

**“But that’s the Way We’ve Always Done it!”
The Fallacy of Deriving Ought from Is**

By
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Why is a mouse a mouse? Or a bird a bird? Or a human a human? If we were to answer these questions from a strictly biological perspective we would likely say something of genetics; that a mouse, or a bird, or a human is a result of its genetic makeup. This, of course, is true—mice, birds, and humans, like all creatures, reproduce by passing on their specified genes. But this answer is also a little like putting the cart before the horse. Genes transmit our patterns from one generation to the next, but it is really our patterns, that is, our behaviors that come first. All creatures, at least genetically speaking, are creatures of habit. It’s true that the members of a species look similar to each other, but, more importantly, they also behave similarly. Species evolve physical characteristics only in order to adapt their behaviors to their changing environments. If this were not so, all life on Earth, if it existed at all, would still remain in the form of a simple single-celled organism.

So a mouse is a mouse largely because of its inherited behavioral instincts. A mouse is a vein of the Life Force that has learned to survive by repeatedly scurrying about in nooks and crannies and crevices unseen undercover of darkness, and remaining relatively small so as to increase its ability to hide and go unnoticed by potential predators. Likewise, birds are an expression of Life that has learned to fly away and high above many potential threats, and to migrate great distances to avoid the discomfort of seasonal climate change. And humans, like birds and mice and other creatures, are human, not so much because of our genes, but because of those patterns of behavior that have allowed us to thrive and survive in our environments. We are, indeed, *creatures of habit*. And the reason we repeat our patterns of behavior, like all creatures, is because they make us feel safe. Repetition is safe! Repetition gives us our identity! Repetition makes us who we are!

But repetition can also lead us to our doom. Survival also requires us to adapt our behaviors, to sometimes change our ways. Penguins, for example, are birds that gave up their ability to fly to warmer climates, in order to gain lots of warm body fat and oily feathers, enabling them to glide, instead, through frigid arctic waters. If Life completely refused to budge, that is, to adapt its behavior, it would, again, never have been able to evolve beyond single-celled organisms. 99.9 percent of all species ever to have existed have gone extinct, not because most of them were wiped out, but because they were willing to change into something new. They were willing to transform their existence. From our perspective these changes occur so slowly they are imperceptible, but from the perspective of cosmic time, the speed through which life changes form is almost too fast to keep up with. Life is constantly on the move, constantly adapting and changing.

So how does this tension between these two opposing survival instincts, between repetition and adaptation, play out among us, within our culture, our body politic? It

cannot go unnoticed that within many societies today people are politically defined as conservatives and progressives. Conservatives typically uphold the status quo, value “staying the course,” and promote traditional values, thoughts, and behaviors. Progressives, on the other hand, tend to see the ways in which the status quo fails certain segments of society, sees the necessity of change, and promotes the future over the past. Yet both perspectives are rooted in our need to survive. The trick is knowing when to cling and when to let go, when to hold on to behaviors that are tried and true, and when to change our behaviors in order to avoid suffering and doom.

This question is, perhaps, more pressing today than ever before in history because our repetitive patterns of behavior have brought us to the edge of disaster. Fortunately, most of us, even the conservatives among us, recognize the negative impact our collective patterns of behavior are having on the environment, and realize we must make rapid changes in order to avert catastrophe. And now, in the wake of a failing global economy, an economy that hasn’t worked for most people in the world for a long time, many of us realize it’s time to try something new. In both these cases, most of us now realize we have to adjust our behavior because the landscape around us has changed so dramatically it’s obvious we must find a new route, a new routine, another way of approaching things and doing things. We must change our habits. We are like soaring eagles who must now become swimming penguins. Here the choice between repetition and adaptation has become clear. We cannot repeat those patterns of the past that have gotten us into these situations, but must adapt our behaviors to our changing circumstances.

The problem is that when it comes to survival, that is, when we feel most threatened; we have a tremendous instinct to cling to those repetitive behaviors that have always kept us safe. This is really perfectly natural, and we shouldn’t judge our conservative brother and sisters too harshly for wanting to survive. Yet our species, in particular, has developed a capacity for reasoning unlike any other. And we can presume our great ability to reason evolved to help us survive. But when we succumb purely to our most basic survival instinct, to that reflexive part of us that wants to fight or flee, we often abandon our species’ greatest adaptive resource, the power to think things through.

So, when it comes to thinking, these two poles, repetition or adaptation, conservatism or progress, become the choice between rationalism and rational thinking. Rationalism starts with a conclusion or belief that is already held, then finds reasons to support it. If we start with the conclusion, for example, that marriage has always been between a man and a woman, then we find reasons to justify continuing this exclusive form of marriage. Gay marriage is a threat to the “sanctity of marriage.” Or, “God created Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve.” Such reasons are, of course, irrational in and of themselves. Marriages that are limited to one man and one woman are an extremely recent and localized phenomenon, and certainly do not represent the definition of marriage uniformly promoted in the Bible. But when we succumb to rationalization, any excuse we come up with is good enough, for all we really seek is minimal justification for our beliefs. Genuine reason, on the other hand, starts with the available evidence then determines what conclusions can be correctly inferred from them. So one

way to know if we’re reasoning or rationalizing is to determine if we’re merely reaffirming what we already believe is true, or if we’re discovering something new, something we hadn’t realized before.

The formal study of logic identifies several fallacies in the way we think. The one pertinent to this discussion is known as “the fallacy of deriving ought from is.” It was first expressed by the Scottish philosopher, David Hume, who recognized that many people have a tendency to think that just because we can identify a pattern of behavior that that pattern of behavior ought to be followed. It’s the fallacy of mistaking a description of behavior as a prescription for behavior. It’s very often expressed by a phrase, “But that’s the way we’ve always done it,” as if the fact that it’s always been done this way is excuse enough to continue doing the same thing.

- But we’ve always settled our disputes through violence and war.
- But we’ve always allowed a small elite group to control most the world’s resources.
- But we’ve always let industries pollute our water and air, and put jobs before the environment.
- But we’ve always let men runs things and paid them higher wages than women.
- But we’ve always gone to the supermarket and purchased our meat and grains without considering where they come from or how they’re produced.
- But we’ve always permitted education and other social programs to suffer in favor of national defense.
- But we’ve always ignored how our way of life impacts others.
- But the Jews and Palestinians have always hated each other.
- But we’ve always taught that the Sun orbits the Earth, that the world is flat, that only Christians are going to Heaven.
- We’ve always believed this.
- We’ve always done it this way.

It’s obvious from these examples that just because we’ve always believed or behaved in a certain way, doesn’t necessarily make our beliefs or behaviors good and right. As rational beings, we have adapted the unique ability to question and weigh the value of our behaviors, and unlike many creatures, we don’t have to wait for rare genetic mutations to come along to permanently alter our species and change our collective behaviors for the better. As rational beings we can choose to change our destructive behaviors without going through millions of years of genetic evolution. We have the power to evolve immediately by making rational decisions.

Can any of us fully grasp and appreciate the importance and rarity of this magnificent gift? Unlike so many of our fellow creatures condemned to do things because that’s the way they’ve always done them, capable of making only the most subtle changes over great expanses of time, we humans have the power to transform our world immediately! We can think about what we’re doing and determine if our behavior continues to serve us well, or if its time to try something new. We can choose peace over war. We can choose the just distribution of wealth over elitist economies. We can

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choose clean technologies and green jobs. We can choose equality. We can choose to think globally and buy locally. We can choose freedom over security and hope over fear. We can choose to respond to the suffering we cause others. We can choose peace in the Middle East at long last. We can whirl like Sufi dervishes around the sun every 365 days, spinning round the hoop of the world, while creating Heaven on Earth. We can change our beliefs. We can do things differently. We don’t have to wait! We’re not condemned to keep repeating our mistakes. We need not remain stuck on the wheel of samsara a moment longer. We’re human beings and we can choose to change right now!

Moreover, we’ve already begun to make these changes. We’re not waiting any longer. The election of our nation’s first African American President during, not the next, but the very same generation in which the passage of the Civil Rights Act took place, shows just how fast we can change and are changing. Why just eight years ago Al Gore had to keep his environmental concerns to himself in order to be a viable political candidate, and today he’s become a loved and respected Nobel Prize Winning educator and leader in the environmental movement. Just this past week an economic recovery bill was agreed upon that includes half a billion dollars for green jobs training, not to mention billions more for clean energy projects and research, and weatherizing low income homes and schools and government buildings. We’re adapting, changing, evolving right now, and our world is at the beginning of a new renaissance in which hope has prevailed over fear, and reason over redundancy. Congratulations! This is a day in which we can all be proud to be part of the human race.