

## THE NATURE OF THE FACT-VALUE DICHOTOMY IN BUDDHIST ETHICAL PROPOSITIONS

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### Introduction

It is generally believed that in making moral judgments the value component of the ethical conclusion must be based on the factual component. This fact-value dichotomy in ethics is a result of modern meta-ethical discussions. Logical positivists, for instance A. J. Ayer, deny knowledge in ethical propositions. For him ethical propositions are not derived from the empirical facts. So the exhortations to moral virtue are, according to A. J. Ayer, not propositions at all, they are “ejaculations or commands which are designed to provoke the reader to an action of a certain sort.” He further argues that they cannot be translated into statements of empirical fact. The attempt made in this paper is to examine where Buddhism stands regarding the fact-value dichotomy and to show the distinctive features of the Buddhist approach to the fact-value dichotomy.

### Discussion

Buddhism evidently holds a cognitivist position regarding the nature of moral judgments. So the Non Cognitivism of Logical Positivism is directly opposed to the Buddha's assertion that one can have knowledge of *kusala* and *akusala* in the sphere of morality.

Early Buddhism, like early Greek philosophy, did not explicitly draw a distinction between factual knowledge and ethical knowledge. Instead it spoke of knowledge in general, admitting that ethical knowledge is possible. But the modern distinction of fact and value poses an important challenge to the moral philosopher.

It is as a consequence of a positivist theory of knowledge that a sharp demarcation between ‘fact’ and ‘value’ came into being in modern western philosophy. For, it is assumed that sensible qualities of objects are capable of being known by our sense experience while the value of a thing whether it be moral, aesthetic or otherwise is said to be non sensible and, therefore, not knowable as a fact. A. J. Ayer, one of the most prominent exponents of logical positivism, argues that the only possible means of gaining knowledge of the world is sense experience.

Buddhism has never drawn such a distinction in terms of a fact-value dichotomy assuming that one can directly witness the “goodness” or “badness” merely by means of the senses. Nor does it propose an intuitive knowledge of good and bad. But still it speaks of knowledge relating *Kusala* and *Akusala* etc. According to Buddhism, we cannot ignore the validity of facts. Of course facts are the ground on which moral conclusions are based. But the problem is “what facts do we believe in and how could these facts be used as legitimate premises of a moral argument?”

### Methodology

This research is mainly based on philosophical inquiry and a literary survey. Relevant primary texts and secondary philosophical works will be used in this inquiry.

### Conclusion

Professor P. D. Premasiri's conclusion in this regard seems to be quite plausible. He says, “Early Buddhism takes certain facts to be relevant to ethical conclusions. Buddhism admits the relevance of facts but it restricts

the kind of facts that are relevant" ("Early Buddhist concept of Ethical knowledge" p. 50).

According to early Buddhism any arbitrary fact cannot be taken as grounds for a moral evaluation. Only actions and mental dispositions productive of happiness are considered as *kusala* or *puñña*. *kusala* is not considered as a directly intuitable property of actions, but is determined on the basis of consequences of action. The recognition of the data of extrasensory perception (*abhiñña*) has a relevance to Buddhist ethics, not in the sense that such perception reveals a special world of moral qualities, but in the sense that they help to overcome the limitation of the ordinary powers of sensibility and bring us more knowledge about the range of consequences that actions have.

In Buddhism, Facts are not reduced merely to what is observed in the sphere of ordinary senses only. In early Buddhism, moral judgments on a non-arbitrary rational basis are made after due consideration of the consequences, taking into account not only the consequences knowable by sense perception, but also by means of *abhiñña* (higher knowledge).

## References

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