Commentary

Putnam on the Fact/Value Dichotomy and the scientific conception of the world

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The philosophical journey of Hilary Putnam has been long and complex. Several entrenched threads have conditioned each other and the whole, but a preferential thread to consider in order to have a sense of the entire process is the relation between the scientific and the manifest conceptions of the world. From this point of view, his journey can be seen as going through (at least) three phases.

In the first phase, Putnam endorsed metaphysical realism and gave priority to the scientific conception of the world: science tells us what reality is ultimately made of, and all the non-scientific areas of our discourse have to be reduced to (or at least can be proven to be reducible to) scientific discourse (Putnam, 1975). Functionalism serves this purpose for one of the areas of our language which is traditionally particularly difficult to express in scientific terms: language about the mind (Putnam, 1960/1975). In the second phase, Putnam turned to the thesis that the scientific and the manifest conceptions are on a pair. The role of language is not to hook onto a mind-independent world of ready-made facts, i.e., scientific facts; indeed, although we can say that both a snooker ball and an electron exist, the electron is not just a very small ball: in these two cases, existence is a very different thing. The point is that language serves the purpose of allowing us to interact with each other and with the world, as Wittgenstein pointed out, according to a normatively regulated form of life which we acquire from our community throughout the process of language learning. (In Putnam’s reading, though, this thesis does not jeopardizes the notion of truth). Scientific language may well be part of our form of life, but it is not any more “referential” than other areas of language. Our language does not take us out of our minds into a world of real facts, but

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1 See, for example, Putnam (1988).
2 Sec, for example, Putnam(1994).
craves a cookie-dough-like world in pieces for us (Putnam, 1981). In the third and last phase, Putnam seems to give priority to the manifest conception. Now, he endorses a “second naivety” about reality, i.e., a self-conscious direct realism. Like Aristotle, Austin, the second Wittgenstein, and – to some extent – American pragmatists and John McDowell, he suggests that our common sense objects are what primarily exists. They do not exist as mind-independent scientific facts, neither are they artifacts made by our conceptual capacities. They simply exist and no further specification is needed. The manifest conception is prior, in this perspective, in the sense that scientific theories (by developing scientific instruments and conceptual tools) enlarge the cognitive capacities through which we think of common sense reality: the latter is thus a precondition of, and thus prior to, scientific reality (Putnam, 2001). (Naturally, here I am employing Sellar’s language in a sense that is far from his usages, in the hope to capture the distinctive character of Putnam’s position).

Putnam’s emphasis on the manifest conception of the world at his third phase opens, among others, the problem of explaining the exact relation between the scientific and the manifest conceptions: does saying that the manifest conception is prior imply that it is more inclusive, and thus the scientific conception leaves something out? And, in case, what is left out by science? A good point of view from which to address these questions is Putnam’s 2002 book *The collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy and other Essays*. Values are traditionally considered to be outside the scope of science, and, thereby, they are sharply separated from facts. Considering their role in the outlook of Putnam’s “second naivety” can be a good way to check what cognitive role science plays in that outlook.

The book is a collection of pieces which were written for various occasions: the first three chapters originated form the Rosenthal Foundations lectures given by Putnam at Northwestern University Law School in 2000; the rest are lectures and essays written for various occasions, which relate to the main topic of the Rosenthal lectures. For our concerns, three main traits of the book should be recalled: the criticism of the fact/value dichotomy, the criticism of value-free science, and the rejection of an ontology of values.

**Criticism of the fact/value dichotomy**

Putnam underlines that Hume’s claim according to which normative statements cannot be inferred from statements concerning matters of fact, has
led neo-empiricists and philosophers influenced by them to accept a sharp distinctions between facts and values. According to this view, facts are dealt with by science and referred to by observational language (Carnap being one of the most influential figures in this respect), whereas values constitute an altogether separate realm, which is dealt with in different ways by different authors. Some deny that they exist and take evaluative language to be always erroneous or senseless, others take them to be subjective states or responses and take evaluative language to express or describe subjective emotions. According to Putnam, though, «the fact/value dichotomy is, at bottom, not a distinction but a thesis, namely the thesis that ethics is not about matters of fact» (p. 19); it originated from the persuasion that ethical language has neither an observational nor a theoretical purpose, and thus must be expelled «from the domain of knowledge» (p. 20). The word “cruel” has different senses, and in virtue of some of these it can be used to describe, in virtue of others it can be used to evaluate. The post-humean view is that the two senses must be kept separated on a cognitive level: by knowing facts we do not acquire grounds on how to evaluate those facts. (At the very best, we can acquire knowledge on how to evaluate other facts: e.g., by knowing facts about A’s psychology, i.e., that A dislikes that p, we can learn about the use of evaluative language by A, i.e., that he would justifiably and sincerely claim “it is bad that p”). By contrast, Putnam contends that scientific practices, in particular choices among empirically equivalent theories, depend on judgments of coherence, simplicity, economy, etc., «yet, simplicity, coherence and the like are values» (p. 142), even if neo-empiricist philosophers and their followers (including Quine and Popper) «were determined to shut their eyes to [this] fact» (p. 31). PACE Rorty and other deflators of science and cognition, though, judgments of value are “judgments of reasonableness” and are “objective”: this requires «rethinking the whole dogma (the last dogma of empiricism?) that facts are objective and values are subjective» (p. 145). The upshot is that there are genuine “thick ethical concepts” that represent a deep “entanglement of fact and value”. E.g., the concept expressed by the word “cruel” «has normative, indeed, and ethical uses» (p. 39), and «simply ignores the supposed fact/value dichotomy and cheerfully allows itself to be used sometimes for a normative purpose and sometimes as a descriptive term» (p. 35).
The criticism of value-free science

One of the main purposes of the book is to offer a philosophical backup to the approach to economics supported by Vivian Walsh and Amartya Sen, both of whom were colleagues of Putnam and have been his long-term collaborators. The success of the neo-empiricist conception of knowledge, Putnam shows, had its influence also in economics: supporters of the neo-classical view thought that the description of the rational agent in economic theory had to be totally value-free. As Walsh has pointed out, though, this was not Adam Smith’s original position. Furthermore, as Sen has argued, that approach completely misrepresents the actual thinking of agents: agents always make choices on the ground of values that they see in the foreseeable outcomes of possible actions open ahead of to them. A theory which does not take values into account cannot represent the actual process of choices of people. Hence, both Walsh and Sen have been working for the development of a new, valuesensitive economic theory, and, in this process, they have often discussed the faults of the received view about the fact/value dichotomy. The upshot about science does not concern only economics, but all practical sciences, including, for example, political science. In a discussion with Habermas, Putnam argues, for example, that «ethical values can be rationally discussed» (p. 133), in the public sphere.

The rejection of a metaphysics of values

In this book, Putnam stresses that his objection is to a dichotomy between facts and values, not to a parallel distinction, the difference being that a dichotomy is inflated with metaphysical contents, whereas a distinction is on a purely linguistic level: «nothing metaphysical follows from the existence of a fact/value distinction in [his] sense» (p. 19). Putnam’s points are, thus, mostly linguistic. He claims that language about values is as legitimate as language about facts, and that the fact that were are these two areas of language does not imply that there two sharply distinguished groups of statements, so that for any statement it must be the case that it fits either in one group or in the other. Rather, the borders between the two groups are vague, and some statements (e.g., thick ethical statements) may be in an intersection. The fact that we accept the legitimacy of value-language does not imply, though, that we need to admit the existence of referents of value-terms akin to referents of empirical or
factual terms. This is very much in the spirit of his return to pragmatism and to
the second Wittgenstein: according to these approaches, linguistic meaning
does not have an essence in virtue of which having a meaning is the same thing
for all terms and statements. Rather, what having a meaning amounts to for a
statement or a term varies from utterance to utterance and depends on the role
it plays in each actual occasion when it is used. So having a referent is not
identical to having a meaning, and thus we can grant that value-terms and
statements have meanings even if we do not commit ourselves to an ontology of
values. Indeed, another book which Putnam published around the time of The
collapse of the fact/value dichotomy is entitled Ethics without ontology: here,
Putnam offers an analysis of value-language which avoids ontological
commitments.

In a very sympathetic review of these two books by Putnam, Sabina Lovibond
remarked that Putnam’s points do not imply that «we ought to avoid any
ontological commitment» (Lovibond, 2006, p. 460). It seems to me that
Lovibond’s point is well put. The fact that not all language needs to be
referential and that we do not need to introduce an ontology of values that
mimics scientific ontology in order to secure a meaning to value language, does
not imply that we cannot (or not even that we need not to) ask ourselves what
are the experiential conditions for the assertibility of evaluative statements. By
“experiential conditions” I don’t mean just empirical conditions, i.e., the
conditions which we can accept if we assume an empiricist conception of
experience; I mean also conditions concerning our evaluative responses to
facts that we describe through our non-purely factual language. It is true that
Putnam rules out the possibility of an ontology of values, but he means that in a
very strict sense of “ontology”. In that context, by “ontology” he means a
discipline which originated from neo-empiricists, and which aims at giving an
observer-free description of what there is, i.e., — as Putnam often puts it — a
description of the world from a No-Eye point of view (see Putnam, 2004, p.
51). We can grant him that there might not be an ontology of values in that
sense, and still insist that it is a legitimate question to ask what features the
world (or even “man-in-the-world”) should have in order for evaluative
language to have the meaning it has, and thus what are the assertibility
conditions of evaluative statements and terms. In senses different from
Putnam’s usage, but probably more traditional, this can be called
“metaphysics” or “ontology”. Putnam himself seems to be after a
“metaphysics” in this sense. Indeed, he is sympathetic with Quine’s
pragmatist-sounding claim that “the fabric of sentences”, which is our language, is not made of black threads (factual statements) and white threads (conventional statements), but of gray threads. He also regrets that Harvard pragmatists did not succeed in convincing Quine to take a step further and claim that some statements are gray also in the sense that they combine factual and evaluative meanings (2002, p. 138). If (at least some) statements describe and evaluate facts at the same time, it must be legitimate to ask what features of the realities they describe elicit the evaluations they state, and why; but this is a metaphysical question, in a wide, traditional sense of the word “metaphysical”. There is, however, a more fundamental reason why someone sympathetic to Putnam’s approach should be willing to be involved in metaphysics. He recognizes that most of the contemporary defenders of the fact/value dichotomy do not accept the old empiricist arguments he mostly dwells with, but embrace that position for other reasons:

today [the dichotomy] is defended more and more on metaphysical grounds. At the same time, even the defenders of the dichotomy concede that the old arguments for the dichotomy were bad arguments. The most common metaphysical ground is simply physicalism (Putnam, 2002, p. 40).

His main example is Bernard Williams, the criticism of whom is left to Walsh’s words against the possibility of a reductive account of agency in economics (2002, p. 42). If one wants to reject the dichotomy, then, one needs to show that an account of human action requires a reference to features of the world, and of the position of man in it, that cannot be given in purely physical terms. Again, this is metaphysics, albeit in a traditional and wide sense.

Putnam’s rejection of the fact/value dichotomy can suggest some speculations about his view, in his third phase, of the relation between the scientific and the manifest conceptions of the world. If by “scientific conception of the world” we mean the description of the world which is offered by physical theory, Putnam seems to think that that conception is not exhaustive, since it leaves out the features of the world and the features of man which make the world a possible object of evaluation and man a subject of evaluation. Thus, saying that the manifest conception is prior to the scientific conception implies that it is more inclusive: to it, the world is made of facts which can be evaluated (just as it is made of facts which are colored, tasty, etc.), whereas the scientific conception has no room for evaluable properties (although scientific practice presupposes values). This is by no mean to say that according to Putnam the scientific
conception of the world is wrong: what is wrong is to take it to be exhaustive, and this is the mistake of physicalism. Saying that the scientific conception of the world is not exhaustive is just to say that physics considers some features of our common sense reality and leaves others out. Economics should thus be autonomous from physics, since it considers a different set of features of reality, including (some) values. Direct realism, or “second naivety”, gives priority to the manifest conception in the sense that it does not take the fact that the sciences overlook some kinds of properties as a reason to consider those kinds of properties inexistent or illusory.

REFERENCES


