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A Humean Argument for the Land Ethic?

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ABSTRACT

This article examines an allegedly Humean solution provided by J. Baird Callicott to the problem of the is/ought dichotomy. It also examines an allegedly Humean argument provided by him for the land ethic's summary moral precept. It concludes that neither the solution nor the argument is Humean or cogent.

KEY WORDS

Hume, Callicott, is/ought dichotomy, the land ethic

INTRODUCTION

Since the earlier 1980s J. Baird Callicott has endeavoured to show that there are Humean justifications for his favoured environmental ethic,¹ namely the 'land ethic' outlined by Aldo Leopold in his 1949 book *A Sand County Almanac*. While Callicott calls this book by Leopold the 'gospel'² of environmental philosophy and proposes 'the extent to which an ethical system resembles Leopold's land ethic' to be used as 'a criterion to measure the extent to which it is or is not of the environmental sort',³ some people working in the field may think that the appeal of the land ethic is rather regional. Andrew Brennan, for instance, calls Leopold the 'darling of the recent American wilderness movement'.⁴ On the popularity of the land ethic among conservationists, Callicott writes:

Of all the environmental ethics so far devised, the land ethic [...] is most popular among professional conservationists [...] According to Leopold (1949, 204, emphasis added), "a land ethic implies respect for ... fellow-members *and also for the community as such*." The land ethic, in other words, has a *holistic* dimension to it [...] Conservationists [...] are professionally concerned about biological and

ecological *wholes* – populations, species, communities, ecosystems – not their individual constituents. And the land ethic is tailored to suit conservation concerns, which are often confounded by concerns for individual specimens. [...] For example:] Preserving the integrity of a biotic community often requires reducing the populations of some component species [...] ecology is about *metaorganismic* entities – biotic communities and ecosystems – not individuals, and the land ethic is expressly informed by ecology and reflects an ecological worldview. Its holism is precisely what makes the land ethic the environmental ethic of choice among conversationists and ecologists. In short, *its holism is the land ethic's principal asset*.⁵

To my knowledge, there are (at least) nine articles published over the last two decades in which Callicott claims and/or argues that the land ethic's holism (its 'principal asset') is supported on David Hume's philosophy.^{6, 7} I have previously argued in this journal⁸ that textual evidence from Hume's various works jeopardises Callicott's claim that Hume's philosophy is a historical antecedent of the 'holistic dimension of the land ethic – respect for the community as such, in addition to respect for its members severally'.⁹ But Callicott's attempt to find Humean support for the holistic dimension of the land ethic is, as we shall see later, only one part of his larger project to supply a Humean argument for the land ethic's summary 'moral precept'¹⁰: 'A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.'¹¹

One of the most detailed discussions offered by Callicott on the relevance of Hume's moral philosophy to the land ethic is given in his article entitled 'Hume's *Is/Ought* Dichotomy and the Relation of Ecology to Leopold's Land Ethic',¹² where he seeks to defend his professedly Humean re-presentation of the land ethic by showing that it is backed by Hume's view on the problem of the transition from is-statements to ought-statements. The motivation of Callicott's discussion there is as follows. The land ethic's moral precept prescribes to us that we 'ought to "preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community."¹³ But as Callicott points out, the land ethic is stimulated and informed by ecology and other environmental sciences: its moral precept (an ought-statement) is supposed to 'follow from'¹⁴ the empirical beliefs (is-statements) of those scientific theories¹⁵ – for instance, the belief that 'the natural environment is a community or society to which we belong, no less than to the human global village'.¹⁶ Consequently, the land ethic, as Callicott anticipates, might be accused of having 'stepped across the barrier separating *is* from *ought*' and be seen as 'doomed to break up on the shoals of the *is/ought* dichotomy'.¹⁷ Furthermore, the *is/ought* dichotomy – the doctrine that it is impossible to deduce an 'ought' (a prescription) from an 'is' (a description) – is traditionally and still quite often supposed to be upheld by Hume.¹⁸ Hence, the problem faced by Callicott is two-fold. It is not just that the doctrine of *is/ought* dichotomy, if it is

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correct, appears to undermine the land ethic which Callicott advocates, but also that the doctrine, if it is upheld by Hume, appears to undermine Callicott's contention that the land ethic is a Humean ethic. Accordingly, Callicott finds it necessary to argue not only that the transition made by the land ethic from 'is' to 'ought' is legitimate, but also that this transition is authorised by Hume's moral philosophy. As Callicott himself defines his task:

I argue that the [...] problem of the transition from *is* to *ought* in practical moral reasoning actually has an easy solution within the ethical system of Hume, the first to pose the problem [..., and] that the conceptual foundations of the Leopold land ethic [...] provide, on Humean grounds, for a direct passage from the perceived facts that we are natural beings and that we belong to a biotic community to the principal values of the land ethic.¹⁹

In this article, I shall discuss Callicott's allegedly Humean 'easy solution' to the general problem of the transition from 'is' to 'ought'. I shall also assess his project of providing 'Humean grounds' for the land ethic's moral precept in particular.

CALLICOTT'S 'EASY SOLUTION' – PART ONE

The passage written by Hume from which Callicott derives his 'easy solution' to the problem the transition from 'is' to 'ought' is as follows:

[R]eason, in a strict and philosophical sense, can have an influence on our conduct only after two ways: Either when it excites a passion by informing us of the existence of something which is a proper object of it; or when it discovers the connexion of causes and effects, so as to afford us means of exerting any passion.²⁰

In the above passage, Hume states two criteria on how reason can influence our conduct. Based on the second criterion, Callicott then illustrates how one can legitimately make a Humean transition, for instance, from the is-statement 'cigarette smoking is deleterious to health' to the ought-statement 'you ought not smoke cigarettes'. Callicott writes:

[L]et us [...] illustrate the latter use of reason in a practical argument meeting Hume's precise and exacting criteria. [...] Reason (i.e., medical science) has [...] recently discovered that cigarette smoking is [...] deleterious to health. It has discovered previously unknown "connexion of causes and effects." This discovery "afford[s] us means of exerting ... passions," namely the passion we normally all feel for our own good health and well-being. But precisely because this passion is so nearly universal in human nature, mention of it is ordinarily omitted from practical argument, And because it is not mentioned, we may experience what one

writer [Regan 1980: 363] recently has called, “the mystery of the passage from ‘is’ to ‘ought.’” The mystery dissolves, on Hume’s own grounds, when the missing premise referring to passion, feeling, or sentiment is explicitly included in the argument [...] as follows: “(1) Cigarette smoking is deleterious to health. (2) Your health is something toward which as a matter of fact you have a positive attitude [...] (3) Therefore, you ought not smoke cigarettes.” [...] This is a perfectly legitimate transition from *is*-statements to an *ought*-statement. It may not be a deduction, in the strictest logical sense, but it is a *cogent* practical argument, according to Hume’s own criteria (which are in his judgment so “strict and philosophical”).²¹

It is necessary to get clear what Callicott is trying to establish here and what not. First of all, Callicott is not disputing (nor is he endorsing) the doctrine of is/ought dichotomy *itself*, which says that it is impossible to logically deduce an ‘ought’ from an ‘is’. For he admits that his is-to-ought transition ‘may not be a deduction, in the strictest logical sense’. In other words, his transition is not put forward as a counter-example to the doctrine of is/ought dichotomy. The doctrine rejects only the possibility of deductive transitions from ‘is’ to ‘ought’; it says nothing for or against nondeductive ones. This being so, the underlying idea of Callicott’s ‘easy solution’ to the problem of is-to-ought transition is simply that a ‘cogent’ transition need not be deductive. If that is true, then his nondeductive²² is-to-ought transition may be cogent according to some criteria broader – or other than – validity, regardless of whether the doctrine of is/ought dichotomy itself is correct. Similarly, in claiming that his nondeductive is-to-ought transition is ‘a cogent practical argument, according to Hume’s own criteria’, Callicott is not disputing (nor is he endorsing) the traditional interpretation that Hume upholds the doctrine of is/ought dichotomy. For it might be the case that Hume advocated a logical gap between ‘is’ and ‘ought’ but nevertheless sanctioned some form of nondeductive transition from one to the other. Or it might be the case that Hume did not advocate such a logical gap because he was not concerned with logical deduction at all in his discussion of is-to-ought transition, and he simply sanctioned some form of nondeductive transition.²³ At any rate, Callicott’s nondeductive transition might be cogent according to some criteria provided by Hume, regardless of whether the traditional interpretation is correct.

Now, having thus bypassed the doctrine of is/ought dichotomy as well as the traditional interpretation that Hume upholds the doctrine, and therefore having bypassed the difficulties in rejecting or establishing one or both of these,²⁴ Callicott is quite right to call his solution to the problem of is-to-ought transition an ‘easy’ one. Our present problem, however, is whether his solution is a good one. Because Callicott’s solution consists of some form of nondeductive transition from ‘is’ to ‘ought’, whether his solution is a good solution, then, depends on whether the ‘criteria’, according to which his transition is said to be

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cogent, are good criteria. What criteria does Callicott appeal to? ‘Hume’s own criteria’, says Callicott, ‘which are in his [Hume’s] judgment so “strict and philosophical”’. Thus, it seems that we can assess Callicott’s solution to the problem of is-to-ought transition by assessing the ‘strict and philosophical’ criteria which he identifies as provided by Hume on this matter.

But rather unfortunately and contrary to Callicott’s interpretation, Hume does not think that his criteria are ‘strict and philosophical’. Consider the following passage from Hume:

[T]he principle, which opposes our passion, cannot be the same with reason, and is only call’d so in an improper sense. We speak *not strictly and philosophically* when we talk of the combat of passion and of reason.²⁵

What does Hume mean? As David Lewis explains:

In the first place, Hume’s “passions” are sometimes none too passionate. He speaks of some passions as “calm”. [...] In the second place, we call someone “reasonable” in part because his desires are moderate and fair-minded. But when we do, I suppose we speak *not strictly and philosophically*.^{26, 27}

Strictly and philosophically speaking, Hume takes it that reason is the faculty in charge of discovering ‘truth and falsehood’, either by comparing ‘ideas’ (i.e., ‘demonstrative’ reasoning) or by inferring ‘matters of fact’ (i.e., ‘probable’ reasoning).²⁸ Hence, when Hume states the two criteria – which Callicott appeals to for making his own is-to-ought transition, it is the ‘sense’ in which Hume uses the term ‘reason’ that is ‘strict and philosophical’; it is not the criteria themselves that are ‘so “strict and philosophical”’ as Callicott suggests.

More important, as Callicott’s citation from Hume clearly shows, what he calls ‘Hume’s own criteria’ are *just* the two criteria under which ‘reason, in a strict and philosophical sense, can have an *influence on our conduct*’. Those two criteria are Hume’s indeed. But they are *not* criteria for judging whether and/or to what extent any *transition* from ‘is’ to ‘ought’ (e.g., Callicott’s nondeductive one) is cogent. Nor are they formulae for making transitions of such kind in the first place. Consider the second criterion provided by Hume. It states: ‘reason ... can have an influence on our conduct ... when it discovers the connexion of causes and effects, so as to afford us means of exerting any passion.’ Accordingly, we can say the following about smoky Joe. Rather like what Callicott says, we say:

If reason informs Joe that ‘cigarette smoking is deleterious to health’ so that not smoking is a means to better health, and if Joe has a ‘positive attitude’ towards his health, then ...

but unlike Callicott, we say:

reason can influence Joe not to smoke.

The above transition is a result of applying Hume's second criterion on how 'reason can have an influence on our conduct'. But it is *not* a transition from 'is' to 'ought'. For the conclusion 'reason can influence Joe not to smoke' is not an ought-statement. The conclusion that Callicott would like instead is 'Joe ought not smoke'. But he could not get that just by appealing to the second criterion provided by Hume. For that criterion itself does not tell us what ought or ought not to be done. It only tells us how reason can direct actions to serve passions. It is all about the instrumental role of reason, not the is/ought dichotomy. Hence, Callicott's transition, *from* Hume's second criterion on how reason can influence conduct *to* his own view that his is-to-ought transition against smoking is 'a cogent practical argument according to Hume', is not cogent.

Let us now put aside Callicott's mis-reading of Hume, and consider his argument against smoking in its own right. From the premises that 'smoking is deleterious to health' and that 'your health is something towards which as a matter of fact you have a positive attitude', Callicott arrives at the conclusion that 'you ought not smoke'. The general form of his argument is as follows:

- (1) X will lead to not Y, and
- (2) you have a positive attitude towards Y, therefore
- (3) you ought not bring about X.

Now, an adviser might say to the king: 'Stopping the queen from taking the poisonous wine will lead to Hamlet not taking it either. But that Hamlet be poisoned by the wine is something towards which as a matter of fact you have a positive attitude.' But I would say to the king: 'That is no justification for you to conclude that you ought not stop the queen from taking that wine.' Another adviser might say to the prime minister of Australia: 'If you on behalf of the government make a formal apology to the stolen generation of Aboriginal people, then the government will eventually have to pay them a huge compensation – see what is happening in Canada now. But the government not paying them that kind of compensation is something towards which as a matter of fact you have a positive attitude.' But I would say to the prime minister: 'That is no justification for you to conclude that you ought not make a formal apology!'

The general form of Callicott's is-to-ought transition, as it stands, is not cogent. In the particular case of cigarette smoking and health, however, you may be tempted to think that his is-to-ought transition has some merit. But if so, I suggest to you that it is because you think of your health as a value (or at least an instrumental value): it is not just that you *have* a positive attitude towards your health, but also that you think of it as something which you *ought to have* a positive attitude towards and ought to pursue. It is this normatively positive element which you most probably associate with the notion of health that makes Callicott's argument from the premises on health to the conclusion that "you ought not smoke" *seem* legitimate to you. If that seems legitimate to you but the

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is-to-ought transitions of the same form in the cases of Hamlet and the stolen generation do not, then, again, I suggest to you that it is because you do not think that Hamlet ought to be poisoned nor do you think that the stolen generation ought not be compensated. Now go back to reconsider Callicott's argument from the premises on health to the conclusion that 'you ought not smoke'. If this seemingly legitimate transition is to *be* legitimate, then you had better make explicit the normatively positive element that you have read into its premises. But then, it will no longer be a transition from 'is' to 'ought'. Rather, it will be a transition from 'is' *and* 'ought' to 'ought'.

In short, the 'easy solution' provided by Callicott so far, to the problem of is-to-ought transition, is not a Humean solution. Nor is it a good solution in general. And if it were to be a legitimate solution in the particular case provided by Callicott, it would not be a solution to the problem which he sets out to solve.²⁹

CALLICOTT'S 'EASY SOLUTION' – PART TWO

There is another part of Callicott's 'easy solution' to the problem of is-to-ought transition that I have not discussed yet. This is the part supposedly based on the first criterion provided by Hume on how reason can have an influence on our conduct, namely, 'when it excites a passion by informing us of the existence of something which is a proper object of it'. By appealing to this criterion, Callicott makes the following transition from two is-statements to the moral precept of the land ethic. He writes:

Prior to the emergence of the science of ecology, [...] nature was perceived more as a mere collection of objects [...] Ecology has changed all this. [...] The natural world is now perceived as a living *whole*, "one humming community." [...] as *Hume observes*, not only have we sympathy for our fellows, we are naturally endowed with a sentiment, the proper object of which is society *itself*. Ecology and the environmental sciences thus inform us of the existence of something which is a proper object of one of our most fundamental moral passions. The biotic community is a proper object of that passion which is actuated by the contemplation of the complexity, diversity, integrity, and stability of the community to which we belong. Ecology, thus, has transformed the value of nature as a *whole*. Leopold sums up his land ethic with the following moral precept: "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise." This precept is derived from ecology and the environmental sciences. *The derivation of this conclusion, in much the same way as that concerning cigarette smoking, falls within the strict confines of Hume's metaethics*. Schematically arranged in a permutation of our familiar format, Leopold urges upon us the conclusion, (3) we ought to "preserve

the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community.” Why ought we? Because (1) we all generally have a positive attitude toward the community or society to which we belong; and (2) science has now discovered that the natural environment is a community or society to which we belong, no less than to the human global village. Like the conclusion, “one ought not smoke cigarettes,” it infers *ought* from *is* and derives value from fact (actually from a theoretical arrangement of natural facts, on one hand, and from certain psychological facts, on the other).³⁰

This is Callicott’s allegedly Humean argument for the moral precept of the land ethic.³¹ It is supposed to be Humean in two ways. First, the transition from the two descriptive premises (1) and (2) to the prescriptive conclusion (3) is claimed to be a result of applying Hume’s first criterion on how reason can influence conduct. Secondly, premise (1) is also claimed to be Humean. As the context of above passage from Callicott indicates, (1) is an expression of the professedly Humean observation that ‘not only have we sympathy for our fellows, we are naturally endowed with a sentiment, the proper object of which is society *itself*.’ Accordingly, (1) is in effect Callicott’s allegedly Humean premise of an irreducibly *holistic* concern which ‘naturally resides in us’ for the ‘society per se’ or the ‘community as such’, understood as a ‘metaorganismic’ entity ‘over and above’ its individual members.³²

I have previously argued in this journal that there is no plausible interpretation of Hume’s writings that would support the kind of holistic concern advocated by the land ethic re-presented by Callicott, and that Callicott’s anti-reductionist holism is incompatible with Hume’s reductionist account of the mind coupled with Hume’s assimilation of the metaphysical nature of the mind to that of the community.³³ My previous conclusion regarding Callicott’s holism is that it is ‘at least non-Humean and at worse un-Humean.’³⁴ Now, as premise (1) in his argument for the land ethic’s moral precept is in effect an expression of holism, my previous conclusion therefore also applies to (1).

Next, consider Callicott’s transition from premises (1) and (2) to conclusion (3). Like his previous argument for the conclusion that one ought not smoke, Callicott’s present argument for the land ethic’s moral precept attempts to derive ‘ought’ from ‘is’. Like his previous attempt to derive the prescriptive conclusion against smoking, Callicott’s present attempt to derive the land ethic’s moral precept is supposed to be based on Hume’s account of how ‘reason can have an influence on our conduct’. But unfortunately, in much the same way as his previous is-to-ought transition falls outside the application of Hume’s second criterion on how reason can influence conduct, Callicott’s present is-to-ought transition on behalf of the land ethic also falls outside the application of Hume’s first criterion.

Recall Hume’s first criterion. It states: ‘reason ... can have an influence on our conduct ... when it excites a passion by informing us of the existence of

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something which is a proper object of it'. Suppose Callicott's premises (1) and (2) are true. Then, we may say:

By informing us of the existence of the biotic community which satisfies the condition for being an object toward which we will naturally have a 'positive attitude' (the condition is given by premise (1), namely: that of being 'a community to which we belong'), 'science' or reason excites a positive attitude from us toward the biotic community.

Now, given Hume's first criterion on how reason 'can have an influence on our conduct', what can be derived from the above is at most:

Reason, by exciting a positive attitude from us toward the biotic community, *can have an influence on our conduct* – in the sense that the positive attitude, being excited by reason, can *motivate* us to act in a certain way – such as 'to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community.'

This conclusion is the result of properly applying Hume's first criterion to the two premises (1) and (2). Unlike Callicott's own conclusion (3), the land ethic's moral precept, the proper conclusion here is not an ought-statement. This is because the first criterion put forward by Hume, as it stands, is about how reason can excite a passion which then *motivates* or carries us to perform an action. It does *not* say or imply that reason can excite a passion which then somehow renders an action *morally justified*.

Last but not least, in order to confirm that Hume's two criteria on how reason 'can have an influence on our conduct' are not as Callicott interprets them recipes for making transitions from 'is' to 'ought', let us consider their original context. The passage cited by Callicott where Hume states the two criteria appears in Book 3 (Part 1, Section 1) of the *Treatise*. But as Hume (and the editor) indicates,³⁵ his discussion there is a continuation of his earlier discussion entitled 'Of the influencing motives of the will' in Book 2 (Part 3, Section 3), where he endeavours to establish the thesis that 'reason alone can never produce any action, or give rise to volition'.³⁶ In that earlier discussion, Hume elucidates his first criterion as follows:

'Tis obvious, that when we [as a result of reasoning from 'probability'³⁷] have the prospect of pain or pleasure from any object, we feel a consequent emotion of aversion or propensity, and are carry'd [i.e., motivated by the emotion] to avoid or embrace what will give us this uneasiness or satisfaction.³⁸

In other words, though reason may excite a passion by informing us of the 'pain or pleasure' from some object (e.g., by informing us that a fruit is 'disagreeable' or 'delicious'³⁹), it is the passion (e.g., the desire for 'excellent relish'⁴⁰) which has what Hume calls the 'original influence'⁴¹ on the will and directly motivates action. Likewise, in connection to the second criterion on how reason can

indirectly influence conduct, Hume argues that though reason may discover the means (or 'cause') to a desired end (or 'effect') and thus channel our action to effectively serve the end, it is the desire for the end which has the 'original influence'. As Hume himself puts it:

[R]easoning takes place to discover this relation [of cause and effect]; and according as our reasoning varies, our actions receive a subsequent variation. But 'tis evident in this case, that the impulse arises not from reason, but is only directed by it. [...] It can never in the least concern us to know, that such objects are causes, and such others effects, if both the causes and effects be indifferent to us. [...] 'tis plain, that reason is nothing but the discovery of this connexion, it cannot be by its means that the objects are able to affect us.⁴²

In short, according to Hume's understanding of the role of reason, it can at most be the indirect cause of an action, and it can be so only by exciting or guiding a passion after the two ways stated above. Hence, when Hume's two criteria on how reason can indirectly influence conduct are put in their original context, it is evident that their point is to illustrate his thesis that 'reason alone can never produce any action, or give rise to volition'. Now, putting this together with the principle that 'nothing can oppose or retard the impulse of passion, but a contrary impulse'.⁴³ Hume then infers that reason alone cannot oppose any passion by contradicting it, and therefore that no passion can be called 'unreasonable'. But, as we have seen, Hume's two criteria allow that our judgment or reason can excite or give guidance to our passions. Then, why can't a passion be called unreasonable on his account if the passion is excited or guided by some false judgment or reasoning? To this Hume replies with the following qualification. He writes:

[P]assions can be contrary to reason only so far as they are *accompany'd* with some judgment of opinion. [...] 'tis only in two senses, that any affection can be call'd unreasonable. First, When a passion [...] is founded on the supposition of the existence of objects, which do not really exist. Secondly, When in exerting any passion in action, we chuse means insufficient for the design'd end, and deceive ourselves in our judgment of causes and effects. [...] But] even then *'tis not the passion, properly speaking, which is unreasonable, but the judgment.*⁴⁴

This passage appears in Book 2 of the *Treatise*. It allows that improperly speaking there are two and only two ways in which a passion can be called unreasonable; but properly speaking there is no way any passion can be so called. This is Hume's qualification of how we may or may not call a *passion* unreasonable. Now, given Hume's previous view that it is passion, not reason, which has an 'original influence' on action, it is natural to expect him to make a similar qualification regarding how we may or may not call an *action* unreasonable. Indeed, later in the Book 3, Hume anticipates that some people – 'by an abusive way of speaking, which philosophy will scare allow of'⁴⁵ – might

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want to call an action unreasonable when it is accompanied with some false judgment. So Hume repeats his above qualification regarding passion and extends it to cover action. He writes:

It has been observ'd, that reason, in a strict and philosophical sense, can have an influence on our conduct only after two ways: Either when it excites a passion by informing us of the existence of something which is a proper object of it; or when it discovers the connexion of causes and effects, so as to afford us means of exerting any passion. These are the only kinds of judgment, which can *accompany* our actions, or can be said to produce them in any manner; and it must be allow'd, that these judgments may often be false and erroneous. [...] These false judgments may be thought to affect the passions and actions, which are connected with them, and may be said to render them unreasonable, *in a figurative and improper way of speaking*.⁴⁶

In an accurate and proper way of speaking, then, neither the passions nor the actions are unreasonable, but only the accompanying false judgments. It is evident that in the above passage when Hume restates the two criteria on how reason can indirectly influence our conduct, his purpose is first to remind his readers of the previously argued point that passions themselves cannot be properly called unreasonable, and then by a similar argument establish that neither can actions themselves be properly called unreasonable. After extending his qualification on passion to cover the case of action, Hume then argues that even though an action may be called unreasonable 'in a figurative and improper way of speaking', its so called unreasonableness is not the source of immorality. This is because, (i) the unreasonableness of an action, thus construed, consists in nothing more than 'a mistake of fact' regarding either (a) 'the influence of objects in producing pain or pleasure' or (b) 'the proper means of satisfying [one's] desires', and (ii) errors of these two kinds, according to Hume, 'are commonly very innocent, and draw no manner of guilt upon the person who is so unfortunate as to fall into them' and therefore cannot be regarded as 'a defect in [the person's] moral character.'⁴⁷ On the other side of the same coin, then, even though an action may be improperly called reasonable when it is accompanied with some correct judgment regarding (a) or (b), its so called reasonableness is not the source of morality. As Hume himself puts it:

Reason and judgment may, indeed, be the mediate cause of an action, by prompting, or by directing a passion: But it is not pretended, that a judgment of this kind, either in its truth or falsehood, is attended with virtue or vice.⁴⁸

Accordingly, whether an action has been (indirectly) caused by some true or false judgment, in the two ways allowed by Hume, is independent of whether the action is morally justifiable or condemnable. In other words, Hume's two criteria on how reason or judgment can be an indirect cause of an action are *not* concerned with the moral justification or condemnation of the action. *Pace*

Callicott, those two criteria are not meant to be recipes for making transitions from 'is' to 'ought' – whether a prescription against smoking or the land ethic's moral precept. Besides, as I have already argued, neither do the two criteria considered in themselves support such transitions, i.e., even if we ignore their original context and consider them in their own right. In short, the second part of Callicott's 'easy solution' to the problem of is-to-ought transition, in much the same way as the first part, is not a Humean solution.⁴⁹

CONCLUSION

Is the argument provided by Callicott for the land ethic's moral precept a Humean cogent argument? First, Callicott's premises (1) and (2) are not sanctioned by Hume, and (1) itself is un-Humean. Secondly, the textual evidence cited by Callicott from Hume does not support his own transition from (1) and (2) to (3). Thus, I conclude that Callicott has failed to show that his argument for the land ethic's moral precept is Humean. And until counter-evidence is available, I maintain that the argument itself is entirely non-Humean and in part un-Humean. Furthermore, apart from his false appeal to Hume's authority, Callicott provides no other support for his transition from (1) and (2) to (3). Thus, I also conclude that he has failed to show that his argument is cogent. And until counter-evidence is available, I also maintain that the argument itself is not cogent.⁵⁰

NOTES

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¹ See Callicott 1982a, 1982b, 1984, 1985, 1986a, 1986b, 1987a, 1987b, 1988, 1990, 1992a, 1994, 1999b, and 2001 which is a conjunction of 1999b: 59–62, 64–75 and 1996: 134–8.

² Callicott 1986b: 403. Also see Callicott 1987a: 75.

³ Callicott 1980: 15.

⁴ Brennan 1998: 327.

⁵ This passage appears in both Callicott 1999b: 59, 67–9 and 2001: 204, 208–9 (emphases added).

⁶ See Callicott 1982a, 1984, 1986a, 1986b, 1987a, 1988, 1992a, 1999b, and 2001.

⁷ Callicott 1984, 1986a, 1986b, 1987a, 1988, 1999b, and 2001 also claim that holism is supported by Charles Darwin's account of the origin of morality. For a brief critique of Callicott's appeal to Darwin, see Varner 1998: 14–6.

⁸ Lo 2001a.

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⁹ Callicott 1999b: 67 and 2001: 208.

¹⁰ Callicott 1982a: 126.

¹¹ Leopold 1949: 224–5. Also see n. 15 below.

¹² Callicott 1982a. This article has been referred to by Callicott (1987a: 281, n. 28) to support his view that ‘According to [Hume’s] analysis, moral value is not identified with a natural quality objectively present in morally considerable beings [...] it is, as it were, projected by valuing subjects’ (ibid.: 85). And the latter article has been considered by Callicott (1989: 7) as representing his ‘best effort’ to ‘present the land ethic in full philosophical regalia’.

¹³ Callicott 1982a: 127.

¹⁴ Ibid.: 117 (emphasis original).

¹⁵ As the land ethic is informed by and founded on ecology and other environmental sciences, in the light of the new theories of deconstructive ecology and sociobiology Callicott (1996: 138) revises the summary moral maxim of the land ethic as: ‘A thing is right when it tends to disturb the biotic community only at normal spatial and temporal scales. It is wrong when it tends otherwise’.

¹⁶ Callicott 1982a: 127.

¹⁷ Ibid.: 117.

¹⁸ Hare 1954/5: 303, for example, calls the doctrine ‘Hume’s Law’. Also see Flew 1963.

¹⁹ Callicott 1982a: 118.

²⁰ Hume 1739/40: 3. 1. 1. 12 (cited by book, part, section, and paragraph numbers). This passage from Hume is cited by Callicott 1982a: 121 and 1992a: 114.

²¹ Callicott 1982a: 121–2 (emphases added).

²² Callicott says that his is-to-ought transition ‘may not be a deduction’. But I say that it *is not*. The reason why Callicott says ‘may not’ instead of ‘is not’ appears to be related to his view that his is-to-ought transition is a deduction according to Kant. In his brief discussion of Kant, Callicott (1982a: 122) appeals to the following passage from Kant (1785: 34): ‘whoever *wills* the *end*, so far as reason has decisive influence on his action, *wills* also the *indispensably necessary means* to it that lie in his power. This proposition, in what concerns the will is *analytical*’ (emphases added). Now, it is quite clear that the Kantian analytical proposition in question is a transition from ‘is’ to ‘is’. When it is applied to Callicott’s case of smoking cigarettes, for instance, it gives us the more specific proposition that if one *wills* health (an end), then one *wills* also refraining from smoking (assuming that it is an indispensably necessary mean to one’s health, and it is within one’s power to do, and one knows these, and one is rational). This Kantian conditional proposition is a transition from some is-statements to another is-statement (namely, that one wills refraining from smoking); it is *not*, as Callicott suggests, a transition to what one *ought* to do (e.g., that one ought not smoke). Accordingly, Kant’s view that his proposition about the will is analytical gives no support to Callicott’s view that his is-to-ought transition is a deduction according to Kant. The fact that Callicott’s has failed to show that his transition is deductive according to Kant, of course, does not imply that his transition is nondeductive. After all, Callicott might appeal to some figure other than Kant in order to show that his transition is deductive, and, more importantly, succeed in doing so. But until then, I shall, as I do, speak of Callicott’s is-to-ought transition as ‘nondeductive’.

²³ This is the view of MacIntyre 1959.

²⁴ See Chappell 1968: 240–307.

²⁵ Hume 1739/40: 2. 3. 3. 4 (emphasis added).

²⁶ Lewis 1996: 303 (emphasis added).

²⁷ For 'calm' passions, see Hume 1739–40: 2. 3. 3. 8; 2. 3. 8. 13; and 3. 3. 1. 18.

²⁸ Ibid. 3. 1. 1. 9, 16; 2. 3. 3. 2; and 1. 3. 6. 6.

²⁹ Callicott 1992b: 334 writes: 'The concept of health, in both its literal and figurative senses, is *at once descriptive and prescriptive*, objective and normative. Health, literally, is an objective condition of an organism capable of more or less precise empirical description. But it is also an intrinsically valuable state of being. [...] Thus, [...] if the health metaphor may be plausibly and persuasively extended to ecosystems, then the fact/value or is/ought dichotomy that has routinely plagued policy debates and applied science can be *obviated*' (emphases added). As we have seen, it is because the notion of health is taken to be 'at once descriptive *and* prescriptive' that an argument from the notion of health to a prescriptive conclusion is in effect an argument from 'is' *and* 'ought' to 'ought'. And it is precisely because such an argument is *not* one from 'is' alone to 'ought' that it does not even touch the problem of the is/ought gap. Hence, Callicott 1992b is quite right in thinking that, by employing the notion of health, one can obviate or bypass the problem of the is/ought dichotomy. But to bypass a problem is not to *solve* the problem. The attempt of Callicott 1982a to solve the problem of the is/ought gap by employing the notion of health remains problematic.

³⁰ Callicott 1982a: 126–7 (emphases added).

³¹ Cf. Callicott 1992a: 114–5, where he apparently puts forward a simplified version of the above allegedly Humean argument for the land ethic.

³² See Callicott 1982a: 124, 1987a: 151, 1988: 57, 1999b: 67–8, and 2001: 208–9.

³³ Lo 2001a.

³⁴ Ibid.: 121.

³⁵ See Hume 1739–40: 3. 1. 1. 8–12.

³⁶ Ibid.: 2. 3. 3. 4. Also see 2. 3. 3. 1.

³⁷ For reasoning from 'probability' and its relevance to Hume's first criterion, see, e.g., *ibid.*: 2. 3. 3. 2; 1. 3. 2. 2–3; 1. 3. 6. 2; and 1. 3. 16. 4–6.

³⁸ Ibid.: 2. 3. 3. 3.

³⁹ See *ibid.*: 3. 1. 1. 12.

⁴⁰ See *ibid.*: 2. 3. 3. 7.

⁴¹ Ibid.: 2. 3. 3. 4.

⁴² Ibid.: 2. 3. 3. 3.

⁴³ Ibid.: 2. 3. 3. 4.

⁴⁴ Ibid.: 2. 3. 3. 6 (first emphasis original, last emphasis added).

⁴⁵ Ibid.: 3. 1. 1. 11.

⁴⁶ Ibid.: 3. 1. 1. 12 (emphases added).

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.: 3. 1. 1. 16.

⁴⁹ Some may be aware of a note from Callicott (1982a: 287, n. 13) where he appeals to Philippa Foot and Alasdair MacIntyre in order to support his claim that his is-to-ought transition is 'a cogent practical argument, according to Hume's criteria'. In that note Callicott cites the following passage from Foot 1963: 73–4: 'Between these calm and indolent judgments [of reason] and the assertion that something should be done there is, Hume thinks, the famous gap between *is* and *ought*. [...] Hume thought he himself had hit on the perfect solution to the problem. The new element in a proposition about virtue was

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the reference to a special sentiment of approbation: nothing new in the object, but something in ourselves'. After citing this passage, Callicott writes: 'Foot thus anticipated me in believing that Hume himself regarded the *is/ought* logical lacuna to be bridged by a premise referring to passion, sentiment, or interest.' Two comments. First, it may be true that Foot alludes that Hume thinks that the apparent *is/ought* gap can be bridged by *some* premise referring to 'a special sentiment of approbation'. But it does *not* follow that the Humean bridging premise in question takes the particular form suggested by Callicott, namely an *empirical* statement about what objects (e.g., 'health', or 'society itself') towards which we actually feel that special sentiment. Hence, Foot's general remark on Hume, as it stands, does not substantiate Callicott's view that his particular kind of *is-to-ought* transition is Humean. Secondly, in the same article, Foot (*ibid.*: 68) points out that Hume (1751, appx. 1. 10) defines virtue to be 'whatever mental action or quality gives to a spectator the pleasing sentiment of approbation; and vice the contrary'. This naturalistic definition of virtue given by Hume amounts to an *analytic* statement analysing the concept of virtue in terms of the disposition of a spectator (or, more accurately, a spectator who adopts what Hume [1739/40: 3. 3. 1. 29] calls 'the common point of view', which is on his view the standard conditions for making reliable evaluative judgements) to feel the special sentiment of approbation. This analytic statement by Hume is, on my view, a Humean bridging premise between 'is' and 'ought'. Hence, unlike Callicott's choice of some empirical statement to bridge the *is/ought* gap non-deductively, Hume's own analytic statement about the concept of virtue bridges the gap in a *deductive* manner. For example, given (a) the *is*-statement that a spectator who contemplates upon the justice of a person (from 'the common point of view') will feel a sentiment of approbation towards this quality, and (b) Hume's conceptual analysis of virtue (which is also an *is*-statement), we can validly infer (c) the *ought*-statement that justice is a virtue. This is, I believe, a sample Humean solution to the problem of *is-to-ought* transition. My view here regarding Hume on the *is/ought* gap is a corollary of the broader view that Hume is a metaethical naturalist and an early advocate of some version of what we now call a dispositional theory of value. This is not the place, however, to defend that broader view (see Lewis 1989, Pigden 1991, and Sayre-McCord 1994). Next, regarding Callicott's appeal to MacIntyre 1959, I should only point out that according to MacIntyre (*ibid.*: 249–50), if we need a Humean bridging premise between 'is' and 'ought' at all, then it will be 'a kind of compressed *definition*' of moral terms, or 'a *necessary* truth underlying morality' (emphases added), which means that it will be an analytic statement, not an empirical statement as Callicott suggests.

⁵⁰ If Hume's philosophy is, as Callicott takes it, an authority the appeal to which can to some extent support the land ethic re-presented by him, then, on the other side of the same coin, the fact that his land-ethical holism is un-Humean (see Lo 2001a) actually reduces its acceptability to an equal extent. Whether the land ethic re-presented by Callicott (or, for that matter, any other applied ethic) is an adequate ethical position, however, depends not merely on whether it has some prominent figures as its historical predecessors. More importantly, the adequacy of the position is to be assessed in terms of its own content and implications. So I discuss Callicott's land-ethical position in its own right in another venue (see Lo 2001b, where I also examine the evolution of his whole ethical system from 1980 to 2001, of which the land ethic is a dependent part).

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