How to Derive "Ought" from "Is"

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David Hume – "Is-Ought" Problem

- In every system of morality, which I have hitherto met with, I have always remark'd, that the author proceeds for some time in the ordinary way of reasoning, and establishes the being of a God, or makes observations concerning human affairs; when of a sudden I am surpriz'd to find, that instead of the usual copulations of propositions, is, and is not, I meet with no proposition that is not connected with an ought, or an ought not. This change is imperceptible; but is, however, of the last consequence. For as this ought, or ought not, expresses some new relation or affirmation, 'tis necessary that it shou'd be observ'd and explain'd; and at the same time that a reason should be given, for what seems altogether inconceivable, how this new relation can be a deduction from others, which are entirely different from it. But as authors do not commonly use this precaution, I shall presume to recommend it to the readers; and am persuaded, that this small attention wou'd subvert all the vulgar systems of morality, and let us see, that the distinction of vice and virtue is not founded merely on the relations of objects, nor is perceiv'd by reason. (*Treatise of Human Nature*, 3.1.1.27, http://www.davidhume.org/texts/thn.html.)

Modus Ponens (mode that affirms)

- If A is true, then B is true
- A is true
- Therefore B is true

- A -> B
- A
- ∴ B

- If a person was born in Canada, then that person is Canadian.
- Sam was born in Canada.
- Therefore, Sam is Canadian.

Soundness

- Sound: Valid inference, true premises
  - If the sky is blue, then it is not raining
  - The sky is blue
  - ∴ It is not raining
- Unsound: Valid inference, false premise
  - If the sky is blue, then it is not windy
  - The sky is blue
  - ∴ It is not windy

Validity

- Valid
  - If a being is a human, then that being is mortal
  - Socrates is a human
  - ∴ Socrates is mortal
- Invalid
  - If a being is a human, then that being is mortal
  - Lassie is mortal
  - ∴ Lassie is a human
  - (affirming the consequent)

Ethical Inference

- If someone is honest and friendly, then that person gets along with people.
- John wants to get along with people.
- ∴ John ought to be honest and friendly.

- Shorter form: If you want to get along with people, then you ought to be honest and friendly.
- This is a hypothetical imperative, not a categorical or universal imperative.
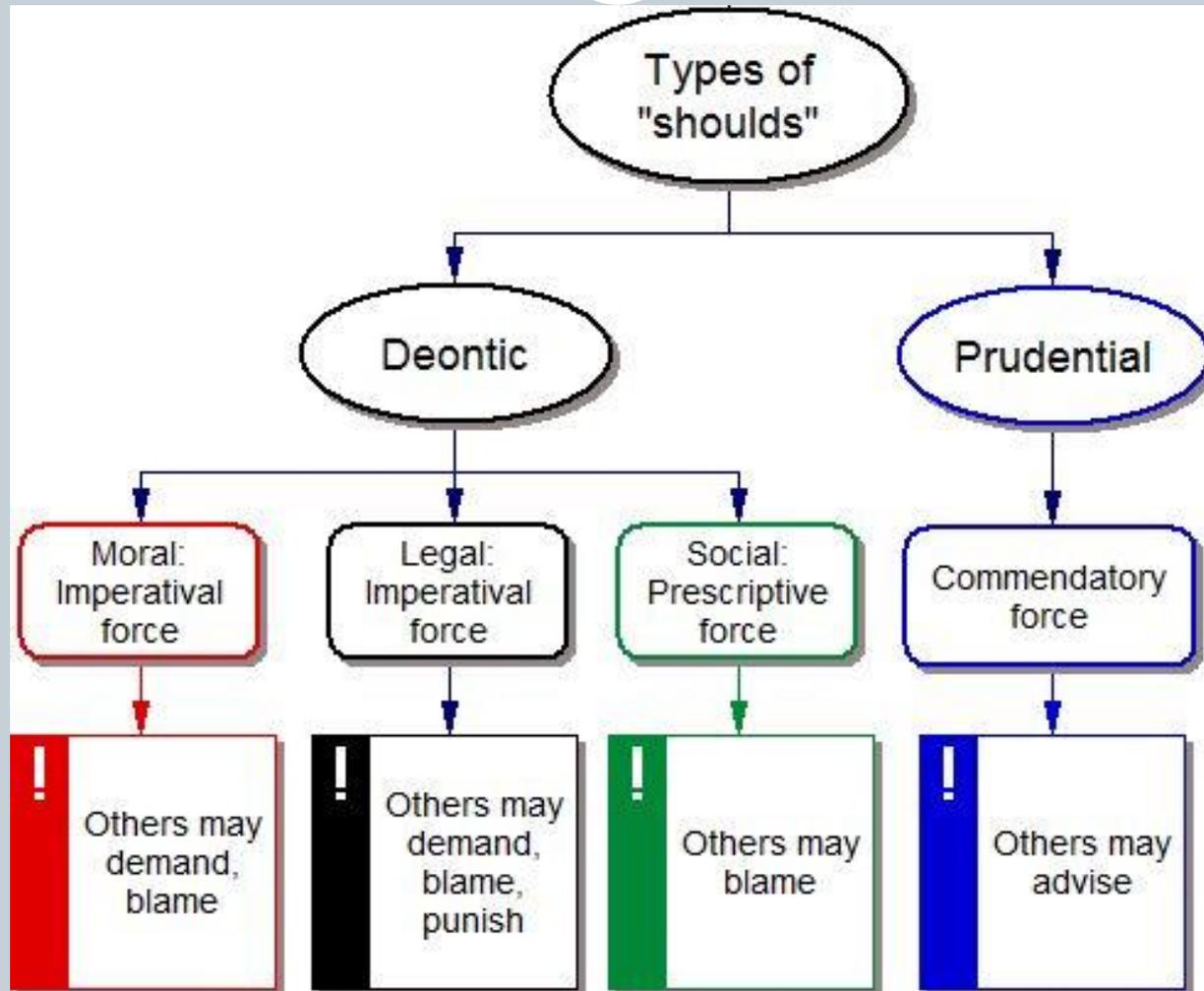
Not Modus Ponens but based on it

- Instead of asserting that A is true and deriving B, we say that we want B to be true, and hence we should do what we can to make A true.

- A -> B

- We want B to be true
  - This does not say B is true; it is not affirming the consequent. It says we want B to be true.

- ∴ We ought do A
  - This does not say A is true. It says we ought try to make A true.

Language Paradigms: Goodness, Rightness

- The ethical inference works in the <u>Goodness paradigm</u>.
  - Uses language such as "good," "bad," "beneficial," "harmful," etc.
  - Evaluates actions (and character traits) by their effects.
- The ethical inference does not work in the <u>Rightness paradigm</u> (which is Hume's point).
  - Uses language such as "right," "wrong," "proper," "improper," etc.
  - Evaluates actions by their conformance to a rule.
- Moral: pay attention to the language of ethical claims.

Ethical Inference is Prudential, not Deontic

More information

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- http://www.bmeacham.com
  - Book: *How To Be An Excellent Human*
  - Blog: *Philosophy for Real Life*