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Chosen Topic: Third topic.

The topic that I wish to discuss in this essay is Hume's theory of faculties¹. More precisely, I wish to discuss the distinction which Hume draws between the faculty of reason and the faculty of taste. In other words, this may be said to be a distinction between epistemology on the one hand and ethics and aesthetics on the other hand. To explain what is meant by a 'faculty', the following example provides a useful illustration: Imagine that two persons, Bill and Bob, are in an art museum. As they walk by a painting, Bill says, "This painting is beautiful!" Bob, being an art critic, replies that "well, the ways in which the colors are used in conjunction with each other really create a dynamic quality to the picture which is not seen very often." According to Hume's theory of faculties, Bill's exclamation is one that belongs to, or originates from, the 'office of taste.' Bob's statement originates from 'the office of reason.' Thus, the former is concerned with beauty, whereas the latter is concerned with truth and falsehood. Hume's full view is laid out in the following quote:

"Thus the distinct boundaries and offices of reason and of taste are easily ascertained. The former conveys the knowledge of truth and falsehood: the latter gives the sentiment of beauty and deformity, vice and virtue. The one discovers objects as they really stand in nature, without addition or diminution: the other has a productive faculty, and gilding or staining all natural objects with the colours, borrowed from internal sentiment, raises in a manner a new creation..."²

To understand the full extent of this view one may divide it into parts, each of which constitutes an aspect of Hume's distinction between reason and taste. First of all, Hume asserts that the faculty of reason is concerned with matters of facts, i.e. whether something is true or false. In opposition hereto, Hume says that the faculty of taste is not concerned with truth and falsehood, but feelings of beauty and deformity, vice and virtue. Furthermore, the former shows things as they really are, but the latter alters natural objects by borrowing colors from internal sentiment. Hume therefore asserts that the concepts of beauty, virtue and so on are qualitatively different from the concepts that relate to truth and falsehood. This means that Bill's statement is founded on some sort of personal opinion – internal sentiment – and is not really a matter of truth or falsehood but rather creation.

The view which I wish to advocate is twofold. First I will show that Hume's theory of faculties does not hold unless modified. Second, I will also argue that ethical and aesthetic assertions may very well be founded on opinion in the sense that they rely on contestable premises that are often unspoken and thus implicit. This does not necessarily make these kinds of statements subjective; instead they may be treated as conclusions reliant upon conditionals that differ from the kinds of conditionals in which scientists are interested because these conditionals are not reliant upon observation-statements but rather on what may be called assumption-statements.

¹ In this essay, I will use the words 'office' and 'faculty' interchangeably. Although this may not fit with Hume's general use of the two words entirely, I assume that for the purposes of this essay, no distinction between the two need be drawn.

² Hume, David: *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751).

In order to reject Hume's theory of faculties it will be necessary to introduce and refute another distinction known as Hume's Fork. According to Hume's Fork, only two kinds of statements exist. There are the kinds of statements which Hume refers to as 'relations of ideas' and then there are 'factual statements.'³ These different kinds of statements can also be classified as analytic and empirical statements, respectively. Now according to Hume – and other philosophers with an empiricist background, such as the logical positivists – anything that does not fit into one of the above categories is meaningless. This means that if one wishes to refute Hume's theory of faculties within his own framework, one must not violate this principle by bringing in a third category of statements. The advantage to following Hume's distinction is that it seems intuitively correct – if something is not an observation about the world it must be tautological, and otherwise it surely must be nonsensical. However, these possibilities are not exhaustive and Hume's distinction must therefore be abandoned. This I will attempt to show in the following.

Being an empiricist, Hume believes that anything non-analytical which can be expressed through language must refer to something in the world or consist of several things that refer to different things in the world. This principle is also known as Hume's 'Copy Thesis.' The word 'horse' thus refers to something in the world, namely a horse. But the word 'unicorn' does not refer to anything in the world. On the other hand, it may be said to be created out of two other words, namely the concepts 'horse' and 'horn.' According to Hume's theory, it is the faculty of imagination that conjoins such concepts into more complex concepts. This theory clearly does not account for entities that are non-existent yet also are not reliant upon other existing entities, but according to Hume, no such thing can be said to exist. But can the concept of fictional characters then be said to have any meaning at all? Take for example the protagonist of Homer's *Odyssey*, Odysseus. Although there may perhaps have been a historical figure whose name was Odysseus, who perhaps even was the king of Ithaca, this is not the person referred to by the description 'the protagonist of Homer's *Odyssey*, Odysseus.' Perhaps it may be objected that the name 'Odysseus' is a complex name like that of 'unicorn,' but how would one ever describe such a person in a meaningful way? After all, the problem could be made a lot more complicated in many ways, for example by considering a fictional character from a science fiction book which takes place in the future. Such a character could never be described by using simpler terms which refer to existing things since anything that would describe the character would, *ex hypothesi*, be non-existent – unless one wishes to advocate the view that the future already exists. On a Humean view, then, it would seem that such literature conveys absolutely no meaning at all. Even if it was somehow possible to show that Hume's theory could adequately speak of literature in terms of complex terms, this seems to be an erroneous endeavor since it is not at all the business of literature to refer to existing entities. Rather, fictional characters and the like convey meaning by being 'make-beliefs.' They are thus unreal in the sense that they do not exist, but meaningful since one could know what it would mean for them to be existent. To describe this using Frege's terminology, such characters may be said to have *Sinn* (meaning) but no *Bedeutung* (reference).⁴ This means that while non-existent, any proficient reader is able to understand them hypothetically. This important point translates to other topics as well, as will become evident later on.

³ The statement 'this triangle has three sides' is an example of 'relations of ideas.' The statement 'this sheep is black' is an example of a 'factual statement.'

⁴ I do not wish to fully embrace Frege's theory as it is presented in his paper *Über Sinn und Bedeutung* since I believe that Kripke's criticism of theories of descriptions is correct. I believe and for now assume that fictional characters and the like must cover some middle ground between being rigid designators and conveying *Sinn*.

If valid, the above argument demonstrates that not all statements are analytic or factual. Instead, a third category of statements which might be called ‘hypothetical statements’ or ‘assumption-statements’ must be added in order to properly deal with all kinds of statements. An apt example of a hypothetical statement in another topic than literature is the logical positivists’ *criterion of verifiability*. Crudely put, it says that a statement can be said to be meaningful only if some possible observation could confirm this statement or if this statement is analytic.⁵ This criterion clearly is not something which could be established on the basis of observations, nor is it analytic. Also, it is conceivable that several other criterions of meaning could exist in other systems alongside it, e.g. Popper’s *criterion of falsification*. Properly formulated, these different statements are *postulated* and have the status of axioms in mathematics. They may be mutually incompatible with each other but the different systems of which they are a part need not be inconsistent. The point that such assumptions underline is that it is possible to assume different systems that are incompatible yet logically coherent.

To turn back to the question of the different faculties of reason and taste, an analysis of the two is required in relation to the abovementioned categories. When a person asserts something which belongs to the faculty of reason, this is either true or false. In philosophical jargon, a sentence which may be said to be true or false is usually known as a proposition, e.g.:

- A. Some dogs are black.
- B. If D is bigger than E and E is bigger than F, D is bigger than F.

Proposition A is a factual statement about the color of some dogs, proposition B is a statement about the relationship between D, E and F, given that certain conditions are met. A may be empirically verified whereas B is analytic – its truth is reliant upon the way we think about the world. Now consider Bill’s statement which was said to belong to the faculty of taste:

- C. This painting is beautiful!

It might be said that this sentence may also be true or false, but any skeptical person would immediately pose the question “What does it mean to say that something is ‘beautiful’?” It seems that the concept of beauty must be clarified in order to judge whether such a statement is true. The same goes for other ‘value statements’ that assert the goodness or evilness of something. Value statements then rely upon other statements that define the content of words such as ‘good’ and ‘beautiful.’ But this statement cannot itself be factual since that would be begging the question. Instead, it must be either analytic or hypothetical. If analytic, the content of a definition such as ‘that action which is good is the action which is X’ would have to be true merely due to its logical form. This definition could also be analyzed in terms of a conditional, saying that ‘if something is good, then it satisfies the condition X.’ The only case in which this conditional is a tautology is if ‘being good’ is substituted for ‘X,’ saying that ‘if something is good, then it satisfies the condition being good.’ The problem with assuming that a definition of value is analytic is then that this once again would be begging the question. *Absurdum ad reductio*, any definition of value must be hypothetical in the sense that its truth value cannot be established due to any observation or due to being analytic.

⁵ For a much more detailed and accurate explanation of the criterion of verifiability, see Ayer’s *Truth, Logic and Language*. My point here is merely that the criterion relies on neither experience nor logical form.

The above analysis of statement C reveals that anyone stating 'this painting is beautiful', or any other value statement, must implicitly be committed to certain premises concerning the nature of value. Now consider a scientist making a conditional statement of the kind 'If A then B.' The argument of such a scientist would typically have the form⁶

If A then B
A

Therefore, B

Where 'A' is an observation statement about the world and the conditional 'If A then B' is also an observation statement asserting a certain causal connection between the two events 'A' and 'B.' The observation statement then, according to Hume, originates in the faculty of reasoning. This can be compared to Bill's statement 'This painting is beautiful' in the following way. As it was noted earlier, 'This painting is beautiful!' also seems to be an observation statement but is reliant upon a certain conception of the nature of beauty – and this conception was presented as a hypothetical statement which, like the scientist's conditional, also had the form 'If A then B.' But the full chain of reasoning which Bill implicitly made in his assertion would then have to be the following:

If something satisfies the condition X, then it is beautiful
This painting satisfies the condition X

Therefore, this painting is beautiful!

Interpreted in this way, Bill's assertion is the conclusion of a *modus ponens* argument which consists of a hypothetical statement and an observation statement – for surely it is an observation if a painting satisfies some condition or not. Following this modified theory of faculties, the crucial difference between a statement originating in the faculty of reason and the faculty of taste is then this: A statement from the faculty of reason can be said to be the premise of a conditional argument whereas a statement from the faculty of taste is a conclusion which implicitly relies upon a certain conception of taste. Both of these statements are capable of being true or false since the latter requires some condition X to obtain in order to be true. But as this condition is specified by a hypothetical statement, the condition imposed may indeed differ according to the 'internal sentiment' of a person and thus be subjective.

In conclusion, a modified theory of faculties has been proposed to Hume's theory of faculties. Whereas Hume's theory is embedded in an empiricist framework, this modified theory does not accept the validity of certain distinctions and definitions that are fundamental to Hume's philosophy. Instead it offers a view that allows for diverging opinions due to the fact that people may have different starting points when they argue. It has been suggested that these different starting points belong to a category which can be called 'assumption-statements' which are neither observations nor analytic. The theory does leave room for improvement, particularly in how assumption-statements are related to other areas of philosophy and in elucidation of the nature of assumption-statements and how they work. Nevertheless, it does provide a tool which makes different kinds of statements discernible from each other, and may be of use in such undertakings.

⁶ What is hereby meant is not an argument relying upon induction but rather deduction. However, the conditional 'If A then B' relies on induction as long as this is a factual statement about the world.