Facts vs. Opinions: Helping Students Overcome the Distinction

Abstract:

Many students struggle to enter moral debates in a productive way because they automatically think of moral claims as ‘just opinions’ and not something one could productively argue about. Underlying this response are various versions of a muddled distinction between ‘facts’ and ‘opinions’. This paper outlines a way to help students overcome their use of this distinction, thereby clearing an obstacle to true moral debate. It explains why the fact-opinion distinction should simply be scraped, rather than merely sharpened. It then proposes a different distinction well suited to replace it. Finally, it outlines an activity which can be used to teach the new distinctions, as well as a number of benefits to attempting the whole replacement process.

Author:

Galen Barry is an assistant professor of philosophy at Iona College (gbarry@iona.edu). His research focuses on the history of modern philosophy, ethics, and epistemology. He is always trying to think of new ways to make philosophy classes meaningful to students.

One of the biggest obstacles I have encountered to getting my students to think clearly about morality is their habit of thinking through the lens of the fact-opinion distinction. For example, in response to authors’ claims about the permissibility or impermissibility of a given action or the value of a given pursuit, many students offer knee-jerk reactions like ‘that’s just their opinion” or “that’s not factual, but only opinion-based”. But the distinction between facts and opinions is deeply problematic, in ways that make students’ thinking more, rather than less, confused.[[1]](#footnote-1) First of all, the distinction between fact and opinion is generally thought to be mutually exclusive—nothing can be both a fact and an opinion—and yet on common uses of the terms it is not. For example, McBrayer (2015) reports seeing the following definitions in his son’s classroom: a fact is “[s]omething that is true about a subject and can be tested or proven” whereas an opinion is “[w]hat someone thinks, feels, or believes”. But, as McBrayer rightly points out, one can believe something true and testable. Second, the way that many people, including students, use the distinction usually conflates multiple issues that can come apart. For example, the definition of facts that McBrayer found in his son’s classroom conflates the issue of whether a claim is true/false with the very different issue of whether the claim is testable/provable/justified. In addition to conflating issues of truth with epistemic issues like justification, the terms ‘opinion’ and ‘fact’ also tend to connote ideas about objectivity/subjectivity, consensus/disagreement, and so on, leading to an even great potential for conflation.[[2]](#footnote-2) As a result, the distinction between facts and opinions simply covers too many categories at once and so actively harms students’ abilities to think clearly about moral issues.

But it is unlikely that students will simply give up their use of the distinction if no suitable replacement is on offer – even if they recognize the confused nature of the distinction (as some do).[[3]](#footnote-3) The point of this paper is to offer a clearer and more productive distinction that can replace the fact-opinion distinction. In section 1, I consider a strategy that seeks to combat students’ use of the fact-opinion distinction by retaining a specific *version* of the fact-opinion distinction. In section 2, I outline the distinction I offer as a replacement. In section 3, I outline both in-class and take-home exercises which help students become comfortable with using the new distinction. In section 4, I outline the specific benefits to this replacement process.

**1. Keeping the Distinction**

Though the fact-opinion distinction as students use it is problematic, there are specific versions of the distinction which are not (e.g., those that pick out only one of the many distinctions in play). So, instructors might prefer to simply retain one version of the fact-opinion distinction rather than discarding it completely. Here is one such proposal, which I will call the ‘metaphysical version’ of the distinction. According to it, facts are parts of the world, specifically parts that are not representations—they are neither true nor false. Opinions, on the other hand, are representations, specifically assertoric representations made by humans (even if only contingently). They purport to represent the way the world is—they purport to represent the facts. True opinions succeed at this while false opinions do not. We can tell the difference between facts and opinions, in this sense, by applying a test proposed by Weddle (1985: 19): “This would be a mathematician-like way of noting that for opinions the question, ‘Whose opinion is it?’ is germane, and of noting that the question, ‘Whose fact is it?’ except as joking, doesn’t make sense”. Facts and opinions are just metaphysically different kinds of things: parts of the world belonging to nobody vs. representations of the world belonging to specific people.

While this metaphysical version of the distinction is much clearer than the confused version that students tend bring with them to class, and while it identifies an important distinction between facts and representations, I do not think it is sufficient to combat students’ misuse of the fact-opinion distinction. The reason is this. Students who accept the fact-opinion distinction often articulate the distinction as a distinction between *claims* of facts and *claims* of opinion.[[4]](#footnote-4) I know this from experience. I start my lecture on facts and opinions by asking students to identify what common category facts and opinions belong to. After all, we distinguish between sneakers and high-heels, or between apples and oranges, only because they belong to a common category: types of shoes, or types of fruit. Sometimes the common category is quite specific; other times it is more general. But we should expect that facts and opinions belong to separate subsets of some common category. The most frequent reply that students offer is that facts and opinions are both kinds of beliefs, kinds of views, kinds of statements (“factual statements” or “opinion-based statements”), and so on. This is where the metaphysical version of the distinction is no longer of much use. Both kinds of claims—claims of fact and claims of opinions—qualify as *opinions* on the metaphysical version of the fact-opinion distinction. After all, both kinds of claims are representations that belong to someone. So, while the distinction between facts and representations is no doubt a distinction that should be preserved, and one which students would benefit from consciously using, it leaves too much of the bad version of the fact-opinion distinction in place to function as an adequate replacement. For example, it cannot be used to help students think through the difference between a claim like “the earth revolves around the sun” (what they call a factual claim) and a claim like “abortion is morally permissible” (what they call an opinion-based claim). I believe that any attempt to preserve the fact-opinion distinction by simply clarifying it will face the same sort of problems. The reason is that this kind of ‘keep-and-clarify’ strategy allows students the use of the word ‘opinion’ and students have a lot of practice using the word in ways other than the way the clarified version of the distinction allows. For example, there is an important distinction between claims about which there is consensus and claims about which there is little consensus, and we might choose to call the former ‘factual claims’ and the latter ‘opinion-based claims’. But students will still feel the urge to call claims like “it’s wrong to torture children”—a claim about which there is great consensus—a merely opinion-based claim. So, it is my view that it is better, for pedagogical purposes, to simply not use any version of the fact-opinion distinction and to replace it completely instead.

**2. The Descriptive-Evaluative Distinction**

I replace the fact-opinion distinction with a distinction between merely descriptive and evaluative claims.[[5]](#footnote-5) For ease of use, I will refer to merely descriptive claims as ‘descriptive claims’. As I teach it, a descriptive claim makes *no* claim about value, while an evaluative claim makes at least *some* claim about value. This isn’t to deny that some claims both evaluate and describe. Claims that use thick concepts, for instance, seem to fit this bill. [[6]](#footnote-6) Rather, the distinction entails only that no claim is both *merely* descriptive and evaluative.[[7]](#footnote-7) In explaining to students what a claim about value is, I rely on examples. Evaluative claims make claims about what’s good, bad, right, wrong, justified, unjustified, just, unjust, deserved, undeserved, evil, righteous, obligatory, blameworthy, valuable and so on. Descriptive claims, on the other hand, make no claim about anything on that list. The list of terms/concepts that could make a claim evaluative is likely indefinitely long, given both the richness of natural language and the implicit nature of many evaluative claims.

Though the distinction is a bit quick in its inclusion of the Right and the Good under a single heading, it is a vast improvement on the fact-opinion distinction. [[8]](#footnote-8) First, while the fact-opinion distinction is *believed* to be mutually exclusive, it faces easy counterexamples, given how it is usually defined (e.g., in the Common Core). The distinction between descriptive and evaluative claims, by contrast, is *actually* mutually exclusive. Second, while the fact-opinion distinction conflates separate issues, the descriptive-evaluative distinction focuses on one issue: whether a claim makes any judgment of value. The descriptive-evaluative distinction also shares enough features with the fact-opinion distinction to make it a likely candidate for replacing it. For example, it shares certain structural features (both distinctions are intended to be mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive) and both distinctions intend for moral claims to all end up in the same category.[[9]](#footnote-9) In sum, the descriptive-evaluative distinction is clearer and tighter than the fact-opinion distinction and yet similar enough to serve as a replacement for the latter distinction.

**3. Practicing the distinction**

To help students practice applying the distinction, I pass out a long list of claims in class which they need to classify as descriptive or evaluative. I do this exercise immediately after explaining the distinction to students, so that it is fresh in their minds. In addition to classifying the claims as one kind or the other, students must also explain *why* the claim belongs in the category they put it in, for reasons explained below. I use the following list, although any list with a combination of descriptive and evaluative claims would work.

John is cruel. The death was the doctor’s fault. Sally is a great woman. There was a great flash in the sky. Your professor said it’s good for everyone to read a little philosophy. Cutting taxes doesn’t stimulate the economy. Michael Jordan would beat LeBron James in a game of one-on-one if they were the same age. Hawaii is the most relaxing vacation destination. Veganism is a healthier diet for nursing mothers than meat-based diets. John thinks that abortion is immoral. The earth is flat. It’s wrong to torture babies for fun. This institution was founded in the twentieth century One should show gratitude when given a gift. The Iraq War was a disaster. The Iraq War improved the Middle East. Dogs are better pets than snakes. Ishiguro was worthy of winning the Nobel Prize. Immanuel Kant believes we have a duty to never use a person like a tool. We ought to burn half our money. Jenny is older than her brothers but not her sisters. It’s illegal to drink alcohol in this state if you’re under 21.

As should be clear, some examples are more difficult than others. Initially, most students struggle with applying the distinction to all but the easiest examples, if only because it is difficult for them to forget the fact-opinion distinction and start afresh. In this context, students are prone to five common mistakes:

i. Treating a report of someone else’s evaluative claim as if it is itself an evaluative claim.

Two claims in the list above are intended to tempt students into this mistake: ‘John thinks that abortion is immoral’ and ‘Your professor said it’s good for everyone to read a little philosophy.’ They are both merely descriptive claims because they only report what someone else says or thinks—they offer no evaluation of abortion or philosophy themselves. Students who make this mistake tend to do so because they are simply scanning for evaluative words like ‘good’ and ‘immoral’, rather than trying to understand what claim is being made.

ii. Failing to see that a claim is implicitly evaluative.

As mentioned above, the list of evaluative terms in English is likely indefinite due in part to the implicit nature of many evaluative terms. Two implicitly evaluative examples from the above list are: “The Iraq War was a disaster” and “The Iraq War improved the Middle East.” If students are merely scanning for explicitly evaluative words like ‘good’ or ‘wrong’, then they will fail to see that ‘disaster’ here means ‘very bad’ and that ‘improved’ means ‘made better’.

iii. Failing to distinguish between evaluative and descriptive uses of the same word.

Sometimes one and the same English word can have evaluative and descriptive senses. I include one such pair in the list above: “Sally is a great woman” (evaluative) and “There was a great flash in the sky” (descriptive). There are also times when it is unclear if a given term is being used evaluatively or descriptively. The claims about health and relaxation in the list above are examples of this (“Hawaii is the most relaxing vacation destination” and “Veganism is a healthier diet for nursing mothers than meat-based diets”). Though these examples are difficult for students, they force them to consider whether concepts like health and relaxation are evaluative or descriptive concepts. The next two mistakes are the most common ones students tend to make.

iv. Confusing a *contentious* descriptive claim for an evaluative claim.

Students often use ‘opinion’ to signal that a claim is contentious, i.e., that people do, or can, disagree about its truth value. Since ‘evaluative claim’ is in some ways a counterpart to ‘opinion’ (for instance, both categories are supposed to contain moral claims), it is natural for students to want to classify any contentious claim as evaluative. To illustrate that descriptive claims can be contentious, I use contentious debates from science (e.g., about explanations for the disappearance of Neanderthals or about interpretations of quantum mechanics). An example from the list intended to tempt students into this mistake is “Michael Jordan would beat LeBron James in a game of one-on-one if they were the same age.” This is simply a claim about an uncertain counterfactual event. Claims about uncertain counterfactuals can be descriptive though, including this one.

v. Using a claim’s truth value as a guide to its classification.

Students often confuse a claim’s being true for its being descriptive, as well as a claim’s being false for its being evaluative. For example, the claim “The earth is flat” is a false descriptive claim, but students often initially classify it as evaluative because it’s not ‘factual’. If students think that truth always goes hand-in-hand with description, then they cannot even entertain the possibility of there being moral truths. If there are no moral truths, it doesn’t follow from the nature of a distinction between two kinds of claims.

I let students go over the list and make classifications in small groups. We then go through the list together, making sure to give students time to explain and correct each other before I offer my verdict. For claims that could go either way depending on how one reads a key term (e.g., the one on health), I make sure to highlight that some terms are ambiguous between having evaluative and descriptive senses. I use roughly 45 minutes for introducing the distinction, giving students a chance to classify claims on their own, and then going through the list as a class. After class I post an answer sheet to the course website, as well as a list of the common errors described above.

I also assign a homework exercise that strengthens students’ abilities to use the distinction. The exercise functions much like a journal. You can assign any number of entries and have them turn them in all at once or throughout a given time period. I usually assign six total entries. The task is for students to find op-ed articles on mainstream news sites and search for both descriptive and evaluative claims within the op-ed. For example, I require students to find six claims total for each entry, at least two from each category. For each claim the student picks, they must offer a one-sentence explanation for why they put in into the relevant category. For instance, if they identified an evaluative claim, they must explain why it’s evaluative. This is necessary since it is quite common for students to correctly classify a claim, but for the wrong reasons. Near the beginning of the semester, students routinely identity moral claims—e.g., the claim that abortion is immoral—as evaluative because ‘people could disagree’. Here they are using a fact that has nothing to do with evaluation—that a claim is contentious—as a sign of the evaluative nature of the claim. Sometimes this shortcut will work: many evaluative claims are in fact contentious. But this is only because we tend not to talk that much about less contentious moral claims. For instance, there is a large consensus that it’s wrong to torture innocent people for fun, and so there is little need to bring this up in conversation. In addition, there are plenty of contentious descriptive claims, e.g., there are many debates in the sciences around which there is no consensus. For a six-claim entry, I grade on a 0-12 scale: one point for each correct classification and one point for each correct explanation.

The op-ed exercise is more challenging for students than the in-class exercise of classifying the claims on the list I supply. First, the list I provide contains only claims, whereas many op-eds contain questions, imperatives, etc. So, a student must first sort through claims and non-claims before they can classify claims of each type. Second, op-ed writing is relatively wild compared to the shorter claims I include on the list. Often times the claims include clauses, or grammar that is difficult to parse. This forces students to focus on the form of the sentence before they can classify it. Few of my own students know what an op-ed is, let alone where to find one, so it is helpful to show students on the projector how to find op-eds on news websites. It also helps to do a practice version of the assignment in class. I generally come prepared with printouts of a recent op-ed, and students must do a practice round of the assignment, which they will submit at the end of class for a low-stakes grade. For the homework version of the assignment, I recommend requiring that students submit one or two entries earlier than others, rather than collecting them all at once. Some students continue to make the same mistakes described above, and they sometimes even offer as an explanation for why a given claim is evaluative that it is ‘just an opinion’. As a result, the grades for initial submissions can be quite low for some students. I think it is best to grade them as is. Applying the distinction accurately requires thoughtfulness and attention to detail, and for many students only a low grade serves as motivation to do this. My impression from having used this assignment for years is that students who try hard end up getting at least Bs on the work eventually. The most capable of the students get perfect or near-perfect scores from the beginning.

**4. Benefits**

Committing to the replacement process just described yields at least six major benefits. First, the fact-opinion distinction is an obstacle to moral debate (and philosophical debate more broadly[[10]](#footnote-10)), and the quicker it is set aside, the easier it is to have genuine moral debates in class. Second, the exercises give students a chance to practice reading a text closely, with a clear goal in doing so, and to get feedback on the success of their attempts. Third, and relatedly, the exercises help students see that philosophy is an activity involving skills. That is, philosophy requires students to read closely to determine the nature of a claim. After all, whether a claim is descriptive or evaluative cannot be determined by scanning for certain words. Sometimes evaluative terms are used to merely report someone else’s views or claims, and sometimes evaluative claims are made with less obviously evaluative words. Fourth, many students default to some kind of anti-realism about thin evaluative terms (“good,” “right,” “immoral”). But they don’t defend anti-realism about thick evaluative terms nearly as strongly, e.g., being cheap or sleazy. Insofar as thick evaluative terms appear frequently in op-ed pieces, the exercises serve to bring out the more realist side of students. Since realism in students is, in my experience, more conducive to having first-order moral debates in class, the exercises increase the likelihood of good discussion. [[11]](#footnote-11) Fifth, the exercises help students see philosophical questions and issues where they might not have seen them before. For example, the in-class activity involving the above list demonstrates to students that the very nature of health—whether it is an evaluative or descriptive concept—is a live debate.[[12]](#footnote-12) Finally, the distinction is a fruitful one, in that it can be applied to *advance* first-order moral debates. I will conclude with an illustration of one way in which the distinction can advance such debates.

After spending roughly two days dismantling, and then replacing, the fact-opinion distinction, I tend to spend a day or two on moral relativism. One of my aims on these days is to help students appreciate that there is probably far less truly *moral* disagreement between cultures, and individuals, than we think, which might cause us to wonder why we’re tempted by relativism to begin with.[[13]](#footnote-13) To help students understand why, I spend roughly half a day explaining two very different ways that two people might disagree with each other about the truth of an evaluative claim. First: both sides agree on all relevant moral principles and yet disagree on the evaluative claim in question because they disagree about some key descriptive claim which functions as a minor premise in generating the evaluative claim at issue. For example, two people might disagree about the permissibility of capital punishment only because they disagree about whether it deters (a descriptive issue). I call these ‘fundamentally descriptive moral disagreements’ because they boil down to a disagreement over a descriptive issue. The second kind of disagreement occurs when both sides agree on the relevant descriptive issues and yet disagree on some background moral principle. For example, two people might disagree on the permissibility of capital punishment despite agreeing on its deterrence effect, on the risk that it will irreversibly punish the innocent, and so on. Here the disagreement boils down to something fundamentally evaluative, such as whether it is the state’s right to kill people. I call these ‘fundamentally evaluative moral disagreements’ for this reason. The two kinds of disagreements are very different in nature, and moving a debate forward looks very different in each case accordingly. For example, looking at statistics about deterrence is a very different activity from debating the limits and rights of a state.[[14]](#footnote-14) But students can diagnose disagreements as being of one form or another, and hence advance debates, only if they have a prior grasp of the distinction between descriptive and evaluative claims. So, the distinction is not only clearer than the fact-opinion distinction, but it can also help students discuss first-order moral issues in a productive way, whether between cultures or within a given culture.

References

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1. See Weddle (1985), Corvino (2015), and McBrayer (2015) for discussions of the various ways that the distinction is problematic. Corvino seems to think the distinction is worth keeping, as long as it’s tightened up. Weddle and McBrayer think we’d better off without it. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Students often mean very different things by ‘opinion’, even if they agree on the basic structural features of the fact-opinion distinction. I often ask students to write a definition of ‘opinion’ on pieces of paper, which I then collect and read in front of the class. It quickly becomes apparent that different students use the term in different, often incompatible, ways. See Weddle (1985) for a nice list of the various meanings the two terms can have. Brotherton and Son (2021) look at evidence suggesting that the distinction is applied relative to users’ beliefs: facts are those claims which are congenial to the user’s beliefs, whereas opinions are those that are not congenial. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Kuhn (1962: 79) makes this same point in relation to scientific theories: scientists retain even significantly flawed theories until there is a suitable replacement. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Weddle (1985:19) makes this same point. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. A claim, as I use the term, is a linguistic utterance capable of truth or falsity. So, questions and imperatives are not claims. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For example, calling someone cheap both describes and evaluates their spending habits. Likewise, calling a parent neglectful both describes and evaluates their parenting. So, the ‘descriptive’ category of claims is really the category of *merely* descriptive claims. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. As I define the two kinds of claims, the mutually exclusive nature of the distinction is an analytic truth. A non-cognitivist, such as Hume, could accept the distinction and just add that there are only descriptive claims. Likewise, the distinction can be granted even if one denies that there are any evaluative *truths*. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Another way to put the point is that the list of evaluative terms includes terms that professional philosophers would consider both evaluative and normative. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The fact-opinion distinction fails in this aim, however. If there are moral truths or justified moral claims, then there are moral claims in the fact category and moral claims in the opinion category. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. For example, “God exists” and “God does not exist” are not moral claims, but they are often treated as mere opinions by students. Thanks to a reviewer for highlighting that the fact-opinion distinction is an obstacle outside of moral philosophy classes too. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. To be clear, the distinction *itself* does not presuppose any kind of realism: it is compatible with all evaluative claims being false. But the distinction can be used to combat knee-jerk anti-realism, if that is one’s goal. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Another example on this front is the concept of a preference. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Rachels (2003: 23-5) offers this as one of his strategies for combating student relativism. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. In this way, evaluative claims lack a key feature of opinions (or at least opinions as how many students conceive them): they can be discussed within the space of reasons. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)