

SOME REMARKS ON WALL'S "A FACT IS A FACT IS A FACT"

by Stephen C. Pepper

Professor George B. Wall's article "A Fact Is a Fact Is a Fact" raises a number of issues which, as he says, seem to need further clarification. Wall's position, as I read the article, is a qualified form of a descriptive value theory. Facts are relevant to values, and declarative sentences (true or false) can be made about values in connection with the relevant facts. He does not take an emotivist's position that value judgments are in the nature of commands, wishes, persuasions, and the like, neither true nor false. He singles out particularly a number of types of normative judgments that are dependent on facts and consequently true if they comport with the facts. For instance, if it is a fact that a person holds an inconsistent norm, "it necessarily follows that the norm is inadequate." Also, "if it is a fact that a norm . . . 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." And so also with a person holding at the same time norms inconsistent with each other. The consequence of holding norms like the above types is that value judgments based on them will turn out to be factually false in some way, thus revealing their inadequacies.

On the basis of these principles, Wall then asks the pertinent question as to what would induce a person to change his norm if some other person regarded it as inadequate. He states the question in a much more complicated way, but this is the gist of it. My answer in terms of a descriptive theory of value would ultimately be simply by the experimental test as to whether the norm when followed in practice led to its falsification in terms of its requirements and expectations. The frustrations testifying to the inadequacy of the norm might be due to an inconsistency in it or to its expressing supposed causal connections contrary to fact (i.e., "inconsistent with natural law"). This simple consequence for the verification or falsification

Stephen C. Pepper, who was invited to comment on Wall's manuscript, sent these remarks shortly before he died on May 1, 1972. He was Mills Professor of Intelligence and Moral Philosophy and Civil Polity Emeritus, University of California, Berkeley.

ZYGON

of a norm seems to me to follow directly from the principles Wall lays down at the beginning, regarding the relation of norms to facts.

However, Wall's position implicitly appears to hold that an ethical norm is in the nature of a concept supported by an individual person's beliefs. Such a norm does institute selective action. But it leads to an unnecessarily restricted individualistic theory of values. In my view an individual's personal norms depend very largely on overindividual social institutions, and these, in turn, on natural selective systems such as certain psychological laws of behavior and the biological laws of adaptive selection. These natural selective systems may be described and set up as private conceptual norms by individuals as with the ethical egoist Wall pictures. Or they may be set up as an egoistic institutional cultural pattern of social behavior, as Wall points out John Ladd found practiced by the Navajos. But such conceptual and institutional norms must still find their justification under psychological, social, and environmental conditions which support and verify them. We know, however, that they do not *always* hold. They are justifiable only under certain factual conditions favorable to such behavior. And at such times they are appropriate. There is no reason to assume that ethical norms have to be absolute and hold under all conditions. Experience testifies to the contrary.

In my study in *The Sources of Value* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1958), I find interrelated series of ethical norms, with two poles of "end norms," as Wall calls them—the pole of maximizing human satisfactions at one end, and biological adaptation for survival value at the other. And I am careful to indicate the conditions under which action in the direction of one pole or the other is appropriate. Wall asks the rhetorical question: "What fact has yet been enunciated" to establish that "acts inimical to social survival were wrong?" My answer, clearly enunciated in my treatment, is the impact of "social pressure." If the social pressure is low, as in times of prosperity, an ethics of satisfaction is appropriate; but when the social pressure is high, failure to be regulated by the demands of adaptation leads inevitably to social disintegration. A reflection of this law can also apply to an individual in the course of his personal activity.

In short, in my view the ultimate norms are the actual natural norms of selective systems, and the conceptual norms of private individuals which Wall emphasizes are but shadows of the factual natural sanctions which can justify them.