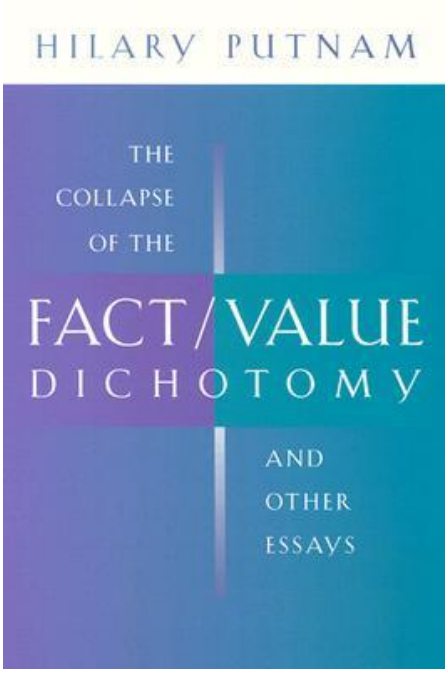

The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy and Other Essays

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If philosophy has any business in the world, it is the clarification of our thinking and the clearing away of ideas that cloud the mind. In this book, one of the world's preeminent philosophers takes issue with an idea that has found an all-too-prominent place in popular culture and philosophical thought: the idea that while factual claims can be rationally established or refuted, claims about value are wholly subjective, not capable of being rationally argued for or against. 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."

Putnam explores the arguments that led so much of the analytic philosophy of language, metaphysics, and epistemology to become openly hostile to the idea that talk of value and human flourishing can be right or wrong, rational or irrational; and by which, following philosophy, social sciences such as economics have fallen victim to the bankrupt metaphysics of Logical Positivism. Tracing the problem back to Hume's conception of a "matter of fact" as well as to Kant's distinction between "analytic" and "synthetic" judgments, Putnam identifies a path forward in the work of Amartya Sen. Lively, concise, and wise, his book prepares the way for a renewed mutual fruition of philosophy and the social sciences.

The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy and Other Essays Details

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John David says

The first essay establishes that the fact/value distinction (a later incarnation of Hume's "you cannot derive an "is" from an "ought" thesis) rests on a dubious positivist definition of "fact" that derives from sense impression. In the second, Putnam explains that the values that science assumes aren't necessarily moral or ethical ones, but epistemic ones. Epistemic values like "coherence" and "simplicity" are assumed in the scientific pursuit, yet science continues to be thought of as wholly objective. John Mackie argued that words like "cruel" and "just" were simply words that described "natural facts," instead of realizing that they cannot be used intelligibly without employing some kind of evaluative judgment.

The third essay transposes this debate into the world of classical economic theory. This same debate found itself transposed into the field of economics ensconced within the framework of a Benthamist moral calculus, but were removed by the empiricist is/ought distinction (later, the work of the positivists.) Amartya Sen's project is to reintroduce ethical concepts and norms (once so lauded by Adam Smith, but since having been forgotten) back into the discourse on classical economics without losing any of its original rigor. Sen realizes that people are motivated by non-self-interested motives, as well. In its place, Sen posits a capabilities approach which emphasizes a plurality of human rights, freedoms, and goals, instead of the poverty of utilitarian ethical monism.

Throughout the three lectures, Putnam carefully picks apart one of the most enduring shibboleths of modern philosophy. Like Rorty, with whom he shares many intellectual affinities, he has an explicit, self-conscious relationship with the analytic tradition. Unlike Rorty, however, he has not wholly eschewed that tradition. While he disagrees with many of its conclusions, he is able to use some of its assumptions and to break outside of the box of morally bankrupt positivism.

The last part of the book contains five essays of in tangential relation to the three main lectures. "On the Rationality of Preferences," one of the essays included in the collection, but not one of the three original lectures, is Putnam's answer to an interlocutor who made a curious criticism of the paper that he presented. Putnam's presentation considered a person who had two choices before them, A and B, neither of which the chooser preferred. Would it matter, he asks, if, instead of the chooser making the decision simply tosses a coin or gets a random person to make the decision for him? After all, they don't have a preference, right? Most classically trained economists would assert that it didn't matter who made the decision. In fact, that's what the interlocutor pointed out. However, this essay, Putnam's response, is a brilliant response defending the idea that, even though one might not prefer A to B, the ability to choose one's own option engenders a kind of "dignity of the self" which economists have heretofore ignored.

Sasha Cooper says

I came to this book hoping for great things. At a high level, Putnam is advancing a theory that few philosophers accept and that, I believe as a pseudo-pragmatist myself, is the right path for philosophy (to wit, the eponymous dichotomy).

I left very disappointed. Part of my problem is Putnam's overbearing tone - he's frequently obnoxious to philosophers greater than him, and even where he gives credit to his opponents, it often feels patronising. Alfred Ayer, a great logician, is contrasted with 'greater logical positivists', Richard Hare (compared to John Mackie) is 'by far the more sophisticated thinker', an unnamed economist who spoke to Putnam after a lecture is 'not without a certain ingenuity' but then later 'dumb' and 'naive', and so on.

Then there's his research ethos. Another review says that he doesn't engage much with contemporary meta-ethics, and I don't know enough about the field to confirm or deny, but it does seem odd that in a book published in 2002, most of the writings it engages with are from pre-1980. But what bothered me more is his constant self-citation.

At age c72, he's perhaps earned some leeway in this respect, but he quickly burned through my patience for such narcissism. Glancing through the endnotes now, I would guess nearly half of his references, perhaps more, are to himself. Either other people will have advanced similar arguments, in which case I would think it more appropriate to refer to them, or no-one has, in which case the lack of support for the argument in question might have prompted greater reservation - in a less self-absorbed writer.

But the main question of course, is whether the philosophy is any good. For the most part, I would say it isn't. Putnam does advance some a couple of decent arguments, but they're all tangential to his main theses, and in a book-length work, I don't think 'not all the arguments are terrible' is enough to merit a second star.

Putnam frequently puts words in his opponents' mouths, and at least once massively misrepresents their views in the process. He says that in Hare's philosophy:

'the statement "capital punishment should be abolished," is equivalent to the imperative "Let us abolish capital punishment," where this means: "*No matter what reasons may be given against doing it*, let us abolish capital punishment."'

A basic understanding of Hare's utilitarian beliefs renders Putnam's claim ludicrous: utilitarianism of any flavour, Hare's included, requires (and indeed is often criticised for requiring) a willingness to make moral trades - to compromise on any moral issue except the most fundamental one of what the ultimate goal is. This misrepresentation is mostly tangential to Putnam's argument, but since Hare is one of the main dramatis personae in Putnam's story it's worrying how profoundly he's misrepresented.

The logical positivists as a whole come under predictable attack, being as a friend once described them, the philosophical whipping boys of the 20th century. I'm not as familiar with their views as with Hare's, but here too I got the impression Putnam's portrayal of their position was ungenerous. He claims that for some of them, any claim not directly based on unmodified experience would be meaningless - ie that knowledge gained from looking through a microscope is unscientific if it's of something we can't see with the naked eye.

Perhaps this is an accurate claim of their beliefs, but the logical positivists comprised some of the greatest logicians of the mid-twentieth century, no less so for the fact that the logical positivism project ultimately failed. I find it extremely hard to believe that any of them would have argued that the claim of Neptune's existence, for example, was unscientific, and not at all hard to believe that the author of this book would be sloppy and/or ungenerous enough to falsely represent them that way.

Ultimately though, my main complaint against Putnam is one that few academic philosophers will sympathise with - his core arguments have essentially the form pilloried so well (IMHO) by Zach Weiner.

More specifically, they generally take the following form:

1. Find a topic-relevant word, such as 'cruel' (using an actual example from the book)
2. Try to break down the word's use (or rather, examine other people's attempts to do so) and find that this naturally evolved and imprecise word used by several million native English speakers doesn't have just one or two set meanings that are easily representable in short phrases.
3. Infer from this that the word therefore represents an emergent and indivisible concept, ie 'cruelty'.
4. Since 'cruelty' has both descriptive and evaluative content, assert that we've now proven the indivisibility of fact and value.

This is nothing more than an argument from Putnam's lack of imagination, yet he writes as though it's conclusive. Needless to say, Putnam advances other arguments in the book, but many of them have a closely analogous form, and few are any more persuasive.

Another weak and recurring argument is his underdefined and overgeneralised concept of 'a value'. He claims that science requires such 'values' as 'plausibility', 'coherence', and 'simplicity'. Even though I also believe science presupposes values of a sort, none of these examples seem anywhere near as self-evident as he treats them.

'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. I suppose you could call that obviousness a value, but in any decisions of practical importance, a scrupulous scientist would consider the actual probability, not some arbitrarily chosen threshold.

'Coherence' can just mean internal consistency, which is extremely well defined (as 'does not result in contradiction'). It admittedly has fuzzier meanings, but Putnam doesn't even try to establish that scientists actually rely on these for any part of their activity.

Similarly, 'simplicity' can mean 'parsimony', which is well definable as 'having low Kolmogorov complexity'. Again, scientists might use it more casually, but again Putnam makes no effort to show that they need do so qua scientists.

Lastly, call me pedantic, but I'd have hoped a book on pragmatist philosophyto be a lot more pragmatic! Putnam starts out by urging us to accept this philosophical discussion as having great real world significance but (with the caveat that I skipped a couple of chapters and so might have missed something there) he seems completely uninterested in offering *applications* for his views. He speaks repeatedly of economics, and frequently criticises specific economic theories, but never (that I saw) offers any theories of his own.

His views on ethics, when the dust has settled from his attacks on the usual suspects, are decidedly unclear. We're frequently impressed upon to 'reflect philosophically' upon ethical questions, but this is nonsensical in the position he leaves us with - to wit, having (at least, in his view) refuted all the traditional ethical systems. One cannot usefully contemplate a move in a game without knowing either the game's rules or its victory conditions, yet this is precisely the actively that Putnam thinks ethics should *ideally* comprise.

Despite my sympathy with at least some part of his project, I can think of little to say for Putnam's book. I came to it following a reference in Sam Harris's *The Moral Landscape*. I've not yet formed a strong opinion of Harris's overall argument, but honestly I found as much profit in reading the short paragraph in which Harris references Putnam as I did in reading this entire book.

Pedro says

I'm baffled by the overt uncharitable review written by the self-entitled "pseudo-pragmatist". Putnam was one of the most open-minded philosophers to date, constantly changing his views in face of constructive criticisms and periodically praising philosophers he disagreed with — such as the positivists themselves (!) and the post-structuralists. Describing Putnam as some sort uncharitable cherry picker philosopher requires, I'm afraid, much more than what the reviewer has given us.

To begin with, in order to adequately review a book, we need to have in view its aimed audience as well as its overall purpose, something that is conveniently ignored by the pseudo-pragmatist. To give some initial background, the first part of the book is a transcript and subsequent adaptation of lectures that Putnam gave to Law students with — it is safe to assume — virtually **no** background in metaethics. Thus, even granting that Putnam does not engage with much contemporary work in metaethics (as a charitable reviewer has pointed out), this does not detract any value from the book. Putnam does a wonderful job of introducing the fact/value dichotomy, as well as its history, relation to issues in Epistemology, and defense of common criticisms. It's in face of such considerations that the book should be evaluated, not by the standards of an academic journal peer-review.

Having said that, I don't even think it's accurate to say that Putnam does not engage with contemporary work in metaethics. If we compare Putnam's references to the ones in the SEP article about "Thick Ethical Concepts", a recurrent theme of the book, they are virtually identical:
https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/th...
(It goes without saying that we cannot demand that Putnam should have engaged with papers that came after the book, so I'm only referring to the references dated before 2002)

Now that this background is laid out, let's analyze the pseudo-pragmatist's considerations one by one.

"Then there's his research ethos. Another review says that he doesn't engage much with contemporary meta-ethics, and I don't know enough about the field to confirm or deny, but it does seem odd that in a book published in 2002, most of the writings it engages with are from pre-1980. "

Given that the book is largely historical (outlining, for instance, how early abandoned mistakes are still implicitly prominent today) and that the literature of the worked topic is not huge in the period between 1980 and 2002 (as per the SEP article), it's not surprising that Putnam does not engage with it. Bernard Williams may have been the most important philosopher working on this topic during the 80's and 90's, and **Putnam does consider him in detail**. Furthermore, if Putnam is right in believing that current mistakes have its roots in classical empiricism and logical positivism, even if those views are now currently abandoned, **it is expected that he would place more weight to those particular views**.

"But what bothered me more is his constant self-citation. At age c72, he's perhaps earned some leeway in this respect, but he quickly burned through my patience for such narcissism. Glancing through the endnotes now, I would guess nearly half of his references, perhaps more, are to himself. Either other people will have advanced similar arguments, in which case I would think it more appropriate to refer to them, or no-one has, in which case the lack of support for the argument in question might have prompted greater reservation - in a less self-absorbed writer."

This criticism is groundless. **Putnam recognizes over and over again throughout the book that his arguments against the fact/value dichotomy are not original and that he's heavily indebted to**

philosophers such as Peirce, Dewey, John McDowell, Philippa Foot, Iris Murdoch, Elizabeth Anscombe, and Amartya Sen (to name only a few). Putnam has definitely made some revolutionary achievements in the philosophy of mind, language, and science, but he's never claimed that his criticisms of the fact/value dichotomy were part of those achievements. He does cite himself a lot, which is expected from a person who has been working on philosophy for fifty years and who's exposing **his views** on a book, but it's far from being the drama that you're making it be. If you are skeptical about this, try being a pragmatist and verifying your statement by actually counting the references.

"Putnam frequently puts words in his opponents' mouths, and at least once massively misrepresents their views in the process. He says that in Hare's philosophy:

'the statement "capital punishment should be abolished," is equivalent to the imperative "Let us abolish capital punishment," where this means: "No matter what reasons may be given against doing it, let us abolish capital punishment."

A basic understanding of Hare's utilitarian beliefs renders Putnam's claim ludicrous: utilitarianism of any flavour, Hare's included, requires (and indeed is often criticised for requiring) a willingness to make moral trades - to compromise on any moral issue except the most fundamental one of what the ultimate goal is. This misrepresentation is mostly tangential to Putnam's argument, but since Hare is one of the main dramatis personae in Putnam's story it's worrying how profoundly he's misrepresented. "

That's a complete misunderstanding of Putnam's point. It's a truism that the non-cognitivist recognizes the possibility and importance of change in opinions, but, whatever that change in opinion is, it cannot be a cognitive change. Rather, it is something to be studied by psychology or sociology (as Amartya Sen recognized in his early writings, when he was still a prescriptivist), that is, something to be placed in the **Space of Causes**, not in the **Space of Reasons**. Otherwise, we would have that ethical judgments can be rationally justified, which is anathema to Hare's non-cognitivism.

"The logical positivists as a whole come under predictable attack, being as a friend once described them, the philosophical whipping boys of the 20th century. I'm not as familiar with their views as with Hare's, but here too I got the impression Putnam's portrayal of their position was ungenerous. He claims that for some of them, any claim not directly based on unmodified experience would be meaningless - ie that knowledge gained from looking through a microscope is unscientific if it's of something we can't see with the naked eye.

Perhaps this is an accurate claim of their beliefs, but the logical positivists comprised some of the greatest logicians of the mid-twentieth century, no less so for the fact that the logical positivism project ultimately failed. I find it extremely hard to believe that any of them would have argued that the claim of Neptune's existence, for example, was unscientific, and not at all hard to believe that the author of this book would be sloppy and/or ungenerous enough to falsely represent them that way."

Again, I'm baffled as to how you can claim this after having read the book. As **Putnam outlines in detail in the first two chapters**, it's not that the positivists claimed that quantum mechanics, for instance, was unscientific, only that this was an **undesired consequence** of their doctrine. The positivists themselves considered this a challenge worth considering, so much that, as Putnam notes, Carnap liberalized the criterion of cognitive significance in 1939 to make a distinction between **"observable terms"** and **"theoretical terms"**. Thus, in the realm of cognitive statements, we have those propositions that are ultimately traceable to direct experience on one side ("observable terms"), and those that, while not being observable themselves, are useful for making observations ("theoretical terms").
(This dichotomy, as it is the case of many dichotomies manufactured by philosophers, is not simple and

clear-cut as it sounds, of course. As many philosophers have pointed out in different ways in the 60's, such as Kuhn and Sellars, meaningful observation implies some sort of background theory.)

"[Putnam's argument] generally take the following form:

1. Find a topic-relevant word, such as 'cruel' (using an actual example from the book)
2. Try to break down the word's use (or rather, examine other people's attempts to do so) and find that this naturally evolved and imprecise word used by several million native English speakers doesn't have just one or two set meanings that are easily representable in short phrases.
3. Infer from this that the word therefore represents an emergent and indivisible concept, ie 'cruelty'.
4. Since 'cruelty' has both descriptive and evaluative content, assert that we've now proven the indivisibility of fact and value.

This is nothing more than an argument from Putnam's lack of imagination, yet he writes as though it's conclusive. Needless to say, Putnam advances other arguments in the book, but many of them have a closely analogous form, and few are any more persuasive. "

That's a paradigmatic textbook example of uncharitability (?) from your part. Putnam's argument has nothing whatsoever to do, either implicitly or explicitly, to the variety of word use. It has to do, instead, with the claim that concepts cannot be neatly categorized into evaluative on one side and descriptive ("factive") on the other. It goes without saying that a mere ordinary distinction between fact and value is innocent enough, but a **strong metaphysical dichotomy** is a whole different monster.

As Putnam points out, some philosophers (such as Mackie and Hare) tried to solve the problem of "thick ethical concepts" (such as "cruel") by claiming that they have a **descriptive** as well as an **evaluative component**, which are potentially separable. As a matter of fact, when I say that Stalin was cruel, I am, according to this view, both saying "Stalin caused a lot of suffering" (descriptive component) and "I don't like suffering" (evaluative component). This is as simplistic as it gets. First of all, "suffering" itself is an evaluative term, which would have to be translated to more neutral terms. Second, even if we translated "suffering" to a more neutral term ("psychological dissatisfaction", for instance), it would not encompass the richness of the concept of cruelty. Prior to the development of anesthesia, doctors would cause "lots of suffering" to their patients, but that doesn't mean they were cruel (at least not in virtue of them causing lots of suffering).

One of the morals I take from the Socratic dialogues is that ethical concepts cannot to neatly reduced to neutral and non-evaluative terms (this is drawn explicitly in Plato's *Laches*). A Socratic interlocutor may say that bravery, for instance, is the willingness to face danger, but that doesn't distinguish bravery from rashness (rushing into a burning building to get a cookie is hardly a case of bravery). The act itself, neutrally conceived, is indetermined between those two scenarios. It's only when we come up with considerations of **rightness**, of danger **worth** incurring, that we can distinguish bravery from rashness or foolhardiness. Putnam comes up with many such cases and demonstrates how the attempts to "neutralize" them (transform them into two separable components) utterly fail. You may say that this entanglement is only an undesirable fact of our ordinary language, something that wouldn't exist in an idealized sort of Absolute Language. Fair enough, **but this is exactly what Putnam aims to show that can't be done!**

"Another weak and recurring argument is his underdefined and overgeneralised concept of 'a value'. He claims that science requires such 'values' as 'plausibility', 'coherence', and 'simplicity'. Even though I also

believe science presupposes values of a sort, none of these examples seem anywhere near as self-evident as he treats them. "

This is not Putnam's idiosyncrasy; the idea of values in science is central to the classical pragmatist tradition. But let's evaluate your take on those terms:

"'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. I suppose you could call that obviousness a value, but in any decisions of practical importance, a scrupulous scientist would consider the actual probability, not some arbitrarily chosen threshold. "

This is as naive as it gets.
1) Even assuming that plausibility is something as simple as "greater than n% probability", we haven't yet arrived at a neutral description of the scientific enterprise. In fact, determining the probability that a given scientific theory has of being true requires values! How are we going to determine that a certain piece of evidence in favor of the theory carries more weight than one that goes against it? Or, even more fundamentally, what count as evidence in favor and evidence against something? We're going, again, use values of plausibility, simplicity, corroboration with data, and so on. Having n% probability is not an epistemically independent proposition that we can neutrally come up with, regardless of all our knowledge and accompanied values.

2) Even in statistics, judging whether something has a certain probability or not is by no means a simple enterprise (unless we are talking about uninteresting cases such as coin tosses and dice rolls). You may want to check the recurring phenomenon of p-hacking in the scientific literature or the endless debates about bayesian probability models, inductive or non-inductive statistics, etc.

"Coherence' can just mean internal consistency, which is extremely well defined (as 'does not result in contradiction'). It admittedly has fuzzier meanings, but Putnam doesn't even try to establish that scientists actually rely on these for any part of their activity."

So, you're basically saying that, since coherence is "well defined" and not "fuzzy", it cannot be a value. How convenient! If only Putnam denied that values can be "well defined", you would have a point. But he doesn't. Furthermore, "consistency" itself carries evaluative and normative weight, and, just like any other value, it cannot be reduced to non-evaluative terms.

Scientific premises do not constitute a set of simple mathematical truisms that we can readily analyze its internal consistency by some sort of mechanical algorithm. To give a concrete example, when scientists found out that atoms were losing their masses out of the blue, they did not (and **should** have not) denied the Law of Conservation of Masses without further ado. Instead, they applied the value of consistency and decided to postulate the existence of neutrinos to explain the loss of mass, which is now a well-corroborated hypothesis. However, there are paradigmatic cases where consistency **must** be left aside to give places to other values. This is what happened when the Newtonian paradigm was substituted by Einstein's. Again, if this substitution was **rational**, it was made by means of values.

"Similarly, 'simplicity' can mean 'parsimony', which is well definable as 'having low Kolmogorov complexity'. Again, scientists might use it more casually, but again Putnam makes no effort to show that they need do so qua scientists. "

I wonder if you would be able to give a noticeable example of a scientific discovery that was made possible by the use of Kolmogorov complexity, but, again, even assuming that this concept is widely used, it does not show that it isn't itself a value. Why use Kolmogorov complexity and not the authority of a Marxist-Leninist Party? The answer will invariably make use of some epistemological value. You may say, "Well, we have proofs that one method often arrives at the truth, and the other doesn't." Fair enough, but "truth" itself is not something that we can identify apart from the values that we are discussing. Values are ubiquitous.

"Lastly, call me pedantic, but I'd have hoped a book on pragmatist philosophyto be a lot more pragmatic! Putnam starts out by urging us to accept this philosophical discussion as having great real world significance but (with the caveat that I skipped a couple of chapters and so might have missed something there) he seems completely uninterested in offeringapplications for his views. He speaks repeatedly of economics, and frequently criticises specific economic theories, but never (that I saw) offers any theories of his own. "

You gotta be kidding me. **Maybe** he doesn't offer economic theories of his own because... he's not an economist. Yet, he constantly refers to the work of Amartya Sen and early classical economists, both of which Putnam sees as models of what he's striving for. The collapse of the fact/value dichotomy has obvious consequences for Law and Education as well, as he glimpses in some parts of the book. Putnam could not solve the world's biggest problems in 150 pages, yes, so what?

*"Despite my sympathy with at least some part of his project, I can think of little to say for Putnam's book. I came to it following a reference in **Sam Harris's** The Moral Landscape. I've not yet formed a strong opinion of **Harris's** overall argument, but honestly I found as much profit in reading the short paragraph in which **Harris** references Putnam as I did in reading this entire book"*

I rest my case.

Gavin says

Remarkable meta-ethics, which establishes itself in large part by undermining neoclassical economics. Important quibble: The title evokes sexy French relativism – e.g. there is no fact of the matter, il n'y a pas de hors-texte – whereas his actual thesis is that only the strictest, stupidest partition between facts and values collapsed. (A distinction is the mild statement that A is not the same thing as B – whereas a dichotomy is the strict logical exclusion of two things: 'if something is A, it is a priori not B'.) A pedantic quibble: god he is fond of italics.

Anyway. It collapsed, but still lives on in other fields, decades after the fall of the positivism that was the only thing motivating it. Book is: a scathing modern history of the distinction, a Pragmatic reconstruction, a love letter to Amartya Sen. Putnam blames the philosophical dichotomy for the failures of economics, and from there for real suffering.

> *The word "cruel"... has a normative and indeed, ethical use. If one asks me what sort of person my child's teacher is, and I say "he is very cruel," I have both criticized him as a teacher and…as a man. I do not have to add, "he is not a good teacher" or "he is not a good man." I cannot simply... say, "he is a very cruel person and a good man," and be understood. Yet "cruel" can also be used purely descriptively, as when a historian writes that a certain monarch was exceptionally cruel, or that the cruelties of the regime provoked a number of*

rebellions. "Cruel" 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. (Indeed, the same is true of the term "crime.")

Some claims: Factual and evaluative statements are necessarily entangled, since; Facts are ascertained *as such* only by the application of epistemic values: "coherence, plausibility, reasonableness, simplicity, and elegance... if these epistemic values do enable us to correctly describe the world... that is something we see through the lenses of those very values."; i.e. facts are thick too; i.e. he has been made to "*rethinking the whole dogma (the last dogma of empiricism?) that facts are objective and values are subjective*". Of course, coupled to his ditching foundationalism, this leads him a long way down the Rortyan road - 'science is just another social practice' yada yada - but he tries to salvage a sort of pragmatic objectivity for science. Dunno if he's winning, but I loved the race.

Brendan says

An excellent takedown of both the fact/value dichotomy in the philosophy of science and its connection to the model of agency promoted by mainstream economics. Putnam spends a good chunk of time on Amartya Sen's development and hints at the promise of combining capacities theory with a pragmatic foundation. He closes by arguing stridently against both Peirce and Apel's notion of truth as well as Habermas' strict separation of facts and norms.
I would give four and 1/2 if I could.

Jennifer says

A somewhat haphazard collection of thoughts I much enjoyed, though it does not engage much of the contemporary work in meta-ethics.

I especially appreciated his comparison between Hume and the logical positivists, and generally, his discussion of how the fact/value dichotomy was treated by early analytic thinkers. Noticeably absent is any discussion of Moore, which is curious. Perhaps he simply had nothing to add to all the previous refutations of Moore's so called "naturalistic fallacy".

Jonathan Norton says

From around the turn of the century, this is Putnam during his later neo-pragmatist phase. It's all about dismantling old dualisms and getting philosophy away from abstractions and back into thick particulars, dealing with objectivity without the sceptical pitfalls of metaphysical realism. Many of these chapters started as lectures presented to non-philosophers, and so arguments get skated over awfully quickly. Also the historical dimension is too focussed on logical positivism, missing that there may have been other currents abroad. In the middle chapters Putnam turns to taking issue with the interpretation of rational preference theory by economists, whilst lauding the broader-based work by his chum Amartya Sen. Scepticism about orthodox economics is not limited to these sources and, again, Hilary is concentrating on the story at western

universities. The final chapter relates his engagement with Habermas, and indicates he has travelled and worked outside Anglophone departments. Reading this straight after "Free Speech" by Timothy Garton-Ash I notice how differently the German gets treated: for TGA he's of marginal relevance, notable mainly for how little importance he gave to religion when he first formulated his theory of communication. That's a datum that Putnam might have considered, though it doesn't fit his critique. Reminiscent of Putnam's comment about a disagreement with Richard Rorty about Rawls' "Theory Of Justice": Hilary thought it was a valuable work because it analysed and explored principles; Richard thought what we really need are "moralising stories".

Simon Lavoie says

La thèse de la normativité ou prescriptivité de la signification admet plusieurs formulations. Par référence à la 'loi de Hume', elle a un caractère principalement moral - la prescriptivité des propositions morales. Grosso modo : il est impossible de dériver d'une ou de plusieurs descriptions ('La neige est blanche' etc.), une obligation ('Tu ne dois pas tuer', etc.). La disposition psychologique dans laquelle on prescrit est identique avec une obligation ressentie à l'évocation des propositions prescriptives, comme 'Paul doit donner à la charité'. L'examen serré de ces propositions, et à plus forte raison des propositions descriptives, ne donne pas la disposition en question si elle manque au départ. La normativité ou prescriptivité est donc sui generis. Mais - se sont empressés d'ajouter deux siècles d'épistémologie - à la différence des descriptions qui représentent des faits (observables, vérifiables), les 'doit' sont inobservables et seulement discutables (subjectifs, relatifs, etc.). Contra Hume, ils ne relèvent donc pas d'une science ou d'un 'raisonnement cognitif'. Par référence à la 'meaning platitude' en philosophie sémantique, la thèse s'élargit et se décline différemment : les conditions d'usage correct qui différencient un mot d'un son sont les conditions dans lesquelles un mot doit être utilisé (par où condition d'usage coïncide avec prescription d'usage ; étant donné que l'obligation n'est pas distincte du mot lui-même). Cette prescription n'est pas une contrainte rationnelle (fin > moyen) ou un impératif catégorique ('ce qu'il faut faire indépendamment, ou à l'encontre, de ses désirs'). Elle est constitutive de ce qui se comprend conceptuellement. Elle précède de ce fait l'intentionnalité. Stricto sensu, la normativité est donc le 'substrat de la compréhension'* (du raisonnement, de l'évaluation, du jugement, etc.).

L'enjeu traditionnel de ce genre de thèse est d'ériger la portion (ou la totalité) de notre vocabulaire et de nos sciences qui est réfractaire à la computation rationnelle et causaliste en la personnification du 'fantôme dans la machine'. Comme l'inventaire admis du mobilier du monde ne comprend pas, outre les atomes, quarks, gluons et autres neutrinos, des relations et des obligations, toute connaissance de ces nobjets est le parent pauvre de la pensée, en instance de promotion au rang "d'ignorance passagère". Mais s'il s'avère impossible de dériver un doit d'un est, s'ensuit-il que le premier est le fait d'une matière pensante (ou obligeante) distincte de l'autre (la froide et neutre aléthée)? Pour la plupart, les philosophes se sont résignés à une version en tenue de galas de cette solution (le fonctionnalisme ou dualisme des propriétés), ou à un acte de foi naturaliste (l'inscrutabilité de la référence étant, nous n'avons pas réussi à réduire le prescriptif au descriptif, mais nous y parviendrons sûrement un jour, cf. dans ce genre Hattiangadi, 2007, Oughts and Thoughts). Dans The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy, Putnam défend une formulation étendue de la thèse qui s'ancre, non à la 'meaning platitude' (présupposée mais non nommée comme tel), mais à l'anthropologie pragmatique (d'ascendance aristotélicienne sur ce point) pour laquelle la délibération sur le sens d'un mode de vie désirable et supérieur à d'autres forme le grand moteur de l'activité humaine ; anthropologie pour laquelle, par voie de conséquence, "normative judgments are presupposed in all reasoning [...] in all of life" (p.VII).

En substance, The Collapse compte parmi ses autres, et principales clefs : (1.) la réduction des dichotomies inconditionnelles et universelles en distinctions contextuelles et historiques ; (2.) les thèses d'un encastrement conceptuel de la perception ; d'un encastrement affectif-conditionné de l'expérience ; (3.) d'une identité de nature entre normes épistémiques (objectivité, cohérence, élégance, etc.) et normes morales-éthiques (courage, gentillesse, etc.) ; (4.) le rétablissement du raisonnement cognitif au substrat normatif* ; (5.) l'encastrement normatif global du raisonnement ; ou réalisme interne. La réduction au sens de (1.) s'exerce sur la 'loi de Hume' et son correlat kantien (analytique / synthétique) : la définition du 'fait' sur laquelle toute deux reposent, peut-on apprendre, s'est avérée intenable au fur et mesure des avancées de la physique. Qui, en effet, soutiendrait que les torsions de l'espace-temps ou les cordes sont un fait au sens d'une image mentale d'expérience sensorielle? Elle s'est avérée intenable sans induire une remise en question, mais au contraire un durcissement et une généralisation ex cathedra de la distinction fait / valeur, avec pour conséquence que les positivistes logiques ont dû se doter en bout de ligne, en terme de définition d'un fait, d'une compréhension pour le moins surprenante (soit le holisme de la confirmation : aucune proposition isolée n'est vraie ; la théorie comme tout affronte le tribunal de l'expérience, mais comme toute théorie peut être critiquée ou rescapée moyennant le renvoi à une autre théorie, seule la science comme totalité est vraie - confrontée au tribunal de l'expérience qu'elle spécifie). La restitution du jugement et raisonnement cognitifs au substrat normatif au sens large (non pas la 'meaning platitude', mais la forme ou mode de vie*) procède de (2.) et de (3.), à savoir : le rôle du concept "rouge" est non moindre ni différent dans l'organisation de la perception correspondante que celui du concept "colère" dans la perception du comportement correspondant ; et à savoir : les normes "cohérence" et "simplicité" sont tout autant dédiées à motiver l'acceptation d'une théorie scientifique que les attributs à caractère explicitement moral ("courage", "honnêteté") le sont vis-à-vis des comportements courants. Par voie de conséquence, bien qu'il y ait plus de relativité et de flottement dans l'identification d'un geste 'généreux' que dans celle d'un tableau 'rouge', il y a un apprentissage préalable dans les deux cas, et il n'y a aucune différence de nature entre eux (seulement, pourrait-on dire, une différence d'usage dans la forme de vie). La restitution au sens de (4.) et (5.) découle de (2.) et de (3.) de manière à rendre intenable les séparations inconditionnelles ou dichotomiques d'une subjectivité de valeurs relative et d'une objectivité-de facto ; séparation d'une réalité perçue subjectivement d'une autre perçue innocemment.

Putnam poursuit cette critique dans le bastion économique où la revendication de scientificité et de neutralité demeure bien vivante. Il soutient un pronostique optimiste : l'application de la dichotomie fait/valeur à la théorie-pratique économique procède d'une mauvaise lecture de Adam Smith (qui construisait non seulement la théorie économique mais aussi, comme Hume, une science morale), et les développements récents (la 'place de Amartya Sen dans l'histoire') montrent que la table est mise pour leur abandon, c'est-à-dire pour une théorie-pratique de l'économie comme science morale. « [W]elfare economics has found itself forced to recognize that its "classical" concern with economic well-being (and its opposite, economic deprivation) is essentially a moral concern and cannot be adressed responsibly as long as we are unwilling to take moral argument seriously » (p.57). Passée la réduction des dichotomies inconditionnelles en des distinctions contextuelles, la réduction holiste des distinctions au substrat moral commun du mode de vie désirable et supérieur à d'autres s'effectue, après une discussion serrée d'Habermas, en suivant Dewey sur la "démocratisation de la recherche" :
« We do know something about how inquiry should be conducted, and the principle that what is valid for inquiry in general is valid for value inquiry in particular [...] the principle of fallibilism (do not regard the product of any inquiry as immuned from criticism), the principle of experimentalism (try out different ways of resolving problematic situations, or if that is not feasible, observe those who have tried other ways, and reflect carefully on the consequences) [...] the[se] principles put together make up what I called "the democratization of inquiry" » (p.110). [we are] never in the position of starting ex nihilo in ethics any more than anywhere else, or in the law any more than anywhere else, there is no reason that it should be impossible to discover in individual problematic situations – however fallibly – that one putative resolution is superior to another » (p.106).

Certains ont vu dans The Collapse..., livre sobre et facile d'accès, une culmination de l'oeuvre de Putman ; philosophe qui a certainement traité avec aplomb de tous les secteurs de la philosophie américaine et qui s'est imposé comme un interlocuteur incontournable de ses figures les plus cardinales (Chomsky, Fodor, Quine, Davidson, Rorty). Il offre un rempart contre l'auto-dénigrement de la condition politique et contre l'empêtrement des sciences sociales dans leur déni de la normativité comme globalité. Et certainement un puissant stimulant à la défense de la dernière théorie anthropologique de la culture comme ordre *sui generis* en date, c'est-à-dire de la dernière lutte en date contre les interminables aberrations de la raison pratique (utilitaire, naturaliste). Mais sur un autre plan, il reste à savoir si, comme certains l'ont remarqué tout en lui restant sympathiques (cf. Bernstein, 2005, "The Pragmatic Turn"), ce remède s'avérera suffisamment pragmatique au moment de trancher sur des enjeux collectifs à chaud.
