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Moral Description: Overcoming the Fact-Value Dichotomy in Social Research

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Values in social research are a vexed question. However, they cannot and should not be avoided. This article argues against the familiar fact-value dichotomy and presents a cognitive approach to values based inter alia on the views of the philosophers Julius Kovesi (1967) and Hilary Putnam (1990, 2002) and the economist philosopher Amartya Sen (1982, 1987). The article concludes that rejecting the fact-value dichotomy does not mean that "anything goes." On the contrary, it proposes reuniting facts and values in a common, factually-grounded and rational cognitive enterprise.

Keywords: Values; Fact-value dichotomy; Social research.

Introduction

Jennifer Borrell (2003) raised an issue at the heart of gambling research in her article in the first edition of *eCOMMUNITY*. In the article, "Values in gambling research and implications for public policy," Borrell (2003) asks us to reject the idea that values have no place in social scientific research. She is right to do so. However, we have to be able to offer strong reasons. Why? The answer is simple. The fact-value dichotomy, to use philosopher Putnam's (2002) phrase, is the received wisdom. Along with its is-ought, positive-normative and descriptive-evaluative siblings the dichotomy permeates most disciplines. Thus we must know clearly why we should reject it.

In gambling research we have another reason to know clearly why we should reject a sharp division between ethics and so-called objective research. The reason is that representatives of the gambling industry and other commentators often label many of us who research in this field, moralizers. The Australian term is *wowser*. The image of a wowser is a finger-wagging, didactic issuer of moral commands. Wowsers' values are seen implicitly as being unconcerned with the real lives people lead. Often enough governments and policy makers also demand value-free gambling research that sticks to the facts.

For both of the reasons I have cited, therefore, gambling researchers who are keen to address the ethical issues should have good philosophical grounds for uniting (or reuniting) values and facts. One such ground is that the fact-value dichotomy, by slicing off values from facts, opens the way to ethical or value relativism. Once values are relativized, it becomes all too easy for policy makers to avoid making ethical decisions, especially when they are desperate to avoid such decisions for pragmatic reasons. This is clearly the case with poker machines in Australia. Governments reap huge revenues by partnering the gambling corporations in this enterprise.

Therefore, the purpose of this article will be to argue against the prevailing view that there are no rational ways to evaluate moral, normative, prescriptive or imperative propositions. According to this view, once such propositions are designated as expressing *value judgements*, they are placed beyond cognitive reach. To the non-cognitivist evidence ultimately can play no role in evaluating value judgements per se. Evidence might inform us but, in the end, values are matters of opinion. Any one person's opinion on this account might be as good as any other's. Values, like their cousin preferences, are relative to their holders: Ultimately, they must be incommensurable.

If I could rather crudely categorize the view I will present, it would be as follows: neither positivist nor

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post-modernist, but a variety of ethical realism. In presenting it I will also try to resurrect interest in a sadly neglected work, Australian philosopher Kovesi's (1967) *Moral Notions*. Indeed, Kovesi's (1967) important contribution to clarifying the fact-value debate will comprise most of the article. However, I will also refer, in particular, to work by Putnam (1990, 2002) and Nobel economics laureate Amartya Sen (1982, 1987).

Misconceptions of Fact, Value and Description

Two erroneous features of the fact-value dichotomy arise from misconceptions of fact and value and an illicit conflation of description with fact. First, the dichotomy necessitates that facts and values can be clearly separated from each other (or disentangled) without cognitive cost. Second, it entails that value terms cannot describe the world. Hilary Putnam's recent book attacks the first error (Putnam, 2002, especially chapter 2). Kovesi (1967) corrected the second. I will consider the two problems in order, but it should be evident by the end of this article that the first set of arguments is a class of the second set.

Two notable critics of the fact-value dichotomy, the philosophers Foot (1967) and Murdoch (1971), raised the problem that some words, denoting "thick" ethical concepts, are both factual and evaluative (in the sense of referring to objects that contain value, both positive and negative). Examples given are words like cruel, generous, elegant, skilful, strong, gauche, weak and vulgar (Putnam, 2002, p. 35; citing also Ortega y Gassett, 1923). Many more words of this type exist, but the word cruel seems to have been influential in the history of the debate. Readers might like to try to strip down such words into their supposed "factual" and "value" components and see how far they get.

Similar views about language to Foot's and Murdoch's have been attributed to Isaiah Berlin by inter alia Collier (1998, p. 451; 1994, p. 178). Unfortunately I have not been able to trace the original Berlin source. However, I will use the Berlin example for its force and then return to a discussion of "cruel" in the next section. Berlin presented the following four true statements regarding the Holocaust: (a) the country was depopulated; (b) millions of people died; (c) millions of people were killed; and (d) millions of people were murdered. Now, it should be obvious that (d) is the most factual. It is clearly also the most evaluative (in the "containing value" sense). It is further evident that this value is in the world, as it were. That is, the moral gravity of the Holocaust is contained in or derived from the events themselves. Its value (moral gravity) therefore stands to be approached (evaluated) cognitively. Hence the "evaluative force" of the example, maintains Collier (1998),"arises entirely out of the factual content … [B]y making a fuller statement of the truth one implies more values" (p. 451).

That we use morally charged words such as murder does not weaken the power of a description or explanation that uses them. It does not make the description somehow unscientific. Indeed notions such as mass murder and genocide would make the description or explanation of the Holocaust stronger still. If we infer from the word "scientific" the sense "more accurate," then terms such as genocide will a fortiori make our description more scientific as well.

To try to eradicate such moral notions from our descriptions would, however, seem to be necessitated by the strategy of proponents of the fact-value dichotomy. Philippa Foot's entry in the Cambridge Companion to Philosophy on the "fact-value distinction" sets out the problems concisely, and it will be useful to quote it. Foot states:

> This distinction, which is crucial to moral theories in the middle and late twentieth century such as those of A.J. Ayer, C.L. Stevenson, and R.M. Hare depends on the idea that "good," like "other evaluative terms," has a special function in the language. According to Ayer and Stevenson it expresses feelings and attitudes, and according to Hare signals the acceptance of a special kind of imperative. On this basis a contrast was drawn between "evaluative" uses of language and "descriptions of the world"; the latter, but not the former, being supposed to "state facts." Some utterances were indeed said to be partly descriptive and partly evaluative, so treating of both fact and value, but the factual and evaluative elements in any word could in principle always be factored out. There was therefore a "logical gap" between "fact" and "value," and this was taken to explain and support the idea (derived from Hume) that no "ought" can be deduced from an "is"…
>
> Very many modern writers on moral philosophy believe that it must be possible to describe a distinction between fact and value such as was insisted on by Ayer, Stevenson and Hare, but it has no place in the work of contemporary neo-Aristotelian moral philosophers such as G.E.M. Anscombe. Critics have challenged the account of evaluation on which the distinction draws, and doubts have also been raised about whether value stands in opposition to any clear notion of fact." (Foot, 1995, p. 267)

The aim of value non-cognitivists, like Ayer, Stevenson and Hare, was to "claim that the thick ethical concepts are 'factorable' into a purely descriptive component and an 'attitudinal' component," with only the former being about matters of fact (Putnam, 2002, p. 36). Surely, though, this effort must fail. Radical decomposition in reality eliminates truth content of de-

scriptions that moral (value) terms contribute. For example, factoring out values to leave "factual" (empirical) descriptions in physical terms—the language of physics being regarded as the absolute bedrock language of truth—would be tantamount to shifting from Berlin's (d) towards a less rich, and therefore less truthful, account.

Moreover, what does it actually mean to factor out a "purely" descriptive component from thick descriptions with ethical aspects? Surely it cannot mean that we should attempt an ultimate decomposition into the language of physics? This, perhaps, would be to decompose an historical event like the Holocaust into, say, a series of Turing-like algorithms that describe the patterns of molecular movements in three-dimensional space over a certain time? This would ultimately factor out any description that might remotely contain value or pejorative terms.

Surely, however, this must end up as an example of *reductio ad absurdum*? Why? Because all that such a physical description in mathematical-logical syntax could tell us is how molecules moved through space and time. A higher level descriptive explanation of the Holocaust must be necessary. It would not be possible to think what such movements entailed—what they were—unless we could use words whose meanings told us what those movements entailed.

Note that, to add an "evaluative" statement or value judgement to an ultimate physical description, such as "molecular movements as so described are wrong," would not help. The reason is that this move begs the question: "why are such movements wrong?" The answer to this question presupposes that we know beforehand why such movements might be wrong. This in turn presupposes that the similarities and differences between this and other sets of unique movements can be explained and accounted for by force of reason and analogy. In the end factoring out just does not make sense.

Why Rich Description Is Necessary (and Inevitable)

It is important to understand that we cannot rely on either the methods of induction or deduction using physical (bedrock or "brute" factual) accounts of wrongness to assist us in such moral reasoning. That is, even if we could factor out an entirely physical account of, say, an act, it would not help us to tell whether it might be wrong. I will approach this question logically first and then consider how Putnam (2002) and Kovesi (1967) have approached similar concerns.

Let me define physical descriptions of known instances of wrongness as x_i and their components as x_j. To rely on the inductive rule "all x_i are wrong" or even "all possible combinations of x_j to form all possible instances x_k are wrong" would limit our capacity to make ethical judgements. Specifically it would be to foreclose on other possible and unique instances of x and, therefore, of its components. We know a priori that any new instance will disprove the inductive method. The facts that (a) members of x_i were themselves once new instances, and (b) we can imagine any number of possible instances of mathematical-logical algorithms that might describe a new instance are sufficient to falsify the approach. This is not to say that known x_i are not informative, but it is to say that we need more. The truly interesting moral deliberations are those about novel cases.

For the same reasons deduction will not work. Were we, for example, to try to say "wrongness is the set of molecular movements defined by the known $x_k(x_i(x_j))$" we would also foreclose. Were we to say "wrongness is the set of molecular movements defined by all possible imaginable $x_k(x_i(x_j))$" we would simply be back where we started, begging the question: "How would we possibly know why these were wrong?"

To know that certain molecular movements are wrong means that we must be able to describe them in a richer way. That is, we must be able to bring them under richer descriptions. To accomplish this means that we have to know something about what those richer descriptions entail. Note here that a move from a molecular description to, say, a bio-mechanical description will not help. All that this will do is to pitch the same problems at a different level. "Why are such bio-mechanical movements wrong?" Again we would have to follow the path traced in the preceding paragraphs.

What does this demonstrate? It shows that a different kind of physical description cannot be the level at which we have to pitch the description because it eliminates something we need. It eliminates truth content. We must necessarily use abstract non-physical words and concepts such as die, kill, cruel, suffer and pain in our description for us even to consider that a move involving the addition of an evaluative predicate containing the word wrong might be possible. This predicate is, of course, precisely what the supporters of the fact-value dichotomy must have. Facts are just facts. To use them in a moral judgement means we must add a value predicate that does all the work. Given facts F, and knowing F are V, where V stands for a predicate containing thin value words like good, bad, right and wrong, statements such as "do not F" or "do F" follow. The problem is that the method cannot tell us why F are V or even why V.

We must acknowledge the need for richer description. However, once we do the question then shifts: "how rich should our description be?" The richer our description, of course, the more the move involving the

addition of an evaluative predicate containing the word 'wrong', becomes redundant. The richer description itself will already contain words that convey evaluative content in their descriptive content. That is, the richer description will also describe in a certain way.

Due to all of the problems, like those discussed above, Putnam (2002) explains why a radical decomposition of descriptive-evaluative terms is impossible even on its own ground:

> The attempt of the noncognitivists to split thick ethical concepts … founders on the impossibility of saying what the "descriptive meaning" of, say, "cruel" is without using the word "cruel" or a synonym … What is characteristic of "negative" descriptions like "cruel," as well as "positive" descriptions like "brave," "temperate," and "just" … is that to use them with any discrimination one has to be able to identify imaginatively with an evaluative point of view. (Putnam, 2002, pp. 38-39; see also, pp. 96-110, 116, 170-171)

Description From the Moral Point of View

I wish now to extend the idea of an evaluative point of view. Following Kovesi (1967), I will refer to it as description from the moral point of view or description using moral notions. Kovesi's (1967) point is simple. The fact-value dichotomists have it wrong: moral notions (or "evaluative" notions in the sense of the word in which the object may be valued positively or negatively) do not evaluate but describe aspects of the world from the moral point of view.

To avoid confusion the noun evaluation and its derivatives (evaluate, evaluative) should be reserved for cases in which we judge something—be it a car, an academic paper or a crime—to be better or worse, or more or less serious, than another of its kind. I will use it in this way unless it is accompanied by the adjective "moral" and we evidently mean by it the same as moral notion. Thus, Kovesi (1967) says:

> The proper field of activity of evaluation is not … when we have to decide about alternative descriptions but when we have to decide about the qualities of particulars falling under one and the same description. *We always evaluate under a certain description*. (Kovesi, 1967, p. 151)

Moral notions, however, perform a different role. They describe the world from a moral point of view, just as chemical notions describe the world from the point of view or perspective of chemistry. Physical notions describe the world from the perspective of physics, and economic notions describe the world of economics. Significantly when we describe purposively or teleologically like this we determine whether a diverse set of relevant facts (qualities, properties and relations) can appropriately be gathered under, or described by, certain notions.

Kovesi (1967) uses Aristotle's distinction between form and matter to distinguish between the formal element of a notion and its material elements. The formal element is the abstraction that can be used to describe anything of a kind. Thus the general entity human being can cover an almost infinite number of material elements that are our concrete particulars. Every one of us is unique. What goes for humans goes for cars, tables, games, music, murder, decency, gambling, addiction and soluble compounds. Kovesi (1967) again:

> We cannot see what different material elements amount to the same act unless we understand why they do so, and unless we understand why they do so we cannot follow a rule in finding further examples [instances] … [W]e must also understand that we do not select these differences (between the material elements of x and y) from the factual point of view. This is how material and formal elements are inseparable. There must be some differences in the field of material elements between x and y if we want to judge them differently, but we would not know what differences would entitle us to do so without the formal element…
>
> [I]t is pointless to ask how we move from the material elements to what we say the thing or action is once we realize that we select the material elements because they constitute that thing or act. There isn't such a thing as murder over and above the various acts that constitute murder … [T]he various material elements of a thing or act are its material elements only because they constitute the thing or act. (Kovesi, 1967, pp. 31-32)

Now once we grant this we have proved more than just the entanglement of fact and value. We have demonstrated that moral notions can be substituted for putatively factual descriptive terms. That is, we have shown that the fact-value dichotomy collapses. This argument can be stated more formally:

1. Values (e.g., moral notions, like murder) describe unique sets of facts in each instance by "bringing certain qualities, features or aspects of things, actions or situations together" (Kovesi, 1967, p. 32); and
2. these value descriptions are constituted by their material, factual elements but say more than them; precisely because
3. these value descriptions cannot simply be reduced to their instances, which will necessarily be different if we rely on particulars alone.

These statements in turn underpin the validity of the following formally stated objections to the fact-value

dichotomy, in particular that the dichotomy presents an impoverished and reductionist view of facts and values:

1. Descriptions of the world can state values and not just facts;
2. facts and values are entangled, and decomposition of fact-value terms is eliminative: i.e. it eliminates essential features of the object to which the term refers;
3. facts and values can both provide cognitive material, which is to say that they are objects of thought, inference, reason and may be judged true or false etc.; and
4. some facts, like values, are abstract entities irreducible to experiences expressible in concrete physical terms.

This formal statement can be illustrated using the case of murder to clarify any residual queries. Let the following represent an evidentiary argument inferring an "ought" conclusion. My claim is that judges and juries deal with just this sort of argumentation:

> X did $\{x_1, \ldots, x_n\}$
> X did $\{x_1, \ldots, x_n\}$ in circumstances $\{y_1, \ldots, y_n\}$
> In circumstances $\{y_1, \ldots, y_n\}$, $\{x_1, \ldots, x_n\}$ is murder
> X ought to be convicted.

Just so we may be clear about the terms of this argument, let me define the set $\{x_1, \ldots, x_n\}$ as being predicates of X; the verb "did" stands for intentionality in its broadest (philosophical) sense. That is, the set $\{x_1, \ldots, x_n\}$ are X's acts and mental states (e.g., beliefs, desires, hopes, fears, and intentions). Both acts and mental states have real referents, and are important in the case at hand: X shot Z because she desired to see him dead for reasons $\{r_1, \ldots, r_n\}$ and, given her beliefs $\{b_1, \ldots, b_n\}$, intended to kill Z and enacted this intention.

Note that abstract entities, such as murder, are real (and not real in the sense of an ethereal Platonic form, but as a form in the Aristotelian sense). Murder is not a concrete particular at which we may peer, of course. We cannot point to it as if it were an extra quality or property sitting alongside the facts of the case. However, unless it was a real social fact we would not be able to point to its instances at all. We could not identify a new instance. For this very reason murder is not "just a name" we give to certain qualities, features or aspects of things, actions or situations. A name in itself does not identify facts in the world that we describe as murder, the formal element does, and it must be real to do it. We give the name to the formal element not material elements. We cannot name an entity such as this in terms of its extant material elements, which we know will differ with the very next instance.

Of course, we might get it wrong about the material elements, the $\{x_1, \ldots, x_n\}$ in circumstances $\{y_1, \ldots, y_n\}$, and mis-describe an instance, juries can and do; judges can and do. However, the error is not moral (unless the process has been corrupted in some way), but epistemic. Description from the moral point of view is as epistemic a process, as is description from the point of view of physics.

Given this analysis, what should we make of a possible reply that the reasoning above leapt to a false inference? That is, we could only make the inference that X ought to be convicted if we make explicit an implicit value statement, such as "murder is wrong." The answer to this objection is similar to the answer for the descriptive status of murder. It is that the word "wrong" is a moral notion itself. It describes classes of qualities, features or aspects of things, actions or situations such as murder, rape, deceit, theft etc. That is, it is just a higher level (thinner) moral notion. Consequently, the supposed problem remains, and it is evident that this line of objection will not be fruitful.

The reason that such a strategy will be fruitless is that it is misconceived. We do not need such a clause, because it is already implicit in the moral notion of murder in its analytic definition (murder is illegal killing, just as all bachelors are unmarried men). It is implicit in the reason we used "murder" as a descriptor, and the "ought" conclusion flows from it as directly as the description murder flows from the evidentiary, factual, descriptive grounds that constitute its material elements.

A Short Move Into Amartya Sen's Perspective From Economics

In this final section I will shift direction and consider the dissenting views of economist and philosopher Amartya Sen (1982, 1987) within economics, which is, with behaviourist psychology, the most positivistic of the social sciences. In particular, I will raise again the notion of rich description, a notion drawn on by Sen from the work of Cambridge Marxist economist Dobb (1937; see, e.g., Sen's, 1987, contribution on "Maurice Herbert Dobb" in the Palgrave Dictionary of Economics).

Walsh (2002), another philosopher and economist, made remarks on "rich description" that are worth quoting:

> Certain descriptions, Dobb had argued, have a vividness that makes it impossible to ignore some vital fact, and this rich and telling description elicits from us a moral judgement, sometimes against our wishes. In somewhat similar vein, [Adam] Smith saw our recognition of moral obligations as dependent on our ability to enter imaginatively into another's plight or suffering. It is not, I believe, historically improper to use the present-day philosophical concept of the 'entanglement' of facts and values for this key property of classical political economy …" (Walsh, 2002, p. 9)

Sen's (1982) article, "Description as choice," explains description in essentially the same way as did Kovesi (1967). "Description isn't just observing and reporting," Sen (1982) emphasized, but it involved the exercise of choice, of "selection." He continues in a similar vein to the above quotation from Walsh (2002):

> For example, in judging F.M. Eden's 1797 study *The State of the Poor*, or Frederich Engels' *The Condition of the Working-Class in England in 1844*, or John and Barbara Hammonds [sic] *The Village Labourer 1760-1832*, a good deal more is involved than just checking the truth of the individual facts recorded. *In fact, description can be characterised as choosing from the set of possibly true statements a subset on grounds of their relevance*. (Sen, 1982, p. 433; emphasis added)

Sen (1982) calls the "conscious act of description," according to relevance and importance, the "choice basis of description" (p. 433). We can choose to describe, according to relevance and importance, from prescriptive (normative) or predictive perspectives. However, other perspectives are also possible, and he offers three examples: the perspectives of simple curiosity and imagination, and the perspective of human involvement in production and exchange. The latter is the perspective that Sen (1982) sees in the approach to the labour theory "best discussed by Maurice Dobb." This is "frequently taken to be 'metaphysical,'" Sen (1982) complains, but "as I have already tried to argue, any description involves discrimination and selection, and the real question is the relevance of the selection process to the objectives of description" (pp. 440-441).

Then, Sen (1982) makes two important moves. The first is to criticize orthodox positivist economics for its neglect of normative description, and the second is to criticize the overstatement involved in the claim we often hear "that every factual statement involves implicit values" (p. 443). The positivist error "has led to an approach that is … remarkably mute about human joys and sufferings." This silence represented a shift away from the concerns of earlier economists, who had been willing to discuss the human condition and to relate economics to it. "The result is a descriptive impoverishment from many perspectives, including—among others—normative relevance…" It creates a view of human beings "totally uncommitted to anything other than" maximizing their own narrowly conceived well-being, "irrespective of political values, class interests, community spirits and social conventions." This is the model of people as the "rational fool" (Sen, 1982, p. 442).

The second error, overstatement of the claims of normative economics, arose with increased criticism of positivist restrictiveness within the discipline. Such claims are false, according to Sen (1982):

> [W]hy must every factual statement involve values? The basis of the claim seems to rest uneasily on the belief, which is correct, that any description involves some selection. What is not correct is the further belief that the selection must be based on some explicit or implicit prescriptive criterion. The criteria used for selection, as I have been arguing, may be aimed at objectives other than prescription, e.g., catering to curiosity. Cosmologists or historians take this for granted. There is, of course, a sense in which this too involves a judgement, to wit, it is right to cater to people's curiosity in the choice basis of description. But this does not imply that the selection has to be done in terms of normative interests. Prescription is one of several possible objectives of descriptive selection, and to assert its omnipresence is to replace the imperialism of predictive economics by that of prescriptive economics. (Sen, 1982, p. 444)

How do we know then that the description (or explanation), which we have made to suit our purpose (or interests or point of view), is a good one, a valid one or a rich one? We judge this as we would a good anything. A good theory, painting, film, book etc. might be analogies. Crucial, however, is the criterion—the cognitive criterion—already mentioned by Sen (1982) in his definition of description italicized above (i.e., truth). A good description does not distort reality, and truth is a necessary but not sufficient condition (Sen, 1982). This holds whether or not the description is predictive or normative. Truth is not sufficient because a truthful description can be inadequate, long-winded, disconnected or just downright bad.

The reason I have chosen to discuss Sen in this final section should now be clear. It is to emphasize what we might call perspective about perspective. Moreover, perspective about perspective constrains moral description as much as it does other forms. Rejecting the fact-value dichotomy does not mean 'anything goes': far from it. It means reuniting facts and values in a common, factually grounded and rational cognitive enterprise.

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