

REALISM AND CONCEPTUAL RELATIVITY

by

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To Jennie Wisley

The Base of All Metaphysics

And now gentlemen,
A word I give to remain in your memories and minds,
As base and finalè too for metaphysics.

(So to the students the old professor,
At the close of his crowded course.)

Having studied the new and antique, the Greek and Germanic
systems,
Kant having studied and stated, Fichte and Schelling and Hegel,
Stated the lore of Plato, and Socrates greater than Plato,
And greater than Socrates sought and stated, Christ having
studied long,
I see reminiscent to-day those Greek and Germanic systems,
See the philosophies all, Christian churches and tenets see,
Yet underneath Socrates clearly see, and underneath Christ the
divine I see,
The dear love of man for his comrade, the attraction of friend to
friend,
Of the well-married husband and wife, of children and parents,
Of city for city and land for land.

Walt Whitman
Leaves of Grass

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....		1
CHAPTER		
ONE	CONCEPTUAL SCHEMES: MOTIVATIONS AND A SELECT HISTORY	7
	Kant as Forerunner.....	7
	Carnap’s Account of Linguistic Frameworks and Motivations.....	13
	Quine’s Account of Conceptual Schemes and Motivations.....	17
	Putnam’s Account of Conceptual Schemes and Motivations.....	36
	Concluding Remarks.....	44
TWO	PUTNAM’S UNEASY RELATIONSHIP WITH REALISM: WHAT KIND OF REALISM DOES PUTNAM’S NOTION OF CONCEPTUAL RELATIVITY DENY?.....	45
	Section One: Departmental and Global Realisms.....	45
	Section Two: Conceptual Relativity, Realism, and Representation-Dependence.....	70
	Concluding Remarks.....	90
THREE	PUTNAM AND THE OPTIONAL LANGUAGES MODEL OF CONCEPTUAL SCHEMES.....	94
	PM1 What are the Primary Components of the Scheme?.....	97
	PM2 What Does the Model Say About the Analytic-Synthetic Distinction and Meaning?	99
	PM3 What are the Criteria of Identity For Schemes?.....	153
	PM4 Concerning the Scheme-Content Distinction, Does the Scheme Organize or Fit the Content?.....	156
	Concluding Remarks.....	169
FOUR	PUTNAM’S EXAMPLES OF CONCEPTUAL RELATIVITY.....	171
	Purported Examples of the Phenomenon of Conceptual Relativity.....	172
	What are the Reasons for All of the Different Examples?.....	200
	Conceptual Relativity, Realism, and the Existential Quantifier	203
	Concluding Remarks.....	217
FIVE	THE CONSISTENCY DILEMMA, PROBLEMS WITH UNRESTRICTED MEREOLGY, AND THE PROBLEM OF SORTAL TERMS.....	218
	Section One: The Consistency Dilemma	218
	Section Two: Conceptual Relativity: to Restrict or not to Restrict Mereological Sums?.....	256
	Section Three: “Object” isn’t Stupid but it is a Dummy Sortal: Problems Counting Objects	266
	Concluding Remarks.....	272

SIX	REALISM AND THE REMAINS OF CONCEPTUAL RELATIVITY	274
	Assessing the Positive in Putnam’s Account of Conceptual Relativity.....	274
	Cookie-Cutters, Bookshelves, and the Correspondence Theory of Truth ...	277
	Alethic Realism, the Objective Perspective Thesis, and Properties	281
	Generic and Determinate Properties	282
	Three Theories of Properties: Realism, Austere Nominalism, and Nominalist Trope Theory.....	283
	Alethic Realism, the Objective Perspective Thesis, and Properties, Again.....	286
	Putnam, Alethic Realism, and Restrictive Theories of Generic Properties	291
	Concluding Remarks.....	294
CONCLUSION	295
	Argument and Vision.....	295
	Realism and Conceptual Relativity Beyond Putnam.....	298
BIBLIOGRAPHY	299

INTRODUCTION

How does the mind connect to the world? This is one of the questions that drove Kant's transcendental idealism. In a number of different forms, it is a question that is still very much with us in contemporary philosophy. Hilary Putnam writes:

The great founders of analytic philosophy—Frege, Carnap, Wittgenstein, and Russell—put the question “How does language ‘hook on’ to the world?” at the very center of philosophy. I have heard at least one French philosopher say that Anglo-Saxon philosophy is “hypnotized” by this question. Recently a distinguished American philosopher [Rorty] who has come under the influence of Derrida has insisted that there is no “world” out there for language to hook on *to*; there are only “texts.” Or so he says. Certainly the question “How do texts connect to other texts?” exerts its own fascination over French philosophy, and it might seem to an American philosopher that contemporary French philosophy is “hypnotized” by *this* question.¹

The question of how language hooks onto the world does indeed hold much of philosophy in a grip. However, this is perhaps not so surprising when one considers how much rides on an answer and how any answer ought to inform one's views in metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, philosophy of mind, philosophy of language, philosophy of perception, etc.

Over the twentieth century there have been, at least, two *general* approaches to the relationship between language and world.² According to the first approach, the mind essentially attempts to mirror the world through linguistic representation.³ On this view, the world is what it is independently of our representations. Call this view simply

¹ Putnam 1990, 104.

² Though the approaches are not, of course, limited to the twentieth century.

³ Or, perhaps, by grasping eternal propositions that are independent of any particular language.

realism, for now.⁴ According to the second approach, the mind does not simply mirror the world; rather, it actively structures the world in some way. Call this view simply *antirealism*, for now.

As it was with Frege, Carnap, Wittgenstein, and Russell, the relationship between mind and world has been at the center of Putnam's philosophical activity. Over his career, he can be seen as going from realism to antirealism and back *toward* a kind of realism. One of the central arguments in Putnam's rejection of realism is his argument from conceptual relativity. Conceptual relativity is characterized by the idea that we can describe the "same" state of affairs in incompatible but equally true ways. The incompatibility here is not that of inconsistency. Just what kind of incompatibility it is will be a central focus of this dissertation. Further, Putnam does not mean that every aspect of every state of affairs admits of incompatible descriptions. For example, a ball's being rubber does *not* admit of incompatible but true descriptions in the sense involved in Putnam's account of conceptual relativity. However, the *number* and *kinds* of objects there are given three balls, can, he thinks, be described in incompatible but true ways—none of which are necessitated by reality. The upshot of conceptual relativity is supposed to be that any view that attempts to make a clean distinction between a representation-independent world and language/representation is mistaken. There is no clear border separating the conventional from the factual. Hence, Putnam claims that truth cannot

⁴ As will be discussed in chapter 2, there are a number of different positions that fall under the label "realism." Moreover, there is controversy as to the exact nature of the different realisms and as to what they should be called. Generally speaking, whenever I use the term "realism" without a modifier, e.g., metaphysical, scientific, or alethic, I am referring to realism concerning truth and reference, as opposed to realism about universals or the realism that is opposed to idealism.

consist of a correspondence between (purely conventional) language and a (purely non-conventional) representation-independent world.

The aim of this dissertation is to explicate and critically evaluate Putnam's views on conceptual relativity and their implications for realism. I begin in chapter 1 by establishing the philosophical context of Putnam's views. I do this by discussing the relevant views of Kant, Carnap, and Quine, followed by a brief discussion of Putnam's project. While Kant's and Carnap's views are important for a full understanding of Putnam's own, Quine's views are particularly important for understanding the evolution of Putnam's attitude toward realism. Specifically, Quine's views on the analytic-synthetic distinction and ontological relativity are keys to understanding more fully Putnam's own philosophical views. Thus, I will spend a good deal of chapter 1 discussing Quine's philosophy of language.

The purpose of chapter 2 is to clarify the kind of realism that is at issue in regard to Putnam's notion of conceptual relativity. I will approach this aim through a discussion of the development of Putnam's views on realism. The latter is a rather complicated story involving Putnam's model-theoretic arguments, their relationship to his earlier internal realist perspective, conceptual relativity, and his subsequent "abandoning" of the model-theoretic arguments. However, it is because of his continued endorsement of conceptual relativity that he continues to reject a certain form of realism. Section one of this chapter is a discussion of the development of Putnam's views on realism. Section two is a discussion of the exact nature of the realism that conceptual relativity is supposed to undermine.

In chapter 3, I explicate Putnam's notion of a conceptual scheme, what he has come to call an "optional language," and his views on language more generally. In doing so, I discuss his views on the analytic-synthetic distinction, semantic externalism, his tripartite distinction between sense, meaning, and reference, and his notions of cognitive equivalence and relative interpretation. The purpose of this chapter is to provide key components of Putnam's philosophy of language so that we can properly evaluate his views on conceptual relativity.

In chapter 4, I go over the many examples that Putnam has used to illustrate conceptual relativity. As we will see, the example that he appeals to most frequently involves two hypothetical people counting the number of objects when three individuals, say, three marbles, are present. The first person is a Polish Logician who includes mereological sums—objects that are the sum of *any* two objects—in his ontology; the second person is a Carnapian who denies the existence of mereological sums. The idea is that when confronted with three marbles, the Polish Logician says there are seven objects and the Carnapian says there are only three. According to Putnam, the existence of the three marbles does not determine the number of objects that are there. Rather, it is a matter of choice whether we represent them as seven or three objects. While this is Putnam's favored example, there are a number of others that will be looked at.

In chapter 5, I raise three kinds of objections to Putnam's account of conceptual relativity. In section one, I consider what Michael P. Lynch calls the consistency dilemma, which every purported example of conceptual relativity faces. I argue that Putnam's views on conceptual relativity fall prey to the second horn of the dilemma. As a result, his attempt to hold that there are true and (in some sense) incompatible

descriptions of the “same” state of affairs is untenable.⁵ In section two, I call into question Putnam’s views on mereological sums, specifically the claim that *any* two concrete objects are themselves an object. In section three, I argue that since “object,” “thing,” “individual,” and “entity” are not true sortal terms, Putnam’s mereological sums example fails to undermine alethic realism.

In chapter 6, I argue that we can salvage a key component of Putnam’s otherwise untenable views on conceptual relativity while happily endorsing realism. The salvageable component of conceptual relativity is the appreciation of the perspectival but objective nature of knowledge: different languages or conceptual schemes can provide for different ways of conceptualizing the world without that entailing any form of radical subjectivism or relativism. I call this the *objective perspective thesis*. I will argue that the *objective perspective thesis* can be combined with alethic realism in such a way as to answer Putnam’s “cookie-cutter” objection. In doing so, I also argue that it is only on certain restrictive (scientific) theories of properties that there are difficulties in combining the *objective perspective thesis* with realism.

Given Putnam’s willingness to reevaluate his own positions, he often has the appearance of a moving target. Because of his penchant for modifying his views over time, Putnam work poses a challenge for attempts at exegesis. This is not to say that there are not important continuities in his work; for example, he still endorses some form of semantic externalism and his earlier defense and “redescription” of the analytic-synthetic distinction (I discuss these in chapter 3). Nevertheless, due to these challenges

⁵ As we will see in chapters 3 and 4, Putnam attempts to distance himself from the idea conceptual relativity requires any strong sense of incompatibility. Nevertheless, as I discuss in chapters 4 and 5, he cannot really distance himself from the claims of incompatibility without giving up the significant “anti-realist” conclusions of conceptual relativity.

and the importance of giving Putnam's views a fair run, this dissertation divides into two main parts. The first part, chapters 1-4, is predominately expository. While I will occasionally offer criticisms or raise possible objections, their purpose is primarily exegetical, with the focus on extracting a coherent picture of Putnam's evolving views. As such, I ask the reader to keep in mind that any lack of explicit qualification or criticism in chapters 1-4 should not be interpreted as agreement with the positions in question. It is not until the second part of dissertation, chapters 5 and 6, that I assert my own views most explicit.

CHAPTER ONE

CONCEPTUAL SCHEMES: MOTIVATIONS AND A SELECT HISTORY

In this chapter, I want to look at how some notion of a conceptual scheme plays a central role in the philosophy of Kant, Carnap, Quine, and Putnam. I have chosen these four philosophers because of the importance of their work and because of the way in which Putnam's views, particularly his ideas on conceptual relativity, are formulated in relation to the work of the other three. I will spend the majority of the chapter on Quine's philosophy, since it provides an important background for Putnam's work.

Kant as Forerunner

Though we will not be looking at Kant's transcendental idealism in detail, we should say a few things about Kant's historical importance for our discussion of conceptual schemes. Further, we should make clear why exactly, given that importance, we will not be looking in more detail at his critical philosophy. Though Kant's transcendental idealism does not contain the idea of a conceptual scheme as it is found in Quine or Putnam, it does contain a rather important precursor. In the Preface to the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant writes:

Up to now it has been assumed that all our cognition must conform to the objects; but all attempts to find out something about them *a priori* through concepts that would extend our cognition have, on this presupposition, come to nothing. Hence let us once try whether we do not get farther with the problems of metaphysics by assuming that the objects must conform to our cognition....⁶

With this, Kant goes on to claim that he will assume (and, of course, argue),

that the objects, or what is the same thing, the *experience* in which alone they can be cognized (as given objects) conforms to those concepts [which play a role in the determination of intuition]....

⁶ Kant 1998, Bxvi.

since experience itself is a kind of cognition requiring the understanding, whose rule I have to presuppose in myself before any object is given to me, hence *a priori*, which rule is expressed in concepts *a priori*, to which all objects of experience must therefore necessarily conform, and with which they must agree.”⁷

I do not want to treat the interpretation of these passages as unproblematic—as Lucy Allais points out, “there is not, and never has been, an agreed interpretation of transcendental idealism – there is not even a dominant consensus.”⁸ However, I will venture that we find here the idea that the objects of cognition, i.e., experience, must conform to the understanding via concepts.⁹ This is part of the subtle and complex answer to Kant’s question of how synthetic a priori judgments are possible. The answer to this question was meant to be, in part, his response to the skeptical worries of Hume, particularly in regard to causation and the possibility of science, and the worry Kant expressed in his letter to Herder concerning the possibility of any of our representations successfully representing objects.¹⁰

So, we have in Kant two of the ideas found in recent philosophical debates concerning certain kinds of realism and antirealism: 1) the purported problem of representing a representation-independent world, and 2) the claim that the mind, in some sense, is responsible for structuring the world, thereby solving the former problem.¹¹

However, while some antirealists do share certain things in common with Kant, Kant’s

⁷ Kant 1998, Bxvii-xviii. Where he assumes these things in the Preface as a hypothesis, he goes on to prove them “apodictically from the constitution of our representations of space and time from the elementary concepts of the understanding.” Footnote, Bxxii.

⁸ Allais 2003, 369.

⁹ However, Kant does not think of these concepts as linguistic.

¹⁰ For the latter point, Gardner 1999, 30.

¹¹ Allais 2003 provides a helpful look at Kant’s similarities to contemporary antirealists.

“concepts *a priori*, to which all objects of experience must therefore necessarily conform” are ones shared by *all* humans, at least. Further, the categories and concepts that are important to Kant—the one’s to which our experience must conform—are categories provided by the *mind* as opposed to *language*. In contrast, by the time we get to Carnap, Quine, and Putnam, the relevant categories and concepts *are* linguistic. Further, with the shift from concepts of the mind to concepts provided by language, a pluralism is opened up. Humans may all have the same kind of mind, but there are different actual and possible languages. Thus, different systems of concepts that might structure experience or reality in different ways seem possible. And thus, Kant’s position does not allow for Putnam’s kind of conceptual relativity in which the number and kinds of objects varies according to the conceptual scheme being used. So, while Kant’s transcendental idealism is extremely important, especially as a historical forerunner and for his way of framing the problem of how the mind and world hook up, we will not be examining his views in any further detail.

However, before leaving Kant, we should look briefly at his distinction between the *analytic* and *synthetic*, on the one hand, and the *a priori* and *a posteriori*, on the other, particularly given the importance of these distinctions in the context of the work of Carnap, Quine, and Putnam, and indeed their importance for philosophy itself.¹²

According to Jill Buroker, Kant believed that Leibniz and Hume didn’t properly

¹² Kant took the existence of *synthetic a priori* judgments to be necessary for the possibility of a priori metaphysics. And with the purported Quinean collapse of the analytic-synthetic distinction, with which the a priori/a posteriori distinction had become identified by the logical positivists (e.g., A.J. Ayer 1952), the possibility of a priori, “arm chair,” philosophy became seriously threatened. Hence, we have Quine’s naturalistic philosophy, which is supposed to be continuous with the sciences.

distinguish between the analytic/synthetic and the a priori/a posteriori.¹³ Leibniz, for example, wrote:

There are...two kinds of truths, those of *reasoning* and those of *fact*. Truths of reasoning are necessary, and their opposite is impossible; those of fact are contingent, and their opposite possible. When a truth is necessary its reason can be found by analysis, resolving it into more simple ideas and truths until we reach those which are primitive.¹⁴

In this passage, truths of reasoning seem to be analytic insofar as they can be known by analysis of parts, and they seem to be a priori insofar as they are necessary, which no truth of fact is. Hume wrote:

All the objects of human reason or enquiry may naturally be divided into two kinds, to wit, *Relations of Ideas*, and *Matters of Fact*. [...] [Relations of ideas] are discoverable by the mere operation of thought, without dependence on what is any where existent in the universe. [...] Matters of fact...are not ascertained in the same manner; nor is our evidence for their truth, however great, of a like nature with the foregoing. The contrary of every matter of fact is still possible; because it can never imply a contradiction, and is conceived by the mind with the same facility and distinctness, as if ever so conformable to reality.¹⁵

In this passage, truths concerning relations of ideas are a priori truths, since they are discoverable by the mere operation of thought; whereas, truths concerning matters of fact are contingent and thus not known by mere thought alone, but through experience.

In contrast, Kant attempted two things. First, he wanted to make clear that there are differences between the sets of distinctions, between the analytic-synthetic and the a priori/a posteriori. Second, he wanted to argue that the analytic and the a priori, and the

¹³ Buroker 2006, 27.

¹⁴ Leibniz 1992, 292, section 33.

¹⁵ Hume 1993, section IV, Part I.

synthetic and a posteriori, are not always paired; most importantly, Kant argued that there are *synthetic a priori truths*.

According to Kant, pure a priori propositions are those that can be known independently of all experience, are necessary, and universal in that they admit of no exception.¹⁶ The a posteriori ones, then, are known only through experience, contingent, and limited in application. Regarding the analytic-synthetic distinction, Kant writes in a well-known passage:

In all judgments in which the relation of a subject to the predicate is thought (if I consider only affirmative judgments, since the application to negative ones is easy) this relation is possible in two different ways. Either the predicate *B* belongs to the subject *A* as something that is (covertly) contained in this concept *A*; or *B* lies entirely outside the concept *A*, thought to be sure it stands in connection with it. In the first case I call the judgment **analytic**, in the second **synthetic**. Analytic judgments (affirmative ones) are thus those in which the connection of the predicate is thought through identity, but those in which this connection is thought without identity are to be called synthetic judgments. One could also call the former **judgments of clarification**, and the latter **judgments of amplification**, since through the predicate the former do not add anything to the concept of the subject, but only break it up by means of analysis into its component concepts, which were already thought in it (though confusedly); while the latter, on the contrary, add to the concept of the subject a predicate that was not thought in it at all, and could not have been extracted from it through any analysis. E.g., if I say: “All bodies are extended,” then this is an analytic judgment. For I do not need to go beyond the concept that I combine with the body in order to find that extension is connected with it, but rather I need only to analyze that concept, i.e., become conscious of the manifold that I always think in it, in order to encounter this predicate therein; it is therefore an analytic judgment. On the contrary, if I say: “All bodies are heavy,” then the predicate is something entirely different from that which I think in the mere concept of a body in general. The addition of such a predicate thus yields a synthetic judgment.

¹⁶ Kant 1998, B3-B4.

Judgments of experience, as such, are all synthetic. For it would be absurd to ground an analytic judgment on experience, since I do not need to go beyond my concept at all in order to formulate the judgment, and therefore need no testimony from experience for that. That a body is extended is a proposition that is established *a priori*, and is not a judgment of experience.¹⁷

For Kant, analytic judgments are thus characterized by a certain kind of containment of their predicates in their subjects—there is a relation of identity between the concepts in the predicate and those of the subject such that you cannot deny the predicate without contradicting the subject. As such, analytic judgments cannot extend our knowledge of the subject; they are clarificatory. However, they can be known independent of the “testimony” of experience. Synthetic judgments, then, do not have partial identity of concepts between their subject and predicate; they go beyond what is found in the predicate, and are empirical judgments.

However, for Kant, while there is an overlap between the analytic and a priori, and the synthetic and a posteriori, not all a priori judgments are analytic. Whereas Leibniz and Hume distinguished only two kinds of truths, Kant makes room for a third. That is, Kant held that there are also synthetic a priori truths. The latter are necessary, universally applicable, known independent of experience, but nevertheless “judgments of amplification” that apply to the world of experience. Again, Kant’s explanation of how synthetic a priori judgments are possible is one of the central themes of the *Critique of Pure Reason*; and as noted above his explanation of their possibility is driven by a concern with the questions of how the mind can form true representations of the world and how science is possible. Before moving on to Carnap, we should note that the relationship between the analytic-synthetic distinction and the a priori/a posteriori

¹⁷ Kant 1998, B10-B12.

distinction is one that will surface again in our examination of Putnam's discussion of Quine's rejection of the analytic-synthetic distinction (chapter 3).

Carnap's Account of Linguistic Frameworks and Motivations

Carnap was, of course, one of the leading and most influential of the logical positivists. One of the tenets of logical positivism is that "in the domain of *metaphysics*, including all philosophy of value and normative theory, logical analysis yields the negative result *that the alleged statements in this domain are entirely meaningless.*"¹⁸

Part of that conclusion comes from Carnap's understanding of linguistic frameworks and rationality. His notion of a linguistic framework has at least one thing in common with Kant's notion that objects of cognition must conform to the understanding via concepts. For example, for Kant it does not make sense to speak of experience independent of the (necessary) conceptual framework employed to cognize it; for Carnap, it does not make sense to speak of the truths of a particular ontology independent of some (in some sense, contingent) linguistic framework used to speak of that domain of objects. According to Carnap's understanding of linguistic frameworks, what seemed to be sensible ontological questions about, e.g., whether numbers really exist, are in fact questions without sense.

Why did Carnap hold this?

Susan Haack nicely summarizes Carnap's notion of a linguistic framework as found in his "Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology":

By a 'linguistic framework' Carnap seems to mean a language, or perhaps one should say, a language fragment, which introduces a sortal predicate and variables ranging over, and constants

¹⁸ Carnap 1932, 61. Emphasis in the original. Compare Ayer's whole project in *Language, Truth, and Logic* (1952).

designating, entities of that sort (p30). The sortal predicate, the extension of which is to be the range of the framework's variable, apparently characterizes the framework, in the sense that the framework of numbers is the language fragment with number variables and the sortal '...is a number', the framework of physical objects the fragment with physical object variables and the sortal '...is a physical object', and so forth (p.24). [...] And it seems...that linguistic frameworks may also have 'rules of evaluation', rules governing the acceptance or rejection of statements made within the framework.¹⁹

Much more could, of course, be said about Carnap's notion of a linguistic framework, but this will suffice for our purposes. As Haack points out, included in the framework are rules of evaluation. This is supposed to have important philosophical implications for rationality and what it makes sense to ask.

Gary Ebbs glosses Carnap's notion of rationality by saying that for Carnap if two investigators are going to be able to understand one another, agree or disagree, they must share:

criteria for determining whether their judgments are correct or incorrect. If they do not share such criteria, then they cannot be genuinely agreeing or disagreeing, even if they appear to be. On Carnap's view the controversies and questions in traditional metaphysics fail to be genuine because there are no criteria for deciding them."²⁰

It is the sharing of a linguistic framework that provides the shared criteria. A key idea here is Carnap's distinction between internal and external questions; a distinction that is supposed to help us resolve questions concerning the existence of entities. Carnap writes that internal questions concern the existence of some entity queried from within the framework for talking about such entities. So, internal questions are legitimate, for they

¹⁹ Haack 1976, 458.

²⁰ Ebbs 1992, 3.

ask questions of things specified by the framework. By contrast, external questions are problematic, for they ask about the frameworks themselves. For example: from within the framework of the spatio-temporally ordered system of observable things and events we can ask whether a particular book is on my shelf or whether unicorns exist. Such questions are answered by empirical investigation. An external question would be one that inquires about the reality of the spatio-temporal world itself. It is a question asked “...only by philosophers. Realists give an affirmative answer, subjective idealists a negative one, and the controversy goes on for centuries without ever being solved.”²¹

Alex Orenstein emphasizes an important aspect of Carnap’s distinction between internal and external questions; an aspect that will reappear in a modified form in Putnam’s own work.²² For Carnap, insofar as statements such as, “There are things,” or “There are properties,” or “There are numbers,” are external statements, then they are either meaningless or imperatives to adopt certain linguistic frameworks for talking about things, properties, numbers, respectively. As imperatives, they are neither true nor false; “they can be justified only by their effectiveness as a policy.”²³ However, if they are taken as internal statements, then they turn out to be analytically true: “Their truth merely reflects our decision to adopt the linguistic framework in question.”²⁴ The existence of numbers, for example, is, then, a matter of choosing or not choosing to adopt the linguistic framework of numbers.

²¹ Carnap 1950, 22.

²² I discuss Putnam’s version of it in chapter 3.

²³ Orenstein 2002, 64.

²⁴ Orenstein 2002, 65.

The above helps us to see that while, according to Carnap, different linguistic frameworks are possible, the frameworks themselves cannot be rationally evaluated: rational evaluation can only occur according to the rules specified by a framework. Put differently, the framework itself cannot be evaluated, since its rules must be assumed if one is to talk about, say numbers, in the first place. Thus we are in a sense free to adopt whatever framework we need, though the choice may be influenced by pragmatic considerations. One implication of this is supposed to be that:

we have no framework-independent conception of facts or objects. No *absolute* sense can be made of statements that facts or objects exist. Insofar as they have genuine content, such statements always presuppose a precise criterion of correctness or incorrectness. We cannot even individuate a statement without specifying a linguistic framework. For Carnap there simply are no intelligible statements, whatever their subject matter, which are not made from within particular linguistic framework.²⁵

Importantly, and as noted above in regard to the adoption of statements such as “There are numbers,” Carnap’s notion of a linguistic framework relies on the distinction between the analytic and the synthetic. Oversimplifying, if a statement’s truth value is determined solely by rules of the framework to which it belongs or if the statement is a defining framework principle such as “There are properties,” then it is analytic. If a statement’s truth value is determined by the rules of the framework and empirical investigation, then it is synthetic.²⁶

While both Putnam and Quine reject much of Rudolph Carnap’s philosophy, they were still both indebted to him in various ways. In fact, much of their writing is a reaction to Carnap’s logical positivism. Quine’s most obvious reaction to the logical

²⁵ Ebbs 1992, 4-5.

²⁶ Ebbs 1992, 4.

positivists is his attack on the analytic-synthetic distinction and the idea that we can confirm or disconfirm statements in isolation. And both Quine and Putnam reacted strongly to the use the logical positivists made of the analytic-synthetic distinction: for example, using the distinction in conjunction with a verificationist theory of meaning to argue against the meaningfulness of metaphysical and axiological debates.

Quine's Account of Conceptual Schemes and

Motivations

There are at least three important ways in which conceptual schemes play a role in Quine's philosophy. First, with his repudiation of the analytic-synthetic distinction, there is a blurring of the lines between language and empirical beliefs. This together with Quine's naturalism leads him to identify conceptual schemes with scientific theory, particularly that of physics. Second, his doctrine of the inscrutability of reference (the first of three indeterminacies) leads him to appeal to the notion of one's own home language/conceptual scheme as the background in which a person acquiesces in order to make reference, in some sense, "scrutable." Third, his naturalism extends to meaning theory as seen by his behavioristic approach to meaning and language acquisition.²⁷

While his theory of the indeterminacy of translation denies that there is really any such thing as unique sentence meaning, there is still a kind of conceptual scheme-stimulation of sensory nodes distinction or dichotomy at work. This scheme-stimulus dichotomy together with Quine's behaviorism and insistence that meaning be explained as a public phenomenon also provide the background assumptions for the indeterminacy of

²⁷ According to Dagfinn Føllesdal, Quine's behaviorism is epistemological, not ontological. The former is evidential: "the only evidence we can build our study of man, as in any other scientific study, is empirical evidence, in particular the observation of behavior" (Føllesdal 1990, 98-99). According to ontological behaviorism, there are no mental states underlying observable behavior.

translation and underdetermination of physical theory by the evidence. All of these issues are important in their own right, but they are particularly important here given Quine's influence on Putnam. Putnam's own views are often formulated in response to Quine's and when Putnam addresses possible objections to his own views those possible objections often take a Quinean line of argument. Let us briefly go over each of the three ways in which conceptual schemes play a role in Quine's philosophy in more detail.

Conceptual Schemes and the Analytic-Synthetic

Distinction

After briefly remarking on the shortcomings of Kant's ways of distinguishing the analytic and synthetic, Quine begins his critical examination of the distinction by offering the following reformulation: "a statement is analytic when it is true by virtue of meanings and independent of fact."²⁸ Then, after raising some problems for the notion of meaning, Quine distinguishes two classes of analytic statement. The first are those like, "No unmarried man is married," which are logically true. The second are those like, "No bachelor is married," which can be transformable into logical truths by way appealing to the notion of synonymy—in the present case, the supposed synonymy between "unmarried man" and "bachelor."²⁹ And so begins Quine's attack on the first dogma of empiricism. I am not going to go over his arguments, but as Gary Kemp points out, the first dogma is attacked by Quine arguing that "the concepts *meaning*, *analyticity* and

²⁸ Quine 1953, 21.

²⁹ Quine 1953, 22-23.

synonymy and so on constitute a circle, such that one cannot make any explanatory progress by using one to define the others.”³⁰

Quine also attacked what he saw as the second dogma, namely, reductionism. Reductionism is a holdover of the idea of the reduction of synthetic statements one by one into sense-datum language—where it is supposed “that each statement, taken in isolation from its fellows, can admit of confirmation or information at all.”³¹ In place of reductionism, Quine argues for a kind of holism: It is the whole of scientific theory, or at least whole “chunks,” that is accountable to the world, not any statement about the world in isolation.

Holism is further characterized for Quine by the idea that even if a hypothesis appears to be disconfirmed by an experiment, the hypothesis may not need to be rejected. That is, since any hypothesis is connected to a broader theory that implies it, it is possible that some part of the background theory may be given up instead. There are constraints concerning which beliefs constituting the theory in question are to be given up: “We heed a maxim of minimum mutilation.”³² This helps to explain why mathematical and logical truths are “more exempt” from disconfirmation than sentences like “All swans are white.” The former are closer to the center of our web of beliefs. Giving up or modifying mathematical and logical truths would in most cases not be warranted given what would be the subsequent dramatic effects on the rest of scientific theory.

³⁰ Kemp 2006, 35. I do discuss Quine and analyticity in relation to Putnam’s views on analyticity in chapter 3.

³¹ Quine 1953, 41.

³² Quine 1990, 11.

The first dogma can actually be seen as coming out of the second dogma insofar as reductionism allows for a statement to be significant in isolation. If a single statement can be meaningful in isolation and confirmed or disconfirmed by experience in isolation, the door is opened for a single statement to be true by meaning alone, completely independent of experience. To reject reductionism is to reject the analytic-synthetic distinction. As Quine puts it:

the one dogma clearly supports the other in this way: as long as it is taken to be significant in general to speak of the confirmation and information of a statement, it seems significant to speak also of a limiting kind of statement which is vacuously confirmed, ipso facto, come what may; and such a statement is analytic.

The two dogmas are, indeed, at root identical.³³

Thus, the rejection of the second dogma is supposed to lend further support to the rejection of the first dogma.

As a result of his holism and the rejection of a clear distinction between analytic and synthetic sentences, Quine's notion of a conceptual scheme became one where the scheme's parts are not concepts but sentences held true.³⁴ If there are no analytic truths, then there is not a distinction between the conventions required for viewing language as a non-empirical system of concepts and the empirical statements that can be formulated using those concepts. Instead language is thoroughly empirical—insofar as there are concepts, they are not defined by sets of necessary and sufficient analytic conditions, but rather their significance and content is determined by the whole, or at least large portions, of empirical theory.

³³ Quine 1953, 41.

³⁴ When considering alternative conceptual schemes the sentences do not of course have to be held true. The emphasis is on conceptual schemes as systems of beliefs/sentences as opposed to systems of concepts.

Thus, Quine has variously identified conceptual schemes with our totality of beliefs, scientific theory, and language. Given his holism (particularly as characterized in the last paragraph), one can begin to see how the totality of our beliefs, scientific theory, and language go together. This is all the more so in light of Quine's naturalism. In "Posits and Reality," Quine writes that "Our one serious conceptual scheme is the inclusive, evolving one of science..."³⁵ Very much in line with this way of thinking, and important in regard to Putnam's rejection of Quinean naturalism, Quine makes a distinction between first- and second-grade conceptual systems. He writes:

Propositional and attributory attitudes belong to daily discourse of hopes, fears, and purposes; causal science gets on well without them. The fact that science has shunned them and fared so well could perhaps encourage a philosopher of sanguine temper to try to include that erstwhile dim domain within an overhauled universal system, science-worthy throughout. But a reasonable if less ambitious alternative would be to keep a relatively simple and austere conceptual scheme, free of half-entities, for official scientific business, and then accommodate the half-entities in a second-grade system.³⁶

In his farewell lecture at Harvard, Putnam points out that Quine certainly recognized the importance of the "second-grade" conceptual systems, especially when considering the "agent's point of view"; however, it is the "first-grade" conceptual system that gives us our *bona fide* description of reality and *what is*.³⁷ Thus, it is not difficult to see why Quine would identify conceptual schemes with beliefs, language, and scientific theory, given that what he is interested in is scientific beliefs and scientific language.

³⁵ Quine 1976, 252.

³⁶ Quine 1969, 23-24.

³⁷ Putnam 2000, 9. I take the expression "*bona fide*," and its use in this context, from Putnam 2004c, 61.

The Inscrutability of Reference and Ontological Relativity

When considering Quine's philosophy of language, it is important to be clear about the differences between the inscrutability (indeterminacy) of *reference* (also called ontological relativity),³⁸ the indeterminacy of *translation*, and the underdetermination of *physical theory* by the evidence. But in order to make sense of Quine's ideas concerning the various indeterminacies, we need to look first at the different kinds of sentences Quine distinguishes between as a part of his empiricism and his naturalism.

Also, Quine's discussion of meaning and reference often involves an imaginary field linguist attempting to construct a manual of translation for a language that is wholly unknown to the field linguist. This is a part of Quine's approach to meaning and reference in terms of objectively observable behavior. As such the distinctions that follow pertain to the context of the public sphere in which peoples' dispositions to assent or to dissent to the queries of the linguist can be observed.

Quine makes use of what he calls *occasion sentences*, *standing sentences*, *observation sentences*, and *eternal sentences*. We will look at each of these in turn. As a preliminary, it is important to understand what Quine means by "stimulation." The stimulation of a subject on a particular occasion is just "the temporally ordered set of all those of his exteroceptors that are triggered on that occasion."³⁹ That is, stimulation is the temporally sequential reception of stimuli by an organism's sense organs. For

³⁸ There is some controversy here (e.g., between me and my committee members) regarding the identification of ontological relativity with the inscrutability of reference. One might argue that the "kind" of inscrutability of reference that can be proved is an epistemological thesis; whereas, ontological relativity is a metaphysical thesis and not subject to the same "trivial" proof. I will address this issue below.

³⁹ Quine 1992, 2.

example, in *Word and Object*, Quine identifies visual stimulation with “the pattern of chromatic irradiation of the eye.”⁴⁰

Occasion sentences are either assented to or dissented to following the “appropriate prompting stimulation” on a particular occasion. Some examples are: “His face is pale,” “The window is fogged,” and “The sky is overcast,” said or written when the appropriate stimulation is present. Occasion sentences contrast with *standing sentences* in that standing sentences do not require the appropriate stimulation to be present to command assent or dissent.⁴¹ Having discovered earlier that the sun is at the center of the solar system, we need not make the observation again when assenting to the sentence “The sun is at the center of the solar system.” However, “The *Times* has come” and “The crocuses are out” can also be standing sentences given the knowledge of the overall conditions that repeat themselves on a regular basis.

For an explanation of an *observation sentence*, we need first to look at what Quine means by stimulus meaning. The *affirmative stimulus meaning* of a sentence is the class of all stimulations for a given speaker that get him to assent to the sentence. The *negative stimulus meaning* of a sentence is the class of all stimulations for a given speaker that get him to dissent to the sentence. Stimulus meaning as a whole is the ordered pair of the two.⁴² Further, “a stimulus meaning is the stimulus meaning *modulo n* seconds of sentence *S* for speaker *a* at time *t*.”⁴³ What Quine calls the modulus of

⁴⁰ Quine 1960, 31.

⁴¹ Quine 1960, 35-6.

⁴² Quine 1960, 32-3.

⁴³ Quine 1960, 33.

stimulation is what is to count as the “specious present.”⁴⁴ So the stimulus meaning of “Rabbit,” understood holophrastically in the sense of “Lo, a rabbit,” would be for a given speaker the class of ocular stimulations produced by a rabbit shape allowing for a range of variance due to things that might obstruct vision, e.g., tall grass, different angles of view.

Quine writes: “Occasion sentences whose stimulus meanings vary none under the influence of collateral information may naturally be called observation sentences, and their stimulus meanings may without fear of contradiction be said to do full justice to their meanings.”⁴⁵ Collateral information is, for example, something known from past experience that would affect a person’s assenting or dissenting to a current stimulation.⁴⁶ If you know that a certain area is home only to garter snakes and you are walking with a friend, when something slithers by you, *you* can say that it is a garter snake, even when it is only glimpsed for a moment through the tall grass. In such a case, saying that the snake is a garter snake does not count as observation sentences since collateral information is involved. Observation sentences are those that would be assented to outright by speakers of the language “on witnessing the occasion.”⁴⁷ Some examples of observation sentences are “It’s raining,” “It’s cloudy,” and “The door is closed.” Quine admits of gradations in the readiness of different people to assent at different times to such sentences. From one angle the door looks closed, from another ajar. Confrontation with an albino zebra may elicit disparate observations. Allowing for a certain flexibility

⁴⁴ Quine 1960, 28.

⁴⁵ Quine 1960, 42.

⁴⁶ This past experience can be the very recent past, e.g., only moments before.

⁴⁷ Quine 1992, 3.

of gradation, observation sentences are those “occasion sentences on which there is pretty sure to be firm agreement on the part of well-placed observers.”⁴⁸

Observation sentences have at least two functions for Quine. They are “the vehicle of scientific evidence” and they are “the entering wedge in the learning of language.”⁴⁹ Observation sentences are the link between language and the world that the language is about. The scientist notes that the chemical is burning blue and the child blurts out “mama” upon seeing her mother. Other scientists would assent to the observation of the color of the burning chemical, and another baby would react similarly if it were his mother.

In contrast to occasion sentences, *eternal sentences* do not change their truth values in the face of changing times and speakers. The sentences of the sciences and mathematics that are theoretical are generally eternal; however, they are not the only ones.⁵⁰ “I am working on my dissertation” is true of me now, but will become false, hopefully, in 2008. However, modifying the sentence to read “On October 6th, 2007, George Wrisley is working on his dissertation,” taken as tenseless, makes the sentence eternal. If the original is true, then the modification of it into an eternal sentence makes it true for all time.⁵¹ The key point about eternal sentences is that their truth goes beyond the circumstances of their utterance. Predictions such as “The sun will rise on March 23nd, 2008, in Iowa City, Iowa at 6:04 AM” are also eternal sentences. The sentence

⁴⁸ Quine 1960, 44.

⁴⁹ Quine 1992, 5.

⁵⁰ Quine 1960, 193.

⁵¹ Or perhaps less controversially, for as long as there are language users.

retains its truth value through time in contrast to, “The sun will rise at 6:00 AM,” which may only be true once a year.

What then is the inscrutability or indeterminacy of reference? In order to answer this question clearly, we need to distinguish between understanding an expression or statement *holophrastically* and understanding it *analytically*. Understanding an expression holophrastically means taking it as a whole without concern for the parts. Understanding an expression analytically means understanding in terms of its parts.⁵² Quine’s famous example of the field linguistic querying the native by saying the native, one-word sentence “Gavagai!” in the presence of a rabbit can be used to illustrate the inscrutability of reference. Taken holophrastically “Gavagai!” and “Lo, a rabbit!” are observation sentences that have *the same stimulus meaning*. But this does not tell us about the reference of the terms involved, namely, “gavagai” and “rabbit.” The problem is that the fact that “Gavagai!” and “Lo, a rabbit!” have the same stimulus meaning does not entail that the terms “gavagai” and “rabbit” are synonymous or that they have the same reference. “Gavagai,” the term, might refer to undetached rabbit parts, a rabbit temporal stage, a rabbit, or the universe minus a rabbit. Nothing in the natives’ speech dispositions to assent or dissent to “Gavagai!”, or in their nonverbal behavior, will determine a unique translation of the term “gavagai.” Importantly, the inscrutability of reference does not affect the truth conditions of the sentences taken as wholes. That is, whether we translate the term “gavagai” as “rabbit” or “rabbit stage,” the truth value of the sentence stays the same:

The only difference between rabbits, undetached rabbit parts, and rabbit stages is in their individuation. If you take the total

⁵² Thus “analytic” here is in the sense of analysis.

scattered portion of the spatiotemporal world that is made up of rabbits, and that which is made up of rabbit stages, you come out with the same scattered portion of the world each of the three times. The only difference is how you slice it. And how to slice it is what ostension or simple conditioning, however persistently repeated, cannot teach.⁵³

As Kemp emphasizes, Quine's point in arguing for the inscrutability of reference is not that the proper translation or reference of "gavagai" is unknowable, but that there is no factual difference to be had as to whether "gavagai" should be translated as "rabbit" or "undetached rabbit parts."⁵⁴

This inscrutability of reference is the same thing as what Quine calls ontological relativity. The ontology or the correct translation is relative to a translation manual: "To say that 'gavagai' denotes rabbits is to opt for a manual of translation in which 'gavagai' is translated as 'rabbit', instead of opting for any of the alternative manuals."⁵⁵

Regarding his earlier claim that the inscrutability of reference or ontological relativity applies to one's own language, whether that of one's neighbors or oneself, Quine says:

...if we choose as our manual of translation the identity transformation, thus taking the home language at face value, the relativity is resolved. Reference is then explicated in paradigms analogous to Tarski's truth paradigm; thus 'rabbit' denotes rabbits, whatever they are, and 'Boston' designates Boston.⁵⁶

With a background language in place, e.g., English, there is no problem in distinguishing meaningfully between rabbits and rabbit stages; there is only a problem in doing it absolutely. That is, it is meaningless to ask absolutely whether "rabbit" and "rabbit

⁵³ Quine 1969, 32.

⁵⁴ Kemp 2006, 55.

⁵⁵ Quine 1990, 6.

⁵⁶ Quine 1990, 6.

parts” refer respectively to rabbits and rabbit parts. Such a question can meaningfully be asked only relative to a background language.⁵⁷

One might object to the identification of the inscrutability of reference with ontological relativity, since the former might be seen as an epistemological thesis and the latter an ontological thesis—particularly if we understand the inscrutability of reference to admit of proof via proxy functions. However, it is not clear to me that Quine does not make an illegitimate move from epistemological conclusions to ontological ones.

Further, in a reply to Paul A. Roth, Quine writes:

Early in his essay Roth methodically sets forth seven relation (a)-(g) of implication, non-implication, or inequivalence that I have purportedly affirmed between various theses. He gets some right and some wrong. [...]
(g) The inscrutability of reference implies ontological relativity. I have no quarrel here, but I do not see what difference there is between the two.⁵⁸

And *In Pursuit of Truth*, Quine writes:

Taken analytically, the indeterminacy of translation is trivial and indisputable. It was factually illustrated in *Ontological Relativity* by the Japanese classifiers, and more abstractly above by proxy functions. ... It is what I have called inscrutability of reference.... The serious and controversial thesis of indeterminacy of translation is not that; it is rather the holophrastic thesis, which is stronger. [...]
Kindly readers have sought a technical distinction between my phrases 'inscrutability of reference' and 'ontological relativity' that was never clear in my own mind. But I can now say what ontological relativity is relative to, more succinctly than I did in the lectures, paper, and book of that title. It is relative to a manual of translation. To say that 'gavagai' denotes rabbits is to opt for a manual of translation in which 'gavagai' is translated as 'rabbit', instead of opting for any of the alternative manuals.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Quine 1969, 48.

⁵⁸ Quine 1986, 459.

⁵⁹ Quine 1992, 50-52.

Insofar as Quine failed to make clear distinctions in his own mind between various theses, it is, of course, quite possible that he sometimes used “inscrutability of reference” to refer to the “provable” epistemological thesis that reference is underdetermined by all possible evidence, and at other times to refer to the ontological thesis concerning the relativity of ontology. However, given Quine’s empiricism and quasi-behaviorism, it would not surprise me if he went from the epistemological conclusion of the underdetermination of reference by evidence to the conclusion that there really is no determinate reference apart from relativization to a background language, and hence to ontological relativity.

The Indeterminacy of Translation, Indeterminacy of Meaning, and Radical Translation

The indeterminacy of translation is the thesis that when translating one language into another— whether Native into English, or French into English—alternative, inconsistent translation manuals are consistent with all of the behavioral (including verbal) dispositions of speakers. Therefore, according to Quine, there is no determinate fact of the matter concerning sentence meaning. This thesis is also referred to as the indeterminacy of meaning. Since Quine first illustrates it with the thought experiment using the field linguist and the natives whose language is wholly unknown, it is also talked about in terms of radical translation.

It is important to remember that Quine is approaching language and meaning theory from a public, empirical standpoint. A language (a theory), consists of eternal sentences, standing sentences, occasion sentences, and observation sentences.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ And surely others; I don’t think Quine takes this to be an exhaustive list.

Language/theory as a whole connects to reality through observation sentences and what Quine calls observation categoricals. As Quine puts it, the relation between theory and sensory evidence “consists in the implying of true observation categoricals by the theory formulation.”⁶¹ An observational categorical is, for example, “Where there is smoke, there is fire” or “When night falls the lamps are lit.” Quine writes, “A generality that is compounded of observables in this way—‘Whenever this, that’—is what I call an *observational categorical*. It is compounded of observation sentences.”⁶² So the idea of the indeterminacy of translation is that two different translation manuals, X and Y, can provide inconsistent translations of sentences from language Z because the translations of the observation sentences of Z, using either X or Y, will have the same stimulus meaning and thus be compatible with all behavioral dispositions. Thus, via the observation categoricals, inconsistent manuals of translation can imply observation sentences with the same stimulus meaning.

This is not just a rehashing of the inscrutability of reference. That is, it is not that X translates “Gavagai!” as “Lo, a rabbit!” and Y translates “Gavagai!” as “Lo, a rabbit stage!” I take the point is rather that even if X and Y translate all of the observation sentences and observation categoricals from Z in the same way, then other, non-observation sentences of Z can still be translated in ways that are inconsistent between X and Y. That this is point behind Quine’s thesis can be seen from the following. Quine writes, “Sentences translatable outright, translatable by independent evidence of stimulatory occasions, are sparse and must woefully under-determine the analytical

⁶¹ Quine 1981, 28.

⁶² Quine 1990, 9-10.

hypotheses on which the translation of all further sentences depend.”⁶³ The analytical hypotheses are those hypotheses used by the linguist to go beyond the translation of observation sentences. In general this is done by dividing heard expressions into recurrent parts, thereby compiling a list of native words.⁶⁴ This vocabulary is tentatively translated into, e.g., English vocabulary.⁶⁵ These analytical hypotheses are then used to translate other sentences, including those that do not have stimulus meaning in the way that observation sentences do. Assuming that the stimulus meaning of the observation sentences underdetermines the analytical hypotheses, Quine writes:

There can be no doubt that rival systems of analytical hypotheses can fit the totality of speech behavior to perfection, and can fit the totality of dispositions to speech behavior as well, and still specify mutually incompatible translations of countless sentences insusceptible of independent control.⁶⁶

Thus, Quine writes:

A manual of Jungle-to-English translation constitutes a recursive, or inductive, definition of a *translation relation* together with a claim that it correlates sentences compatibly with the behavior of all concerned. The thesis of indeterminacy of translation is that these claims on the part of two manuals might both be true and yet the two translation relations might not be usable in alteration, from sentence to sentence, without issuing incoherent sequences. Or, to put it another way, the English sentences prescribed as translation of a given Jungle sentence by two rival manuals might not be interchangeable in English contexts.⁶⁷

⁶³ Quine 1960, 72.

⁶⁴ These would include truth-functional terms such as “or” and “and.”

⁶⁵ Quine 1960, 68. I say tentatively, because as hypotheses the translations are always subject to revision. This is a very oversimplified sketch of the construction of a translation manual.

⁶⁶ Quine 1960, 72.

⁶⁷ Quine 1992, 48.

The upshot to the indeterminacy of translation is supposed to be that we are forced to give up “uncritical semantics,” i.e., “the myth of a museum in which the exhibits are meanings and the words are labels. To switch languages is to change the labels.”⁶⁸

We give up an assurance of determinacy. Seen according to the museum myth, the words and sentences of language have their determinate meanings. To discover the meanings of the native’s words we may have to observe his behavior, but still the meanings of the words are supposed to be determinate in the native’s *mind*, his mental museum, even in cases where behavioral criteria are powerless to discover them for us. When on the other hand we recognize with Dewey that “meaning ... is primarily a property of behavior,” we recognize that there are no meanings, nor likenesses nor distinctions of meaning, beyond what are implicit in people’s dispositions to overt behavior. For naturalism the question whether two expressions are alike or unlike in meaning has no determinate answer, known or unknown, except insofar as the answer is settled in principle by people’s speech dispositions, known or unknown. If by those standards there are indeterminate cases, so much the worse for the terminology of meaning and the likeness of meaning.⁶⁹

Føllesdal emphasizes that insofar as we take mental content to be identical to or even identified by its verbal formulation (whether formulated “in the mind” or out loud), the indeterminacy of translation thesis affects mental content.⁷⁰ If one person is thinking “Snow is white and cold” and another is thinking “Schnee ist weiß und kalt,” we might expect them to be in the same mental state. However, since there is no one correct translation manual from English to German or German to English, there is no one determinate meaning that “Snow is white and cold” or “Schnee ist weiß und kalt” could

⁶⁸ Quine 1969, 27.

⁶⁹ Quine 1969, 28-29.

⁷⁰ Føllesdal 1990, 106-107.

have. That is, since different, inconsistent translation manuals are consistent with all possible behavior and dispositions of speakers, and since meaning is holistic, there is nothing that is *the* meaning of mental content insofar as it is verbal.

It is important to recognize the difference for Quine between the inscrutability of reference and the indeterminacy of translation. The former concerns the reference of individual terms and the latter concerns the meaning of whole sentences.⁷¹ Also, as Kemp points out, the inscrutability of reference does not affect the truth conditions or the truth values of sentences taken as wholes (it concerns the reference of their parts), whereas indeterminacy of translation is supposed to involve different manuals offering inconsistent translations of whole sentences.⁷² Additionally, according to Quine, the inscrutability of reference is indisputable, but the indeterminacy of translation is controversial.⁷³

It is also important to emphasize that the conclusion of the thesis of indeterminacy of translation is not epistemological but ontological. Quine makes this clear:

I have argued that two conflicting manuals of translation can both do justice to all dispositions to behavior, and that, in such a case, there is no fact of the matter of which manual is right. The intended notion of matter of fact is not transcendental or yet epistemological, not even a question of evidence; it is ontological, a question of reality, and to be taken naturalistically within our scientific theory of the world. Thus suppose, to make things vivid, that we are settling still for a physics of elementary particles and recognizing a dozen or so basic states and relations in which they may stand. Then when I say there is no fact of the matter, as regards, say, the two rival manuals of translation, what I mean is

⁷¹ Quine emphasizes this, for example, in Quine 1992, 50.

⁷² Kemp 2006, 55.

⁷³ Quine 1992, 50. As we will see in chapter 2, Putnam takes issue with Quine's acceptance of ontological relativity.

that both manuals are compatible with all the same distributions of states and relations over elementary particles. In a word, they are physically equivalent. Needless, to say, there is no presumption of our being able to sort out the pertinent distributions of microphysical states and relations. I speak of a physical condition and not an empirical criterion.⁷⁴

The assumption, then, seems to be that if there were some fact of the matter about meanings, then it would show up at the physical level and would be accessible to scientific inquiry.

Underdetermination of Physical Theory by the Evidence

Quine's thesis of underdetermination of physical theory is different than the indeterminacy of translation. He characterizes the thesis of underdetermination at one point as the thesis "that our system of the world is bound to have empirically equivalent alternatives which, if we were to discover them, we would see no way of reconciling by reconstrual of predicates."⁷⁵ Quine admits this sets one wondering about truth: are both or just one of the empirically equivalent theories true? That is, unlike the indeterminacy of translation, he considers the possibility that only one of the rival physical theories may be true—there may be a fact of the matter as to which is correct—or that they might both be true (or false). This would mean that underdetermination is epistemological in the way that the indeterminacy of translation is not. However, Quine admits that he has vacillated as to whether in cases of rival theories one may be true and the other false or whether they might both be true.⁷⁶ It is not my intention to address this issue any further,

⁷⁴ Quine 1981, 23.

⁷⁵ Quine 1975, 327. This is the very modest version of the underdetermination thesis that he ends with after considering stronger versions.

⁷⁶ See, for example, Quine 1992, 98-102.

but rather to make clear the distinction for Quine between indeterminacy of translation and underdetermination of physical theory by the evidence.

Concluding Remarks on Quine and Conceptual Schemes

As we have seen, with the identification of language with scientific theory and his further naturalistic approach to the philosophy of language, there is for Quine a distinction to be made between our conceptual schemes and the triggering of our sensory receptors. This is the main reason that Donald Davidson includes Quine in his attack on the very idea of a conceptual scheme.⁷⁷ Quine argues that Davidson unjustifiably includes him in his criticisms of scheme-content dualism. Quine agrees with Davidson that we shouldn't say that true sentences fit the *facts*: "There is nothing to add to Tarski's analysis, Davidson rightly urges, so far as the concept of truth is concerned."⁷⁸ However, Quine thinks that Davidson has misunderstood the role that sensory evidence has played for him (Quine):

Where I sense a conflation of truth and belief, however, is in [Davidson's] referring to "the totality of experience" and "surface irritations" on a par with "the facts" and "the world." The proper role of experience or surface irritation is as a basis not for truth but for warranted belief.⁷⁹

Interestingly, Davidson writes: "The point is that for a theory to fit or face up to the totality of possible sensory evidence is for that theory to be true."⁸⁰ And we might wonder against Quine what warranted belief is if not warranted belief about what is true.

Quine rightly emphasizes that there is an important distinction between truth and

⁷⁷ See Davidson 2001, 183ff.

⁷⁸ Quine 1981, 39.

⁷⁹ Quine 1981, 39.

⁸⁰ Davidson 2001, 193.

warranted belief—if there weren't, then what is true would be what is warrantably assertible, which would make it difficult to explain the revision of previously warranted beliefs.⁸¹ Nevertheless, I take it that *Davidson is correct in detecting a dichotomy of language/scheme and content/surface irritations in Quine's philosophy*. However, it is not my purpose here to settle the dispute between Quine and Davidson or to say whether Davidson is correct in his overall attempt to repudiate the very idea of a conceptual scheme. The point of this whole section on Quine has been to characterize Quine's philosophy of language, his views on analyticity, meaning, and reference. I have done this so that they may be contrasted with, and provide a background for, Putnam's views.

Putnam's Account of Conceptual Schemes and

Motivations

In describing part of Putnam's philosophical development Maximilian de Gaynesford quotes John Austin and then goes on to relate the quote to Putnam:

When we examine what we should say when, what words we should use in what situations, we are looking not merely at words (or "meanings", whatever they may be) but also at the realities we use the words to talk about: we are using a sharpened awareness of words to sharpen our perception of, though not as the final arbiter of, the phenomena. J. L. Austin, *A Plea for Excuses* (1979: 182)

[...]

Putnam's overall concerns in the first part of his career, no less than the second, are expressed by the quoted passage from John Austin (1911-60). How must we and the world be, and how must we be connected up with the world, if we are to perceive it, think about it, talk about it? And in particular, what should we make of the concepts and words we have at our disposal for thinking and talking about the world – what are the "arbiters" here, and how do they operate?⁸²

⁸¹ Quine 1992, 93-94.

⁸² De Gaynesford 2006, 45.

Putnam's concerns have a number of affinities with Kant's concerns, e.g., with avoiding skepticism in regard to our representations of the world, with the way our conceptual and cognitive apparatus relates to the world, among others. In discussing Kant's influence on Putnam, Conant writes:

[The] Kantian quest for a coherent conception of what is "objective humanly speaking"—a conception that avoids the twin perils of a relativism that denies the possibility of objective knowledge and of a metaphysical absolutism that transcends the limits of what is coherently conceivable—has emerged as perhaps the single most pervasive theme in Putnam's recent work.⁸³

Putnam originally held to a realist⁸⁴ view of science and reference. But he eventually came to see problems with realism. In particular he found it problematic how it explained reference, meaning, and truth. Putnam sees realism as promising to save us from the antirealist who denies us the mind/representation-independent reality of our ice cubes, tables, etc., while in the end, realism claims that the only things that really exist are what finished science tells us exists—which wouldn't be ice cubes and tables as such.⁸⁵ For these kinds of reasons, Putnam has long sought a way between what he sees as metaphysical realism on the one hand and relativism on the other.⁸⁶

⁸³ Putnam 1990, xix.

⁸⁴ Again, in chapter 2, I will discuss Putnam's relationship to realism and the kind of realism that is at issue.

⁸⁵ Putnam 1988, 4. For Putnam, metaphysical realism is to be associated strongly, if not almost identified, with scientific materialism: "Today, apart from relics, it is virtually only materialists (or 'physicalists', as they like to call themselves) who continue the traditional enterprise [of metaphysics/describing the 'furniture of the world']" (Putnam 1983, 208). It is unclear how right Putnam was then, much less now, about this virtual identification of realist metaphysics with scientific realism and scientific materialism. Part of the problem is knowing exactly the form of materialism Putnam has in mind; he is, at least, thinking of the "naturalism" or scientific materialism of Quine: "In Quine's sense, to be a 'naturalist' is to believe that there is nothing to be said about science except what science itself can discover about science, i.e., there is no distinctive activity of philosophy apart from science" (Putnam 1994b, 251).

⁸⁶ See for example, Putnam 1988, 107.

Putnam's appeal to the notion of a conceptual scheme has developed over the years in response to his concerns about the possibility of a realist theory of meaning and reference, the shift in focus from model-theoretic arguments to conceptual relativity, and his desire to undermine ontological disputes that he thinks must lead to skepticism. His concerns about realism and reference can be seen directly in his model-theoretic arguments and his argument from conceptual relativity. His concerns about ontological disputes can be seen in his development of his notion of conceptual schemes, i.e., optional languages, which are in many ways retooled versions of Carnap's linguistic frameworks.

The Model-Theoretic Argument and Conceptual Schemes

I will discuss the model-theoretic argument in more detail in chapter 2, for now I will give a brief overview. In a telling passage, Putnam writes:

Briefly, my view is that the model-theoretic argument is not a proof of ontological relativity but rather a *reductio ad absurdum* of ontological relativity and of the "naturalism" that underlies Quine's arguments for ontological relativity.⁸⁷

But what is the model-theoretic argument?⁸⁸

Putnam broke from what he saw as metaphysical realism largely because of problems he found with that view's being able to make sense of there being a determinate relation between mind/language and world. Putnam revisits these concerns again and again in *Meaning and the Moral Sciences*, "Models and Reality," and *Reason, Truth and History*. Putnam characterizes metaphysical realism as the view that:

⁸⁷ Putnam 1994b, 251.

⁸⁸ The answer that follows is a kind of amalgamation of the three different model-theoretic arguments distinguished in chapter 2.

The world consists of some fixed totality of mind-independent objects. There is exactly one true and complete description of ‘the way the world is’. Truth involves some sort of correspondence relation between words or thought-signs and external things and sets of things.⁸⁹

One of Putnam’s concerns with metaphysical realism is what he sees as its implication that even an ideal theory could be false. This is supposed to follow because the theory is said to correspond to a world that is what it is independent of the theory. The model-theoretic argument starts from these realist assumptions and concludes that they cannot provide for a *unique correspondence relation between language and the world*. The model theoretic argument functions in a way similar to the way Quine’s inscrutability of reference functions. The idea is that the terms of the theory can be mapped onto the world in infinitely many ways—similar to the way that “rabbit” can refer to a rabbit or the universe minus a rabbit—and remain true, even when the theory satisfies all observational and theoretical constraints.⁹⁰ Importantly, where Quine takes the moral to be that there is no absolute fact of the matter about reference, Putnam takes the moral to be that metaphysical realism must be rejected.

In response to the model-theoretic argument, Putnam originally saw no alternative but to say that reference is internal to a theory in such a way that what exists is representation-dependent: He writes:

In an internalist view..., signs do not intrinsically correspond to objects, independently of how those signs are employed and by whom. But a sign that is actually employed in a particular way by a particular community of users can correspond to particular objects *within the conceptual scheme of those users*. ‘Objects’ do not exist independently of conceptual schemes. *We* cut up the

⁸⁹ Putnam 1981, 49.

⁹⁰ For example, making correct predictions, being simple, complete, and consistent.

world into objects when we introduce one or another scheme of description. Since the objects *and* the signs are alike *internal* to the scheme of description, it is possible to say what matches what.⁹¹

And thus, for Putnam, conceptual schemes help to provide for reference and meaning.⁹² As I will explain in chapter 2, Putnam ultimately gives up the model-theoretic argument, or, perhaps better, he sees another way to avoid it. As a result his stronger antirealist pronouncements are qualified and he leans instead on conceptual relativity for a refutation of realism.

Optional Languages, Skepticism, and Ontological Disputes

Putnam's conceptual schemes, his optional languages, are in many ways a makeover of Carnap's linguistic frameworks. Reminiscent of Carnap's objections to external questions, Putnam writes that "the question whether mereological sums 'really exist' is a silly question. It is literally a matter of convention whether we decide to say they exist."⁹³ However, he writes that "unlike Carnap, I do not rest the distinction between questions which have to do with the choice of a linguistic framework and empirical questions on the analytic-synthetic distinction."⁹⁴ But like Carnap, he seems to want to do away with the problematic ontological disputes that have plagued philosophy.

Thus Putnam writes:

"exist" is a concept that can be and is continually being extended in various ways (consistently with the core examples of its use), and...asking "do numbers really exist?" is asking a question to

⁹¹ Putnam 1981, 52. Emphasis in the original.

⁹² This is reminiscent of Quine's appeal to a background language to make reference *relatively* determinate in the face of the inscrutability of reference.

⁹³ Putnam 2004, 43.

⁹⁴ Putnam 1991, 407.

which Ontologists have not succeeded in giving a sense. (Just saying, “By exist I mean *exist*,” and stamping your foot, doesn’t do it.)⁹⁵

And then in regard to his example of conceptual relativity involving the Carnapian and Polish Logician counting objects and the conventionality of the answer, he writes in a footnote:

Of course, Carnap would not have *objected* to the use of Lezniewski’s calculus of parts and wholes; his attitude to such questions was the one I recommend here, that this is a question of the adoption of a convention, and not a question of fact. Unfortunately, Carnap regarded *too many* questions as questions of convention, and this served (unfortunately, in my view) to discredit the idea that *anything* is a matter of convention.⁹⁶

Putnam’s appeal to the possibility of (in some sense) incompatible conceptual schemes, and the similarities therein to Carnap’s linguistic frameworks and motivations, is in part due to Putnam’s wanting to avoid what he sees as the skeptical results engendered by attempts to adjudicate ontological disputes. He likens the latter to the Kantian antinomies of reason:

...one might do something analogous to what Kant did in the Second Antinomy; one might say that the question ‘Do mereological sums really exist?’ is an antimony, that the mind (which is allegedly unable to get down to ‘things as they are in themselves’) can’t *know* whether the question is appropriately conceived or not, and must tangle itself in contradictions if it tries to answer it.⁹⁷

While Putnam is indebted to Kant in a number of ways, Putnam does not want to say that the question of whether mereological sums exist must result in an antimony of reason.

⁹⁵ Putnam 2004a, 3.

⁹⁶ Putnam 2004a, 137; footnote 6.

⁹⁷ Putnam 2004a, 43.

Again, properly understood, he thinks the question as to whether they really exist is a bad question—reality simply leaves it open. Again, making full sense of this will have to wait until our detailed consideration of Putnam’s optional languages model of conceptual schemes in chapter 3 and his arguments for conceptual relativity in chapter 4. Another issue to keep in mind is the scope of conceptual relativity and whether it is supposed to apply to all, most, or just some ontological disputes. As we will see in latter chapters, Putnam is not entirely consistent on this issue. But let us now turn to an important distinction between conceptual relativity and conceptual pluralism.

Conceptual Relativity and Conceptual Pluralism

To fully understand Putnam’s motivations, we need to recognize a tripartite distinction between the phenomenon of conceptual relativity, the doctrine of conceptual relativity, and conceptual pluralism.

The *doctrine* of conceptual relativity is the claim that fact and convention interpenetrate one another in such a way that they cannot be cleanly separated into a fact part and a convention part. Putnam describes this as follows:

The doctrine of conceptual relativity, in brief, is that while there is an aspect of conventionality and an aspect of fact in everything we say that is true, we fall into hopeless philosophical error if we commit a “fallacy of division” and conclude that there must be a part of the truth that is the “conventional part” and a part that is the “factual part.”⁹⁸

We will discuss what this is supposed to mean in more detail in chapter 3.

The *phenomenon* of conceptual relativity is found in Putnam’s examples where he claims that there can be true but in some sense incompatible descriptions of the “same” state of affairs such that they cannot be conjoined into a more complete description.

⁹⁸ Putnam 1990, Preface x.

Again, one of the main examples of the phenomenon of conceptual relativity is that of the Carnapian and the Polish Logician counting the number of objects when three individuals are present. This is closely tied to the doctrine of conceptual relativity, since the phenomenon of conceptual relativity is supposedly an example of the interpenetration of fact and convention.

Conceptual pluralism is purportedly exemplified by the fact that we can describe a room as containing tables and chairs *or* as containing a certain arrangement of particles and fields (or whatever correct physics says there is). The idea is that neither description is more fundamental. We are not “required to reduce one or both of them to some single fundamental and universal ontology...”⁹⁹ It is important to emphasize that Putnam sees conceptual pluralism as *not* involving even apparent incompatibility of the true descriptions. This lack of incompatibility is the key distinction between conceptual relativity and conceptual pluralism.

However, according to Putnam, the relationship between conceptual relativity and conceptual pluralism is such that conceptual relativity implies conceptual pluralism, but conceptual pluralism does *not* imply conceptual relativity. That is, conceptual relativity involves the denial of a “single fundamental and universal ontology” and thus implies conceptual pluralism. But the denial of a single fundamental and universal ontology does not require conceptual relativity, i.e., the truth of incompatible descriptions of the “same” state of affairs. We will only be looking at arguments concerning conceptual relativity. We will not focus on arguments for conceptual pluralism that do not involve conceptual relativity.

⁹⁹ Putnam 2001, 437.

Concluding Remarks

We have seen some of the ways in which Kant's "conceptual schemes" and metaphysical concerns have lead, through logical positivism, to the views of Quine and Putnam. Much more could have been said, of course, about Kant and Carnap, as well as Wittgenstein's influence on the logical positivists and the role of his later philosophy; but we have seen enough to enable us to perceive the common threads. There is a central theme that connects all of the above appeals to the notion of a conceptual scheme: conceptual schemes play a role in making sense of our connection to the world through thought, language, and experience. A further theme in Putnam's work is that a plurality of conceptual schemes—schemes that allow for incompatible descriptions—provide a way to defuse or adjudicate seemingly intractable ontological disputes.

CHAPTER TWO

PUTNAM'S UNEASY RELATIONSHIP WITH REALISM:

WHAT KIND OF REALISM DOES PUTNAM'S NOTION OF CONCEPTUAL RELATIVITY DENY?

The aim of this chapter is to clarify the kind of realism that is at issue in regard to Putnam's notion of conceptual relativity. I will approach this aim through a discussion of the development of Putnam's views on realism. The latter is a rather complicated story involving Putnam's model-theoretic arguments, their relationship to his middle internal realist perspective, conceptual relativity, and his subsequent abandoning of the model-theoretic arguments. It is because of his continued endorsement of conceptual relativity that he continues to reject a certain kind of realism.

Section one of this chapter is a discussion of the development of Putnam's views on realism. Section two is a discussion of the exact nature of the realism that conceptual relativity is supposed to undermine.

Section One: Departmental and Global Realisms

As philosophers have increasingly come to emphasize, there are what we might call departmental realisms and antirealisms, and there are what we might call global realisms and antirealisms. While the distinction may be somewhat artificial, and while there may be some difficulty in drawing a sharp line between the two, the departmental realisms and antirealisms concern the existence of certain entities, e.g., god(s), minds, numbers, propositions, properties (universals), and moral properties. These are departmental because one can be a realist about one of the entities while being an antirealist about other entities. A departmental *realism* affirms the existence of a

particular kind of entity, whereas a departmental *antirealism* denies the existence of a particular kind of entity or holds that it reduces to something else. So, one can be a realist in regard to god by claiming that there really is a god. An antirealist in this respect, then, would be someone who denies the existence of god. Similarly, one can be a realist about moral properties by claiming that there is a property of goodness that some things can truthfully be said to have. The antirealist would deny that there are such moral properties. One could be an antirealist about minds by claiming that mental states, etc., reduce to behavioral dispositions. However, as Alston points out, the line between denials and reductions is not always clear.¹⁰⁰

What I am referring to as the global realisms and antirealisms concern either truth or the nature of reality as a whole. While specifying the different departmental realisms and antirealisms is fairly straightforward, it is not quite so straightforward to specify the content of the global realisms and antirealisms. This is for at least two reasons: first, the issues involved are, in a sense, simply difficult to formulate clearly; and second, the waters are often muddied because philosophers are not always clear or careful in distinguishing between the global versions of realism/antirealism; and there is no agreed upon terminology for discussing them. Nevertheless, we might distinguish between realism/antirealism concerning truth, i.e., alethic realism/antirealism, and what is sometimes problematically called “metaphysical realism,” this latter having to do with what is often (unfortunately) referred to as the “mind-dependent/independent” nature of reality. It can be problematic to contrast alethic realism with metaphysical realism

¹⁰⁰ Alston 1996, 65. Further, one can imagine that some reductionists are not going to want to call themselves “antirealists,” e.g., behaviorists about mental states may see themselves as not denying anything. Though it is not necessarily a criterion for antirealism, there is something *surprising* about some reductions, e.g., mental states to behavioral dispositions, that seem to justify the antirealist label.

primarily for three reasons. First, Putnam identifies alethic realism as metaphysical realism; and some authors, e.g., Richard Fumerton, argue that certain departmental realisms, e.g., realism concerning universals, should be called metaphysical realisms.¹⁰¹ Second, as we will see, there is disagreement about the role of truth and semantics in relation to the issue of the mind/representation-dependence of the world. Third, the notion of mind-dependence that is often invoked is misleading because of the ambiguity of “dependent/independent” and “mind.” All of the issues will be addressed in more detail below.

Putnam and Realism

Since Putnam’s notion of conceptual relativity is supposed to be incompatible with a global kind of realism, we need to get clear on the exact nature of that global realism. That task mainly consists of clarifying Putnam’s views in relation to the second and third problems just mentioned in the last paragraph, i.e., the role of truth and the issue of “mind-dependence.” In the course of this chapter I will argue that alethic realism is the kind of realism called into question by Putnam’s argument from conceptual relativity. However, in order to avoid confusion, the reader should keep in mind that Putnam does not clearly distinguish between metaphysical, scientific, or alethic realism (as we will see Putnam has his reasons for not doing so). We will begin by looking at how Putnam’s philosophy has developed in relation to the question of realism.

Tracking Putnam’s Evolving Views Regarding Realism

In “A Half Century of Philosophy, Viewed From Within,” Putnam writes:

The prominence that the term “realism” later came to have was, perhaps, presaged by a remark in my essay “What Theories Are

¹⁰¹ See Fumerton 2002, chapter 1.

Not” to the effect that certain positivist views are “incompatible with a rather minimal scientific realism.” At that point, to be a realist was simply to reject positivism. This was the way that I (and most of the analytic philosophers of my generation) thought about realism as late as when I wrote the introduction to *Mathematics, Matter and Method*. In that Introduction, dated September 1974, there is a section titled “Realism,” which begins: “These papers are all written from what is called a realist perspective. The statements of science are in my view either true or false...and their truth or falsity does not consist in their being highly derived ways of describing regularities in human experience.” What was all this about?¹⁰²

As Putnam goes on to explain, the positivists’ view of scientific claims about the world was such that those claims are expressible in observational terms alone. Observation terms are terms such as “red,” “touches,” and “stick,” and observation statements are “statements containing only observation terms and logical vocabulary.”¹⁰³ In contrast, theoretical terms are terms such as “electron,” “dream,” and “gene.” Theoretical statements are “statements containing theoretical terms.”¹⁰⁴ The idea is that “In principle...one could use ‘sense-datum terms,’ terms referring to ‘subjective experiences’ rather than to physical objects, and still state the entire content of science.”¹⁰⁵ Of course, this leaves the unobservables, e.g., atoms, electrons, and quarks, out of the picture as far as the content of scientific theories is concerned. Thus, according to this non-realist picture, “science is just a device for predicting regularities in the behavior of ‘observables.’ Unobservables such as microbes are simply, the positivists claimed,

¹⁰² Putnam 1997, 181. As we will see, Putnam shifts somewhat freely between speaking of scientific realism and metaphysical realism. However, at the point where he does so, he has gone beyond thinking of realism, i.e., scientific realism, as just the rejection of positivism.

¹⁰³ Putnam 1975, 215.

¹⁰⁴ Putnam 1975, 215.

¹⁰⁵ Putnam 1997, 181.

‘constructs’ we introduce to help predict how observables behave.”¹⁰⁶ So an important part of realism, as Putnam then saw it, was the denial of the positivists’ claims about the nature of scientific theories.

Putnam continues his account of the development of “realism”:

If what “scientific realism” meant to philosophers like myself at the beginning of the 1960s was simply the rejection of positivism and, more generally, of the idea that the statements of the natural sciences require *philosophical reinterpretation*, within a few years it was to develop into an elaborated metaphysical position, or rather a pair of positions (each of which has many versions).¹⁰⁷

Putnam refers to these two positions as “panscientism” and “quasi-realism.” Briefly, *panscientism* is the view that philosophical problems will eventually be solved (those that are solvable) by the natural sciences. The job of the philosopher, then, is to try to help guide the scientists where possible. *Quasi-realism* is the view, not that all philosophical problems are ultimately scientific problems, but rather that:

the complete description of reality as it is “in itself” is given by natural science and, in most versions of the position, by physics. The idea that there is a sharp distinction between the way things are “in themselves” and how they appear to be, or how we speak of them as being, is characteristic of this position.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶ Putnam 1997, 182.

¹⁰⁷ Putnam 1997, 183.

¹⁰⁸ Putnam 1997, 183. The term “quasi-realism” was originally introduced by Simon Blackburn. Blackburn describes the “quasi-realist” as “a person who, starting from a recognizably anti-realist position, finds himself progressively able to mimic the intellectual practices supposedly definitive of realism. In effect, quasi-realism is the program begun by Hume in his treatment of both causal and moral belief” (Blackburn 1993, 15). Given Hume’s views on causation it’s not really clear how the position Putnam describes as quasi-realist is related to the Blackburn’s quasi-realism. That is, given the central role of causation in the sciences and the role it would play in a scientific description of the world in itself, Humean skepticism about causation would be incongruous with such a description. Perhaps the common thread between Putnam and Blackburn is the way Hume might say that we project value onto the world; there aren’t really any value facts outside of those found in our breast. So a description of the world that is independent of the world as experienced wouldn’t include value as a scientific description of the world independent of our experience wouldn’t include, perhaps, colors or tables or rocks.

Cultural or physiological characteristics, for example, or what according to Putnam Bernard Williams called “local perspectives,” may cause us to experience the world in ways that do not belong to the way the world is “in itself.” Putnam characterizes this kind of scientific realism in terms of the following two assumptions:

- (1) the assumption that there is a clear distinction to be drawn between the properties things have ‘in themselves’ and the properties which are ‘projected by us’ and (2) the assumption that the fundamental science—in the singular, since only physics has that status today—tells us what properties things have ‘in themselves’.¹⁰⁹

Under quasi-realism, insofar as philosophy is involved in trying to clarify the role and function of these local perspectives, philosophy does not collapse into science.

Nevertheless, these local perspectives do not have any metaphysical significance; they belong to what Quine calls our “second-grade” conceptual system—our “first-class” or “first-grade” conceptual system is science, which has the means for describing the world in itself.¹¹⁰

Putnam was a self-described scientific realist.¹¹¹ Part of that realism involved endorsing the idea that our words have determinate reference in regard to both observables and unobservables (entities such as protons and quarks). However, around 1972 he became preoccupied with a long standing Quinean issue, namely, “how (and

¹⁰⁹ Putnam 1987, 13.

¹¹⁰ Putnam 1997, 183-184. For the distinction between first and second-grade conceptual systems, see Putnam 2004c, 61ff, and Quine 1969, 24. I also discuss it briefly in chapter 1.

¹¹¹ For example, in *Renewing Philosophy*, he writes, “it was the scientific materialist that was dominant in me in the fifties and sixties. I believed that everything there is can be explained and described by a single theory” (Putnam 1992a, 2). Scientific materialism may not imply scientific realism, but Putnam tends to lump scientific realism, scientific materialism, and metaphysical/alethic realism together, as we will see.

Quine would say, *if*) words could have determinate reference at all.”¹¹² Putnam eventually brought in considerations from mathematical logic, which led him to the model-theoretic arguments.¹¹³ I will discuss the arguments in more detail in a moment, for now, the basic idea is that the scientific/metaphysical realist is committed to there being a unique correspondence relation between a language/theory and a determinate set of representation-independent objects in the world. Among other things, the model-theoretic arguments are supposed to show that the realist cannot account for this unique correspondence relation. Putnam sees the model-theoretic arguments as similar to Quine’s argument for the inscrutability of reference and ontological relativity. As we saw in chapter 1, Quine’s answer to this problem comes in the form of a kind of acceptance of it on one level, and thus Quine denies that there is any absolute fact of the matter about reference.¹¹⁴ While Quine’s exact views on truth are difficult to pin down, Putnam seems to take Quine’s acceptance of ontological relativity to be a result of his still working with some conception of truth as correspondence.¹¹⁵ As Putnam later writes:

¹¹² Putnam 1997, 196.

¹¹³ There is not just one version of the model-theoretic argument. Various versions appear in different papers, e.g., “Realism and Reason,” in Putnam 1978, “Models and Reality,” in Putnam 1983, and “A Problem about Reference,” in Putnam 1981.

¹¹⁴ I say “at one level” because for Quine, as we saw in chapter 1, problems about reference “go away” when we “acquiesce” into our home language.

¹¹⁵ It’s not clear that Putnam is right about ontological relativity following from a commitment to correspondence or about Quine’s being committed to a theory of truth as correspondence. Regarding the latter issue, Quine dismisses facts out of hand, saying they provide only “specious support of a correspondence theory” (Quine 1990a, 79-80). However, Quine doesn’t seem to want to dispose entirely of the notion of correspondence. He writes: “Truth is disquotation” (1990a, 80). Further, “the truth predicate is an intermediary between words and the world. What is true is the sentence, but its truth consists in the world’s being as the sentence says” (1990a, 81). Further, “Sentences are what is true, and their disquotational paradigm is, as Tarski taught us to say, ‘Snow is white’ is true iff snow is white” (1994, 499). Regarding this Tarskian schema for truth, Quine writes, “Here, as Tarski has urged, is the significant

In *Reason, Truth, and History* I used an argument similar to Quine's, but drew an opposite conclusion (thus illustrating the well known maxim that one philosopher's *modus ponens* is another philosopher's *modus tollens*). I argued there that metaphysical realism leaves us with no intelligible way to refute ontological relativity, and concluded that metaphysical realism is wrong. And I still see ontological relativity as a refutation of any philosophical position that leads to it.¹¹⁶

Let us look at the model-theoretic argument in more detail.

The Model-Theoretic Argument

Putnam gives different versions of the model-theoretic argument in different publications.¹¹⁷ Both Drew Khlentzos and Barry Taylor identify three main versions.¹¹⁸ Following Khlentzos, one is based on the Löwenheim-Skolem theorems; the second is based on Gödel's completeness theorem for first-order logic; and the third is "based on permutations of a universe of a model."¹¹⁹ While the three versions share commonalities, they are still different from one another. In brief, the version based on the Löwenheim-Skolem theorems is meant to show that given certain scientific/metaphysical realist assumptions, "no assignment of truth-values (however tightly constrained) to any (however comprehensive) class of whole sentences can suffice to fix the reference of

residue of the correspondence theory of truth" (Quine 1987, 213). I don't mean to imply that a disquotational theory of truth is a correspondence theory. But it is clear from these passages that there is a kind of deflated notion of correspondence at work in Quine's idea of a disquotational theory of truth.

¹¹⁶ Putnam 1994, 280.

¹¹⁷ Again, in "Realism and Reason," in Putnam 1978, "Models and Reality," in Putnam 1983, and "A Problem about Reference," in Putnam 1981.

¹¹⁸ Khlentzos 2004, 225ff., and Taylor 2006, 49ff.

¹¹⁹ Khlentzos 2004, 228.

terms and predicates.”¹²⁰ The version based on Gödel’s completeness theorem for first-order logic essentially argues that certain scientific/metaphysical realist assumptions imply that an ideal, complete, and consistent theory could still be false; however, such a theory has a model in which it comes out true of the world. Hence scientific/metaphysical realism implies a contradiction.¹²¹ The permutation version argues that given certain realist assumptions, neither the truth-values nor the truth-conditions of whole sentences can suffice to fix the reference of their terms and predicates.¹²² We will be looking at only the permutation version found in *Reason, Truth and History*.¹²³

In *Reason, Truth and History*, Putnam identifies the key realist assumptions as the following:

- [1] The world consists of some fixed totality of mind-independent objects.
- [2] There is exactly one true and complete description of ‘the way the world is’.¹²⁴
- [3] Truth involves some sort of correspondence relation between words or thought-signs and external things and sets of things.¹²⁵

¹²⁰ Hale and Wright 1999b, 428. This version is found in Putnam’s “Models and Reality,” in Putnam 1983; and it certainly plays a role in the version found in Putnam 1981.

¹²¹ This version is found in Putnam’s “Realism and Reason,” in Putnam 1978.

¹²² Hale and Wright 1999b, 4289. This version is found in “A Problem about Reference,” in Putnam 1981.

¹²³ In part this is because of the details found in this version as compared to the other versions; and in part because of Putnam’s explicit reference to the similarities between his argument and Quine’s arguments for the inscrutability of reference.

¹²⁴ I take it that a “true and complete description” of something would consist of a consistent conjunction of true and non-synonymous descriptions of it. I take it that a “true and complete theory of the world” would be the kind of theory provided by finished science. Such descriptions or theories need not be actual or even attainable in practice. What is important is the idea that scientific/metaphysical realism is supposed to require such a thing because of its commitment to a representation-independent reality.

¹²⁵ Putnam 1981, 49. I have added the numbers and changed the pagination for ease of reference. What Putnam here calls “mind-independent,” I call “representation-independent.” I discuss the difference below.

Given these assumptions, and as we will see, a few others, Putnam thinks he can show that, "...there are always infinitely many different interpretations of the predicates of a language which assign the 'correct' truth-values to the sentences in all possible worlds, *no matter how these 'correct' truth-values are singled out.*"¹²⁶ Therefore, the realist is unable to provide an explanation for the supposedly unique and determinate correspondence relation that is supposed to hold between language and representation-independent reality. As Putnam puts it: "The whole problem we are investigating is how representations *can* enable us to refer to what is outside the mind."¹²⁷ What the realist needs to explain is how:

...when I look at something and think that it is a cat, my 'mental representations', the visual images or tactile images, the verbalized thought 'cat', and so on, *refer* to cathood and to various other physical or biological properties (being a certain shape, being a certain color, belonging to a certain species) and not to their counterparts....¹²⁸

Note that Putnam here claims that the scientific/metaphysical realist needs to provide an explanation for how our *mental representations* and not just *linguistic representations* refer to the things they purportedly represent. Putnam seems to be assuming that a scientific/metaphysical realist will also be committed to a representational theory of mind. Following Khlentzos, a representational theory of mind is "any model of mind that posits physically realized mental representations as intermediaries between the

¹²⁶ Putnam 1981, 35.

¹²⁷ Putnam 1981, 27.

¹²⁸ Putnam 1981, 37.

cognizing/perceiving subject and the world.”¹²⁹ Given Putnam’s association of metaphysical realism with scientific materialism, Putnam seems to think that scientific/metaphysical realists will take a representational theory of mind to be the best naturalistic theory of mind.¹³⁰ At the very least, Putnam attributed a representational theory of mind to the scientific/metaphysical realists because that had been his position. And in fact, he still held a representational theory of mind as of writing *Reason, Truth and History*: “Today I am inclined to think that that theory [the identity of psychological states with functional properties of matter] is the right naturalistic description of the mind/body relation.”¹³¹ And as he says later about his earlier self:

The possibility of holding that what we are immediately aware of in veridical perception is genuine properties of external things and not "representations" is one that I categorically rejected. On this neo-Cartesian picture of the mind, there seemed to be no problem as to how the mind (conceived of as a computer) could know the "subjective experiences" (the sense data) the person has, since these were supposed to be events inside the computer itself and thus "available" to the computer. But what does it mean to say that these experiences "represent" objects *outside* the mind/computer?¹³²

Putnam’s acceptance of a representational theory of mind and his connecting it with the challenge the realist faces for explaining the possibility of a unique reference relation will be important for later. But what exactly is the permutation version of the model-theoretic argument?

¹²⁹ Khlentzos 2004, 376, endnote 2.

¹³⁰ This seems to be Khlentzos’s suggestion. See Khlentzos 2004, 225-226. However, one could certainly be a property or a substance dualist and endorse a representational theory of mind.

¹³¹ Putnam 1981, 79.

¹³² Putnam 1997, 197.

Imagine we have a theory that is ideal. An ideal theory is one that meets all operational constraints, e.g., it implies the right observation sentences, and it meets all theoretical constraints, e.g., it is consistent, complete, simple, and beautiful. Even if this is the case, as we saw in chapter 1 with Quine's inscrutability of reference, the truth conditions and truth values of all the sentences of this ideal theory can remain constant while the reference of the terms is indeterminate. So even if we allow that the operational and theoretical constraints allow us to determine which sentences are true, their truth value won't determine a unique reference relation between the terms and objects in the world. Putnam acknowledges that Quine has already demonstrated this kind of indeterminacy of reference. Putnam wants to extend these Quinean results even further:

I shall extend previous 'indeterminacy' results in a very strong way. I shall argue that even if we have constraints of whatever nature which determine the truth-value of every sentence in a language *in every possible world*, still the reference of individual terms remains indeterminate. In fact, it is possible to interpret the entire language in violently different ways, each of them compatible with the requirement that the truth-value of each sentence in each possible world be the one specified.¹³³

Putnam offers a detailed, technical proof that this is possible in an appendix; in the main body of the text he gives an informal explanation of the proof. Taking the sentence, "A cat is on a mat," where "is on" is tenseless, he attempts to show that there is a way to reinterpret it so that it is made true *not* by some cat's being on some mat, but by some cherry's being on some tree. While we might be able to see how the truth condition of "Lo, a rabbit!" is the same whether "rabbit" refers to a rabbit or a rabbit stage, it is not

¹³³ Putnam 1981, 33.

quite so clear how the truth condition of “A cat is on a mat” is the same whether “cat” refers to a cat or a cherry.

The answer lies in the fact that Putnam is employing a notion of truth condition whereby truth conditions are equivalent if they provide for the same truth values in all possible worlds; for example, “That is a cube” and “That is a regular polyhedron with six square faces” have the same truth value in all possible worlds and would on this account have the same truth conditions.¹³⁴ Here is Putnam’s example concerning the sentence:

(1) A cat is on a mat:

The idea is that sentence (1) will receive a new interpretation in which what it will come to mean is:

(a) A cat* is on a mat*.

The definition of the property of being a cat* (respectively, a mat*) is given by cases, the three cases being:

- (a) Some cat is on some mat, and some cherry is on some tree.
- (b) Some cat is on some mat, and no cherry is on any tree.
- (c) Neither of the foregoing.

Here is the definition of the two properties:

DEFINITION OF ‘CAT*’

x is a cat* if and only if case (a) holds and x is a cherry; or case (b) holds and x is a cat; or case (c) holds and x is a cherry.

DEFINITION OF ‘MAT*’

x is a mat* if and only if case (a) holds and x is a tree; or case (b) holds and x is a mat; or case (c) holds and x is a quark.

Now, in possible worlds falling under case (a), ‘A cat is on a mat’ is true, and ‘A cat* is on a mat*’ is also true (because a cherry

¹³⁴ Hale and Wright 199b, 434. The example is from Putnam 1981, 27. Hale and Wright consider an objection to this way of equating truth conditions with sameness of truth value in all possible worlds; they offer a possible response on Putnam’s behalf. See Hale and Wright 1999b, 434-435.

is on a tree, and all cherries are cats* and all trees are mats* in worlds of this kind). Since in the actual world some cherry is on some tree, the actual world is a world of this kind, and in the actual world ‘cat*’ refers to cherries and ‘mat*’ refers to trees.

In possible worlds falling under case (b), ‘A cat is on a mat’ is true, and ‘A cat* is on a mat*’ is also true (because in worlds falling under case (b), ‘cat’ and ‘cat*’ are coextensive terms and so are ‘mat’ and ‘mat*’). (Note that although cats are cats* in some worlds – the ones falling under case (b) – they are *not* cats* in the *actual* world.)

In possible worlds falling under case (c), ‘A cat is on a mat’ is false and ‘A cat* is on a mat*’ is also false (because a cherry can’t be on a *quark*).¹³⁵

Thus, given these three possible kinds of world (and in the example, they are the only possibilities) the reference of “cat” and “mat” can be reinterpreted in such a way that whether the referent of “cat” is a cat or a cherry (respective for mats and trees), the truth values are the same in all possible worlds, even though operational and theoretical constraints are met. In an appendix, Putnam shows “that a more complicated reinterpretation of this kind can be carried out for all the sentences of a whole language.”¹³⁶ Thus, given the scientific/metaphysical realist assumptions of a representation-independent world consisting of a fixed totality of objects, “...there are always infinitely many different interpretations of the predicates of a language which assign the ‘correct’ truth-values to the sentences in all possible worlds, *no matter how these ‘correct’ truth-values are singled out.*”¹³⁷ The problem is that according to realism truth is supposed to consist of a *unique* correspondence relation between language and the representation-independent world.

¹³⁵ Putnam 1981, 33-34.

¹³⁶ Putnam 1981, 35.

¹³⁷ Putnam 1981, 35.

At this point we should perhaps press the point as to why operational and theoretical constraints aren't enough to fix the reference or at least narrow the reference in the above example. For example, say the ideal theory predicts that I will see a cat on a mat at such-and-such a time. We can see in Quine's discussion of "Gavagai!" why an ideal theory's predicting a "gavagai" wouldn't determine whether it was a rabbit or a rabbit stage, but couldn't we tell whether we are confronted with a cat on a mat versus a cherry on a tree? Putnam's response to this is at least twofold. First, given a representational theory of mind, any experience one takes to be of a cat's being on a mat is itself a representation. To the point, it is a representation that stands in need of an explanation of how it is that it stands in a determinate relation to an actual cat being on a mat. Second, the thought, "I see a cat on a mat, not a cherry on a tree," faces the same problem that the original "A cat is on a mat" faced regarding the permutation of its reference.¹³⁸

Thus Putnam thinks he has challenged the scientific/metaphysical realist to give an explanation of the possibility of determinate reference; further he thinks he has offered an argument to the effect that the realist cannot meet that challenge. Putnam offers two other arguments in order to block further attempts by the realist to fix a determinate reference relation between language and representation-independent reality. Other than operational and theoretical constraints, the two candidates that Putnam anticipates the realist appealing to are intentional states (mental states in the head) and causal connections between language and world. I won't go into the details, but his basic reasons for rejecting these possibilities are as follows. He appeals to his arguments for

¹³⁸ Putnam 1981, 36.

semantic externalism, e.g., the thought experiment with Twin Earth—where “water” on Twin Earth refers to XYZ not H₂O as it does on Earth—to argue that what goes on in the head is not sufficient for fixing a unique reference.¹³⁹ Further, he argues that the causal connections a causal theory of reference invokes won’t work to fix a unique reference because it is just more theory that itself admits of different ways of modeling onto the world. That is, one might argue that it is the causal connection between experiences of cows and cows or naming someone “Hilary” and telling others about it, that is involved in fixing the reference of “cow” and “Hilary.” However, Putnam’s response is that the language used to describe this causal theory and how it fixes a determinate reference suffer the same model-theoretic problems as the rest of language. Thus the theory cannot help to fix a determinate reference.¹⁴⁰

It is not my intention to evaluate Putnam’s model-theoretic arguments.¹⁴¹ Rather, I want to emphasize that they motivated Putnam to reject metaphysical/scientific realism, and in particular, the idea that truth is a relation between language and a representation-independent world. As Putnam notes in the introduction to *Realism and Reason*, he found a way out of having to choose between a metaphysical position, i.e., scientific/metaphysical realism, on the one hand and a reductionist position, i.e., disquotational theories of truth, on the other in the work of Michael Dummett.¹⁴² As he later says, this Dummettian way out consisted in taking the understanding of a language

¹³⁹ For example, see Putnam 1981, 22-25. I discuss Putnam’s semantic externalism in chapter 3.

¹⁴⁰ Putnam 1978, 126ff; Putnam 1981; Putnam 1983, x-xi.

¹⁴¹ For good, critical discussions of them see Merrill 1980, Lewis 1984, Devitt 1984, Landini 1987, Alston 1996, van Fraassen 1997, and Hale and Wright 1999.

¹⁴² Putnam 1983, xvi.

to be a “mastery of such skills as the ability to assign degrees of confirmation to sentences....”¹⁴³ His views on truth also came to resemble Dummett’s. Putnam says of himself that in *Reason, Truth and History*, “I proposed to identify being true not with being verified, as Michael Dummett does, but with being verified to a sufficient degree to warrant acceptance under sufficiently good epistemic conditions.”¹⁴⁴ While Putnam’s arguments against deflationary theories of truth are important, they would take us too far afield.¹⁴⁵ Suffice it to say that his arguments against deflationary theories of truth and metaphysical realism helped to push him into what he came to call internal realism.¹⁴⁶

As Putnam goes on to say in “A Half Century of Philosophy, Viewed From Within,” he moved away from “hard-core scientific realism” partly because of the model-

¹⁴³ Putnam 1999, 17.

¹⁴⁴ Putnam 1999, 17. Putnam goes on to say that his position differed from Dummett’s in at least two other ways. First, he did not think that empirical propositions could ever be verified once and for all. Second, he didn’t like Dummett’s extreme views concerning antirealism about the past. He avoided the latter by arguing against Dummett’s claims concerning a speaker’s grasp of a statement consisting in being able to tell presently whether it is true. 17-18.

¹⁴⁵ Putnam’s criticisms of deflationary theories of truth appear in numerous places. See, for example, Putnam 1983, Introduction and chapter 15; Putnam 1988, chapter 4; Putnam 1994, chapters 13 and 16; Putnam 1999, 49ff.

¹⁴⁶ As Putnam explains in an endnote to Putnam 1999:

Some readers, misled by a careless reading of a sentence in “Realism and Reason,” started referring to what they took to be my new position, as first put forward in those two essays [“Realism and Reason” and “Models and Reality”], as “internal realism.” I used the term *internal realism* in “Realism and Reason” as a name for the position I held in “The Meaning of ‘Meaning’” and in my “functionalist” writings. In *Realism and Reason* *internal realism* was not a term for my new position; it was rather a term for a kind of scientific realism I had already accepted for some years, for a position (I now argued) both realist and antirealists could accept. But I soon discovered that everyone else was using the term as a name for my new position (or whatever they took that position to be). Even though I had modified my position in certain ways between those two essays and *Reason, Truth, and History*, in that work I capitulated to the fashion of calling whatever Putnam’s new position happened to be “internal realism.” (Endnote 36, p182)

theoretic difficulties he saw with a realist picture of reference and partly because of the influence of Nelson Goodman's work:

Scientific realism seems only to exacerbate rather than resolve these deep problems, because for scientific realists there are only two possibilities: either reduce reference to notions employed in the physical sciences, which seems impossible, or say (with Quine) that it is an illusion that there is a determinate relation of reference. I began to move away from hard-core scientific realism partly for this reason and partly because I was discovering the important work of a philosopher who has always insisted that understanding the arts is as important as understanding science in understanding cognition. That philosopher is Nelson Goodman. I found myself agreeing with Goodman's insistence that the world does not have a "ready-made" or "built-in" description; many descriptions may "fit," depending on our interests and purposes. (This does not mean that anything we happen to like "fits." That more than one description may be right does not mean that every description is right, or that rightness is subjective.) While I could not agree when Goodman went so far as to say that there is not one "world" but many worlds and that these are of our own making, I still find his work a continuing source of stimulation.¹⁴⁷

Given the model-theoretic concerns, Dummett's influence, and Goodman's influence, in *Reason, Truth and History*, Putnam says truth on his internalist perspective is:

...some sort of (idealized) rational acceptability – some sort of ideal coherence of our beliefs with each other and with our experiences *as those experiences are themselves represented in our belief system* – and not correspondence with mind-independent or discourse-independent 'states of affairs'.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁷ Putnam 1997, 198.

¹⁴⁸ Putnam 1981, 49-50. Importantly, Putnam claims that he is not *identifying* truth with idealized rational acceptability. This is because, for example, "truth is supposed to be a property of a statement that cannot be lost, whereas justification can be lost. The statement 'The earth is flat' was, very likely, rationally acceptable 3,000 years ago; but it is not rationally acceptable today" (Putnam 1981, 55). Elsewhere, Putnam clarifies that in *Reason, Truth and History* he intended to suggest "that truth and rational acceptability are interdependent notions" (Putnam 1988, 115). However, it certainly seems that he *was* identifying truth with idealized rational acceptability.

Such a view is supposed to sidestep model-theoretic problems, since there is no question as to how it is that language is determinately connected to a representation-independent reality. As Putnam puts it:

In an internalist view..., signs do not intrinsically correspond to objects, independently of how those signs are employed and by whom. But a sign that is actually employed in a particular way by a particular community of users can correspond to particular objects *within the conceptual scheme of those users*. ‘Objects’ do not exist independently of conceptual schemes. *We* cut up the world into objects when we introduce one or another scheme of description. Since the objects *and* the signs are alike *internal* to the scheme of description, it is possible to say what matches what.¹⁴⁹

Let us look at another argument that led Putnam to the above internalist view, namely, the argument from conceptual relativity.

Conceptual Relativity

In *Meaning and the Moral Sciences*, after giving a version of the model-theoretic argument, Putnam also gives an argument to the effect that a straight line can truly be said to have extensionless points on one theory and truly be said on another theory to have only parts with extension. These different theories are what Putnam calls “equivalent.” And he thinks that scientific/metaphysical realism cannot make sense of such seemingly incompatible but equivalent theories. This purported phenomenon of equivalent, incompatible descriptions of the “same” thing is what he develops into an account conceptual relativity.¹⁵⁰ The example that he has come to prefer is the following one that is already familiar.

¹⁴⁹ Putnam 1981, 52. Emphasis in the original.

¹⁵⁰ I discuss this example of the line in more detail in chapter 4.

Imagine a hypothetical Polish Logician and a Carnapian.¹⁵¹ The Polish Logician countenances mereological sums, i.e., the idea that *any* two things are themselves an object, and the Carnapian denies the existence of such objects.¹⁵² If asked to count the number of objects when presented with what Putnam calls three “individuals,” x_1 , x_2 , x_3 , the Carnapian says, “There are three objects,” and the Polish Logician, ignoring the null object, says, “There are seven objects.” That is, the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd objects are each of the three individuals, the 4th the sum of x_1 and x_2 , the 5th the sum of x_1 and x_3 , the 6th the sum of x_2 and x_3 , and the 7th object is the sum of x_1 , x_2 , and x_3 .¹⁵³ According to Putnam, the realist will insist that the Carnapian and the Polish Logician cannot both be right, since the realist is supposed to be committed to a fixed totality of representation-independent objects. Against this, Putnam argues that in some contexts it might be quite right to talk like the Carnapian and in other contexts like the Polish Logician, but reality does not force us to speak one way or the other if we are to speak truthfully. There is no representation-independent fact of the matter as to how many objects are there; moreover, the example generalizes: there is no representation-independent fact of the matter as to the number of objects constituting the world. Therefore, it is not the case that there is only one true and complete description or theory of the world standing in a unique correspondence relation to the world.

¹⁵¹ This hypothetical Carnapian is not meant to be representative of the real Carnap who Putnam thinks would have no problem with mereological sums.

¹⁵² As Putnam points out, mereological sums, unlike sets, have spatial location. The mereological sum of my left hand and the air molecules within an inch around it is located in the same space as my hand and the air an inch around it. See Putnam 2004, 34-37.

¹⁵³ It is not entirely clear why Putnam thinks that the Polish Logician would stop at seven objects. That is, it is not clear why the sixth and seventh objects wouldn't sum to form an eighth, the seventh and eighth to form a ninth, and so on ad infinitum.

Putnam's Shifting Focus from the Model-Theoretic

Argument to Conceptual Relativity

In the Preface to *Realism with a Human Face*, Putnam writes:

it might be said that the difference between the present volume and my work prior to *The Many Faces of Realism* is a shift in emphasis: a shift from emphasizing model-theoretic arguments against metaphysical realism to emphasizing conceptual relativity.¹⁵⁴

Putnam doesn't say why there is this shift of emphasis, but at some point in the late 1980s or early 1990s after this shift has been going on for a number of years, he changes his mind about the scope of the implications of the model-theoretic arguments against realism.¹⁵⁵ In their place, he focuses on issues concerning conceptual relativity. Before looking further into the exact nature of the realism that conceptual relativity is supposed to undermine, let us look briefly at why Putnam gives up the model-theoretic arguments.

An initial step in Putnam's changing views regarding the model-theoretic arguments, and in his pulling back from the more extreme global antirealist position found in *Reason, Truth and History*, had to do with his realizing that his epistemic notion of truth faced model-theoretic problems after all. That is, since he endorsed a representational theory of mind, and since he thought it was reality that determined whether a person is in a sufficiently good epistemic position or just seemed to be in one, there was a problem explaining how it is that a person can stand in determinate referential

¹⁵⁴ Putnam 1990, x.

¹⁵⁵ Though he still thinks the argument is effective in refuting a realist theory of truth that includes a representational theory of mind. The sense in which he abandons them will become clearer shortly.

relations to sufficiently good epistemic positions—those lying on the other side, so to speak, of the sense data.¹⁵⁶

Putnam alerts us to a further step in the Preface to *The Threefold Cord*:

During the discussion of my model-theoretic argument in *Reason, Truth, and History* at a conference in Madrid in 1988 [Cesar] Gomez made a remarkable suggestion. He suggested that “perhaps John Austin’s *Sense and Sensibilia* contains the way out of the whole problem.” I disagreed on that occasion, but in a few years I came to see that Gomez had been exactly right. (The fact that I was studying the philosophy of William James, who was a powerful advocate of “natural realism,” was a big factor.)¹⁵⁷

The question, of course, is how does natural or direct realism avoid the model-theoretic problems? For our purposes here, it is not important to settle this matter, but rather to see why Putnam thinks direct realism settles the matter.

In brief, Putnam describes his version of direct realism, what he prefers to call natural realism, thus:

A natural realist, in my sense, does hold that the objects of (normal, “veridical”) perception are “external” things, and, more generally, aspects of “external” reality. The natural realist, in William James’s sense, holds...that successful perception is *sensing* of aspects of the reality “out there” and not a mere affectation [sic] of a person’s subjectivity by those aspects. I agree with James, as well as with McDowell, that the false belief that perception *must* be so analyzed is at the root of all the problems with the view of perception that, in one form or another, has dominated Western philosophy since the seventeenth century. James’s idea is that the traditional claim that we must conceive of our sensory experiences as intermediaries between us and the world has no sound arguments to support it and, worse, makes it impossible to see how persons can be in genuine cognitive contact with a world at all.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁶ Putnam 1999, 18.

¹⁵⁷ Putnam 1999, xii.

¹⁵⁸ Putnam 1999, 10-11.

It would take us too far from the focus of this chapter to flesh out the details of Putnam's "new" views on perception and his arguments in defense of those views. However, a bit more must be said if we are to see why he abandons the model-theoretic arguments.

An important part of Putnam's natural realism is the idea that the mind is not a thing, and as such it is not to be identified with the brain: "talk of our minds is talk of *world-involving capabilities that we have and activities that we engage in.*"¹⁵⁹

Perception, Putnam claims, is not supervenient on processes in the *brain*:

perception is *transactional*. . . . And that is compatible with supervenience, because transactions between the eye and the things 'out there' that we see are also material. Seeing a tree is supervenient on material processes. [But] why would anyone think that they must all be inside the brain? The answer, I think lies in the assumption that *cognitive* processes are confined to the brain. But why would one think that, unless they assumed that the mind is a thing, and if it is a thing. [sic] What can it be but the brain? (The picture that drives this line of thought is that there has to be this *place*, the inner theatre.)¹⁶⁰

Following what he takes to be the main thrust of Aristotle's views on perception (minus what he takes to be the metaphysical baggage of Aristotle's position), Putnam claims that "what we perceive is the external warmth and coldness, the external shape, the intelligence and the animality of the person with whom we are talking, etc."¹⁶¹ We do not just experience events internal to our minds "whose only relation to the warmth and

¹⁵⁹ Putnam 1999, 170. Putnam's emphasis.

¹⁶⁰ Putnam 2002, 125. Elsewhere Putnam elucidates this notion of transaction:

As Dewey might have put it, perception is *transactional*. We are aware of ourselves as in *interaction* with our perceptual objects. I am aware of a series of visual, tactile, etc., *perspectives* on the chair without ceasing to perceive the chair as an object that does not change as those perspectives change. (Putnam 1999, 159)

¹⁶¹ Putnam 1999, 22.

the coldness, the shape, the intelligence, and the animality is that they are *caused* by them....”¹⁶² Thus, Taylor writes:

For both Putnam and McDowell, what turns the trick in...welding representational content onto the world is perception, which both insist is properly viewed...as involving direct engagement of the perceiving intellect with the facts, unmediated by intervening appearances, sense-data, or ideas....¹⁶³

Assuming for the sake of argument that Putnam’s position here is intelligible and right, we might still wonder how this view defuses the concerns of the model-theoretic arguments. Insofar as those arguments rely on a representational theory of mind according to which we are, in a sense, cut off from things in themselves (trapped in our minds), we can perhaps see why denying a representational theory of mind might get us a step closer to diffusing the model-theoretic arguments. However, insofar as the model-theoretic arguments are an extended version of Quine’s arguments for the inscrutability of reference, then Putnam’s recent views on perception seem to imply that Quine’s arguments for the inscrutability of reference hinge on whether or not one accepts a representational theory of mind. And it is not clear that the latter is true.

The potential problem for Putnam’s position can be seen from the following passage. Putnam writes:

By speaking of perceiving coffee tables, what I have in mind is not the minimal sense of “see” or “feel” (the sense in which one might be said to “see” or “feel” a coffee table even if one hadn’t the faintest idea what a coffee table is), I mean the full achievement sense, the sense in which to see a coffee table is to see that it is a coffee table that is in front of one.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶² Putnam 1999, 22.

¹⁶³ Taylor 2006, 138.

¹⁶⁴ Putnam 1999, 14.

Putnam is not denying that we have experiences before learning language, or that animals don't have experiences. However, insofar as Putnam claims that our perception of the coffee table is unmediated by sense-data *and* that the mind is world-involving *and* that the full achievement sense of perceiving the coffee table is to see *that* it is a coffee table, ontological relativity can gain a foothold. This is because we can ask what the referent of "coffee table" is, since the full achievement sense of perceiving a coffee table will involve learning to speak about "coffee tables." Does the achievement sense of perceiving a "coffee table" involve perception of a coffee table stage, undetached coffee table parts, etc.?

Whether I am right that Putnam's natural realism does not really evade Quine's arguments for ontological relativity, and thus Putnam's own model-theoretic arguments, Putnam certainly sees natural realism as diffusing the model-theoretic concerns. And this is important because as a result Putnam mitigates the stronger antirealist tones found in *Reason, Truth and History*. That is, he becomes more moderate regarding the idea that we carve up the world into objects.¹⁶⁵ However, Putnam remains devout to his argument from conceptual relativity and he still denies the intelligibility of scientific/metaphysical realism. Let us now turn to focus on the exact nature of the realism that Putnam takes conceptual relativity to undermine.

¹⁶⁵ And over time he retreats from such a strong endorsement of the idea that truth should be cashed out in terms of idealized rational acceptability.

Section Two: Conceptual Relativity, Realism, and Representation-Dependence

In an endnote in *the Threefold Cord*, Putnam looks back at how he had earlier characterized the position he took to be opposed to internal realism:

in *The Many Faces of Realism* I identified [internal realism] with the rejection of the traditional realist assumptions of (1) a fixed totality of all objects; (2) a fixed totality of all properties; (3) a sharp line between properties we “discover” in the world and properties we “project” onto the world; (4) a fixed relation of “correspondence” in terms of which truth is supposed to be defined. I rejected those assumptions not as false assumptions but as, ultimately, *unintelligible* assumptions. ...I still regard each and every one of those assumptions as unintelligible, although I would argue for that conclusion in a different way. So whether I am still, to some extent, an internal realist is, I guess, as unclear as how much I was including under that unhappy label.¹⁶⁶

In many respects this description of metaphysical realism is the same as that found in *Reason, Truth and History*. What’s missing is the explicit reference to “mind-independence” and “one true and complete description.” However, the latter is implicit since Putnam takes a fixed totality of objects and properties to limit the number of true and complete descriptions to just one. And as I will discuss below, truth as correspondence is, for Putnam, intimately tied to the notion of the world being what it is independent of our representations of it. However, in the body of *the Threefold Cord*, there is a marked change from his earlier way of casting the contrast between his own position and scientific/metaphysical realism. I now quote Putnam at length because of the importance of the passage for the aim of this chapter:¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁶ Endnote 41, p183.

¹⁶⁷ Because of their importance, I am including the text from several endnotes in the quotation. They are marked by “EN# [...]”.

Toward the end of his life William James wrote a letter to a friend in which he bitterly complained of being misread. James wrote that he never denied that our thoughts have to fit reality to count as true, as he was over and over again accused of doing. In the letter he employs the example of someone choosing how to describe some beans that have been cast on the table. The beans can be described in an almost endless variety of ways depending on the interests of the describer, and each of the right descriptions will *fit* the beans-minus-the-describer and yet also reflect the interests of the describer. And James asks, Why should not any such description be called true? James insists that there is no such thing as a description that reflects no particular interest at all. And he further insists that the descriptions we give when our interests are not theoretical or explanatory can be just as *true* as the ones we give when our interests are “intellectual.” “And for this,” James wrote “we are accused of denying the beans, or denying being in any way constrained by them! It’s too silly!”

A traditional realist philosopher might reply to James as follows: “If that is *all* you are saying, then I do not see that any of your fulminations against philosophers who believe in a ‘ready-made world’ are in order. And if you have been misunderstood, it is your own rhetoric that is at fault. The Scholastic realists had the matter just right in their rejoinders to their nominalist opponents,” my imaginary traditional realist might continue. “Suppose you decide to classify the beans by color, or by whether they are next to a bean of the same size, or in any other way. The reason that such a classification is possible, and can be extended to other similar collections of beans in the future, is that there are such *properties* as colors, sizes, adjacency, etc. Your beloved ‘interests’ may determine which combinations of properties you regard as worth talking about, or even lead you to invent a name for things with a particular combination of properties if there is no such name already in the language, but it does not change the world in the slightest. The world is as it is independently of the interests of any describer.”

As will become clear, I do not, myself, side completely with James, nor do I side completely with his traditional realist critic. I agree with the critic that the world is as it is independently of the interests of describers. EN7 [Apart, of course, from the fact that those interests are themselves part of the world. The truth about those interests would be different were those interests different. But what the traditional realist is pointing out is that when I talked about anything that is not causally effected by my own interests—say, when I point out that there are millions of species of ants in the world—I can also say that the world would be the same in that respect even if I did not have those interests, had not given that

description, etc. *And with all that I agree.* (my emphasis)] James's suggestion that the world we know is to an indeterminate extent the product of our own minds is one I deplore. EN8 [...I myself regret having spoken of "mind-dependence" in connection with these issues in my *Reason, Truth, and History!*] But the traditional realist's way of putting what is wrong with James's position involves a metaphysical fantasy.

The metaphysical fantasy is that there is a totality of Forms, or Universals, or "properties," fixed once and for all, and that every possible meaning of a word corresponds to one of these Forms or Universals or properties. The structure of all possible thoughts is fixed in advance – fixed by the Forms. James rightly rejected this picture – but his recoil from its metaphysical excess drove him to question the independence of the world, which in turn caused his opponents to recoil either back to this picture or to the differently extravagant picture proposed by James's Absolute Idealist opponents.¹⁶⁸

Here Putnam still characterizes the realist position in terms of a fixed totality of properties (if not objects). But what is particularly noteworthy is Putnam's explicit repudiation of the idea that the world is "a product of our own minds" and his regret of having spoken of "mind-dependence" in *Reason, Truth, and History*. However, this does not, of course, mean that Putnam is now some sort of metaphysical realist. A few pages later, he goes on to write:

The traditional metaphysician is perfectly right to insist on the independence of reality and our cognitive responsibility to do justice to whatever we describe; but the traditional picture of a reality that dictates the totality of possible descriptions once and for all preserves *those* insights at the cost of losing the *real* insight of James's pragmatism, the insight that "description" is never a mere copying and that we constantly add to the ways in which language can be responsible to reality. And this is the insight we must not throw away in our haste to recoil from James's unwise talk of our (partly) "making up" the world.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁸ Putnam 1999, 5-6.

¹⁶⁹ Putnam 1999, 8-9. Not only James's unwise talk, but also Putnam's, e.g., in the Preface to Putnam 1981, he writes, "If one must use metaphorical language, then let the metaphor be this: the mind and the world jointly make up the mind and the world" (xi).

However, we should note that Putnam still thinks that a correspondence theory of truth is “unintelligible,” especially when reality is conceived of as “dictating” the “totality of possible descriptions once and for all.”¹⁷⁰ Importantly, however, he no longer wants to connect these issues with the notion of “mind-dependence.” This is actually all to our purpose, because as I shall argue below, “mind-dependence” is a misleading notion for a number of reasons. The question is, then, given Putnam’s rejection of truth as correspondence and his endorsement of conceptual relativity, what do we replace the notion of “mind-dependence” with? As I will suggest below, following Fumerton, “mind-dependence” should, in this context at least, be replaced with the notion of representation-dependence or representation-constitution. Briefly, the idea is that the realist holds that no truthmaker is even in part constituted by our representations of it; whereas with Putnam’s conceptual relativity, there are at least some things that are at least partially constituted by our representations of them.

At this point, having looked at how Putnam characterizes metaphysical realism over time, we can see that the main characteristics of metaphysical realism that concern Putnam are still those found in *Reason, Truth and History*, just without the misleading notion of mind-dependence. Again, those characteristics are:

- [1] The world consists of some fixed totality of mind-independent objects.
- [2] There is exactly one true and complete description of ‘the way the world is’.
- [3] Truth involves some sort of correspondence relation between words or thought-signs and external things and sets of things.¹⁷¹

¹⁷⁰ I take it that Putnam’s talk of reality dictating the totality of possible descriptions “once and for all,” is a sloppy way of saying that on the realist’s view, reality is representation-independent in such a way that at any given time there is only one determinate set of object, properties, and relations.

¹⁷¹ Putnam 1981, 49. Again, I have added the numbers and changed the pagination for ease of reference.

For ease of reference, let us refer to each numbered position as a particular thesis. I will refer to [1] as the *existence thesis*, [2] as the *description thesis*, and [3] as the *truth thesis*.

Our main task here is to specify exactly the kind of realism Putnam's argument from conceptual relativity calls into question. As I will argue below, conceptual relativity specifically concerns the *existence* and *truth theses* together. As a first step in seeing this, let us look at two important issues. First, what exactly is the nature of, and the relationship between, the *truth* and *existence theses*; second, in regard to Putnam's notion of conceptual relativity, what should we make of the fact that a number of philosophers have taken Putnam to task for characterizing (metaphysical) realism as being committed to all three theses? I will begin by addressing the second issue.

Metaphysical Realism(s) and Alethic Realism

It is clear that Putnam takes the existence, description, and truth theses from above to go together as parts of a single viewpoint. He writes that the three theses "have been held by philosophers of every historical period, and one can think of a rich filigree of ideas, doctrines, and detailed arguments which flesh out these abstract theses in different ways."¹⁷² Further, the three "do not have content standing on their own, one by one; each leans on the others and on a variety of further assumptions and notions."¹⁷³ Nevertheless, a number of philosophers have taken issue with the idea that all three must go together. For example, Hartry Field argues that a fixed totality of mind-independent objects does not imply that there is one true and complete description of those objects.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷² Putnam 1990, 30.

¹⁷³ Putnam 1990, 31.

¹⁷⁴ Field 1982.

Both William Alston and Michael P. Lynch argue, though in different ways and in different respects, that some form of alethic realism (realism about truth) is consistent with the central thesis of conceptual relativity, namely, that there can be, in some sense, incompatible descriptions of the “same” state of affairs.¹⁷⁵ Others argue that the heart of (non-alethic) realism has nothing to do with truth; rather, it concerns the extent to which and in what sense reality is mind-dependent.¹⁷⁶ Since I will argue in chapter 6 that the realist is not committed to there being one true and complete description of the world, I will not be concerned to address it here any further.¹⁷⁷

So, there are those who think that a realist version of the *truth thesis* is one form of realism, e.g., alethic realism; and there those who think that a realist version of the *existence thesis* is another form of realism, e.g., metaphysical realism. Putnam maintains, and I will argue that he is right, that conceptual relativity undermines the *truth* and *existence theses* together. Since Alston claims *both* that the *existence thesis* is separable from the *truth thesis*, and that a form of the realist *truth thesis* is compatible with a partial denial of the realist *existence thesis*, a discussion of Alston’s views will nicely lead us to the heart of things.

Alston on Realism

Alston offers what he calls a form of alethic realism that he calls a minimal realism. He describes the sense in which it is realist as follows:

¹⁷⁵ Alston 1996 and Lynch 1998. While Lynch makes clear that he wants to combine alethic realism with conceptual relativity, Alston is much more guarded. I address Alston in more detail below.

¹⁷⁶ For example, Alston 2002, Khlentzos 2004, and Devitt 1991. I use “mind-dependent” as opposed to “representation-dependent” on purpose.

¹⁷⁷ In part this is because there are no *prima facie* reasons for saying that the realist cannot countenance there being languages that are non-intertranslatable in such a way that it is unclear whether it would make sense to conjoin true statements from the two languages into a complete description.

What it takes to make a statement true on the realist conception is the actual obtaining of what is claimed to obtain in making that statement. If what is stated is that grass is green then it is grass's *being* green that is both necessary and sufficient for the statement. Nothing else is relevant to its truth value. This is a *realist* way of thinking of truth in that the truth *maker* is something that is objective vis-à-vis the truth *bearer*. It has to do with what the truth bearer is about, rather than with some "internal" or "intrinsic" feature of the truth bearer, such as its epistemic status, its place in a system of propositions, or the confidence with which it is held. This is a fundamental sense in which truth has to do with the relation of a potential truth bearer to a REALITY beyond itself.¹⁷⁸

Alston's minimal account of truth, his alethic realism, is captured by universalizing his T-schema: (*p*) The proposition that *p* is true *iff p*.¹⁷⁹ According to Alston, the latter generalizes:

over propositions as unanalyzed units, rather than being put in terms of some view as to their internal structure, whereas a full-dress correspondence theory must include some account of the structure of propositions (statements...) in order to be in a position to say something significant about what would constitute *correspondence* with a fact.¹⁸⁰

Alston's alethic realism avoids, so he claims, having to solve the problem of detailing the nature of the correspondence relation. Nevertheless, he takes it that facts could have a place in his alethic realism, i.e., the "p" on the left-hand side of the equivalence can be thought of as being a fact, even though the term "fact" is not a part of the generalized T-schema:

in saying that the proposition that lemons are sour is true *if and only if* lemons *are* sour, we are, in effect, committing ourselves to the thesis that this proposition is *made true* by lemons being sour. And that could just as well be put as saying that it is made true by

¹⁷⁸ Alston 1996, 7-8.

¹⁷⁹ Alston 1996, 28.

¹⁸⁰ Alston 1996, 32.

the fact that lemons are sour. This nicely brings out the kinship of my minimal-realist conception of truth with the correspondence theory, for the latter could be seen as taking off from this point.¹⁸¹

So, while Alston's minimal realism about truth is not a "full-dress" correspondence theory, he takes it to be akin to one. Moreover, he takes his alethic realism to be the foundational starting point for such a correspondence theory. Importantly, in regard to his alethic realism, Alston sees no reason that the "facts" that make our statements true cannot be the facts that they are relative to conceptual schemes. That is, in our terms, he claims that his alethic realism allows that the truthmakers might be, in some way, constituted in part by our representations of them.¹⁸²

However, he does not hold that *all* facts are, or might be, conceptual-scheme-relative. In *A Sensible Metaphysical Realism*, we find Alston defining the *metaphysical* realism he is interested in in the following negative way:

The species of metaphysical realism I will treat here is a denial of the view that whatever there is, is constituted, at least in part, by our cognitive relations thereto, by the ways we conceptualize or construe it, by the language we use to talk about it or the theoretical scheme we use to think of it.¹⁸³

And he goes on to positively characterize the metaphysical realism that he wishes to defend "as holding that *large stretches of reality do not depend on our conceptual and theoretical choices for existing and being what they are.*"¹⁸⁴ Further, his metaphysical realism is sensible because "it recognizes that some stretches of reality do conform to the

¹⁸¹ Alston 1996, 32.

¹⁸² Alston 1996, 179ff. Alston, for example, writes: "...I am about to argue that even the full-blown Putnamian form [of conceptual relativity] (on at least one reasonable construal) is compatible with adherence to a realist conception of truth...." 179.

¹⁸³ Alston 2001, 8.

¹⁸⁴ Alston 2001, 10. Emphasis in the original.

account antirealism gives of the whole of reality.”¹⁸⁵ I take it that the “antirealism” here referenced is the sort that Putnam defends via his notion of conceptual relativity. It is informative to see what those stretches of reality are that Alston thinks are not conceptual-scheme-relative. In “What Metaphysical Realism is Not,” Alston gives the following, non-exhaustive list of examples:

- (1.) Familiar macroscopic objects that we perceive in the physical environment—animal and vegetable organisms, artifacts, topographical formulations...
- (2.) Familiar kinds of stuff and portions thereof—water, earth, sugar, manure, snow...
- (3.) Unperceivable entities recognized by successful scientific theories—electrons, nuclei, quanta of energy...¹⁸⁶

With such a list, one may be left wondering which stretches of reality he does think could be conceptual-scheme-relative. In *A Sensible Metaphysical Realism*, Alston sketches what he takes to be prime candidates for the conceptual-scheme-relative “parts” of the world. I won’t describe them in detail here, but they primarily concern philosophical issues such as whether a statue is a different object than the stuff of which it consists and the issue of whether “enduring objects” have temporal as well as spatial parts, among others.¹⁸⁷ Interestingly for the aims of this chapter, he also seems to agree with Putnam’s mereological sums example: “Each of us is free to treat any group of entities as an entity, or refrain from doing so. Here, so far as I can see, is a prime candidate for facts that obtain only relative to a certain theoretical choice, to which there are equally viable

¹⁸⁵ Alston 2001, 10.

¹⁸⁶ Alston 2002b, 98-99.

¹⁸⁷ Alston 2001, 41ff. As we will see in chapter 4, these are similar to some of Putnam’s other examples of conceptual relativity.

alternatives.”¹⁸⁸ So, Alston holds a version of the *existence thesis* according to which large stretches of reality are representation-independent and certain aspects of reality admit of scheme-relativity of the kind involved in Putnam’s account of conceptual relativity.

Importantly, Alston claims that the above *metaphysical* realism does not imply anything about the nature of truth. That is, while Alston defends a minimal form of *alethic* realism, the *metaphysical* realism he defends does not imply or require any particular theory of truth. While he takes it to be natural for a metaphysical realist to endorse a correspondence theory of truth:

an account of truth is distinct from an account of the metaphysical status of objects and facts, and this difference should be respected. It would, indeed, be bizarre for a metaphysical realist in my sense to adopt an epistemic conception of truth that identifies the truth of a statement with some epistemic status of the statement (conclusively justified, member of an ideally coherent system, or whatever) rather than with its telling it as it, in fact, is. But if he should do so, he would not be contradicting himself.¹⁸⁹

Thus, according to Alston, the *existence thesis* and the *truth thesis* are separable in two different ways. First, the realist *truth thesis* is compatible with the (partial) denial of the realist *existence thesis*, i.e., alethic realism is compatible with some form of conceptual relativity according to which our representations are partially constitutive of some aspects of reality. Second, Alston claims that his version of the *existence thesis*, his metaphysical realism, does not imply or require the realist *truth thesis*, i.e., alethic realism. Therefore,

¹⁸⁸ Alston 2001, 43.

¹⁸⁹ Alston 2002b, 107. Alston is, I take it, right about this. As Fumerton emphasizes, Berkeleyan idealism is quite compatible a correspondence theory of truth. (Fumerton 2002, 2ff) However, as I will discuss shortly, idealism is not the right kind of mind-dependence for the present discussion of the realism and antirealism opposition involved in Putnam’s notion of conceptual relativity.

we can see why Alston disagrees with Putnam's holding that the *existence*, *description*, and *truth theses* all go together, mutually supporting one another.

We will look shortly at reasons for believing that Alston is wrong in holding that the *existence thesis* and the *truth thesis*, as Putnam construes them and the nature of conceptual relativity, are separable. Part of the difficulty in seeing clearly whether or not, and in what way, the *existence* and *truth theses* go together is due to the ambiguity of the notion of *mind-dependence*. Putnam originally spoke of mind-dependence, but as we saw, he later regretted doing so, and I have avoided the phrase by speaking of representation-dependence. But at this point it is still unclear what exactly is meant by "representation-dependence" in contrast to "mind-dependence." Let us take up these issues now.

The Realist Existence Thesis: In What Sense

Representation-Independent?

Let us look at the realist version of the existence thesis again: [1] "The world consists of some fixed totality of [representation]-independent objects." Our aim now is to determine what sense that fixed totality of objects is supposed to be "representation-independent." To begin, as Putnam himself points out, the dependence in question is not causal dependence—even if conceptual relativity is true, we did not cause the moon to come into existence.¹⁹⁰ Also, it is not the kind of dependence that is involved in some kind of Berkeleyan idealism where everything, except god and minds perhaps, reduces to the mental, e.g., ideas. What kind of representation-dependence is it, then?

¹⁹⁰ See, for example, Putnam 2004b, 236.

We can get closer to an answer by considering something that Alston writes concerning alethic realism. As we have already seen, Alston thinks that some forms of conceptual relativity are consistent with alethic realism. However, he notes that there is “a grain of truth” in the idea that “alethic realism implies that (most of) what determines the truth values of propositions is (constitutively) independent of human cognition.”¹⁹¹

What is this grain of truth exactly? Alston writes:

Since alethic realism holds that what it takes for an assertion to be true is determined by whether the state of affairs that constitutes its propositional content actually obtains, it is rarely, if ever, the case that that statement itself—its being issued, its epistemic status, its content—determines whether that propositional content obtains. In order for that to be so, the content would have to concern the statement itself, including its properties—its epistemic status or whatever. In other words the statement would have to be self-referential.¹⁹²

I understand Alston to mean the following. Given some statement *S*, *S* has propositional content, it is about something. If *S* is to be true, then that which it is about must be the case—there must be some fact that makes *S* true. In most cases facts will not be the facts that they are because of the propositional content of the statements for which they are the truthmakers. That is, the truthmaker for a particular statement cannot be (in most cases) partially constituted by the truthbearer. The “most cases” is there because Alston does leave room for the possibility of self-referential statements such as “This statement is justified.” In this example, he claims that “on alethic realism the truth of the statement would depend on the epistemic status of that statement itself, for that is what the

¹⁹¹ Alston 1996, 83.

¹⁹² Alston 1996, 83-84.

statement is about.”¹⁹³ Such cases, according to Alston, rarely occur; so the majority of statements will be true or false independent of the:

features of the statement, or of the belief expressed by the statement, since its content concerns something other than the statement. This being the case, if truth is determined as alethic realism has it, then what determines the truth of almost any true statement, that is, the fact that makes it true, is constitutively independent of that statement. Hence alethic realism, together with the obvious fact that self-reference in statement or belief is rare at best, implies that (almost always) what confers a truth value on a statement is something independent of the cognitive-linguistic goings on that issued in that statement, including any epistemic status of those goings on.¹⁹⁴

Relating these remarks back to Alston’s endorsement of some form of conceptual relativity, I take the moral to be the following. According to Alston, alethic realism is consistent with conceptual relativity, i.e., the idea that some facts are the facts they are only *relative to some conceptual scheme*. But while those facts are relative to conceptual schemes, they are *not* relative to the *statements* that those facts make true. Why? Because for them to be so would require that the statements they make true be self-referential and most statements are not self-referential.

Thus, if Alston is right, then the scheme-relativity involved in conceptual relativity is a relativity between fact and scheme, not truthmaker and truthbearer. Further, if he is right, then conceptual relativity is not inconsistent with a realist conception of truth. Hence, Alston would succeed in separating the *truth thesis* from the *existence thesis*.

¹⁹³ Alston 1996, 83.

¹⁹⁴ Alston 1996, 84.

There are, however, at least two reasons to question whether Alston is correct. First, there is the issue of whether he is correct in distinguishing between conceptual schemes, truthbearers (representations), and truthmakers in such a way that he can claim that certain truthmakers are *scheme-relative* but *not partially constituted by the truthbearers representing them*. That is, if the propositional content of a statement is what it is relative to a conceptual scheme and the facts that obtain are relative to the same scheme, in what sense can it be that the content of a truthbearer is not partially constitutive of the truthmaker? A second though very much related issue concerns what I will discuss in much more detail in chapter 3, namely, Putnam's so-called *doctrine* of conceptual relativity (as opposed to the *phenomenon* of conceptual relativity). Let us now look at these two issues in turn.

*The Existence Thesis and the Truth Thesis in Relation to
Conceptual Relativity*

As we have seen, in illustrating the idea of conceptual relativity, Putnam appeals to the example of two people, a Carnapian and a Polish Logician, who are counting the number of objects when there are three individuals, say, three marbles in a bag. The Polish Logician countenances mereological sums and the Carnapian does not. So, while they both speak English, each operates with his own conceptual scheme or "optional language," as Putnam has come to call them. Those optional languages provide for different uses of the terms "object" and "exist." Ignoring the null object, the Polish Logician says, "There are seven objects"; the Carnapian says, "There are three objects." Now, according to Putnam the different counts are, in some sense, incompatible while

both statements are true.¹⁹⁵ From this it is supposed to follow that the number of objects is indeterminate without some optional language being in place to specify what counts as an object.

If we view the relationship between alethic realism and conceptual relativity in the way that Alston seems to suggest, then we can make out three distinct parts that are relevant to the truth or falsity of the Polish Logician's and the Carnapian's statements. First, there are the three marbles; second, there are the optional languages which determine the content of statements made relative to them, and relative to which we have a determinate fact of the matter concerning the number of objects that exist; third, there are the statements themselves, i.e., "There are seven objects" and "There are three objects."

There are perhaps a number of ways to bring out the problem here, but one way is by pointing out that it is unclear in what sense a conceptual scheme can "determine" the facts independently of the statements made relative to the scheme. In the end it may depend on exactly how we understand the notion of a conceptual scheme; however, on what I take to be a fairly natural way to think of conceptual schemes, they, like languages in general, do not exist independently of our capacity to form certain beliefs, assertions, and to participate in other linguistic activities.¹⁹⁶ Thus, it is not as if on the picture of conceptual relativity that Putnam offers there is some entity (a conceptual scheme) that exists independently of language use and which structures reality—a reality which can then be described using language whose propositional content is only determinate in

¹⁹⁵ I explain this in much more detail in chapter 3.

¹⁹⁶ Unless, perhaps, we identify conceptual schemes with systems of propositions and are realists about propositions. Putnam certainly does not hold either view.

relation to that scheme. Note that the problem is independent of whether or not a statement is self-referential. That is, whether or not alethic realism is compatible with conceptual relativity does not hang on issues of self-reference.

We thus come closer to seeing why Putnam is right to link the *existence thesis* and the *truth thesis* in the way that he does. That is, when the realist version of the *existence thesis* is understood in contrast to conceptual relativity and not to idealism (or something similar, e.g., perhaps phenomenalism), we see that Putnam's notion of conceptual relativity entails that what exists is representation-dependent in a way that makes it problematic to claim that language (truthbearers) and reality are cleanly separable.

This, more or less, leads us directly into the second issue with Alston's take on the compatibility of alethic realism and some form of conceptual relativity, and the separability of the *existence thesis* from the *truth thesis*, namely, what Putnam calls the *doctrine* of conceptual relativity. Putnam succinctly expresses that doctrine in the following way:

The doctrine of conceptual relativity, in brief, is that while there is an aspect of conventionality and an aspect of fact in everything we say that is true, we fall into hopeless philosophical error if we commit a "fallacy of division" and conclude that there must be a part of the truth that is the "conventional part" and a part that is the "factual part."¹⁹⁷

Whether Putnam is right to call this a "fallacy of division" is not obvious; nevertheless, it is relatively clear that he thinks the doctrine of conceptual relativity denies that it makes

¹⁹⁷ Putnam 1990, preface x. As Putnam immediately goes on to say, what I explain later as the phenomenon of conceptual relativity, the idea that the "same" state of affairs can be described in incompatible but equally true ways, is a corollary of the doctrine of conceptual relativity. So, for Putnam the doctrine of conceptual relativity is involved with the example of the Polish Logician and the Carnapian.

sense to separate out the truthbearer (with its conventional content) from the truthmaker (non-conventional fact). Truth does not consist in a truthbearer made true by some fact (truthmaker) that is what it is independent of the truthbearer. If I am right in my characterization of Alston's position, this is exactly what his combination of alethic realism with conceptual relativity entails. But Putnam's conceptual relativity implies that the propositional content is at least partially constitutive of the number and kinds of objects, properties, and relations that exist. As such those objects, properties, and relations cannot be said to *correspond* as truthmakers to truthbearers or be separate in the way that Alston's alethic realism requires.

Realism and Representation-Dependence, Again

While we have come ever closer to the exact nature of the representation-dependence that conceptual relativity requires and the way in which it involves both the *existence* and *truth theses*, the exact nature of that representation-dependence isn't clear. In order to achieve the proper clarity, I want to turn now to Fumerton's helpful discussion of these issues.

Fumerton takes one of the defining characteristics of *alethic* realism to be a particular kind of representation-independence of truthmakers. As we have done, he rules out causal dependence, the dependence of certain social facts on attitudes and beliefs, in John Searle's sense, and the mental-dependence involved in idealism.¹⁹⁸

Fumerton then writes:

If we are leaving open the possibility of combining alethic realism with radical metaphysical idealism, we obviously can't commit the realist to the existence of facts or features of the world that are independent of minds. Rather, we must focus on *certain* mental

¹⁹⁸ Fumerton 2002, 4-6. See Searle 1995 for his influential ideas on the "construction of social reality."

states on which potential truth makers are not independent (of which truth makers are not even partially constituted). We might say that a realist thinks that truth is determined in part by facts that are independent of people's beliefs (or other intentional states). Again, however, we have the immediate problem that there are truths about people's beliefs that are, trivially, made true by facts about beliefs.¹⁹⁹

In order to get closer to the kind of representation-independence that we are looking for, Fumerton brings out the important distinction, which he admits some antirealists may find objectionable, between noun clauses that refer to the contents of beliefs/propositions and those that refer to the facts that make those beliefs/propositions true. He points out that it can lead to confusion when philosophers use the same symbol, e.g., "P," to refer to both types of noun clauses. So we need to be careful when using these noun clauses.

Taking for his discussion the distinction between belief and fact, the kind of representation-independence involved in alethic realism is the following. The belief that snow is white has nothing to do with the fact that snow is white being the fact that it is. That is, "the fact that snow is white is not *constituted* even in part by my belief, or anyone else's belief that snow is white. The world could have contained white snow even had no one formed a belief."²⁰⁰ And while the fact that I believe that snow is white is constituted by a fact involving beliefs, "it is *not* even in part constituted by the fact that I believe that I believe that snow is white or the fact that anyone else believes that I believe that snow is white."²⁰¹ In more general terms, in order to accommodate the fact that this sort of

¹⁹⁹ Fumerton 2002, 6.

²⁰⁰ Fumerton 2002, 6.

²⁰¹ Fumerton 2002, 6.

independence covers all kinds of “intentional representation,” Fumerton refers to it, as we have been doing, as representational independence:

Let us say that the fact that P has representational independence if it is not constituted by any intentional state that has P as its object. Now when I say, “has P as its object,” I do not intend that last “P” to be referring to the fact that P. It is the “P” that characterizes the belief that P, the hope that P, the fear that P, the thought that P *whether or not* there is a fact that P. It is a way of specifying the content or the character of the intentional state. . . . In characterizing a belief as the belief that P we are indicating only that the belief is of that character which would enable it to correspond to the fact that P were there such a fact.²⁰²

So, some fact F has representational independence just in case the statement P, whose propositional content is about F, is not even in part constitutive of F’s being the fact that it is. Alethic realism on this view, then, is the view that *all* facts have representational independence in that *no* facts are even partially constituted by intentional states representing the facts as the facts that they are. However, there may be a problem in making such a universal claim.

Fumerton considers a possible counter example to the claim that *all* facts can have this sort of representational independence:

Certain sorts of existential facts might still seem to pose troubles for the realist’s understanding of the representation-independence of truth makers. Consider the fact that someone has beliefs. Suppose that fact exists only because there is one person, S, who has one belief, the belief that someone has beliefs. Will that not be an example of a fact that P constituted by the belief that P?²⁰³

Though he admits that the answer is not obvious, Fumerton ultimately argues that the answer to the last question is “no.” However, at this point, going into those arguments

²⁰² Fumerton 2002, 6-7.

²⁰³ Fumerton 2002, 7. This kind of example is reminiscent of Alston’s examples, discussed above, of self-referential statements that seem to partially constitute their own truth values.

would unnecessarily take us off course. While it would be nice to be able to cleanly say that alethic realism is the view that *all* facts have representational independence, or *no* facts are even partially constituted by intentional states representing the facts as the fact that they are, the overall distinction between Putnam's conceptual relativity and alethic realism does not depend on such a clean formulation. In fact, it is best that it not hang on what might well be a controversial defense of a universal claim of representation-independence. While such examples as the one person with the one belief perhaps might be proliferated, they are surely rare in actual theories or descriptions of the world and human experience. With this last caveat, let us say that alethic realism is the view that, except for certain exotic possibilities, truth consists in correspondence between language (truthbearers) and representation-independent truthmakers.

We have thus settled on the kind of realism that Putnam's notion of conceptual relativity calls into question. It involves both the idea that truth is correspondence and the idea that facts are representation-independent (they are not even in part constituted by representations of them). So, while there may indeed be a global form of the realist *existence thesis* that is *separable* from a realist theory of truth, the target of Putnam's conceptual relativity is not that form of realism.²⁰⁴ Indeed, conceptual relativity calls into question both the realist *truth thesis* and the realist *existence thesis* together.

²⁰⁴ I take it that Devitt tries to capture such a form of realism when he writes that realism is the view that:

Tokens of most common-sense, and scientific, physical types objectively exist independently of the mental. ... In insisting on the objectivity of the world, realists are not saying that it is unknowable. They are saying that it is not *constituted by* our knowledge, by our epistemic values, by the synthesizing power of the mind, nor by our imposition of concepts, theories, or languages; it is not limited by what we can believe or discover. (Devitt 1991, 45.)

Devitt takes this kind of realism to be independent of semantic issues such as those involving theories of truth. As the earlier discussion of Putnam and Alston hopefully indicates, I think Devitt goes wrong in

While I have argued that the realism challenged by Putnam's account of conceptual relativity is best understood as alethic realism, as we have seen Putnam refers to it as metaphysical realism. Because "metaphysical realism" will appear in the Putnam quotations in the remaining chapters, and in order to avoid confusion in discussing those passages, I will also speak of metaphysical realism in relation to the quotations.

However, we should remember that the realism at issue in the rest of the dissertation, except where otherwise noted, is alethic realism.

Concluding Remarks

Though we have accomplished the goal of this chapter, we might be left wondering at this point whether we should characterize Putnam's position as claiming that *everything* that exists—all objects, properties, and relations—is representation-dependent. Does conceptual relativity imply that everything is at least partially constituted by intentional states representing some object or state of affairs as the object or state of affairs that it is?²⁰⁵ This is an important but difficult issue. In closing the chapter, I will look at some of the reasons why it is so difficult.

On the one hand it would seem absurd to make the claim that every state of affairs is at least partially constituted by an intentional state having that state of affairs as its object, since this would immediately seem to produce an infinite regress. That is, every intentional state that partially constitutes some state of affairs would itself be a state of

trying to offer such an all inclusive characterization of realism and the way it involves objectivity, particularly since he includes in his conception of metaphysical realism the idea that what exists is not "constituted by our concepts, theories, or languages."

²⁰⁵ Putnam himself appeals to the notion of a state of affairs, e.g., see Putnam 1992b, 432.

affairs in need of some other intentional state to partially constitute that state of affairs, and so on *ad infinitum*.

Further, there seems to be the obvious problem that if every state of affairs is at least partially constituted by a representation of it as the state of affairs that it is, what exactly is that which the representation is representing? That is, doesn't an intentional state's representing something imply that that something is different from the representation? This implication would be denied if we asserted that everything is representation-dependent.

And, on the other hand, while Putnam rejects a correspondence theory of truth, he still wants to say that:

whether a sentence is true or not typically depends on whether certain things or events [states of affairs] satisfy the conditions for being described by that sentence—conditions which depend upon the ongoing activity of using and reforming language.²⁰⁶

However, he goes on to say that speaking of objects as having or not having “independent existence” is “deeply problematic, when what is at stake is neither ordinary causal or ordinary logical independence.”²⁰⁷ Putnam agrees that the sky's being blue is neither causally nor logically dependent on our “ways of talking”: “In any sense of ‘independent’ I can understand, whether the sky is blue *is* independent of the way we talk.”²⁰⁸ Further:

It is sentences (not abstract entities called “propositions”) that are true or false, and while it is true that the sky would still have been blue (indeed, bluer!) even if language-users had not evolved, there

²⁰⁶ Putnam 1992b, 432.

²⁰⁷ Putnam 1992b, 433.

²⁰⁸ Putnam 1992b, 433.

would still have been a world, but there would not have been any *truths* about the world. But recognizing that fact—and it is an important one—does not require us to say that the sky is not blue independently of way we speak.²⁰⁹

Fumerton himself says something similar when he discusses the mind-dependency of *truth* versus that of *truthmakers*. Calling an alethic realism committed to Platonic truthbearers “extreme realism,” Fumerton suggests an alternative version of alethic realism where truthbearers are sentence tokens, statements, beliefs, or thoughts:

And it is plausible to argue that none of these things could exist without conscious beings. Certainly on one interpretation, thoughts and beliefs are trivially mental entities—no minds, no thoughts and beliefs. And if these are one half of the *relata* of the relation property of being true, then it is equally obvious there could be no truths without minds (without consciousness). Let’s call this view *moderate realism*. The moderate realists, to repeat, share the view sometimes associated with anti-realism that truth depends on conscious being—on conscious representations of reality. What makes the view realist, however, is that truth also depends on facts, facts that are [representation-independent].²¹⁰

As we saw, Putnam seems to want to eschew speaking of dependence or independence in this context. However, immediately following the last quote from Putnam, he goes on to say that while giving up mind-independent truthbearers does not require us to say that the sky is not blue independent of the way we speak:

What it does require us to do—and here I agree with Rorty—is give up the picture of Nature as having its very own language which it is waiting for us to discover and use; the picture Rorty called “the mirror of Nature.” In my view, as on Rorty’s, there is no one metaphysically privileged description that was always waiting to be written down. There are many ways of using words, some better and some worse and some equally good but simply different, but none which is Nature’s own way.²¹¹

²⁰⁹ Putnam 1992b, 433.

²¹⁰ Fumerton 2002, 12-13.

²¹¹ Putnam 1992b, 433.

What are we to make of all of this? Given the threat of an infinite regress mentioned above, and given Putnam's admission that for him "reality" is causally and logically independent of the way we speak, and given his recurring examples of conceptual relativity, it is particularly unclear how we should positively characterize Putnam's position on these issues.

Thankfully, the purpose of this chapter is not to clarify Putnam's position but the kind of realism that Putnam is attempting to show as untenable by way of his case for conceptual relativity. I have hopefully succeeded in doing the latter; I hope to do the former in the chapters that follow.

CHAPTER THREE

PUTNAM AND THE OPTIONAL LANGUAGES MODEL OF CONCEPTUAL SCHEMES

It is time now to look at Putnam's ideas concerning conceptual schemes. It is the way he understands conceptual schemes that will allow us to try to make sense of conceptual relativity. A coherent explication of Putnam's position is made more difficult by his continued willingness to reevaluate arguments and positions he has previously defended. Thus, my aim will be to offer the most plausible Putnamian picture of conceptual schemes based on his most recent work and earlier work to which he still approvingly refers readers. The aim of this chapter is thus not to evaluate Putnam's ideas (though I will sometimes point out problems and issues) so much as it is to reconstruct them for the purpose of being able to evaluate conceptual relativity with understanding and charity.²¹²

Fortunately, in recent years Putnam has become more explicit about his views concerning conceptual schemes and conceptual relativity. This is in part because of his published dialogue with Jennifer Case, about whom he has written: "Once again, I have to thank Jennifer Case for pressing important clarifications upon me."²¹³ In his reply to her article "The Heart of Putnam's Pluralistic Realism," which is a follow up to her "On the Right Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," Putnam summarizes two of the

²¹² This is something that is not always done. For example, in his recent *Fear of Knowledge: Against Relativism and Constructivism*, Paul Boghossian criticizes Putnam's arguments concerning conceptual relativity with no consideration of the details of Putnam's work or the fact that Putnam, in *Ethics without Ontology*, has explicitly responded to the main objection Boghossian makes. Boghossian 2006, 32ff; Putnam 2004a, 33ff.

²¹³ Putnam 2001, 438.

misunderstandings that others have had concerning his talk of conceptual schemes and conceptual relativity:

the most common misunderstandings are (1) that by a “conceptual scheme” I meant any body of thought and talk at all, including our ordinary talk of tables and chairs; and (2) that by “conceptual relativity” I meant a doctrine which implies that every conceptual scheme in *this* sense, *every* body of thought and talk, has an alternative which is incompatible with it (sometimes my critics miss the qualifier—“at face value”) but equally true. [...] It was never part of my doctrine of conceptual relativity that every statement is an example of it....²¹⁴

In regard to these misunderstanding he goes on to write:

Obviously these misunderstandings are my fault as well as that of the misunderstanders, for I did not say clearly what I meant by a “conceptual scheme”. This is the gap that Jennifer Case has worked to fill in the earlier paper [“On the Right Idea of a Conceptual Scheme] to which I referred. [...] If instead of using the vague expression “conceptual scheme”, which invites all the misinterpretations I complained about, I had followed Case’s suggestion in [her] earlier paper and spoken of optional languages, all of these misinterpretations might have been avoided.²¹⁵

Putnam immediately goes on to quote approvingly portions of Case’s “On the Right Idea of a Conceptual Scheme,” where she specifies what exactly is meant by an “optional language.” In his even more recent *Ethics Without Ontology*, Putnam has adopted Case’s notion of an optional language. Because of Putnam’s explicit, positive recognition of Case’s work on conceptual schemes, and in particular her interpretation of his own philosophy, I will at times rely heavily on what Case writes about optional languages and what Putnam says in response to Case to fill out the Putnamian model of conceptual schemes.

²¹⁴ Putnam 2001, 432.

²¹⁵ Putnam 2001, 432-433.

The structure of this chapter is influenced by the work of Michael P. Lynch. In *Truth in Context*, Lynch discusses three different models of conceptual schemes. His strategy for doing so is to address the following four questions:

1. What are the primary components of the scheme?
2. What are the criteria of identity for the schemes?
3. Does the model require the analytic/synthetic or related distinctions?
4. What is the structural nature of a scheme?²¹⁶

I find this to be a helpful way of organizing the discussion of conceptual schemes and, thus, I have adopted it with a few modifications. Instead of addressing these four questions, I will address the following four questions. The “PM” stands for “Putnam’s Model:

PM1 What are the Primary Components of the Scheme?

PM2 What Does the Model say About the Analytic-Synthetic Distinction and Meaning?

PM3 What are the criteria of identity for schemes?

PM4 Concerning the scheme-content distinction, does the scheme organize or fit the content?

I have dropped Lynch’s number 4 because the role it plays in his book is due to his comparing three different models of conceptual schemes, whereas I am focusing on Putnam’s alone. PM4 is inspired by Davidson’s discussion of conceptual schemes, particularly his framing the discussion in terms of a scheme-content dualism. In this context, “content” does not mean propositional content, or the like, but rather the world or experience.

²¹⁶ Lynch 1998b, 33.

Regarding Davidson, I will not be addressing his arguments against the very idea of a conceptual scheme for two reasons. The first, and more important, reason is that I am simply bracketing consideration of Davidson's arguments as they relate to Putnam's notion of a conceptual scheme. The concerns of this dissertation lie elsewhere. The second, and lesser, reason is that Jennifer Case, in her two articles "On the Right Idea of a Conceptual Scheme" and "The Heart of Putnam's Pluralistic Realism," makes what I take to be a strong case that Davidson's arguments are more or less circumvented by Putnam's model of conceptual schemes.²¹⁷

PM1 What are the Primary Components of the Scheme?

As we saw in chapter 1, for Quine, conceptual schemes consist of sets of sentences held, or possibly held, true—and the sentences that are important for Quine are those of scientific theory, our supposed first-class conceptual scheme.²¹⁸ Quine's holding sentences instead of concepts as fundamental is, in part, the result of his rejection of the analytic-synthetic distinction and his endorsement of holism.²¹⁹ In contrast, Putnam's notion of a conceptual scheme is one of concepts. As we will see, Putnam endorses a modified version of the analytic-synthetic distinction, one that allows him to draw a (fuzzy) line between empirical statements and those that are "definitional."

Describing Putnam's view of conceptual schemes, Case writes:

²¹⁷ Case 1997 and 2001, respectively. Again, this second reason is not primary.

²¹⁸ The "possibly held true" is here since it shouldn't be a necessary condition that the components of a conceptual scheme actually be believed in order for them to constitute a possible conceptual scheme.

²¹⁹ In part, the idea is that for Quine we can no longer think of concepts as delineated by sets of necessary and sufficient analytic conditions. And insofar as Quine is willing to talk about meaning, meaning is holistic, it is an affair of the corporate body of theory; and theory is not a set of concepts, but a set of sentences consisting of observation sentences and theoretical sentences (among others).

I am now convinced that what Putnam refers to as “conceptual schemes” are not really schemes of distinct concepts but, rather, linguistic schemes distinguished primarily by their divergent ways of extending shared concepts.²²⁰

And it is clear from Putnam’s description of the example of the counting Carnapian and Polish Logician, and their purported use of different schemes while speaking the same language, that difference of scheme does not entail a difference in natural languages.

This has lead Case to call Putnam’s notion of conceptual schemes “optional languages,” which, as we saw above, Putnam has enthusiastically endorsed. Case writes:

When he implicitly equates languages with *natural* languages, Davidson equates the translatability of languages with the translatability of natural languages, which permits him to reach the conclusion that any two conceptual schemes will be incommensurable. However, languages need not be equated with natural languages. An example drawn from Putnam’s discussion of conceptual relativity will help convey the significance of this remark. To speak the language of the Polish Logician is to employ the conceptual scheme of mereological sums, but it is not to speak Polish. A speaker of Polish may employ the Polish Logician’s conceptual scheme on one occasion and Carnap’s on another, all the while speaking Polish. This situation may be generalized: for any natural language *L*, a speaker of *L* may employ the Polish Logician’s conceptual scheme on one occasion and Carnap’s on another, all the while employing only sentences of *L*. In principle, the generalization may be carried even further: for any natural language *L* and any two conceptual schemes *C*₁ and *C*₂, a speaker of *L* may employ *C*₁ on one occasion and *C*₂ on another, all the while employing only sentences of *L*. (Let it be noted that, arguably, accepting that last statement requires accepting Davidson’s claim that necessarily all [natural] languages are translatable. Accepting the statement may also require construing the criteria of identity for natural languages loosely enough to allow for the enlargement of a natural language through the addition of vocabulary without which translation of one or more sentences of some other natural language would be impossible.)²²¹

²²⁰ Case 2001, 420: footnote 15.

²²¹ Case 1997, 11.

So, it is important to keep in mind the following points: optional languages are not to be identified with natural languages such as English, Polish, etc.; differences in scheme are not tied to differences in natural languages; an individual can have more than one scheme at her disposal; and an individual can alternate between schemes at will, though this does not imply that a choice of scheme will not be influenced by context.

The conceptual schemes, optional languages, that are relevant to understanding Putnam's ideas concerning conceptual relativity stem from concepts, such as "exist" and "object," found in natural languages. The meanings of "object" and "exist" are such that they allow for philosophically important extensions of what Putnam calls their "sense" through differences of use. And it is the different uses of the terms that make the schemes different. As I will discuss in more detail below, this extension of concepts relies on a distinction Putnam makes between the "linguistic meaning" of a term and what I will call its "use in a particular context."²²²

PM2 What Does the Model say About the Analytic-Synthetic Distinction and Meaning?

In §65 of the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein writes:

Here we come up against the great question that lies behind all these considerations.—For someone might object against me: "You take the easy way out! You talk about all sorts of language-games, but have nowhere said what the essence of a language-game, and hence of language, is: what is common to all these activities, and what makes them into language or parts of language. So you let yourself off the very part of the investigation that once gave you yourself most headache, the part about the *general form of propositions* and of language."

And this is true.—Instead of producing something common to all that we call language, I am saying that these phenomena have

²²² As this distinction suggests, Putnam is not simply *identifying* meaning with use in the way that some interpreters have attributed, I believe wrongly, to the later Wittgenstein.

no one thing in common which makes us use the same word for all,— but that they are *related* to one another in many different ways. And it is because of this relationship, or these relationships, that we call them all “language”. I will try to explain this.²²³

In many ways echoing the second paragraph in the above quotation, Putnam replying to Devitt writes:

If my own view is not entirely in agreement with his [Devitt’s], the reason is, perhaps, that the sheer *variety* of linguistic phenomena makes it premature (at the very least), in my opinion, to try to construct a “theory of meaning” that is supposed to cover all the different sorts of words in the language. This is a view I expressed in “The Meaning of ‘Meaning’” that I still hold.²²⁴

This passage is important for two main reasons at this point. First, it is further evidence of, at least self-purported, continuity in Putnam’s views. Second, and more importantly, it is an indication that we should not expect to find a full-blown or comprehensive theory of meaning on offer when looking at Putnam’s views on language and meaning.

In a discussion of Putnam’s views on reference, Ebbs distinguishes between a *theory* and a *picture* of reference. Where a theory of reference is a statement of non-circular, necessary and sufficient conditions for reference, a picture of reference:

...does not state necessary and sufficient conditions for a term to have a particular reference. Instead, it relates our concepts of reference to other concepts, like truth, belief, agreement, and disagreement. A particular picture of reference is valuable to us to the extent that it clarifies our implicit understanding of reference.²²⁵

²²³ Wittgenstein 1958. I do not mean to imply that as the author of the *Philosophical Investigations* that the “me” and “I” in this section necessarily refer to Wittgenstein himself. For a discussion of the issues concerning the “voices” of the *Philosophical Investigations*, see Stern 2004, particularly 21-26.

²²⁴ Putnam 2001b, 501-502.

²²⁵ Ebbs 1992, 21.

Something very similar can be said for Putnam's views on meaning in general; and, again, it is important to keep this in mind, to know what to expect, when examining Putnam's views.

In this section, we will look at different aspects of the picture of meaning that Putnam has presented over the years. The goal is primarily to understand Putnam's views on meaning as they relate to conceptual relativity, but we will also look at Putnam's views on language more generally. We will begin with a look at Putnam's discussion of the analytic-synthetic distinction and his "rehabilitation" of the distinction in light of Quine's rejection of it. We will then look at Putnam's semantic externalism and the question of how Putnam might reconcile that externalism with conceptual relativity and conceptual pluralism. Lastly in this section, we will look at the distinction between linguistic meaning and use in a particular context, cognitive equivalence, and translation versus relative interpretation.

Putnam on the Analytic-Synthetic Distinction

Introduction

In "The Analytic and Synthetic" Putnam writes:

...I think Quine is wrong. There are analytic statements: 'All bachelors are unmarried' is one of them. But in a deeper sense I think that Quine is right; far more right than his critics. I think that there is an analytic-synthetic distinction, but a rather trivial one. And I think that the analytic-synthetic distinction has been so radically overworked that it is less of a philosophical error, although it is an error, to maintain that there is no distinction at all than it is to employ the distinction in the way that it has been employed by some of the leading analytic philosophers of our generation.²²⁶

²²⁶ Putnam 1975b, 36.

The first thing we will note is that, *pace* Quine, Putnam believes that there is an analytic-synthetic distinction to be made. De Gaynesford has a helpful distinction to make concerning Putnam's views on the analytic and synthetic. He distinguishes in Putnam's writings an absolute and a relative notion of the analytic-synthetic distinction. The *absolute notion* is one where analytic statements are unrevisably true but do not involve philosophical investigations to "discover." In this sense we find him in the above quote claiming that the analytic-synthetic distinction is trivial—it is too weak and limited to do any philosophical heavy lifting in the way that the logical positivists employed it. For example, Putnam, and he is of course not alone in this, denies that we can use it to say that either statements are meaningful because they are analytic or they are meaningful because synthetic and verifiable, and if a statement is not either analytic or verifiable, then it is meaningless. The *relative analytic statements* are non-trivial. De Gaynesford describes them as "central to the web of beliefs comprising our conceptual scheme; they are statements on which many others hinge and depend."²²⁷ Importantly, they are revisable, though not individually. Many of them require a rival theory to be on offer that better explains some phenomenon. We will see shortly the way in which Putnam conceives of these "relative" analytic statements.

We should, however, be careful not to make it sound as if Putnam thinks there are three kinds of statements with sharp borders between them: absolutely analytic ones, relatively analytic ones, and synthetic ones. Rather, he holds that there is a continuum between the analytic and synthetic. Some statements are closer to the absolute analytic end, e.g., "All bachelors are unmarried"; others are closer to clearly synthetic statements,

²²⁷ De Gaynesford 2006, 71. De Gaynesford's use of "conceptual scheme" is not the same as Putnam's use of "optional language."

e.g., “There is a book on the table”; and others fall in-between in various places and ways. Hence, Putnam writes:

Of course many philosophers are aware that there are statements which are not happily classified as either analytic or synthetic. My point is not that there exist exceptional examples, but that there is a far larger class of such statements than is usually supposed. [...] ‘There is a past’ is recognizably closer to the law of conservation of energy than “If Jones knows that p , then he must have or have had evidence that p ’ (in the cases where the latter inference seems a necessary one); and ‘If Jones knows that p , then he must have or have had evidence that p ’ is more like ‘All bachelors are unmarried’ than is ‘There is a past’. But neither statement is of exactly the same kind as the law of conservation of energy, although that law too is a statement with respect to which it is not happy to say, ‘Is it analytic or synthetic?’ and neither statement is of exactly the same kind as ‘All bachelors are unmarried’. What these statements reveal are different degrees of something like convention and minimum degree of systematic support.²²⁸

We will proceed by considering in some detail the different examples of the kinds of statements that Putnam discusses in order effect a full appreciation of Putnam’s views on the analytic-synthetic distinction. But first we will look at Putnam’s contention that Quine’s main argument against analyticity is really an argument against apriority. This is important because although Putnam is in general agreement with Quine about the problematic status of the idea of a statement that it would never be rational to give up, Putnam does not want to give up the idea of an analytic statement.

Two Dogmas of Empiricism, Analyticity, and Apriority

Putnam distinguishes two main notions of analyticity attacked by Quine in “Two Dogmas of Empiricism.” There is the *linguistic* notion of analyticity: “a ‘linguistic’ version of Kant’s account: a sentence is analytic if it can be obtained from a truth of

²²⁸ Putnam 1975b, 39.

logic by putting synonyms for synonyms.”²²⁹ And there is the notion of analyticity in which an analytic truth is one that is “confirmed no matter what.” Putnam thinks that Quine’s attack against the linguistic notion amounted to no more than his inability to come up with a definition of “synonymy” and as such it was not a good argument. But he contends that Quine’s argument against the second kind of analyticity was successful; it had nothing to do with circular definitions, and moreover, that *that* notion of analyticity is really “one of the traditional notions of apriority.”²³⁰ We will not look at Putnam’s objections to Quine’s attacks on the circularity of attempts to define the analytic. Instead, we will focus on Putnam’s contention that Quine’s important contribution was to show that there is no clear distinction to be made between the a priori and a posteriori.

Putnam’s explains Quine’s take on the Vienna Circle’s view of analytic statements. According to that view, statements have meaning:

by being reducible to statements about sense experience. This view went well with the view that each meaningful statement has its own individual range of confirming and disconfirming experiences. Analytical truths are simply those statements which have the universal range of confirming experiences, i.e., which are confirmed no matter what.²³¹

Putnam questions why the concept of a statement that is confirmed no matter what should be a concept of *analyticity* and not *apriority*. He does this by pointing out that the positivist’s notion of confirmation concerns rational belief. If a statement is highly confirmed, then it is (highly) rational to believe it. If statements exist that are confirmed in all circumstances, then not only are those statements always rational to believe but it

²²⁹ Putnam 1983, 87.

²³⁰ Putnam 1983, 87.

²³¹ Putnam 1983, 90.

would be irrational to doubt them. Putnam conjectures that it is these kinds of principles that Aristotle thought first principles were like or Descartes thought clear and distinct ideas were like. Given all of this, Putnam thinks that the notion of a truth that is confirmed no matter what is really a notion of apriority, not analyticity.²³²

Putnam offers an explanation as to why Quine thought this was a notion of analyticity. He notes that Quine's targets were the positivists who held a verificationist theory of meaning. This includes the idea that fixing a statement's meaning involves fixing its range of confirming experiences. Such fixing is done by stipulation or convention. "As a part of their view, the positivists held that *a priori* statements (statements with the universal range of confirming experiences) are true by *meaning alone*. And since truth by virtue of meaning is analyticity, it followed (for the positivists) that apriority is analyticity."²³³ So for the positivists, a priori statements are really analytic statements, which are true by convention. While Quine does not directly address the notion of truth by convention in "Two Dogmas of Empiricism," he addresses it in an earlier paper.²³⁴ There Quine concludes that the idea of truth by convention ultimately amounts to the idea of truths that we would simply never give up; in "Two Dogmas of Empiricism" he then goes on to deny that there are statements that we should never give up—thus denying that there are any truths by convention. From this Putnam concludes:

Curiously enough, then, Quine *confused* analyticity and apriority because of positivist assumptions (assumption he was attacking)!

²³² Putnam 1983, 90.

²³³ Putnam 1983, 92.

²³⁴ In "Truth by Convention" in Quine 1976.

But, fortunately, this confusion does not invalidate his argument against apriority.²³⁵

Putnam takes Quine's argument against analyticity, i.e., apriority, to be an argument "from what is clearly a normative description of the history of modern science."²³⁶ Putnam quotes Quine:

Any statement can be held true come what may, if we make drastic enough adjustments elsewhere in the system. Even a statement very close to the periphery can be held true in the face of recalcitrant experience by pleading hallucination or by amending certain statements of the kind called logical laws. Conversely, by the same token, no statement is immune to revision. Revision even of the logical law of the excluded middle has been proposed as a means of simplifying quantum mechanics; and what difference is there in principle between such a shift and a shift whereby Kepler superseded Ptolemy, or Einstein Newton, or Darwin Aristotle?²³⁷

Quine's point is that not only have some people considered revising logical laws in the face of experience, but normatively speaking we *should* be willing to consider revising even the laws of logic in the face of certain kinds of experience. So we can remain rational while remaining open to the idea that even the laws of logic are revisable; they are not a priori truths. "In short, Quine is saying that the history of science, properly understood, leaves no room for *this* notion of an 'analytic' statement, i.e., for the notion of an *a priori* or *unrevisable* statement."²³⁸

Against the idea that revolutions in the history of science have helped to truly disconfirm truths once thought to be a priori, Putnam notes that the obvious response is to say that the apriority of those overthrown statements was merely psychological. That is,

²³⁵ Putnam 1983, 92.

²³⁶ Putnam 1983, 90.

²³⁷ Quine 1951, 40.

²³⁸ Putnam 1983, 91.

they were not really a priori statements; after all, the notion of apriority in the sense of unrevisability need not include the idea of infallibility in regard to recognizing apriority and aposteriority—people do make mistakes in identifying which statements are which.

Interestingly, against this psychological defense, Putnam writes:

But the stunning case is geometry. Unless one accepts the ridiculous claim that what seemed *a priori* was only the *conditional* statement that if Euclid's axioms, then Euclid's theorems (I think that this is what Quine calls 'disinterpreting' geometry in 'Carnap and logical truth'), then one must admit that the key propositions of Euclidean geometry were *interpreted* propositions ('about form and void', as Quine says), and these interpreted propositions were *methodologically* immune from revision (prior to the invention of rival theory) as Boolean logic was prior to the proposal of the quantum logical interpretation of quantum mechanics. The correct moral – the one Quine draws – is that some statements can only be overthrown by rival *theory*; but there is no such thing as an absolutely unrevisable statement.

And hence there is no such thing as an a priori statement in that sense, i.e., the sense of unrevisable come what may.²³⁹ We will come back shortly to the importance of the idea

²³⁹ Importantly, in a later paper Putnam reconsiders whether there are any such a priori statements. In "There is at least one *a priori* truth," Putnam writes:

What I want to do here is to argue that there is at least one *a priori* truth in exactly the sense that Quine and I denied; i.e., at least one truth that it would never be rational to give up. [...] ...I shall consider the weakest possible version of the principle of contradiction, which I shall call the minimal principle of contradiction. This is simply the principle that *not every statement is both true and false*. The denial of this principle is, of course, the claim that *every statement is both true and false*. If every statement is such that under some circumstances it might be rational to revise it, then under some circumstances it might be rational to accept that *every statement is both true and false*. Is this the case? Well, it certainly doesn't seem to be the case. And if it is not the case, if, indeed, there are no circumstances under which it would be rational to give up our belief that not every statement is both true and false, then there is at least one a priori truth. (Putnam 1983, 100-101)

This is certainly not Putnam's last word on the a priori—he discusses it further in other papers—however, my only point is to clarify that he does not reject the a priori altogether.

that some statements can only be rationally rejected when there is a rival theory up for consideration.

The main point to come away with here is that by separating the notion of apriority from analyticity, Putnam can deny the sensibility of the first while endorsing the sensibility of the second. We turn now to a closer look at Putnam's take on analyticity and the range of statements that fall between the absolutely analytic and the synthetic. This will connect up with the above idea that "some statements can only be overthrown by rival theory."

The Continuum Between the Analytic and Synthetic

Gary Ebbs has a helpful discussion of Putnam's views on the analytic-synthetic distinction in his *Rule-Following and Realism*. He sees Putnam's arguments in "The Analytic and the Synthetic" as motivated, in part, by the idea that the distinction as traditionally conceived "prevents us from properly describing our linguistic practices."²⁴⁰ And Ebbs sees Putnam's arguments as criticisms of Carnap's analytic-synthetic distinction. Ebbs writes:

...Carnap designed his analytic-synthetic distinction to solve the positivists' problem of reconciling our knowledge of logic and mathematics with empiricism. Carnap's "solution" to the positivists' problem was shaped by his "motivating insight" that if investigators are to agree or disagree at all, they must share precise rules for evaluating their assertions. Once the rules for a language L are precisely specified, the truth values of some of the sentences of L may be deduced from the rules alone, whereas the truth values of the other sentences of L can be discovered only through empirical investigation. The former sentences are either analytic or contradictory, and the latter are synthetic. Carnap proposed that we view logical and mathematical truths as among the analytic or contradictory sentences of language systems we are free to adopt. Since the truth values of analytic and contradictory sentences of a

²⁴⁰ Ebbs 1997, 152.

language can be deduced from the rules of language, we can evaluate such sentences without appeal to empirical evidence or a special faculty of pure reason.²⁴¹

Putnam is critical of several aspects of this picture. We saw above that he is concerned to separate the notion of a sentence being immune from revision from what may come from that of analyticity. But Putnam is also concerned to criticize Carnap's idea that either the truth of a sentence is derivable from the rules of a language L or it is synthetic. That is, he is critical of there being a sharp dichotomy between the analytic and the synthetic. As Ebbs puts it, Putnam is critical of what he [Ebbs] calls "Carnap's empiricist principle":
 "...in Carnap's view *it is reasonable to hold a sentence S of language L immune from disconfirmation by all empirical evidence only if S is true in virtue of the rules for L.*"²⁴²
 It is this sharp dichotomy between sentences that are derivable from the rules of a language L, which are immune from disconfirmation by all empirical evidence, and sentences that are not so derivable and thus synthetic, that is not born out, Putnam argues, by our actual linguistic practices as they are found, for example, in science.²⁴³ According to Ebbs:

To challenge Carnap's empiricist principle, Putnam exhibits false sentences that physicists at one time held immune from disconfirmation by all empirical evidence. These sentences are not analytic, since they are false, nor should they be understood as synthetic in Carnap's sense, since reasonable investigators held them immune from empirical disconfirmation. Putnam's examples

²⁴¹ Ebbs 1997, 153.

²⁴² Ebbs 1997, 154.

²⁴³ In *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy*, Putnam continues to object to the analytic-synthetic distinction along the same lines, i.e., when it is conceived as a strong dichotomy and not a "mere" distinction: "...one difference between an ordinary distinction and a metaphysical dichotomy: ordinary distinctions have ranges of application, and we are not surprised if they do not always apply" (Putnam 2002, 11). I mention this, in part, to show the continuity in Putnam's thought.

apparently undermine Carnap's empiricist principle: we must either give up this principle, or redescribe Putnam's examples.²⁴⁴

So, for example, Putnam takes it that "If two lines are straight and they are perpendicular to a third, then those two lines won't meet," was once held immune from empirical disconfirmation—only to be disconfirmed after Einstein's theories concerning the curvature of space-time.²⁴⁵ Let us look now in more detail at Putnam's discussion of such examples.

*Bachelors, Kinetic Energy, the Principles of Geometry,
and the Notion of Framework Principles*

In "The Analytic and Synthetic," Putnam begins his discussion of the different kinds of statements by considering a statement that superficially resembles "All bachelors are unmarried," which he sees as a paradigm of analyticity (more on this later). That superficially analytic statement is: "kinetic energy is equal to one half the product of mass and velocity squared, ' $e = \frac{1}{2} mv^2$.'"²⁴⁶ Why is that statement *superficially* analytic? Einstein introduced the "principle that all physical laws must be Lorentz-invariant."²⁴⁷ A quantity is Lorentz invariant when, in the context of the special theory of relativity, it remains unchanged after a Lorentz transformation.²⁴⁸ Thus, I take it that the above principle loosely means that all physical laws must remain the same across relative space-time, i.e., across different frames of reference. This principle, i.e., that of physical laws

²⁴⁴ Ebbs 1997, 154.

²⁴⁵ Putnam 1975b, 46.

²⁴⁶ Putnam 1975b, 42.

²⁴⁷ Putnam 1975b, 43.

²⁴⁸ One need not fully understand what a Lorentz transformation is in order to understand Putnam's discussion here.

being Lorentz-invariant, led Einstein to revise a number of physical laws. Some of those laws are unproblematically empirical or synthetic statements, e.g., “Moving clocks slow down.” However:

the interesting thing is that Einstein was to revise, and in an *exactly similar fashion*, principles that had traditionally been regarded as definitional in character. In particular Einstein, as we all know, changed the definition of ‘kinetic energy’. That is to say, he replaced the law ‘ $e = \frac{1}{2} mv^2$ ’ by a more complicated law.²⁴⁹

Putnam maintains that it is a “distortion” to hold that Einstein simply changed the definition of kinetic energy. While “kinetic energy = $e = \frac{1}{2} mv^2$ ” may have had a “special status when it came into the body of accepted theory” it was never definitional in the sense of “All bachelors are unmarried.”²⁵⁰ The “definition” of kinetic energy was revised because of the introduction of a new theory and new experiments in light of that theory; but what physicists were talking about before the change in theory and afterward was the same thing. According to Putnam, something similar could not happen for “All bachelors are unmarried”; if that changed, then the meaning of “bachelor” would change. This is tied to Putnam’s understanding of words like “bachelor” and “vixen” as “one-criterion words”; a notion we will look at more closely shortly. Again, one of the main points of comparison between “bachelor” and “kinetic energy” is that “kinetic energy” is not a one-criterion word. In fact statements like “ $e = \frac{1}{2} mv^2$,” which seem definitional and which had stood unchallenged and perhaps seemed unchallengeable, do not change their meaning, i.e., reference, as easily as one-criterion words. If we were to modify the marital status of bachelors, we would no longer be talking about bachelors; but in

²⁴⁹ Putnam 1975b, 44.

²⁵⁰ Putnam 1975b, 44-45.

modifying the “definition” of “kinetic energy,” Einstein was not, Putnam maintains, talking about something else—the extension of “kinetic energy” did not change.

According to Putnam, the point is that laws such as “ $e = \frac{1}{2} mv^2$,” which often have privileged status and which seem definitional, can be overthrown. But they “can be overthrown only if someone incorporates principles incompatible with those statements in a successful conceptual system.”²⁵¹ An isolated experiment is not enough to overthrow such statements because in practice they will not be suspected to be at fault if an isolated experiment somehow conflicts with them. Some alternative principle needs to be on hand—one that fits with other parts of the theory and which fits experience at least as well—before such seemingly definitional laws can be overthrown.

Putnam argues that the principles of geometry are analogous to “ $e = \frac{1}{2} mv^2$.” “Principles as central to the conceptual system of science as laws of geometry are simply not abandoned in the face of experiment *alone*. They are abandoned because a rival *theory* is available.”²⁵² Before the development of non-Euclidean geometry, the principles of geometry were taken to be virtually analytic. According to Putnam, it just would not have been rational for a scientist to question the principles of geometry, regardless of what happened in isolated experiments, prior to the development of a rival theory. The principles of Euclidean geometry “were as *close* to analytic as any nonanalytic statement ever gets. That is to say, that [sic] had the following status: no

²⁵¹ Putnam 1975b, 46.

²⁵² Putnam 1975b, 46.

experiment that one could possibly describe could possibly overthrow them, by itself.”²⁵³

Importantly, by saying this, Putnam means:

to group them, in this respect, with many other principles: the law ‘ $f = ma$ ’ (force equals mass times acceleration), the principle that the world did not come into existence five minutes ago, the principle that one cannot know certain kinds of facts, e.g., fact [sic] about objects at a distance from one, unless one has or has had evidence.²⁵⁴

These principles, which include “ $e = \frac{1}{2} mv^2$,” Putnam broadly classifies as “framework principles”—they are the relative analytic statements. To summarize, they are characterized by two related traits. First, none of them can be refuted in isolation. They can only be overthrown by experiments that support an available rival theory. Second, they “are so central that they are employed as auxiliaries to make predictions in an overwhelming number of experiments, without themselves being jeopardized by any possible experimental results.”²⁵⁵

This second trait Putnam refers to in places as “contextual a priori.” We saw above Putnam’s skepticism towards the absolutely a priori, in the sense of a statement that is immune for all time to any possible empirical disconfirmation. However, those “truths” that serve as framework principles are, as noted above, revisable but only when a new theory is on offer that can explain and predict phenomena at least as well, and presumably better. Absent the rival theory, they “seem” a priori:

...when we say that a statement is necessary relative to a body of knowledge, we imply that it is included in that body of knowledge and that it enjoys a special role in that body of knowledge. For

²⁵³ Putnam 1975b, 48.

²⁵⁴ Putnam 1975b, 48.

²⁵⁵ Putnam 1975b, 48.

example, one is not expected to give much of a reason for that kind of statement. But we do not imply that the statement is *necessarily* true, although, of course, it is thought to be true by someone whose knowledge that body of knowledge is.²⁵⁶

To summarize Putnam's purpose in contrasting terms like "bachelor" and "kinetic energy," Putnam wants to point out that there is a distinction between principles that we can *never* give up except on pain of irrationality, and principles that we *cannot at some time* give up except on pain of irrationality simply because all there are are isolated experiments absent a conceived rival theory. Putnam holds that any principle of knowledge can be revised for theoretical reasons as long as it is not a truly trivial principle in the sense of the analyticity of "All bachelors are unmarried": "There are indeed analytic statements in science; and these are immune from revision, except the trivial kind of revision which arises from unintended and unexplained historical changes in the use of language."²⁵⁷ However, statements that function as framework principles are not ultimately immune from revision, though they are immune from it in a way that statements like "The book is on the table" are not. We turn now to look in more detail at the sense in which "All bachelors are unmarried men" is analytic.

The Absolute Analytic: Drawing an Analytic-Synthetic

Distinction in Natural Languages

In "The Analytic and the Synthetic," Putnam considers a notion of analyticity for a formalized language. However, as he notes, while there are some similarities between a

²⁵⁶ Putnam 1975a, 240.

²⁵⁷ Putnam 1975b, 49. Because it would lead us astray from the aim of this section on analyticity, I am ignoring the issue of the status of the laws of logic for Putnam. As discussed in an earlier footnote, Putnam does hold that there is at least one a priori law of logic, namely, that *not every statement is both true and false*.

formalized language and a natural language, what applies to the former with its explicit rules of language may not necessarily apply so clearly to the latter with its often implicit rules of language. This is in part why he thinks we cannot rely on the formal language notion of analyticity when thinking of natural languages. We should instead “look at natural languages directly” to draw an analytic-synthetic distinction if we are to believe there really is one.²⁵⁸

Putnam suggests a set of criteria to delineate analytic statements, the kind of analytic statements that de Gaynesford calls absolute analytic statements. However, Putnam makes it clear that those statements that meet the criteria are only a *fundamental subset* of the analytic statements. This is because Putnam distinguishes statements that are analytic definitions, e.g., “Someone is a bachelor if and only if he is an unmarried man”—those that satisfy his criteria—from statements that are analytic because they are consequences of those that are definitional. These derivatively analytic statements do not necessarily directly satisfy the criteria. Putnam writes:

In short, I shall present criteria which are intended to show what is unique or different about certain analytic statements. Such criteria do not constitute a definition but one might obtain a definition, of a rough and ready sort, from them: an analytic statement is a statement which satisfies the criteria to be presented, or a consequence of such statements, or a statement which comes pretty close to satisfying the criteria, or a consequence of such statements. The last clause in the ‘definition’ is designed to allow for the fact that there are some ‘borderline’ cases of analyticity, e.g. ‘Red is a color’. However, it is not a very important point that the analytic-synthetic distinction *is* afflicted with ‘borderline fuzziness’. The trouble with the analytic-synthetic distinction *construed as a dichotomy* is far more radical than mere ‘borderline fuzziness’. Yet, there are borderline cases, and the reason for their existence is that the analytic-synthetic distinction is tied to a certain model of natural language and correspondence between the

²⁵⁸ Putnam 1975b, 64.

model and the natural language is not unique. To say that it is not unique is not, however, to say that it is arbitrary. Some statements in natural language really are analytic; others may be *construed* as analytic; still others really are synthetic; others *may be construed* as synthetic; still other statements belong to still other categories or may be construed as belonging to still other categories.²⁵⁹

The criteria for a statement's being (absolutely) analytic that Putnam suggests are as follows:

- (1) The statement has the form: 'Something (Someone) is an *A* if and only if it (he, she) is a *B*', where *A* is a single word.²⁶⁰
- (2) The statement holds without exception, and provides us with a *criterion* for something's being the sort of thing to which the term *A* applies.
- (3) The criterion is the only one that is generally accepted and employed in connection with the term.
- (4) The term *A* is not a 'law-cluster' word.²⁶¹

Putnam immediately notes that criterion (1) is not enough in all cases to separate analytic statements from statements of natural laws. What he means by this is connected with his notion of a "law-cluster word" that appears in criterion (4), and so we will turn briefly to that notion before looking in more detail at the four criteria together.

Analogous to the notion of a cluster concept, where the meaning of a term is given by a cluster of properties none of which are individually necessary, Putnam introduces the notion of a law-cluster concept:

²⁵⁹ Putnam 1975b, 65.

²⁶⁰ Concerning the point that it must be a single word Putnam writes:

The requirement that *A* be a single word reflects the principle that the meaning of a whole utterance is a function of the meanings of the individual words and grammatical forms that make it up. This requirement should actually be more complicated to take care of words which consist of more than one morpheme and of idioms, but these complications will not be considered here. (Putnam 1975b, 65 footnote.)

²⁶¹ Putnam 1975b, 65.

Law-cluster concepts are constituted not by a bundle of properties as are the typical general names like ‘man’ and ‘crow’, but by a cluster of laws which, as it were, determine the identity of the concept. The concept ‘energy’ is an excellent example of a law-cluster concept. It enters into a great many laws. It plays a great many roles, and these laws and inference roles constitute its meaning collectively, not individually. I want to suggest that most of the terms in highly developed science are law-cluster concepts, and that one should always be suspicious of the claim that a principle whose subject term is a law-cluster concept is analytic. The reason that it is difficult to have an analytic relationship between law-cluster concepts is that such a relationship would be one more law. But, in general any one law can be abandoned without destroying the identity of the law-cluster concept involved, just as a man can be irrational from birth, or can have a growth of feathers of feathers all over his body, without ceasing to be a man.²⁶²

Relating this back to criterion (1) for analyticity, the reason it does not rule out statements of natural law in all cases is simply because some natural laws may meet that criterion by having the form “Something is an *A* if and only if it is a *B*.” In regard to criterion (4), law-cluster concepts are not analytic for the reason that a) they are not one-criterion terms, i.e., they consist of a cluster of associated natural laws, and b) almost any of those laws can be given up without changing the meaning of the law-cluster term, which is something that Putnam wants to deny is possible for analytic statements, i.e., if a statement is absolutely analytic it cannot be given up without changing the meaning of the concept.

Turning now to the four criteria together, they specify that an absolutely analytic statement is a statement that gives a *single*, exceptionless criterion for a term where the statement is not one of a natural law. They are not natural laws because a) they are exceptionless, which natural laws are not, and b) they have “little or no systematic

²⁶² Putnam 1975b, 52.

import,²⁶³ which natural laws have. As to why we should think that an exceptionless, one-criterion word is analytic, Putnam begins by noting that statements that satisfy the four criteria *are not synthetic* in any usual sense. They cannot be confuted in the way that statements like “The book is on the table” can be confuted, i.e., by isolated experiments. Further, “to verify or confute a statement of the form ‘Something is an *A* if and only if it is a *B*’ in this way requires that we have *independent* criteria for being an *A* and for being a *B*.”²⁶⁴ The point he wants to make is that statements that satisfy the criteria are not such that we could have theoretical grounds for accepting them or rejecting them.

It is for these reasons that statements that satisfy the four criteria can be seen as the “arbitrary fixed points in our natural language.” The absolutely analytic statements are:

unverifiable in any practical sense, unrefutable in any practical sense, yet we do seem to have them. This must always seem a mystery to one who does not realize the significance of the fact that in any rational way of life there must be certain arbitrary elements. They are ‘true by virtue of the rules of language’; they are ‘true by stipulation’; they are ‘true by implicit convention’. Yet all these expressions are after all nothing but metaphors: true statements, but couched in metaphor nonetheless. What is the reality behind the metaphor? The reality is that they are true because they are accepted as true, and because this acceptance is quite arbitrary in the sense that the acceptance of the statements has no systematic consequences beyond those described in the previous section, e.g. that of allowing us to use pairs of expressions interchangeably.²⁶⁵

²⁶³ Putnam 1975b, 68.

²⁶⁴ Putnam 1975b, 68.

²⁶⁵ Putnam 1975b, 68-69. One might object to Putnam’s saying “they are true because they are accepted as true” for it is not by representing “A bachelor is an unmarried man” as true that makes it analytic. But all Putnam needs to say, *inter alia*, is something like “Bachelor” is analytic because we choose to take “Bachelor” to be interchangeable with “unmarried male.”

Since “bachelor” is not a law-cluster concept it does not carry with it theoretical import—it does not serve as a fixed framework point underlying physical theory. Insofar as it is a fixed point, it is arbitrarily fixed by grouping together a set of people “by ignoring all aspects except a single legal one.”²⁶⁶ Hence the importance of the criterion that the absolutely analytic statements are one-criterion terms like “bachelor” and “vixen.”

Such a description of the absolute analytic statements might give the impression, as Ebbs points out, that for Putnam statements like “Bachelors are unmarried men” are paradigms of knowledge based on meaning alone, independent of experience, after all. If this were true, “these paradigms could then help us to “solve” the positivists’ problem of reconciling our knowledge of logic and mathematics with empiricism.”²⁶⁷ However, Putnam does not hold that the truth of “Bachelors are unmarried men” is based solely on the meaning of the terms. The other relevant factor is that in taking “Bachelors are unmarried men” to be analytic we assume that there are no exceptionless laws about bachelors. “Bachelor” is analytic because it is a one-criterion word and there are no revisable, exceptionless laws concerning bachelors. What if some were to be discovered? Putnam’s answer is that if “bachelor” were to become a law-cluster word, then we would simply have to say that:

the linguistic character of the word has changed. The word ‘atom’ is an example of a word which was once a ‘one-criterion’ word and which has become a ‘law-cluster’ word (so that the sentence ‘Atoms are indivisible’, which was once used to make an analytic statement, would today express a false proposition).²⁶⁸

²⁶⁶ Putnam 1975b, 57.

²⁶⁷ Ebbs 1997, 163.

²⁶⁸ Putnam 1975b, 68.

However, according to Putnam, we have no good reason to think this will happen with “bachelor”; this lack of reasons is enough, Putnam thinks, for us to reasonably construe “bachelor” to be a one-criterion word, i.e., analytic in the absolute sense.²⁶⁹ Importantly, this means that even the absolute analytic words are not unrevisable come what may.

None of the above is uncontroversial, of course. Again, it is my intention to give the reader a general understanding of the way in which Putnam conceives of the analytic-synthetic distinction. It is not to present purposes to evaluate those views. With this in mind, we have seen that Putnam is concerned with rehabilitating the notion of analyticity. Part of this task consists in acknowledging Quine’s insights regarding what Putnam takes to be a priori truths. Another part is recognizing that many truths, or apparent truths, may seem to be true by definition or at least play a framework like role in that they are assumed in a way that makes them seem unrevisable, though they may actually be revisable in the face of disconfirming experiments *and* a sufficiently explanatory rival theory. Again, these are the relative analytic statements. In general Putnam wants to acknowledge that there is a distinction to be made between analytic and synthetic statements, but in so doing also acknowledge that there are statements that do not clearly fall into either category and most importantly acknowledge that insofar as there are analytic statements they cannot be relied on for any, so to speak, philosophical heavy lifting of the kind the logical positivist were known to attempt.

Let us relate the above discussion of the analytic-synthetic distinction back to the idea that for Putnam conceptual schemes are schemes of concepts and not beliefs. As we saw, with framework principles or the relative analytic statements, parts of their

²⁶⁹ Putnam 1975b, 58.

definitions—in terms of theoretical statements—can be heavily revised without the meaning of the term changing, i.e., without their reference changing. Concerning the absolute analytic statements, their one-criterion status means that they don't have theoretical important and that if the criterion changes, then so does the meaning of the term. Now the words that Putnam is most concerned with in regard to optional languages are those such as “object” and “exist.” Putnam does not speak of them in these terms, but I take it that neither “object” nor “exist” are law-cluster terms or one-criterion words, nor is either of them meaningful because of a set of necessary and sufficient analytic conditions constituting their meaning. Indeed, we will see below in more detail how Putnam thinks their linguistic meaning is open-ended in such a way that they can be extended in different ways, given different senses. If nothing else, we can say at this point that Putnam is not skeptical about meaning in the way that Quine is. In the present context, this means that for Putnam there is a distinction between the meaning of a word and empirical beliefs about the word's referent, even if the distinction isn't always black and white, easily assayed, or fixed once and for all. As we saw in his discussion of law-cluster concepts, there is not a clear distinction between belief and meaning insofar as a part of the concept, e.g., of kinetic energy, can be revised; the theory can change, while the meaning, according to Putnam, does not change. As Putnam writes in a later context: “We are left with no standards, except pragmatic and context-sensitive ones, for deciding which of our beliefs about tigers, or leopards, or water are to count as somehow connected with the ‘meaning’ of these terms.”²⁷⁰ We now turn to a consideration of semantic externalism and its relation to conceptual relativity.

²⁷⁰ Putnam 1990, 290. “Tiger” and “water” are natural kind terms, not law-cluster terms, but the point of the passage holds for both.

Semantic Externalism and Conceptual Relativity

There are two main reasons for looking at Putnam's views on semantic externalism. The first is that they are an important feature of Putnam's views on meaning, which is one of the concerns of this chapter; second, I want to consider briefly whether semantic externalism is incompatible with Putnam's more recent views concerning conceptual relativity.

In "The Meaning of 'Meaning'," Putnam discusses in detail the notion of meaning and the assumptions:

(I) That knowing the meaning of a term is just a matter of being in a certain psychological state (in the sense of 'psychological state', in which states of memory and psychological dispositions are 'psychological states'; no one thought that knowing the meaning of a word was a continuous state of consciousness, of course).

(II) That the meaning of a term (in the sense of 'intension') determines its extension (in the sense that sameness of intension entails sameness of extension).²⁷¹

Employing the distinction between intension and extension, or sense and reference, assumption (I) is the idea that a person's knowing the intension of a term is exhausted by being in a particular psychological state. Assumption (II), then, is the idea that that

²⁷¹ Putnam 1975b, 219. According to Putnam, philosophers have traditionally understood psychological states in terms of methodological solipsism. That is, they assumed that no psychological states require the existence of anything other than the person having them, not even the subject's body. Putnam notes a restriction implied by methodological solipsism. He claims that ordinarily when we say that X is jealous of Y, the existence of Y is thereby entailed. If we hold to this entailment, then methodological solipsism cannot permit such psychological states as X's being jealous of Y. If such states are to be permitted they must be modified to allow that X may be jealous of a hallucination or the like. Putnam calls those states that require the existence of things other than the subject "psychological states in the wide sense" and those permitted by methodological solipsism "psychological states in the narrow sense." It is this narrow understanding of psychological states that is contained in assumption (I) (Putnam 1975b, 219-220).

We should note, however, that Putnam is no longer satisfied with the wide/narrow distinction. He has come to think that the distinction between wide and narrow psychological states implies that we *can* think of the mind as a private theater. Instead, Putnam thinks that the mind is best thought of as a "system of environment-involving capacities and interactions" (Putnam 1996, xviii).

intensional state, regardless of whose “head it’s in,” determines a single extension or referent. Putnam’s Twin Earth, Elm/Beech, and Gold thought experiments are intended to show the falsity of (I) and the need to modify (II). Let us look at the reasons Putnam gives for these conclusions.

Putnam asks us to imagine that in addition to Earth the universe contains what is in almost all respects an exact duplicate of Earth, which he calls Twin Earth. There are exact duplicates of the people on Earth on Twin Earth, and people who speak “English” in both places. Both Earth and Twin Earth have a substance its people call “water,” which fills oceans, streams, water tanks, and runs out of faucets; and which in both places has the same physical and phenomenal characteristics; and which in both places behaves the same under changes of temperature, pressure, etc. The difference is that where on earth what is called “water” is (predominately) H_2O , on Twin Earth the liquid called “water” is a liquid with a very different and complicated formula abbreviated as XYZ .

Now let us imagine that a spaceship goes from Twin Earth to Earth. At first, Twin Earthers will say that “water” has the same meaning on Earth and Twin Earth. Putnam claims that this will be corrected once it is learned that Earth “water” is H_2O and Twin Earth “water” is XYZ . The Twin Earthers will report home saying “On Earth ‘water’ means H_2O .”

Now let us imagine a time on both planets before chemistry’s development, say 1750. At this time no English speaker on Earth knows that what he calls water is H_2O , and the same is true on Twin Earth in regard to XYZ . Imagine now that Oscar₁ lives on Earth and his duplicate Oscar₂ lives on Twin Earth. Both Oscars are in the same brain states in regard to “water.” Putnam’s point is that despite the sameness of their internal

states the extension of Oscar₁'s "water" is H₂O and the extension of Oscar₂'s "water" is XYZ: same "intension" = different extension.

Putnam briefly considers a possible objection at this point. Why should we assume that "water" on Earth in 1750 had the same extension that "water" on Earth now has? That is, we might be tempted to say that "water" on Earth in 1750 had the extension of everything we would call water in 1750, since we were ignorant of chemistry. Thus, if presented with the liquid called "water" on Twin Earth, Oscar₁ would have called it "water" and thus the extension of "water" in 1750 included H₂O and XYZ. So, in 1750 Oscar₁ and Oscar₂ had not only the same internal state, same "intensional" state, when using "water," but "water" had the same extension, namely H₂O and XYZ: same intension = same extension, after all.

In response Putnam claims that if I point to a glass of water and say "This is called water" my ostensive definition presupposes that what I am pointing to is the same kind of thing as, i.e., "bears a certain sameness relation (say, *x is the same liquid as y*, or *x is the same_L as y*)" to, what others in my linguistic community call water and have called water.²⁷² However, if it turns out that unbeknownst to me the stuff in the glass fails to meet that sameness relation, then I do not really intend for it to count as a glass of water.²⁷³ That is, if I had known it was not what I and others in my linguistic community have called water in the past, I would not have called it "water" or I would retract my "definition." In this way:

²⁷² Putnam 1975b, 225.

²⁷³ It seems to me that one might think that Putnam is begging the question here, since he is assuming that the underlying microstructure is what determines the sameness relation. Couldn't the sameness relation be determined by superficial or phenomenological similarities?

the ostensive definition conveys what might be called a defeasible necessary and sufficient condition: the necessary and sufficient condition for being water is bearing the relation same_L to the stuff in the glass; but this is the necessary and sufficient condition only if the empirical presupposition is satisfied. If it is not satisfied, then one of a series of, so to speak, ‘fallback’ conditions becomes activated.²⁷⁴

The relation same_L is such that whether something is or is not correctly judged to be the same liquid as what I point to may need to be revised after further investigation reveals new facts—facts that are taken to be definitive of the sameness relation. Even the most certain result may be overturned at some point given new evidence. This is why Putnam claims that sameness of intension does not equal sameness of extension and that we ought to say that Oscar₁, in applying the Earth “water” to the liquid the Twin Earthers call “water,” is mistaken in thinking that XYZ is Earth “water.”

Elms, Beeches and the Division of Linguist Labor

Putnam claims that his understanding of the differences between elms and beeches amounts to nothing. He knows that they are different kinds of trees but cannot tell them apart or describe their differences. Despite Putnam’s inability to distinguish an elm from a beech, the extension of “elm” in Putnam’s idiolect is different from the extension of “beech.” This is how it should be, given that elms and beeches are different kinds of trees. Putnam claims that the achievement of this difference in extension cannot be the result of a difference in concepts or internal states, since his concept of an elm and a beech are the same.²⁷⁵ Rather, his talk of elms and beeches is meaningful because of what Putnam calls the division of linguistic labor. The determination of the extensions of

²⁷⁴ Putnam 1975b, 225.

²⁷⁵ Putnam 1975b, 226.

“elm” and “beech” is spread out through the linguistic community: others, e.g., dendrologists, some hikers, gardeners, etc., do know the differences. Perhaps Putnam should speak of his “conception” of a beech and an elm being the same instead of his “concept,” since one might argue that one doesn’t “possess” the concept of a beech or an elm if one cannot identify them. Of course, part of Putnam’s point here is that one person alone doesn’t really “possess” such a concept. We might still wonder whether the dendrologist isn’t capable, at least in some sense, of determining the extension of “beech” by herself.

Putnam illustrates more fully the notion of the division of linguistic labor by considering gold. There are many ways in which gold is an important metal: people treasure it, invest in it, and wear it proudly and as a symbol. However, in buying, selling, trading, and treasuring it most people in our community need not know how to tell real gold from fake gold. What “gold” means, what determines its extension is not, and need not be, possessed by any single member of the community. Its meaning is, so to speak, divided up among the different members of the community. While this division of linguistic labor may not be needed for all terms, e.g., it isn’t needed for “chair,” with the increase of specialization in the labor force, humanities, and sciences there are, according to Putnam, increasingly more words that depend on it.

Natural-Kind Terms, Rigidity, and the Importance of

Stereotypes

According to Putnam (and Kripke), there are two main ways that one can tell another what one means by a natural kind term.²⁷⁶ Taking water as the example again,

²⁷⁶ For a later discussion of how and why Putnam’s views have changed in relation to Kripke’s, see Putnam 1990, 54ff. For Kripke’s views, see, e.g., Kripke 1980.

one can point and say “This (liquid) is water,” where the parentheses indicate that the “kind marker” is either implicit or explicit as the context may warrant. Alternatively, instead of pointing, one can give a description. In the case of a description, it will ordinarily consist in a number of markers and what he calls a stereotype. In general a stereotype is a description of the kind that a normal member of the linguistic community would typically give:

The central features of the stereotype generally are *criteria* – features which in normal situations constitute ways of recognizing if a thing belongs to the kind or, at least, necessary conditions (or probabilistic necessary conditions) for membership in the kind. Not all criteria used by the linguistic community as a collective body are included in the stereotype, and in some cases the stereotypes may be quite weak. Thus (unless I am a very atypical speaker), the stereotype of an elm is just that of a common deciduous tree. These features are indeed necessary conditions for membership in the kind (I mean ‘necessary’ in a loose sense; I don’t think ‘elm trees are deciduous’ is *analytic*), but they fall far short of constituting a way of recognizing elms. On the other hand, the stereotype of a tiger does enable one to recognize tigers (unless they are albino, or some other atypical circumstance is present), and the stereotype of a lemon generally enables one to recognize lemons. In the extreme case, the stereotype may be *just* the marker: the stereotype of molybdenum might be *just* that molybdenum is a *metal*.²⁷⁷

Considering first the method of ostensive definition, Putnam indicates the way he thinks that natural kind terms rigidly designate. When I say “*This* is water” pointing to a glass of H₂O, then in terms of possible worlds something is water if and only if it is the same kind as, if and only if it bears the proper sameness relation to, the sample I point to in the actual world—namely, if and only if it is H₂O. Thus if there is some possible

²⁷⁷ Putnam 1975b, 230.

world W where there is a liquid that looks, tastes, and behaves like H₂O, but it is not H₂O, then it is not what I mean by water when I point to H₂O and say “*This* is water.”²⁷⁸

According to Putnam indexical or token-reflexive terms like “I,” “here,” and “now” have never been thought of as satisfying assumption (II) from above (that the same intension determines the same extension). Two different people can say “I…” and be in the same internal state while the extension of each token of “I” is different. A further aspect and result of semantic externalism and the division of linguistic labor is that, even after it is discovered, the majority of people do not need to know what the microstructure of a natural kind term is in order to know what the term means. As long as there are experts that can (defeasibly) tell water from non-water, H₂O from liquid that is not H₂O, then the collective body of a linguistic community knows the meaning of “water.” For those words that incorporate a stereotype, it is the stereotype that is more essential to applying “water” in everyday contexts. Again, since meaning is partially determined by the extension of a term, a person can have false beliefs about the term and still use the term meaningfully and be understood by others. Relating this to our earlier discussion of Putnam’s views on the analytic-synthetic distinction, his semantic externalism is, in part, why he thinks that the meaning of “kinetic energy” didn’t change after Einstein.

Meanings Are Not in the Head

We thus see why Putnam holds that the earlier assumptions concerning the relationship between intension and extension are flawed. In the Twin Earth example we supposedly have two people in the same internal (intensional) states, but where the

²⁷⁸ Putnam 1975b, 231.

extensions of the mental states are different. With the division of linguistic labor we have a situation where the psychological state of an individual does not determine the extension of a term; rather, the extension of the term is fixed, e.g., by specialists who are able to pick out paradigmatic examples of the extension. In fact, psychological states in these cases shouldn't be thought of as internal, since they involve the environment and the community. Thus, with certain kinds of words, e.g., natural kind terms, different extensions do not imply different intentions and an individual's internal mental state is not enough (in every case at least) to determine extension: assumption (I) is to be given up. Assumption (II) is kept, but in a slightly modified way. According to Putnam, there is no clear distinction between intensional-meaning and extensional-meaning. Rather, meaning determines extension insofar as the extension is partially constitutive of the meaning: "Meaning determines extension – by construction, so to speak."²⁷⁹ "Meaning indeed determines extension; but only because extension (fixed by some test or other) is, in some cases, 'part of the meaning.'"²⁸⁰ Knowing and meaningfully using natural kind terms is not a matter of being in a certain internal/psychological state. Rather, it consists of being proficient with stereotypical, non-analytic descriptions of the kind, *and* being a part of a certain environment and linguistic community.

²⁷⁹ Putnam 1975b, 270.

²⁸⁰ Putnam 1975b, 151.

The Later Putnam, Semantic Externalism, and Causal

Theories of Reference

As Michael Devitt does, we can interpret Putnam's arguments for semantic externalism, in part, as an attempt to refute descriptive theories of reference.²⁸¹ In regard to the Twin Earth thought experiments, Devitt writes:

[Another] moral is the essential incompleteness of description theories. According to these theories, the reference of 'tiger' is determined by the reference of such words as 'carnivorous' and 'striped' with which 'tiger' is internally associated. What then determines *their* reference? If there is to be any reference at all, this buck passing must stop. Some terms must get their reference not in virtue of internal associations with other terms, but in virtue of external relations to things outside language and mind. Such external relations are, of course, the sort that causal theories appeal to.²⁸²

As we saw above with the example of water, what is important is establishing the sameness relation, i.e., that which holds between the various things we call water that makes them all water. With natural kind terms this sameness relation, what makes the

²⁸¹ However, Putnam makes clear that his views on externalism do not deny that descriptions have their place:

It is often overlooked that [sic] even in externalist theories of reference descriptions play a key role: the original dubber or dubbers identify or have the capacity to identify what they are talking about by definite descriptions, or at least by what I once called "approximately correct definite descriptions". (Putnam 2001b, 496-497)

²⁸² Devitt 1999, 87. We have to be careful here, for while Putnam may be skeptical of description theories, he is also not offering a causal theory of reference. In a very telling footnote, Putnam writes:

I should note here in passing that Kripke and I have both denied quite consistently that what we are proposing is a theory of reference in Fodor's sense, that is to say, a definition of reference in causal terms. What Kripke and I have defended is the idea that certain sorts of words can refer only if there is a causal connection between them and certain things or certain kinds of things. But we have never tried to *reduce* reference to causation. (Putnam 1992a, 221, footnote 4)

kind the kind that it is, is discoverable by science and is “natural.” Thus Devitt writes in explaining the causal theory of natural kinds and the “grounding” of a natural kind term:

Thus, ‘tiger’ is introduced by causal contact with sample tigers and ‘gold’ by causal contact with samples of gold. The extension of the term is then all those objects, or all those examples of stuff, that are of the same kind as the ostensively given samples, that share the underlying essential nature of the samples. Thus ‘tiger’ refers to all and only the objects that are of the same kind as the sample tigers – that is, to all tigers; similarly, ‘gold’ refers to all gold. In virtue of what is one thing of the same kind as another, sharing its underlying nature? This is discovered only by empirical scientific research.²⁸³

It is discovered by scientific research, but it is, in part, determined prior to such discovery, if it is ever made, by our causally interacting with the kinds we are naming and talking about.

As Alex Mueller points out, “One of the pillars of [Putnam’s] early realism, it is agreed, was semantic externalism....”²⁸⁴ Since Putnam has come to reject (metaphysical) realism, we may be left wondering in what form he could still hold semantic externalism. However, that he does still endorse some form of semantic externalism alongside conceptual relativity and the more general conceptual pluralism is clear. In the recent *What Philosophers Think*, Putnam approvingly explains in general terms what semantic externalism and holism are, and how they are related. As the interviewer notes, externalism and holism have been constants in Putnam’s thought for over a quarter of a

²⁸³ Devitt 1999, 88.

²⁸⁴ Mueller 2003, 59. In this article, Mueller attempts to argue that not only are semantic externalism and conceptual relativity/pluralism compatible, they actually mutually support one another. While these issues are certainly interesting and important, it is not my intention to go into them in any great detail or to consider Mueller’s arguments.

century.²⁸⁵ Less recently, but still within the time when Putnam has defended conceptual relativity, Putnam writes:

According to the semantic externalism that I defended (and still defend), the content of our words and thoughts are partly determined by our relations with things in our environment (including other people). The fact that what [we] speak of [as] *water* is water and not some other liquid has everything to do with the fact that the word *water* refers to water, for example.²⁸⁶

While I do not want to spend too much time on this, I want to briefly look at why one might find it problematic for Putnam to endorse conceptual relativity, and his more general pluralism, while still endorsing semantic externalism. I also want to briefly suggest how Putnam reconciles them (or might reconcile them).

I take it that there is a group of related problems. I will go over each in turn, offering a brief possible response on Putnam's behalf. First there is the problem that if it is the world that is supposed to determine natural kinds, i.e., the sameness relation between tokens of a natural kind, e.g., by their microstructure or the physical laws they obey, how can we reconcile that with the claim that the identity conditions of objects are scheme-dependent? Two things in response: first, as we have seen, regarding conceptual relativity and its representation-dependence implications, Putnam does not think that conceptual relativity applies in all cases. So it is not necessarily the case that the microstructure or physical laws involved in identifying natural kinds are scheme-dependent in the sense implied by conceptual relativity. Second, as relates to what seems to be Putnam's more general position about the representation-dependence of what exists,

²⁸⁵ Putnam 2003, 230.

²⁸⁶ Mueller 2003, 76 footnote 1.

we might turn to what he says in “Why There Isn’t A Ready-Made World” regarding the essentialism that is present in his externalism:

...what I said [regarding essentialism] was that it has long been our *intention* that a liquid should *count* as “water” only if it has the same composition as the paradigm examples of water (or as the majority of them). I claim that this was our intention even before we *knew* the ultimate composition of water. If I am right, then *given those referential intentions*, it was always impossible for a liquid other than H₂O to be water, even if it took empirical investigation to find it out. But the “essence” of water in *this* sense is the product of our use of the word, the kinds of referential intentions we have: this sort of essence is not “built into the world” in the way required by an *essentialist theory of reference itself* to get off the ground.²⁸⁷

The idea is, I take it, that it is our use of words, along with background intentions, that determine the kinds of things we are talking about. Relative to those things there may be some underlying common physical property. But it is only an underlying property relative to the language use and concepts determined through that language use. The concepts and language use are not determined, causally or logically, by the underlying physical properties in the world in some representational-independent, God’s-Eye view of things. And again, Putnam’s account of conceptual relativity does not imply that everything is relative—the world still determines which of our statements are true and which are false, though not of course because of the latter corresponding or failing to correspond to the former. Whether he is right about all of this is, of course, another question.

The second issue with combining Putnam’s later views with his externalism concerns Putnam’s views on the interest relativity of causation: the causal connections grounding the reference relation between terms and world are supposed to be, in Devitt’s

²⁸⁷ Putnam 1983, 220-221.

words “external,” not internal or relative to our interests. In response, Putnam might claim that it doesn’t really make sense to speak of “external” causes grounding reference—i.e., causes external to the world of experience, or the experience of someone in an ideal situation. However, though causation is, in some sense, interest relative according to Putnam, he does not think this is a problem.²⁸⁸ And it is not going to be a problem, he thinks, in the same way that the interest relativity of “essence” is not going to be a problem. Let us look at the latter.

In “Aristotle after Wittgenstein,” Putnam claims that “...there are...difficulties with the doctrine that every (kind of) substance has a determinate intrinsic form or essence.”²⁸⁹ He goes on to argue this by claiming that whether it is part of the essence of dogs that they are descended from wolves is dependent upon who is talking: is it an evolutionary biologist or a molecular biologist? Putnam believes that each would say different things. The descent of dogs from wolves would be essential for the evolutionary biologist but not the molecular biologist who would be more concerned with DNA.²⁹⁰ He goes on to say:

That different descriptions of the “nature” of a natural kind should lead to not quite coextensive criteria for membership in the kind is not in itself a new phenomenon, and is not limited to biology. In chemistry, for example, there have long been different definitions of “acid,” which agree in all the ordinary cases but disagree about such exotic case as single ions. And of course, the two views I have described are not the only points of view that we take toward dogs.²⁹¹

²⁸⁸ See Devitt 1984, 182ff., for a critical discussion of Putnam’s views, as of 1981, on the interest relativity of causation.

²⁸⁹ Putnam 1994, 75.

²⁹⁰ Putnam 1994, 75-76.

²⁹¹ Putnam 1994, 77.

We can find a possible response to the possible problems that such claims, and their counterparts concerning the interest relativity of causation, might pose for semantic externalism in the last paragraphs of “Aristotle after Wittgenstein.” There Putnam says that in order to avoid misunderstanding his position, it is important to realize that he is not claiming “that just anything can be regarded as the nature of a kind from some point of view or other.”²⁹² Not only is it the case that not all points of view are rational, but not all of those that are rational are “sufficiently important to our lives with our language for us to feel that what it is necessary for someone who holds them to know about Xs justifies such a grand name as ‘the nature of Xs’.”²⁹³ As an example of the latter point Putnam says that while it may be important for a groomer to know how to wash a dog, knowing how to best wash a dog has nothing to do with knowing the essence of a dog.

Tying this into the interest relativity of causation, Putnam writes:

I am struck by the analogy between the limited relativity, the relativity to interest, of talk about the nature of Xs and the relativity pointed out long ago by Hart and Honoré of talk about “the cause” to the point of view or the interest of the person using this expression. [...] I remember discussing this some years ago with Richard Boyd, who remarked that while what counts as “the cause” of something may be relevant to interests, that something is the cause of something *given* those interests is absolute, and I am inclined to agree.²⁹⁴

²⁹² Putnam 1994, 78.

²⁹³ Putnam 1994, 78.

²⁹⁴ Putnam 1994, 78. It is not clear how telling it is that he says that he is “inclined to agree” as opposed to something like “wholeheartedly agree.”

Again, given some particular intention on the part of language users, water has an essence, and given some particular interest there are “absolute” causal connections involved in determining the extension of certain words.

The third issue concerns the idea that a causal theory of reference is really a realist theory of reference—causal connection is supposed to be a way of spelling out the correspondence relation between language and world. So if correspondence is out, then how do we keep a causal theory of reference? The response to this is fairly quick. As I noted earlier in a footnote, Putnam claims that:

I should note here in passing that Kripke and I have both denied quite consistently that what we are proposing is a theory of reference in Fodor’s sense, that is to say, a definition of reference in causal terms. What Kripke and I have defended is the idea that certain sorts of words can refer only if there is a causal connection between them and certain things or certain kinds of things. But we have never tried to *reduce* reference to causation. (Putnam 1992a, 221, footnote 4)

So, Putnam can say that insofar as he was never grounding reference in causation, in the way that, for example, Devitt wants to do, he can happily still admit that causal connection is important, at least with some words, but it is not something to which reference reduces. Moreover, while one might appeal to causation to spell out the realist’s notion of correspondence that need not entail that all appeals to causation are realist.

Linguistic Meaning vs. Meaning as Use in a Particular Context, Cognitive Equivalence, and Relative Interpretation vs. Translation

Much of the above comes from an earlier period of Putnam’s philosophy. As already noted, despite his reputation for “changing his mind” frequently, that does not

mean that he simply jettisons all of his previous work with every change of mind. There is much that is continuous in his philosophy. I have tried to capture a number of the strands that have remained strong over time and which are relevant to an understanding of Putnam's views on meaning and language. We may now turn to some of the further developments and distinctions found in his post-realist work, developments that bear directly on our project of evaluating the possibility of conceptual relativity. There are three main things to look at: linguistic meaning versus meaning as use in a particular context, cognitive equivalence of whole theories, and relative interpretation versus translation.

Linguistic Meaning versus Meaning as Use in a Particular Context

Putnam makes an important distinction between what he calls "linguistic meaning" and what I am calling "use in a particular context." I will not go into the details of Putnam's views on linguistic meaning much more than I already have above in explaining his views on the analytic-synthetic distinction and semantic externalism. What is important from the standpoint of understanding conceptual relativity is 1) acknowledging that Putnam is not skeptical of word and sentence meaning in the general way that Quine is; that does not, of course, mean that Putnam takes it that there are "meanings" or that he is a realist about propositions; and 2) understanding his notion of use in a particular context.

First, a few words about linguistic meaning in the context of conceptual relativity. In *Ethics Without Ontology*, Putnam explains that by "linguistic meaning" he is referring to the sense of "meaning" that is similar to the linguist's and on which Davidson has

spent so much time (though this does not, of course, mean that Putnam endorses Davidson's views). In this sense of meaning, if you ask for the meaning of a word, then you "expect to be given, if not a synonym, at least a paraphrase of the kind that any native speaker of the relevant language might give, or if the paraphrase is in a different language, one that counts as a reasonable translation."²⁹⁵ Linguistic meaning is connected to translation practice, which is concerned with preserving linguistic meaning in the following way: translating "fünf rote Äpfel" as "five red apples" and not "the camel kneels." It is translation practice that provides the criterion for sameness of meaning between expressions in this sense of meaning.²⁹⁶

One way to cross over from the notion of linguistic meaning to that of use in a particular context is to look at Putnam's brief discussion of what Charles Travis calls "speaking-sensitive semantics," what Putnam also refers to as "context semantics."²⁹⁷ As Putnam understands it, the main idea is that the content of a statement is indeterminate outside of a particular context in which it is spoken. The idea is not that words don't have meaning or "something that is rightly called 'knowing the [or a] meaning' of a word and that this knowledge constrains the contents that can be expressed using the word with what can be regarded as that particular meaning."²⁹⁸ Putnam continues:

What [context semantics] denies is that meaning (or the knowledge in question) completely determines what is being said (what is

²⁹⁵ Putnam 2004a, 40.

²⁹⁶ Clearly by leaving things here I am bracketing a large number of issues, e.g., Quine's indeterminacy of translation thesis, the details of a theory of meaning (is it truth-conditional or verificationist), Putnam semantic externalism, and his notion of a meaning vector, among others.

²⁹⁷ Putnam 1999, 87ff; Travis 1989.

²⁹⁸ Putnam 1999, 87.

supposed to be true or false, or if anything *is* being said that is true or false) when a sentence is used to make an assertion.²⁹⁹

Putnam gives several examples. The first is that he says he knows “the meaning of the words *there, coffee, a lot, is, on, the, and table.*”³⁰⁰ However, that knowledge alone does not give, “There is a lot of coffee on the table,” determinate content. In order for the content to be determinate and for the statement to have a truth value, it needs to be embedded in a particular context. Different contexts of speaking could determine the content to be, e.g., that there are many cups of coffee on a particular table, that a number of bags of coffee are on the table, or that coffee has been spilled on the table, etc.³⁰¹

According to Putnam (following Travis), classical, i.e., Gricean, semantics does not deny that context is sometimes, in special circumstances, needed to determine content. However, in contrast to classical semantics, Putnam maintains that context sensitivity is the norm instead of the exception.³⁰² In “What Philosophers Think,” he is quoted as saying:

It goes back to the whole idea of a sense-datum language and all that. I think we need to rethink what meaning is. I think we expect from logical positivism that the meaning of sentences should exhibit very little context sensitivity. Words like “I” and

²⁹⁹ Putnam 1999, 87.

³⁰⁰ Putnam 1999, 87.

³⁰¹ Putnam 1999, 88. Against this kind of context dependence, we might note that despite a given context, a speaker can mean something entirely different than what the context might lead a listener to believe. For example, in the context of bags of coffee on the table, one could (dishonestly) mean by “There is a lot of coffee on the table” that there are many cups of coffee on the table.

³⁰² It’s important to note that conceptual relativity does not stand or fall by this claim. Putnam could be wrong about the ubiquity of context sensitivity without its meaning that conceptual relativity is wrong or unintelligible. However, appealing to context sensitivity—seeing how it leads into the distinction between meaning and sense introduced below— is, I think, how Putnam wants us to make sense of what is at work in the examples of conceptual relativity.

“this” and the present tense introduce a certain element of context sensitivity, but that’s all.

Now a number of philosophers, like Travis and myself, and Wittgenstein and Austin well before us, would argue that sentences do not normally have context-independent truth conditions. It’s the meaning of the sentence or the words plus the context that fixes the truth conditions. We need to rethink what meaning is. That’s something I really called for in “The Meaning of Meaning [sic]”, by the way, where I argue that we need to rethink what a normal form for a dictionary entry for a word should ideally look like.³⁰³

The second example he gives concerns an ornamental tree in his garden with bronze leaves. Say someone paints the leaves green. According to Putnam, regarding that tree, the statement, “The tree has green leaves,” is also context sensitive: “Depending upon who says it and to whom and why, the sentence *The tree has green leaves*, said with my tree in mind, may be true, false, or not clearly either!”³⁰⁴

Of these two examples, Putnam writes:

My “coffee” and “green” examples illustrate how common nouns and adjectives may have very different reference in different contexts *compatibly* with what they “mean.” To determine what is being said by “There is a lot of coffee on the table” or “The tree has green leaves now” in a particular context one needs to know the “meaning of the words,” the implicit constraints on what can and cannot be said using those words, and to use good judgment to figure out what is being said in the given context....³⁰⁵

Whether or not Putnam is right about the nature and ubiquity of context sensitivity, he elsewhere discusses the same notion in a way that makes the connection to conceptual relativity even easier to make. In a reply to James Conant, he writes:

³⁰³ Putnam 2003, 232. And a related kind of context sensitivity was at work in “The Meaning of ‘Meaning’,” namely, the contextual role of the environment and linguistic community in determining the reference of terms.

³⁰⁴ Putnam 1999, 88.

³⁰⁵ Putnam 1999, 88-89.

...unlike most philosophers, I do not use “sense” and “meaning” as synonyms....

What I argue...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 [sic] 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.³⁰⁶

Thus, Putnam seems to make a distinction between linguistic meaning, sense, and reference. However, saying that they are truly distinct would probably be inaccurate, since 1) under Putnam’s externalism the physical and social environments help to determine meaning; 2) under his context semantics, linguistic meaning constrains sense (the sense of “There is a lot of coffee on the table” is not determined solely by context; rather, it is the context in combination with Putnam’s, and others’, knowledge of the linguistic meaning of the words in that sentence that determine its sense).

It is his notion of “sense” that comes out in the discussion of context semantics that we can use to understand what I am calling “use in a particular context.” The idea is that the linguistic meaning of “object” and “exist” leave open different possible senses. While Putnam argues that context sensitivity is the norm, as he did with “coffee” and “green,” the examples of conceptual relativity are similar, yet importantly different. I now want to look at how “object” and “exist” are different from “coffee” and “green.”

³⁰⁶ Putnam 1992d, 374-375.

The reader is by now familiar with Putnam's favorite example of conceptual relativity involving the Carnapian and Polish Logician. In the example, the Polish Logician and the Carnapian disagree about the number of objects in a bag with three marbles. The Polish Logician says, "There are seven objects." In this context, the linguistic meaning, the ordinary meaning of "object," does not fully determine the content of "There are seven objects." Whether that statement is true will depend on how "object" is being used in this particular context; it will depend on the sense given to "object." And one can either talk like the Carnapian or like the Polish Logician. But Putnam expects that one might object along the lines that there is the question of in what sense the Polish Logician is *right* to count three marbles as seven objects. Putnam responds by saying that *the* correct way of using, of giving a sense to, "object" is not determined by the linguistic meaning of "object." The linguistic meaning leaves it open as to how we use "object" in different contexts. While he says that we can count as the Polish Logician "in some context and for some appropriate reason"³⁰⁷, "the question whether mereological sums 'really exist' is a silly question. It is *literally* a matter of convention whether we decide to say they exist."³⁰⁸

In what sense is it "literally a matter of convention" that we can say mereological sums exist or are objects? While Putnam acknowledges that Quine "destroyed the idea that the laws of logic are, one and all, true by convention"³⁰⁹, Putnam does think that there is a legitimate way of understanding conventional truth. Following David Lewis's

³⁰⁷ Putnam 2004b, 243.

³⁰⁸ Putnam 2004a, 43.

³⁰⁹ Putnam 2004a, 44.

early work on convention, Putnam says that we can legitimately think of a convention as “a solution to a certain kind of coordination problem.”³¹⁰ As Putnam explains in an earlier paper, the heart of the conventional is a kind of arbitrariness, but one that is constrained by the non-arbitrary. So, while it is not at all arbitrary given the goals of transportation and preserving life that cars should drive on the same side of the road, what is arbitrary, what is conventional, is which side of the road the cars drive on.³¹¹ Similarly, we are faced with a kind of coordination problem when given the question “How many objects are there in the bag” and by extension “How many objects are there in the world?”³¹² “How many objects are there in the bag” does not have determinate content until we specify what sense of object we are using. And this is where the convention comes in, for according to Putnam we can extend “object” in a number of different ways. If we choose to speak like the Polish Logician and say “There are seven objects,” then we are adopting as a conventional truth, “Mereological sums are objects.” If we choose to speak like the Carnapian and say “There are three objects,” then we are adopting as conventional truth, “Mereological sums are not objects.” These kinds of conventional truths are not, according to Putnam, statements of fact.³¹³ They are explicit formulations of the sense being given to “object.” And it is these different ways of using

³¹⁰ Putnam 2004a, 44. Putnam’s emphasis.

³¹¹ Putnam 1983, 174-175. Lewis’s discussion of the conventional is obviously much more detailed than this. However, this is the general idea that Putnam appeals to in order to explain conceptual relativity.

³¹² The philosophical issue isn’t, of course, how many objects are there in the world, but whether it makes sense to speak of a world that consists of a totality of objects with properties and that are related to one another in their many ways.

³¹³ Putnam 1994b, 247.

“object” that constitute the conceptual schemes, or what are better called “optional languages,” that are involved in conceptual relativity.

With the above in mind, we can more fully understand what Putnam means when he writes:

Conceptual relativity...holds that the question as to which of these ways of using “exist” (and “individual,” “object,” etc.) is *right* is one that the meanings of the words in the natural language, that is, the language that we all speak and cannot avoid speaking every day, simply leaves open. Both the set theory that developed in the nineteenth (and early twentieth) century and the mereology that Lezniewski invented are what I will call *optional languages* (a term suggested by Jennifer Case), in the sense that one may count as a master of the (English or German or Polish...) language without learning these particular sublanguages. The optional language of set theory and the optional language of mereology represent possible *extensions* of our ordinary ways of speaking.³¹⁴

But, as we have seen, whether mereological sums “really” exist, is a question that Putnam rejects. In the optional language of mereology, “Mereological sums are objects,” is a non-factual, conventional truth. But given that optional language, given that sense of “object,” in the context of three marbles in a bag, “There are seven objects” is a factual statement. Similarly, using the Carnapian’s optional language, “There are three objects” is a factual statement.

Unlike “coffee” and “green,” the context sensitivity and openness of the linguistic meaning of “object” can result in different optional languages. According to Putnam, there are two other main differences between the example of coffee on the table and the example of the number of objects when there are three marbles. First, there is the cognitive equivalence of the Polish Logician’s and the Carnapian’s statements (or optional languages). Second, there is the distinction between translation practice and

³¹⁴ Putnam 2004a, 43.

relative interpretation; relative interpretation applies to the cases of conceptual relativity but not the coffee and green leaves examples.

*Cognitive Equivalence of Whole Theories*³¹⁵

Putnam begins an earlier essay, one to which he has continued to approvingly refer readers, as follows:

the notion of equivalence that is philosophically important today is not the notion of logical or mathematical equivalence, but rather the notion of *cognitive equivalence of whole theories*, and, in particular, of theoretical systems which are, taken literally, incompatible. It is to this topic – the cognitive equivalence of theories and conceptual systems, especially systems which are incompatible when taken at face value – that the present article is devoted.³¹⁶

Putnam begins by considering Reichenbach's attempts to produce a notion of equivalence. Reichenbach's notion of equivalence was based on a modified version of a verificationist theory of meaning—the modifications having to do with Reichenbach's stressing that verification is a matter of degree and probability. We do not need to look at it in detail here, but Putnam ultimately rejects Reichenbach's attempt at a notion of equivalence on Quinean grounds, namely, problems with the idea of *isolated* statements being confirmed or disconfirmed.

Interestingly, much of the impetus for working on a notion of equivalence that will account for the apparent truth of incompatible statements or theories comes from the observations that help confirm the special theory of relativity. We will take a closer look

³¹⁵ In reading the following, it is enlightening to keep in mind that Putnam writes that he first defined the phenomenon of conceptual relativity “under the name ‘cognitive equivalence’” (Putnam 2001, 436).

³¹⁶ Putnam 1983, 26.

at the exact nature of the problem presented by special relativity in order to see how

Putnam's notion of equivalence develops out of it. Putnam writes:

Let A and B be two inertial systems. It is the very notion of an inertial system that an inertial system does not rotate or experience accelerations of any kind; so A and B must either be at rest relative to one another or else moving with a constant relative velocity. Choose A as the rest system. Then B will be described as moving with a constant velocity v (assume now that $v \neq 0$, i.e., A and B are not at rest relative to one another). Choose B as the rest system. Then A will be described as moving with a constant velocity $-v$. This much is familiar from classical physics and classical philosophical discussions of the relativity of motion.³¹⁷

In classical physics, if we were to transform a mathematical description of two events taking A as the rest system into a mathematical description that takes B as the rest system, then we could do so in a way that keeps the events in A simultaneous whether described relative to A or to B . However, this method of transformation does not actually fit the data. The change of perspectives from system A to system B does not *necessarily* allow one to keep the events simultaneous. (Part of it depends on how closely the speed of one system approaches the speed of light relative to the other system.) According to the special theory of relativity, we must perform the mathematical transformation using what is called a "Lorentz transformation." We needn't worry about the details of a Lorentz transformation. The point is that we end up with the following:

Let description (A) be a description of the world in the coordinate system of A . (Imagine A is the earth, if we neglect the acceleration of the earth at a given time.) Let description (B) be the description that we obtain by transforming all the statements in description (A) according to the Lorentz transformation corresponding to the choice of B as the new rest system. (Imagine B is a rocket ship moving at one-quarter the speed of light relative to A .) Then, from the point of view of the observers in the rocket ship B , description (B) is a *true* description of the world. Yet, how can this be?

³¹⁷ Putnam 1983, 33.

Description (A) says two events X and Y (say, an explosion on the moon and an explosion on Mars) happened simultaneously and description (B) says X happened *before* Y . How can two such flatly contradictory accounts *both* be true?³¹⁸

Putnam describes Reichenbach's attempt to answer this last question. Again we won't go into the details, but a basic description of the attempt will prove helpful in the long run. Reichenbach, and others, took the observation language used to report events in each frame to be neutral in the sense of if true in one frame, then true in all frames. So, for example, "The observer saw the light flash when his clock read 12" is neutral, i.e., taken to be true in all frames. Thus:

Having a neutral language available, they then tried to show that such terms as 'simultaneous', 'distance', and 'temporal separation' really receive *different definitions* in the different frames, i.e., *different definitions in the neutral language of observation*. Since 'simultaneous', for example, doesn't have the same *definition* (relative to the neutral language) in description (A) that it does in description (B), the incompatibility between the sentences 'X and Y happened simultaneously' and 'X and Y did not happen simultaneously' is only a *real* incompatibility when these sentences are uttered by an observer in the same frame; if one sentence occurs in description (A) while the other occurs in description (B), on the other hand, then the incompatibility is only apparent. Description (A) and description (B) are equivalent, then, in the sense of being *notational variants* of each other.³¹⁹

Putnam rejects this attempt at a notion of equivalence, again on Quinean grounds, this time because of the problem of taking a statement, particularly a scientific one, to be definitional, i.e., analytic, in an absolute sense. His basic point is that there were ultimately no grounds to pick the statements that Reichenbach called definitional over the ones he called synthetic. That is, the statements that were ruled synthetic could have

³¹⁸ Putnam 1983, 34.

³¹⁹ Putnam 1983, 35.

been ruled analytic. The so-called analytic statements used to ground the notion of equivalence as notional variation did not really have the privileged status required for that notion of equivalence “*in the actual methodology of science.*”³²⁰

Wanting to offer a conception of equivalence that does not rely on the idea that some statements are the definitions, i.e., analytic, Putnam argues for an equivalence combining a formal and an informal requirement. The formal requirement involves the logical notion of *relative interpretation* of one theory in another. Take theories T_1 and T_2 : T_1 is relatively interpretable in T_2 if the terms of T_1 can be formally defined in the language of T_2 , whereby the sentences of T_1 can be “translated”³²¹ into those of T_2 with the result that the theorems of T_1 become those of T_2 . T_1 and T_2 are “*mutually relatively interpretable* if each is relatively interpretable in the other....”³²² Since the logical notion of relative interpretation is a formal notion it does not take into account the meanings of a theory’s terms. This is where the informal requirement for equivalence comes in.

For the informal requirement, Putnam proposes *explanation*. The idea is that the “translation” of one theory into another “preserves the relation of *explanation*, and that *the same phenomena are explained by both....*”³²³ Elsewhere, Putnam has explained this notion of equivalence by saying that in regard to, for example, the Carnapian’s and Polish Logician’s optional languages:

it makes no difference to our predictions or actions which of these schemes we use. Nor are these schemes equivalent only in the weak sense of what is sometimes called “empirical equivalence”,

³²⁰ Putnam 1983, 38. Emphasis in the original.

³²¹ We will see just below why “translation” is in scare quotes.

³²² Putnam 1983, 39.

³²³ Putnam 1983, 39.

but...each sentence in one of them can be correlated in an effective way with a “translation” in the other scheme, and the sentence and its translation will have the same truth value and the same explanatory power.³²⁴

So the key aspects of equivalence are a) the same phenomena are treated by both theories, b) neither theory produces a difference in prediction, c) each theory explains the phenomena equally well, and d) the “translation” from one theory into another preserves sameness of truth value. We now turn to a discussion of relative interpretation in comparison to translation.

Relative Interpretation versus Translation

Above we encountered the logical notion of relative interpretation, which is disconnected from meaning (and meaning as use). A different but related kind of relative interpretation applies to Putnam’s examples of conceptual relativity; in fact, this is what was meant above by “translation” in scare quotes in the above explanation of equivalence. Thus, connected to his notion of theory equivalence and his distinction between meaning and sense, or linguistic meaning and use in a particular context, there is relative interpretation as the means of “translating” the Polish Logician’s “There are seven objects” into the Carnapian’s “There are three objects.” Relative interpretation differs from translation primarily because it does not provide for synonymy since the difference in the two sentences is one of use and not meaning. Case summarizes the distinction between translation and relative interpretation using a sentence in Czech thus:

We would ordinarily say that the sentences ‘Existuje sedm objektu’ and ‘There are seven objects’ have the same meaning. Sameness of meaning is a creature of ordinary translation practice, which is translation across *natural* languages without translation across *optional* languages. With or without translation across

³²⁴ Putnam 1991, 405.

natural languages, translation across optional languages is not ordinary translation practice. As Putnam mentions in a passage I quoted earlier, the technical name for such translation is ‘relative interpretation’—the original sentence and its relative interpretation are *equivalent* without being synonymous, and the two associated conceptual schemes are also equivalent. Relative interpretation yields equivalence without sameness of meaning. Whereas synonymy is a creature of ordinary translation practice, the phenomenon of conceptual relativity is a creature of relative interpretation.³²⁵

So the idea is that since both the Carnapian’s and Polish Logician’s optional languages concern the “same” states of affairs, and since they are cognitively equivalent, we can correlate the sentences from one with the sentences in the other.

Here is an example of relative interpretation. In another version of the mereological sums example, Putnam once again has us imagine that there are three individuals x_1, x_2, x_3 . Again with the Carnapian and Polish Logician, the question is now in regard to the existence of a multicolored object when x_1 is red and x_2 is black. In regard to x_1, x_2, x_3 , Putnam asks us to consider the following two sentences:

- (1) There is an object which is partly red and partly black.
- (2) There is an object which is red and an object which is black.³²⁶

Given that x_1 is red and x_2 is black, (2) is true in both the Carnapian and Polish Logician’s versions. But what about the truth value of (1)? According to Putnam, we can choose either to make (1) true or to make it false depending on which optional language we adopt. Part of the explanation for why this is possible is that we can give a relative interpretation of the Polish Logician’s language into the Carnapian’s or vice versa. According to Putnam, such a scheme would allow us to say that “(1) turns out to

³²⁵ Case 1997, 12-13.

³²⁶ Putnam 1990, 98.

say no more and no less than (2).³²⁷ Putnam explains a way of interpreting the one into the other; he writes:

To verify this, assuming that “red” and “black” are predicates of Carnap’s language, observe that the only way a Polish logician’s object—a mereological sum—can be partly red is by containing a red atom, and the only way it can be partly black is by containing a black atom. So if (1) is true in the Polish logician’s language, then there is at least one red atom and at least one black atom—which is what (2) says in Carnap’s language. Conversely, if there is at least one black atom and at least one red atom, then their mereological sum is an “object” [in the Polish logician’s sense] which is partly red and partly black.³²⁸

So presumably, then, continuing with the above example, if the Polish Logician said as the black individual and the red individual are moved away from one another, “The partly colored object’s parts are moving away from one another,” we could then offer a relative interpretation, not a translation, of that into the Carnapian’s optional language: “The red object and the black object are moving away from one another.”

Earlier we noted that the optional languages are, in a sense, constituted by giving a new sense to the linguistic meaning of, for example, “object.” In such a case, the statement “Mereological sums are objects” would be a conventional truth in the Polish Logician’s optional language, as would “Mereological sums are not objects” in the Carnapian’s optional language. One might wonder whether these conventional truths themselves can be correlated with one another via relative interpretation. Putnam’s answer is that they can, though we normally would not; rather, it is the “less”

³²⁷ Putnam 1990, 100.

³²⁸ Putnam 1990, 100.

conventional truths such as the Carnapian's "There are three objects" and the Polish Logician's "There are seven objects" that we would give relative interpretations.³²⁹

Before leaving this section of the chapter, I want at least to note that there are important differences between the example of whether two events are simultaneous and the mereological sums example of conceptual relativity. The different frames of reference in the case of simultaneous/non-simultaneous explosions are physical frames of reference, i.e., the rocket ship and the earth. In the mereological sums example, the different frames of reference are the different conceptual schemes, i.e., the Polish Logician's and the Carnapian's; they are not literally different physical locations. While Putnam says we can offer a kind of relative interpretation (via Lorentz transformations) of events as observed from one inertial frame of reference into another, it doesn't seem that "simultaneous" has either a different meaning or a different sense in the different frames of reference.³³⁰ Rather, the reason there are different reports regarding whether the explosions are simultaneous is due to the fact that the physical frames of reference differ in regard to their speeds relative to one another. In contrast, the mereological sums example is supposed to involve different senses of "object" and "exist." So, while the example from physics helps to get across Putnam's notions of cognitive equivalence and relative interpretation, we should at least wonder whether such examples are relevantly analogous to his other examples of conceptual relativity (ones we will look at in chapter 4).

³²⁹ Putnam 1992a, 118. Putnam calls these statements "less conventional" presumably because he thinks there is no such thing as a purely factual statement. We have already seen his views on the analytic-synthetic distinction, and I discuss his views on the related continuum between fact and convention in section PM5 of this chapter.

³³⁰ However, my knowledge of physics is limited, so I may be missing something.

PM3 What are the Criteria of Identity for Schemes?

We have seen that for Putnam differences in scheme do not require a failure of translation, and that in fact different schemes can produce what he calls cognitively equivalent statements—true statements that are relatively interpretable into each other and which do not differ in predictive and explanatory force. Further, Putnam’s optional languages model of conceptual schemes allows that a person speaking one natural language, e.g., English, can operate with a number of different conceptual schemes. Thus, one could at one time count objects as the Carnapian does and at another time count objects as the Polish Logician does, all the while speaking English. But if a difference in scheme does not require a difference in language, then what does it require?

We have in essence already seen the identity conditions for schemes. Case writes, “I am now convinced that what Putnam refers to as ‘conceptual schemes’ are not really schemes of distinct concepts but, rather, linguistic schemes distinguished primarily by their divergent ways of extending shared concepts.”³³¹ This would mean that identity of a scheme is a matter of extending a concept, or set of concepts, in the same direction—using a concept in the same way. Two instances of language use belong to the Carnapian optional language insofar as they both extend the concept “object,” for example, in the same way, i.e., the Carnapian way.

We might have a number of worries about this criterion of identity. First, we might worry about the exactness of the notion of “sameness of use.” However, given Putnam’s comfort with fuzziness and open-endedness, I do not think this would be a problem for him. It seems that there is a clear difference of use between the Carnapian’s

³³¹ Case 2001, 420. Footnote 15.

extension of “object” and the Polish Logician’s extension of “object.” For the distinction between the schemes to be real, we need not think that *every imaginable case* of the use of “object” will be clearly identifiable as belonging to one scheme or another.

Second, we might wonder about which concepts and their extensions are definitive of a scheme. That is, if we are speaking of the Carnapian optional language, is it only the concept of *object* and its use/sense by itself that are definitive or is it the concepts of *object*, *exist*, and *individual* and their uses that are definitive or is it those concepts plus still others? In his examples of conceptual relativity, Putnam most often appeals to the concepts of *object* and *exist*, saying that:

they do not have a single absolutely precise use but a whole family of uses. These uses are not totally different; for example, in all of its uses the existential quantifier obeys the same logical laws, the law, for instance, that if we say that all things have a certain property, then we can infer that there is something which has that property....³³²

Not only is there overlap in the uses of the individual concepts “object” and “exist,” but further, part of the point of his discussion of “object” is that there is a “conceptual link” between “object” and “exist.”³³³ This will be discussed more later, but the general idea is that as the concept of an object is open-ended, so is the concept of *existence*—different senses of object yield different “kinds” of existence: existence is non-univocal.³³⁴

It is also easy to imagine that the extended uses/sense of “object” and “exist” in different directions would “infect” other words. However, since the examples of conceptual relativity that Putnam focuses on most directly involve the concepts of *object*

³³² Putnam 2004a, 37. Emphasis in the original.

³³³ He says this, e.g., in Putnam 1992d, 367.

³³⁴ This will be spelled out in more detail in chapter 4.

and *exist*, among a few others, e.g., “entity,” they are the ones that are important or definitive of the optional languages in question. Again, I doubt that Putnam is going to insist upon strict boundary conditions for optional languages.

Third, we might wonder about the vast majority of people who count objects (things) everyday but who are ignorant of set theory and mereology, i.e., who do not seem to be operating with either the Carnapian or Polish Logician optional languages. In what sense do such people operate with conceptual schemes? In response to this worry, we may note something Putnam says in response to misunderstandings of his views on conceptual relativity. As we saw earlier, by “conceptual scheme” he does not mean “any body of thought and talk at all, including our ordinary talk of table and chairs” and “by ‘conceptual relativity’ [he does not mean] a doctrine which implies that every conceptual scheme in *this* sense, *every* body of thought and talk, has an alternative which is incompatible with it (sometimes my critics miss the qualifier—‘at face value’) but equally true.”³³⁵ Thus Putnam seems to acknowledge a sense of “conceptual scheme” that is any “body of thought and talk.” It is just that he is not so interested in *those* kinds of conceptual schemes, since they do not provide for instances of conceptual relativity.³³⁶

Fourth, in regard to those same people who do not operate with any optional languages, but who seem to count in a way that is rather akin to the Carnapian optional language, should we say that they are implicitly operating with the Carnapian optional language? On Putnam’s behalf we might respond to this by saying that the ordinary language concept of *object* is not precise in the way that the Carnapian use of “object” is.

³³⁵ Putnam 2001, 431.

³³⁶ But Putnam is, of course, interested in the notion of a conceptual scheme in the sense of language as a whole insofar as he is interested in philosophizing about language, truth, and reality.

The identity conditions or what counts as an object or thing in ordinary discourse is open in a way that the Carnapian use of “object” is not. So, while there may be the appearance of overlap between our ordinary use of “object” and the Carnapian use of “object,” if we were to look at more cases, we would see that they really diverge. For example, what counts as an individual and thus an object for the Carnapian may not count as an object for the ordinary speaker, though of course it depends on the context. And it is precisely the malleability of concepts like “object,” “individual,” and “exist,” which can be extended in ways that do not distort their “original” meaning, that allow for the optional languages.

PM4 Concerning the Scheme-Content Distinction,

Does the Scheme Organize or Fit the Content?

For Putnam, this question requires a response that ultimately rejects the question.

To see in what way Putnam rejects this question, let us begin by looking at a quote from

Case:

Davidson argues that if there are multiple conceptual schemes, then there are uninterpretable languages. He goes on to argue that there can be no uninterpretable languages and, consequently, that it is not the case that there can be multiple, or even any, conceptual schemes. To maintain in spite of this outcome that the idea of a conceptual scheme makes sense is, according to Davidson, to buy into what he calls “the third dogma of empiricism.” In rejecting the third dogma of empiricism Davidson rejects the cookie cutter metaphor. He writes, “I want to urge that this second dualism [the first being the dualism of the analytic and the synthetic] of scheme and content, of organizing system and something waiting to be organized cannot be made intelligible and defensible. It is itself a dogma of empiricism, the third dogma.” *Davidson and Putnam both reject the scheme-content dualism.* But Davidson, in rejecting it, throws out the very idea of a conceptual scheme. Davidson uses a theory of interpretation to argue, I think convincingly, that we do not need and cannot use the scheme-content dualism in order to make sense of the notions of language and sameness of meaning

across languages. If his theory of interpretation were richer, encompassing not only ordinary translation practice but also relative interpretation, he might have realized that we do not need and cannot use the scheme-content dualism in order to make sense of the idea of a conceptual scheme, either. Putnam amends and extends Davidson's conclusions by introducing richer and more realistic conceptions of language and interpretation, thereby avoiding throwing out the baby with the bathwater.³³⁷

Regarding conceptual relativity, what is important for Putnam is the idea that we can make sense of the notion of a conceptual scheme without having to appeal to the distinction between scheme and content—the distinction between language as organizer and world/experience waiting to be organized or “cut up.” Let us look further at the way in which Putnam rejects the scheme-content distinction.

Putnam writes:

The doctrine of conceptual relativity, in brief, is that while there is an aspect of conventionality and an aspect of fact in everything we say that is true, we fall into hopeless philosophical error if we commit a “fallacy of division” and conclude that there must be a part of the truth that is the “conventional part” and a part that is the “factual part.” A corollary of my conceptual relativity—and a controversial one—is the doctrine that two statements which are incompatible at face value can sometimes both be true (and the incompatibility cannot be explained away by saying that the statements have “a different meaning” in the scheme to which they respectively belong).³³⁸

Two things in this passage are of importance here. First, the claim that fact and convention are not separable in a way that would allow us to specify what exactly is convention and what exactly is fact, and second, the claim that the doctrine of conceptual relativity consists of the first claim. For the sake of clarity, it is vital at this point to take note of a correction Putnam makes in regard to the above quoted passage.

³³⁷ Case 1997, 13. Emphasis mine.

³³⁸ Putnam 1990, Preface x.

In his “Reply to Jennifer Case,” Putnam acknowledges that he had at an earlier time run together two distinct though interconnected ideas. In the above quote from the Preface of *Realism with a Human Face*, Putnam uses “conceptual relativity” to name both the interpenetration of fact and convention and the phenomenon that the “same” state of affairs can be described in seemingly incompatible but true ways. The problem, according to Putnam, is that just as conceptual relativity is an instance of conceptual pluralism while not every instance of conceptual pluralism is an instance of conceptual relativity, so too, conceptual relativity is an instance of the interpenetration of fact and convention while not every instance of the interpenetration of fact and convention is an instance of conceptual relativity.³³⁹ That is, while the “fact” that some states of affairs allow for seemingly incompatible descriptions is supposed to imply the interpenetration of fact and convention, Putnam gives other reasons for the interpenetration of fact and convention, ones that do not depend on conceptual relativity.³⁴⁰ However, as we will see in what follows, while there is a distinction to be made between conceptual relativity and the interpenetration of fact and convention, the two are intimately connected and a discussion of them naturally goes together.

Conceptual Relativity and the Interpenetration of

Fact and Convention

Let us begin by looking briefly at what it might mean for fact and convention to be separate or non-interpenetrating. As we have seen, Putnam characterizes the conventional, following Lewis, as the arbitrary. Yield signs are triangular but they could

³³⁹ Putnam 2001a, 436-437.

³⁴⁰ See, for example, “Convention: A Theme in Philosophy” in Putnam 1983, 170-183. I will go over some of these examples below.

just as well be square as long as they are distinguishable from other road signs. Similarly, the phonemes and written signs of a language are, discounting their history, arbitrary. On the other hand, it is at least initially plausible to think that a dog's being a dog is not a matter of convention—it is not arbitrary but rather a matter of fact completely independent of convention. Neither is it conventional, one might say, that there is a blue ball and a red ball that are a certain distance apart.

Now, on this picture, we can use something conventional, namely, language, to talk about what is, non-conventional or fact.³⁴¹ But the conventional is one thing and the fact is another. Thus we end up with something like the scheme-content (or scheme-world/experience) distinction that troubles not only Davidson but Putnam as well. And, of course, Quine was troubled by this picture of language as conventional in contrast to a non-conventional, factual world.

Against such a picture of a sharply separable fact and convention, we find Putnam writing such passages as the following (please note that in this passage Putnam does not make the distinction made above between conceptual relativity and the interpenetration of fact and convention):

It is known since *Principia Mathematica* at least that we can identify points with sets of convergent spheres and all geometric facts will be correctly represented. We know that we can also take points as primitive and identify spheres with sets of points. So any answer to this question [“Is a point identical with a series of spheres that converges to it?”] is, once again, conventional, in the sense that one is free to do either. But what Quine pointed out (as applied to this case) is that when I say, “We can do either,” I am assuming a diffuse background of empirical facts. Fundamental

³⁴¹ This need not mean, of course, that on this picture no facts are what they are because of convention, e.g., the conventions are trivially facts that are the facts they are because of the conventions they are, and money facts could reasonably be seen as the facts they are because of conventions. Here I am distinguishing between convention dependence and the kind of representation dependence discussed in chapter 2.

changes in the way we do physical geometry could alter the whole picture. The fact that a truth is toward the “conventional” end of the convention-fact continuum does not mean that it is *absolutely* conventional—a truth by stipulation, free of every element of fact. [...] What is factual and what is conventional is a matter of degree. We cannot say, “These and those elements of the world are the raw facts, the rest is the result of convention.”³⁴²

In what sense can't we say which elements of the world are the raw fact and the rest the result of convention? Putnam admits that saying there is a factual component and a conventional component, even when claiming that they cannot be clearly separated, “lands us in the soup.”³⁴³ This gives the impression, despite all claims to the contrary, that we should “in principle” be able to separate out the different components. In light of this, Putnam thinks a better way to put the point would be to say that “our knowledge, or any piece of it, is conventional relative to certain alternatives and factual relative to certain others.”³⁴⁴ I want now to go over three main ways in Putnam's writings that fact and convention can be claimed to interpenetrate.³⁴⁵

1) First, an example of conceptual pluralism that Putnam offers is that we can describe something as an electrical field or as “particles interacting by exchanging other particles.”³⁴⁶ It is a matter of convention which description we use, but it is a matter of fact whether there is an electrical field in that space-time region or not. Similarly, we can

³⁴² Putnam 1988, 112-113.

³⁴³ Putnam 1983, 178.

³⁴⁴ Putnam 1983, 178. I will explain what I take this to mean in the next paragraph.

³⁴⁵ I do not intend these three ways to be exhaustive of Putnam's views on the interpenetration of fact and convention.

³⁴⁶ Putnam 1983, 178.

describe the contents of a room using the language of medium sized dry goods, or we can describe it in terms of particles and fields. Whichever we do is a matter of convention, but it is a matter of fact what there actually is in the room. The convention, the description, cannot conjure an easy chair or a desk. This is one of the main ways that Putnam thinks our descriptions or knowledge claims are simultaneously conventional relative to one group of alternatives and factual relative to others.

We might wonder just how arbitrary such choices of description actually are. For the majority of people, describing a room in terms of particles and field distributions is not going to be a real option; and surely a “choice” of description is going to be determined, in part, by the purpose of giving it: is it an electrician or a physicist who is speaking? However, there is no reason to think that Putnam would not, or at least could not, agree with these last two points. But if he were to agree, then that would qualify the sense in which he thinks convention is the “solution to a coordination problem,” as Putnam explains the notion of convention by example of deciding which side of the road cars will drive on.³⁴⁷ For that kind of convention is much less constrained than that of speaking in terms of particles and fields as opposed to tables and chairs.

While it might be clearer now in what sense our descriptions are factual in relation to certain alternatives—we cannot just choose to say that there is a table where there is no table—and conventional in relation to other alternatives—we can say there is a table or we can say that there is a particular arrangement of particles and fields—we might still question in what sense the above examples of conceptual pluralism demonstrate that the conventional and the factual are a matter of degree and that they

³⁴⁷ Putnam 1983, 175.

cannot be clearly separated out. For it seems that in the above examples that we have a choice of which concepts we are going to use, “tables” or “particles and fields,” and once we make a choice, there is a fact of the matter whether there is a table there or not, and if so, what the arrangement of particles and fields is. Here at least there does not seem to be a continuum and there seem to be two distinct components, the conventional choice of concepts and the matter of fact of what is there to be described.

While I think there is something to these worries in relation to conceptual pluralism, a partial reply on Putnam’s behalf might appeal to his discussion of the analytic-synthetic distinction. As we saw there are very few words whose meaning are purely conventional in the way that “bachelor” is; and bachelor itself is true by convention with the caveat that there are no exceptionless laws that apply to bachelors. The meaning of other terms, e.g., “kinetic energy” and “water,” are constituted by beliefs about matters of fact—the concept of *kinetic energy* before and after Einstein’s theories of relativity—and by the actual environment—the fact that water is H₂O. Thus, Putnam could say that it is not as if there are some purely conventional concepts that are applicable in describing a world of facts. However, such a move does not imply that the *facts* are constituted in part by convention.

2) However, Putnam’s notion of conceptual relativity does imply that at least certain facts are conventional.³⁴⁸ This is because, for example, of his denial that there is some conceptual-scheme-independent matter of fact as to the number of objects that constitute the world. As we have seen, Putnam thinks that it is a matter of convention whether to adopt the Carnapian or Polish Logician optional language. The fact of the

³⁴⁸ The qualification is due, as we saw earlier, to Putnam’s explicit claim that not every description has an alternative that is, at face value, incompatible with it. See Putnam 2001a, 432.

matter concerning the number of objects is a result of which convention is adopted—similarly for the other examples of conceptual relativity which will be discussed in chapter 4. Nevertheless, as with the examples of conceptual pluralism, we might also wonder here just how arbitrary it is that we speak like the Carnapian or the Polish Logician. What was said above ought to be said here as well. Putnam does after all say:

If we use PL [the Polish Logician’s optional language], *in some context and for some appropriate reason* [my emphasis], then we should simply say “there is an object which is the mereological sum of my nose and the Eiffel Tower,” or “The mereological sum of my nose and the Eiffel Tower exists.”³⁴⁹

So it seems Putnam does not think that deciding whether to speak like the Carnapian or the Polish Logician is something that should be decided by tossing a coin; speaking like the Polish Logician calls for the appropriate context and reasons.³⁵⁰

Before moving away from conceptual relativity entirely, we might note another way that fact and convention are connected. As Putnam points out in the first block quote of this chapter section, while an answer to such questions as “How many objects are there?” and “Is a point identical with a series of spheres that converges to it?” is a matter of convention, in the sense that we can choose either, there is “a diffuse background of empirical facts” that is assumed. I take it that this means, in the case of counting objects, for example, that it is implicitly assumed that medium sized dry goods do not spontaneously disappear and then reappear, or spontaneously multiply or merge. That we can count as the Carnapian or the Polish Logician is a matter of convention, but

³⁴⁹ Putnam 2004b, 243.

³⁵⁰ This should perhaps leave us wondering what sort of contexts and reasons, outside of making a philosophical point, one might have for saying “The mereological sum of my nose and the Eiffel Tower exists.” While this would be an interesting point to pursue, I want to leave it here; there are larger worries that I will focus on in chapter 5.

it is a matter of fact that the world is such that objects are countable. This would be another way that the conventional end of conceptual relativity is not pure. Since the next two chapters will cover the details of conceptual relativity, I will leave the discussion of how conceptual relativity specifically implies the interpenetration of fact and convention here.

3) Moving away from conceptual relativity to the more general interpenetration of fact and convention, we find in Putnam's writing another sense in which convention is supposed to be constrained by fact, but where the constraints fall along the continuum between fact and convention and the related continuum we saw in the beginning of this chapter between the analytic and synthetic. In a discussion of Goodman's views and his idea that the "worlds" we speak of are made by us, Putnam considers the differences between the terms "Big Dipper," "constellation," and "star." According to Putnam, we did not make the Big Dipper the "Big Dipper" in the way that a builder builds a house, but there is a sense in which we *did* make it the "Big Dipper." We chose to group those particular stars into a constellation that we thought resembled a dipper, "thus, as it were, institutionalizing the fact that that group of stars is metaphorically a big dipper."³⁵¹ But what about the stars of which the constellation consists? Should we say that stars are a natural kind whereas constellations are an artificial kind? Or should we say something similar about stars as what was said about the Big Dipper? To these questions Putnam responds by admitting (claiming) that there is something conventional about the boundaries of natural kinds. Considering stars, he writes:

Stars are clouds of glowing gas, glowing because of thermonuclear reactions which are caused by the gravitational field of the star

³⁵¹ Putnam 1992a, 112.

itself, but not every cloud of glowing gas is considered a star; some such clouds fall into other astronomical categories, and some stars do not glow at all. Is it not *we* who group together all these different objects into a single category “star” with our inclusions and exclusions? It is true that we did not make the stars as a carpenter makes a table, but didn’t we, after all, *make them stars?*³⁵²

Thus, we *might* say that even what we call natural kinds are just the result of our choice of emphasis and, like the Big Dipper, we make them what they are. Now, Putnam agrees that there is something conventional to the boundaries of most natural kinds. However, he does not want to go the way of Goodman and say that we made them stars even with the caveat that we did not make them the way a carpenter makes a table. So what is the difference, according to Putnam, between “Big Dipper” and “star”?

According to Putnam, “Big Dipper” is a typical proper name in the sense that its extension is fixed by linguistic convention: “The term applies to a finite group of stars, and one learns which stars are in the group and how they are arranged when one learns the meaning of the term.”³⁵³ Knowing which stars belong to the Big Dipper is to know what is called the “Big Dipper”; however, Putnam does not want to say that the Big Dipper containing all of those stars is analytic of “Big Dipper” for the reason that if one of them suddenly disappeared from the sky, we would still go on talking about the Big Dipper. We would just say that it no longer consists of the same number of stars as before, as we say of Tom who has lost an arm that he is still Tom. On the other hand it is not entirely clear what we would say if a new star appeared among the stars of the Big Dipper; we might say that it still is the Big Dipper or we might not.

³⁵² Putnam 1992a, 112.

³⁵³ Putnam 1992a, 113.

However, according to Putnam, the term “star,” on the other hand, functions much differently than “Big Dipper”:

In contrast to the term “Big Dipper”, the term “star” has an extension that cannot be fixed by giving a list. And no particular object is in the extension of “star” simply by virtue of being *called* a star; it might be crazy to doubt that Sirius is really a star, but someone who thought that Sirius is really a giant light bulb or a glowing spaceship wouldn’t thereby show an inability to use “star” in the way in which someone who doubted that that constellation is really the Big Dipper would show an inability to use “Big Dipper.”³⁵⁴

The idea is that regardless of what the lights in the sky turn out to be—stars, alien light bulbs, etc.—we would not say that the pattern in the sky is not really the Big Dipper. In contrast, something is not a star just because it is labeled a “star.” If a light in the night sky that we have been calling a star for thousands of years turned out to be an alien light bulb, then it would be an alien light bulb and not a star. Concerning the term “constellation,” Putnam thinks it is unclear what we would say if it turned out that the “stars” of the Big Dipper turned out to be alien light bulbs. We would say, he thinks, that they weren’t stars, that the pattern is still the Big Dipper, but that it is unclear whether that pattern of alien light bulbs is a constellation. Thus Putnam writes that, “in these respects, the term ‘constellation’ lies somewhere in between ‘Big Dipper’ and ‘star’.”³⁵⁵

So, again, convention is constrained by fact. Continuing the line of thought from the last paragraph, Putnam writes:

The upshot is very simple. One perfectly good answer to Goodman’s rhetorical question “Can you tell me something that we didn’t make?” is that we didn’t make Sirius a star. Not only didn’t we make Sirius a star in the sense in which a carpenter

³⁵⁴ Putnam 1992a, 114.

³⁵⁵ Putnam 1992a, 114.

makes a table, *we didn't make it a star*. Our ancestors and our contemporaries (including astrophysicists), in shaping and creating our language, created the concept *star*, with its partly conventional boundaries, and so on. And that concept *applies* to Sirius. The fact that the concept *star* has conventional elements doesn't mean that *we* make it the case that that concept applies to any particular thing, in the way in which we made it the case that the concept "Big Dipper" applies to a particular group of stars. The concept *bachelor* is far more strongly conventional than the concept *star*, and that concept applies to Joseph Ullian, but our linguistic practices didn't make Joe a bachelor. (They did make him "Joe Ullian".) General names like "star" and "bachelor" are very different from proper names like "the Big Dipper" and "Joe Ullian", and Goodman's argument depends upon our not noticing the difference.³⁵⁶

We, through our interaction with the world, came up with the concept "star," but we did not thereby make it the case that the concept applies to Sirius. This corresponds to the difference in degree of conventionality that constitutes the continuum between the concepts "bachelor," "Big Dipper," "constellation," and "star." But even though "bachelor" is much more conventional than "star," according to Putnam, we still do not make it the case that a particular person is or is not a bachelor. Thus Putnam attempts to steer his course between what he sees as metaphysical realism (which he thinks is committed to the idea that there are distinct boundaries between fact and convention) and relativism (which he thinks is committed to the idea that everything is convention).

In closing this section in a way that will nicely lead into the next chapter, let us note the connection between the interpenetration of fact and convention and Putnam's rejection of the cookie-cutter metaphor—the idea that the world is like a dough that we cut up with our concepts.³⁵⁷ Putnam sees an endorsement of the cookie-cutter metaphor

³⁵⁶ Putnam 1992a, 114-115.

³⁵⁷ Case points out the connection in Case 1997, 13.

as a rejection of the interpenetration of fact and convention. Again, Putnam's rejection of the cookie-cutter metaphor ties directly into his understanding of conceptual relativity and the role that conceptual schemes have to play in explaining it:

depending on how we use the notion [of an object], the answer to the question "How many objects are there in the room?" can be "Five," "Seven," "2"³⁵⁸—and there are many more possibilities.

A metaphor which is often employed to explain this is the metaphor of the cookie cutter. The things independent of all conceptual choices are the dough; our conceptual contribution is the shape of the cookie cutter. Unfortunately, this metaphor is of no real assistance in understanding the phenomenon of conceptual relativity. Take it seriously, and you are at once forced to answer the question "What are the various parts of the dough?" If you answer that (in the present case) the "atoms" of the dough are the n elementary particles and the other parts are the mereological sums containing more than one "atom," then you have simply adopted one particular transcendental metaphysical picture: the picture according to which mereological sums "really exist." [...]

The cookie-cutter metaphor *denies* (rather than explains) the phenomenon of conceptual relativity. The internal realist suggestion [Putnam's position as then called] is quite different. The suggestion, applied to this very elementary example, is that what is (by commonsense standards) the same situation can be described in many different ways, depending on how we use the words. The situation does not itself legislate how words like "object," "entity," and "exist" must be used. What is wrong with the notion of objects existing "independently" of conceptual schemes is that there are no standards for the use of even the logical notions apart from conceptual choices. What the cookie-cutter metaphor tries to preserve is the naïve idea that at least one Category—the ancient category of Object or Substance—has an absolute interpretation. The alternative to this idea is not the view that it's all *just* language. We can and should insist that some facts are there to be discovered and not legislated by us. But this is something to be said when one has adopted a way of speaking, a language, a "conceptual scheme." To talk of "facts" without specifying the language to be used is to talk of nothing; the word "fact" no more has its use fixed by the world itself than does the word "exist" or the word "object."³⁵⁸

³⁵⁸ Putnam 1988, 113-14.

So again, we have two things here. First, rejection of the cookie-cutter metaphor is a rejection of the scheme-content dichotomy, a dichotomy of conventional, conceptual scheme and scheme-independent world. Second, in the place of that scheme-content dichotomy we have the interpenetration of fact and convention, which is, I take it, at its most conspicuous in cases of conceptual relativity. In the next chapter we will look at Putnam's purported examples of conceptual relativity in detail.

Concluding Remarks

We have covered a lot of ground in this chapter: the first half having to do with Putnam's views on meaning and the analytic-synthetic distinction generally; the second half having to do with Putnam's views on optional languages, cognitive equivalence, and the interpenetration of fact and convention.

Briefly, to recap the first half, Putnam takes Quine to task for completely rejecting the analytic-synthetic distinction. Part of the problem, according to Putnam, is that Quine identified the analytic with the a priori; by Putnam's lights, Quine was (essentially) right to reject the idea of a statement that is true come what may, but wrong to identify the latter kind of statement as analytic. If we look at the history of science, there are statements that functioned as relative analytic statements, e.g., those of Euclidean geometry and those that were "definitional" of "kinetic energy." And there are also single criterion terms such as "bachelor" and "vixen" that are absolutely analytic—if the one criterion that defines them were to change, then so would their meaning—but which presuppose that there is no exceptionless scientific law that could be used to identify, e.g., bachelors, in such a way that they become law-cluster concepts.

Putnam's semantic externalism, which includes his views on the division of linguistic labor, challenges the assumptions that internal brain states are sufficient to determine the extension of a concept and that sameness of intension guarantees the sameness of extension. One's physical and social environments help to determine the reference of, e.g., natural kind terms like "water" and "gold." Knowing and meaningfully using natural kind terms is not a matter of being in a certain internal/psychological state.

Though Putnam does not intend to give us a theory of meaning in the sense of non-circular, necessary and sufficient conditions for meaning, he does offer a picture of meaning and reference. As we saw in chapter 2, Putnam rejects Quine's ontological relativity by arguing against truth as correspondence and a representational theory of mind. Given this and Putnam's views on the analytic-synthetic distinction, and his semantic externalism, we see that Putnam holds that there is such a thing as knowing the meaning of a word and there is determinate reference between language and world.

However, as we saw in the latter half of the chapter, according to Putnam, the connection between language and world is such that convention and fact interpenetrate. In Putnam's most recent work, conceptual relativity is one of the central ways in which this interpenetration occurs. The possibility of conceptual relativity depends upon what Putnam calls optional languages—"languages" that consist of the extension of natural language concepts such as "object" and "exist." True statements made using these optional languages, and which are about the "same" state of affairs, cannot be conjoined; but they are equivalent in explanatory and predictive force, and can be relatively interpreted into one another. Let us turn in the next chapter to an examination of Putnam's examples of conceptual relativity.

CHAPTER FOUR

**PUTNAM'S EXAMPLES OF CONCEPTUAL RELATIVITY AND THEIR
RELATION TO REALISM**

As a result of feedback from and dialogue with others, Putnam has refined his views on conceptual relativity as he has progressed from his internal realism to his more recent pragmatic pluralism. One of the refinements has been his coming to see a difference between what he now calls conceptual pluralism and conceptual relativity. Putnam realized that some of the examples he was giving for conceptual relativity were more properly examples of conceptual pluralism.

I spelled out the differences between conceptual relativity and conceptual pluralism in chapter 1. Here is a brief summary of those differences so that we may be clear on what the variety of examples of conceptual relativity are meant to show.

Regarding conceptual relativity there is a distinction between the doctrine of conceptual relativity and the phenomenon of conceptual relativity. The *doctrine* of conceptual relativity is the claim that fact and convention interpenetrate one another in such a way that they cannot be cleanly separated into a factual part and a conventional part. The *phenomenon* of conceptual relativity is purportedly illustrated by Putnam's examples where he claims that there can be (seemingly) incompatible but true descriptions of the "same" state of affairs. A recurring example both in Putnam's work and in this dissertation is that of the Carnapian and the Polish Logician counting objects. The phenomenon is, of course related, to the doctrine of conceptual relativity, since the phenomenon of conceptual relativity is an example of one of the ways that Putnam thinks fact and convention interpenetrate.

Conceptual pluralism is illustrated by the idea that we can describe a room as containing tables and chairs or as containing a certain arrangement of particles and fields. The main idea behind conceptual pluralism is that neither description is more fundamental. We are not “required to reduce one or both of them to some single fundamental and universal ontology...”³⁵⁹ In part, Putnam means this to count against the idea that finished science would or could provide us with the one true description of the world. The idea, then, is that conceptual relativity implies conceptual pluralism, but conceptual pluralism does not imply conceptual relativity, since conceptual pluralism need not involve descriptions that are true but non-conjoinable.

Purported Examples of the Phenomenon of Conceptual Relativity

Putnam’s views have of course evolved and developed over the past fifty years or so that he has been doing philosophy. However, as I have repeatedly stressed there are many threads that are continuous, especially from the late 1970s to the present. While his understanding and defense of the phenomenon of conceptual relativity has become ever more subtle, we find examples of the phenomenon as early as “Realism and Reason” (1977), which was also published as a part of *Meaning and the Moral Sciences*. I am going to start there and present his different examples of conceptual relativity more or less chronologically.³⁶⁰ As we will see, even though his understanding of conceptual relativity evolves, he repeatedly appeals to the same examples, particularly the counting

³⁵⁹ Putnam 2001, 437.

³⁶⁰ Putnam repeats the same examples in different places. I will not go over each repetition in full, but I will mark where there are important additions to an example or where Putnam draws different conclusions from the same example.

example with the Polish Logician and the Carnapian. It is important to keep in mind that my purpose in this chapter is to go over Putnam's examples, not to critically evaluate them. I will spend all of chapter 5 evaluating them. Thus, appearance to the contrary, I am not letting Putnam get away with anything here; in fact, if the examples raise any hackles, then that is all the more to my purpose.

In *Meaning and the Moral Sciences*, Putnam asks us to imagine a one-dimensional world consisting of a line segment; a “‘hard-core’ realist” might claim that *either* the line consists of extensionless points *or* there are no points and all the parts of the line have extension, but not both.³⁶¹ There is a fact of the matter independent of what we say or think as to which it is. According to Putnam, what he here calls the “sophisticated realist” would concede that the two different descriptions of a line are equivalent. He goes on to say that earlier he did not think this was a problem for the realist:

In particular, I believed, it can happen that what we picture as ‘incompatible’ terms can be mapped onto the same real object – though not, of course, within the same theory. Thus the real object that is labeled ‘point’ in one theory might be labeled ‘set of convergent line segments’ in another theory. And the *same* term might be mapped onto one real object in one theory and onto a different real object in another theory. It is a property of the world itself, I claimed – i.e. a property of THE WORLD itself – that it ‘admits of these different mappings’.³⁶²

He finds this problematic for reasons given by Goodman. The point that Putnam takes from Goodman is that the above notion of mapping equivalent descriptions onto the same object—THE WORLD—leaves unintelligible the notion of the object itself independent

³⁶¹ Putnam 1978, 130-131.

³⁶² Putnam 1978, 132.

of our descriptions: it would be like the Kantian thing-in-itself. Putnam concludes saying that if we concede that “The line consists of extensionless points” is equivalent to “The line consists only of extended parts,” then even the property of being an object becomes theory-relative. I take it that the latter is supposed to follow because under the first description extensionless points are supposed to be objects, but under the second description there are no extensionless objects.

Putnam goes on to generalize the results from the line example:

All this isn't an artifact of my simple example: actual physical theory is rife with similar examples. One can construe space-time points as objects, for example, or as properties. One can construe fields as objects, or do everything with particles acting at a distance (using retarded potentials). The fact is, *so many* properties of THE WORLD – starting with *just* the *category* ones, such as cardinality, particulars, or universals, etc.- turn out to be ‘theory-relative’ that THE WORLD ends up as a Kantian ‘noumenal’ world, a *mere* ‘thing in itself’. If one cannot say how THE WORLD is theory-independently, then talk of all these theories as descriptions of ‘the world’ is empty.³⁶³

I take it that his saying one can construe space-time points as objects or properties means that he thinks doing either would yield equivalent descriptions. The point then is that you cannot hold onto a realist position, where the world is representation-independent, and concede that there are equivalent descriptions as in the example of the line and its parts, etc. It is, of course, far from clear whether, first, the realist cannot consistently concede that there are such equivalent descriptions, or second, whether one should concede that there are equivalent descriptions in the sense that Putnam depends upon. But I am saving my criticisms for the next chapter.

³⁶³ Putnam 1978, 133.

As we have seen, Putnam's views on cognitive equivalence are inspired by his knowledge of science, e.g., his understanding of Einstein's theories of relativity. Further, as should be clear, cognitive equivalence is an integral part of Putnam's understanding of the phenomenon of conceptual relativity, since he sees such phenomena as admitting of cognitively equivalent descriptions, descriptions that are internal to different theories or conceptual schemes. In "Convention: A Theme in Philosophy," Putnam in many ways continues the line of thought we found in "Realism and Reason," particularly in regard to the notion of an invariant world that is described in different but equivalent ways. He quotes Goodman before specifying where he agrees and disagrees:

Goodman (1978), writing on convention and content remarks,

In practice, of course, we draw the line wherever we like, and change it as often as suits our purposes. On the level of theory, we flit back and forth between extremes as blithely as a physicist between particle and field theories. When the verbiage view threatens to dissolve everything into nothing, we insist that all true versions describe worlds. When the right-to-life sentiment threatens an overpopulation of worlds, we call it all talk. Or to put it another way, the philosopher like the philanderer is always finding himself stuck with none or too many.

[...]

Goodman's remark is more challenging [than Quine's concerning the entanglement of fact and convention]. If there are many right versions of the world (Goodman includes artistic as well as scientific versions), and no specifiable set of invariants to which they can all be reduced, what becomes of the notion of a *world*? Goodman would say that it doesn't matter; that one can either say that there is one world, or no worlds, or as many worlds as there are versions; and it is best to say all three of these to keep us on our toes. I am more staid than Goodman; I would say that any version we accept as right can be regarded as a description of the world; and I would finesse Goodman's point by conceding that if one chooses to speak in this way, one must add that identity goes soft. In many cases there will be no hard and fast answer to the question which object in one version is 'identical' with an object in another version (if any). Field theory can be translated into particle theory;

but in many right ways (right but *incompatible* ways!). Such traditional philosophical questions as whether material objects are bundles of actual and possible sensations, and whether sensations are brain states, have no unique right answers. They have many right answers or none.³⁶⁴

Confronted with conceptual relativism and equivalent descriptions, the realist cannot make intelligible the notion of THE WORLD in itself, Putnam thinks. But where Goodman takes this to mean that there are many worlds, or one world, or none (whatever *that* is supposed to mean—if one were to be glib, one might say that metaphysical realism is quite intelligible in comparison), Putnam still wants to say that there is *one* world that we are talking about. It is just that, first, we shouldn't think of language as one relatum, the world in itself as another relatum, where the two are correlated in such a way that we get meaningful descriptions. Second, we should realize that the world is such that there are no scheme independent facts of the matter concerning the totality of objects, and, as we strikingly see here, such philosophical conundrums as those concerning phenomenalism and monism in the philosophy of mind.³⁶⁵

In *The Many Faces of Realism* Putnam presents the example that we have already seen repeatedly throughout this dissertation, namely that of the Carnapian and Polish Logician counting objects. The Polish Logician counts in a way that endorses mereological sums and the Carnapian counts in a way that excludes mereological sums. So with individuals x_1, x_2, x_3 we get this picture:

³⁶⁴ Putnam 1983, 178-179.

³⁶⁵ We should, however, note that this last point doesn't mean that any answer is right or that every question has multiple answers. Regarding the multiplicity of answers, Putnam thinks that it may turn out that some philosophical questions don't admit of any answers, since they ultimately end up being bad questions.

World 1	World 2
x_1, x_2, x_3	x_1, x_2, x_3
	$x_1 + x_2, x_1 + x_3, x_2 + x_3$
	$x_1 + x_2 + x_3$
(A world à la Carnap)	(‘Same’ world à la Polish logician)

366

From the perspective of the Carnapian optional language there are three objects and from that of the Polish Logician’s optional language there are seven objects; independent of some optional language the number of objects is indeterminate. Putnam’s claim is that the realist explains the above by saying that there is a world that we carve up in different ways, like a lump of dough that we might variously cut up. However, Putnam objects by asking what the pieces of the dough are supposed to be. If we say x_1, x_2, x_3 , then we have just adopted the Carnapian way of counting. There is no neutral description of the parts of the dough.³⁶⁷ Whatever parts there are, whatever objects there are depends on what optional language you are using. We should, however, keep in mind that with his rejection of the model-theoretic argument—because of his endorsement of natural/naïve realism—it is not entirely clear in what sense Putnam takes these purported examples of conceptual relativity to imply that every object and kind is internal to some optional language or another. At times he seems to endorse the less extreme idea that the number

³⁶⁶ Putnam 1987, 18. Putnam gives this example of counting objects in a number of other places, for example: Putnam 1990, 97; 2004a, 39.

³⁶⁷ This is in many ways Davidson’s objection to the notion of a scheme *organizing* neutral content.

of objects, but not in every case the *kind* of object, is a matter of which optional languages are being used.

So, again, realism founders in the face of the phenomena of conceptual relativity, or so Putnam maintains:

...it is no accident that metaphysical realism cannot really recognize the phenomenon of conceptual relativity—for that phenomenon turns on the fact that *the logical primitives themselves, and in particular the notions of object and existence, have a multitude of different uses rather than one absolute ‘meaning’*.³⁶⁸

By implication, Putnam claims that metaphysical realism is committed to the view that the world itself determines what our terms can possibly mean, what kinds of things exist. We might question whether or in what sense it is right to say that the realist is committed to reality determining what our terms can possibly mean. A realist who also holds a kind of semantic externalism might be committed to reality determining the “meaning” of natural kind terms. However, as I argued in chapter 3, Putnam himself repudiates realism and endorses semantic externalism. Thus, one can endorse semantic externalism without that implying that the world determines what language we must speak in the way that Putnam seems to attribute to the realist.

Immediately after the mereological sums example, Putnam gives an example similar to the earlier one concerning the points on a line, but this time the example has to do with the ontological status of a Euclidean plane. Are the points on such a plane parts of the plane, as Putnam claims Leibniz thought, or are they “mere limits” as Putnam claims Kant thought? According to Putnam, if we say in this case that we can cut up the

³⁶⁸ Putnam 1987, 19. We will look more closely at Putnam’s claims regarding the non-univocal nature of existence below.

same dough in two different ways, then we must admit that that which is a part of space according to the one description is an abstract entity according to the other description, “say, a set of convergent spheres—although there is not, of course, a *unique* way of construing points as limits....”³⁶⁹ If we must admit that, then Putnam thinks that we will have conceded that it is internal to a scheme as to whether the Euclidian plane’s points are concrete objects or abstract objects. Putnam follows this up with the notable:

Metaphysical realists to this day continue to argue about whether points (space-time points, nowadays, rather than points in the plane or in three-dimensional space) are individuals or properties, particulars or mere limits, etc. My view is that God himself, if he consented to answer the question, ‘Do points really exist or are they mere limits?’, would say ‘I don’t know’; not because His omniscience is limited, but because there is a limit to how far questions make sense.³⁷⁰

So again, we have the claim that the phenomenon of conceptual relativity shows, when properly understood, that there is no fact of the matter concerning the example in question, here the ontological status of space-time points (or points on a Euclidean plane). Further, we see Putnam’s claim that questions like “Are there really mereological sums?” “Do points really exist as concrete particulars?” etc., are bad questions. “Points are mere limits” and “Points are particulars” are, according to Putnam, cognitively equivalent. All statements made conceiving of points as mere limits can be given a relative interpretation into statements made conceiving points as particulars and nothing

³⁶⁹ Putnam 1987, 19.

³⁷⁰ Putnam 1987, 19. Putnam also gives the same example of a Euclidean plane and also talks about God not knowing the answer to the question concerning the points on a plane in Putnam 1990, 97. And in Putnam 1992a, 115, he talks about space-time points again, saying that whether they are conceived of as concrete particulars or mere limits, either way will do perfectly well for geometry and physics.

observable will decide between them. Thus, asking whether there are really points as particulars or instead points as mere limits is supposed to be a bad question.

Later in *The Many Faces of Realism*, Putnam changes the mereological sums example in an interesting way. Say that x_1 and x_2 are black and x_3 is red.³⁷¹ Given this, the Polish Logician can assert that there is an object that is partly black and partly red. The Carnapian would deny this, saying that there are two black objects and one red object, but no object that is multicolored. Again Putnam claims that an appeal to the cookie-cutter metaphor will land one either in the Carnapian position or the Polish Logician position, since one will be forced to say what the dough's parts are. Alternatively, instead of just saying that the Polish Logician's position is simply false, the Carnapian can try to explain away the Polish Logician's version by saying that "(I) There is at least one object which is partly red and partly black"

is to be understood as a useful *façon de parler*, rather than as something which is 'literally true'. Under an adequate translation scheme (and such a scheme can be easily given in a recursive way, in the case of the kind of first-order language that Carnap had in mind in these simple examples), I turns out to say no more than

(II) There is at least one red object and there is at least one black object.

—says when written in the Carnapian language.³⁷²

However, the Carnapian's claim that such a translation scheme gives us the *real* parts of the dough is just an assertion that mereological sums don't really exist. Putnam's own view, of course, is that neither ontological version is more correct than the other. The

³⁷¹ In Putnam 1992a, 120, he also talks about this example in terms of red and black "atoms."

³⁷² Putnam 1987, 33-34.

descriptions given in each language are cognitively equivalent, but neither scheme-relative description is merely a *façon de parler* of the other.

Putnam continues to consider the possibility of someone who would dismiss the appearance of conceptual relativity by “producing a translation scheme which *reinterprets the logical connectives (in this case, existence)*, in such a way that each statement in the ‘richer’ language can be ‘translated’ into the more ‘parsimonious’ language....”³⁷³ We might very well imagine Quine being such a person. It is not entirely clear from his writings, but it seems that Putnam’s objection to claiming that the more parsimonious language gives us the true ontology is simply that it results in an insistence that there is one correct ontology. One side says that we should affirm the most parsimonious ontology and interpret the Polish Logician’s talk as at best a *façon de parler*. Why should we postulate “such strange discontinuous objects as mereological sums” if we don’t have to? Against the latter claim, Putnam thinks there will come the inevitable response that the tables, chairs, countries, galaxies, and our own bodies are all “strange discontinuous objects” and we count them as existing. And if such discontinuous objects exist, then why don’t objects consisting of, for example, my nose and the Eiffel Tower exist?³⁷⁴

It is, however, unclear whether he provides good reasons here against the idea that the more parsimonious language provides the true ontology. While there would certainly be philosophical disagreement as to what the correct ontology is, it seems that Putnam comes dangerously close to saying that since appeals to parsimony allow one to be

³⁷³ Putnam 1987, 34.

³⁷⁴ Putnam 1987, 35.

ontologically partisan, they cannot be right, for that would deny conceptual relativity. If we are to be charitable in our interpretation of Putnam, we perhaps ought to say that he isn't begging the question here; rather, he thinks that he can provide a much better account of what is going on when the Carnapian and Polish Logician appear to be contradicting each other.

In "Truth and Convention,"³⁷⁵ Putnam again discusses the example of x_1 , x_2 , x_3 and the question of the existence of a multicolored object when x_1 is red and x_2 is black. One of the main results of the phenomenon of conceptual relativity is supposed to be that "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."³⁷⁶ Putnam's understanding of the phenomenon of conceptual relativity, as he says, "turns on the fact that *the logical primitives themselves, and in particular the notions of object and existence, have a multitude of different uses rather than one absolute 'meaning.'*"³⁷⁷ Putnam argues that an appeal to "meanings" or "truth conditions" won't defuse the phenomenon of conceptual relativity so as to save the metaphysical realist's position. Why does he think this?

In regard to x_1 , x_2 , x_3 , Putnam asks us to consider the following two sentences:

- (1) There is an object which is partly red and partly black.
- (2) There is an object which is red and an object which is black.³⁷⁸

³⁷⁵ Putnam 1990, 96-104.

³⁷⁶ Putnam 1990, 98.

³⁷⁷ Putnam 1990, 97.

³⁷⁸ Putnam 1990, 98.

Given that x_1 is red and x_2 is black, (2) is true in both the Carnapian and Polish Logician's versions. (1) is "clearly" true in the Polish Logician's version, but what about in the Carnapian's version? Putnam here brings in his character, Professor Antipode, a "staunch metaphysical realist," who supposedly would say that the Carnapian position is the only correct one, and that (2) is true and (1) is false. According to Professor Antipode it makes sense to speak of cars, bees, humans, books, the Eiffel Tower, or even one's nose or the hood of a car as objects, but when philosophers start calling one's nose and the Eiffel Tower an object, they are going off the deep end: "You can't create objects by 'postulation' any more than you can bake a cake by 'postulation.'"³⁷⁹ Similarly, in regard to x_1 and x_2 being an object, Professor Antipode holds that in the world described as consisting of just x_1, x_2, x_3 , if x_1 and x_2 are part of any object it would be different from either of them. However, the only object different from them is x_3 , but it "does not overlap with either x_1 or x_2 . Only in the overheated imagination of the Polish Logician is there such an additional object as $x_1 + x_2$."³⁸⁰ So, if we add "Part Of" to Carnap's language,³⁸¹ then we can express (1) as:

(3) $(\exists x)(\exists y)(\exists z)(y \text{ is Part Of } x \ \& \ z \text{ is Part Of } x \ \& \ \text{Red}(y) \ \& \ \text{Black}(z))$ ³⁸²

which Professor Antipode would say is false. Professor Antipode:

"Whether you say it in plain English or in fancy symbols...if you have a world of three nonoverlapping individuals, which is what

³⁷⁹ Putnam 1990, 98.

³⁸⁰ Putnam 1990, 99.

³⁸¹ Putnam tells us that when he and Carnap worked on inductive logic using these kinds of examples, the languages usually had only one-place predicates.

³⁸² Putnam 1990, 99. The notation here is exactly as it is in "Truth and Convention." That is, he uses "E" instead of " \exists ".

Carnap described, and each is wholly red or wholly black, which is what Carnap said, then there cannot be such a thing in that world as an ‘object which is partly red and partly black.’ Talking about the ‘mereological sum of x_1 and x_2 ’ makes no more sense than talking about the ‘mereological sum of my nose and the Eiffel Tower.’”³⁸³

The real Carnap, not the Carnapian of Putnam’s examples, and with whom Putnam agrees, would have said in opposition to Professor Antipode, that we can choose either to make (1) true or to make it false depending on which conceptual scheme we adopt.³⁸⁴ Further, as we saw earlier, we can even provide a translation (interpretation) scheme for translating the Polish Logician’s language into the Carnapian’s or vice versa. According to Putnam, such a scheme would allow us to say that “(1) turns out to say no more and no less than (2).”³⁸⁵ As we saw in chapter 3, Putnam offers a way to verify this; he writes:

To verify this, assuming that “red” and “black” are predicates of Carnap’s language, observe that the only way a Polish logician’s object—a mereological sum—can be partly red is by containing a red atom, and the only way it can be partly black is by containing a black atom. So if (1) is true in the Polish logician’s language, then there is at least one red atom and at least one black atom—which is what (2) says in Carnap’s language. Conversely, if there is at least one black atom and at least one red atom, then their mereological sum is an “object” [in the Polish logician’s sense] which is partly red and partly black.³⁸⁶

³⁸³ Putnam 1990, 99. Part of the point here is to illustrate the metaphysical realist’s purported interpretation of the logical connectives and in particular the existential quantifier as being univocal.

³⁸⁴ We might wonder though in what sense (1), “There is an object which is partly red and partly black,” would be the same statement relativized to the Carnapian’s optional language as when it is relativized to the Polish Logician’s optional language. That is, does it make sense to say that *we can make* the numerically identical statement (1) true or false by adopting a scheme, since (1) has a different “sense,” if not linguist meaning, when relativized?

³⁸⁵ Putnam 1990, 100.

³⁸⁶ Putnam 1990, 100.

Putnam admits that this verification of the possibility of interpreting the one language into the other holds good as “a result in mathematical logic,” but it is much more controversial in regard to its overall philosophical significance. I take it that part of the point here is that the truth conditions for both the Carnapian’s statement and the Polish Logician’s statement are just x_1 , x_2 , x_3 , and thus that state of affairs won’t determine which of the statements is *really* correct—concomitantly, it is not just a matter of the two statements having different meanings: they differ in their contextualized sense.

Putnam considers what he takes to be Quine’s way of handling the case of interpreting the Polish Logician’s language into that of the Carnapian.³⁸⁷ It might turn out that it is useful to talk at times like the Polish Logician and to even say things like (1)—which again is “There is an object which is partly red and partly black”—but in the end (1) is literally false. But as long as we, and others, realize that we are not accepting the ontological commitments of mereology:

One can responsibly take the view that the Polish logician’s story is only a useful make-believe, and yet employ its idioms, on the ground that each of the sentences in that idiom, whatever its ‘meaning,’ *can* be regarded—by fiat, if you like—as merely a convenient abbreviation of whatever sentence in the ‘unabbreviated language’ it is correlated with by the interpretation scheme.³⁸⁸

This is something that the metaphysical realist could live with, since it says that there is one true story, namely, the Carnapian one. Of course, a metaphysical realist could also live with it by saying that the Polish Logician has the one true story. What the

³⁸⁷ This he takes from Quine’s “On What There Is.”

³⁸⁸ Putnam 1990, 101.

metaphysical realist purportedly cannot live with is the idea that both stories are true even though they both differ in their ontological commitments.

Putnam goes on to illustrate further the Quinean attitude by contrasting the mereological sums example with an example concerning numbers and sets. The idea is that we can do a reductive interpretation of numbers as sets and thereby remove the need to postulate numbers as robustly existing objects. The moral of such a story is that there is one true story concerning the ontology of numbers, namely, either numbers are identical with sets or they don't exist. According to Putnam, this moral is different from the Quinean moral concerning the example of counting objects. The moral of the latter is not that either mereological sums are identical with the atoms we use to identify them or they don't exist, but rather that mereological sums don't really exist at all, though it may sometimes be useful to speak as if they do. The reason Putnam gives for the difference between the two cases, and for why Professor Antipode can happily endorse the Quinean position, is that in giving a reductive interpretation of (1) into (2), the interpretation given is syncategorematic. (Again, (1) and (2) are: (1) There is an object which is partly red and partly black. (2) There is an object which is red and an object which is black.) The individual words in (1) are not identified with individual words in (2). The translation of (1) into (2) does not involve identifying "mereological sum" in (1) with any object in the Carnapian language: "(1) as a whole is 'translated' by (2) as a whole; but the noun-phrase 'object which is partly red and partly black' has no translation by itself."³⁸⁹ Thus, the purported objects that were mereological sums in the Polish Logician's version drop

³⁸⁹ Putnam 1990, 102.

out when translated into the Carnapian's version, leaving the realist where he wants to be.³⁹⁰

Now Putnam, of course, does not agree with Quine's way of handling ontological questions, at least in regard to purported examples of conceptual relativity. Instead, as we have seen, Putnam adopts an attitude much closer to that of the real Carnap. According to Putnam, Carnap rejected the idea that there is evidence against the existence of numbers, or evidence that numbers aren't distinct from sets, and further, he is sure that Carnap would reject the idea that there is evidence against the existence of mereological sums. Putnam thinks that Carnap would say that it is a matter of convention; and with this we know Putnam agrees.³⁹¹

Interestingly, and this is another reason I have rehashed his discussion of the example of mereological sums in "Truth and Convention," Putnam says not only as he has in other places that there is no scheme-independent fact of the matter concerning the existence of mereological sums, but further, *there is no fact of the matter concerning which of the following is correct* regarding the relation between (1) There is an object which is partly red and partly black. And (2) There is an object which is red and an object which is black:

³⁹⁰ Putnam makes a point to say that he is not implying that Quine thinks that if we can reduce one kind of entity to another by way of a formal reductive translation, that that counts as decisive evidence against the existence of the kind of entity being reduced. Sometimes reductions can go in either direction, in which case it may not be clear which way to go. However, Putnam points out that "when the reducing language (the prima facie 'poorer' language) is one we are happy with, and the reduction does not go both ways, it is clear that Quine regards this as very strong evidence for denying the real existence of the unreduced entities" (Putnam 1990, 102).

I have lingered on this because of the importance of Quine and the importance of seeing how Putnam relates to Quine's views on ontology, especially in regard to purported examples of the phenomenon of conceptual relativity.

³⁹¹ Putnam 1990, 102.

- (a) The two sentences are mathematically equivalent.
- (b) The two sentences are logically equivalent.
- (c) The two sentences are neither logically equivalent nor mathematically equivalent.
- (d) The first sentence is false and the second true (Professor Antipode's position).
- (e) The two sentences are alike in truth-value and meaning.
- (f) The two sentences are alike in truth-value and unlike in meaning.
- (g) The second sentence can be used as an abbreviation of the first, but this is really just a useful "make believe."³⁹²

Looking at it as a metalevel dispute about the properties of linguistic forms, e.g., different kinds of equivalence or synonymy, won't help, according to Putnam. Why? Purportedly because "None of these notions is well defined enough to be a useful tool in such cases."³⁹³ I take it that the 'these notions' refers to the notions of synonym, and mathematical and logical equivalence. However, the example and discussion he goes on to give does not seem to me to be an illustration of how these notions are not well enough defined.

He raises the possibility of going a Davidsonian route in which a test for meaning is had by constructing a theory for the language in question which is presented in the form of a Tarskian style truth definition and which meets the standards of translation practice. Putnam admits that it would violate standard translation practice to give (2) as a translation of (1), in part because the truth-functional connectives are not "preserved." Thus, on this picture (1) and (2) are not the same in meaning and (e) above turns out false.

³⁹² Putnam 1990, 103.

³⁹³ Putnam 1990, 103.

What is the result if we go even further with Davidson and say that to understand a sentence from an “alien language” requires being able, in some sense, to give a truth-condition for that sentence in one’s own language—a truth-condition in accord with standard translation practice? Putnam’s answer:

If my “own” language is Carnap’s, and we accept that *no* “truth-condition” for (1) storable in Carnap’s language will satisfy the constraints on translation practice any better than (2) did, then the conclusion is forced: the Polish logician’s language is *meaningless*. We have arrived at a strong metaphysical result from what looked like a bit of ordinary language philosophizing (aided with a bit of Tarskian semantics) about the notion of “meaning”!³⁹⁴

We might wonder how fair this is to Davidson, since the Polish Logician’s language isn’t necessarily an “alien language” in the sense that Davidson has in mind. Think of Davidson’s arguments in “On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme,” where Davidson considers cases of complete *and* partial failures of translation. The example of the Carnapian and Polish Logician would seem to fit Davidson’s discussion of partial failure of translation best of the two. However, Davidson’s problem with the examples of partial failure of translation, in regard to judging a difference in scheme, is the following. Two partially inter-translatable schemes are supposed to be comparable in terms of their shared parts. However, given two groups, each of which might be said to employ a different conceptual scheme, there will be sentences that one group rejects but which the other may decide to translate into sentences that they accept as true. In such a case, we might take them to have a different scheme. But there may be other ways to translate the sentences of the one group into the other that make it only seem a difference of opinion between them. According to Davidson, however, there is no general principle or type of

³⁹⁴ Putnam 1990, 104.

evidence that can allow for discerning whether there is a difference of belief or difference in concepts between the two schemes or languages.³⁹⁵ Since we cannot say whether the difference is conceptual or doxastic, we cannot really say that two partially non-intertranslatable languages really are examples of different conceptual schemes. Thus, it is not necessarily the case that Davidson would judge the Polish Logician's sentences meaningless from the perspective of the Carnapian language; rather, it is indeterminate for the Carnapian as to whether the Polish Logician has different beliefs or different concepts.

However, if I am correct in rephrasing what Davidson's worry with the example of the Carnapian and Polish Logician would be, Putnam's point about achieving a strong metaphysical result would still apply. That is, on my rephrasing of Davidson's worry, there is still the denial that there is no fact of the matter concerning at least one of (a)-(g). As Putnam points out: "we might simply adopt the Polish Logician's language as our own to begin with. But what we cannot do, according to Davidson, is regard both choices as genuinely open."³⁹⁶ And thus, from a Davidsonian theory of meaning we have the denial of the phenomenon of conceptual relativity and everything that comes with it. We might wonder against Putnam whether he is, in a sense, doing the same thing of which he accuses Davidson. That is, from several observations about language and language use, *inter alia*, he comes to the conclusion that at least some ontological disputes are really just a matter of conventional choice—something we might reasonably think of as a "strong metaphysical result."

³⁹⁵ Davidson 2001, 196-197.

³⁹⁶ Putnam 1990, 104.

Against what he sees as Davidson's view concerning the idea that an interpreter has a *single* home language from which she can provide truth-conditions for all the languages she is supposed to understand—a view which supposedly forces the rejection of conceptual relativity—Putnam claims that we should recognize that an interpreter can operate with multiple “home” conceptual schemes, i.e., optional languages (though he doesn't call them that here). And further we should see that translation practice may have more than one set of constraints, e.g., those involving cognitive equivalence and relative interpretation. If we do this, then we should see that “conceptual relativity does not disappear when we inquire into the ‘meanings’ of the various conceptual alternatives: it simply reproduces itself at a metalinguistic level!”³⁹⁷ And it is at the metalinguistic level of providing relative interpretations that conceptual relativity reproduces itself.

However, given what we have seen so far in this chapter, we should wonder how sincere, or if he is sincere, how correct he could be when he says that there is no fact of the matter as to which of (a)-(g) is correct in relation to (1) and (2). Here they are again with brief comments:

(a) The two sentences are mathematically equivalent. Well, if mathematical equivalence is something like “ $2 + 2$ ” is equivalent to “ $5 - 1$,” then it is not clear in what sense the Carnapian's “3 objects” is equivalent to the Polish Logician's “7 objects.” They both describe the “same” state of affairs, namely, the arrangement of x_1, x_2, x_3 , but given that Putnam claims that the existential quantifier is in some sense being used differently by the Carnapian and by the Polish Logician, it doesn't seem that we should say that their statements are mathematically equivalent.

³⁹⁷ Putnam 1990, 104.

(b) The two sentences are logically equivalent. Well, (1), “There is an object which is partly red and partly black,” is false in the Carnapian’s optional language but true in the Polish Logician’s language, but that is because “object” is being used differently in each. Once one gives a relative interpretation of (1) into the Carnapian’s language as (2), “There is an object which is red and an object which is black,” then the truth values are the same in the sense that (1) from the Polish Logician’s optional language appears as (2) in the Carnapian’s and both are true. If we define logical equivalence thus: Two statements are logically equivalent if they necessarily have the same truth value³⁹⁸—then we should say that the Carnapian’s and Polish Logician’s statements are logically equivalent when viewed from the perspective of relative interpretation. They are not logically equivalent—since each would be a different statement—if either appeared as such, i.e., un-relatively interpreted, in the other’s optional language.

(c) The two sentences are neither logically equivalent nor mathematically equivalent. Because of the just canvassed unclarity regarding their mathematical and logical equivalence, it seems that it is also unclear as to whether or in what sense (c) might be true; but unclarity is not the same thing as no fact of the matter.

(d) The first sentence is false and the second true (Professor Antipode’s position). Insofar as Putnam rejects Professor Antipode’s position, it seems that he should say that there is a fact of the matter about (d), namely, that there is no scheme-independent fact of the matter concerning how many objects there are.

³⁹⁸ Haack 1978, 246.

(e) The two sentences are alike in truth-value and meaning. Well, given Putnam's views on optional languages and his distinction between linguistic meaning and sense, it seems he should say that the two sentences are not alike in linguistic meaning. Further, their truth value depends upon the sense given to them by the different optional languages.

(f) The two sentences are alike in truth-value and unlike in meaning. Again, their truth value for Putnam is going to depend on their sense, which is relative to an optional language, and their linguistic meaning is different.

(g) The second sentence can be used as an abbreviation of the first, but this is really just a useful "make believe." As we have seen, Putnam has already rejected this as the proper way to make sense of the situation. So, it isn't clear why he would say there is no fact of the matter as to whether one of the two is just a useful make believe.

So, perhaps, we should take Putnam to have overstated his case a bit. This is unfortunate insofar as it obscures Putnam's aims in arguing for conceptual relativity. Nevertheless, we can still see and evaluate Putnam's position despite such accretions of zealotry.

In *Representation and Reality*, Putnam offers another version of the mereological sums example of conceptual relativity. The example he gives is that of asking someone to count the objects in a room containing a chair, a table with a lamp, notebook, and pen on it, and nothing else except for Putnam and the other person. The initial answer he supposes would be five: the chair, table, lamp, notebook, and pen. When queried about Putnam and himself not being in the count, the person agrees to add two more objects to the count. When queried about the pages of the notebook counting as objects, Putnam's

companion protests. But Putnam wants to know the answer: what are the objects in the room? Putnam claims that a logician is likely to distinguish between two different notions of “object”: an ordinary (metaphysical) notion of an object and a logical notion of an object (entity). The metaphysical notion would count the notebook and a person as an object but perhaps not an undetached page or nose. The logical notion would count “anything we can take as a value of a variable of quantification (anything we can refer to with a pronoun)...[as] an ‘object’; and...all the parts of a person or a notebook are ‘objects’ in this logical sense.”³⁹⁹

According to Putnam, there is still a problem even after we distinguish between these two notions of “object.” Ignoring the complications of quantum mechanics, let us say that the room contains n elementary particles. Thus there would seem to be at least n objects under the logical notion of object. But what about the mereological sum of some of those particles? Putnam’s body is a sum of particles that we might consider an object, but what about the sum of particles that is his nose and the lamp? It is difficult to come up with a clear criterion to distinguish those sums that equal objects from those that don’t, according to Putnam. Being organic might be seen as too subjective a quality to determine what falls under the logical notion of “object.” Putnam claims that Aristotle’s criterion for being an object, namely, the parts staying together when moved, doesn’t seem to work: lamp shades fall off and chewing gum can be stuck to the side of the lamp. Is a lamp not an object and should we call the lamp+gum an object? Thus, we

³⁹⁹ Putnam 1988, 111.

might end up saying: “Either you should consider only elementary particles to be objects, or you should allow arbitrary mereological sums.”⁴⁰⁰ Putnam goes on to say:

If we agree that all mereological sums count as objects, we will say that there are 2^n “objects” in the room. If we count only “organic wholes” as objects, we will end up with a much smaller number. Which is right?

To me it seems clear that the question is one that calls for a convention. As a layman might well put it, “It depends on what you mean by an object.” But the consequence is startling: the very meaning of existential quantification is left indeterminate as long as the notion of an “object in the logical sense” is left unspecified. So it looks as if *the logical connectives themselves have a variety of possible uses*.⁴⁰¹

We have seen this all before in Putnam’s writings. I quote it in full because of his explicit mention of appealing to convention and claim that the logical connectives do not have a use that is fixed—something I will examine more closely later in this chapter.

Very interestingly, Putnam immediately goes on after this last example to broaden the (purported) implications of conceptual relativity:

The writ of convention runs farther than the decision to count/not to count mereological sums as objects, however. We have said that my nose is a group (mereological sum) of atoms. But Saul Kripke would deny this; he would say, “Since your nose could have consisted of different atoms, it has a modal property the group of atoms does not. So your nose is not identical with the group of atoms.” David Lewis would reply that when we say that there is a possible world in which my nose consists of different atoms, what we mean is that there is a possible world in which a *counterpart* of my nose consists of different atoms. In *this* world, Lewis would say, my nose *is* identical with this group of atoms. Again it seems to me that the question calls for a convention. We

⁴⁰⁰ Putnam 1988, 112.

⁴⁰¹ Putnam 1988, 112. This example of counting the objects in a room blurs together Putnam’s later distinction between conceptual pluralism and conceptual relativity. On the one hand, Putnam thinks that the description of the room in terms of particles and fields is not the primary description to which the description of the room in terms of tables and pens should be reduced—this is conceptual pluralism. It is an example of conceptual relativity in the sense of asking whether there are n elementary particles or n elementary particles plus certain mereological sums of those particles.

can decide to speak with Kripke and we can decide to speak with Lewis and we can decide to speak in a variety of other ways (including deciding to say, “There is no fact of the matter as to whether the relation between the nose and the group of atoms is ‘identity’ or not”).⁴⁰²

I want to emphasize just how bold these claims are. Putnam is saying that the answer to who is right when Kripke and Lewis argue is that, in a sense, they both are: it just depends on how you choose to talk, on the convention (conceptual scheme) you adopt. This would mean that Kripke’s statement “Your nose is not identical with the group of atoms” is cognitively equivalent to Lewis’s statement “In this world your nose is identical with the group of atoms.” And as such their “obvious” incompatibility is only on the surface. Once we realize that the one can be relatively interpreted into the other, the seeming incompatibility disappears: they both explain the phenomena equally well and neither would imply different predictions. Thus, we again see Putnam making the very strong claim that ontological disputes can be “settled” by realizing that we need not see them as contraries.

One of the many ways such claims might strike us as puzzling is that we know that Kripke and Lewis would admit that nothing in experience, or no physical fact, might prove one of them right, but that there are nevertheless other, *philosophical* reasons for thinking that one of them is correct or both of them are wrong. Thus, it seems that Putnam is throwing up his hands and saying, “Look, both of you are just going to keep on arguing, doing metaphysics, much of which is really counterintuitive or wacky (actual possible worlds—come on!); something has gone wrong.” What might be seen as most troubling is the move from throwing up his hands to, “You need to realize we can talk

⁴⁰² Putnam 1988, 112.

either way; it's just a matter of convention.” I take it that there are two main ways that Putnam bridges the two. First, he has offered a number of arguments over the last thirty or so years against the attempts of metaphysicians to argue for their positions. Second, he argues for and develops an alternative picture, namely, internal realism, which after further developments he now calls pragmatic pluralism. Central to Putnam's pragmatic pluralism are his conceptual pluralism and conceptual relativity.⁴⁰³ Again, it is not my purpose to evaluate his arguments against the positions and methods of philosophers such as Lewis and Kripke, but rather to evaluate the tenability of conceptual relativity.

Again, as we saw in chapter 3, Putnam is quick to point out that when he says that these problems call for an appeal to convention, he does not mean that it is all convention. For example, according to Putnam, it is a matter of convention whether we describe a point as being identical to a series of convergent spheres or, taking points as primitive, we use them to identify spheres with sets of points.⁴⁰⁴ We are:

free to do either. But what Quine pointed out (as applied to this case) is that when I say, “We can do either,” I am assuming a diffuse background of empirical facts. Fundamental changes in the way we do physical geometry could alter the whole picture. The fact that a truth is toward the “conventional” end of the convention-fact continuum does not mean that it is *absolutely* conventional—a truth by stipulation, free of every element of fact.⁴⁰⁵

⁴⁰³ Again, conceptual relativity implies conceptual pluralism—the claim that there is no single, fundamental ontology—but conceptual pluralism does not imply conceptual relativity. The difference is that conceptual relativity involves “apparent” incompatibility and conceptual pluralism doesn't. It is only in recent years that Putnam has clearly distinguished between the two.

⁴⁰⁴ Putnam 1988, 112.

⁴⁰⁵ Putnam 1988, 113.

Thus, there is a world “out there” constraining the conventions we can implement while at the same time our experience (perception) of that world is dependent on the conceptual scheme we have “adopted.”

I want to close the explication of his examples from *Representation and Reality* with a quote that summarizes part of the importance Putnam takes the examples to have:

The seemingly more complex cases of conceptual relativity described above—the relativity of identity (as in the question “Is the tree identical with the space-time region it occupies?” or “Is the chair identical with the mereological sum of the elementary particles that make it up?”) and the relativity of the categories Concrete and Abstract (as in the question “Is a space-time point a concrete individual, or is it a mere limit, and hence an abstract entity of some kind?”)—and one might add many other examples—can be handled in much the same way. “Identical,” “individual,” and “abstract” are notions with a variety of different uses. The differences between, say, describing space-time in a language that takes points as individuals and describing space-time in a language that takes points as mere limits is a difference in the choice of a language, and neither language is the “one true description.”⁴⁰⁶

So again we see Putnam’s view that many an ontological question can be “answered” or rejected when we understand properly the role of convention.

Summing up the Purported Examples of

Conceptual Relativity

Here is now a list of the examples we have seen of the purported phenomenon of conceptual relativity:

1. A line segment can be divided into extensionless points or parts that have extension.
2. Concerning a Euclidean plane: Are the points on a Euclidean plane parts of the plane, as Leibniz thought, or are they “mere limits” as Kant thought?

⁴⁰⁶ Putnam 1988, 114-115.

3. Space-time points can be taken to be objects or properties.
4. Points can be identified with sets of convergent spheres or spheres can be identified with sets of points.
5. “Field theory can be translated into particle theory; but in many right ways (right but *incompatible* ways!).”⁴⁰⁷
6. “Such traditional philosophical questions as whether material objects are bundles of actual and possible sensations, and whether sensations are brain states, have no unique right answers. They have many right answers or none.”⁴⁰⁸
7. We can speak like Kripke or like Lewis or in other ways in regard to whether a particular nose is identical with atoms occupying the same space-time region.
8. Concerning a tree, is it identical with the space-time region it occupies?
9. Concerning a chair, is it identical with the mereological sum of the elementary particles that make it up?
10. Mereological sums example concerning the number of objects.
11. Mereological sums example concerning whether there is a multicolored object.
12. Counting the objects in a room: What notion of object should be used: metaphysical or logical notion? Further, if one includes the particles, then what about the mereological sum of those particles?

⁴⁰⁷ Putnam 1983, 178-179.

⁴⁰⁸ Putnam 1983, 178-179.

What are the Reasons for All of the Different

Examples?

I want to consider briefly the reasons behind Putnam's appeal to different examples in support of the conclusions he draws from conceptual relativity and to consider whether we should come away with different conclusion from different examples.

An obvious reason for considering a wide range of examples is to bolster his position in a kind of inductive way. In some sense it is like saying, "Look at all of these different examples of the phenomenon of conceptual relativity! How can you deny that it is a phenomenon; further, given that it is such a widespread phenomenon, you must confront it and its implications." Putnam, of course, thinks the only way to confront the phenomenon correctly is by seeing that metaphysical realism, particularly a scientific variety, cannot make sense of it.

Another possible reason for considering a wide range of examples is so that if any one of them ends up not being an actual instance of the phenomenon of conceptual relativity, Putnam need not give up his conclusions based on the purported phenomenon. While this is certainly a possible reason, it seems less likely to be a driving force than the former reason. I say this in part because Putnam nowhere says anything like, "Well, if this example turns out not to be a legitimate instance of the phenomenon of conceptual relativity, then at least there are all those other examples." Another reason is that while he does give a number of different examples, there really are only a core few that he appeals to repeatedly, e.g., the mereological sums case. Further, he does not display any doubt that those core examples are really examples of conceptual relativity. Given

Putnam's desire to endorse fallibilism, this is, of course, not to say that he does not realize he could be wrong.

One thing we should notice is that Putnam is not entirely consistent concerning what exactly counts as an example of the phenomenon of conceptual relativity. In various places he speaks as if the phenomenon of conceptual relativity can be found all over the place in philosophy. We saw this in the example involving Kripke and Lewis, and the question of whether a nose is identical to the particles that occupy the same space-time region. We also saw it when he says:

Such traditional philosophical questions as whether material objects are bundles of actual and possible sensations, and whether sensations are brain states, have no unique right answers. They have many right answers or none.⁴⁰⁹

But more recently he might be seen as pulling away from such a general conclusion. In his reply to Jennifer Case, Putnam emphasizes that the examples he has come back to again and again are from science or mathematics.⁴¹⁰ Further, Putnam explicitly says that conceptual relativity:

is not a doctrine about all bodies of thought and discourse whatsoever, but about certain areas of thought. It concerns scientific images and optional languages.... It does not claim either that everything we say and think belongs to a "conceptual scheme" in the sense I had in mind (an optional language in some area of science), nor does it claim that *everything* that anyone might call a "conceptual scheme" has a significant alternative.⁴¹¹

I do not think that this conclusively shows that Putnam is restricting the scope of conceptual relativity to science and mathematics; however, it is strongly suggestive that

⁴⁰⁹ Putnam 1983, 178-179.

⁴¹⁰ Putnam 2001a, 432-433.

⁴¹¹ Putnam 2001a, 435.

he is doing so. It may be that he has progressively come to see the limitations of conceptual relativity. However, if conceptual relativity is limited to only a few scientific and mathematical examples, including that of mereological sums, it would still imply, if correct, that there is no scheme-independent fact of the matter as to the number and kinds of objects that exist. Thankfully I do not need to settle the question of what Putnam takes to be the exact scope of conceptual relativity, since I will be arguing that whatever the scope, it is not possible to make the position tenable.

Let me close this section with two last thoughts regarding the importance of the different examples. The two examples that Putnam come back to most frequently are the mereological sums example and the example of whether space-time points are individuals or properties, particulars or mere limits. Particularly as he identifies the metaphysical realist with a scientific materialist/physicalist, these two examples together would pack a punch. This is because they concern both space-time and the objects found within space-time, i.e., reality as a whole. If Putnam is right, then there is an element of conventionality pervading not only the number and kinds of objects that exist but also the space-time “containing” those objects—and for the physicalist there is nothing left out.

Lastly, we should note that Putnam does not seem to intend the examples of conceptual relativity, or the doctrine of conceptual relativity, to imply that we “cut up the world into objects when we introduce one or another scheme of description. Since the objects *and* the signs are alike *internal* to the scheme of description, it is possible to say what matches what.”⁴¹² At the time he wrote this, he believed that the way to escape the model-theoretic concerns, the radicalization of Quinean ontological relativity, was to say

⁴¹² Putnam 1981, 52.

that reference to all objects is internal—that is how “cat” refers to cats and not cherries. But in recent years, as discussed in chapter 2, he no longer sidesteps the model-theoretic worries in this extreme way. Nevertheless, he still believes that there are important aspects of the world, as mentioned in the last paragraph and discussed in this chapter, that are scheme-relative or representation-dependent. And that this is so is enough to undercut alethic realism, Putnam claims.

Conceptual Relativity, Realism, and the Existential Quantifier

We know that conceptual relativity, both the phenomenon and the doctrine, is supposed to undermine realism. But what is the upshot of the above examples of conceptual relativity generally supposed to be? The key element is Putnam’s claim that the “same” state of affairs can be described in (seemingly) incompatible ways. This is supposed to show, for example in the mereological sums case, that there is no scheme independent fact of the matter concerning the number and kind of objects that exist. Other than this making certain “facts” representation-dependent, Putnam takes it to cause a problem for the realist because:

The traditional realist assumes that general names just correspond more or less one-to-one to various “properties” of “objects” in some sense of “property” and some sense of “object” that is fixed once and for all, and that knowledge claims are simply claims about the distribution of these “properties” over these “objects.”⁴¹³

Thus, if the number of objects and the existence of certain kind of objects are somehow relative to different optional languages, then there is no one totality of representation-independent objects to which our language could correspond. Certain objects, e.g.,

⁴¹³ Putnam 1999, 8.

mereological sums, and certain properties, e.g., being a multicolored mereological sum, are not determined by a representation independent reality, but by our interaction with reality and the choices we make and the languages we use. Regarding the scientific, mathematical, and mereological examples, at least, Putnam thinks that the different optional languages are cognitively equivalent—they do not differ in predictive or explanatory force. Further, there are no facts that would determine which is the more fundamental or correct position.

In a relatively recent restatement of what he meant by conceptual relativity (and still means as of 2004), Putnam writes in reply to David L. Anderson:

What I meant by my doctrine of scheme dependence (or to use my own preferred term, conceptual relativity) is that (1) the notion of an “object” is an inherently extendable one; we extend it when we speak of the strange ‘objects’ of quantum mechanics as objects; we extend it (in an unfortunate way, I think) when we refer to *numbers* as “objects”; we extend it when we invent such *recherché* notions as “mereological sum” and begin to refer to mereological sums as “objects”; and we shall undoubtedly continue to extend it in the future. (The same is, of course, true of such technical-sounding variants as “entity”.) Because the notion is inherently open in this way, the very notion of a “totality of all objects” is senseless. (2) certain things are paradigmatically objects, for example tables and chairs, but other uses of the term “object” are, to a greater or a lesser degree, optional. Thus there is no fact of the matter as to whether numbers, or mereological sums, are objects or not (and since “object” and “exist” are conceptually linked, there is no fact of the matter as to whether “numbers exist” and no fact of the matter as to whether “mereological sums exist”). (3) As a consequence of (2), apparently incompatible schemes—for instance, a scheme that quantifies over mereological sums and one that denies that there are any such things—may serve equally well to describe one or another state of affairs. For example, the state of affairs that would ordinarily be described by saying “there are three objects on the table” would be described in a scheme that countenanced mereological sums as objects by saying “There are seven objects on the table.”⁴¹⁴

⁴¹⁴ Putnam 1992d, 367.

An actual evaluation of conceptual relativity won't occur until the next chapter; however, it is important to note a few things about this important passage. First, as we have seen, Putnam saddles the realist with the idea that there is a *fixed* totality of objects. As Colin McGinn does, we can ask whether Putnam is talking about a fixed totality at any given moment in time or atemporally.⁴¹⁵ But either way, even if Putnam is right about the openness of "object," there would be a totality of all objects, even if some objects were representation-dependent. At any given moment there would be the uses of object "in play" at that moment and the totality of those objects; atemporally, there would be all of the different uses of "object" and the totality of those objects.⁴¹⁶ Of course, against this, Putnam's point is that there is no fact of the matter as to whether mereological sums exist apart from our deciding to say they do. But here is where Putnam, in the above block quote, seems to get the description of conceptual relativity backwards. Above, (1), he claims that since "object" is open and without one fixed sense, the idea that there is a totality of objects is senseless. Then, in (2), he says that since speaking of mereological sums as objects is optional, there is no fact of the matter as to whether mereological sums exist. He then says as a consequence of (2), we can have, (3), apparently incompatible schemes (optional languages), one saying there are mereological sums and another saying there aren't any. I say he gets it backwards because the reason why there could not be a single totality of objects, either at some given moment or atemporally, would have to be because of the apparent incompatibility of the optional languages. The Carnapian's and

⁴¹⁵ McGinn 2001.

⁴¹⁶ If there were uses of "object" still not included in the atemporal situation and thus objects that could have been "in existence" if those uses were included, this would not seem to count against there being a totality of objects given the uses that were included.

the Polish Logician's counts cannot simply be conjoined in one description. So at any given time or atemporally there cannot be just one complete description of all objects or a single totality of objects. If it wasn't for the apparent incompatibility, then either at some given moment or atemporally, we could—excluding other possible problems—say that there is a single totality of objects. Thus, it is the openness of “object” mentioned in (1) that allows for the incompatible optional languages mentioned in (3); those incompatible optional languages imply that there is no scheme-independent fact of the matter as to the number of objects mentioned in (2); and it thus that there is no single totality of objects, temporally or atemporally, mentioned in (1).

It is important to see the centrality of the idea of (apparently) incompatible descriptions for conceptual relativity. In the next chapter I will focus on evaluating the possibility of there being incompatible descriptions or optional languages in the sense required by Putnam's conceptual relativity.

Objects and the Existential Quantifier

A key part of Putnam's views on conceptual relativity concern the concept of *existence*, which Putnam takes to be connected to the concept *object*. As we saw above, after considering a mereological sums example of conceptual relativity, Putnam writes:

...it is no accident that metaphysical realism cannot really recognize the phenomenon of conceptual relativity—for that phenomenon turns on the fact that *the logical primitives themselves, and in particular the notions of object and existence, have a multitude of different uses rather than one absolute 'meaning'*.⁴¹⁷

More recently, he writes:

⁴¹⁷ Putnam 1987, 19.

the reason for the mereological sums examples was to illustrate how there can be a choice between different uses of exist, on some of which it is true to say that mereological sums exist while on others it is false.⁴¹⁸

And:

In sum, we can think of our words and thoughts as having determinate reference to objects (when it is clear what sort of “objects” we are talking about and what vocabulary we are using); but there is no one fixed sense of “reference” involved. Accepting the ubiquity of conceptual relativity does not require us to deny that truth genuinely depends on the behavior of things distant from the speaker, but the nature of the dependence changes as the kinds of language games we invent change.⁴¹⁹

The overarching theme here is that language, its relation to the world, and the “way” things exist do not have one fixed essence or form. It is clear that Putnam takes the meaning, language/world relations, and existence of objects to be determinate “in the stream of life.”⁴²⁰ Relative to a conceptual scheme, which exists itself as a part of our practices, actions, dispositions, etc., there are determinate “facts” about relations, objects, reference, etc. Our language does not simply mirror nature; reality does not force a single true description of itself upon us.

While the foregoing is somewhat vague and too general, we can say more specifically that according to Putnam, in an important sense, “existence” and “exist” are not univocal. The existential quantifier, “ \exists ,” does not have only one interpretation, one use. In “Wittgenstein on Reference and Relativism,” Putnam writes the following:

⁴¹⁸ Putnam 2004b, 240.

⁴¹⁹ Putnam 1994, 308-309.

⁴²⁰ Wittgenstein writes: “For words have meaning only in the stream of life.” (Wittgenstein 1980, §687) This is something with which Putnam certainly has sympathies. A section in *The Threefold Cord*, pp87ff, in which Putnam discusses context sensitivity is titled “words have meaning only in the stream of life.” We looked at this notion of context sensitivity in chapter 3.

While the notion of a family-resemblance word has become commonplace, many people miss Wittgenstein's point: as Rush Rhees emphasized a long time ago, Wittgenstein was not just making a low-level empirical observation to the effect that in addition to words like *scarlet*, which apply to things all of which are similar in a particular respect, there are words like *game* which apply to things which are not all similar in some one respect. Wittgenstein was primarily thinking not of words like *game*, but of words like *language* and *reference*. It is precisely the big philosophical notions to which Wittgenstein wishes to apply the notion of a family resemblance. On Rush Rhees's reading (and I am convinced he is right), what Wittgenstein is telling us is that referring uses don't have an "essence"; there isn't some one thing which can be called referring. There are overlapping similarities between one sort of referring and the next, that is all. This is why, for example, Wittgenstein is not puzzled, as many philosophers are, about how we can "refer" to abstract entities. After all, we are not causally attached to the number three, so how can we refer to it? Indeed, do we know that there is such an object at all? For Wittgenstein the fact is that the use of number words is simply a different use from the use of words like *cow*. Stop calling three an "object" or an "abstract entity" and look at the way number words are used, is his advice.⁴²¹

The correctness of Putnam's interpretation of Wittgenstein aside, it is clear that Putnam follows what he takes to be Wittgenstein's "advice." So, for example, when the Carnapian says there are only three objects and the Polish Logician says there are seven objects, not only are they using "object" in different ways, but the sense in which those objects exist is supposed to be different as well.

Part of what motivates Putnam is what he sees as the need to discredit scientific materialism, which he often takes to be associated with realism. One of his main targets is Quine: "Quine proposes to reduce logic, mathematics, and philosophy itself to

⁴²¹ Putnam 1992a, 167-168.

physics.”⁴²² And Quine does often emphasize the primacy of the physical.⁴²³ For example:

In a contest for sheer systematic utility to science, the notion of physical object still leads the field. On this score alone, therefore, one might still put a premium on explanations that appeal to physical objects and not to abstract ones, even if abstract object be grudgingly admitted too for their efficacy elsewhere in the theory.⁴²⁴

As to which objects we are committed to, Quine writes:

In our canonical notation of quantification, then, we find the restoration of law and order. Insofar as we adhere to this notation, the objects we are to be understood to admit are precisely the objects which we reckon to the universe of values over which the bound variables of quantification are to be considered to range. Such is simply the intended sense of the quantifiers ‘ (x) ’ and ‘ $(\exists x)$ ’: ‘every object x is such that’, ‘there is an object x such that’. The quantifiers are encapsulations of these specially selected, unequivocally referential idioms of ordinary language. To paraphrase a sentence into the canonical notation of quantification is, first and foremost, to make its ontic content explicit, quantification being a device for talking in general about objects.⁴²⁵

And it is to the last sentence that Putnam would surely disagree, since, *inter alia*, Putnam thinks, as we saw in chapter 3, that context is needed to make the content (ontic or

⁴²² Putnam 1983, 183.

⁴²³ Although, we should note the following from Quine:

Here we have two competing conceptual schemes, a phenomenalist one and a physicalist one. Which should prevail? Each has its advantages; each has its special simplicity in its own way. Each, I suggest, deserves to be developed. Each may be said, indeed, to be the more fundamental, though in different senses: the one is epistemologically, the other physically, fundamental (Quine 1953, 17).

⁴²⁴ Quine 1960, 238.

⁴²⁵ Quine 1960, 242.

otherwise) of statements determinate—and context is presumably not going to be captured by the quantifiers of the canonical notation. In a telling endnote, Putnam writes:

My objection to “Quine’s criterion of ontological commitment,” as this view is called, is that ontological commitment – “commitment to the existence of a kind of object” – only seems to be a determinate sort of “commitment” because it is assumed that *exist* is *univocal*: assumed, that is, that I am saying the same sort of thing when I say that the brick houses on Elm Street exist and when I say that prime numbers greater than a million exist, notwithstanding the enormous difference between the uses of words (in the case of this example, between the use of words in empirical description and in mathematics). Of course, it would be wrong to register that difference by saying, flat-footedly, that *exist* has several different meanings, in the sense of deserving several different dictionary entries. But the assumption that the meaning of words, in any conventional sense of that phrase, determines exactly what is *said* on each occasion of the use of the words reflects a picture of how language functions that I would argue is deeply misguided. (Quine would of course agree with this last remark – which makes it all the more puzzling that he is gripped by the picture of *exists* as univocal!) I think it is helpful to distinguish, in this context, between the “sense” of a word and its “meaning.”⁴²⁶

As we saw, this distinction between linguistic meaning and the sense of a word is one of the main features of Putnam’s conception of optional languages and conceptual relativity.

Interestingly, Quine takes Gilbert Ryle to task for saying something similar to what Putnam claims in the last quotation. Quine writes:

There are philosophers who stoutly maintain that ‘true’ said of logical or mathematical laws and ‘true’ said of weather predictions or suspects’ confession are two usages of an ambiguous term ‘true’. There are philosophers who stoutly maintain that ‘exists’ said of numbers, classes, and the like and ‘exists’ said of material objects are two usages of an ambiguous term ‘exists’. What mainly baffles me is the stoutness of their maintenance. What can they possibly count as evidence? Why not view ‘true’ as unambiguous but very general, and recognize the difference between true logical laws and true confessions as difference

⁴²⁶ Putnam 1999, 179 endnote 12.

merely between logical laws and confessions? And correspondingly for existence?⁴²⁷

In a footnote, Quine tells us that he is thinking of, for example, the following passage from Ryle:

It is perfectly proper to say, in one logical tone of voice, that there exist minds and to say, in another logical tone of voice, that there exist bodies. But these expressions do not indicate two different species of existence, for 'existence' is not a generic word like 'coloured' or 'sexed'. They indicate two different senses of 'exist', somewhat as 'rising' has different senses in 'the tide is rising', 'hopes are rising', and 'the average age of death is rising'. A man would be thought to be making a poor joke who said that three things are now rising, namely the tide, hopes and the average age of death. It would be just as good or bad a joke to say that there exist prime numbers and Wednesdays and public opinions and naives; or that there exist both minds and bodies.⁴²⁸

In this passage from Ryle, we find a distinction between meaning and sense that is akin to the one we find in Putnam; and particularly striking is the similarity between Ryle's saying that the senses in which prime numbers and Wednesdays and public opinions exist are different and Putnam's finding problematic that "it is assumed that *exist* is *univocal*: assumed, that is, that I am saying the same sort of thing when I say that the brick houses on Elm Street exist and when I say that prime numbers greater than a million exist...."

Quine quite rightly asks what evidence there is to say that "exists" is ambiguous or has different senses. Part of Ryle's answer seems to be his appeal to the simple fact that there would be a strange sort of equivocation going on to say that the tide, hopes, and age of death are all rising in the same way. Part of Putnam's response is, of course, to point to his examples of conceptual relativity: there is not just one sense of "object"—

⁴²⁷ Quine 1960, 131.

⁴²⁸ Ryle 1948, 23.

mereological sums are perfectly good objects as are apples—and as such there is not just one sense of “existence” that can be captured by the existential quantifier. In a relatively recent attempt to clarify what he means, Putnam writes:

...what logicians call “the existential quantifier,” the symbol “ $(\exists x)$,” and its ordinary language counterparts, the expressions “there are,” “there exist” and “there exists a,” “some,” etc., *do not have a single absolutely precise use but a whole family of uses.* These uses are not totally different; for example, in all of its uses the existential quantifier obeys the same logical laws, the law, for instance, that if we say that all things have a certain property, then we can infer that there is something which has that property (in logical symbols: from “ $(x)Fx$ ” we can infer “ $(\exists x)Fx$ ”), and the law that if we say that there is something which is both F and G we can infer that there is something which is F and there is something which is G (in logical symbols: from “ $(\exists x)(Fx \& Gx)$ ” we can infer “ $(\exists x)(Fx \& (\exists x)Gx)$ ” [sic]. But these properties of the existential quantifier and the related properties of its close relative the universal quantifier “ (x) ” (“for all x ”) do not fully determine how we are to use these expressions. In particular, there is nothing in the logic of existential and universal quantification to *tell us* whether we should say that mereological sums exist or don’t exist; nor is there some other science that answers this question. I suggest that we can *decide* to say either. We can, in short, create divergent uses of the existential quantifier itself, and, to some extent... we have always invented new, and in some cases divergent, uses of existential quantification.⁴²⁹

As far as I know Putnam is not explicit as to whether he endorses an objectual or substitutional interpretation of the quantifiers; however, I take it that he endorses an objectual interpretation, according to which, “ $(\exists x) Fx$ ” is interpreted as ‘For at least one

⁴²⁹ Putnam 2004a, 38. We should note, however, that Quine’s criterion of ontological commitment and his use of the existential quantifier (and its logic) to express those commitments are not meant to tell us what exists and what doesn’t exist. Rather, the idea is that by using Quine’s criterion of ontological commitment we can figure out the entities to which a theory is committed, at which point it is still an open question as to whether that theory is true and whether those entities actually exist. Quine doesn’t think that the “actual” existence of the entities a theory is committed to is determined by the logic of the quantifiers. Even if we accepted the idea that existence is univocal, that would not tell us whether or not trees exist—and we don’t look to science either to tell us whether we should say trees exist.

object, x , in the domain, D , $\exists x$.”⁴³⁰ And Putnam’s point, then, is that that notion of *object* in “For at least one object...” is left open. There are different senses in which something is an object and thus different senses in which the existential quantifier can be interpreted.

Quine, of course, would not be convinced. We already saw earlier in this chapter where Putnam takes it that Quine would perhaps allow that speaking of mereological sums might be something like a useful make believe, but as long as we can “translate” or paraphrase away the Polish Logician’s talk into that of the Carnapian’s, then mereological sums don’t really exist.⁴³¹ It is not my purpose here to try to argue for or against Putnam’s position—that will happen in the next chapter. However, because of the importance of these issues, I do want to look briefly at why Van Inwagen thinks that existence is univocal.

After distinguishing Quine’s ontological question—“What is there?”—from the meta-ontological question—“What are we asking when we ask ‘What is there?’”—Van Inwagen sets out five theses that he thinks constitute a Quinean meta-ontology.⁴³² The first is that being is the same as existence. Regarding the identity of *being* and *existence*:

This thesis seems to me to be so obvious that I have difficulty in seeing how to argue for it. I can say only this: if you think that there are things that do not exist, give me an example of one. The right response to your example will be either, “That does too exist,” or “There is no such thing as that.”⁴³³

⁴³⁰ Haack 1978, 42. Though he needn’t necessarily endorse just one over the other. As Haack does, he could say that in some contexts one may be more appropriate than the other. See Haack 1978, 42ff.

⁴³¹ For a good discussion of and reasons for rejecting Quine’s method of “translating away” certain apparent ontological commitments, see Alston 1958.

⁴³² Van Inwagen 2001, 13.

⁴³³ Van Inwagen 2001, 16.

Leaving aside whether Van Inwagen is right about the identity of being and existence, the next thesis he sets out is, in fact, that being (existence) is univocal.⁴³⁴ The univocality of existence is supposed to follow from the identity of being and existence. It is not entirely clear why this follows, for if existence and being are not identical, why would that entail that existence is non-univocal? Be that as it may, he points out that some people are attracted to the idea that existence is not univocal, that it means something different when attributed, e.g., to physical objects versus minds versus supernatural beings versus numbers: “This is evidently an extremely attractive position. Undergraduates fall effortlessly into it, and it is very hard to convince anyone who subscribes to it that it is false, or even that it is obviously not true.”⁴³⁵ As a first attempt to show that it is at least not obviously true, he gives the following reasons. No one thinks that number words like “three” mean something different when applied to different kinds of things. While novels and trees are quite different, if there are three trees and three novels, then the number of trees is equal to the number of novels. The point is supposed to be that existence and number are closely connected. Saying that centaurs don’t exist is very much like saying that the number of centaurs is 0; whereas to say that trees exist is to say that there is at least 1 tree. According to Van Inwagen, “The univocacy of number and the intimate connection between number and existence should convince us that there is at least very good reason to think that existence is univocal.”⁴³⁶

⁴³⁴ The other three are that being is not an activity, the single sense of being or existence is adequately captured by the existential quantifier of formal logic, and the last concerns the best way to answer the ontological question.

⁴³⁵ Van Inwagen 2001, 16-17.

⁴³⁶ Van Inwagen 2001, 17.

On Putnam's behalf, however, there seems to be something wrong with Van Inwagen's reasoning here. First he says that number words are univocal, they don't change meaning when applied to different kinds of things. Second he makes a connection between number and existence by saying that the existence of a kind requires at least one member of that kind. But it just isn't clear how these two points come together to count against the idea that existence is non-univocal. For example, the ontological status of a play, e.g., *Romeo and Juliet* is a bit strange in comparison to, say, the ontological status of an apple. Does the play consist of the various physical copies of its text, its performances, or something else?⁴³⁷ However, the differences in ontology between *Romeo and Juliet* and an apple have nothing to do with the univocacy of number. There may be only one play by Shakespeare "starring" Romeo and Juliet, and there may be only one apple on the table, or there may be no play by Shakespeare called *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* and there may be no apples left in the world, but none of this speaks to the ontological differences between plays and apples.

Van Inwagen next considers the passage by Ryle quoted earlier, focusing on the importance Ryle puts on the awkwardness of saying "There exist prime numbers and Wednesdays and public opinions and navies."⁴³⁸ For Ryle, we are supposed to see that there is something odd about saying they all exist (*simpliciter*)—what we should see is that they don't exist in the same way, as the existence of a university isn't the same as the existence of a particular building on campus. Van Inwagen tries to explain away the "silliness," as he calls it, of saying in one breath that all those things exist. First, saying

⁴³⁷ This is not to say that the ontology of an apple is necessarily straightforward or unproblematic.

⁴³⁸ Van Inwagen 2001, 17.

“There exist Wednesdays” sound strange by itself. Second, Van Inwagen thinks it unlikely that there is a natural sounding sentence that includes all of those elements. Further, he quotes two examples from print media which are similar to Ryle’s example but which don’t jar us in the same way. Here is one example:

In the novel of a major Soviet prose writer who died recently the main characters are blinded and start to suffocate when the peat bogs around Moscow begin burning. The peat bog fires actually exist, but then so does Brezhnev’s regime.⁴³⁹

However, I don’t find that a few examples that don’t jar us somehow negate Ryle’s example that does, if one does find it jarring. But Van Inwagen concludes that Ryle has not made any case against the univocal nature of existence; further, Van Inwagen knows “of no argument for this thesis that is even faintly plausible.”⁴⁴⁰

I will consider in the next chapter Van Inwagen’s objections to Putnam’s mereological sums example—so it is not the case that he is just ignoring Putnam. However, given the above reasons against the non-univocacy of existence, I doubt that Putnam would be convinced. As I have tried to indicate, despite my disagreements with Putnam’s account of conceptual relativity, I do not find Van Inwagen’s objections very clear or convincing.

One final point here is that while it seems that Putnam’s denial of existence’s being univocal is tied up with his views on conceptual relativity, one need not endorse conceptual relativity in order to think that existence is non-univocal. Ryle, of course, is a prime example of this. But we also saw Putnam denying the univocality of existence,

⁴³⁹ Van Inwagen 2001, 18.

⁴⁴⁰ Van Inwagen 2001, 18.

absent conceptual relativity, when he claimed that there is a difference between the way in which houses exist and the way in which numbers exist.

Concluding Remarks

While it is not entirely clear how far and wide Putnam thinks conceptual relativity is to be found—as we saw he sometimes writes as if it occurs quite regularly in philosophy and other times he claims that it is limited to formalizable cases in science and mathematics—it is clear that Putnam thinks it counts against realism. Since there is no scheme-independent fact of the matter about the number of objects that exist, there can be no correspondence between language and representation-independent reality. Further, for Putnam, it turns out that existence itself is non-univocal. The objects spoken of by the Polish Logician don't exist in the same way as those spoken of by the Carnapian. However, as I indicated, while Putnam takes conceptual relativity to entail the non-univocacy of existence, the entailment does not go in the other direction.

As I have tried to make clear, Putnam's conclusion that, e.g., there is no fact of the matter concerning the number of objects that exist, requires some kind of incompatibility that would keep us from being able to conjoin the Carnapian's and Polish Logician's statements into one description. The main task of the next chapter is to investigate whether the required incompatibility is possible. Among other reasons, I will argue conceptual relativity falls through on precisely this point: the required kind of incompatibility cannot be had.

CHAPTER FIVE

**THE CONSISTENCY DILEMMA, PROBLEMS WITH UNRESTRICTED
MEREOLGY, AND THE PROBLEM OF SORTAL TERMS**

We finally come to a critical evaluation of Putnam's account of conceptual relativity. This chapter is divided into three sections. In section one, I consider what Lynch calls the consistency dilemma, which every purported example of conceptual relativity faces. I argue that Putnam's views on conceptual relativity fall prey to the second horn of the dilemma. Therefore, his attempt to hold that there are (in some sense) incompatible descriptions of the "same" state of affairs is untenable.⁴⁴¹ In section two, I call into question Putnam's views on mereological sums, specifically the claim that *any* two concrete objects are themselves an object. In section three, I argue that since "object," "thing," "individual," and "entity" are not true sortal terms, Putnam's mereological sums example fails to undermine alethic realism.

Section One: The Consistency Dilemma

What if one person says that it is 32 degrees outside and another says that it is 0 degrees outside? There may not be any real conflict, for the former person could be using the Fahrenheit scale and the latter the Celsius scale—in which case they are using different systems of measurement to describe the same state of affairs.⁴⁴² However, what are we to say concerning the Polish Logician's mereological use of "object" and the Carnapian's use of "object"? In what way is this case different from the temperature

⁴⁴¹ Putnam attempts to distance himself from the idea conceptual relativity requires any strong sense of incompatibility. Nevertheless, as I discussed at the end of chapter 4 and as I will discuss below, he cannot really distance himself from the claims of incompatibility without giving up the significant "anti-realist" conclusions of conceptual relativity.

⁴⁴² This example, though not the way it is used, is taken from Lynch 1998b, 23.

case? We might say that in the temperature case we use “temperature” in the same sense whether we use a Fahrenheit or Celsius scale. In the object case, Putnam claims that the sense of “object” changes depending on whether we are speaking from within the Polish Logician’s optional language or the Carnapian’s optional language. But it is unclear whether we should say they are operating with two different concepts of *object*. Putnam, for example, writes concerning the Polish Logician that “when he says that there are such objects (or such entities) as mereological sums, he counts, at least for linguistic purposes, as simply using ‘object’ (‘entity’) in the normal (Anglo-American) way.”⁴⁴³ Putnam, it would seem, needs to say that the Carnapian and Polish Logician are using “object” ordinarily, otherwise they won’t be giving different answers to the same question—How many objects are there? If that question means something (entirely?) different in each optional language, then we wouldn’t have the implication that there is no fact of the matter as to how many objects there are independently of a scheme. If the questions are not the same, then assuming each question is answered truly, there will not be any conflict, just as there wouldn’t be conflict when truly answering the questions ‘What time is it?’ and ‘What kind of shirt is that?’ There is potentially a serious problem here for Putnam’s position. It seems, at least on the surface, that if you have two different optional languages, and if what you say or ask is relative to an optional language, then you won’t have conflict between what is said relative to one scheme and what is said relative to another. As Fumerton points out:

If different people with different conceptual frameworks merely mean different things, then the world that exists independently of

⁴⁴³ Putnam 2004b, 240. However, given what we saw in chapter 3, the “using” he speaks of here can’t be “use” in the sense of “sense” but rather “linguistic meaning,” since his whole point is that the Polish Logician is giving a different sense to “object.”

its representations can unproblematically make true, in a realist sense, the different (but not incompatible) claims made about it.⁴⁴⁴

And this is why Putnam is concerned to insist that the Polish Logician and the Carnapian do not mean different things by “object” or “exist.” But if they don’t mean different things, then it would seem that we have a straight contradiction between the one saying, “There are three objects” and the other saying, “There are seven objects.”

Lynch calls this seemingly forced option between saying that they either mean something different or they are contradicting each other the “consistency dilemma.” If we have two statements, A and B, each relative to a different scheme, A and B are either consistent or not. If they are not consistent, then Putnam is committing himself to the truth of contradictions. If they are consistent, they are either 1) expressing the same truths just in different languages or notations, or 2) about completely different things.⁴⁴⁵ This is the dilemma that Putnam’s conceptual relativity faces.

As we saw in chapter 3, Putnam’s attempted way out of this dilemma involves making a distinction between linguistic meaning and use in a particular context. Nevertheless, as I will argue, the consistency dilemma reappears at the level of “use in a particular context.” In the end, the different purported examples of conceptual relativity involve people either speaking past each other or expressing the same truths in different notations. To show this, I will look at five different attempts to make sense of the kind of incompatibility Putnam needs to argue that conceptual relativity implies that there is no clear division between the factual and the conventional—that we go wrong if we think that truth consists in correspondence between language (convention) and world (facts).

⁴⁴⁴ Fumerton 2002, 75.

⁴⁴⁵ Lynch 1998b, 29.

A First Attempt at Making Sense of the Incompatibility

Required for Putnam's Account of

Conceptual Relativity

In his "Reply to Jennifer Case," Putnam writes that conceptual relativity certainly does not involve the claim that "*genuinely* incompatible theories can be true."⁴⁴⁶ But if the incompatibility involved is not *genuine*, then what is it? In *Renewing Philosophy*, Putnam discusses an example of conceptual relativity concerning whether space-time should be seen as dividing into points as concrete particulars or points as mere limits. He writes:

If the sentence, "points are mere limits" is a contrary of the sentence "points are not limits but parts of space", even when the first sentence occurs in a systematic scheme for describing physical reality and the second occurs in another systematic scheme for describing physical reality *even though the two schemes are in practice thoroughly equivalent*, then we are in trouble indeed. But the whole point of saying that the two schemes are in practice thoroughly equivalent is that, far from leading us to incompatible predictions or incompatible actions, it makes no difference to our predictions or actions which of the two schemes we use.⁴⁴⁷

But if the statements really are so equivalent, it is terribly unclear why we should take them to be incompatible in a way that would preclude us from either conjoining them or saying they are just different ways of saying the same thing. In a more recent work, Putnam again addresses the issue of incompatibility. He writes that the examples of conceptual relativity that he has used:

all involve statements that *appear* to be contradictory (if we simply conjoin them, ignoring the different uses that they have in their

⁴⁴⁶ Putnam 2001, 436. Emphasis in the original.

⁴⁴⁷ Putnam 1992a, 116-117.

respective optional languages, we get a contradiction), but *are not in fact contradictory*, if we understand each of them as belonging to a different optional language, and recognize that the two optional languages involve the choice of incompatible conventions. *What are “incompatible” are not the statements themselves, which cannot simply be conjoined, but the conventions* [my emphasis].⁴⁴⁸

So, the idea seems to be that the statements cannot be conjoined because they each belong to, or have their content in part determined by, a different set of conventions, i.e., different optional languages, where those different optional languages are incompatible with each other.

We should ask, then, in what sense the conventions or optional languages can be incompatible with each other. Taking the example concerning the existence of mereological sums, it seems the Carnapian and Polish Logician optional languages are incompatible if the conventions are incompatible. In chapter 3, we saw what he means by this. According to Putnam, if we choose to speak like the Polish Logician and say “There are seven objects,” then we are adopting as a conventional truth, “Mereological sums are objects.” If we choose to speak like the Carnapian and say “There are three objects,” then we are adopting as a conventional truth, “Mereological sums are not objects.” These kinds of conventional truths are not, according to Putnam, statements of fact.⁴⁴⁹ They are explicit formulations of the sense being given to “object,” how “object” is to be used. These conventional “truths” are certainly inconsistent, since the one denies and the other affirms that mereological sums are objects. So, perhaps this is the way in which the *optional languages* are incompatible. However, if that is right, then the only way that the *statements* are “incompatible” is in the sense that you cannot use the word

⁴⁴⁸ Putnam 2004a, 46.

⁴⁴⁹ Putnam 1994b, 247.

“object” in both ways at the same time. That is, you cannot use “object” as the Carnapian uses it and as the Polish Logician uses it with the same token use of “object.” Thus, when presented with x_1, x_2, x_3 , one cannot say “There are seven objects and I am using ‘object’ as both the Carnapian and Polish Logician use it,” for the way the Carnapian uses “object” there are three objects, not seven.

If this is all the incompatibility amounts to, then it is not going to amount to the incompatibility that Putnam needs for true but incompatible descriptions of the “same” state of affairs. If it is unclear that there are two different uses of “object,” then it may sound odd, even downright contradictory, but there is no real problem in saying, “The Carnapian counted three objects and the Polish Logician counted seven objects.” There is no problem as long as what is meant by the latter is “The Carnapian counted three objects_{non-merological use} and the Polish Logician counted seven objects_{mereological use}.” Once it is clear how each token of “object” is being used, we can see that there is not the incompatibility required to deny the possibility of conjoining their statements into a more complete description of the world.

Notice that this conclusion does not require denying Putnam’s distinction between linguistic meaning and use in a particular context—what I will call his “meaning/use distinction” from here on. It does not involve an appeal to differences in linguistic meaning in order to say that the Polish Logician and Carnapian are just talking past each other. Rather, differences of use in a particular context yield the result that the Carnapian and Polish Logician are each using “object” in such a way that once we realize their uses are different, we *can* unproblematically conjoin their statements.⁴⁵⁰

⁴⁵⁰ This does not, however, mean that they *should* be conjoined. Whether they should be conjoined into a more complete true description depends on whether they are both true. By claiming that they are

In order to see more clearly the way in which I claim we can conjoin the Carnapian and Polish Logician's statements, consider an objection. Horgan and Timmons object to *relativizing* the content of each statement to its respective optional language as a way of dissolving the apparent incompatibility of the statements. The purported objection is that relativizing the content implies that part of the content of each use of "object" contains *implicit* reference to the optional language to which it is relative. So, for example, if the Carnapian's "There are three objects" really just meant "Relative to the Carnapian scheme, there are three objects," and the same *mutatis mutandis* for the Polish Logician's statement, then they *would be* talking past each other. The incompatibility would only be on the surface. Horgan and Timmons argue, however, that implicit relativization is not a part of the content of either statement. Rather, the Carnapian and Polish Logician are each using "object" *from within* a different optional language, which means that each use of "object" is governed by different semantic conventions.⁴⁵¹

However, in the context of Putnam's conceptual relativity, it is not clear that there is any real sense to saying that the content of their statements is *internal* and *not* relative to different optional languages. This is for two reasons. First, since the Carnapian and Polish Logician are both speaking natural languages, e.g., English, it is not as if their statements are really said "from within" different languages. Yes, we might say they are using different optional languages, but all that means is that the use of terms like "object"

conjoinable I am not claiming that they are actually both true—the truth of the Polish Logician's statement depends on whether and in what sense there are mereological sums. We will address this issue in part II of this chapter.

⁴⁵¹ Horgan and Timmons 2002, 84.

and “exist,” both English terms with other natural language counterparts, have additional or different semantic conventions governing their use. And this leads us to the second reason, namely, that the content of their statements is, whether made implicitly or explicitly, what it is because of, i.e., relative to, the different semantic conventions. So, even if it is better to say that those semantic conventions are not implicitly a part of the content of the statements, each statement’s content is still what it is because of the semantic conventions governing the use of “object” and “exist.”

*A Second Attempt at Making Sense of the
Incompatibility Required for Putnam’s Account of
Conceptual Relativity: Horgan and Timmons*

In “Conceptual Relativity and Metaphysical Realism,” Horgan and Timmons have two primary aims.⁴⁵² The first is to make sense of the phenomenon of conceptual relativity; the second is to show how that phenomenon is consistent with some form of metaphysical realism. In pursuit of both aims they discuss the mereological sums example and attempt to make sense of the problematic notion of incompatible yet true descriptions. It is a useful piece to consider, since they explicitly acknowledge the difficulty of claiming that it is possible to have descriptions that are both incompatible and simultaneously true. They refer to these two aspects of conceptual relativity as “affirmatory conflict” and “mutual correctness” respectively.⁴⁵³

They acknowledge that, on the one hand, if one endorses the idea that the Carnapian’s and Polish Logician’s statements involve affirmatory conflict, then one is

⁴⁵² Horgan and Timmons 2002.

⁴⁵³ Horgan and Timmons 2002, 75-76.

naturally led to conclude that they cannot be mutually correct. On the other hand, if one endorses the idea that the statements are mutually correct, then one is naturally led to conclude that they cannot involve affirmatory conflict. Therefore, conceptual relativity, which requires there to be both affirmatory conflict and mutual correctness concerning the same sets of statements, is not a true phenomenon. However, since they hold that the phenomenon of conceptual relativity is real, they claim that there must be something wrong with the seemingly sound reasoning that led to its rejection: “When confronted with a philosophical puzzle of this sort, the thing to do is to look for one or more underlying assumptions—ones that, while perhaps common and initially plausible, should be challenged. What are they?”⁴⁵⁴

The assumptions they question, in a way analogous to Putnam’s questioning certain assumptions about the applicability of the concept of *linguistic meaning* to the phenomenon of conceptual relativity, concern the conditions of identity for both concepts and meanings. They distinguish between “invariantist” and “variantist” views of concepts and meanings. The distinction concerns “semantic standards that govern the correct employment of concepts and words—that is, standards that determine the conditions under which statements employing the words, and judgments employing the concepts those words express, are true.”⁴⁵⁵ It is the invariantist view, they claim, that leads to a rejection of conceptual relativity.

Concerning *concepts*, the *invariantist* view holds:

I₁ If the semantic standards governing the correct employment of concept C₁, as employed by person P₁ at time t₁, differ from the

⁴⁵⁴ Horgan and Timmons 2002, 77.

⁴⁵⁵ Horgan and Timmons 2002, 77.

semantic standards governing the correct employment of concept C_2 , as employed by person P_2 at time t_2 , then $C_1 \neq C_2$.⁴⁵⁶

Thus, if each person is employing a concept in accordance with different semantic standards, then each person is employing a different concept.

Concerning *meanings*, the *invariantist* view holds:

I₂ If the semantic standards for the correct employment of word W , as it is used by person P_1 at time t_1 , differ from the semantic standards for the correct employment of W , as it is used by person P_2 at time t_2 , then the meaning of W as used by P_1 at $t_1 \neq$ the meaning of W as used by P_2 at t_2 .⁴⁵⁷

Thus, if each person is using a word in accordance with different semantic standards, then the meaning of that word as employed by each person is different. Under the invariantist view, then, if semantic standards differ, then so do the concepts and word-meanings involved.

The rejection of the phenomenon of conceptual relativity also requires an assumption concerning genuine affirmatory conflict. Horgan and Timmons identify that assumption as:

DI All cases of genuine affirmatory conflict—cases in which what person P_1 affirms at t_1 conflicts with what person P_2 affirms at t_2 —involve straightforward inconsistency between what P_1 and P_2 are thinking or saying.⁴⁵⁸

They call this the “direct-inconsistency conception” of affirmatory conflict. I take it by “inconsistency” they mean that the affirmed statements are contradictory or at least contraries.

⁴⁵⁶ Horgan and Timmons 2002, 77.

⁴⁵⁷ Horgan and Timmons 2002, 77.

⁴⁵⁸ Horgan and Timmons 2002, 78.

In order to make sense of the phenomenon of conceptual relativity, Horgan and Timmons propose to reject assumption I₁, I₂, and DI. In place of I₁ and I₂, they propose a variantist view of concepts and meaning. This variantist view is supposed to make sense of the Carnapian's and Polish Logician's statements both involving affirmatory conflict (though not that of DI) and mutual correctness. The core idea of the variantist view is that *concepts and meanings can stay the same under modest variations in semantic standards governing the usage of a concept or word*. That is, semantic standards may differ without affecting the identity of a concept or the meaning of a word. Horgan and Timmons adopt a term from Derrida to refer to these identity preserving differences; they call it "différance." Thus, "an identity-preserving difference in two uses of a given concept, or in the meaning of a given word, is a *différance* in concepts (or in meaning)."⁴⁵⁹

With this notion of *différance* in hand, they replace I₁ and I₂ with the following respectively:

V₁ The semantic standards for the correct employment of C₁, as C₁ is employed by person P₁ at time t₁, may differ in certain permissible ways from the semantic standards for the correct employment of concept C₂, as C₂ is employed by person P₂ at time t₂, while C₁ = C₂. When this occurs we have *différance* in concepts.⁴⁶⁰

V₂ The semantic standards for the correct employment of word W, as it is used by person P₁ at time t₁, may differ in certain permissible ways from the semantic standards for the correct employment of W, as it is used by person P₂ at time t₂, and yet the meaning of P₁'s word W = the meaning of P₂'s word W. When this occurs we have a *différance* in meanings.⁴⁶¹

⁴⁵⁹ Horgan and Timmons 2002, 79.

⁴⁶⁰ Horgan and Timmons 2002, 82.

⁴⁶¹ Horgan and Timmons 2002, 82.

According to Horgan and Timmons, an illustration of this variantist view that is germane to conceptual relativity concerns the concept of *flatness*. Horgan and Timmons cite an exchange between David Lewis and Peter Unger. Lewis objects to what he takes to be Unger's claim that almost nothing is flat. The idea is supposed to be that anything that you claim is flat can be shown to not be flat. How? Because "flat" is an "absolute term" and there is something else that you would agree is flatter than what you originally called "flat." Presumably this could be repeated a number of times. According to Lewis, one could object to the claim that "flat" is an absolute term; however, Lewis agrees that it is an absolute term. He takes another approach in objecting to Unger's claims. Here is that response with Horgan and Timmons comments:

The right response to Unger, I suggest, is that he is changing the score on you. When he says that the desk is flatter than the pavement, what he says is acceptable only under raised standards of precision. Under the original standards the bumps on the pavement were too small to be relevant either to the question whether the pavement is flat or to the question whether the pavement is flatter than the desk. (Lewis 1983, pp. 245-46)

We claim, with Lewis, that the semantically correct use of the notion of flatness depends upon certain implicit, contextually operative, standards of precision—standards that can permissibly vary somewhat from one usage to another. The standards of precision that govern a particular use constitute the specific current setting of what may be called the *precision parameter* for flatness. As the passage from Lewis makes clear, this parameter is contextually variable: it can take on different specific settings in particular contexts.⁴⁶²

⁴⁶² Horgan and Timmons 2002, 81.

Thus, the semantic standards for the correct employment of the concept of *flatness* and the word “flat” may vary in certain contexts while preserving the identity of the concept of *flatness* and the meaning of “flat.”

The question remains as to whether the variantist picture of concepts and meaning provides for the kind of affirmatory conflict that does not involve contradiction but nevertheless precludes us from conjoining the Carnapian’s and Polish’ Logician’s statements. Above we saw how Horgan and Timmons want to avoid claiming that the content of the Carnapian’s and Polish Logician’s statements is a product of implicit relativization to different schemes or semantic standards. Let us look at how they do understand the affirmatory conflict.

Horgan and Timmons appeal to the above notion of a parameter governing the precise use of a term in a particular context. The idea is that the parameters for the use of one concept exclude its conjunction with the use of the “same” concept governed by different parameters:

There is no way to formulate the respective claims of person P_1 at time t_1 and person P_2 at time t_2 such that a single person at a single time could correctly affirm both statements (as so formulated) and thus could correctly affirm their conjunction. As we will put it, the two statements are not *correctly co-affirmable*.⁴⁶³

Relating this to the mereological sums example, the idea is presumably that the Carnapian’s use of “object” is governed by one set of parameters and the Polish Logician’s use of “object” is governed by another set of parameters. These different parameters are *modestly* different semantic standards so that what we have is a *différance*, not a *difference*, in concepts or meaning. Given all of this, the claim is that the

⁴⁶³ Horgan and Timmons 2002, 84.

Carnapian, e.g., could not say, “There are three objects and there are seven objects.”

Why? Because each token of “object” is governed by different semantic parameters.

Why is that a problem for the conjunction of the statements by a single person at one time? Horgan and Timmons’s answer:

the various permissible settings for contextually variable semantic parameters are *mutually exclusionary*; i.e., for a single person P at a single time t, no more than one parameter-setting for a given concept or word can semantically govern correct usage, by P at t, of that concept or word.⁴⁶⁴

So the Carnapian’s concept of *object* and the Polish Logician’s concept of *object* are identical concepts. There is merely a *différance* in the different counts. If person P at time t uses the concept of *object*, P can only use that concept according to one set of parameters. So, if P affirmed “There are three objects and there are seven objects,” then P would either be using “object” according to a single set of parameters, and therefore be saying something false, or P would be trying to use the same concept according to two different sets of parameters, which is something that cannot be done. However, *pace* Horgan and Timmons, *it is not at all clear why the latter cannot be done*.

For the moment, let us agree with Horgan and Timmons and say that the Carnapian and Polish Logician are using the same concept of *object* but their different uses are merely ones involving a *différance* in concepts. This is supposed to mean that the Carnapian can truthfully affirm “There are three objects” and at the same time the Polish Logician can affirm “There are seven objects.” But neither can say, “There are three objects *and* there are seven objects,” without saying something false or incoherent. But why would the shift from two mouths to one mouth make the claims nonconjoinable?

⁴⁶⁴ Horgan and Timmons 2002, 85.

The reason is supposed to be that the same concept cannot be governed by different semantic parameters at the same time. However, there is an ambiguity in the notion of “the same time.” That is, what counts as “the same time” might vary. Standing on only one foot at a *single instant*, you could not stand on both your left and right foot. However, standing on only one foot at a *single yoga session*, during one part of the session you could stand on your left foot and at another stand on your right foot. So, of course, you cannot use “object” according to two different semantic parameters at the same time in the sense of the same instant, e.g., the same token use of “object.” But why should this preclude one, on pain of inconsistency or incoherence, from using the same concept according to different semantic parameters as long as the that concept was expressed by different token instances of a word? So, of course, the Carnapian cannot say truthfully or coherently, “There are three and seven objects,” when “object” is governed by different semantic standards. But there is not a problem having the same concept used according to different semantic parameters in the same sentence if we have more than one token of “object”: “There are three objects_{non-merological parameters} and there are seven objects_{mereological parameters}.” To take the example with “flat,” we can acknowledge that the same concept of *flatness* can be used according to different semantic parameters. Thus, even though the pavement is flat according to one set of parameters and not flat according to the set of parameters in which the desk is flat, that in no way precludes one person from saying “The desk is flat and the pavement is flat,” or even “The pavement is flat and it is not flat,” so long as there are different standards governing the use of each token of “flat.”

This issue concerning the inability to use the same token of “object” in different ways was discussed above in the first attempt to make sense of Putnam’s claims concerning incompatible but equally true descriptions. As there, so here: once we have more than one token of “object” there is no incompatibility. The Carnapian can say, “There are three objects” while the Polish Logician says, “There are seven objects” because we have two tokens of “object.” So, just as two people can use the same concept according to two different semantic parameters, so can one person *as long as there is more than one token of “object” in the conjunctive sentence*. The number of people is irrelevant—it’s the number of tokens of the word expressing the concept that is all important.

***A Third Attempt at Making Sense of the
Incompatibility Required for Putnam’s Account of
Conceptual Relativity: Lynch***

In *Truth in Context*, one of Lynch’s main concerns is to make sense of Putnam’s conceptual relativity and defend it in the face of the consistency dilemma. In order to fully understand Lynch’s response to the consistency dilemma, we need to first look at the distinction he makes between *minimal* and *robust* concepts. Lynch approvingly quotes Paul Moser as saying: “People operating with different specific notions of X can still, however, understand and even intentionally use common concepts of X generally characterized. We can thus talk intelligibly of various notions of some one thing (generally characterized).”⁴⁶⁵ Moser’s example, which Lynch adopts, is that different philosophers can operate with different definitions of epistemic justification while still

⁴⁶⁵ Lynch 1998b, 66.

sharing a definition of that concept generally characterized: “In the most general sense, epistemic justification is that feature of beliefs, other than truth, that is desirable from the epistemic point of view, from which one is engaged in inquiry or seeking to know.”⁴⁶⁶

The idea, then, is that philosophers share that general characterization of epistemic justification, but go on to extend it in different ways: some offer a coherence theory of justification, others a reliabilist theory, for example. These extended views are largely incompatible, but nevertheless, the philosophers are not equivocating in regard to “justification.” Lynch takes this point to mean that we often extend concepts in incompatible ways while still being able to talk about the same thing. This discussion leads Lynch to distinguish between minimal and robust concepts.

The general distinction is that minimal concepts are without (or mostly without) metaphysical accoutrements (there is neutrality in regard to ontological nature), whereas robust concepts come with metaphysical trappings (ontological commitments). The concept of *epistemic justification* generally characterized is a minimal concept, whereas the attempts to spell it out in coherentist or reliabilist terms are attempts to give a robust concept of *epistemic justification*.⁴⁶⁷ Lynch specifies the distinction in various ways and it will be helpful to quote him here in full:

The minimal/robust distinction can be put in different ways. Put linguistically, the minimal sense of the word “*F*” does not commit the speaker to any particular ontological view on the nature of *F*s. Put adverbially, to speak minimally about *F*s, or to conceive of *F*s minimally, is to remain mute on the subject of the ultimate nature of *F*s. We can also capture the idea at the level of propositions: a proposition about *F*s is minimal to the degree to which its truth or

⁴⁶⁶ Lynch 1998b, 66.

⁴⁶⁷ Lynch does note that Alston, 1993, “maintains that there isn’t even a minimal concept of justification.” (Lynch 1998b, 163, note 10.)

falsity does not depend on the resolution of ontological debates about *F*s. True to the pluralist position I have been attempting to explain, I shall take all of these to be equally perspicuous ways of stating the same point.⁴⁶⁸

Lynch appeals to this distinction between minimal and robust concepts in attempting to answer the consistency dilemma.

The example that Lynch focuses on in replying to the consistency dilemma is a version of Putnam's mereological sums example. Imagine two people, Smith and Johnson, counting the number of objects in a bag containing three marbles. Johnson says that there are exactly three objects in the bag: x , y , and z . Smith who is a mereologist, says that there are exactly seven objects in the bag: x , y , z , $x + y$, $x + z$, $y + z$, and $x + y + z$.⁴⁶⁹

In terms of this example Lynch puts the consistency dilemma in the following terms. The fact relativist, his name for the person who endorses conceptual relativity, must find a way to affirm consistently all of the following four propositions:

- (1) Smith and Johnson are expressing distinct propositions.
 - (2) Smith and Johnson are expressing incompatible propositions.
- And yet,
- (3) Smith and Johnson are expressing true propositions.
 - (4) Smith and Johnson are *not* employing completely different concepts of "object" or "exist" or "number"; they are not talking past one another.⁴⁷⁰

As Putnam does, as well as Horgan and Timmons, Lynch attempts to make (1)-(4) coherent through a particular picture of concepts and meaning. Appealing to the minimal/robust concept distinction, Lynch claims that Smith and Johnson are using the

⁴⁶⁸ Lynch 1998b, 68-69.

⁴⁶⁹ Lynch 1998b, 78.

⁴⁷⁰ Lynch 1998b, 82.

same minimal concept of *object* and extending it in different, robust directions. This is, of course, very similar to Putnam's move of distinguishing between linguistic meaning and what I have called use in a particular context. As Lynch does, let us go through (1) through (4), though not in that order, and examine in what sense each could be true.

“(1) Smith and Johnson are expressing distinct propositions.” Smith says, “There are exactly seven objects in the bag” and Johnson says, “There are exactly three objects in the bag.” Lynch claims that since “exactly three” and “exactly seven” each imply the negation of the other, e.g., “exactly three” implies “not exactly seven,” then in an “obvious” sense of “distinct proposition,” Smith and Johnson are expressing distinct propositions.⁴⁷¹ The realist can give Lynch this much.

“(3) Smith and Johnson are expressing true propositions.” The reason that Lynch seems to give in support of the truth of (3) is that given the concept of *object* employed by Smith, three marbles “satisfies” the claim that there are seven objects; similarly, given Johnson's concept of *object*, three marbles satisfies the claim that there are three objects. Further, both claims can be true without “causing so much as a whisper of cognitive dissonance.”⁴⁷² I take it he means something similar to Putnam's claims concerning the Carnapian's and Polish Logician's optional languages being cognitively equivalent in the sense that they do not result in differences in explanation and prediction. However, I would raise the same concern here as I do later in this chapter for Putnam's claim that it is obviously true that there are mereological sums in an unrestricted, arbitrary sense.

⁴⁷¹ Lynch 1998b, 92.

⁴⁷² Lynch 1998b, 92.

However, as I will note there, this concern regarding (3), while important, does not impugn all the possible examples of conceptual relativity.

“(4) Smith and Johnson are *not* employing completely different concepts of ‘object’ or ‘exist’ or ‘number’; they are not talking past one another.” Lynch takes it that since Smith and Johnson are employing the same *minimal* concepts of “object” and “exist,” and extending them in different ways, they are not employing entirely different concepts of *object* or *exist* and are thus not talking past each other.⁴⁷³ However, despite the minimal/robust distinction, it still isn’t clear that Smith and Johnson aren’t speaking past each other in an important sense. Using Lynch’s terms, while it may be true that they are both using the same minimal concept of, e.g., *object*, I take it that they are using different *robust* concepts of *object*. So, even if they are employing the same minimal concept of *object*, each statement says something importantly different. Moreover, if robust concepts come with ontological commitments and we have different robust concepts, then we have different ontological commitments. Therefore, either Smith and Johnson are contradicting each other by saying that the minimal concept has only one correct way of being employed robustly or they are talking past each other. The minimal/robust distinction is supposed to defuse this problem by allowing for the extension of the minimal concepts in such a way that they are incompatible, both true, but not inconsistent. But this leads to the more devastating problem at the heart of the consistency dilemma to which we now turn.

“(2) Smith and Johnson are expressing incompatible propositions.” Lynch writes:

⁴⁷³ Lynch 1998b, 92.

Suppose that Johnson says that there are three objects in the bag and Smith denies it. In what sense of “incompatible” are Smith’s and Johnson’s assertions incompatible? According to the pluralist, they are (or could be) extending their shared minimal concept of an object differently. Thus the propositions they are expressing are relative to different conceptual schemes and are therefore logically consistent. At the same time, there is a clear and important sense in which the pair of propositions *are* incompatible: *if these propositions were relative to the same scheme, they would be inconsistent.*⁴⁷⁴

Thus, according to Lynch, the incompatibility at the heart of conceptual relativity is supposed to be *counterfactual incompatibility*. The idea, according to Lynch, is that the same proposition taken minimally can be shared by different conceptual schemes. Each scheme interprets the same minimal proposition in different robust ways. This allows for Smith’s, “There are seven objects” and Johnson’s, “There are not seven objects” to be *consistent*. It is only if you were to interpret Smith’s and Johnson’s propositions in a robust sense by using the same conceptual scheme that the propositions are incompatible. The incompatibility, then, is in the end regular logical inconsistency—it is just that the inconsistency is only there counterfactually.

It is difficult to see how this counterfactual move is going to provide for the requisite incompatibility. It doesn’t remove the difference in content between Smith’s and Johnson’s statements. Further, though we could not conjoin Smith’s and Johnson’s propositions *if we were* to relativize them to the same conceptual scheme, that is irrelevant. What we want to know is whether we can conjoin them when they are each relativized to different conceptual schemes, ones which provide for different robust content. As we saw earlier, Horgan and Timmons object to *relativizing* the content of each statement to its respective optional language. The reason why is that it very quickly

⁴⁷⁴ Lynch 1998b, 93.

removes the incompatibility of the propositions. The content of Smith's and Johnson's propositions is not incompatible at all once we realize that the "robust content" involved is different. Saying that their statements are counterfactually incompatible is beside the point. And since both Putnam's and Lynch's understanding of differences in conceptual schemes does not rely on either difference or incommensurability between natural languages, there is no barrier to conjoining Smith's and Johnson's statements. They are either already both in the same natural language or could be translated into the same natural language.

A Fourth Attempt at Making Sense of the

Incompatibility Required for Putnam's Account of

Conceptual Relativity: Butchvarov

One might say that the Carnapian's and Polish Logician's statements cannot be conjoined simply because they come from different optional languages. As Panayot Butchvarov has said in correspondence, thinking that one can compare and conjoin statements from different optional languages "presupposes that there is a super-language in which all this can be asked and answered, which would be a presupposition paralleling the realist presupposition that there is a super-reality independent of us."⁴⁷⁵ However, given Putnam's meaning/use distinction and his understanding of optional languages, we need not appeal to a super-language (a super-meta-language). The metaphysical realist can simply point out that the optional languages are not independent of natural languages such as English. The different uses of "object" presuppose the openness of the linguistic meaning of "object." To put the point another way, while the Carnapian's and Polish

⁴⁷⁵ This quote comes from an email from Butchvarov.

Logician's statements involve different optional languages, both of their statements still belong to the English language. Thus, insofar as the optional languages are imbedded in a natural language, using that natural language to talk about and even conjoin statements from the optional languages is unproblematic. In doing so the realist is not begging the question concerning whether there is a "super-reality independent of us." That question, in the context of conceptual relativity, is addressed by arguing that the meaning/use distinction does not satisfy the requirement for incompatible but equally true descriptions. The failure of the meaning/use distinction to satisfy that requirement is due to problems internal to Putnam's views. It does not depend on sneaking in metaphysical realist assumptions about meaning or the existence of a representation-independent reality.

Lastly, Putnam's examples of conceptual relativity rely on the fact that he thinks it makes sense to specify those states of affairs that admit of "incompatible" descriptions using a natural language. So we can supposedly use English to specify that three marbles admit of more than one count of the number of objects. If Putnam thinks he can get away with that without it implying some transcendent notion of a state of affairs admitting of different descriptions, then it seems we should be able to use natural language to conjoin statements that are not truly inconsistent, even if their content is relative to different optional languages.

A Fifth Attempt at Making Sense of the Incompatibility

Required for Putnam's Account of

Conceptual Relativity: Alston

Alston provides a way of trying to make sense of the incompatibility required for conceptual relativity—a way that Putnam perhaps intended all along. Concerning different ways of dividing the world into objects, Alston writes:

These ways are incompatible if, but only if, they are each taken as “absolute”, as depicting the one unique constitution of reality. But if we give up the dogma that there is “exactly one true and complete description of ‘the way the world is’”, we can recognize all of these different ontologies as “right” or “correct”.⁴⁷⁶

Thus, if the Carnapian's use of “object” is taken to be the one, absolute way of using “object” and the Polish Logician's use of “object” is taken to be the one, absolute way of using object, then their statements about the number of objects are incompatible because each would be a claim about the one, absolute count of objects. A use of “object” would be “absolute,” then, in the sense that either there are mereological sums or there are not mereological sums—there is only one correct use of “object.” As we have seen this is the attitude that Putnam attributes to the realist. However, therein lies the problem for reading Putnam and his notion of conceptual relativity in the way that Alston does.

Conceptual relativity, which Putnam clearly thinks is possible if not actual, requires the possibility of actually incompatible descriptions of the “same” state of affairs. This result is supposed to go toward showing the untenability of realism. Thus, the incompatibility involved in conceptual relativity cannot be the incompatibility that would result from viewing the different ways of dividing up objects from the purportedly realist, absolutist

⁴⁷⁶ Alston 1996, 163.

perspective. As we have seen, that kind of incompatibility is only on the surface and disappears once we see that the Carnapian and Polish Logician are each using “object” in different ways, ways specified by different optional languages.

Alston is not necessarily to be faulted for his reading of Putnam, for where Alston quotes Putnam, it sounds as if Putnam is saying that the ways of dividing up the world are incompatible in the way Alston claims. For example, Alston quotes Putnam as saying, “In my picture, objects are theory-dependent in the sense that theories with incompatible ontologies can both be right.”⁴⁷⁷ Insofar as an ontology, i.e., ontological theory, is taken to tell *the* way the world is, to say that incompatible ontologies can both be right certainly sounds as if you are asserting that there are two mutually exclusive ways that the world is. Putnam of course thinks this will be jarring and unacceptable to the realist who thinks that there is one, representation-independent way the world is. However, again, while the Carnapian’s and Polish Logician’s statements might be incompatible to certain realists for those reasons, they are not incompatible to Putnam for those reasons.

Remember that for Putnam the optional languages, the conventions are incompatible, independent of any “face value” or “surface” incompatibility of the statements made from within the different optional languages. What does it mean to take the statements literally or at face value? I take it that it means to take them in some absolute sense, i.e., in the way Alston understands the incompatibility. But Putnam is saying, and must say, that they are not really incompatible in that sense.⁴⁷⁸ Rather, they are cognitively equivalent, which means that neither explains or predicts the phenomena

⁴⁷⁷ Putnam 1990, 40. Quoted in Alston 1996, 165.

⁴⁷⁸ For if they were incompatible in that sense, then Putnam would be endorsing the truth of contradictions.

in question any better than the other; further, we can give a relative interpretation of one into the other. However, we cannot conjoin the Carnapian's and Polish Logician's statements. Why? Because as Putnam says, "What are 'incompatible' are not the statements themselves, which cannot be simply conjoined, but the conventions [optional languages]." ⁴⁷⁹ And here we are back to the same problem seen above over and over again. If "object" has a different sense in each optional language, then it is not clear why we cannot conjoin the statement—as long as we have good reason to admit arbitrary mereological sums.

Three Possible Responses on Putnam's Behalf

There are at least three responses that Putnam could make to my criticisms. The first concerns my focusing on the mereological sums example; the second concerns my thinking we can clearly distinguish between fact and meaning; and the third concerns my claiming that incompatible descriptions are a part of conceptual relativity as a premise to the argument from conceptual relativity, and not an implication of conceptual relativity.

The First Response: More than just Mereological Sums

First, the problem, Putnam might say, with the above charges against the notion of nonconjoinable but noncontradictory true descriptions is that I have focused exclusively on the mereological sums example. That is not to say that it is not a good example of conceptual relativity. Rather, the nature of the example makes it easy, even for a realist, to explain away the noncontradictory incompatibility. Let me explain this line of possible response.

⁴⁷⁹ Putnam 2004a, 46.

The notion of an object, like that of a thing, is truly open ended. It can refer to such things as physical objects (chairs, rocks, paintings), to such things as objects of thought, which may not be physical objects or even exist (mermaids, unicorns, round squares). We might describe this open-endedness of the concept of an object by saying that there are all sorts of things that might be taken as objects. If you were asked to count all of the sentient objects in a room, you would count a different set of things than if you were asked to count all of the triangular objects. So, of course, if you say “There are two objects_{sentient use} and there are eight objects_{triangle use},” you are not really saying anything inconsistent or incompatible, even though it may appear so on the face of it.

(Instead of using subscripts to make clear the use of “object,” another alternative would be simply to say that “object” does not have a different use or meaning, but rather there are different *kinds* of objects. There are triangular objects, there are book objects, there are mereologically-summed objects, etc. If we did this, then the Carnapian would say, “There are three non-mereologically-summed objects.” The Polish Logician would say, “There are seven mereologically-summed objects.” And given that they are talking about different kinds of objects, there is no problem in conjoining their statements.⁴⁸⁰ I will address this idea further below when considering the idea that “object” by itself is not a proper sortal, i.e., counting term. However, I want to press the problem of incompatibility in terms of Putnam’s use/mention distinction in order to show that even with this distinction, we cannot make sense of the incompatibility required for conceptual relativity.)

⁴⁸⁰ I owe this suggestion to Richard Fumerton.

Putnam may admit that the mereological sums example is problematic insofar as it can be viewed as I have been suggesting. “However,” Putnam might continue, “be that as it may, the other examples of conceptual relativity cannot be treated in the same way.”

That is, take the examples of conceptual relativity in this relatively recent passage:

there is no unique right version of the relation between ordinary objects (tables and trees and animals) and scientific objects. We can speak as if such ordinary objects were identical with scientific objects, or as if they were distinct from the physical systems which constitute their matter, or we can say that which physical system a given common sense object is identical with is to some degree vague (as I would urge) but that there are some physical systems that this chair, or whatever the example may be, is definitely *not* identical with.⁴⁸¹

Thus, we might have an optional language that would “allow” someone, Smith, to say, “A tree is identical with the atoms making up the space-time region it occupies,” and another optional language that would “allow” someone, Jones, to say, “A tree is not identical with the atoms making up the space-time region it occupies.” In regard to this situation, we can well imagine Putnam saying something like the following. Taken at face value, these two statements are incompatible. If Smith and Jones are interpreted as simply meaning the very same thing by “identical,” then both of their statements cannot be true. However, given the meaning/use distinction, we can say that Smith and Jones are using “identical” in different ways. They are talking about the “same” state of affairs: they are talking about the same atoms and the same tree. However, we should not think that the world forces us to use notions like “object,” “exist,” and “identity” in only one way. There is not just one kind of identity. There is a sense, a use, of “identity” in which the tree is identical to the atoms making up the space-time region it occupies. After all, it

⁴⁸¹ Putnam 1992a, 110. In this passage Putnam’s distinction between conceptual pluralism and conceptual relativity is blurred. Nevertheless, it still contains a purported example of conceptual relativity.

wouldn't be right to say that it is different from them. But there is a sense, a use, of "identity" in which the tree is not identical to the atoms making up the space-time region it occupies. After all, it is the same tree now that it was last year, even though the molecules in that space-time region are not the same at those two times. We can speak in either way. But while we can speak either way, we cannot conjoin the descriptions. Why? Because the optional languages that provide for the different uses of "identical" are incompatible. Why?

Given the above five failed attempts to make sense of the required incompatibility, at this point I really do not know what Putnam can say. As soon as he takes away the outright contrariness that exists when we take Smith and Johnson to be using "identity" in the same way, and we pair that with the claim that both Smith and Johnson are right, where is the incompatibility to keep us from conjoining the descriptions?⁴⁸² He might say because the same tree and atoms cannot be both identical and not identical according to the same optional language, we cannot conjoin their descriptions. However, in response to that we merely need to point out that which Putnam already admits, namely, that the claim of conceptual relativity is that the same tree and atoms are identical according to one optional language and not identical according to another optional language. And "identical" is not being used in the same way.

We can further point to the problem involved here by looking at some of Putnam's motivations for endorsing conceptual relativity. We can imagine him saying: "Look, first there are all of these terribly difficult, seemingly intractable, ontological

⁴⁸² As with the mereological sums case, I would say that there may be independent reasons for denying that the tree is identical to the atoms making up the space-time region it occupies.

problems. Some very smart people have been working on some of them over the course of thousands of years without resolving them to even a majority of people's satisfaction. People have taken it as obvious that saying that an object is identical to the atoms making up its space-time region is the contrary of saying that it is not so identical. Second, let's avoid going the Kantian route whereby we would claim that these problems are really antinomies of reason, and that we just cannot know what the right answer is or whether the questions are 'appropriately conceived or not' without our getting tangled in contradictions.⁴⁸³ Third, notice that the phenomena we are talking about can be described in these different ways without running into empirical troubles in regard to prediction and explanation. Thus, we can speak either way without conflicting with the phenomena. Thus, the question as to whether the tree REALLY is identical with the atoms making up the space-time region it occupies is a bad question."

The problem is that by saying that we can speak either way, the contrariness that those in the throes of ontological disputes thought existed is removed. According to Putnam, we can speak either way because, e.g., "object," "exist," and "identity," have different uses, different senses (not different linguistic meanings). When taking the ontological problems to involve contrary descriptions, we agree that those descriptions cannot be conjoined—their incompatibility is obvious. But when that contrariness is defused by saying that those arguing are really just using certain concepts/words in different ways, we are left to wonder why we cannot conjoin their descriptions. So, in the end, since the consistency dilemma cannot be met, Putnam's position implies that the metaphysical disputes with which he is concerned either involve philosophers talking

⁴⁸³ As he says in Putnam 2004b, 42-43.

past one another in such a way that they *could* both be right or the same theory being given in different notation—a result that neither Putnam nor those involved in the disputes would find attractive.

The Second Response: The Entanglement of Fact and Meaning

The second response that Putnam might formulate is that I have made the anti-Quinean move of distinguishing between the conceptual and the factual, the analytic and the synthetic, in saying that there are two different senses of “object” and they either are or are not applicable to representation-independent facts. As Pihlström points out:

...it would be an essentially anti-Quinean move, typical of a metaphysical realist, to insist that there are two different meanings assigned to the word “object” in the two “versions” (or language-games) mentioned. This claim assumes (ignoring Quinean worries) that we can clearly distinguish between differences in fact and differences in meaning (or, correspondingly, between fact and values, or facts and conventions).⁴⁸⁴

Though Pihlström formulates this in terms of “meanings,” he would surely say the same thing in regard to my appealing to the different uses/senses of “object” to say that the Carnapian and the Polish Logician are ultimately talking past each other. In response to this objection, we can begin by noting that while it is true that Putnam rejects the idea that we can clearly demarcate the conventional and the factual, he is not wholly onboard with Quine’s rejection of the analytic-synthetic distinction. As we saw in chapter 3, Putnam does think that there are analytic sentences and synthetic sentences and a host of sentences that fall in-between. Further, as we saw in the same chapter, Putnam does

⁴⁸⁴ Pihlström 1996, 120.

think that there is a perfectly good sense in which we can speak of convention, e.g., the choice between different optional languages.

Indeed, it is in the optional languages that we see Putnam being, in a sense, “anti-Quinean” himself. That is, he takes it that the optional languages consist, in part, of “conventional truths.” For example, “Mereological sums are objects” is a conventional truth in the Polish Logician’s optional language—it is non-factual. While conceptual relativity is supposed to be a paradigm case of the interpenetration of fact and convention, it involves these kinds of purely conventional truths:

[Carnap] would, I am sure, have...rejected the idea that there is evidence against the “existence” of mereological sums. I know what he would have said about this question: he would have said that the question is one of a choice of a language. On some days it may be convenient to use what I have been calling “Carnap’s language” (although he would not have *objected* to the other language); on the other days it may be convenient to use the Polish Logician’s language. For some purposes it may be convenient to regard the Polish Logician’s language of mereological sums as “primitive notation”; in other contexts it may be better to take Carnap’s language as “abbreviations,” or defined notation. *And I agree with him.*⁴⁸⁵

In response, we can point out that while Putnam admits that there may be some pragmatic, contextual reasons for choosing one optional language over the other (though he never gives examples of such determining contexts), it is still a conventional choice whether we say mereological sums exist. Moreover, though he doesn’t say there *couldn’t* be evidence against the existence of mereological sums, he certainly says there isn’t any such evidence.⁴⁸⁶ The combination of non-factual, conventional truth and the claim that

⁴⁸⁵ Putnam 1990, 102. The emphasis in the last line is mine.

⁴⁸⁶ By “evidence” it is not entirely clear whether Putnam means empirical or perhaps “philosophical,” e.g., that perhaps available to “pure reason.” However, given Putnam’s aversion to the a priori *and* the idea that the analytic-synthetic distinction can be used to reach robust philosophical conclusions, he probably is

there is no evidence against the existence of mereological sums are certainly anti-Quinean.⁴⁸⁷

Thus, it is not that the realist has to make some kind of anti-Quinean move that is ruled out by Putnam's own position on conceptual relativity. The anti-Quinean aspect is already there in Putnam's own position. If not a difference in meaning, then the differences in the senses of the Polish Logician's "object" and the Carnapian's "object" provided by Putnam's own views, allows us to undermine Putnam's understanding of conceptual relativity.

The Third Response: Conceptual Relativity Reconsidered:

Wittgenstein on Simples and Putnam on Objects—Shifting

our Perspective

As I pointed out in chapter 4, Putnam's reasons for considering the number and kinds of objects that exist concern both what he calls metaphysical realism and what he sees as scientific materialism, the latter, again, being the idea that (finished) science provides the only legitimate explanation of what exists. As such (finished) science would tell us what the *fundamental* objects of the world are—and these would not be the tables,

thinking of empirical evidence. Regarding whether there could be evidence in the future that would count against the optional language conventions, Putnam explicitly says, "...I am not claiming that conventions of the kind I am describing might never have to be given up for presently unforeseeable reasons. That would be a crazy claim" (Putnam 2004a, 44.)

⁴⁸⁷ At least in one sense; in another sense, as we saw in chapter 1, Quine does hold that physical theory is underdetermined by empirical evidence. As Quine admits, he has vacillated regarding the question of whether to treat rival but empirically equivalent physical theories as both true (Quine 1990, 95ff.). This underdetermination of physical theory might be seen as analogous to Putnam's claims that whether mereological sums exist is not determined by the evidence. Nevertheless, while there may be some similarity, the difference between Quine's and Putnam's views on meaning and Quine's reluctance to say that rival underdetermined theories are both true in the way that Putnam holds incompatible optional languages can provide equally true descriptions undermines the idea that there is a deep similarity between Quine and Putnam.

chairs, trees, rocks, etc., which we find so familiar. So, Putnam's mereological sums example is meant to go against realism, since it denies that there is a representation-independent world consisting of determinate objects and properties. And insofar as the mereological sums example is an example of conceptual pluralism, it is meant to deny that it make sense to speak of some one fundamental ontology of objects, i.e., it is a mistake to think that science, finished or otherwise, could tell us what THE *fundamental* objects are that constitute the world.

So far I have been arguing that Putnam's conceptual relativity is not tenable, since we cannot make sense of the requisite notion of incompatibility. But perhaps I have been too hasty. Despite the fact that Putnam emphasizes the incompatibility of the optional languages involved in conceptual relativity, and despite other philosophers', e.g., Horgan and Timmons, and Lynch, focusing on making sense of conceptual relativity by attempting to make sense of the incompatibility involved, perhaps conceptual relativity can only be seen in the right light if we shift the emphasis off of incompatible descriptions and onto something else.

Following a lead suggested in conversation by David G. Stern, let us begin this shift of focus by considering a passage from Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*. In a discussion of both his Tractarian notion of a simple and Russell's notion of an individual, and the idea that a "true" name ought to signify such simples or individuals, Wittgenstein writes:

If I tell someone without any further explanation: "What I see before me now is composite", he will have the right to ask: "What do you mean by 'composite'? For there are all sorts of things that that can mean!"—The question "Is what you see composite?" makes good sense if it is already established what kind of complexity—that is, which particular use of the word—is in

question. [...]

We use the word “composite” (and therefore the word “simple”) in an enormous number of different and differently related ways. [...]

To the *philosophical* question: “Is the visual image of this tree composite, and what are its component parts?” the correct answer is: “That depends on what you understand by ‘composite’.” (And that is of course not an answer but a rejection of the question.)⁴⁸⁸

While Putnam’s concern is not with the idea that a true name is meaningful only insofar as it signifies a simple, his response to the idea that there is some representation-independent world of determinate objects with determinate properties standing in determinate relations to one another is similar to Wittgenstein’s response to the idea that there is a single fixed sense of “simple” and “composite.” As we have seen, Putnam thinks that the concept of an object is open-ended. We can extend it in different directions—it has no one fixed sense and no one sense determined by a representation-independent world.

With the above in mind, let us revisit a passage from Putnam quoted in chapter 4:

What I meant by my doctrine of scheme dependence (or to use my own preferred term, conceptual relativity) is that (1) the notion of an “object” is an inherently extendable one; we extend it when we speak of the strange ‘objects’ of quantum mechanics as objects; we extend it (in an unfortunate way, I think) when we refer to *numbers* as “objects”; we extend it when we invent such *recherché* notions as “mereological sum” and begin to refer to mereological sums as “objects”; and we shall undoubtedly continue to extend it in the future. (The same is, of course, true of such technical-sounding variants as “entity”.) Because the notion is inherently open in this way, the very notion of a “totality of all objects” is senseless. (2) certain things are paradigmatically objects, for example tables and chairs, but other uses of the term “object” are, to a greater or a lesser degree, optional. Thus there is no fact of the matter as to whether numbers, or mereological sums, are objects or not (and since “object” and “exist” are conceptually linked, there is no fact of the matter as to whether “numbers exist” and no fact of the

⁴⁸⁸ Wittgenstein 1985, §47.

matter as to whether “mereological sums exist”). (3) As a consequence of (2), apparently incompatible schemes—for instance, a scheme that quantifies over mereological sums and one that denies that there are any such things—may serve equally well to describe one or another state of affairs. For example, the state of affairs that would ordinarily be described by saying “there are three objects on the table” would be described in a scheme that countenanced mereological sums as objects by saying “There are seven objects on the table.”⁴⁸⁹

When I first considered this passage, I wrote that Putnam seems to get the description of conceptual relativity backwards. This was because in the above passage he seems to take the “fact” that there is no scheme-independent fact of the matter about whether mereological sums exist to follow simply from the open-endedness of “object” and not from that open-endedness in conjunction with there being some incompatibility regarding the Polish Logician’s and the Carnapian’s statements. However, with the shift in focus from incompatibility to the Wittgensteinian point of the open-endedness of object, we can read Putnam as saying that the reason there is no scheme-independent fact of the matter concerning the number and kinds of objects in the world is that “object” and “exist” are truly open-ended. While we may not be able to help talking about paradigmatic objects like tables and chairs, it is completely up to us whether we admit that there are mereological sums like that of my nose and the Eiffel Tower. The world does not determine the answers to such questions as to whether mereological sums exist. We can choose to say they do or to say that they don’t. And, as Putnam says in the above passage, it is because of this open-endedness of “object” and “exist” that we can have apparently incompatible descriptions as in the example with the Polish Logician and the Carnapian. But the representation-dependent aspect of the number and kinds of objects

⁴⁸⁹ Putnam 1992d, 367.

that exists does not follow from such apparent incompatibility.

What can the realist say in response to this reversal of perspective? Well, if Putnam is here admitting that there really isn't any incompatibility between the different uses of object, then it seems the metaphysical realist can just say that the totality of objects that constitutes the world includes all those "strange" mereological sums that we can think of; thus, there is a totality of objects, properties, and relations to which our statements can correspond, and thus, there is no problem for realism. But not every realist is going to want to admit such arbitrary objects as the mereological sum of my nose and the Eiffel Tower into her ontology. So now we are back to a dispute between realist affirming and denying what counts as an object. And Putnam's point is that we can choose either to count mereological sums as objects or not. At this point, there are two moves the realist can make.

The first move begins by pointing out that Putnam needs the descriptions from the different optional languages to be about the "same" state of affairs. These "same" states of affairs are specified according to Putnam by simply using our natural language to say what it is that admits of the different descriptions, e.g., three marbles, my nose and the Eiffel Tower, etc. Further, the descriptions using the different optional languages are cognitively equivalent and relatively interpretable into each other. Whichever optional language we adopt will not affect our predictions or explanations. But here we can begin to reintroduce the importance and, in a sense, priority of the incompatibility of the descriptions. That is, the Polish Logician's and the Carnapian's statements need to be cognitively equivalent, relatively interpretable into each other, and about the "same" state of affairs *without being mere notational variants*. Let us return to Lynch's description of

the consistency dilemma to help make the connection here to the need for incompatibility:

The real problem for pluralism is not the *inconsistency* but the *consistency of schemes*. In other words, given the consistency [between two perspectives/descriptions] *A* and *B* that the relativization of fact apparently implies, the pluralist must explain how it is legitimate to talk about *incompatible* but equally true schemes in the first place. Specifically, if *A* and *B* are consistent, then either (1) *A* and *B* are expressing the same truths in different languages (they are “notational variants”) or (2) *A* and *B* are simply concerned with different subject matters altogether.⁴⁹⁰

I take it that for Putnam what keeps *A* and *B* from being mere notational variants despite the fact that they are supposed to be *consistent, cognitively equivalent* descriptions of the “*same*” state of affairs, is that they are in some sense incompatible. For conceptual relativity to work, “object” cannot be open-ended in the sense that the Carnapian and the Polish Logician are talking about different things. Nor is it that they are just saying the same thing in different notations. The reason neither of these is the case is that the optional languages with which they are speaking consist of incompatible conventions specifying what counts as an object. Therefore, *pace* Putnam, the incompatibility is at the heart of conceptual relativity, it is not just a byproduct of the open-endedness of “object.” But as I have argued above, the incompatibility between the Polish Logician’s and Carnapian’s optional languages doesn’t block or outmaneuver the second horn of the consistency dilemma. Statements involving different senses of “object” *can* be conjoined into a more complete true description, *if both statements are true*. And this leads into the second move the metaphysical realist should make.

⁴⁹⁰ Lynch 1998b, 29. As we have seen, Putnam doesn’t like to think of existence or sense being relative to optional languages, but rather internal to them. But this difference between Putnam and Lynch will not affect what follows.

The second move is to question the exact sense in which we can admit that the notion of an object is open-ended. To this end, in the remainder of this chapter we will look at two different issues. First, we will examine whether it is clear that the existence of completely arbitrary mereological sums is unproblematic in the way that Putnam so dogmatically claims. I will argue that whether we should admit arbitrary mereological sums of the kind to which Putnam appeals is much more problematic than Putnam allows. Second, we will examine in what sense “object” should even be considered a sortal term that would allow us to say that there is no scheme-independent fact of the matter concerning the number of objects that exist. I will argue that “object” cannot be used as the kind of sortal that would provide for the scheme-dependence of the number of objects that exist.

Section Two: Conceptual Relativity: to Restrict or not to Restrict Mereological Sums?

Putnam claims that any two objects can be described as an object (mereological sum); thus, the state of affairs consisting of the individuals x_1, x_2, x_3 can be described as either three objects or seven objects. However, it is not obvious in what sense x_1, x_2, x_3 *are* seven objects. Part of what is so strange about this case is that the truth conditions for the Carnapian’s statement and the Polish Logician’s statement are, in a sense, exactly the same. In what sense, then, is, e.g., $[x_1 + x_2]$ an object? In what sense are a sword and its hilt an object? In what sense are Putnam’s nose and the Eiffel tower an object? I want to begin addressing these questions by looking at some issues in mereology.

Calling into Question Putnam's Notion of

Mereological Sums

According to Putnam, Leśniewski built on Husserl's understanding of a mereological sum. In doing so, Leśniewski made a significant decision. As Putnam writes:

Husserl had made it clear that by a "thing" he meant something that had a certain kind of *unity*. No more than Aristotle was Husserl prepared to count just any arbitrary assemblage of things as a *thing*. A heap of junk, or a scrambled pile of books, papers, and whatnot... is not a thing in Aristotle's sense of a substance (*ousia*), nor would it be a thing in Husserl's sense. Lezniewski, for the sake of getting a tidy theory, decided to entirely ignore this philosophical restriction, and not just to ignore it, but to count the "sum" (as one speaks of it in mereology) of *any* two things (which may themselves be "sums") as a further "thing." For example, the sum of my nose and the Eiffel Tower is regarded as a perfectly good object in mereology.⁴⁹¹

It is this Leśniewskian understanding of mereological sums that Putnam relies on for his mereological sums example of conceptual relativity. My aim in what follows is simply to cast doubt on the notion of a completely arbitrary mereological sum, or at least cast doubt on an ontologically significant notion of an arbitrary mereological sum.⁴⁹²

Concerning the nature of mereological sums, Peter Simons writes:

Just as any old collection of individuals can (*modulo* occasional paradoxes) be comprehended into an abstract set, so, argues Goodman by analogy, any old collection of individuals may (*without* threat of paradoxes) be considered to make up a sum individual. This individual can serve for some purposes as a substitute for the set for philosophers who deny the existence of abstract sets, such as Goodman and Leśniewski. Just as abstract sets may be comprehended of individuals which are ill assorted,

⁴⁹¹ Putnam 2004a, 35-36. It should be noted that such sums are not "perfectly good" in every system of mereology, which is one of the main points this section.

⁴⁹² I mean "ontologically significant" in regard to showing realism to be untenable.

and do not constitute a class, group, collection, or whatever in any everyday sense of the word, so a Goodmanian individual may have an odd assortment of parts, and may not be an individual, substance, or thing in any everyday sense of the word.

...the existence of *concrete* (as distinct from *abstract*) pluralities of various kinds may be reasonably asserted, though the existence of arbitrarily membered pluralities must be more carefully argued for, since such entities... appear to some extent to be the mere reflection of the existence of plural terms, and it has to be shown that this is more than just a *façon de parler*. Goodman's individuals have a similar appearance: they seem to exist just because there is a form of expression which requires a referent. The objection here is not that there are *no* sums, for clearly there are: rather it is the assumption that there are *arbitrary* sums which is in question.⁴⁹³

We see, in part, why Leśniewski would decide to opt for an unrestricted mereology, namely, because if one is going to replace sets with mereological sums and still do many of the things with mereological sums that one could do with sets, then one will want to have unrestricted mereological sums. However, that leaves open the question of in what sense there are *concrete*, as opposed to *abstract*, *arbitrary* mereological sums. By “abstract mereological sum,” I mean an object *not* located in space; by “concrete mereological sum,” I mean an object located in space. As Simons points out, there surely are concrete mereological sums (a chair, for example).⁴⁹⁴ The point is that we need some kind of reason to think that there are *arbitrary*, *concrete* mereological sums. What is Putnam's general argument for the acceptance of them?

Part of the argument is that descriptions that include concrete mereological sums are cognitively equivalent to those that do not include them. Again, this means that the cognitively equivalent statements will predict and explain the “behavior” of the “same”

⁴⁹³ Simons 1987, 109.

⁴⁹⁴ Unless, of course, one thinks along the lines of Van Inwagen who claims that only living organisms are real wholes (objects). See Van Inwagen 1990.

state of affairs equally well. So we do not get into any trouble with the phenomena if we admit arbitrary mereological sums. Now that may be, but the question that needs to be answered is whether there are such arbitrary, concrete mereological sums and not just statements that include them and which do not conflict with experience, our predictions, or explanations. Both Berkeleyan idealism and the kind of realism it is opposed to say very different things about the nature of the “physical” world. However, neither theories make a difference to our predictions or explanations of the physical world. That is, whether we interpret the billiard balls knocking off of each other in terms of idealism or realism, our scientific explanation and predictions of what will happen are not changed one bit. Nevertheless, even though idealism and realism may be equivalent in their explanatory and predictive force, that neither means that they are both true nor that there is not some significant difference between them.

To further highlight the problem here, let us look at one of Putnam’s recent remarks concerning truth.⁴⁹⁵ Responding to a question from Rorty concerning in what sense Putnam thinks “objects bear a relation [Rorty] calls ‘making true’ to correct statements about them”⁴⁹⁶ Putnam writes:

My view is that whether a sentence is true or not typically depends on whether certain things or events satisfy the conditions for being described by that sentence—conditions which depend upon the ongoing activity of using and reforming language. I agree with

⁴⁹⁵ How exactly Putnam understands the concept of truth is a difficult issue, especially given his distancing himself from what certainly appeared to be an epistemic theory of truth in *Reason, Truth and History*. For example, his earlier claim that “‘Truth’, in an internalist view, is some sort of (idealized) rational acceptability – some sort of ideal coherence of our beliefs with each other and with our experiences *as those experiences are themselves represented in our belief system* – and not correspondence with mind-independent or discourse-independent ‘states of affairs’.” (Putnam 1981, 49-50)

⁴⁹⁶ Putnam 1992b, 431.

Davidson that this should not be thought of as the correspondence of the sentence to a unique sentence-shaped *thing* in the world.⁴⁹⁷

Putnam is not giving away very much in this characterization of what makes a sentence true. However, let us ask what the conditions are that would make the description “There are seven objects_{mereological sums use}” true. As we have seen, this is a tricky question since it might seem that the truth-conditions for “There are seven objects_{mereological sums use}” are the same as for “There are seven objects_{non-mereological sums use},” namely, x_1, x_2, x_3 . However, *it is still unclear in what sense x_1, x_2, x_3 are seven objects*. If we take tables, chairs, human bodies, houses, and fleets of naval vessels to be paradigmatic examples of concrete mereological sums, then in what sense are Putnam’s nose and the Eiffel Tower an object, a mereological sum?

I contend that Putnam faces a dilemma concerning the sense in which his mereological sums example is an instance of conceptual relativity. Regarding the mereological sum of any group of objects, either that mereological sum is an *abstract* object or it is a *concrete* object. In regard to conceptual relativity, the problem with the existence of *arbitrary, abstract* mereological sums is that they need not bother the realist in the same way that admitting sets into one’s ontology need not bother the metaphysical realist.⁴⁹⁸ The problem with the existence of *arbitrary, concrete* mereological sums is that it is not clear that there are any such *arbitrary* objects. Putnam makes it clear that he takes mereological sums to be objects located in space, i.e., to be concrete objects. In regard to the counties in Massachusetts, Putnam writes, “...the mereological sums [of

⁴⁹⁷ Putnam 1992b, 432.

⁴⁹⁸ I do not mean to say that admitting sets into one’s ontology is a trivial matter. The point is that it is not inconsistent with realism to hold that there are arbitrary mereological sums if they are conceived of in the way that one might think of sets as abstract entities not located in space.

those counties] have very good spatial locations (their spatial location is precisely that of Massachusetts)...”⁴⁹⁹ The problem for conceptual relativity, then, is that, *pace* Putnam, it is not obvious that just *any* group of “individuals” can be described truthfully described as a concrete object. And insofar as it is unclear that we can arbitrarily count any two concrete objects as themselves a concrete object, the mereological sums example is not clearly a case of conceptual relativity. Putnam, of course, thinks he has good reason for conventionalizing the identity conditions of objects.

In one version of his mereological sums example, one we saw in chapter 4, Putnam explicitly addresses the issue of the criteria of identity for objects. According to Putnam, if we ignore the complications of quantum mechanics, and decide to count the number of elementary particles in a room there is the following problem. Let us say that the room contains n elementary particles. Thus there would be at least n objects. But what about the mereological sums of some of those particles? Putnam’s body is a sum of particles that we might consider an object, but what about the sum of particles that is his nose and a lamp? According to Putnam, it is difficult to come up with a clear criterion to distinguish those sums that equal objects from those that do not. Being organic might be seen as too subjective a quality to determine what is an object. Aristotle’s criterion for being an object, namely, the parts staying together when moved, does not seem to work: lamp shades fall off and chewing gum can be stuck to the side of the lamp. Is a lamp not an object? And should we call the lamp+gum an object? In the face of such difficulty, Putnam thinks we come to the point of saying: “Either you should consider only

⁴⁹⁹ Putnam 2004a, 37.

elementary particles to be objects, or you should allow arbitrary mereological sums.⁵⁰⁰

It is at this point that Putnam claims that which one is right is a matter of convention.

However, while figuring out which contexts and conditions are appropriate for counting a group of concrete objects as itself a concrete object is difficult, that is not reason enough to go Putnam's conventionalist route.⁵⁰¹ Indeed, philosophers such as Peter Van Inwagen and Ned Markosian address the contentiousness of this very issue.

For example, Van Inwagen writes:

Since Mereology is a theory, we are free to reject it—in the absence of compelling reasons for accepting it or at least for regarding it as plausible. As it happens, *I* reject it. (I regard it, in fact, as wholly implausible.) At least: I reject it if 'is a part of' in the statement of the theory means what 'is a part of' means in English. (And I do not know what else it could mean.) Mereology makes assertions about what there is, and I do not accept those assertions. Take, for example, my dog Sonia and my cat Moriarty. If Mereology is a true theory, then there is such a thing as the sum of Sonia and Moriarty. What properties does this object have? The theory itself tells us only that it has Sonia and Moriarty as parts and that each of its parts overlaps either Sonia or Moriarty—and that it has such other properties as may be logically derivable from these. But I know some things about Sonia and Moriarty, and I know some things about parthood (e.g., that if a point in space falls inside a part of a thing all of whose parts are extended in space, then it falls inside that thing; that if $x = y + z$ and y and z do not overlap, then the mass of x is equal to the sum of the masses of y and z). It follows from Mereology and these things I know that there exists a scattered object that weighs about twenty-five pounds and has two maximally connected parts each of which is now asleep, is about forty feet from the other, and is covered with fur. I do not believe there is any such thing, since I do not believe anything has these properties. Just as those who believe that I have no immaterial soul believe this because they think that nothing has the set of properties a thing would have to have to be my soul, so I

⁵⁰⁰ Putnam 1988, 112.

⁵⁰¹ As to Putnam's other reasons, which involve his understanding of conceptual relativity and its requirement of true but incompatible descriptions of the "same" state of affairs, we have already seen the problems it faces.

think that nothing is the sum of Sonia and Moriarty because I think that nothing has the set of properties a thing would have to have to be that sum. And why should one think there was any such thing? After all, that there is a theory that says there is something with certain properties, taken by itself, a rather unimpressive reason for believing that there is something that has those properties. [...] Although I don't deny that some sets of material objects have sums, I don't think a very high proportion of them do. For most sets of, say, atoms, I don't think that there is anything that has the set of properties that the sum of that set of atoms would have to have. Putnam's Polish logician and I disagree not only about simple, imaginary world, but about the real world. [...] The "Polish logician" and I simply disagree about what mereological sums there are; like the atheist and the theist, the dualist and the materialist, and the nominalist and the platonist, we disagree about what there is. [...]

I cannot, therefore, grant that "Carnap"'s and the "Polish logician"'s descriptions are equally good or equivalent descriptions of the population of a world—not, at least, if Carnap's description is 'a world that contains three mereological simples and nothing else'.⁵⁰²

Van Inwagen holds that we get a whole out of parts *x*s if and only if "the activity of the *x*s constitutes a life..."⁵⁰³ where "life" denotes "the individual life of a concrete biological organism."⁵⁰⁴ This view could certainly be seen as radical in its own right. Nevertheless, the point stands that there is *serious* and *reasoned* disagreement about when something is a part of something else.⁵⁰⁵

Hence Markosian writes:

According to standard, pre-philosophical intuitions, there are many composite objects in the physical universe. ... Recently, a growing body of philosophical literature has concerned itself with questions about the nature of composition. The main question that has been

⁵⁰² Van Inwagen 2002, 192-193.

⁵⁰³ Van Inwagen 1990, 82.

⁵⁰⁴ Van Inwagen 1990, 83.

⁵⁰⁵ I am, of course, not saying that this disagreement implies there is no fact of the matter as what the right answer is.

raised about composition is, roughly, this: Under what circumstances do some things compose, or add up to, or form, a single object? It turns out that it is surprisingly difficult to give a satisfactory answer to this question that accords with standard, pre-philosophical intuitions about the universe's composite objects. ...the three rival views in response to this question that have received the most support in the literature are (i) that there are no objects composed of two or more parts (which means that there are no stars, chairs, humans, or bicycles); (ii) that the only objects composed of two or more parts are living organisms (which still means no stars, chairs, or bicycles); and (iii) that any objects whatsoever, no matter how disparate, far apart, or otherwise unrelated, compose a single object (which means that there are stars, chairs, humans, and bicycles, but also countless other bizarre objects that standard, pre-philosophical intuitions would never countenance).⁵⁰⁶

It is clearly, then, not obvious as to whether we should count just *any* two concrete objects as making a third concrete object. As life-forms ourselves, it is natural to think of life-forms in general as being wholes with parts. Artifacts such as tables, hammers, and swords are singled out as wholes from their surroundings in part because of the purposes to which we put them. Natural objects such as trees and mountains are singled out as wholes from their surroundings for a variety of reasons. In all of these cases and others, there are difficulties regarding, e.g., what is an essential part of a table or an organism (Is a sword with a missing hilt still a sword?), and problems concerning vagueness and the boundaries of wholes (Is the house paint on the hammer's handle a part of the hammer? Is the mostly digested mouse in a snake's intestines part of the snake?). But while there are such difficulties with these familiar kinds of cases, we can say fairly easily, even if it will need refinement after reflection, why we take a table leg to be part of a table, or an arm to be part of a body, or the bark on a tree to be part of a tree. But it is not so easy to

⁵⁰⁶ Markosian 1998, 211.

say why we should take Sonia to be part of a whole whose other part is Moriarty, or Putnam's nose to be part of a whole whose other part is the Eiffel Tower.

Where does this leave us and Putnam? Faced with the question, "Given x_1, x_2, x_3 , are there seven objects?" the answer is: "How are you using 'object'?" If the answer to that question is, "By 'object' I mean the *abstract* sum of any two objects," then the answer can unproblematically be "yes" for the realist. If the answer to the question is, "By 'object' I mean the *concrete* sum of any two concrete objects," then the answer is unclear. We need to have some reasonable criteria for objecthood. Such criteria are admittedly not easy to come by. However, the point is that it is unclear, if not doubtful absent further context, whether we should count Putnam's nose and Eiffel tower as a concrete object in the way that a chair, a house, or even a fleet of ships is an object. That lack of clarity is all we need to call into question Putnam's use of mereology to argue for conceptual relativity.

Conclusions Concerning Mereological Sums and

Conceptual Relativity

In addition to my earlier arguments that the required sense of incompatibility for conceptual relativity cannot be had, I have argued that the mereological sums example fails to be a clear example of conceptual relativity for further reasons. Mereological sums understood as abstract objects do not pose a problem for the realist. Mereological sums understood as concrete objects raise the question of what is to count as a concrete mereological sum. It is simply unclear what the right answer is in regard to the criteria of identity for a concrete mereological sum. This is not, of course, a conclusive result against Putnam's mereological sums example. However, coupling the latter conclusion

with the problems concerning the possibility of incompatible but true descriptions leaves conceptual relativity in poor shape.

Further, we can apply similar reasoning to the example considered earlier concerning whether a tree is identical to the atoms occupying the same space-time region. There I claimed that treating it as an example of conceptual relativity fails because the different senses of “identical” do not allow for the requisite incompatibility. But even if there are these different possible senses of “identity,” that does not automatically mean that they are legitimate, just as the different possible senses of object (mereological, non-mereological) are not automatically legitimate. In the end there may be good reasons for thinking that a tree is not identical with the atoms making up the space-time region it occupies. I take it this is part of the reason for the debate between absolute and relative identity, and the problems with identity over time.

**Section Three: “Object” isn’t Stupid but it is a
Dummy Sortal: Problems Counting Objects⁵⁰⁷**

Though Putnam has recanted much of the radical kind of antirealism seen in *Reason, Truth and History*, he still finds (metaphysical/alethic/scientific) realism problematic. As we have seen, part of the problem, he thinks, lies in the realist’s commitment to a world consisting of a fixed totality of objects:

The traditional realist assumes that general names just correspond more or less one-to-one to various “properties” of “objects” in some sense of “property” and some sense of “object” that is fixed once and for all, and that knowledge claims are simply claims about the distribution of these “properties” over these “objects.”⁵⁰⁸

⁵⁰⁷ I am thankful to Gregory Landini who pressed the question of whether “object” is a sortal term during my prospectus defense.

⁵⁰⁸ Putnam 1999, 8.

So, if Putnam can undermine the notion that there is some kind of representation-independent totality of objects, he has undermined realism. As we have seen, his argument from conceptual relativity, and in particular the mereological sums example, is meant to do just that. However, the realist, as part of the overall strategy of response to conceptual relativity contained in this chapter, can question Putnam's use of "object" as a sortal term (or concept) that can be used to show that the number of objects that constitute the world is somehow indeterminate apart from reference to a conceptual scheme.

In her discussion of sortal concepts and essential properties, Penelope Mackie writes:

Although it has been employed in slightly different ways, a common thread is provided by the idea that sortal concepts have a special role in *individuation*: they are concepts that provide *criteria of identity* or *principles of individuation* for the things that fall under them....⁵⁰⁹

It is these criteria of identity that provide for one of the main functions of sortals, namely, counting the sort in question. I quote the following passage in full because of how similar E. J. Lowe's rhetoric concerning the number of *red things* is to Putnam's rhetoric concerning the number of *objects*; nevertheless, Lowe's point is ultimately contrary to Putnam's:

A sufficient, but not necessary, condition for a general term's being a sortal is that there should exist some principle for *counting* or *enumerating* individual instances falling under it. Thus there are ways of counting the number of *men* or *tables* or *books* in a given room, but no way of counting the number of *red things* there are: and this is not because there is such a number but one beyond our powers of determining (as in the case of the number of *atoms*

⁵⁰⁹ Mackie 1994, 313.

in the room), but because it apparently does not even make sense to speak of such a number until the *sort(s)* of red thing one is to count have been specified. Suppose, for example, that the room contained a red table: then that, it might be urged, is clearly *one* red thing. But what about its red top and its red legs, or the red knob on one of its red drawers? Are *these* to be counted as different ‘red things’ in the room *in addition to* the red table itself? And what about, say, the red paint covering one of the table’s legs: is *that* also to count as a distinct ‘red thing’ in its own right? It rapidly becomes apparent that there is no principled way of deciding these matters, until we are told what *sorts* of red things we are supposed to be counting.⁵¹⁰

“Thing” and “object” are so-called “dummy sortals.” They do not by themselves provide criteria of identity or principles of individuation. As in the passage from Lowe, they do not even provide the necessary criteria of identity when we specify *red* objects or things.

Given that “object” and “thing” are dummy sortals, we are left to wonder what Putnam is trying to pull over on the metaphysical realist. Putnam asks the metaphysical realist, “Do you think that the world consists of a certain totality of representation-independent objects?” To which the realist might naturally, but perhaps not so carefully, respond in the affirmative. At which point Putnam asks her to start counting them, and the same problem occurs as occurs for “red thing” in the above passage. Putnam then says, “You see then that it is senseless to think that there is some totality of objects?” But the realist should respond by saying that she was careless, and what she meant was that there is a totality of trees, cars, rocks, people, alligators, tables, chairs, etc.⁵¹¹

However, as Nicholas Griffin points out there may be problems in counting people, cars, etc.:

⁵¹⁰ Lowe 1989, 10.

⁵¹¹ I take Risto Hilpinen to be making a similar point in Hilpinen 1996.

The counting criteria [for sortals]...are such that even with obvious sortals there can be problems. For example, 'car' is as good an example of a sortal as we could wish and yet on entering a car-breaker's yard we may not be able to say how many cars are in it, for we should need to know first whether we are to count only those cars which are complete as they stand, or those we could reconstruct from the separate parts in the yard, or only those that are in running order. Moreover, we need to know how much of a car can be missing if it is still to count as a car, what is to count as a reconstruction or as 'in running order' before we can start counting. There are similar and quite well-known problems with other paradigmatic sortals such as 'man': when does a foetus become a man, and when do Siamese twins cease to be twins and become one person with supernumerary organs?⁵¹²

Nevertheless, such problems need not pose a problem for realism in particular. We may have to legislate what counts as a car in running order and we may run into difficulties concerning when a fetus is a person. But this does not entail that there are not fetuses, people, and cars with determinate properties standing in determinate relations that can act as representation-independent truthmakers.

Putnam further objects to the idea that there is the fixed totality of objects required by realism because, e.g., it is not clear whether a lamp he has is a single object, since when it is moved the shade falls off.⁵¹³ But we don't have to decide whether the lamp is a single object or not, since "object" is a dummy sortal. The lamp's being a representation-independent truthmaker doesn't require saying whether it is a single object, one out of the fixed totality. All the realist needs is for the lamp to have certain determinate properties standing in certain determinate relations. And if it is true that at the quantum level, the lamp has properties that are not determinate or which don't stand in determinate relations, this need not be a problem for the metaphysical realist. It may

⁵¹² Griffin 1977, 40-41.

⁵¹³ Putnam 1999, 7.

be unclear whether those indeterminate properties or relations count as objects, but that does not stop them from being representation-independent truthmakers, since “object” is a dummy sortal.

Let us look at the mereological sums example. According to Putnam, “object” is open-ended; there are things that we would count as paradigmatic objects, e.g., tables and chairs, but other uses of “object” are optional and left open.⁵¹⁴ We can count as the Polish Logician or we can count as the Carnapian. However, if we accept that “object” and “thing” are dummy sortals, and thus don’t provide principles of individuation, then it seems that the optional languages involved in Putnam’s example are supposed to provide principles of individuation. But here the realist can raise two issues. First, whether the criteria of individuation, e.g., those provided by the Polish Logician’s mereology, are legitimate. That is, as I argued above, it is not at all clear or uncontroversial whether we should countenance arbitrary mereological sums. Second, even with the principles of individuation provided by the optional languages, there are still problems counting the number of objects. Let me explain the second problem now.

The different optional languages concerning “object” will involve the specification of principles of individuation for what counts as an object. According to the Polish Logician’s optional language, *any two objects* themselves count as a further object. But this principle of individuation contains the dummy sortal “object.” We could replace “object” with “thing,” “individual,” or “entity,” but these are also dummy sortals. The point is that Putnam’s examples rely on there being some predetermined “individuals” such as three marbles or x_1, x_2, x_3 . And it make sense to ask how many

⁵¹⁴ Putnam 1992d, 367.

marbles there are—three—and it would make sense to ask how many individual variables there are—three, again. In order for the mereological sums example to make sense, we have to specify independently of them what is to count as an individual, thing, or entity. The optional languages themselves are not sufficient for specifying what to count as an object. Thus, the mereological sums example requires that there be a world of determinate individuals that can be counted—counting them as “objects” is problematic because “object” is a dummy sortal, but counting them as marbles or chairs, etc., is not problematic, at least not in sense unique to realism. Putnam, of course, wants to say that it is *optional* whether a chair and a marble are an object. Here, the realist can refer back to the two earlier arguments that, one, the incompatibility required for conceptual relativity cannot be had; and two, it is not obvious in the way that Putnam seems to think that we should say a particular chair and a particular marble are a mereological sum.

Let us tie together all of the above considerations concerning sortals. Given that “object” is a dummy sortal, when Putnam argues that realism runs into problems because it assumes “that there is one definite totality of objects that can be classified and one definite totality of all properties,”⁵¹⁵ we know what the realist can say in response. There may be no definite totality of objects *qua* objects, i.e., objects falling under the concept “object,” but that is only because “object” is a dummy sortal. We shouldn’t expect there to be totality of objects *qua* objects, but we should expect there to be a totality of objects *qua* alligators, people, cars, etc. And the same goes for the mereological sums example: if you expect the Carnapian or the Polish Logician to say how many objects there are, you have to first specify the individuals under consideration by using a true sortal term.

⁵¹⁵ Putnam 1999, 7.

But then the question becomes whether any of those individuals really do form another sort of object called a “mereological sum.”

These considerations help us to see the plausibility of a point mentioned parenthetically above: another possible way to handle the mereological example is to say that it is not a matter of “object” having a variety of uses; rather, there is a potentially infinite number of *kinds* of objects. Before counting how many objects there are, we have to have the proper sort of adjectival modifier for “object”—one that allows us to enumerate what objects there are. Such a move also defuses the mereological sums example as an illustration of conceptual relativity.⁵¹⁶ However, it denies Putnam’s meaning/use distinction, since it says that there are simply different kinds of objects, not different uses of “object.” In criticizing Putnam’s position, it is best to give him as much his position as possible and to show that it still fails.

Concluding Remarks

I have tried to do three things in this chapter to undermine Putnam’s argument from conceptual relativity. First, insofar as incompatible descriptions of the “same” state of affairs is central to conceptual relativity, and I have argued that it is, the requisite notion of incompatibility is not to be had. Putnam is not able to avoid the consistency dilemma. This result affects every one of his purported examples of conceptual relativity. Second, I have tried to cast doubt on, or at least bring out the problematic nature of, Putnam’s views on mereology and the arbitrary summing of any two concrete objects. Third, I have tried to show that because “object” is a dummy sortal, Putnam’s

⁵¹⁶ And it would still leave open the question of whether or not “mereologically-summed” denoted an actual property. Thus, considerations from part II would still apply. Again, I owe this adjectival way of looking at the issue to Fumerton.

mereological sums example is ill conceived. It is, of course, the first argument concerning Putnam's inability to escape between the horns of the consistency dilemma that is central to undermining conceptual relativity as a whole. However, given the centrality that the mereological sums example holds for Putnam in his attack on realism, the other two objections are important.

CHAPTER SIX⁵¹⁷

REALISM AND THE REMAINS OF CONCEPTUAL RELATIVITY

In this chapter, I will argue that we can salvage a key component of Putnam's otherwise untenable views on conceptual relativity while happily endorsing alethic realism. The salvageable component of conceptual relativity is the appreciation of the perspectival but objective nature of knowledge: different languages or conceptual schemes can provide for different ways of conceptualizing the world without that entailing any form of radical subjectivism or relativism.⁵¹⁸ I call this the *objective perspective thesis*. I will argue that the *objective perspective thesis* can be combined with alethic realism in such a way as to answer Putnam's "cookie-cutter" objection. In doing so, I also argue that it is only on certain restrictive (scientific) theories of properties that there are difficulties in combining the *objective perspective thesis* with alethic realism.

Assessing the Positive in Putnam's Account of Conceptual Relativity

Assuming that chapter 5 was successful in showing the untenability of Putnam's account of conceptual relativity, I want to look at an important idea that should be salvaged from his views. We can pull from Putnam's views on conceptual relativity the idea that knowledge and experience are what we might call *perspectival* in a way that does not entail a radical subjectivity or relativism. By "perspectival" I mean two related things. First, the beliefs that constitute knowledge are formed using concepts taken from

⁵¹⁷ I am very thankful to Richard Fumerton for helpful suggestions regarding the argumentative structure of this chapter.

⁵¹⁸ I intend to remain vague as to what exactly a conceptual scheme is; however, as will become clear, I am using the notion in such a way that differences of scheme are tied to differences in concepts.

within particular contexts of time and place, and which are conditioned by our physiology and the nature of our environment. And second, the possible variations in at least some concepts are based on our noticing or failing to notice certain representation-independent similarities and differences in the world. Call the position that knowledge and experience are perspectival in these two ways the *objective perspective thesis*.

As Putnam is at pains to point out, given a choice of concepts or a language, e.g., the Carnapian's, the answer to the question "How many objects are there?" is not a matter of convention.⁵¹⁹ And in considering Nelson Goodman's claim that just as we make a certain group of stars the Big Dipper, we make Sirius a star, Putnam writes:

Not only didn't we make Sirius a star in the sense in which a carpenter makes a table, *we didn't make it a star*. Our ancestors and our contemporaries (including astrophysicists), in shaping and creating our language, created the concept *star*, with its partly conventional boundaries, and so on. And that concept *applies* to Sirius. The fact that the concept *star* has conventional elements doesn't mean that *we* make it the case that that concept applies to any particular thing, in the way in which we made it the case that the concept "Big Dipper" applies to a particular group of stars.⁵²⁰

"Star" applies to the thing that is Sirius because the concept of a star is the concept that it is *and* because Sirius has the properties that satisfy that concept independently of what we do or say. Similarly, from different perspectives, employing different concepts, we can form different true beliefs without that implying that the *truthmakers* are subjective or relative.⁵²¹ The representation-independent truthmakers consist of properties standing in determinate relations to one another. I take it that it is a virtue of a position if it allows

⁵¹⁹ Putnam 1987, 33.

⁵²⁰ Putnam 1992a, 114.

⁵²¹ I use "truthmaker" in the sense of that which corresponds to and makes true a *truthbearer*, e.g., a thought, belief, statement, sentence, etc. I will say more about the distinction between truthbearer and truthmaker, and the way in which they constitute *truth* below.

us to accommodate the subjectivity of different cultures, time periods, and even beings different from ourselves without at the same time losing objectivity.

To be clear, there are at least two important aspects of the foregoing objectivity. The first, and the one just discussed, is the idea that while our beliefs might be perspectival, e.g., subjective or culturally conditioned, their truth or falsity is not determined by the perspectives themselves, but by a reality independent of the perspectives.⁵²² The second is the idea that this representation-independent reality consists of properties and relations that existed prior to our appearance on the scene—ones that had a particular nature before our arrival. What we call “Sirius” had the properties it has before we came into being. Thus, the subjectivity or relativity that I suggest we endorse is not that of the *truthmakers* of our beliefs, but rather the idea that different cultures, epochs, or beings may be operating with different concepts. And they may do so in such a way that they form beliefs that reflect the perspectives of those cultures, epochs, or beings.⁵²³

Such talk of differing concepts might seem to rely on a naïve understanding of the analytic-synthetic distinction or the distinction between concepts and the empirical statements they can be used to formulate. Quine, one might think, showed that such a distinction is untenable.⁵²⁴ While there isn’t space here to address this issue adequately, I would argue that some sense can be made of the distinction between statements that are relevant to the definition of a concept and those that aren’t. For example, I take it that “A

⁵²² If all truth is subjective, immediate problems arise, e.g., concerning the truth of the belief that all truth is subjective.

⁵²³ So, for example, if our physiology were different with respect to our visual range, we presumably would have concepts that reflect that difference.

⁵²⁴ See, e.g., Quine’s “Two Dogmas of Empiricism” in Quine 1953.

long seat often with arms, a back, and cushions” is definitive of “sofa” in a way that “Often has change and other miscellany between the cushions” or “Is placed across from a television in many homes” are not.⁵²⁵

I am also sympathetic to Putnam’s views on the analytic-synthetic distinction. As we saw in chapter 3, Putnam argues that there is a useful continuum between the analytic and the synthetic. It just can’t be used, as some logical positivists tried, in combination with a verificationist theory of meaning to argue that if a statement isn’t analytic or verifiable, then it is without sense. An important point to take from Putnam’s discussion is that empirical considerations can bear on linguistic meaning without that implying that there is no distinction between, e.g., “There is a book on the table” and “A bachelor is an unmarried man.” For example, “A long seat, often with arms and a back” can be in some sense definitive of “sofa,” even if it is possible that we could discover that sofas really aren’t human-made, inanimate seats but rather some strange life-form. Let us now look at a problem that Putnam might pose for the combination of the *objective perspective thesis* and alethic realism.

Cookie-Cutters, Bookshelves, and the Correspondence

Theory of Truth

The alethic realist is supposed to be committed to the idea that the world consists of representation-independent objects, properties, and relations. They are representation-independent in the sense that they are not even in part constituted by our representations of them. So, for example, the fact that a particular tree has no leaves is not even in part constituted by someone saying or thinking, “This tree has no leaves.” According to

⁵²⁵ For good, critical discussions of Quine’s arguments, see, e.g., Grice and Strawson 1956, and Boghossian 1994 and 1999.

Putnam, since the totality of objects, properties, and relations that constitute reality are supposed to be representation-independent, we can describe that totality of objects, the world, in only one way.⁵²⁶

However, it is not clear that an alethic realist need commit herself to there being only *one true and complete* description of the world. For one thing, there might be issues concerning the ability to conjoin incommensurable languages, if there are or could be any.⁵²⁷ Further, considerations of incommensurability aside, there is an important sense in which alethic realism can allow for the kind of conceptual relativity called for by the *objective perspective thesis* as long as it doesn't imply that what exists is representation-dependent. That is, the alethic realist can say that we can, so to speak, draw conceptual lines across reality in different ways. For example, we speak of mountains as separate from the landscape around them; and when there happen to be several mountains arranged a certain way we speak of a mountain chain. But we could also conceive of not only a mountain chain but something that is the arrangement of mountains and the surrounding area in a one mile radius. Call it a "mountain-chain-area." It is because of the particular properties and their relations in a particular space-time region that we can truthfully talk about a mountain chain or a mountain-chain-area. In something like this way, we can think of our conceptual schemes as carving up the world—and importantly, there may be things that our scheme leaves out and things that other schemes include.

⁵²⁶ Putnam 1981, 49ff. Presumably such a description is not one that we could ever formulate, but the idea is that it would consist of a conjunction of all true, non-synonymous descriptions, e.g., "The cat is on the mat *and* the cherry is on a tree *and*...." See, e.g., Blackburn 1994, 17ff.

⁵²⁷ I take it that if two languages are "incommensurable," then at least some sentences of at least one of the languages cannot be translated into sentences of the other. The modal status of this "cannot" could conceivably vary from causal impossibility to logical impossibility.

Putnam would object to this kind of conceptual carving for at least two reasons: first, it denies the idea of incompatible but true descriptions of the “same” state of affairs, an idea required for Putnam’s “antirealist” version of conceptual relativity; and second, it essentially involves what Putnam calls the cookie-cutter metaphor. Putnam believes that the cookie-cutter metaphor is ultimately a rejection of conceptual relativity:

A metaphor which is often employed to express this is the metaphor of the ‘cookie-cutter’. The things independent of all conceptual choices are the dough; our conceptual contribution is the shape of the cookie cutter. Unfortunately, this metaphor is of no real assistance in understanding the phenomenon of conceptual relativity. Take it seriously, and you are at once forced to answer the question, ‘What are the various parts of the dough?’⁵²⁸

Using his mereological sums example, if you answer that the three individuals x_1, x_2, x_3 are the dough, then you have adopted the Carnapian’s ontology. If you say that they plus their mereological sums are the dough, then you have adopted the Polish Logician’s ontology.⁵²⁹ In either case, the cookie-cutter metaphor denies that the representation dependence of the ontology of objects. In the rest of this chapter, I will argue that there is a wide range of possible answers an alethic realist who endorses the *objective perspective thesis* could give to Putnam’s question regarding the parts of the dough.

As a first approximation of such a position, let us look at a metaphor Fumerton uses that is similar to the cookie-cutter metaphor. He writes:

Consider the ways in which one might sort the books on one’s office bookshelf. What corresponds to the realist’s world of facts are the books with all their similarities and differences—*infinitely*

⁵²⁸ Putnam 1987, 33.

⁵²⁹ This is in part Davidson’s objection to the idea that different conceptual schemes can organize the world in different ways. Organization implies parts to be organized, and if there are parts antecedent to the conceptual schemes, then it is not the conceptual schemes that are doing the organizing. See, e.g., Davidson 2001, 190ff.

many similarities and differences. Some similarities and differences we decide to use in sorting; others we ignore. It may be misleading to describe the process as one of *deciding*. Perhaps it is often better to say only that some similarities and differences we notice and use; others, we don't. We can sort the books on the shelves by author, by subject matter, by shape, by color, by number of pages, by how much we like them, by how old they are, by how expensive they were, by how dusty they are, by what country they were printed in—there is literally no end to the ways in which we might categorize the books. A realist is surely free to recognize the existence of conceptual relativity that is directly analogous to this categorizing relativity of books. Given a system of categorization (a conceptual framework), the nature of the books will determine whether a book is placed correctly or incorrectly on the shelf, but there is no one correct way of categorizing books, any more than there is one correct way of conceptualizing the world.⁵³⁰

As a metaphor, this is certainly inexact; however, we can begin to fill in the details by asking, what in reality is supposed to be analogous to the books' properties, which can be used to sort the books in various ways? I take it that the bookshelf metaphor should be cashed out in terms of properties and relations—there are determinate, representation-independent facts about these properties and relations. Those properties and relations can be variously categorized into or as kinds, objects and further properties and relations. The next question we have to answer concerns the kinds of properties and relations that are representation-independent and on the basis of which *we can form truths*. But before addressing this central question concerning properties, I want to address briefly the antirealist sound of *our forming truths*.

According to the alethic realism that I am advocating, the truthmakers are not even in part constituted by representations of them as the truthmakers they are. So, a cat's being on a mat is the *truthmaker* for "A cat is on a mat"; but the cat's being on the

⁵³⁰ Fumerton 2002, 14.

mat isn't the fact that it is because of some representation like, "This cat is on this mat." However, there is a sense in which *truth* is *mind*-dependent. This mind-dependence of truth is in the sense that *truthbearers* are mind-dependent, i.e., they wouldn't exist without minds. I am, thus, taking truthbearers to be something like thoughts, beliefs, sentences, or statements conceived of as products of conscious minds.⁵³¹ Again, it is the truthbearers—not the truthmakers—that are mind-dependent. Let us return to the issues concerning the bookshelf metaphor and properties.

Alethic Realism, the Objective Perspective Thesis, and Properties

As we saw in chapter 2, Putnam accuses realism of a certain fantasy, namely: "that there is a totality of Forms, or Universals, or 'properties,' fixed once and for all...."⁵³² Knowledge claims are claims about the way these properties distribute over objects.⁵³³ True beliefs are those that correspond to an actual distribution of properties over objects and their relations. Part of Putnam's concern with this realist picture is that he takes it to imply that the world comes neatly carved up into only certain kinds of objects, properties, and relations. As we will see, he is particularly concerned with the idea that it is only science that can tell us what these particular objects, properties, and relations are. This predetermined and limited division of the world into properties and kinds is supposed to admit of only one true and complete description. Thus, Putnam

⁵³¹ Thus, truthbearers are not eternal, mind-independent propositions (universals). This is admittedly a controversial position. One might object by saying that since it makes truthbearers contingent upon minds, the necessary truths of logic and mathematics would then be dependent upon the existence of contingent minds. It would thus seem that there are possible worlds in which supposed necessary truths do not obtain.

⁵³² Putnam 1999, 6.

⁵³³ Putnam 1999, 8.

seems to think that the alethic realist is committed to a view of properties and kinds that is incompatible with the *objective perspective thesis*. However, as I will now argue, alethic realism and the *objective perspective thesis* are only antithetical if the alethic realist adopts *very restrictive (scientific) views about properties*. Indeed, there are a number of different theories of properties to which the alethic realist could appeal in order to explain what constitutes the dough (reality) that the alethic realist can say we “cut up” through our conceptual schemes. Let us now look at the distinction between generic and determinate properties, followed by a short discussion of three traditional theories of properties. This will lead into a discussion of the different possible ways the alethic realist can conceive of the dough.

Generic and Determinate Properties

In the debate over the nature of properties, an important issue is whether and in what sense there are generic properties (also called determinables) in addition to absolutely determinate properties. For example, a swatch of scarlet exemplifies the *determinate* property scarlet. But it might also be thought to exemplify the *generic* property of redness and the *generic* property of being colored. The relation between determinate properties and generic properties is a relative one. In relation to the property of being colored, being red is determinate; in relation to being red, scarlet is determinate and red generic. However, as Swoyer points out, “The hierarchy is generally thought to bottom out...in completely specific, absolute determinates.”⁵³⁴ So, if being scarlet is an absolutely determinate property, it is never a generic property. Other examples of

⁵³⁴ Swoyer 2000.

generic/determinate properties are shapes, odors, tastes, sounds, and the “scientific” ones of mass and charge.

Importantly, the generic/determinate distinction is different from the genus/species distinction. For example, *mammal* is a species of *animal*, as *red* is a determinate of the generic property of *being colored*. However, *mammal* is a species of the genus *animal* because of certain properties added to those that make something an *animal*. So, whatever properties are definitive of “animal,” the species “mammal” is formed by adding such properties as being warm blooded, being such that it nurses its young with milk, etc. In contrast *scarlet*’s being a determinate property is not because of some further property added to that which makes something *colored*.

Other characteristics of the generic/determinate distinction are the following. There is a generic property only if there is a determinate property. For example, something cannot exemplify the generic property of redness if it does not exemplify a determinate property of redness, e.g., being maroon. Further, exemplifying redness does not, of course, imply the determinate kind of redness exemplified. However, exemplifying a determinate property does entail the kind of generic property exemplified. For example, being scarlet entails exemplifying redness.⁵³⁵

Three Theories of Properties: Realism, Austere Nominalism, and Nominalist Trope Theory

Another important part of the debate about properties concerns the following question: In virtue of what are two instances of a property the same property or

⁵³⁵ Gillett and Rives 2005, 485. These above characteristics of the generic/determinate distinction are not meant to be exhaustive. They do, however, help to clarify the nature of the distinction between generic and determinate properties. Fales (1982) critically discusses other ways of standardly characterizing the distinction. See, e.g., pages 29-31.

resembling properties? There are three general approaches to answering this question: realism, austere nominalism, and nominalist trope theory. Realism asserts that there are universals; nominalism denies their existence.⁵³⁶ Let us briefly look at each in turn.

A realist theory of universals explains resemblance and qualitative identity by appealing to the existence of universals or properties that can be fully exemplified by numerically distinct things. For example, if scarlet is a universal, then all things that are scarlet exemplify the numerically identical property of being scarlet. If we admit generic universals, then two scarlet things are red in virtue of their both exemplifying the generic universal redness.

A realist about universals may hold that a universal exists only if there is at least one instance of it in the world, or that it can exist even if unexemplified. Aristotle is thought to have held a version of the former view and to have taken Plato to task for having held the latter.⁵³⁷ Further, a realist about universals may hold that all or only some properties are universals. For example, one might hold that there are determinate universals but no generic universals. Or one might appeal to universals in particular areas, e.g., David Armstrong's appeal to generic universals in unifying determinate instances of (scientific) laws.⁵³⁸

There are two general forms of nominalism. The first, austere nominalism, denies that universals exist and holds that only concrete particulars, e.g., persons, tables, trees,

⁵³⁶ Though as we will see, it is possible to combine some form of trope theory with a theory of universals.

⁵³⁷ Swoyer 2000.

⁵³⁸ Gillett and Rives 2005, 493ff. See Armstrong 1997, 243.

etc., exist.⁵³⁹ The predicate “red” does not refer to a property but rather a class of particular entities, e.g., sweaters, scarves, dogs, rocks, leaves, etc. But we still need some account of class membership. According to Armstrong, there are two main options for uniting the particulars into classes. First, concrete particulars can be said to form a natural class that cannot be further explained.⁵⁴⁰ So, a scarlet sweater, maroon scarf, etc., simply form a natural class. Second, concrete particulars can be collected by way of a *primitive* relation of resemblance that cannot be further analyzed or explained. So, a scarlet sweater and maroon scarf would belong to the same class in virtue of a primitive relation of generic resemblance.⁵⁴¹

The second general form of nominalism is trope theory. According to trope theories, there are properties such as scarlet, redness, triangularity, mass, etc., but they are particular instead of universal. That is, a scarlet sweater and a scarlet scarf exemplify numerically distinct properties, as distinct as the sweater and scarf. According to Armstrong, there are three main options for accounting for resemblance under trope theories. First, the individual, particular instances of being scarlet might “form a closely unified natural class and that is all that can be said.”⁵⁴² Second, tropes can be collected

⁵³⁹ Loux 1998, 61.

⁵⁴⁰ Armstrong 1989, 14. Armstrong explains that, in part, the idea of a natural class is epistemological. There is a natural class X when after being presented with a number of samples of a kind, e.g., a number of different shades of blue, one can then go on to identify unfamiliar entities as being further examples of the same kind. However, according to Armstrong it is up to science to figure out the true natural classes. Thus, what we initially take to be a natural class may have to be changed. 21ff. We should note that this kind of scientism is antithetical to the *objective perspective thesis*. This will be discussed in more detail below.

⁵⁴¹ There is a still more extreme form of nominalism called linguistic nominalism, according to which particulars belong to a class simply in virtue of our using the same word to describe them. For example, a sweater and a scarf would both be scarlet if, and only if, we apply the predicate “scarlet” to them. However, this implies that there are no similarities in the world independent of our use of language.

⁵⁴² Armstrong 1989, 16.

by way of a primitive and unanalyzable relation of resemblance. Third, tropes can be collected by way of appealing to certain universals. For example, the scarlet trope of the sweater and the scarlet trope of the scarf could instantiate the same, single scarlet universal. However, as Armstrong points out, this makes the tropes redundant and thus might not make for an attractive view.⁵⁴³

Alethic Realism, the Objective Perspective Thesis, and Properties, Again

Answers to the cookie-cutter objection can avail themselves of at least three ways of combining the distinction between generic and determinate properties, and the distinction between realist and nominalist theories of properties: 1) There are both generic and determinate universals. 2) There are determinate but not generic universals. And 3) There are neither generic nor determinate universals.⁵⁴⁴ It is not to my purpose here to venture which of these views might be correct. Rather, the point is that all three of these positions are consistent with the combination of alethic realism and the *objective perspective thesis*. There are only problems maintaining the *objective perspective thesis* if one also maintains a *highly restrictive* conception of properties. Let us look at these three possibilities in more detail.

⁵⁴³ However, Armstrong's conclusion might be too quick. There may actually be dialectical reasons to pair universals with tropes. For example, if one is a realist about universals, then one needs a way to individuate purportedly different objects exemplifying the exact same universals. If one is not sympathetic to their being individuated by means of the existence of substrata or bare particulars, then, since tropes are particulars themselves, one might appeal to tropes as a means of individuation. I owe this point to Richard Fumerton.

⁵⁴⁴ It is not clear how much sense it would make to try to combine a denial of determinate universals with acceptance of generic universals, since, except for the absolutely determinate properties and perhaps the absolutely generic properties (if there are any), the generic/determinate distinction is relative. That is, since *red* is generic in relation to *scarlet*, but determinate in relation to *color*, it's not clear how we could hold that red is both a universal and not a universal.

1) A realist about both generic and determinate universals can happily accept the *objective perspective thesis* in combination with alethic realism. That is, she can admit that conceptual schemes can differ in regard to which generic and determinate universals are taken note of or ignored when classifying and conceptualizing what there is. For example, even though we do not, some conceptual scheme might have the concept of what we would describe as a tree and a particular amount of soil surrounding its roots—call it a “troil.” A description involving the concept of a troil would be made true or false by the arrangement of generic and determinate universals in a particular space-time region.

However, assuming that there are generic and determinate universals, a central issue in regard to the *objective perspective thesis* concerns what sort of limits there are on their existence. If they are limited in a particular way, the *objective perspective thesis* is threatened insofar as the legitimacy of certain conceptual perspectives would then be called into question. For example, say that a) the only real properties are those given by physics, e.g., the properties that are exemplified by atomic “objects”; and that b) predicates such as “color” and “hardness” are not real properties. If a) and b) were true, then classifications based on color and hardness would not be based on “real” properties, and beliefs based on such classifications would be at best the stuff of folk theory. Think of classifications of liquids in virtue of phenomenal qualities, e.g., taste, smell, color, fluidity, on the one hand, versus chemical composition, e.g., H_2O , on the other. If the latter kinds of properties alone determine the correct classifications, then the *objective perspective thesis* is compromised.

Does the *objective perspective thesis* require there to be no restrictions on which universals exist? Well, perhaps there should be at least one restriction given the problems presented by the predicate “non-selfexemplifying.” If “non-selfexemplifying” denotes a real property, then it leads to a paradox, for, as Michael J. Loux points out, “the property must either exemplify itself or fail to do so.”⁵⁴⁵ If non-selfexemplifying is a property that is self-exemplifying, then it is non-selfexemplifying; if it is non-selfexemplifying, then it is self-exemplifying.

Figuring out which universals there are would presumably be a very difficult task. But the point to come away with is that while there may be some limitations on which universals exist, as long as those limitations are not too severe, one can endorse the *objective perspective thesis*, realism about generic and determinate properties, and alethic realism.⁵⁴⁶

2) The *objective perspective thesis* and alethic realism are consistent with a theory according to which there are absolutely determinate but no generic universals. On such a view, the problem is to explain our talk of generic properties. We often say things such as “The colors don’t match,” and “The sound of the accident was horrible.” On the view of properties we are considering, whatever the absolutely determinate colors and sounds are, they are universals; but there are no generic universals that satisfy the generic predicates. There are a number of different routes one might take in order to explain the use of generic predicates. As trope theory does with all property instances, one might appeal to the notion of a natural class of red things, one that consists of all the absolutely

⁵⁴⁵ Loux 1998, 36.

⁵⁴⁶ And there are further difficult questions as to nature and “location” of the border between kinds of restrictions that are too severe for the *objective perspective thesis* to be true and those that aren’t.

determinate instances of red, e.g., maroon, scarlet, crimson, etc. Or one might argue that there is some kind of primitive generic resemblance between the absolutely determinate universals scarlet, maroon, crimson, etc. Apparent reference to generic properties is then explained in terms of reference to these classes.

Assuming we can explain apparent reference to generic universals even when there are only absolutely determinate ones, the question arises as to which predicates refer to *actual* natural classes of absolutely determinate universals or classes of absolutely determinate universals founded on primitive resemblances. This issue should, *mutatis mutandis*, be handled in the same manner as it was above in regard to which determinate and generic universals there are.

Alternatively, one might follow Fumerton's suggestion that truths about generic properties are dependent upon the correspondence of determinate properties with abstract ideas of some kind. He considers different possibilities for what these abstract ideas might be, but the general idea is that: "The truth makers for truths about something's being blue or triangular might be perfectly *determinate* colors and shapes that correspond to 'abstract' ideas or thoughts."⁵⁴⁷ It is important to be clear on how Fumerton's suggestion is supposed to work and why it is not a problem for the representation-independent truthmakers required by the kind of alethic realism I am advocating.

On Putnam's version of conceptual relativity, three marbles equal three objects because of their being represented/described as "three objects." Similarly, three marbles equal seven objects because of their being represented/described as "seven objects." It is

⁵⁴⁷ Fumerton 2002, 120. See 120ff., for his considerations for and against the different possibilities for what the abstract ideas or thoughts might be. He considers, for example, the possibility that the abstract (generic) ideas are concepts or paradigmatic "images" (perhaps morphing ones), or genuinely abstract ideas that are not properly thought of even metaphorically as images or pictures, etc.

the representation of the marbles as the kind of objects they are (non-mereological objects/mereological sums) that makes it the case that they are or are not mereological sums. In contrast, Fumerton's suggestion about generic properties is that the truthmaker (TM) for "Scarlet and maroon are red" is a) the two determinate properties, b) their *correspondence* or *relation of resemblance* to c) an abstract idea of redness. This is certainly a complex truthmaker; however, neither it nor any of its parts are what they are because of their being represented as such. That is, none of TM, a), b), or c) are what they are by way of being represented as TM, a), b), or c). Scarlet and maroon are *not* red, they do not exemplify redness, because of the representation, "Scarlet and maroon are red." The latter is true because of a representation-independent relation of resemblance between the representation-independent, determinate properties and a representation-independent abstract idea.⁵⁴⁸

All of these views accounting for apparent reference to generic properties face difficult challenges. But for present purposes, we need not say which is correct. Rather, let us note that there are a number of different possibilities whereby one can reject generic universals and at the same time a) explain apparent reference to generic properties, b) endorse realism about determinate properties, c) endorse the *objective perspective thesis*, and d) endorse alethic realism.

3) One can also combine alethic realism and the *objective perspective thesis* with a theory that denies *both* determinate and generic universals. Such a view would presumably analyze properties in terms of austere nominalism or trope theory. As we

⁵⁴⁸ The abstract idea is trivially representation-dependent in the sense of its being a representation; but it is not representation-dependent in the sense of its being the abstract idea that it is because of some meta-representation representing it as such.

have seen, the problem is to then explain the resemblance between absolutely determinate property instances in addition to our talk of generic properties. In regard to explaining apparent reference to generic properties, I take it that, *mutatis mutandis*, the same possibilities that we considered in 2) are applicable here as well. And again, the issue arises as to which predicates refer to *actual* natural classes of absolutely determinate properties or classes of absolutely determinate properties founded on primitive resemblances. This issue should, *mutatis mutandis*, be handled in the same manner as it was above in 1) regarding determinate and generic universals.

Putnam, Alethic Realism, and Restrictive Theories of Generic Properties

If 1)-3) above are all consistent with alethic realism and the *objective perspective thesis*, then what would make them inconsistent? Putnam often speaks very generally about realism. For example, he claims that “metaphysical realism” consists of the following three theses: A) There is a fixed totality of representation-independent objects. B) Those objects, properties, and relations admit of only one true and complete description. And C) Truth consists in correspondence between A) and B).⁵⁴⁹ As I have argued above, the alethic realist can endorse A) and C), reject B), endorse the *objective perspective thesis*, and still have a wide range of options regarding what sorts of properties constitute the dough of reality waiting to be carved up by different perspectives.

However, Putnam also talks about a particular form of “metaphysical realism” that we might call scientism. On this view it is (finished) science that tells us the true

⁵⁴⁹ Putnam 1981, 49.

nature of reality and the kinds of things that exist. There are strong and weak versions of this scientism. The *weak* versions claim that the sciences, which may include biology, chemistry, etc., tell us what properties and kinds there really are. These kinds might include the so-called natural kinds such as water, tigers, and gold. Science would tell us, then, e.g., whether certain phenomenal qualities are real properties or whether gold, tigers or *troils* are real kinds. The *strong* versions of scientism claim that only *physics* tells us what the real properties and kinds are. These properties and kinds won't be the familiar stuff of daily experience. The real properties and kinds aren't gold, tigers, water, or the like, but rather atomic particles, quantum objects, states, fields, etc.⁵⁵⁰

Putnam's having something like these forms of scientism, or *scientistic* realism in mind, at least some of the time, can be seen from his discussions of the views of Bernard Williams and Quine. Putnam spends a good deal of time arguing against Williams's notion of the absolute conception of the world.⁵⁵¹ The absolute conception of the world is that which science would converge upon and which is maximally independent of our perspectives as human beings—one that beings other than ourselves could arrive at.⁵⁵² As we saw in chapters 1 and 2, Quine makes a distinction between first- and second-grade conceptual systems. He writes that our hopes, fears, purposes, etc. (intensional states in general), belong to the second-grade conceptual system; the first-grade conceptual system is that of science.⁵⁵³ Putnam points out that Quine certainly recognized the importance of the "second-grade" conceptual systems, especially when

⁵⁵⁰ Whatever finished science figures out.

⁵⁵¹ See, e.g., Putnam 1992a, especially chapter 5.

⁵⁵² Williams 1985, 138-139.

⁵⁵³ Quine 1969, 23-24.

considering the “agent’s point of view”; however, according to Quine it is the “first-grade” conceptual system that gives us our *bona fide* description of reality and *what is*.⁵⁵⁴

Putnam is particularly anxious to repudiate these forms of scientism, particularly the strong version.⁵⁵⁵ However, because he associates these kinds of scientism with realism more generally, in rejecting the former he ends up thinking we must reject the latter. Granted he has other reasons for rejecting alethic realism, principally his argument from conceptual relativity.⁵⁵⁶ Although I have not argued for it here, I would claim that his notion of conceptual relativity requires the untenable idea of incompatible but equally true descriptions. However, as I *have* argued here, the *objective perspective thesis* can be salvaged from it. And the latter is consistent with alethic realism and a wide array of positions as to what properties are, what the “dough” consists of, and how we account for reference to generic properties. Alethic realism and the *objective perspective thesis* only run into problems when combined with some form of severe restrictions on the properties to which we can truly refer. The above forms of scientism entail just such severe restrictions. It is not to my purpose here to argue against the various forms of scientism. Rather, it is important to see that we can keep a central insight of conceptual relativity,

⁵⁵⁴ Putnam 2000, 9. I take the expression “*bona fide*,” and its use in this context, from Putnam 2004b, 61.

⁵⁵⁵ For example, Putnam writes:

Metaphysical materialism has replaced positivism and pragmatism as the dominant contemporary form of scientism. Since scientism is, in my opinion, one of the most dangerous contemporary intellectual tendencies, a critique of its most influential contemporary form is a duty for a philosopher who views his enterprise as more than purely technical discipline. (1983, 211)

⁵⁵⁶ In chapters 1 and 2, we reviewed Putnam’s other main arguments against the correspondence theory of truth, namely, his so-called model-theoretic arguments. However, as we saw in chapter 2, Putnam argues that the argument can be defused if one adopts a particular form of direct realism. And others have argued against the model-theoretic argument(s) more generally. See, e.g., Merrill 1980, Lewis 1984, and Landini 1987.

namely, the *objective perspective thesis*, and endorse alethic realism. Doing so is only a problem given views that severely restrict the kinds of properties that exist. While there may be other, dialectical reasons for restricting the kinds of properties that exist, adherence to scientism in its various forms is the predominant motivation for contemporary restrictive theories of properties.

Concluding Remarks

Alethic realism in combination with the *objective perspective thesis* does not entail anti-*science* even if it entails anti-*scientism*. The sciences certainly bring very successful conceptual schemes to bear on our understanding of the world. But if we are sympathetic to the combination of the *objective perspective thesis* and alethic realism, then a certain permissiveness regarding what counts as a legitimate property and kind is required. As I have tried to argue, this permissiveness does not mean that anything goes. There may very well be limits on which predicates pick out real properties. Further, the existence of a predicate does not entail the existence of a property or a kind. Nothing has the properties of a unicorn, even though there is the concept of a unicorn. Lastly, when a predicate truly applies it does so in virtue of how the world is, independently of the application of that predicate. The world is what it is independently of our representations. In rejecting the overly restrictive views of scientism, we need not reject alethic realism, as Putnam seems to imply.

CONCLUSION

Argument and Vision

In chapter 6, I tried to indicate that there are parts of Putnam's philosophy that I find appealing, and which are consistent with alethic realism. In closing this dissertation, I would like to look briefly at why I believe Putnam's work is of interest on a more general level.

Though perhaps somewhat artificial, following Wolfgang Künne, we may fruitfully divide up Putnam's philosophy into three periods: scientific realism, interim period, and pragmatic period.⁵⁵⁷ While Putnam may be wont to change his mind on key philosophical issues, we should not let this obscure the fact that there are important continuities in his thought. One such continuity pervades the latter two periods, while perhaps being inchoate in the first. That continuity is what we might call Putnam's overarching *vision*. In his *Cogito* interview, Putnam responds to the question of what makes a good philosopher by saying, in part:

I would agree with Myles Burnyeat who once said that philosophy needs vision *and* arguments. Burnyeat's point was that there is something disappointing about a philosophical work that contains arguments, however good, which are not inspired by some genuine vision, and something disappointing about philosophical work that contains a vision, however inspiring, which is unsupported by arguments.⁵⁵⁸

And by "vision," Putnam takes Burnyeat to mean, "vision as to how to live our lives, and how to order our societies. Philosophers have a double task: to integrate our various

⁵⁵⁷ See Künne 2002.

⁵⁵⁸ Putnam 1999, 44.

views of our world and ourselves...and to help us find a meaningful orientation in life.”⁵⁵⁹

At least one aspect of Putnam’s vision is as follows. For Putnam, naturalism in the form of scientism is dangerous to the task of addressing the question “How shall I live?”, for “finding a meaningful orientation in life.” It is dangerous because, as Putnam sees it, scientific naturalism holds that science provides the only legitimate description of the world—it is our first class conceptual scheme. There is no room for values or religion in such a description. In *Realism and Reason*, Putnam writes:

Metaphysical materialism has replaced positivism and pragmatism as the dominant contemporary form of scientism. Since scientism is, in my opinion, one of the most dangerous contemporary intellectual tendencies, a critique of its most influential contemporary form is a duty for a philosopher who views his enterprise as more than purely technical discipline.⁵⁶⁰

We might question the extent to which metaphysical materialism has replaced positivism and pragmatism, and as I did in chapter 6, we can question whether an alethic realist must be scientific. However, I take it that philosophy as a purely technical discipline is, for Putnam, philosophy without vision.

Along these same lines, in his introduction to Putnam’s *Realism with a Human Face*, Conant writes:

...the peculiarly Kantian flavor of many of these essays stems not from a new departure in Putnam’s thought, but rather from the flowering of a tendency that has been maturing for some years. Earlier I specified one symptom of this process of maturation: the pervasive responsiveness of these essays to questions about how the formulation of issues in certain areas of philosophy (metaphysics, philosophy of mind, and philosophy of science) both

⁵⁵⁹ Putnam 1999, 52.

⁵⁶⁰ Putnam 1983, 211.

determines and is determined by the formulation of (often apparently unrelated) issues in moral and political philosophy. [...] Indeed, it would not be much of a distortion to summarize the underlying agenda of the volume as a whole in the following terms: Putnam wishes to draw limits to scientific reason in order to make room for ethics. ...it would be still more accurate to say: Putnam wishes to find a way to make sense of both our scientific and everyday practices of adjudicating disputes and arriving at truths in a way that also enables us to make the right kind of sense of our moral lives.⁵⁶¹

Though I will not pursue the details here, Putnam's attempt in the past thirty or so years to undermine the fact/value dichotomy is one of the more explicit parts of his efforts to "make room for ethics."⁵⁶²

Recently, in attempting to characterize what exactly scientific naturalism amounts to, Putnam writes:

At first blush, the fact that so many philosophers are proud of calling themselves "naturalists," without spelling out what the term means, might suggest "naturalism" has no definite content at all. But this would be a mistake; there *is* a content to "naturalism" (in the scientific understanding of the term that I am criticizing), but the unfortunate term "naturalism" conceals it instead of making it clear. To find what that content is, we have to consider what the *opponents* of (scientific) naturalism really defend. What they defend is, of course, not "supernatural" or "occult" explanations (although the term "naturalism" is intended to suggest that that is what they defend). What they defend is, rather, conceptual pluralism. But what is "conceptual pluralism"?⁵⁶³

It is at this point that we enter explicitly into the discussion of truth and realism. As should be clear from the foregoing chapters, I do not believe that Putnam's argument from conceptual relativity is effective at undermining (alethic) realism.

⁵⁶¹ Putnam 1990, xxiii.

⁵⁶² See, e.g., "Fact and Value" in Putnam 1981, "The Place of Facts in a World of Values" in Putnam 1990, and *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy and Other Essays*, Putnam 2002.

⁵⁶³ Putnam 2004, 60-61.

However, despite the failure of conceptual relativity, there is much that is of interest and import in Putnam's later work. I tried to capture some of it in chapter 6 by arguing that a realist can endorse the *objective perspective thesis*. Part of what I find appealing in Putnam's work is his account of conceptual pluralism (without the form found in conceptual relativity). The question is in what sense can we, or should we, endorse conceptual pluralism.

Realism and Conceptual Relativity Beyond Putnam

While the foregoing chapters are obviously focused on Putnam's work, I want to end by emphasizing, as is hopefully apparent from the details of chapters 1-6, that the issues, arguments, and conclusions discussed go well beyond Putnam and into the heart of much of 20th century Anglo-American philosophy.⁵⁶⁴ One of the general conclusions we can draw from the discussion of Putnam's account of conceptual relativity is that if one is going to claim that what exists is representation-dependent in such a way that there can be incompatible descriptions of the "same" state of affairs, then one will have to give an account of that incompatibility. If I have been successful, then it is clear that such an account is not going to be had.

⁵⁶⁴ Though, of course, given the development of philosophy, many of the issues go further back to Kant, Descartes, and to the ancient Greeks.

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