Review Article

The Practice of Philosophy

Isaac Nevo

***Words and Life*, by Hilary Putnam (edited by James Conant). Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994, lxxvi + 531 pp.**
ISBN 0–674–95606–0 $45

***Pragmatism: An Open Question*, by Hilary Putnam. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1995, xii + 106 pp.**
ISBN 0–631–19343–X pb £9.99/$15.95

Words and Life (= WL) is a bulky collection of 29 essays, edited and introduced by James Conant. *Pragmatism: An Open Question* (= P) is a much thinner collection, dedicated to Conant, of just three lectures. Taken together, the two books constitute an argument for pragmatism as a viable option in contemporary philosophy, and a new (pragmatic) basis for what remains viable in the philosophical and political ideals of the Enlightenment. As in a previous collection of essays (Putnam 1990), Conant's role appears to be more than just editorial. In his own lengthy introductions, he gives Putnam's work an interpretive 'spin', of which Putnam, for his part, seems to approve. Together, Putnam and Conant develop a strain of pragmatism which is well worth looking into.[1]

Putnam's pragmatism is best captured by the quote from Cavell (1979: p. 125) which appears as the motto on the title page of the 1994 collection, and from which its title – 'Words and Life' – is derived. It is the view that although philosophy is an open ended practice of reflection, rather than a purely contemplative theory of one kind or another, the practice in question is at one and the same time a part of culture (immanence) and a step beyond it (transcendence). In Cavell's language, the task of such reflection ('philosophizing') is 'to confront culture with itself, along the lines in which it meets in me', where the self in question – the individual qua philosopher – appears to be engulfed by culture even as he is confronting it from the outside. On this interpretation, Putnam's appeal to practice in philosophy is part of an attempt to keep its transcendent, or critical, dimension alive, even while recognizing philosophy's radical embeddedness in culture and tradition, and the futility of seeking some God's-eye view from which reality as such is to be viewed.[2] The question is whether, and how, these two perspectives can be held together. If our standards of rational criticism transcend any particular culture in terms of their scope and authority, how can they also be embedded in culture and immanent to it? Can pragmatism offer a coherent synthesis of these two dimensions?

European Journal of Philosophy 5:1 ISSN 0966–8373 pp. 74–82. © Blackwell Publishers Ltd. 1997. 108 Cowley Road, Oxford OX4 1JF, UK, and 350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148, USA.

Taken in this light, Putnam's strain of pragmatism is diametrically opposed to other forms of pragmatism – currently much in vogue – in which the appeal to practice in philosophy is conceived as a naturalizing gesture, a way of embracing 'contingency'. Indeed, much space is devoted, in both these books, to arguments against Quine and Rorty (and as Putnam puts it 'a certain quasi-fictional philosopher I call Kripgenstein' (WL: 342)) who apply their pragmatist insights in ways leading to excessive forms of scientism, relativism, or scepticism. As Putnam clearly shows, both Quine and Rorty turn to pragmatism primarily in order to account for belief fixation in conditions of empirical irreducibility, i.e., for the rational assertibility of empirically irreducible, but theoretically (or otherwise) indispensable claims. Both favour the so–called 'disquotational' theory of truth, rather than a definition of truth in terms of pragmatic conditions ('the good in the way of belief', etc.), and both accept, as a consequence of this strategy, an idea that Putnam, on his admission, finds to be shocking, namely, that 'truth is an empty notion' (WL: 331), and that beyond the Tarskian analysis of truth-predicates and their extension there is no substantive, or normative, conception of truth to appeal to. Thus, both Quine and Rorty apply pragmatism – the idea that 'in a certain sense, practice is primary in philosophy' (WL: 152) – to the question of rational belief fixation in first order theory (or discourse). They conjoin a pragmatic theory of belief fixation with a disquotational theory of truth, according to which the concept of truth that was shown to be impossible by Tarski's theory of truth – a universal, unitary, language-independent concept – is also unnecessary for the purposes of forming a coherent web of belief, scientific or otherwise.[3]

In a famous passage, Quine makes the point that no relativist consequences need be accepted as a result of this (partly Peircean) move:

> Have we now so lowered our sights as to settle for a relativistic doctrine of truth – rating the statements of each theory as true for that theory and brooking no higher criticism? Not so. The saving consideration is that we continue to take seriously our own particular aggregate science, our own particular world-theory or loose total fabric of quasi-theories, whatever it may be. (1960: p. 24)

Thus, taking 'aggregate science' seriously (though without precluding internal revision, when necessary) does not depend on the availability of a universal concept of truth. Truth as a formal device is all we can have, and – happily – all that we need. Rorty's views, as Putnam convincingly argues, are not much different on this score, except that his own 'surrogate' notion is not confined even within the limits of Quine's aggregate science. Rorty develops a broader, 'ironist' notion of assertibility, for precisely these purposes.

As Putnam points out, Quine is an 'atypical pragmatist' (WL: 153) in maintaining a principled distinction between facts and values, as well as a 'bifurcation' between a purely extensional scientific language and an intentional idiom of mere practical utility. Rorty follows other pragmatists in rejecting both these distinctions. Consequently, he is led to a much broader holism that Quine's and finds a

© Blackwell Publishers Ltd. 1997

'surrogate' for truth (as a normative notion) in intra-cultural, rather than scientific, assertibility. Nevertheless, Rorty is guilty of another kind of 'bifurcation', namely, that between the nihilist attitude he reserves for epistemology, which is completely dismissed due to the failure of foundationalism, and his more constructive attitude in matters of political justification, where lack of foundations no longer seems to be an insurmountable obstacle. The Rortyan split between a private space of (cognitive) irresponsibility and a public space of sober political morality is an inverted mirror image of Quine's bifurcation. As Putnam might have put it, if truth is empty and all values are optional, then nihilism and 'mere rhetoric' could only be avoided by some such unprincipled bifurcation, i.e., by introducing 'seriousness' or 'sobriety' at some point by pure fiat. Quine takes science and naturalized epistemology seriously and dismisses values and intentionality as merely practical devices, or methodologically infirm propositions. Rorty reverses these priorities, taking cultures, particularly Western culture, seriously, while dismissing epistemology, even naturalized epistemology, as standing in need of precisely the kind of foundationalism, or God's-eye view, that was found to be impossible. Both depend on the assumption that, as Putnam puts it, 'eliminative materialism is true of the noumenal world' (P: 74), and that consequently any talk of normative standards (e.g., 'limning the true and ultimate structure of reality' (Quine 1960: p. 221), or 'The priority of Democracy to Philosophy' (Rorty 1991: p. 175)) requires some such unprincipled privilege. Putnam's pragmatism is designed to overcome both these unprincipled 'bifurcations'.

Putnam objects to the disquotational theory of truth on various grounds. In 'Realism with a Human Face' (1990) he argues that the absence, or breakdown, of a universal and unitary concept of truth cannot be accepted with equanimity by cognitive creatures like us, because this view totally undermines the ideal of impersonal and objective knowledge. Of the possibility of such a breakdown he says the following: 'that there should be principled difficulties with the ideal itself – that it should turn out that we can no longer visualize what it would mean to attain the ideal – this is a fact which constitutes for us, constituted as we are, the most profound of paradoxes' (1990: p. 18). The disquotational theory, of course, counsels the very opposite, namely, that we should take the normative emptiness of truth in our stride. However, without the disquotational theory of truth Putnam cannot go along with the Quinian-Rortyan interpretation of pragmatism – the primacy of practice in philosophy – as applying directly to the rationality of belief fixation. Consequently, if Putnam is still interested in pragmatism, as indeed he is, he has to transcendentalize it, i.e., to apply it not directly to the fixation of belief, but more obliquely to our understanding of such belief as objective. In other words, without the disquotational theory Putnam is left with a seemingly stark choice between metaphysical realism, on the one hand, and various forms of anti-realism, phenomenalism or reductive materialism. Being unhappy with all these choices, Putnam has to show that the alternative is not exhaustive, and that a practice-relative conception of objectivity, rather than belief, is a sufficiently attractive form of pragmatism, capable of overcoming the problems encountered by the more disenchanted, and more coarse, versions of it.

© Blackwell Publishers Ltd. 1997

Cavell (1989) describes Wittgenstein (and Heidegger) in terms of a similar sensibility. What these philosophers share in common is a movement in 'structurally similar recoils', not only away from 'Kant's settlement with the thing in itself', but also 'toward linking the two "directions" of language – that outward, toward object, and that inward, toward culture and the individual' (p. 51). Cavell stresses that if one is in search of necessity in philosophy, 'of something a-priori' (p. 49) (rather than just being satisfied with contingency), one will be perplexed by the possibility of a connection between the two 'directions' of language, namely, the immanent and the transcendent. For Putnam, the appeal to practice in philosophy is designed to bridge this gap, not to widen it, and the bridge he offers lies in viewing cognition itself, along with its aspirations for objectivity and transcendence, as normative concerns, i.e., as forms of (non-instrumental) evaluations that are grounded in certain types of social agreement and cooperation. Thus, while Rorty undermines the fact/value distinction (along with other 'dogmas of empiricism') by relying on Quine's eliminative materialism, Putnam turns against the fact/value distinction by going in the other direction, i.e., by viewing all statements of scientific facts as implicit value judgments.

How, then, does Putnam pull off this trick? In the lecture entitled 'Was Wittgenstein a Pragmatist?' (P: 27), Putnam offers Kant's notion of 'the primacy of practical reason' as a model for his pragmatism (as well as a model for Wittgenstein's later philosophy), and it is with this Kantian model that the desired connection between the transcendent and the immanent is articulated. As Putnam understands the primacy of practical reason, it is the Kantian view that the scientific image of the world – the conception of the world as a nomological system described in objective and universal terms – derives not from the understanding (namely, theoretical reason), but rather from pure practical reason. In other words, the scientific image of the world, including, presumably, the intuitive notion of truth, is itself a value-judgment, an image of 'human flourishing in the theoretical realm' (P: 43). Putnam compares this view to Wittgenstein's view that imagining a language, including presumably the language of science, is imagining a form of life, namely, that the understanding of language is not possible without sharing the practical purposes – the point – of the form of life underlying it.

Hence, the intuitive notion of truth as a universal concept which transcends any particular language or theory is itself a value judgement, and it is one on which the very possibility of our cognitive achievements depends. In other words, unless there are normative facts (corresponding to such value judgments), no facts at all could be objectively recognized, at least not in so far as the objective recognition of such facts depends on the conceptual scheme of science. What such normative facts consist in, however, is not the existence of value entities in some separate metaphysical realm, but rather in forms of agreement and cooperation that are conducive to the flourishing of inquiry. Thus, for Putnam, metaphysical realism is rejected not by adhering to the counter-metaphysics of phenomenalism, or eliminative materialism, but rather by turning transcendence, not mere assertibility, into a practice-relative concern. Immanence and

© Blackwell Publishers Ltd. 1997

transcendence are connected in so far as the aspiration for transcendence is not only an 'immanent' value judgment, but also one which makes an objective science possible.

Of course, transcendence as a value judgment of 'pure practical reason' is not transcendence as such, however necessary it may be thought to be in terms of our cognitive faculties. Using one of Putnam's more questionable idioms, we may call this 'quasi-transcendence relative to a conceptual scheme', the latter being 'our' conceptual scheme, for which we presently have no (global) alternative. As already noted, the conceptual scheme, or form of life, in question, is one that is supposed to be conducive to human flourishing in the realm of inquiry, and it is, therefore, inseparable from a liberal and enlightened conception of society. Thus, for Putnam, it is not knowledge that grounds freedom, as the tradition of Enlightenment had it, but the other way around. Freedom, i.e., the democratization of inquiry, grounds knowledge by making the ideal of impersonal objectivity possible.

Putnam's pragmatic synthesis of transcendence and immanence does not successfully do all that it is claimed to do. It does not, for instance, clarify the status of logical necessity. In 'Rethinking Mathematical Necessity' (WL) Putnam attempts, *pace* Quine, to articulate conceptual (not merely pragmatic) grounds for delimiting the scope of belief revision by excluding logical truth, particularly the law of contradiction, from the possibility of such revision. Here, too, Putnam falls back on a Kantian conception of logic as a formal, and consequently unrevisable, condition for the possibility of cognitive judgement as such. Kant, we are reminded, held that noumenal reality is not in space and time, and not subject to causal relations. However, not even the noumenal can be conceived as violating the laws of logic. It cannot be thought that anything violates the laws of logic, because any such thought is logically incoherent, and therefore, it is no thought at all. In this sense, logic is transcendental. It is a condition for the possibility of cognition, not an independent cognition on its own. Hence, logical truth does not describe the world. It has no 'ontological' content of its own, and it could not be revised.

However, all Putnam can have of the Kantian perspective, given his attempts to 'demythologize' Kant's transcendental idealism, is a scheme-relative constraint on the possibility of revision in logic, not an absolute one. Thus, he concludes:

> My suggestion is not, of course, that we retain this idea of a nature of thought (or judgment, or the ideal language) which metaphysically guarantees the unrevisability of logic. But what I *am* inclined to keep from this story is the idea that logical truths do not have negations that we (presently) understand. It is not, on this less metaphysically inflated story, that we can say that the theorems of classical logic are 'unrevisable'; it is that the question 'Are they revisable?' is one which we have not yet succeeded in giving a sense. (WL: 256)

In short, unrevisability does not attach itself somehow to the truths of logic themselves. Rather, it is only within our conceptual scheme, i.e., within what we

© Blackwell Publishers Ltd. 1997

presently can or cannot make sense of, that these truths are unrevisable. Putnam describes the condition of such relatively unrevisable truths as being 'quasi-necessary relative to a conceptual scheme', and goes on to argue that this is how logical truths are to be viewed.[4] But much depends here on how 'conceptual scheme' is to be understood, and, particularly, on how the temporal specifications that make their appearances in these formulations ('presently', 'not yet succeeded', etc.) are to be interpreted. If 'presently' is intended to include the whole of human history (as in 'presently, no one has risen from the dead'), then the condition of quasi-necessity does seem to be universal enough for the purposes it is designed to serve. Logic would indeed be unrevisable for human cognizers as such, provided that 'presently' no alternative has been conceived. However, this comes dangerously close to accepting a single conceptual scheme for all humanity, a fixed and unchanging 'nature of thought', or system of categories, which is definitive of human cognition and which metaphysically excludes revision in logic. On this view of the matter, Putnam comes very close to a transcendental idealism of his own. If on the other hand, 'presently' is intended to include only a partial stretch of human history, then the condition of 'quasi-necessity' seems to be too temporal for its task. Relativized to conceptual schemes as historical entities, the necessity of logical truths seems to incorporate the possibility of change after all (even if 'presently', i.e., within the scheme, we cannot make any sense of it). Conceptual schemes evolve, and however much they constrain revisions internally, these constraints are not themselves immune to the pressures of time.

Putnam's approach thus poses a dilemma. Relativizing transcendence, or necessity, to an immanent human perspective raises a question as to the status of that human perspective. If it is itself a-temporal then Putnam's pragmatism comes close to a Kantian transcendental idealism. If on the other hand, the human perspective in question is a full blooded, temporal scheme, then the question of revisability comes back with a vengeance. Quasi-necessity does not seem to be a stable resting place for Putnam's views on logic. The constraint it offers on revisability is still merely a pragmatic one, not one that is different in metaphysical principle from Quine's. Putnam shifts the problem from one of articulating the conditions under which scientific theories are to be revised by an individual scientist, to one of articulating the conditions under which (broader) conceptual schemes evolve, and that may be an interesting shift in its own right. It does not, however, amount to changing sides in the metaphysical debate, unless a transcendental idealism is brought in to explain why such empirical realism (or quasi-necessity) is still a form of realism (or necessity). Putnam, however, does not endorse any such explanation.

Indeed, the problem may be generalized. As we saw, Putnam attempts to avoid unprincipled 'bifurcations' by transcendentalizing the pragmatist's appeal to practice. However, without a transcendental idealism to support this move, another 'bifurcation' may be rearing its ugly head, this time a bifurcation between ordinary notions and metaphysical (or 'quasi-metaphysical') notions. *Pace* Wittgenstein, Putnam insists that there are theses in philosophy, or at least that

© Blackwell Publishers Ltd. 1997

he – Putnam – has such theses to impart. These are the propositions that describe the quasi-necessity of logic, or the quasi-transcendence of Reason. Their point is to articulate, without reference to a transcendental idealism, why, and how, empirical realism (or other immanent forms of transcendence) is still a realism (or transcendence). As such, Putnam's 'quasi-metaphysical' propositions cut across the line between the ordinary and the metaphysical that he is calling attention to, in his polemic against both metaphysical realism and Rortyan relativism. The Wittgensteinian option is, perhaps, still available to him, i.e., the option of providing a mere critique of the metaphysical abuse of language while avoiding all positive, or general, theses in philosophy. Indeed, if Conant is to be believed this is the direction that Putnam's philosophy is taking. This, however, is incompatible with such metaphysical jargon as Putnam continues to use in his talk of 'quasi-necessity', 'ought-implying facts', 'objectivity', etc. Ramsey's principle is still valid: If it can't be said, it can't be whistled either.

Nevertheless, there is a great deal that Putnam's version of pragmatism does remarkably well, whatever its metaphysical price may be. In particular, it serves more clearly than other versions to distinguish what is still viable in the ideas of the Enlightenment from what is no longer so. More radical forms of pragmatism, particularly those in which truth is dismissed as an empty notion, run the risk of throwing the baby of Enlightenment's liberalism out with the bath-water of its more totalitarian side. Indeed, Rorty's appeal to ethnocentrism as a truth-surrogate raises precisely this worry, however liberal-minded his prioritizing of democracy over philosophy may be. Liberal politics may not need the support of any foundational theory of human nature (and the place of reason in it), but the excessive debunking and deconstructing of reason and truth as mere intra-cultural devices raises not only the problem of 'bifurcation', noted earlier, but also the political worry that a liberalism based on such arbitrary ethnocentric moves may not be sufficient to hold under pressure. By contrast, Putnam's form of pragmatism provides for a more discriminating attitude. Having debunked merely a metaphysical rendering of truth and reason, not the genuine articles themselves, Putnam can dismiss the totalitarian side of Enlightenment's utopianism – the view that there is a rationally compelling, 'final' solution to the problems of humanity – without having to dismiss more humble employments of rationality, either practical or theoretical. The two strands of the 18th century Enlightenment, namely, the view that problems of a moral and political nature are to be solved rationally (in a non-instrumental sense of that term), and the view that there is a purely rational solution which addresses all such problems on a basis that excludes traditional contexts and communities, can safely be separated. The more modest of these views can well be defended within Putnam's form of pragmatism, and Putnam demonstrates convincingly that more than just instrumental rationality is available for purposes of such moral and political deliberation. The other view – the more totalitarian side of the Enlightenment – can be dismissed as an error without illiberal, or anti-rational, repercussions.

Putnam agrees with much of the rhetoric of anti-foundationalism in contemporary philosophy. For him, too, there is no a-priori foundation for either science

© Blackwell Publishers Ltd. 1997

or ethics and politics, and no algorithm by which results in these fields can be mechanically produced. Consequently, there is no unitary theory, or final truth, in any area of human inquiry. However, Putnam points out that this does not imply that there isn't any 'dependable path toward the discovery ... of truth' (WL: 195), for although there is no algorithm for this purpose, there is none the less an 'imperfect but necessary "path" of struggling for and testing one's ideals in practice, while conceding to others the right to do the same' (WL: 195). What this view of science does imply, according to Putnam, is an ethics of discourse capable of combining 'the great Enlightenment value of tolerance with respect for the particularity of tradition, and with the recognition of the need for thick conceptions of the significance of life whose absence in Enlightenment thought left people feeling a huge void' (WL: 195–6). It is in articulating this Deweyan combination and bringing it philosophically up to date that Putnam's greatest contribution to contemporary philosophy lies.

Isaac Nevo
Ben-Gurion University, Israel

NOTES

[1] Also along for the ride is Ruth Anna Putnam, co-author of two chapters in Putnam's 1994 collection, 'Dewey's Logic: Epistemology as Hypothesis' (ch. 10), and 'Education for Democracy' (ch. 11). *Words and Life* contains much more than an argument about pragmatism. Whole sections in it are devoted to Aristotle, Reichenbach, the philosophy of mind, and the philosophy of science. The argument on pragmatism, however, dominates at least three of the major parts of the book (Parts III, IV & V), and comes very naturally together with the material of Putnam's 1995 collection.

[2] For the theme of immanence and transcendence, and the importance of keeping both these perspectives in sight, see also Putnam (1983). In many of his writings Putnam points out the paradoxes arising from both dogmatism and relativism, as one-sided attempts to resolve the immanence/transcendence conflict in philosophy. However, no positive account of the link between the two has so far been offered. The appeal to pragmatism, as Putnam articulates it in the two books under review is an attempt to supply the missing link, i.e. to account for the immanence/transcendence nexus in philosophy.

[3] Quine's doctrine of the immanence of truth is, of course, in line with his other important theses of the indeterminacy of translation and the inscrutability of reference. Putnam's illuminating discussions of these important doctrines cannot be elaborated here. See, in particular, the essays: 'Realism Without Absolutes', 'A Comparison of Something with Something Else', and 'Model Theory and the "Factuality" of Semantics', all in WL.

[4] For earlier discussions of these themes, though different views are expressed, see: 'There is at least one a priori truth', and other essays in *Realism and Reason* (Putnam: 1983).

REFERENCES

Cavell, S. (1979), *The Claim of Reason*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Cavell, S. (1989), 'Declining Decline', in *This New Yet Unapproachable America*. Albuquerque, New Mexico: Living Batch Press.

© Blackwell Publishers Ltd. 1997

Putnam, H. (1983), *Realism and Reason*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Putnam, H. (1990), *Realism with a Human Face*, (ed.) James Conant. Cambridge USA: Harvard University Press.
Rorty, R. (1980), *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
Rorty, R. (1989), *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Rorty, R. (1991), *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Quine, W. V. (1953), *From A Logical Point of View*. New York: Harper & Row.
Quine, W. V. (1960), *Word and Object*. Cambridge USA: the M.I.T. Press.
Quine, W. V. (1969), *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays*. New York: Columbia University Press.
Wittgenstein, L. (1953), *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe. New York: Macmillan.

© Blackwell Publishers Ltd. 1997