The is’s and the ought’s.

“There is no description of the way the universe is that tells us how the universe ought to be.” — David Hume

David Hume was not a guest on Making Sense. He was a Scottish philosopher who died in 1776. But his writing persists as some of the most influential work (for better or worse) in the field of moral philosophy.

The important question: Can we ever get an OUGHT by looking at the IS’s?

The anti-realist says “no!” This casts “ought” statements (moral statements) into the realm of the subjective.

The moral-realist says “yes!” This proposes a kind of judge who sits in the philosophical “view from nowhere,” and is able to evaluate the legitimacy of “ought” statements (moral statements) objectively.
CONTINUED

The is’s and the ought’s.

Now, it’s not quite that simple, of course. But you should have this basic Humean primer in mind as we head out into the wild world of moral philosophy.

The is/ought distinction and challenge raised by David Hume is a crucial point of departure for our exploration of morality. Sam contends that the confusion which results from Hume’s argument has been disastrous for the modern array of paralyzed attitudes and variations of moral subjectivism. Sam’s attempt to navigate the famously difficult questions raised on the moral objectivism side of the argument is laid out in his book *The Moral Landscape*.

Okay, we’ll get there.

But first, let’s meet the guests...
Peter Singer is famous for his advocacy of Utilitarianism, a moral framework which argues that good actions “maximize flourishing and minimize suffering.” Singer is determined to advocate for philosophy that changes people’s behavior in the world. He is a thinker who is laser focused on “practical” ethics. Sometimes, Singer’s philosophies can seem like matter of fact common sense. Here’s his most famous example:

In 1971 he wrote this sentence: “...if I am walking past a shallow pond and see a child drowning in it, I ought to wade in and pull the child out. This will mean getting my clothes muddy, but this is insignificant, while the death of the child would presumably be a very bad thing.”

Singer delivered this analogy while making a philosophical plea for wealthy nations to aid in a humanitarian crisis in East Bengal. But the application of the analogy has been expanded to suggest that nearly everyone (in a relatively affluent situation) is just like the pond passer-by. If Peter could show you convincing data that a donation in the same amount that the clothes cost would be effective in saving a life, would you donate that amount instead of buying them?

This analogy has been challenged, discussed, supported, and dissected from multiple angles and from countless critics, but it does seem to have some significant power over the imaginations’ of those who encounter it.

Another bit of general moral philosophy terminology: Consequentialism.

This is a moral framework which evaluates the moral value of something based on the outcomes (consequences) of the action rather than the action itself.
The deontologist* emphasizes following a rule which is divorced from its consequences. If one had an unbreakable rule to “never tell a lie,” it would have to be adhered to in this situation as well.

Some concerns and problems with consequentialism...

1. When do you stop the causal chain? Is a modern day thriving Japanese society a consequence of the bombing of Hiroshima that needs to be factored in? Did the abuse that someone suffered as a child lead to the important lessons later in life which were of “good” consequence? The argument that the “ends” justify the “means” is relevant here, but what are the “ends” if we just wait longer. Will we be at a new “end?”

2. Do we value the utility of future generations as equal to our own?

3. Is a small increase in flourishing for every member of a group equivalent to a large increase in flourishing for a small number?

4. How would one measure flourishing and suffering anyway? Is all flourishing equal? If you were forced to choose one action would you save the life of a child or cure the blindness of 5 adults?

One fascinating moral discussion in the realm of consequentialism revolves around the differences (if there are any) between acts of omission versus acts of commission. This is the difference between letting something happen versus actively inserting yourself into an event to “make” something happen. If the consequences are identical, is there a difference in the morality of each instance?

Peter has written extensively over the years on variations of consequentialism and utilitarianism. But there does really seem to be some power to the pond...

*Immanuel Kant made the most influential deontological arguments. The most frequently cited argument is the categorical imperative which suggests that behaviors that are morally permissible for you to engage in should be morally permissible for others to engage in as well.
A philosopher named Philippa Foot first gave us the nightmare of the “Trolley Problem” in an essay from 1967 about abortion ethics. It’s a strikingly clean hypothetical which puts you next to a switch that would divert an out of control trolley towards one person tied to the tracks and away from the five people who are currently in its path.

The framework underpinning the dilemma here is generally utilitarian ethics versus psychological impulse and deontological commitments. All things being equal, the lives of the 6 hostages are fungible. The simple math of 5 - 1 = 4 suggests the moral marching orders to pull the switch.

But when we start playing with the variables, as philosophers are known to do, and we swap out the anonymous humans with people like relatives, friends, loved ones, or countrymen, people begin to feel differently about the problem. We value our kin over strangers. We tend to save the child whose name we know. We tend to save the human who is lucky enough to be closest to us. We tend to favor the human who happened to be born in our home town and roots for the same sports teams as us.

Paul Bloom suggests that all of these adjustments and edits really might be moral errors. And what is the bug in our software that results in these moral mistakes? Empathy.
Simple psychological experiments called "Dictator Games" reveal some of this strange behavior. In "Dictator Games," a participant is given a sum of money and the power to donate or endow any amount to other participants. One of the most remarkable versions of it goes like this:

Experiment Variation A:

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THERE ARE 8 OTHER RANDOM PARTICIPANTS IN THE NEXT ROOM. 
YOUR DONATION WILL GO TO ONE OF THEM WHO I WILL SELECT 
AT RANDOM. 

YEY WONT KNOW HOW MUCH YOU STARTED WITH. HOW MUCH WOULD 
YOU LIKE TO DONATE? 

$100

OKAY, #6 

UMM... 
I'LL DONATE $20 BUCKS. 
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These kinds of discoveries, and others discussed by Sam and Bloom, seem to expose the irrational directions that psychological evolution can steer our moral choices. In this example, apparently the simple act of imagining "number 6" triggers empathetic psychology and leads to a dramatic increase in donations. (This example comes from the work of Daniel Kahneman).
Do the most good.

Let’s return to the pond, but with a wider lens this time.

Philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah offered this picture of the shallow pond.

Should the pond passerby run past the drowning child, head into a pawn shop, sell his clean shoes for a lot of money, and then donate that money to a charity that will save the lives of three children somewhere in the world?

If we set aside the psychological revelations of “being the kind of person” who watches a child die, as well as Sam’s consequentialist lens which argues that the outcome of a world full of people who watch children drown is a world full of suffering… The math is compelling.

MacAskill takes this kind of utilitarian morality rather seriously. He helped launch a movement and general attitude called Effective Altruism. The idea is somewhat simple. It attempts to analyze and quantify the effects of charitable efforts in order to maximize one’s impact towards flourishing in the world. It’s hard to argue with the premise, but there are some critics. Or, rather, there are those who want to highlight the psychological pitfalls on the path to maximizing flourishing.
The Appiah edit to Singer’s pond is sometimes distilled to a 3 word effort: “earn to give.” This form of engagement attempts to take a holistic approach to life which is focused on giving to effective efforts but on maximizing that impact over a lifetime. If you “burn out” because you have no creature comforts or leisure and abandon the whole effort after 3 hard months of living off of a dollar a day, that is a much worse outcome than treating yourself to a nice dinner every other day and giving effectively for years.

The argument of “earning to give” also encourages one to seek high paying employment at a marketable skill you happen to be good at in order to maximize how much money you can siphon from the system in order to redirect it to effective charities.

The pitfalls of psychology and justificationism lurk here. Do you need to purchase a yacht because... burn out? How about flying first class because there is a chance you would rub elbows with a billionaire and convince him to donate a large sum of money?

*There have been some high profile public cases of this kind of selfish-justificationism within the Effective Altruism community which have surfaced since Sam’s conversations in this compilation. Some critics have been tempted to apply the cynicism highlighted by these cases on the entire enterprise of Effective Altruism. Sam warns against this and in favor of the logic of Effective Altruism in a solo episode*.
One more note on the flexibility of consequentialism:

The consequentialist might be tempted to argue for the killing of one person in the waiting room to save the four people in the ER. However, Sam answers this challenge by pointing out that a world in which this regularly occurs and might just happen to you—would actually be a world with more suffering than the one we currently live in. In that sense, the “consequences” of the organ harvesting doctor are what provide the moral arguments against it.

Some philosophers phrase this as a kind of blend of deontology and consequentialism. It’s something like deontological rules serving consequentialist goals. Most post-enlightenment liberal constitutional societies tend to work in this kind of way... or try to.
Haidt provides a picture of our moral decisions that emphasizes the psychological. He contends that we are much more like lawyers than philosophers when it comes to our moral lives. The analogy works on the premise that a lawyer is hired to provide a defense of a position (regardless of his or her true belief). It might work something like this:

The primary question which Haidt would encourage us to ask ourselves is something like this: Did we reason ourselves towards a moral position and then adjust our behavior? Or, did we simply justify a behavior we enjoy by using the moral reasoning available to us?
Haidt raises the concept of “moral dumbfounding” with Sam to expose this wrinkle in human behavior. In a 2000 essay exploring moral dumbfounding and leaning on the work of David Hume, Haidt and his co-authors, use the incestuous example that we include in the Essentials compilation. But let’s use his other lovely story here. This one involves cannibalism. Here’s the story:

Jennifer works in a medical school pathology lab as a research assistant. The lab prepares human cadavers that are used to teach medical students about anatomy. The cadavers come from people who had donated their body to science for research. One night Jennifer is leaving the lab when she sees a body that is going to be discarded the next day. Jennifer was a vegetarian, for moral reasons. She thought it was wrong to kill animals for food. But then, when she saw a body about to be cremated, she thought it was irrational to waste perfectly edible meat. So she cut off a piece of flesh, and took it home and cooked it. The person had died recently of a heart attack, and she cooked the meat thoroughly, so there was no risk of disease. Is there anything wrong with what she did?

This story (and the other equally fun ones in the study) is designed and written in such a way as to elicit a strong intuitive response of disgust. But the stories are also written in such a way as to unplug any of the available “moral reasoning” avenues.

What Haidt wants to look at is the process that the subject goes through when encountered with these stories. What he finds is that people are strongly morally against the actions but then go searching for the best arguments to justify that outrage, oftentimes forgetting that the story had pre-countered that logic (the moral vegetarianism of the researcher for example).

Haidt offers another analogy of how this might look.

“Reason is the press-secretary of the intuitions, and can pretend to no other office than that of ex-post facto spin doctor.” In modern political life the president makes his decisions first and then dispatches the press-secretary to justify and rationalize those decisions. The press secretary may have no access to the real causes of the President’s decision, and is therefore free to make up whatever argument will sound most convincing to the general public. Everyone knows that it serves no purpose to argue with the press secretary.”
So, where does this psychological exploration of our moral behavior leave the deeper philosophical arguments about objective foundations of moral truths? Haidt appreciates Sam’s landscape analogy, but his psychological emphasis on how we navigate it and measure the altitude of our position is crucial to the general subject and is imperative to effective political orientations.
Sam’s argument in *The Moral Landscape* rests on coming to some “objective” definition of a “bad” world. This bad world is composed of conscious creatures experiencing ultimate suffering. This is pointless, lesson-free, maximum torture... forever.

**Universe in State A:** *Infinite pointless misery for all conscious creatures.*

Go ahead and pin the altitude of this world at 0. You can’t get any lower than this. If you are imagining any glimmer of non-suffering in that world, you aren’t doing it right. If this world is not what you mean by “bad,” then Sam is not sure what you are talking about. Now, go ahead and give it a tiny bit of that non-suffering. Just a drop of meaning, love, beauty, hope, or flourishing.

**Universe in State B:** *A whole lot of pointless misery for all conscious creatures with a tiny bit of non-miserable flourishing.*
This tiny bit of non-suffering raises the altitude of this world the slightest bit. In Sam's analogy of the landscape, we're climbing upwards.

From this worst world/sea-level starting point we can imagine undulations, canyons, mountaintops, and plateaus for us to traverse as we move away from it. Deciding what altitude one is at is not easy. This is the measurement problem of morality – the problem of deciphering what flourishing and suffering actually is. But Sam's focus on not divorcing that measurement effort from the truths of science, and the truths of psychology (the "IS's"), is the hard work of discovering moral progress.

This moral landscape analogy could be applied to a personal life, or a culture which is producing lives with differing amounts of flourishing and suffering. Applying the analogy to wider cultural scales would be done with questions like: “Does this particular set of cultural norms and philosophies represent a peak or valley on the landscape? And how does it compare with the “moral altitude” of other cultures, both future and historical, and current geographically disparate cultures?”

If the moral landscape can be mapped with a kind of objective measure, then these questions become even more potent... and politically controversial.
Dan Carlin gives a lot of weight to self reported desires and hypothetical voting results in his exchange with Sam. This brings up a fascinating exchange where he suggests the potential to “want the wrong things” and to “not know what one is missing.” But there may be an underlying confusion and assumption that is behind the drift with Carlin and Sam.

Carlin’s detailed study of history, and in particular the history of international conflict, likely colors his hesitancy to espouse moral judgements about other cultures. But why is that? It might be because he fears that the moral declarations imply, demand, or strongly endorse a particular political prescription to remedy the moral problem. This is something that Sam has run into countless times in his public entanglements. So, let’s take a look at it.
Oftentimes there is an assumption of the 2nd panel which seems to follow from the 1st panel. This assumption can have a degrading effect on discourse where fear of political difference and temperament results in the extreme obfuscation or complete avoidance of the truths of the philosophical moral propositions.

What is important to focus on here is Sam’s earlier arguments in favor of “consequentialism.” Even if objective moral evaluation of a practice can be made or philosophically defended, the potential consequences of attempting to intervene to bring about that more moral universe (a higher point on the landscape) can backfire or fail for plenty of unrelated reasons.

The key point is to not allow the discomfort of the possible interventions or the possibility of their failure to paralyze us into inaction or, worse yet, to convince ourselves that the initial moral evaluation was false, misconceived, or the result of bigotry.
But, to steelman Carlin's position, it is possible to argue that even making simple public moral statements themselves can become hindrances towards effective political interventions. The public expression of moral stances can generate their own kind of momentum that leads to the realization of inevitably blundered and mess-making interventions. Again, Carlin's study of history must play a large role in his advocacy of those positions.

But Haidt may stress that this kind of argumentation could be the work of our inner press-secretary who wishes to justify a direction which allows us to avoid unpleasant moral emotions like anxiety over confrontation. Or that these kinds of self-muzzling arguments may be deployed to avoid the anxiety of trespassing on social taboos and doctrines of cultural tolerance or other political norms.

An argument for not expressing moral evaluations because of the potential for uncomfortable implied political prescriptions is certainly not the kind of argument of which Sam is in favor. Sam has often said that "we will be mugged by the truth" if we attempt to avoid a subject, especially a subject with potentially dangerous implications. Variations of this argument have motivated Sam to speak boldly and directly about the morality of many controversial topics but keep in mind the wide range of political stances which can and should carefully follow the moral analysis of any situation.

A common form of moral revisionism and escape from psychological discomfort:
VALENTI is the CEO of Upside Foods, a company focused on producing cultivated meat – meat grown from cells that would be chemically identical to animal meat. It’s meat production without a conscious animal involved in the process.

A quick flashback from episode 16 with Paul Bloom where Sam and Bloom had this exchange:

**SAM:** Take the ethics of meat eating more or less from the top. So you and I both agree that we are participating in a system. That is on some basic level, ethically indefensible, that factory farming is just a horror show. We both know that if we had to work in an abattoir, we would never stomach it. We would never do it. I know that I’m not going to go out and kill a cow to get my next hamburger. And yet the fact that I participate in a system that does this knowingly, more or less, condemns me as a total hypocrite. That’s kind of the basic situation.

**Paul Bloom:** I think ethically, this isn’t a very hard case. I’ve heard defenses of meat eating and they’re some of the worst arguments I have ever heard in my life. “Animals don’t feel pain.” “Humans have a right to do whatever they want.” “It’s natural.” Arguments which wouldn’t be taken seriously in any other domain. Arguments that are just born out of guilt and bad faith. So, I think it’s clear enough that what we do to animals is wrong. We can ask ourselves. “What’s it like to knowingly do evil?” And think this is what it feels like. We know what it’s like to knowingly do evil. Although I’ll sort of nibble around the edges... as it’s not really “hypocrisy.” I think there’s a nicer term for it. It’s this word “akrasia.” It’s “a weakness of will.” We know the right thing to do. We’re not shy about saying what the right thing to do is. We just can’t do it.

They continued with some added nuance to the relevant animal ethics, but Sam does come away from the conversation bothered by the misalignment between his ethical argumentation and his behavior.

“AKRASIA” is a fascinating concept. Debates about its existence and appearance date back to Plato and Socrates. Let’s look at two states of the universe. Universe A has a lot of horses working for mankind – laboring, arguably enslaved, suffering etc.
Technological Innovation is Moral Progress?

Universe B has far fewer suffering horses. Let’s say that we consider horse suffering to have some moral value and therefore, at least in regard to that situation, Universe B represents moral progress from Universe A.

The question to ask: What brought universe B about from universe A?

Was it a moral awakening about the immorality of the treatment of horses? Would that moral awakening alone result in a universe where everyone just walked everywhere and used wheelbarrows? Or was it the invention of the combustion engine which put them out of a job and enabled their “liberation?” Did the awareness of immorality put internal pressure on the economic system and hint at the promise of a market for the self-interested innovators to then invent and sell the engine? Did it all just happen at the same time? Does isolated technological innovation result in strangely related inevitable moral progress? The causal direction of all of these events is fascinating to consider and argue.

Which version of events is closest to reality?

Noticing the problem, solving it yourself:
The problem is noticed and solved, you conveniently agree with the former immorality:

**Noticing the problem, solving it yourself (with sacrifice):**

*The behavior reveals a market and spurs a solution to lessen the sacrifice.*
But what if someone just happened to be born into a world before the invention of the combustion engine and he was convinced of the unethical situation of horse enslavement. This person might know the “right” thing to do in that world, but perhaps he would be unable to conjure the “will” to align his behaviors with the avoidance of horse-labor. Foregoing horse-labor may also have come at a high cost to him. Would he choose not to use products that were delivered or cultivated with horse labor? Would he be viewed as an outcast in his social circles?

So, if we become aware of an unethical system, what kind of technological innovation can resolve it? What are those of us who notice the immorality before the innovation arrives to do? Of course, Sam, and all of us, could simply eat vegan diets (it’s much better and easier than pushing a wheelbarrow). But this isn’t so “simple” for some people. People get enjoyment out of eating animals. People have cherished cultural practices that involve eating animals. The current distribution systems local to many citizens make vegan diets expensive and limited. But it could certainly be incredibly simple if no one had to change any of their behavior at all (just like our neighborhood car inventor resolving our horse treatment issues).

Imagine if every human blinked at the same time and when they opened their eyes, all animal meat on Earth had been replaced by cultured meat with identical properties. In fact, no one would notice the change at all. Setting aside the interesting (but solvable) issues of how to retire the last generations of food animals on Earth, that universe is arguably more moral than our current one which widely practices factory farming and animal harvesting.
But there are the interesting questions to ask: Is someone born into that future universe morally better than an animal-eater in 2023? Did this future human face the challenge of “akrasia?” Are we morally better than the people who were born into a world before the combustion engine and used horse-labor?

Those post-cultivated meat future humans might pat themselves on the back for their moral purity and convince themselves that an ethical awakening was the cause of their situation while they castigate those past humans for their behavior and participation in unethical systems.
This kind of exploration reveals the intertwined relationship between scientific knowledge, technological problem solving, and the notion of climbing to higher peaks in Sam's moral landscape.

Utilitarian moral progress, personal growth, and the challenge of "akrasia" may be less connected than they first appear. The notion of sacrifice and moral integrity intertwines with humanistic ethics and virtue ethics in ways that are worth exploring in our recommendations.

Morality is tremendously complicated.
There are countless variations of the classic “trolley problem.” What if you were driving the trolley? What if you could push a fat man (who would stop the trolley) onto the tracks and save the five lives? See if you can come up with a creative variation and what it does to your intuitions.

Sam and Paul Bloom asked themselves what practice they participated in which would be looked back at with moral horror and both came up with factory farming. What else do you think fits this description?

What figures from the history of moral philosophy (besides David Hume) would you have loved to hear on the Making Sense podcast?

A pizza chain in New Zealand (Hell Pizza) swapped out the meat on a “meat lovers” pizza offering with a vegan alternative without informing their customers. They claim that 3,000 orders were placed and no one noticed the difference. Did they do something unethical in this experiment?

If you are looking for a random ethical dilemma to discuss, go to the archives of the National High School Ethics Bowl and choose a random case. (The author of The Essential Sam Harris series has served as a judge for this group for 6 years.)
How does the deterministic argument against the existence of Free Will affect questions of moral progress and character development? (We have a Free Will compilation coming!)

Does the context of the “emergency” of Singer's shallow pond matter in the moral analysis?

Are there some truths that should not be known because of the inevitable immoral consequences?

How does the Carlin-Sam exchange sound given the events in the Middle East in the 7 subsequent years?

How does secular moral realism safeguard itself from the kind of attractive “objective legitimacy” that Haidt might caution against?

Bloom’s argument in Against Empathy stresses the gap between the world our moral psychology evolved in and the networked, technological, diverse world we find ourselves in now. How do we navigate this gap?

Sam has argued that given the technological power of destruction and reach that is now possible (be sure to check out our compilation on Existential Threat and Nuclear War) we simply “must converge” on some basic moral arrangements, and quickly. Are you convinced that divergence of moral codes in a technological world is an increasingly dangerous and pressing problem?
Included Making Sense Episodes
#11 — Shouldering the Burden of History
#14 — The Virtues of Cold Blood
#28 — Meat Without Misery
#31 — Evolving Minds
#44 — Being Good and Doing Good
#48 — What Is Moral Progress?

Debate
Clarifying the Moral Landscape

Additional Making Sense Episodes
#13 — The Moral Gaze
#16 — The Dark Side
#91 — The Biology of Good and Evil
#150 — The Map of Misunderstanding
#295 — Philosophy and the Good Life
#287 — Why Wealth Matters
#292 — How Much Does the Future Matter?

Books
The Moral Landscape by Sam Harris
Animal Liberation by Peter Singer
The Life You Can Save by Peter Singer
Against Empathy by Paul Bloom
Just Babies by Paul Bloom
Doing Good Better by William MacAskill
The Righteous Mind by Jonathan Haidt
Life After Babel by Jonathan Haidt

Talks
Science can answer moral questions by Sam Harris

Websites
The Life You Can Save
Founders Pledge
Effective Altruism

Podcasts
Dan Carlin's Hardcore History

Classic Philosophy
Treatise of Human Nature by David Hume
Critique of Pure Reason by Immanuel Kant
An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation by Jeremy Bentham

Food
Upside Foods
Eat Just

Film and Television
Rashomon
The Adventures of Robin Hood
Locke
Dog Day Afternoon
Sophie's Choice
The Good Son
Saw

Theater
Les Misérables

Music
Nebraska by Bruce Springsteen

Graphic Art
Blu
Herbert Baglione
Isaac Cordal
Stik
Banksy
Links in Episode Companion

1. "Trolley Problem" essay by Philippa Foot, pg.6
   https://philpapers.org/archive/FOOTPO-2.pdf

2. Episode on the logic of Effective Altruism by Sam Harris, pg.10


4. Protagoras by Plato, pg.20
   https://www.bard.edu/library/arendt/pdfs/Plato-Protagoras.pdf

5. The archives of the National High School Ethics Bowl, pg.26
   https://nhseb.unc.edu/case-archive/

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