

## OUGHTS FROM IS'S

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Hocutt, M., *Grounded Ethics: The Empirical Bases of Normative Judgments*.  
New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2000, pp. xvi, \$49.95 (hardback).

*Evidence-based medicine* is a new selling-point for HMOs whose physicians maintain currency with the literature, integrate the latest validated technical advances into their practice, and select therapies based on published meta-analyses of clinical trials. “My god of course” you think as you watch the commercial, “. . . should go without saying.” But then a voice from the other end of the couch opines: “No, thanks, I prefer the old type, based on intuition, personal sensitivity, and a deep feeling for just what the right prescriptions must be.” A gentle chill runs down your spine.

Hocutt sells evidence-based ethics. It is strong medicine for an audience that prefers the old type, based on intuition, personal sensitivity, and a deep feeling for just what the right prescriptions must be. An audience that might paraphrase Hume, and deny the utility of evidence by intoning “No oughts from is's;” any more and your arguments will be dismissed as another naturalistic fallacy. Hume noted the ubiquitous segues from *is's* to *oughts* found in every moral disquisition that were made *absent explanation*: but “ ’tis necessary. . . that a reason should be given” (Hume, in Hocutt, 2000, p. 43). Most readers concluded “No oughts from is's” alone. Period. But, if not from is's, from whence *do* oughts emerge? What is left? Values? But those differ among individuals, and what they are and how they differ are themselves matters of fact. How do we construct/realize a universal ethics?; or even just a local one? Over-reaction to Hume's valid concern launched philosophers on a search for unmotivated Value.

Kant, awakened from his dogmatic slumbers by reading Hume, argued that duty is universal and absolute. It must not be conditioned on any “empirically determinate or discoverable fact of the matter”—precisely the thing that is

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essential to Hocutt's definition of duty. For Kant, behavior in accord with moral principles is superior to behavior motivated by "fellow feeling;" behavior with such "ulterior" motives "lacks moral worth" (Hocutt, 2000, p. 35). Without hope of a rule for saying which motivations are honorable and which perverse, Kant must dispense with motivation. We should be motivated to do the right thing without having to be motivated to do the right thing, he concludes. This is a delicate argument.

In *Grounded Ethics* Hocutt clarifies the central operative concept of ethics: *Ought*. He dismisses the idea that *ought* always entails an obligation. The term has several uses, and ". . . what distinguishes one use of 'ought' from another is the *kind* of reason [what is the nature of the good to be achieved or harm avoided] or *who* has it [good for me, or you, or country or . . .]." Sometimes *ought* does mean *obligation*, a social contract. There are varying degrees of obligation, ranging from etiquette to moral imperatives. Obligations can be in conflict, resulting in an ethical dilemma. Solutions to such dilemmas that minimize damage to one's personal values may maximize affront to those of society. Hocutt's analyses may help in arbitrating these conflicts.

Hocutt is a behaviorist: He sees that doing one's duty, like other behavior, originates with motivation (conscious or unconscious) to obtain rewards or avoid punishments. Eventually, moral (and immoral) acts may become detached from those consequences. For Hocutt, all moral acts reflect personal reasons—logic and goals—that are derived from experience—or perhaps inherited. Afraid perhaps of the mutability of extrinsic motivations, Kant wants a person to do his or her duty without motivation. Reason Rules: Just say "Know!" For Kant, control by desire diminishes freedom; for Hocutt control by others diminishes freedom. But control by others is the essence of ethics (Skinner, 1971).

Capital-R *Reason*—logic premised with intuition—is to be distinguished from reasons—statements of the goals that motivate an action, and their logical connection to that action. The latter must stipulate both a relevant belief and a relevant desire. Hocutt distinguishes between subjective and objective reasons. Subjective reasons are the emotions and beliefs that actually motivate conduct: You went to see that movie because you liked the actor. Objective reasons, on the other hand, are the mere facts that might serve to generate desires and beliefs: "You should see *Beautiful Mind* because Russell Crowe is a good actor and he stars in that movie." Objective reasons are *potential* reasons; they have the correct form—but the desire might, or might not, exist. Hocutt criticizes the normative use of the term *reason*; debating *which* objective reasons *should* motivate conduct is the lifework of many philosophers. Hocutt reduces the normative use to a kind of "Do as I see fit, not as you see fit." We *may* be able to find reasons that will motivate the listener—ones that we think would motivate us if we were in his shoes. But giving the listener our reasons does not make them his, as all parents of teenagers know. And you, reader, are you going to that movie? You may hate Russell Crowe, or movies in general. My insisting that he's good may not move you. My reasons are not assignable; that's why they are intrinsically subjective.

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Reasons, ones that have any chance of changing action, must be subjective—personal. In defending this assertion, Hocutt must parry the arguments of Thomas Nagel (1970) and Stephen Darwall (1983) who assert the power of objective reasons. Nagel, like Kant, sought to divorce reason from motivation (behavior fueled by desire or emotion). Nagel’s arguments balance on the fulcrum of altruism. For Nagel (1970) and Kant (1785/1995), “altruism” should be reserved for behavior motivated solely by belief, independent of any personal desire or emotion—if Mother Theresa found personal fulfillment in her work to ease the sufferings of the poor, we should not think of her as altruistic. This leaves scant opportunity for altruism—none if, like Hocutt, you think unmotivated acts are uncommon and in a deep sense irrational. The very possibility of an unmotivated act runs contrary to Hocutt’s behavioral perspective. Nagel (1970) himself took a kind of behavioral position by claiming that talk of desires such as *hunger* is unnecessary so long as we can identify an objective cause—in this case deprivation. *A fortiori*, he argued, desires are supererogatory in discussing motivation. If we can have behavior without desire, we can have good behavior without desire. Whooa!, says Hocutt; the ability to dispense with a term is not the same as proving that its referent is unnecessary. Hunger is not an efficient cause, but rather a disposing condition. Hunger describes the state of an organism in which, other things being equal, it will eat when presented food. We can certainly get rats and people alike to work for food if we starve them, and we need not mention *desire* to make them behave. But this hardly wins the argument. Force and starvation are classic motivational operations—ways of *making* your reasons the other person’s reason. Such *argument ad baculum* is more baculum than argument—it works because of the cogency of the desire, not of the logic. Because theories don’t mention *desire* does not mean that a starved organism is unmotivated; indeed, it is motivation, not its latent variable desire, upon which the argument hinges.

Do moral judgments ever have truth value? Hocutt briefly considers and then rejects the Platonic notion that entities may be ascribed the status of being good because they possess the *property* of goodness. According to Plato, goodness was a primary quality and thus inhered within a person, behavior, event, or thing. Against Plato, Hocutt argues that goodness cannot be a property because the entities that we call *good* seldom have any properties in common other than that we admire them, they bring us pleasure, provide us benefits, etc. What all good things and good behaviors share is our (favorable) response to them, not some intrinsic quality. Goods are reinforcers.

Although Hocutt dismisses universal Moral Law as a basis for classifying actions as intrinsically good or bad, he does not conclude that such judgments need be arbitrary. Evaluations may be true, or they may be false: To be meaningful (in Hocutt’s eyes) they must be indexed to their speakers and to specific contexts, whereupon they can be assigned a truth value. “Licorice tastes good” is true if and only if the person saying it likes the taste of licorice. The statement is elliptical, with the missing phrase being “. . .to me.” “Licorice is good” is an even less precise way of saying the same thing (it might refer to other properties than taste,

such as its utility in silencing babies, plugging holes, or applying blackface). Similarly, declaring “penicillin is good” is valid only when the ellipsis is supplied—“. . . medicine for people with bacterial infections;” and with additional hedges against allergies, and so on.

It is by requiring that we always supply the ellipses that Hocutt avoids the error of conflating ethical judgments with mere opinion. He shows that a statement of goodness or preference expresses not belief but rather fact indexed by the subject and the context and that a statement of preference is necessarily true (unless the speaker is lying or mistaken in terminology). If you say “I like licorice,” it is a statement of fact, not opinion. If you say “Licorice is good,” you are either merely asserting that you like it or are mistaken about the universality of taste.

The fact value of ethical judgments must also be indexed to the relevant ethical community. We all live in overlapping networks of societies, from family through friends, neighborhood, region, political party, country, religion, species. Each tugs at our sleeves in different directions. Contradictory ethical judgments are often held in those communities. This doesn’t undermine their standing. That polygyny is permissible in Saudi Arabia but not in Southern Alabama is an indication only that morality varies across societies, not that the status of bigamy is uncertain. Having 3 wives is of unambiguous moral status: It is absolutely immoral here, and absolutely moral there. Moral statements are validated by their consonance with the accepted moral practices of society. We may, of course, deny the validity of the premises or logic upon which a society or individual bases moral judgment. We may believe it is OK to cheat those who have cheated us. We may believe this, but it is our community who will decide whether or not it is ethical.

By asserting that ethical principles are grounded in experience, but nonetheless that they have “objectively real” status, Hocutt places his philosophy of ethics in a middle ground between traditional Rationalist and radical relativist approaches to morality—somewhat closer to the relativist end of the continuum. Against the Rationalists, Hocutt holds that: (1) Moral truths are neither universal nor self-evident. (2) Ethical principles have no existence independent of human experience. (3) Our moral intuitions give us no sure access to fundamental moral truths. Societies invent ethical principles; they do not discover them.

Hocutt associates Rationalism with Big Government. For Hocutt, appeal to universal moral truths is but a slip away from belief in absolute political authority, bureaucracy, and centralized management. What the Rationalist calls freedom is really control—freedom to be controlled by people who know better or at least argue better: Plato’s Philosopher Kings. Surprisingly, the Rationalist position is not relegated to backwater fascist states; it has tenure in academe.

So, if we can’t figure it out from reflective contemplation, how do we know what is good? Philosophical convention holds that an event, action, or thing can be good in three ways: intrinsically, instrumentally, or morally. According to Hocutt, all three can be explained in terms of reinforcement. (a) If an event, action, or thing reinforces, then it is intrinsically good. (b) If it leads to reinforcement, then it is instrumentally good (c) If society reinforces it, then it is morally good.

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Instrumental goods (a job) and moral goods (acts of charity) can become intrinsically good through a process of higher-order conditioning. Society can both reinforce action through praise and admiration and punish its omission through aspersion and shunning. Duties are actions whose omission is punishable. Giving blood to the Red Cross is admirable charity; giving money to the Internal Revenue Service is enforceable duty. You ought to do each, but for different kinds of reasons. What we call rights are the reinforcers that a society has been convinced it is their duty to provide. The rules of etiquette and morality derive from society; this is where ethics, like mores, find their grounding. Talk of natural universal rights, like that of Moral Law, is either “nonsense on stilts” or “proleptic”: speech that “attempts to make something true by saying that it is already true.” “It is our Natural Right. . .” is a rhetorical device to obtain reinforcers. Because it is not grounded in reason—analysis of the benefits for society or classes within it and associated costs, but rather in assumed absolutes, it is “demoralizing” for all involved.

Hocutt reiterates that qualities such as goodness and rectitude do not exist as properties of things: “*X* is good” has the more correct expanded form of “*X* has the power to reinforce person *y* in circumstance *c*.” Reinforcers aren’t just candies; A minister might be reinforced by his congregation’s being devout, a politician by his constituents’ being law-abiding, a scientist by his audience being knowledgeable. These individuals might enhance audience compliance (and thus their own reinforcement) by making the stronger claim that not only is *X* good (to them); it is good to God, to the founding fathers, and to enlightened thinkers everywhere; indeed, it is *intrinsically* Good. “Once we realize these facts of logic [and rhetoric!], most of the pseudopuzzles that have perplexed philosophers since Plato will evaporate in thin air.” Universally binding Moral Law is “a myth created by priests and perpetuated by politicians seeking a justification for their authority, but the justifications. . .are tissues of fallacies.” Philosophers compound the confusion with specious arguments. Try an empirical approach: Talk to anthropologists and other social scientists about mores. Do we shirk from such conversation because it leads to the Naturalistic Fallacy? It doesn’t have to lead there, but it may lead to ethical frameworks that might work better in achieving our goals for our society than those currently employed.

Must relativists, then, tolerate evil? If a relativist believes that all ethical principles can only be considered within the context of a particular society, what grounds does she have for criticizing another culture’s conventions? The relativist seems obliged to tolerate any and all behaviors, as long as they accord with the accepted moral customs of the society in which the behavior was performed. Hocutt disagrees: Not only are the moral standards of a culture open to criticism from within that society, they are also open to external criticism. Hocutt distinguishes between evaluating a behavior as *right* versus evaluating it as *morally right*. To say that a behavior is *morally right* is to say that that behavior is consistent with conventional moral and legal practices in the regnant society. But that is not to say that it is right in a broader sense. What Hocutt means by *right* is whether the thing advances the stated aims of that society. One must appeal to

reason (not Reason!) to answer this sort of question. Does the behavior function well within the larger cultural framework? Thus, of any behavior we can ask two distinct questions: (1) Is the behavior ethical (in the eyes of the society permitting or prohibiting it)? and (2) Is it advisable (given the goals of that society)? The external evaluation of cultural practice rests on the second of these two questions, and it is reason (not Moral Law) that must inform the answer. Functional arguments (e.g., one practice *works* better than another and so your society should adopt the former) remain instrumentally, rather than intrinsically, moral.

Even if a cultural practice is entirely consistent with both the moral customs of the society and its practical aims, a relativist can still criticize it—not as a moral issue, but as a personal preference (usually couched in more grandiose terms for effect). Of course, members of the society in question have no special need to care that an external constituency has criticized their practice. But this does not prevent the relativist from making those criticisms, and perhaps effecting change. This may seem a weak foundation for those interested in advancing progressive ideas, but Hocutt would respond that this is all that reason can support. That is, of course, a good basis for those with strong convictions to jettison reason. Crusades start this way, as do jihads and pogroms.

### **In Closing**

*Grounded Ethics* provides a logical framework for intelligently evaluating ethical and moral claims. Its first step is on the major moral philosophers, most of whom find ways to elevate personal sentiment to universally binding law. Because the evidence for universal, heavenly, or natural rights (and wrongs) is nil, these philosophers must abandon databased argument. Two other tactics to achieve Universal Right-Thinking have been favored over the years: the Impatient favor Force of Arms as the surest way to make others behave well; the Cerebral favor Force of Reason, reason that they wind over and around their persuasions to fabricate a Natural Law. For a homiletic against the former, read Stone (1989); against the latter, read Hocutt.

*Grounded Ethics* won't help those in search of a Rationalist Bible. There are bibles aplenty, geared for audiences ranging from Sunday Schools to Ivory Towers. Hocutt's book will not tell us that abortion is bad, that contraception is good, or that the death penalty makes murderers of us all. Hocutt is of no help to those searching for data, despite his broadside of the "empirical bases of normative judgments;" he points us toward social sciences for that grounding. His book will not help those wanting some One stronger than Convention to make him good. The Will to Believe must suffice for that.

*Grounded Ethics* will help those whose wish to know is stronger than their will to believe. It will help those frustrated by opaque moral disquisitions. It is a plea for empiricism, against Rationalist arguments of universal values papered over the kernels of personal preference. Its evolutionary/functional stance will be congenial to scientists. It will help sociobiologists and their critics clarify their relation to the naturalistic fallacy. It will help those who must bridge social,

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religious, and cultural divides to build coalitions. It will help lead us all toward a more just, less confused society, for it asks for reasons, not appeal to higher authority, whose fiat is absolute and unquestionable.

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