

**Phil 420: Metaphysics
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[Handout 5]

Ernest Sosa: Putnam's Pragmatic Realism

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§ Summary of Putnam's Position

1. Having once championed hard realism, Putnam has moved steadily away from any scientism that would have physical science determine fully our world view and its ontology to the detriment of our lifeworld.
2. Putnam has been at pains to distinguish his view from Rortean relativism and from the excesses of recent French philosophy, but he has also warned repeatedly against naïve belief in a ready-made world with "in-itself" categories.
3. According to his own preferred *via media*, **the mind and the world jointly constitute both the mind and the world.**
4. In Putnam's own mind, objectivism and absolutism are closely related.
5. Putnam's rejection of the dichotomies derives from his rejection of the possibility that there are things-in-themselves with intrinsic properties.
6. Realism is *compatible with* conceptual relativity.

§ Summary of Putnam's Arguments:

1. The Model-theoretic Argument
2. The Argument from the Nonobjectivity of Reference and Causal Relations
3. The Argument from the Unlikelihood of Scientific Convergence on a Finished Science
4. The Argument from the Nonabsoluteness of Objecthood and of Existence

§ Sosa's Critique of Putnam's Arguments:

A. [Putnam] The Model-theoretic Argument

Sosa: It seems to me that on this argument we have reached an impasse.

B. [Putnam] The Argument from the Nonobjectivity of Reference and Causal Relations

1. **Truth depends on, and is constituted by, reference (at least in part).**
2. **Reference depends on, and is constituted by, causation (at least partly).**
3. **Causation is radically perspectival.**
4. **Thus, reference is radically perspectival. (from 2, 3)**

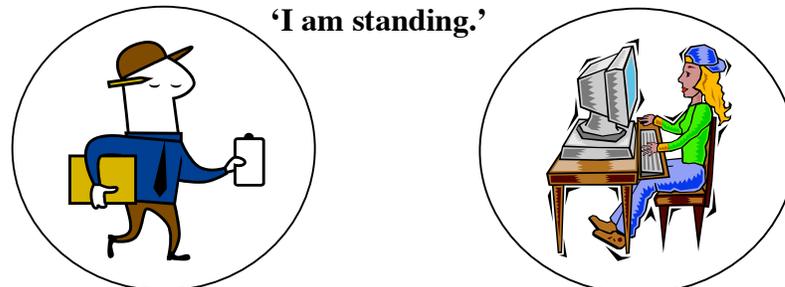
5. Thus, truth is radically perspectival. (from 1, 4)
6. Thus, reality is internal to one's perspective. (from 5)

Explanation:

___ Strictly speaking, 'X causes Y' is true or false not absolutely, but only relative to perspective. If the sort of causation constitutive of reference is thus radically perspectival, then reference is similarly perspectival, and so then must truth be, since reference is in turn constitutive of truth. But in that case reality itself must be also perspectival, also relative to perspective, and in that sense "internal" to perspective, and not wholly external.

Sosa's Critique:

1. What seems most questionable is the move from the perspectival character of truth to the perspectival character of reality itself. **Suppose that our concepts and our conceptual scheme are thus importantly perspectival. Would it follow that reality itself must be similarly perspectival?**
2. Take a world W defined by two people (Paul and Mary) and the postural state (standing, not-standing) of each, such that in W Paul is standing while Mary is sitting. In W, therefore, the sentence 'I am standing' is true relative to Paul, but false relative to Mary. And, more generally: whatever is true in a certain world W relative to a certain perspective and whatever is false is as it is in that world a necessary consequence of how things are in that world absolutely and nonperspectivally.



3. Everything that is true relative to a perspective and everything that is false relative to a perspective may be as it is as a necessary consequence of the absolute and nonperspectival character of things.
4. Even if it is true that our concepts of reference and truth are ineliminably perspectival, it still would not follow that reality itself could not be largely as it is independently of us and our thought, in the sense that plenty of reality could have existed propertied and interrelated very extensively even if we have never existed to have any thoughts, and even if no other finite thinkers had taken our place.
5. What is more, our perspectival references and truths may be seen to derive necessarily from absolute and unperspectival reality.

[C]. The Argument from the Unlikelihood of Scientific Convergence on a Finished Science [Putnam]

Q: What is the “finished science”? How different would it be from our *current* science? If the finished science rejects all matters posited in our current science, does this mean that what we take to exist now (atoms, energy, etc.) actually don’t exist?

*** [Putnam's Argument against Finished Science]:**

- 1. There is no real possibility of a finished science.**
- 2. Things-in-themselves are by definition the things in the ontology of finished science, and intrinsic, objective properties are by definition those in the ideology of finished science.**
- 3. Hence, there is no possibility that there are things-in-themselves with intrinsic, objective properties.**

Explanation:

1. When we see that finished science might well be a chimera, that our best attitude to it is that of agnosticism, we must not assert the claims of our present, unfinished science as if they amounted to truths about an in-itself reality and its intrinsic properties.
2. Rather, we should rest content with the assertibility of our assertions in our unfinished conceptual or linguistic frameworks. But of course what is assertible in one framework may not be so in another. So we have to learn to live with our relativism.
3. Mathematics and physics, as well as ethics and history and politics, show our conceptual choices; *the world is not going to impose a single language upon us, no matter what we choose to talk about.*

*** [Putnam's Argument against Objectivism]:**

- 1. Objectivism is the view that what really has a place in objective reality is only what is included in the ontology and the ideology of "finished science", only that the absolute conception recognizes.**
- 2. However, the history of science induction precludes any reasonable expectation of convergence on one final ontology and ideology.**
- 3. Therefore, objectivism is hopeless.**

Explanation:

1. The only viable form of metaphysical realism is objectivism (or materialism or scientific realism).
2. For objectivism only properties that figure in strict and exceptionless laws are real properties of things in themselves -- though perhaps we might admit also properties based on strict laws in the way strict dispositional properties might be so based.
3. But clearly there is little prospect that the mind can be viewed as constitutive or characterized by such properties.
4. If we think of some mental properties in terms of dispositions, and of these in terms of conditionals, we find that the conditionals involved are all " in normal conditions," *ceteris paribus* sorts of conditionals; and none of these has a place in finished science.

5. As for reference, aboutness, and correspondence, the most promising account of these acceptable to an objectivist is in terms of causation. But the causation involved would be relative to interests and background conditions and hence perspectival in a way antithetical to finished science.

Sosa's Critique:

There is much to discuss about this whole argument, but one main focus of serious doubt is its assumption that realism (even commonsense realism about observable reality) can be upheld only if scientific realism can be upheld. This runs up against a problem: the history of science induction that feeds doubt against scientific convergence is inapplicable to our commonsense conception of ordinary reality or anyhow to a substantial portion of it.

[D]. [Putnam] The Argument for Conceptual Relativity

* **How to count things:** Is it an object that is partly red and partly black, or are there two objects, one is wholly red and the other is wholly black?

Putnam: The question is one of the choice of language. On some days it might be convenient to use one language, and other days it might be convenient to use another language.



[The Argument]:

1. Each of us acquires and develops a view of things that includes criteria of existence and perdurance for categories of objects.
2. When we consider whether an object of a certain sort exists, the specification of the sort will entail the relevant criteria of existence and perdurance.
3. And when we correctly recognize that an object of that sort does exist, our claim is elliptical for ".... exists relative to *this* conceptual scheme.'
4. Therefore, there is no absoluteness in objecthood or in existence itself.

Explanation:

There is no *absolute* right or wrong in our choice of ontology (what things exist and how they exist). What language we use is a matter of linguistic convenience.

e.g. how many “cities” are there in Orange County? How counts as a “neighborhood”? How far is Fullerton from Los Angeles?

*** note: [semantic ascent] from Quine**

___ **“Semantic ascent occurs when you switch from talking about objects to talking about words as in switching from talking about whether unicorns exist to whether the word “unicorn” has any useful role to play in our theory.”** (Pete Mandik)

___ In other words, we switch from the language we use to a “meta-language”.

Finally:

§ [Putnam's Mater Argument]: [PMA]

1. **Realism (in general) is acceptable only if scientific realism is acceptable.**
2. **Scientific realism is not acceptable, if only because of the history of science induction, which precludes any reasonable expectation of convergence on one final ontology and ideology.**
3. **Therefore, realism is unacceptable: we cannot accept that there are any things-in-themselves with intrinsic properties; we can accept at best a view of things constitutive of our present conceptual or linguistic framework, but we must not suppose that this would gain convergence among persistent, undefective inquirers, etc.**

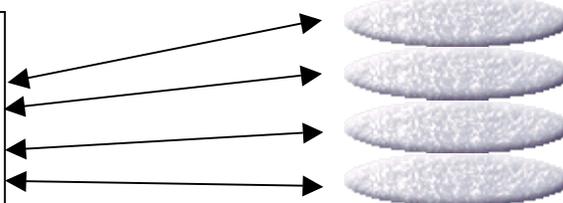
[Sosa's Criticism]:

___ One premise that seems immediately dubious is the first. A large fragment of our commonsense view of ourselves and things around us seems quite safe from anything like the history of science induction. Surely, there is a great deal in our ordinary outlook that we share in common with groups widely divergent from us in place, time, and culture. Concerning all of that, nothing like the history of science induction stands in the way of convergence. Suppose we granted that the acceptability (the certainly or at least the likelihood of) convergence *is* relevant to the acceptability of ordinary realism. And suppose we granted further that, given the history of science induction, we *cannot* plausibly expect that there would be any relevant sort of convergence in science: that here we must remain at best agnostic. Even so, that would not establish internal realism with its conceptual or linguistic relativity.

[the example of snowball and snowdiscall]



Snowball (SB)



Snowdiscall (SD)

___ In every case, there are criteria of existence and of perdurance for an entity of the sort in question such that necessarily an entity of the sort exists at t (perdures through t) if and only if its criteria of existence are satisfied at t .

___ Compare now with our ordinary concept of a snowball, the concept of a snowdiscall, defined as *an entity constituted by a piece of snow as matter and as form any shape between round and being disc-shaped*.

___ At any given time, therefore, any piece of snow that constitutes a snowball might at a time constitute a snowdiscall without then constituting a snowball.

___ Any snowball SB must hence be constituted by *a piece of snow* PS which also then constitutes a snowdiscall SD. Now, SB is distinct from PS, since PS would survive squashing and SB would not. By similar reasoning, SD also is distinct from PS. And, again by similar reasoning, SB must also be distinct from SD, since enough partial flattening of PS will destroy SB but not SD.... Whenever a piece of snow constitutes a snowball, it constitutes many entities all sharing its place with it.

- (i) SB = snowball
- (ii) SD = snowdiscall
- (iii) PS = a piece of snow
- (iv) SB \neq PS (since PS would survive squashing and SB would not)
- (v) SD \neq PS (same reason)
- (vi) SB \neq SD (since enough partial flattening of PS will destroy SB but not SD)
- (vii) Therefore, PS constitutes both SB and SD, but PS, SB and SD are all different objects
- (viii) We now have "the explosion of existence": SB, SD₁, SD₂..., PS₁, PS₂.... They each have its own criteria for existence and perdurance, and each is a distinct object from one another.

§ Existential Relativism OR Explosionism

[Explosionism]: There are as many objects as there are descriptions for the kinds

We now have "the explosion of existence": SB, SD₁, SD₂..., PS₁, PS₂....

OR: [Existential Relativism]: Things exist relative to our scheme. If we had not existed, if there were no conceptual schemes, things would not have existed on their own either.

___ We might perhaps resist this "explosion" of our ordinary world by embracing conceptual relativism. Just as we are not willing to countenance the existence of snowdiscalls, just so another culture might have been unwilling to countenance snowballs. We do not countenance snowdiscalls, because our conceptual scheme does not give to the snowdiscall form the status required for it to be a proper constitutive form of a separate sort of entity -- at least not with snow as underlying stuff.

Consequences of Conceptual Relativism:

1. That would block the explosion of reality, but the price is conceptual relativity.
2. What thus exists relative to one conceptual scheme may not do so relative to another.
3. In order for such a sort of entity to exist relative to a conceptual scheme, that conceptual scheme must recognize its constituent from as an appropriate way for a separate sort of entity to be constituted.
4. Our conceptual scheme encompasses criteria of existence and of perdurance for the sorts of objects that it recognizes.

Q: Shall we say now that a sort of object O exists (has existed, exists now, or will exist) relative to a scheme C at t if and only if, at t, C recognizes sort O by allowing the corresponding criteria?

The picture is roughly this.

1. Each of us acquires and develops a view of things that includes criteria of existence and perdurance for categories of objects.
2. When we consider whether an object of a certain sort exists, the specification of the sort will entail the relevant criteria of existence and perdurance.
3. And when we correctly recognize that an object of that sort does exist, our claim is elliptical for "... exists relative to *this* our conceptual scheme.'
4. Therefore, there is no absoluteness in objecthood or in existence itself.

Again, this is not the only conceivable view of the matter. We could try to live with the explosion.

If we allow the satisfaction by any sequence S of any form F of the appropriate polydicity and logical form to count as a criterion of existence for a corresponding sort of object, then reality right in us, before us, and all around us is unimaginably richer and more bizarre than we have ever imagined. And anyway we shall still face the problem of giving some explanation for why we focus so narrowly on the objects we do attend to, whose criteria of existence and perdurance we do recognize, to the exclusion of the plethora of other objects all around and even in the very same place.

§ Sosa: We have three choices:

[Eliminativism]:	[Absolutism]:	[Conceptual relativism]:
→ linguistic convenience only; no real existence other than the basic elements	→ explosion of existence; all conceivable things do exist on their own	→ criteria makes up existence; things exist relative to each conceptual scheme

[Eliminativism]:

___ **A disappearance view for which our ordinary talk is so much convenient abbreviation. The only existing things are the fundamental entities. We allow ourselves to talk about constituted objects only as a convenience or abbreviation.**

Problem: We still need to hear: abbreviation of what and convenient for what ends and whose ends? Must puzzling of all is how we are to take this abbreviation -- not literally, surely.

[Absolutism]:

___ **Snowballs, hills, trees, planets, etc. are all constituted by the in-itself satisfaction of certain conditions by certain chunks of mater, and the like, and all this goes on independently of any thought or conceptualization on the part of anyone.**

Problem: This leads to the explosion of reality.

[Conceptual relativism]:

___ **We recognize potential constituted objects only relative to our implicit conceptual scheme with its criteria of existence and of perdurance.**

Problem: Is there not much that is very small, or far away, or long ago, or yet to come, which surpasses our present acuity and acumen? How can we allow the existence of such sorts at present unrecognized by our conceptual scheme?

§ Sosa's Conclusion:

By extending Putnam's reasoning, we reach a set of options in contemporary ontology that presents us with a rather troublesome trilemma. Which shall we opt for: eliminativism, absolutism, or conceptual relativism? Putnam's own pragmatic realism is built around the case that he makes against both eliminativism and absolutism, and in favor of his special sort of conceptual relativism.

This fourth and last of arguments seems to me by far the most powerful and persuasive. It raises a threefold issue -- the choice between eliminativism, absolutism, and relativism -- still wide open on the philosophical agenda, and a most exciting issue before us today.