The Fact / Value Distinction

Is there a clear dividing line between factual statements and evaluative statements? David Hume (1711-1776) certainly thought there was.

He wrote in *A Treatise of Human Nature* Book III, Part I, Section I:

"In every system of morality, which I have hitherto met with, I have always remark'd that the author proceeds for some time in the ordinary way of reasoning, and establishes the being of God, or makes observations concerning human affairs; when of a sudden I am surpriz'd to find, that instead of the usual copulations of propositions *is* and *is not*, I meet with no other proposition that is not connected with an *ought*, or an *ought not*. This change is imperceptible; but is, however, of the last consequence. For as this *ought*, or *ought not*, expresses some new relation of affirmation, 'tis necessary that it shou'd be observ'd and explain'd; and at the same time that a reason should be given, for what seems altogether inconceivable, how this new relation can be a deduction from the others, which are entirely different from it."

Here Hume is suggesting that there are statements of facts ('is' statements) and judgements of value ('ought' statements) and the 'ought' statements do not follow from the 'is' statements. Factual statements (either empirical statements or logical/mathematical statements) are objective, whereas value statements merely express our subjective preferences.

Empiricists since Hume have generally agreed with him, and they suggest there is a dichotomy between facts and values.

Some clear-cut examples:

- Water molecules are made of two hydrogen atoms and one oxygen atom
- Water ought to be protected from pollution
- Over one million people have used food banks this year
- Food banks ought not to be necessary

However, various considerations seem to undermine this dichotomy.

The difference between a distinction and a dichotomy

The empiricists treat the fact/value distinction as a fact/value dichotomy where every assertive statement is either a fact or a value. Every statement must be one or the other, and not both. Thus their dichotomy can do substantial metaphysical work. By contrast, I want to agree that some statements are purely descriptive, some purely evaluative, but there are others in the middle which are neither purely descriptive nor purely evaluative.

Ordinary distinctions have ranges of application and we are not surprised if they do not always apply. I want to down-grade the empiricists' fact/value dichotomy which does fundamental metaphysical work to a mere fact/value distinction which is not philosophically interesting.

Subjective preferences and subjective values come apart

Example: Sally enjoys smoking but does not value it. She has a subjective preference for smoking but she does not value this aspect of her life. In fact she would prefer it if she had no desire for cigarettes.

Generally I can value things which don't give me pleasure (honesty, kindness) and I can desire things which I don't value.

Hilary Putnam wrote: "Boredom, weakness, apathy, self-contempt, despair and other motivational states can make a person fail to desire what she judges to be good or desire what she judges to be bad."

Thick concepts reveal the entanglement between the factual and the evaluative

There are some 'pure' evaluative terms – thin concepts: good, bad, right, wrong, ought

There are also mixed terms – thick concepts: cruel, exploit, dark, insidious, honest, courageous, kind, resentment, loving, pest, vermin, derogatory terms for people of other nationalities, races, classes, genders, and sexual orientation.

Empiricists claim that for each of the thick concepts, it is possible to separate out the descriptive component from the evaluative component. However their opponents disagree. We learn to apply these terms with their entangled components and we could not learn a term like 'cruel' based solely on pure descriptions.

We carry our values around with us, and what we call facts are filtered through our evaluations, so we judge the world as interested beings, not as totally disinterested.

Developments in the philosophy of science

A number of developments in the philosophy of science undermine a clear-cut fact/value distinction.

First, scientists themselves use epistemic values to help them decide between opposing scientific theories which theory is the best. Examples of epistemic values: simplicity, elegance, coherence, reasonableness, plausibility. So, scientists when doing science are judging like the rest of us, they judge the world as interested beings, not as totally disinterested.

Second, Hume thought that there were two sorts of factual statements – Empirical facts (which were observable and verifiable) and Relations of Ideas (the logical and mathematical statements which were tautologies – true in virtue of their meanings). However as science got more complicated, a third category appeared – what were known as theoretical statements (e.g. 'Electrons have negative charge') which were neither observation statements nor tautologies. The realm of the factual was being stretched beyond what Hume had envisaged.

Developments in epistemology

Empiricists liked three dichotomies: a priori vs. a posteriori; necessary vs. contingent and analytic vs. synthetic. Analytic statements are true in virtue of their meanings alone, e.g. “All bachelors are unmarried.” Synthetic statements are those that are not analytic. In the middle of the last century Quine wrote a paper which undermined the analytic/synthetic distinction and also argued for an epistemological holism: the view that a scientific theory must be assessed as a whole, rather than assessing individual statements in isolation from each other. Observation statements and theoretical statements are entangled. This supports the idea that factual statements and value statements are entangled. The level of assessment is the scientific paradigm or the conceptual scheme as a whole, rather than at the level of single statements.

Quine argued that the analytic/synthetic dichotomy collapses because of the entanglement of fact and convention. This case mirrors the entanglement of fact and value to undermine the fact/value dichotomy.

Back to Socrates and the opportunity of rational discussion concerning how best to live

Socrates asked “What is justice?”, “What is courage?” etc. Perhaps we no longer ask these questions very often, but we do discuss particular cases and ask questions like “Is it just to return asylum seekers to their home countries where they may be in danger?” “Is it just to deny life-saving treatments to people purely on grounds of cost?” etc. We can discuss such questions rationally. Ethical issues are not ‘brute subjective preferences’ as the empiricists make out. Our questions are not ‘marmite’-type questions where there cannot be a rational discussion about whether marmite tastes good or not. You either like it or you don’t. Empiricists often insist that ethical questions are just marmite questions, but the fact we can discuss ethical questions in a rational way refutes the empiricist claim.

An Aristotelian response to the empiricist

One response to Hume’s quote is that in cases where a thing has a function, ‘ought’ statements do follow from ‘is’ statements. Thus the function of a clock is to tell the correct time, and if the clock loses five minutes a day, it is correct to say “The clock ought to be calibrated to tell the right time”. We can speak of a good clock – one that tells the correct time, and a bad clock – one that loses or gains time. Similarly “The bus driver ought to stick to the timetable”, “The host ought to make his guests feel welcome”, “The security guard or bouncer ought not to kick a man when he is down”. Things have functions, and people have roles, which imply ‘ought’ statements, given their particular function.

Does the human being have a function? Aristotle answers “Yes” and thus various ‘ought’ statements can be seen to follow from this. I do not follow Aristotle in attempting to articulate the function of the human being, however we can follow Aristotle and distinguish to some extent between a flourishing life, and an impoverished or miserable life. Thus, I would argue the following can count as factual statements “The hungry child ought to be fed”, “The person with the knife wound ought to be given medical attention”, “The homicidal maniac ought to have his weapons taken off him”. Whilst I think there are many and varied ways in which a human being

can flourish, I would argue that without sufficient food, shelter or kindness and concern from others, the person would fail to flourish.

The position I have arrived at is moral realism – the view that evaluative statements can be true or false just like the purely descriptive statements favoured by the empiricists.

Is economics value-free?

There is a lively debate between social scientists and economists as to whether economic theory is value-free or not. When discussing how an economic system affects the human beings who live within it, such measures as the longevity of the citizens, their health, their access to education at various levels, the opportunity to create and enjoy works of art come up. Following what I have said above, I would say these measures were thick concepts where facts and values are entangled. Thus I would argue economics is not value-neutral, rather it involves evaluations.

Two views of rationality

The empiricist is often drawn to a very austere view of human rationality. According to this austere view, human beings have one motivation - self-interest, and they only act rationally when they act in their own self-interest, and they act irrationally when they act against their self-interest. I would argue that once again the empiricist presents a theory which is overly simplistic – in reality, we sometimes act from self-interest and sometimes don't, and a better account of rationality would consider the coherence and consistency of our actions in the light of our needs, our values and our desires, and our judgements about the situations we encounter in our daily lives.

A spectrum? And what about science?

Instead of a fact/value dichotomy, I suggest, based on the considerations above, we think of a spectrum with the most factual statements at one end and the most evaluative statements at the other, with 'mixed' statements inbetween. Alternatively, we can think of the spectrum as having an objective end and a subjective end. Further, I want to suggest that scientific claims are close to the objective end and that scientists aim at an unbiased view of the world, leaving their personal preferences and values outside their laboratories. However in recent years this view has been challenged, particularly with regard to biology, which is seen by some as a European male prejudice. But can we reach an unbiased view about scientific statements or statements about benefits and harms to human beings, animals and the planet?