### DESCRIPTIONS, NORMATIVE STATEMENTS AND PRESCRIPTIVE STATEMENTS

Let’s quickly review the three levels of language, descriptive, normative, and prescriptive.

So, here is a question for discussion: Will we see arguments that contain a mixture of our three-fold types, e.g. descriptive, normative, and prescriptive? The short answer is yes, although Nicholas Kristof suggests otherwise.[[1]](#endnote-1)

Aside from deterring murders and saving money, a third common argument for the death penalty is that it is appropriate retribution for a heinous crime, a way for a community to rise up and express it revulsion for some brutal act…

This an argument that cannot be counter with data, for it rests on values.

Let’s take up this issue, namely whether argument about value cannot contain statements of fact (normative statements and descriptive statements). This is a well-rehearsed debate in the history of philosophy. There has been much puzzlement and some controversy about just what this *relationship is*. There is no doubt the seeds of this history in Plato and his effort to follow the Socratic question, what is X? were X frequently is replaced with a moral concept, e.g. Piety, Justice, Virtue, etc.

Here are two quotes that further illustrate that history:

The origin of action—its efficient, not its final cause—is choice, and that of choice is desire and reasoning with a view to an end. This is why choice cannot exist whether without reason and intellect or without a moral state; for the good of action and its opposite cannot exist without a combination of intellect and character. Intellect itself, however, moves nothing, **but only the intellect which aims at an end and is practical**. (my emphasis**)**

Aristotle NE 1139a35

It is manifest great part of common language, and of common behavior over the world, is formed upon the supposition of such a moral faculty; whether called conscience, moral reason, moral sense, or Divine reason; whether considered as a sentiment of the understanding, or as a perception of the heart; or**, which seems the truth, as including both**. (Butler: *Analogy of Religion*) (my emphasis)

Later, Hume sets the stage for even more recent excursions with his famous passage in the Treatise:

(R)eason alone can never produce any action or give rise to volition. Nor by the same token, is it ever capable alone of inhibiting any sentiment of performance. For reason merely demonstrates abstract connections of ideas or enables us to learn the brute relations of things.

And:

Morals excite passions and produce or prevent actions. Reason of itself is utterly impotent in this particular.[[2]](#footnote-1)

In recent times following “linguistic turn in philosophy” Hume’s proclamation was taken up by Ayer, Stevenson, Hare and others. It has found its way as gospel into Critical Thinking textbooks

"By now it should have become clear how often the reasons presented in favor of a thesis are at least in part about values, not facts. It is a fact, for example, that sugar sweetens coffee; it is a value judgment that sweetened coffee tastes better than unsweetened.

Value judgments typically are justified, or defended, in ways that are different from judgments about facts. Someone who claims, for example, that gold does not rust can support that claim by citing the fact that nothing made of gold has ever been observed to rust, and that all attempts to rust gold have failed. But the person who says that gold generally makes beautiful jewelry has to cite a different sort of evidence, for example, that people generally like the look of gold jewelry. That is why many philosophers say that value judgements concern matters that are subjective, while judgments about alleged facts deal with matters that are objective.[[3]](#footnote-2)

In an excellent summary of this tradition, Philppa Foot writes.[[4]](#footnote-3)

I should say something more general about the theories I am attacking. It is characteristic of those I have mention and other inspired by to suggest that the making of any sincere moral judgement requires the presence of individual feeling, attitude, or intention and thus goes beyond ‘description’ or ‘assertion of fact. It was recognized, of course, that the language contains many terms like ‘courage’ or ‘justice’ designed for description as well as moral judgement, it was said that their ‘descriptive’ content could not reach all the way to the moral evaluation; the speaker’s feeling or commitments to action would have to be added if evaluation were to be on the scene. Hence the apparently unquestionable distinction between ‘descriptive’ and ‘evaluative’ language more or less taken for granted in much of contemporary ethics.

It is clear from the Hume passage and later inquiries that there are two separate issues; one in which the relationship between description and value judgements is questioned, the other in which the motive for action the issue is.

So, what should we make of the debate? Which side seems the strongest? To answer this let’s start with a current example: In what follows is a report appearing the New York Times. February 8, 2019:

“Separating children from their parents contradicts everything we stand for as pediatricians — protecting and promoting children’s health,” AAP President Colleen A. Kraft, M.D., M.B.A., FAAP, said in a press statement. “The new policy is the latest example of harmful actions by the Department of Homeland Security against immigrant families, hindering their right to seek asylum in our country and denying parents the right to remain with their children.”

Human rights organizations such as Amnesty International have argued that this policy change is inhumane, and it is. But evidence from developmental neuroscience suggests it is more than inhumane.

It’s also, by definition, torture.

Under federal law, which adopts the United Nations definition, [torture is](https://www.uscis.gov/ilink/docView/SLB/HTML/SLB/0-0-0-1/0-0-0-11261/0-0-0-34922/0-0-0-35186.html): “any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person for such purposes as … punishing him or her for an act he or she or a third person … has committed or is suspected of having committed.” And though in theory any action inflicting such suffering is banned, that is what is inflicted by separating parents and children in border detention.

Their heart rate goes up. Their body releases a flood of stress hormones such as cortisol and adrenaline. Those stress hormones can start killing off dendrites — the little branches in brain cells that transmit messages. In time, the stress can start killing off neurons and — especially in young children — wreaking dramatic and long-term damage, both psychologically and to the physical structure of the brain.

When we compare the example from the textbook (gold jewelry) and the passage form the New York Times, the puerile character of the first and the serious nature of the second makes us wonder how they both can fall under the heading of “value”. So, let me focus on matters of important values, not questions of personal taste in jewelry and coffee.

Those who argue along the lines set out by Hume base the value question on feelings of approval. Later followers focus on commending (Hare) choice, preference etc. Within this tradition there are those who seek to avoid the pit fall of skepticism and its companion relativity. But there is a fundamental fact of grammar that has not been examined, so let me try.

Feelings of approval can be expressed in the first person, as in “I feel a warm sentiment” “I have a good feeling” and this can result as an effect of stories about child welfare in the context of the above example. So too can feelings of disgust, repulsion when hearing about the separation. But these feeling don’t occur sui generis; their expression can be expanded to include the preposition “about” or “by”. “I am disgusted by the policy of child separation.” “I commend programs that enable child nurturing.”

This fact of grammar further indicates the nature of value judgments in general, namely they are about the world; they are about children in the world, separations occurring in the world.

This is clearly the case about the descriptive expressions in the above quote from the New York Times; descriptions about heart rate, hormone release, neural activity. So here is the question for the followers of the line set out by Hume: How can it be in the complete judgment there are third person descriptions about the world and first person reports about feelings and emotions such that the third person descriptions bear no relation to the first person expressions of feeling except in the case of descriptions of heart rate, blood pressure, etc.? Put another way, I see no problem of a gap in “I see that the blood pressure is elevated” and the description. “The blood pressure was 180/70” Yet there is an apparent gap between “I regard the separation as a moral outrage” and the “blood pressure was 180/70”.

Here Foote offers some help. The blood pressure and the related anatomical conditions are the destructive conditions in the human being. Their immediate and long-term effect are inimical to the wellbeing and flourishing conditions of humans. One way to connect is to see that the moral outrage is about conditions in the world, the anatomical conditions of the children. Now to the feeling of disgust and the opposite feeling of approval when children are flourishing these are feeling about the world and the factual conditions. Unlike some bodily feeling, e.g. tickles, twitches, these are intentional, i.e. have an object completed by the requisite preposition. This may only partially close the gap, but it speaks to Hume’s failure to recognize any bridge to between feeling and the world; (See again the quote from Butler)

## Writing Exercise

#1. Consider Type 1 nonvalue claims, descriptive. Write a set of instructions for some instrument of your choice, e.g., setting a clock radio. Include one definition, and one answer to a possible question from a follower of your instructions, e.g., what is a “snooze alarm”? What parts of your directions are prescriptive?

#2. Explain with examples the difference between reporting one’s feelings and venting one’s feelings. Is this difference reflected by the difference between category A and D found in the previous Language Primer?

#3. Locate any recipe or set of assembly instructions and identify language from any of the above categories.

#4. Number 1-3 are a warmup for #4. Write a critical review of the above argument which claims that there is a logical relation between statements of fact and value judgments.



1. New York Times, June 16, 2019 . [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Treatise II p 414 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. 3. Logic and Contemporary Rhetoric, Howard Kahane/Nancy Cavender, Wadsworth 1998. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. Philppa Foot, Natural Goodness [↑](#footnote-ref-3)