

Putnam, Hilary. *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy and Other Essays*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002.

It has long been a dogma in some quarters that value judgments are radically different from factual judgments, that they are “subjective” or “untestable” in a way that factual judgments are not. This fact/value dichotomy has become so widely accepted that I can recall my high school teachers in the 1970s reciting it as an uncontroversial truism; and even my college students today, most of whom are religiously conservative Alabamians unlikely to harbor sympathies for ethical relativism, can be counted on to confront assertions in ethics with the question “Who’s to say what’s right or wrong?” on the clear assumption that the question is unanswerable.

During the first half of the twentieth century the fact/value dichotomy was also widely accepted among academic philosophers. (Indeed, their authority probably helped to win respectability for the doctrine in broader intellectual circles.) In the previous few decades, however, support for the dichotomy, while still strong across most of the academy, has begun to crumble in philosophy departments. Putnam’s *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy* helps to explain why.

Any plausible short list of the most important philosophers of the twentieth century would have to include the name of Hilary Putnam; everyone working today in philosophy of mind, philosophy of language, or philosophy of science toils in the shadow of his revolutionary achievements. *Collapse* is not, and makes no claim to be, one of those revolutionary achievements; as Putnam freely acknowledges, many of the book’s central points have been made previously by other philosophers. But for that very reason this short book serves as a valuable introduction to the sorts of considerations that have been moving a growing number of thinkers to reject the fact/value dichotomy. (For that matter, many of the ethical and epistemological points that Putnam wants to make can be found already in the ancient Greek philosophers; the first attack on value-free economics, for example, was Plato’s dialogue *Hipparchus*.)

One of the chief props of the fact/value dichotomy has been the closely related analytic/synthetic dichotomy. (Putnam has a general suspicion [p. 9] of dichotomies, or “philosophical dualisms.”) According to this latter dichotomy, every true judgment must be either analytic or synthetic; analytic judgments are logical tautologies, “true by definition,” while synthetic judgments are substantive claims whose truth or falsity—according to the

Reason Papers Vol. 28

most popular version of the dichotomy—can only be determined by empirical test. Value judgments are substantive claims, and so presumably aren't analytic; but there doesn't seem to be any way to test them empirically, so they must not be synthetic either. Hence, the analytic/synthetic dichotomy forces its proponents to the conclusion that value judgments have no place among truths at all.

Putnam raises a familiar problem for the analytic/synthetic dichotomy: We are never in a position to test any empirical statement *singly*, since such testing always takes place against background assumptions which are themselves open to revision. No empirical test can by itself determine whether what needs to be revised is the statement being tested or one of the background assumptions; such decisions can only be made by weighing all of our beliefs against one another and making comparative judgments concerning their plausibility, centrality, etc. But obviously *this* sort of evaluation can be done as easily for value judgments as for factual judgments; hence, value judgments are *no less testable* than factual judgments. Putnam concludes that ethical discourse is *objective*—without thereby being committed to the existence of ethical features intrinsic in reality, external to our practices of valuing, with which we mysteriously interact.

Another point Putnam makes against the fact/value dichotomy is that the case for rejecting the factual status of *ethical* or *aesthetic* values would, if it worked, have to apply with equal force against *epistemic* values. Yet any claim to *factual* knowledge that we possess must rely on principles of belief-justification and theory choice that are themselves normative. An upholder of the dichotomy (call her a dichotomist) might try to define these epistemic values in purely descriptive terms, as those methods of investigation that have been shown to lead us reliably to the truth; but as Putnam points out, we have no “way of telling that we have arrived at the truth *apart from* our epistemic values” (p. 32), and so we cannot identify which epistemic value judgments are truth-conducive without already relying on such judgments to begin with. Scientific practice's dependence on value judgments is thus irreducible. (Putnam's critique of value-freedom in science is of course not a critique of *objectivity* in science, since he does not regard value judgments as non-objective.)

Another problem for the fact/value dichotomy is the existence of “thick” ethical concepts, that is, terms that include both descriptive and evaluative aspects; standard examples are “cruel” and “courageous.” Dichotomists usually argue that the descriptive and evaluative aspects are *separable components*—that to call someone courageous, say, is to make a factual judgment that she is unusually willing to face danger, along with a *distinct* value judgment approving of this trait. Now this analysis might work for some terms that mix description with evaluation (racial epithets, for example); but, as Putnam points out, it does not work for “courageous”—or

most of the other normative concepts that interest us. To be courageous is not just to be unusually willing to face danger; otherwise, rushing into a burning building to rescue one's ham sandwich would be a clear act of courage, and it isn't. It is part of the concept of courage that a danger's not being *worth* facing counts—at least somewhat—against calling those who face it courageous. Putnam concludes (following Plato in the *Laches*) that there is no *value-neutral* way to identify what all courageous acts or persons have in common, and so there is no way of *separating* the normative from the descriptive aspects of courage in the way dichotomists require.

The absence of a value-neutral way of applying thick concepts implies, Putnam tells us, that “if one did not at any point share the relevant ethical point of view one would never be able to acquire a thick ethical concept,” and so that “sophisticated use of such a concept requires a continuing ability to identify (at least in imagination) with that point of view” (pp. 37-38). This seems right. But Putnam is too quick, I think, to deny the further Platonic inference that “anyone who uses [an evaluative term] without hypocrisy or insincerity must be *motivated* to approve (or disapprove)” of what the term refers to. To regard something as good, I would argue, is to regard it as an appropriate object of endorsement; and in granting that something is an appropriate object of endorsement *one has thereby endorsed it already*. But just as (Wittgenstein showed) we cannot intelligibly interpret someone as believing that the left fork leads to Ennis without attributing to her *some* (defeasible) tendency to take the left fork when she wants to get to Ennis, so we cannot intelligibly interpret someone as endorsing, say, a rule of action without attributing to her *some* (defeasible) tendency to act in accordance with that rule. Hence, there is a conceptual link between regarding something as worth doing and being disposed to do it. Putnam thinks apathy, depression, and weakness of will are counterexamples (p. 71); but I do not see how they are anything more than counterexamples to the claim that value judgments provide *overriding* motivations for action, which is a stronger claim than the one I've been defending. (After all, an agent can be torn by *conflicting* value judgments of varying strengths; to be motivated is not to be *decisively* motivated.)

Readers of this journal will have noted several points of contact between Putnam's views and those of Ayn Rand: the rejection of the fact/value and analytic/synthetic dichotomies; the suspicion of philosophical dichotomies generally; the emphasis on the *contextual* nature of empirical testing; the acceptance of ethical objectivity while denying “intrinsic” ethical features; and the conscious invocation of an ancient Greek understanding of ethical concepts. Putnam does discuss Rand briefly (pp. 114-15), but in a way that suggests little recognition of these affinities. He seems to have a rather simplistic picture of what Randian “egoism” (or “egotism,” as Putnam calls it) is supposed to be, and he describes her central ethical commitment as a

“rejection” of the Kantian principle that “one must act so as to treat others always as an end, and not as a mere means”; given Rand’s frequent and explicit insistence that *man is an end in himself, not a means to the ends of others*, this charge at the very least needs more defense than Putnam gives it. Putnam also maintains that the entrepreneur-heroes in Rand’s novels unethically “manipulated people . . . via their control of capital” (with no defense of this idiosyncratic conception of “manipulation” offered), and dismisses Rand as too “amateurish” to be considered a genuine philosopher (which is an awkward judgment for Putnam to be making about a thinker who, whatever her philosophical failings, was able to come up, independently of Putnam, with a theory of reference and necessity strikingly like the one that is Putnam’s own chief claim to philosophical fame).

Since Putnam maintains that “in ethics we need both Aristotelian and Kantian insights,” and favors attempts to “reconcile a concern with human flourishing with Kantian ethics,” it is surprising that he rejects Christine Korsgaard’s argument for the conclusion that, *pace* Kant himself, Kantians should attach moral value to self-love. Korsgaard maintains that Kantian moral requirements make sense only in the context of a life that is *already* characterized, prior to those requirements, by the pursuit of its own ends; hence, the “denial of self-love is a route to normative skepticism and emptiness,” for “unless human beings place a value upon ourselves, there can be no reasons and values at all” (pp. 173-74). To this Putnam replies as follows:

But surely no one ever, say, ate a pastrami sandwich because they decided to make the maxim of acting on those of their desires which are not morally or prudentially wrong into a law *because they didn’t see any other way to avoid normative skepticism*. Even as a rational reconstruction, this is unbelievable. (p. 174)

Putnam is of course right to dismiss Korsgaard’s account as an *explanation*—whether actual or “rationally reconstructed”—of anyone’s eating a pastrami sandwich; but it hardly follows that it isn’t a good argument for the *moral value* of eating a pastrami sandwich. Recognizing that moral principles depend for their intelligibility on the moral value of self-love would have brought Putnam into still closer affinity with Aristotle and Rand.

Readers of this journal may be wondering how Putnam’s arguments apply to Austrian economics, with its aspiration to “value-free” analysis. Putnam, in fact, devotes several chapters of *Collapse* to exploring the implications of his thesis for economic theory, and much that he says is strongly reminiscent of what the Austrian School has been saying for decades—*e.g.*, his critiques of positivist methodology, mathematized utility functions, and unrealistic *homo œconomicus* models of rationality echo Mises

Reason Papers Vol. 28

and Hayek, while his charge (pp. 54-56) that Pareto-optimality is not truly value-neutral, and is neither necessary nor sufficient for a desirable social order, echoes Murray Rothbard and Walter Block.

Unfortunately, Putnam seems unfamiliar with the Austrian tradition. His ideal economist is Amartya Sen, of all people; reading Putnam, one might indeed form the impression that no economist other than Sen had ever criticized the neoclassical mainstream. Of course, Putnam, as a social democrat, would find the Austrian critique, which attacks the mainstream from the libertarian left, far less politically useful than Sen's, which attacks the mainstream from the social-democratic right. (I use the terms "left" and "right" in their precise rather than their popular sense.)

Putnam's discussions of diminishing marginal utility (p. 53) and preference transitivity (p. 81) show that he knows of only the *psychological* interpretation of these principles; certainly, his lengthy critique of preference transitivity in chapter 5 is completely irrelevant to the Austrian version of that doctrine, which is about preferences expressed *in action*. Putnam's discussion of Habermasian "discourse ethics" likewise takes no account of the contributions of recent Austrians like Shearmur, Madison, and Hoppe to that tradition. It's particularly regrettable that Putnam doesn't discuss Hayek's seminal 1942 article "The Facts of the Social Sciences," which he ought to find quite congenial.

Do Putnam's arguments endanger Austrian value-freedom? I don't think so. They certainly endanger the view that judgments of ultimate value are inherently arbitrary and beyond rational discussion; but while some Austrians (e.g., Mises and Hazlitt) have held this view, others (e.g., Menger and Rothbard) have not. The sense in which Austrian economics is value-free is that the economist's argument that a certain policy will have a certain result is not supposed to depend on the economist's evaluation of the desirability of either the policy or the result; Rothbard in particular has argued that economics can and should be value-free in *this* sense *without* being value-free in the distinct sense of denying any way of objectively assessing the desirability of policies or consequences. As Rothbard liked to point out, advocates of minimum wage laws, say, could happily accept the Austrian demonstration that these laws increase unemployment, if they thought unemployment was not such a bad thing.

Now it may well be true, as Putnam suggests, that we need to accept certain epistemic value judgments in order to conduct scientific inquiry, as well as certain ethical value judgments in order to be able to identify economic categories in practice—to engage in the process of hermeneutic understanding that both Putnam (p. 25) and the Austrians call *verstehen*. But these requirements seem consistent with the rather narrowly delimited sense of value-freedom that Austrians champion. So long as economists can explain the effects of a particular policy without presupposing any evaluation of *that*

policy or its effects, the fact that *other* evaluations must be presupposed need not perturb us.

The subtext of Putnam's critique of value-free economics is a political one: He thinks that the refusal to allow value judgments into economics creates the illusion that the free market is "efficient," and he evidently hopes that reintroducing values will strengthen the case for governmental intervention. If Mises is right, however, the efficiency of the market is going to be relatively *invariant* across differences in civilized values; one need have only a general preference for cooperation over conflict, prosperity over poverty, and more options over fewer—preferences that few moral theories are likely to reject. Of course, Mises's theories might be wrong, but if so, then showing this will require engaging Mises's specifically *economic* arguments; bringing in value judgments will not be sufficient.

It's unclear whether he knows of Mises's Kantian *a priori* approach to economics; but Putnam attacks *a priori* theorizing, whether in economics or in ethics, on the grounds that knowledge of general theories presupposes knowledge of particular facts (and vice versa)—a thesis which he says "would be denied by Kantians who would argue that certain generalizations are *a priori*" (p. 137). This criticism is puzzling, since Kant famously maintained not only that thoughts without content are empty, but also that intuitions without concepts are blind; Kant grants that all conceptual knowledge begins *with* experience, while denying that it must therefore arise *from* experience. Hence, the fact that we cannot employ our concepts in the absence of experience is no objection to the Kantian version of apriorism, and so no objection to Mises.

The closest Putnam comes to discussing an Austrian theorist is his critique of Lionel Robbins, who was at least a semi-Austrian at the time of the methodological writings that Putnam discusses. (It was Robbins who brought Hayek to the London School of Economics in 1931.) Putnam speculates as to whether Robbins's prohibition on interpersonal utility comparisons was influenced by positivism or by Jevons (p. 53), apparently unaware that the chief methodological influence on Robbins was Mises. Of course, the Misesian case against interpersonal utility comparisons is based not on "skepticism concerning the possibility of knowledge of the states of mind of other people"—Putnam rightly dismisses this—but on the fact (pointed out by Mises in 1912, a full two decades before Robbins) that utilities are *ordinal* rather than cardinal, and so lack a common *unit* for interpersonal comparison.

Part of Putnam's hostility to the ban on interpersonal utility comparisons is provoked by the fact that it would bar one traditional argument for compulsory income redistribution—namely, that "the marginal utility of, say, a thousand dollars to someone at the point of going hungry or becoming a homeless beggar is greater than the marginal utility of a thousand dollars to, say, Bill Gates" (p. 53), and so redistributing those thousand dollars from

Reason Papers Vol. 28

Gates to the beggar would increase overall social utility. What Putnam fails to see is that “utility” in the *economic* sense describes the structure of *preferences*, and so utility comparisons make sense only in the context of a single agent; “I prefer X to he prefers Y” is nonsense.

Nothing in Austrian theory rules out interpersonal *eudaimonic* comparisons, based on an objective theory of human flourishing, say; but this would not be an *economic* comparison—not because it involves values, but because it involves *preference-transcending* values. Without preference-transcending values, the case for compulsory redistribution is blocked. And once we invoke preference-transcending values, issues of rights and liberty come into play—and the case for compulsory redistribution is arguably blocked once again.

The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy is a book that libertarians should welcome. Putnam has given us an excellent introduction to what I will optimistically call an emerging philosophical consensus on the legitimate role of value judgments in objective social science; and the aspects of the book that are intended to undermine the case for free markets actually strengthen that case, by bolstering the “Austro-Athenian” perspective generally.

Roderick T. Long
Auburn University