



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

By Hilary Putnam

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## The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy and Other Essays By Hilary Putnam

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.

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#### From Library Journal

Hume's and much 20th-century moral philosophy contrasted moral with factual judgments and led people to conclude that the former, unlike the latter, are subjective in the sense of not being rationally supportable. Putnam (philosophy, emeritus, Harvard) believes that the contrast is ill conceived and that the conclusion is both unwarranted and false. He acknowledges the usefulness of the fact/value distinction but denies that anything metaphysical follows from it. Indeed, he goes so far as to assert that knowledge of facts presupposes knowledge of values. He grounds his argument in Amartya Sen's discussions of non-self interested human motives and of "capabilities" people rationally value and enjoy freely exercising. Putnam covers such matters as imperative logic, economics vis- -vis ethics, and preference theory and such thinkers as V. Walsh, L. Robbins, and R.M. Hare. A fine philosophical workout for attentive readers.

*Robert Hoffman, York Coll. of CUNY*

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#### Review

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In this bold, energetic, and extensive work, Putnam undertakes a revitalization of philosophy. He wants to put philosophy back in touch with the 'human issues which it has always been philosophy's highest goal to articulate'...This is exciting and engaging stuff, and anyone with an interest in philosophy, at whatever level, will enjoy it and learn from it. (Martha Nussbaum, The University of Chicago)

This is an excellent collection on a very important issue...These are also very useful contributions, because they guide the reader, particularly the general reader, who is not an expert in either philosophy or science or economics, around the issue, so that one sees its contours, what connects with what, how it ramifies out through different disciplines. The collection as a whole thus fulfils two rather different functions: (a) bringing new and original arguments to bear against the erroneous thesis that there is a dichotomy between fact and value, and (b) guiding the reader around the contours of the issue and pointing to interesting relevant arguments developed elsewhere by others. (Charles Taylor, Professor of Philosophy at McGill University)

#### About the Author

Hilary Putnam is Cogan University Professor, Emeritus, at Harvard University.

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