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# CONTENT

## WHICH FUTURE FOR PHILOSOPHY? DISCUSSING WITH HILARY PUTNAM

### INTRODUCTION

Massimo Dell'Utri ..... 5

### ON THE ABSENCE OF AN INTERFACE: PUTNAM, DIRECT PERCEPTION, AND FREGE'S CONSTRAINT

Stephen L. White..... 11

### REPLY TO STEPHEN WHITE

Hilary Putnam..... 29

### PUTNAM, PRAGMATISM AND THE FATE OF METAPHYSICS

David Macarthur..... 33

### REPLY TO DAVID MACARTHUR

Hilary Putnam ..... 47

### PUTNAM ON TIME AND SPECIAL RELATIVITY: A LONG JOURNEY FROM ONTOLOGY TO ETHICS

Mauro Dorato..... 51

### REPLY TO MAURO DORATO

Hilary Putnam ..... 71

### THE THREAT OF CULTURAL RELATIVISM: HILARY PUTNAM AND THE ANTIDOTE OF FALLIBILISM

Massimo Dell'Utri..... 75

### REPLY TO MASSIMO DELL'UTRI

Hilary Putnam ..... 87



# INTRODUCTION

There is no need to explain who Hilary Putnam is in light of the sheer number of books and articles on his work that have appeared over the past several decades. For the sake of the youngest readers, it is enough to say that he is one of the leading philosophers of our time and that he has dealt with nearly every topic in analytic philosophy, producing fundamentally new theories and opening new routes to further research in virtually every area he has discussed. On November 6, 2007, the four essays contained in this volume were presented to Putnam in a Conference dedicated to his philosophy, organized by Mario De Caro at Università Roma Tre.

The essays collected here treat several of Hilary Putnam's contributions to some of the most controversial debates in contemporary philosophy. Stephen White looks at Putnam's commonsense realism in the context of theories of perception and meaning and considers its bearing on the appeal to a transcendental argument in response to skepticism. David Macarthur examines Putnam's metaphysics in relation to the question whether, within a pragmatist and naturalist framework, metaphysics can be given any positive content. Mauro Dorato highlights Putnam's philosophy of physics and the complex issues raised by the Special Theory of Relativity in the context of considerations of the reality of the future. Massimo Dell'Utri discusses Putnam's current conception of objectivity as it bears on the threat posed by radical relativism and examines the possibility of a fallibilist response.

The Conference benefited from Putnam's replies to each essay, which pointed out lines of agreement and disagreement. The reader will find Putnam's replies in what follows. Now a brief description of the content of the essays is in order.

Stephen White addresses one of the most central features of Putnam's recent thought—the idea that there is no perceptual or cognitive interface between human beings and the world. The upshot is that our relation to the world is *direct*. This means—among other things—that there is no such thing as *narrow content*, i.e. a kind of content that supervenes on what is inside the subject's head, since this would give us precisely the interface in question. The idea that there is no interface is one to which White himself subscribes, but he claims that Putnam's arguments on behalf of broad content—arguments that he has been making at least since the Seventies—do not rule out the possibility of there being narrow content as well. White, however, presents an argument to this effect—a *transcendental* one, according to which *object involving thought* “is necessary to our having a meaningful language” (p. 15)—and of course the ‘object involvement’ provides the directness our relation to the world is meant to have. Here is an outline of White's transcendental argument.

In order to be meaningful, language must be grounded in a connection to objects and states of affairs in the world. To this first necessary condition on the existence of a meaningful language White adds a second: that this grounding must satisfy Frege's constraint. This is the requirement that if a subject believes obviously incompatible things of the same object and is not irrational, there must be different modes of presentation of the object under which the beliefs are held. A subject might, for example believe incompatible things of Venus without being irrational as a result of thinking of Venus under two different descriptions and failing to recognize that these are two modes of presentation of the same object. The difficulty arises in demonstrative cases—**cases in which a subject has two different views of the same object and fails to believe that the object presented in these two ways is the same.** In such a case there may be no descriptive modes of presentation, and a question arises as to what the modes of presentation in such demonstrative cases could be.

White warns us at this point against supposing that the modes of presentation in the demonstrative case consist in *sense-data*. Such a supposition leads either to skepticism, via an argument of Hume's, or to 'phenomenalism', according to which our terms for external objects are (in principle) reducible to terms in a *sense-datum* language. Phenomenalism, however, seems incapable of providing a genuine grounding of our language for external objects, because all we could meaningfully talk about in this case are patterns and regularities among our sense-data. Moreover, phenomenalism involves an even more serious problem that White points out: our talk about past, future, possible, and counterfactual sense-data, as well as the sense-data of others, must itself be reducible to talk about our own, actual, present sense-data. And White suggests that this is "too thin a 'definitional base' for anything we might think of as a genuine language" (p. 18). According to White, then, the appeal to sense-data to provide the modes of presentation through which our language connects to the world leads not just to epistemological skepticism, as many have supposed, but to meaning skepticism—skepticism about the possibility of our having a meaningful language.

The final step of the transcendental argument exploits this skeptical consequence of any version of *representational realism* to support a picture that takes object-involving content as basic—a form of *direct realism*. It is this realism, then, that has to be reconciled with Frege's constraint. White claims that this reconciliation is made possible through his talk of different packages of "basic action possibilities"—talk that he claims does not presuppose a way of characterizing our experience that is neutral as regards the existence of external objects. Hence, according to White, it is a reconciliation that does not lead to either epistemological or meaning skepticism.

If White's paper is concerned with a specific question in metaphysics, David Macarthur's addresses the question of the tenability of metaphysical inquiry in general. Does Putnam, Macarthur asks, share the 'end-of-metaphysics' spirit of most of contemporary philosophy? The guiding idea of the paper is that "clarity can be shed

on this region of Putnam's thought only if it is understood as the latest incarnation of a pragmatist approach to metaphysical systems exemplified in different ways by the work of William James and John Dewey" (p. 34). Macarthur accordingly starts by clarifying what the attitude toward metaphysics of these great pragmatists of the past amounts to.

Both James and Dewey oppose the traditional conception of metaphysics as an a priori inquiry aimed at revealing a purported hidden structure of reality constituted by eternal essences and necessary structures, and both appeal to the pragmatic significance of metaphysics. The difference between them, in a nutshell, lies in the fact that this appeal is "vindicatory" for James and "undermining" for Dewey. What, however, does it mean to have a pragmatic attitude toward metaphysics? It means opposing 'intellectualist metaphysics', which in the end offers nothing but abstraction and verbal disputes, and considering instead the practical effects of endorsing a particular metaphysical conception. Among these practical effects there could be beneficial feelings of confidence or comfort and a principled guarantee of an ideal moral order. By means of a number of quotations, Macarthur shows that James regards these practical effects as 'non-epistemic' reasons that are useful in assessing good and bad metaphysical pictures. James therefore advances a positive conception of the role of metaphysics, and considers such practical effects sufficient to vindicate the metaphysical enterprise.

According to Macarthur Dewey draws a very different moral from his pragmatist outlook. For him metaphysics is nothing but a blunder or a piece of self-deception that causes philosophers to regard concepts and conclusions arising from a particular context as absolute and ahistorical. Thus, "in contrast to James, he does not think that a consideration of the practical significance of metaphysical systems provides any vindication of them" (p. 38), and Dewey completely renounces even the use of the word "metaphysics".

Macarthur's thesis is that Putnam's stance is best characterizable as a third path between James and Dewey. Indeed, Putnam seems to think that some parts of traditional metaphysics are endowed with cognitive content and valuable insights, and Putnam reveals a Jamesian side when he claims that "there is much of permanent value in the writings of... traditional metaphysicians" (p. 41). On the other hand, according to Macarthur, Putnam's Deweyan side emerges when he attacks metaphysical realism and tries to make room for common sense in the description of the relation that obtains between human beings and the world. What, then, is Macarthur's final diagnosis of the fate of metaphysics as it is characterized in Putnam's writings? It is that metaphysical inquiry survives in Putnam's analysis of the general features of our conceptual network—e.g., "uses of language, concepts as employed in judgments" and the like—even if this means "changing the subject" (p. 45).

One major concern of Hilary Putnam's from early on is the philosophy of physics, especially the analysis of the philosophical consequences of the Special Theory of Relativity

(STR) and quantum mechanics—topics that offer a wealth of material for philosophical discussion. Mauro Dorato examines a view Putnam put forward in 1967, to the effect that STR implies the actual reality of future events. This means that “reality ought to be understood *tenselessly*, so that existence is coextensive with ‘what has occurred, what is occurring now, and what will occur’, [and] that all propositions possess a well-defined truth-value independently of the time of assertion” (p. 52). One of the interesting features of Dorato’s paper is the fact that he develops his discussion along the lines of the distinction between the *scientific image* and the *manifest image*, a distinction due to a philosopher with whom Putnam is quite sympathetic—**Wilfrid Sellars**. Indeed, on several occasions Putnam has endorsed Sellars’ idea that the aim of philosophy consists in understanding “how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term”—an idea that for obvious reasons recurs in Macarthur’s paper too. The way in which things hang together is here explored in an attempt to ascertain whether and how the scientific image and the manifest image can be made to cohere. Putnam, Dorato argues, seems to give primacy to the scientific image, thereby suggesting that he holds a view called “eternalism” (past, present and future events are equally real), which he tries to bring into conformity with the manifest image of the man-in-the-street, who holds a view called “presentism” (only what exists now is real). Adding a third option called “possibilism” (the future is empty—only past and present events are real), Dorato reconstructs Putnam’s argument and shows that, and why, it is at odds with Howard Stein’s account, according to which “possibilism turns out to be implementable (and uniquely so) in the structure of Minkowski space-time” (p. 61). Who wins the dispute between Putnam and Stein?

Neither of them, according to Dorato, since the *ontological* issue which opposes presentists, possibilists and eternalists lacks a clear meaning, and the most plausible way to address it consists in dissolving it into a *practical* one. As he puts it, “sometimes, according to our different purposes, we rely on the tensed sense of existence, and then we take a *perspectival* attitude toward reality; some other times, for different purposes, we rely on a tenseless sense of existence, and we look at reality from ‘nowhen’” (p. 67).

The methodology of giving importance to practice is something Putnam employs in a number of cases—for instance in his discussion of the issue of *relativism*. This is the issue at the center of Massimo Dell’Utri’s paper. Dell’Utri argues that the thesis of *radical* cultural relativism entails the existence of a threat to the peaceful co-existence of human societies, since it describes a situation in which differences cannot be resolved by an appeal to rational considerations. If the thesis is true, then people living on the basis of different cultural networks cannot really communicate, and their inevitable disagreements can be reconciled only through the use of nonrational persuasion or force. If, on the contrary, we assume that an anti-relativistic position is correct, we are committed to thinking that the notion of objectivity has a content, and thus to envisaging a common ground for an intercultural confrontation. How, then, is it possible to give content to objectivity?

In search of an answer, Dell’Utri rehearses Putnam’s criticisms of the so-called *God’s Eye View* of the world and truth, pointing out how difficult it is to defend an anti-relativistic position once we abandon ideas like ‘convergence’, ‘fact of the matter’ (at least in some contexts), and in general the strong notion of objectivity that the God’s Eye View allows. The way in which Putnam gives content to the notion of objectivity, according to Dell’Utri, is through an appeal to *fallibilism*, “the idea that there is no (metaphysical or semantic) guarantee that what we say is right, no guarantee that our statements are beyond doubt, that they are immune to revision” (p. 78). Fallibilism—a central element in Putnam’s thought from the very beginning of his philosophical career—rules out *certainty*, but still allows room for an enormous amount of knowledge on the basis of which we may pursue our ordinary lives. However, because we cannot be sure of the continued strength of the justification of the things we assume we know, we have to test and criticize it when we have a plausible enough reason to do so. “The ‘dignity of criticism’—this is the lesson we can take from fallibilism”, as Dell’Utri puts it (p. 78), where the exercise of criticism is seen as something which, on particular occasions, could help to assess what is right or wrong, good or bad, true or false (and objectively so). This is why we can take fallibilism as an ‘antidote’ to the threat posed by radical relativism.

Having isolated the *mild* notion of objectivity stemming from fallibilism, Dell’Utri discusses whether it could be used to characterize plausible notions of absoluteness and universality. His idea is that the very repudiation on Putnam’s part of the notions of convergence and (in some contexts) facts of the matter makes it difficult, if not impossible, to gain beliefs absolutely and universally valid. Dell’Utri suggests, however, that this does not rule out the possibility of an anti-relativistic position. Simply put, anti-relativism need not be grounded in a notion of absoluteness and universality—contrary to a traditionally widespread point of view.

To conclude, *direct realism*, *metaphysics*, *time* and *relativism*—four Putnamian topics, four papers. A tribute to a philosopher of wide-ranging scope, whose reflections over the past several decades have provided nourishment not just for thought, but for life.

Massimo Dell’Utri  
Guest Editor



# ON THE ABSENCE OF AN INTERFACE: PUTNAM, DIRECT PERCEPTION, AND FREGE'S CONSTRAINT<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Hilary Putnam and John McDowell have each argued against representational realist theories of perception and in favor of direct realist (or “common-sense realist”) alternatives. I claim that in both cases they beg the question against their representational realist opponents. Moreover, in neither case has any alternative been offered to the representational realist position where the solution to perceptual or demonstrative versions of Frege’s problem is concerned. In this paper I present a transcendental argument that some of our perceptions of external objects must be direct in the sense that we perceive them and there is nothing else we perceive in virtue of which we do so. I also present a reply to standard objections to the claim that transcendental arguments can be used to support conclusions about the world and not simply about our own use of concepts. Finally, I present a theory in terms of which the relevant Frege problems can be solved without appeal to any of the sorts of representations in terms of which representational realism is defined.

**Keywords:** Hilary Putnam, perception, representation, Frege’s Problem, transcendental argument

## 1. Is the notion of an interface problematic?

Hilary Putnam, echoing John McDowell, has denied that “there has to be an interface between our cognitive powers and the external world.”<sup>2</sup> And Putnam has denied as well (the same claim differently expressed) that “our cognitive powers cannot reach all the way to the objects themselves.”<sup>3</sup>

What, though, does it mean to say that there is no interface, no boundary, between what is internal and external to a subject? Certainly we can stipulate such a boundary—at the surface of the brain, say—or, for particular purposes, around some of its relevant functional sub-units. And if our cognitive powers are thought to be identical to, reducible to, or super-

<sup>1</sup> Some of the arguments presented here are discussed at greater length in White (2007). I am grateful to Akeel Bilgrami, Ned Block, Mario De Caro, Massimo Dell’Utri, David Macarthur, Roberto Pujia, and Susanna Siegel for their comments and suggestions on these topics.

<sup>2</sup> Putnam 1999, p. 10; McDowell 1994.

<sup>3</sup> Putnam 1999, p. 10.

venient upon states or properties of the brain, and if we are considering the question from the objective or third person point of view, then it seems obvious that such an interface exists.

That there is such an interface is not ruled out, even if we hold, as Putnam does, that our cognitive powers are a matter of intentional states and that the contents of such states reach all the way to objects in the world. It is not ruled out, that is, even if we hold, for example, that the contents of beliefs depend on the character of our external environment, i.e., that they have “broad content.” In Putnam’s famous thought experiment, everything on Earth has a molecule-for-molecule duplicate on Twin Earth except water.<sup>4</sup> On Twin Earth, what falls as “rain,” flows from the faucets, and fills the lakes and reservoirs is a completely different substance from water (i.e.,  $H_2O$ ). What plays the role of water on Twin Earth, though it has the same macro-level properties as water, has a completely different chemical formula (which we abbreviate as XYZ). According to Putnam, subjects on Earth and their Twin Earth duplicates refer to different substances in using the word ‘water’— $H_2O$  and XYZ respectively—solely because of the differences in their external surroundings. But even if we grant that such “broad content” exists, this does not rule out the possibility of there being narrow content as well. That is, granting that our beliefs have broad content that does not supervene on what is inside the subject’s head does not preclude their having a kind of content that does. And narrow content would give us precisely the interface between, on the one hand, beliefs, perceptual states, and so forth understood as internal to the subject and, on the other, the subject’s external environment. Nor does granting the existence of broad content rule out the possibility of our “factoring” such content into a narrow content plus an external causal chain.

Putnam is, of course, well aware of this possibility and has himself offered a possible characterization of narrow content. But in *The Threefold Cord*,<sup>5</sup> Putnam argues on a number of grounds that no such account is viable. I find these arguments inconclusive or, perhaps it would be more accurate to say, incomplete.

To see the problem, consider the conception of narrow content that I put forward in “Partial Character and the Language of Thought.”<sup>5</sup> On this conception, the meaning or intension of a term is treated as a two-place function defined for a domain of ordered pairs of possible worlds. The first world of such a pair is a possible context of acquisition of the term and the second world a possible context of evaluation. The function maps such an ordered pair into the extension of the term at the second world when it is acquired at the first. If the term ‘water’, for example, is acquired on Earth, then it picks out bodies of  $H_2O$  (if it picks out anything) on Earth, on Twin Earth, and on every other possible world at which we evaluate its extension. Acquired at Twin Earth, it picks out bodies of XYZ at every such possible world. And whereas the meaning of

<sup>4</sup> Putnam 1975.

<sup>5</sup> White 1982.

'water' construed as a function from possible worlds to extensions is different for an Earthling and his or her Twin Earth duplicate, the two-place function will be identical for such pairs of subjects. Indeed, it will be identical for pairs of subjects whose relevant functional makeup is "sufficiently similar." Meaning in this sense, then, supervenes on functional makeup, hence on what is "in the head."

It is not my aim to defend the conception of content of a very distant self, a conception that I now reject. And, indeed, Putnam considers a similar view and dismisses it for what I regard as the right reason—that it is parasitic on an account of broad content. But that it is parasitic on such an account was an explicit feature of this conception of content. The factors that determine the association between a term and, say, a natural kind for a particular context of acquisition were like the reference determining factors that figure in typical causal theories. And Putnam provides no argument that narrow content should *not* presuppose broad content in this way. I believe that such an argument is available, but it can only be stated when we have in hand a fully articulated account of the problems raised by Fregean considerations, particularly in demonstrative contexts. This is a topic that neither Putnam nor McDowell takes up, and I shall postpone its discussion until after we consider Frege's constraint.

That there is no interface between our cognitive powers and the external world, then, is far from obvious. McDowell seems to argue that there cannot be one because the existence of such an interface would lead to epistemological skepticism about the external world. But this argument is also seriously incomplete. Many philosophers hold what Michael Williams has dubbed the "new Humean" position. According to this position (held, according to Williams, by Barry Stroud, P. F. Strawson, and Thomas Nagel, among others), we *cannot* answer the skeptic about the external world, but this is of no practical significance.<sup>6</sup> Thus there should be an *argument* that a view that entails epistemological skepticism about the external world is automatically unacceptable, and none has ever been provided.

## 2. Can we make sense of direct perception?

Putnam's argument against the existence of an interface is clearly meant to be stronger than McDowell's. Putnam suggests in many places that if there is an interface, we can have no account of how language "hooks onto the world." This consequence is clearly related to what I shall call below "meaning skepticism." And an argument that the existence of an interface leads to meaning skepticism is not one that can be easily dismissed. But what would such an argument look like?

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<sup>6</sup> Williams 1996, pp. 10-17.

As we have seen, not every conception of an interface seems problematic. And this is true even for McDowell's (anti-skeptical) purposes. In fact, it seems, there is only one route from the existence of an interface to epistemological skepticism about the external world. This is the route that proceeds from the first person subjective perspective, or the Cartesian perspective, via Hume's argument.<sup>7</sup> According to this argument, if one focuses on the character of one's present perceptual experience (an experience, say, as of a room, furniture, etc.), one will recognize that there are other possible explanations of the experience than the one suggested by ordinary common sense. One might, for example, be dreaming, be a brain in a vat, be the victim of an evil demon, or be a subject in a virtual reality setup. There is, then, a logical gap between what one is given in experience and its causal source in the external world. And this gap can only be bridged by an inference. As Hume argues, however, an *a priori* inference couldn't be justified, since we cannot argue *a priori* from effects to causes. Nor, however, could an *a posteriori* inference be justified. Any such inference would have to be grounded in an *a posteriori* principle or generalization connecting the character of our perceptual experiences with features of the external world. And the use of any such principle would clearly beg the question against the skeptic. The conclusion, then, is not simply that we cannot ever *know* the truth of any *a posteriori* proposition about the external world. It is the much stronger claim that we could never be *rationally justified in believing* such a proposition. In other words, we could never have rational grounds for preferring one hypothesis about the external world over any other.

This conclusion is obviously very strong and is, I think, more disturbing (or should be) than new Humeans acknowledge. I am not concerned to argue this claim, however, because, as I have indicated, I believe, (as I think Putnam does) that the real issue is not epistemological skepticism but meaning skepticism. The present point is that we now have a clear conception of the interface that is at least problematic. Suppose our concepts can be factored into components that are "external-world-neutral" and components consisting of mere causal chains to the external world. And suppose that, as a result, everything that is given to the mind—everything available from the first person point of view—can be understood in external-world-neutral terms. Then epistemological skepticism about the external world follows. Suppose on the other hand that we could make sense of the idea of our being given external objects directly, in a way that left no logical gap between what we were given and the existence of such an object. Then no inference from what is given in perception would be necessary, and the Humean argument for epistemological skepticism would be defeated.

Can we make sense of such a notion? I believe that the notion of direct perception is, properly understood, unproblematic. Consider the notion of a basic action. An action is basic if we do something and there is nothing else that we *do* in virtue of which this

<sup>7</sup> Hume 1988, Section XII, Part I, p. 184; Hume 1896, Book I, Part IV, Section II, p. 212; cf. Stroud 1984, pp. 545-551, reprinted in Alcock 1998, see especially pp. 363-364.

is the case. This is not to suppose that there are no causal antecedents of our basic actions. It is simply to say that at the level of *action* there is nothing more to be said. By analogy, then, a case of direct perception is a case in which we perceive something, and there is nothing we *perceive* in virtue of which this is so. Again this is not to deny that there is a causal chain connecting the perceptual experience to things in the world. It is simply to say that an analysis in terms of *perception* can go no further.

But so far all we have is a conditional. *If* it is to be claimed that there is no interface, then the claim must (if it is to be plausible) be understood in terms of direct perception characterized by analogy with basic action. And, understood in this way, the claim that we perceive external objects directly has a desirable consequence—it provides an answer to the Humean skeptic. Moreover, it is clear that there needn't be an interface understood in the present sense—the sense that gives rise to Humean skepticism—just because, understood in another way—from the objective perspective—there obviously *is* an interface. But this falls short of an argument that there *is* no interface in the sense ruled out by the claim that we sometimes perceive things directly. Is there an argument for this latter claim?

I believe there is. I believe that there is a transcendental argument that *de re* (or object-involving, or Russellian) thought is necessary to our having a meaningful language and that such object-involving thought is irreducible to thought that is non-object involving. (To say that some thought or intentional content is object involving is to say that if the object or objects in question do not exist there is no complete thought; there is nothing that could be evaluated for truth, accuracy, veridicality, or the like.) The view that we must have (some) irreducibly *de re* thought has a claim to being anti-Cartesian and anti-naturalist. It is anti-Cartesian because Descartes' own skeptical arguments require a conception of what we are given in perception as "external-world neutral," even if they do not require a sense-datum conception. It is anti-naturalist since if we had an objective-causal reduction of meaning, then the partial character view would show how we could factor our intentional states into internal and external components.

### 3. The transcendental argument for irreducibly *de re* thought

The argument is as follows.

#### 1. Language must be grounded subject to Frege's constraint

Frege's constraint says, in effect, that if a subject has two beliefs regarding an object, beliefs that, logically, cannot be true of one and the same thing, then there must be two distinct modes of presentation of that object under which the beliefs are held.<sup>8</sup> And modes of presentation are precisely the sorts of things that have to be given to subjects

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<sup>8</sup> For Stephen Schiffer's version of Frege's constraint, see Schiffer 1978. Similar versions occur in the work of Gareth Evans, Brian Loar, and Christopher Peacocke. Interestingly, though the notion of object-involving thought figures prominently in the work of John McDowell, Frege's constraint does not.

in the form of conscious experience, not external causal chains. Putnam attributes to William James the claim that “the traditional claim that we must conceive of our sensory experiences as *intermediaries* between us and the world has no sound arguments to support it.”<sup>9</sup> But if it was James’ view that there was no serious argument for such a conception of experience that any account of these issues would have to address, it was false. The argument stems from the requirement that language be grounded subject to Frege’s constraint.

With a minimal amount of charity we can credit Russell with having been moved by the following considerations in favor of his sense-datum theory, though not with having articulated them explicitly.<sup>10</sup> (And, of course, whether the following argument can be attributed to Russell is irrelevant to its cogency and validity.) The argument is that in addition to inferential roles or word-to-word connections, our linguistic expressions must have some direct connections to nonlinguistic reality. If there were no such word-to-world connections, we would have no more than an uninterpreted formal calculus. And if the connections were not direct (unmediated by any descriptive linguistic content), we would have an infinite backward regress of word-to-word connections. In the absence of such a direct connection to the world, our language would be ungrounded. We must have, then, in addition to lexical definitions, ostensive definitions in which we pick out items in the world directly and in virtue of which our language “hooks onto the world.” The contemporary notion that this is a matter of external causal chains satisfies the requirement of grounding but fails in the second regard—that the grounding be subject to Frege’s constraint. The reason is that such causal chains needn’t be, and normally are not, available to the subject. Hence they can’t provide the modes of presentation that rationalize otherwise incompatible beliefs about the same object. And this is why the partial character conception of narrow content, presupposing as it does (something like) a causal theory of reference, must be rejected.

We do justice to the subject’s rationality, then, only by postulating “modes of presentation” that are available to the subject and that are not modes of presentation of the same object *a priori*. In a case like that of the morning star and the evening star, it is plausible to assume that these modes of presentation will be descriptive. But if all such modes of presentation were descriptive, we would be back to the infinite regress of word-to-word connections, and our language would be ungrounded in any connection to the world. The challenge, then, is to solve the Frege problems in the demonstrative cases. And the question is what the modes of presentation in such cases could be.

It is in this context that Russell’s suggestion that the logically proper names (demonstratives) refer to sense-data looks attractive. Indeed, in this context it can look almost inevitable. Sense-data are nonlinguistic and our access to them via acquaintance is direct in being unmediated by any linguistic-descriptive content. Moreover, sense-data

<sup>9</sup> Putnam 1999, p. 11.

<sup>10</sup> Russell 1956.

themselves have no hidden sides and are available in principle from only one point of view. Thus they raise no new Frege problems. In Gareth Evans' example of a demonstrative version of Frege's problem, one points out a window to one's right at the bow of a ship and says "that ship was built in Japan."<sup>11</sup> One points out a window to one's left at the stern of a ship and says, "that ship was not." And, without realizing it, one has pointed to the same ship twice and said of it logically incompatible things. The problem is solved by saying that the two modes of presentation required to do justice to one's rationality are the two different sets of sense-data associated with the different perspectives on the ship.

## 2. The attempt to ground a meaningful language in sense-data leads to meaning skepticism

Sense-data solve one problem regarding meaning only by raising another that I shall call the problem of meaning skepticism. If the meanings of our terms like 'table' and 'mountain' are grounded in their connections with sense-data, then the notion of an external object—an object distinct from any pattern (however complex) among our sense-data—will be meaningless. The argument that the attempt to ground language in sense-data leads to meaning skepticism is as follows. Words get their meanings in virtue of their inferential roles (word-to-word connections) and their direct connections to the world (word-to-world connections). How, then, would what purport to be our terms for external objects get their meanings? If it is via their inferential connections with (definitions in terms of) sense-datum terms that are grounded in their direct connections to sense-data, then the conclusion follows. The terms that allegedly pick out external objects will, in fact, pick out nothing over and above patterns and regularities among our sense-data. Such putative external object terms will be definable in terms of, and hence in the strongest sense be reducible to, terms in a sense-datum language. Suppose, then, that they are not so definable or so reducible—that they cannot get their meanings in virtue of their definability in a vocabulary that is itself unproblematically grounded. Then, since we can never in principle be given external objects directly, we can never correlate the terms with the items they purport to pick out. Thus we can never give the terms meaning via acts of ostensive definition, and, it seems, they can never be grounded at all. Thus, whether the external object terms are definable in sense-datum terms or not, it seems that on these assumptions all we can ever talk about meaningfully are patterns and regularities among our sense-data.

Why, though, is there any suggestion here of meaning *skepticism*? The picture of meaning (the one in which external object terms have definitions in a sense-datum language) is just the picture put forward by C. I. Lewis and, more generally, what is definitive of (linguistic) phenomenalism.<sup>12</sup> The answer is that the same arguments that lead to the

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<sup>11</sup> Evans 1982, p. 84.

<sup>12</sup> Lewis 1946.

conclusion that our external object terms, if they are to be meaningful, must have definitions in a sense-datum language show something stronger. They show that our terms that purport to pick out sense-data in the past or the future, possible or counterfactual sense-data, or the sense-data of others must have definitions in terms of expressions that pick out our own, actual, present sense-data. In this case there seems to be too little even to justify talk of interesting patterns or regularities. Thus it seems we have too thin a “definitional base” for anything we might think of as a genuine language.

How, after all, did the original argument go? We started with an ordinary language with terms that purported to pick out external objects such as tables or mountains. And we argued that such terms were in fact meaningful only if they had translations into a sense-datum language. But what was the basis for this claim? It was that since our access to external objects (as ordinarily understood) cannot be in principle be ostensive or demonstrative (all we can be given directly in perception are sense-data), there is no other way in which such terms could be meaningful. But the same point applies to past and future, possible and counterfactual sense-data, as well as the sense-data of others. These are also things that we cannot be given directly in perception, hence cannot demonstrate. Suppose, then, we ask about the meaningfulness of the terms that the phenomenalist would use in accounting for the meanings of our ordinary terms for external objects. That is, suppose we ask about the meaningfulness of the sense-datum terms themselves. By the phenomenalist’s own arguments, these terms must have definitions or translations in terms that refer only to our own, actual, present sense-data.

It might be thought that this is unfair to phenomenism. For it seems that there is a disanalogy between the two arguments. If the sense-datum intuitions in the context of the necessity of grounding language (subject to Frege’s constraint) are right, then ordinary external objects are simply not the kinds of things we could suppose we were given directly. To suppose they were, it seems, would be to give up trying to satisfy Frege’s constraint and thus to give up on the attempt to do justice to the rationality of subjects. And since there is widespread agreement that rationality is constitutive of the ascription of intentional states, this would be to give up on intentionality and meaning themselves. But, it might be argued, this is not the case where sense-data other than our own, actual, present sense-data are concerned. For these are just the kinds of things it *does* make sense to suppose are given directly. Past sense-data were given directly *in the past*. Future sense-data will be given directly *in the future*. Counterfactual sense-data would be given directly *in appropriate counterfactual circumstances*, the sense-data of others are given directly *to them*, and so forth. Does this get the phenomenalist off the hook?

To suppose that it does is to forget the dialectical context in which sense-data come to seem so attractive. We appeal to sense-data to play a certain role: to provide the modes of presentation necessary to do justice to the rationality of individual subjects. But certainly it would seem absurd to argue that because sense-data are the kinds of things

that are given directly, are non-linguistic, and don't themselves raise Frege problems, we can appeal to the sense-data of other people to play this role in our own case. What rationalize *my* beliefs are the sense-data given to *me*.

Suppose I have irrational beliefs about a given object O. Two of my beliefs about O are contradictory, but I fail to notice this because they normally come to consciousness in different contexts. And suppose that I recognize O to be the same under all the relevant modes of presentation. Thus, were the contradictory nature of the beliefs pointed out to me, I would not say that I had been ignorant of the fact that two modes of presentation of mine were modes of presentation of a single object. Rather I would say that I had indeed been irrational in holding a pair of contradictory beliefs. Surely, then, I am not (and my beliefs are not) rationalized by the fact that *Smith* has sense-data in virtue of which there is a mode of presentation of O that I would not recognize as such

What this means, in effect, is that it is the notion of acquaintance that allows sense-data to play the role for which they have been slated by the phenomenalist response to the demonstrative versions of Frege's problem. And we can no more be acquainted now with our past sense-data than we can be acquainted with the sense-data of another subject. What rationalizes (or fails to rationalize) our present beliefs about the past is not the totality of our sense-data (past, present, and future) but our present sense-data associated with our present memories. Analogous points are true of our future, possible, and counterfactual sense-data.

It might be thought that we needn't talk of past sense-data, for example, but merely of sense-data *in the past*. But we can no more suppose that we have direct or unmediated access to (direct perception of or acquaintance with) the past than we can, on phenomenalist principles, suppose that we have it to the external world. Indeed, the past seems even less like the sort of thing that could be perceived directly. On such principles, our access to the past is mediated by our present sense-data, primarily the sense-data in virtue of which we have memories. On phenomenalist principles, however, what makes them memories is their (alleged) connection with past sense-data. Hence the phenomenalist needs to be able to explain the meaning of this notion. And unless the notion of a past sense-datum can be defined in terms of patterns and regularities among our present sense-data, it seems that this cannot be done.

Pursuing the analogy with the problem of other minds may help in this context. As is well known, the problem of other minds has been, at least since Wittgenstein, a problem of meaning. What does it *mean* to talk about a sensation such as pain that I myself don't experience? Following Kripke we might see the problem as one of answering the following question. Suppose that the meaning of my term 'pain' is exhausted by my ability to recognize pains when *I* have them. What, then, is there in what I mean that could be detached and applied in the case of another subject?<sup>13</sup> Any conception such as

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<sup>13</sup> Kripke 1982, pp. 114-145.

functional role or physical realization that could in principle be detached and applied in the case of another seems irrelevant to what I mean—namely, “the subjective feeling of pain (to me)”. And all we have explained where the meaning of this expression is concerned is, of course, what it feels like to me when *I* have it. The suggestion now is that the concept of past sense-data of mine is problematic in the same way as the concept of the sense-data of other subjects. And exploiting the analogies between other subjects and our past and future selves is a standard philosophical move—one that has been used to very telling effect (against Hume!) by both Derek Parfit and Henry Sidgwick in the domain of moral psychology.<sup>14</sup> I conclude that the phenomenalist cannot resist the shrinkage of the “definitional base” to his or her own, present, actual sense-data and thus cannot avoid meaning skepticism.

### 3. Language must be grounded in demonstrative belief, direct perception, and basic action possibilities

If the foregoing is right, then we have an argument for the strong thesis that Putnam’s views suggest—that a conception of the mental that entails the existence of an interface in the problematic sense is incoherent. The alternative is a conception of the mental according to which *de re* or object-involving content is basic and irreducible. The problem, of course, is that we can have two object-involving beliefs—beliefs in singular propositions in the analytic jargon—in virtue of which we believe logically incompatible things of the same object. In other words, the problem is to reconcile direct realism with Frege’s constraint. The account I have suggested in a number of places involves the appeal to what I call packages of basic action possibilities. Consider again Evans’ ship. What are the modes of presentation in virtue of which the incompatible beliefs about the ship do not compromise one’s rationality?

It is tempting to throw up one’s hands and say the following. In such cases we have two distinct direct perceptual experiences of the same object, one in virtue of which we can point to the bow, and one in virtue of which we can point to the stern. That they are distinct shows that their contents cannot be represented as singular propositions (ordered pairs of objects and properties) because, so understood, they would represent the subject as ascribing incompatible properties to the same object. Nor could we add a third element—external-world-neutral modes of presentation (whether sense-data or not). For this would simply be another instance of the factoring of the internal and external that leads to the problematic conception of the interface and meaning skepticism. The alternative seems to be to say that direct perceptual experiences individuated in such a way that we can have different direct experiences of the same object are simply *sui generis*. And this is to say that there is no explanation of *what it is in virtue of which they are different*—hence, no explanation of *how* such experiences could satisfy Frege’s constraint.

<sup>14</sup> Parfit 1984, pp. 117-194; Sidgwick 1981, pp. 418-422.

Desperate situations call for desperate measures, but not this desperate. There is quite a lot that we can say about our direct access to the world. And we can do it without supposing that direct access has an analysis into an internal and external component, hence without supposing that it is reducible to indirect access. The strategy is simply to explain some forms of direct access in terms of others and to avoid the charge of vicious circularity by making the circle large and informative. Evans' ship, for example, presents different packages of basic action possibilities, depending on whether one is looking at the bow or the stern. In either case, one can point, trace the outline in the air, move closer for a better view, aim a laser sight, give directions to a crane operator loading cargo, and do an indefinite range of other things, all as basic actions. That they are basic actions means that there is no external-world-neutral mode of presentation in virtue of which the action possibilities hook onto the ship in question—one simply performs the actions directly on “that ship.” Such actions are, nonetheless, different actions depending on whether one is looking at the vessel's bow or stern. And they clearly help to explain how one could believe incompatible things of the same ship.

There is a sense, then, in which our two modes of presentation of the ship are a matter of know how, and this is crucial to the claim they are object involving. But it might be objected that this attempted reduction of the perceptual to the agential leaves out precisely what is essential to the perceptual states—that there is something it is like to have them. And this thought threatens to reintroduce sense-data and with them the problematic conception of an interface. The objection, however, ignores the reference to holism and to non-vicious circularity and so misconstrues the suggestion. Consider what I have called elsewhere the perfect blindsight example and the example of the passive subject.<sup>15</sup> Imagine first a modification of the well-known empirical example of blindsight. In the original example, subjects with certain kinds of brain lesions report a blind area in their visual fields. The subjects, however, are asked to guess the features of images projected on the part of a screen that falls within the so-called blind area. And many such subjects reliably discriminate a range of simple visual features, while maintaining that they see nothing. Imagine now such subjects becoming better and better in their discriminations until, spontaneously and without prompting, they can make all the same discriminations as a normal subject, as well as performing all the same actions with the same degree of confidence and reliability. Imagine in one's own case driving in downtown Boston, avoiding pedestrians and careless drivers, and driving around new construction and serious potholes, while succeeding in finding suitable parking. Can one really imagine doing this while being, nonetheless, blind? It seems not, particularly in light of the fact that one could reproduce the same sense-datum description of one's visual experience as a normally sighted subject. Asked why one parked in a no-parking zone, one could say that from where one was, the no-parking sign was occluded by a parked truck. And such a description could in an obvious way be restated in sense-datum terms.

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<sup>15</sup> For the passive subject see White 2004a. For the passive subject and the perfect blindsight example see White 2004b and White 2007.

This first example suggests that just as the phenomenology of direct perception requires agency, agential capacities, if they are as sophisticated as ours, require some phenomenology of experience. But we can go further: there seems to be a distinctive phenomenology of agency itself. Imagine a subject who awakens one morning and claims, with apparent sincerity, not to understand the concept of action. It seems possible to tell a coherent story in which such a subject believes all the same propositions we do when they are couched in non-agential terms. In addition, such a subject, it seems, might know all the things that it is appropriate to *say* about action. At least this might be so in the sense in which an anthropologist might know everything it is appropriate to say about tribal gods in which he or she does not believe. Such a subject, we might say, has retained the inferential roles of our agential expressions, but finds nothing in the world to motivate or justify their application. So described, what the subject lacks, it seems, must be something perceptual. What is missing, we can suppose, is any perception of the world as presenting opportunities for action. And this suggestion is supported by the research tradition stemming from the work of J. J. Gibson, according to which what we are given in experience is not a world of agentially neutral physical objects and structures, but a world of affordances—of shelters and hiding places, doorways, stairs, bridges, and escape routes.<sup>16</sup> And according to Gibson, these are not descriptive interpretations we impose on a neutral perceptual experience, but a part of the experience itself. Were they missing, as they are in the example of our passive subject, our perceptual experience of the world would be radically different.

The conclusion is that an agential account of the modes of presentation of objects in cases of direct perception does not entail that there is no story to be told about the phenomenology of perceptual experience. It would be as accurate to say that the account of agency is a phenomenological one as it is to say that the account of phenomenology is agential. In both cases the intentional states in question are object involving. The perceptual experiences are direct and the opportunities are opportunities for basic actions. And, it seems, there is a clear sense in which direct perceptions and basic actions are made for each other. Roughly, the things we see directly are the things we can manipulate through our basic actions.

The upshot is what I have described as a phenomenology that is both inflationary and deflationary relative to what the sense-datum theory entails.<sup>17</sup> We are, on the inflationary side, given far more than sense-datum theories, at least of the orthodox sort, allow. Far from being given only apparent shapes, colors, and relative sizes, we are given humanly meaningful objects and features of the world—“threats and promises” in Ryle’s terms. But also, I would argue (though I cannot do so here), we are given objects and aspects of the world that are valuable in specific ways. We are given features and things that are beautiful, strong (in an intellectual and aesthetic as well as a physical sense),

<sup>16</sup> Gibson 1986, pp. 33-44.

<sup>17</sup> See White 2004a, White 2004b, and White 2007.

virtuous, elegant, fascinating, cool, hot, bold, subtle, steadfast, brave, and so forth. On the deflationary side, however, we may fail to see any of the things the sense-datum theorist says we must see in order to see anything else. Nothing could be more common than seeing a friend's distress without noticing or being aware of any of the subtleties of the facial geometry in virtue of which the distress is given. *A fortiori* we can do so without seeing those things the perception of which the sense-datum theorist holds to be basic. Again, there is nothing more mysterious here than there is in the fact that we can see a letter on a page without being aware of any of the details of the typeface in which it is printed. This is not to deny that the shape of the letter is *causally* relevant to our recognition of it. It is merely to deny that, in addition to the letter, the details of the shape must be registered in our conscious awareness. To say that an adequate phenomenology of experience is both inflationary and deflationary relative to the sense-datum theory, then, is to say that our experience is both richer and more transparent than that theory allows. Moreover, these two features go hand in hand. It is precisely because we are not given what the sense-datum theory requires that we can be given our friend's distress directly.

**4. Thus the Humean claim that any *a posteriori* belief about the external world would have to be inferred (illegitimately) from what we are given in external-world-neutral perception is false: We must have some object-involving perceptual beliefs in order to have a meaningful language, and such beliefs give us ontological commitments.**

Therefore, we cannot intelligibly step back, as the Humean skeptic requires us to do, to a point from which we can call all of our external-world beliefs into question simultaneously.

The criterion of ontological commitment that would support this claim would be some appropriate generalization of the Quinean criterion. Something, for example, like:

We are ontologically committed to the existence of those things about which we have to talk in order to say the things we are committed to saying.

Putnam rejects the Quinean criterion,<sup>18</sup> but expresses sympathy for something like the generalized criterion.<sup>19</sup> If something like this is right, then we have the strongest possible answer to the Humean skeptic. We have a transcendental argument that the skeptic's claims are incompatible with the possibility of our having a meaningful language.

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<sup>18</sup> Putnam 1999, p. 179.

<sup>19</sup> Putnam 1999, p. 120.

#### 4. The legitimacy of transcendental arguments

In response to such a claim, two objections will be raised, both of which have been made familiar by Barry Stroud. First, and most obviously, it will be objected that even if such an argument works, it can show at most something about us—that we must apply certain concepts or the like. What will be denied is that such an argument could, in principle, show us anything about reality outside the mind. What I hope the preceding discussion has shown is that this objection to transcendental arguments, long regarded as conclusive, can in fact be dismissed. For the objection presupposes precisely the factoring into external-world-neutral facts about our psychologies and facts about the external world that it has been the burden of that discussion and the transcendental argument it supports to undermine. The transcendental argument, then, provides more than just a conclusion about us—that we have certain commitments and that in principle we cannot step back from them all simultaneously. It also provides a reply to the standard objection to the legitimacy of transcendental arguments themselves. To put the reply another way, one cannot have genuine commitments regarding the external world and say, nonetheless, “but that’s just me.” One cannot meaningfully thump one’s chest but keep one’s fingers crossed behind one’s back.

The second objection is not to transcendental arguments *per se*, but to the implication that what the skeptic says is incoherent. We obviously *do* understand the skeptic’s claim that we might be brains in vats, it will be said, and any suggestion to the contrary will presuppose a theory of meaning that we should reject on that very ground. What possible justification could there be, it might be asked, for the claim that we literally don’t understand *The Matrix*, or *Vanilla Sky*? And it may be added that the only theory of meaning with the required consequence is verificationism, a theory known to be defective on independent grounds.

It should be clear, of course, that the approach being defended is nothing like the classic versions of verificationism, which presuppose exactly the interface being rejected. In fact, it seems that the theory on offer has as much right to be regarded as a form of realism as any other—as indeed the connections between direct perception and direct or naive realism suggest. The real answer to the objection, however, is that it trades on an equivocation. It is indeed difficult to deny that we understand the suggestion that we might, like Neo, or the Tom Cruise character in *Vanilla Sky*, be in a virtual reality setup. We can, after all, imagine the experiences Neo has in coming out. But to suppose that our capacity to imagine such experiences from the inside is what our understanding of the skeptic’s claims consists in is to confuse two senses of ‘skepticism’. In the first sense (“Humean” or “philosophical” skepticism), nothing could in principle count for or against any hypothesis about the external world. In particular, nothing could count as evidence that one was (or had been) in a virtual reality setup. On this view, all we could have in principle as evidence would be what we can be given directly in experience—sense-data—and no inference from sense-data to the external world

could ever be justified. This, however, is clearly not how we understand the examples. Neo's experience in which he seems to come out of the Matrix is taken as virtually conclusive evidence that he was once in it and now no longer is. And so is the Tom Cruise character's experience with an uncanny stranger who has knowledge of him that no one but he could have and apparently supernatural powers that no ordinary understanding of the world could explain.

There is, then, another understanding of the usual skeptical hypotheses ("real" skepticism), according to which we can quite easily imagine evidence that would count in their favor. And if we can imagine evidence that would count in their favor, then the lack of such evidence is clearly some evidence against them. More generally, we can say that this latter way of treating the skeptical hypotheses neither demands nor allows what the Humean understanding of hypotheses that sound exactly the same requires—that we entertain these hypotheses from a perspective in which we have put into doubt or "bracketed" all of our external-world beliefs simultaneously. The conclusion is that the apparent ease with which we understand the standard skeptical scenarios—i.e., understand *real* skepticism—provides no support for Stroud's claim: that there can be no transcendental argument against skepticism in its Humean or philosophical form.

## 5. Conclusion

That we can make sense of real skeptical scenarios, so understood, is difficult to deny. And yet it is no small concession. I shall conclude by spelling out some of the costs of the concession—costs that I am more than willing to bear, but that others may not be. First, though I have said a great deal about the phenomenology of our agential perspective, I have said nothing about what our agential capacities are. Both naturalistic accounts and dualistic accounts, if they are to figure in a philosophy of mind and language that does justice to Frege's constraint, are equally problematic.

Consider the question whether such capacities supervene on the physical. To suppose they do is to invite the question how large a supervenience base is needed. In particular it is to ask whether it must be any larger than the brain. But now consider two examples. In the first example, one is in perceptual contact with the external world in the usual way. One has, however, a duplicate in a virtual reality setup whose brain is molecule-for-molecule identical to one's own and is receiving the same electrical inputs. Suppose that in the duplicate's case the inputs are all completely artificial, and that the duplicate is out of touch with the external world. In the second example, the source of the electrical inputs to one's own brain switches back and forth (seamlessly) between the real world and an artificial source. Suppose it does so in such a way that one has no idea that such switches are taking place. And suppose that when one is told about the switches, one has no idea when or how often they occur. Considerations stemming from the role of Frege's constraint in demonstrative contexts (together with

the requirement that we say *how* it is satisfied in particular cases) suggest that we should opt for supervenience on what is intrinsic to the brain. The notion of seamless switching, after all, suggests that, temporal considerations aside, there is no difference from one's own point of view between the way things are given before and after the switch. Thus the cases of seamless switching suggest that events outside the brain make no difference to what things are like for one subjectively. The desire to do justice to the phenomenological fact that there is something it is like to have the experience one is having now—something shared by one's duplicate and the person-stages of oneself that are out of touch with the world—seems to point in the same direction. And yet if the arguments above are roughly correct, to opt for the supervenience of our relevant agential capacities on intrinsic features of the brain is to embrace one more version of the interface between the internal and the external that generates Humean skepticism and its meaning-skeptical consequence. Thus opting for such a supervenience thesis can only be self-defeating. However, the nonsupervenience of our conscious experiences on the intrinsic features of events in the brain, together with their supervenience on the physical threatens to make facts about what it is like to have one's present experiences mysterious. And the nonsupervenience of such facts on the totality of physical objects, facts, and events makes it mysterious how we could ever get in touch with mental events. Thus it leads to apparently intractable problems with self-knowledge and knowledge of other minds—problems that generate their own versions of meaning skepticism.

For completely independent reasons, I believe this problem of supervenience cannot arise. Very briefly, the agential perspective and the objective-causal perspective are, on my view, incommensurable in the Kuhnian/Hansonian sense.<sup>20</sup> If the foregoing phenomenological points are correct, each perspective generates its own perceptual base, in a way that prevents their coming into direct or immediate competition or conflict. This is not to say, of course, that there are no serious prospects of conflict at all. I believe, rather, that the relation between the two perspectives is dialectical—each grows naturally out of the other, and each, if carried to its logical extreme, undermines (or threatens to undermine) the other. As to the first point, the objective scheme grows naturally out of the agential scheme in virtue of our attempts to improve our agential capacities by viewing ourselves as objective entities and objects of appropriate sciences. And the agential scheme grows out of our need to do justice to the meaningfulness of our scientific terms via the account of “meaning as use” already sketched. As to the second point, there is the familiar argument that no causal-objective scheme, whether deterministic or indeterministic, seems to leave any room for genuine agency. And a resolutely agential perspective, particularly as regards the practice of science, seems impossible to reconcile with the assumption that scientific objectivity delivers the ultimate perspective on the world. Suppose, as is generally believed, that doing justice to agency involves taking one or more of the essential indexicals—‘I’, ‘here’, or ‘now’

<sup>20</sup> Kuhn 1962; Hanson 1961.

as ineliminable. Then doing justice to agency will compromise either the third person objectivity of the objective scientific scheme or the assumption that such a scheme provides the ultimate perspective on the world. These considerations support the idea of the incommensurability of the agential and objective schemes. Indeed, they support the idea of incommensurability in a much stronger sense than Kuhn or Hanson had in mind. And if these claims about incommensurability are correct, the question of supervenience cannot arise, since there is no common ground from which to ask it. The position, then, is not supervenience or nonsupervenience, but asupervenience.

That such a line rules out the usual causal theories of mind-related domains—for example, causal theories of perception, reference, action, and knowledge—is perhaps a conclusion that Putnam would not find uncongenial. In the case of action, for example, this suggestion has a very Wittgensteinian ring. (“Of course reasons can’t be causes—to suppose they could would be to ignore their normative dimension.”) Other consequences, however, are less familiar, and I mention only one. Imagine Neo, having emerged from the Matrix, recalls apparently thinking to himself the thought he would have expressed by saying “That woman is wearing red.” Since no such woman exists, it seems that neither we nor he could even entertain a thought of the type that seems necessary to do justice to his experience in the Matrix. My own view is that this is indeed a consequence of our taking *de re* intentionality as basic, but I shall end on a positive note. Our access to other subjects, as our access to the world, is less epistemological than practical—less a matter of knowledge than of know how. In the case of others, I believe that this know how involves not only knowing how to deal with them, but knowing how to play their parts, as Olivier knew how to play the part of Hamlet and as we know how to play ourselves. But this is, I think, clearly a topic for another occasion.

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## REPLY TO STEPHEN WHITE

HILARY PUTNAM

When I responded to Stephen White's deep and elegant lecture in Rome, I said that I agreed with his transcendental argument and I do. It is a profound contribution to the discussion of the epistemology and phenomenology of perception. And apart from one minor textual issue having to do with William James,<sup>1</sup> was so convinced by that lecture that I had no criticism to voice. But on a subsequent close reading of his paper, I have discovered an issue (one that he raises towards the end) where it seems that we do disagree, and it seems appropriate to explain that disagreement in this reply, although I don't want the fact that we disagree on a very subtle and complex issue to obscure the fact that I do find the central argument of his paper an important contribution.

The subtle issue in question has to do with supervenience. White sets up a complicated pair of examples. "In the first example," White tells us, "one is in perceptual contact with the external world in the usual way. One has, however, a duplicate in a virtual reality setup whose brain is molecule-for-molecule identical to one's own and is receiving the same electrical inputs. Suppose that in the duplicate's case the inputs are all completely artificial, and the duplicate is out of touch with the external world. In the second example, the source of the electrical inputs to one's own brain switches back and forth (seamlessly) between the real world and an artificial source. Suppose it does so in such a way that one has no idea that such switches are taking place. And suppose that when one is told about the switches, one has no idea when or how often they occur." And he continues:

Considerations stemming from Frege's constraint (together with the requirement that we say *how* it is satisfied in particular cases) suggest that we should opt for supervenience on what is intrinsic to the brain. The desire to do justice to the phenomenological fact that there is something it is like to have the experience one is having now—something shared by one's duplicate and the person-stages of oneself that are out of touch with the world—seems to point in the same

<sup>1</sup> In my book, *The Threefold Cord*, I said that Willam James showed that there is no good argument for the interface conception, and this statement is challenged in White's paper. I stand by it for the following reason: far from overlooking what White calls "modes of presentation" (in the case of direct perception), James recognizes them, and defends the radical claim that these are *aspects of the perceived public object*. (This may make him the first "disjunctivist".) There is a sense in which James convinced Russell, because Russell says in *The Analysis of Mind* that he has been won over by "the American new realists whose leader was William James". Ironically, the American new realists never *admitted* that they took their realism from William James. But, Russell knew very well where they got it.

direction. And yet if the arguments above are roughly correct, doing so can only be self-defeating. However, the nonsupervenience of our conscious experiences on the intrinsic features of events in the brain, together with their supervenience on the physical threatens to make facts about what it is like to have one's present experiences mysterious. And the nonsupervenience of such facts on the totality of physical objects, facts, and events makes it mysterious how we could ever get in touch with mental events. Thus it leads to apparently intractable problems with self-knowledge and knowledge of other minds—problems that generate their own versions of meaning skepticism.

“Having, in this way, encountered what looks like an antinomy—since all the alternatives (global supervenience, supervenience on brain-states, and denial of supervenience) supposedly have objectionable consequences—“ White opts for saying that “this problem of supervenience cannot arise”. “Very briefly,” he continues, “the agential perspective and the objective-causal perspective are, on my view, incommensurable in the Kuhnian/Hansonian sense.”

I do not, however, find the antinomy genuine.<sup>2</sup> While it would take a book to explain in full why I think it isn't,<sup>3</sup> I hope that I can briefly indicate the main points at which I disagree with this argument:

First, I do think that all of our capacities, including “agential” ones (a category which, as Stephen White correctly argues, includes our perceptual capacities), supervene on the states of the physical universe, including, in a great many cases, past as well as present ones. Stephen White scorns “naturalism”, but that, I think, is because he identifies “naturalism” with *reductive* naturalism (a mistake I have been guilty of making at times myself). When I am careful, I say that I am a naturalist—a non-reductive naturalist—and I don't see how any naturalist can deny global supervenience of human psychological states and capacities.<sup>4</sup> (And appealing to the murky doctrine of “incommensurability” is no help.) But there is no one simple answer to the question of whether our agential capacities are *locally* supervenient (supervenient on just the relevant brain-states) or *globally* supervenient (supervenient on factors external to the brain, and even to the organism), because *it depends on which agential capacities one is talking about*, even if we restrict the issue to perceptual capacities.

To see what I mean, let me mention a bit of science fiction of my own—a variant of Ned Block's idea of “Inverted Earth”. In Block's scenario,<sup>5</sup> the sky on Inverted Earth

<sup>2</sup> By the way, I have always found the Kuhnian notion of incommensurability seriously confused.

<sup>3</sup> Hilla Jacobson and I are engaged in writing a book on perception which will discuss these, among other, topics.

<sup>4</sup> There are, however, misuses of the notion of supervenience, particularly by reductionist philosophers. On this see, my “The Uniqueness of Pragmatism”, *Think*, Autumn, 2004, pp. 89-205.

<sup>5</sup> Block, Ned, 1990: “Inverted Earth”, in James Tomberlin (ed.) *Philosophical Perspectives*, 4, *Action Theory and Philosophy of Mind*, Atascadero, Ridgeview, 53-79.

was supposed to be yellow, the grass was supposed to be red, etc. But to an immigrant who has been provided with color-inverting lenses (and whose body pigments are changed) everything would seem as it does on earth, although, unknown to the immigrant (who was brought to Inverted Earth as a small child) his neighbors have visual “qualia” which are the opposite of his. In my version (constructed for a seminar on perception that I taught recently), there is no immigrant and the natives of Inverted Earth have naturally evolved neural systems that act like color-inverting lenses. In this version, the sky looks to Inverted Earthers the very same way our sky looks to us, but it is “really” yellow, etc., and the “correction” to the sky’s color (by the visual system of the Inverted Earthers) is the result of the evolution of their visual system, not the insertion of anything artificial. The purpose of my thought-experiment was to make it clear that the same quale (the one we call the sensation of blue) could have the biological function of representing the presence of a quite different color.

Now, in order to discuss White’s problem about supervenience, I want to use a combination of the two scenarios. Let Jim, who is one of us “Earthers”, be transported to Inverted Earth, but without being aware of the differences. And suppose Jim to be fitted with clever contact lenses that switch colors with their complementary colors (without his being aware that this has been done), so that the colors of objects on Inverted Earth look “normal” to him. It is dark and rainy for several hours, and then the sun comes out, and Jim’s Inverted Earth friend Betty says, “Look at that blue sky!”, and Jim responds enthusiastically, “Yes, it’s a heavenly blue”. Since Jim is speaking Earth English and Betty is speaking Inverted Earth English,<sup>6</sup> Jim is actually wrong (the sky is yellow, not blue) and in agreeing with Betty, he is agreeing to an incompatible description of the sky, since Betty means that the sky is yellow—at least yellow (I am, of course, using Earth language here) is the color it is the function of the Inverted Earth-English word “blue” to pick out. By Frege’s constraint, there must be a relevant difference in the mode of presentation of the sky to Jim and to Betty, to account for the fact that Jim, without being mentally disturbed, etc., has just accepted two incompatible statements about the color of the sky. And there is: Jim is seeing the sky through color-switching lenses. But this is not a difference in the *brain-states* of Jim and Betty (as far as their visual systems are concerned). So in this case, Frege’s constraint should lead us to say that the mode of presentation of the color of the sky is supervenient on the brain-state *plus* something external to the brain: the presence of contact lenses, in Jim’s case. If the mode of presentation depended only on the state of the visual cortex, it would be the *same* for Betty as for Jim, and the acceptance (unawares) of incompatible beliefs by Jim would not have a Fregean explanation.

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<sup>6</sup> The only difference between the two languages is that in Earth English the word “blue” refers to the color blue, and in Twin Earth English it refers to yellow. But neither Jim nor Betty know this, and the phenomenal character of Betty’s experiences of what she calls “blue”, i.e., her experiences of yellow things, such as the Inverted Earth sky, matches the phenomenal character of Jim’s experiences of what *he* calls “blue”, such as his experiences of the Earth sky, prior to his visual system’s being altered.

I believe, however, that both Betty and Jim are capable of introspecting the visual quality of their sensation (which *is* the same) when they look at the sky. In this case, the mode of presentation is the same, and it may well be that it is only “locally” supervenient. But in the case of a presentation of a public property or a public object, I do not see Frege’s constraint as driving us to reject global supervenience at all.

Armed with these observations, let me return to Stephen White’s thought-experiments. We recall that White wrote: “Considerations stemming from Frege’s constraint (together with the requirement that we say *how* it is satisfied in particular cases) suggest that we should opt for supervenience on what is intrinsic to the brain. The desire to do justice to the phenomenological fact that there is something it is like to have the experience one is having now—something shared by one’s duplicate and the person-stages of oneself that are out of touch with the world—seems to point in the same direction. And yet if the arguments above are roughly correct, doing so can only be self-defeating.” My response is that *phenomenal* character (“what it’s like”) is, indeed, supervenient on “what is intrinsic to the brain”, but that what we are aware of, and that in many cases includes “modes of presentation”, is usually not. That what we are aware of is a function of our “quale” is the essential tenet of classical empiricism, but that tenet is, I believe quite wrong. (And countering that error by denying the existence of qualia altogether is also wrong.) Awareness of public objects and properties (e.g., Betty’s and Jim’s awareness of the color of their respective skies, when they are on their respective home planets) is mediated by object involving capacities. Those capacities are functional states in a non-reductive sense of “functional states”, and they have long arms; they reach out to the world. They are not locally supervenient.

But what of White’s unhappy subject, who is such that the electrical impulses to her brain switch back and forth (seamlessly) between the real world and an artificial source? “Suppose it does so in such a way that [she] has no idea that such switches are taking place. And suppose that when [she] is told about the switches, [she] has no idea when or how often they occur.” Well, imagine a subject who is teleported back and forth (seamlessly) between Earth and Inverted Earth, from babyhood on. What is the extension of her predicate “blue”? Does she speak Earth English or Inverted Earth English? It seems obvious that there is no fact of the matter in this case. But it does not follow that there is no fact of the matter in the case of a subject normally brought up in a definite language community. Frege’s constraint should not be interpreted as a guarantee that what Cavell famously called “the truth, or what I might call the moral of skepticism”<sup>7</sup> can be refuted. And if it isn’t so interpreted, I see no difficulty here for global skepticism or non-reductive naturalism.

<sup>7</sup> Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1979, p. 241.

# PUTNAM, PRAGMATISM AND THE FATE OF METAPHYSICS

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## ABSTRACT

Putnam has called for a renewal of philosophy by invoking the names of Wittgenstein and Dewey, both strong critics of traditional metaphysics. In the light of his own attacks on various forms of metaphysics (e.g. metaphysical realism, the fact/value distinction), one question that arises is this: what is the fate of metaphysics in Putnam's vision of philosophy? The present paper explores this question by reading Putnam as committed to a broadly pragmatist approach to metaphysics exemplified in different ways by James and Dewey. I end by providing several different ways of understanding Putnam's claim that "there is a sense in which it is the task of philosophy to overcome metaphysics and a sense in which its task is to continue metaphysical discussion".

**Keywords:** Putnam, metaphysics, pragmatism, James, Dewey

In *Renewing Philosophy* (1992), having surveyed a number of metaphysical programs in contemporary analytic philosophy, including Bernard Williams' appeal to an absolute conception of the world, Ruth Millikan's attempt to reduce intentionality to biological function, and Nelson Goodman's irrealism, Putnam concludes as follows:

I have argued that the decision of a large part of contemporary analytic philosophy to become a form of metaphysics is a mistake. Indeed, contemporary analytic metaphysics is in many ways a parody of the great metaphysics of the past. As Dewey pointed out, the metaphysics of previous epochs had a vital connection to the culture of those epochs, which is why it was able to change the lives of men and women, and not always for the worse. Contemporary analytic metaphysics has no connection with anything but the "intuitions" of a handful of philosophers. It lacks what Wittgenstein called "weight". (Putnam 1992, p. 197)

If contemporary analytic metaphysics is a mistake then is the point that we should try to revive traditional metaphysical programs? Or should we perhaps renovate metaphysics so that it will, once again, have “a vital connection” to culture? Or, more radically, is the renewal of philosophy that Putnam calls for a vision of a non-metaphysical form of philosophising—what we might call philosophising without philosophical “musts”? That would certainly fit with the invocation of Wittgenstein and Dewey whose therapeutic aims seem to stand in stark contrast to the program of constructive metaphysics. And it is undeniable that at least part of Putnam’s vision of what philosophy ought to be involves resisting the revisionist tendencies of substantial metaphysical programs in order to do justice to our everyday life-world. Philosophy, unlike contemporary analytic metaphysics, ought never to lose contact with the question of how we ought to live or with forms of thought that have ‘weight’ in our lives.

The question I want to address in this paper is whether this vision spells the end of metaphysics as such or only of a particular kind of metaphysics of which the analytic version is an example? What is the fate of metaphysics on Putnam’s conception? Various features of his position might suggest an end of metaphysics reading in something like the spirit of logical positivism. For the positivists, recall, metaphysical expressions are meaningless pseudo-statements lacking any cognitive meaning or truth-value. Such a conception is consistent with Putnam’s long-running battle with metaphysical realism, which he describes on more than one occasion as “a metaphysical fantasy” (Putnam 1999, p. 6). This reading can also seem to fit nicely with Putnam’s status as a leading neo-pragmatist, the kind of philosopher who, in the words of Richard Rorty, “does not think of himself as *any* kind of metaphysician” (Rorty 1982, p. xxviii). Furthermore, Putnam’s work for more than two decades has shown a strong sympathy with the writings of Ludwig Wittgenstein, who describes his own philosophical project as “bring[ing] words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use” (Wittgenstein 1953, § 116).

On this way of looking at things, Putnam’s claim that traditional metaphysics had a vital connection to the cultures in which it flourished can be glossed as a statement about a time when philosophical reflection had yet to reach a stage of maturity from which it could see its way past the construction of metaphysical systems. The recent recrudescence of metaphysics in analytic philosophy has simply failed to see that there is no longer any question of returning to the grand old days of traditional metaphysical inquiry. Metaphysics, on this reading, is nothing but *luftgebäude*, as Wittgenstein puts it, castles of air (Wittgenstein 1953, § 118).

Although there is more than a grain of truth in this reading, I take it that it misses the depth and complexity of Putnam’s attitude to metaphysics. The guiding idea of this paper is that clarity can be shed on this region of Putnam’s thought only if it is understood as the latest incarnation of a pragmatist approach to metaphysical systems exemplified in different ways by the work of William James and John Dewey.

The pragmatist approach to metaphysics has been unjustly neglected in contemporary philosophy for two main reasons both having to do with the rise of logical positivism.

In the first place the prestige of pragmatism has suffered on account of a widespread misreading which regards it as little more than an implausible analysis of truth in terms of verifications and practical benefits. Secondly, the pragmatist approach was eclipsed in the twentieth century by the powerful and sweeping logical positivist conception of metaphysics as meaningless pseudo-statements.

The paper is divided into three parts. The first considers James's appeal to practical factors to help determine whether a metaphysical claim is true. The second turns to Dewey's more skeptical diagnostic approach to metaphysics. And the last part argues that Putnam can be located on the unstable ground that lies between these two positions.

Before turning to consider James, however, it is worth providing a brief sketch, however incomplete and preliminary, of the traditional conception of metaphysics since it is this conception, first and foremost, that the pragmatists are suspicious of.

## 1. Traditional metaphysics: a sketch

The term "metaphysics" was first used to refer to certain works of Aristotle. Traditional metaphysical inquiry as practised in Europe from the middle ages through to the nineteenth century retains a connection to Aristotle's idea of a science of *being qua being*, the most general study of existence or reality distinct from, and supposedly more fundamental than, any special science. In this traditional conception it is an a priori enquiry concerned to provide a complete and comprehensive explanation of the way the world *appears* to be in terms of some particular conception of an underlying *reality*. The metaphysical distinction between appearance and reality departs significantly from the everyday understandings of these terms as concretely applied to, say, the motives of politicians, the shapes of distant objects, or the looks of colours. The 'reality' the metaphysician is concerned with is something hidden and only revealed through some combination of intuition (or revelation) and argument. A crucial assumption of the metaphysician is that if we could comprehend or know this underlying reality then we could provide *an absolute or final explanation* of the 'appearances' of things, one that is basic and supposed to hold once and for all. Plato's Forms, Leibniz's monads, Kant's things-in-themselves, and Descartes' mental substances are familiar examples of metaphysical entities employed to play a role in this kind of explanation.

A contemporary, and representative, metaphysician is Frank Jackson who writes:

Metaphysics... is about what there is and what it is like... Metaphysicians seek a comprehensive account of some subject matter—the mind, the semantic, or most ambitiously, everything—in terms of a limited number of more or less basic notions... ["Serious metaphysics"] attempt[s] to explain it all... in terms of some limited set of fundamental ingredients. (Jackson 1994, p. 25)

Note the typical features of traditional metaphysics: the unfamiliar use of the appearance/reality distinction; the claim that some (few) things are fundamental; and the claim that everything can be explained in terms of such things. In this explanation ‘appearances’ are either to be eliminated or reduced to (or ‘located’ in) the ‘reality’ that the metaphysician recognizes as fundamental.

## 2. James and the truth of metaphysics

In his famous volume *What is Pragmatism* James presents pragmatism, in the first instance, as opposing what he calls intellectualist metaphysics:

[A pragmatist] turns away from abstraction and insufficiency, from verbal solutions, from bad a priori reasons, from fixed principles, closed systems, and pretended absolutes and origins. (James 1975, p. 31).

This dimension of his thought appears to be a rehearsal of the Kantian strategy of eliminating a dogmatic kind of metaphysics in favour of another more acceptable kind. The application of the pragmatic principle—to clarify our ideas or concepts of an object by “consider[ing] what conceivable effects of a practical kind the object may involve” (James 1975, p. 29)—is advertised as undermining rationalist metaphysics but leaving empiricist metaphysics relatively unscathed. Thus James speaks of pragmatism as representative of “the empiricist attitude” (James 1975, pp. 4, 31), an attitude which has “anti-intellectualist tendencies” (James 1975, p. 5). Although he presents pragmatism as “a method only” (James 1975, p. 31), not a metaphysical position, James regards his own metaphysics of experience—the doctrine of *radical empiricism*—as fitting particularly well with it. Consequently, although inimical to intellectualist metaphysics, pragmatism is presented as at least compatible with, perhaps even sympathetic to, empiricist metaphysics.

But there is another side to James’s pragmatism that is in tension with this. In applying the pragmatic maxim to metaphysical claims, if there are no specific experiences to be expected, one must consider the conduct to be recommended and any emotional or other reactions that the object under consideration, supposing it exists, would elicit. James’s liberal understanding of what constitutes practical effects puts pressure on him to acknowledge that a pragmatic defence of the intellectualist metaphysics he officially opposes is available.

On James’s view it is a significant advantage of pragmatism that traditional metaphysical disputes, which would otherwise be interminably irresolvable on grounds of a priori reason or empirical evidence, are able to be settled by appeal to pragmatic considerations. Thus James writes,

in every genuine metaphysical debate some practical issue, however conjectural and remote, is involved. (James 1975, p. 5)

James suggests that it is not retrospectively but *prospectively* that the practical value of metaphysical systems reveals itself. For example, on this basis he argues that the dispute between materialism and theism, which cannot be decided by appeal to epistemic considerations of evidence or explanatory power, can decisively be settled in favour of theism. His claim is that belief in God can satisfy a widespread desire for a philosophy of promise or hope when we consider the *future* course of the world since “the notion of God... guarantees an ideal [moral] order” (James 1975, p. 6).

Similarly, when James examines the traditional metaphysical topics of substance, the Absolute (of German Idealism), design in nature and free will, the *only* thing that he decisively rejects on pragmatic grounds is substance, the mere bearer of properties that Locke suspiciously called a *we-know-not-what*. All the rest provide *some* basis for an attitude of hope, either by implying that there is an eternal rational order in the universe that does not depend on us or, in the case of free will, by implying that there will be novelties in the future. As these examples demonstrate, a metaphysical topic that might have seemed pointless from either a rational or empirical point of view is revealed as having, at least for a certain class of minds, beneficial pragmatic effects such as feelings of confidence or comfort, particularly when the *future* course of the world is taken into account.

Like the positivists, James holds that metaphysical disputes are not settled by appeal to empirical evidence or a priori reason. His invocation of pragmatic value makes available non-epistemic reasons to help decide in favour of the truth of one side or the other of a metaphysical dispute that would otherwise be undecidable. That is, James treats the benefits of believing in some metaphysical posit as being part of the rationale for so believing. Consequently, the unreality and unwieldy abstraction of the Absolute, say, which counts against it as far as truth is concerned, is balanced by the fact that since it “yield[s] a religious comfort to a class of minds... [it is] true ‘in so far forth’” (James 1975, p. 12).

James’s pragmatism, then, ultimately has very little anti-metaphysical bite. Whilst he claims to stand opposed to empty intellectualism, whether in the form of merely verbal disputes or metaphysical posits that lack practical value, he is forced to admit that most intellectualist metaphysics is, upon reflection, free of these deficiencies. Pragmatism, for James, makes available new opportunities for discovering which metaphysics is true all things considered.

### 3. Dewey and the content of metaphysics

Dewey is a more robustly anti-metaphysical thinker than James although, as we will see, there is an important qualification to be made. By conceiving philosophy as a broadly empirical method of inquiry, Dewey renders traditional metaphysics (or “absolutistic philosophies”) obsolete. Dewey’s experimentalism leaves no room for any purely a priori inquiry into the (putatively) hidden and fixed nature of the world. Of the problems of traditional metaphysics Dewey writes, “We do not solve them; we get over them” (Dewey 1910, p. 7). In contrast to James, he does not think that a consideration of the practical significance of metaphysical systems provides any vindication of them. Two main points of difference are worth noting: 1) For James, practical significance is a criterion of the *truth* of a metaphysical system; whereas for Dewey it primarily bears on the question of its *content*; and 2) Dewey’s conception of the practical significance of a metaphysical system is rooted in the social and historic conditions under which that system was invented and flourished. James’s account, alternatively, focuses on the relation of metaphysics to allegedly trans-historic human needs such as “the need of an eternal moral order” (James 1975, p. 6). Dewey remarks,

Metaphysics is a substitute for custom as the source and guarantor of higher moral and social values—that is the leading theme of the classic philosophy of Europe, as evolved by Plato and Aristotle... [and] renewed and restated by the Christian philosophy of Medieval Europe. (Dewey 1967-90, vol. 12, p. 89)

Metaphysics is here seen as the illusion of a timeless foundation for what are in fact local and changeable moral and social values. At the same time it is, together with traditional epistemology, a consolation of the purely speculative mind for its inability to change the world:

In truth, historic intellectualism, the spectator view of knowledge, is a purely compensatory doctrine which men of an intellectual turn have built up to console themselves for the actual social impotency of the calling of thought to which they are devoted. (Dewey 1957, p. 117)

Of course this conception of metaphysics is not one that the metaphysician himself could reflectively endorse. Dewey’s is a diagnostic approach that implies that metaphysics characteristically involves self-deception. It is not really a study of the timeless, universal or necessary features of reality, as it takes itself to be, for there is no such thing on Dewey’s view. It plays an imaginary role of apparently securing a transcendent account of the source and authority of what is, in reality, attributable to custom and human history. Metaphysics thus consoles us for its inability to play any *genuine* or *authentic* moral or social function.

This account, far from vindicating metaphysics, is no less destructive of it than logical positivism is. Metaphysical questions lack genuine empirical or practical value, and the apparent authority they provide for a community's moral and social values is a grand illusion. Perhaps one should add that Dewey is sensitive to the way in which such illusions can, nonetheless, be forces in world history. But he is the last person to want to perpetuate these myths. So, if the moral function of metaphysics cannot be appealed to as a defence of it and one has followed Dewey in abandoning a priori inquiry, what hope is there for the future of metaphysics? In this vein he writes,

Is there not reason for believing that the release of philosophy of its burden of sterile metaphysics and sterile epistemology instead of depriving philosophy of problems and subject-matter would open a way to questions of the most perplexing and the most significant sort? (Dewey 1957, p. 126)

Nonetheless, in spite of the strongly anti-metaphysical tendencies of his thinking, Dewey surprisingly follows James in attempting to articulate what he calls a "metaphysics" of experience. The tension in Dewey's position is mitigated to some extent by an explicit attempt to employ the old metaphysical vocabulary in a new more pragmatic spirit. Thus, what he calls "metaphysics" is not concerned with fixed essences, ultimate origins or ultimate ends but with what he calls "the more ultimate traits of the world" which he goes on to identify with "certain irreducible traits found in any and every subject of scientific inquiry" (Dewey 1967-90, vol. 8, p. 4). Examples of the objects of metaphysical inquiry in this sense include diversity, interaction, and change. Whereas traditional metaphysics typically concerns itself with the fixed and final, Dewey's metaphysics concerns itself with the fluid and incomplete. The impression that Dewey has cut off the branch he is attempting to sit on is confirmed when we ask what this new metaphysics consists in. What are its discoveries or insights? Dewey provides nothing but vague and disappointing generalities which do not have any of the power of his diagnostic claims or, for that matter, of the great metaphysical systems of the past. In a particularly revealing passage he writes:

This is the extent and method of my "metaphysics": - the large and constant features of human sufferings, enjoyments, trials, failures and successes together with the institutions of art, science, technology, politics, and religion which mark them, communicate genuine features of the world within which man lives. The method differs not a whit from that of any investigator who, by making certain observations and experiments, and by utilizing the existing body of ideas available for calculation and interpretation, concludes that he really succeeds in finding out something about some limited aspect of nature. (Dewey 1927, p. 59)

What are the "large and constant features" of the human condition or, more broadly still, of what he elsewhere calls "the generic traits manifested by existences of all kinds"

(Dewey 1929, p. 412)? And even if we can give content to such vague and general pronouncements about the human condition or all existences, why call it metaphysics rather than anthropology or history, especially if the method is the same as that of the social scientist?

Dewey eventually gave up his attempt to reinterpret metaphysics to fit his own pragmatist standpoint. The tension in Dewey's conception finally led to his complete renunciation of metaphysics. In a reply to a critic in 1949, Dewey writes,

I now realize that it was exceedingly naïve of me to suppose that it was possible to rescue the word ["metaphysics"] from its deeply ingrained traditional use. I derive what consolation may be possible from promising myself never to use the word again in connection with any aspect of any part of my own position. (Dewey 1949, pp. 712-13)

To take this remark seriously is to see Dewey as having a fundamentally therapeutic attitude to metaphysics all along. His mistake was to suppose there was any point in trying to rescue the term in the radically new setting of pragmatism.

#### 4. Putnam and the insights of metaphysics

Let us sum up the pragmatist stance to metaphysics as exemplified in James and Dewey. The pragmatist is presented as a critic of the traditional intellectualist metaphysician and of the merely verbal disputes often associated with such metaphysics. He is more congenial to a metaphysics of experience. More importantly, pragmatism is perhaps the first philosophical movement to seriously consider the practical function of a metaphysics: as a source of spiritual comfort; or an apparent guarantor of the moral and social order; or a consolation for political impotence. For James this provides some reason to think a metaphysics is true; for Dewey, on the contrary, it shows that metaphysics is inescapably bound up with self-deception or what existentialists call bad faith. For Dewey, the illusion that there is a fixed, underlying realm of Being is a consequence to the human capacity to transcendentalize or eternalize the time-bound values of a particular society. Thus James's appeal to the pragmatic significance of metaphysics tends to be vindicatory; whereas Dewey's tends to be undermining.

Now let us ask: where does Putnam stand on these issues? Is he a Jamesian apologist for metaphysics or a Deweyan critic of the enterprise? As I hope will become clear I read Putnam as sharing aspects of both the positions of James and Dewey, an uneasy position that is not without internal tension. I shall end this paper by raising some questions about how this tension might be overcome.

In the first place, Putnam is certainly a strong critic of the foundationalist and essentialist pretensions of traditional metaphysics. A representative passage reads:

the long history of failures to explain in metaphysical terms how mathematics is possible, how nondemonstrative knowledge is possible... and so on, suggests nothing much follows from the failure of philosophy to come up with an explanation of anything in “absolute terms”—except, perhaps, the senselessness of a certain sort of metaphysics. (Putnam 2002, p. 45)

Putnam reserves his strongest criticisms for the many and various attempts to explain away or denigrate our everyday ethical thought and talk in metaphysical terms whether by way of the contrasts between cognitivism and non-cognitivism (e.g. Simon Blackburn), facts and values (e.g. A.J. Ayer), or absolute and perspectival knowledge (e.g. Bernard Williams).

Perhaps Putnam’s most well-known anti-metaphysical program has been his attempt to salvage a small “r” realism—qualified at one time as “internal” and, more recently, as “pragmatic” or “natural”—from big “R” Metaphysical Realism. His criticisms are too familiar to rehearse again in this context. What I want to call attention to is that Putnam explicitly avoids the Kantian strategy: he is careful to distinguish natural realism from *any* kind of metaphysical theory that might be imagined to superannuate Metaphysical Realism. Natural realism is rather an attempt to salvage a common sense attitude towards the world that metaphysics (and skepticism) is thought to ultimately deny or denigrate. We might think of this as representing the Deweyan dimension of his approach.

Like both James and Dewey, and in contrast to the logical positivists, Putnam does not regard traditional metaphysics as totally lacking in cognitive content. He explains,

To call upon us to renounce... the dreams of metaphysics... is not at all to join the logical positivists of yesteryear in calling... metaphysics... ‘nonsense’. There is much of permanent value in the writings of... traditional metaphysicians. It would be false to Dewey’s own spirit to deny that there is. (Putnam 2004, p. 105)

But what does Putnam mean by “permanent value” in this context? Putnam takes himself to be following Dewey here but his thought is, in fact, much closer to James. Putnam is inclined, for all of his criticisms of traditional metaphysics, to think that this region of philosophy contains valuable insights. Dewey, as we have seen, takes a more Wittgensteinian or diagnostic approach which attempts to explain metaphysics as an understandable intellectual distortion or “divination” of aspects of our familiar world for understandable reasons such as our fear of change or the theorist’s need for consolation for being unable to change the world for the better. Dewey, in short, does

not look to metaphysics as a rich seam of insights; he looks to it, rather, as an all-too-human indulgence in mythology and consoling self-deception.

To illustrate this difference it is worth comparing the different ways in which Dewey and Putnam think about the role of the imagination in metaphysics. Dewey holds that a human being is “primarily a creature of the imagination” (Dewey 1957, p. 118) and that this has an important bearing on the way in which we understand what motivates metaphysical speculation. On his view, an important difference between metaphysics and scientific inquiry lies in two different employments of the same idealizing function of the imagination. In metaphysical thinking there is a tendency to treat ideals and idealizations as realities by forgetting that they are products of human intellectual activity, often arising out of everyday experiences but, as Dewey puts it, “with their blemishes removed, their imperfections eliminated, their lacks rounded out, their suggestions and hints fulfilled” (Dewey 1957, pp. 105-106). Plato’s Forms are a classic example. The metaphysician Plato not only treats these ideals as perfect, singular and unchangeable entities but as more real than the mundane realities of the world in which we live our lives. For a scientist, or a scientifically-minded pragmatist, however, ideals and idealizations are seen as imaginative tools that help to explain or understand highly complex real-world objects or events. An ideal or idealization, like an architectural model, is not to be assessed as simply true or false. Its role is, rather, to illuminate by way of analogy some, but by no means all, of the important features of the target phenomena.

The moral is that although metaphysics arises from a natural, indeed laudable, capacity for idealization—a capacity that includes the construction of models and imagined possibilities—Dewey sees metaphysical system-building as an undisciplined employment of this capacity, one that depends on forgetting the schematic character of ideals, and their context-sensitive utility in highlighting some features of a particular thing to the exclusion of others. Dewey’s diagnostic approach is not a matter of seeing metaphysics as containing various truths, however indirect. It would be better to say that metaphysics has its source in a useful capacity which, when properly employed (e.g. in scientific theorizing), can lead to fruitful discoveries.

Putnam follows Dewey (and Wittgenstein) in thinking that the imagination plays a central role in motivating metaphysical thinking but he conceives this role in a more Jamesian spirit. Putnam employs Wittgenstein’s notion of a *picture* which can be variously understood as: what we would ordinarily call a picture e.g. a drawing or diagram; or a mental image; a rough and ready conception; an engineer’s model e.g. of a bridge; and so on. A picture, we might say, is a rough and ready or schematic way of seeing things that is to be contrasted with a fully elaborated theory.

What, then, is the relation between pictures and metaphysics? Consider the following passage in which Putnam is comparing what he calls the picture of metaphysical realism with the idealist picture of truth as consisting in idealized warranted assertibility,

I think the idealist “picture” calls our attention to vitally important features of our practice—and what is the point of having “pictures” if we are not interested in seeing how well they represent what we actually think and do. (Putnam 1990, p. 42)

This passage strongly suggests a representationalist conception of pictures according to which they represent the world well or badly. I take it that the pictures themselves are not simply true or false but that they can, through a certain use or employment, bring “vitally important features of our practices” to our attention, and, in that sense, represent the world. The Jamesian suggestion seems to be that traditional metaphysics, in so far as it is a matter of using pictures, can indirectly represent features of the world that we would otherwise miss. This constitutes part of its “permanent value”.

## 5. The end of metaphysics?

Where do these reflections leave the fate of metaphysics? We have seen how Dewey, despite some equivocation, is charitably interpreted as having an end of metaphysics stance. His equivocation is not a matter of thinking that traditional metaphysics has any life left in it; it is, rather, a matter of thinking that metaphysics can be reconceived and rehabilitated on a pragmatist basis. As we have seen, Dewey has a more nuanced approach to traditional metaphysics than the positivists. He provides a rich account of its motivations in various entrenched human capacities, needs and desires but for all that his account is not a vindication of metaphysics, as James’s account tends to be. A central part of his view is that metaphysicians do not realize the nature or sources of their own thinking. If they did, they would be out of business.

Putnam’s attitude to the fate of metaphysics seems to be located somewhere between Dewey and James. He writes,

I take it as a fact of life that there is a sense in which the task of philosophy is to overcome metaphysics and a sense in which its task is to continue metaphysical discussion. (Putnam 1988, p. 457)

The difficulty in interpreting this comment is to understand in what sense it is the task of philosophy to *continue* metaphysical discussion. Putnam has made it quite clear that he thinks almost all current analytic metaphysics, and large tracts of traditional metaphysics, are a matter of “dreams”, “fantasies”, “confusions” and “ridiculous” ideas. This fits well with the Deweyan (and Wittgensteinian) idea that an important task for philosophy is to overcome metaphysics. But, like James in particular, he has also claimed that there are salvageable insights in at least some of the great systems of traditional metaphysics. These insights, however, were certainly not the insights the metaphysicians themselves believed they had discovered. For Putnam, there is no fixed realm of

essences or necessary truths of the sort the metaphysicians of old dreamed that they had discovered. One example is worth considering further.

In lectures delivered at Harvard Putnam held that the insight in Metaphysical Realism (an insight owed to James) is that words do indeed correspond to realities but that there are many different kinds of correspondence relation in question not a single relation as the Realist had supposed. But, note, that this insight salvaged from the metaphysical picture of a single word-world relation is not a distinctively *metaphysical* insight and it is certainly not the insight the Metaphysical Realists themselves supposed they had found.

Putnam follows Dewey and Wittgenstein in holding that the metaphysician is subject to the illusion of taking products of his own imagination for realities. If that is so, then how could a contemporary metaphysician engage in metaphysical discussion *without* illusion, or self-deception, or forgetting that his pictures are pictures? In approaching this question it is worth reflecting that throughout the discussion we have been assuming that metaphysics is a fairly well-circumscribed concept for an a priori inquiry into eternal essences or fixed and necessary structures of the world. But what of a philosopher who holds that what reality is *really* like does not include essences? Surely this is still a metaphysical stance even if it is anti-essentialist. Or one could hold that there are essences or fixed necessities but they are in the mind or perhaps language rather than the external world. Surely that counts as metaphysics too. Or what of a philosopher like Quine who claims to forgo a priori theorizing but retains elements of empiricism or physics worship that seem like elements of a first philosophy (in so far as they are not subject to revision)? One is tempted to call these elements metaphysical too. The point is that since there are many forms that the metaphysical aspiration to explain *appearances* in terms of some underlying *reality* can take, the concept of the metaphysical is itself not fixed but evolves. It is what Wittgenstein calls a family resemblance concept. The traditional search for essence prompted by the Socratic question “What is X?” is simply the most important historical paradigm of metaphysics. But metaphysics also includes Kant’s transcendental question “How is X possible?” as well as the modern search for the necessary and sufficient conditions for the application of a concept.

Consequently, it can be hard to say what counts as a metaphysics in any given case, especially if Wittgenstein is right in thinking that metaphysics often dresses itself up as science. So one reason for thinking that we will continue metaphysical discussion is that it is often unclear whether certain expressions are being employed for metaphysical purposes or not. The question of discerning what is metaphysical and what not thus becomes an important matter for philosophical investigation. But even if that is so it is not obvious that this exhausts what Putnam means by speaking of the continuation of metaphysical discussion—although it does seem clear that his renewed vision of philosophy is incompatible with the metaphysical system-building of, say, a David Lewis or a David Armstrong.

Putnam's remarks suggest that philosophy will always engage in metaphysical discussion in at least the relatively weak sense that we are creatures who, given the facts of our human nature—our wants, wishes, imaginings, etc.—will inevitably drift into asking metaphysical questions and urging metaphysical answers. This view is compatible with a primarily therapeutic conception of philosophy that sees its aim as one of exposing and interrogating metaphysical pronouncements with a view to overcoming them, endlessly, one by one. This would be to embrace an end to metaphysical system-building whilst acknowledging that there will be no end to the *urge* to metaphysics.

Alternatively, Putnam may think, as Dewey sometimes did, that there is a viable re-conception of metaphysics that is distinct from traditional metaphysics. In the same vein, Strawson (1959) supposed that an investigation of the general features of our conceptual network is a kind of metaphysics, which he called “descriptive metaphysics”. We might think of it as contributing to a conception of philosophy as the attempt “to understand how things, in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term” (Sellars 1963, p. 1). But this attempt to re-define the term ‘metaphysics’ is prone to lead to confusion, as Dewey finally saw. The aim of ‘descriptive metaphysics’ is to describe something that lies open to view—uses of language, concepts as employed in judgments—not to explain the ‘appearances’ in terms of something hidden i.e. some metaphysical reality. And it has no trouble accepting that our concepts are contingent, changeable and responsive to human needs. If one *is* tempted to make this move it is important not to lose sight of the great difference between, on the one hand, engaging in traditional metaphysics and, on the other, responding to traditional metaphysical questions by, in effect, changing the subject to engage in piecemeal descriptions of our concepts and their uses.

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## REPLY TO DAVID MACARTHUR

HILARY PUTNAM

David Macarthur raises the question “Why do I want to keep the term ‘metaphysics?’”. A general answer is that I am interested in questions that are traditionally called “metaphysical questions”, including a number that have arisen within science itself, and not only within philosophy. (I recognize that I have changed my position since I wrote some of the statements that David quoted.) I think that, for example, the realism issue is important for science. (I argue this, for instance, in the paper “Science and Philosophy”—forthcoming in a book of papers of mine edited by Mario De Caro and David Macarthur).

For example, whether one is a realist or an instrumentalist makes a difference to the paradigm science of physics itself, and not only to what philosophers *say* about physics. I think that when anti-instrumentalism began to defeat logical positivism, and some physicists—especially J.S. Bell—tried to understand physics realistically, saying “We want to understand quantum mechanics not just as a prediction tool, we want a picture of the world, we want to make sense of a world in which this crazy tool works”, a great many good things happened in physics that would not have happened otherwise. Bell was interested in all the foundational approaches—he was interested in Bohm’s interpretation, he was interested in GRW’s (i.e., Ghirardi, Rimini and Weber’s) spontaneous collapse theory. I don’t believe that the so-called “Many-Worlds interpretation” of quantum mechanics works. But that attempt did lead to the discovery of the decoherence theorems which certainly are going to be part of any explanation of why the macroscopic world we experience is as it is. And that interpretation was proposed because its inventors, Hugh Everett III and Cecil M. DeWitt, were willing to take seriously the question as to what quantum mechanics actually says about reality. And the list goes on and on.

Thus, if the question of realism and anti-realism is a metaphysical question—and at least since Hume and Berkeley it *has* been a metaphysical question (we did not have the modern kind of anti-realism in the Greek time, but surely that question has been with us for three hundred years—there’s a straight line from Hume to Mach, and it entered physics itself with a vengeance)—then this *metaphysical* question is one that cannot simply be dismissed as philosophers’ “confusions”, “misuse of language”, or whatever. And if it isn’t a metaphysical question?—but I don’t know any other name for that sort of question.

In fact, the very philosophers who denounce metaphysics *always* get entangled with it. Carnap had a *metaphysical* view of mathematics, and it doesn’t work. (Here I disagree

with my good friend, the late Burton Dreben.) And I think that Wittgenstein himself was deeply in the grip of a metaphysical picture—for example, when he claimed, as he does, on my reading at least, that the only genuine kind of necessity is linguistic necessity. I am afraid the great majority of Wittgenstein’s unpublished remarks on the foundations of mathematics are, frankly, junk. (Not, however, the famous remark on Gödel theorems—that’s been widely misunderstood.) What finally led me to this harsh verdict was studying his remarks about Dedekind cuts, his remarks about Cantor’s proof of the non-denumerability of the real numbers, and his remarks about what it means to say there are infinitely many integers. When Wittgenstein says “I want to deprive set theory of its charm”, one naturally thinks that what he wants to give up is just Zermelo Fraenkel set theory. (Not that I would agree, even if that were all he meant.) In fact it turns out that what he includes under “set theory” includes Dedekind cuts (hence the intermediate value theorem of the calculus), includes the standard treatment of the theory of real variables, includes the heart of classical mathematics.

How could a great philosopher, one who urged us constantly to be sensitive to different “forms of life”, devote perhaps fifty percent of his unpublished writing to mathematics, without ever seeking to learn anything about what the mathematical form of life is? For Wittgenstein Cantor’s Continuum Hypothesis is “metaphysics” in the pejorative sense!—But it seems to me that the *metaphysical* questions “What is going on in mathematics?”, “Is it really just ‘grammar?’”, “Are we merely following certain linguistic rules and engaging in certain linguistic practices, or is there an objective truth in mathematics that goes outside of that?” (which is my position), are important and rationally discussable. In my view, whenever somebody sets out to be consistently “anti-metaphysical”, he ends up doing bad metaphysics. I believe this is true even of Wittgenstein. This seems to be a very profound piece of evidence that some metaphysical questions are *inescapable*.

The realism question is one of those inescapable questions. And I think also the question of fact and value is an inescapable question. In America we think of Charles Stevenson as the one who introduced the claim that value judgments can’t be rationally decided, that they are out of the sphere of objective truth and falsity, but it was raised earlier by the greatest of all European sociologists, Max Weber. What is right and wrong about Weber’s fact-value dichotomy is a question for all of the European cultures, and ultimately for all of the world culture. Stevenson thought that the question of fact and value could be simply disposed of, in the way the logical positivists disposed of it. But he was wrong. Such questions which are traditionally called “metaphysical” are questions for which we have no other name. And they are going to stay with us.

To be sure, the way we cut up cultural space into separate fields changes with time. It is well known that questions that were at one time considered to be philosophical questions later became scientific questions. That doesn’t mean that all the questions we presently call “philosophical” will eventually be swallowed up by some special science.

At least at present, that seems to me a utopian fantasy. But the fact that it is no longer tenable that there exists a special field of metaphysics doesn't mean that questions that were traditionally regarded as metaphysical don't continue to interest us. They interest us even when the metaphysicians are wrong. For example, consider the premise of Kant's philosophy, the idea that the laws of geometry are a priori and unrevisable and yet they refer to objective space, the space in which we live and move and have our being, and not just to an "ideal space". I think he identified a real problem, but the fate of that problem turned out to be very different than he anticipated. Nevertheless, he asked the right questions. When I say there are insights in traditional metaphysics, I mean precisely this.



# PUTNAM ON TIME AND SPECIAL RELATIVITY: A LONG JOURNEY FROM ONTOLOGY TO ETHICS

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper I discuss Putnam's view on time and the special theory of relativity. I first locate Putnam's philosophical approach within a more general framework, essentially making reference to Sellars' distinction between the scientific image and the manifest image of the world. I then reconstruct Putnam's argument in favour of the reality of the future and the determinateness of truth-value for future tense sentences (Putnam 1967) by showing that it is based on three premises that generate a contradiction. In the second part of the paper I discuss Putnam's argument both by using later results belonging to the foundations of STR and quantum mechanics (Putnam 2005), and by invoking some conceptual analysis on the pseudo-predicate "is real". Since I will show that the presentists/eternalists debate is ill-founded if regarded as *ontological*, I will conclude that it boils down to our different *practical* attitudes towards past, present and future.

**Keywords:** special theory of relativity, presentism, eternalism, becoming, ontology, pragmatism

## Introduction

Putnam's work has been wide-ranging and highly original both in the philosophy of physics (space and time and quantum mechanics) and in the philosophy of science in general. However, here I will concentrate mostly on a famous paper published forty years ago (Putnam 1967), not only because it has been very influential on the philosophical literature on relativistic time, but also because – from the moment in which I was captured in its gravitational field while writing my PhD thesis at the Johns Hopkins University – I have worked on some of its topics extensively.<sup>1</sup> Eventually, I will also bring to bear a more recent paper on quantum mechanics (Putnam 2005), which could be regarded as a sequel not only to his previous paper on quantum mechanics (Putnam 1965) but also to Putnam 1967. I am aware that by discussing just these two papers, I will be looking like a fly bothering a horse who has been (and

<sup>1</sup> See for instance Dorato 1995, Dorato 1996 and Dorato 2000.

still is) galloping in a free field, actually in many fields of philosophy. But discussing in depth a great philosopher is the best tribute that I can pay to honour him.

In a nutshell, in 1967 Putnam argued that the Special Theory of Relativity (STR from now on) implies that “any future event *X* is *already* real” (Putnam 1967, p. 243). Of course, this potentially misleading conclusion is not meant to entail the absurd view that *X*, which has not yet occurred *qua* event that is *future* relative to some coordinate frame’s “here-now”, is *now already* real or *was already* real relative to that very same frame. More charitably, Putnam’s claim entails that after STR, reality ought to be understood *tenselessly*, so that existence is coextensive with what “has occurred, what is occurring now, and what will occur”, a disjunction that can be regarded as a definition of tenseless existence. Correspondingly, also from a semantical viewpoint, according to Putnam STR implies that all propositions possess a well-defined truth-value independently of the time of assertion, and don’t “become true” when (and only when) the event that they purport to describe occurs.

Here I will argue that the opposition between *presentism* – only the presently existing event exist – and *eternalism* – past present and future events are equally real – which is somewhat presupposed in Putnam 1967, is misguided.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, rather than an ontological or semantical debate, the true problem raised by Putnam’s argument concerns the compatibility of a correctly defined notion of temporal becoming with the structure of Minkowski spacetime. Considering the fact that the paper I am referring to was written so long ago, one ought not to assume that Putnam would now disagree with my conclusion.<sup>3</sup>

However, before describing in more details why, according to Putnam, STR entails the semantic determinateness and the ontic reality of the future, it is important to locate his argument in a wider philosophical perspective. This will be done in the next section (1), by introducing Sellars’ fundamental distinction between the manifest and the scientific image of the world (Sellars 1962). In the second section I will then offer a synthetic reconstruction of Putnam’s argument, and discuss some possible ways-out from its conclusion, involving either raising doubts on the transitivity of a “reality” relation (or of a becoming relation), or on the existence of events at a distance (or better, their “spacelike” kind of becoming). In the third section, I will insert this latter premise in the context of Stein’s criticism to Putnam (Stein 1991), by synthetically bringing in some considerations from quantum mechanics that have been advanced also in “A philosopher looks at quantum mechanics (again)” (Putnam 2005), and that seem to re-establish Putnam’s 1967 conclusion against Stein’s. In the last section of the paper, I will finally evaluate the dispute between eternalists and presentists, so as to show that

<sup>2</sup> See Dolev 2006 and Savitt 2006, who independently argued for a similar conclusion.

<sup>3</sup> This comment should not be regarded as a joke on his tendency to change his philosophical views rather frequently, but is rather meant to take into account the decisive influence that Yuval Dolev, a Ph.D student of his, had on him (personal communication by Putnam). On Dolev, see *infra*.

the ontological aspect of the dispute – much more than the semantical one, which is epistemically-driven – really dissolves into our different *pragmatic attitudes* toward past, present and future.

## 1. The background of Putnam argument: Sellars' influence and three different views on time and reality

I thought that it was quite fortunate that in the paper presented in Rome on November 6th 2007, Putnam explicitly quoted Sellars, since it confirmed my deep conviction that Putnam's approach to the philosophy of science is closely related to his: "The aim of philosophy is to understand how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term" (Sellars 1962, p. 37). Of course, a crucial question is whether things hang together at all, and for Sellars this meant asking what is the relationship between the *scientific image* of the world with the *manifest image* that we have of it, where by "manifest" we should mean, roughly, "the world as it appears to us" and is re-elaborated by the philosophical thought.

As I see it, Putnam's method was (and still is) to start taking the *scientific image* at face value: essentially, this means asking what physical reality must be like for our theories to be as predictively successful as they are. In our case, the scientific image specializes to the scientific image of time as it emerges from STR. On the other hand, he considered the manifest image of the world from the point of view of our phenomenology of time, and asked whether the two images can be regarded as compatible. In a word, I take it that one of Putnam's main aim in his 1967 paper was to inquire into the compatibility of the time of physics as it emerges from STR with the so-called "man in the street" view of time, to which he explicitly refers at the beginning of the article (1967, p. 240). Quite correctly, the main tenet of the manifest image of time that he considers is what is currently known as *presentism*, that is, the view that "All (and only) things that exist *now* are real" (Putnam 1967, p. 240).

While conflicts between the scientific image and the manifest image are a splendid occasion for serious and deep philosophical work, and possibly philosophy's most important vocation, I think that today's Putnam (and plausibly also his older self) would correctly warn us to steer away from two easy "ways out". The first would consist in resolving the above conflict by going instrumentalist about physics (or science), while taking the manifest image of the world as unchallengeable and unrevisable. By adopting this solution *a priori* and for all possible cases of conflict, it would be the scientific image that should always yield to the manifest image. The second easy solution is opposite but similar to the first in its radicalism, and would consist in claiming that mature physical theories are an infallible guide to ontology, so that whenever they are in conflict with the manifest image, it is the latter that should always yield *qua illusory*. In his 2006 contribution to *The Ontology of Spacetime*, Dolev has also warned against

what he calls “the exclusivity dogma”, namely the view that “if something is not part of the ontology of physics, then it is not part of the world” (Dolev 2006, p.189).<sup>4</sup>

These two opposite attitudes, if taken aprioristically, would be wrong, and not just because we cannot exclude that sometimes the conflict ought to be resolved in favour of science, and some other times in favour of the manifest image. This invitation to a case by case analysis would of course be sound. But more importantly, one should bear in mind that it is possible to be both a scientific realist *and* a defender of the view that colours are, for example, *real, mind-independent* properties of objects. Such a third possibility is, in fact, given by the possibility that, on closer analysis, some conflicts between the scientific image and the manifest image might turn out to be only *apparent*, as it was the case with the Copernican revolution. The Copernican natural philosophers had to *explain* why the Earth may truly and absolute move – as absolutists about motion like Galileo and Newton had it – even though in our manifest image everything looks *as if* the Earth is at rest. Once we realized the features of inertial motion, and the fact that the Earth is approximately an inertially moving body, we came to realize why our perceptions cannot inform us of the Earth’s translational motion, since the latter is indistinguishable from a state of rest. In cases of this kind, we can maintain a realist understanding of the import of the physical theory as well as the accuracy of our manifest image of the world.

In light of Putnam’s more recent work (Putnam 2005), I think that he would agree that conflicts between the manifest image and the scientific image cannot be overcome by slogans invoking “the unavoidable pluralism of our descriptions of the world”: the ontology posited by a physical theory should in principle be capable of establishing connections with the world of our experience, since the latter world is the source of *the empirical tests of the theory*. If a physical theory were in radical conflict with our experience of the world, and it could not give any explanation of the origin of such contrast, we should not invoke the illusoriness of our experience, but we would rather have good reasons to reformulate or even abandon the physical theory.

According to Sellars, the manifest image is often the very source and object of philosophical analysis and explications. The reader will excuse this rather long quotation: “Now the manifest image ... defines one of the poles to which philosophical reflection has been drawn. It is not only the great speculative systems of ancient and medieval philosophy which are built around the manifest image, but also many systems and quasi-systems in recent and contemporary thought, some of which seem at first sight to have little if anything in common with the great classical systems ... For all these philosophies can, I believe, be fruitfully construed as more or less adequate accounts

<sup>4</sup> The view that physics is an infallible guide to ontology has been authoritatively defended, among others, by Reichenbach and Grünbaum – “If nowness were a fundamental property of physical events themselves, then it would be very strange indeed that it could go unrecognized in all extant physical theories *without detriment to their explanatory success*. And I hold with Reichenbach that “If there is Becoming (independently of awareness) the physicist must know it” (Grünbaum 1967, p. 20) – and is frequently defended also today.

of the manifest image of man-in-the-world, which accounts are then taken to be an adequate and full description in general terms of what man and the world really are” (Sellars 1962, pp. 37-38).

Attempts at conceptualising the manifest image of time in different ways can be traced in the history of philosophy quite easily. For instance, presentism has been defended by many philosophers of the past as an *ontological* hypothesis directly suggested by the manifest image of time, together with a less ontologically parsimonious view, allowing also the past to be real together with the present, a view that I will be referring to as possibilism, or the empty-future view of time.

Here are a couple of quotations showing how entrenched presentism has been in the history of philosophy.<sup>5</sup> Augustine, in the *Confessions* clearly defends the idea of the single time (the present) in which we live and think as the only real time: “Nor is it properly said, ‘there are three times: past, present, and future.’ Yet it might possibly be properly said, ‘there are three times: a present of things past, a present of things present, and a present of things future.’ For these three do exist in some way in the mind, and I do not find them elsewhere. The present of things past is memory. The present of things present, sight. The present of things future, expectation” (Augustine 1853, p. 239).<sup>6</sup>

Another famous quotation from the modern times will suffice to convince us that presentism has indeed enjoyed a special role in the philosophical explications of the manifest image of time: “The *Present* onely has a being in nature; things *Past* have a being in the memory onely, but things to come have no being at all, the *Future* being but a fiction of the mind applying the sequels of actions Past to the actions that are Present” (Hobbes 1988, p. 10). Notice that the semantical counterpart of this view would be a form of radical scepticism, as it would amount to claiming that only present tense sentences have a definite truth-value, while all past- and future-tense sentences would be deprived of a definite truth value.

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<sup>5</sup> Possibly already Parmenides was a quasi-presentist, where “quasi” here means that reality according to him is an “eternal now”. He was convinced of the unreality of time and becoming on the following grounds: the passage from the non-being of future events (future events are *not* yet) into their being real in the present was as absurd as the passage from the being of present events into a state of non-being, when they become past (past events are no longer). “Nor was [it] once, nor will [it] be, since [it] is, now, all together, / One, continuous; for what coming-to-be of it will you seek? / In what way, whence, did [it] grow? Neither from what-is-not shall I allow / You to say or think; for it is not to be said or thought / That [it] is not. And what need could have impelled it to grow / Later or sooner, if it began from nothing? Thus [it] must either be completely or not at all. [What exists] is now, all at once, one and continuous...” (Parmenides, *On Nature*)

<sup>6</sup> Here is the original text: “Nec proprie dicitur Tempora sunt tria: praeteritum, praesens et futurum; sed fortasse proprie diceretur: Tempora sunt tria, praesens de praeteritis, praesens de praesentibus, praesens de futuris. Sunt enim haec in anima tria quaedam et alibi ea non video: praesens de praeteritis memoria, praesens de praesentibus contuitus, praesens de futuris expectation” (Augustine, *Confessiones*, XI, 26).

Many other quotations from contemporary authors could be provided, but I prefer to begin illustrating a second ontological/semantical view, also quite close to the manifest image of time: possibilism: “Nothing has happened to the present by becoming past except that fresh slices of existence have been added to the total history of the world. The past is thus as real as the present. On the other hand, the essence of a present event is, not that it precedes future events, but that there is quite literally *nothing* to which it has the relation of precedence. The sum total of existence is always increasing” (Broad 1923, pp. 66-67). The main thought here seems to be that by leaving the future wholly *empty*, we make sense *both* of the fact that our actions can give a (cosmically negligible) contribution to bring it about, *and* of our closely related intuition, hard to explicate in a clear way, that at any instant of time, there is a part of the history of the universe that is “fixed” and “definite”, and a part that isn’t.

The third view, certainly more remote from common sense, and often referred to as *eternalism*, can be illustrated by the following quotation: “There ‘exists’ an eternal world total in which past and future events are as determinately located, characterized and truly describable as are southern events and western events” (Williams 1966, p. 287). In the following, last quotation, supposing that Einstein is referring to an *ontological* distinction, we could have another illustration of eternalism: “For us believing physicists the distinction between past present and future amounts to an illusion, albeit stubborn” (Einstein and Besso, 1979, p. 312, letter dated, May 21, 1955).

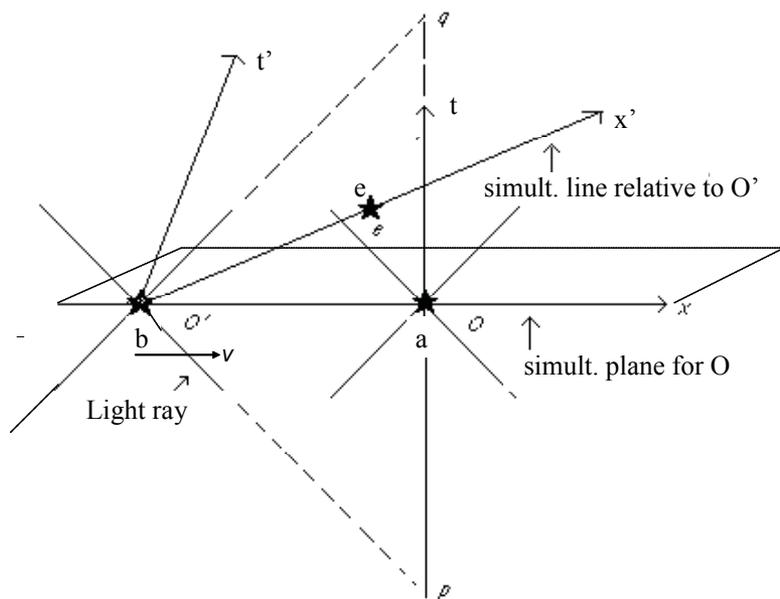
Which of these views, in decreasing order of closeness to our manifest image of time, is compatible with special relativistic time? Which of these seems to be mandated by the theory? These, I take it, were the main questions lying behind Putnam’s 1967 paper.

## 2. Putnam’s argument reconstructed

Putnam has been one of the first, if not the first, philosopher/scientist to notice an amazingly counterintuitive consequence of the special theory of relativity: events in someone’s future light cone can be in someone else’s *relative present* or even *relative past*! There are actually two ways to obtain these effects, which are rigorously obtainable from the mathematical/physical structure of the theory.

The first is assume two observers in relative inertial motion zooming past each other at speeds close to that of light: the spatio-temporal closeness of the two observers requires great speeds for these weird effects to be noticeable. The second way is to assume observers that are very far away from each other, but still in relative inertial motion. For example, one can calculate that if someone, simultaneous with our here-now, but located 10 billions light years away from us, were to *recede* from us at 16 km/h, her “instantaneous now”, different from ours due to the relativity of simultaneity, would include events that in *our* frame happened 150 years ago! Analogously, if

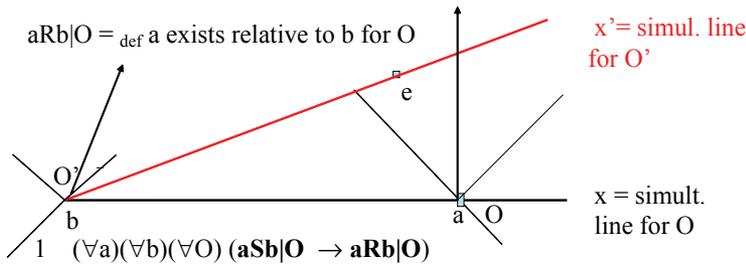
she approached us with the constant speed  $v = 12 \text{ km/h}$ , her “simultaneity hyperplane” would include the first day of the year in XXII century, say the event  $e$  marked with a star in the figure below.<sup>7</sup>



Suppose the observer  $O$  is either a presentist or a possibilist, believing, that is, that the future “is unreal”. Putnam’s 1967 simple but brilliant argument is a consequence of the relativity of simultaneity, one of the pillars of STR: relative to the two inertially moving observers  $O$  and  $O'$ , there are two different simultaneity “three-spaces”, which in the picture are indicated by  $x$  and  $x'$  respectively.<sup>8</sup> The event  $e$ , which is in the absolute future of the observer  $O$ , and therefore unreal relative to her here-now centered in  $a$ , is simultaneous to observer  $O'$ , since it is intersected by the latter’s simultaneity space. If we assume that a presentist is committed just to the reality of whatever is simultaneous with her “here-now”, then  $e$  is real relative to  $O'$  and  $b$ , while  $b$ , the here-now of  $O'$ , is real relative to  $O$ . *Transitivity* of the reality relation across different inertial frames concludes the argument, because anything  $e$  that is real relative to  $b$ , conjoined to the hypothesis that  $b$  is real relative to  $a$ , gives us that also  $e$  is real relative to  $a$ , contrary to our preliminary assumption about the unreality of the future event  $e$  relative to  $a$ ! In the following diagram I schematised the whole argument, and in particular the premises leading to the contradiction contained in the box.

<sup>7</sup> These figures are taken from Greene 2005, ch. 5.

<sup>8</sup> Of course, one spatial dimension is suppressed for  $O$  and two for  $O'$ .



$$1 \quad (\forall a)(\forall b)(\forall O) (aSb|O \rightarrow aRb|O)$$

(if two events co-occur for  $O$ , they coexist for  $O$ )

$$2 \quad (\forall a)(\forall e)(\forall O) (\neg eSa|O \rightarrow \neg eRa|O) \text{ (if two events don't co-occur rel. to } O, \text{ they don't coexist rel. to } O: \text{ presentism)}$$

3  $R$  is **transitive** across different reference frames

Since  $eSb|O'$  then (for 1)  $eRb|O'$ , and since  $bSa|O$  then  $bRa|O$

But  $(eRb|O' \wedge bRa|O) \Rightarrow eRa|O$  for 3), **against premise 2)**

$$eRa|O \wedge \neg eRa|O$$

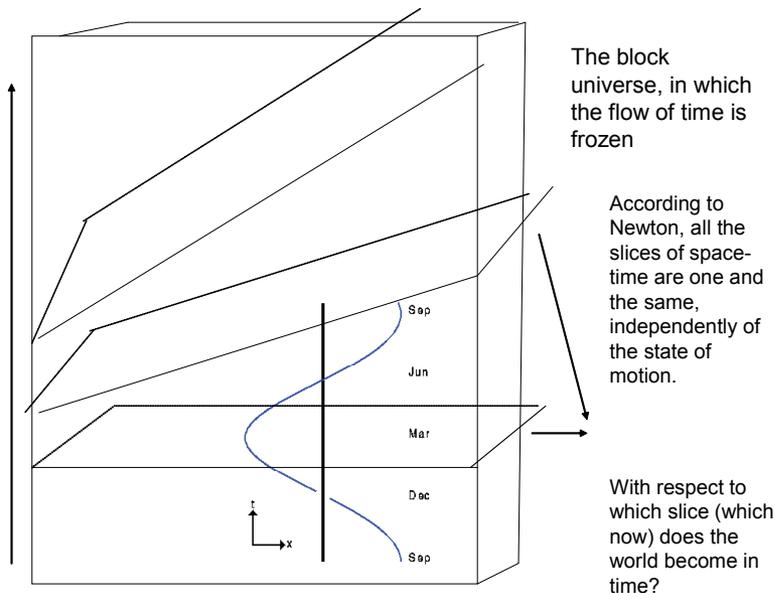
Note the crucial role played by the ternary relation denoted above by  $aRb|O$ , and defined as “event  $a$  exist (or is real) as of event  $b$  relative to observer  $O$ . While such a relation plays a crucial role in Putnam’s argument, *the sceptic may observe that it has nothing to do with physics!* The relation is in fact *not* a physical relation, and it plays no role whatsoever in any physical theory I know of, unlike the other ternary relation of simultaneity, denoted above by  $S$ .

Putnam could of course rebut that *if* we want to judge the compatibility of presentism or possibilism as metaphysical/ontological reconstructions of two assumptions of the manifest image of time, we need to supplement STR with an additional metaphysical/ontological hypothesis, and see whether such an addition is consistent with the structure of the theory.

Since the question of the role of physics in metaphysical debates will be examined more thoroughly in the last section, here I will conclude my presentation of Putnam’s argument with the following, crucial question: *which of the above premises should be abandoned?* Denying *transitivity* (3) would imply that what exists at a distance depends on a state of motion: a position that we could call “ontic protagonism”. It seems reasonable to assume that the relation of existence as defined above *ought to be* transitive. Denying (1) does not seem palatable either: if  $b$  occurs simultaneously with  $a$  (relative to  $O$ ),  $b$  and  $a$  coexist for  $O$ , *even if  $b$  is epistemically inaccessible for  $a$*  due to their being spacelike-separated. Among the three premises, Putnam concluded that it seems more plausible to deny “presentism”: past, present and future events all coexist *tenselessly*, even though we should not express this conclusion, as he did, by claiming that future events and things “are *already* real”, since, for reasons specified above, we would be mixing in the same statement the tensed (conveyed by the adverb “already”) and the tenseless sense of existence, implied by “are”.

If this is Putnam's conclusion *vis à vis* the ontological side of the debate, its *semantic* side was the second but not minor target of his paper. His opinion is that STR settles once and for all the Aristotelian question of the indefiniteness of the truth-value of future tense statements, which calls into question the view I called possibilism. "Aristotle would have added that there is a fundamental difference between the past and the future, viz., that past events are now determined, the relevant statements about them have now acquired truth values which will stick for all time; but future events are undetermined, and at least some statements about them are not yet either true or false ... Aristotle was wrong. At least he was wrong if Relativity is right" (1967, p. 244). The old issue of the sea battle mentioned in the book IX of *De Interpretatione* is then settled once and for all: all past and future tense statements are either true or false independently of the time of assertion. This is how he wraps things up: "I conclude that the problem of the reality and the determinateness of future events is now solved. We have learned that we live in a four-dimensional world and not in a three dimensional world ... Indeed I do not believe that there are any longer any *philosophical* problem about Time" (1967, p. 247).

Another remarkable consequence of Putnam's article was not addressed by its author, however, and it is worth mentioning for the sequel of this paper. To the extent that the notion of *temporal becoming* presupposes the unreality of future events as its necessary condition, STR seems to rule out also temporal becoming. In the picture below, there is no privileged time (or no separation in cosmically extended past and future events) relative to which the world "unfolds": the universe is like a *block* or a big loaf of bread that can be "sliced" by hyperplanes of simultaneity in different, equally legitimate ways. Relative to which of these "slices" does the universe *become* in time? If none of the slices can be regarded as privileged, there is a sense in which none of them can represent the unfolding of the universe in time, and the river of time seems to freeze.



### 3. Stein’s criticism of Putnam’s theorem: quantum mechanics to Putnam’s rescue?

It could be argued that our endorsement of some of the premises of the argument was too quick. However, transitivity should be granted, despite the fact that defining reality in terms of simultaneity might induce one to reject it, especially since STR has rejected the transitivity of simultaneity across different reference frames.<sup>9</sup> If it makes sense at all to introduce a notion of *reality* in a philosophical reconstruction of the ontological consequences of a physical theory, such a notion calls for transitivity *as a matter of meaning*. Furthermore, by denying transitivity, two observers zooming past each other would share the same present without sharing what is real at a distance, and by simply changing reference frame (getting off a bus or jumping on an airplane), we would change what counts as real for us at a distance. Rejecting the transitivity of the relation *R* seems to be a much less palatable option than denying presentism.

Could we not deny that what occurs at a distance and is simultaneous with an event *a* in a frame is *ipso facto* real for *a*? (premise 1). This move could be justified on a verificationist ground (if event *y* does not register on *x*’ worldline, *y* does not exist for *x*) and would seem *prima facie* admissible, given the original empiricist foundations of the theory of special relativity. After all, the theory is founded upon a very successful verificationist move, the epistemic inaccessibility of distant simultaneity (Einstein 1905), and the relativity of simultaneity may justify one to believe that the present moment, relative to an event, coincides with the event itself. By introducing a binary relation between spacetime points (“being determinate as of”), and by imposing upon it some plausible axioms, Stein (1991) could in some sense be interpreted as trying to justify the pointlike nature of “being present”, since the upshot of his theorem is that for any point *p* in Minkowski spacetime, only the points in the causal past of *p* are *definite*.

In order to try to tackle the decisive question “what does *definite* mean?”, I will briefly review the premises of his theorem, which might be viewed as implicitly defining the notion in question. Working with a beefed up model of Minkowski spacetime,  $M = \langle \mathbb{R}^4, \eta_{ab}, \hat{\uparrow} \rangle$ , where  $\hat{\uparrow}$  is a temporal orientation, Stein proves that

if

- 1) “Being definite” is a binary *relation* between pointlike events:  $xBy =_{def}$  “*y* is definite as of *x*”;
- 2) Such a relation is *non-universal*: for all events *x* of spacetime, there are events *y* such that  $\neg xBy$ ;
- 3) *B* is reflexive and transitive;
- 4) *B* is invariant under automorphisms of *M* preserving the temporal orientation  $\hat{\uparrow}$ ;

<sup>9</sup> See Sklar 1985 for a defence of this claim and Dolev 2006, p. 183 for a new vindication of it.

- 5) for any pair of events such that the vector  $ab$  is past pointing,  $b$  is definite as of  $a$ :  
 $\forall a \forall b (aK_p b \rightarrow aBb)$ ;

then

being definite is co-extensional with the relation of past causal connectibility  $K_p$ : for all  $x$  and  $y$ ,  $xK_p y$  iff  $xBy$ , so that the relation  $B$  can be uniquely defined in terms of the causal structure of Minkowski spacetime.

If being definite meant “being real”, and the premises of the theorem were acceptable, its conclusion would amount to a vindication of a special relativistic version of possibilism, since only the points in the causal past of any event are real as of that event!

Well, there are no doubts that this is the intended interpretation, since Stein was responding, among other things, to Nick Maxwell’s claim that special relativity and quantum probabilism were incompatible, based on reasons similar to those already given by Putnam in 1967 (Maxwell 1985). The question, for Stein, is to show that “at each stage, the entire history of the world is separated into a part that has already become – ‘is ontologically fixed and definite’, as Maxwell puts it (1985, 24) – and a part that is not yet settled” (Stein 1991, p. 148).

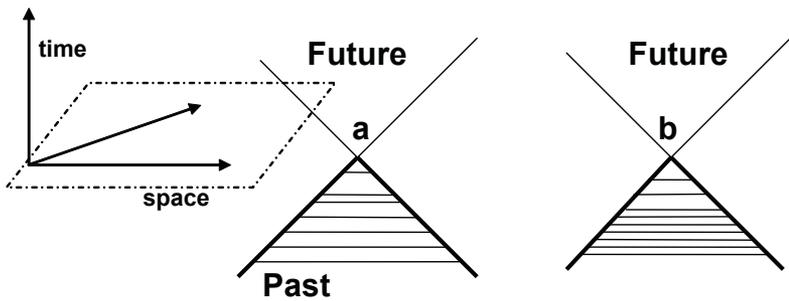
While Stein brings in the issue of becoming,<sup>10</sup> not explicit in Putnam’s paper, and tries to prove its compatibility (and therefore the compatibility of the time of our experience) with the temporal structure of STR, his conclusion and Putnam’s are clearly at odds. According to Putnam, eternalism is the only view compatible with STR, while for Stein, if we accept his premises as reasonable, possibilism turns out to be implementable (and uniquely so) in the structure of Minkowski spacetime. Which of the two philosophers is correct?

While in the next section I will try to argue – along with Savitt (2006) and Dolev (2006) – that the *ontological* dispute between presentists, possibilists and eternalists is devoid of a clear meaning, so that there is no real disagreement between Putnam and Stein from this viewpoint, in the remainder of this section I will try to defend the claim that, *if the ontological dispute were genuine*, introducing *quantum* phenomena in a world characterized by relativistic becoming *à la* Stein would vindicate Putnam’s eternalism.

Crucial to this argument is a simple corollary to Stein’s theorem: since all and only the events that are in the causal past of spacelike-related events  $a$  and  $b$  are definite relative to  $a$  and  $b$  respectively, it trivially follows that  $a$  and  $b$  aren’t definite as of each other:  $-aBb$  &  $-bBa$  relative to any observer whose here-now coincides with  $a$  and  $b$  (see figure below).

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<sup>10</sup> This is why he presupposes an asymmetric notion of causal connectibility.



Imagine an Aspect type of experiment in which  $a$  and  $b$  are spacelike-related measurement outcomes. Either there is causal influence between the two wings of the experiment or there isn't. Let us assume the first alternative: if some sort of causal influence between the two wings of the experiment were admissible,<sup>11</sup> we would have *both*  $aBb$  and  $bBa$  on the basis of a modification of Stein's premise 5). In fact, the reason for assuming that premise is that whatever causes  $b$  needs to be regarded as definite as of  $b$  (alternatively, as having become with respect to it). This, however, would contradict the corollary that  $-aBb$  &  $-bBa$ . If we interpreted quantum non-locality in a causal way that implies action at a distance, we would violate the condition of relativistic becoming because the corollary would be violated.<sup>12</sup> STR conjoined to quantum physics would imply eternalism and Putnam's argument would be vindicated. Suppose now that the correlations were non-causally interpretable, an issue that is interpretation-dependent and might be regarded as still open. Also in this second alternative, however, it would still follow that the nonseparability between the two measurement outcomes  $a$  and  $b$  would be *sufficient* to rule out Stein's type of becoming, since  $a$  and  $b$  ought to be regarded as mutually definite (see Dorato 1995 and Dorato 1996, and for a contrary view, Myrvold 2003).

Bringing quantum mechanics into the picture might be regarded as equivalent to changing the rules of the game, though, given the lack of a shared interpretation of the quantum formalism. In Bohmian mechanics, for instance, for which there is no developed relativistic form yet, an absolute time is needed, and likewise in the GRW theory invoking a collapse of "density of stuff". Currently, only Tumulka's version of the flash-theory of GRW is relativistic invariant (Tumulka 2006). In other words, it is still unclear whether quantum mechanics and special relativity are really compatible, so that it might be too soon to try to learn lessons about time from their conjunction.

<sup>11</sup> This causal interpretation of non-locality is favoured by Bohmian mechanics.

<sup>12</sup> On the basis of an extension of Stein's theorem due to Clifton and Hogarth (1995), "spacelike" forms of becoming are ruled out, i.e., no two spacelike-separated event can become as of each other unless becoming is the universal relation (all events have become as of any event). Clearly, if the becoming relation is universal relation, there is no becoming at all.

The fact that we can assume their compatibility **For All Practical Purposes** (FAPP) can be interpreted in a dual way. On the one hand, “practical purpose” might mean, in Bell’s sense, “lack of an accepted ontology”, and therefore a prohibition to draw metaphysical lessons about quantum mechanics and special relativity. On the other hand, the fact that any empirically adequate future extension of quantum mechanics will have to incorporate the quantum non-local correlations might mean that the hypotheses required by Stein, Clifton and Hogarth are incompatible with quantum mechanics.

Be that as it may, if one wants to find out about becoming in the real physical universe one should consider cosmological models in which a cosmic time *is* definable. For example, isotropic and homogenous cosmological models in stably causal spacetimes (no closed timelike curves) reinstate a complete temporal order. And finally, one should open one’s perspective to the current attempts at unifying quantum mechanics with general relativity, in which one finds some timeless and changeless models *vis à vis* some other attempts admitting a cosmic time. In this respect, I cannot resist quoting an interesting speculation contained in Putnam (2005), a must-read by anyone interested in the philosophy of quantum mechanics:

... what relieves my initial distress at the idea of an absolute time coming back into the picture is the following thought: it might not be quite as bad a contradiction of Einstein’s vision as it first seems. It might be that, before we ‘superimpose’, each space-time is perfectly Einsteinian—each space-time is a Minkowski space-time which knows nothing about any ‘simultaneity’. And it may be that the time parameter that both GRW and Bohm need is just the absolute time parameter that quantum cosmology seems to need. Of course, this is just a speculation. But it would mean that, although Einstein would have to admit that there is such a thing as simultaneity, it comes from ‘outside’ any one well-defined space-time, it comes from the quantum mechanical ‘interference’ between whole space-times. (Putnam 2005, p. 632)<sup>13</sup>

If enlarging our perspective is certainly needed if we want to know whether there is becoming in the physical world, here I will have to restrict myself to these scanty remarks, given that Putnam has not explicitly dealt with this question in print.

In a word, while *a propos* of the question “which is the best ontology for Minkowski spacetime?” I want to suspend judgment until the next section, for now I would defend a revised version of Stein’s local becoming, where the revision entails that Stein’s result should be deprived of any ontological significance. More precisely, this means that his relation of “being definite” should be dropped altogether, and replaced by a time-asymmetric relation of becoming, so that his theorem would not involve the attempt at

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<sup>13</sup> For a discussion of some philosophical problems (among which the changelessness of the universe) in classical general relativity, see Dorato & Pauri 2006.

establishing what is “ontologically fixed at a spacetime point”, but rather what has and what has not become relative to any event in Minkowski spacetime. Interpreted in this way, and not as a contribution to ontology, Stein’s result is interesting, because, by confining the *physical* present of any event to the event itself, and relativizing becoming to worldlines and worldtubes, it helps us to see how it is that *the manifest image of time came to contain the false belief that the now extends at cosmic distances*.

The psychological present is spatially extended in proportion to the duration of the specious present and to the immense speed of light. Consider 30 msec as the threshold under which *two* distinct, temporally separated light signals are perceived by humans as being *one and the same signal*. Multiplying 30 msec by 300.000 km/sec gives a practically immense distance (9000 km): our earthly experience (i.e., when we don’t look at the night sky or the Sun) takes place within a spherical “bubble” of psychical simultaneity (presentness) whose radius is approximately 9000 km. Within this “bubble” we cannot discriminate a light signal *L* coming from objects lying on the surface of the bubble (that are 9000 km away from the center of the sphere where we are located), from light signals *L'* emitted at the same time just around us, since *L* and *L'* are perceived as *one* signal, and therefore as being “the same signal”. This remark helps reconciling the manifest image of time, entailing a belief in a cosmically extended present, and the physical image of time, relying on the relativity of simultaneity, and implying that there is no fact of the matter as to what is occurring right now on Andromeda independently of a particular inertial frame.<sup>14</sup> This claim in particular is addressed to Dolev’s criticism of Stein result (Dolev 2006), given that also within Stein’s picture, it is possible to claim that each event is either past, present or future, even though the notion of being present clearly turns out to be *mind-dependent*. What we regard as present is strictly speaking *past*, and is impinging on our senses from the past light cone centered on our bodies. When I look at the moon, I see it as it was approximately half a second before. The further question whether in STR there is something objectively occurring “right now” on Andromeda seems to be not only relative to a given frame, but also purely conventional, and this result holds simply as a consequence of the relativity of simultaneity.

In any case, as far as this particular debate in the foundations of physics is concerned, for better or for worse it still goes on, and has been inspired, as many other things in other fields of philosophy, by Hilary Putnam’s decisive contributions.

<sup>14</sup> For more details, see Stein 1991, Dorato 2006a, Arthur 2006, Savitt 2007.

#### 4. Presentism and eternalism, or how to dissolve an ontological issue into a practical one

In the literature on the compatibility between relativistic time and the manifest image of time, there are at least *three* different senses of “a real or unreal future” that are frequently confused, to the detriment of clarity. The first is “the real as *the determined*”, an epistemic or metaphysical sense, depending on how determinism is construed (predictability/retrodictability *versus* metaphysical relations of “events + laws fixing other events”). In this first sense, laws and initial conditions uniquely fix past and future events, and a future (past) event is real if and only if it is determined by laws and initial conditions. This is not the sense that is relevant in evaluating the metaphysical consequences of STR, since the geometrical structure of Minkowski spacetime by itself is clearly *not* sufficient to enforce determinism or indeterminism, despite the fact that special relativity is somewhat friendlier to the requirements of determinism.<sup>15</sup> And Putnam did in fact correctly concentrate on the other two senses, namely, “the real as *the determinate*” (a *semantical* sense, having to do with the definiteness of truth-value of future contingents) and the real as *the existing* (an *ontological* sense). The argument to be presented shortly have been independently supported by Dolev (2006) and Savitt (2006), and will just touch upon the ontic side of the dispute, and will therefore ignore (implausible) epistemic theories of truth, in which truth does not transcend the assertability conditions.

Let us begin by carefully distinguishing between two different uses of the copula “is” or of the verb exist, the *tensed* and the *tenseless* one.

DEF<sub>1</sub> An event *e* “exists” in the tensed sense of “existence” iff *e* exists now.

The above definition *is contrasted* with the following definition of tenseless existence:

DEF<sub>2</sub> An event *e* “exists” in a tenseless sense of “existence” iff *e* existed, or exists now or will exist.

Note that DEF<sub>2</sub> *is* useful because it can be *contrasted* with the abstract sense of existence of numbers, classes and mathematical objects, whether one believes that such an existence is needed in one’s ontology or not.

I can now state the Dilemma of Presentism, which is committed to the view that

“Any future (past) event *F* (*P*), as of the present time *t*, doesn’t *exist*” (*is unreal*).

The italicized copula “*is*” or the verb “*existence*” in the above sentence is either (i) tensed or (ii) tenseless, *tertium non datur* (*abstract* atemporal existence is irrelevant here).

<sup>15</sup> Earman noted that the claim (often associated to the special theory) that there is an upper limit to the velocity of propagations of signals prevents the existence of “infinitely fast invaders” coming from infinity and intersecting future time slices without having registered in the present (Earman 1986).

- (i) In the former case, presentism becomes a triviality (*F* does not exist or is not real means that *F* does not exist now or is not real now). Both presentists and eternalists must agree that whatever occurs in the future (past) does not exist now!
- (ii) In the latter case, presentism runs into a contradiction: supposing that at least *some event F will occur (has occurred), that something is* (tenselessly) real or existent in virtue of DEF<sub>2</sub>, and it cannot be (tenselessly) unreal, as presentism has it. Of course, a presentist will not want to deny that something will occur, or that something has occurred, unless presentism turns into the apocalyptic view that the world will come to an end after the present moment (or, to explain the disappearance of past events, is created anew every moment, as in occasionalistic metaphysics).

In a word, presentism seems to be caught between the Scylla of a triviality or the Charybdis of a contradiction. Is this a refutation of presentism and an endorsement of eternalism? No, because if it is not clear what it means to claim that the future (the past) is *not* real, it is not very informative to claim that it is real either (it amounts to the trivial claim that something will occur after the present moment).

As a matter of fact, other attempts to defend the genuine character of the dispute between presentists and eternalists often charge eternalism with absurd consequences attached to DEF<sub>2</sub>. What does it mean to affirm that past, present and future events *are* equally *real*, or *exist* on a par, or tenselessly coexist? First of all, tenseless coexistence (“existence on a par”) does not entail coexistence in a *Totum Simul*: timelike-related events in Minkowski spacetime (or any classical relativistic spacetime) are *temporally separated* and do not coexist in the sense that they are simultaneous. Since *the reality of the future does not mean its simultaneous coexistence with the present events*, there cannot be any possible disagreement with presentism about this point. Analogously, even though it is always true to assert that “event *F* occurs at its own spatiotemporal location”, such an *eternal truth* about *F* in no way implies the *eternal existence* of *F* (existence at all times of single, localized events is absurd). Since the reality of future events does not imply their eternal coexistence, there is no possible disagreement here either! Other philosophers have insisted that the dispute is about the truth makers of claims like “there *exist* dinosaurs”, or “there *exist* human outposts on Mars”.<sup>16</sup> While presentists claim that there *are* no truth-makers for these claims, eternalist disagree. But note that this reformulation is subject to the same dilemma between triviality and contradiction noted above, since the italicised copula is either tensed or tenseless. So where does the alleged disagreement lies?

I want to advance the claim that the debate between eternalists and presentists is a pseudo-debate for at least four reasons.

<sup>16</sup> This point was suggested to me by Barry Lower in a personal communication.

- 1) The pseudo-predicate “is real” should only be used in cases where there is a clear contrast class between what is real and what isn’t (think of “a real coffee” *versus* a surrogate coffee or a “real team” versus a disorganized assembly of players).<sup>17</sup> The presentist/eternalist debate lacks such a contrast class, because it is not clear at all how to make sense of the claim that the future (the past) *is* not real (the copula here *is* understood in a tenseless sense, the only one about which there could be some disagreement). As we will see below, the lack of what I refer to as “a contrast class” has been particularly stressed by Dolev (2006).
- 2) Once tensed and tenseless existence are clearly distinguished, we have seen that it is difficult to state a single ontological claim about the past and the future on which there could be a genuine disagreement: presentists and eternalists do not disagree about the fact that “the future will exist but it does not exist now”.
- 3) Ruling out the legitimacy of the tenseless “is” or the tenseless “exist”—a presentist’s possible but desperate move—would amount to denying oneself the possibility of distinguishing concretely existing entities from merely possible or abstract entities.
- 4) The fact that the tensed sense of existence might be regarded as more entrenched or more fundamental in our language – a claim which looks highly reasonable – does not entail by itself an ontological bias toward tensed existence over tenseless existence, once the latter is purified from some frequent misunderstandings.<sup>18</sup>

In conclusion, I would like to state a claim about which I think Putnam would not disagree at all these days: sometimes, according to our different purposes, we rely on the tensed sense of existence, and then we take a *perspectival* attitude toward reality; some other times, for different purposes, we rely on a tenseless sense of existence, and we look at reality from “nowhen”. If reality is spoken about in many ways, both senses are well-grounded and useful in our language. *Such a pragmatic difference commands only a linguistic choice, one that, however, can make no difference about ontological commitments.*

The need to drop ontology in our context has been forcefully argued also by Dolev, who refers to the widespread claim that the difference between past, present and future is to be analyzed in ontological terms as the “*ontological assumption*” (2006, p. 178). He correctly (in my view) rejects such an assumption as unintelligible, by developing Austin’s remark that in the case of “real” it is the negative sense that “wears the trouser”.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> “The function of the word real is not to contribute positively to the characterization of anything, but to exclude possibly ways of being not real” (Austin 1962, p. 70). This reference to Austin was reminded to me by Dolev in his presentation in Montreal, for which I thank him (see Dolev 2006). I had made reference to the emptiness of the predicate “is real” (along kantian lines) already in my Ph.D thesis in 1992 (see Dorato 1995), where I tried to establish whether relativity rules out “the becoming determinate” and the “becoming determined” of previously undetermined and indeterminate events.

<sup>18</sup> For a fuller articulation of arguments 2, 3, 4, I must refer to Dorato 2006b, Dolev 2006 and Savitt 2006. Argument 1 is spelled out in some more details in the following.

<sup>19</sup> “Next, ‘real’ is what we may call a trouser-word. It is usually thought, and I dare say usually rightly thought, that what one might call the affirmative use of a term is basic—that, to understand ‘x,’ we need to know what it is to

Dolev writes: “in general, assertions that something is (or is not) real are meaningful only when they can be used to rule out concrete ways in which the thing spoken of could be not real (or real). Accordingly, the question “Real or not?” can be meaningfully raised on a given occasion only if, on that occasion, a definite and relevant way in which the thing in question can be real, and a definite and relevant way in which it can be not real, are specifiable” (Dolev 2006, p. 180).

Suppose that we affirm, along with the presentists, that “only and all present events *are* real”. This is the positive sense of “real”: consequently, if Austin is right, for presentism to make sense there has to be a way for present events *not* to be real. At this point Dolev rhetorically asks what is the contrast class of what presentism asserts, that is, “what form of being *not* real is excluded by such an assertion?... To say that they are real in the way that past and future events are not real begs the question twice.” (Dolev 2006, p.181). As he explains, we beg the question in a first sense, because we are trying to establish whether past and present events are real or not, and cannot presuppose lack of reality for non-present events with a *petitio principii*. In the second sense, we beg the question because we are assuming (in a vicious circle) that it makes sense to claim that past and future events are *not* real just to make sense of the claim that only present events *are* real (Dolev 2006, p. 180)

It might be thought that we can evade Austin’s and Dolev’s challenge by avoiding the pseudopredicate “is real” and talking instead about a temporally unqualified sense of *existence*. This move however can be countered by the remark that in the expression “all and only present events *exist*”, the verb “exist” is either *tensed* or *tenseless*, so that the point raised in 2 above applies: we are either peddling tautologies or selling contradictions. In reply it could be argued that the verb “exist” is neither tensed nor tenseless (*tertium datur*) but simply *used* in a more general sense, one that can be made true by the existence or non existence (in this general sense) of the relevant truth makers. However, there is, once again, a problem of lack of contrast class: it is not clear (to me, at least) what it *means* to claim that future events do not exist in this general, temporally unqualified way, if we thereby don’t mean that they do not exist now”!

The dissolution of the ontological side of the debate does not entail that the disputed issues are devoid of practical consequences. Leaving aside theories in which truth does not transcend assertability conditions as implausible, one might want to look at the ethical existential “interpretations” of the various pseudo-ontological positions at stake. Claiming that only the present exists really should be regarded as meaning that we should only worry about the present: *carpe diem*, or seize the day, the famous motto advocated by many hellenistic philosophers influenced by Epicureanism.<sup>20</sup> Much later, we find different readings of the motto. According to Kierkegaard for instance, don Juan – the symbol of the aesthetic life – tries to transform the present experience into something provid-

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be x, or to be an x, and that knowing this apprises us of what it is not to be x, not to be an x. But with ‘real’ (as we briefly noted earlier) it is the negative use that wears the trousers” (Austin 1962, p. 70).

<sup>20</sup> See the beautiful reconstruction of the hellenistic ethical outlooks by Pierre Hadot 2002.

ing value to his whole life, but escapes from any sort of *commitment* that would keep together his past and his future together with the present moment.<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, the figure of the judge, or the married man – the symbol of the ethical life – considers the future as real as the present and the past, and it is such a (“Rawlsian”) concept of a *life plan* that keeps together his life by binding his past to his future.

If I am right in claiming that the ontic debate between presentists and eternalists dissolves, such human practical attitudes toward the present and the non-present are the only aspect of the debate that survives and that really matters.

Living only in the present (presentism), *versus* keeping faithful to one’s past commitments (the past is as real as the present, or possibilism), *versus* considering each present action and past commitment as a step toward the realization of a future goal (eternalism) are the different practical options that we have and that “correspond” to the ontological positions sketched above. We might endorse these attitudes in different ways at different stages of our life (the personal future might be more important at younger ages, thought not the collective one), and different persons might have different attitudes. Of course, much more would need to be said about these different pragmatic attitudes and the role that they play in our lives and here I can simply name them. But considering that also the recent Putnam insisted on having “ethics without ontology” (Putnam 2004), the dissolution of an ontological debate into a pragmatic attitude might not find him on an unsympathetic position.

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<sup>21</sup> Kierkegaard 1992.

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## REPLY TO MAURO DORATO

HILARY PUTNAM

(1) I believe that Yuval Dolev, Mauro Dorato, and Steven Savitt are absolutely right, and that the question whether the past and the future are “real” is a pseudo-question. In my view, what still survives of my 1967 “Time and Physical Geometry”, after their criticisms, is that the philosophical position that statements about the present and the past have determinate truth values, whereas statements about the future do not, is incoherent. But, like these three authors, I am *not* convinced by a well known criticism due to Howard Stein. Stein’s objection to my argument was that I overlooked the possibility of *relativizing the notion of reality* (or “having become”, in his terminology). On his proposal, what “has become” relative to an observer at a time is what is in the “here-now” of that observer or else lies in the past light cone of that observer, and this is a relativistically invariant notion. In my view, Stein simply misses the issue I was addressing, which is whether future events are real *in the standard metaphysical understanding of “real”*, on which what is “real” is precisely supposed to be *mind-and-observer-independent*. At best, Stein’s view, like Dorato’s, rejects my question, but if one is going to reject the question, I prefer to be up front about that rejection, in the way Dorato is.

Let me mention that, as an immediate consequence of the Lorentz formulas, the time displacement of events at a distance depends not only on their relative speeds, but also on their relative distance, and the effect is significant even when the relative velocities of the observers is small relative to the speed of light. In fact, if we choose a star system that is only ten light years from here, then if I am in Singapore (roughly on the Equator), and my friend Jack Smart is at the antipodal point from me (also near the Equator), so that our relative velocities due to the Earth’s rotation are of the order of 3200 km per hour, and each of us chooses a rest system in which he himself is at rest, we will differ about when an event in that distant system took place by *several minutes!*

(2) As to what Mauro Dorato says about the relationship between the manifest image and the scientific image, I want to say that the manifest image can certainly be corrected by science—but not only by science: philosophical reflection has long been a major source of correction.

Let us begin with the original form of the idea of two incompatible “images”—Eddington’s celebrated “two tables”. According to Eddington, there is a table that physics has shown to not really be solid because it is mainly empty space, and therefore the table of

the manifest image is not identical with the table of the scientific image. That argument depends on assuming that the ordinary language term “solid” has a semantics which makes almost all of its descriptive occurrences false. But what kind of linguistic methodology is that? Doesn’t it make more sense to claim that there is a sense of “solid” in which to say that something is solid *isn’t* to say anything about its microstructure? In fact there is a field of physics called “solid state physics”—but if physics has really shown there are no solids, how can there be a solid state physics? Physics may have shown there are no ghosts, but it doesn’t go on to create a field of physics called “ghost state physics”, or “ectoplasm physics”!

Similarly, there are exaggerated claims sometimes made by psychologists about the alleged falsity of “folk psychology” (another part of the “manifest image”). It is very easy to construct clever experiments to show that people sometimes rationalize and invent a reason why they did something, which wasn’t actually the cause of their behavior. But to conclude that we don’t really *eat because we are hungry*, we don’t really *turn on the water in the bathtub because we want to take a bath*, we don’t really *take an unpleasant job because we need money*, we don’t really *try to impress that person because we are in love with them*, etc., is nonsense.

Nevertheless, I do expect that science will *sometimes* correct folk psychology. In fact, it already has. Here is an example: I know that there are a lot of mistakes in Freud. He had the typical Viennese *Gelehrter’s* arrogant sureness about his own opinions, *plus* the great psychologists’ over-ambitiousness (recall that in the *Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume claimed to have done for psychology what Newton did for physics!). Freud vastly overgeneralized from a small number of cases, he was overly reductionist, and so on. *But the unconscious is still important*. And I think folk psychology did undergo a correction as a result of psychoanalysis. Theophrastus, the head of the Lyceum after Aristotle, is the author of a book called *The Characters*. Reading it, I was struck by his sketch of what we would call a “neurotic behavior”, a sketch of someone who has a compulsion to spread rumors, and even misses the trial of a civil suit he himself has brought, being so busy with his irrational behavior. Theophrastus’s *description* of this behavior was marvelous, but when it comes to *explanation* he just threw up his hands, saying, as it were, “utterly inexplicable, utterly irrational behavior”. But even the man on the street now appeals to unconscious motivation in such a case. In fact, any branch of psychology may lead to some *corrections* in so-called “folk psychology”. But notions from folk psychology, including the central notions of *belief* and *desire*, remain indispensable.

The specialized perspectives of the sciences can be overly “reductionist” at times, to be sure, but they are also the perspectives from which we demolish, for instance, the pseudo-science of racism. In fact, the most powerful destructive criticisms of so-called “racial science” came from the modern synthesis of genetics and evolutionary theory. So, I am opposed to any view which sets science and ordinary language in opposition to each other. There are times in which ordinary language *does* need corrections—

from science, and, as I said before, also sometimes from philosophy. Forgive now what may look like a digression.

When Ernst Gombrich was 26 years old, he had a friend, a publisher, who said to him “I had someone lined up to write a short history of the world for children, and he quit on me—it has to be written in six weeks”. Gombrich replied “I’ll do it”. (He needed the money, was in love with a girl he wanted to marry, had a PhD in art history and no job.) And he wrote his amazing *A Little History of the World*. His short account of what was good about Enlightenment is particularly important. Gombrich begins by listing things that everyone thought they “knew” in the years before the Enlightenment—things like “of course” you have to beat children, “of course” it is all right to beat your wife, “of course” you have to burn witches, and so on. The point Gombrich wished to make is that the central virtue of Enlightenment was *tolerance*.

So, here is a case of ordinary language being corrected—the use of the term “witch” got “corrected”, for example. But the Enlightenment’s attack on superstition required also support from science. In this case the philosophy and the science worked together. One needed both philosophical arguments and a new view of the facts. So, it is not that the whole job can be done by science, because science can be used by anybody. Late capitalism has developed a technology of manipulating public opinion—which is a *scientific* technology. So, there’s nothing intrinsically good or bad about science. But there is a moral duty to fight pernicious errors. Michele Moody-Adams wrote a book in 1997 called *Fieldwork in Familiar Places: Morality, Culture and Philosophy* in which she does a beautiful job describing what she calls “affected ignorance”—the deliberate “not knowing” the things that you have a moral obligation to know. I think that this is a tremendously important notion: the prevalence of *affected ignorance*. And of course the evil person would then try to make other people *affectedly ignorant*.

So, science can be enlisted in bad causes, and exposing that it is *bad* science is very important. We should show that those negative stereotypes are wrong, and wickedly wrong, and combat affected ignorance of the facts that refute those stereotypes. I would say that destroying those stereotypes is itself a moral obligation, since the presence of a stereotype which is factually nonsense in the majority of the population, or even in a significant minority, is itself a significant form of oppression. I think that (and in this I agree with Habermas) it is a feature of discriminatory oppressive positions—those of the racists, the oppressors of women, the defenders of cruelty to children and so on—that they always invent facts that are not facts. They encourage affected ignorance of the truth, and here truth is on the side of justice.

In sum, I think that when the so-called “manifest image” is wrong, it can and must be corrected, but there is no principled incompatibility between the scientific image and the manifest image. Sellars and Eddington were just wrong about that.



# THE THREAT OF CULTURAL RELATIVISM: HILARY PUTNAM AND THE ANTIDOTE OF FALLIBILISM

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## ABSTRACT

The polemical target of the paper is 'radical cultural relativism'—according to which the validity of principles, values, statements, theories and the like is exclusively relative to the culture within which these have developed. Drawing heavily on Hilary Putnam's thinking, the paper aims to show how this kind of relativism is fundamentally false.

An element that is central to Putnam's philosophy is addressed, i.e. *truth*—a substantive normative notion discussed by Putnam in connection with the issue of realism, thereby inheriting the achievements gained in the course of his "long journey from realism back to realism". Some of these achievements are then isolated. Since they seem to compel Putnam to leave no room whatsoever for the notion of objectivity, preventing him from envisaging any anti-relativist position, another element of his philosophy which substantiates the notion of objectivity is tackled: that of *fallibilism*.

Distancing itself somewhat from Putnam's later work, the paper then goes on to show how fallibilism enables the formulation of an anti-relativist stance based on epistemic premises.

The paper ends with an analysis of the bearing of this kind of anti-relativism on the notions of universality and absoluteness, as well as a brief discussion of fallibilism itself.

**Keywords:** Hilary Putnam, relativism, fallibilism, truth, objectivity

## 1. A possible route to relativism

We may define cultural relativism as the view according to which the validity of principles, values, statements, theories and the like is exclusively relative to the culture within which they have developed. There might be other forms of cultural relativism—forms which relativize some but not all the fundamental notions of a conceptual scheme—but this is the most radical one. The 'threat' the title of this paper alludes to is a consequence of the view of human beings which would arise, should the radical cultural relativists be right. If this were so, then it would be as if human beings were segregated into groups, each group corresponding to a different culture, with no possibility of actual rational communication and understanding among groups. If *this* is the real human situation, then the disagreements which are bound to occur between groups have just one solution: war. In fact,

the principal source of conflict  
between human communities is

the belief that I have no reason to justify my beliefs to you, and none in finding out what alternative beliefs you may have, because you are, for example, an infidel, a foreigner, a woman, a child, a slave, a pervert, or an untouchable. In short, you are not “one of us”, not one of the *real* human beings, the *paradigm* human beings, the ones whose persons and opinions are to be treated with respect. (Rorty 2000a, p. 15)

Hence, the threat which radical cultural relativism (from now on just “relativism”) represents.

However, is relativism right? Let us briefly see how it may be presented as a plausible position. A quick look at what happens around us everyday reveals that people do agree on a number of questions, and disagree on a number of others as well. She or he who we can take as an average ordinary person may basically assume the following two lines of reasoning, depending on how much weight she/he is attaching to our agreements and how much to our disagreements: on the one hand, she/he may think (or, better, *intuit*) that what makes an agreement on a given question possible is the existence of a *fact of the matter* regarding that question, a fact of the matter which allows a ‘yes or no’ answer—giving content to what on a philosophical level is known as the *principle of bivalence*. Accordingly, cases of disagreement are explained as the result of the impossibility to know the relevant fact of the matter. On the other hand, if she/he pays more attention to the wide variety of disagreements than to that of agreements, if in other words she/he is struck by the fact that on some questions which divide different cultures we have not arrived at a solution—even after decades of discussion—she/he may think (or, better, *intuit*) that this is because different fundamental principles belonging to different cultures cannot be directly compared, and inevitably clash. Now, whereas in the former case our person would implicitly subscribe to what in philosophy is called *realism*, in the latter case she/he would subscribe to *relativism*. So, as to the latter, we have a possible route which leads from taking note of an empirical state of facts to relativism as the philosophical explanation of that very state of facts. And such a route makes relativism appear a plausible option.

This kind of realism and this kind of relativism are based on two contrasting intuitions—two immediate and spontaneous feelings as to how things stand, which we may call ‘pre-philosophical intuitions’. Though I do believe that pre-philosophical intuitions are a deep source of philosophical thinking, I do not go thus far to claim that they are always trustworthy. On the contrary, I think that they must be carefully evaluated, and that they could eventually be proved utterly false. In particular, the two pre-philosophical intuitions we hinted at above are wrong, and so I would rather say that both realism (that kind of realism) and relativism (that kind of relativism) are false. The aim of this paper is to show why relativism is false, relying heavily on Hilary Putnam’s thinking.

## 2. Fallibilism and objectivity

One feature which emerges clearly from Putnam's thought is the role of *truth*. Truth is and always has been a central ingredient to his philosophy, being a substantive notion with a distinctive normative import—a notion which is deeply reflected in Putnam's treatment of the question of relativism. Truth has been discussed by Putnam in connection with the issue of realism, and thus inherits the achievements gained in the course of his “long journey from realism back to realism (but not [...] back to the metaphysical version of realism with which [he] started)” (Putnam 1999, p. 49). Among these achievements there is the denial of a metaphysical and epistemological image—the image of the so-called *God's Eye View*, i.e. a superhuman perspective, the sole position from which—as supporters of this image claim—one can correctly see the world, the connection between language and the world, and the truth value our sentences possess, thereby judging all possible epistemic situations. Another important achievement is the denial of *convergence*, i.e. the idea that the many forms of research human beings are engaged in are destined to proceed toward a common point of arrival, one point for every kind of research. Those who subscribe to this idea believe that the availability of these points should allow human beings to find an answer to every question (*the* only possible one, the *true* answer) and a solution to every problem (*the* only possible one, the *right* solution), so that—provided that research is carried out long enough—the human genre shall enjoy a common stance on every question, at least *in principle*. By the way, note how the rejection of convergence impinges on the issue of relativism, and how, in a sense, it can be considered an example of Putnam's intellectual honesty. In fact, note how difficult the task of presenting an anti-relativist position becomes as soon as one realizes that there is no metaphysical guarantee of reaching shared solutions—no guaranteed shared solutions to ethical controversies, no guaranteed shared solutions to religious, aesthetic, and, for that matter, scientific controversies. In brief, note how difficult the task of opposing relativism becomes if “the model of everyone ultimately converging to one view has [...] no relation to reality”.

I would like to stress another achievement of Putnam's long journey, an achievement which is connected with the previous ones. It is the idea that in some contexts there is *no fact of the matter* to appeal to, that in these contexts the very notion of ‘fact of the matter’—the one already encountered in the first section of my paper—is senseless. These are, for instance, contexts which involve *quasi-necessary statements*, in Putnam's own term—i.e. statements which are ‘necessary relative to a conceptual scheme’ (cf. Putnam 1994b, p. 251)—and contexts which involve ethical questions. In all these cases the principle of bivalence has no grip, and it is difficult—if not impossible—“to attach metaphysical weight to” it (Putnam 1994b, p. 259). Thus, as far as the issue of relativism is concerned, it may seem that Putnam has given the relativists all they need to win the dispute. It may seem, to borrow a useful distinction made by Stephen L. White, that *real relativism* (the obtaining of actual examples of relativism around us) cannot help but give way to *philosophical relativism* (the idea according to which things stand in principle so)—and thus that the notion of objectivity is empty.

However, is this the right moral? Do Putnam's achievements compel him to get rid of any room for the notion of *objectivity*?

The answer is in the negative. There is in fact a central element in Putnam's thought which allows us to believe that our tentative solutions to controversies, even on an intercultural level, can be really 'objective'—an element which therefore constitutes a sort of antidote to relativism. This is *fallibilism*.

Let us now examine what fallibilism is. It is the idea that there is no (metaphysical or semantic) guarantee that what we say is right, no guarantee that our statements are beyond doubt, that they are immune to revision. Error can crop up anywhere, anyhow and anytime. This strikes us as being very close to skepticism, but there is a fundamental difference, which lies in the strictness imposed on the criteria a belief has to fulfill in order to be taken as a piece of knowledge: while the skeptic purports that a belief must be based on 'perfect' evidence, the fallibilist "is willing to base claims of knowledge on evidence that is good enough though less than perfect" (Ben-Menahem 2005b, p. 150). Doubt is the fundamental epistemological tool for both skeptic and fallibilist, but whereas the former favors the application of doubt *across the board*, the latter stresses the requirement that doubt be *reasonable*, and grants that a large amount of what we believe *is* knowledge. We actually *do* know. The fact is that, since we cannot exclude that our most cherished beliefs will be proved false, we *cannot know that we know*—and, lacking knowledge at this meta-level, we are doomed to uncertainty forever. But this should not give way to despair. We are humans, not gods, and can do nothing but try to do our best with what is at our disposal, repairing our boat while it is afloat on the open sea—according to Neurath's well-known metaphor. We still have a great deal to do, mending and reshaping the planks of the boat, i.e. criticizing beliefs and behaviors when we have a plausible enough reason to do so.

The 'dignity of criticism'—this is the lesson we can take from fallibilism. And one of the clearest signs of this attitude is detectable, among others, in Putnam himself. In fostering a general program for the philosophy of the third millennium—the *pragmatist enlightenment*—Putnam recommends for philosophy what he calls 'reflective transcendence', i.e. a critical attitude toward every received view. In his own words, it is a

standing back from conventional opinion, on the one hand, and the authority of revelation [...], on the other, and asking "Why?" Philosophy [...] thus combines two aspirations: the aspiration to justice, and the aspiration to critical thinking. (Putnam 2004, p. 92)

Moreover, referring back to John Dewey, Putnam urges us to promote criticism at a higher level—criticism of our ways of criticism, i.e. "the 'standing back' and criticizing even the ways in which we are accustomed to criticize ideas" (Putnam 2004, p. 96).

Criticism, of course, is not an easy task to accomplish—and neither is assuming a general fallibilist outlook. There is no intellectual means given in advance, nor algorithm,

we could make use of, no formalizable procedure we could apply to every case, independently of its subject. On the contrary, we have to use ourselves, our sensibility, our insight, our mother wit. As Alfred Edward Housman once said, “to read attentively, think correctly, omit no relevant consideration, and repress self-will, are no ordinary accomplishments. [Yet, more is needed:] mother wit which [we] must have brought from [our] mother’s womb”. It is no mere coincidence that the room dedicated to mother wit in Putnam’s thought has increased over the last decades—at least from the ’80s onwards. It is what makes Putnam claim on several occasions and in different contexts—borrowing a phrase from John Austin—“enough is enough: it doesn’t mean everything” (cf. Putnam 1984, p. 121, and Putnam 2002, p. 110). And it is what accounts for the central role played by common sense and intuitions in his philosophical explanations (cf. Macarthur 2009).

Criticism, in short, involves use of our best insight for the singling out of the feasible ways to reach solutions and settle problematic situations. It requires our subtlest and finest capacity to realize how things stand, appealing to explicit and implicit aspects of our rationality. In particular, it requires our mother wit and our best capacity for *imagination*, the one which allows us to put ourselves in somebody else’s shoes and start ideal conversations with people who have or have had problems that are the same as or similar to ours. It is these conversations that, as Richard Rorty puts it, give

substance and concreteness to the otherwise thin and useless notion of “rationality”. [...] when we want to reassure ourselves of our own rationality—to convince ourselves that we are not being caught up by something merely vogueish or merely self-interested—we often hold imaginary conversations with people (our parents, our teachers, our friends) who might be imagined to have *doubts* about what we are up to. (Rorty 2000b, p. 89, my italics)

All these elements—common sense, (pre-philosophical) intuitions, mother wit and imagination—cooperate to project ourselves into other people’s frames of mind, in order to develop reasonable criticism and a better fixation of beliefs. In short, they cooperate to the formation of a plausible fallibilist stance. And—as I hinted above—it is just because of the urge to criticize theories, statements, behaviors and values (an urge raised by the very conviction that what everybody says and does is not in principle beyond doubt) that the notion of objectivity increasingly acquires its own content, pointing to fallibilism as an antidote to relativism.

### 3. Objectivity, absoluteness and universality

I feel very sympathetic with this line of thought. What is right and wrong, good or bad, true or false, emerges in the course of an endless and multifarious discussion—

within and among cultures—which finds in criticism its main drive. Not any discussion, however, will be good. In order to have an impact on the notion of objectivity this kind of discussion must fulfill at least two (commonsense) conditions: on one hand, it must avoid illusions, such as that it is possible to arrive at a shared position on *every* question, and, on the other, it must avoid dogmatic attitudes. The first condition may be fulfilled by avoiding any metaphysical position which could be responsible for those illusions. At the beginning of this paper I hinted at a position of this kind: a *non-epistemic type of realism*, according to which there are Objective (with a capital ‘O’) facts of the matter capable of settling any dispute one way or the other. The idea that every question has a solution provided we come to know the relevant fact of the matter (knowledge which, by the way, is far to be guaranteed by non-epistemic realism) is thus consequential. The second condition, then, is easily fulfilled by fallibilism itself. Therefore, the agreement that participants in a discussion may possibly reach must not be taken as ‘the only possible one’ given the question at stake. Many agreements could settle a question: it suffices that participants deem a solution good *enough*. This means that, when all the possible arguments in favor of or against that question have been put forth, thoroughly discussed and evaluated, when it is clear that no one could possibly come out with new unexpected evidence and consistent arguments, then the argument which results from the participants’ careful analyses and trade-offs counts as ‘the’ solution—given the knowledge, needs, desires, interests the discussants have *at that moment*. Enough is enough: it does not mean everything. An intersubjective agreement of this kind shows what we can take as ‘objective’ about a given question, what we can say is ‘true’ or ‘false’, ‘right’ or ‘wrong’, and so forth, giving content to the notions of objectivity, truth and rightness. Thus, since these contents arise from the cognitive procedures by means of which we promote discussions, and do not therefore transcend the power of the human cognitive faculties, those notions reveal themselves as *epistemic* ones.

All this helps to outline a viable anti-relativist position. Now, a question naturally arises: even though we did *not* make room for a strong kind of anti-relativism—i.e. the kind based on a strong non-epistemic conception of objectivity, allowed by the God’s Eye View—still we made room for a position which denies that values, norms, principles and the like are valid if exclusively relating to a particular conceptual scheme. Is this anti-relativist position entitled to make use of the favorite anti-relativist terms like “absolute” and “universal”? A quick reaction would prompt us to answer in the affirmative, just because “absolute” is the opposite of “relative” and “universal” that of “particular”. But things are not that simple.

Both terms, “absolute” and “universal”, are usually kept together and taken on a par, even if they have different meanings. “Absolute” (etymologically) means ‘untied from any particular  $x$ ’—where “culture” can be here the value of the variable  $x$ —or, in other words, ‘independent of any perspective whatsoever’. Now, if “absoluteness” is taken as a property of beliefs or statements, little reflection suffices for us to realize that, accord-

ing to the *epistemic* anti-relativist position we described above, such independence is a chimera. Any belief, idea, statement, theory or the like is inevitably tied to the culture it is produced by, so that no belief a human being might develop can exist, as it were, in a vacuum—in a sort of Platonic realm of entities quite independently of any human practice. On the other hand, if “absoluteness” is to be taken as a property of the *validity* of beliefs or statements, we should have beliefs or statements that are valid independently of any perspective, i.e. quite apart from the standpoints human beings may come to adopt—a validity which, again, may be situated in a supernatural dimension detached from human practices and cultures and, so to speak, surveying them from above. If this is the case, then that validity would be *common* (in principle) to every culture. It would be a *universal* validity, since the term “universal” means just this, i.e. ‘common to all perspectives and all cultures irrespectively of their spatial or temporal placement’. And this, by the way, may account for the fact that “absolute” and “universal” are often used as an inseparable couple.

So, what about the term “universal”? Are there universal beliefs—beliefs common to human beings independently of their epoch and place? And, for that matter, is there something *universal*, i.e. common to every culture? Putnam does speak of ‘universal’, for instance, he very carefully stresses the idea according to which ethics is *universal*. In his words,

insofar as ethics is concerned with the alleviation of suffering, it is concerned with the alleviation of *everyone’s* suffering, or if it is concerned with positive well-being, it is concerned with *everybody’s* positive well-being. (Putnam 2004, p. 25)

Here the universality resides in the fact that what ethics aims at regards *all* human beings—with no distinction of age, social position, color of skin and so on—since ‘suffering’ is such an ineluctable ingredient of human life. Thus, it is not particular beliefs or statements that are universal, but a very general problem which people have in common. Ethics is universal because its topic, broadly conceived, is universal. However, note that in the passage just quoted Putnam speaks of a general *concern* or *attitude*, the attitude of being fully aware of questions which regard all of us. May it be that ethics is universal because the concern it deals with is universal? In other words, may the universality of the problem of human suffering give rise to a universal concern? And, moreover, may universal beliefs and statements be guaranteed by such a universal concern? The answers would seem to be in the negative.

The concern with the alleviation of suffering and positive well-being is far from being common to everybody. It is not an ‘intrinsic’ feature of human beings, something one directly possesses in virtue of her or his human nature. Not all of us have such an attitude, but only—as Putnam himself claims—“people who stand within the ethical life” (Putnam 2004, p. 75). Therefore, if ethics is universal because of the concern it is based on, its universality is confined within the boundaries of the set of morally con-

scious people. In fact, we could not deny that there were and are many ‘morally unconscious people,’ people whose existence makes it difficult to obtain anything resembling intercultural rational discussion on moral issues—and, for that matter, on *any* issue whatsoever. These are people, moreover, whose existence makes it difficult to envisage beliefs or statements that we might reasonably term “universal”.

Does this mean that relativism wins after all? Does this mean that at the bottom of every (or, at least, some) culture there remains a residue of non-ethical beliefs which thwarts rational discussion? Actually, differences among cultures usually come down to differences in moral beliefs and behaviors, and it seems that the persistent presence of morally unconscious people and the lack of beliefs common to *every* human being independently of the culture she or he belongs to, paves the way to relativism—at least, to *real* relativism (remember Stephen L. White’s distinction mentioned above), i.e. to actual cases of strong disparity in forms of life and the absence of rational discussion. But what about *philosophical* relativism, i.e. the philosophical idea according to which things stand *in principle* so?

Well, it seems to me that Putnam’s brand of anti-relativism entails a breaking of the dichotomy between things we can do in principle and things we can do in practice, or at least a warning to the effect that talk of ‘possibility in principle’ is slippery ground. Putnam’s general stance is characterized by a sort of *primacy given to practice*, and practice tells us that argument and discussion sometimes have very limited power: one cannot convince everybody, especially if she or he stands outside the ethical life. As Putnam claims:

I do not believe that someone who stands outside the whole circle of related concerns [...] constitutive of ethics can be brought to share any one of them by argument alone, and if such a one were brought to act ethically by the force of a *non-ethical* reason, although the conduct that resulted might be “ethical”, the *person* would not have become an ethical person (not at that stage, anyway).  
(Putnam 2004, p. 29)

Could we reasonably say that—despite what happens in practice—it is *in principle* possible to bring more and more morally unconscious people into the circle of the ethical life? Could we reasonably say that this circle may be enlarged so that virtually all human beings will behave according to moral principles, showing thereby the existence of *universal* moral principles and beliefs? Well, we *could* say that, but it would be a mere *façon de parler*. It would make no difference to practice, given the enormous obstacles we encounter. And since, according to a pragmatist maxim Putnam subscribes to, “what does not make a difference to practice should not make a difference to philosophy”, we have that believing that it falls within the cognitive powers of human beings to reach agreements on any question, and that we indeed shall agree on any question, even if *in principle*, is a patent illusion, a piece of utopian philosophy which runs

against the first condition we put on a successful discussion—the condition which imposes to avoid illusions.

However, this does not entail that philosophical relativism is right. Granted, we cannot reach ‘universal’ agreement on a given question—i.e. we cannot have something like a *convergence* of *all* cultures on the solution of a given problem. But it simply is not true that, if convergence is excluded from the epistemic horizon of human beings, then it is plausible to say that some problems are *irresolvable*—even in principle. To contrast philosophical relativism it suffices to show that two or more cultures may agree on the solution of a given problem, and therefore that cultures are not imprisoned, so to speak, in their respective conceptual schemata. Indeed, they are far from being shackled in this way, as we soon realize if we pay attention to the fact that—as we said above—there are many different ways of settling a discussion about a given question, none of which coincides with ‘the last word’ to be said on that question. As a matter of fact, no problem of intercultural interest may admit that a solution may be good once and for all. As fallibilism urges us to consider every agreement as being temporary and open to renegotiation, in case new evidence is acquired, and every belief may be put into discussion and, eventually shared. The very aim of discussion is ‘enlarging commonality’, and effort can be made in many different ways in order to find an epistemic connection between cultures.

Roughly speaking, what is *common* to different cultures is a matter of degrees on a spectrum the opposite ends of which are (very broad) beliefs shared by virtually every culture, on the one hand, and beliefs deeply rooted in single definite cultures, on the other. But even the most deeply-rooted beliefs can be put into rational discussion and, eventually, abandoned or shared by more than two cultures. Of course, in situations like these—cases which involve the most cherished beliefs of both parties in the dispute—even the best argument may be ineffective in order to make the opponent modify her or his position. But there still remains one chance (the ‘last one’, so to speak), i.e. being brought to modify one’s position by *rational persuasion*. Persuasion is what comes “at the end of reasons” (Wittgenstein 1969, § 612), to use Wittgenstein’s words. It is what we are committed to

when we try to argue with, say, the Azande [and realize that] we cannot find reasons that are reasons for them; the world views are so totally different that we sometimes find that in an argument with an intelligent Azande we cannot resort to ordinary argument based on premises that we share with the Azande but have to resort to persuasion. (Putnam 1995, p. 55)

Briefly, there are two relevant outcomes of a persuasive procedure (i.e. the effort to make room for premises which could be ‘shared’): either changing one’s mind, or better understanding of the opponent’s point of view. In the former case, one could change one’s mind and accept a given belief in virtue of what we may call a ‘Why not?’

argument, i.e. an argument to the effect that, even though there are no rational *positive* reasons to appeal to, neither are there any *negative* reasons. In the latter case, one could come to appreciate where the disagreement actually lies. In both cases, however, the fact is that a change is brought about as the result of a real intercultural discussion which is not at all *rhetorical* but *rational*—we have to use mother wit, for one thing, and mother wit would hardly allow rhetorical arguments.

So where do we stand with the question of the existence of ‘absolute and universal’ beliefs? We saw that it is possible to bring absoluteness to universality, and, then, that about important questions which sometimes divide cultures thinking that we might come to an universal agreement is an illusion. In fact, whenever we come to share beliefs with other cultures—beliefs we may reasonably take as ‘objectively’ true or false—this is hardly due to convergence. And this does not hold only for ethical, religious or theoretical questions, given that there are also genuine “factual estimates on which it is difficult if not impossible to ever get convergence” (Putnam 2004, p. 76). Thus, since convergence seems to require possession of beliefs universally agreed on, we have that, contrary to a pervasive conviction, the notion of objectivity, on the one hand, and those of absoluteness and universality, on the other, are to be divorced.

#### 4. Empirical and quasi-empirical fallibilism

We have seen that what gives Putnam’s anti-relativism its distinctive character is fallibilism, since it constantly aims at inflating beliefs with objectivity. Now, fallibilism comes at least in two varieties, and I would like to end this paper by highlighting the distinction and asking whether it is a distinction which really makes an essential difference.

We may call the two varieties of fallibilism ‘empirical’ and ‘quasi-empirical’, respectively. The slogan of the former could be “Experience can strike anywhere”, so that actually *no* belief is immune to revision—from ordinary empirical beliefs to ethical, mathematical and logical ones. Quine, Rorty and Popper rank among the empirical fallibilists, but—of course—we may take Quine as the main representative. The latter’s kind of fallibilism denies that experience can strike anywhere. In fact, doubt is deemed ‘senseless’ if directed toward those beliefs which are the cornerstones of our present body of knowledge—e.g. laws of logic and elementary mathematics, basic commonsense beliefs and the like. Who is the advocate of the ‘quasi-empirical’ kind of fallibilism? The answer is: “Hilary Putnam”. In fact, he maintains that our body of knowledge contains beliefs “which cannot be overthrown merely by *observations*, but only [...] by thinking of a whole body of alternative theory as well”. As we mentioned above, those beliefs he refers to as “*quasi-necessary*”, i.e. necessary in relation to our present conceptual scheme (cf. Putnam 1994b, p. 251). The moral is straightforward: “to insist [...] that *all* statements must be falsifiable—is to make falsifiability a third (or is it a fourth by now?) dogma of empiricism” (Putnam 1994b, p. 258).

I feel that this specification of the status of our beliefs, and the correlative distinction between two kinds of fallibilism, are of great importance. Moreover, I do not think that Putnam's quasi-empirical kind is a *softening* of fallibilism, as it has been claimed (cf. Ben-Menahem 2005b, p. 151). The unassailability of 'contextually' necessary truth is contained in the very idea of fallibilism from the start. Fallibilism is not skepticism, and does not recommend that we question a belief just for the fun of it. Doubt, as we stressed above, must be reasonable, and in certain cases plausible reasons are available only if 'a whole body of alternative theory' is present, otherwise we happily make do with the beliefs we have. I think this is the same point made by Peirce and Wittgenstein when they pointed to *common sense* as the foundations of knowledge. Common sense may be rejected as well (as every other part of our body of knowledge), but it does not seem advisable to try relentlessly to do that. Even if fallible, common sense is *grounding enough*. However, what I want to say is that the same attitude is detectable in Quine himself—the representative of the 'empirical' variety of fallibilism. Indeed, according to Quine,

To disavow the very core of common sense, to require evidence for that which both the physicist and the man in the street accept as platitudinous, is no laudable perfectionism; it is a pompous confusion, a failure to observe the nice distinction between the baby and the bath water. (Quine 1955, pp. 229-230)

So, to conclude, I think that Putnam's qualification of fallibilism is important, but that it was already contained in Quine's thought—even if implicitly. On the one hand, Quine—like Putnam—maintains that some beliefs should be preserved and shielded; on the other hand, Putnam—like Quine—maintains that quasi-necessary beliefs may be abandoned, although in very special circumstances. But then, where does the difference actually lie?

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## REPLY TO MASSIMO DELL'UTRI

HILARY PUTNAM

Massimo Dell'Utri knows my work very well, and, indeed, he has translated some of it into Italian. Nevertheless the temptation is always present to interpret a philosopher in such a way as to bring him close to oneself, and I think that, in places, this is what Massimo is doing here. So, it seems to me that, in one respect, I am, in a way, being interpreted out of my actual position.

I still reject the position I called “metaphysical realism” in *Reason, Truth and History*, but I now think that I chose an unfortunate name for it. It was a mistake to use that particular term, because there are *many* kinds of “metaphysical realism”, not just one—indeed, in one sense my present position (as opposed to the “internal realist” position I defended from 1976 to 1990) is a metaphysical realist one—for I *am* a realist *in* my metaphysics. Nevertheless, I am *not* a “metaphysical realist” in the sense that I attacked in *Reason, Truth and History*. In “metaphysical realism”, in the sense I attached to the term there, there were two leading ideas: one was the idea of making a catalog of all the kinds of things there are, i.e. all the kinds of things we can quantify over, and the second was that those things could be divided up into individuals and properties (or, in Quine's case, individuals and classes). Both ideas still seem to me to be “pipe dreams”. Think about the number of things that we talk about nowadays that simply don't fit in any of the classic categories. For example, what sort of an entity is a *depression*—in the economic sense of the word, not the psychological? What sort of an entity is a *war*? Constantly, as our conceptual vocabularies enlarge, we find ourselves able to refer to more and more aspects of reality that we never referred to before. The idea of a categorical list of all the fundamental aspects of reality may have seemed like a possible task to an ambitious Greek in the fifth or fourth century B.C., but I think that we should now recognize that it is tremendously overambitious. There's no foreseeable possibility of exhausting all the fundamental aspects of reality in any list we can ever make. That is one point I want to make.

The other point is that “ontology” itself, in the sense that Quine has given that term, is an extremely problematic project. To suppose that all the different aspects of reality can be cut up into “individuals” and “predicates” in just one way is a fundamental mistake—a mistake from a realist point of view. The phenomenon I have called “equivalent descriptions” (that is to say, the phenomenon of theories that if taken at face value clash, but in fact turn out to be intertranslatable) is widespread precisely in the fundamental science of physics, whose supposed “ontology” Quine so much admired. In fact

the physicists stumbled on the phenomenon quite independently of me, and they invented the term “duality” for exactly what I call “equivalent descriptions”. I do believe in realism in the sense of believing that there is a real world out there, most of which is not of our own making (we are of course very much interested in the part that is of our making, but most of it isn’t of our making), and I believe that there is a truth about that world which is not of our making—in that sense I am a realist in my metaphysics. I do believe that true empirical statements about contingent reality are made true because they correctly represent aspects of reality. That’s objectivity and I am an objectivist. But the question “What does objectivity in the epistemic sense mean?” is a much more complicated one. “Objectivity” has a number of senses; in particular it can refer for example to certain kinds of epistemic virtues, to certain ways of being detached, which are appropriate in certain contexts and not in others.

In fact, the key place where Massimo is really stating his position rather than mine occurs when he says:

An intersubjective agreement of this kind shows what we can take as ‘objective’ about a given question, what we can say is ‘true’ or ‘false’, ‘right’ or ‘wrong’, and so forth, giving content to the notions of objectivity, truth and rightness. Thus, since these contents arise from the cognitive procedures by means of which we promote discussions, and do not therefore transcend the power of the human cognitive faculties, those notions reveal themselves as *epistemic* ones.

That is what I thought in my “internal realist” period, which I gave up in 1990, and so it is not what I think now. I do not think that the notion of truth is an epistemic notion. If it were an epistemic notion, then there couldn’t be truths that are unknowable. But there *can* be truths that are unknowable. I do not subscribe to the view that truth is an epistemic notion.

It simply isn’t true for example that Peirce defined truth correctly. In several places I have stressed the deleterious effects of the Copenhagen interpretation of quantum mechanics. In *The Quest for Certainty*, Dewey argues that the real meaning of the theoretical statements in science is what they say about observables, and in support of that he cites the latest science, Bohr’s Copenhagen interpretation. (He had a granddaughter who took a PhD in theoretical physics in Copenhagen, and he talked about that with her.) So, it doesn’t matter if Dewey gave up the word “metaphysics”; he held a metaphysical view of truth, right to the end of his life. In fact, he held a metaphysical view of reality, I would say, because he had the strange view—as far as I can make it out—that reality consists of qualities, but there is no *knowledge* of qualities. This is a clear example of the fact that the generalization “Whenever a philosopher says that metaphysics is over, you can start looking for the bad metaphysics” is correct.

I believe in a big world in which human sensations are a very small part, as opposed to the empiricist-cum-idealist picture that the real world is only a very small part of a reality consisting of certain patterns in human sensations. That has always seemed to me a crazy picture. And if there is a real world of which we are only a very small part, then surely there are a lot of truths about it that are not going to be verifiable by human beings. It could be, for example, that the sentence “There are no intelligent extraterrestrials” is true—and if it’s true, it is very likely that we can never know that it is true.

Let me spell this out: suppose that there are no intelligent extraterrestrials. Perhaps that is highly improbable. Perhaps the probability is 99.999 that there are, somewhere in this big universe, intelligent extraterrestrials. But it is a *logical consequence of the notion of probability itself* that if you say that the probability is 99.999 that there are intelligent extraterrestrials, you are also saying that maybe there are none (with the probability 0.001). Suppose then that there are no such extraterrestrials. Since information cannot travel faster than light, most parts of the universe are sufficiently far away that causal signals from them showing that they contain no such extraterrestrials could never reach us. Thus it may be physically impossible for human beings ever to know the truth that intelligent extraterrestrials do not exist, if they don’t. So, for realists the idea that truth cannot outrun verifiability is unacceptable. I can see no justification for the identification of what is true with what is in principle verified or could in principle be verified. And once one says that truth outruns verifiability, then the idea that truth is epistemic is ruled out.

I would like to talk about just three more points touched on in Massimo’s paper. First, I did say once that we shouldn’t attach metaphysical weight to bivalence, but I was wrong to say that. (I think that I was overly impressed by something Wittgenstein said.) In general, I think statements *are* true or false unless they are vague. But apart from cases in which one can point to a relevant vagueness, perhaps a vagueness arising from a particular context of use, I don’t think one should reject bivalence. In particular, what I think we should say is that there are mathematical truths that outrun provability by human beings; that is, there is a fact of the matter as to the truth of mathematical statements in many cases in which human beings are unable to ascertain that truth.

Secondly, about the question “What is the difference between Quine’s position and mine regarding fallibilism”, Massimo writes—and this is correct for Quine but not for me—“Common sense may be rejected as well (as every other part of our body of knowledge)”. Well, what I want to say is that part of my position is that there are statements such that saying that they are false—even saying that they are possibly false—has no presently intelligible sense. But I also maintain that in each particular case, the judgment that a statement is necessarily true is itself corrigible. In short, I believe—and have believed ever since I wrote “It Ain’t Necessarily So” and “The Analytic and the Synthetic”—that we need the notion of a *revisable* necessity, the notion of what I have called *necessity relative to a body of knowledge*. On revisability, Quine and I agreed, of

course, but his position failed to do justice to the *difference* between, say, arithmetical truths and empirical ones.

Finally, Massimo correctly emphasized in his paper that people could actually come to agreements through *democratic and fallibilistic discussion*—which I think is the Deweyan successor to the a priori decisions of the philosophers. Not that what results from democratic fallibilistic discussion would necessarily be true—it can involve mistakes too. But to mimic what Winston Churchill said about democracy, democratic fallibilistic discussion, especially well-informed discussion, is the worst of all possible systems except for all those others that have actually been tried.

This brings us back to the question of *objectivity*—especially in ethics.

One of the familiar problems of moral philosophy is how to relate to humans who feel no obligations to the institution of morality. (It is not that one has a simple answer or the same answer in all cases.) But we often forget that one of the chief functions of morality is to enable us to resolve conflicts not with immoral people, but with other moral people. For me, it was the emphasis that Stanley Cavell put on that point in Part Three of *The Claim of Reason* that I found novel, and that to a certain extent shifted my way of thinking about morality. We are all aware that there is a question of the moral individual versus the immoral individual, but we tend to downplay the question of moral people who have disagreements, even disagreements that are not going to have any resolution. As Cavell puts it, there can be a rational argument which doesn't end in agreement—the fact that an argument doesn't lead to a conclusion that everyone agrees on doesn't show that the argument was irrational.

Moreover, I think that one thing we cannot do is to show that the unethical person is *irrational*. If we take it as a constraint on the semantics of ethical language that it should be possible to show that the unethical person is irrational, then we will lose—cognitivism will lose. Showing such a thing is simply an unrealistic ambition. I think that it is certainly true that someone could be fully rational and not ethical. Thus I think it should *not* be part of the burden of any present day ethical cognitivist to try to pretend that there is ahistorical truth in ethics. Ethics is a human institution. It rests on human interests—it doesn't rest on a transcendental principle. If we think of ethics as a human institution—and not in a metaphysical way, i.e. as something a priori—think of it as an institution which is the least violent way we have of resolving conflicts—then we may be able to see that ethics rests *not* on one fundamental principle, one fundamental interest, but on a *set* of interests, e.g. an interest in compassion, an interest in universality (ethics should apply to everyone), an interest in equality (equality before the ethical law, which is in large part something that came in with the constitutional revolutions in Europe in the 1840s). These are ideas that have a history and also possess wide appeal. Moreover, they are not ideas whose appeal affected only Europeans. The moment they reached China, they swept China; they swept to some extent Japan; they swept India. These are ideas that we have come to accept because of their wide

appeal. But if someone genuinely does *not* have these interests—if someone is not out to treat others as equals, not out to be compassionate, not out to obey the moral law, I can't say that person is *irrational*. I can't *prove* that he should behave differently—there is no argument that will prove to the bad man that if he is rational, he must become good, or at least sincerely agree that he ought to become good. That's not what we can provide. We must not, as it were, have a *magical view of rationality*. I do, however, think that believing in the objectivity of ethics is believing that there is a fact of the matter—sometimes a fuzzy one, because reasonableness is a vague notion—as to what is reasonable to do to further the interests I mentioned. And if you ask “Would the world be better off if such and such a moral idea were adopted?”, very often it would be clear that everyone who has those moral interests at all would answer “Yes”. In that sense morality is *objective*.

In sum, I think it is possible to have a kind of “moderate cognitivism” in ethics, which is fully compatible with naturalism, and which does not commit one in the ambitions of Kantian, or Platonic ethics.



SAŽETAK

STEPHEN WHITE

O IZOSTANKU POVEZNICE: PUTNAM, DIREKTNA PERCEPCIJA I FREGEOVO  
OGRANIČENJE

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I Hilary Putnam i John McDowell iznjeli su argumente protiv teorija reprezentacijskog realizma u percepciji zagovarajući direktni realizam (ili zdravorazumski realizam) kao alternativni pristup. Tvrdim da u oba slučaja *beg the question* protiv svojih protivnika koji zagovaraju reprezentacijski realizam. Štoviše, niti jedan nije ponudio alternativu stajalištu reprezentacijskog realizma koje se tiču rješenja perceptivnih ili demonstrativnih verzija Fregeova problema. U ovom radu predstavljam transcendentni argument prema kojem neki od naših opažaja vanjskih predmeta moraju biti direktni u smislu da opažamo te predmete i ništa više što bi bilo s tim opažajem. Također nudim odgovor na uobičajene prigovore tvrdnji da se transcendentni argumenti mogu koristiti samo kako bi poduprli zaključke o svijetu, ali ne i o našoj upotrebi koncepata. Naposljetku, predstavljam teoriju unutar koje se relevantni Fregeovi problemi mogu riješiti bez pozivanja na bilo kakve vrste reprezentacija na način kako ih definira reprezentacijski realizam.

**Gljučne riječi:** Hilary Putnam, percepcija, reprezentacija, Fregeov problem, transcendentni argument

SAŽETAK

MAURO DORATO

PUTNAM O VREMENU I SPECIJALNOJ RELATIVNOSTI: DUGAČKO PUTOVANJE OD  
ONTOLOGIJE DO ETIKE

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U ovom članku raspravljam o Putnamovom stajalištu o vremenu i specijalnoj teoriji relativnosti (STR), prije svega smještajući je unutar općenitijeg filozofskog okvira i referirajući primarno na Sellarsovu distinkciju između znanstvene i pojavne slike svijeta. Zatim rekonstruiram Putnamov argument o realnosti budućnosti i determiniranosti istinsne vrijednosti za buduće slučajnosti (Putnam, 1967) pokazujući da se temelji na tri premise koje generiraju proturječje. U drugom dijelu članka raspravljam o Putnamovom argumentu koristeći kasnije rezultate koji pripadaju temeljima STR i kvantne mehanike (Putnam, 2005) i oslanjajući se na konceptualnu analizu. Budući da pokazujem da je debata između prezentista i eternalista pogrešno smještena unutar ontologije, zaključujem da se ona svodi na naše različite praktične stavove o prošlosti, sadašnjosti i budućnosti.

**Gljučne riječi:** specijalna teorija relativnosti, prezentizam, eternalizam, postajanje, ontologija, pragmatizam

SAŽETAK

MASSIMO DELL'UTRI

PRIJETNJA KULTURALNOG RELATIVIZMA: HILARY PUTNAM I PROTUOTROV  
FALIBILIZMU

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Polemička meta članka je 'radikalni kulturalni relativizam' prema kojem je valjanost načela, vrijednosti, izjava, teorija i slično relativna isključivo prema kulturi unutar koje se razvijaju. U članku se nastoji pokazati da je ova vrsta relativizma fundamentalno pogrešna. Pritom se uglavnom pozivam

na mišljenje Hilarya Putnama, posebice na ključni element Putnamove filozofije - pojam *istine* – substantivni normativni pojam o kojem raspravlja u kontekstu pitanja relativizma primjenjujući pritom postignuća do kojih je došao tijekom svog ‘dugačkog putovanja od realizma do realizma’. Neka od ovih postignuća su potom izdvojena. Budući da se čini da ona obvezuju Putnama da u potpunosti izbací pojam objektivnosti, spriječavajući ga tako da razmotri bilo kakvu anti-relativističku poziciju, u članku se dotiče još jedan element njegove filozofije koji potkrjepljuje pojam objektivnosti - falibilizam.

Uz stanociti odmak od Putnamova kasnijeg rada, u članku se nadalje pokazuje kako falibilizam omogućuje formulaciju antirelativističkog stajališta koje se temelji na epistemičkim premisama.

Članak završava analizom posljedica koje ova vrsta antirelativizma ima na pojmove univerzalnosti i apsoluta, kao i kratkom raspravom o samom falibilizmu.

**Ključne riječi:** Hilary Putnam, relativizam, falibilizam, istina, objektivnost

#### SAŽETAK

DAVID MACARTHUR

PUTNAM, PRAGMATIZAM I SUDBINA METAFIZIKE

Putnam je pozivao na obnavljanje filozofije oslanjajući se na imena dvaju oštrih kritičara tradicionalne metafizike, Wittgensteina i Deweya. U svjetlu njegovih napada na različite oblike metafizike (primjerice metafizički realizam, razlikovanje činjenica i vrijednosti), jedno od pitanja koje se postavlja je i sljedeće: kakva je sudbina metafizike u Putnamovoj viziji filozofije? U ovom se članku istražuje to pitanje tako što se Putnamu pripisuje ‘široki’ pragmatistički pristup metafizici na različite načine oprmjeren kod Jamesa i Deweya. Završavam nudeći nekoliko različitih načina na koje možemo razumjeti Putnamovu tvrdnju da “postoji smisao u kojem je zadatak filozofije nadvladati metafiziku i smisao u kojem je njezin zadatak nastaviti metafizičku raspravu”.

**Ključne riječi:** Putnam, metafizika, pragmatizam, James, Dewey

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Nozick 1981, p. 203

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