

How Putnam Collapses the Fact Value Dichotomy

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Abstract

Hilary Putnam's philosophical work critiques the entrenched dichotomy between facts and values established by logical positivism and highlights intrinsic interconnection of fact and value. Putnam contends that philosophical discourse should embrace ordinary language, balancing clarity with the need for innovative thought, thereby avoiding the pitfalls of academic pretentiousness. He argues against the notion that ethical values exist independently from empirical facts, asserting instead that ethical judgments possess genuine truth-value and are predominantly influenced by underlying values that guide scientific inquiry. By emphasizing the role of "thick ethical concepts," which carry both descriptive and evaluative elements, he challenges the reductionist view held by traditional empiricists. Putnam posits that observations are not value-neutral; rather, they are shaped by the epistemic standards one employs, thus asserting that every factual assertion is inherently value-laden. Ultimately, he advocates for a more nuanced understanding of moral philosophy that acknowledges the complex interplay between empirical reality and ethical considerations, urging for their integration rather than separation in philosophical inquiry. Through this, Putnam seeks to illuminate how our understanding of the world is deeply entwined with the values we hold, thereby transforming ethical discussions into rational inquiries that enrich both philosophical and scientific discourse.

Keywords: *subjective truth, interconnectedness, functionalism, realism, relativity, universality*

Introduction

American philosopher cum mathematician and computer scientist Hilary Putnam (1926 -2016) has a notable contribution on philosophy of mind as well as philosophy of language. He appropriately remarks "*Metaphysics without Ethics is blind*". Putnam's stance on the use of ordinary language in philosophy highlights a tension between clarity and innovation; while he advocates for making philosophical discourse accessible and rooted in everyday language, this perspective risks constraining philosophical creativity and the expression of novel ideas. He acknowledges the pitfalls of pretentiousness in academic philosophy, suggesting that a commitment to ordinary language should not serve as a straightjacket that inhibits the exploration of complex or unconventional concepts that may defy traditional linguistic norms. Ultimately, the evolution of language

and thought suggests that extraordinary ideas may necessitate extraordinary linguistic expressions, underscoring the need for both clarity in communication and the freedom to innovate within philosophical inquiry. His position in moral philosophy emphasizes a strong anti-reductionist stance regarding the relationship between facts and values. He argues that ethical judgments possess genuine truth-value and that the widely held dichotomy between descriptive (factual) and evaluative (ethical) beliefs is rationally indefensible. Putnam critiques the narrow empiricist conception of facts, which aligns only with sensory experience, and posits that facts and values are fundamentally intertwined, particularly through the use of thick ethical concepts that blend descriptive and evaluative elements. He asserts that every fact is "value loaded" and that a truly comprehensive understanding of the world, especially the human experience, cannot be achieved without acknowledging the inherent values involved.

Logical positivism

Putnam explores the evolving relationship between facts and values in philosophical discourse, particularly highlighting the legacy of Enlightenment thinkers and later logical positivists. The Enlightenment initiated a belief that ethical values cannot be derived from empirical facts, encapsulated in Moore's argument against the naturalistic fallacy, which posits that non-natural concepts like 'goodness' cannot be defined purely in natural terms. Moving into the twentieth century, logical positivists further entrenched this notion of the fact/value dichotomy, declaring that science should only concern itself with empirical facts while relegating values to subjective experiences that defy scientific scrutiny. Consequently, this intellectual trajectory illustrates a persistent tension in philosophy regarding how we understand and justify moral and ethical beliefs amidst an increasingly scientific worldview. Logical positivism, as articulated by thinkers like A. J. Ayer, asserts that meaningful statements must be verifiable through empirical observation, thereby creating a sharp distinction between factual and value-laden statements. This perspective categorizes ethical, moral, and aesthetic claims as subjective expressions of personal preference, devoid of objective truth or rational discourse. Nancy Pearcey (1952), an American writer and cum economist, highlights how this fact-value dichotomy enables science to

dominate discussions of reality and truth, relegating ethics and religion to mere opinion. Ayer's verification principle underscores that since moral statements cannot be empirically validated, they are dismissed as non-cognitive or "meaningless," leading to a fundamental debate about the nature of knowledge and its implications for discussions of ethics and values. A.J. Ayer, a leading figure in logical positivism, argues that meaningful sentences must either be tautologies or empirically verifiable, a criterion that excludes value statements like "charity is good" from having meaningfulness since they cannot be tested against observation or defined structurally. He posits that moral statements do not convey factual information but instead express subjective feelings, creating a fundamental distinction between factual and moral utterances. This leads to his conclusion that moral language does not serve the function of conveying truth but rather reflects emotional responses, thereby establishing a clear distinction in the nature of these two types of statements – factual and evaluative. The arguments shown by the logical positivists between the two are ---

a) The argument posits a strict dichotomy between facts and values, asserting that factual statements are objective, verifiable, and grounded in empirical evidence, while evaluative statements are subjective, based on personal or cultural preferences. In this view, values—such as moral judgments or aesthetic preferences—are seen as inherently non-empirical and therefore not applicable to scientific discourse, which relies on replicable and observable phenomena. This separation suggests that the scientific method, rooted in measurable facts, cannot accommodate subjective value judgments, as the introduction of values could compromise the objectivity and reliability that characterize scientific inquiry. As such, the argument emphasizes the importance of distinguishing scientific analysis, which seeks to understand the world through factual evidence, from evaluative dimensions that pertain to human experience and opinion.

b) Factual statements are grounded in observable reality and can be verified within a spatiotemporal context, focusing on what exists in the external world. In contrast, evaluative statements hinge on human emotions, sentiments, and moral considerations—elements that are inherently subjective and lack an objective counterpart in the physical realm. Since sentiments arise from personal experiences

and feelings rather than empirical evidence, the reasoning suggests that one cannot draw legitimate conclusions about moral values or judgments solely from factual premises; thus, the two domains operate independently, emphasizing the limitations of factual evidence when addressing ethical questions.

c) Factual statements hold a truth value that is determined objectively and formally, while the evaluation of moral values, which encompasses various frameworks such as Kantian ethics, virtue ethics, and consequentialism, relies on subjective criteria and informal judgments. Each ethical theory necessitates different considerations -- for Kant, an action is moral if it aligns with the categorical imperative; for virtue ethics, it hinges on the character of the moral agent; and for consequentialism, the focus is on the outcomes of the action. Thus, the determination of moral value is inherently complex and context-dependent, contrasting sharply with the more straightforward determination of logical truth.

d) The distinction between facts and values posits that facts can be established through objective, systematic methods and are universally recognizable—if an assertion corresponds to reality, it is deemed true regardless of personal beliefs; this aligns with Wittgenstein's proposition that a statement reflects a state of affairs that can be validated as true or false. Conversely, values are inherently subjective and open to interpretation, leading to potential controversies; different moral frameworks—such as Kantian ethics, which promotes universal moral laws, versus relativistic perspectives that assert the situational basis of morality—illustrate this divergence. As moral principles are often influenced by cultural, situational, and personal factors, what one group may consider virtuous could vary drastically from another's view, culminating in a landscape where moral judgments are frequently contested and cannot achieve the same level of consensus as established facts.

e) Evaluative statements, such as judgments about morality, aesthetics, or personal preferences, cannot be classified as true or false because they do not adhere to the standards of propositional logic that apply to factual statements. Instead of possessing cognitive or truth-functional value, the worth of evaluative statements stems from emotional and moral considerations, reflecting individual

attitudes, feelings, and societal norms that vary significantly across contexts. This creates a distinction wherein facts are objective and impersonal—rooted in observable reality—while values are subjective and deeply personal, dependent on an individual's experiences and the specific circumstances in which they arise. Consequently, while facts inform us about the world, values guide our responses and interactions within that world, marking their presence as non-factual and contextually contingent.

f) The distinction between values and facts is fundamental in philosophical discourse, as they operate in separate realms with inherently different natures. Values pertain to subjective judgments about what is good, desirable, or ought to be, while facts represent objective truths about the state of the world. So, one cannot logically deduce factual statements from evaluative premises or vice versa; for example, the assertion that "everyone ought to do it" does neither inherently lead to the conclusion "it is a fact", nor does the existence of a fact necessitate a corresponding evaluative conclusion like "everyone should do it." Logical deduction requires both premises and conclusions to originate from the same domain, which is impossible here given the fundamental divergence between value judgments and factual statements. Thus, any attempt to derive one from the other is logically untenable.

g) The assertion that values are not involved in scientific descriptions stems from the distinction between empirical facts and moral or aesthetic judgments, which elude scientific verification due to their transcendental and psychological nature. While scientific facts are established through observable, testable data grounded in a rigorous methodology, values exist outside this empirical framework, residing in personal sentiment and subjective experience. They are considered intrinsic or non-instrumental, not merely tools for achieving an end but fulfilling an innate purpose that reflects individual or collective feelings and beliefs. As such, values cannot be rationalized or falsified through empirical means, making them a fundamentally different domain from scientific inquiry. Consequently, the realms of science and values remain distinct, with scientific theories and facts remaining neutral and devoid of subjective value judgments.

h) Values are inherently subjective, meaning they are shaped by personal tastes, preferences, and experiences, making them vary significantly from person to person. Unlike objective statements, which can be verified through observable qualities—like affirming that a pen is red based on its color—value judgments rely on an individual's feelings and sentiments, which cannot be universally or scientifically measured. For instance, when assessing the worth or quality of an artwork, such as a picture of Rabindranath Tagore, one recognizes that this valuation hinges on an individual's aesthetic sensibility rather than any objective attribute of the artwork itself. Thus, while we can ascertain the factual qualities of physical objects through direct observation, the evaluation of values remains rooted in personal interpretation and context, illustrating their subjective nature.

The arguments framed by the logical positivists are vulnerable and have been nullified by Hilary Putnam and he replies these in his unique style. He said, "*Values are not separate from the 'facts' we come to know; they coalesce into the frameworks through which we interpret our experiences.*" (Putnam, H. 2002, p128). He critiques the fact-value dichotomy for oversimplifying and ultimately hindering meaningful discourse by dismissing value judgments as mere subjective preferences, thus inhibiting deep reflection about our convictions. He argues that this distinction not only marginalizes the relevance of values in science and other areas but also serves to curtail critical discussions, turning complex issues into simplistic assertions that sidestep the nuanced examination required in philosophical inquiry. By emphasizing that values are inextricably linked to facts, Putnam advocates for a more integrated approach that recognizes the interplay between empirical evidence and ethical considerations. Putnam critiques the widely accepted dichotomy between factual statements and value judgments, arguing that this strict separation is a cultural institution rather than a philosophical necessity. He believes that it is possible for something to be both a fact and a value, challenging the logical positivists' assertion that no statement can embody both elements. By undermining this dualistic view, Putnam aims to encourage a more integrated understanding of how facts and values interplay in our reasoning, suggesting that the rigid categorization of knowledge leads to unnecessary confusion and disagreement. The idea that facts and values are completely disjointed

is challenged by the perspective that many statements embody both factual and evaluative components. Putnam argues against the notion that no statement can serve dual roles in this way; for instance, the claim "Bill Clinton was a good president" encapsulates factual content regarding his presidency while simultaneously expressing a value judgment about the quality of his leadership. This is also evident in examples like John's understanding of keeping promises, where both belief and evaluation coexist. Thus, numerous instances demonstrate that statements can indeed be both evaluative and factual, contradicting the strict separation posited by the view in question. The argument presented highlights the tension between the coexistence of factual and evaluative content in statements and the positivist claim of a lack of logical connection between them. While some posit that evaluative statements should be viewed purely as evaluative, this perspective undermines the possibility that factual elements can inform evaluative judgments. To reconcile this, proponents of the fact-value dichotomy argue that pure evaluative statements cannot be derived from pure factual statements, encapsulated in Hume's Law, which asserts that normative conclusions cannot be logically deduced from descriptive premises, thus modifying the stricter interpretation of the relationship between factual and evaluative content. Putnam's critique of Hume's Law highlights a significant tension between descriptive and evaluative statements by demonstrating that, although the individual statements about John may appear purely descriptive, when considered together, they clearly imply a moral judgment about his character. This suggests that understanding the meaning of these statements necessitates an acceptance of underlying moral principles, indicating a logical connection between what is factual and evaluative. Thus, Putnam challenges the dichotomist view that maintains a strict separation between descriptive facts and moral values, suggesting instead that evaluative conclusions can arise from purely factual descriptions when contextualized appropriately. Putnam challenges the two-component theory which suggests that factual statements can have both factual and emotive meanings. He argues that if such a separation exists, the factual aspect becomes trivialized and the statement cannot be regarded as truly factual. Using the example "John is considerate," Putnam asserts that while the statement may carry emotive weight in context, it serves various functions such as evaluation

and description without requiring a dichotomy between facts and values. He emphasizes the distinction between a sentence as a linguistic form and its uses in different contexts, and while he acknowledges that factual content exists in evaluative statements, he contends that this content cannot be encapsulated within the strict confines of physical theory, contradicting the notion held by proponents of the fact-value dichotomy. Accordingly he contends that---

- 1) **Values entangle in facts:** The debate between logical positivists and thinkers like Putnam centers on the relationship between factual statements and value judgments, with the former asserting a strict separation between the two domains, while the latter argues that values are intrinsically linked to the interpretation and understanding of facts in scientific practice. Putnam (2002) emphasizes that "*values are entangled with facts*" in *scientific practices* (p. 44). He contends that even observations and definitions in science are not value-neutral; instead, they are shaped by epistemic values that guide our pursuit of accurate descriptions of reality. Thus, he emphasizes that the interplay of facts and values is crucial in the scientific enterprise, highlighting that our understanding of the world is not solely grounded in empirical data but is also influenced by the underlying philosophical and ethical frameworks we employ. Putnam mentions the intricate interplay between facts and values within the scientific inquiry process, as articulated by scholars like Allen and Putnam. Allen emphasizes that scientific research is inherently guided by standards that distinguish truth from falsehood and significant insights from trivial ones, highlighting that knowledge requires individuals to assess their progress based on these evaluative criteria. He argues that this reliance on judgment reveals the first breach of the dichotomy between fact and value, contending that knowing is intrinsically tied to personal standards of evaluation. Putnam further expands on this idea by arguing that even factual statements are laden with values, suggesting that the criteria used to select scientific theories—like coherence and simplicity—are not purely objective but rather normative and value-based. He asserts that the acceptance of one theory over another often hinges not just on available data but on these underlying values,

especially in cases where evidence is lacking. This argument is illustrated through historical examples, such as the preference for Einstein's theory of gravitation over Whitehead's, despite the absence of conclusive observational data at the time. In essence, both Allen and Putnam illustrate that the pursuit of science is deeply intertwined with normative values, challenging the notion that facts alone can dictate scientific truth. He emphasizes the intrinsic connection between facts and values, asserting that all factual assertions are interpreted through a lens of values, which shapes understanding and meaning. It acknowledges that while scientific inquiry is often perceived as objective, it is inherently influenced by value judgments, as seen in Putnam's assertion that evaluating a statement's truth involves epistemic values like coherence and simplicity. This leads to the conclusion that truth is not merely a factual assertion but intrinsically tied to evaluative criteria, challenging the traditional fact-value dichotomy. However, this raises questions about the nature of truth assessment, as certain evaluative statements may not universally hold truth values, suggesting that a nuanced understanding of truth is necessary to navigate the complexities between factual and evaluative claims.

- 2) **Values identify facts:** Hilary Putnam argues that values can identify facts, particularly through his idea of the "internal realism" perspective, which posits that our understanding of facts is influenced by the conceptual frameworks and values we hold. Putnam suggests that facts cannot be considered independent of human perspectives and values because our interpretations of facts are shaped by our social and ethical contexts. Thus, he emphasizes that values play a crucial role in guiding our inquiries, shaping our perceptions of reality, and informing what we consider to be factual. Putnam's observation that values are intertwined with facts suggests that values play a crucial role in the identification and determination of non-self-evident facts, as they inform the processes of selection and evaluation during fact discovery. While self-evident facts may not be influenced by values, non-obvious facts require interpretation and observation, inherently involving value judgments according to Michael Polanyi. He posits that a

scientific fact is not merely an objective truth but rather a scientific opinion substantiated by evidence, which reflects the values embedded within the scientific community. Therefore, science transcends mere fact collection, becoming an interpretive system informed by underlying value judgments. The claim emphasizes that scientific endeavor, like other disciplines such as art, morality, and law, is reliant on a set of traditional values that shape what is considered factual. These epistemic values are passed down through generations, influencing the collective understanding of scientific merit and establishing a framework for evaluating facts. Philosopher Hilary Putnam argues that understanding facts necessitates an awareness of the underlying values that inform them, positing that value judgments are integral to justifying factual claims. This perspective acknowledges that both the pursuit of knowledge and the interpretation of facts are inherently intertwined with the values that societies hold, thus making science a domain embedded in tradition and subjective interpretation. Putnam's anti-realist perspective reconfigures the concept of truth by framing it as internal to a conceptual scheme, influenced by epistemic justifications rather than external, objective realities. He articulates truth as an idealization, suggesting that statements are labeled 'true' based on what would be justified under ideal epistemic conditions, emphasizing a plural and pragmatic understanding rooted in human language. Importantly, he argues that facts and values are interconnected, with value judgments shaping epistemology but not conflating the two; rather, he acknowledges that while values can influence factual determinations, they can still possess objectivity and are distinctly different from moral or ethical values as traditionally understood. Thus, Putnam navigates the complex relationship between facts and values without falling into subjectivity or relativism. The distinction between 'what really exists' and 'what we believe exists' highlights the influence of values and theoretical frameworks in shaping our understanding of truth, as the pursuit of knowledge is continually guided by our epistemic theories rather than mere observation. As illustrated by the differing interpretations of a biopsy slide by an ordinary person and a

trained medical specialist, factual existence can be obscured by the observer's theoretical background, demonstrating that observation alone does not guarantee access to objective truths. This challenges the logical positivist position of fact-value dichotomy, asserting that while verificationism emphasizes human capacity to recognize truths, it inherently limits the realm of what can be understood, leaving open the possibility of facts that may remain forever beyond human verification. Ultimately, the relevance of the fact-value distinction persists despite the critique of verification theory, as it serves to underscore the complex interplay between our theories of knowing and the objective reality we strive to comprehend.

- 3) **Values in the case of examination and description:** Hilary Putnam emphasized the importance of practical context in understanding value, arguing that examination and description are interconnected processes that help reveal the complexities of human experience. He challenged the idea that values are purely subjective or objective, suggesting instead that they arise from our interactions with the world and are influenced by societal norms, scientific knowledge, and ethical considerations. This fusion of examination (analyzing concepts) and description (articulating experiences) allows for a more nuanced appreciation of moral and philosophical inquiries, reflecting his broader views on realism and the nature of truth. Putnam's philosophy suggests that values are deeply intertwined with the description of facts, challenging the traditional positivist view that separates evaluative statements from descriptive ones. He argues that when we describe an object, such as calling something a "calculator," we are not only identifying its function but also making an evaluative judgment about its utility or correctness based on epistemic values. This entanglement of facts and values implies that our understanding and language are inherently laced with evaluative considerations, a notion that has often been overlooked by empiricists and positivists alike. Thus, in examining and describing facts, one cannot escape the influence of values, which further complicates the relationship between knowledge and ethics across various contexts. Indeed,

the intertwining of values and facts, as highlighted by Putnam, suggests that many statements we categorize as factual often contain evaluative components that enrich their meaning rather than detract from their objectivity. Phrases like "a good result" or "a worthwhile experiment" exemplify how empirical observations can be inherently laden with value judgments, indicating that our understanding of facts is often influenced by the evaluative criteria we apply. This interplay underscores the complexity of language and its role in both scientific discourse and everyday communication, illustrating that facts are frequently imbued with subjective interpretations that do not undermine their factual nature. The debate surrounding the fact-value dichotomy highlights the complexity of how factual statements and value judgments interact, as evidenced by Putnam's assertion that many factual claims are inherently value-laden. The examples provided illustrate that statements which appear subjective can have objective elements when grounded in shared experiences or criteria, such as in the assessment of blood pressure machines or materials used for sidewalks. This intermingling of facts and values, as supported by both Putnam and Smith, suggests that our understanding of knowledge and truths is incomplete without recognizing the evaluative dimensions that influence our conclusions, ultimately demonstrating that factual claims cannot be entirely divorced from the values informing them. The debate surrounding the fact-value dichotomy challenges the notion that values are purely subjective and devoid of rationality. While fact-value dichotomists argue that values stem from personal preferences and cannot be rationally compared, thinkers like Putnam and Strauss suggest that value disputes can indeed illuminate objective truths and facilitate rational discourse. For instance, Strauss illustrates that through objective assessments of actions against rational standards, one can arrive at valuable judgments about their efficacy. Moreover, Amartya Sen emphasizes that scientific evidence and rational arguments can and should be integral to discussions about values, indicating that a comprehensive understanding of human decisions incorporates both factual and evaluative dimensions. Consequently, values

and rationality are intertwined, suggesting that ethical discussions are not merely subjective but can aspire toward objectivity. The relationship between factual statements and value judgments is complex and interdependent, as factual accuracy often relies on the embedded values that give these facts their significance in human life. Putnam argues against the idea that facts can be evaluated independently of values, asserting that the worth of a fact depends on its ability to be valued positively or negatively. This perspective is echoed by Smith, who posits that value judgments can be descriptive and are supported by factual realities, ultimately suggesting that evaluations and descriptions are intertwined, where the acceptance or rejection of a fact is often dictated by its perceived value. The text discusses the distinction between brute-factual statements, which are devoid of value implications (e.g., "There are two pens on the desk"), and value-laden statements that reflect personal preferences or judgments (e.g., stating a preference for pens over pencils). It emphasizes that some facts can intertwine with values, as seen in assertions about materials that imply a value judgment (e.g., concrete being a "good material" for sidewalls). Putnam argues that value judgments can achieve objectivity by appealing to external standards, even in scientific contexts, where certain characteristics—like reasonableness—align with typical properties of values. Furthermore, he asserts that ethical values such as justice and fairness can also be viewed as objective due to their universal applicability beyond individual or societal contexts.

Putnam places the more comprehensive replies for collapsing the dichotomy— i) Putnam argues that while individual moral reasoning is influenced by diverse personal and cultural factors, there exists a shared commitment to fairness and universal moral principles that promote objective ethical standards. ii) The critique of moral objectivity based on societal variations is countered by the notion that our ability to question and evaluate norms indicates a pursuit of higher ideals, revealing a moral compass that transcends subjective influences. iii) Despite cultural differences and potential maladaptive characteristics, moral values possess an

underlying universality akin to scientific truths, suggesting a foundational basis for ethical statements that can be recognized across varying contexts.

Conclusion

Through this analysis, the discussion seeks to underscore that ethical discussions should not be excluded from scientific rationality, as they are deeply intertwined with the realities we seek to understand. Putnam's critique of the fact/value dichotomy highlights the influence of Hume's is-ought problem and the verifiability theory of meaning from the Vienna Circle, asserting that ethical statements lack empirical verification and thus may seem meaningless. He argues that this perspective enforces a strict separation between descriptive and evaluative discourse, reduces ethics to subjective emotional expression, and suggests that fact-based issues are more resolvable than value-based ones. However, Putnam's focus on early Vienna Circle thinkers like Carnap overlooks the later evolution of their views, particularly the more nuanced positions of thinkers like Otto Neurath and W. V. O. Quine, who also advocated for a separation of ethics from empirical science. This selective historical narrative may lead to the impression that Putnam is shaping his arguments to fit predetermined conclusions. Putnam critiques the fact/value dichotomy by arguing that the simplistic distinction between factual and value judgments has evolved into a misleading dualism that overlooks the entangled nature of both concepts. He observes that the historical development of this dichotomy, particularly arising from earlier discussions on analytic and synthetic propositions, leads to the erroneous assumption that ethical judgments do not pertain to facts.

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