A Bridge Too Far: Abraham Maslow's Bridging the Is-Ought Gap

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Abstract: In this paper the authors argue for creation of management practices based on several facts about human beings. This is done by stating bridge propositions between what is found to be (facts), and what ought to be done (oughts). They attempt to justify that it is not too big of a gap. Contrarywise, not bridging it has serious consequences for any business enterprise. Concerning the Is-Ought Gap, Maslow implicitly claims something like "Don't Mind the Gap", because there is not one.

INTRODUCTION

A famous problem, brought up by Hume [7], sometimes called the Is-Ought distinction, has influenced numerous discussions and papers. The gist of the dilemma, simply put, is that by knowing some facts, without looking for some higher authority, it is not possible to derive what ought to be done. On the other hand, motivation science psychologists (Maslow's theory is used as an example in this paper) will try to discern what are the facts in regard to a specific human being, and from there determine how they should behave, or how should they be treated in order to encourage them to behave in a certain way. Unfortunately, in the everyday business context it seems that the facts and the knowledge about human nature, as well suggested modes of action and decisions (based on that knowledge), are being overshadowed by other considerations. ([15]; this analysis supports what we claim based on actual business practice).

In this text, we argue for the creation of management practices based on facts about human beings by stating bridge propositions between what is found to be (facts), and what ought to be done (oughts). Formal structure of the analysis runs as follows:

(H): Hume states is-ought principle (see part 1).

(M): Maslow claims that "oughtness" can be reached via "isness" which is argued for by conjunction of Maslow's propositions P1a, P2a, and P3a (see part 2).

(B): Is-ought principle (H) is exemplified in business practice; (B) is consistent with (H) (see part 3).

(I): B could be improved via M. If this is the case, it implies that H is wrong (see parts 2, and 4 in which (I) is argued for by conjunction of propositions P1b, P2b, and P3b which are based on P1a, P2a, and P3a).

The question is how to bridge the gap between (H) and (M) in (B). In order to bridge the gap, it seems to be necessary to create what we call "bridge propositions" (P1b, P2b, and P3b which are based on P1a, P2a, and P3a) which show that not following the guidelines for managing based on facts about human being is erroneous, in other words it is wrong to follow (H) in (B).

In order to achieve that we do the following. In the first part of the paper the Is-Ought dilemma, as formulated by Hume, is presented (H). In the second part, key points of Maslow's theory, so called "oughtness" vs. "isness" distinction are brought up and propositions on human nature (P1a, P2a, and P3a) stemming from Maslow's theory are explicated (M). The third part of the paper deals with the possibility of being entrapped in categorical mistake if Hume and Maslow are being compared, and evidence for (B) is given.

In the fourth section, bridge propositions, (P1b, P2b, and P3b) which can serve to influence decision makers in organizational settings to actually base their policies on findings

about human nature, are stated. A concluding overview of propositions, bridge proposi-tions and proposed management practice is given as well.

IS-OUGHT

In his critique of moral rationalism Hume says:

> "In every system of morality, which I have hitherto met with, I have al-ways remark'd, that the author proceeds for some time in the ordinary way of reasoning, and establishes the being of a God, or makes observa-tions 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*, *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." [7]

This famous passage from the *Treatise* has become known as "Hume's Law" and has stirred a lot of discussion in the context of rationalism in ethics. The central point of Hume's problem is that one should be cautious when inferring ought-statements from is-statements. Usually some kind of reason for such inference needs to be provided. Debates stemming from Hume's passage are not our topic per se. What is important is that Hume thinks that it is necessary to give *reasons* for deriving what *ought* to be done if one knows the *facts*.

It is possible to look for those reasons in actions themselves. By this we mean: perhaps an action itself, as a reaction to a fact in terms of what ought to be done, is its own reason for action, i.e. perhaps the action itself has its reason deeply implicit in it, and manifested by its commission. The sufficient reason for a belief that a person is able to replace a flat automobile tire under particular circumstances can be the very action of replacement of a flat tire. In other words, the very performance of an action is the reason for it.

Concerning the scope of the discussion, again there are various solutions. No matter what the level of abstraction of the phenomena or concepts really is, standpoints are presented sufficiently clear. On one hand, there are standard solutions, namely con-cerning affirmatively relating "is" to "ought" or "fact" to "value", or "description" to "normativity", or (in ethics) "descriptive value" to "moral value", and these are: incor-

rect (we suppose Hume), correct (criticism of Hume), and irrelevant (moral nihilism, and perhaps moral relativism, see [6] for major papers in the discussion in meta-ethics).

Now, leaving other standpoints aside, amongst correct there are various. In meta-ethics there is classical Searle's defense of the possibility of "deriving" "ought" from "is" (however, only in cases of so-called speech-act utterances, Searle, in [6]). Here, there is a strange possibility, namely in analogy with a standpoint from the philosophy of mind, monism, which would claim that "is" and "ought" are only two "aspects" of the same reality. In Maslow's terms this reality would be human being in its wholeness, or human action with its descriptive and normative aspects, or even with its physical (the very bodily movement), mental (intention, motivation, willingness), consequential (efficiency and efficacy of an action), and moral aspects (moral value of an action).

MASLOW ON "OUGHTNESS" VIA "ISNESS"

One of the most well-known psychologists and thinkers on motivation whose theories influenced the entire field is Abraham Maslow [10]. He is considered to be a founder of the so-called humanistic psychology, a sort of a third way between Freudian psychology and behaviorism [17]. Maslow's views are appropriate to be used as examples, because his line of thinking is similar to various other authors writing on motivation, especially proponents of content theories of motivation. In general, content theories of motivation are suitable for discussing questions on the cross section between philosophy and organizational science because content theories of motivation are oriented on things such as universal human needs and traits which stem from human nature.

According to Maslow, it is quite dangerous to tell human beings what they ought to do, without finding what they actually are. So, the best way to find what one ought to do is to find who one is. As Maslow states:

> "(…) the path to ethical and value decision, to wiser choices, to oughtness, is via "isness", via discovery of facts, truth, reality, the nature of particular person." [10]

Maslow basically suggests that certain things about human beings – facts – should first be discovered, and then certain actions should be realized (oughts). Those actions should be completed just because of the facts that were previously discovered. This seems to stand in opposition to what Hume is saying.

From Maslow's writings it is possible to explicate propositions on human beings (what is) and from them propositions on management practice (what ought to be done). First:

> P1a: In order to manage people, the more we know about them the more likely we will be effective (considering multiple aspects in order to achieve more "complete" knowledge).

This proposition basically says what we are claiming in this paper. The downside of not following this proposition seems to be obvious. There is no point in trying to manage

people if they are unknown to us. It would be like trying to swim without actually knowing how to swim. Some rare people might do it because of pure luck or some divine factor, but most of us would drown. It is fair to say here that all people (in a relatively normal surroundings) know at least something about people in general. But in order to effectively manage in a systematic way, everyday knowledge, based only on the limited experience of belonging to same species, is not enough.

Furthermore, Maslow claims that human beings must be looked both in their highest states and in their humanely limited states. It is the only way that wholeness of human beings can be perceived.

> "Human life will never be understood unless its highest aspirations are taken into account. Growth, self-actualization, the striving toward health, the quest for identity and autonomy, the yearning for excellence (and other ways of phrasing the striving "upward") must by now be accepted beyond question as a widespread and perhaps universal human tendency." [10]

> "To perceive unitively we must be able to perceive both the sacred and profane aspects of a person. Not perceiving these universal, eternal, essential symbolic qualities is (…) therefore a kind of partial blindness. (…) The relevance of this for our topic lies in the fact that this is a technique for perceiving simultaneously the *is* and *ought*, the immediate, concrete actuality and also what might be, what could be, the end value that not only could come to pass but is there now, existing before our eyes." [10]

From the idea of two-sided nature of human beings, Maslow continues like this:

> "The integrated wholeness of the organism must be one of the foundation stones of motivational theory." [9]

At this point, it seems appropriate to point out what Maslow says about the results of his approach to study of human nature.

> "It draws some of the truly revolutionary consequences of the discovery that human nature has been sold short, that man has a higher nature which is just as "instinctoid" as his lower nature, and that his higher nature includes the needs for meaningful work, for responsibility, for creativeness, for being fair and just, for doing what is worthwhile and for preferring to do it well." [10]

So, human beings, according to Maslow, are, simply put, complex. In order to correctly understand human beings, every part of them has to be taken together, and one is not allowed to pick one trait and leave out another for whatever reason. This can be formulated as another proposition on management practice:

> P2a: "Complete" human being, with both "lower" (biological) and "higher" (spiritual) characteristics has to be taken into account (see previously P1a).

What might happen if this is not followed? Here, we can borrow from another author working on the content theories of motivation. Generally speaking, myths about human nature seem to be "most far reaching, ubiquitous, and serviceable" [5]. Herzberg continues: "In the past, the accepted conceptions of man have been utilized by the dominant organizations to acquire and maintain control over society."

The most important definitions of human beings are promoted by top institutions in the society at a certain time. Such definitions are usually incomplete because only those human needs that are beneficial to the institution, which creates the definition and the needs which maintain or reflect that institution's values, are put in front. Needs of human beings per se are left out. As a response to that, Herzberg claims that a human being has to be studied in his totality.

This goes in line with what Maslow is saying in P2a. If today *homo oeconomicus* is emphasized as the supreme human aspect which supposedly serves well today's business oriented world, then it is no wonder that most management policies are created with that in mind. Unfortunately, the downside of this limited understanding of human beings is that there are numerous indicators that such orientation is not beneficial to the company financial success. Maslow found out that human beings cannot be motivated in a work related context solely by pay. This is because if their lower needs are gratified, and money usually makes this possible, people become motivated by higher kinds of "compensation" for their work [10]. If those needs are not met, then again company faces problems of employee motivation, commitment and engagement.

This does not mean that lower sections of the famous Maslow's pyramid of needs are not important. Safety is definitely something that can, if unfulfilled, cause human beings not to have a healthy life. In the work context safety practically translates into job security and having enough income to cover one's expanses. The question is can everything from management practices to understanding human nature be only focused on the needs in the lower sections of the pyramid.

On top of all this, according to Maslow, two desires are present in human beings. One of them is the desire to know, and the other one is the desire to understand. The second desire is a result of the fact that desire to know has no known limits. In other words, human beings are searching for "meaning". The search for meaning starts with the need for knowledge and then proceeds to the desire for understanding. Maslow explains the connection between the two like this:

> "Even after we know, we are impelled to know more and more minutely and microscopically on the one hand, and on the other, more and more extensively in the direction of a world philosophy, religion, etc. The facts that we acquire, if they are isolated or atomistic, inevitably get theorized about, and either analyzed or organized or both. This process has been phrased by some as the search for 'meaning.' We shall then postulate a desire to understand, to systematize, to organize, to analyze, to look for relations and meanings." [9]

The third proposition on management comes from here referenced and states that:

> P3a: Human beings are searching for meaning. (A search for meaning is a "higher" human characteristic, see previously P2a.)

The issue is: do we just simplify tasks? This might be beneficial in terms of sheer efficiency, but than a problem of efficiency vs. humanity appears. If habits are looked at as if they: "transform performances which may once have required attention and concentration into actions which come so naturally and easily that we just find ourselves doing them, whilst we think about other things" [11], then habits are also relevant for management practice.

The abovementioned is important for two reasons. While it is true that automatization of actions may lead to greater efficiency, speaking in the business context, still the fact that the role of the intellect diminishes seems to go against one of the core needs of human beings. The one to use reason. The second downside implicated in P3ais that such actions, where reason and awareness are not necessary for the action itself, may lead to boredom, another negative state of human beings. (e.g. [14])

INTERMEZZO: "A DIFFERENCE THAT MAKES NO DIFFERENCE IS NO DIFFERENCE AT ALL."

Hume's and Maslow's positions about inferring what ought to be done from what is,were constructed in different contexts. Maslow, as a psychologist, probably did not take into account Hume's reluctance about deriving ought's from is in the context of ethical discussions, whichalso means that the two positions are not really comparable. In short:

> Possible objection: Contexts are different. This may possibly lead us to fall into categorical error.

We claim that in the everyday business context this possible incomparableness should not pose a problem. The problem in the organizational context is that people serving as managers often do not follow findings in psychology, motivation theory, or research on human nature in general to create policies for managing employees, or only follow them partially. It turns out that they follow Hume's line of reasoning (probably without realizing it) figuring that it is not possible to derive ought's from is. In short:

> Possible objection: No matter what Hume's and Maslow's contexts are, in everyday business context, actions are conducted as if Hume's position is correct.

Unfortunately, we presume that the reason for such thinking is not in trying to cope with moral rationalism in ethics as Hume did. The precise motive for such state of things seems very situation-specific. In other words, it may depend on the level of the decision maker. It seems that often as not factors such as– ignorance, sloth, convenience, fear of precedent, misunderstanding of the role of managing, desire for control – are as often as not just as important or more important in daily decisions, as is profit concerning de-

cisions made at upper management levels. So, although there are findings about human nature, that is not enough to ensure that management policies are created based on those insights. Additional considerations may drive decision-making [15]. Furthermore, indirect argument in favor of this can be seen in studies on motivation which show that grounding management policies on facts about human beings results in higher employee wellbeing. (e.g. [12][13])

Perhaps providing a sort of a bridge proposition – give reasons for going from "isness" to "oughtness" – will ensure that policies are created with keeping in mind the facts about human beings.

We think one way of going about this is to look at some propositions from content theories of motivation about humans (example being Maslow's theory) and to look for possible negative consequences of not paying attention to what is being said in them. In short:

> Acknowledging both Hume and Maslow (in different contexts), we argue that the *reason* for deriving ought from is (what Hume calls for) is precisely that "deriving ought from is (in everyday business context) results in more benefits than harm for companies and for employees".

BRIDGING THE GAP IN MANAGERIAL PRACTICE

From knowing what the full aspect of a human being is, it is not "a bridge too far" to ground management practices in this understanding. In the previous part we have stated three propositions stemming from Maslow's understanding of motivation and the possible downsides of not addressing them:

- P1a: In order to manage people, the more we know about them the more likely we will be effective.
  - P1b: There is no point in trying to manage people if they are unknown to us.
- P2a: The complete human being, with both "lower" and "higher" characteristics has to be taken into account.
  - P2b: If employees are managed by looking only at their economic aspects, the company still faces motivational problems.
- P3a: Human beings are searching for meaning.
  - P3b: Reasoning diminishes, which impacts negatively wellbeing.

Accepting these facts about human beings and creating management policies based on them seems to bring more benefits and is less harmful then ignoring them. This is applicable and important from a business perspective because if all known facts are incorporated in creating management policies then they collectively create values and reasons for actions. In other words, reasons for management actions are deeply implicit in the facts about human beings. In addition, the more facts about human beings are incorporated in management actions, the more values they actually manifest.

If this is the case, then the *reasons* for deriving *oughts* from *facts* are already present in the facts about human beings. The possible downsides of ignoring them are more than obvious even in an everyday discussion about managing and motivating employees. In this way, propositions P1b, P2b and P3b for management policy grounded in the facts on human beings may fulfill the role of bridge propositions in the "ought-is" conundrum for the everyday business context.

CONCLUSION

Concerning the Is-Ought Gap, it can be justified that Maslow implicitly claims something like "Don't Mind the Gap", because there actually is no gap. This whole discussion is multi-leveled one. There are highly abstract philosophical and anthropological levels to which the discussion on fact-value distinction surely applies, but there are meta-ethical levels to which the discussion on Is-Ought applies.

As an additional remark, it can be claimed that Maslow's solution stands between Hume's and anti-Hume's standpoints claiming, from experience, that we deal with whole human beings, not with "their parts" (something that was also claimed by Wittgenstein, according to [8]), and in this view a particular ethics would apply, namely pragmatist ethics (as in [1][2] for instance), or communicative action ethics (as in [3][4]), and similar.

However, further research is warranted on to explore mentioned ideas in detail. The present research was intended and done in terms of conceptual research and critical analysis of selected theories. So, this is in the same time the limitation of the paper. For further research an alternative experimental method can be suggested, namely to research actual policies and actions of HR officers in companies concerning, for example, their resolving motivation issues of employees, and their level of understanding their management practices. Finding answers to this question is complicated by the fact that few organizations explicitly articulate their practices in such a way as to allow us to easily answer these questions. The matter is further complicated by the layers of management within organizations. Nevertheless, various examples of research on application of some of the ideas mentioned here, can be found at Self-Determination Theory (SDT) website [16].

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