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Chosen Topic: 3.

In his *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals* Hume tries to develop a clear-cut distinction of “reason” and “taste.” Statements of reason would “convey” “truth” and “falsity” about subject-independently existing objects in nature. They would be *descriptive*. They seem to state things just as they objectively are. One could say that in Hume’s view deciding between true and false is, psychologically spoken, a “bottom-up-process”. Statements of “taste” on the opposite for Hume have a certain *creative* aspect: in statements of “beauty” or the morally good we would “give” or *project* sentiments of that kind on the natural objects and insofar give them an evaluation as “beautiful” or “virtuous” and so on. This could be characterized as a “top-down-process”.

From here it can be easily inferred that descriptive statements are true or false independently of what some subject feels about that; they can be verified by some kind of “brute facts” or “objects in nature” to which they correspond or refer. The opposite accounts for statements of taste: they would be not some objectively verifiable judgement – therefore it is possible that they differ between different subjects, just as “matters of taste” indeed often do. Hume’s account of reason and taste insofar seems quite plausible; it seems to be consistent with our all-day-life experience. We all think of descriptive statements as some which are or at least should not be variant between different subjects but have no problem in tolerating differing opinions concerning for example the beauty of some certain object – and, as I think, we do rightly so.

Still, it seems to me that there are some problematic points about Hume’s distinction of reason and taste, of the “descriptively true” and the “morally good” or “beautiful”. His account of reason and taste seems, as I shall argue, to be based on a false premise and having a false implication. On the one hand Hume’s analysis presupposes some concept of brute facts or “natural objects” existing independent of our perception. Otherwise it would not be clear how Hume thinks of “truth” and “falsehood” as being “non-productive”. On the other hand this account of reason and taste implicates a strong fact-value-distinction which, as I shall argue, should not be accepted. From the account Hume gives in it follows that there is no statement of fact which could be relevant to any statement of value insofar they are fundamentally different kinds of judgements as Hume elaborates by the distinction of statements of reason and those of taste. In what follows I first want

to problematize the Humian concept of natural objects or “brute facts”. After that I will try to do the same for Hume’s fact-value-distinction. I will hold the two theses that stating something as a “natural object” or a “fact” has some creative aspect and that the relation between statements of value and statement of facts should be characterized by the concept of supervenience. With this I wish to make plausible that we should not accept Hume’s concept of reason, as I will conclude in a final section.

I

In the Humean world natural objects exist and events are taking place independently of any human perception. Any statement could then said to be descriptive iff it is expressing some objectively existing fact and is not “adding or diminishing” something to it. This thesis about reasoning is, as I will argue, ill-founded on a false ontology of objects.

Kant – probably the most famous Critic of Hume – tried to show in his *Critique of Pure Reason* that the process of recognition (“erkennen”) should not be seen as a “bottom-up-one”. Condition of the possibility of experience is that we are projecting certain categories (time, dimension, causality and so forth) on what is independently of us real.¹ Categories like “existence” or the identification of something as cause or as effect lies “before” any sensually given material; such categories therefore could not have been derived from such sensually given things – they are on the opposite the condition of possibility of experience.

If this is right, then it is easy to see why Hume’s account of reality and therefore his account of a statement being descriptive should not be accepted. According to Kant’s transcendental epistemology things like “facts” cannot be stated as existing independently of us. Something in the world can only be individuated as a fact by the application of the categories which make experience possible. For a Kantian there could therefore not be any “brute fact” or even “object” outside in the world waiting to be recognized. No one would actually have *seen* a “brute fact”. Objects need to be synthesized to those by us as well. There is i.e. no “house” outside in the world; there’s only stuff we are synthesizing to that object. Identifying something as a fact or an object insofar has a creative aspect: “things” are as such only accessible by application of certain categories and principles lying before any sensual experience.

¹ This is a little self-contradicting since “existence” itself belongs to the categories which are making experience possible; I wanted to translate “Ding an sich” by “what is independently real of us” so the point should be clear.

Reason should therefore not be viewed as something which is “discovering” facts or “conveying” truth. If what I took from Kant is correct, then it is not clear how based on Hume’s account statements of taste and those of reason should be distinguished by the fact, that one of them “has a productive faculty”. It is obviously not the case that objects and facts would be accessible to us “without addition or diminution”. If the distinction of statements of taste and statements of reason should be upheld it needs restatement by specifying different criteria of demarcation.

II

Hume’s thesis that statements of fact and statements of value are referring to substantially different faculties of the mind leads to a second confusion: to a fact-value-distinction which is such strong that for any moral evaluation facts become irrelevant. If a moral evaluation consists in the projection or addition of some relevant sentiments on the object to be evaluated, descriptive statements as Hume understands them cannot contribute in that task because they are only stating the facts and do say nothing about what sentiments should be added then to that object. In short: matters of fact would say nothing about how we will evaluate them, because this for Hume is a matter of taste and both of them are not interacting. Insofar the Humean fact-value-distinction corresponds to a psychological thesis about a fundamental difference between reason and sentiments which is important to note. Indeed these consequences Hume explicitly acknowledges for he holds the thesis that “reason is and ought to be only the slave of the passion”.

But from examples one will easily see that this distinction of statements of fact and statements of value is too strong. It is clear that we evaluate altruistic behavior morally different if we think that humans are naturally egoists or think that cooperation emerges in the process of evolution naturally. We do think that, because altruistic behavior is harder to perform for an egoist, it is more valueable if an egoist performs it and that, if it is natural to be an altruist, altruistic behavior is not that outstanding. Notions about the disposition to be altruistic are purely descriptive but definitely not irrelevant to the moral evaluation of the relevant behavior.

A second point can be made about the Humean fact-value-distinction: if Hume would be right, then it would not be assured that the same facts are deserving the same moral evaluations. If two people would be in the exact same situation and would have shown the exact same or equivalent behavior then we would not think that it would be possible to give two different moral evaluations about that. We think of moral principles in a way in which they should be applied

to all humans equally. And this is something Hume cannot catch with his fact-value-distinction: it would make possible to evaluate the same facts in morally in a different manner.

The distinction of facts and value should rather be characterized by the relation of supervenience. Within the concept of supervenience one speaks about a *supervenience*-basis and a *supervenient* top. The basis in this context would be the relevant statements of fact; the top would be the moral evaluation which is fitting to it. For a supervenient relation it is characteristic that if two bases are equal, then both tops must be equal as well; but in this kind of relation it is not necessary that there are two different bases, if there are two different tops. Different cases can be morally evaluated in the same way; but equivalent cases cannot be evaluated differently. Since supervenient relations are non-reductive this relation is still upholding some sort of distinction of moral judgements and descriptive statements; but it is expressing the distinction in a way, in which it is better fitting to our beliefs about moral issues.

III

It is time to sum up and to gain some conclusions. What I tried to show so far was that there were two problems with Hume's account about reason and taste: it is based on a false concept of objects, and it implicates a problematic view about the relation of facts and values. We also saw that the fact-value-distinction Hume gave us corresponds to a psychological thesis about fundamental differences of reason and passion (which corresponds to the difference of reason and taste). What I want to conclude now is that if that distinction is an implication from a certain psychological thesis and it is false, then these psychological premises need to be false as well. If Hume's idea that reason is and ought to be only the slave of the passions results in an unpalatable view about the relation of facts and values, then we seem to be required to abandon the Humean concept of reason as being strictly separated from passions. It seems like we should abandon a view of reason working as a clockwork, ideal, mechanically, untouched by any emotions. For our cognition and sentiments could then be seen as essential. This seems to be made even more plausible by the fact that the distinction Hume tries to make about reason and taste (as corresponding to the distinction of reason and passion) is, as I tried to elaborate in section I, ill founded.