

THE FACT-VALUE DICHOTOMY

The individual who has the freedom to choose his values may feel his freedom not as an emancipation but as a burden. The tension he has to face is : how to keep values distinct from facts on the one hand and from 'mere' preferences on the other. The problem of the fact-value dichotomy has received somewhat similar answers both from many Anglo-Saxon philosophers and from many continental philosophers. For many of the latter, it is of the very nature of the situation in which individuals find themselves that they have no other way but to create their own values, while for many of the former, the impossibility of deriving value-judgments from statements of facts is purely logical.¹

In effect the main contention of the thesis of the autonomy of morals is that there is a fundamental distinction between statements of the facts of any situation and expressions of approval or disapproval of those facts. Two persons may describe a particular situation in the same way, but may evaluate it in different ways. The fact that two persons agree on how a particular situation has to be described (or reported) does not imply that they also agree about their approval or disapproval of it.

On what grounds does the distinction between description and evaluation rest ? Are evaluations distinguished from descriptions simply in view of the obvious differences between attitudes of different individuals ? Can disagreement about valuations be traced back to disagreement in likes and dislikes ? This, in fact, is the answer given by some logical positivists. According

to Ayer², for example, value-judgments are nothing but the expression of the feelings of the speaker. For Stevenson³, value-judgments express the preferences of the speaker and serve to persuade the hearer. 'This is good' means 'I prefer doing it : do it likewise'. For the logical positivists and the emotivists to say that something is 'good' is to say that it is something that someone or other prefers. The main objection raised against the view that value-judgments 'merely' state or express preferences is that on this view value-judgments turn out to be basically irrational. If value-judgments state or express preferences alone, there seems to be no way of explaining (other than in terms of a clash or conflict of preferences) such statements as "I ought to do it, although I don't want to" or "This is 'good' for him although he may not like it". In fact words like 'ought', 'right', 'good' etc, derive crucial part of their meaning from a contrast between the language of value and the language of preference. The language of value differs as much from the language of preference. The language of value differs as much from the language of description.

The contrast between value-language and preference language is often brought out by pointing to the fact that if someone calls something 'good' or 'right,' one can always ask him : "What is good or right about it?" But one cannot always ask the same question about one's likes and dislikes. One may or may not have reasons for one's likes and dislikes. One cannot press for reasons for preference as one can press for reasons for evaluations. What distinguishes value-language from preference-language is the former's commendatory force.⁴ To make a value-judgment, as R. M. Hare argues, is not simply to attempt to persuade others, but to commend it either to oneself or to others for future guidance. Hare himself has called his view 'universal prescriptivism.' Value-judgments, as distinguished

from descriptive statements, have 'prescriptive' meaning. Value-judgments, are action-guiding: to make a value-judgment is to offer some guidance in making future decisions. Value-judgments entail imperatives. To speak of any action as 'good' is to impart a certain instruction or to convey a certain advice to the hearer, namely, 'do it' (the advice also being about actions like it in relevant respects in relevantly similar contexts). Anyone who says, 'You ought to do X, but don't,' and who intends the 'ought' to be evaluative, is contradicting himself. Value-judgments are distinguished from other kinds of prescriptive judgments by their 'universality.' A person who says, 'I ought to act in a certain way, but nobody else need act in that way in relevantly similar circumstances' is contradicting himself. Value-judgments are derivable from universal principles. To make a value-judgment is to apply universal principles to particular cases. If value-judgments are basically prescriptive, can they be said to be capable of being derived either from analytic propositions or from statements of fact alone? For Hare, the answer is obviously 'no.' No value-judgments can be deduced from a set of premises that does not contain at least one value-judgment.⁶ Descriptive judgments, unlike value-judgments, do not entail imperatives. If value-judgments entail imperatives and descriptive judgments do not, a value-judgment cannot be deduced from a set of premises that does not contain an imperative.

A number of objections brought against the doctrine of "No 'ought' from an 'is'" may now be considered. A. Macintyre⁶ has argued that the doctrine of "No 'ought' from an 'is'" develops only when 'man' ceases to be a 'functional' concept, when the concept of man does not refer to any purpose of function which man is supposed to carry out. The problem of deriving an 'ought' from an 'is' did not present itself as such

⁶ A. H. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (London: Duckworth, 1963), p. 10.

in the Aristotelian tradition. In that tradition to call an X good is to say that it is the kind of X that might be chosen by someone who wanted an X for that purpose for which X's are typically suitable. So to speak of something as 'good' in that tradition was also to provide some information. The deduction of an 'ought' from an 'is' appears impossible when the notion of 'functions' disappears from morality, when the concept of man is no longer seen as functional one, when man is considered as an 'individual' prior to and apart from his roles.

Doubts have often been raised about the various attempts to 'distill' all values from ordinary language and to construct what has been called a 'purely evaluative element.' J. Kovesi,⁷ for example, has tried to show that the 'is-ought' dichotomy is not one of the central problems of moral philosophy. Moral judgments, Kovesi says, are neither about objects 'out there' that can be *both* described and evaluated, nor about individuals themselves, in so far as they are considered to be capable of being evaluated: moral judgments are about human life in so far as this life is constituted by these very notions, judgments and descriptions. There is no transition from 'facts' to values: some evaluation is implicit in the very language of description. The 'is-ought' dichotomy, Kovesi says, is partly ideological: its elaboration is, to a considerable extent, directed towards supporting a kind of individualism and anti-authoritarianism.

Doubts about the plausibility of drawing a rigid distinction between facts and values have also been raised on the ground that it is possible to make statements that both evaluate and provide factual information. That 'value-words' can convey information of a purely factual character is not denied by most supporters of the fact-value dichotomy.⁸ Hare, for example, agrees that it is possible to make statements that both evaluate and provide factual information, but he also points out that one should

distinguish between the evaluative and the descriptive meanings of words. To say 'This is a good knife' is not only to commend the knife as an instrument suitable for purpose of cutting, but also to provide information about the property of 'sharpness' that it possesses. If a person tells someone that P is a good knife and if the hearer has not seen P, but knows what being a good knife means, he will obtain some information about P. The evaluative meaning of the word 'good', Hare argues, is constant for every class of object to which the word is applied. Whether one speaks of a 'good knife', or 'good pen' or a 'good motor car', in each case one is commending the thing called 'good'. Since each of them is commended for a different reason, the descriptive meaning varies from one case to another, but the evaluative meaning remains the same. Although the evaluative meaning is primary, the secondary descriptive meaning is never wholly absent. The relative prominence of the descriptive and evaluative meanings of 'good' varies according to the class of objects within which the commendation is being given.⁹ The more fixed and accepted the standard is, the more information is conveyed. The word 'good' in 'good egg' conveys more information than the word 'good' in 'good poem' because the standard of goodness in the former is more fixed than it is in the latter. But this does not mean that the evaluative meaning varies in an inverse proportion to the descriptive meaning. A standard may be firmly established and yet not only the descriptive meaning but also the evaluative meaning may be decidedly strong.

Another objection¹⁰ raised against the doctrine of the autonomy of morals may be considered with reference to Kant's philosophy, to which the doctrine leads back. In Kant's philosophy, to put it in the simplest terms, the world of natural experience and science is governed by laws of causation while

free will and the activity of reason are excluded from the realm of causation and are characterized by rational self-direction or autonomy. But the problem is : how can the rational will find itself embodied in the world of experience if the latter is constituted as such by the synthetic activity of the former itself ? How can the freedom of rational and moral will be effective within the world of experience if it is considered to be excluded from that very world ? If, on the other hand, the rational will did find itself embodied in the world of experience, values would not, so the objection runs, be the products of the rational choice of individuals, but would be encountered as facts are and so could no longer operate as values.

The above objection in effect rests on doubts about the possibility of conceiving individual consciousness as being in any way world-constitutive. Many modern thinkers would indeed argue that each individual is, rather to be considered as one who finds himself already in a particular society, speaking a particular language and so on. His self-awareness develops in a network of relationships with other individuals. Individual consciousness is seen as the outcome of the interaction of the individual with various cultural and social factors. The very language in which individual evaluations are clothed have to be considered as growing out of complex interactions of the individual with other individual members of society. The concepts used in making judgments belong to intricate network of concepts that the individual finds to be already at work in the society to which he belongs. All interpretations are made from one point of view or another, and make use of some presupposition or other, and at no stage can one dispense with them altogether. Even the distinction between facts and values is a distinction drawn from one perspective. The supporters of the fact-value dichotomy insist on the possibility of making factual statements

without evoking any value-questions. But this very statement is one that upholds a certain point of view. The very concepts of fact and value can develop only within one *evaluative* perspective or another.

The arguments advanced both for and against the doctrine of the autonomy of values seem to be equally convincing when they are considered separately within their own contexts. On the one hand it cannot be denied that there is a difference between describing or recognizing a fact and deciding what is good or not good about it. It also seems impossible to deny the difference between value and preferences as such. To value something is very much to prefer something, but no mere preference as such can be considered to be a value. A distinction is sometimes drawn¹¹ between *valuing* something and *evaluating* something: to *value* something is to accept it as a value, that is to say, to value it for being what it is, while to *evaluate* something is to impute a value or disvalue to that thing or to assess something according to some (may be only implicit) scale. To be a value a preference must have some degree of rationality, that is to say, it must be capable of being supported by reasons in the case of its being questioned.¹² To be a value a preference must also have a degree of consistency over a range of objects. A preference that is liable to change all too quickly from one situation to another is not a value. It seems impossible simply to equate values either with desires and preferences on the one hand, or with facts on the other. Even if it is difficult to decide what values exactly are, any consideration of values will have to take note of both personal preferences and desires as well as interpersonal perspectives. Hence the basic problem facing any individual trying to choose values for himself is: how to harmonize the two perspectives so as to reduce the tension between one's personal preferences on the one hand and the restraints imposed by the interpersonal

framework of reference on the other. He cannot ignore the demands of either of them. If he ignores the interpersonal reference, his values would be indistinguishable from personal likes and dislikes, while if he ignores the personal reference, his values would hardly be distinguishable from facts.

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NOTES

1. K. R. Popper, "What can Logic do for Philosophy", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* (Suppl. Vol. XXII, July, 1948), p. 154.
2. A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1971) p. 142.
3. C. L. Stevenson, *Ethics and Language* (Yale University Press, New Haven, 1944).
4. R. M. Hare, *The Language of Morals* (Oxford University Press, Oxford), p. 144. Hereafter *LM*.
5. *Ibid*, p. 20.
6. A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Duckworth, London, 1981), pp. 56-57.
7. J. Kovesi, *Moral Notions* (Routledge, London, 1967), pp. 142-143; also, "Against the Ritual of 'is' and 'ought'", *Midwest Studies in Philosophy III* (University of Minnesota, Morris, 1967), pp. 5-16.
8. Hare, *LM*, *op. cit.*, p. 112; and P. T. Geach, "Good and Evil", *Analysis* (Vol. 17, April, 1957).
9. Hare, *LM*, p. 122.
10. A. Montefiore, *Handbuch wissenschafts theoretischer Begriffe*, (ed.), Josef Speck (Göttingen and Zürich 1976), p. 8.
11. A. N. Prior, "Varieties of objectivity and value", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* (October, 1982), p. 105.
12. D. Wiggins, "Truth, Invention and Meaning of Life", *Proceedings of the British Academy* (No. 62, 1976).