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PUTNAM'S NATURAL REALISM AND ITS PROBLEMS

Hilary Putnam (1926–2016) was prone to change his mind on variety of philosophical issues and almost constantly to modify and gloss his views. In this respect he reminds Bertrand Russell, his great analytic predecessor. The last period discernible in his philosophy is known as the phase of commonsense or natural realism, eloquently presented in his 1994 Dewey Lectures (PUTNAM 1994 and 1999). In what follows I shall focus on three facets of his position, elaborated there and subsequently amended or supplemented, and try to identify three difficulties it encounters. However, while doing this I shall remain acutely aware of the complaint often made that to write about Putnam's philosophy "is like trying to capture the wind with a fishing-net" (PASSMORE 1985, 92).

1. THE STAGE SETTING

Putnam claims that in the contemporary realism debate we have, on the one hand, proponents of traditional metaphysical realism, and, on the other hand, advocates of various versions of antirealism. For the most part, philosophers tend to oscillate between these two extreme and implausible views. This gives rise to what he describes, inspired by John McDowell, as "the recoil phenomenon":

Philosophers who recoil from the excesses of various versions of metaphysical realism have recoiled to a variety of very peculiar positions—deconstruction be-

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ing currently the most famous, but one could also mention Nelson Goodman's "irrealism" or Michael Dummett's "antirealism" as examples of a similar recoil on the part of some analytic philosophers. And philosophers who recoil from what they see as the loss of the world in these antirealisms have embraced such mysterious notions as "identity across metaphysically possible worlds" and "the absolute conception of the world". (PUTNAM 1999, 4)

In other words, philosophers seem to oscillate between extravagant or even reactionary metaphysics and irresponsible relativism or subjectivism that gives up the idea of answerability to reality. Putnam wants to find a middle way between these unsatisfactory positions; that is to say, he aspires to identify a sensible and moderate realism of some kind.

Unfortunately, the delineation of the debate is too coarse-grained. There are many forms of metaphysical realism, and lumping together various antirealisms is confusing and unhelpful.

For instance, Dummettian antirealism is far from being a version of relativism or subjectivism, and in general it tends to do justice to the universal requirements of objectivity. Putnam thinks otherwise and argues that Dummett's position is unstable: torn between Scylla of solipsism and Charybdis of metaphysical realism (PUTNAM 2007/2016). He starts his argument from the description of the way in which Dummett contrasts the realist account of meaning of our statements in terms of their truth conditions, with the verificationist, justificationist, or antirealist conception of meaning in terms of what would verify or justify asserting our statements as true. Dummett strongly prefers the latter, because it meets the manifestation challenge of explaining the mastery of our language, and especially of specifying in what the knowledge of meaning of our statements consists in and how it can be manifested. In this picture, then, we have speakers and hearers of a given language that publicly display the understanding of statements they made by supporting them with justifying grounds or recognizing such grounds. There is no place for those grounds in the realist theory of meaning, since—according to Dummett—the knowledge of truth conditions cannot directly and effectively manifests itself, and becomes puzzling and elusive when those conditions are, as it often happens, recognition-transcendent. However, Putnam insists that the former account, known as verificationist, justificationist, or assertabilist, runs into trouble when it comes to giving full justice to the idea of independent or objective world.

It would be grossly unfair to suggest that Dummett in his justificationism confines justificatory grounds conferring meaning on our statements to pri-

vate experiences or evidence possessed by a single speaker or hearer, and thus reduces the objective world to its appearances within the purview of individual speakers. That would certainly be solipsism of some kind, which Dummett explicitly repudiates:

Solipsism has never exerted any attraction on me. How could I—how can anyone—be a solipsist? I learned my language from other people; without it I could form only inchoate thoughts about the immediately present. I might be quite cunning in dealing with the immediately present, but I should barely be rational. I am what I am only because I belong to the human race, and am surrounded by its members, with whom I interact in various ways. (DUMMETT 2007, 168)

He also rejects the reduction of independent reality to subjective appearances:

The justificationist is not a solipsist, or even a phenomenalist: he does not think that reality—all that exists—consists solely of our experiences. (He does not believe, however, that God could have created a physical universe devoid of sentient beings to experience it. It is not just that there would have been no point in His doing so: there would have been no *substance* to His doing so).

The justificationist thus accepts that there is an external world, an environment common to himself and other human beings and to other animals, too. He distinguishes between genuine perceptions and dreams on the ground of the coherence of the former: even when utterly unexpected and even inexplicable things happen, their effects can be perceived to persist. (DUMMETT 2005, 672)

Nevertheless, assurances or pronouncements is one thing, and appropriate epistemic legitimacy to make them is another. Putnam thinks Dummett is wanting in making his assurances fully legitimate. One can admit that language is essentially social and that the appeal to common knowledge is unavoidable, but one should at the same time remember that the competence in using language is individual, and the acquisition of all necessary communal skills is quite a feat requiring more by way of a general picture of the world and our place in it than a justificationist or antirealist can provide. Of course, it is relatively easy to explain the child's mastery of relying on the testimony of others and trusting them, but it is for an antirealist more difficult, if not impossible, "to account for the child's grasp of the thought that a statement about the past may be true even though *no* testimony is available (to the child)" (PUTNAM 2007/2016, 164 and 126). Moreover, one can argue that antirealism about the past, based upon the idea of a constitutive link between

the existence of past events and the availability of evidence for them, is fundamentally flawed and presumably incoherent.

Dummett rebuts the charge of incoherence and claims that “the anti-realist about the past is perfectly coherent and free of self-contradiction”, but “it is just difficult, and not very pleasant, to believe” (DUMMETT 2007, 173).¹ At the same time he puts a lot of effort to moderate his antirealism about the past and make it immune to contingencies of our epistemic situation and the availability of evidence. Thus it would be wrong to treat his overall philosophical position as contributing to “the loss of the world”, mentioned by Putnam.

This underlying drift of Dummett’s position is aptly noticed by John McDowell, though he himself is far from sharing it and has always been one of its severest critics:

Dummettian antirealism is not a version of the thought that on pain of fantasy we must give up trying to see ourselves as answerable to reality. Dummett argues that for languages whose expressive resources enable claims that are not effectively decidable, we cannot understand the semantics of sentences suitable for claim making in terms of conditions for their truth. Instead we need to consider conditions for assertibility, evidentially relevant conditions of sorts whose members, unlike truth conditions, are recognizable as obtaining whenever they obtain. This is not a *substitute* for seeing ourselves as responsible to reality in our claim making. What Dummett offers, rather, is an account of how we should conceive the responsibility to reality that continues, in this way of thinking, to be a condition for the very possibility of claim making. According to Dummett, lack of effective decidability prevents us from cashing out the idea directly, in terms of truth conditions, and he offers assertibility conditions as an alternative, indirect resource for saying what our responsibility to reality comes to. (MCDOWELL 2015, 645)

¹ In parentheses completing this statement he adds “though Łukasiewicz found it consoling”. Dummett has in mind here the great Polish philosopher and logician Jan Łukasiewicz, who in the concluding passage of his famous essay “On Determinism” (originally delivered in 1922 as an inaugural lecture at the University of Warsaw) reflects on past events no longer affecting the present, without any traces or evidence left, and writes as follows:

One cannot say about them that they took place, but only that they were *possible*. It is well that it should be so. There are hard moments of suffering and still harder ones of guilt in everyone’s life. We should be glad to be able to erase them not only from our memory but also from existence. We may believe that when all the effects of those fateful moments are exhausted, even should that happen only *after* our death, then their causes too will be effaced from the world of actuality and pass into the realm of possibility. Time calms our cares and brings us forgiveness. (ŁUKASIEWICZ 1970, 128)

Be that as it may, Putnam might respond, Dummett's attempts to save the objective world bring him dangerously close to Charybdis of metaphysical realism. Dummett admits that this indeed once happened:

I expressed the view that the meaning of a statement that some event occurred or that some state of affairs obtained at some particular place or time had two components: what evidence would justify its assertion, and what it *said*; and I allowed that the admission of this second component involved a lurch towards realism. (DUMMETT 2007, 174)

However, before too long Dummett revoked this distinction and argued that while working with a properly communal conception of evidence justifying assertion of a statement, one may replace the idea of what a statement says with the notion of its direct justification, which at any given moment may be unavailable for an individual speaker (though is, was, or will be available for someone within a wider community). Putnam thinks that this move has not fully removed the threat of realism, because this would eventually require an elaborate grid in which individual speakers are placed and mutually related; that is to say, it would require a certain picture of the world with variously located people within it. If so, then the following objection may be raised:

If I can form a mental "grid" that shows the relation of other places and times to my present location, why does the knowledge that certain events either did or did not happen at those places and times have to depend on whether observers were there *then*? Can *meteorites* not occupy positions in a mental grid? Originally the rationale of verificationism was the idea that my understanding of such sentences about the past *consists* in *my* ability, the *speaker's* ability, to verify them or falsify them. Once one says, "it does not have to be the speaker herself; it can be some other speaker, even someone who never communicated with the speaker," then it seems to me that she has made a huge concession to realism without appreciating just how huge it is. (PUTNAM 2015b, 447)

When Putnam talks about a concession to realism he presumably has in mind traditional metaphysical realism, which he thinks includes the idea that there is "a definite totality of all objects (in a sense of 'object' that was imagined to have been fixed, at least in philosophy, once and for all) and a definite totality of all 'properties'" (PUTNAM 1999, 21).

This idea has often been conjoined with the thought that "there is a definite totality of all possible knowledge claims, likewise fixed once and for all independently of language users or thinkers" (PUTNAM 1999, 22). It seems

that there are no obvious reasons why metaphysical realism should be burdened with such a strong or hefty metaphysics. Dummett rightly notices:

This may be part of what Putnam means by “metaphysical realism”; but I cannot see why a realist should be saddled with this assumption. A philosopher may be determinedly realist, and yet recognize that how we slice the world up into discrete objects depends upon the sortal concepts we use, and recognise that we might have used, or other rational creatures might use, quite different ones. (DUMMETT 2007, 178)

Nonetheless, it should be recognized that in his latest publications Putnam softened his view on this matter and conceded that metaphysical realism he used to describe and criticize is simply one form of such a view, and there is no principled obstacle to conceive metaphysical realism more broadly “as applying to all philosophers who reject all forms of verificationism and all talk of our ‘making’ the world” (PUTNAM 2012, 62). However, it is disputable whether his moderate—natural or common sense—realism is a metaphysical view at all² and engages in the traditional debate between realism and antirealism. I shall return to this issue in the third part of the paper.

2. DIRECT REALISM AND TRANSACTIONALISM

A key ingredient of Putnam’s new moderate realism, advertised by him as common sense or natural realism (in a wide sense), is a form of direct realism (natural realism in a narrow sense) in the theory of perception.³ The underlying idea of direct realism is “that the objects of (normal ‘veridical’) perception are ‘external’ things, and, more generally, aspects of ‘external’ reality” (PUTNAM 1999, 10). One should follow in this respect the “natural realism of the common man”, as William James put it, for whom “successful perception is a *sensing* of aspects of the reality ‘out there’ and not a mere

² Putnam sometimes explicitly insists that it is “an unmetaphysical version of realism” (2007/2016, 163 and 124).

³ The narrow use of the term “natural realism”, confined to the theory of perception, is primary in Putnam’s writings, though it is sometimes extended to cover other components of his position; for instance, in his “Intellectual Autobiography” he refers to “natural realism with respect to the nature of truth” (PUTNAM 2015a, 94). Philosophers discussing Putnam’s views often find it useful to talk about natural realism in a wide or comprehensive sense (see, e.g., McDOWELL 2015, *passim*; WRIGHT 2003, 207–8, 288–89, 318–19, 323 and 325). For the most part I shall be following this wide usage.

affectation of a person's subjectivity by those aspects" (PUTNAM 1999, 10).⁴ Taking into account current terminological preferences, this view may be also called a version of naïve realism.

Direct or natural realism is opposed, Putnam claims, to the widespread and deeply entrenched interface conception of perception for which

perception involves an interface between the mind and the "external" objects we perceive. In dualistic versions of early modern metaphysics and epistemology, that interface was supposed to consist of "impressions" (or "sensations" or "experiences" or "sense data" or "qualia"), and these were conceived of as immaterial. In materialist versions the interface has long been conceived of as consisting of brain processes. (PUTNAM 1999, 43)

Dualistic and materialist versions of the interface conception, though *prima facie* distinct and unlike, may be conflated into a view called by Putnam "Cartesianism cum materialism" in which impressions or sense data are simply identified with brain states or processes.

The interface conception usually takes form of a causal theory of perception.

On that theory the objects we perceive give rise to chains of events that include stimulations of our sense organs, and finally to "sense data" in our minds. In materialist versions of the theory "sense data" are assumed to be identical with physical events in our brains; in recent variations on the materialist theme inspired by cognitive science, these events in our brains are said to be a subset of the "mental representations" or to be the outputs of certain "modules," etc. (PUTNAM 1999, 22)

Putnam holds that any form of a causal theory of perception is incompatible with direct realism. Apparently, one can plausibly argue that this is not unavoidable, and there are accounts of causality that are compatible with direct realism in the theory of perception.⁵ However, for current considerations

⁴ By insisting upon the importance of William James in restoring natural or direct realism Putnam wants, among other things, to reveal the genuine roots of the American new realism movement in the early years of the 20th century. He provides the following rationale: "In his two-volume biography of William James, the official leader of the new realists, R.B. Perry, said he had neglected James' realism. He then takes credit for it. A very strange episode" (PUTNAM 2013, 515).

⁵ I argued along these lines in SZUBKA 2002. Undoubtedly Dummett has a cogent point when he claims "that more caution is needed than Hilary Putnam exercises in repudiating the causal theory of perception, since causal notions are genuinely bound up with our concepts of sense perception" (DUMMETT 2015, 428).

what is more important is the question of the nature of perceptual experience within the framework of direct or natural realism.

In his Dewey Lectures Putnam does not focus on this question, though from various remarks made by him in passing one may infer that he was inclined to embrace a disjunctive conception of perceptual experience (MACARTHUR 2004). He admitted this explicitly in his later writings. While discussing influence of several contemporary philosophers on his views he stated: “It was not until I became aware of the ‘disjunctivist’ school in the philosophy of perception, of which John McDowell is today one of the most distinguished representatives, that I came to see it is possible to defend what James called ‘the natural realism of the common man’” (PUTNAM 2008/2022, 111 and 342). In his later paper on the revival of naïve realism he wrote:

The disjunctivist position (which I actually endorsed in *The Threefold Cord*, before appreciating how much Martin in particular, but I think maybe also McDowell, want to add) simply says that in the case of a veridical perception what you perceive is the white picket fence, and that in the case of a hypothetical hallucination you’re not aware of anything, but it seems to you that you’re aware of something. The disjunctivist position doesn’t say that having a hallucination is a case of absent qualia or being a zombie; but it says that having phenomenal experience is not the same as being aware *of something*. (PUTNAM 2013, 517)

also emphasized this point in a recent essay on the development of his views in the philosophy of mind:

However, I went further and opted for “disjunctivism,” which is the view that, in veridical perception—say, seeing objects in one’s vicinity as they actually are—there are no such objects as sense data at all. According to disjunctivists, even a “perfect hallucination”—for instance, a hallucination produced by an “experience machine” that causes one’s visual cortex and all the other relevant parts of the brain to be in exactly the state that they would be in if one were perceiving, say, a white cat on a blue sofa—and the veridical experience one would have in that state have no common elements. It is true that the two experiences cannot be distinguished on the basis of how things seem to one visually, but, according to disjunctivists, one cannot say that they are indistinguishable *because* they have the same phenomenal quality or qualities. (PUTNAM 2016, 155)

To put it briefly and simply, for proponents of disjunctivism about perceptual experience (J. M. Hinton, J. McDowell, M. G. F. Martin, P. F. Snowdon) even if one cannot distinguish between cases of veridical perceptions and

cases of illusions or hallucinations, it does not mean they share common content, since in both cases one is aware of something radically different and differently constituted. This idea is often expressed in the slogan that there is no highest common factor in veridical perceptions and their non-veridical counterparts.⁶

Such a view (or a family of views) goes very well with direct realism in the theory of perception. One can claim that the content of perceptual experience in veridical cases is constituted by qualities or properties of the perceived object, while in non-veridical cases it is constituted by something else. Nevertheless, on further reflection Putnam realized several weaknesses of disjunctivism. He found it incredible to believe, among other things, that the content of veridical perceptual experience is exhausted by qualities of its object. He provides three examples from the domain of visual experiences supporting his claim: (i) the picket fence looks different to someone having astigmatism and to someone with normal vision; (ii) when observers see the white picket fence, they will notice a certain difference in the hue of its whiteness while switching from looking at it with their left eyes closed to looking at it with their right eyes closed, which comes as no surprise since the macular areas of left and right eyes differ to some extent; (iii) scientific data show that “a given shade of green looks pure ‘green’ to some observers and ‘yellow green’ to others, and that there are reasons to think that neither observer misperceives the shade in question” (PUTNAM 2009, 151). In brief, there are noticeable and variously explainable discrepancies between ways in which perceivers see the same object. Thus, one may suggest that irreducibly subjective elements are present, however marginally, in the content of all veridical perceptual experiences, and if so, then these elements constitute distinctive phenomenal qualities or qualia. This is even more conspicuous when the relevant qualities or qualia are induced without the presence of a corresponding external object. Certainly in such a case “we can still attend to the qualitative dimension of the experience, and we can perceive its similarity to the qualitative dimension of a corresponding veridical experience” (PUTNAM 2016, 158).

Worries of this kind led Putnam to reject the disjunctive account of perception, while keeping some of its insights. For related reasons, he did not find intentionalism as a plausible account of perception. Its advocates (F. Dretske, G. Harman, M. Tye) describe perceptual experiences as determined

⁶ For a useful and instructive survey of disjunctivism, its varieties and problems, see SOTERIOU 2016.

by representational content, often explicated in terms of information, and insist that public properties of perceived objects exhaust the phenomenal or qualitative character of these experiences. The gist of intentionalism may be put as follows:

Experiences are not flat psychological surfaces—they intrinsically represent. The experience of the white picket fence intrinsically represents the world as containing a white picket fence. But that content is present both when it's a veridical experience, and when it's hallucination. So there is a common factor, but the common factor represents the world, or claims to represent the world, as being a certain way. (PUTNAM 2013, 518)

What for Putnam seems to be absent in this account is the proper recognition of the role played in perception by subjective qualities of experience, and their irreducibility to information or representational content. This role is definitely recognized in the conception known as phenomenism, defended by Ned Block, which takes those qualities as *sui generis* and contributing to the subjective “mental paint” of our perception. However, Putnam thinks this conception detaches excessively phenomenal qualities from the objects perceived. He argues:

In our view, the fact that a green object may look different to different subjects no more shows that the *capacity to have that look* is not a property of the object seen (say, the picket fence), than does the fact that the picket fence has a different look in bright sunlight and when cloud passes over the sun. Looks, in my view, are *capacities that objects have* (and realizations of those capacities), not properties of a supposed ‘mental paint’. (PUTNAM 2009, 151)

Unsatisfied with current philosophical theories of perception, and convinced they are too much in the grip of the “spectator” conception of mind and cognition, Putnam proposes a view called transactionalism, inspired by John Dewey and James J. Gibson.⁷ For that view, perception and its content is the result of various interactions or transactions between cognizing subjects and their environment.

⁷ This view, merely hinted at and provisionally sketched in Putnam's latest publications, would be presumably the main topic of a book on perception Putnam had been planning to write with Hilla Jacobson (PUTNAM 2009, 147; PUTNAM 2015a, 101). Unfortunately, the project failed to materialize.

Once this is recognized, there is room for an account which preserves what is right in talk of the 'transparency' of perceptual experience—namely, the idea that in a successful perception we experience properties of the picket fence (or whatever), and not properties of our own minds or brains, while leaving room for recognition of subjective as well as objective factors in perception. (PUTNAM 2009, 151–52)

Advertised in this way, transactionalism seems to combine what is the best in various competing theories of perception, in particular, direct realism with irreducibly subjective and perspectival aspects of perceptual experience. Nonetheless, the prospects of this view are not so rosy when one carefully considers what it does entail. Putnam admits that if perception is transactional, then one is aware of perceptual objects as interacting with them; in other words, one is aware of their perspectival properties of some kind. At the same time he insists that “there is a longstanding tendency in philosophy to think that perspectival properties are subjective, not really properties of ‘external things’, but this is a mistake” (PUTNAM 1999, 159). Maybe he is right and these properties are not fully subjective, but they are certainly partially subjective, since in their constitution both the object of perception and its perceiving subject are essentially involved. What is more important, in this picture perceptual objects are not given in themselves, but as they appear to perceiving subjects. Such a picture seriously undermines any direct realism in the strict sense, and especially direct realism in its naïve form, endorsed by Putnam. Here is the reason:

What is distinctive about a naïve form of direct realism is the claim that the direct objects of perception are actually involved in the most fundamental analysis of the experience, typically by being constituents of the experience's phenomenology. This has the consequence that the fundamental kind of experience a subject has when they perceive a certain object would not be available if the experience were of different objects or did not involve objects at all. (FISH 2021, 103)

That is to say, phenomenal or qualitative aspects of perceptual experiences (at least veridical ones) are constituted by the external objects of perception. Putnam wants to admit something analogous by talking of world-involving abilities exercised in veridical perceptions, but at the same time wants to concede that phenomenal character of perceptual experiences is determined to some extent by subjective factors, since the objects of perception are not given in themselves; they are given through their appearances or looks, or

better—as emphasized by transactionalists—through ways they interact with us. Only after further reflection should we be able to distinguish between truly objective features of perceptual experiences, conferred by the perceived objects themselves, and their subjective features, arising from the unique way our sensory capacities, however limited and distortive, respond to the world. Hence, if transactionalism deserves the name of realism, the adjective “critical” or, perhaps better, “indirect” attached to it would be the most appropriate. Of course, it remains open whether critical realism or indirect realism may be fully reconciled with the “natural realism of the common man”. Doubts in this matter strongly suggest that metaphorical descriptions of that kind, no matter how catchy, are not good tools for pursuing philosophy. Putnam himself did not do much to elucidate that phrase, even in his later writings, and was content to claim merely that it amounts to “the view of the man and woman on the street, that is, to a view in which we actually perceive shoes and ships and sealing wax and cabbages and kings and many of the other items in the passing show” (PUTNAM 2016, 154).

3. WITTGENSTEINIAN QUIETISM AND TRUTH

Direct realism in the theory of perception gives much substance to Putnam’s natural or common sense realism. It seems surprising, then, that it is presented predominantly in negative terms. In his 1997 Royce Lectures Putnam explicitly declares: “indeed, in my opinion, ‘direct realism’ is best thought of not as a *theory* of perception but as a denial of the necessity for and the explanatory value of positing ‘internal representations’ in thought and perception” (PUTNAM 1999, 101). In a similarly atheoretical, deflationary and anti-metaphysical spirit he describes this view in his Dewy Lectures:

“The natural realist account” urged on us by Austin and Wittgenstein, is, in the end, not an “alternative metaphysical account,” although, in James’s case, it had pretensions to become that. Winning through to natural realism is seeing the *needlessness* and the *unintelligibility* of a picture that imposes an interface between ourselves and the world. It is a way of completing the task of philosophy, the task that John Wisdom once called a “journey from the familiar to the familiar.” (PUTNAM 1999, 41)

This spirit is also nicely captured by James Conant, one of the best commentators of Putnamian ideas:

This locution—"natural realism"—as Putnam deploys it, is not meant to be a label for an alternative philosophical position; rather it is meant to denote something both more familiar and more elusive: our own prephilosophical understanding of the character of our cognitive relation to the world, prior to its corruption by certain forms of philosophizing that have now come to seem to be forms of post-scientific common sense. In issuing his call for a return to a lost state of epistemological innocence, Putnam knows he is bound to appear to many of his colleagues to be merely the most recent incarnation of the proverbial philosophical ostrich burying his head in the sands of our everyday ways of talking and thinking. (CONANT 2022, 35–36)

All this gives rise to the suspicion that the main driving force behind Putnam's turn to common sense or natural realism was (meta)philosophical quietism, endorsed by Ludwig Wittgenstein in his later writings. The distinctive aim of such a quietism is "to give philosophy peace, in the face of a temptation to find a mystery, which would need to be alleviated by substantive philosophy" (MCDOWELL 2009, 370).

In general, quietism in philosophy "refers to a non-doctrinal non-constructive mode of philosophizing. It is not a philosophical doctrine, as its name perhaps suggests, but a *method* of philosophizing that aims at ridding oneself of philosophical doctrine in one region of thought or another" (MACARTHUR 2017, 250).⁸ This method is motivated by a mixture of various considerations—sceptical, semantic, and pragmatic—that may lead to distinctive, though interrelated, varieties of quietism. Presumably the most widespread quietism in contemporary philosophy is semantically oriented and its aim is to discourage us from fostering traditional philosophy and metaphysics. Such a quietism is forcefully and influentially advocated by Ludwig Wittgenstein.

It is a method based on suspicion of the *intelligibility* of metaphysical 'problems' and their 'solutions'. A quietist of this kind engages in the delicate art of *scrutinizing the problems themselves*—rather than working on answers to them—to avoid having to take a stand in metaphysical debates about which theory (say, which form of realism or anti-realism) is best. The immediate aim of the quietist in the region of philosophical thought to which it applies is not to debate metaphysical doctrines, which are seen as semantically dubious (non-truth-apt, non-explanatory, etc.), but to attempt to get along without them. (MACARTHUR 2017, 252)

⁸ For other attempts of general account of philosophical quietism see SPIEGEL 2021.

This method or attitude of avoiding traditional philosophical problems and their solutions is also present behind Putnam's account of truth given within the framework of natural realism. It is also very much Wittgensteinian in spirit. Its core is the principle ("Tarski's insight") that to call a proposition or sentence true is equivalent to asserting that proposition or sentence. While elaborating this principle we should not commit errors of deflationists concerning understanding, and be tempted by the idea

that there must be just one *way* in which a knowledge claim can be responsible to reality—by "corresponding" to it, where "correspondence" is thought to be a mysterious relation that somehow underwrites the very possibility of there being knowledge claims. (PUTNAM 1999, 68)

Briefly, there is no one unique way in which a proposition or a statement is true. Rather the following non-committal pluralist manifesto seems suitable:

On the one hand, to regard an assertion or a belief or a thought as true or false *is* to regard it as being right or wrong; on the other hand, just what sort of rightness or wrongness is in question varies enormously with the *sort* of discourse. *Statement, true, refers*, indeed, *belief, assertion, thought, language*—all the terms we use when we think about logic (or "grammar") in the wide sense in which Wittgenstein understands that notion—have a plurality of uses, and new uses are constantly added as new forms of discourse come into existence. (PUTNAM 1999, 69)⁹

If there is something general to be said about the notion of truth, in addition to Tarski's insight, the following remark would be pertinent: "truth is sometimes recognition-transcendent because what goes on in the world is sometimes beyond our power to recognize, even when it is not beyond our power to conceive" (PUTNAM 1999, 69). This remark is directed against proponents of epistemic conceptions of truth, for whom truth is in principle evidentially constrained. Unfortunately, the examples of the evidence-transcendence provided by Putnam are rather inconclusive.¹⁰

⁹ In order to realize how strongly Wittgensteinian this manifesto is, one may juxtapose it with Wittgenstein's reaction to the standard distinction of three theories of truth—correspondence, coherence, and pragmatic—made by C. D. Broad in the course of his lectures in the 1930s. Wittgenstein, according to his students, protested and said that "philosophy is not a choice between different 'theories'", and furthermore, since the word "truth" and its cognates have in everyday life several different meanings "it is nonsense to try to find *a* theory of truth" (WITTGENSTEIN 1980, 75–76).

¹⁰ For further details see SZUBKA 2007.

In his most recent publications Putnam tried to gloss and partially amend this elusive and impressionistic account of truth. He explicitly stated, in his intellectual autobiography, that in the Dewey Lectures he was actually endorsing a version of disquotational account of truth, for which “true” is predicated of “*sentences used in certain ways*—that is, of objects, which are neither merely syntactic ... nor independent of the world involving uses of syntactic objects in a particular language community” (PUTNAM 2015a, 98–99).¹¹ Given these world-involving uses of sentences and their parts, one can even claim that this version of disquotationalism invokes a correspondence relation, though Putnam noticed that “it is an internal relation, not an external or contingent one” (PUTNAM 2015a, 99; for further elaboration and amendment see PUTNAM 2015/2016).

While concluding a brief restatement of common sense or natural realism, Putnam wrote:

To sum up, “common-sense realism,” in my sense, involves a negative element, the rejection of the idea that truth cannot outrun verifiability, and two positive elements: returning (as close as possible) to “naïve realism” with respect to perception, and a disquotational account of truth similar to the one I find in Wittgenstein. It differs from what I once *called* “metaphysical realism” in rejecting what I see as the fantasy of one final true and complete Ontology, but of course, it is both metaphysical and realist in its own way. (PUTNAM 2015a, 99)

At that time, several years after giving his Dewey Lectures, he was slowly shaking off Wittgensteinian quietism and was ready to return to substantive philosophy, more metaphysically oriented. In his reappraisal of Wittgenstein he criticized the view that doing metaphysics unavoidably leads to nonsense (pseudo)statements (PUTNAM 2011/2012). He also reassessed his former views and acknowledged:

Some of my talk about “unintelligibility” in the Royce Lectures now seems wrong to me. Although those lectures were published together with the Dewey Lectures, Wittgenstein figures in the Dewey Lectures themselves in a much more modest role, although I do engage in some metaphysics bashing. (PUTNAM 2016, 154)

¹¹ In the very same publication (originally written in 2009, and revised in 2014) Putnam advised the reader: “Today I prefer to avoid the terms ‘disquotationalist’ and ‘deflationist’ because of the confusion as to just what views they denote, and to say that on my view ‘true’ belongs to the family of words to which the logical constants belong, and not to the family of descriptive words” (PUTNAM 2015a, 94).

Putnam also started putting forward philosophical conceptions and theories again, and sharply criticizing alternative theories, as the outline of transactionalism and his preliminary debate with disjunctivism, intentionalism and phenomenism in the philosophy of perception clearly reveals. Methodologically he was prepared to supplement constructive conceptual considerations with reflection on advances of neuroscience and cognitive science, and thereby to show how much he was “influenced by American pragmatism and the American style of doing philosophy after Quine” (PUTNAM 2013, 521). Regrettably, he did not live long enough (after all, *ars longa, vita brevis*) to make another turn in his fascinating philosophical peregrinations fully cohesive, developed and elaborated.¹²

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¹² An earlier version of this paper was presented at the conference “Realism: Epistemological Foundations and Metaphysical Consequences”, organized by Dr Jacek Jarocki from the Faculty of Philosophy, John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, and held in Kazimierz Dolny on October 26–28, 2022. I greatly profited from stimulating comments from those who attended it. Among them were Professors Leopold Stubenberg and Dean Zimmerman, whose presence brought to my mind very pleasant reminiscences of the 1994/1995 academic year, which I spent at the University of Notre Dame. That was the year when all three of us participated in a lively discussion group devoted to John McDowell’s Locke Lectures and Putnam’s Dewey Lectures that had just been published.

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PUTNAM'S NATURAL REALISM AND ITS PROBLEMS

Summary

Hilary Putnam (1926–2016) was prone to change his mind on variety of philosophical issues and almost constantly to modify his views. The last period of the development of his philosophy is known as the phase of commonsense or natural realism, eloquently presented in his 1994 Dewey Lectures. This paper is focused on three facets of his position and tries to identify three difficulties it encounters. Firstly, Putnam claims that in the contemporary realism debate we have, on the one hand, proponents of extravagant metaphysical realism, and, on the other hand, advocates of various versions of irresponsible antirealism. Unfortunately, the delineation of the debate is too coarse-grained, since there are many forms of metaphysical realism, and lumping together various antirealisms is confusing and unhelpful. Secondly, Putnam's naïve direct realism in the philosophy of perception seems incompatible with his transactional account of perception. Thirdly, for some time Putnam was under a spell of Wittgensteinian quietism that distorted the true character of his philosophical ideas.

Keywords: Hilary Putnam; Michael Dummett; metaphysical realism; antirealism; natural or commonsense realism; naïve direct realism; disjunctivism; philosophical quietism; truth.

PROBLEMY REALIZMU NATURALNEGO PUTNAMA

Streszczenie

Hilary Putnam (1926–2016) miał skłonność do zmieniania swoich poglądów filozoficznych oraz do ich ciągłej modyfikacji. Ostatni okres rozwoju jego filozofii jest znany jako faza realizmu naturalnego lub zdroworozsądkowego. Realizm ten został najpełniej przedstawiony w Wykładach Deweyowskich z 1994 r. Artykuł dotyczy trzech aspektów stanowiska w nich wyłożonego, a następnie ulepszanego i uzupełnianego. Wskazane są trzy trudności tego stanowiska. Po pierwsze, Putnam twierdzi, że we współczesnym sporze o realizm mamy z jednej strony do czynienia ze zwolennikami ekstrawaganckiego realizmu metafizycznego, z drugiej zaś z entuzjastami rozmaitych wersji nieodpowiedzialnego antyrealizmu. Niestety Putnamowski zarys tej debaty jest zbyt uproszczony, ponieważ jest wiele postaci realizmu metafizycznego, natomiast scalanie w jedną całość różnych odmian antyrealizmu prowadzi na manowce. Po drugie, naiwny realizm bezpośredni Putnama trudno pogodzić z zaproponowanym przez niego transakcjonalizmem w teorii percepcji. Po trzecie, przez jakiś czas Putnam był pod wpływem Wittgensteinowskiego kwietyzmu, który zniekształcał charakter wysuwanych przez niego koncepcji filozoficznych.

Słowa kluczowe: Hilary Putnam; Michael Dummett; realizm metafizyczny; antyrealizm; realizm naturalny lub zdroworozsądkowy; naiwny realizm bezpośredni; alternatywizm; kwietyzm filozoficzny; prawda.