

THE RATIONALITY OF FACTS AND VALUES

by *Edward Walter*

ARE HUME'S GROUNDS FOR THE FACT-VALUE GULF VALID TODAY?

The contemporary English-American view is that fact statements and value statements are separated by a logical gulf. It is argued that value statements function in a unique way that is not reducible to the way in which fact statements function. According to this view, value judgments present a logic of their own and can be validated by the application of their own criteria.

The source of the separation of fact statements and value statements is David Hume's famous logical rule which asserts that, since each type of statement belongs in a different category, the latter cannot be deduced from the former. It is important for my purpose to note that it appears at the end of the first part of the third book of *A Treatise of Human Nature*, for I will argue that the basis for the rule is what is said in the earlier parts of this section. I contend that Hume seriously misconceived the reasoning and the evaluative processes, and that his rule rests on these misconceptions. The contemporary philosopher no longer accepts Hume's conceptions of reasoning and evaluating, yet retains the rule without offering a new justification for it. He merely presupposes that there is an essential difference between the two types of statements. I will argue that there is good reason to believe that this rule cannot be justified in light of the contemporary view of the reasoning process. I will try to show that both scientific and value problems require rational processes, and that the obstructions to rational resolutions of ethical disputes encumber scientific advances as well.

Hume begins his discussion of the role of reason in moralizing by noting that moral judgments are intended to influence passions and emotions, which requires an active process. Reason, he argues, cannot account for this activity, for it is a passive process.

Hume's argument is based on the Lockian notion that when we

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reason we passively receive impressions, and that through this process we obtain facts. Since morality is concerned with passions and actions, an active principle is required to direct behavior. Reason, being passive in all its forms, cannot causally influence our emotions or passions. Consequently, emotions and passions are distinct responses which are separated from other emotions and passions in that one cannot affect or be affected by another. This being so, they cannot be said to be true or false. The moral judgment, according to Hume, is the expression of emotion or passion.¹

It certainly follows that, if the Humean description of reasoning and moralizing is correct, then one cannot deduce a value statement from a fact statement. But since he argued that a moral judgment is an expression of emotion or passion that cannot be influenced by reason, the statement of the logical rule adds no information.

I think that most contemporary thinkers recognize that the Humean conceptions of reasoning and moralizing are untenable in light of our present evidence. There is good reason to believe that neither process is purely active or passive, that the gathering of facts is not a value-free process, and that our emotions and evaluations are causally affected by knowledge of facts. The problem for the contemporary philosopher of ethics is to decide to what extent reasoning influences evaluations. It is my impression that the contemporary philosopher who accepts the Humean rule either reverts to the untenable Humean separation of facts and values or merely assumes that they are separate.

In short, I contend that the separation of facts and values has become in our times an unquestioned assumption. In light of our present knowledge, its present status is one of a prejudice. If it is to be retained, new grounds must be offered to support it. Again, in light of our present knowledge, I believe that there is little hope for a new support for this dichotomy.

HUME'S "REASON" AS BAD FOR SCIENCE AS FOR VALUES

If Hume were right about how we reason, morality would not be the only casualty. Science, as has often been noted, would be impossible. If reason be passive in all its forms, as Hume argued, then the scientifically essential conceptions of causality and inductive inference become denuded. The reduction of the former to a regularity of appearances and the latter to probability cannot produce the necessary connection among the relations we observe in experience without which the scientist cannot control and predict. The reliance on emotively

acceptable terms like "probability" cannot disguise the fact that scientific expectation is being reduced to psychological expectation. If regularity of appearance cannot establish a necessary connection among relations (and I agree that it cannot), then it cannot establish probability either. Regularity of appearance refers to the past, not to the future. About this, at least, Hume was right.

However, since my paper is not primarily concerned with the effect of the Humean conception of reasoning on science, I will not develop this point further.

In ethics, his theory reduces the moral judgment to a response that is uncaused by training and conditioning, cannot be causally affected by knowledge of facts that may be acquired, and finally cannot be causally influenced by previous emotional states. Each evaluation is a separate and distinct emotional response which is unrelated to any other.

PERCEPTION NOT PASSIVE AND EMOTION NOT IRRATIONAL

In the first place, the claim that the reasoning process is passive is not supported by the evidence. The contemporary view holds that from the moment of birth perception is an active process. The newborn infant does not passively receive impressions from the world but actively interacts with it. It is a well-attested fact that the environment—at least to a significant, although not complete, extent—determines how we perceive the world. This active process involves the attempt by the organism to satiate biological needs. In the early days of life, these needs are satisfied by the parent or guardian. His or her method of satisfying needs influences later reactions to stimuli. It influences the way we perceive the world. We are not surprised to find that the embryonic patrician perceives the world somewhat differently from the way it is perceived by an individual raised in a Nazi concentration camp. The very uncertainty of life in a concentration camp may cause an individual to observe more closely so that he can be prepared to deal with any threat to his existence. He may also respond more passionately and fearfully to changes in the environmental conditions.

Of course, there are similarities between the experiences of two such individuals. This is attested to by the well-developed state of communication among people. Similarities occur because not only do we act upon our environment but our environment acts upon us. If we were entirely free of outside influences, we would live in a completely subjective world which would make communication impos-

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sible. Despite similarities, however, there are unique aspects to each individual's perception of the world, which results from the particular way in which he has been exposed to the world, the particular way he has learned to respond to it, and the particular condition of his organism.

Modern science, I believe, supports me in this contention. J. Z. Young, for example, investigated the visual learning ability of people who were able to see for the first time in adult life.² His study surprisingly found that visual acuity had to be taught, that his subjects did not make the visual distinctions that ordinary people make. Furthermore, most of his subjects, even after considerable training, found vision disappointing, difficult to master, and an inferior discriminator in comparison with the other senses. Last, he found that only a few learned to read and to use vision as a primary source of experience. These final steps were achieved only when the subjects were convinced of the value of the enterprise.

Just as our reception of the world is not value-free, our emotional life does not develop independently of our past conditioning and our growth of knowledge. It may be interesting to remember that, according to Hume, the emotional life does not grow at all; since every emotional response is a complete whole in itself and unrelated to any other, there can be only capricious, haphazard responses. In this view there obviously can be no continuity in our emotional lives. If an individual responds angrily to a particular stimulus at one moment, we have no reason to expect him to react in the same manner if the stimulus is repeated.

It is believed today that emotions develop as a result of the training—the knowledge and the habits of responding to stimuli—that is developed throughout a lifetime. The bearing that the emotions have on moralizing is also the result of the training one has undergone. In some instances, moral judgments are as Hume described—the expressions of emotional states. But it is important to realize that these uses of emotion result from training and are alterable in light of future training. In other instances, people put aside feelings and emotions in moralizing. And so Major Picquart defended Captain Dreyfus's claim of innocence despite the fact that Picquart, personally, did not like the man and that his own career was threatened by telling the truth.³ According to his own report, he did so because he believed it to be the right thing to do. (Although he might not have been able to give a rational justification for his belief, others can.)

It is important to realize that emotions have the same effect on

science—where reason is supposed to have full sway. When Copernicus disagreed with the Ptolemaic tradition concerning the relationship of celestial bodies and the earth, there were those who argued against his hypothesis on the grounds that it conflicted with the authority of the Bible. Those who defended this position fell into two groups: (1) those who argued through reason that the Bible could be trusted as an authority and (2) those who expressed their emotional preference for accepting the Bible as an authority in spite of the evidence. The former individual could be convinced that his claim was false. The latter could not. In subsequent centuries, the weight of the evidence so strongly supported the Copernican theory that even the latter type of theologian had to give way. But the point is that he did so only under the threat of being discounted as a serious force in the world. In more recent times, the theory of evolution was rejected by some fundamentalist Christians on nonrational grounds because it upset their emotional security. They, too, had to give way. Again, they did so not because of the force of reason but in order to maintain their place of eminence in the modern world.

Emotions interfere with reasoning both in moral evaluations and science. What the emotional states of an individual are and how they are used depend upon the training, which includes knowledge, which one has undergone. The importance of this for ethical theory is that we have not learned to deal with emotion in moral problems, while we have in science.

EMOTIONS AND ATTITUDES CAN BE EXPLAINED AND CHANGED BY BELIEFS

The writings of contemporary followers of Hume (Ayer, Stevenson, Hare, and others) are vague about the nature of emotions. They hold that attitudes ultimately determine moral beliefs. Although reasoning may occur in moralizing, an assumption will be found that contains an attitude (as if attitudes are not found in science!) It is important for the theories of these writers that the terms "attitude" and "emotion" receive more explication than they have been given.

Hume treated "emotions" and "attitudes" as immediate physical reactions to stimuli which must be independent of knowledge. The contemporary emotivist, while he states that he does not accept the Humean conceptions of reason and emotion, still reduces "attitudes" to noncognitive physical processes without explicating how this view differs from Hume's.

It must be granted that each human being has a unique physical

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structure that reacts uniquely to stimuli. Pain, physical exercise, etc., are individually and uniquely experienced. The amount of food required varies according to the composition of the organism. Some individuals, because of their physical structure, require more activity than others; some individuals, because of their auditory acuity, are more sensitive to music. But these physical characteristics are not synonymous with or the sole determinants of attitudes. Attitudes are developed as a result of exposure (the social environment), training, reflection, and, to give Hume his due, base physical endowments. A tone-deaf person will not love music despite his conditioning, and an individual whose hearing is highly sensitive will reap the advantages of a musical environment more readily and happily than his less-endowed brothers and sisters.

Attitudes, then, are dispositions to react favorably or unfavorably to stimuli. Furthermore, modern psychology and sociology credit training as an essential condition of this development. Music lovers are made, not born. Even more, sociologists tell us that the kind of music that is loved is determined by the cultural bias. Philosophy might add that reflection permits one to adjust the influences acting upon us.

If a white individual is repulsed by a black (a feeling) and predisposed to find fault with him (an attitude), beliefs about the constitutional inferiority of the black race and/or fears of the consequences of granting equality to them will be found. It is also certain that new information and training can modify the attitude of the white.

According to Hume and the emotivist, we would expect to find that the emotion and attitudes are independent of the beliefs that the individual has. This is not the case. Neither bigotry nor tolerance occurs apart from a social context in which certain beliefs are held and a certain training has taken place. Similarly, the ability of the individual to modify and alter feelings and attitudes depends upon beliefs that are held about them. In an environment which elevates emotion and deprecates science and rationality, the impact of new information about race will be lessened.

Attitudes, even if they are considered to be the source of moral judgments, are not necessarily independent of knowledge and reason. To assume that some attitudes are independent of knowledge, as Hume and Hare do, begs the question.

MORAL JUDGMENTS MAY ARISE FROM REASONING ABOUT CONSEQUENCES

This being the case, that reasoning can alter attitudes, good reasons

can be given for rationally directing all behavior. I have been arguing that our attitudes and evaluations are the product of our knowledge and our conditioning. In some cases, the conditioning we have been exposed to is the development of a rational process. In other cases, we respond irrationally to stimuli. So, we meet people who argue, in spite of any contrary evidence, that prayer cures disease. We also meet people who capriciously dislike Negroes, foreigners, and communists. As children, they have been taught that certain beliefs, emotions, and values were justified without reason. In such cases we do not say that rational processes are impotent, as Hume did. We say that an individual who has been conditioned in this way has not developed, although he could have, a rational approach to his environment.

The assertion that prayer cures cancer is rejected because we have evidence that other methods may work, while there is no evidence that prayer works. The continuation of this belief in spite of the evidence is dismissed as irrational because we know that only rational processes can, if anything can, guarantee man's end in developing scientific technology, which is for the utilization of the environment to serve his own interests.

Similarly, in the case for values, if I do not learn to develop and to direct my feelings rationally, I cannot master my environment, which is a precondition to self-fulfillment.

The moral philosopher shifted from ethical absolutism to ethical relativism when he discovered that moral rules are man-made means of achieving man's ends. But it does not necessarily follow that man's interests are served by his seeking ill-planned, thoughtless ends. Man's interests may be perceived from a rational understanding of the whole man, that is, an understanding of his psychophysical nature and the social and physical conditions in which he operates. Nonrational interests satisfy only accidentally and capriciously.

While it is true that since each individual's interests, even if rationally derived, are unique because of the distinct nature of his organism and his environment, it does not follow that moral agreements among people cannot be reached. All human beings must interact with the physical and social environment. It is this fact which necessitates the development of a value system.

If no conflicts arise either among a person's own desires (smoking has no consequences other than giving pleasure) or his desires and the desires of other people (my desire for an active night life coincides with my wife's, we have no children, we can afford it, our physical constitutions are such that we can function adequately living this way, etc.),

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then there is no problem of valuation. Problems of valuation arise only when we have conflicts about the consequences of acts.

The possibility of developing a rational system of ethics does not hinge on the possibility of all people finding out through the employment of the rational method that they have the same desires and interests. It hinges on the fact that the best possibility of maintaining one's interests is in rationally resolving disputes with others, since our interests and desires have ramifications for others as well as for ourselves. If we are concerned with our own interests, as the opposition will suggest and I will not deny, then we cannot avoid considering the environmental conditions in which we live, which requires that we, at times, must modify our desires and interests here and now for future interests.

ROLE OF REASON IN CONFLICTS OF VALUES

Many of those who hold the Humean rule might admit that rational processes may be used in *all* cases in order to determine what a person's value system is, but they would argue that this cannot guarantee that *all* moral disagreements among people can be resolved because people have different value systems. They would say that a moral agreement can be logically attained only if both parties to a dispute employ the same moral system. I think that this argument would be made by C. L. Stevenson and R. M. Hare.

Stevenson talks about "attitudes" eventually separating disputants, and Hare, about "decisions in principle" separating them. The point is the same in both cases: the acceptance of the "attitude" or "way of life" upon which the decision in principle is made is, for them, nonfactual.

In order to illustrate my point, I would like to refer to an example used by C. L. Stevenson in *Ethics and Language*. He considers a dispute about whether it is moral to engage in premarital intercourse. One disputant argues in favor of it on the grounds that the reason for the inception of the rule—the possibility of becoming pregnant—has disappeared as the result of the development of birth-control methods. The second disputant argues that this does not change his evaluation, for despite the rule's origin, its continuance can be justified on the grounds that the possibility of pregnancy still exists, that psychological harm can be done to people if the rule is changed, etc. At this point, Stevenson asserts that the problem becomes too complicated for a rational resolution.

As our discussion proceeds, it becomes more and more apparent, particularly since many of the methods can appear in the same argument, and repeatedly, how very complicated ethical questions can become. It is partly for that rea-

son, no doubt, that many people consider certain matters "too sacred" to be freely discussed. The factors that determine what our attitudes are to be are so multitudinous and bewildering that most of us are afraid to face them.⁴

He goes on to say that some people cannot continue to reason about the problem, and that the problem is resolved by a resort to appeals to authority, consensus of opinion, and other informal fallacies.

But to leave the argument at this point is not to prove that rational methods cannot resolve the disagreement, only that, as a matter of fact, they do not in many cases. The fact that people desert rational means of resolving disagreements does not mean that rational methods are impotent at that point. The fact that a man does not accept the scientific evidence that he has cancer does not mean that the scientific evidence is irrelevant to the problem. It only means that he has deserted the rational method.

In the problem of premarital sex, person *A*, who favors it, might go on to point out that person *B* cannot seriously maintain his position, for his argument that the possibility of pregnancy still exists is specious in that the probability is negligible, and if this standard were accepted, we would not even leave our apartments, and, while at home, we would not take the risk of bathing. If *B* argues that the gravity of the problem determines the risk we will take, it can be pointed out to him that for less serious ends he takes great risks with less chance of success than is afforded by this act.

At this point, the disputants may digress into a discussion of the criteria of "gravity." Assuming that both disputants continue to use the rational method, this problem also can be solved.

It can be shown that *B* is applying a criterion of gravity that is not consonant with the facts; that is, the consequences of an accidental pregnancy, although great, are not so great that risks are always inadvisable.

If *B* maintains that he still favors the rule against premarital sex, we would ask for another justification for his claim. If he answers that his attitude determines his decision, then he has deserted the rational method. He can be reminded that the rule was devised in the first place as a means to an end, and that he himself had defended it in the second place as a means to another end. He might be asked why rational arguments were relevant then but are not now that these reasons are no longer tenable. If *B* argues that the reasons did not actually give rise to the evaluations—they are rationalizations—it can be shown that moral injunctions against premarital sex, and other similar rules, were developed as means of resolving problems that arose in different societies. When the rule is retained without a rational justification, we have a

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reliance on attitude, but one that did not have to occur. If it be maintained that some people like *B* are incapable of using rational methods either because of lack of training or constitutional deficiency, he may be reminded that the same fact applies to scientific methods. Not everyone is adequate to be a scientist. This is not a reason for using an alternate method.

A comparison of some scientific disputes—those which broke new ground or upset long-established theories—with ethical disputes would turn up the same complicated arguments. Since disputants were uncertain what assumptions could or could not be relied upon or what direction the investigation would take, only the talented maintained emotional equilibrium throughout the controversy. But science has emerged from its youthful search for a method which deludes observers into oversimplifying its past. Ethics, as John Dewey pointed out, has not yet achieved such a method, since it only recently divorced itself from platonic absolutism.

Again, to return to the dispute, if *B* asserts that the injunction is justifiable simply because of the feelings or attitudes that he has about it, this itself is a moral claim that calls for reasoned support. C. L. Stevenson has attempted to supply it in a recent paper.

"In this realm [of creating values] we are kings, and we debase our kingship if we bow down to nature." . . . When we no longer have to fear that our judgments are unfaithful to something "out there," it may be urged, why should we evince anything more than a half-hearted willingness to revise them? Or alternatively (and the alternative is equally distressing) why should we not revise them capriciously, changing our judgments with each passing whim?²⁵

However, a more scientific picture of man would indicate that we must "bow down to nature" because we are part of nature and cannot avoid natural consequences. We should not revise our attitudes capriciously because we are concerned with consequences. Self-autonomy is desired as a means of attaining and setting ends. Once this is admitted, we acquire responsibility for achieving these enterprises, which requires the intelligent development of ends and the intelligent discernment of means to these ends.

SUMMARY

A number of misconceptions have grown around the distinction between facts and values which obscure their real nature. I have argued through this paper that the ground for the distinction was the mistaken notion that the rational method cannot be used, at least in some cases, to arrive at an evaluation. I have argued that it can be used in principle

in all cases, although it may not, as a matter of fact, resolve every problem. It may not because of any of the following reasons: the unwillingness of the participants to use reason, their inability to use it, lack of information, etc. But these factors impede scientific studies of facts as well as judgments of values.

The psychological factor which led philosophers such as Hume to doubt that rational methods can lead to "moral facts" was that the beliefs in a God-given law and an intuited ideal good were coming under intellectual fire. The other alternative—that moral rules were man-made—was unacceptable because of the platonic prejudice against emotions and appetites. These were considered antirational. Consequently, any judgment based on them must be capricious, relative to the individual, and irrational. I have tried to show that this is not necessarily the case.

What the traditional empiricist who separates facts and values often does is to distinguish the unique characteristics of values from the unique characteristics of physical objects. It is obvious that I do not "see" goodness, while I do "see" stones and water. But perception through sense experience has never been the sole ground for asserting that something is a fact.

Nor can we base the distinction on the grounds that values are personal and alterable, while facts are impersonal and inalterable.

To say that values are personal does not distinguish them from other things about persons that are considered to be factual. Similarly, to say that facts about stones have features that other facts do not have is to identify that subject matter and no more. To say that values are alterable is to point out that they depend on the conditions in which value problems arise. Similarly, to state "facts" about physical objects is to characterize the thing being described under certain conditions. The facts about physical objects are alterable according to the conditions as well as are the facts about values. The alterability of a value that would make it nonrational would be that it is capriciously arrived at and capriciously changed. This would be true if values could only be the random and unexplainable expression of the desires of individuals. Then they also would be subjective and relative. But I have tried to show that while we consider desires in evaluating, we do not reduce one to the other. This follows because desires are not independent of knowledge and training. They arise because of beliefs and training, and can be changed by altering beliefs and by retraining.

The relevant argument for the claim that moral judgments are not factual is to show that rationality is impotent in this regard. Hume tried

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to do this and failed. Contemporary philosophers, like Stevenson, merely assume that rationality is either impotent or limited without proving it. To point out that the rational method is not usually used does not prove that it cannot be used. To point out that moral problems, because of their multiple consequences, are not easy to resolve rationally does not prove that they cannot be so resolved. Both of these points can be made about scientific problems as well. But, the scientist does not on this account desert his method, for he realizes that it is the only method available to him for learning about his physical environment. Similarly, the moralist should not desert the rational method because of the complexity of the problems with which he deals. The alternative is irrationality.

Finally, to assert, as R. M. Hare does, that every ethical argument contains, at least, a suppressed moral premise, assumes that it is thereby nonfactual. His argument only proves that each argument contains assumptions which are undefended in specific contexts. But if this be a defect, science is equally faulted. To conclude that these assumptions are nonfactual requires proof. Hare does not give it; Hume tried and failed.

NOTES

1. David Hume, *A Treatise of the Human Understanding* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958), bk. 3, pt. 1, pp. 456-68.
2. J. Z. Young, *Doubt and Certainty in Science* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960).
3. For maintaining that the truth must be told, Picquart was eventually tried and jailed. Eventually, of course, he was freed and reinstated in the army with the rank of general. Sometimes the truth pays.
4. C. L. Stevenson, *Ethics and Language* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1962), pp. 124-25.
5. Charles L. Stevenson, "Ethical Fallibility," in *Ethics and Society: Original Essays on Contemporary Moral Problems*, ed. Richard T. De George (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1966), p. 212.