

***Rethinking Facts and Values: How Normativity Establishes the Fact of Values and the Value of Facts***

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The European Conference on Ethics, Religion & Philosophy 2019  
Official Conference Proceedings

**Abstract**

C. S. Peirce claimed that logic is a normative science (CP, 1.281). It is not about how people think, but how they ought to think, and so he classified it as a branch of ethics. Elsewhere he argued the contrapositive, that purely self-interested individuals would have to be irrational in all their inferences (1878, 615). They could not constitute valid thoughts regarding either the value of their ends or the reliability of their means. Determining value, like determining meaning more generally, depends on taking a participant stance within social and disciplinary practices. Any legitimacy that disciplines, and moral and rational practices more generally, have rests on the accountability provided by participating in such communal activities. “Objectivity” in the disciplines does not mean seeing things as they are in themselves, or somehow getting back to “the given” behind our interpretive activity, but seeing things in light of, and being accountable to, certain procedural and evidentiary norms. To invoke “norms” here is to recognize something that evades Hume’s Law, as a norm is simultaneously a value grounded in a fact and a fact grounded in a value. This is not to simply affirm what Hume denies, but to question the dichotomy between facts and values he presupposes. A statement of fact is an act we must be accountable for, and our ethical task is not merely a matter of assessing and choosing between alternatives that are just there and forced upon us, like railroad tracks laid down in advance, but a matter of constituting the paths themselves, and hence reconstituting the world.

Keywords: Facts, values, normativity

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It is commonly believed that facts are not merely distinct from values, but that they are utterly independent of them. Sometimes this dichotomy is expressed by saying facts are real and values are ideal, where the dichotomy is between what is the case and what ought to be the case. Other times, more cynical voices express the dichotomy by saying that facts are objective and values are subjective, where what is real is contrasted to something arbitrary, private, idiosyncratic, illusory, or otherwise illegitimate. In all these cases, the facts are thought to be just there, fully formed, regardless of and wholly independent of our thoughts and judgments about them. Wilfred Sellars dubbed this thesis “the myth of the given.” The correlates to this notion that objects are merely given is that knowers are passive observers and that “objectivity” means seeing things from a neutral god’s eye view, a view from nowhere that makes no presuppositions whatsoever, a kind of total open-mindedness. And values involve some kind of additional and distorting lens that makes some kind of arbitrary and illegitimate assumptions. Values are thus merely subjective opinions or prejudices that float independent of reality.

Following this line of thinking, it has often been argued that one could passively observe the facts without acknowledging or buying into any values, or one could rationally manipulate and strategize about this reality in a purely private, subjective and self-serving way. One such immoralist, Thrasymachus, argues in Plato’s *Republic* Book 1, that the only reason people need to heed moral values is that society punishes those who violate them, so if we had a ring that made us invisible, we could ignore all social and moral norms with impunity, and it would be rational to do so in order to better promote one’s self-interest. Socrates, of course, disputes this and argues that even with such a ring, ignoring values would be neither possible, rational, nor in our self-interest, as without them an immoralist would be unable to form ends of action or calculate rational means. Later in the *Republic* Socrates argues that the Good is like the sun-- it is both the source of the being of the world, and what makes it intelligible to us (504 b-509 c). In this analysis, there simply are no facts without values.

We will ultimately defend the Socratic thesis that thinking of facts as separable from, or independent of, values, or values as separable from facts, is incoherent. An adequate understanding of normativity recognizes an intrinsic relation between facts and values.

Hence, the wholly self-serving tyrant or the ego-driven immoralist could neither think clearly nor do what he wills.

Given that this thesis was widely recognized in many ancient traditions, why do so many people in the contemporary context think facts are independent of values? One explanation is that in the major strands of the empiricist philosophical tradition in Europe there arose a strong and persistent dichotomy between facts and values. Thinking through the modern debates surrounding epistemology can help us understand where this dichotomy comes from and why many people have found it so compelling.

It is illuminating to note first that the rise of the modern fact/value dichotomy followed the disintegration of the moral cosmos widely embraced in classical and medieval times, and generally embraced by most major traditions in Asia, Africa, and the Americas. It is a direct reflection of the modern European disenchantment of the

world, where everything real was reduced to its materiality and stripped of purpose and teleology, leaving only blind efficient causes. First physics, and then biology, adopted methods of explaining change that eschewed any appeal to ends, purpose, or design. Consequently, values were no longer a credible part of this objective world. The real world is material and all legitimate explanations and reasons are causal, and all non-causal explanations were thought to be as illusory as magic, witches, and gods, and were banished to the realm of subjective superstitions. This means that human intentions could no longer be taken at face value but have to be accounted for in terms of psychological, social and economic forces. The growth of the social sciences reflects this shift. Students go to college not to learn, to get better jobs, or to make friends, as they consciously and subjectively think, but they go to college due to the pressure of complex objective psychological, social, and economic forces.

Ironically, the hard-headed materialism and realism of early modernists like Hobbes soon gave way to the equally hard-headed skepticism of Hume. With Hume, empiricism follows Descartes into the theatre of the mind, where all we can observe and know is limited to superficial sense impressions. This serves to extend the subjectification of values to the subjectification of facts. Even our experiences of the substance and connective tissue of the material world lack independent reality and are fictions created by the mind.

First, given Hume's empiricist model of the mind (1748, Sect. 2-3), where all our ideas have to be copied from sense impressions, our ideas of substances, as enduring and self-subsistent realities, cannot be copied from the outward impressions of colors, shapes and movements that appear on the stage of the mind (1748, Sect. 4). Since Hume assumes a *tabula rasa* theory of the mind, and he admits we do have *ideas* of enduring and self-subsistent substances, he must look elsewhere for their origin. He concludes that these ideas must be copied from our inward sentiments and feelings as creatures of custom (1748, Sect. 5). It is not lost on Hume that this puts the supreme fact of realism, the objectivity of objects, on the same subjective ground as values and emotions.

When one is limited to observing a series of discrete and superficial sense qualities, not only do we lack outward impressions of substances, but we lack any outward impressions of causal connections. This leads to a powerful version of the problem of induction. All associations of ideas which are not deductively or analytically true, true by definition, will appear as contingent matters of fact, and there is no way to observe connections, let alone *necessary* connections, between them (1748, Sect. 4). Although, being creatures of custom, we will come to anticipate, and intensely believe, the appearance of a second event upon the appearance of a first event, heat upon the appearance of flame, for example, all that we observe with the outward senses is one discrete event followed by another. In effect, this makes all knowledge, all matters of fact, utterly contingent and "anecdotal." Correlation does not imply causation, and in Hume's empiricist model of the mind, all we ever can have is correlation.

The ultimate and frequently cited expression of the dichotomy between facts and values is Hume's Law: you cannot derive an ought from an is (1738, iii, 1, 1). Given that the world of our experience is limited to the theatre of the mind and has to be built up out of discrete and superficial sense impressions, what appears as reality

lacks any inner purpose or intrinsic value. All statements of facts or values are really just beliefs in the mind, and these beliefs are no longer about reality but about someone's subjective experience. From the fact that "Sue believes 'x is good'" we cannot logically infer "x is good," as the original fact merely says something factual about what Sue believes and not anything about the actual value of "x." In this way, all statements of value are reduced to facts of anthropology or psychology, so we can never infer what ought to be the case from what is the case.

Hume's skeptical challenges wake Kant from his dogmatic slumbers. They make Kant realize that every effort to extend knowledge under the empiricist assumption that knowers are passive observers who merely conform to objects as they are in themselves, fails to account for the possibility of Newtonian science and its success in describing universal and necessary laws of motion (1786, Second Preface). Just as the appearance of movement in the heavenly bodies above us is due to the rotation and revolution of the earth, and not merely to the motions of the heavenly bodies themselves, Kant's Copernican revolution in epistemology seeks to make a virtue of Hume's subjective turn by recognizing that the objects of our experience appear to us as they do, not because things are really like that, but because of our own synthetic interpretive activity. In other words, Kant discovers the crucial role of the "synthetic a priori," the inescapable and legitimate ways our mind employs specific presuppositions to actively shape our experience and make appearances intelligible. All sense intuitions are experienced through the application of the a priori concepts of substance and causality. He thereby addresses the problem of induction and reestablishes the "objective" validity of our knowledge of objects, and the conditions for the possibility of universal and necessary laws of nature. In so doing, Kant's Copernican revolution leaves us no way to experience or know things-in-themselves, thus ending both the notion of objectivity as passive observation and facts as givens, on one hand, and the notion of subjectivity as always an obstacle to knowledge, on the other hand.

The inability of isolated empirical experiences to produce universal and necessary laws for a passive subject has a direct parallel in morality. No sensory stimulus, no empirical force, and no historical, psychological, or social fact, can produce a state of genuine moral obligation (1785). Again, what is needed is the active contribution of a non-empirical, and non-contingent, a priori source. We are truly subject to moral laws only to the extent that we are sovereign with respect to them, since we are only obliged to obey laws we can recognize as the legitimate creation of our own independent, and hence a priori, exercise of reason. Kant uses synthetic a priori principles to reestablish the legitimacy of moral judgments. Only a rational being has this capacity to form principles, and adopt courses of action, that rest on pure a priori grounds.

Thus, Kant locates the source of the Moral Law in the purity of Reason, a faculty that is meant to determine the will to adopt courses of action on a priori grounds, independent of all facts of experience. Pure sincerity in friendship holds as a moral obligation even if all historical instances of friendships were self-serving, because the source of obligation rests on a priori grounds and not on contingent historical conditions. The moral obligation to treat persons as ends in themselves remains even if as a matter of empirical fact all persons have always used one another as means to their own subjective ends. Thus the a priori syntheses that determine experience, what

is the case, are fundamentally different from a priori syntheses that can determine a good will, what rational beings ought to do. Whereas the laws of nature that determine the facts of the phenomenal world arise through the immediate application of the a priori concepts of Understanding in experience, laws of freedom are created through the autonomous exercise of Reason. So Understanding determines what is empirically real (and transcendently ideal) while Reason determines genuine moral obligations.

Kant's transcendental solution to Hume's skepticism, his immediate use of a priori concepts to establish the objectivity of objects in experience, and his use of a priori reason to establish the validity of values, comes at the price of preserving Hume's dichotomy between them. Kant shows the incoherence of, and dismantles, the dichotomy between "objective" and "subjective," but the dichotomy between facts and values is now enshrined in the difference between the faculty of Understanding that determines experience and the faculty of Reason that determines genuine moral obligations. The synthetic use of the a priori concepts of understanding, like substance and causality, determines the laws of nature and conditions the empirical facts about what is the case. The synthetic use of a priori reason to create unconditional or categorical principles determines moral ideals about what ought to be the case. For Kant these are utterly independent realms. Consequently, despite Kant's rejection of the myth of the given, and its correlate the passive observing subject, and his profound recognition of the a priori synthetic activity of the subject as the necessary condition for both the intelligibility of facts and the legitimacy of values, the fact/value dichotomy remains. The faculties of Sensibility and Understanding combine to constitute the phenomenal world of our experience, the facts, while the faculty of Reason soars independent of these facts to create ideals and to stipulate what ought to be the case. With Kant, we still cannot derive an ought from an is.

Willard V. O. Quine (1951) identified two dogmas running through the empiricist tradition, from Hume and Kant to 20<sup>th</sup> Century positivists and logical empiricists. The first dogma is that there is a sharp line between analytic judgements—judgments that merely reflect the a priori work of reason where the subject of the statement contains the predicate and need only be deduced from it—and synthetic judgments that depend on a contingent *a posteriori* (empirical) experience since the predicate is not logically derivable from the subject. The second dogma is one of reductionism, where any meaningful statement is equivalent to a logical construct of simpler beliefs regarding empirical experience. Kant, like Hume, assumes both of these dogmas. Quine shows convincingly that both of these dogmas are incoherent and should be abandoned.

Hegel and Nietzsche had already abandoned the two dogmas of empiricism a century before Quine. By rejecting Kant's fundamental distinction between the faculties of Understanding, which constitutes the facts of human experience, and Reason, which constitutes ideals and genuine moral obligations, they effectively undermine Hume's Law. Hegel's phenomenology of Geist is simultaneously a story of empirical historical change, and a story of the creation of values through the self-actualization of reason. The historical facts regarding the spirit of an age determine the values and ideals those in the age hold, and their use of these values and ideals in turn determine the world. Nietzsche's genealogical story of how the will to power perpetually re-appropriates and reinterprets the world as received from the past, in order to give it the form of a function in the present, is more disjunctive and open-ended and hence

less tidy than Hegel's story, but it still serves to create a value-laden world that is full of meaning and purpose. Hence for Hegel and Nietzsche the sharp dichotomy between facts and values— and the Kantian dichotomies between empirical desire and rational will, necessity and freedom, heteronomy and autonomy, or between psychology and morality—all fall away.

In other words, Hegel and Nietzsche replace both sides of the fact/value dichotomy with normativity. To invoke “norms” here is to recognize something that evades Hume's law, as a norm is simultaneously a value grounded in a fact and a fact grounded in a value. This is not to simply affirm what Hume denies, but to question the dichotomy between facts and values he presupposes. Robert Pippin notes that a statement of fact is an act we must be accountable for, and our ethical task is not merely a matter of assessing and choosing between alternatives that are just there and forced upon us, like railroad tracks laid down in advance, but a matter of constituting the paths themselves and hence of getting the facts right (2009). In this way understanding the world around us is like reading a sentence—it is made possible due to our participation in a social/historical community. So, while a distinction between description and prescription seems to map onto the older fact value dichotomy, it makes more explicit that both description and prescription involve, and depend on, active participation in social practices, and hence they involve neither passive observation on one hand, nor an isolated and arbitrary subjectivism, on the other hand. So now, drawing on Hegelian and Nietzschean traditions, Pippin concludes that the emphasis is on the *prima facie* and provisional rational legitimacy of these free-floating and self-correcting processes (2008).

Consequently, objectivity does not require that we buy into the myth of the given. Contemporary disciplines no longer need to take “objectivity” to mean seeing something like it is in itself. Objectivity now means seeing something in light of, and being accountable to, certain procedural and evidentiary norms, as these norms are determined by the appropriate normative practices. This means that speaking is an act of agency, a deed, and hence speech acts, like other kinds of action, entail obligations of various kinds. Other people can hold us responsible for what we say just as they hold us responsible for what we do. Determining facts, like determining values, or meaning more generally, depends on taking a participant stance within social and disciplinary practices. This participant stance is common to everything from doing science to parenting—all that differs is the practice in question and the contextual norms in play. The strength of a claim to truth, like the morality of an action, depends on measuring up to a variety of relevant communal norms. Any legitimacy that disciplines, and moral and rational practices more generally, have rests on the accountability provided by participating in such communal activities.

C. S. Peirce claimed that even logic is a normative science (CP, 1.281). It is not about how people think, which is the subject of empirical psychology, but about how they ought to think, and so he classified it as a branch of ethics. Elsewhere he argued the contrapositive, namely that purely self-interested individuals would have to be irrational in all their inferences (1878, 615). They would not be able to constitute valid thoughts regarding either the value of their ends or the reliability of their means.

In conclusion, those who presume to separate their ends from their means, those who suppose values all float independent of facts, and vice versa, will fail both morally

and rationally. On the other hand, rational agency—whether in using logic, doing science, or raising a child—requires participating in normative practices, and participating in normative practices requires respecting communal norms, and hence recognizing both the fact of values and the value of facts.

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