest's job is to educate and care for his people attending worship. Therefore, it would be wrong for a priest to mistreat a child. A doctor's job is to assist the patient to survive and therefore it would be wrong on behalf of a doctor to practice physician-assisted suicide. A government is financially supported through taxes paid by its citizens and therefore government ought not to misuse its financial resources. All such actions as cited above are moral assessments based on feelings and emotional reactions.

We think that the history of the fact-value dichotomy parallels in certain respects with the history of the **analytic-synthetic dichotomy**.<sup>14</sup> Like the analytic-synthetic dichotomy, the fact-value dichotomy is foreshadowed by the Humean dichotomy inherent in the slogan that one cannot infer an 'ought' from an 'is'. He terms, "No ought from an is."<sup>15</sup> This view is philosophically known as **Hume's Law**.

In fact, Hume's classical distinction between *matters of fact* and *relations of ideas*, later to become the analytic-synthetic distinction as well as Hume's dictum that an "ought" can never be derived from an "is", later to become the fact-value dichotomy. When Hume inclines to say that

---

<sup>14</sup> Putnam, Hillary, *The Collapse of the Fact-Value Dichotomy*, Harvard University Press, 2003, pp.1-3.

<sup>15</sup> Hare, R. M. *Moral Thinking*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1981, p.6.

one cannot infer an 'ought' from an 'is', he thereby assumes a metaphysical dichotomy between 'matters of fact' and 'relation of ideas', i.e. the dichotomy that constituted his early anticipation of the analytic synthetic distinction. According to Hume, if an 'is' judgment describes a 'matter of fact', then no 'ought' judgment can be derived from it. Putnam says, "Hume's metaphysics of "matters of fact" constitutes the whole ground of the alleged underivability of "oughts" from "ises"."<sup>16</sup> Putnam further contends that Hume's criterion for "matters of fact" actually presupposes what he (Putnam) calls *pictorial semantics*. According to Hume's theory of mind, concepts are ideas which are pictorial in nature because the only way they can represent any 'matter of fact' is by resembling it. However, all ideas, according to Hume, are not pictorial in nature. Some ideas are involved or associated with sentiments as well. Putting all the issues in perspective, what we can say here is that Hume perhaps does not tell us that one *cannot* infer an 'ought' from an 'is', rather he perhaps intends to say that there is no 'matter of fact' about *right* and no matter of fact about *virtue*. According to Putnam, if there were matters of fact about virtue and vice, then it would have to be the case that the property of virtue would be *pictorial* in the way that the property of being an apple is pictorial. In fact, Hume was right in saying that there are no such matters of fact. He justifies it by saying that the components of our *ideas* that correspond to judgments of virtue and vice are nothing more than 'sentiments' aroused in us by the deliberation of the relevant actions owing to the particular structure and framework of our minds.

---

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. p.15.

Hume perhaps does not agree or intend to disintegrate the is-ought dichotomy mainly because of the fact that the very nature of such statements is different. Each of them has distinctive feature on the basis of which they have been enumerated. The very disadvantage of value judgment is that it incorporates so many sub-classes of concepts. The ethical use of ought is somewhat vague. In fact, Hume in his *Inquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* hints that one may enlarge the class of value judgment containing not only the word "ought", but also "right", "wrong", "virtue", "vice", and such derivatives as "virtuous" and "vicious", as well as "good" and "bad" in their ethical uses. The resulting class may be called as the class of *paradigmatic value judgments*. We think that Kantian interpretation of value judgments is somehow distinct from Hume even though it would be very difficult to read Kant in a superficial manner. However, many Kantian philosophers perhaps would like to share the view that value judgments have the character of imperatives. In fact Kant himself speaks of *rules* and *maxims* as well as the *categorical imperatives*. According to them "Murder is wrong" is an alternative way of saying "do not murder" and this is not a description of any fact. In this regard, Kant perhaps would agree with Hume. But Kant equally disagrees with Hume on the ground that unlike Hume, Kant holds that even moral statements can be **rationally justified**. Kant, of course, does not agree with Hume on the point that morality is all about a *vulgar system*.

-----x-----