

**PART IV**  
**FACT/VALUE DICHOTOMY**



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MORAL DISAGREEMENT AND THE “FACT/VALUE  
ENTANGLEMENT”

**ABSTRACT.** In his recent work, “The Collapse of the Fact-Value Dichotomy,” Hilary Putnam traces the history of the fact-value dichotomy from Hume to Stevenson and Logical Positivism. The aim of this historical reconstruction is to undermine the foundations of the dichotomy, showing that it is of a piece with the dichotomy – untenable, as we know now – of “analytic” and “synthetic” judgments. Putnam’s own thesis is that facts and values are “entangled” in a way that precludes any attempt to draw a sharp distinction between “value judgments” and “matters of fact.” The idea of an “entanglement of facts and values” Putnam rightly attributes to John Dewey, who – we should add – made of it the main issue in his controversy with Logical Positivism. Nevertheless, a closer inspection of the problem whose history Putnam summarizes could bring into light important aspects of it that have been neglected. It is worth reading in this connection the intercourse between Dewey and Stevenson. Secondly, it is striking that Putnam’s version of the history of the fact-value dichotomy hardly mentions the problem that caused this very dichotomy to arise in the first place: i.e., the problem of (apparently) insoluble moral *disagreements*. By contrast, Dewey’s attack on the dualism of fact and value can be read as an attempt to re-describe this kind of disagreements in a way that makes room for intelligent inquiry, and consequently for rational expectations of agreement. The “entanglement thesis” surely is a part of this re-description. But then it must have implications – particularly for the analysis of value-justification – which are overlooked, or by-passed, by Putnam. This leaves the question open whether Putnam and Dewey subscribe to different versions of pragmatism with regard to norms and values.

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## I.

In his recent essay “The Collapse of the Fact-Value Dichotomy” (2002),<sup>1</sup> Hilary Putnam traces the philosophical history of the fact/value dichotomy from Hume to Logical Positivism. The aim of this historical reconstruction is to show that the dualism of facts and values was of a piece with central theoretical commitments endorsed by the empiricist tradition: namely, the dualism between “relations of ideas” and “matters of fact” in the case of Hume, and the dualism between “analytic” and “synthetic” propositions in the case of logical positivists. Putnam argues that these commitments are no longer tenable. Hume’s epistemological analysis depended upon a sensualistic, representational interpretation of knowledge which could not survive the science’s revolution of the first half of the twentieth century (Putnam 2002, p. 21). In an effort to place empiricism on better grounds, Logical Positivism turned from epistemology to semantics. This shift led to the various versions of the Verifiability Theory of Meaning, none of which ever reached a satisfactory formulation; finally, the philosophical credit of the theory could not survive Quine’s energetic attack on the analytic/synthetic distinction.

It seems that the collapse of these fundamental dualisms, epistemological and semantic, should have provoked the abandonment of the fact/value dichotomy, since the very meaning of its first term, ‘fact’, obtained its philosophical clarification from such dualisms (as far as ‘fact’ is a term of the standard vocabulary of empiricism). However, this has not been the case. To quote Putnam’s own words:

What it has led to is a change in the nature of the *arguments* offered for the dichotomy. Today it is defended more and more on metaphysical grounds. At the same time, even the defenders of the dichotomy concede that the old arguments for the dichotomy were bad arguments. (Putnam 2002, p. 40, his emphasis)

The new arguments are arranged to prove that in a world described as it is in itself there would be no room for the kind of properties that ethical judgments predicate, which leaves noncognitivism and relativism as the only way to cope with the realm of value – in sharp contrast with the (ideal) possibility to achieve objective knowledge and absolute truth in the realm of fact. Not to say, these “metaphysical grounds” presuppose notions as questionable as “the absolute description of the world,” “the

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<sup>1</sup> My comments will concentrate on sections 1-2 of the essay (pp. 1-45).

world in itself,” or “completed physics,” which Putnam and other neo-pragmatists have successfully undermined in the last decades.

Anyway, there must be additional reasons, apart from metaphysical puzzles, that make the fact/value dichotomy so appealing; otherwise, it would be difficult to account for its entrenchment among non-philosophers. Putnam mentions two of them (2002, pp. 44-45): first, it is a swift expedient for evading the difficult task of trying to solve our ethical disagreements. As this may not sound very respectable as a *reason*, it would normally remain unspoken. The second reason seems more noble, but not necessarily sounder from a logical point of view: relativism can be (wrongly) seen by many people as the only alternative to ethnocentrism and cultural imperialism.

In short, the alleged reasons, old and new, for drawing a sharp line between facts and values are, at best, non-conclusive, and, at worst, totally misconceived. This does not mean that we would be better off without the distinction, it only means that we cannot expect to reach a better understanding of the problems involved in it, problems concerning how our descriptions relate to our valuations, by keeping them apart and putting valuations out of the domain of objectivity, rational argument, and empirical testability, a domain that we take for granted in descriptions. This, I think, is the gist of the “entanglement thesis” that Putnam borrows from John Dewey: you cannot explain the activities that conform the task labeled as “describing what the facts are” without introducing a good deal of values in the picture. When the facts of the matter have to do with how the world is, those values are epistemic values; when they have to do with human action and human products, we are then confronted with ethical, political, or aesthetic values. Of course, it would be fatally misleading to conclude that there is no difference between these two kinds of values, but the difference has nothing to do with “objective” *versus* “subjective” concerns. The concerns are different simply because the interests displayed in the activity of investigating how the world is are different from those connected with the aims of our action (although, as far as both types of interests are *human* interests, in this case “difference” does not amount to “independence”). Each concern, however, requires its own standard of objectivity if it is to be pursued rationally. The entanglement of facts with values does not preclude the possibility of making objective judgments about facts; it simply underscores the pervasiveness of values whenever human interests are at stake. Consequently, unless you are ready to admit that human beings have an interest, let’s say, in ethics but not in science, you cannot use these two activities (as logical positivists did) to instantiate

the fact/value dichotomy. And, in my book, nobody has ever advanced better candidates.

## II.

Up to this point, I have been summarizing what I think to be Putnam's main line of argument in the essay mentioned above. If I have not misread him, I will then feel happy to say that I find no objections to oppose to it. Therefore, the comments that follow are not to be interpreted as aiming to question the central point of the argument, that is, the "entanglement thesis." But a closer inspection of the historical narrative – or, more precisely, of some threads of it – used by Putnam to make his point<sup>2</sup> will bring into light important aspects of the problem that have been neglected. On these grounds, some obscurities in Putnam's position will be revealed, as well as some important differences between his view and that advanced by Dewey.

In his exposition of the metaethical theses associated with Logical Positivism, Putnam concentrates mainly on Carnap. Stevenson is mentioned several times also, but his analysis of the nature of ethical arguments is not carefully discussed. I think this is a mistake, for Stevenson, who was sympathetic with the positivist school, exhibited a genuine concern for the language of ethics, whereas Carnap and others approached the topic only incidentally. Reading Stevenson's *Ethics and Language* (1960) one understands the *positive* role played by the fact/value dichotomy in making moral controversies more manageable and in reducing them to rational terms. For the dichotomy was intended to *explain* why it is so difficult to reach rational agreements when "values" are at stake, in contrast with the comparatively swift procedures we display when the disagreement involves "bare facts." Hence Stevenson's well-known distinction between "disagreement in belief" and "disagreement in attitude," which could be paraphrased in terms of our dichotomy as "differences in description of facts that are relevant to a particular moral judgment" and "differences in the values attached to such facts," respectively. It is all important to realize that Stevenson does not mean to say that moral disagreements *are* disagreements in attitude.

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<sup>2</sup> As Putnam himself recognizes in his Introduction to the book, "although I have criticized the fact/value dichotomy in chapters of previous books, this is the first time I have tried to examine the history of the dichotomy from David Hume to the present day" (2002, p. 2). Therefore, we will omit references to previous works of Putnam and concentrate on the new materials provided by this one.

Far from it, he insists that ethical controversies are characteristically *dual* in nature (see, for instance, Stevenson 1960, pp. 11 and 19), for they involve *both* beliefs and attitudes. Moreover, Stevenson claims that beliefs and attitudes do not subsist in mutual isolation (Stevenson 1960, p. 5), though we need to think of them separately in order to clarify in each particular case what the disagreement is about and what would be the best strategy in trying to reduce it. To this extent, Stevenson’s position could be phrased as follows: every moral conflict is likely to have a descriptive side, and this gives experience and reasoning a chance. Then, if we succeeded in identifying and assessing relevant facts, we could expect some progress in our efforts to reach rational agreements in ethics.<sup>3</sup>

As I have declared my sympathy for the “entanglement thesis,” I cannot say that Stevenson is right. Nevertheless, I find his intention perfectly respectable because, far from evading the difficult task of trying to solve our ethical disagreements, he presents a method to achieve this goal. Certainly, the method does not always work: agreement in belief does not entail agreement in attitude (Stevenson 1960, p. 10) (this would be Stevenson’s version of the non-derivability thesis between “is” and “ought” advanced by Hume). Thus, it is conceivable that a moral disagreement persists even when all the facts of the matter have been agreed on by both parts; in such case, experience and reasoning are no longer useful, and persuasion takes their place. In conclusion, reason has a place in ethics (and a place not necessarily small or subsidiary); but it has a limit too, as attitudes can express ultimate, incompatible differences in the “moral sense” by which different persons perceive the same facts.

Now let us take a look at the way the “entanglement thesis,” as entertained by Putnam, faces the same problem. In order to illustrate how facts and values are entangled, we do not need to restrict ourselves to ethical contexts. As I said earlier, Putnam is clear in that we cannot answer even the purely descriptive question “Is this a fact of the world?” without presupposing a whole set of values which form our standards of epistemic justification, exactly in the same sense that we cannot answer the prescriptive question “Is this action right?” without presupposing the

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<sup>3</sup> It is true that Stevenson’s attention is preferentially devoted to disagreements in attitude, but this is due to the fact that historically it is that aspect of moral disagreement that has been normally overviewed (see Stevenson, p. 16). This, of course, has influenced the usual interpretation of his position as purely noncognitivist, which Putnam seems to subscribe, since he does not find it necessary for his argument to distinguish between Stevenson’s position and Carnap’s.

set of values which form our standards of moral justification (Putnam 2002, pp. 30-31). But if we ask “How do we know that our standards are *the right ones?*,” we find out that there is no second set of meta-values to rely on for assessing the reliability of the first set (in any case, this move would lead us to an infinite regress). We know that our epistemic values are right because by using them we reach beliefs that are acceptable according to the standard those very values prescribe. Putnam’s commentary on this cannot be more explicit:

To say this is not to express any sort of skepticism about the superiority of these criteria [. . .]. If this is circular justification, it is still justification enough for most of us. But it is to say that if these epistemic values do enable us to correctly describe the world (or to describe it *more* correctly than any alternative set of epistemic values would lead us to do), that is something we see *through the lenses of those very values*. It does not mean that those values admit an “external” justification. (2002, pp. 32-32, his emphasis)

It must be assumed that the same holds for justification of ethical judgments: we know that our moral values are right because by using them we arrive at courses of action that are commendable, or attain ends that are worthy, or avoid undesirable results, etc., according to the standard these very values prescribe.

What Putnam seems to have in mind is that kind of situation in which members of the same community try to fix their beliefs according to a normative framework that they all share (say, the scientific community, or the community of liberal, democratic citizens). Here the practice of dealing with justifications preserves its meaning in spite of its self-confessed circularity, for, to repeat Putnam’s words, it is still justification enough for most of us (i.e., for the persons already partaking in that common set of values). Then, saying that values do not admit an “external” justification, is the same as to say that there is no normative framework outside the community which could justify those values when they are challenged – normally by a second community with its own set of epistemic and/or moral values. Any appeal to “experience and reasoning” in order to settle the question, as if these formed a neutral jury, would mean an appeal to facts as disconnected from values; the kind of appeal that the “entanglement thesis” prevent us from doing.

Regarding the question of moral disagreement, we seem to be led to the same conclusion we arrived at by Stevensonian means: reason has a place in ethics (maybe a large and fundamental one), but it also has limits. And those limits are essentially the same in both analyses: the limits imposed by a sort of “normative incommensurability” that could



manifest itself when persons belonging to different communities (with specific cultural, social, political, or religious traditions) adhere to different value judgments.<sup>4</sup> However, this conclusion has obvious relativistic implications that Putnam is not willing to admit. So he invites us to “give up the very idea of a ‘rationally irresolvable’ ethical dispute” and replace it by “the idea that there is always the possibility of further discussion and further examination of any disputed issue” (Putnam 2002, p. 44). But the question is: how is this to be accomplished when each chain of justifications is moving into its own circle? How, if every justification is “internal,” is the discussion supposed to reach a point placed beyond the limits? To this problem

the solution is neither to give up on the very possibility of rational discussion nor to seek an Archimedean point, an “absolute conception” outside of all contexts and problematic situations, but – as Dewey taught his whole life long – to investigate and discuss and try things out cooperatively, democratically, and above all *fallibilistically*. (Putnam 2002, p. 45, his emphasis)

But, again, do all these commendations mean something more than a solemn statement of our shared values as a democratic community?

In my opinion, this line of discussion leads to a dead-end. And, which is more important, it is the kind of discussion that Dewey was trying to avoid when he claimed that facts and values are entangled. Indeed, Dewey’s attack on the dualism of fact and value can be read as an attempt to re-describe this kind of situation in a way that makes room for intelligent inquiry, and consequently for rational expectations of agreement. But then the “entanglement thesis” must have further implications which are overlooked, or by-passed, by Putnam. It was William James who said that, in order to be real, a conceptual difference must make a difference elsewhere. According to Stevenson, we must separate attitude from belief – and, to that extent, values from facts – if we are to keep moral disputes under rational control; according to Putnam, we simply cannot do that. But what is the difference this difference makes regarding the possibility of arriving at rational agreements when a shared framework is lacking? As we have seen, that difference is, at the very least, difficult to ascertain. Does this mean that the “entanglement thesis” does not make a real, clear-cut difference? I do not think so. But maybe it is high time we took a glance at the intercourse between Dewey and Stevenson to seek for some light.

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<sup>4</sup> Stevenson is perfectly aware of the social origin of “attitudes” and its dependence on community-patterns; see his (1960, p. 13).

## III.

Putnam's historical narrative may suggest that there is a gulf between Dewey's philosophical stance and the thinking trend represented by Stevenson and Logical Positivism. The collapse of this thinking trend, that finds its origin rooted in Hume, would put us now in a position that enables us to appreciate the potentialities of the alternative approach that Dewey was trying to enforce – an approach dismissed or sidelined by those who adhered to that mainstream of philosophy. Some readers can get the impression that, in turning their eyes to Dewey's contribution, recent philosophers like Putnam are behaving as the instrument of some kind of historical justice. But, despite the undeniable merits that Putnam and others deserve for bringing Dewey's work back in, I would like to express a warning about the wrong image that narrative conveys. A full assessment of pragmatism's place in the empiricist tradition is, needless to say, out of the scope of this paper. I will just state the fact that the image I was referring to is not tenable as far as Stevenson is concerned.<sup>5</sup> It is not insignificant that Stevenson's *Ethics and Language* starts with a long quotation from Dewey; nor that the quoted lines concern the desirability of keeping moral theory (that is, values) in contact with human nature (that is, facts) in order to “put an end to the *impossible attempt* to live in two unrelated worlds” (Stevenson 1960, p. iv, emphasis added). Besides, Chapter VIII of the book – entitled “Intrinsic and Extrinsic Value” (pp. 174-205)<sup>6</sup> – makes an intensive use of Dewey's ideas that are, in the first paragraph of Chapter XII – entitled “Central Aspects of John Dewey's Analysis” (pp. 253-264) – the purpose of a separate assessment. It is also pertinent to remember that Stevenson is the author of the Introduction to Volume 5 of Dewey's *Middle Works*, which contains the first edition (1908) of Dewey's and Tufts's *Ethics* (Stevenson 1978). Dewey, in return, reviewed *Ethics and Language* in an article entitled “Ethical Subject-Matter and Language” (Dewey 1945). At this point it is worth quoting a comment Dewey made on Stevenson's book the same year in a letter to Horace S. Fries: “In some respects it is better than most writing on ethical method – but its ‘psychological’ so called-foundations are terrible” (1981-1991, Vol. 16, p. 470, editor's

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<sup>5</sup> Of course, I do not mean to charge Putnam of ignoring this fact or designedly omitting it. My point is rather that his historical reconstruction induces the wrong impression that Dewey and Stevenson (or even Dewey and Logical Positivism as a whole) represented *antithetic* positions.

<sup>6</sup> In the first footnote (p. 175), Stevenson acknowledges that he is making use of Dewey's ideas throughout the chapter.

note). And we can take Dewey’s contribution to the International Encyclopedia of Unified Science, his (1939), as an attempt to present his views as akin to the spirit of Logical Positivism. These references do not pretend to prove that the differences were scarce or non-important, but they do prove that a dialog was ongoing; it is only natural to presume that the terms of that dialog should throw some light on our problem.

To this effect, Stevenson’s commentary on Dewey in his (1978) gives important clues. (Let me mention by the way that in these pages Stevenson places Dewey’s work on ethics in that mainstream of British empiricism that arises from Hobbes, Hume and Mill [pp. xiv-xv].) There Stevenson offers a tentative reconstruction of Dewey’s position on the problem of moral disagreement (Section 5 is totally devoted to this subject), using his own categories of analysis: “Dewey used neither the term ‘disagreement in attitude’ nor any equivalent term; but like a multitude of other men he must certainly have been aware, intuitively, of the sort of disagreement to which the term refers” (p. xxv). This reconstruction is summarized by Stevenson as follows:

I venture to ascribe to Dewey the following view: he recognized, *implicitly*, the *logical possibility* of scientifically unresolvable disagreements in attitude, along with the *logical possibility* that men, even if wholly rational, would continue to judge and act in opposition to one another rather than in accord with one another; but he went on, in the interest of making the most of scientific reasoning, to *assume* that such disagreements will not *in fact* arise. In other words, *he believed (or “willed to believe”)* that men who have opposing attitudes would no longer have them, but instead would let their predominating attitudes stamp the same things with the same values, *if* they could complete their dramatic rehearsals. [. . .] Relative to that *assumption* he ascribed to ethical methodology an intersubjectivity of its own, not far distant from that of the sciences. (Stevenson 1978, p. xxvi, all emphases added, except that on ‘if’)

This reconstruction affords the answer to another question Stevenson is willing to establish: that is, the extent to which Dewey “was prepared to compromise with a straightforward naturalism” (Stevenson 1978, p. xx) (which, in this metaethical context, means a purely descriptivist analysis of the meaning of ethical terms). In Stevenson’s reconstruction of Dewey’s view, descriptivism is avoided once the *logical possibility* of scientifically irresolvable disagreements is acknowledged. But, at the same time, these disagreements are discarded *in fact* on the basis of an unwarranted assumption, or by virtue of an act of faith: that is, that rational individuals will converge progressively toward the same

attitudes.<sup>7</sup> It is only “relative to that assumption” that Dewey can ascribe the “method of intelligence” – or the scientific method – to ethics.

As far as I can see, the view that Stevenson is ascribing to Dewey does not differ, in any essential feature, from Putnam’s own contention with respect to the problem of moral disagreement: in both cases, at most we can *trust* that discussion, if sustained long enough, will lead to convergent value judgments. Stevenson does not object to this, for it does not contradict his own analysis. All that he needs to point out is that we are trespassing here the limits of pure analysis to enter the field of moral *influence*.<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, the “entanglement thesis” is supposed to be a contribution to the analysis of normative statements, not a normative statement in itself. So we must ask again, what is the difference that thesis makes? The situation is this: if Stevenson’s reconstruction of Dewey’s view is right, then this view is not able to question Stevenson’s analysis of moral disagreements, and, consequently, Putnam’s contention that the “entanglement thesis” represents an alternative to positivists views is wrong; but, if Stevenson’s reconstruction is wrong, then Putnam (or Putnam’s reading of Dewey) cannot be right either, for he is arriving at essentially the same conclusion regarding the problem of persistent disagreements – remember that there is no possible “external” justification for the values of a given community, and that leaves us only with the *hope* that communities converge in the long run. I lean towards the second option of this dilemma. I think both Stevenson and Putnam are missing something in their interpretation of Dewey. And this “something” can be disclosed by examining Dewey’s side in the dialog.

#### IV.

In his article “Ethical Subject-Matter and Language” (1945) – a review of *Ethics and Language*, which had appeared the year before – Dewey charges Stevenson with having confused the function and use of ethical

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<sup>7</sup> In support of this interpretation, Stevenson mentions (1978, p. xxvii) a “postulate” that Dewey introduced into his (1891, p. 332), by virtue of which the realization of the individual and of the community are satisfied by the same conducts. Although Dewey did not mention such postulate ever since that early date, “he *may* have taken [it] for granted throughout his subsequent writings” (Stevenson’s emphasis).

<sup>8</sup> This explains an earlier remark made by Stevenson in (1960), concerning an important difference between Dewey’s method and his: “Dewey, unlike the present writer, does not wish to isolate the special tasks of analysis” (p. 261), that is to say, Dewey does not separate philosophical analysis in ethics from the promotion of a certain moral attitude. On this point, Stevenson is undoubtedly right.

sentences with their structure and contents, thus taking "the cases in which "emotional" factors *accompany* the giving of reasons as if this accompaniment factor were an inherent part of the judgment" (Dewey 1945, pp. 127 and 129, his emphasis). Then the argument focuses on the notions of "sign" and "meaning," in order to refute Stevenson's claim that an utterance can have emotive meaning "in a sense which excludes descriptive reference" (Dewey 1945, p. 130). I will not go into these semantic topics, but concentrate instead on a second, connected criticism which has been already anticipated: that is, the *psychological* assumptions Stevenson makes, which Dewey described to Fries as "terrible."<sup>9</sup> For an expression to have emotive meaning but no reference at all, there must be something *meant* which is not an object "in the world." That "something" are emotions and feelings, not as they have "a specified position in a complex situation in which occur also the things the "emotions" are *at, about, or for,*" but – here Dewey quotes Stevenson's own words – as "designating an affective state that *reveals its full nature to immediate introspection, without use of induction*" (Dewey 1945, pp. 134-135, his emphasis). Of course, this appeal to an introspective self-revelation is totally incompatible with the psychological views Dewey had been developing his whole life long; but, what is more pregnant in the context of the dialog we are examining, it is a part of a mythology of "the mental" wholly devoid of scientific basis. Therefore, Dewey's rejection of emotivism springs from deep scientific, psychological sources, and this fact is of paramount importance in order to understand his attack on the fact/value dichotomy, as well as to assess his positioning with respect to the empiricist-positivist tradition.

Now we can see that Stevenson's tentative reconstruction of what Dewey would have to say as to the problem of moral disagreement is hopelessly wrong. For he is wrong in assuming that Dewey would accept the "intuitive" notion of "disagreement in attitude," *if 'attitude' means an "emotive" response not integrally connected with the things that cause it to go off.* On the other hand, if attitudes are taken, as Dewey certainly does, as a non-separable element of the "complex situation in which occur also the things" those attitudes are about, then the question whether "men, even if wholly rational, would continue to judge and act in opposition to one another rather than in accord with one another," is not well formulated. For 'rationality' is here a name for *the method of choosing the response that fits better with the requirements of the situation, that is, a method for reflectively establishing the right*

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<sup>9</sup> See p. 252 above.

*judgment*. Were men wholly rational, they would judge and act in accord with one another, because they would set aside their emotional preferences – that is, their unreflective impulses – and try to react as experience and reasoning advise them to do. As Dewey clearly puts it:

The theoretical view about ethical sentences which is an alternative to that put forward by Stevenson is, that as far as non-cognitive, extra-cognitive, factors enter into the subject-matter or content of sentences purporting to be legitimately ethical, those sentences are by just that much deprived of the properties sentences should have in order to be genuinely *ethical*. (1945, p. 137, his emphasis)<sup>10</sup>

As we can see, the “assumption” that Stevenson was attributing to Dewey is totally absent: only if ‘attitude’ is interpreted in terms of “unreflective impulse,” can we contemplate “the *logical possibility* of scientifically unresolvable disagreements in attitude”; but, of course, this is no more than a truism.

As to the question of “naturalism,” I think the following statement is pretty clear also:

If moral theory has any distinctive province and any important function it is, I would say, to criticize the language of the *mores* prevalent at a given time, or in given groups, so as to eliminate if possible this [non-cognitive] factor as a component of their subject-matter; to provide in its place sound matter-of-fact or “descriptive” grounds drawn from any relevant part of the *whole* knowledge possessed at the time. (Dewey 1945, p. 138, his emphasis)

In Stevenson’s use of the term, Dewey is undoubtedly a naturalist, because he does not recognize other *meaning* for ethical terms than the descriptive one. He *do* recognizes that ethical language possesses non-descriptive, “quasi-imperative” *functions*,<sup>11</sup> but “the point at issue is whether the facts of *use* and *function* render ethical terms and sentences not fully comparable with scientific ones as respects their subject-matter and content” (Dewey 1945, p. 137, his emphasis). Nevertheless, Dewey’s naturalism, as the statement above shows, does not deprive ethical theory of its *critical* role. Far from limiting itself to validate whatever the current usage of moral language may sanction, moral theory – as any other part of philosophy, according to Dewey – must provide the methods for correcting and improving the judgments that usage conveys.

<sup>10</sup> The term ‘genuinely ethical’ is to be interpreted in connection with the narrow sense of ‘ethical judgment’ as a *reflective* activity.

<sup>11</sup> “Of ethical sentences as ordinarily used, it may be said, I believe, that their *entire* use and function [. . .] is directive or “practical”” (Dewey 1945, p. 137, his emphasis).

I find it difficult to conciliate this naturalism with Putnam’s idea that justifications are “internal.” What does it mean for a value to have an *internal* justification? Does it mean that we cannot know that our response to the situation is the right one unless we see things “through the lenses of those very values”? In that case, we would be taking values as a kind of *a priori* pattern, by virtue of which the situation will look – or, maybe, will *be* – one way or another. That is exactly what lenses do. But it is also what emotions and feelings are supposed to do, according to Stevenson. Therefore, I dare to say that Dewey’s reply to Putnam would be similar to the one he gave to Stevenson: if that pattern is defined as extra-cognitive, it must be eliminated from the subject-matter of genuine ethical sentences. If, on the contrary, the pattern is thought of as cognitive, then it is itself subjected to evaluation and criticism by means of any relevant part of the available knowledge. I do not see any pre-established framework here which could make sense of the internal/external dichotomy.

## V.

Indeed, Dewey never used a dichotomy of this sort to account for the logic of moral (or any other kind of) justification. He was just interested in showing that “ethical terms and sentences are fully comparable with scientific ones as respects their subject-matter and content”; this content was for him genuinely descriptive, and hence objective. For this reason, when Putnam declares, “what I am saying is that it is time we stopped equating *objectivity* with *description*” (Putnam 2002, p. 33), I am not quite sure that these words correspond to the same spirit that inspired Dewey’s “entanglement thesis.” As I stated earlier, the “entanglement thesis” means that we cannot expect to reach a better understanding of how our descriptions relate to our valuations by keeping them apart and putting valuations out of the domain of objectivity and empirical testability. But, when Dewey comes to grips with the question as to how descriptions and valuations relate to each other, he never tries to intimate that there is something wrong with the idea of “fact.” Rather, he sets to prove that deliberation with respect to values is essentially a matter of *factual* description and prediction. This is the point I think Dewey was eager to make in his discussion with Logical Positivism. In other words, Dewey put the emphasis not so much on the role played by values in scientific knowledge, than on the possibility of treating values

*scientifically*. And this was so because positivists had expelled value judgments from the field of scientifically warranted propositions.

This is fairly evident when we look at the way Dewey introduces the topics of his *Theory of Valuation*: “Since the propositions of the natural sciences concern matters-of-fact and the relations between them, and since such propositions constitute the subject matter acknowledged to possess preeminent scientific standing, the question inevitably arises whether scientific propositions about the direction of human conduct, about any situation into which the idea of *should* enters, are possible” (1939, p. 192). Here Dewey develops the same argument that he will later repeat in his review of Stevenson: emotivism rely on “an alleged psychological theory which is couched in mentalistic terms, or in terms of alleged states of an inner consciousness or something of that sort” (p. 199). Such inner states, in case they existed, are irrelevant and unnecessary in an analysis of value-expressions, for “value-expressions have to do with or are involved in the behavioral relations of persons to one another” (p. 200); that is, they have to do with interpersonal public phenomena. Since any kind of valuation refers “directly to an *existing* situation and indirectly to a *future* situation which it is intended and desired to produce,” the phenomena involved are: “(i) aversion to an existing situation and attraction toward a prospective possible situation and (ii) a *specifiable and testable relation between the latter as an end and certain activities as means for accomplishing it*” (p. 202, his emphasis). On these grounds, Dewey’s argument proceeds to show that such phenomena can be phrased in terms of “propositions about observable events – propositions subject to empirical test and verification or refutation” (p. 201).

I do not think it necessary to pursue Dewey’s argument further in order to support my claim that it does not follow Putnamian lines. While Putnam seems most interested in showing how values intervene in the description of matters-of-fact, Dewey’s emphasis is on the “*matter-of-factness*” of values: “propositions *about* valuations have, indeed, been shown to be possible. But they are valuation-propositions only in the sense in which propositions about potatoes are potato-propositions. They are propositions about matters-of-fact” (p. 208, his emphasis). Of course, the “entanglement thesis,” if true, must work in both directions, but I think that the insistence in one direction or in the other reveals different attitudes toward those to whom the thesis was initially addressed to (i.e., philosophers of the empiricist-positivist tradition). To say it more explicitly: when Putnam asserts that to think without the fact/value dichotomy is to depart from “classical empiricism as well as [from] its



twentieth-century daughter, logical positivism” and “to enter upon a *genuine* “post-modernism”” (Putnam 2002, p. 9, his emphasis), in my opinion he is parting from Dewey in fundamental respects.

In brief, Dewey’s position in his dialog with empiricists and positivists amounts to the following. The difference between “factual-propositions” and “value-propositions” consists only in that “value-propositions” make reference to the direction of human interactions and human relationships in definite existential situations. Such interactions and relationships *require* value-terms to be adequately *described*. Then, as far as value-propositions express in what relation desire and purpose are supposed to be with respect to the existential situation and its future development, they must be treated as any other scientific, empirically ascertainable propositions.

This means that moral disagreements, inasmuch as they emerge from competing value-judgments, should be solved by the very same methods that we run when the issue point is not “moral” or evaluative. In other words, propositions about valuations are themselves capable of being evaluated<sup>12</sup> – note that there is here no trace of the kind of restriction Putnam introduces with his notion of “internal” justification. To carry out this second appraisal, we need to examine things “as they sustain to each other the relation of *means to ends or consequences*” (Dewey 1939, p. 211, his emphasis). But, whereas the possibility of an empirical evaluation of something as means is generally recognized, ends tend to be thought of as endowed with “intrinsic” value, and therefore as final. For this reason, Dewey’s well-known theory of the “continuum of ends-means” becomes central in his conception of ethics as a form of scientific inquiry.<sup>13</sup> For the sake of brevity, I will omit here the details of the theory; instead, I will conclude by illustrating the difference it makes with respect to the problem of moral disagreement as addressed by Putnam in his analysis of “thick” ethical concepts (see Putnam 2002, pp. 34ff).

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<sup>12</sup> “Are propositions about existent valuations themselves capable of being appraised, and can the appraisal when made enter into the constitution of further valuations? [. . .] If this condition is satisfied, then propositions about valuations that actually take place become the subject matter of valuations in a distinctive sense, that is, a sense that marks them off both from propositions of physics and from historical propositions about what human beings have in fact done” (Dewey 1939, pp. 208-209). This, of course, illustrates the *critical* role of Dewey’s ethical theory that was mentioned above.

<sup>13</sup> The relation ends-means is considered at length in Sections V (“Ends and Values”) and VI (“The Continuum of Ends-Means”) of (Dewey 1939, pp. 220-236).

Words like ‘rude’, ‘brave’, ‘generous’, ‘cruel’, have the peculiarity of admitting descriptive as well as normative uses; therefore, the concepts they carry cannot be considered as *purely* evaluative (like ‘good’, ‘bad’, ‘virtue’, ‘vice’, or ‘duty’) nor as referring *only* to facts. The ethical “thickness” of such concepts would speak for the “entanglement thesis,” since it defies the idea that there is an absolute dichotomy between facts and values. It is only natural, then, that Putnam takes the trouble in defending the claim that they are *genuinely* “thick,” that is:

- (i) that they cannot be replaced by a purely descriptive equivalent term; and
- (ii) that they are not “factorable” in two different components, descriptive and “attitudinal.”

Now, if such concepts are genuinely thick, then we cannot *use* their descriptive function without incorporating in the same speech-act, so to say, their evaluative content. But, to learn a concept is to learn how to use it, then we cannot *understand* a thick ethical term either without adopting the corresponding evaluative standpoint. We cannot, for instance, *know* what *facts* are involved in the description of someone as “cruel” unless we *endorse*, at least hypothetically, certain *value* judgments. Accordingly, “proponents of the entanglement” would maintain “that if one did not at any point share the relevant ethical point of view one would never be able to acquire a thick ethical concept, and that sophisticated use of such a concept requires a continuing ability to identify (at least in imagination) with that point of view” (Putnam 2002, pp. 37-38). Or else: “What is characteristic of “negative” descriptions like ‘cruel’, as well as of “positive” descriptions like ‘brave’, ‘temperate’, and ‘just’ [. . .] is that to use them with any discrimination one has to be able to identify imaginatively with an *evaluative point of view*” (p. 39, his emphasis).

Although Putnam has invited us to “give up the very idea of a “rationally irresolvable” ethical dispute,” his analysis of thick ethical terms supplies an excellent basis for describing what such a dispute would consist in. If *A* says: “Ariel Sharon is a cruel statesman,” and *B* replies: “I concede that Sharon’s policy concerning Palestinians is harsh and painful, but I do not think he is being cruel at all,” their disagreement is not likely to be solved by a patient examination of every single military action ordered by Sharon in recent years to repress Palestinian people; for *A* and *B* will differ again in referring to these actions by means of different thick terms. As long as *B* refuses to call those actions “cruelty,” he is resisting to identify with *A*’s evaluative point of view;

and, since such point of view is not rigidly associated with any definite set of non-evaluative statements whatsoever (for there is no "descriptive component" that we can isolate as corresponding to the meaning of 'cruel'), there is no hint about what sort of rational argument *A* could use here. Putnam's suggestion is that *A* and *B* should continue discussing and trying things out just the same. I think this is wise, considering the alternatives. But if, as a result of these sustained efforts, *B* finally acknowledges that Sharon's policy is cruel, all that we could say is that a "switch" has taken place in *B*'s evaluative point of view. As this switch is contingent, unpredictable, and non-compulsory, it hardly could be described as the effect of rational force, nor is it easy to distinguish from the "change in attitude" that Stevenson associated with sheer persuasion.<sup>14</sup> To say that *B*'s final opinion is "internally" justified according to *A*'s evaluative framework does not alter the fact that the disagreement has been, so to say, solved accidentally in a vacuum of rules; for, in case that *B* would have convinced *A* that Sharon's policy is morally impeccable, the opposite judgment would be "internally" justified as well according to *B*'s evaluative framework.

*Per contra*, I presume that Dewey's analysis of the case we are considering would have hinged on the means/ends relation. After all, what *A* is claiming is that Sharon's policy is unnecessarily tough, whereas for *B* it is tough but necessary, and this is a typical problem of assessing the adjustment between ends and means. Then, what we have to do is to *evaluate* those conflicting value-judgments, which means to examine things rationally "as they sustain to each other the relation of means to ends or consequences." This is not "to seek an Archimedean point, an "absolute conception" outside of all contexts and problematic situations," a mistake against which Putnam rightly warns us. On the contrary, it is to put under discussion *the whole situation* in order to examine what conditions have to be brought into existence to serve as means, what ends are actually reached, how these ends turn out to be "means to future ends as well as a test of valuations previously made. Since the end attained is a condition of further existential occurrences, it must be appraised as a potential obstacle and potential resource" (Dewey 1939, p. 229). According to Dewey, such a thorough examination of the

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<sup>14</sup> Moreover, it could be legitimately asked whether, in using the term "to identify imaginatively with an evaluative point of view," Putnam is committing to that "terrible" mentalistic psychology that Dewey deplored in Stevenson, for such term echoes the idea of "empathy," a notion too obscure indeed to play such a central role in elucidating how rational agreement can be achieved in ethics.

situation should be enough to empirically settle the question whether Ariel Sharon is being “cruel” or not.

On this perspective, the term ‘cruel’ is but a linguistic resource to indicate that a particular ill-adjustment between means and ends is taking place. As this constitutes an empirically ascertainable matter, the term is, to that extent, purely descriptive. But the fact it describes is *undesirable* in itself, for it means that the responses actually elicited do not fit with what the situation requires. For this reason the term has also an evaluative import that is inseparable from its descriptive content.<sup>15</sup>

Let me ask again the question with which this discussion begun. Why is it so difficult to reach rational agreements when “values” are at stake? Stevenson’s explicit answer is that there is no strict implication between beliefs and attitudes. Putnam’s implicit answer is that it is hard to move from one evaluative point of view to another. Dewey’s answer is that we persist in the untenable idea of “ends-in-themselves,” the view

that, as compared with the importance of the selected and uniquely prized end, other consequences may be completely ignored and brushed aside no matter how intrinsically obnoxious they are. This arbitrary selection of some one part of the attained consequences as *the* end and hence as the warrant of means used (no matter how objectionable are their *other* consequences) is the fruit of holding that *it*, as *the* end, is an end-in-itself, and hence possessed of “value” irrespective of all its existential relations. (Dewey 1939, p. 228, his emphasis)

Dewey’s doctrine of “the continuum ends-means” has been favorably commented by Putnam in different previous works. Thus, it is rather striking that he did not mention it in his historical reconstruction of the collapse of the fact/value dichotomy. For, as this paper has been suggesting, that doctrine is essential to understand Dewey’s contention that values are subjected to the same methodology of inquiry that applies to physical science – a contention that Dewey badly wanted to urge on positivists. In omitting this point, Putnam’s version of the “fact/value entanglement” falls short in evading the non-cognitivist conclusions arrived at by the proponents of the dichotomy. No matter whether we frame values in terms of “subjective attitudes” or in terms of “evaluative points of view,” they will acquire that static “final” character of “ends-in-themselves” which, according to Dewey, blocks the road of moral inquiry. Dewey’s pragmatism has been defined by a Spanish scholar as

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<sup>15</sup> I venture to say that Dewey would have disliked the expression ‘thick ethical concept’, for it puts the emphasis on the “ethical” side; ‘value-laden descriptive concept’ is perhaps closer to Dewey’s mind.

“the critic of culture” (see Esteban 2001), which means the critic of any “community” that presents itself as identified with a given set of values, or as endowed with a set of “lenses” of its own. Such “values” are the *mores* that moral theory must criticize in order to abolish them, or to correct them, or to improve them, according to the verdict of inquiry. As opposed to those *traditional* communities, Dewey’s *democratic* community must be experimentalist, that is, it must enter an endless process of forming and reforming its ends and values: fallibilism, tolerance, cooperation, are but the *milieu* of such process; they are means, not ends.

If one looks at the three answers given above, one realizes that only the third one makes a real difference with respect to the dominant view that value judgments are subjective and that moral disagreements escape rational control. I have argued that the claim that facts and values are entangled is not strong enough to remove this dominant view, unless it is complemented, as Dewey did, with a more full-blooded naturalism. The question whether such naturalism is or is not objectionable in its own terms is, of course, another story.

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