

FACTS AND VALUES:
IS THERE A NATURALISTIC FALLACY?

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I. Context

In answer to those philosophers who claim that no relation can be established between ultimate ends or values and the facts of reality, let me stress that the fact that living entities exist and function necessitates the existence of values and of an ultimate value which for any given living entity is its own life. Thus the validation of value judgments is to be achieved by reference to the facts of reality. The fact that a living entity is, determines what it ought to do. So much for the issue of the relation between "is" and "ought".¹

In making this statement, Ayn Rand has challenged a long established philosophical tradition, a tradition that was started with David Hume², reinforced by Kant³, stressed by British Analytic philosophy as the prohibition of arguments from factual premises to normative conclusions⁴ (the naturalistic fallacy), promoted by logical positivism as the thesis of emotivism, namely that "pure" normative statements have no "cognitive" but only "emotive" meaning⁵, and adhered to even by an apparent non-conformist like Popper⁶ in his "critical dualism of facts and norms". Clearly, the fact that Rand is opposed to the whole tradition of the dominant academic philosophy concerning a fundamental issue of meta-ethics⁷ does not show that she is wrong. As it will be clear shortly, I will argue in detail that she is perfectly right. But it is worth stressing that the fact just alluded to explains to a considerable degree the resistance of the bulk of academic philosophers to grant Objectivism a serious consideration. Many of them find it sufficient to claim that Objectivist ethics is "naive" since it commits the "naturalistic fallacy", and to conclude from that

that it deserves no further scrutiny.

Since the issue of the relation between facts and values, or the alternative (equivalent) issue of the existence or non-existence of logical entailment relations between factual statements and so called "normative" statements, has not been discussed in an elaborate manner by either Rand or other Objectivist philosophers, the fundamental disagreement on this matter between Objectivists and most academic philosophers creates a communication barrier. This communication barrier is different in nature from those which arise due to the highly emotional, almost hysterical response of some academic philosophers to "egoism". The latter kind of response indicates that no communication is worthwhile--since a person who does not accept that "emotions are not tools of cognition"⁸ cannot be communicated with. But someone who holds that Rand's ethics is mistaken in principle, since it violates what that individual considers to be a logical principle, may be sincerely mistaken. Hence this paper.

II. Purpose

The purpose of the present paper is to examine the claim that Objectivism commits the "naturalistic fallacy" by reflecting on this alleged fallacy itself, and by analyzing, from the point of view of the philosophy of language, the locutionary function of so called "normative expressions" and "normative statements." While the intellectual framework for the discussion is perfectly consistent with Objectivist epistemology (and can be directly embedded in it), it does not depend on it, academically. Rather, I will use, to a large extent, the philosophy of language of an academic philosopher, Yehoshua Bar-Hillel, I will use, though, only those aspects of his philosophy of language which are consistent with Objectivism.

III. Inference and Context

Any linguistic act¹⁰--be that a written or spoken utterance--is always performed in a specific *context*.

This fact may seem perfectly trivial. But it is not. Its importance emerges from the consideration of the following additional points. Any human act, including linguistic acts, is pur-

poseful.¹¹ The purpose of a linguistic act is to affect a listener in a specific manner.¹²

Any communication process (involving speech acts by both interlocutors) is, therefore, determined by the purposes of both interlocutors, one with respect to the other. The purposes may vary--I may wish to inform you about something, obtain your agreement, make you cooperate with me, or even antagonize you. But whatever are my purposes, if I use language to reach them, I have to communicate some information to you.¹³

Now, whenever I communicate information to you, by means of language, I do *not* state explicitly all of it, by means of fully spelled out formulations. Rather, I rely on the fact that our communication takes place in a specific *context*, in order to make my communication as *short* as possible.¹⁴

Indeed, if I tell you "I am hungry" I do not provide you a fully explicit message. Who is hungry? When is he hungry? What business of mine is it? You are to answer these questions, usually for yourself, not on the basis of my stated sentence but on the basis of the *context*. The context tells you (by looking at me and identifying me) who is hungry, what time it is (by looking at a watch) and why you are supposed to care (say, because you have just invited me to a swim, and I indicated that a visit to a restaurant beforehand may be advisable).

Thus, the contextuality of language use implies that when a fact of reality is identified by someone via language, the linguistic formulation is not always (rather, usually not) fully explicit. Rather it relies, to a large degree, on the *context*. More specifically, certain locutions (such as "I", "now" and many others) serve to direct the attention of the listener to the relevant contextual features which have to be taken into account in order to complete the reconstruction of the fact you identify.

The fact that certain linguistic locutions are *indexical*--namely that they serve as means of referring to the context as a source of specific kinds of relevant information--is crucial for the understanding of normative formulations. For I will establish later that all so called "normative locutions" are indexical, and hence that whenever one makes a complete, fully explicit paraphrase of sentences expressed by their means, they are eliminated in terms of fully descriptive locutions. But before reaching this point let us observe that

this fact affects very seriously the issue of inference relations between sentences.

#1. I am hungry.

Hence, I am hungry.

#2. Moshe Kroy is hungry at 2 a.m. 28/8/75.

Hence, I am hungry.

At first inspection, you will accept #1 as valid, #2 as invalid. But this is due to lack of sufficient attention. Actually, if the premise of #1 is made before dinner, by John Doe, and its conclusion is uttered after dinner, the argument is no longer valid. On the other hand, if #2 is uttered by me, Moshe Kroy, at 2 a.m. 28/8/75, #2 is perfectly valid. Clearly, under these circumstances, the premise of #1 identifies a different fact from the one identified by its conclusion, while both premise and conclusion of #2 identify the *same* fact.

Thus, the use of indexical expressions (such as "I" and "am" --which refers to state of existence at the present time, the time of utterance, that is) implies that the issue of the validity or invalidity of arguments cannot be decided just by reference to the *sentences* they involve. An argument is valid only if its premises identify the same facts of reality as its conclusion. But the identification of a fact of reality by a use of sentences in utterances is always contextual. Hence, the evaluation of validity or invalidity of arguments stated in English (or any other natural language) requires taking *context* into account.

This fact, in itself, suffices to cast considerable doubt on the position of those who hold the doctrine that "normative statements" cannot be inferred from "descriptive statements". The point is that the demarcation between "normative" and "descriptive" statements is drawn by reference to a *linguistic* criteria. Normative statements are those which involve, in formulation, locutions such as "value", "should", "ought", "permitted", etc., and descriptive statements are those which do not. But since entailment, or non-entailment, depends not on sentences as such but on the *facts* which these sentences serve to identify, and these facts are always identified by sentences in specific *contexts*, it follows that it is impossible to say anything in general about entailment, or non-entailment, between sentences as such, without reference to the specific context in which they are used. Even #1, which seems to be an obvious case of an immediately valid inference, is not always

valid. It is valid only when both premise and conclusion are uttered by the same speaker, and when the speaker did not eat between the act of uttering the premise and the act of uttering the conclusion.

Thus, whoever claims that no argument with factual premises and normative conclusions is valid tries to do the impossible: to make a general claim about inference relations between *sentences*, without taking into account the *contexts* in which they are used. Hence such a position is strongly suspect to begin with, and its advocate is faced with the task of justifying it. As a matter of historical fact, there has not been a single argument in favor of the claim that normative statements do not follow from descriptive statements. This claim has always been maintained dogmatically--as if it were self-evident, which it obviously is not. So even without a detailed analysis of the use of normative expressions, the rather fragmentary discussion of philosophy of language provided thus far invalidates the position of those upholding the naturalistic fallacy to a considerable degree. But only a complete analysis of these expressions will suffice to show it completely wrong.

IV. Normative Locutions

Consider dialogue #3.

#3. John: I am very tired.

Mother: You should go to sleep.

This is a perfectly natural, perfectly everyday life kind of dialogue. It exhibits the use of the "normative locution" *should*. What is the context for this use?

The context, clearly, is established in part by John's prior utterance and, also, by a knowledge basis common to both John and Mother. John informs Mother he is tired. Mother assumes she and John *agree* that no one *wants* to be tired. Hence she suggests to him the relevant *means* to achieve his implied end--the end of becoming, once again, fresh and widely awake: sleep.

Observe that John could reply with #4.

#4. I enjoy being tired--and I enjoy it all the more so the more tired I am.

#4 is odd--since it is either a joke, or a reflection of some kind of aberration on the side of John. But it cancels the relevance of Mother's reply. Mother, if she really respects John's individuality, would then reply with something like #5.

#5. So don't go to sleep. Stay awake. Want some strong coffee? (Or, if she is a paternalistic authoritarian, would say #6.)

#6. You should go to sleep all the same since I want that you will be refreshed.

In either case, the purpose of "should" is to indicate a relevant means to some end. The end is usually not specified: it is given (or assumed to be given) by *context*. When the assumed end is explicitly withdrawn, or denied, the "should" statement loses all its force.

Thus, in the context where person A assumes person B to desire the end E, and where A takes M to be a relevant means to E (or better, the best means for achieving E, or sometimes the only means available for bringing about E), A may communicate this assumption to B by saying: "You should do M"--abbreviating thereby the much longer "You want to achieve end E, and M is the only (or best) means to realize E".

The word "should" is then an indexical word. It is used in order to *refer* to a specific feature of contextually shared knowledge: the aim (or aims) of the person to whom one addresses the "should" (who may be oneself).

Accordingly a "should" statement is true provided both the following conditions are satisfied:

- i. The person to whom the "should" statement is addressed *wants* to achieve the end which the speaker assumes that person wants to achieve.
- ii. The action which is recommended by the use of "should" is the only means, or best means, to achieve this end.

Thus one can object to a "should" statement on either of two grounds:

- a. One does not have the aim the other assumes one has.
- b. One knows of better means of achieving it--or has reason to suspect the recommended means to be irrelevant, or even damaging from the point of view of one's own aims.

Observe, moreover, that in view of i. and ii. the following argument is valid, provided that its premises and conclusion are stated by the same speaker, consecutively.

#7. You want to become President of the U.S. The only way to become President of the U.S. is to promise to the voters reduction of taxation and government spending. Hence, you should promise to your voters reduction of taxation and government expenses.

#7, however, violates strictures subscribed to by those who uphold the "naturalistic fallacy" claim. It infers a "should" conclusion from factual premises. Therefore it is invalid according to their doctrine. But obviously it is valid. And the fact of its validity refutes the doctrine.

Now, on what *grounds* can someone ascribe a given goal to another? This issue, of the greatest importance to moral philosophy, is totally irrelevant in the present context. Rand holds that one person can address "shoulds" to another on the basis of the principle of *non-contradiction*, as applied to that person's system of goals. None can consistently hold a goal-system which includes one's own death--since one's death will make the realization of that person's other goals impossible. This, however, has no relevance here, even admitting its truth fully, since what I wish to show is that "should" statements are indexical, that they refer to an assumed goal; I do not aim here to get involved in the moral issue of the grounds on which one is entitled to attribute to another goals (or even to recommend goals to another).

The analysis of "should" statements, however, is not restricted to these particular brand of "normative statements". Consider #8.

#8. John: I have promised Aunt Bertha to visit her today.

Mother: So you ought to go and visit her.

This discussion, when its context is brought fully to light, illuminates the nature of "ought" statements. An "ought" statement is true if it follows a *promise* (or more strongly a contractual commitment). By promising, you make your intention to act in a specific manner (usually desirable from the point of view of your interlocutor) known to your interlocutor. The concept of "ought"--which expresses an *obligation*--is usable in a context of such a promise. Each and every "ought" derives from a promise. To say to A that he ought to

do something is to refer to a past promise he made.

This, in itself, has nothing to do with the Objectivist analysis of the reasons why one *should* keep promises. These reasons, which pertain to one's own life as an ultimate *goal* (one which is required by the principle of non-contradiction) and relate to one's specific nature as a rational animal with a volitional consciousness¹⁵, point out that keeping promises is a *means* required by this goal. But even if, per impossible, these reasons would not exist, it would still be true that what one ought to do is what one promised to do--simply due to the contextual nature and meaning of the word "ought"--which refers to an act of promising. But such "thought experiments" cannot really be made--they assume something requiring demonstration, namely the analytic-synthetic dichotomy.¹⁶

Consider now #9.

#9. John: Mr. X tried to kill me, pretending that he was my defender.

George: It is totally permissible for you to take severe retaliatory actions against Mr. X.

Clearly, the "permissible" here is, as the "should" and "ought" before, contextual. It means, when explicitly elaborated, that the action considered is consistent with the totality of John's goals (values). Thus you can oppose a "permissibility" claim by indicating a goal of yours which will be violated by carrying out the "permissible" action. But in any case, the issue is factual. Both "permissible" and "ought", just as "should", refute the doctrine of the naturalistic fallacy. It is not fallacious to argue as in either 10 or in 11:

#10. I promised John to visit him today.

Hence, I ought to visit him today.

#11. I do not mind whether the cat will live or not.

Hence, it is permissible for me to kill the cat, provided I have nothing better to do.

Both #10 and #11 commit the "naturalistic fallacy". Their validity shows, therefore, that it is not a fallacy.

Consider, finally, the most important word--that of *value*.

#12. A good car is a great value.

Under what conditions can #12 be asserted to true? Clearly, when the person to whom you talk is assumed to wish to be

capable of easy, convenient, and swift locomotion, and that it is very important for his further aims to possess one. Thus, the concept of *value* serves as an indexical concept to refer to what a person *wants*. The preference of one value over another is the preference of one wish or desire over another. The objectivity of the Objectivist ethics follows from the fact that it managed to formulate consistency criteria to demarcate consistent from inconsistent value systems. But this success depends on the previous realization that a *value* is what somebody wants to achieve and/or maintain.¹⁷

So, sentences formulated by means of locutions such as "should", "ought", "permitted", "value" identify facts. They differ from more straightforward "factual" formulations only in the fact that they involve *indexical expressions*--expressions which refer directly to the context of communication: to the purposes of one's interlocuter, to that person's prior actions, etc. But this difference is not fundamental: any sentence which involves personal pronouns, tenses, etc., presupposes context in the same fashion, and to the same degree. Consequently, the truth or falsity of "normative" formulations, as that of any other formulation, depends on nothing else but the facts. Specifically on the fact that human beings act for a purpose, and that their actions are directed by their knowledge of the means required by the achievement of given purposes--and on the additional fact that one cannot act in order to achieve inconsistent goals and be successful, since contradictions do not exist.¹⁸

V. Summary

Academic philosophers, by and large, hold the principle that "ought" statements do not follow from "is" statements. They label inferences from "descriptive premises" to "normative conclusions" cases of the "naturalistic fallacy".

This conception follows from ignoring the fact that entailment relations never hold between sentences as such but between sentences as used in specific contexts--in virtue of the fact that all use of language is contextual.

Therefore, it is impossible to state either principles of inference or principles of non-inference by reference to the linguistic structure of sentences alone.

Moreover, all "normative locutions"--specifically "should", "ought", "permissible" and "value"--here examined (the rest being left as an exercise readers might want to carry out) were found to be *indexical expressions*. They all serve to direct the attention of the hearer to some contextual information--which completes the information explicitly contained in the sentence--in order to identify the fact to which the utterance of the sentence refers.

So, the only way in which one can use rationally normative locutions (namely, either assert statements by means of them or deny statements thus asserted) is by pointing out relevant *facts*. It is not only permissible to derive "ought" from "is". There is no other way.

¹ Ayn Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness* (New York: Signet, 1964), p. 17.

² The usual source given by historians of philosophy is David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Garden City, N. Y.: Dolphin Books, 1961), p. 423. For one specific reference to Hume as the source of this tradition see J. Hintikka, *Models for Modalities* (Dordrecht, Holland: D. Reidel, 1969), p. 212

³ This in Kant is reflected in his stress that "theoretical reason" and "practical reason" are totally separate, and in his stress that apart from "hypothetical imperatives" which are means-end imperatives, there is a "categorical imperative" which states a "should" which has no ulterior purpose, as well as in his metaphysical separation of reality into two worlds: seen but unreal (phenomena) and unseen but real (noumena), where facts concern phenomena but imperatives concern man as a "noumena" since they assume that man is *free* while as a phenomena he is "obviously" deterministic. Cf., I. Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason* (Indianapolis, Ind.: Liberal Arts Press, 1956), *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1964).

⁴ Cf., A. C. Graham, *The Problem of Value* (London: Hutchison University Press, 1961), especially pp. 15-19.

⁵ Cf., Charles L. Stevenson, "The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms" in A. J. Ayer (ed.) *Logical Positivism* (New York: The Free Press, 1959), pp. 264-281.

⁶ Karl Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1945), Vol. I, pp. 60-61, 234-5, Chapter 5, Sec. III, *passim*.

⁷ The term "meta-ethics" usually refers to the study of the meaning, function, and logical relations of ethical statements--as against the study of actual principles of ethics. Objectivism does not accept this dichotomy (which reflects the analytic-synthetic dichotomy, actually, although I will not here demonstrate this). I make use of the term since academic philosophers by and large assume that meta-ethics precedes ethics and the Objectivism is to be ruled out on preliminary, "meta-ethical" grounds.

⁸ Ayn Rand, *For the New Intellectual* (New York: Signet, 1961), p. 55.

⁹ Y. Bar-Hillel, *Aspects of Language* (Jerusalem: Magnes press, 1970), esp., Chapters 5, 7, 10, 16, 17, 21, 24, and 32, and my "Bar-Hillel, Generative Semantics and Generative Pragmatics" *Logique et Analyse*, 65-66 (1974), p.

3-60. I no longer fully adhere to the views expressed in this paper, having written it prior to my understanding of Objectivism.

¹⁰The term "linguistic act" or "speech act" is from the J. L. Austin tradition and has been stressed particularly by J. Searle in "What is a Speech Act?" in J. Searle (ed.) *The Philosophy of Language* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), Chapter III.

¹¹This obviously excludes pure reflex action which is irrelevant here.

¹²Cf., H. P. Grice, "Meaning" in D. D. Steinberg & L. A. Jakobovits (eds.) *Semantics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), pp. 53-60.

¹³Cf., my "Logic, Language and Formalization" *Logique et Analyze* 67-68 (1974). Again, I no longer adhere to most of the points made in this paper.

¹⁴Cf., note 13.

¹⁵Cf., Ayn Rand, *Atlas Shrugged* (New York: Signet, 1957), p. 939.

¹⁶For a discussion of the invalidity of this philosophical idea see Leonard Peikoff, "The Analytic-Synthetic Dichotomy" *The Objectivist* Vol. 6 (1967), Nos. 5-9.

¹⁷Op. cit., Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness*, Chapter 1.

¹⁸Op. cit., Rand, *Atlas Shrugged*, p. 315.

