These handouts are for personal educational use only: do not copy, cite, or distribute.

3.9 Problems for moral naturalism

Recall that the *conclusion* of **practical reasoning** can take various forms (an action, an intention, a desire, a normative judgment), but only if among the *premises* there is at least one premise that takes that same form. Let's take a look at what that means for **normative judgments** (i.e., ethical judgments, judgments that have an "ought" or "should" in them) in particular.

Let's use our previous "fridge" example from lecture 3.8, cast in terms of normative judgments:

Premise 1: If I open the fridge, I'll find a sandwich to eat. [*A belief about a **natural** fact: an "is" claim.*]

Premise 2: I ought to eat a sandwich. *[This is an "ought" claim.]*

Conclusion: I ought to open the fridge door. *[This is an "ought" claim.]*

Note that Premise 2 is absolutely *essential* to arriving at the conclusion. After all, how can Chad conclude that he **ought** to open the fridge door, unless he already knows that he **ought** to do the thing that opening the fridge door would allow him to do? Premise 1 alone cannot bring him to the conclusion. So the Western focus on logic has tends to discourage the Western philosophical tradition about **ethical naturalism.** It seems that **plain natural facts** (e.g., that there **"is"** an edible sandwich in the fridge) cannot *by themselves* deliver knowledge of ethical conclusions.

The above observation is captured by a slogan also typically associated with David Hume:

You can't get an "ought" from an "is".

Another example: returning to the abortion argument

Suppose you don't want to rely on moral **intuition**. You instead prefer to use science.

"Here's why you shouldn't be killing fetuses. The fetus in the womb has a heartbeat and has brainwaves and can feel pain, and therefore you ought not to kill it."

Premise 1: Fetuses have heartbeats and brainwaves and can feel pain.
Conclusion: We ought not to kill fetuses.

But wait: we have an "**ought**" in the conclusion. We need an "**ought**" in the *premise*!

Premise 1: Fetuses have heartbeats and brainwaves and can feel pain.
Premise 2: We ought not kill anything that has a heartbeat and brainwaves and can feel pain.
Conclusion: We ought not to kill fetuses.

That's better. But science would test Premise 2. Does it lead to any ***false*** conclusion? We ought not to kill fish, lizards, cockroaches. Hmm? Can science tell us that? Can we instead find a **deductive** argument for premise 2? If it is valid, it will have another ethical premise. To argue for *that,* we again need a still higher **ethical** premise... on and on and on. Now we see how we were tempted to the shortcut of moral intuition.

In fact, surprisingly Hume's observation creates a problem for supernaturalism as well as naturalism.

Suppose God has commanded us to honor our parents. Can we conclude that we therefore *ought* to do so?

Premise 1: God commands us to honor our parents.
Conclusion: We ought to honor our parents.

Just like with the abortion example, we are missing a premise. We need to insert:
Premise 2: We ought to obey God's commands.

But Premise 2 itself needs a defense! *Why* ought we to obey God's commands? So this logical problem, that "you can't get an 'ought' from an 'is'" even **undermines the appeal to God as an authority**.