Ruth Anna Putnam and the Fact-Value Distinction

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Although in three papers in *Philosophy*[1] Ruth Anna Putnam evinces much ethical wisdom, I wish to canvass some meta-ethical disagreements. In the most recent of these articles, 'Perceiving Facts and Values', on p. 7 she refers to her objection to the fact-value distinction in this article and in the two others. As one of those philosophers, ranging from G. E. Moore to R. M. Hare, who regard the fact-value distinction as vital to meta-ethics[2], I wish to defend this distinction. It seems to me that many of the reasons she brings up against the distinction could be accommodated by a defender of the distinction. Some though not all of the differences between Putnam and me may indeed come from the differences in our own understanding of the terms 'fact' and 'value'. Let me explore these issues.

I see the fact-value distinction in terms of the 'is'-'ought' distinction. Talking about a person's values is talking about that person's desires or attitudes and is hence about a matter of psychological fact. On the other hand, making a value judgment is not primarily talking *about* our desires or attitudes but is expressing them. As to facts, I do not have them in my ontology for reasons given by Donald Davidson[3]. It is not correspondence with facts that hooks language onto the world but satisfaction (in Tarski's sense) of predicates by sequences of objects. Nevertheless it will not affect my argument in this paper if I talk loosely but conveniently of the correspondence of propositions to facts.

In 'Perceiving Facts and Values', p. 14, Putnam says that even physical science is value laden because of the human interests which

[1] Ruth Anna Putnam, 'Creating Facts and Values', *Philosophy* **60,** No. 232 (April 1985),187–204, 'Weaving Seamless Webs', *Philosophy* **62**, No. 240 (April 1987), 207–220, and 'Perceiving Facts and Values', *Philosophy* **73**, No. 283 (January 1998), 5–19.

[2] Moore in a sense believed in ethical facts, but called them 'non-natural' facts. For familiar reasons I think that Moore would have done better to have expressed the distinction in some such manner as that between description and prescription.

[3] 'True to the Facts', in Donald Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984).

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lead scientists to decide what questions to investigate. This does not, however, seem to me to be an objection to the fact-value distinction. One person may go in for classical mechanics, another for electromagnetism. Their decisions would involve value judgments, but the law of conservation of momentum and Maxwell's equations themselves contain no value judgments. A similar mistake occurs often and especially in the writings of social scientists and historians. It is sometimes said that history is value laden because a historian has to select his facts from an immense mass of information. That does not imply that the facts so selected are value laden. There is no contradiction in saying that value judgments are relevant to what value neutral facts we want to unearth.

Similarly that people would be irresponsible if they failed to consider the social consequences (e.g. in warfare) of their discoveries in (say) physics does not show that the facts discovered are themselves value laden. Deciding which science to study and research does require a value judgment, but this judgment is *about* a body of factual discourse and is not part of that discourse. In blurring the distinction here there may have been something of an assimilation of the language of scientific observation and theory to language *about* science. A metaphysical realist will surely reject this assimilation. Moreover I agree with Putnam that aesthetic considerations play a role in the methodology of science. Physicists often look for symmetries, and there is aesthetic motivation here. Also, however, they can be influenced by the consideration that in the past the search for symmetries has been successful. Two or three hundred years ago this heuristics may have been influenced by theological considerations to the effect that God would have created a beautiful universe but now the experience of the success of the heuristics can be enough to encourage us. However the methodology is one thing, truth another. Theories have to be tested by facts. Thus in physics T symmetry has given way to CPT symmetry[4]. Since we find symmetries beautiful we rejoice when we find them. We rejoice when the heuristics of seeking symmetries succeeds. Nevertheless the symmetries themselves are matter of fact, not of value.

It could be that explanation (though not theory) is interest laden. At least the notion of explanation is a highly contextual one. What may serve as an explanation to Jones may not be seen as an explanation to Smith. To take a simple case, Smith may know the laws but not the boundary conditions, whereas Jones may know the boundary conditions but not the laws.

I concede to Putnam therefore that, as she says, 'One theory may

[4] Curiously but not really relevantly I would be prepared to argue that CPT symmetry is more beautiful than T symmetry.

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be preferred to another because of its elegance, or because of its appeal to some intuitive sense of how a theory, or the universe ought to be.'[5] This is indubitable. However the preferred theory may turn out to be refuted by future observation or experiment. And even if this is not so, can Putnam object to me saying as a metaphysical realist, that one of the theories is objectively true and the other objectively false even though we cannot decide between them? Of course the issue between metaphysical realism and metaphysical anti-realism is too big a one to be within the scope of this paper, which is meant rather to be mainly defensive against Ruth Anna Putnam's arguments.[6] Holistic philosophical theories typically pass one another by and proponents of one or the other are reduced to comparisons and trade offs between consequences of the respective positions.[7] Even so, as a metaphysical realist, I can say that there is a fact of the matter as to which of the positions is objectively true. In meta-ethics I defend a non-cognitivist position and so Ruth Anna Putnam's moderate anti-realism puts her as more realist than I am in ethics and as less realist in metaphysics.

Consider her discussion, early in 'Perceiving Facts and Values', of William James' poignant thought experiment of a case where we could achieve universal and everlasting happiness for all except one person, at the cost of everlasting torture of that one lost soul on the far edge of things. As a utilitarian I have agonized about James's example, though I comfort myself with the thought that one should not agonize too much about merely fanciful possibilities[8]. Putnam seizes on James's remark '[W]hat except a specifical and independent sort of emotion can it be which would make us immediately feel, even though an impulse arose within us to clutch at the happiness so offered, how hideous a thing would be its enjoyment when deliberately accepted as the fruit of such a bargain?' Putnam fastens on the word 'specifical', and sees the 'specifical emotion' to be understood not so much as 'feeling' but as 'perception'. This leads her on to an account of the nature of perception, inspired largely by Dewey, which contains elements both of realism and anti-realism. In Dewey's language there can be percepts without perceptual judgments. For Dewey the percept is the common sense object: for

[5] 'Perceiving Facts and Values', p. 14.

[6] For my defence of metaphysical realism see J.J.C. Smart, 'Realism v. Idealism', *Philosophy*, **61** (1986), 295–312, 'A Form of Metaphysical Realism', *Philosophical Quarterly* , **45** (1995), 301–15.

[7] See J. J. C. Smart, 'Why Philosophers Disagree', in *Canadian Journal of Philosophy Supplement*, **19** (1993), 69–82.

[8] See J. J. C. Smart, 'Utilitarianism and Punishment', *Israel Law Review*, **25** (1991), 360–75, especially pp. 364–65.

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example it might be a tomato. I can put the matter in my own way by using D. M. Armstrong's account of perception in which the core idea is that of acquiring of beliefs by means of the senses. The beliefs are about common sense objects (Dewey's percepts). Electrons, for example, are not perceived though the evidence for them, such as cloud chamber tracks, can be. We can agree with Dewey and Putnam that we often or indeed most of the time perceive without making perceptual judgments. I pass through the door into my bedroom without being consciously aware that the door is open. Still I certainly perceived the open door. I acquired the belief that the door was open even though I was not consciously aware of this acquiring of belief. The act of walking through the door is caused jointly by the belief that the door is open (and leads to the bedroom) and the desire to go to the bedroom.

It is a familiar Humean point that actions are caused neither by beliefs alone nor by desires alone. Susan wanted a ripe melon for her party.[9] So she tested it for ripeness by pressing it with her hand. It was unfortunately unripe. Now suppose that she had wanted an unripe melon to play football with. In testing the melon for ripeness the belief that it was unripe would be exactly the same, even though her desires would have been different. In this sense there is no need to say that the belief itself is value laden. Similarly in science it may be our own interests that leads us to test what the facts are, but this does not impugn the fact-value distinction. Putnam remarks ('Perceiving Facts and Values', p. 12) that Peirce, giving credit to Bain, defined a belief as that which we are prepared to act on. Perhaps a desire is that which we desire to act from. I doubt how much these definitions would help, except to emphasise that both beliefs and desires are needed to cause action. It does not seem very illuminating to say that to believe Fermat's last theorem is to be prepared to act on it. How do we act on it, other than saying things about it (e.g. 'Wiles has proved it') or making deductions from it ?

Because of action, beliefs and desires are intertwined. To this extent they make a web. The size and character of the web will depend on our interests. Someone who likes number theory will discover facts different from those discovered by someone who likes zoology. Why would a defender of the fact-value distinction need to disagree with this? In her 1987 article Putnam argues that fact and value form 'a seamless web'. In discussing action we need to suppose a web of belief and desire made up of orthogonal strands, but I want to argue that it need not be a seamless one. Extrinsic values

[9] Susan, a character in one of Putnam's examples in 'Perceiving Facts and Values'.

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are partly factual, but intrinsic values are independent of facts. Suppose that health were an intrinsic value. It could be an extrinsic one too, for example in so far as healthy doctors normally can work harder and cure patients better than can unhealthy ones. It might be only an extrinsic one: health might be valued *only* because it promotes an intrinsic value, happiness. Many, perhaps most, disagreements about what ought to be done, are disagreements about means to agreed ends, and hence the disagreements are about matters of fact. There need not even be agreement about ultimate ends. If one disputant is a Kantian whose ultimate end is respect for persons and another is a utilitarian whose ultimate end is maximization of happiness, they may agree on seeking how to bring about some intermediate end which promotes both respect for persons and maximization of happiness. Thus the substantive argument would be on a question of fact, not of value. In a sense 'good as a means' straddles the gap between fact and value. But this does not mean that there is not a sharp distinction between factual discussion of means to ends on the one hand and value judgments on the other hand. It is a familiar contention of Hume's that facts channel our desires and attitudes and of course if we know someone's desires we can often persuade him or her to do a certain action by arguing for some fact. Another way of influencing action is the use of the language of 'ought'. This is commonly done by those with charisma or by preachers who appeal to the charisma of others, perhaps even of God. But even here factual language will do for people who are susceptible to the charisma: 'Doing X will please Y'. In principle it would seem that specifically ethical words or imperatives are unnecessary for persuasion to act in a certain way as has been well argued by M. Zimmerman in an interesting article[10]. Why should Smith do something just because uncharismatic Jones says that Smith ought to do it? Much better for Smith to assert facts which will channel Jones's desires in the direction that Smith wants. But even if specifically moral language or imperatives were eschewed, the fact-value distinction would remain in the form of the belief-desire distinction. In the case of ultimate attitudes this appeal to means-ends facts will not be possible, but is anything else (except rhetoric and charisma) likely to make a practical difference in cases of such ultimate moral exhortation?

I am uneasy about the title of one of Ruth Anna Putnam's aforementioned essays: 'Creating Facts and Values'. To say that we create facts is to suggest that Maxwell created electromagnetism. But

[10] M. Zimmerman, 'The "Is-ought" Barrier: an unnecessary dualism', *Mind* **71** (1962), 53–61.

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Maxwell was not God! Maxwell created the *theory of* electromagnetism. In correspondence Putnam has said that she would not now talk about creating facts, but would talk of creating descriptions of facts. This is analogous to talk of creating theories. A metaphysical realist and ethical anti-realist (non-cognitivist) need not disagree with this.

Objectivists about ethics hold that 'It is wrong to torture children' states a fact no less than does 'It is uncommon to torture children'. Perhaps the difference between Ruth Anna Putnam and me is that she is using an epistemological sense of 'fact' whereas I am using an ontological one. I am using 'fact' much in the way that philosophers commonly do, with the Tarskian and Davidsonian reservations mentioned earlier. It is much the same sense of 'fact' that is used by Wittgenstein in his *Tractatus* and which had nothing to do with epistemology. However there is a common sense epistemological sense in which 'fact' is contrasted with 'theory'. Thus the *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* gives various meanings of 'fact', none of them ontological, and including the very epistemological 'things certainly known to have occurred or be true'. In the metaphysical sense of 'fact' there can of course be unknown facts and moreover these need not be observational as contrasted with theoretical. Another non-ontological sense of 'fact' given by the dictionary is that of 'thing assumed as a basis for inference', as in 'his facts are disputed'. In this sense even an imperative (for example 'Do as you would be done by') could express a fact. In *this* sense a non-cognitivist about ethics who understood ethical precepts as imperatives (and hence neither true nor false) could accept that there are ethical facts. It is surely not in relation to this sense that non-cognitivists treat categorical sentences as expressions of attitudes or as imperatives. All except psychopaths and some criminals will agree with the imperative 'Do not torture children', and so would be willing to accept it as a premise in an argument in accordance with a logic of imperatives. This is perfectly consistent with holding a non-cognitivist theory about ethics and a metaphysical realism about science, history and even much of common sense.

A metaphysical realist who also an ethical non-cognitivist can think of ethical perception as something *like* perception of observable facts. Susan may perceive the melon as ripe and therefore good. If, like Armstrong, we think of perception of coming to believe by means of the senses, we may also, as in the case of the melon, think of a coming to *desire* by means of the senses. This analogy may perhaps explain the idea that we perceive values.

For the non-cognitivist (and perhaps for some sorts of cogni-

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tivists such as Michael Smith in his *The Moral Problem*[11]) the fact-value distinction is a matter of the belief-desire distinction. It is to do with what has been called 'the direction of fit'. In science we are trying to fit our beliefs to the world. In ethics we are concerned to fit the world to our desires. Not any desires, because we also have non-ethical desires that we ourselves can recognise as evil. In ethics we are expressing not any attitudes but over-riding attitudes, attitudes that control lower order attitudes[12]. Attitudes which become directly operative in, as Bishop Butler put it, 'a cool hour'.

Suppose that you were concerned to build a robot aeroplane which would navigate to some chosen destination, perhaps Iceland. The robot would contain a computer which would itself contain some programming analogous to a map of the world. If winds pushed it off course this map would cause it to steer back on course. Still, the map is not enough by itself. A programmer would have to put in the instruction 'Go to Iceland', say. This corresponds to the desiring part (or circuitry) of the robot. A walker may learn about the topography from his map. We can think of this map as constituting the walker's belief. However this map will not determine the walker's route. For this there is needed the walker's desire, say whether to climb a certain mountain or to visit a certain swamp to look at birds. Putting it another way, I hold that the belief-desire distinction is as undeniable as the distinction between indicative sentences and imperative sentences, though the parallel is not exact as prescriptions can be made with indicative sentences containing the word 'ought' or 'good' and facts can be studied in imperatives beginning 'know ye that'.

My intent here has been to argue that the fact-value distinction can be defended against Ruth Anna Putnam's criticisms. I do so from a position which is realist in metaphysics and anti-realist (non-cognitivist) in ethics. Putnam is less realist than I am in metaphysics and more realist in ethics. It is possible that part of the difficulty may come from the ambiguity in the word 'fact' already noted but this is surely not the whole story.

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[11] Oxford: Blackwell, 1994. I think that Smith may have given a hostage to fortune in assuming that with enough logical acumen and true factual information people would come to agree on ultimate ethical principles. And even if all humans would, scientifically rational extraterrestrials might not!

[12] See D. H. Monro, *Empiricism and Ethics* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1967).

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