

REALISM AND CONCEPTUAL RELATIVITY

by

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PH.D. THESIS

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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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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 *realism*, for now.⁴ According to

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.

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.

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 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

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.

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 (scientistic) 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 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.