Review of “The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy and other essays”

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Overview.

Hilary Putnam’s latest book is more or less a transcription from lectures he gave in November 2000 at the invitation of the Rosenthal Foundation and the Northwestern University of Law. The more casual nature of the talk makes for an enjoyable read that flows very much as one would expect from a lecture than one would normally get from reading a formally written book.

Putnam has constructed a brilliant, yet concise, exposition and argument for the failure of the fact/value dichotomy in philosophy. We are exposed to what Putnam keenly calls the “Final Dogma of Empiricism,” whereby philosophers of language and science have attempted to expunge values from the hallowed ground of scientific investigation and logic. But Putnam argues that value judgments creep into our preferences for one scientific view over another when we attempt to determine why one view is more reasonable than another. We are typically offered, as a response, the claim that views must be adjudicated on the basis of their plausibility, coherence, or simplicity. Putnam, however, argues that such “standards” of objectivity are themselves infused with value preferences.

One very important contribution that Putnam makes is the argument that there is a rippling effect that is caused throughout many disciplines once we codify the myth that facts are divorced from values. In his
treatment of Amartya Sen’s views on economics, for instance, Putnam argues that the fact/value dichotomy has played a significant role in the traditions of economic theory. Sen has argued against viewing economic theory in terms of a discipline that eschews value judgments. As both Sen and Putnam would likely agree, a view that depicts economic theory as purely factual may be able to tell us how to go about achieving certain ends, but it cannot tell us which ends are more valuable. Since the economic system we adopt affects the lives of people in a very direct way, the avoidance of values in an economic system leaves a vital breach in the fabric that is economics.

**Main Argument.**

Putnam traces the origin of the fact/value dichotomy to the views of David Hume. Once Hume excluded moral judgments from the realm of knowledge, a distinction was made between cognitive judgments and non-cognitive judgments. Judgments of fact or of relations between our ideas were the sorts of judgments that an observational or rational process could in principle decide. But values were not considered to be the sorts of things that one could decide using observation or reason. Instead, value judgments were considered to be those judgments based in sentiment, which, it was argued, are immune from the scrutiny of science and formal logic.

The logical positivists of the 20th century extended this Humean notion to claim that judgments which are immune from observation and reason are to be held as nonsense, a term which means that the judgment literally lacks an ability to be objectively confirmed or disconfirmed. As the views of the logical positivists came to prominence, the dichotomy of fact and value was established as an unchallenged doctrine. The objectivity of scientific investigation was held to be paradigmatic of a rational methodology that was not influenced by the caprice of subjective values. But this standard of objectivity came under scrutiny by 1950 with Quine’s famous attack on the analytic/synthetic distinction. The traditional empiricist picture of sensible claims being either statements of pure mathematics or statements of observational fact, against the view that non-cognitive statements are based in convention was, as Putnam states, “a hopeless muddle.”

The main line of argument begins with the acknowledgement that epistemic values are also values. When we decide that judgments must be coherent, plausible, reasonable, and simple, we are drawing normative judgments about how we ought to reason. But Putnam argues that there have been no successful algorithmic methods for hypothesis selection. Instead, scientific inquiry proceeds through criticism and valuation. In particular, Putnam argues for what he calls the democratization of inquiry, which involves the principles of fallibilism and experimentalism. These principles involve the acknowledgement that our views are provisionally held on the strength or weakness of the available evidence and that any of our views could turn out to require modification, given the goal we are trying to achieve. And while this acknowledgement does not tell us which values to hold, neither does it tell us which non-value goals to hold, if there are such things. What matters is that fallibilistic, experimentation is conducted for the achievement of our goals whether we consider those goals to be value-based or not. As Putnam states, “…what is valid for inquiry in general is valid for value inquiry in particular…”

Putnam concludes his book with an exposition of the evasion of values in science. Throughout the work of many 20th century figures, the hope was to find a rule that could vindicate scientific inquiry, whether Reichenbach’s straight rule of induction or Popper’s falsifiability theory. But both projects fail, as Reichenbach’s rule can only show, at best, that inquiry may converge on the right hypothesis in the long run, while it does not provide a rule for hypothesis selection. Popper’s theory proposes a way to make
observation the guiding force in theory selection, but in practice, when observation conflicts with what has been taken to be a fact, we sometimes give up the theory, while on other occasions, we give up the fact. As Quine pointed out, decision is often a matter of pragmatic features that are not purely observational.

Putnam concurs with this Quinean claim and adds that even at the observational level, “we have to decide which observations to trust.” In the end, the empiricist hope of a discovery of a way to reduce hypothesis selection to an algorithmic procedure failed. What is considered to be reasonable may be objective in a conventional sort of way, but decisions of this kind carry value judgments at their every turn. Putnam ultimately sides with his pragmatist teachers who argued that “knowledge of facts presupposes knowledge of values.”

All those interested in the transformation in philosophy that led from a purely language based enterprise to a more pragmatic way of viewing philosophy should find this book of tremendous value and interest. Hilary Putnam has once again produced a work of great importance, while writing with the kind of clarity that other philosophers ought to strive to emulate.

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The fact/value dichotomy of the Logical Positivists "was not based on a serious examination of the nature of values and valuation at all."

Things are much more entangled than that and this is a serious study aimed at evaluating that entanglement. This issue seems clearly at the forefront of an examination of narratives and values, and their relationship to the Wittgensteinian “forms of life” -- how much value is a result of human creativity, or is all human creativity traceable to facts in the Humean sense? This is a serious argument and I am rereading. ‘Plausible’, in the mouth of a scientist is shorthand for something like ‘greater than n% probability’, where n would typically be obvious from the context. Although it is on occasion important and useful to distinguish between factual claims and value judgments, the distinction becomes, Hilary Putnam argues, positively harmful when identified with a dichotomy between the objective and the purely "subjective.” Lively, concise, and wise, his book prepares the way for a renewed mutual fruition of philosophy and the social sciences. The fact–value distinction is a fundamental epistemological distinction described between: 'Statements of fact' ('positive' or 'descriptive statements'), based upon reason and physical observation, and which are examined via the empirical method. 'Statements of value' ('normative' or 'prescriptive statements'), which encompass ethics and aesthetics, and are studied via axiology.