

## **Well-Being, Reality, and the Good**

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What is the ethical good? If the ethical good is a set of values or a set of virtues, what are these values or virtues?

My starting point in answering these questions is to expand on the idea that the ethical good is connected with well being. We can distinguish between the ethical concept of the good and the concept of the good life as well being, happiness, or some other basic positive quality (qualities) of life. My hypothesis is that the ethical good should depend upon what constitutes well being. It does not seem to make sense to argue for an ethics that does not lead to well being. What is good is what leads to well being; what is bad (or evil) is what leads to a loss or deprivation of well being.

The contemporary writer, Sam Harris, in his book *The Moral Landscape* (2010), has argued for such a theory of ethics that is grounded in well being. Harris contends that theories of ethics generally assume that the ethically good supports (leads to) well being. Further, Harris argues that well being can be factually determined, and hence, ethics can be factually grounded. Just as physical health (or physical well being) is something that can be described in terms of a set of factual conditions and functions of a healthy body, so can overall human well being be factually described, inclusive of at the very least a set of psychological, social, and habitation factual conditions. Hence, we can derive ethics from the facts of human existence. (Or more generally, a bio-ecologically encompassing ethics from a set of facts about earthly biology and ecology.)

In these connected assertions, Harris is challenging the classical philosophical position, usually associated with the eighteenth century philosopher, David Hume, that one can not derive an “ought” or “should” (a prescriptive ethical statement) from an “is” (a descriptive factual statement). For Hume one can not logically deduce normative or prescriptive statements of what we should do from descriptions of facts.

Consider: If a person engages in action X, it will lead to consequence Y. This is a factual or descriptive reality. Based on this factual reality, can we logically argue that the person should do X, or not do X? Can we logically argue that X is something of value to be pursued because it leads to Y? We can argue that the person should value X and do X, if Y (its consequence) is something to value. And conversely, we can argue that the person should not value and should not do X, if Y is something of negative value. But how do we establish if Y is something to value or not to value? The value of Y is something above and beyond a simple description of the nature of Y. We could argue that Y will produce (or lead to) Z, which we could say is of value, but then we have the same problem again. How do we establish the value of Z?

For example, let us propose that dishonesty (X) is ethically wrong, an ethical vice, and that ethically we shouldn't be dishonest. We have stated an “ought.” We attempt to

justify this ethical prescription by pointing out, as a factual reality, that dishonesty often leads to human misery (Y). Can we therefore conclude that we shouldn't be dishonest—that it is ethically wrong to be dishonest because it leads to misery? But wouldn't we have to demonstrate that what leads to human misery is ethically wrong? Perhaps we don't care about human misery, even with respect to ourselves. Whether we care about human misery or not, depends on what we value, and values are prescriptive or normative. Perhaps, being a masochist or a sadist, I like and value misery? Is this ethically wrong? How do we determine if human misery is a good or a bad thing? Wouldn't we need some further argument to show that misery is ethically bad, but if this argument depends on some other facts (misery provokes destructiveness toward oneself or others), we are in the same situation of having to show why destructiveness is morally bad—of why we shouldn't engage in destructiveness. We are back to the problem of deriving an "ought" from an "is," in what appears to be an never ending series of back-peddling arguments. The only basis, it would seem, for arguing for the value of something is to assume the value of something else connected with it, which then begs the question of the value of that something else. (I could argue that X is wrong because God said X is wrong, and as such resolve the dilemma, but this turns ethics into an absolutist position, without justification.)

This is Hume's logical critique of ethical philosophies throughout the ages. Ethics is not built on evidence or logic.

We can though state that something has intrinsic value or worth and should be pursued, in and of itself. Aristotle argued that "happiness" had intrinsic value, in the sense that it is a valued end in itself and it is not simply a means to some other valued end. Regarding happiness we do not need to argue that happiness is good because it leads to something of value, since happiness has intrinsic value. But how are we to determine what has intrinsic value? In essence, this is like asking what is intrinsically good and how do we determine it? Wouldn't we have to engage in some kind of reasoning process to determine its intrinsic value? We could argue that X simply feels wrong, or we can directly intuit that X is wrong, but this again turns ethics into something that can not be thoughtfully assessed. We can say any damn thing under the sun within such a context. Asserting a value that is not open to question is like asserting a belief that is not open to question; it is simple dogmatism.

As far as Hume can ascertain, we all base our ethics on likes and dislikes—on personal "sentiments" rather than logical arguments—an emotional and subjective foundation. There is no inherent good, or right or wrong to things, and no way to logically deduce what is good from any set of facts. As far as Hume can tell, it is a simply a matter of subjective (a-rational) taste. What we think (or feel) is good is simply what we like; what we think (or feel) is bad is what we don't like. But this is not an argument, it is just a psychological and idiosyncratic (emotional) fact. I can not though logically or evidentially support an ethics in terms of personal likes or dislikes. I can not logically argue that it is ethically good that I should do what I like to do, and ethically bad that I should do what I don't like to do.

Harris though thinks differently than Hume; in fact Harris makes a strong case that one can assess, both empirically and logically, the validity of an ethics. He believes we can compare different ethical theories based upon logical and factual criteria.

He believes that ethical theories throughout history assume that ethical behavior (or consciousness) facilitates well being and that well being is a factual or descriptive state. Moreover, well being is not simply a matter of personal taste or personal opinion, anymore than what is factually true is a matter of taste or opinion. I may not care about human misery, or I may even pursue it, but I would be ethically wrong to do so, if misery as a factual psychological state does not contribute to well being, either for myself or others. Hence, for Harris, an ethical theory (the ought) can be assessed for its validity by ascertaining whether or not it produces well being (the is).

So is Harris correct? Can ethics be grounded in factual reality? Is well being a set of factual conditions that provides the factual grounding for determining what is ethical and what is not?

First I should note that the presumed historical fact that ethical theories are invariably based on theories of well being is not sufficient logical grounds for arguing that a theory of ethics *should* be based on a theory of well being. We need to further argue that it is non-sensical or oxymoronic to argue for a theory of ethics not based on well being.

This point does seem to make sense. What can we plausibly mean by “the good” that is independent or antithetical to well being? Hence, in response to Hume, we can at least state that any theory of ethics (what we ought value and do) has to support the achievement of well being (an identifiable set of facts).

Second though, we can argue that we can not help but frame our ethics and theory of well being within the context of a theory of reality. Depending on our view of what is real, we will have different notions of what constitutes well being, for well being is always understood as an ideal state of reality, as we understand reality. So we might agree with Harris that well being is a set of factual conditions, but what are the facts of reality, especially concerning the human condition, in which we frame and describe our concept and ideal of well being? As it turns out, throughout history different visions of reality (or emphases on certain dimensions and not others) have been used to inform and structure different theories of well being and the good.

The long and the short of it: A theory of well being depends upon a theory of reality. The “facts” of well being are always structured and given meaning within a particular theory of reality. Further, even granting that well being is a set of factual conditions, we need though to note that it is only certain factual conditions among many that constitute well being. Well being refers to those factual conditions we consider ideal or best (the good life in the broad second sense). There are other factual conditions (pertaining to human existence) that would constitute the opposite reality: The lack of well being (for example in humans). Hence, what are our criteria for selecting the important and relevant facts concerning well being?

It is important that we have a sound theory of human reality from which to derive a sound theory of well being for humans. I propose that conscious human reality is evolutionary, future-directional, and purposeful. It is within the context of such a theory of humans that we should develop a theory of well being: What is well being for a purposefully evolving future oriented conscious human being?

In summary, the argument that ethics can be based upon well being consists of the following points:

- Well being has been the foundation for theories of ethics (the ethical good) within human history.
- It is oxymoronic, illogical, or senseless to argue for an ethics that does not lead to and support well being.
- Well being is a set of factual conditions, yet factual conditions framed within a particular theory of reality.
- It is some subset of these factual conditions, what are considered ideal states or activities, that constitute well being.
- Critical to a viable theory of well being (and hence the good) is a sound theory of (human) reality.
- We should embrace and practice an ethics that leads to well being, understood as ideal conditions within our best theory of reality.
- I suggest that our best theory of human reality is that we are evolutionary, future-directional, purposeful conscious beings (or becomings).

## References

Harris, Sam *The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Values*. New York: Free Press, 2010.