

## FACTS AND VALUES AND SCIENCES OF VALUE

*by Joseph Margolis*

The perennial concern of value theory lies with the conceptual connection between facts and values. Sometimes, the question is raised whether "ought" can be derived from "is"; sometimes, whether science is competent to specify the proper values of human nature; sometimes, whether some particular science—evolutionary biology, for instance—is competent to specify certain fundamental or essential or inherent or unavoidable values proper to human nature. As it happens, the detailed questions are quite negligible unless a satisfactory answer may be given about the general relationship between facts and values. Often, this is not fully appreciated, and specialists plunge directly into announcing that certain preferred values (that is, values preferred on some independent ideological grounds) just happen to be vindicated by a "scientific" scrutiny of the conditions of survival of the human species. Kirtley F. Mather, for example, is quite comfortable in declaring: "The history of the hominoid taxon, especially during the last quarter-million years, has been marked by increasingly efficient organization of individuals in societal groups on an amicable basis and by progressive expansion of the territories within which amity is sovereign. Families have banded together into clans, clans have united to form tribes, and tribes have joined together to create nations."<sup>1</sup> He finds that our choices lie between imitating the social insects—"an experiment already tried and found wanting; social insects have existed on a dead level for at least ten million years,"<sup>2</sup> though he admits their survival capacity is nothing short of stunning—and pursuing a "program that allows greater freedom for individuals to respond in their more unique and differing ways to a looser, more abstract, or more generalized definition of the overall societal needs to which individuals are committed by their social training,"<sup>3</sup> which may lead "to the attainment of a truly human civilization" (the norms for specifying which he never provides).<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Stephen C. Pepper, pursuing his well-known theory, declares: "As I read the evidence for an empirical theory of value, there are two opposite dynamic poles for the generation of value—the maximization of individual satisfactions through prudence

Joseph Margolis is professor of philosophy, Temple University.

and intelligent social cooperation, and the continuous necessity of biological adaptation, whatever it may cost in the sacrifice of satisfactions in periods of emergency.”<sup>5</sup> But Pepper never says how the norms associated with either of these two poles are supported on *empirical* grounds or how conflicts between them may be normatively resolved on empirical grounds.<sup>6</sup> The puzzle, in fact, runs through the accounts of all those who are sanguine about the prospects of a science of values. I am not interested in disqualifying such a science out of hand, and I think it would be merely quarrelsome to run through a large sample of supportive views in order to show that the fundamental issues remain unresolved.<sup>7</sup> I can perhaps more usefully attempt to formulate the considerations on which and on which alone the matter of a science of values may be decided.

#### CONSIDERATIONS FOR A SCIENCE OF MORAL VALUES

There are two quite different conceptual issues that hold the key to the relationship between facts and values: one has to do with whether there are formulable distinctions between factual judgments and value judgments and, if so, what they are; the other has to do with whether there are grounds for supposing that normative values may, as such, be cognitively discriminated and, if so, by what mode of sentience or other epistemic power. But since the general question of the relationship between facts and values is normally introduced in order to raise the possibility of a science of moral values, a further issue ought to be canvassed, namely, whether there are formulable differences between moral values and nonmoral values and, if so, what they are. Answers to these questions can be given in entirely straightforward and relatively simple ways, and they are most instructive about the prospects of a science of values or, in particular, of moral values.

The single most important logical consideration regarding factual judgments and value judgments is this: these two sorts of judgments simply do not form coordinate species of a common genus. To grasp this is to appreciate at a stroke that the usual questions about facts and values, about deriving “ought” from “is” and the like, are entirely misconceived. Factual judgments are such in virtue of their being assignable truth values; value judgments are such in virtue of the restricted range of predicates that they employ. Consequently, it is entirely possible that a given judgment be at once a factual judgment and a value judgment. An illustration will make this entirely clear. To judge that Peter murdered Paul is to judge what may be true or false; consequently, it is to make a factual judgment. But murder

is an act which violates a norm of conduct; consequently, to judge someone to be a murderer is to make a value judgment. Murder is one of a very important and ubiquitous range of events which can be identified only within the developed institutionalized life of a human society and only in accord with its rules and norms. Within the boundaries of such a life, facts regarding murder (or illness, theft, winning contests, intelligence, and the like) are as readily established as any concerning events and states of affairs that do not presuppose such norms. For instance, that Peter is a murderer is as straightforwardly a matter of fact as that Leo is a lion; but it is not the case that to predicate being a lion of Leo requires reference to any norm of excellence or merit—all that is needed are marks of sufficient resemblance to admissible specimens of lions, not in any way necessarily distinguished for their excellence. Now, whether given predicates are or are not value-laden, in the sense in which to assign a given property to something entails reference to some norm or rule or standard of excellence or merit or the like, depends on one's theories about the detailed nature of the world (and of course the tenability of those theories).<sup>8</sup> But as far as the logical features of factual judgments and value judgments are concerned, there is no reason why a given judgment should not be at once a factual judgment and a value judgment.

#### FACTUAL AND VALUE JUDGMENTS

It will be useful to add two remarks to give a sense of the flexibility and scope of the thesis here advanced. For one thing, there may well be (and there are) value judgments that are *not* factual judgments; that is, there are judgments that employ value-laden predicates to which we cannot straightforwardly assign truth values. For instance, for value judgments that depend on personal taste and the like, rather than on established norms and rules of merit, the ascription of value cannot be said to be simply true or false. I find John's sister charming and you find that she is not; both of us may defend our judgment, selecting relevant qualities of John's sister in accord with our distinct tastes. We should then have defended our judgments, but they would be contradictories if treated in the same way as the statement that Leo is a lion and the statement that Peter murdered Paul; nor are they judgments that rest on personal tastes as defending reasons, for personal taste is never a reason that, as such, may relevantly be offered to another. I shall say no more about this class of judgments (which I call appreciative judgments), for it does not bear directly on the issue of a science of values.<sup>9</sup> The second amplification is this: "ought" judg-

ments may be shown to fit the formula of value judgments quite simply. Merely construe "ought" as a predicate—for instance, transform all relevant statements by substituting "oughtful" for "ought" (paralleling what is already explicit in the use of "obligatory," "forbidden," and "permissible"); "ought" will be seen to be a ranking attributive that singles out whatever is first, primary, preferred, or the like among a range of possible alternatives. "Ought" is, in this respect, univocal for all normative contexts; and different criteria may be introduced for the ranking relevant to different contexts. The argument need not deter us.<sup>10</sup> But to indicate the competence of our thesis to handle this important kind of judgment explains at a stroke the extraordinary misunderstanding since Hume's day about the alleged derivation of "ought" from "is": it is simply a counterpart error of the one already uncovered regarding facts and values. "Ought" is *not* a copula, as "is" is; consequently, it cannot be made to sort out value judgments and factual judgments. Also, "ought" judgments are readily derived from factual judgments, because the conception of phenomena like murder—that presuppose the institutionalized norms of a society—provide already for the issuance of "ought" judgments. From the *fact* for instance that Peter murdered Paul, it is entirely correct to infer that Peter did what he ought not to have done; if to have murdered Paul is a fact (however special a fact, as our theory of the world should clarify), then it is also a fact that Peter acted as he ought not to have acted. To grasp the point is to appreciate as well the ease with which imperativist, prescriptivist, and emotivist constructions of value judgments may be upset.<sup>11</sup>

#### EMPIRICAL DISCOVERY OF VALUES

The foregoing distinction, however, cannot by itself sustain a would-be science of values, for a science of values requires not only that statements ascribing value be assignable truth values but also that the values ascribed be open, in some relevant sense, to empirical discovery. *This* thesis is not nearly so easy to support. To see where the difficulty lies, we must consider a trivial (but entirely defensible) form of a science of values. Admit, therefore, the normative conventions of a society (regarding for instance illness, conformity to law, moral excellence, academic beauty, and the like), and admit the force of our sketch of the sense in which a judgment may be at once a factual judgment and a value judgment. A science of value would, on such a foundation, merely concern the corpus of true statements compatible with the conventions laid down. A judge and a physician, for instance, would, in

## ZYGON

rendering their usual judgments (as that someone is guilty of a felony or ill because of some disease), be practicing a specialized science of value. There is also, as the illustrations should make clear, no lack of complexity and special skills involved in the practice of such a science. The triviality lies elsewhere, for the ulterior question must be met, whether the norms on which the practice of medical and legal science depend are themselves, in some relevant sense, open to scientific discovery. The answer—to resist any kind of hedging at all—is simply, No. Once certain fundamental conventions of a normative sort are admitted, one may well extend the system of such norms by what may fairly be called discovery. For example, given certain models of health (let us say, models in which certain preferred homeostatic systems are taken as normative), medical science may, by drawing suitable analogies, enlarge and alter our knowledge of the conditions of health.<sup>12</sup> The same is true for the prospects of political science, economic science, legal science, moral science, and the like. The ulterior question still remains: are there any norms that may be assigned to man on the basis of some empirical discoveries respecting his very nature? Again, the answer must be, No.

The trouble with taking an affirmative stand on this issue is itself of a dual sort. For one thing, there appears to be no convincing argument to support the claim of a distinctive cognitive capacity (as, for instance, of moral intuition or moral perception) by which valuational properties may, as such, be discovered; and all the otherwise empirically discoverable properties of men and of whatever else in the world is said to exhibit values may be admitted and accounted for, without foreclosing in the least on the most radical quarrels about which alternative norms these are to be subsumed under. In fact, it makes no difference, from this point of view, whether cognitivism with respect to values takes a nonnaturalistic (that is, intuitionistic) form or a naturalistic form (that is, one that avoids assuming odd cognitive capacities and merely defines certain empirically discriminable properties as normative ones). The second difficulty is that it is possible to classify creatures as men—much as one may classify creatures as lions—without any reference to norms or standards of excellence of any sort, relying entirely on resemblance to admissible specimens: there is nothing in the concept of being a man that obliges us to admit certain norms as essential to man's nature in any sense that compares favorably with that in which artifacts and systems having a function or role assigned to them (by men) cannot be understood without reference to some system of norms.<sup>13</sup> Given the function of a knife,

for example, one can judge whether a particular knife is good in some relevant way; and to understand what it is to be a knife is to understand its function and, therefore, the norms with respect to which its functioning may be appraised. If man had a function like a knife (if, for instance, God gave him a function or nature impressed a certain role on him), then a science of values—in the full-fledged sense—might be possible. But as soon as we speak of what human interests, wants, desires, and the like actually are and then proceed to intrude notions of “normality,” “rationality,” “maturity,” “ideal values,” and the like, we find we have slipped from speaking about what people happen to value (in the sense of what, in fact, they happen to prefer and savor—regardless of what it is) to speaking of what they ought to value or what (even more mysteriously) they *really* value. This, I think, is a much more serious argumentative weakness than the one that Hume thought he had uncovered. I submit that there is no sense in which the institutionalized norms of a society may be said to be discovered. But, as it happens, there is no need to discover them, in the sense that *all* discourse about the defense or reform of existing norms can proceed only in a piecemeal way, appraising some subsystem against the backdrop of other operative norms. To try to get behind such conventions to discover the true or real values of human nature is simply to practice the incomprehensible. Rational disputes about values concern only the possible reorganization of the normative values that happen to obtain in different societies; debate proceeds by way of maximizing internal coherence and scope and minimizing arbitrariness—that is, in accord with relatively specialized (and non-question-begging) norms of argument. But it is notoriously clear that such constraints provide more than ample room for the admissibility of very nearly all strenuously competing points of view.

#### IMPOSSIBILITY OF A SCIENCE OF VALUES

The final question about moral and nonmoral values does not bear directly on the prospects of a science of values; it concerns rather the application of arguments bearing on such prospects of the sort already sketched. A simple, threefold distinction will make this clear. First of all, values, in an important sense, are either normative or non-normative. Values, in the nonnormative sense, concern merely whatever men (or other creatures) actually value—in the sense of like, dislike, prefer, and so on. That is, values, in this sense, are largely confined to whatever conforms to certain relevantly selected behavioral criteria. Thus, a man values a certain object if he is prepared to part with his

money or to exchange his labor for it. There is no mystery here; the only interesting disputes concern what, given some reasonably explicit criteria of such value, human beings may be found to value and disvalue under changing circumstances. Such values do not, as such, concern arguments and supporting reasons for judgments of value—though, of course, they may well be the result (causally) of attending to certain arguments and would-be supporting reasons. But normative values are, as such, the objects of reasoned judgments, whatever may be rationally discriminated in accord with formulable norms of merit and excellence. They may, of course, be absorbed in the nonnormative sense (presumably, this is the point of indoctrination of any sort). But to say that something has a measure of value is simply to grade or rank it with respect to some rule or norm; and to do this is to render an arguable judgment of some sort.

Now, with respect to normative values, we may distinguish between overriding values and those that are not overriding. What I mean is this. *Given* certain interests on the part of human beings, and the norms relevantly formulated to service such interests, various things in the world may be evaluated, that is, judged in accord with assignable norms. Given, for example, a community's interest in establishing an empire, certain strategies may be appraised as good or excellent or poor. The judgments thus rendered will obviously concern normative values (since they concern the application of norms to a given range of things), but they will not, as such, concern overriding values because they will not concern whether the interests originally given ought to take precedence over all other possible interests. Moral values are, precisely, those that concern overriding (normative) values and not merely the (conditionally) normative values to which we may happen to subscribe.

Human beings, we may say, prize and prefer (value) this and that according to their highly variable and highly impressionable inclinations and tastes. As rational beings, they reflect on their behavior, and, subscribing to particular norms that accord with their interests, they judge whether this or that has value; that is, they evaluate things. But, again, *as* rational agents, they are bound to evaluate their provisional and serial interests and to subscribe to norms for the ordering of all their energies in terms of overriding objectives. So it is, precisely, the conditional nature of certain piecemeal norms that misleads us into thinking that we may similarly assume *what* the moral interests of man are. A moment's reflection, however, will expose the error. If a man sets about practicing as a thief, he will quite unexceptionally

subscribe to certain appropriate norms; whether he ought to practice as a thief, in the sense of whether—all things considered—the energies of his life ought to be directed to this as his supreme goal is a question that simply does not arise. It will arise for a rational being, but it is not a question that concerns the application of the norms governing his practice; it is a question concerning the justification of his very practice. On the other hand, it is entirely reasonable to suppose that all men have certain basic and similar interests, for instance, an interest in preserving one's life. These form a family that may be called prudential interests: they are presumptive interests based on large empirical samples, and they are not particularly specialized interests in the sense in which thieving is. Also, however, they remain contingent interests. They are not interests that a man cannot give up without sacrificing coherence or rationality or his essential nature; for example, a man may deliberately give up his life—whether by sacrifice for an allegedly higher cause or by suicide in the face of a loss of interest in life itself—and yet one cannot conclude merely from that that he does not subscribe to some coherent system of norms. So, technical norms (like those of empire-building and thieving) and prudential norms (like those of preserving one's life) are quite dispensable, consistently with man's being a rational agent (though the onus clearly rests with anyone who goes decidedly contrary to the presumptive interests of prudent men); and moral norms (that is, norms governing overriding values) are themselves bound to be notably variable and divergent, given that there is no prospect of a science of value, in the strenuous sense previously specified. In fact, to specify, as we have, *what* is involved in a would-be science of moral values is to expose at a stroke the incredibly ambitious purpose of whoever would pretend to have contributed to it.

In any case, it is clear that, in the sense in which a science of values is viable, it is logically trivial (though of great practical importance) and that in the sense in which disputes about normative values are themselves at stake—about which norms are the correct ones for human nature to be governed by—a science of values is quite impossible.

#### NOTES

1. Kirtley F. Mather, "The Emergence of Values in Geologic Life Development," *Zygon* 4 (1969):22.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 23.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 22.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 23.



## ZYGON

5. Stephen C. Pepper, "Survival Values," *Zygon* 4 (1969):11.
6. See Joseph Margolis, "Professor Pepper on Value Theory," *Ethics* 69 (1959):134-39.
7. I have aired this somewhat more fully in *Psychotherapy and Morality* (New York: Random House, 1966).
8. See Joseph Margolis, "Value Judgments and Value Predicates," *Journal of Value Inquiry* 1 (1967-68):161-71.
9. Ibid.
10. See Joseph Margolis, "The Analysis of 'Ought,'" *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* (1970), in press.
11. See Joseph Margolis, "The Use and Syntax of Value Judgments," *Journal of Value Inquiry* 2 (1968):31-40.
12. See Joseph Margolis, "Illness and Medical Values," *Philosophy Forum* 8 (1969): 55-76.
13. See Joseph Margolis, "Classification and the Concept of Goodness," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 41 (1963):182-85.