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## PUTNAM'S PRAGMATIC REALISM\*

Exceptional among contemporary philosophers, Hilary Putnam has long defended a philosophy sane enough to hold not only water, but also people and even values. Having once championed hard realism, he has moved steadily away from any scientism that would have physical science determine fully our world view and its ontology to the detriment of our lifeworld. In several fascinating papers and books, he has developed an alternative realism called first "internal" and more recently "pragmatic."

Putnam has been at pains to distinguish his view from Rortean relativism and from the excesses of recent French philosophy, but he has also warned repeatedly against naive belief in a ready-made world with "in-itself" categories. According to his own preferred *via media*, the mind and the world jointly constitute *both* the mind and the world. It is not immediately obvious what this amounts to in prosaic detail, however, and there is no better way to find out than to examine his arguments.

Putnam argues against "metaphysical realism" and in favor of his own "internal (or pragmatic) realism." Both the view and the arguments, however, have provoked much controversy. Donald Davidson,<sup>1</sup> for example, finds Putnam's version of antirealism objectionable, and indeed incoherent. By 'internal realism' Putnam seems to have in mind not just that the truth of sentences or utterances is relative to a language. That much is, as Davidson indicates, "familiar and trivially correct." But, Davidson continues, "Putnam

\* This paper grew (extensively) from one presented at a conference, *The Philosophy of Hilary Putnam*, organized by the Instituto de Investigaciones Filosóficas, National University of Mexico. I am very pleased to have been included in this conference on Hilary Putnam's work and in his honor.

<sup>1</sup> "The Structure and Content of Truth," this JOURNAL, LXXXVII, 6 (June 1990): 279-328.

seems to have more in mind—for example that a sentence of yours and a sentence of mine may contradict each other, and yet each be true ‘for the speaker’. It is hard to think in what language this position can be coherently, much less persuasively, expressed” (*ibid.*, p. 307). What argument might lead to such a view?

Putnam has several arguments, actually, but four stand out. First, the “model-theoretic” argument; second, the argument from the nonobjectivity of reference and of the sort of causation involved in contemporary accounts of reference; third, the argument from the unlikelihood of scientific convergence on a finished science that provides an objective and absolute conception of reality; and, finally, the argument from the nonabsoluteness of objecthood and of existence.

The model-theoretic argument has been most extensively discussed and has elicited much criticism. It seems to me that on this argument we have reached an impasse. The critics charge that whatever it is that constitutes reference can on its own secure reference between our words and the pertinent items in the objective, independent world: for example, if a certain causal relation is what constitutes reference, then the existence of that causal relation between a word of ours and a certain item would be sufficient on its own to bring it about that the reference relation holds between the word and the item. Most emphatically, according to the critics, it is not required, as Putnam seems to believe, that we accept a theory about the relevant causal relation and about how it constitutes reference, a theory about which one could then with Putnam raise questions concerning how *its* words secure their reference, how the word ‘causation’ in it, for example, acquires its own reference. Putnam for his part accuses his critics of begging the question in supposing that the relevant causal relation can on its own, objectively and independently, secure reference relations between our words and corresponding items in ready-made reality. And he accuses his critics of superstitious belief in essentialism, and in a magical theory of reference.

Here I shall put that controversy aside, as one with little prospect of any new progress or insight beyond what is already contained in the extensive journal literature about it.<sup>2</sup> In what follows, I would like to discuss instead, and in turn, the other three arguments that sustain Putnam’s pragmatic realism.

<sup>2</sup> But see the excellent paper by James Van Cleve, “Semantic Supervenience and Referential Indeterminacy,” this JOURNAL, LXXXIX, 7 (July 1992): 344–61.

## I. PERSPECTIVAL CAUSATION, REFERENCE, TRUTH, AND REALITY

One place where this argument is presented in detail by Putnam is his paper "Why There Isn't a Ready-Made World."<sup>3</sup> Here is a thumbnail sketch:

- P. 1. Truth depends on, and is constituted by, reference (at least in part).
2. Reference depends on, and is constituted by, causation (at least partly).
3. Causation is radically perspectival.
4. Reference is radically perspectival (from 2,3).
5. Truth is radically perspectival (from 1,4).
6. Reality is "internal" to one's perspective (from 5).

This can be spelled out a bit further as follows. When a belief or a sentence is true, that depends on and derives from what that belief or that sentence refers to. But when a belief or sentence refers to something, it does so, surely, in virtue of some appropriate causal relation holding between it and its referent. Causation is not an absolute relation, however, not a relation that holds in metaphysical reality independently of any perspective. For Earthians it may be a discarded cigarette that causes a forest fire, while for Martians it is the presence of oxygen. Strictly speaking 'X causes Y' is true or false not absolutely, but only relative to perspective. At least that seems clear with regard to the less-than-total causation needed for an appropriate pairing of referents with referring terms. For example, we need to pair the term 'window' with windows and the term 'draft' with drafts, so we cannot stop with the *total* causation that relates, on one side, *both* the felt draft and the seen window (and much else) and, on the other, your utterance of 'Please close the window'.

If the sort of causation constitutive of reference is thus radically perspectival (perspective-relative), however, then reference is similarly perspectival, and so then must truth be, since reference is in turn constitutive of truth. But in that case reality itself must be also perspectival, also relative to perspective, and in that sense "internal" to perspective, and not wholly external.

<sup>3</sup> In his *Realism and Reason* (New York: Cambridge, 1983), pp. 205–28. Similar reasoning may also be found in the more recent *Realism with a Human Face* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1991); see, e.g., ch. 11, "Objectivity and the Science/Ethics Distinction," and also ch. 5, "The Causal Structure of the Physical," on p. 88 of which we find: ". . . an *epistemic* distinction between a 'cause' and a 'background condition'. How does the mind get to be able to *refer* to the mind-independent world? Answer 'via the relation of causal connection', and you have slipped back to treating causation as something 'out there' and not simply 'epistemic'." Here again it is the last move that seems false, and in step with the misstep to be discussed here.

What seems most questionable in that argument, put briefly and bluntly, is the move from the perspectival character of truth to the perspectival character of reality itself. Consider for comparison our vocabulary of indexicals and the associated perspectival concepts of oneself and of the temporal present. It may well be that these are important and ineliminable components of any adequate conceptual scheme (adequate for us limited humans, anyhow). Suppose that our *concepts* and our *conceptual scheme* are thus importantly perspectival. Would it follow that reality itself must be similarly perspectival? This seems implausible when we consider the following.

Take a world *W* defined by two people (Paul and Mary) and the postural state (standing, not-standing) of each, such that in *W* Paul is standing while Mary is sitting. In *W*, therefore, the sentence 'I am standing' is true relative to Paul, but false relative to Mary. And, more generally: whatever is true in a certain world *W* relative to a certain perspective and whatever is false in *W* relative to a certain perspective is as it is in that world as a necessary consequence of how things are in that world absolutely and nonperspectivally.

It is true that our talk and even, granted, our *thought* is in fact largely perspectival. It may well be, moreover, that the perspectival character of our thought is not eliminable except (at best) with a very high practical and intellectual cost. But from the fundamentally and ineliminably perspectival character of our thought it does not follow that reality itself is fundamentally perspectival. Everything that is true relative to a perspective and everything that is false relative to a perspective may be as it is as a necessary consequence of the absolute and nonperspectival character of things.

Perhaps it is true that our concepts of reference and truth are ineliminably perspectival. Even so, it still would not follow that reality itself could not be largely as it is independently of us and our thought, in the sense that plenty of reality could have existed proper-tied and interrelated very extensively just as it is in fact proper-tied and interrelated even if we had never existed to have any thoughts, and even if no other finite thinkers had taken our place. What is more, our perspectival references and truths may be seen to derive necessarily from absolute and un-perspectival reality.

## II. OBJECTIVITY, ABSOLUTENESS, AND THE MANY FACES OF REALISM

What the metaphysical realist holds is that we can think and talk about things as they are, independently of our minds, and that we can do this by virtue of a 'correspondence' relation between the terms in our language and some sorts of mind-independent entities.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Putnam, "Why There Isn't A Ready-Made World," p. 205.

But reference, like causality, is a flexible, interest-relative notion [and so, therefore, is correspondence]: what we count as *referring* to something depends on background knowledge and our willingness to be charitable in interpretation. To read a relation so deeply human and so pervasively intentional into the world and to call the resulting metaphysical picture satisfactory (never mind whether or not it is 'materialist') is absurd (*ibid.*, p. 225).

But, again, why must the metaphysical realist "read into the world" any such relation of reference or of correspondence (or of causal explanation)? What the metaphysical realist is committed to holding is that there is an in-itself reality independent of our minds and even of our existence, and that we can talk about such reality and its constituents by virtue of correspondence relations between our language (and/or our minds), on one hand, and things-in-themselves and their intrinsic properties (including their relations), on the other. This does not commit the metaphysical realist to holding that reference itself (or correspondence, or causal explanation) is among the objective properties constitutive of in-itself reality.

Bernard Williams<sup>5</sup> apparently reaches just that conclusion and adopts the view that it opens up. Putnam responds as follows:

. . . Williams's suggestion is that the intentional (or the "semantic") is itself perspectival, and the absolute conception will someday explain why this kind of talk is useful (as it explains why talk of "grass" and "green" is useful, even though "grass" and "green" are not notions that figure in the absolute conception of the world). But . . . the absolute conception of the world was *defined* in terms of the idea that some statements describe the world with a minimum of "distortion," that they describe it "as it is," that they describe it "independently of perspective"—and what does any of this talk mean, unless something like a correspondence theory of truth is in place? Williams tacitly assumes a correspondence theory of truth when he *defines* the absolute conception, and then forgets that he did this when he suggests that we do not need to assume that such semantic notions as the "content" of a sentence will turn out to figure in the absolute conception itself.<sup>6</sup>

It is hard to see this bit of reasoning as anything more than a fallacy. From the fact that the absoluteness that applies to conceptions is a perspectival concept it simply does not follow that any absolute conception itself must include any perspectival concept, not even the concept of absoluteness. (My copy of *Principia Mathematica* is *mine*, and the concept of what is one's own is a perspectival

<sup>5</sup> *Descartes: The Project of Pure Inquiry* (New York: Penguin, 1978) and *Moral Luck* (New York: Cambridge, 1981), esp. ch. 11.

<sup>6</sup> "Objectivity and the Science/Ethics Distinction," p. 174.

concept, but it does not follow that my copy of PM must include the concept of what is one's own.)

Putnam does argue further that Williams must make room in his absolute conception itself for notions of reference and correspondence (and of absoluteness itself). Putnam writes that "if, as Williams believes, the fact that we are 'fated' to accept the sentence 'Snow is white' is *explained* by something 'out there', then the correspondence too must be 'out there'" (*ibid.*, pp. 172–3.) And his argument here seems to turn on an assumption that only an objective, nonperspectival correspondence could do the explanatory work that Williams requires. Only such an objective relation of correspondence could possibly explain why it is that we accept certain truths, and why it is that they are rightly assertible, when all this is so *because* the truths in question correspond to the way things (mind-independently) are. This seems inconclusive, however. *Prima facie*, it would seem I can explain why I return a book to you by saying that it is *yours*. I can explain why I reach for some water by saying that *I* am thirsty. And so on. Why assume that perspectival concepts have no legitimate place in explanations?

There is nevertheless an argument open to Putnam against Williams's view if the latter includes commitment to "objectivism," which is defined by Putnam in *The Many Faces of Realism*<sup>7</sup> (TMFR) as *the view that what really has a place in objective reality is only what is included in the ontology and the ideology of "finished science," only what the absolute conception recognizes* (TMFR, 4). It is not at all clear that Williams himself would accept objectivism, but in Putnam's own mind objectivism and absolutism are closely connected, as emerges clearly in TMFR. In any case, the argument against objectivism is as follows. The objectivist believes that only what would be reflected in finished science is truly real (the rest will amount at most to heuristically or practically valuable talk, and cannot truly represent reality). But, as we have seen, perspectival concepts like those of reference, correspondence, and causal explanation will not be reflected in finished science, in the science to be converged upon by all determined inquirers, whatever their perspective or context. So the objectivist seems committed by Putnam's reasoning to holding that he is not really thinking at all, nor referring to anything (assuming, again, that Putnam's reasoning about reference, correspondence, and causal explanation is correct). Thus Putnam's complaint in TMFR (16): "It's as if it were all right to say 'I don't deny that there is an external world; I just deny that we [truly really] *think* about it!'"

<sup>7</sup> Lasalle, IL: Open Court, 1987.

In TMFR, Putnam also returns to his argument against metaphysical realism via appeal to intentionality, aboutness, reference, and correspondence. And again his reasoning goes in outline like this:

- a. The only viable form of metaphysical realism is objectivism (or materialism or scientific realism).
- b. For objectivism only properties that figure in strict and exceptionless laws are real properties of things in themselves (and these are presumably laws that would be part of finished science)—though perhaps we might admit also properties based on strict laws in the way strict dispositional properties might be so based.
- c. But clearly there is little prospect that the mind can be viewed as constituted or characterized by such properties. *Sensa* have no place in any actual science, much less in finished science (TMFR, 7–8). If we think of (some) mental properties in terms of conditionals, and of these in terms of conditionals, we find that the conditionals involved are all “in normal conditions,” *ceteris paribus* sorts of conditionals; and none of these has a place in finished science (TMFR, 8–11). As for reference, aboutness, and correspondence, the most promising account of these acceptable to an objectivist (materialist, scientific realist) is in terms of causation. But the causation involved would be relative to interests and background conditions (in the way we have seen in earlier discussion) and hence perspectival in a way antithetical to finished science (TMFR, 11–6; 39–40; also 7 above).

Let us now consider this line of reasoning, which connects realism thus with objectivism.

In TMFR, four dichotomies are decisively rejected. First these three:

- D1. Subjective (interest- and culture-relative) versus objective (interest- and culture-independent).
- D2. Projection [property attributed falsely, etc.] versus property of the thing in itself.
- D3. Power [dispositional property] versus property of the thing in itself (TMFR, 27–31).

About these we are told: “The rejection of these three dichotomies is the essence of . . . ‘internal realism’ ” (TMFR, 28). And then a fourth dichotomy is also targeted:

- D4. Statement possessing only assertibility conditions versus statement possessing truth conditions (TMFR, 31).

How are we to understand the technical terms used in the formulation of these four dichotomies? Here is a proposal:



- i.  $\phi$  is a subjective property = Df  $\phi$  is postulated by a particular language or conceptual scheme.
- ii.  $\phi$  is a property of the thing in itself (an intrinsic, objective property) = Df  $\phi$  is a property that is not just subjective but would be postulated by finished science.
- iii.  $x$  is a subjective individual = Df  $x$  is among the individuals or is a member of a kind of individuals postulated by some particular language or conceptual scheme.
- iv.  $x$  is a thing in itself (an objective individual) = Df  $x$  is among the individuals or is a member of a kind of individuals postulated by finished science.
- v. Statement  $\sigma$  has assertibility conditions in a particular language or conceptual scheme L = Df L contains criteria or rules that specify conditions within which  $\sigma$  would be correctly assertible.
- vi. Statement  $\sigma$  has truth conditions = Df  $\sigma$  has assertibility conditions within finished science (i.e.,  $\sigma$  attributes an intrinsic, objective property with respect to things in themselves or objective individuals).

We can understand the emphasis that Putnam places on rejection of these dichotomies above, and on how that rejection defines his own internal or pragmatic realism, if we focus on how all four of them involve the notion of an intrinsic property of things-in-themselves, about which Putnam has this to say: "The deep systemic root of the disease [of objectivism or scientific realism, and hence of metaphysical realism], I want to suggest, lies in the notion of an 'intrinsic' property, a property something has 'in itself', apart from any contribution made by language or the mind" (TMFR, 8).

Perhaps our definitions may help clarify Putnam's rationale for rejecting the four dichotomies, and the content and motivation for his own internal or pragmatic realism, as well as his emphasis on conceptual relativity, as put, for example, in the following passage: "The key to working out the program of preserving commonsense realism while avoiding the absurdities and antinomies of metaphysical realism in all its familiar varieties . . . is something I have called *internal realism*. (I should have called it pragmatic realism!) Internal realism is, at bottom, just the insistence that realism is *not* incompatible with conceptual relativity" (TMFR, 17).

Putnam's rejection of the dichotomies derives, on the present suggestion, from his rejection of the possibility that there are things-in-themselves with intrinsic properties. For if there is no possibility that there are any such things or properties, then there are no objective things-in-themselves, no intrinsic, objective properties of things-in-themselves, and no statements with truth conditions. All this may be seen through the definitions above. And it then follows

that none of the dichotomies is real: they are all necessarily empty on one side.

But just how does Putnam refute the possibility that there are things-in-themselves with intrinsic, objective properties. He has argued explicitly as follows:

[If] . . . it is simply a matter of how we formalize our language whether we say (with Saul Kripke) that stones, animals, persons, and so on are *not* identical with mereological sums at all, or say (as suggested by Lewis) that they *are* mereological sums (and take care of Kripke's difficulty by claiming that when we say that "the" stone consists of different particle-slices in different possible worlds, then what that means is that the various modal "counterparts" of the stone in different possible worlds consist of different particle slices, and not that the self-identical stone consists of different particle slices in different possible worlds)—and to me this certainly looks like a mere choice of a formalism, and not a question of fact—we will be forced to admit that it is partly a matter of our conceptual choice which scientific object a given commonsense object—a stone or a person—is identified with. . . . Nor is the situation any better in theoretical physics. At the level of space-time geometry, there is the well-known fact that we can take points to be individuals or we can take them to be mere limits. . . . Not only do single theories have a bewildering variety of alternative rational reconstructions (with quite different ontologies), but there is no evidence at all for the claim (which is essential to . . . an "absolute conception of the world") that science converges to a *single* theory. . . . We simply do not have the evidence to justify speculation as to whether or not science is "destined" to converge to some one definite theoretical picture. . . . Yet, without the postulate that science converges to a single definite theoretical picture with a unique ontology and a unique set of theoretical predicates, the whole notion of "absoluteness" collapses [and indeed is] . . . incoherent. Mathematics and physics, as well as ethics and history and politics, show our conceptual choices; the world is not going to impose a single language upon us, no matter what we choose to talk about.<sup>8</sup>

And that suggests the following argument against things-in-themselves with intrinsic properties.

- a. There is no real possibility of a finished science.
- b. Things-in-themselves are by definition the things in the ontology of finished science, and intrinsic, objective properties are by definition those in the ideology of finished science.
- c. Hence, there is no possibility that there are things-in-themselves with intrinsic, objective properties.

<sup>8</sup> "Objectivity and the Science/Ethics Distinction," pp. 170–1.

When we take stock, now, we see that we must learn to live with unfinished science: when we affirm that there are certain things with certain properties, our affirmation must be viewed as relative to a particular language or conceptual scheme. It may then be viewed as one that, if correct, is correct by the assertibility rules or criteria of that language or scheme. I shall return to this form of reasoning below.

Putnam has further reasoning behind his rejection of objective or absolute reality, however; I mean his arguments from the nonabsoluteness of existence itself. To this reasoning I turn next.

### III. NONABSOLUTE EXISTENCE AND CONCEPTUAL RELATIVITY

Suppose a world with just three individuals  $x_1$ ,  $x_2$ ,  $x_3$ . Such a world is held by some "mereologists" to have in it a total of seven things or entities or objects, namely,  $x_1$ ,  $x_2$ ,  $x_3$ ,  $x_1 + x_2$ ,  $x_1 + x_3$ ,  $x_2 + x_3$ ,  $x_1 + x_2 + x_3$ . Antimereologists by contrast prefer the more austere ontology that recognizes only the three individuals as objects that *really* exist in that world. Talk of the existence of  $x_1 + x_2$  and its ilk is just convenient abbreviation of a more complex discourse that refers to nothing but the three individuals. Thus, suppose  $x_1$  is wholly red and  $x_2$  is wholly black. And consider

1. There is an object that is partly red and partly black.
2. There is an object that is red and an object that is black.

For the antimereologist, statement 1 is not true, if we assume that  $x_3$  is also wholly red or wholly black. It is at best a convenient way of abbreviating the likes of 2.

Putnam has now joined Rudolf Carnap in viewing our controversy as follows:

. . . the question is one of the choice of language. On some days it may be convenient to use [antimereological language]; . . . on other days it may be convenient to use [mereological] language.<sup>9</sup>

Take the question

How many objects with a volume of at least 6 cubic centimeters are there in this container?

This question can have no absolute answer on the Carnap-Putnam view, even in a case where the container contains a vacuum except for three marbles each with a volume of 6 cubic centimeters. The antimereologist may say

3. There are three objects in the box.

<sup>9</sup> Putnam, "Truth and Convention: On Davidson's Refutation of Conceptual Relativism," *Dialectica*, XLI (1987): 69-77; p. 75.

But the mereologist will reply:

4. There are at least seven objects in the box.

The Carnap-Putnam line is now this: *which statement we accept—3 or 4—is a matter of linguistic convenience*. The language of mereology has criteria of existence and identity according to which sums of individuals are objects. The language of antimereology rejects such criteria, and may even claim that by its criteria only individuals are objects.

There is a valuable insight here, I believe, but I am puzzled by the linguistic wrapping in which it is offered. After all, none of 1–4 mentions any language or any piece of language, nor does any of them say that we shall or shall not or should or should not use any language or bit of language. So I do not see how our decision actually to use or not to use any or all of the sentences 1–4 can settle the question of whether what these sentences *say* is true or false. And if the point is that these sentences do not really *say* anything, then how can they be incompatible in the first place so that a conflict or problem can arise that requires resolution? Also, it is not clear how we gain by replacing questions about atoms (or the like) with questions about *sentences* and *our* relations to some specific ones of these sentences. This is all very puzzling, and we should pause to peer more closely.

What does the proposed linguistic relativity amount to? Can it be spelled out more fully and prosaically? Here, for a start, is a possibility:

- LR1. In order to say *anything* you must adopt a language. So you must “adopt a meaning” even for so basic a term as ‘object’. And you might have adopted another. Thus you might adopt Carnap-language (CL) or you might adopt Polish-logician-language (PL). What you say, i.e., the utterances you make, the sentences you affirm, are not true or false absolutely, but are true or false only relative to a given language. Thus, if you say “There are three objects in this box” your utterance or sentence may be true understood as a statement of CL while it is false understood as a statement in PL.

But under this interpretation linguistic relativity seems trivially true. Who could deny that inscriptions of shapes and emissions of sounds are not true or false independently of their meaning, independently of all relativization to language or idiolect? Of course, you must “adopt a language” in order to speak (though such “adoption” need

not be a conscious and voluntary act), and indeed you might have adopted another. And it seems quite uncontroversial that an utterance of yours might be true relative to one language while it is false relative to another.

Perhaps then the point is rather this:

LR2. When we say 'There are 3 objects here, not 8' we are really saying: 'The following is assertible as true in our CL: "There are 3 objects here, not 8"'

This is indeed in the spirit of Carnap's philosophy, whose *Logical Syntax of Language*,<sup>10</sup> published in English in 1937, defends the following theses:

- i. Philosophy, when cognitive at all, amounts to the logical syntax of scientific language.
- ii. But there can be alternative such languages and we are to choose between them on grounds of convenience.
- iii. A language is completely characterized by its formation and transformation rules.

In that book Carnap also distinguishes between:

- s1. Object sentences: e.g., 'Five is a prime number', 'Babylon was a big town'.
- s2. Pseudo-object sentences: e.g., 'Five is not a thing but a number', 'Babylon was treated of in yesterday's lecture'.
- s3. Syntactical sentences: e.g., '"Five" is not a thing-word but a number-word', '"Babylon" occurred in yesterday's lecture'.

And he defends the thesis that s2 sentences seem deceptively like s1 sentences but are really s3 sentences in "material mode" disguise.

It was W. V. Quine who in 1934 suggested 'material mode' to Carnap (as Quine himself reports in the section on "Semantic Ascent" in *Word and Object*<sup>11</sup>). Quine agrees that a kind of "semantic ascent" is possible, as when we shift from talk of miles to talk of 'mile', but he thinks this kind of semantic ascent is *always* trivially available, not just in philosophy but in science generally and even beyond. Thus, we can paraphrase 'There are wombats in Tasmania' as ' "Wombat" is true of some creatures in Tasmania'. Quine does grant that semantic ascent tends to be especially useful in philosophy. But he explains why as follows:

<sup>10</sup> New York: Harcourt Brace, 1937.

<sup>11</sup> Cambridge: MIT, 1960.

The strategy of semantic ascent is that it carries the discussion into a domain where both parties are better agreed on the objects (*viz.*, words) and on the main terms concerning them. Words, or their inscriptions, unlike points, miles, classes, and the rest, are tangible objects of the size so popular in the marketplace, where men of unlike conceptual schemes communicate at their best. . . . No wonder it helps in philosophy (*ibid.*, p. 272).

The use of this strategy, however, is clearly limited to discourse about recondite entities of controversial status. No relevant gain is to be expected from semantic ascent when the subject matter is the inventory of the marketplace itself. Tables and chairs are no more controversial than words: in fact, they seem less so, by a good margin. No general internal realism, with its conceptual or linguistic relativity, can be plausibly supported by the semantic ascent strategy offered by Quine.

In addition, questions of coherence arise concerning LR2. When we say something of the form 'The following is assertible in our CL: . . .' can we rest with a literal interpretation that does not require ascent and relativization? If not, where does ascent stop? Are we then *really* saying 'The following is assertible in our CL: "The following is assertible in our CL: . . ."'. This way lies vicious regress. But if we *can* stop the regress with our metalinguistic reference to our sentences of CL (and to ourselves), why can we not stop it with our references to tables and chairs and other medium-sized dry goods?

An additional interpretation of Putnam's linguistic or conceptual relativism would have it say this:

LR3. When we see that finished science might well be a chimera, that our best attitude to it is that of agnosticism, we must not assert the claims of our present, unfinished science as if they amounted to truths about an in-itself reality and its intrinsic properties (which would require us to know that our claims would be found also in finished science—and who could possibly know about that?). Rather, we should rest content with the assertibility of our assertions in our unfinished conceptual or linguistic frameworks. But of course what is assertible in one framework may not be so in another. So we have to learn to live with our relativism. It is all pretty much like our claim that one must drive on the right, whose assertibility in the relevant American frameworks is not impugned by the fact that the opposite is assertible in the relevant British frameworks, nor by the absence of any "finished millenary legal system" that would include driving on the right as one of its requirements.

There is much to be discussed about this form of argument. But I would like to focus on one main presupposition required if it is put forward as a form of reasoning that would apply quite generally, whatever sphere may be involved. The argument, which I shall call *Putnam's master argument* (PMA) against realism, runs more simply as follows:

- PMA: 1. Realism (in general) is acceptable only if scientific realism is acceptable.
2. Scientific realism is not acceptable, if only because of the history of science induction, which precludes any reasonable expectation of convergence on one final ontology and ideology.
3. Therefore, realism is unacceptable: we cannot accept that there are any things-in-themselves with intrinsic properties; we can accept at best a view of things constitutive of our present conceptual or linguistic framework, but we must not suppose that this would gain convergence among persistent, undefective inquirers, etc.

Here again there is much to be discussed, for example, about the relation between convergence and the existence of things-in-themselves, independently of the mind, with intrinsic properties in no way contributed by any speakers or thinkers. In any case, one premise of the argument that seems immediately dubious is the first. A large fragment of our common-sense view of ourselves and things around us seems quite safe from anything like the history of science induction. Surely, there is a great deal in our ordinary outlook that we share in common with groups widely divergent from us in place, time, and culture. Concerning all of that, nothing like the history of science induction stands in the way of convergence. Suppose we granted that the acceptability of (the certainty or at least the likelihood of) convergence *is* relevant to the acceptability of ordinary realism. And suppose we granted further that, given the history of science induction, we *cannot* plausibly expect that there would be any relevant sort of convergence in science: that here we must remain at best agnostic. Even so, that would not establish internal realism with its conceptual or linguistic relativity, as presently understood in line with interpretation L3 above.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> To mention only one attractive possibility, one might, with Bas van Fraassen, combine both agnosticism toward theoretical science and common-sense realism toward observable reality; see, e.g., his *The Scientific Image* (New York: Oxford, 1980).

There is hence reason to doubt the linguistic turn taken by Carnap and now Putnam. We have found no very plausible way to conceive of the turn so that it discloses an attractive new direction in metaphysics. The only direction that seems certainly right and clearly defensible is that provided by our first interpretation above (interpretation LR1), but that also seemed trivially right, and not something anyone would deny, not even the most hard-line metaphysical realist. Nevertheless, it still seems to me that there is a valuable insight in Putnam's now repeated appeal to the contrast between the Carnapian conceptual scheme and that of the Polish logician. But, given our recent reflections, I would like to put the insight without appeal to language or to any linguistic relativity.

The artifacts and even the natural objects that we recognize as existing at a time are normally composed of stuff or of parts in certain ways, and those which we see as enduring for an interval are normally not only thus composed of stuff or of parts at each instant of their enduring; but also the stuff or parts thus composing them right up to  $t$ , must be related in certain restricted ways to the stuff or parts that compose them right after  $t$ , for any time  $t$  within the history of such an enduring object.

Thus, the existence of a snowball at a time  $t$  and location  $l$  requires that there be a round quantity of snow at  $l$  and  $t$  sufficiently separate from other snow, etc.; and for that snowball to endure through an interval  $I$ , it is required that for every division of  $I$  into a sequence of subintervals  $I_1, I_2, \dots$ , there must be a corresponding sequence of quantities of snow  $Q_1, Q_2, \dots$ , related in certain restricted ways. By all this I mean to point to our "criteria of existence and perdurance for snowballs."

I spoke of a snowball, its existence and perdurance, and what that requires of its sequence of constituent quantities of snow. In place of these, I might have talked of chains and constituent links, of boxes and constituent sides, or of a great variety of artifacts or natural entities such as hills or trees; or even—especially—of persons and their constituent bodies. In every case, there are criteria of existence and of perdurance for an entity of the sort in question such that necessarily an entity of the sort exists at  $t$  (perdures through  $I$ ) if and only if its criteria of existence are satisfied at  $t$  (its criteria of perdurance are satisfied relative to  $I$ ). Thus, necessarily a snowball exists at  $t$  if and only if at  $t$  a quantity of snow is round and separate from other snow; and a snowball perdures through  $I$  if and only if for any subdivision of  $I$  into a sequence of subintervals  $I_1, I_2, \dots$ , there must be a corresponding sequence of round, etc., quanti-



ties of snow  $Q_1, Q_2, \dots$ , such that, for all  $i$ ,  $Q_i$  satisfies the conditions for being successor of  $Q_{i-1}$  in the constitution of the "life" of a snowball. And similarly for chains, boxes, hills, trees, and persons.

I am supposing a snowball to be constituted by a certain piece of snow as constituent matter and the shape of (approximate) roundness as constituent form. That particular snowball exists at that time because of the roundness of that piece of snow. More, if at that time that piece of snow were to lose its roundness, then at that time that snowball would go out of existence.

Compare now with our ordinary concept of a snowball, the concept of a snowdiscall, defined as an entity constituted by a piece of snow as matter and as form any shape between being round and being discshaped. At any given time, therefore, any piece of snow that constitutes a snowball constitutes a snowdiscall, but a piece of snow might at a time constitute a snowdiscall without then constituting a snowball. For every round piece of snow is also in shape between discshaped and round (inclusive), but a discshaped piece of snow is of course not round.

Any snowball SB must hence be constituted by a piece of snow PS which also then constitutes a snowdiscall SD. Now, SB is distinct (a different entity) from PS, since PS would survive squashing and SB would not. By similar reasoning, SD also is distinct from PS. And, again by similar reasoning, SB must also be distinct from SD, since enough partial flattening of PS will destroy SB but not SD. Now, there are infinitely many shapes  $S_1, S_2, \dots$ , between roundness and flatness of a piece of snow, and, for each  $i$ , having a shape between flatness and  $S_i$  would give the form of a distinctive kind of entity to be compared with snowballs and snowdiscalls. Whenever a piece of snow constitutes a snowball, therefore, it constitutes infinitely many entities all sharing its place with it.

Under a broadly Aristotelian conception, therefore, the barest flutter of the smallest leaf hence creates and destroys infinitely many things, and ordinary reality suffers a sort of "explosion."

We might perhaps resist this "explosion" of our ordinary world by embracing conceptual relativism. Constituted, supervenient entities do not just objectively supervene on their requisite, constitutive matters and forms, outside all conceptual schemes, with absolute independence from the categories recognized by any person or group. Perhaps snowballs do exist relative to all actual conceptual schemes ever, but not relative to all conceivable conceptual schemes. Just as we are not willing to countenance the existence of snowdiscalls, just so another culture might have been unwilling to

countenance snowballs. We do not countenance snowdiscalls, because our conceptual scheme does not give to the snowdiscall form (being in shape between round and disc-shaped) the status required for it to be a proper constitutive form of a separate sort of entity—at least not with snow as underlying stuff.

That would block the explosion of reality, but the price is conceptual relativity. Supervenient, constituted entities do not just exist or not in themselves, free of any dependence on or relativity to conceptual scheme. What thus exists relative to one conceptual scheme may not do so relative to another. In order for such a sort of entity to exist relative to a conceptual scheme, that conceptual scheme must recognize its constituent form as an appropriate way for a separate sort of entity to be constituted.

Must we now conceive of the existence even of the conceptual scheme itself and of its framers and users as also relative to that conceptual scheme? And are we not then caught in a vicious circle? The framers exist only relative to the scheme and this they do in virtue of the scheme's giving their constituent form-cum-matter the required status. But to say that the scheme gives to this form-cum-matter the required status—is that not just to say that the *framers* of that scheme do so? Yet are not the framers themselves dependent on the scheme for their existence relative to it?

Answer: existence *relative* to a conceptual scheme is *not* equivalent to existence *in virtue* of that conceptual scheme. Relative to scheme *C* the framers of *C* exist *in virtue* of their constitutive matter and form, and in virtue of how these satisfy certain criteria for existence and perdurance of such subjects (among whom happen to be the framers themselves). This existence of theirs is in that way relative to *C* but not in virtue of *C*. There is hence no vicious circularity.

The picture then is roughly this. Each of us acquires and develops a view of things that includes criteria of existence and perdurance for categories of objects. When we consider whether an object of a certain sort exists, the specification of the sort will entail the relevant criteria of existence and perdurance. And when we correctly recognize that an object of that sort does exist, our claim is elliptical for “. . . exists relative to *this* our conceptual scheme.”

Again, this is *not* the only conceivable view of the matter. We could try to live with the explosion. And that does seem almost inevitable if we view it this way: a sort of object *O*—a constituted, supervenient sort—comes with a sort of constituent matter *M*, or sorts of constituent matters *M1*, *M2*, . . . , and a sort of constituent

form  $F$ . These— $M$  (or  $M1, M2, \dots$ ), and  $F$ —we may take to be given independently of any acceptance by anyone of any criteria of existence or perdurance. For the sake of argument, then, we are accepting as given the sorts of items— $M1, M2, \dots$ —that will play the role of constituent matters, and also the property or relation— $F$ —that will play the role of constituent form. And presumably whether or not any particular sequence of matters [ $m1, m2, \dots$ ] of sorts  $M1, M2, \dots$ , respectively, does or does not satisfy form  $F$  is also generally independent of whether or not we accept any criteria of existence or perdurance, and indeed independent of whether *anyone* does so.

Suppose there is a time  $t$  when our conceptual scheme  $C$  first recognizes the appropriate criteria of existence and perdurance. According to our conceptual relativism, prior to that time  $t$  there were, relative to  $C$ , no objects of sort  $O$ , and in particular object  $o$  did not exist. But if there were no objects of sort  $O$ , such as  $o$ , relative to our scheme  $C$ , then why complicate our own scheme by supplementing it with criteria of existence and perdurance which do give standing to objects of sort  $O$ ? After all, it is not as though we would fail to recognize the existence of something already in existence. By hypothesis *there are no objects of sort  $O$* , not right up to that time  $t$ , anyhow.

On the other side, there is the threat of exploding reality, however. If we allow the satisfaction by any sequence  $S$  of any form  $F$  of the appropriate polyadicity and logical form to count as a criterion of existence for a corresponding sort of object, then reality right in us, before us, and all around us is unimaginably richer and more bizarre than we have ever imagined. And anyway we shall still face the problem of giving some explanation for why we focus so narrowly on the objects we do attend to, whose criteria of existence and perdurance we do recognize, to the exclusion of the plethora of other objects all around and even in the very same place.

A third option is a disappearance or elimination theory that refuses to countenance supervenient, constituted objects. But then most if not all of ordinary reality will be lost. Perhaps we shall allow ourselves to continue to use its forms of speech “. . . but only as a convenience or abbreviation.” But in using those forms of speech, in speaking of snowballs, chains, boxes, trees, hills, or even people, we shall *not* believe ourselves to be seriously representing reality and its contents. “As a convenience”: to *whom* and for what *ends*? “As an abbreviation”: of *what*?

With alternatives so grim, we are encouraged to return to our

relativistic reflections. Our conceptual scheme encompasses criteria of existence and of perdurance for the sorts of objects that it recognizes. Shall we say now that a sort of object *O* exists (has existed, exists now, or will exist) relative to a scheme *C* at *t* if and only if, at *t*, *C* recognizes sort *O* by allowing the corresponding criteria? But surely there are sorts of objects that our present conceptual scheme does not recognize, such as artifacts yet uninvented and particles yet undiscovered, to take only two obvious examples. Of course, we allow there might be and probably are many such things. Not that there could be any such entities relative to our *present* conceptual scheme, however, for by hypothesis it does not recognize them. So are there sorts of objects—constituted sorts among them, as are the artifacts at least—such that they exist but not relative to our present scheme *C*? In that case we are back to our problem. What is it for there to be such objects? Is it just the in-itself satisfaction of constitutive forms by constitutive matters? That yields the explosion of reality.

Shall we say then that a constituted, supervenient sort of object *O* exists relative to our present scheme *C* if and only if *O* is recognized by *C* directly or recognized by it indirectly through being recognized by some predecessor or successor scheme? That, I fear, cannot suffice, since there might be sorts of particles that always go undiscovered by us, and sorts of artifacts in long disappeared cultures unknown to us, whose conceptual schemes are not predecessors of ours.

Shall we then say that what exists relative to our present scheme *C* is what it recognizes directly, what it recognizes indirectly through its predecessors or successors, and what it *would* recognize if we had developed appropriately or were to do so now, and had been or were to be appropriately situated? This seems the sort of answer required, but it obviously will not be easy to say what appropriateness amounts to in our formula, in its various guises.

Regardless of whatever success may await any further specification of our formula, there is the following further objection. Take a sort of object *O* recognized by our scheme *C*, with actual instances *o*<sub>1</sub>, *o*<sub>2</sub>, . . . ; for example, the sort Planet, with various particular planets as instances: Mercury, Venus, etc. Its instances, say we, exist, which amounts to saying that they exist relative to our scheme. But if we had not existed there would have been no scheme of ours for anything to exist relative to; nor would there have been our actual scheme *C* either. For one thing, we may just assume the contingent existence of our actual scheme to depend on people's actually

granting a certain status to certain constitutive forms. If we had not existed, therefore, the constitutive form for the sort Planet would not have had, relative to our conceptual scheme, the status required for it to be possible that there be instances of that sort, particular planets. And from this it apparently follows that if we had not existed there would have been no planets: no Mercury, no Venus, etc.

*This* objection conceptual relativism can rebut as follows. While existing in the actual world  $x$  we now have a conceptual scheme  $Cx$  relative to which we assert existence, when we assert it at all. Now, we suppose a possible world  $w$  in which we are not to be found, in which indeed no life of any sort is to be found. Still we may, in  $x$ : (a) consider alternative world  $w$  and recognize that our absence there would have no effect on the existence or course of a single planet or star, that Mercury, Venus, and the rest, would all still make their appointed rounds just as they do in  $x$ ; while yet (b) this recognition, which after all takes place in  $x$ , is still relativized to  $Cx$ , so that the existence in  $w$  of whatever exists in  $w$  relative to  $Cx$  need not be affected at all by the absence from  $w$  of  $Cx$ , and indeed of every conceptual scheme and of every being who could have a conceptual scheme. For when we suppose existence in  $w$ , or allow the possibility of existence in  $w$ , we do so *in*  $x$ , and we do so there still relative to  $Cx$ , to our present conceptual scheme, and what it recognizes directly or indirectly, or ideally.

If I am right we have three choices:

*Eliminativism:* a disappearance view for which our ordinary talk is so much convenient abbreviation. Problem: we still need to hear: "abbreviation" of what, and "convenient" for what ends and whose ends? Most puzzling of all is how we are to take this "abbreviation"—not literally, surely.

*Absolutism:* snowballs, hills, trees, planets, etc., are all constituted by the in-itself satisfaction of certain conditions by certain chunks of matter, and the like, and all this goes on independently of any thought or conceptualization on the part of anyone. Problem: this leads to the "explosion of reality."

*Conceptual relativism:* we recognize potential constituted objects only relative to our implicit conceptual scheme with its criteria of existence and of perdurance. Problem: is there not much that is very small, or

far away, or long ago, or yet to come, which surpasses our present acuity and acumen? How can we allow the existence of such sorts at present unrecognized by our conceptual scheme?

Right now I cannot decide which of these is least disastrous. But is there any other option?

#### IV. CONCLUSION

I have considered four lines of reasoning used by Putnam in favor of his pragmatic realism. Of these, the fourth seems to me deepest, most richly suggestive, and most effective. The first, the model-theoretic argument, we put aside. The interest of the second resides mainly in its exploration of (a) the sort of causation that is required for a realist account of reference, and (b) consequences of this for the perspectival nature of reference and of truth. My questions arise mainly with the last step of the argument, where the move is made from the perspectival status of truth to a correspondingly perspectival character of reality itself, its internality to conceptual scheme. As for the third line of reasoning, it merges with the second to some extent but is separable, and emphasizes a requirement of scientific convergence or absolutism. According to this line, the very idea of in-itself reality with intrinsic properties is tied together with the notion of an absolute conception of the world to be provided by finished science: an ontology and ideology that would attract convergence by all persistent and undefective inquirers, given sufficient time and resources. To the extent that we must remain agnostic with regard to the possibility or likelihood of such convergence, therefore, to that extent must we be equally agnostic with regard to the very idea of things-in-themselves with their mind-independent, intrinsic properties. There is much to discuss about this whole approach, but one main focus of serious doubt is its assumption that realism (in general, even common-sense realism about observable reality) can be upheld only if scientific realism can be upheld. This runs against a problem: *the history of science induction that feeds doubt against scientific convergence is inapplicable to our common-sense conception of ordinary reality or anyhow to a substantial enough portion of it.*

I also discussed a fourth line of reasoning used by Putnam, one that leads to a sort of conceptual relativity. I questioned the linguistic turn taken by Putnam's actual reasoning, since there seemed no good interpretation on which it would avoid both triviality and absurdity. Nevertheless, the considerations adduced by this line of reasoning contain important insights worth exploring. And in fact they

eventually open a fascinating menu of ontological possibilities.<sup>13</sup> By extending Putnam's reasoning, we reach a set of options in contemporary ontology that presents us with a rather troublesome trilemma. Which shall we opt for: eliminativism, absolutism, or conceptual relativism? Putnam's own pragmatic realism is built around the case that he makes against both eliminativism and absolutism, and in favor of his special sort of conceptual relativism.

Of the four Putnamian arguments for pragmatic realism—the model-theoretic argument; the argument from the perspectival character of causation, reference, and truth; the argument from agnosticism regarding scientific convergence upon a finished science; and the argument for conceptual relativity—this fourth and last of them seems to me far the most powerful and persuasive. It raises a three-fold issue—the choice between eliminativism, absolutism, and relativism—still wide open on the philosophical agenda, and a most exciting issue before us today.

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<sup>13</sup> Closely related issues are explored in my "Subjects among Other Things: Persons and Other Beings," *Philosophical Perspectives*, 1 (1987): 155–89.