"OUGHT" DOES NOT EXIST IN NATURE

Just as we compose a life myth by labeling our experiences, so do groups operate on the principle of "consensus reality." Consensus reality is the agreed-to truth of any given social group --what we believe to be good, bad, right, wrong, moral, immoral, or just plain disgusting. A group of revelers at Mardi Gras have a different consensus reality than members of a religious cult where women are dressed to the ankles, wearing hairdos from *Little House on the Prairie.*

Having mirrored the outside world inward as children, and formed ourselves from behavior and beliefs swirling around us in the environment, we're raised to accept our own group's mores and reject the customs of other groups. We agree to live *as if* our rules, laws, and customs are worth obeying, while the impetus for those rules could change simply by crossing a geographical border. In India, it's appropriate to kill young brides whose husbands die or no longer want them. The males who perform these crimes are respectable members of their community for having done the "right," if abhorrent, thing. We ask ourselves how this can be and feel righteous in our indignation. Our opinion may even be correct (how can burning women not be wrong?), but the fact remains that someone, somewhere, will find it right and good, and the wheel of suffering will continue to turn. This is because truth is different from Truth and consensus reality is not the Truth. The Truth exists beyond us-here-now or it cannot be called moral conviction. Customs are different from ethical wisdom. Also, "ought" does not exist in nature. "Ought" is the creation of our precious left brain, the storytelling hemisphere,

dictating our personal value system. "It is difficult to get a man to understand something when his salary depends upon his not understanding it," Upton Sinclair once quipped. Survival sometimes depends on such ethical blind spots.

We mistakenly squeeze "ought" from "is." Philosophers call this the naturalistic fallacy. Most of us do this every day of our lives without realizing it. We obey the "oughts" of our consensus reality and call them scripture. Women are physically weaker in the animal kingdom, for instance, which must mean they are to be dominated. Just look at the wildebeests. When we claim that because something exists in nature, that makes it right, or conversely that when things do not appear in nature, that makes them wrong, we really have drunk the Kool-Aid. Like cult members agreeing to mass hallucination, we've consented to pretend that wrong is right. The naturalistic fallacy can lead us to lynching (integration isn't "natural"), to infanticide (male grizzly bears kill their young), and to throwing virgins whose hearts have been ripped out of their chests while alive into the bowels of volcanos because the God of the mountain is hungry for female, pubescent flesh and must be appeased to prevent an eruption.

We believe our *ought* to be what *is*. But how does the brain conjure "ought" from "is"? "To dislike something is very different from disapproving of it,"1 as philosopher Richard Joyce notes. The answer to this riddle lies in a psychological process known as projectivism. Projectivism in philosophy involves the attribution of qualities to an object *as if those qualities actually belong to it*. The Scottish philosopher David Hume put it like this: "'Tis a common observation, that the mind has a great propensity to spread itself on external objects, and to conjoin with them any internal impressions, which they occasion. [Just as] beauty is not a quality of the object, but a

certain feeling of the spectator, so virtue and vice are not qualities in the persons to whom language ascribes them, but feelings of the spectator."2 From the privacy of our own minds, we simulate the world, coloring it with our likes and dislikes, then break into the privacy of other minds (what would so-and-so think?) with our own beliefs and opinions.

We believe in the truth of our own projections – some of which originate with personal bias, most of which arise from genetic and cultural predispositions, and live as if our responses were based in fact. We are motivated by our ideas about things, not the things themselves, which in turn depend on the story we believe in. Everybody knows that the same situation through different eyes turns into different movies. Let's use Hume's famous example of a suffering animal found in a forest. You come upon the animal and see it as deserving – indeed, requiring -- your pity. Stricken with emotion, you don't understand that "this quality of pitifulness," as Hume calls it, "is the new creation your own mind has conjured." Someone else might not have given the creature a second thought. Holding the wounded animal's head in your hand, you believe that the pitiful nature of the event is the "parent of the sentiment" but it is, in fact, "emotion's child." The emotion comes first (poor little kitty!) followed by the thought, "I am morally obligated to relieve its suffering."

The "ought" is a mental fabrication, cold as that sounds to our kitty-loving ears. According to Richard Joyce, there is "no evidence that the human moral sensibility functions anything like a perceptual organ, detecting moral properties in the world."3 Knowing how projectivism works can help us see through our own melodramas and bigotries. Because projectivism is so willy-nilly, we need laws, punishment, and a modicum of ethical consensus in order to cooperate. But there is hypocrisy hidden in

"ought." Because the loop between perception, feeling, and judgment is so infinitesimally quick, we're unaware that we're painting the world with a palette of moral opinions mixed inside our own brains.

The question is: How can we know what's real and what isn't? If no objective standard for right and wrong exists, what is to stop us from winging it? The answer is nothing – which is where free (or free-ish) will comes in. Helped by the higher angels of our neocortex, we learn to unpack our own prejudicial suitcases, sort truth from consensus reality, and make considered personal choices. Free-ish will is a moment-by-moment practice requiring self-scrutiny. Since our sense of "ought," or just deserts, is nearly automatic, more like "growing a limb than sitting in Sunday school and learning about vices and virtues,"4 as Marc Hauser notes, we're called on to examine our most intimate appendages. Which of your "oughts" are crippled, outdated, or just plain wrong? Which phantom limbs should you prune off your ethical structure in order to root it more authentically? How do these "ought's" affect how we see ourselves, or how we ought to be, as opposed to who we are? While "oughts" are the glue of social arrangements, they are also sources of conflict, confusion, pain, self-loathing, restriction, and misapprehension, especially when we need them to maintain some inauthentic way of being.

I know a radical feminist attorney, for instance, whose psychosexual needs refuse to line up with her politics. Publicly, she's a ferocious advocate of female rights, a tireless crusader for women's liberation, opposed to what she loathes as the "patriarchy," which means the male-dominated world as it exists today (and which I, as a man, feel automatically guilty for). But in private, this public crusader for female freedom is

radically, hopelessly submissive, and only attracted to macho men. In bed, especially, she wants someone to show her who's the boss, by way of bondage, mean talk, and other erotic accoutrements.

Her "ought" and her "is" are out of synch; what she wants for other women, politically, is opposed to what she lusts for personally. This makes her crazy a lot of the time, and fills her with self-judgment and moral fear. She questions her own authenticity, the contradiction between her walk and her talk. This terrifically well-meaning woman really can't stand that *both are true* nor has she a clue how to integrate her emotional needs with her public persona. Because of this ethical disconnect, my friend has been unable to have non- abusive, long lasting relationships. *Sex and the City* as this may sound, her moral dilemma is a common one. Given the choice between her political activism and private needs, she would not hesitate to sacrifice the latter. But she'd like to have a relationship, too, if such intimacy did not interfere with what my friend – as a flagrant, knee-jerk, post-sixties partisan -- believes to be right and wrong.

Desire and fear. What we *want* to want – and what we desire – are often antithetical. Gut mind contradicts head mind which contradicts groin mind, which leaves us all in a heap. Desire does not speak the language of ought; the sensual and the rational don't always mesh. The good news is that they can be brought closer. Culturally acquired traits (such as political judgment) are easier to change than emotional and physical needs. Indeed, they have been shown to be malleable *within a single generation*, meaning that things like sexism and prejudice can actually be shifted when consensus reality allows them to be. Nature has provided our ethical sense with a great

deal of leeway for the majority of choices that we make. Free-ish will can, indeed, change our oughts and raise consciousness.

It's important to remember that we have a negativity bias, however. Evolution has prepared us for bad things to impact us more forcefully than good. As Haidt points out, "Our responses to threats and unpleasantness are faster, stronger, and harder to inhibit than responses to opportunities and pleasures."5 It's true. Have you never wondered why you're still obsessing over the single rude creep in a roomful of friends – the one who could never stand you -- hours after you've left the party? Or why you have a voice in your head predicting the very worst. Our brains are hard-wired for threat and distrust. We place greater value on negative acts than positive ones. In one test, subjects suggested that it would take twenty-five acts of life-saving heroism to make up for a single murder.6 In marriage studies, spouses estimate that it takes five good deeds to make up for one lousy screw up. 7 In Yiddish there's a saying that it takes twelve good men to build a house and one bad man to destroy it. It is easy to contaminate things in life but hard to purify.

When it comes to consensus reality, the negativity bias can be a disaster. Cultural shifts with the faintest glimmer of innovation or envelope-pushing may be rejected out of hand as bound for failure. We may become elephantinely stubborn, refusing to consider alternative views. In other words, gripped by the negativity bias, we risk becoming ethically horrendous, inflexible, and disconnected from shifting demands in the evolving world. We bypass opportunities for change and open-mindedness. We're convinced that our way is the right one – full stop. Children go through this stage -- the Terrible Twos -- when every suggestion is met with a strident "No!" This is because children at that age

are going through a phase when newly learned rules take on a kind of sacredness and unchangeability, a stage known as “immaculate justice.” The budding elephant is stomping its foot. As children become more sophisticated in their understanding of right and wrong, they gain moral flexibility, we hope.

Empathy deepens into kindness. We become people capable of altruism, automatic acts of nobility that may seem far-flung to the negative elephant. But the elephant also transcends itself, sometimes, and in this leap becomes a man. A child falls into a well. There’s no time for “ought” or cost-benefit analysis, no time to think about reputation, self-protection, or common sense. There is simply the fact of needing to help. For a split second the suffering of another person passes before your eyes. Your mirror neurons go into gear. You feel the child’s endangerment in your own body. Then you dive.