

The Fear of Moral Truths: Low Self Esteem and the Fact/Value

Dichotomy

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Presented at the Cardiff University Postgraduate Seminar Series - 2007

I shall begin this paper by stating what I believe to be a truism, argued for more thoroughly in the wider thesis from which this piece is extracted: that we *can* obtain ethical knowledge about universal human interests, by extrapolating these interests from uncontroversial and empirically verifiable *facts* possessed by all human beings as members of a common species, and tying them to logically concurrent moral obligations.

Such a position clearly falls foul of the infamous fact/value dichotomy, however, and as I am rather fond of my thesis, indeed, as the procurement of my PhD *depends* on it, I will attempt to draw into question the much talked about idea that one cannot derive an *ought* from an *is* and expose it for what I believe it to be: nothing more than a philosophical insecurity complex that has wasted far too much of our time already.

The existence of a fact/value dichotomy was first suggested by David Hume. To Hume's mind, each time we leave the realm of fact-based "is" statements and jump into ethical value-statements about what we "ought" to do, we are making a leap into a logical connection that simply isn't there. For example; though we might say both that a person has an interest in staying alive and that by shooting that person in a vital organ, it would kill them; reaching the conclusion from these factual statements that therefore we *ought not* to shoot that person in a vital organ is impossible, because we have gone from an area of descriptive language, to an area of *prescriptive* language. To use Humean terminology: there is no *necessary connection* between the matters of *fact* and their corresponding "ought" statements. When I recount the *facts* that the person does not want to die and that to shoot them will kill them; to reach the conclusion that we therefore *ought not* to shoot them requires the following normative judgments: that what that person wants *ought to* be taken into account, that life *ought to* be *valued* over death, that the right of the shooter to shoot is *less important* than the right of the person to live, that one *shouldn't* shoot if it will cause certain types of harm, etc. None of these value-statements, it is claimed, can be said to be *facts* though. There is no demonstrable empirical evidence to

emphatically support a statement such as: a person's wants should be taken into account, or that life should be valued over death. There are people, there are wants; there is life and there is death; but the value-statements we conclude from these facts, it is argued, are never anything more than assertions of personal judgment.

Now, whilst it is true that the kind of statements we consider *facts* and the kind of statements we consider to be *normative judgments* are, on a superficial level, doing different sorts of things, I don't believe it is possible to fully separate the two; a view that is championed by Hilary Putnam, who argues that "if we look at the vocabulary of our language as a *whole*...we will find a much deeper entanglement of fact and value".¹

To speak of normative statements as lacking the noble validating characteristics of factual statements is to miss the point of what normative statements are: a *certain kind* of factual statement about how naturally rational and autonomous human individuals should *choose* to act when taking into account all the non-normative facts about a situation.

¹ Putnam, H: The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy and Other Essays, p34, 2003, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA

Putnam suggests that belief in there being a fact/value dichotomy is a throwback to logical positivism and its self-refuting and paradoxical idea that there is a dichotomy of things we can call truths – synthetic and analytic – with everything else condemned as merely nonsense (a definition which sadly left itself out in the cold and, coupled with Quine’s collapsing of the synthetic/analytic dichotomy, eventually was dismissed by most).

For Putnam, not only is this conception of “fact” that the fact/value dichotomy rests on outdated and invalid, but the same entanglement Quine found within synthetic statements and analytical statements can be found between factual statements and normative ones. Whilst there is certainly a *trivial* distinction between “facts” and “values” in that: we know what we mean when we say that we can distinguish the two; philosophically speaking, this trivial distinction doesn’t mean all that much, because facts and values are usually far too intertwined with each other.

Putnam uses the example of “cruelty” to show this entanglement. We may say that a king was “cruel”, but cannot say what we mean by this evaluative word without describing the *facts* of his reign; nor

could we describe those particular facts without concluding the normative judgement that he was cruel. As he puts it; “to split thick ethical concepts into a ‘descriptive meaning component’ and a ‘prescriptive meaning component’ founders on the impossibility of saying what the ‘descriptive meaning’ of, say, ‘cruel’ is without using the word ‘cruel’ or a synonym.”²

It works with any other normative concept. Taking politics as an example, when we say that one system of social organization would be “better” for people than another, the evaluative word “better” can only make sense by looking at the *facts* of what exact form such betterment should take, which in turn can only come from looking at the *facts* we know about who these “people” are and what their needs and interests would be.

Likewise, certain *facts* about humanity can’t help but be intertwined with evaluative concepts: for instance, that we need food and water to survive is a biological fact, as is the fact that we have a capacity for compassion; but that these facts lead to an ethical evaluation is impossible to ignore when we see a fellow human being dying of starvation in front of us.

² *ibid*, p38

Defenders of the fact/value dichotomy however, will tell you that this blatant entanglement does not negate the fact that there are still two separate entities being entangled here, and though they intertwine in our conventional usage, they are both still mutually exclusive categories with no way of intertwining *metaphysically* and therefore any insistence that a value can be a fact, or a fact a value, is purely mistaken.

I believe that to hold this position, is not only to misunderstand what counts as a “fact”, but to also entirely miss the point of ethics, and make the mistake of looking for something in ethical theory that is unnecessary for it, irrelevant to it, and simply not there to be found.

An ethical position *not* grounded in some factual belief doesn't make any sense. Critics can reduce moral thought to a series of gut-reactions, prescriptions, attitudes, or cries of boo or hooray; but to do so misses the crucial fact that to have such a gut reaction, to possess a specific attitude, or to think something worthy enough to prescribe or cheer for, can only come from having *reasons* for doing so; reasons about the *facts* of the matter.

When we say that something like “murder is morally wrong” – regardless of what specifically one *counts* as murder – it is because in the mind of the moralist, there are strong, fact-based reasons for believing that it is wrong. To say that one *ought not* to murder, makes no sense without the rationale for such a position coming from the facts as the agent sees them. This is entirely why there can be such discrepancies between people about things like animal rights, abortion or euthanasia: because there is a variance in belief about the *facts* of the situation that supports each person’s ultimate moral evaluation.

To say that ethical evaluations and normative judgments are separate and distinct from facts, and so cannot be called *facts* is to purposefully define “fact” in such a way as to exclude normative statements, stacking the deck against ethical judgments from the start without any logically compelling reason to do so. A value statement, whilst a *different type* of factual statement from a purely *descriptive* factual one, is in no way necessarily *less factual* simply because it uses normative terms; I believe it is simply acknowledging the concurrent fact of some sort of *goal* that, if it is

wished to be reached, requires certain things to be done and certain things not to be done.

For example, if I were trying to build a television set, I would have a goal. I would need specific parts, I would need to construct them in a certain order, and I would need to ensure that all of my actions whilst building it, led to the creation of something that worked successfully at receiving television signals and allowing me to watch television programmes. Within this process, there are many facts: the *fact* that I want to build a television set; the *fact* that television sets are electrical appliances which receive television signals and allow a viewer to watch television shows; the *fact* that I have various electrical parts and tools with which to build my set; and most importantly – the *fact* that as a human being, I have the rational autonomy and self-control to be able to put together those electrical parts in whichever way I might choose.

The fact of such autonomy is important here because autonomy of action creates *choices* of action, and the rational and autonomous human agent *always* has to make a choice of what they will do, dependent on all the facts at their disposal, out of the myriad options available to them. If I wanted to, I *could* take the

component parts of my television and screw and solder them together in a big long line of metal. If I wanted to, I *could* sit and stare at the collected pieces and just attempt to *will* them together in such a way as to make a TV. If I wanted to, I *could* do anything, but what I *want* to do is to build a television set, and so the *fact* that this is my goal, and the *facts* of how that goal is to be achieved lead to our ability to say, without controversy, that I therefore *ought* to assemble the parts in a specific way.

There is no mysterious step of logic here that we cannot comprehend or mystical property of *oughtness* that we should not be able to fathom (just the common meaning of ‘ought’ in our language as a prescriptive word used in conjunction with a rational goal and a fact-based argument as to what option it would be most logical to choose in order to achieve that goal). Put another way, *oughtness* can be reduced to this simple equation: if fact X *is* the goal of Y, and Z leads to goal X but Q does not, then Y *ought* Z not Q.

Far from not being able to get an “ought” from an “is” – we can *only ever* get an “ought” from an “is”! Without the *is* the *ought*

would make no sense, and further still, we can only have so many “is” statements before an “ought” logically follows.

I will briefly state a discomfort with using an equation here, as I don't think complex questions of morality, ethics and human behaviour can be so easily distilled into simplistic mathematical calculations and dependable models. But I do think that, although not necessarily a *rule* of moral reasoning, the equation works well as a clarifying *illustration* of the logical and reasonable way one can deduce an ethical “ought” from a descriptive “is” in just the same way as one usually deduces a *non-ethical* ought from an is.

That said, one might reasonably argue that such a position solves nothing, as we still have the question of why one goal over another? If normative statements require their “ought” component to be in relation to a desired goal X, then the question is left open as to *why* I *ought* to want X. This objection is a good one, and is answered more thoroughly in my thesis, but as that detailed reply relies on a specific teleological conception of human nature, which, although argued for in the thesis, would be way off topic to discuss right now. For our present purposes, I will just say that *if* we were to concede an underlying goal present in all human lives – what I

define in my thesis as the goal of fulfilling and protecting their innate species-interests – then in all instances of using the word “ought” in relation to human behaviour, the goal X of the equation would always, necessarily, be considered as the teleological goal of fulfilling and protecting these species-interests.

Accepting for now though, the idea of a teleology to humanity; there may, however, still be an objection to the way that I describe the conclusions of our ethical equation as a “fact”. Once we have deduced that if Y wants X, and that Z achieves X whilst Q does not, Y therefore ought Z not Q; is the concluding normative statement really a “fact”, or is it still just a judgment?

Again, when used in the context of *non-moral* uses of the word “ought”, the defining of normative judgements as “facts” seems entirely uncontroversial. For example: for my television set to be made *well*, I *should* do certain things, and furthermore, if I do those certain things and build it the way I *ought to*; then the television I make will be a *good* one. Such a statement is littered with normative terms, but it seems entirely reasonable to call those normative terms matters of *fact* because they conform to all of the non-normative facts of the situation correctly and follow logically on

from them. Certain facts are irrefutable and inarguable and form the basis of our knowledge of things; but when we couple this knowledge of things with the necessity in life as naturally autonomous human beings to *rationally choose our actions* from an infinite variety of choices, then from the existence of such a realm of choices regarding how we react to this knowledge, it seems entirely appropriate to say that, all things considered, certain choices make more sense than others, and therefore it becomes a *fact* that we *ought* to make those choices and not other ones.

The fact that we can use normative words like *ought*, *good*, *should*, *right*, etc in entirely uncontroversial ways when discussing incontrovertible *fact* statements of a non-*moral* nature, show that the real problem with the supposed fact/value dichotomy is not anything to do with a logical inability to get an “ought” from an “is” (we do that all the time); the real problem is actually that when it comes to making ethical normative statements from what we know factually about the world, we just find it hard to agree on the *facts*.

When I say I *ought* to do certain things instead of others to build my television, this is because we *know* what a television is and the

exact specifics required of this end-goal; if I use my electrical parts and build instead a *radio*, it is not a television *by definition*. But when I say that you *ought not to* kill another human being, its status as a “fact” becomes a much more complicated thing because, it relies on a *judgment* about human teleology, which some people might well debate.

Being randomly evolved, sentient biological organisms, there is no definitive instruction manual one can point to, clearly stating what makes a human being *good* and how they *ought* to live their life that we could call objectively true in the same way that we could about an instruction manual about what makes a good TV and how you *ought* to build one. There is no way of objectively verifying the conclusions of any empirically based argument about human nature; be it my own argument about inherent species-interests or any other argument; we only ever have, at bottom, an argument, based on the best evidence we can obtain. A position may be plausible, reasonable, rational and convincing; but there is no definitive answer from an impartial and knowledgeable vantage point as to whether it is objectively *true* and thus considered an irrefutable *fact*, leaving it seemingly doubtful that any normative

conclusions gleaned on the basis of this unverified teleological statement can truly be said to be an objective *fact*.

However, I would reject this objection and contend that the same problem of finding completely objective verifiability is true of *any* so-called fact claim, not simply controversial fact claims positing a specific teleology to human nature; and that *all* alleged facts are, in a sense, arguable constructions from foundations of potentially debatable evidence.

Consider, for example, the supposedly objective facts about televisions. When we say that it is a *fact* that we have built a television set and achieved our goal, how do we know this? We can look at the *fact* that we see a TV before us and claim to know this *fact* from the concurrent *fact* that there are certain necessary specifications an object must possess for it to be considered a television set, which the object before us conforms to. But the descriptive facts of its operation and form, necessary for our claiming the “fact” that we can see a TV before us, come only *after* a normative decision has been made as to what should be defined as a ‘television’ and what should not, and then from the evaluation of whether or not the object before us successfully matches that

definition. They are as factual as facts can be, but only when the normative evaluations of what a television set *should* and *should not* be are understood, alongside the equally normative evaluations of whether the information we have about the object in question, and its success or lack thereof of fulfilling the necessary requirements of being a television set is, itself, *good* information or *bad* information – *right* or *wrong*.

In other words – in all objective truths, there is an element of evaluation both linguistically and descriptively necessary to their discovery. We simply cannot say that X *is* the case, without first using our reason to ascertain that X is true and whether or not our reasons for believing that X is true are sound; in other words, without using normative judgments. This is essentially Putnam’s “entanglement”, and the reason Alasdair MacIntyre pejoratively refers to “fact” a “folk-concept”, reminding us that without a normative evaluation of empirical fact “we would be confronted with...an uninterpreted...uninterpretable world”³

Here is another illustration to clarify the reliance on normative assertions necessary for understanding “facts”: If I were to say,

³ MacIntyre, A: After Virtue, p76, University of Notre Dame Press, Indiana, 1981

whilst at home one night, that it is a *fact* that my girlfriend *is* in the next room from me, I would only claim such an opinion as a *fact* if I had a variety of *reasons* for doing so. Perhaps she told me she was going into the other room; I watched her leave the room I am in, and heard her go into the other room; I have *not* heard the front door open or close and know that there are only these two rooms in our flat; and, when I get up from my desk and check, I see that she really is in the next room from me.

From all of these reasons, I can happily claim that it is therefore a *fact* that my girlfriend is in the next room from me, and that I believe this *is* statement to be a fact, because I have evidence to give me a sufficient *rationale* for holding that belief.

Perhaps though, it could also be the case that my girlfriend *is* in the next room from me, but I have no reason to believe this is the case and so I do not; she is planning to surprise me and has told me that she was going out for the night. She made the sound of the front door opening and closing and then quietly crept back into the other room without me noticing. I have a variety of reasons to believe that she is out: she told me she was going out and has never lied to me about her whereabouts in the past; she got all

dressed up to go out for the night just as she does on a night that she is going out; and after saying goodbye to her, I heard the front door open and close and haven't heard a sound from her since.

All of the above facts are *true*, but my *evaluation* about *what is*, is wrong because I do not know one crucial other fact: that she has been acting a certain way to lead me into thinking a specific thing that is *contrary* to the truth. I have no reason to believe that she is in the next room from me and so, to the best of my knowledge, it seems reasonable to assume that it is a *fact* that she is not.

Now, perhaps I hear a cough come from the other room.

Wrongly believing that my girlfriend is out, I still believe that it is a *fact* that it *cannot possibly* be her, and, intrigued, I go and investigate. When my girlfriend jumps out with a cry of 'surprise', what I believed I had reason to believe were *facts* up until this point have to be dropped immediately because I no longer have good *reasons* to believe them: I know more than I did before and therefore what I once perceived as the *facts* of the matter has changed.

What *is* always is, regardless of what we *believe* to be true or not – but what we *believe* to be true is all we can ever know about what *is*, because as human beings who learn what they learn and know what they know only through first and second hand empirical evidence, experience and hearsay, we will only ever have a limited access to the external world and its *facts*. We base what we call fact on evidence which must always first be evaluated, and when the evidence changes – so too do our *facts*.

Far from trying to suggest some sort of anti-realist subjectivity and denouncing the validity of these things we call ‘fact’ though, what I am trying to do here is show that there are clearly obtainable *facts* in the world that are objectively true – there is a way that things are that is simply *the way it is*. I am also saying though, that our *access* to these facts can come only from gaining knowledge of them, and we can only lay claim to their objective trueness when we have sufficient *evidence* with which to do so. As this evidence can often change *in the light of new evidence*, our knowledge of these objective facts appears as evaluative and transient as any proclaimed *normative fact* has ever appeared.

Just like any other fact, a normative fact needs a basis of *reasons and evidence* that support it, and just like any other fact, a normative fact's basis of reasons and evidence can be hard to obtain satisfactorily; but if obtained and reasonably supported, I think it fair to say that a normative statement can be considered just as objective and factual as any of our other non-normative facts. In *all* cases, it is only through analysis, constant re-evaluation and the procurement of all the relevant information about something that allows us to say that *X is true*.

Again, this is not an attempt to denounce the idea of objectivity or empirical truth-claims, but rather to *raise-up* the status of normative claims. Ultimately we are choice-making autonomous and rational individuals whose knowledge is constantly evolving as more and more facts become known to us, and are evaluated on the basis of their evidence. Truth exists and so too does non-truth; but most truths and therefore *facts* should always be accompanied with the cautionary proviso: *to the best of our knowledge*; a proviso which is actually an unspoken assumption in all truth-claims that we make anyway.

When I look in the next room from mine and see my girlfriend standing there, I have excellent reasons for saying as a *fact* that she is in that room; but even with my excellent reasons for believing this to be true, they are only excellent to the *best of my knowledge*. It *could* be that there is an elaborate system of smoke and mirrors in place and all I am actually seeing is an illusion; it could be a lifelike mannequin; or it could be her twin sister simply pretending to be her – sometimes you simply can't know everything, but from what you *do* know you can give good and compelling reasons to say that something *is* the case *to the best of your knowledge*; and as the chances of smoke, mirrors, mannequins or secret twins are very slim and unlikely, the best of my knowledge seems pretty complete. If however it *did* turn out that I was merely looking at a wax-work replica, I would simply have to say that what I – to the best of my knowledge – hitherto believed to be a fact was, in fact, *wrong*.

The point of all of this is to show that the belief that *facts* hold some essential property which *values* do not is misguided. All that facts are, ultimately, are things which are *true*. And all that we can ever know to be true is that which, once all the evidence is in, it is *reasonable* to believe to be a fact *to the best of our knowledge*.

Whilst there are definitely objective facts and truths out there about *what is*; not being born with an innate encyclopaedic knowledge of exactly what those facts and truths are, the only way we can ever come to know them is by using our *reason* and assessing whatever relevant evidence we can obtain to make an *evaluative judgment* about whether or not we *ought* to believe that *X is* the case; and the same can be said about the way we make evaluative judgments about certain pieces of evidence which give rise to evaluations that are *ethical*.

With the factual evidence evaluated before me that, as a fellow human being, you would die if I were to shoot you in a vital organ; that you have an interest in not dying (discovered not only via extrapolation from my own individual aversion to death, but from the fact that when I produce my gun you tell me quite explicitly that you do not want to die); the fact that my reasons for killing you are poor and do not justify my actions compellingly (in this example let's say that, like Johnny Cash, I wish to do it out of curiosity, just to watch you die); and the fact that I have a rational and autonomous *choice* about my actions and it is entirely up to my own choosing whether or not I pull the trigger; with all these facts

before me, it seems entirely reasonable to say that it is therefore a moral *fact* that I *ought* not to kill you.

When I said earlier that often moral theorists are looking for something in ethics that is simply not there, what I meant can be explained by the strange sense of lacking one might feel from hearing this above explanation as the complete account of a moral fact. When I say that it is a moral fact that I ought not to kill you, there is a sense in which I am sure you hoped for something more *absolute* than an argument which essentially can be summed up as: *there is just no reasonable justification for doing so*. The obvious fear here, would be that perhaps I *could* eventually come up with a good reason to do so, in which case your protection would no longer be guaranteed.

Within most human cultures, *moral laws* are depicted as something deeper and more intrinsically unbreakable than conventional, human-made, laws. In fact, it is only this sense of absoluteness, of profound *wrongness* at breaking them, which seems to give the justification for the extremes of punishment we give to those who do violate their edicts; not only within the tangible workings of human systems of criminal justice, but in the

theologies of human cultures. If a person breaks a conventional law (say, an unpaid parking ticket) and isn't caught, we have little problem accepting that they *got away with it*. If a person breaks a *moral* law however, we demand something more; we want the wrongness of their act to exist independent of observed censure and punishment; we want it to somehow exist as an absolute wrongness *out there in the world*, to which a blind eye cannot possibly be turned. To that end we have invented numerous religions that assure their followers that those who do break such absolute moral laws, whether or not caught and punished in their life here on earth, will still be unable to escape their final judgment by an all-seeing, all-knowing god. Indeed, my theory that we can simply gain moral knowledge through using our *reason* is exactly what John Locke claimed many centuries ago; but Locke was not content with pure reason alone giving us such moral truths, and needed to invoke god as the ultimate authority behind that which we reason to be morally true.

If I do not do as I *ought* to do when building my television set, all that happens is that I do not have a television set. If I do not do as I *ought* to do morally, we want the repercussions to be much more profound. This is the kind of thing most are looking for in their

theories of ethics, and I believe it is this desired *absolutist* quality that Mackie was looking for, and could not find, in his famous “argument from queerness”⁴. Mackie claimed that “if there were objective values, then they would be entities or qualities or relations of a very strange sort, utterly different from anything else in the universe”⁵, and he claimed this because he believed that an ethical truth would need to be “intrinsically prescriptive”⁶, with any wrong action having to have a “not-to-be-doneness somehow built into it”.⁷ Such an entity would certainly be, in Mackie’s unfortunate and antiquated language, *queer* indeed; but this queerness is not a blow to morality itself as Mackie thought, leaving all moral thinking in “error” – it is simply a blow to Mackie and others like him, with similarly flawed theories of what morality “must” be.

To look for an innate prescriptive quality within a moral truth, is mistaking the forest for the trees – a moral fact is simply a truthful prescription made rationally about what one *ought* or *ought not* to do, based on all the descriptive facts of the matter, as known to the best of one’s knowledge. And just as the truthfulness of a

⁴ Mackie, J. L: *Ethics*, 1977, Penguin Books, Middlesex

⁵ *ibid*, p38

⁶ *ibid*, p40

⁷ *ibid*

descriptive fact has within it no innate “truthiness”⁸ that makes one compelled to believe it, other than a convincing and reasonable sum of evidence which persuades one of its factuality, there is no further innate and magical *compulsion-giving* property within these ethical *prescriptive* facts to ensure that they are actually followed; the compulsion to follow them can only come from the rational agent themselves, convinced by the logical rationale given for what they *ought* to do, over what they *ought not* to do.

If the moral agent is *not* convinced by the given rationale, then they can either explain why they are not convinced and give a better, more compelling reason for doing something different (perhaps utilizing new facts that were unavailable before; for instance, as new factual evidence has been discovered about climate change and the ramifications of our lifestyles on Global Warming, we have now begun to question actions hitherto considered morally acceptable); or they can choose to ignore the logic and rationale of the given facts and the proposed moral edict – but in such cases we can say, quite reasonably and *factually*, that these people who do not acquiesce to certain ethical positions

⁸ A word and concept coined satirically by Stephen Colbert on The Colbert Report, 2005, Comedy Central Television

without offering us a compelling justification for why they do not: are *wrong*.

It is quite possible that the reason so many people look for a morality which is something *more* than our usual descriptive-fact truth-claims, and has within it this authoritative *compelling* quality missing from my own theory, is because of the damaging psychological legacy caused by generations and generations of naturally autonomous and rational human beings being forced to live under religious or political systems of strict authoritarian leadership and legislation which *necessarily* stamp out the reliance on, and use of, internal individual rational autonomy, and replace it with an uncritical dependency on externally defined and absolute laws, given from on high, by unquestionable authorities. After such intense training in intellectual deference, generation after generation, is it any wonder that we are left with a people now who feel they need some sort of “higher power” to deem explicitly and absolutely to them what is right and what is wrong, despite the weight of compelling evidence from their own factual deductions about such matters?

The problem has never really been that we cannot get an “ought” from an “is”. The real problem has always been that we simply cannot always agree on exactly what *is*; and when we do finally agree on it, decide that the obvious and logical *ought* that follows from it *needs something more* to call it an ethical *truth*, because we have been told for so long that such laws come from somewhere *external* to us, not simply from our own powers of reason. Put simply: this self-destructive desire for *something more* to our ethical truths than what is so obviously already there, is nothing more than a good old fashioned dose of cultural *low self esteem* after generations of abuse at the hands of traditional external power structures.

I believe it is also due to a fear of the *responsibility* that comes with the realization that the only thing binding us to the demands and obligations of ethics is our own autonomous decision to do so. The realization that there is no definitive complex list of moral laws written out in stone, to be followed to the letter on fear of extreme and profound punishment; that there is simply our own rational cashing out of a *very few* logically gained universal ethical facts about how to act or not act *to the best of our knowledge*; leads to the terrifying comprehension that if we choose not to do what we

ought to do, there will be no eternal damnation and no ultimate punishment from an external source of justice and virtue; just simply our own internal sense of responsibility and guilt at doing something we know to be wrong and without justification. In existentialist terms: there is an anguish and sense of despair at the sudden weight of our freedom and a subconscious feeling of abandonment by a formerly imagined external authority that once relieved us of this crushing responsibility for our actions. We are simply scared to admit that we can know the facts of morality easily, but that once known, they hold no more compelling power over us than any other fact that we know, and that the decision to do what we now know we *ought* to do is entirely up to our own rational autonomy and nothing more.

We may *want* something more absolute from our ethics than there is; and we may wish for all of our moral edicts to contain some sort of profound essence of compulsion that ensures that we always do what we ought to do or else face the consequences; but in my opinion such desires are merely a psychological defence-mechanism, used to deny oneself the moral responsibility of the weight of their rational autonomy. As autonomous and rational individuals we must always ultimately make *choices* about our

actions, and it is this species-fact which condemns human beings to the responsibility of moral realism.

Essentially, I believe that the idea of a fact/value dichotomy is a manifestation of humanity's low self-esteem and fear writ large *meta-ethically*; avoiding the awful truth with a wild goose chase into distracting metaphysical dead ends. But the awful truth is not so awful at all; whilst perhaps not revealing to us a mystical and magical world of ethical *forms* laid down by a philosopher king, a god, or some other external moral authority; it does show us that ethical facts *do* exist as much as empirical ones, and that objective and universal moral edicts *can* be made so long as there is a convincing and logical, rational and fact-based argument to support them. What is right; is any action that can be rationally justified in the face of all available evidence relevant to it; and what is wrong; is any action for which there is no convincing justification that outweighs the evidence *against* doing it, but it is done anyway.

Put bluntly, the quest for an absolute, inarguable and all pervasive complex set of moral laws by which we are to live our lives will always be a folly that is destined to fail; and history shows us a myriad of gruesome examples where certain groups or

individuals have attempted to impose such ridiculous fictions on others and nothing but conflict and bloodshed has been achieved. But such mystic absolutism is unnecessary, so long as there are rational and compelling fact-based justifications for an ethical position held at any given time. Whilst it is true that such a view of ethics imposes on our concluded moral facts no innate sense of “should or should-not do”, nor a complex and definitive list of moral dos and don’ts; what it does do is allow us to hold people as being morally accountable for their actions, and whilst not entirely gratifying for those seeking definitive proof of moral absolutes, it is certainly much more satisfying than the opposing position that there is *no such thing* as objective ethics at all and all of our values are just subjective delusions used to make us feel better in an amoral universe. Most importantly though, it is also a much more convincing argument, based on all of the available empirical and normative evidence, and as such, rationally speaking, being well supported by the evidence and logically compelling, is the only position on the fact/value dichotomy that, *to the best of our knowledge*, it seems we *ought* to hold.