

**PHIL 470: Seminar: Metaphysics & Epistemology
Truth and Reality**

Handout (16)

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Hilary Putnam: *Many Faces of Realism* [I]

- * It is interesting that we are all either realists or anti-realists, even if we haven't thought about this issue. Unlike some other philosophical debates, with which we can remain indifferent, this debate is the one closely related to our daily life. If you are an anti-realist, then even the stars you gaze at would signify differently to you now.
- * Even though Putnam calls his view 'realism', he is generally regarded as defending anti-realism. He changed his realism view in 1980's. He used to be defending realism, and then claimed that it was incoherent. He argues that his view actually preserves commonsense realism. Do you agree with him?

§ Two Kinds of *Realism*

It is clear that the name 'Realism' can be claimed by or given to at least two very different philosophical attitudes (and, in fact, to many.)

- (I) The philosopher who claims that only scientific objects 'really exist' and that much, if not all, of the commonsense world is mere 'projection'.**
- (II) The philosopher who insists that there *really are* chairs and ice cubes.**

These two attitudes, these two images of the world, can lead to and have led to many different programs for philosophy.

[Metaphysical Realism]: (*Realism* – with a capital 'R')

___ Commonsense objects do not *really* exist. All properties of an object are our sense data projected onto a 'thing in itself' that is beyond our human cognitive capacities.

___ The thing in itself may have some *intrinsic* properties that are not relative to human interests and human capacities.

___ The world is independent of any particular representation we have of it. Truth is determined independently of our theories and our methods of verification.

[Scientific Realism]: (Objectivism)

___ Only scientific objects 'really exist' and much, if not all, of the commonsense world is mere 'projection'.

___ All there *really* is, is what 'finished science' will say there is (whatever that may be).

§Putnam's Critique

I want to suggest that the problem with the 'Objectivist' picture of the world (to use Husserl's term for this kind of scientific realism) lies deeper than the postulation of 'sense data'; sense data are, so to speak, the visible symptoms of a systematic disease.

The deep systematic root of the disease, I want to suggest, lies in the notion of an 'intrinsic' property, a property something has 'in itself,' apart from any contribution made by language or the mind.

(1) First Intrinsic Property: Dispositions

A disposition that something has to do something *no matter what*, I shall call a *strict disposition*. A disposition to do something under 'normal conditions,' I shall call an '*other things being equal*' disposition.

Why should we not say that dispositions (or at least other things being equal dispositions) are also not 'in the things themselves but rather something we 'project' onto those things?

(2) Second Intrinsic Property: *Intentionality*

I do not believe that even all *humans* who have the same belief (in different cultures, or with different bodies of knowledge and different conceptual resources) have in common a physical *cum* computational feature which could be 'identified with' that belief. The 'intentional level' is simply not reducible to the 'computational level' any more than it is to the 'physical level.'

If this is right, then the Objectivist will have to conclude that intentionality *too* must be a mere projection.

§ Putnam's Own Position

My old-fashioned story of the Seducer and the Innocent Maiden was meant as a double warning: a warning against giving up commonsense realism and, simultaneously, a warning against supposing that the seventeenth-century talk of 'external world' and 'sense impressions', 'intrinsic properties' and 'projections', etc, was in any way a Rescuer of our commonsense realism.

[Internal realism]: (realism – with a small 'r') OR: [Pragmatic realism]

___ Realism is *not* incompatible with conceptual relativity.

___ Objects do not exist independently of conceptual schemes. We cut up the world into objects when we introduce one or another scheme of description.

___ Different versions of conceptual schemes are *equally* right, as long as they are correct (coherent?). No view is *absolutely* right. Our descriptions reflect our interests and choices.

___ The mind and world jointly make up the mind and the world.

___ Reference is *not* a relation to a mind-independent world.

___ A being with no values would have no facts either. To talk of 'facts' without specifying the language to be used is to talk of nothing.

___ There are no 'things in themselves'. The phrase simply makes no sense – *NOT* because we cannot know the things in themselves (as Kant thinks). (So, Putnam is not an agnostic in this respect.) We simply don't know what we are talking about when we talk about "things in themselves."

___ Commonsense realism is true: there *are* tables and chairs as we commonly perceive them.

Conceptual relativism sounds like 'relativism,' but has none of the 'there is no truth to be found... "true" is just a name for what a bunch of people can agree on' implications of 'relativism'.

Example:

WORLD 1

x_1, x_2, x_3

(A world a la Carnap)

WORLD 2

$x_1, x_2, x_3, x_1 + x_2$

$x_1 + x_3, x_2 + x_3,$

$x_1, + x_2 + x_3$

(**same** world a la Polish logician)

Given a version, the question 'How many objects are there?' has an answer, namely 'three' in the case of the first version (Carnap's world) and 'seven' in the case of the second version ('The Polish logician's world'). Once we make clear how we are using 'object' (or 'exist'), the question 'How many objects exist' has an answer that is not at all a matter of 'convention.' That is why I say that this sort of example does not support *radical* cultural relativism. Our concepts may be culturally relative, but it does not follow that the truth or falsity of everything we say using those concepts is simply 'decided' by the culture. But the idea that there is an Archimedean point, or a use of 'exist' inherent in the world itself, from which the question 'How many objects *really* exist?' makes sense, is an illusion.

___ To require that all of these must be reducible to a single version is to make the mistake of supposing that 'What are the real objects' is a question that makes sense *independently of our choice of concepts*.

§ The Rejected Dichotomies:

If I reject the dichotomies I depicted, it is not, then, because I fail to recognize their intuitive appeal, or because that intuitive appeal counts for nothing in my eyes. It is rather because these dichotomies have become distorting lenses which prevent us from seeing real phenomena – the phenomena I have been describing – in their full extent and significance.

1. **Projection/Property of the thing in itself**
2. **'Power'/Property of the thing in itself**
3. **Intrinsic properties/extrinsic properties**
4. **Assertability conditions/ Truth conditions**

§ Against Realism

[Putnam's Argument against Realism]: #1

1. According to Realism, properties such as solidity and motion are *really* in the objects (i.e., they are *intrinsic properties*), while properties such as colors or sounds are either our sense data projected onto objects, or some power in the objects to produce those sense data in us.
2. But such a distinction cannot be sustained, since even so-called *intrinsic* properties are not really in the objects.
3. Therefore, Realism is giving us a Reality that none can approach.
4. Therefore, Realism is the foe, not the defender, of commonsense realism.

[Putnam's Argument against Realism]: #2

1. According to Realism, all different sciences will eventually converge into one unified fundamental science. It is the fundamental science, in particular, physics, that tells us what reality truly is.
2. But there is no proof that such a convergence is ever possible.
3. Therefore, Realism is giving us a false promise. Under this theory, we may never know this "Reality."

[Putnam's Conclusion]:

Reality without the dichotomies

How we go about answering the question 'How many objects are there?' – the method of 'counting', or the notion of what constitutes an 'object' – depends on our choice (call this a 'convention').

What we *cannot* say – because it makes no sense – is what the facts are *independent of all conceptual choices*.

[the metaphor of cookie cutter]: The things independent of all conceptual choices are the dough; our conceptual contribution is the shape of the cookie cutter.

The notions of 'object' and 'existence' are not treated as sacrosanct, as having just one possible use.

What does the world look like without the dichotomies? It looks both familiar and different. It looks familiar, insofar as we no longer try to divide up mundane reality into a 'scientific image' and a 'manifest image'. Tables and chairs exist just as much as quarks and gravitational fields.... But mundane reality looks different, in that we are forced to acknowledge that many of our familiar descriptions reflect our interests and choices.

Ernest Sosa:
Putnam's Pragmatic Realism

§ Putnam's Four Arguments

The Model-theoretic Argument

§ The Argument from the Non-objectivity 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)

[Sosa's Criticism]:

_____ My question arise mainly with the last step of the argument, where the move is made from the perspectival status of truth to a correspondingly perspectival character of reality itself, its internality to conceptual scheme.

§ The Argument from the Unlikelihood of Scientific Convergence on a Finished Science

[I]

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.

[II]

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.

[Sosa's Criticism]:

___ 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.

§ The Argument for Conceptual Relativity

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.

[Sosa's Criticism]:

___ We have three choices (Putnam's pragmatic realism is not the only option).

[Eliminativism]:

___ A disappearance view for which our ordinary talk is so much convenient abbreviation.

[Absolutism]:

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

[Conceptual relativism]:

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

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.