

The Experience of Values

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I. THE WORLD IS NOT "NEUTRAL"

The world is not an object that confronts me. It does not "present itself"; it is not something that faces me from the other side of a distance and submissively waits for my appraisal. It is not a separated tame thing. It is not neutral. It is not a field indifferently strewn with indifferent facts. It almost never is simply *the case*. It is not just there. It acts on me in ten thousand different ways. It invites and rejects, excites and charms, threatens and overwhelms me. It horrifies and disappoints me but fills me in the next minute with exhilaration. Occasionally it wounds me, but it also soothes and calms.

I am not at all sure that all these complex interactions can be reduced to a matter of "positive" and "negative" value, to a single parameter that points only in two directions. And yet most contemporary theories of ethics seem at least to give the *impression* that this can be done. Part of this is due to the very frequently employed distinction between values and facts. When the factual, descriptive content of judgments is separated from the evaluative component or force, all the variety and concreteness is usually treated as part of the description, and the evaluative aspect is reduced to a quite general endorsement or to a rejection. One does, of course, distinguish the degree or the manner of this positive or negative judgment. There are judgments supported by reasons, recommendations, commands, and merely emotive expressions of approval and of disfavor. But that is not my point. My concern at the moment is not with degrees, or even with degrees of support, but with the varieties among different values. One is apt to think that words like "rotten," "awful," "filthy," "horrible," "disgusting," and "dirty" have quite different descriptive contents but that the evaluative

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part of their meaning is simply "negative" yet of one and the same kind. One imagines, in other words, that the meanings of words like "horrible" and "disgusting" and "rotten" can each be divided into two parts. One of these is descriptive. It refers to a complex occurrence of features, to a set of "neutral," "objective" facts. The other part is thought to contain the evaluation, and it is thought of primarily in terms of degrees. It is imagined as a kind of minus-sign or as a head-shake which can be big or little, hesitant or emphatic, but which is otherwise dumb. Eventually I will argue that this view is quite implausible—if one considers words like "awful" and "dirty" it seems to me fairly obvious even on superficial inspection that this framework is somehow mistaken, that the evaluative components are different in kind and not only in degree—but first some clarification is needed.

The most important part of this can be put briefly. I do not maintain that the view that the evaluative content is of one kind is logically or otherwise entailed by the fact/value distinction. Obviously one can make that distinction and hold at the same time that the evaluative content of words is very diverse (one could even hold that it is *sui generis* for each word). Also I do not want to raise the question whether three or seven important philosophers have explicitly defended this view. This would be quite contrary to my picture of this situation. To my mind the notion that the evaluative force could be charted on a single or at least on very few scales (say the moral, the aesthetic, and the prudential) is a hidden assumption, or one might also say an unintended and unacknowledged result. It underlies most discussions in the theory of value, but it is not itself contested or brought out into the open. This, in fact, is precisely one of the things I mean to accomplish. An enormous amount of attention has been lavished on the question concerning the degree of the evaluative force, on what reasons can be used to support it, and on the nature of the support that these reasons give. This concern has been so paramount that the various ethical theories that currently contend with each other are all essentially different answers to this principal question. This is the issue that names and divides them: are the reasons merely persuasive or are they of a stricter logical nature? I want to claim only that philosophers often *sound* as if the evaluative component, once its degree and the reasons for it have been considered, is no more than a pro or a con, and that the fact/value distinction has helped to produce that *impression*, since the evaluative component is often so treated when it is employed. If someone protested that this is decidedly no more than an impres-