Is the Fact/Value Dichotomy a Thought-Stopper?

One overarching aim of this workshop is to clarify the seemingly paradoxical observation that: (i) as a matter of fact, science is a value-driven form of human inquiry, which (ii) nevertheless is our best shot at arriving at something like objective facts. In the first panel, we aim to investigate some of the conceptual underpinnings of the very distinction between facts and values: What, if anything, is paradoxical about the juxtaposition of facts and values?

Hilary Putnam, in his book *The collapse of the fact/value dichotomy* (2002), credits David Hume for having introduced the dichotomy between facts and values into western philosophy. According to Hume, a statement expresses a matter of fact if its terms refer to objects that are manifested to us in our experience. In comparison, evaluative statements do not describe objective reality, hence they cannot be a direct result of science. This way of thinking eventually cumulates in the formula which is sometimes referred to as Hume’s Law: No ‘ought’ can be derived from an ‘is’! Putnam’s critique of the dichotomy rests on a variety of considerations. For example, he points out that words like ‘cruel’ function both in evaluative and descriptive ways. One case study in the panel will illustrate that the entanglement of normative and descriptive components is by no means restricted to everyday speech, but can be detected in scientific terminology as well. Another key topic of this panel concerns the observation that Hume’s approach to drawing the line between facts and values is a principled one, in the sense that he presupposes empiricism to arrive at the dichotomy. This has been criticized as an obvious weakness of his approach, given that much of modern science purports to speak of unobservable realities. We will consider how far pragmatic justifications, according to which the fact/value dichotomy is relative and/or a matter of degree, could vindicate the distinction or some of its philosophically and socially desirable implications.