

**Phil 420: *Metaphysics*  
Spring 2008**

**[Handout 4]**

**Hilary Putnam:  
Why There Isn't A Ready-Made World**

**§ Putnam's Main Theses:**

**1. There is no "ready-made" world.**

**\* [A *ready-made* world]:**

\_\_\_\_\_ The world itself has to have a 'built-in' structure since otherwise theories with different structures might correctly 'copy' the world (from different perspectives) and truth would lose its absolute (non-perspectival) character.

**2. Contemporary materialism and essentialism are inconsistent with each other.**

**\* [Contemporary materialism]**

\_\_\_\_\_ On the one hand, the materialist claims that physics is an approximation to a sketch of the one true theory, the true and complete description of the furniture of the world.

\_\_\_\_\_ On the other hand, he meets the epistemological argument against metaphysics by claiming that we don't *need* an intellectual intuition to do *his* sort of metaphysics: his metaphysics is as open ended, as infinitely revisable and fallible, as science itself. In fact, it *is* science itself! This is to "naturalize" metaphysics: placing metaphysics within the bounds of science.

\_\_\_\_\_ There is somewhere "one true theory". This belief in *one true theory* requires a *ready-made* world.

**§ Two Leading Metaphysical Views:**

Two ideas that have become part of our philosophical culture stand in a certain amount of conflict. **Q: What is the conflict?**

**1. [Metaphysical realism]**

\_\_\_\_\_ We can think and talk about things as they are, independently of our minds, and that we can do this by virtue of a 'correspondence' relation between the terms in our language and some sorts of mind-independent entities.

**2. [Non-Essentialism]**

\_\_\_\_\_ It only makes sense to speak of an "essential property" of something *relative to a description....* The question "what are the essential properties of the thing *in*

*itself*” is a nonsensical one. The denial of essence is also a denial of *intrinsic* structure.

### § Non-essentialism

“essential property”

\_\_\_ a property *P* is an essential property of *x*, iff without *P*, *x* would cease being *x*  
(Or: *x* has *P* necessarily)

[The argument against “essential properties”]



1. Suppose a piece of clay has been formed into a statue.
2. That piece of clay = that statue.
3. However, the essential property of the statue is being a statue, which is not the essential property of that clay.
4. The essential property of clay is being clay, which is not the essential property of that statue.
5. Therefore, whether a property is essential is relative to a description.
6. Therefore, there are no *intrinsically* essential properties.

### § The trouble with “correspondence”:

\_\_\_ There are many different ways of putting the signs of a language and the things in a set *S* in correspondence with one another, in fact infinitely many if the set *S* is infinite (and a very large finite number if *S* is a large finite set).

\_\_\_ How can we pick out any *one* correspondence between our words (or thoughts) and the supposed mind-independent things *if we have no direct access to the mind-independent things?*

### \* The incompatibility between metaphysical realism and non-essentialism:

\_\_\_ If the denial of intrinsic properties is right, then it is not more essential to a mental event that it stands in a relation *C1*, to any object *x* than it is that it stands in any other relation *C2*, to any other object *y*. Nor is it any more essential to a non-mental object that

it stand in a relation C to any one of my thoughts than it is that it stand in any one of a myriad other relations to any one of my other thoughts.

\_\_\_ If there are no essential properties or intrinsic structure, then **no relation is metaphysically singled out as *the* relation between thoughts and things.** We can't get "correspondence" at all.

### § On contemporary materialism:

**Contemporary materialists assume that there is a ready-made world with its built-in structures. These built-in structures include**

- (i) **causal relations: Events have causes; objects have 'causal powers.'**
- (ii) **reference**

\_\_\_ **What makes it the case that I *refer* to chairs is that I have *causally interacted* with them, and that I would not utter the utterances containing the word 'chair' that I do if I did not have causal transactions of *the appropriate type* with chairs.**

### § [Putnam's Arguments against Contemporary Materialism]

1. **Is *causation* a physical relation?**
2. **What on earth could make anyone think that *reference* is a physical relation?**

What we learn from Kant:

\_\_\_ The whole enterprise of trying to *demonstrate* the existence and nature of a supersensible world by speculation leads only to antinomies.

1. The universe *must* have a cause.
2. But that cause would have to have a cause.
3. But an infinite regress is no explanation.
4. Self-causation is impossible.
5. So, ???

\_\_\_ When I have a memory of an experience this is not, contrary to Hume, *just* an image which 'resembles' the earlier experience. To be a memory the interpretation has to be 'built in': the interpretation that this is a *past* experience of *mine*.

\_\_\_ The notion of *past* involves causality and that causality involves laws and objects. Past experiences are not directly available; saying we 'remember' them is saying we have succeeded in constructing a version with causal relations and a continuing self in which they are located.

Therefore, all experience involves mental construction.

Wittgenstein: rabbit/duck experiment:

\_\_\_ While the physical image is capable of being seen either way, no 'mental image' is capable of being seen either way: the mental image is always unambiguously a duck

image or a rabbit image.... We might express this difference by saying the interpretation is *built in* to the ‘mental image’; the mental image is a *construction*.

➔ Truth becomes a radically epistemic notion. **Truth is *assertability* (by creatures with our rational natures) *under optimal conditions* (as determined by our sensible natures).**

## § Putnam on Causation

Two possible definitions of ‘causation’:

[1] causal laws – whenever A-type event happens, then a B-type event follows in time.

[Few philosophers believe today that this is possible.]

[2] sufficient condition – A cause is a *sufficient* condition for its effect; whenever the cause occurs, the effect *must* follow (at least in a deterministic world).

e.g. {striking the match, oxygen in the air, phosphorus on the stick, the force exerted, the structure of the surface, ...} ➔ {igniting the match}



[total cause]:

\_\_\_ An example of a total cause at time  $t_0$  of a physical event  $e$  occurring at a later time  $t_1$ , and a point  $x$  would be the entire distribution of values of the dynamical variables at time  $t_0$ .

However: [The Argument against *Causation* being a physical relation]

1. In ordinary language ‘cause’ rarely (if ever) means “total cause”: Even if the notion of ‘total cause’ *were* physically definable, it would not be possible to use it either in daily life or in philosophy.
2. We regard certain parts of the total cause as ‘background,’ and refer only to *the part of interest* as ‘the’ cause.
3. What we point out as the *relevant* or *salient* features in causation is our way to explain why event C causes event E.
4. Therefore, in its ordinary sense, ‘cause’ can often be paraphrased by a locution involving *explain*.
5. But this notion is certainly not physically definable.
6. Therefore, causation cannot be a purely physical relation. Our explanation is already built into this relation.

\* What is and what is not a ‘cause’ or an ‘explanation’ depends on *background knowledge* and our reason for asking the question (our *interest*). Saliency and relevance are attributes of thought and reasoning, not of nature.

Hence, contemporary materialism is incoherent:

1. If events *intrinsically* explain other events, if there are saliencies, relevancies, standards of what are ‘normal’ conditions, and so on, built into the world itself independently of minds, then the world is in many ways *like* a mind, or infused with something very much like reason.
2. And if *that* is true, then materialism *cannot* be true (it would be *objective idealism* instead).

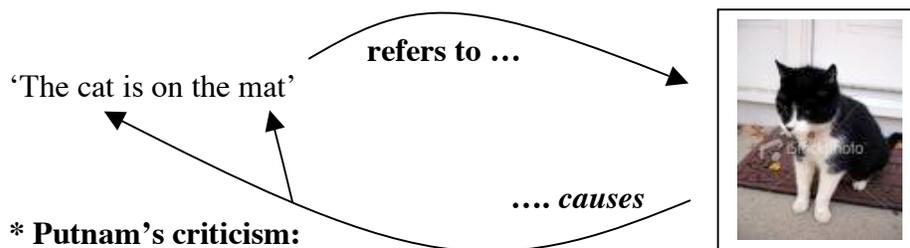
### § Putnam on Reference

Contemporary materialists assume that reference is a physical relation:

**The cat is on the mat.** → the words ‘the cat’ in the particular sentence-analog stand in a physical relation R (the relation of *reference*) to some cat and the words ‘the mat’ stand in the relation R to some mat.

Lewis’ suggestion is that *reference* is a member of such a batch of properties: not functional properties of the organism, but functional properties of the organism-environment system.

Typical examples of functional properties come from the world of computers.... Functional properties are typically defined in batches; the properties or ‘states’ in a typical batch (say, the properties that are involved in a given computer program) are characterized by a certain *pattern*. Each property has specified cause and effect relations to the other properties in the pattern and to certain non-functional properties (the ‘inputs’ and ‘outputs’ of the programs).



1. The crucial point is that functional properties are defined *using the notions of cause and effect*.
2. But *cause and effect* is not a physical relation (as argued above), since it is heavily based on background condition and our interest in explanation.
3. Hence, ‘reference’ cannot be defined in purely physical terms. *Reference* is not a purely physical relation.

[The Argument against *Reference* being a physical relation]

1. The Materialist thinks that we *refer to* objects in the world in one particularly correct way: that reference is a physical relation.
2. But reference is a flexible, interest-relative notion: what we count as *referring* to something depends on background knowledge and our willingness to be charitable in interpretation.
3. Therefore, the relation of reference cannot serve as a proof of materialism.

§ Conclusion:

1. Contemporary materialism is false because it cannot find any relation (neither *causation* nor *reference*) that is built into the world itself.
2. The approach to which I have devoted this paper is an approach which claims that **there is a ‘transcendental’ reality in Kant’s sense, one absolutely independent of our minds, that the relative ideal of knowledge is to copy it or put our thoughts in ‘correspondence’ with it, but (and this is what makes it ‘natural’ metaphysics) we need no intellectual intuition to do this: the ‘scientific method’ will do the job for us.**
3. But the idea of a coherent theory of the noumena; consistent, systematic, and arrived at by ‘the scientific method’ seems to me to be chimerical.
4. **There is, then, nothing in the history of science to suggest that it either aims at or should aim at one single *absolute* version of ‘the world.’**

If all this is a failure, as Kant saw, where do we go from there?

§ Putnam’s proposal: *Internal Realism*

One direction, the only direction I myself see as making sense, might be species of pragmatism, internal realism: a realism which recognizes a difference between ‘*p*’ and ‘I think that *p*’, between being *right*, and merely thinking one is right without locating that objectivity in either *transcendental correspondence* or *mere consensus*.

Goodman: *ways of world-making*

\_\_\_ We should give up the notion of ‘*the world*’.

\_\_\_ We make many versions [many worlds]; the standards of rightness that determine what is right and what is wrong are corrigible, relative to task and technique, but *not* subjective.

Putnam:

1. All experience involves mental construction.

2. The dependence of physical objects concepts and experience concepts goes *both* ways: The mind and the world together make up the mind and the world.

**Discussion Questions:**

1. What is the view of “metaphysical realism”?
  2. What is the trouble with “correspondence” according to Putnam?
  3. What are the basic assumptions of Materialism on causation and reference?
  4. What does Putnam mean by the claim that the notion of *causation* involves human perspectives? (What is “total cause”? What is the connection between “causation” and “causal explanation”?)
  5. What is Putnam’s “internal realism” or “pragmatic realism”? Is it still a form of “realism” in your opinion?
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	<b>Searle</b>	<b>Putnam</b>
<b>Reality</b>	<b>Reality is independent of our representations of it.</b>	<b>The mind and the world make up the mind and the world.</b>
<b>The world</b>	<b>There is <i>a</i> way the world is.</b>	<b>There is no ready-made world.</b>
<b>Truth</b>	<b>Truth is a relation of “correspondence”</b>	<b>Truth is <i>assertability</i> (by creatures with our rational natures) <i>under optimal conditions</i> (as determined by our sensible natures).</b>
<b>Conceptual relativity</b>	<b>Yes. Complete epistemic objectivity is difficult, sometimes impossible.</b>	<b>Objectivity lies neither in <i>transcendental correspondence</i> nor in <i>mere consensus</i>.</b>