

A FACT IS A FACT IS A FACT

by George B. Wall

The recent discussions in *Zygon* concerning the relationship between facts and norms have provided for a clarification and sharpening of many of the issues.¹ It is my desire to clarify several of the issues still further.

FACT-NORM RELATIONSHIPS

First of all, I would say that theorists generally admit that there is some form of relationship between facts or factual beliefs and norms. The question is, What sort of relationship? In many cases, the answer must be, A logical relationship. For example, if it is a fact that a norm is inconsistent, and any inconsistent norm is, by definition, inadequate, then it necessarily follows that the norm is inadequate. Or, if it is a fact that a norm is empirically impossible (requires action inconsistent with natural law), and it is assumed that any adequate norm must be empirically possible, then, again, it necessarily follows that the norm is inadequate. Or, if it is a fact that a person accepts one norm, then it necessarily follows that he may not at the same time accept another norm inconsistent with the first. Or, if a person accepts the norm that mistreating others is wrong, then if it is a fact that he mistreated another, he must necessarily deduce that he did what was wrong. All these points, though, are not very interesting, for they are entirely consistent with the fact-norm thesis stated by Hume, namely, that a normative conclusion may not be derived from factual premises. In each of the above cases a normative premise is either explicit or implicit. Note, for example, that in the first two cases the concept of adequacy is a normative concept. Thus, all the above cases would only confirm the thesis of Hume. Is it possible to shake his thesis?

Any attempt to shake the thesis must start with a norm which is not derived from another norm. Such a norm would be a fundamental or end norm. The question, then, is: Could facts ever resolve a dispute over fundamental norms by logically requiring one of the

¹George B. Wall is associate professor of philosophy at Lamar University, Beaumont, Texas.

disputants to change his position? Suppose that a person, *P*, does not believe that it is wrong to mistreat others as long as doing so would maximize his value. In other words, suppose that *P* accepts the egoistic norm that he ought to maximize his value.² If this norm is a fundamental norm for him (he would not derive it from any other), what fact will logically require him to admit that action which maximizes his value, but does not maximize the value of others, is wrong? How would acquiring belief in some fact or set of facts logically require him to change his end norm?

Now the question here is not whether there is or could be a causal relationship between some factual belief (or beliefs) which *P* has or might have and his end norm, but whether there is a logical relationship. I would hold that, along with culture, social and physical environment, and biological and psychological constitution, a person's factual beliefs could be causally related to his end norms. Yet, how would a causal relationship between a belief (or beliefs) and an end norm (or norms) of some person be demonstrated? By showing that (1) the person did not think that a change in the belief would provide him with logical grounds for changing the norm, and (2) the norm would, nevertheless, change with a change in the belief. Granting the possibility that beliefs and end norms are causally related, one must also grant the possibility that, if everyone had only true beliefs causally related to end norms, everyone would hold the same end norms. However this may be, I would say that if there is a causal relationship between some *true* belief (or beliefs) and some end norm (or norms), this relationship may be characterized as broadly rational. Since demonstrating a causal relationship between true beliefs and end norms is, for the most part, simply out of the question (a person's beliefs cannot be changed on demand), the possibility of the relationship may be provided for by requiring that persons meet the ideal of holding the full system of true beliefs. Of course, this requirement would also provide for only true beliefs being employed in deductions of means norms, a provision which must be met if means norms are to be rational. Thus, I would say that, to the extent that a person meets the ideal of holding the full system of true beliefs, to that extent he has met a necessary condition for making rational normative judgments. This is why I said in an earlier article that a qualified moral judge must be informed.³

But back to *P*. If an end norm of the type held by *P* is not logically related to any fact which he does or might believe, then the only possible relationship between his beliefs and the norm is causal. The question, though, is whether there is some fact which is *logically* related to his norm and which would require him to change it.

ZYGON

ARE THERE VALUE-LADEN FACTS?

Suppose that *P* performs an act which maximizes his value but which is inimical to the security and survival of his society or of mankind. What fact could be adduced to show him that this act is wrong? Is it the fact that his action is inimical to survival? But how may he, from this fact, deduce that his action is wrong? Is it because the fact is really not *just* a fact but is, as May Leavenworth says, a fact which is not value free? But isn't this begging the question? Let us analyze the matter more carefully.

Leavenworth says that "certain facts, such as the fact that certain behavior patterns adapt man to survival, are not value free. This fact provides the basis for what Pepper calls the 'adaptive selection system,' which has as its values the social security and survival of the species."⁴ The question is how the fact cited provides the *basis* for the adaptive selective system and how this selective system is the *source* (to use the language of Pepper) of the values of social security and survival. Since Leavenworth is following Pepper at this point, let us see what his views on the subject are.

According to Pepper, "social situations tend to develop social institutions with special sanctions and cultural patterns embodying the experience of human societies."⁵ These social institutions with their sanctions and behavior patterns are, in effect, social selective systems, which are, of course, subject to natural selection, that is, subject to the adaptive selective system. A social system will be adaptive if it meets the demands of the adaptive selective system, in short, if it is consistent with survival. Similarly, any behavior pattern of a social system will be adaptive if it meets the demands of the adaptive selective system. But why is the fact that a social system or behavior pattern is adaptive a value-laden fact? Is it because the adaptive selective system is the *source* of survival value? But why is the adaptive selective system the *source* of survival value? Is it because the fact that something is adaptive is value laden? An argument of this sort would clearly be circular. Yet what other argument is available? The points at issue are whether some facts are value laden and where the adaptive selective system is the source of survival value. How will either point ever be established without simply assuming one or the other first of all?

The question, then, is, What fact has yet been enunciated that would require any individual or society which did not have social survival as a norm to deduce that acts inimical to social survival were wrong? All that we can say is that adaptive social systems, which are admittedly empirically describable, only enculturate behavior patterns con-

sistent with the conditions of social survival. Social selective systems which are not adaptive do not enculturate only such behavior patterns, and, as a result, the societies of which they are a part will not, over a period of time, be likely to survive. This, indeed, is just what we mean when we say that the social systems are not adaptive.

Now let us be perfectly clear as to what has just been said. The term "behavior pattern" seems to refer to *general kinds* of action—for example, stealing, keeping one's promise, or maximizing one's value. I assume, then, that in saying that a behavior pattern, such as maximizing one's value, is nonadaptive, the idea is not that every act which maximizes an agent's value will lead immediately to the demise of society, but that some acts of this kind (such as *P*'s) are inimical to the survival of society. Thus, a society with a nonadaptive behavior pattern may very well survive over a long period of time—because the circumstances giving rise to the action which would prove disastrous to social survival may simply not have arisen. The Navajos, for example, have been around for a while, although, according to John Ladd, they follow an egoistic ethic,⁶ which Leavenworth considers nonadaptive. Similarly, it would be difficult to prove that egoists, from Epicurus to the present, have generally come to an early end.

The question remains, then, as to what fact will convince our egoist, *P*, that his nonadaptive act was wrong. And it should be noted that referring to an egoist is not at all artificial. Pepper holds that, besides the adaptive selective system, there is the purposive selective system, which has as its values individual satisfactions.⁷ He must somehow show how conflicts between the two selective systems will be resolved. Presumably, he would say that an adaptive social system instills survival value as superior to the values of the purposive selective system. Yet, since no social selective system is 100 percent effective at enculturation, what is to be said in the case of individuals who are missed? We come back, then, to *P*. If the social system is not the source of the norm of social survival in *P*, that is, if the norm has not been enculturated in *P*, how will reciting the fact that his action does not achieve social survival ever require him to deduce that his action was wrong? If "wrong" is not being defined so as to guarantee the conclusion, is some new form of inference being used?

Perhaps the ethical egoist is, in Leavenworth's words, an alienated self. But I am quite certain that she is factually incorrect in saying that he would have no power to achieve his values. Some egoists may not have the power, but others very well may. And, again, to call his values artificial⁸ is, I think, a reversion to question begging.

The conclusion is that the facts cited by Leavenworth and Pepper

ZYGON

are certainly not facts which would logically require *P* to deduce that his action is wrong. And, of course, we have not even begun to deal with questions such as, What fact will ever decide the question as to whether a promise may be broken if the overall utility of breaking the promise would be equivalent to or slightly greater than the utility of keeping the promise?

NOTES

1. *Zygon*, vol. 4 (March 1969 and September 1969).
2. I am assuming that ethical egoism may be stated so that it is not inconsistent. See John Hospers, "Baier and Medlin on Ethical Egoism," *Philosophical Studies* 12 (1961): 10-16; Peter H. Hare, "In Defense of Impersonal Egoism," *Philosophical Studies* 17 (1966): 94-95; Roger Donway, "Can Egoists Be Consistent?" *Ethics* 80 (1969): 50-51.
3. See George B. Wall, "The Specter of Hume," *Zygon* 4 (1969): 272-73.
4. May Leavenworth, "On the Impotence of Unnatural Values," *Zygon* 4 (1969): 284.
5. Stephen C. Pepper, "On a Descriptive Theory of Value," *Zygon* 4 (1969): 263.
6. John Ladd, *The Structure of the Moral Code* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967), pp. 277 ff.
7. Stephen C. Pepper, "Survival Value," *Zygon* 4 (1969): 11.
8. Leavenworth, p. 285.