

IAN KLUGE (Abbotsford, B.C., Canada)

## **ETHICS BASED ON SCIENCE ALONE?**

### **Introduction**

Can ethics be based on science alone? Is it possible to develop a coherent and internally sufficient ethical system without relying on a transcendental power as the ground and/or goal of our existence as moral beings? Despite the confident assurances of such contemporary authors as Paul Kurtz, Greg M Epstein and Sam Harris, there still are numerous reasons to doubt why this is possible. These authors maintain that it is possible to establish a viable system of personal and social ethics on a strictly empirical basis provided by the sciences, most especially neuroscience, psychology, physiology sociology and anthropology. Each of these sciences can supply the objective, physical, quantitative and universal knowledge needed by individuals and collectives to establish moral codes and make moral decisions. In short, science alone is necessary and sufficient.

Before proceeding, it is important to clarify our two key terms – ethics and science – as precisely as we can. At the foundational level, ethics concerns itself with obligations, i.e., it is prescriptive in telling us what we must do or not do. It concerns value judgments of good and evil; right and wrong; virtuous and blameworthy; and just and unjust. For its part, science is the empirical study of the natural world. For a thing or an event to be an appropriate object of scientific study, it must be:

- (1) physical/material;
- 2) susceptible to empirical direct or indirect observation by the humans senses or instruments;
- (3) measurable or quantifiable;
- (4) observer independent
- (5) disprovable or falsifiable by observation and/or experiment, at least in principle.
- (6) universal, i.e., applicable everywhere under the same circumstances

While ethics concerns *prescription*, science concerns *description* about the attributes and behaviors of natural beings. The advocates of basing ethics on science, i.e., on the description of empirical facts, believe that science alone is both necessary and sufficient to prescribe behavior

without any appeal to a transcendental ground or goal. As Greg Epstein puts it, “God is beside the point.”<sup>1</sup>

In this paper we shall argue that while science is necessary for developing a coherent ethical system, it is not sufficient to achieve this goal. By that we mean that an ethics based on science alone is irremediably deficient in regards to the establishment of values and obligations; in regards to its criteria for moral evaluations; and in regards to internal self-sufficiency. How shall we determine values and obligations? How can we establish standards by which to judge? How can we acquire internal self-sufficiency so that our arguments do not need to go beyond the boundaries of empiricism and science?

Greg Epstein recognizes this problem when he states, “Can you rationally justify your unconditional adherence to timeless values without implicitly invoking the existence of God?”<sup>2</sup> In our view – which we hope to prove below – the answer is negative. Making up the inherent deficiencies of a strictly empirical science-based ethics, logically requires an implicit or explicit appeal to something transcendent to the phenomenal world, i.e., ‘God.’ Otherwise, our reasoning remains trapped in the empirical realm, and that is precisely one of the chief logical problems of a strictly science-based ethic. In short, to ground a coherent ethical system, science and religion or religion-based ethics must work together.

To forestall any misunderstanding, we hasten to emphasize that this is not an argument to diminish the role of science in establishing morals and making ethical decisions. For the Bahá'í Writings, science is much too important to be shunted aside. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá summarizes the Bahá'í view of the importance of science:

If we say religion is opposed to science, we lack knowledge of either true science or true religion, for both are founded upon the premises and conclusions of reason, and both must bear its test.<sup>3</sup>

Elsewhere he asserts,

We may think of science as one wing and religion as the other; a bird needs two wings for flight, one alone would be useless. Any

---

1. Greg M. Epstein, *Good without God* (New York: Harper, 2009), p. 14.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 31.

3. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, 2nd ed. (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982), p. 107.

religion that contradicts science or that is opposed to it, is only ignorance – for ignorance is the opposite of knowledge.<sup>4</sup>

Given the inter-dependence of science and religion – and by implication, ethics – the question is not *if* science has a role in ethics but *what kind* of role it has and what are the parameters of that role? To discover the parameters of science's role in ethics, we shall have to examine its limits and go on from there to establish its appropriate function. As this paper will attempt to show, both science and religion are required to ground necessary and sufficient ethical principles in a rational and incoherent manner.

### **Separating Ethics and Religion**

The goal of separating ethics from religion and, thereby, building ethics on a strictly empirical and/or scientific basis is not new in the history of Western ethics. The three best known attempts are Hume's emotivism and communitarianism, Kant's deontology and Bentham and Mill's utilitarianism. Unlike other attempts to establish a fully empirical and scientific ethics such as Social Darwinism and Communism, emotivism and communitarianism, deontology and utilitarianism have survived as viable alternatives in contemporary ethical debates and have numerous intellectual offspring. Although Hume, Kant or Bentham and Mill do not specifically refer to science as the basis of their ethics, but science based ethics are a logical extension of their insistence on a strictly empirical basis for morality.

For Hume, sentiment or feelings are the foundation of ethics. Indeed, he states that the "notion of morals implies some sentiment common to all mankind,"<sup>5</sup> to which he adds,

The hypothesis which we embrace is plain. *It maintains that morality is determined by sentiment.* It defines virtue to be whatever mental action or quality gives to a spectator the pleasing sentiment of approbation; and vice the contrary.<sup>6</sup>

Feeling, and the community's approbation or condemnation determine that

---

4. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks* (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1971), p. 130.

5. David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, Part II, p. 64, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/4320/4320-h/4320-h.htm>.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 73.

we must at last acknowledge, that the *crime or immorality is no particular fact or relation, which can be the object of the understanding*, but arises entirely from the sentiment of disapprobation, which, by the structure of human nature, we unavoidably feel on the apprehension of barbarity or treachery.<sup>7</sup>

Hume emphasizes that the morality (or lack of it) of an act is found in “entirely” in personal and community sentiment and that there is nothing in the act itself that makes it good or evil. This view reminds us of Hume’s famous is/ought distinction (sometimes known as Hume’s Guillotine) by which he shows that a description of a fact cannot logically lead to a prescription of how we ought to behave. As we shall see, this distinction is one of the key weaknesses of all empirical and scientific ethics. The importance of sentiment is further emphasized in his statement that

though reason, when fully assisted and improved, be sufficient to instruct us in the pernicious or useful tendency of qualities and actions; *it is not alone sufficient to produce any moral blame or approbation*. Utility is only a tendency to a certain end; and were the end totally indifferent to us, we should feel the same indifference towards the means. *It is requisite a sentiment should here display itself, in order to give a preference to the useful above the pernicious tendencies. This sentiment can be no other than a feeling for the happiness of mankind, and a resentment of their misery*; since these are the different ends which virtue and vice have a tendency to promote. Here therefore reason instructs us in the several tendencies of actions, and humanity makes a distinction in favour of those which are useful and beneficial.<sup>8</sup>

Three points must be noticed here. First, we need for sentiment or feeling to motivate us. Second, this sentiment is for the happiness of humankind and rejection of its misery, and that this sentiment is in favour of the “useful and beneficial actions.” The third point concerns the role of reason which can guide our sentiments into proper directions once such sentiments exist but cannot arouse such sentiments by itself. Reason cannot, in Hume’s, view to motivate us to choose “the useful above the pernicious tendencies.” Consequently, Hume writes that “Reason is, and

---

7. *Ibid.*, p. 75; emphasis added.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 72; emphasis added.

ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them.”<sup>9</sup>

From the foregoing discussion we may conclude that the basis of Hume’s ethic is immanent to the phenomenal world. The actual decision as to whether an act is right or wrong belongs to the individual and the community and not to any transcendent entity for whom there is actually no need. In short, the community and its customs have replaced God as the arbiter of virtue and vice and consequently, have provided an empirical foundation for ethical issues. By separating ethics from religion in this manner, Hume helps clear the way for a scientific approach to ethics.

Immanuel Kant’s deontological ethics took another major step of separating ethics from religion. Unlike Hume, who saw the power of reason as quite limited, Kant’s ethics are based on pure rationality. His goal was to develop an ethical system based only on reason and nothing else. In the “Preface to *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone* (1793), Kant writes,

So far as morality is based upon the conception of man as a free agent who, just because he is free, binds himself through his reason to unconditioned laws, it *stands in need neither of the idea of another Being over him, for him to apprehend his duty, nor of an incentive other than the law itself, for him to do his duty.* At least it is man’s own fault if he is subject to such a need; and if he is, this need can be relieved through nothing outside himself<sup>10</sup>

The gist of these statements is clear: “morality” is independent of everything except reason which is the basis of all moral injunctions; ethics cannot rely upon God. If we are to devise a system of ethics it must work strictly within the empirical realm and must have no other basis than reason. In his earlier book, *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, Kant goes even further in the direction of a scientific ethic than he did in *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788) in which he says that the idea of God is a practical necessity for an ethical system. However, he reminds us that this does not give us “the least encouragement to run riot into the

---

9. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Part III, Section 3, p. 253, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/4705/4705-h/4705-h.htm>.

10. Immanuel; Kant, *Preface to Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, trans. by Theodore M Greene and Hoyt M Hudson, <http://www.hkbu.edu.hk/~ppp/rbbr/toc.html>.

transcendent.”<sup>11</sup> As a transcendent being, God has no place in rational ethics.

Utilitarianism and its offshoot consequentialism are another attempt to uncouple ethics and religion. Despite some differences in emphasis both assert “that actions are right or wrong according to their consequences rather than any intrinsic features they may have.”<sup>12</sup> For utilitarianism which began with Jeremy Bentham in nineteenth century England, that consequences that mattered were pleasure and pain. Utilitarianism is based on

the *greatest happiness or greatest felicity* principle . . . which states the greatest happiness of all those whose interest is in question, as being the right and proper, and only right and proper and universally desirable, end of human action . . . [This forms the] . . . *standard of right and wrong*, by which alone the propriety of human conduct, in every situation, can with propriety be tried.<sup>13</sup>

Although Bentham speaks of “happiness” in general, his ideas focus more on pleasure which he believed we could measure empirically by means of his “hedonistic calculus” (or “felicific calculus”) on a quantitative scale including such factors as intensity, duration, predictability (certainty) and purity, i.e., the absence of later pain. Mill, however, centers his deliberations on “happiness,” a far more encompassing term than ‘pleasure.’ He writes,

The creed which accepts as the *foundation of morals, Utility*, or the Greatest Happiness Principle, holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness.<sup>14</sup>

Mill associates happiness with “well-being”<sup>15</sup> which is also something we can measure empirically in order to build a moral system. Mill

11. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans by Thomas Kingsmill Abbott, ch. 1, <http://philosophy.eserver.org/kant/critique-of-practical-reaso.txt>.

12. Tom L Beauchamp, *Philosophical Ethics* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1991), p. 129.

13. Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, p. 11, <http://www.econlib.org/library/Bentham/bnthPML.html>. This note was added to chapter 1 by Bentham in July, 1822.

14. John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism* (London: Longmans, Green, 1901), p. 9; emphasis added.

15. *Ibid.*, pp. 33, 88.

differed from Bentham insofar as Mill thought there were qualitative differences between experiences. Some pleasure or happiness is of a higher quality than others and, therefore, more desirable. “It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied.”<sup>16</sup> As we shall see, Mill’s doubts about the hedonistic calculus also point to some problems with “well-being” in Harris’s attempt to establish a strictly scientific ethic.<sup>17</sup>

The goal of this critical analysis of the attempts to establish an ethic based on science alone is to show that the inherent deep-seated problems in these attempts revive the viability of transcendently based ethics as a worthwhile alternative.

### **The First Problem: The Scientific Method**

The most obvious problem in developing an empirical and science-based ethics is the scientific method itself. As noted above, for a thing to be a proper object of scientific study, it must, among other things be physical/material, quantifiable, observer independent and testable. In addition, it must be subject to the process of observing facts, forming a hypothesis, testing the hypothesis and forming a testable explanation of the findings. The insurmountable difficulty with a strictly science-based ethics is that the scientific method makes this impossible. Obligations, values, prescriptions and judgments cannot meet any of the criteria of appropriate objects for scientific study: they are not physical/material, quantifiable or necessarily observer independent. Nor can we conceive of or set up an experiment to show that a certain act is ‘immoral.’ Such concepts do not fit into the scientific method. Consequently, concepts of morality have to be imported from outside the boundaries of empirical science to arrive at any conclusion about ethics. Those concepts are not empirical – a fact already noted by Hume who writes:

we must at last acknowledge, that the *crime or immorality is no particular fact or relation, which can be the object of the understanding*, but arises entirely from the sentiment of disapprobation, which, by the structure of human nature, we unavoidably feel on the apprehension of barbarity or treachery.<sup>18</sup>

---

16. *Ibid.*, p. 14.

17. Sam Harris, *The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values* (New York: Free Press, 2010), p. 2.

18. David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, Part II, p. 75; emphasis added. <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/4320/4320-h/4320-h.htm>

Because morality is not one of the things for which empirical science can test, any strictly science-based ethical system lacks internal self-sufficiency in its reasoning since it must import its moral categories from beyond empirical science. Therefore, it is inherently incomplete and fails to establish its own intellectual foundations.

A second and equally serious problem for science-based ethics is the is/ought or facts/value distinction, sometimes known as Hume's Guillotine. According to Hume:

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 shou'd 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 . . .* [I] 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.<sup>19</sup>

Hume's argument is devastatingly simple: we cannot argue from *description to prescription*, from an *is* to an *ought*, from a *statement of fact* to a *statement of obligations*. As Hume notes, the "crime or immorality is no particular fact or relation, which can be the object of the understanding."<sup>20</sup> The moral status of an act is not intrinsic to the act, it is not an empirically observable fact, and, therefore is not an appropriate object for science. That being the case, drawing an ethical conclusion from a factual premise is a logical *non sequitur*. This error applies to all science-based ethics. The only way to remedy this error is to begin with facts that already imply intrinsic values – something which theist ethics are able to do.

---

19. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Book III, Part 1, Section 1, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/4705/4705-h/4705-h.htm>.

20. David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, Part II, p. 75, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/4320/4320-h/4320-h.htm>.



Let us examine this argument more closely. The problem is that if we wish to establish a strictly empirical and scientific system of morality, it is necessary to close the gap between empirical facts which are established by the scientific method and human values which are the products of human judgments *about* those facts. From a purely empirical perspective, valuation is something that we bring to the facts; the facts themselves do not give us an evaluative judgment, although they do give us the material on which to base such judgments. For example, nothing in the strictly empirical evidence from a body sprawled on the sidewalk allows us to establish that this death is ‘sad,’ ‘wrong’ or ‘evil’ or even a ‘crime.’ Such moral evaluations are not scientifically testable because moral values are not physical, measurable, physically observable, observer independent, objective or disprovable.’ No coroner’s report will say that certain physical evidence shows the moral evil of this death. How could the scientific method even begin to investigate the ‘evil’ nature of such an event – even when the evil is as egregious as the Holocaust, Stalin’s Gulags or Mao’s Red Guards? How could scientific experimentation establish the moral ‘rightness’ of picking a flower or saving a child from drowning? The inescapable conclusion is that moral values are not proper scientific objects, i.e., they are not suited to discovery or exploration by the scientific method.

We may, of course, show that a certain act is more advantageous to some people, but advantage and morality are not the same kinds of things. This is well illustrated in ‘The Hospital’ scenario.<sup>21</sup> There are five people desperately requiring an organ transplant (a different organ in each case) when the chief surgeon realizes he has a healthy young man with a multiply fractured leg available to him. By transplanting the organs from the young man, he can save five lives – the greatest good for the greatest number – and bring the advantage of life to the five. Although the advantage to the five is clear, few would consider the advantage to be moral. Advantages may be moral – but do not necessarily have to be.

It is important not to confuse the process of reaching ethical judgments with the sociological and psychological study of the judgments that people actually make. The latter study measures the popularity of opinions, and the intensity with which they are held but does not measure the moral value of the act *per se*. Hume’s fact/value distinction is clearly at work. The fact that a certain opinion has a popularity rating of 80% cannot in itself make that opinion morally right; it is a fact *about which* we can make a moral judgment but is not a moral judgment in itself.

---

21. Julia Driver, *Ethics: The Fundamentals* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2010), p. 131.

The significance of Hume's argument cannot be exaggerated because it undercuts the possibility of establishing moral rules on an empirical or scientific basis. This negates the logical foundations of ethics in utilitarianism, consequentialism, hedonism, egoism, "self-realizationism,"<sup>22</sup> pragmatism, scientific ethics, situation-ethics and deontological ethics. We must especially remember that advantages to one or many, practical, or 'best' results, pleasure, logical consistency and agreement with science are in themselves neither moral nor immoral – they are simply facts *about which* we must make ethical judgments. By themselves such results are morally neutral and we cannot use them to 'bootstrap' our way to moral imperatives. An act is what it is – and no strictly empirical scientific argument can demonstrate that it is inherently more than that.

### **A Reply from Harris and Kurtz**

Although Harris seems unaware of the problem concerning the non-scientific nature of values and obligations, he is fully aware of Hume's is/ought difficulty. In his view, "the divide between facts and values is illusory"<sup>23</sup> and he states that "the division between facts and values is intellectually unsustainable especially from the perspective of neuroscience."<sup>24</sup> He begins his argument by asserting that

Questions about *values* – about meaning, morality, and life's larger purpose – are really questions about the *well-being* of conscious creatures. Values, therefore, translate into facts that can be scientifically understood . . . The more we understand ourselves *at the level of the brain*, the more we will see that there are right and wrong answers to questions of human values.<sup>25</sup>

He adds,

"good" [is] that which supports well-being . . . it makes no sense at all to ask whether maximizing well-being is "good." It seems clear that what we are really asking whether a certain state of pleasure is "good,"

---

22. William S Sahakian, *Ethics: An Introduction to Theories and Problems* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1974), p. viii.

23. Harris, *The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values*, p. 14.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 24.

25. *Ibid.*, pp. 1-2; emphasis added.

is whether it is conducive to or obstructive of, some deeper form of well-being.<sup>26</sup>

According to Harris, brain-states are a reliable way to determine whether or not an action contributes to our well-being. Because neuroscience is able to determine the attributes of the brain-state of well-being, it is possible for us – so says Harris – to measure whether or not well-being, i.e., the moral good, is being achieved. This will even work across cultures.<sup>27</sup> In other words, brain-states provide physical/material, quantifiable, objectively observable and testable standards by which to measure moral goodness or well-being. For this reason, Harris says:

science can, in principle, help us understand what we *should* do and *should* want – and, therefore, what *other people* should do and want in order to live the best lives possible.<sup>28</sup>

In other words, brain-states can cross the chasm between is and ought, between description and prescription and between what we do and what we should do.

However, only a little reflection reminds us that Harris' argument is not safe from Hume's Guillotine. The problem is that the brain-scans are facts i.e. descriptions of reality, and facts by themselves cannot logically lead to prescriptions without committing the logical *non sequitur* fallacy. Furthermore, there is also a category mistake in such attempts. Facts belong to one logical category – namely, statements of that which is actually the case – while prescriptions belong to another – statements of what *should, ideally be* the case.

To rebut Harris' claim that an fMRI brain scans can give a scientific proof of well-being, and, thereby, of moral good, we need only point out that even the most positive brain-scan imaginable, is still only a brain scan, i.e., an objective piece of scientific data *about which* one must pass judgment and which is still subject to all the limitations of the scientific method. As Hume has already pointed out, nothing in the data provided by a brain scan itself tells us whether this state of mind or state of brain or the action that accompanies it is morally 'good,' 'virtuous,' 'blame-worthy' or conducive to well-being. There is no empirical evidence in the brain-scan to instruct us whether we are obligated or have a duty to avoid or cultivate such acts or their correlated brain-states. The judgment that

---

26. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 60.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 28; original emphasis.

certain brain-states are morally good must be imported from outside the scientific framework – illustrating thereby, that such a science-based science is not internally self-sufficient.

This problem is not just a matter of awaiting future refinements in fMRI technology; rather the problem is intrinsic to the scientific method and the fMRI machines themselves. Such equipment is not designed to detect moral evaluations because such evaluations do not meet the criteria of being scientific objects, i.e., they are not physical, measurable, physically observable, observer independent, objective or disprovable. What Harris tries to do is to substitute a physical state – well-being as measured by fMRI – for a moral condition – being ethically justified. This, too, is a logical category mistake since a physical and a non-physical state cannot be interchanged without destroying his argument since he is, in effect, changing the subject. Moreover, this exchange seems to work until we ask if all positive brain-states are moral? It is not difficult to imagine that a man like Dr. Mengele had positive brain-states while subjecting victims to vivisection ‘in the name of science.’ His brain-states may have been just as positively correlated with well-being as Mother Teresa’s because both believed they were serving humanity and doing the morally ‘right thing’. We might also recall the surgeon in “The Hospital Story” mentioned earlier; she, too, might have fully positive brain-scans while sacrificing the healthy young man to the lives of five transplant candidates. The problem is obvious: the evidence provided by even the most positive brain-scans is insufficient to define the moral good.

Of course, science can tell us that people who have a lot of type X brain scans tend to be a lot physically healthier than people who have a lot of type O’s. However, science cannot tell us why we are morally obligated to prefer type X scans, why we ‘ought’ to, or why it is our ‘duty’ to facilitate type X scans in as many people as possible. Interestingly enough Harris admits as much: “Science cannot tell us why, *scientifically*, we should value health.”<sup>29</sup> In effect, he concedes that science has nothing to say about moral valuations or obligations and, thereby, undermines his own thesis. It seems clear that if “scientifically” speaking there is no reason to value something as self-evidently important as health, then there is not much hope of building an ethical system – with all its complex questions – on science alone.

How, for example, could science-based ethics help us in the following situation which often played out in the twentieth century? You believe in

---

29. *Ibid.*, p. 37; original emphasis.

always telling the truth, but one night, you are hiding an innocent man from unjust persecution by the state police. The police come and ask if you have anyone in your house. Most people would probably lie (or like to think they would) but the real point of recounting this story is that no conceivable scientific experiment has the slightest bearing on the morality of your act one way or the other. Science is simply not intended or equipped to answer these kinds of questions that do not involve mass, measurability, repeatability, predictability, objectivity and falsifiability.

Interestingly enough, Harris tries to dismiss the question “*why* the well-being of conscious beings *ought* to matter to us.”<sup>30</sup> He says he does “not think anyone sincerely believes this kind of moral skepticism makes sense.”<sup>31</sup> He misses the point of the question which is not to doubt that well-being is worthwhile but to show that science cannot establish the moral ‘goodness’ of this goal – which he admits several pages later, saying “Science cannot tell us why, *scientifically*, we should value health.”<sup>32</sup>

In the last analysis, Harris is left with the problem so clearly articulated by Daniel Dennett: “If ‘ought’ cannot be derived from ‘is,’ just what *can* it be derived from?”<sup>33</sup> That is exactly the problem to which Harris’ argument about science-based ethics is unable to provide a logically coherent answer.

In *Forbidden Fruit: The Ethics of Secularism*, secular humanist Paul Kurtz also seeks to develop a science-based ethics, the sciences in this case being physiology, evolutionary science and anthropology. He calls his approach “eupraxsophy,”<sup>34</sup> which he defines as “good practical wisdom.”<sup>35</sup> Kurtz, like Harris, believes that “The intrinsic value we seek to achieve is *eudaemonia*: happiness or well-being.”<sup>36</sup>

The heart of Kurtz’s ethical philosophy is the concept of “the common moral decencies”<sup>37</sup> which are “transcultural in their range.”<sup>38</sup> They are

30. *Ibid.*, p. 32.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 32.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 37.

33. Daniel Dennett, quoted in Harris, *The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values*, p. 196; original emphasis.

34. Paul Kurtz, *Forbidden Fruit: The Ethics of Secularism* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2008), p. 22.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 22.

36. Paul Kurtz, *Free Inquiry*, Volume 23, Number 1, Winter, 2002/2003, [https://www.secularhumanism.org/index.php/cont\\_index\\_23](https://www.secularhumanism.org/index.php/cont_index_23).

37. Kurtz, *Forbidden Fruit*, p. 93.

38. Kurtz, *Free Inquiry*, Volume 23, Number 1, Winter, 2002/2003, [https://www.secularhumanism.org/index.php/cont\\_index\\_23](https://www.secularhumanism.org/index.php/cont_index_23).

universal because they are based on the needs of human nature which, in Kurtz's view is grounded in biology. (One cannot help remembering Maslow's hierarchy of needs at this point.) Therefore, we can expect that "humankind, including the specific societies within it, already possess a number of [these] principles . . . as binding."<sup>39</sup> Among the major "decencies" we find truthfulness; promise-keeping; trustworthiness; justice and fairness; tolerance and benevolence and cooperation to name a few. Without these attributes, human individuals could not survive as members of society and societies could not maintain unity and function successfully, i.e. survive. As Kurtz says, "They no doubt grow out of the long evolutionary struggle for survival."<sup>40</sup>

According to Kurtz, these "common moral decencies" provide a scientific foundation for ethics because they have an empirical

*socio-biological* basis; they are rooted in the nature of the human animal and the *processes of evolution* by which the species adapts and survives. Human beings are social animals, and our young require an extended period of nurturing for survival. Given this, a number of moral rules that govern behavior have developed . . . Moral codes thus have an adaptive function; one can postulate that those groups which had some effective regulation for conduct were better able to survive, reproduce and compete with other species or human groups . . . The test of the truth of these principles was their consequences.<sup>41</sup>

Kurtz makes clear the empirical science-based nature of his ethical system vis-à-vis its "socio-biological" and evolutionary basis as well as the anthropological study of "moral codes" among various groups. As noted before, the aim is not only survival but also well-being. As a result of the socio-biological and evolutionary processes working in individuals and societies, the "common moral decencies" are rooted in human nature and, therefore, they "need not be divinely ordained to have moral force, for they are tested in the last analysis by their *consequences* in practice."<sup>42</sup> In other words, the ontological basis of ethics lies in human nature which, at bottom, is given to each human being; we have no choice about being born human with a particularly defined nature.

---

39. Kurtz, *Forbidden Fruit*, p. 105.

40. Paul Kurtz, *Free Inquiry*, Volume 23, Number 1, Winter, 2002/2003, [https://www.secularhumanism.org/index.php/cont\\_index\\_23](https://www.secularhumanism.org/index.php/cont_index_23).

41. Kurtz, *Forbidden Fruit*, pp. 97 – 98.

42. Paul Kurtz, *Free Inquiry*, Volume 23, Number 1, Winter, 2002/2003, [https://www.secularhumanism.org/index.php/cont\\_index\\_23](https://www.secularhumanism.org/index.php/cont_index_23).

These “socio-biological” needs are the ontological basis on which the “socio-cultural”<sup>43</sup> and the “historical”<sup>44</sup> moral codes are built. In this way, Kurtz answers his own challenge about the necessity for building moral systems on ontological foundations. He says that the central issue about moral and ethical principles concerns their ontological foundation. If they are neither derived from God nor anchored in some transcendent ground, are they ephemeral? . . . The moral and ethical principles that we live by and to which we are committed are “real”: that is, we can make factual descriptive statements about their centrality of human behavior.<sup>45</sup>

In Kurtz’s view, because the “common moral decencies” are empirically verifiable and can be studied by the scientific method, there is no need to appeal beyond empirical phenomena to any transcendental entity as a basis for morality. Therefore, he argues that we can make “factual descriptive statements” about ethics since they are “part of nature”<sup>46</sup> and therefore protected from subjective relativism. He rejects subjective relativism by stating:

Ethical principles are not simply subjective emotional attitudes or states unamenable to any critical justification. There are important objective criteria that we use to evaluate ethical principles.<sup>47</sup>

Kurtz aims at establishing reason and critique as integral parts of making ethical judgments and to remove reliance on faith i.e. on unexamined presumptions, on authority and tradition.<sup>48</sup>

There are at least three problems with Kurtz’s argument. The first is that it cannot escape Hume’s Guillotine. The fact that the “common moral decencies” are found everywhere and seem necessary to individual and/or societal well-being and/or survival does not make them morally obligatory. It makes them advantageous, but being advantageous and being moral are not the same things. Advantage is an *aspect* of morality but it does not exhaust the concept of morality, as we have already seen in the hospital dilemma, and in various problems with utilitarianism and consequentialism. Letting the old and sick die might be financially advantageous to a society, i.e., the greatest good for the greatest number, but the morality of that is dubious. The “common moral decencies” may

---

43. Kurtz, *Forbidden Fruit*, p. 97.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 100.

45. *Ibid.*, p. 95.

46. *Ibid.*

47. *Ibid.*, p. 104.

48. *Ibid.*

also be seen as necessary *vis-à-vis* survival, but how do we distinguish them from the “common moral *indecencies*” such as slavery, the suppression of women and the rule of paterfamilias which many societies regarded as necessary to survival and even moral? In other words, the fact that the “common moral decencies” are/were ubiquitous and could be important to survival is not sufficient to bridge the gap between description and prescription.

There is a second difficulty: by what standard are we to distinguish between the “common moral decencies” and the common moral indecencies? It is not difficult to argue that slavery, the suppression of women and the paterfamilias contributed to survival in the past. To say that their ‘time is over’ simply appeals to an argument that has no basis in science or empirical evidence since there is no scientific way to prove that we are morally obligated to give up practices that no longer contemporary preferences even though they do not threaten human survival. Indeed, someone might argue that we should keep these practices because they have served us so well for so long. Such a morally perverse argument becomes possible precisely because there is no scientific way to exclude it without some standard by which to do so – and science cannot provide that standard.

A third, similar, difficulty arises *vis-à-vis* the actual applications of the “common moral decencies” which sound positive if we implicitly assume they are intended for all human beings. Few if any of these decencies were missing in Nazi, Fascist or Soviet society, for example, because they are rooted in human nature and in the humanity’s “socio-biological” nature. However, few would defend their application of these decencies as moral. These societies – and others like them in the past – applied these decencies to a limited circle, i.e., family, tribal, racial, class or national members. However, by what empirical or scientific standard can we judge them as ‘immoral’? This problem undermines Kurtz’s argument because it clearly shows that within his empirical/scientific framework, there is no answer to the question of what is really good and really bad. At best, we have individual or societal preferences. Ultimately, Kurtz’s argument falls into the very relativism it seeks to avoid.<sup>49</sup>

Strangely, both Kurtz and Harris recognize that they cannot produce a compelling scientific obligation to act for well-being or the “common moral decencies.” As Harris notes, “Science cannot tell us why, *scientifically*, we should value health.”<sup>50</sup> Kurtz asks, why should we be

---

49. *Ibid.*, pp. 95-96.

50. Harris, *The Moral Landscape*, p. 37.



moral, “Why ought I to perform *this* obligation or *that* duty?”<sup>51</sup> These questions point to the heart of the problem: if a science-based ethic cannot give us science-based reasons for being moral – or even determine what constitutes morality and a moral standard – then something is missing in that ethic. It is not internally self-sufficient, which is to say, it must import the ethical concepts of obligation and value from outside empirical science.

At this point it is important to remind ourselves that the lack of self-sufficiency and the problems caused by Hume’s is/ought division do not completely invalidate Harris’ and Kurtz’s arguments. Only their limitations are revealed. The information they provide can, as we shall see, be used in other arguments that complete the foundation for ethics by other means.

### **‘Is’ to ‘Ought’ in the Bahá’í Writings**

Before beginning this discussion about the is/ought distinction in the Bahá’í Writings – and, by implication – other theistic systems, two introductory remarks must be made regarding the invocation of God. First, there is the empiricist critique that invoking the transcendent God is simply a desperate artifice to cover up a lack of logic and evidence, i.e. the ‘God-of-the-gaps’ argument. But this is little more than an accusation since the critic cannot prove that the theist answer is false. The critics’ accusation is no more than an expression of hope of ‘things unseen’ to which the theist can easily reply that the denial of God is simply a tactic to remove the only logically remaining answer from the debate about the ontological foundations of ethics. On one hand, it might be argued the concept of God is merely an artifice to give absolute grounding to a specific moral position; on the other hand, it can be equally argued that the denial of God is merely a way of avoiding the consequences of the existence of absolute moral standards. Such criticisms and counter-criticisms are, in effect, moot, and, therefore the ‘God-of-the-gaps’ argument is not really of much use in arguing against the Bahá’í other theistic positions. Second, the censure that God’s existence is an illegitimate assumption, whereas the assumption that He does not exist is somehow allowable also fails. Both are assumptions and proving that one assumption or the other is ‘more justified’ simply leads us to an infinite regress of assumptions that cannot – even in principle – decide the problem. For these two reasons, and the implications of Hume’s is/ought problem, we maintain that the most rational response is evaluate the theist

---

51. Kurtz, *Forbidden Fruit*, p. 196.

and non-theist positions on the basis of their internal logical coherence and self-sufficiency, and on their ability to answer logical problems such as the is/ought distinction.

In contrast to empiricist ontologies, the 'is-ought' problem does not exist in Bahá'í ethics or in the ethics of other theistic systems. In this paper, we shall focus on the Bahá'í Writings but it will become clear that none of the theistic religions fall victim to Hume's Guillotine. The reason is clear. Empiricism and the scientific method cannot find more in nature than can be revealed by the scientific method – and obligations, values, judgments and goodness or evil cannot be found in that way. However, the Bahá'í Writings – like all theistic religions – do not see nature as exclusively material. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá says, "there is a sign (from God) in every phenomenon."<sup>52</sup> More specifically, Bahá'u'lláh says:

Whatever is in the heavens and whatever is on the earth is a direct evidence of the revelation within it of the attributes and names of God, inasmuch as within every atom are enshrined the signs that bear eloquent testimony to the revelation of that Most Great Light. Methinks, but for the potency of that revelation, no being could ever exist. How resplendent the luminaries of knowledge that shine in an atom, and how vast the oceans of wisdom that surge within a drop . . . all things, in their inmost reality, testify to the revelation of the names and attributes of God within them. Each according to its capacity, indicateth, and is expressive of, the knowledge of God.<sup>53</sup>

Bahá'u'lláh makes it clear that there is more to reality than what is empirically perceptible and scientifically measureable, i.e., the "signs . . . of that Most Great Light." Indeed, physical reality reveals the "names and attributes of God" which appear in all things to an appropriate degree. These signs are ontologically real "spiritual realities"<sup>54</sup> even though they are not available for empirical analysis and can only be known if we "awaken [our] spiritual susceptibilities"<sup>55</sup> (As a quick digression, we note that science, too, requires the cultivation of special 'susceptibilities' and understandings for us to become aware of certain scientific truths, as in, for example, quantum physics. Thus, the requirement for "spiritual susceptibilities" is not an extraordinary claim made by religious thought.)

---

52. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 174.

53. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1976), p. 177.

54. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 302.

55. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

Through the signs and knowledge revealed or instantiated in His creations, God makes His will known to a degree consistent with humankind's abilities to understand. Therefore, it is not necessarily a logical error to extract an ethical argument, i.e., an 'ought' or a prescription, from a natural fact, an 'is.' A particular argument may be faulty due to its own inherent flaws but, in principle, the procedure of reasoning from an 'is' to an 'ought' in a universe preternaturally charged with spiritual significances is valid. That is because prescriptions based on natural facts are grounded in an ontology that gives spiritual – in this case, ethical – significance to natural facts. Thus, spiritually speaking, there is an intrinsic connection between the subject matter and the moral to be learned. Natural facts have “spiritual significance”<sup>56</sup> which is not just a pleasing but fictitious analogy but is, rather, ontologically real, like “the luminaries of knowledge that shine in an atom.”<sup>57</sup>

This non-materialist outlook on the phenomenal world provides an ontological foundation for our ethical systems. For example, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states:

all humanity must be looked upon with love, kindness and respect; for what we *behold in them are none other than the signs and traces of God Himself*. All are evidences of God; therefore, how shall we be justified in debasing and belittling them, uttering anathema and preventing them from drawing near unto His mercy? This is ignorance and injustice, displeasing to God; for in His sight all are His servants.<sup>58</sup>

In other words, we must treat all created beings – and especially humankind – in a morally upright fashion precisely because they contain spiritual value as direct references to God. This is straight forward ‘is’ to ‘ought’ reasoning which, in a Bahá’í or theist context, is valid because the conclusion we draw is already implicit in the premise or the ‘is.’ Of course, theists may disagree about which specific moral imperative may be taken from certain natural facts, but that does not invalidate the effort to go beyond mere material knowledge. Here is another example. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states:

For Christ declared, “Love your enemies . . . and pray for them which . . . persecute you; that you may be the children of your Father

---

56. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 98.

57. Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings*, p. 177.

58. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 231; emphasis added.

which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust.”<sup>59</sup>

From this natural example, he extracts a moral lesson, an ‘ought,’ an obligation, a prescription for human behavior. We are to be like the rain and offer good to everyone. From an empiricist perspective, this is an illogical violation of the ‘is/ought’ distinction. Of course, it might be argued that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá simply uses rain as a convenient metaphor just as an empiricist might. However, for an empiricist, this metaphor is at best a clever and pleasing analogy; there is no intrinsic connection between the example and the lesson drawn from it. The connection is purely accidental. Consequently, the metaphor cannot give authority to any argument on which it is based. This is not true of the Bahá'í Writings in particular and theism in general. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s use of this natural illustration is grounded in an ontology that gives spiritual – in this case, ethical – significance to natural facts. Therefore, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s example is not merely a pleasing embellishment but points to a real ethical truth. From this it follows that there is an intrinsic connection between the subject matter and the moral explicated by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá.

All this is not to say that God created rain solely for the purpose of teaching humans about doing good to all. Rain, like anything else, has other reasons for being, but it also performs a spiritual function for those who are spiritually awake and are “informed of the mysteries of the world of significances.”<sup>60</sup> They will understand that these “significances” are not merely subjective phenomena but are ontologically real aspects of reality since, as, Bahá'u'lláh tells us, everything that exists reveals God’s names and attributes. In short, ethics have an ontologically real foundation.

To sum up our foregoing argument: the exemption of the Bahá'í Writings (and other theistic systems) from Hume’s is/ought distinction is of tremendous logical significance because it legitimizes the move from ‘is’ to ‘ought.’ Therefore, unlike scientific and empirically based ethics, theistic ethics can build on the factual descriptions of nature – be they fMRI brain-scans or “socio-biological” discoveries about human nature or scientific studies of well-being – to lead to prescriptive conclusions because values are already in the premise, i.e., in the natural data. Whether or not this possibility is always used well is another matter. What counts is that the principle has been established. On this issue, the Bahá'í Writings and other theistic ethics are internally self-sufficient and

---

59. *Ibid.*, p. 86.

60. *Ibid.*, p. 303.

coherent, i.e. they do not have to import concepts from beyond the framework they have adopted.

### **The Problems of Legitimacy, Authority/Power and Universality**

The belief in God helps us deal with three basic issues that any system of ethics must deal with: legitimacy, authority and universality. Legitimacy deals with the questions, ‘Who – if anyone – has the legitimacy or qualifications to lay down moral principles and precepts for the human race? Who or what – if anything – has the knowledge, understanding and intrinsic goodness necessary to legitimize a demand for obedience? Who – or what – is inherently entitled to make obedience a condition for attaining ‘rightness,’ or true value and appropriate worth as a human being?’ Clearly, no human individual or collective has the unlimited knowledge needed to dispense perfect justice, understanding and compassion. Human beings are fallible and fickle, have personal agendas, lack absolute independence from all things, are susceptible to outside influence, interference and coercion. Therefore, it is virtually self-evident that no individual and no collective inherently possess such legitimacy by virtue of their human nature. This leaves science-based ethics in a weak position regarding the legitimacy of any ethical system it might adopt because no one has the qualifications that justify making particular demands. Of course, we may give governments or social institutions the power to do so but this is legal not moral legitimacy. On the other hand, in Bahá’í or in any other theist ethical system, God is not only unaffected by the aforementioned deficiencies, but He is also the actual maker of the world and the nature of everything in it. Consequently, it is difficult to imagine who else could be better qualified and possess the moral legitimacy to legislate for humanity.

All ethical systems must also deal with the issue of authority or power which refers to the power to enforce ethical commands in some way or another, i.e., to ensure that some kind of consequence follows moral or immoral behavior, just as consequences follow all behaviors in the natural world. Without power, legitimacy remains purely theoretical, in effect, impotent, thereby undermining and endangering one of the main *raison d’être* of ethics, i.e., providing unity and the basis for co-operation among people.

In the last analysis, science-based ethics are forced to rely on political power to impose their ethical standards; they rely on government or social institutions to make their moral standards effective in the world. Here, too, they show their lack of internal self-sufficiency because they need to import an essential aspect of their ethical systems from beyond the scientific domain. What experiment could possibly tell us which political

decision – regardless of how it is made – is correct? Neither political nor moral correctness can be measured by the scientific method. Bahá'í, and by implication, theistic ethics, do not suffer this deficiency because the question of power is soluble within their conceptual frameworks. They are logically coherent on these foundational matters.

The third challenge for scientific and empirical ethics is ‘universality’ by which we mean the applicability of ethical standards everywhere, at all times and under all circumstances. Harris deals with this by referring to the human brain which is substantially the same among all ethnicities and which is part of the body that humans have evolved over the last three million years. For his part, Kurtz relies on the “common moral decencies” that he believes underlie all human culture because human “socio-biology” requires them. Because the is/ought divide is an insurmountable problem in establishing brain-scan results or “common moral decencies” as moral obligations, it is impossible to maintain any claims to universality. From the perspective of the Bahá'í Writings, these suggestions are not so much mistaken as incomplete insofar as the Manifestations of God in every time and place “restate the eternal verities”<sup>61</sup> i.e., the basic religious truths which, of course, include the moral truths. These truths may appear in different forms under different circumstances but are always fundamentally the same. However, the problem with the science-based ethics is that they can neither bridge the is/ought divide nor definitively establish their legitimacy, authority and universality on the basis of their own premises. Here, too, they reveal their lack of internal conceptual self-sufficiency which undermines their claims.

### **Conclusion**

In this paper we have examined two claims that a science-based ethics is a viable alternative to theist-based ethics such as we find in the Bahá'í Writings. We have found these claims to be untenable for three major reasons. First, they cannot logically bridge the divide between ‘is’ and ‘ought’ as explained by David Hume. Second, because of their inability to bridge the is/ought divide, they are not internally self-sufficient, i.e. they have to import ethical concepts from outside their empirical framework. Science simply cannot prove ‘goodness’ or ‘obligation.’ Third, because of their failures in the foregoing two endeavors, they cannot adequately assert claims to legitimacy, authority/power and universality. The fact that science-based ethics cannot establish their conceptual framework and

---

61. Shoghi Effendi, *The Promised Day Is Come* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1980), p. 108.

work within it, indicates that the serious logical deficiencies undermine their project. As our examples from the Bahá'í Writings have shown, theist ethical systems do not suffer from these difficulties and, therefore, remain a logically viable alternative to science-based ethics.

*Wilmette Institute*