Ethics and Scholarship

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Within the precincts of Harvard University, one can still hear an ardent defense of the venerable distinction between "facts" and "values," or, as sometimes put, between "description" and "evaluation." Arguments over this distinction go to the heart of the relation of ethics to scholarship, as was vividly illustrated recently by a controversy in this university concerning a doctoral dissertation proposal in "ethnonational studies." Among other things, the proposal, which envisioned an examination and a critique of ideas of citizenship, as they bear on a contemporary case of ethnonational conflict, was criticized for being more a piece of advocacy, more the subject for an op-ed article, than serious scholarship. The possible consequences were portentous. If the case against the proposal had stood, the candidate would, in effect, *have had no right as a scholar* to pursue such a line of inquiry in the way proposed.

As the controversy unfolded, it became evident that on all sides opinions were not thoroughly thought out. If, as suspected, confusion and uncertainty on this issue are widespread, a general effort at clarification may be of use, especially if the stakes, personal and professional, are as high as they appear to be. Seen in that way, the controversy perhaps serves a good purpose. It prompts members of the university community to confront a problem with broad and profound importance both inside the academy and elsewhere.

There are two fundamental points of concern. The first and most general has to do with the present status of the conventional, and much-disputed, distinction between "descriptive" and "normative" statements, sometimes referred to as the "fact/value dichotomy," classically associated by Max Weber with the principle of *Wertfreiheit* ("value neutrality"),[1] or as the well-known Humean distinction

[1] Max Weber, "The Meaning of 'Ethical Neutrality' [*Wertfreiheit*] in Sociology and Economics," in idem, *The Methodology of the Social Sciences* (ed. Edward A. Shils and Henry A. Finch; Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1949) 1–47.

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between "is" and "ought" statements.[2] Defenders of the "dichotomy" who are of interest to us believe that works of scholarship should be purely "descriptive" in character and not "normative" or "advocative."[3]

The second concern has to do with the character and objectives of ethnonational studies, a rapidly growing area of investigation devoted to understanding the sources and prospects of conflicts that prominently involve issues of ethnic and national identity. Rather than confine our attention solely to the more abstract theoretical questions raised by our first concern, we can also examine the actual practice of scholars engaged in a specific area of study to see how the more theoretical conclusions work out on the ground. I select this example both because of its connection to the particular case before us, and because, as we shall see, it represents an interesting test of the proposition that scholarship should be "purely descriptive" and "in no way normative." Beyond that, what we learn from one specific area of study will, I hope, be applicable elsewhere.

The Status of the Fact/Value Dichotomy

The initial, more general, concern about the acceptability of the "descriptive/normative" distinction has been dealt with thoughtfully by Hilary Putnam in his recent book, *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy and Other Essays*.[4] Putnam makes four important points.

First, the distinction between descriptive and normative statements, taken to be synonymous with the fact/value dichotomy, is misleading in a quite rudimentary way. The act of describing or "stating facts" is itself already a normative activity. The endeavor necessarily presupposes norms (or canons) of evidential verifiability and logic (and sometimes mathematics). Putnam calls these "epistemic values," which are necessarily assumed in descriptive judgments of "proof," "coherence," "plausibility," "reasonableness," or in Charles S. Peirce's words, of "what ought to be" in regard to reasoning.[5] Accordingly, we conventionally distinguish between "good and bad description" or "good and bad fact-stating" and sometimes loosely identify it as "good and bad science." So any valid distinction that we wish to draw is in reality between *different kinds* of norm (or value or ought) and *not* between norms (or values or oughts) and something else. We already witness some erosion of the famous dichotomy.

[2] David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968) 469–70.

[3] For purposes of this discussion, it shall be assumed that "advocacy" constitutes a strong, specially focused kind of "normative" utterance—"urging public support for a particular policy or cause," from the Latin, "to call to one's side," presumably in a conflict or contest (*Concise Oxford English Dictionary* [ed. Judy Pearsall, 10th ed., rev.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004]).

[4] Hilary Putnam, *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy and Other Essays* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002).

[5] Ibid., 31. In other words, rules of evidence, logic, and mathematics all constitute standards of correct epistemic judgment.

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Second, Putnam correctly emphasizes "differences between epistemic and ethical values."[6] We may speak of "description" and "evaluation," but only so long as we know what we are doing and are sufficiently sensitive to conceptual complications and to the complex ways the two systems of value interact.

One problem with the distinction is what to call the broad class of "personal" norms or values that includes ethical commitments along with religious, aesthetic, and other nonepistemic commitments. These designations notoriously beg their own special problems of definition. This is a difficult matter for which I have no ready solution. We may simply assume, with Putnam, that we do indeed presuppose such a distinct class and for purposes of our discussion continue to refer to it under the rubric of ethical norms or values.

Putnam does not explain altogether clearly the basic distinction between epistemic and ethical values. As a pragmatist, he resists the idea of any "objective" (metaphysical) distinction and assumes, rather, some kind of "working distinction." We need not settle this complicated matter here. For our purposes, *that we do assume such a distinction is the important point*. In some significant way ethical (and other "personal" religious or aesthetic) claims involve beliefs and commitments that are consistently distinguishable from "fact-stating," "descriptive" claims, as in the difference between the statements, "the cat is on the mat" and "it is right and good that the cat is on the mat."

At the same time, if the distinction between two sorts of value is important, the fact that they interact and overlap in various ways is equally important. One way pertains to ethically value-laden terms, like "cruelty," which represent an admixture of epistemic and ethical values. Certain factually verifiable features (/deliberate infliction/ of /severe suffering/ upon an /innocent party/) are singled out as being ethically wrong. The statement, "slapping the infant because it cries is cruel," entails both proving that the defining features are in fact present and asserting the ethical wrongness of the combination of features. Another way is employing certain epistemic values (say, the rules of logic and a certain use of the rules of evidence) "constructively" to ethical (or religious or aesthetic) subject matter and thereby arguing that ethics (or religion, etc.) is a "form of knowledge" subject in certain ways to epistemic values. A third way is studying ethical (or religious or aesthetic) values descriptively (according to the epistemic rules of evidence, coherence, etc.) while reserving ethical judgment as to the worth of the values studied. However, even there, such studies are by no means ethically irrelevant, since they are typically defended as being "fairer," "more balanced," "more honest," or as having some other virtue in greater measure than studies with an apologetic slant.

Third, Putnam points out some deeper complexities in the connections between description and evaluation that complicate the picture. On the one hand, he agrees with Weber (and certain unorthodox economists like Amartya Sen) that "the

[6] Ibid.

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decision as to what question the social scientist investigates *is and has to be one that involves ethical values*."[7] As a matter of fact, Putnam could have made more of this point by emphasizing its relation to a broader theme of great importance to Weber, namely that a commitment to the scientific method (epistemic values) itself rests on a prior ethical decision. "Whether," as Weber says, "science is a worthwhile 'vocation' for somebody, and whether science itself [is] an objectively valuable 'vocation' are [matters of personal value judgment]."[8] On the other hand, Putnam states, again in agreement with Weber, that "once the choice is made, ascertaining the answer to the scientist's question *is not to be dictated by the scientist's [ethical] value system,*" but rather by proceeding according to the full array of epistemic standards.[9]

In the light of these two points, then, ethical values are both indispensable to the scientific enterprise and distinguishable from it. Acknowledging *both* the relevance of the two sets of value to each other *and* the distinction between them *would seem to be part of the scientist's ethical commitment*. In other words, having chosen (on ethical grounds) what is "right and good" to study, the scientist also assumes that it is "right and good" (in an ethical sense) to embrace and to live up to epistemic values in investigating the question selected for study.

Fourth, Putnam takes things one step further and calls attention to a second point at which ethical and epistemic values overlap. He appreciatively invokes Sen's value-laden "capabilities approach" to the study of economics against Weber by pointing out Weber's failure to acknowledge that "the terms one uses even in *description* in history and sociology and other social sciences are invariably ethically colored; this is nowhere more true than in the case of the terms Weber used to describe his 'ideal types'."[10] Though some ambiguity and perhaps confusion exists in Weber's writings on this point,[11] Weber does say that an ideal type in his sense

[7] Ibid., 63; emphasis and tense altered. Weber famously characterized the unavoidable role that a scientist's personal values play in "determin[ing] the selection and formulation of the objective of empirical investigation" (my translation) as "value-relevance" (*Wertbeziehung*). Weber, "The Meaning of 'Ethical Neutrality' [*Wertfreiheit*] in Sociology and Economics," 21–22.

[8] Max Weber, "Science as a Vocation," in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958) 129–56, at 152.

[9] Putnam, *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy,* 63 (emphasis and tense altered). In Weber's words, "one can only demand of the teacher that he have the intellectual integrity to see that it is one thing to state facts, to determine mathematical or logical relations or the internal structure of cultural values, while it is another thing to answer questions of the value of culture and its individual contents and the question on how one should act in the cultural community and in political associations," in "Science as a Vocation," 146.

[10] Putnam, *Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy*, 63; author's emphasis.

[11] In discussing the study of culture, which, he believes, is the central focus of social science, Weber asserts that the "concept of culture is a value-concept," and that "empirical reality becomes 'culture' to us because and insofar as we relate it to value ideas. . . . It includes those segments and only those segments of reality that have become significant to us because of this value-relevance," in " 'Objectivity' in the Social Sciences," Weber, *Methodology of the Social Sciences,* 49–112, at 76.

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of the term "has no connection at all with value-judgments."[12] As Putnam implies, this conviction seems to blind him to the fact that, for example, his famous ideal typical category, "charisma," is "ethically colored" in a very important way. That charisma is described by him as essentially counterrational and anarchic in character is undoubtedly connected to Weber's own particular ethical theory of the nature of "ultimate values," which for him are similarly counterrational and anarchic, or radically nonepistemic in character.[13]

These two points—the ultimate ethical orientation of science, and the ethical coloring of the categories of scientific analysis—lead Putnam to speak convincingly of the "interdependence" or the "entanglement" of "valuation" and "description."[14]

Facts, Values, and Ethnonational Studies

As we mentioned, the growing body of ethnonational literature is essentially aimed at examining the causes and prospects of conflicts prominently involving issues of ethnic and national identity. Examples are general books on the subject by Anthony Marx,[15] Ted Robert Gurr,[16] Jack Snyder,[17] and Edward D. Mansfield and Jack Snyder.[18] See also books on South Asia by Stanley Tambiah,[19] H. L.

This line of thinking suggests that the basic orientation of the scientific study of culture, including, one would have thought, the very categories of analysis, are predetermined, so to speak, by their "value-relevance." If this interpretation is right, then at least part of Weber's thinking is in line with Putnam's position, and it suggests that he should not have been surprised if his ideal types could be shown to be ethically colored.

[12] Ibid., 98.

[13] See, for example, "Meaning of 'Ethical Neutrality,'" 18–19: "There is no rational or empirical scientific procedure of any kind whatsoever that can provide us with a decision" regarding the validity of ultimate meaning and values.

[14] Putnam, *Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy*, 62–63.

[15] Anthony Marx, *Faith in Nation: Exclusionary Origins of Nationalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

[16] Ted Robert Gurr, *Peoples versus States: Minorities at Risk in the New Century* (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace, 2000) and idem and Barbara Harff, *Ethnic Conflict and World Politics* (Boulder, Col.: Westview, 2004).

[17] Jack Snyder, *From Voting to Violence: Democratization and Nationalist Conflict* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2000).

[18] Edward D. Mansfield and Jack Snyder, *Electing to Fight: Why Democracies Go to War* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2005).

[19] Stanley Tambiah, *Sri Lanka: Ethnic Fratricide and the Dismantling of Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986); idem, *Buddhism Betrayed? Religion, Politics, and Violence in Sri Lanka* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); idem, *Leveling Crowds: Ethnonationalist Conflicts and Collective Violence in South Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

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Seneviratne,[20] K. M. de Silva,[21] and Peter van der Veer.[22] I include books on the Former Yugoslavia by Michael Sells[23] and Paul Mojzes,[24] on Sudan by Francis Deng,[25] and on the United States by Anatol Lieven.[26]

Putnam's two critical points, which I just elaborated—the ultimate ethical orientation of science and the ethical coloring of the categories of scientific analysis—are profoundly relevant to ethnonational studies.

All of the books cited (and many more that could be cited) unequivocally illustrate Putnam's first point. All of the authors mentioned are, in their various ways, "ethically disturbed" by the existence of serious ethnonational tension or violence in the cases they take up. They are interested not only in studying the causes and character of ethnic tension and violence but in indicating or implying ways to reduce tension and violence.

H. L. Seneviratne's extraordinary book on Sinhala Buddhist monks in modern Sri Lanka is an excellent example. "The rise of new nation-states upon the eclipse of empires," he writes, "has given rise to new nationalisms which have developed hegemonies over ethnic and other minorities that are no less oppressive than colonial hegemony. . . . [Widespread social problems] demand the anthropologist's involvement, not merely as allegedly objective and impartial analyst of culture, but as a participant in unraveling social ills with a view to contributing towards their amelioration. The anthropologist's role has changed from participant observer to observing participant."[27] He goes on to state as his central thesis that "the definition of a new role for the Buddhist monk, which was one aspect of the movement to modernize Sri Lankan Theravada Buddhism in the twentieth century, has been detrimental to the happiness and well-being of the people of Sri Lanka."[28]

Let it be emphasized that this is a serious scholarly book, carefully documented and reasoned, one that appears to be fully in accord (in the judgment of highly competent scholars of Sri Lanka) with the epistemic requirements of sound description. It would not be true to say that Seneviratne's conclusions are "dictated"

[20] H. L. Seneviratne, *The Work of Kings: New Buddhism in Sri Lanka* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

[21] K. M. de Silva, *Managing Ethnic Tensions in Multiethnic Societies, Sri Lanka, 1880–1985* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1986).

[22] Peter van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism: Hindus and Muslims in India* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1994).

[23] Michael Sells, *The Bridge Betrayed: Religion and Genocide in Bosnia* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1996).

[24] Paul Mojzes, *Yugoslav Inferno: Ethnoreligious Warfare in the Balkans* (New York: Continuum, 1994).

[25] Francis Deng, *War of Visions, Conflict of Identities in the Sudan* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1995).

[26] Anatol Lieven, *America Right or Wrong: An Anatomy of American Nationalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

[27] Seneviratne, *Work of Kings*, 6.

[28] Ibid., 7.

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(in Putnam's word) by his ethical position in the sense of doctoring evidence to prove his preconceived ethical convictions.

Seneviratne demonstrates conclusively that an important group of monks did indeed hold the views and have the influence that he finds so objectionable; he makes a strong case regarding the deleterious effects of these people on "the happiness and well-being of the people of Sri Lanka." As Seneviratne writes, "related to the monkhood's lack of broad social and human concern is the warmongering propaganda of the elite monks and the theory that a military victory alone would solve Sri Lanka's ethnic problem, when it is perfectly clear that, *had the monkhood taken a firm stand for peace, the question would have been easily solved*."[29] This is a book dedicated to understanding, in a "scientifically reliable way," the effects on ethnic tension and violence of a formidable Sri Lankan religious body. But it is also a book with a strongly "normative" starting point—one might even say, a strongly "advocative" starting point.

Is Seneviratne's "ethical predisposition" somehow inappropriate, somehow damaging to the investigation he undertakes? Frankly, I do not see how. Of course, ethnonational—or any other—studies may legitimately be undertaken "more neutrally" or more noncommittally, from an ethical point of view. But three points need to be made in regard to Seneviratne's volume. First, doing it the way Seneviratne does by no means invalidates the "epistemic" worth of his study; second, adopting an "ethically neutral" stance is itself an ethical choice; and, third, finding literature in the field of ethnonational studies that exemplifies such a posture is next to impossible, most likely because there is something ethically odd about assuming an attitude of ethical indifference toward the study of group antagonism and violence.

Jack Snyder's approach, to take a second example, in *From Voting to Violence: Democratization and Nationalist Conflict* is ethically colored in an important sense. In studying the relation of forms of democracy to violence, Snyder (one may safely assume) has an "ethical disposition" toward peace. He wants to understand the connection of political organization to violence the better to reduce violence and to encourage peace. Were that not so, he would not spend so much time toward the end of his book *prescribing* "ways to avert nationalist conflict in an age of democratization" in his lengthy concluding chapter.[30]

Snyder's central categories, "civic" and "ethnic nationalism," are more than simply descriptive in character. They are evaluated in relation to their respective tendencies to encourage violence, and as such they illustrate Putnam's second point regarding ethical coloration. Ethnodemocracy (democracy based on ethnic nationalism), he says, is a "threat to democratic peace." "Any movement away from civic democracy [democracy based on civic nationalism] would undermine the

[29] Ibid., 324; emphasis added.
[30] Snyder, *From Voting to Violence*, 313–53.

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democratic peace because it would deactivate the mechanisms that keep relations between democracies peaceful."[31]

> Civic nationalisms, like those of the British, the United States, and for the most part the French, base their appeals on loyalty to a set of political ideas and institutions that are perceived as just and effective. Inclusion in the group depends primarily on birth [*jus soli*] or long-term residence with the nation's territory, though sufficient knowledge of the nation's language and institutions to participate in the nation's civil life may be a criterion for the naturalization of resident aliens. . . . Ethnic nationalisms, like those of the Germans and the Serbs, base their legitimacy on common culture, language, religion, shared historical experience, and/or the myth of shared kinship, and they use these criteria to include or exclude membership from the national group.[32]

Snyder's book is one grand (and in my view successful) argument (carefully documented, carefully argued) in favor of civic democracy and in opposition to ethnodemocracy.[33] Again, one might even say, the book "advocates" civic as opposed to ethnic democracy. It is, however, hard to see how such an ethically colored argument invalidates the work. Snyder's book is highly regarded in the study of the politics of ethnonationalism.

In my opinion, the real "father" of modern ethnonational studies is Gunnar Myrdal in his classic work, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*,[34] which by itself "changed American life" according to a review by Harvard historian Oscar Handlin.[35] By 1963 the book was in its twenty-sixth printing, and, according to Handlin, "its recommendations have helped shape the strategy of every organization interested in legislation and in judicial interpretations. It was cited in the Supreme Court decision of 1954 that ended segregation in the public schools and killed the doctrine of separate but equal."[36] It is worth quoting a memorable statement from the author's preface, since "changing American life" was exactly what Myrdal had in mind: "When looking back over the long manuscript [1483 pages!], one main conclusion—which should be stressed here since it cannot be reiterated through the whole book—is this: that not since Reconstruction has there been more reason to anticipate fundamental changes in American race relations, changes which will involve a development [away from racism and] toward the American ideals."[37] Myrdal identified these ideals as what he called, "the American

[31] Ibid., 352–53.

[32] Ibid., 24.

[33] His study has been further refined and expanded in his well-reviewed book with Edward Mansfield, *Electing to Fight*.

[34] Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1944).

[35] Handlin, "A Book that Changed American Life," *New York Times Book Review*, 21 April 1963 at 1, 26, 27.

[36] Ibid., 1.

[37] Ibid., xix; author's emphasis.

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creed," understood as "the essential dignity of the individual human being, of the fundamental equality of all men, and of certain inalienable rights to freedom, justice, and a fair opportunity [that] represent to the American people the essential meaning of the nation's early struggle for independence."[38]

While indisputably and unapologetically a work of social and political advocacy based on unmistakable ethical passion,[39] *An American Dilemma* was at the same time a work of impeccable and innovative scholarship,which has generated all sorts of further studies, including, no doubt, numerous doctoral dissertations. As Handlin again commented: Myrdal's book "drew upon a significant body of sociological, historical and psychological research that specialists had been assembling for two decades. Myrdal was able to incorporate into his own synthesis a valuable fund of information gathered in investigations not previously known."[40]

On the basis, then, of both logical analysis and scholarly practice, I have tried to refute any attempt at a radical divorce of ethics from scholarship. But if the basic terms and commitments of both practices are intimately entangled, they are by no means completely indistinguishable. As much rides on accurately marking and maintaining the boundaries between "ethical" and "epistemic values" as on appreciating their interdependence.

[38] Ibid., 4.

[39] Myrdal concludes *An American Dilemma* with the following words: "To find the practical formulas for [the] never-ending reconstruction of society is the supreme task of social science. The world catastrophe places tremendous difficulties in our way and may shake our confidence to the depths. Yet we have today in social science a greater trust in the improvability of man and society than we have ever had since the Enlightenment," 1024.

I must express my deepest appreciation to Sissela Bok, Myrdal's daughter, for kindly sending me a copy of *The Essential Gunnar Myrdal* (ed. Örjan Appelquist and Stellan Andersson; trans. Richard Litell and Sonia Wichmann; New York: New Press, 2005). In her illuminating introduction, Sissela Bok calls attention to the concluding words mentioned above as an illustration of her father's dedication to wide-ranging social reform (xxii-xxvi). Additionally, one section of the book is entitled, "On Evaluation in Research," wherein Myrdal is quoted as indicating "how my conception of the valuation problem has changed. . . . [Earlier,] I thought there was valuation-free economic theory. . . . Now, after continued study in many areas, I know that this conception is wrong and that value premises are necessary in order to scientifically observe reality," 54. Elsewhere in the volume, the following words of his, echoing Weber and Putnam, are reproduced: "[S]ocial facts or the behaviour of their quantitative characteristics do not organize themselves into a scientifically analysable system merely by being observed and recorded. A viewpoint, indeed a correlated complex of concepts, is needed, which constitutes a theory. Prior to answers there must be questions, and the questions we raise stem from our interest in the matter, from our valuations. Indeed, our theories and all our scientific knowledge are necessarily pervaded by valuations," 19.

[40] Handlin, "A Book that Changed American Life," 1.

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