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Questions of Value, Matters of Taste

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There is nothing especially iconoclastic in current efforts by some established philosophers to dissolve the “illusion” or expose the “myth” of a fact/value split, nor is there anything especially important in the claim by scientific New Atheists that we may now cheerfully discard that old “shibboleth.”¹ On the contrary, the first reflects quite conservative intellectual aims with regard to the claims of rationalist moral philosophy, while the second attempts to play a transparently vacant card in the dubious contemporary game of Science trumps Religion. Where these purported refutations of the doctrine of a fact/value distinction do not amount to laborious rehearsals of ideas that have been commonplace for some time (e.g., that scientific theories are not, after all, completely value-free; that descriptions do, when you look closely, involve evaluations; that our factual knowledge should, and usually does, have bearing on our value judgments), they go some distance to demonstrating the intellectual force and current significance of some traditional formulations of just that doctrine.

Many readings of the doctrine or idea in question can, of course, be offered, some of which make more sense than others. Invoked as a set of dubious conceptual dichotomies, the idea of a fact/value distinction can and should be challenged. Taken to forbid intellectual practices widely recognized as inevitable or valuable, it can and should be ignored. In some

¹ See Judith Jarvis Thomson, “Goodness and Advice,” in *Goodness and Advice*, ed. Amy Guttmann (Princeton University Press, 2001); Hilary Putnam, *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Distinction* (Harvard University Press, 2002); Sam Harris, *The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values* (Free Press, 2010) including jacket and website blurbs by Richard Dawkins, Steven Pinker, Michael Shermer et al.

formulations, however, it names a complex but significant logical-conceptual difficulty. The reminder of that difficulty can be appropriate on specific occasions and the conspicuous failure of some contemporary efforts to overcome it can indicate even deeper problems for a range of classic intellectual projects.

In elaborating these points, my remarks here fall into two parts. The first focuses on the social operations and epistemic value of value judgments, especially judgments of taste. Here I indicate the problems of the fact/value distinction understood as a crucial disparity of worthiness between statements of fact and value judgments. In the second part, I focus on efforts by moral philosopher Judith Jarvis Thomson to demonstrate that we can reason from facts to objectively true moral judgments. Here the fact/value distinction is understood as the impossibility of deriving statements of moral obligations from factual statements alone—or, as it is sometimes called in this formulation, the is/ought gap. The questionable moves that Thomson makes to close that gap illustrate the force of the fact/value distinction so understood. More significantly, her efforts raise questions about the intellectual viability of any enterprise seeking to ground the objective truth of moral judgments or of value judgments of any kind—or, indeed, the objective truth of statements of any kind. Ultimately, I suggest, these questions concern the viability of traditional understandings of each of the key concepts in play here—facts, value, truth and reason—and of related understandings of the operations of language and knowledge.²

² I examine these questions more extensively elsewhere. For the concept of value, see B. H. Smith, *Contingencies of Value: Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory* (Harvard University Press, 1988); for traditional views of facts, truth, reason and the operations of language and knowledge, see Smith, *Belief and Resistance: Dynamics of Contemporary Intellectual Controversy* (Harvard University Press, 1997) and *Scandalous Knowledge: Science, Truth and Human* (Duke University Press, 2006).