THE SPECTER OF HUME

by George B. Wall

In response to the articles in *Zygon* (March 1969), I would first of all like to make three general observations:

1. No one has ever denied that evaluating is a fact of human existence, and that factual disciplines can discover what man's evaluations have been, what they are, and even what they probably will be. What has been denied is that from a mere description of man's evaluations, one set of evaluations may be selected over another. Unless every evaluation of man is considered to be equally acceptable (in which case one has, in effect, abandoned evaluation), some means of selection is called for. The question is whether a strictly factual survey of man's evaluations provides for the selection of this means.

2. Evaluative responses are undoubtedly expressions of the total person in the sense that they are conditioned by man's nature and culture. However, man's cultures are immensely diverse as are the viewpoints of what constitutes man's nature. Assuming, though, that there is agreement concerning man's nature, the problem is that of selecting those aspects of human nature and culture that are to be fulfilled, or are to be given the greatest emphasis in fulfillment. Again a means of selection is required, and the question is how a strictly factual description of man's nature and culture is going to provide for the selection of this means.

3. The specter of Hume has haunted modern moral theory, and it is not about to disappear. Hume's point about the distinction between the "is" and the "ought" is essentially a point about deductive logic—the conclusion of a valid argument may not contain terms which are not at least implicit in the premises. I do not see how Hume's conception of valid deductive reasoning can be faulted. Certainly John R. Searle in his article, "How to Derive 'Ought' from 'Is',"[1] does nothing to reveal inadequacies in Hume. In deriving the normative conclusion, "Jones ought to pay Smith," Searle employs the factual premise, "Jones promised to pay Smith." But Searle carefully notes that "promising is, *by definition,* an act of placing oneself under an obligation."[2] Searle also employs the premises, "All those who place themselves under an

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obligation are, other things being equal, under an obligation," and "Other things being equal, one ought to do what one is under obligation to do."[3] These premises are tautological, according to Searle, which means in the case of the former premise that if one places himself under obligation, then, by definition, he is under obligation, other things being equal; and in the case of the latter premise that if one is under obligation, then, by definition, he ought to do what he is under obligation to do, other things being equal. It is perfectly clear, of course, that this last mentioned premise introduces the term required for the conclusion, namely, "ought." It is also clear that statements that are tautologies are not factual in the sense of depending upon observation or experience for verification. Whatever may be said on this topic, I would say that one of the values of Searle's analysis is that it reveals that normative terms may be introduced by definition, not merely by value statements or moral principles. In any case, Hume's point about deductive reasoning has not, and, I believe, cannot be faulted. The only way to get around Hume, then, would be to say that moral reasoning is nondeductive. Obviously Searle is no illustration of nondeductive reasoning. Moreover, the question is what this other form of reasoning might be. Everyone is well aware that reasons and reasoning in normal moral discourse hardly ever even begin to measure up to a rigorous deductive model. But everyone is also aware that normal discourse is very loose and incomplete. The question is whether the reasoning would be nondeductive if it were completely and rigorously developed.

Having made these observations, I should now like to raise several questions about values, after which I shall return to a discussion of the problem of deriving norms from facts, giving particular attention to the problem as it relates to ethics.

SOME QUESTIONS ABOUT VALUE

Suppose that agreement has been reached that value-disvalue is to be understood in terms of desire-aversion. I, for one, accept this viewpoint. However, I always wonder about the additional terms introduced in value discussions, particularly the notoriously vague terms, "need," and "drive." Are both these terms synonymous with "desire"? If so, I have no further questions. If not, then the following questions arise. How is a need, for example, different from a desire? What are the tests for a need that would not also be tests for a desire? Is a desire for anything, the achievement of which brings satisfaction, a need? It is certainly a fact that desires are culturally conditioned; indeed, many are

entirely cultural in origin. Thus, if a warrior has been conditioned to find satisfaction in the excitement and risk of headhunting, may he not be said to have a need for the practice of headhunting? Or if a Hindu mystic has been conditioned to find satisfaction in the mystic way of life, may he not be said to have a need for the mystic life? In both cases does not one have a need in Pepper's sense[4] of "a pattern of tensions with accompanying conditions of satisfaction"?

The matter of mystic experience raises another point. How is one to rate values? Perhaps the major disagreements in mankind are not disagreements about whether something is a value, but whether one value is to be rated above another. Is mystic experience the highest value? The mystics—from both East and West—certainly thought so. And numerous mystics have not been ascetics all their lives. Often they have at one time enjoyed the satisfactions of comfortable living and loving companionship. Yet they have jettisoned these satisfactions for the pursuit of mystic experience, maintaining all the while that no satisfaction is comparable to the satisfaction of mystic experience. What is the "scientific study of value" going to say about the mystic? About all it does reveal is that mystics are very scarce. But does it reveal that no more or even that all persons could not be mystics, or that the mystics' priorities are incorrect?

Indeed, the discussion of the mystic raises interesting questions about the value of survival. Since the Hindu mystic is seeking *Moksha,* release from the cycle of life with its reincarnations, what is his interest in survival for himself, not to mention the rest of mankind?

The question of the rating of values, particularly survival, returns us directly to the question of norms. I should like to discuss this question in terms of fundamental ethical norms.

FACTS AND FUNDAMENTAL ETHICAL NORMS

In order to relate the question of ethical norms to questions of value, I shall state the ethical question as follows: What is the norm for value achievement, That is, in any given situation, what should one try to achieve with respect to values? To say with Leavenworth[5] that one must meet the requirements—the needs, desires, and interests—of the situation is to say something extremely vague. I suppose that her norm is essentially that one should maximize value in a situation. Since Leavenworth is liable not to like my restatement, I shall adhere to her language, and raise the following questions. First of all, whose requirements are to be considered in a situation? Presumably, every one's requirements in a situation are to be considered. But which are to be

met? Again the answer is, I suppose, that as many requirements as possible are to be met. But this opens up the old question of whether all requirements are of equal status. However, the important point to note is that Leavenworth has a norm—to meet as many requirements as possible in a situation. Neglecting the vagueness of even this norm, the question is how did she get this norm? From what facts was it derived? Certainly she does not believe that a factual survey reveals that all persons have this norm. How, then, was it selected? Suppose, for example, that an ethical egoist confronts her with his norm. Why should her norm be selected over his? A standard objection to ethical egoism is that it is inconsistent. Let us assume that ethical egoism is rejected on this basis. But is it rejected, then, on factual grounds? Does not rejection of ethical egoism on these grounds indicate that ethical egoism has violated the *norm* of inconsistency? As a consequence, one has not eliminated ethical egoism on the grounds of some fact, but a norm. If someone were to contend that this norm is a fact of human existence, I would agree, but so is the denial of the norm, otherwise why are some people ethical egoists? But to speak of the norm as a fact of human existence is confusing to say the least. Everything that man desires, thinks, imagines, or expresses, including self-contradictions, is a fact of human existence. What we are trying to determine is why certain facts of man's existence, in the present case, why certain norms, are to be preferred to others. And the question is how a factual survey of man and his norms will ever discover the answer.

Thus, one can go on to ask, On the basis of what facts will the differences between a utilitarian and nonutilitarian theory be resolved? An act-utilitarian argues that the value consequences of an action are the only matters of relevance in determining the rightness of an act, such as promise keeping or punishing a person; whereas a nonutilitarian argues that value consequences are not the only matters of relevance—a promise ought to be kept and the innocent ought not to be punished, even though breaking the promise or punishing the innocent would have somewhat greater overall value. What scientific investigations will decide between these two norms? How will the superiority of one be deduced from any set of "facts? Indeed, if Leavenworth believes that her standard is different from act-utilitarianism, by what factual considerations does she show the superiority of her standard to act-utilitarianism? What study of human nature will ever decide that question?

If one should maintain that survival is the ultimate value, and that an ethical principle must be designed in order to achieve survival,

then we are no closer to deciding between at least several ethical principles, for it appears very clear to me that a number of different principles would equally achieve survival—act-utilitarianism, a position such as Ross's, a Kantian position, Dewey's position, and probably even ethical egoism. Besides, survival is obviously not the only consideration. Few would deny it as a necessary condition of any moral principle, but just as few would admit it as a sufficient condition. The real question is the quality of life, not mere survival.

Thus, up to this point, it is far from clear how the difficulties in selecting fundamental ethical norms can be resolved by an appeal to facts about the nature of man or his culture. How, then, are fundamental ethical norms to be selected? I would like to suggest a means.

A Proposal for Selecting Fundamental Ethical Norms

The basic problem in selecting fundamental or underived norms is that as long as the norms are self-consistent there just does not seem to be any means for selecting one as opposed to another besides the sheer approval or dispproval of qualified persons, where a qualified person is one who is in a normal state of mind, and who is reflective, sufficiently informed, and capable of logical reasoning. In other words, no independent tests besides the approval or disapproval of qualified persons seem to be possible in the case of underived moral judgments. Thus, if two self-consistent underived norms conflict, such as in the case of a utilitarian as opposed to a nonutilitarian norm, the only method of selection is to get the response of qualified persons. If these persons differ, then selection does not seem possible, and an irreducible relativism with respect to the norms would be present. But if agreement were reached on one norm, it would, by the very fact of agreement, have been selected. If an objection were to be raised to the norm, on what grounds would it be raised? Would it not, in order to be a reasonable objection, have to be an objection which would be recognized by any qualified person? But to say that agreement is reached with respect to a norm is simply to say that any qualified person would not have any objection to it.

What I have just offered as a method for selecting norms could be formalized in the following principle.

UNJ: An underived normative moral judgment (where a normative judgment
is one which all persons ought to select as a principle of judgment) is
a moral judgment which would not be derived from another moral judgment (or judgments), or another moral judgment (or judgments) in
conjunction with a factual judgment (or judgments), and which would

be agreed to after careful reflection by any person in a normal state of mind, who was sufficiently informed and capable of logical reasoning.

Obviously numerous terms in UNJ need clarification. However, what I wish to emphasize is that, on the approach that I am suggesting, the question of the normative nature of some judgment becomes a strictly factual question: Would the judgment be agreed to by any ———? On this approach, of course, any decision concerning the normative status of some judgment would be most tentative. The requirement of sufficiency of information should indicate this. Sufficiency of information is an ideal which is only approached at any given stage of man's history. The requirement to get the response of any qualified person even more clearly indicates the tentative nature of a decision concerning the normative status of some judgment. The term "any" is without restriction as to culture or time.

By saying that the question of the normative status of some judgment is a strictly factual question, I may be accused of having refuted my own remarks about Hume. Yet I would simply note that the determination of the status of a judgment ultimately rests on UNJ, and UNJ is a norm. Or rather, to be more precise, UNJ is a proposed definition of "underived normative moral judgment." As a definition it functions as the norm for determining whether or not some moral judgment is an underived normative moral judgment. If questions were to be raised about UNJ, my only response would be: What else would one propose as the criterion for *reasonable* selection of underived ethical norms?

NOTES

1. John R. Searle, *Philosophical Review* 73 (1964):43–58.
2. Ibid., p. 45; my emphasis.
3. Ibid., p. 46.
4. Stephen C. Pepper, "Survival Value," *Zygon* 4 (1969):6.
5. May Leavenworth, "On Integrating Fact and Value," *Zygon* 4 (1969):33–43.