

Barbora Pořízková, *O tom, co je a co by být mělo*
Bakalářská práce. Posudek vedoucího práce

This bachelor's thesis takes as its subject Hume's Law, or the claim that one cannot derive an *ought* from an *is*. The author explores the significance of this law for rationalist and objectivist ethics, arguing that only a subjectivist account of ethical motivation, such as that offered by Hume himself, can adequately deal with moral motivation and avoid the 'is-ought problem'. Nevertheless, the thesis is by no means a straightforward defence of Hume's own ethical position as the author argues that his grounding of the power of ethical prescription in natural desires brings its own difficulties. Hume's theory of ethical motivation may be logically adequate, but the ethical system that flows from it disappoints traditional expectations about morality, such that it be universal (pp. 30-31) and unconditional (p. 43).

Barbora Pořízková's discussion of Hume is primarily focused on Book III of the *Treatise of Human Nature*, and her interpretation centres on the long first section entitled 'Moral Distinctions not deriv'd from Reason'. She argues that Hume's Law should be understood in the context of this section's anti-rationalism, and it therefore applies only to systems that hope to derive morality from reason. In other words, she narrows the significance of the principle, arguing that systems, like Hume's own, which appeal to a special kind of moral sense or human sentiment, are not susceptible to Hume's Law, for they do not require any bridge between *is* and *ought*. There is much to be said for this line of interpretation and the author's defence of it makes her thesis a valuable and stimulating contribution to the discussion.

Nevertheless, the interpretation faces certain challenges. The most conspicuous problem is that Hume writes that 'in *every* system of morality, which I have hitherto met with, I have *always* remark'd' [that authors slide from descriptive to prescriptive assertions] (my emphases). Hume seems to be including here moral systems that are non-rationalistic, such as Shaftesbury's and Hutcheson's moral sense theories, which were well-known to him. Barbora Pořízková is aware of this challenge (p. 8), and she argues that we must distinguish between evaluative judgement—which remains descriptive if morality is objective—and obligation. It is obligation that is at issue and, as she writes, Hume *nepostuluje žádný obligatorní etický systém* (p. 17). He is only describing how we do in fact judge based on our common human nature. It is this that is original in his philosophical project and which absolves him from having to derive an *ought* from an *is*, unlike those, like Shaftesbury and Hutcheson, who still wish to postulate obligation.

The thesis is notable for its large vision and its bold treatment of some of the most important questions of ethics, including the question of why we should be moral. From a critical point of view, I would note that the discussion is somewhat

fragmentary, with a wide range of different topics being taken up, but each treated rather briskly, sometimes raising more questions than are answered. This true, for example, of the important question of conscience which is raised in section 11 (pp. 32-33), but which little is said about, despite the promise of the title of this section. Here, the author seems more interested in whether moral sense in Hume's philosophy is necessarily a part of human nature, or whether it might not be a pragmatic fiction. This question, again, would require more detailed treatment. For the pragmatic fiction to function it would, itself, need to draw on human sentiment and would seem to require a predisposition to moral feeling in children. Also, the author's suggested comparison with Rousseau's social contract (p. 33) is, as it stands, hard to make out.

At a number of places the author's arguments turn on terms which are not properly explained or defined and leave the reader somewhat perplexed as to how they are meant. Two such cases might be addressed in the defence:

(i) What is intuitionism in ethics (*intuitivistická etika*, p. 20) in the author's view? The author uses the term in an unclear way, seeming to classify Hume with this label as well as other positions. Intuitionism is usually associated with such thinkers as Whewell and G.E. Moore who claim that we have a special and indefinable intuition of the good. It is also associated with the utilitarian Henry Sedgwick, in his *Methods of Ethics*, when proving that well-being is the only good.

(ii) What is metaethics? And why does the author assume that utilitarianism is a moral philosophy without a metaethics? The section that critiques utilitarianism for lacking a metaethics (pp. 22-23) is unclear to me because I do not know how the author uses this key term. Certainly the metaethical question of the ontological status of the good and whether or not it is a natural quality is one that utilitarians have discussed in detail, as they have the proof and motivation for utilitarian ethics (see, for example, Mill's *Utilitarianism*, chapters 3 and 4). The section on utilitarianism is also less than satisfactory because it treats the doctrine as a monolith and quite ignores the significant disagreements between different theories falling under the label 'utilitarianism'. One disagreement among utilitarians is over how we know what is good—by intuition in Sedgwick's view, as noted above, by experience of my own desires in Mill's view.

The treatment of the distinction between natural and artificial virtues in Hume (pp. 34-35) is persuasive, and the author is right to argue that artificial virtues are unthinkable in abstraction from human passion, though their relation to the passions is more indirect than the natural virtues. It might have helped here to have looked at an example of an artificial virtue (say loyalty, justice, or tolerance) and to have examined exactly *how* the given artificial virtue draws on the passions. The discussion and critique of John Searle's institutional explanation of how to derive an *ought* from an *is* (pp. 37-40) is also persuasive. These sections are among

the strongest in the thesis and demonstrate that the author grasps, and thoughtfully reflects, central ethical problems.

As should be clear from the above, the author's position is in certain key respects rather under-developed. The potential is obvious, though, and I believe her further inquiry in this area could be very fruitful. It strikes me that her position could be profitably developed by a reading of the work of Bernard Williams (for example his *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*), as he sets out in detail a similar quasi-Humean position founded on internal motivation, and he also thinks that the ambitions we traditionally have for the discipline of ethics must be accordingly limited. Overall, I would recommend the grade 2, or '*velmi dobře*'.

31.8.2020, doc James Hill