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THE PHILOSOPHY OF HILARY PUTNAM

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## REPLY TO JAMES CONANT

I have profited more than I can say from Jim Conant's philosophical insight and scholarship, as well as from his warmth and his willingness to serve as reader and critic of virtually everything I have written in the last decade. His present paper, which goes far beyond just a response to my "Rethinking Mathematical Necessity" is an excellent example of what I am talking about. For reasons of space, I cannot begin to do justice here to this deep and complex essay; but I heartily recommend reading and rereading it, for it requires (and deserves) more than one reading to fully absorb. It is also a model of the way in which topics too often kept apart in conventional philosophy departments—history of philosophy, Wittgenstein scholarship, and contemporary philosophy of logic—can benefit from having their deep and manifold relationship brought out by a brilliant interpreter.

Conant's paper divides into two parts, of roughly equal length. Both parts contain observations on my philosophy of logic. The first part largely concerns the forerunners of my view, as both Conant and I take them to be: Kant and Frege. (Conant also comments on Descartes's views, which my paper does little more than mention.) The second part reads Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* in the light of my views, and offers a powerful rebuttal of what is still the most common way of reading that work. I am totally in agreement with Conant on all this, so in this reply I will simply take the opportunity to expand on and clarify some points in my position.

### SENSE AND MEANING

Conant reports "very recent Putnam" as agreeing with Wittgenstein that "sense had not (yet) been made of the question" as to the revisability of the laws of logic. That is quite right, but since,<sup>40</sup> unlike most philosophers, I do not use "sense" and "meaning" as synonyms, it may give rise to the impression that I think the denial of a law of logic has no meaning, in which

case it would be utterly unclear how I could regard sentences which contain such denials as subsentential components as meaningful. Clearly a sentence which can be shown to be self-contradictory *can* function as a meaningful part of a larger sentence; for example, a conditional whose consequent is known to be self-contradictory is treated as equivalent to the denial of its antecedent.

What I argue in the paper Conant cites is that the word "sense" in questions like "In what sense do you mean that?" is much more flexible than the word "meaning" as used in philosophers' talk of "translation manuals" and "recursive specifications of meaning." To use an example due to Charles Travis, suppose someone paints the leaves on my Japanese ornamental tree (which has copper-colored leaves) green. If someone who doesn't know what happened remarks that my tree has "green leaves", is that right or wrong? We may reply that it all depends on what sense we give to "green leaves"; but I don't think this shows that that either "green" or "leaves" has two meanings. Rather, it shows that even given the (dictionary) meanings of the words, we do not always know what a particular sentence says (if anything). The content of a token sentence depends on the meaning of its words in the language, but it also depends on a multitude of features of the context.

A case which interested me as far back as "It Ain't Necessarily So"<sup>41</sup> is the following: someone says, before anyone has succeeded in conceiving of a coherent alternative to Euclidean geometry, that a plane triangle may have two right angles as base angles. I think it is fair to say that we would not find this *intelligible* in that cognitive situation. Learning Riemannian geometry enables us to give sense to those words; that doesn't mean that we are *stripping a new meaning* for one or more of the words in the sentence in question. It means that we can now see how that sentence can be used to make a claim, whereas before we could not. We now understand 'in what sense' such a triangle is possible.

Similarly, "Momentum is not exactly mass times velocity" once had no sense; but it is part of Einstein's achievement that the sense he gave those words now seems inevitable. We read old physics texts homophonically for the most part; certainly we do not say that "momentum" used to refer to a different quantity, but rather that the old theory was wrong in thinking that momentum was exactly *mv*. So this is not a case of giving a word a new meaning in the language. But that does not alter the fact that the use to which we put those words (the sense we have given them) was not available before Einstein. Even if we decide to say that the sentence "had a meaning in the language" even before Einstein, that does not mean that it was *understandable*—understandable as a *claim*—before Einstein.

Coming to the case of the laws of logic: certainly there is no meta-physical guarantee available that something that will strike us as completely analogous to what happened in the case of geometry will *never* happen in the

field of logic. To point this out is the right way to be a 'fallibilist' with respect to logical laws. But to express fallibilism 'positively', by saying "The laws of logic may turn out to be wrong," is a mistake: for we have no more succeeded in giving *those* words a sense now than the pre-Euclidean I imagined a moment ago had succeeded in giving a sense to "a plane triangle may have two right angles as base angles."

#### SENSE AND NONSENSE

In "Rethinking Mathematical Necessity" I dismissed the question as to whether contradictions are meaningless as "futile". Thus when I suggested that Frege was attracted to and Wittgenstein actually held the position that the negation of a theorem of logic violates the conditions for being a thinkable thought or judgment, I was not excluding contradictions from "meaning" in the sense of well-formedness in the language, or saying that they have no use at all. (As already pointed out, a sentence which is known to be self-contradictory can still function as a meaningful part of a larger sentence.) My point was, rather, that a contradiction cannot be used to make an intelligible claim.<sup>42</sup>

#### IS PHILOSOPHY JUST THE UNMASKING OF NONSENSE?

In the second half of his paper, Conant suggests that reading the *Tractatus* in the light of my present view can help to explicate that work. The emphasis of Conant's reading is not on the early Wittgenstein's conception of philosophy; rather, he concentrates on (and, in my opinion, greatly illuminates) the form of the work, but he does say some very helpful things about that conception of philosophy, and I cannot resist commenting on that conception.

Conant reads the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus* as having had the following conception of philosophy (often taken to be the conception of the later Wittgenstein): philosophy exposes the kind of nonsense that bewitches the intellect by reducing it to, or unmasking it as, plain nonsense. (Both Conant<sup>3</sup> and I see the later Wittgenstein as moving beyond this conception, but that is material for another essay.<sup>44</sup>) Now, I do think that a great deal of nonsense has always accompanied philosophy, and that no one can spend a lifetime doing philosophy without *sometimes* falling into speaking nonsense. But I do not accept the Tractarian view that the unmasking of nonsense is the entire business of the philosopher (which is not to say that it isn't a necessary *part* of philosophy).

What the Tractarian view misses, it seems to me, is the fact that philosophy does not spring up in a void. Great philosophical movements arise from reflection on life and on the place of humanity in the world. Again and again they have proposed ways of redirecting both individual and social life.

This activity—the activity of putting forward and discussing what I called "moral images of the world" in *The Many Faces of Realism*—seems to me the indispensable task of philosophy.<sup>45</sup> Philosophy certainly needs moments of technical argument, and it needs moments of exposing nonsense, but neither of these adds up to anything of lasting value in the absence of moral imagination.

In conversation with Drury, Wittgenstein made the remark that "The problems discussed in the *Investigations* are being seen from a religious point of view." This remark has puzzled commentators, who have thought that it must be evidence of a covert religious doctrine underlying Wittgenstein's overt teaching. This interpretation neglects the fact that Wittgenstein also said to Drury "I am not a religious man, but I cannot help seeing every problem from a religious point of view." What does it mean to see a philosophical problem from a religious point of view? I am struck by the following analogy between the present situations of religion and philosophy: any religious person must become aware, in our time, of the widespread tendency to identify religion with the diseases of religion—with fundamentalism, fanaticism, and superstition in all its forms. Certainly one cannot simply say that religion is a good thing; it can work good, but it can also work great evil, and God alone knows whether it has so far worked more of the one or of the other. And there is a strikingly similar, though smaller-scale, tendency to identify philosophy with the diseases of philosophy—with dogmatism, apriorism, unintelligibility, and nonsense. (And again, one cannot simply say that philosophy is a good thing, and for the same reason.) There is, on the other hand, also a tendency to 'reinterpret' religion as radical politics, or morality, or personal encounter, etc.; and there is a strikingly similar tendency to reinterpret philosophy as cognitive science, or para-scientific speculation in general. But I believe that philosophy and religion must both be defended, defended from their enemies, within and without, and defended also from their misguided 'reinterpreters'. To apply to philosophy a remark that Wilfrid Cantwell Smith made about religion years ago: it cannot raise us above a human level, but it can bring us to a fully human level.

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