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Review of "Hilary Putnam: Pragmatism and Realism"

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Book Review

Hilary Putnam: Pragmatism and Realism, James Conant and Urszula M. Zeglen, eds. London: Routledge, 2002. ix+242 pages. $80 hardback. ISBN: 0-415-25605-4.

This book is the ninth volume in Routledge's series, "Routledge Studies in Twentieth-Century Philosophy." It is a collection of eleven essays, with responsesto each by Putnam. The first five essays (Part One of the book) focus on issues relating to Putnam and pragmatism; the remaining six essays (Part Two) deal withPutnam on realism. In addition there is an introduction to each of the book's two parts.

Part One, on pragmatism, begins with a short essay by Ruth Anna Putnam ("Taking Pragmatism Seriously"), in which she claims that in spite of Putnam's rejection of a pragmatist theory of truth, he embraces pragmatist doctrines. His philosophical positions, such as a rejection of the fact/value dichotomy and a rejection of treating Cartesian skepticism seriously, are aligned with the classical pragmatists, as is his insistence on the social character of inquiry (inquirers are agents, not spectators). H. Putnam's response is not a criticism or even critique of R. A. Putnam's paper, but an acknowledgement of debt to pragmatists and to her. This response is followed by a paper by H. Putnam ("Pragmatism and Nonscientific Knowledge"). Here he reiterates his rejection of a fact/value dichotomy, this time by arguing against a sharp distinction between scientific and nonscientific knowledge. There is a symbiotic relationship between knowledge of facts and knowledge of values; minimally, scientific knowledge presupposes epistemic values such as judgments of simplicity, coherence, etc. On the other hand, value judgments are indeed *judgments*; they are valuings that presuppose criteria and standards of objective reasonableness.

Richard Warner's essay ("Pragmatism and Legal Reasoning") presses the issues of the reasonability of value judgments and that (citing Putnam) "practice is primary in philosophy." Claiming that legal reasoning is supremely practical, Warner argues that the typical task of adjudication is to resolve particular disputes, adding that such disputes are and must be backed by reasons, hence maintaining a level and kind of objectivity that is practically relevant yet contextually sensitive. Laying out principles of practical reasoning and showing how its universal and contextually relative components work together is just the sort of project that pragmatists, including Putnam, have as their proper task. Putnam's response to this view is, perhaps surprisingly, critical. The task of practical (including legal) reasoning is not simply or even primarily to resolve disputes, to find successful outcomes, but rather to sketch out what would count as reasonable outcomes. This, for Putnam, is part of his larger position that a mistaken view of pragmatism is that expediency is sufficient for justifiability. It is not merely the case, he insists, that whatever works is right.

Having explicitly noted his affinity in many respects with the classical pragmatists, Putnam's position comes under critical scrutiny in Robert Brandom's, "Pragmatics and Pragmatisms."

Brandom identifies a narrow version of pragmatism as a "philosophical school of thought centered on evaluating beliefs by their tendency to promote success at the satisfaction of wants," centered in the works of Peirce, James, and Dewey. There is also a broad version of pragmatism, for Brandom, as a "movement centered on the primacy of the practical," traceable back at least to Kant and extended up to Davidson and Rorty. Brandom's sympathies lie with broad pragmatism, with narrow pragmatism being acceptable only to the extent that it can fit into the constellation of ideas of the broad version. Fundamental to the distinction between these two versions, for Brandom, is that narrow pragmatism focuses exclusively on instrumental success. As he states it: "The basic idea of classical pragmatism is that one can understand normative assessments of the truth of beliefs as assessments of the extent to which the holding of that belief would contribute to the satisfaction of desires." Broad pragmatism, on the other hand, understands the norms implicit in discursive practice to involve more than "what works;" it requires implicit "conceptual commitments [that] can be understood as *social statuses*, instituted by the practical attitudes of participants in an essentially *social* linguistic practice." The elements of power and sociality, he claims, are missing in the narrow, classical, pragmatist account of norms of discourse. Putnam disagrees with Brandom's depiction of classical pragmatism, and this serves as the focus of his response. As he puts it: "serious students of pragmatism have spend almost a century rebutting the sort of travesty of what the classical pragmatists thought that Brandom relies on, and it must not be allowed to go unrebutted now." Putnam then proceeds to establish that none of the classical pragmatists held the view that satisfying wants was sufficient as norms as the assessment of the truth of beliefs (or the goodness of actions). With specific citations from the works of Peirce, James, and Dewey Putnam demonstrates that none of them held this view and all of them bemoaned that this was a misunderstanding of their positions.

In the final essay of the first part of the book ("Knowledge of the Truth in Pragmatic Perspective"), Nicholas Rescher looks at various conceptions of truth as they relate to Putnam's notions of realism. The most promising of these conceptions, he says, is that of methodological pragmatism, which maintains the meaning of truth as actual facticity ("correspondence to fact") while allowing/demanding sufficient epistemological recourses to enable us to decide what is true. Warranted assertability then is not was "true" means, but serves as the criteria for how we come to know what is true. In the context of laying out this view, Rescher makes the same mistake – for Putnam – that Brandom and others do: "With Putnam, as with Dewey, communal acceptance is the key." Once again, Putnam's response is that communal acceptance is not key, not sufficient either as the meaning or as the criteria for truth. In terms of criteria and epistemological recourses, Putnam continues to demand that active intervention by interested inquirers, intelligently directed experimentation and attempts to falsify hypotheses are essential to rational belief fixation and establishing what we can claim as true. Mere communal acceptance is not at all the same as cooperation and active manipulation of the environment. The latter acknowledges the social aspects of inquiry and the determination of truth, while avoiding the truth-relativism of the former. As for the meaning of truth (as opposed to criteria for establishing it), Putnam claims that he holds to a version of a disquotational account. Many terms (e.g., "cats in Jerusalem") correspond to reality, he says, but that is different from saying that whole sentences correspond to reality. The latter view suggests that all true sentences are descriptions, which then leads to metaphysical conundrums, requiring that mathematical sentences, conceptual sentences, ethical sentences of all kinds, must be also taken as descriptive. While Putnam thinks they don't need to be understood in that manner, he does not expand on it in this response, having dealt with it in other writings.

The second part of the book, on realism, begins with John Haldane's essay ("Realism with a Metaphysical Skull") that is a response to Putnam's well-known *Realism with a Human Face*. In the latter, Putnam attempts to steer a path between what he sees as the untenable commitments of a "reactionary metaphysics" and the unpalatable commitments of "irresponsible relativism." Haldane remarks that this "realism with a human face requires the support of a metaphysical skull," particularly as it applies to one of Putnam's major recent concerns, perception. Resurrecting an Aristotelian perspective, Haldane argues that an emphasis on semantics and language in general transformed the issue of realism from that of the independence of objects to the independence of truth. Putnam's "natural realism," which draws heavily from the classical pragmatists, maintains that successful perception is just the perceiving of things "out there," even in the context of principles of individuation and categorization not being "out there." Haldane claims that Putnam gives no account of how such perception is successful. Haldane's answer is the Aristotelian one that our cognitions involve a formal identity between thought and object. "Each actuality (thought and object) has a structuring principle (concept and substantial form); and these principles, though distinct in the modes of their actualization, are specifically alike. The form of [e.g.] dog exists naturally and substantially (*in esse naturale*) in the dog, and intentionally and predicatively (*in esse intentionale*) in the thought." Putnam's response, drawing from Charles Travis, is that what is at issue in the relation between thought and object is "ways something can be." But the ways that something can be, says Putnam, are context dependent and are always capable of further interpretation. They are neither subjective nor given, hence his middle ground between "irresponsible relativism" and "reactionary metaphysics."

Continuing with the issue of the nature of perception and cognition, Tadeusz Szubka ("The Causal Theory of Perception and Direct Realism") argues against Putnam's view that the causal theory of perception is incompatible with his (Putnam's) direct/natural realism. Drawing on the work of Peter Strawson, Szubka holds that Putnam's claim of incompatibility presupposes a causal theory of perception that reduces sensory experiences with brain states. Since one could (and Strawson did) formulate a non-reductive causal theory of perception, Putnam's view is mistaken. Putnam responds that any causal theory of perception rests on the assumption that the mind is a thing (causally affected by what is external to it). While, of course, our best scientific picture is that perception is supervenient on material processes, it doesn't follow that it is supervenient on brain processes. Cognitive processes, Putnam says, are assumed to be brain processes only if the mind is taken as a thing, which it shouldn't be.

John Heil's paper ("Functionalism, Realism and Levels of Being") raises again the claim against Putnam that, although there are many ways to characterize how things are, this is not the same as there being many ways things are; levels of description are not the same thing as levels of being. He gets at this by way of criticizing Putnam's functionalistic account of mind. Putnam, he claims, holds to Principle (P): If a predicate 'f', holds of an object, o at t, then 'f' designates a property, f, possessed by o at t, and any object of which 'f' holds possesses f.

Commitment to Principle (P), to the idea that when a predicate truly holds of an object, it does so by virtue of naming a property possessed by that object and shared by every other object of which it truly holds, has led Putnam and others to in turn be committed to levels of being (that is, levels of properties). Putnam's – quite brief – response is to say that he indeed wants to defend Property (P)

and then to deny there is (or can be) any one fixed brain state that is correlated with a given thought (e.g., there are churches in Vienna), even if physicalists wants to loosen their criteria of brain states to mean a fuzzy set of similar brain states.

The next two papers ("From Alethic Anti-realism to Alethic Realism" and "Truth and Trans-theoretical Terms") by Wolfgang Künne and Garry Ebbs respectively, deal with Putnam's conception(s) of truth. Künne asks whether Putnam sees epistemic constraints on the concept of truth, while Ebbs draws on Putnam to suggest a view of truth that keeps the reference of terms stable across their housing in different theories (e.g., 'electron'). Künne's contention is that alethic realism is the view that "truth outruns rational acceptability," it is not epistemically constrained, while alethic anti-realism denies this. He advocates alethic realism and traces in detail Putnam's gradual move from alethic anti-realism to alethic realism. Putnam's response is to call Künne's essay "beautiful." He adds only a brief remark on the connection between justification and truth that one cannot grasp the content of even ordinary observation sentences (e.g., "This is a chair") without implicitly grasping certain justificatory norms, so that, while truth is not the same as justification, it is inherently connected to it. As Ebbs's paper focuses in large part of Putnam's criticisms of Quine's deflationary view of truth, Putnam's response is only to add a few additional, clarifying remarks.

The final essay ("What Laws of Logic Say"), by Charles Travis, explores connections between Putnam's understanding of what logic is (and, hence, what his treatment of logical laws is) and Wittgenstein's. Arguing that logic is both about language and thought, Travis looks at what it would be to deny a law of logic. Reminiscent of a Deweyan pragmatist approach, he claims: "A problem about what sense the denial of a law of logic makes is in part a problem about what sense the law makes. One solves *that* problem by saying what laws of logic do – just how they connect with what we think." And this, for Travis, is a matter of engaging in and with the world, but always for certain purposes. The connection with Wittgenstein's notion of language-games should be obvious. Putnam's response is a short, clarifying one. He suggests that Wittgenstein's language-games are not parts of which language consists, but rather are idealized models of parts of a language.

What are we to take from this collection of essays and responses? Putnam's works have been defended (by himself and others) and have been criticized (by himself and others!) for decades. His positions on numerous topics have altered over the years. Nonetheless, the two areas of concern in this volume – pragmatism and realism – consistently have been hallmarks of his work. What does it mean for Putnam to be classified as pragmatist? As realist? He, unlike his critics, sees these stances as being consistent. For example, on the topic of truth, Putnam is insistent that truth is not socially determined or a matter simply of what works or satisfies desire. At the same time, what counts as being true is not a simple given. Knowledge of facts, for Putnam, presupposes knowledge of theories (categorizations) and of values, just as knowledge of theories and values presupposes knowledge of facts. Truth is a normative term as well as a descriptive one. Simple correspondence between word and object (or sentence and state of affairs) provides no (or very little) explanatory force or value. Nelson Goodman, for example, could have been just been just as content with saying that "Grass is grue"is true iff grass is grue as Tarski would have been with saying "Grass is green" is true iff grass is green. Inquiry is never disinterested, so while, of course, facts in the world are a necessary feature of what it means to talk about truth, there are underlying ontological

and epistemological and axiological commitments in holding a term or sentence to be true. The pragmatist in Putnam contends that, since inquiry is never disinterested, questions of what and how and why are ineliminably intertwined. The realist in Putnam contends that however inquiry is to be resolved and however the what and how and why are to be addressed, there are objective and reasonable standards, independent of any human interest but not independent of all human interest. Some of the essays in this collection speak to these broad issues, while some of them focus on more detailed concerns. As a collection, this is a nice balance. While the editors's introductions to the two parts of the book are clear and useful, a concluding statement (from either the editors or from Putnam himself) would have been a good addition, one that explicitly addresses how Putnam sees his pragmatism and realism as two sides of a unified position.

There are a number of other works about Putnam, both about his views generally and about specific aspects of them. For example, an anthology devoted to Putnam's work on language and meaning is *The Twin Earth Chronicles*, edited by Andrew Pessin (Paragon, 1996). Works that are broader in scope include *Reading Putnam*, edited by Peter Clark and Bob Hale (Blackwell, 1994), *Meaning and Method*, edited by George Boolos (Cambridge, 1990), and *Hilary Putnam*, by Christopher Norris (Manchester University Press, 2002). This present collection of essays, however, focuses more than any of them on rinterelating the pragmatist and realist aspects of Putnam's thought.

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