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THE USE OF PHILOSOPHY: THE "IS-OUGHT" TEST

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Part 2 of 2

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The difference in the usefulness of science and philosophy corresponds to the difference in their methods as modes of inquiry. No question properly belongs to science which cannot be answered by investigation or to the answering of which investigation can make no contribution. That is precisely why no *ought*-question is scientific and why, therefore, science includes no normative branch, no *ought-knowledge.*

Beginning in the seventeenth century, the natural sciences gradually separated themselves from speculative philosophy. More recently, the social sciences have declared their independence of philosophy in its normative branch. In order to establish themselves as subdivisions of science, such disciplines as economics, politics, and sociology had to eschew all normative considerations (that is, all *ought*-questions or, as they are sometimes called, "questions of value"). They had to become purely descriptive, becoming in this respect exactly like the natural sciences. They had

to restrict themselves to questions of how men do in fact behave, individually and socially, and forgo all attempts to say how they ought in principle to behave.

It may be conceded by anyone who understands the distinction between *is* and *ought* that investigative science, natural or social, cannot deal with matters of *ought.* But it may still be thought that *ought-knowledge* can be derived from scientific know-that, just as productive and practical know-how are derived from it. To think so is to commit what has come to be recognized as the "naturalistic fallacy" in ethics.

The basic error which goes by this name consists in trying to derive an *ought*-conclusion from premises that are exclusively *is*-statements. It is fallacious to suppose that from knowledge of that which is and happens in the world, including knowledge of how men do or can behave, and *from such knowledge exclusively,* it is possible to know how men *ought* to behave, how society *ought* to be organized, and the like. If we avoid making this error, we will not make the mistake of supposing that scientific knowledge—all that we now have and all that we can ever acquire—will, taken by itself, establish a single normative judgment about what men *ought* to do or seek.[5]

[5] There are, of course, hypothetical normative judgments, of the form "If you want to achieve a certain end, you ought to do this"; and such judgments may be made in the light of scientific knowledge about available means and their relative efficiency. But such judgments beg a whole series of normative questions, such as: Ought you to desire the end in view? Ought you to employ this means, even if it is the most efficient means available? The question: Ought you to do this? cannot be properly answered without explicitly answering these other questions. As we have seen, scientific knowledge can go no further than to tell us what means are available and which is most efficient; it cannot tell us whether we *ought* or *ought not* to seek the end in view; it cannot tell us whether we *ought* or *ought not* to employ a certain means on the basis of considerations other than efficiency. Hence, scientific knowledge as such cannot provide *all the answers we need* for the adequate solution of any normative question.

What has just been said about the naturalistic fallacy applies to philosophical know-that exactly as it applies to scientific know-that. From premises which consist entirely of philosophical *is*-statements, no *ought-conclusion* can be validly drawn. The whole of speculative knowledge in philosophy—all that we now have together with all we may ever achieve—cannot by itself establish a single normative judgment about what men *ought* to do or seek.

We are thus faced with the following dilemma: either there is no philosophical *ought-knowledge* at all or, if there is, then normative philosophy must have principles of its own, in no way derived

from speculative philosophy. If we were to take the first alternative, it would follow that speculative philosophy must be totally useless knowledge—which, I repeat, is a contradiction in terms. I take the second alternative, not only for that reason, but also because I think that philosophy can answer first-order normative questions and achieve *ought*-knowledge (in the form of testable *doxa)* under the same conditions that it can answer first-order speculative questions and achieve *is*-knowledge.

Before I explain my position with respect to normative philosophy, let me make clear how the existence of normative judgments in philosophy that are independent of its speculative knowledge relates to the usefulness of the latter knowledge.

The statement of the naturalistic fallacy is largely negative in its import. It enjoins us from basing a normative judgment or *ought-conclusion* on premises or grounds that consist entirely of *is*-statements, whether these represent philosophical or scientific know-that. It leaves open the question whether normative judgments can be based directly on experience; and it allows, on the positive side, for the possibility that normative judgments can be based on mixed grounds—grounds which combine *is*-statements with *ought-statements* that are based on experience, not on other *is*-statements.

Hence, if normative philosophy includes some *ought-knowledge* that is derived directly from experience, it can reason to additional *ought-knowledge* (in the form of conclusions) by combining some is-knowledge with the original *ought-knowledge* (the normative principles derived directly from experience) to constitute adequate grounds for such conclusions. The *is*-knowledge which is thus combined with the normative principles may be either scientific or philosophical know-that. If the latter, speculative philosophy has been put to use through the mediation of normative philosophy, exactly as pure science is put to use through the mediation of technology or other forms of applied science.

When we consider the usefulness of philosophical knowledge, we must, therefore, distinguish between the direct usefulness of normative philosophy in the spheres of action and production and the indirect usefulness of speculative philosophy when the latter is put to use by normative philosophy—that is, when normative philosophy employs philosophical know-that as *part* of the grounds on which it bases *some* of its *ought*-judgments.

Scientific know-that may also be used by normative philosophy as

part of the grounds for making *ought*-judgments. In other words, there are pure and mixed *ought-questions,* as there are pure and mixed *is*-questions. The purely philosophical *ought-questions* are those which can be answered by normative philosophy either by *ought*-knowledge derived directly from experience or by *ought-judgments* based on the combination of *ought-principles* with philosophical know-that. A mixed *ought-question* is one which cannot be answered except by combining *ought-judgments* with is-knowledge supplied by disciplines other than speculative philosophy. The answer involves scientific know-that or historical know-that, whether or not it also involves philosophical know-that.

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Speculative philosophy can rely on common experience as the source of its basic notions and principles and also to provide one way of testing its theories or conclusions; so can normative philosophy. Each, however, relies on a different sector of common experience: speculative philosophy, on our common experience of that which is and happens in the world; practical philosophy, on our common experience of human desires, aspirations, preferences, regrets, and feelings of obligation and of relationship to others.

Speculative philosophy, as we have seen, may either defend or correct common-sense opinions or beliefs about that which is and happens in the world. Whichever it does, it does in the light of the very same common experience on the basis of which the defended or criticized common-sense opinions were originally formed. Normative philosophy may, similarly, either defend or correct common-sense opinions about how men ought to act individually or how they ought to conduct their social affairs. When it does so, it also reverts to the same common experience whence come the opinions it defends or criticizes.[6]

[6] See Henry Sidgwick's *The Method of Ethics,* 7th edition, London, 1962, Book III, especially Chapters XI and XIII. Cf. C. D. Broad's discussion of Sidgwick's treatment of "The Morality of Common Sense," in *Clarity Is Not Enough,* edited by H. D. Lewis, London, 1963, pp. 67-69, 73-74.

Speculative and normative philosophy are thus essentially alike as philosophical knowledge in that both stand in the same relation to common experience and to the common-sense opinions which are based on common experience. Yet they can be relatively independent branches of philosophical knowledge because the area or sector of common experience to which the one appeals is separate from the area or sector of common experience on which the other relies.

I said "relatively independent," not "absolutely independent." Normative philosophy is relatively independent of speculative philosophy in that it has some principles of its own, but it also makes use of speculative philosophy and so is not wholly independent of it. In this respect, normative philosophy stands in relation to speculative philosophy as technology stands in relation to pure science. But there the parallelism ends. Pure science often puts technology to use. It derives new techniques and new implements of investigation from the technological applications of earlier scientific knowledge. This reverse relationship does not obtain in the domain of philosophy; speculative philosophy never puts normative philosophy to use. In the process of reasoning by which the conclusions of speculative philosophy are reached, none of the premises is ever drawn from normative knowledge about how men ought to conduct their lives or their social affairs. *Ought*-statements never function as grounds for is-statements as *is*-statements function to furnish part of the grounds for certain *ought*-statements.[7]

(4)

The reader will recall that one of the four tests of the relative truth of philosophical theories was called the "is-ought" test.[8] The analysis set forth in the preceding pages, of the difference and relation between speculative philosophy as is-knowledge and normative philosophy as *ought-knowledge,* makes it possible now to explain that test.

[7] Throughout the foregoing discussion and in what follows, everything said applies *only* to first-order inquiries, whether normative or speculative. First-order normative knowledge or common-sense opinions of a normative character can be put to use, in a sense, by speculative philosophy when that moves on the plane of second-order inquiry. The analytical and linguistic philosophers, moving on that plane, have devoted considerable attention to the language and meaning of normative statements.

[8] See Chapter 9, pp. 148-149.

Looked at one way, the "is-ought" test appears to be merely a special form of the logical test—the test of internal consistency. Does a philosopher's view of the nature of things support or undermine his view of how men should conduct their lives? In the one case, he would be free from inconsistency; in the other, not. For example, a philosopher who denies the existence of individual beings which retain their identity over a span of time cannot consistently hold that men should be held morally responsible for acts which they performed at an earlier time. If there are no such enduring entities, the agent who performed a certain act at an earlier time cannot be identical with the individual who is to be charged at a later time with moral responsibility for that act. Or, to take another ex-

ample, a philosopher who prescribes how men ought to act or who recommends any course of action that they should adopt cannot consistently hold the view that everything which happens is so completely determined that men are not free to choose between one course of action and another.

It would appear that the philosopher, confronted with these inconsistencies, could resolve them by taking either horn of the dilemma and relinquishing the other. If that were so, then the “is-ought” test would add nothing to the general requirement of logical consistency in a sound philosophy. The “is-ought” test is additive precisely because the reverse is the case. Our common experience of living and acting gives a certain primacy to normative over speculative philosophy. The denial of moral responsibility is immediately falsified by our common experience of human life, in which we feel responsible for our acts and hold others responsible for theirs. Hence, if we have to choose between denying moral responsibility, on the normative side of philosophy, and giving up, on the speculative side, the view that there are no enduring entities in the world, we must do the latter.

The primacy of the normative over the speculative gives special force to the “is-ought” test. It requires us to reject as unsound any philosophical theory about what *is* or *is not* which undermines our effort, on the normative side, to deal philosophically with how men *ought* to behave.

(5)

It was pointed out in the preceding chapter that philosophy is generally regarded as being less useful to ■mankind than science.[9] If technological and practical know-how were the only measure of the usefulness of knowledge, we should be compelled to admit, not that philosophy is less useful than science, but that it is totally useless. As we have seen, however, *ought-knowledge* as well as know-how is needed in the spheres of action and production. Normative philosophy supplies us with the *ought-knowledge* that we need for guidance or direction in the conduct of our lives. We cannot go to any other of the major branches of natural knowledge—to science, to history, or to mathematics—for it. If we exclude from consideration the claim of revealed religion to offer us supernatural guidance (in the form of God-given laws) and supernatural help (in the form of God-given grace), philosophy alone, of all branches of knowledge, can tell us what we ought to seek as well as both why and how we ought to seek it. Philosophy alone gives us knowledge of what is good and bad, right and wrong—the order of goods, the

moral law, ends and means, happiness, the human virtues, and our duties.[10]

The power which science gives us through technology can be used either for constructive or for destructive purposes. The same scientific knowledge, put to productive use, can be used to emancipate man from labor or to enslave him, used to provide him with the comforts and conveniences of life or to kill and maim him, used to cure diseases or to inflict them. Precisely because it is ambivalent in this way, productive power is inherently dangerous and needs to be controlled by sound normative judgments about the pursuit of good and the avoidance of evil.

[9] See Chapter 10, p. 166.

[10] The stories of human conduct that we find in narrative histories, like the stories told by writers of fiction, can be morally instructive ; but narrative history is not as such a branch of human knowledge, and unless the stories are laced with normative judgments, either by the storyteller or by us, they teach no moral lessons.

To overcome the dangers inherent in technological power, and to make its use beneficial rather than injurious to mankind, we must be able to direct and control technology. Science, which is the source of productive power, is entirely neutral with regard to the opposite ways in which that power can be used. Being non-normative, it makes no moral judgments—that is, no *ought-judgments*. It is by its very nature incompetent to guide or control the productive power which it has placed in man's hands and unleashed on the world. Therefore, it is to normative philosophy, not to science, that we must look for whatever help we can get in the direction and control of technology.

Far from accepting the prevalent opinion that philosophy has not been, and can never be, as useful to man as science has been, and is, through all its technological applications, I submit that the very opposite is the case. Of the two, philosophy has a superior usefulness, a higher claim on our respect for the benefits it confers upon us and the help it gives us. In one sense, the respective ways in which philosophical and scientific knowledge can be useful—through *ought-judgments* and through know-how—are incomparable, as incomparable as the ways in which philosophy and science make progress or achieve agreement. They are simply different. Yet things as different as normative philosophy and technology can be placed on a scale of values and judged, relative to one another, for their contribution to human well-being, to the happiness of men and the welfare of society.

Judged by such standards, the *ought-knowledge* which directs man in the achievement of the good life and the good society is superior to the know-how which puts at man's disposal productive power, power that may either facilitate or defeat man's achievement of the good life and the good society. In addition, one of the uses of philosophy is to give us rational control over the use of science; and it is in this very important respect, if in no other, that the superior usefulness of philosophy must be conceded by anyone who is persuaded that philosophy, both normative and speculative, can satisfy the conditions of intellectual respectability.

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