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‘‘METAPHYSICS WITHOUT ETHICS IS BLIND’’: THE ENDURING IMPACT OF HILARY PUTNAM

Debashis Mondal

Philosophy is discussion, creativity, intuition, challenge, doubt, argumentation, criticism and self-criticism, an effort at understanding reality andour place within it, and an attempt to present all these aspects in the broadest and mostsystematic possible outlook. And the sheer joy of discussion—that after all is a sheer joy oflife itself—is what Putnam conveyed to those attending his lectures, listening to his talks, or speaking with him. As he made clear in closing the conference in his honour that took place in June 2011 in Harvard, one of the tasks of philosophy is that which emerges from those passages in Plato’s *Phaedo*, where Socrates’ friends and disciples realize with great astonishment that, even though Socrates was about to die, it was still a great pleasure to talk philosophy with him. A task summed up by Putnam with the words ‘‘philosophy is fun.”

This may lead one to think that, without an attitude of this kind, it would perhaps have been impossible to produce the vast contribution to virtually every aspect of philosophy that Putnam’s legacy constitutes—from the philosophy of science and philosophy of language to philosophy of mathematics, philosophy of mind, philosophy of religion, metaphysics, epistemology and metaethics, with the possible exception of aesthetics.

An astonishing achievement, especially if you bear in mind that philosophy was not Putnam’s only main interest as a student. In fact, as he later claimed, ‘‘I did not think of pursuing philosophy as a profession until my senior year at the University of Pennsylvania’’ (Putnam 2015, 8).

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Analytic, Necessary, A Priori:

As we have already seen, one of the topics at the centre of Putnam's first philosophical interest was the discussion about the analytic-synthetic distinction. At that time, the main reference in that discussion was—of course—W. V. Quine's celebrated *Two Dogmas of Empiricism* (1951), a paper that aimed to show that there is no rational basis on which to place the notion of analyticity. According to Putnam, however, Quine was too extreme in what appears to be the conclusion of his argument, namely that, since it is impossible to rationally argue in favour of the existence of analytic truths, *all* truths are synthetic—where ''synthetic'' was construed as ''empirical''. Putnam's own argument was in two stages.

First, he has argued that, despite being a tiny percentage of the vast array of assertions we are capable of making, our language does contain true analytical truths. They merely center on a hundred words, including the well-known ''A vixen is a fox'', ''All bachelors are unmarried'', and the like.

He has also emphasized that Quine's criticism of analyticality was also a critique of necessity and a priori, as Quine had inherited the Neopositivists' inclination to blur the lines between these three ideas. Putnam preserved the ideas of necessity and a priori in addition to the discussion of analyticity, as one could reasonably anticipate—and he did it in a very unique way.

Exploiting a strategy destined for a wide fortune in contemporary philosophy, he invites us to consider a science fiction case. Suppose, he says, ''that modern physics has *definitely* come to the conclusion that space is Riemannian'', and ''let us discuss the status of the statement that *one cannot reach the place from which one came by traveling away from it in a straight line and continuing to move in a constant sense*'' (Putnam 1962, 239–40).

When we come to the case devised by Putnam, however, the inconceivable happens: if space is Riemannian, the Euclidean parallel postulate is false, and *S* (which depends on it) is likewise false. A

straight line can have a curvature that—when placed in a physical environment—allows one to reach in a finite amount of time the spot from where one started, although one is facing forward. Something having the status of a necessary a priori truth turns out to be a contingent a posteriori assertion. Is this *S*'s actual status? Not exactly: Putnam's astonishing stance begins to take shape from the following claim: ''Euclidean geometry as a theory of physical space was always a synthetic theory, a theory about the world, but it had the strongest possible kind of paradigm status prior to the elaboration of the alternative paradigm'' (Putnam 1975, *x*).

A synthetic theory can be overthrown because of reasons gathered from experience: observations of natural phenomena, laboratory experiments, and the like. Euclidean geometry, Putnam tells us, is a synthetic theory, but quite *sui generis* at that: before the advent of non-Euclidean geometries no empirical evidence could have demonstrated its inadequacy. It served as a ''paradigm'', as a conceptual background against which it was possible to observe, explain, and foresee the many phenomena occurring in physical space. Assuming its validity, no experiment could ever be conducted to disprove it because it would invariably include assumptions derived from it. Its seeming insensitivity to experiment led to it being merely taken as a typical example of a necessary a priori theory. The rules of the game change significantly when plausible alternative theories are put forth, since only those may offer theoretical foundations for creating experiments intended to disprove Euclidean geometry. That's when it becomes clear that the other hypothesis is artificial.

So, what should we say about *S*, an assertion deduced from a theory which enjoyed a paradigmatic status until the arrival of one or more alternative theories? According to Putnam's response, S is a contingent a posteriori assertion when alternatives to the paradigm it is based on emerge and demonstrate their viability, and it has the status of a required a priori truth while these alternatives are absent. For

assertions of this kind, he coins the phrase ‘‘*quasi*-necessary relative to a given conceptual scheme’’ (cf. Putnam 1994b, 251).

We therefore get a more faithful description of our language if, beside the small set of genuine *analytic* assertions and the set of genuine *empirical* assertions (i.e. liable to be corroborated or refuted by empirical observations), we acknowledge the existence of quasi-necessary assertions. Putnam suggests that we save the term "synthetic" for the latter, i.e., statements that, while falsifiable in theory, are not supported by empirical data, unless those data are being interpreted in light of an alternative theory. Methodological considerations motivate this. Until such a theory makes its appearance and is validated, quasi-necessary assertions cannot be jeopardized by experience, and therefore are ‘‘non-empirical’’, ‘‘non-a posteriori’’. In a nutshell, they are a priori. A couple of centuries after Kant, this is how one can speak of *synthetic* a priori assertions.

Conceptual Relativity and Equivalent Descriptions:

One of the topics Putnam insisted on throughout his entire career was the phenomenon of conceptual relativity—represented by the *cognitive equivalence* of sentences, theories, conceptual systems which, when taken at face value, are *incompatible*: e.g., two sentences saying different things about the same portion of reality and that, nevertheless, are both true. How did something that seems so illogical at first glance come to be? Putnam provides clarification on the query using the following examples:

> the choice, in formalized geometry, of taking points to be individuals or taking them to be convergent sequences of spheres […]; the choice, in a certain portion of classical electrodynamics, between taking the action between charged particles to be mediated by ‘‘fields’’ or by ‘‘point-source retarded potentials’’; and […] the choice, in mathematical logic, between taking sets to be characteristic functions or taking them to be primitive objects and taking functions to be sets of ordered pairs (Putnam 2001, 432).

Nothing in any of these situations compels a person to select one option over another at the expense of the other. Every theory and every sentence accurately describes the phenomenon in the same way as the alternative theory and sentence do; they are completely interchangeable.

Instead, the equivalency between the two theories and the two sentences is explained by the fact that the primitive terms of the latter theory can be defined by those of the former, meaning that any sentence expressed in the former's language could be transformed into a sentence expressed in the latter's language, and vice versa. This is true even though neither theory is more fundamental than the other because they both have the same capacity to explain and predict phenomena related to the same area of the world. They are *cognitively equivalent*.

There is no definite truth that allows for determining which description is correct and which one is incorrect. The epistemological and metaphysical significance of equivalent descriptions, which is a specific example of conceptual relativity, is found in this place. In no case of two or more equivalent descriptions is it possible to precisely separate the role played by the (conventional) choice of an expressive mode from the role played by the facts: there cannot be a ‘‘*neutral* description’’, one which reports the facts in a way which is aseptic and devoid of human contribution, since every description is unavoidably ‘‘*partisan*’’ (cf. Putnam 1987, 97). Yet, this partisanship does not imply that the human cognitive enterprise comes down to a mere play of conceptual schemes and optional languages:

> “Accepting the ubiquity of conceptual relativity does not require us to deny that truth genuinely depends on the behavior of things distant from the speaker, but the nature of the dependence changes as the kinds of language games we invent change” (Putnam 1994c, 309).

Putnam maintains that ‘‘some facts are there to be discovered and not legislated by us. But this is something to be said when one has

adopted a way of speaking, a language, a 'conceptual scheme'. To talk of 'facts' without specifying the language to be used is to talk of nothing'' (Putnam 1988, 114).

The Functionalist Hypothesis:

Let us now see the repercussions Putnam's conception of necessity and the a priori have had on his analysis of the human mind.

During the first half of the past century, two conceptions held a central position in the discussion about the relation between mind and body: *behaviourism* and the *identity* theory. According to the supporters of the former conception, only observable behaviours—or at most dispositions to behave—constitute the data the scientist can work on, and hence every mental element should be excluded. According to the advocates of the latter conception, this exclusion is a mistake, since we cannot deny the existence of genuine aspects of our mental life that have no relation whatsoever with behaviour. However, acknowledging this, they go on, does not amount to taking the mental aspects of our existence to benon-physical: far from having a spiritual nature, they are to be located in our neuro- physiology. Being in pain, for instance, is nothing more than having a more or less intense stimulation of *C* fibres.

From the criticism to these conceptions Putnam begins to outline his view of the human mind. Exclusive attention to manifest behaviour and disposition to it is unsatis- factory for a plausible account of our mental life, since we could imagine a group of ''super-Spartan'' people who are trained, generation after generation, to put up with even the most acute pain, suppressing every behavioural manifestation, to realize the intrinsic explicative limits of behaviorism. On the other hand, the mistake made by the supporters of the so-called type-identity theory lies in exclusively focusing on human biology—on C fibres in the case of pain. It is enough just to focus not so much on the *C* fibres themselves, as the *role* they play within the global functioning of the organism in which they are embedded. This is a path Putnam found promising: paying attention not to what *C* fibres are, but what they do,

the *function* they perform. If the function is what matters, then what determines a mental state *M* is not its physical substratum, but the functional relations that *M* bears to other mental states, sensory stimuli, and behavioural responses— relations which are of a causal kind. This is the functionalist hypothesis Putnam put forward at the beginning of the Sixties.

Putnam's slight change of perspective was of great importance. If a suitable conception of psychology does not concern the *what* but the *how*, then it is clear that in principle any system, even an artefact, can have a certain mental state—provided that that system has an adequate level of functional organization. In brief, our psychology is closer to a computer's *software* than to its *hardware*. Hence, from an anti-reductionist outlook, Putnam maintains that possessing a mind constitutes ''a real and autonomous feature of our world'' (Putnam 1975d, 291): there is not only a physical reality, but a mental reality as well. As we can see, ''the functional-state hypothesis is not incompatible with dualism'' (Putnam 1967, 436), although Putnam's acknowledgment of an autonomous mental dimension needs "no mysteries, no ghostly agents, no *élan vital*" (Putnam 1975d, 303), and remains within a rigorous naturalistic perspective.

The functionalist hypothesis Putnam advanced gave rise to a program of research that was widely followed. However, Putnam gradually distanced himself from computational functionalism and the analogy which guided it— the analogy between the mind and a computer—and in the course of the first decade of the new millennium came to endorse a ''liberalized'' kind of functionalism.

One of the virtues of the functionalist hypothesis was the anti-reductionist spirit, expressed by the refusal to reduce the mental dimension to any other dimension considered as more basic—a physico-chemical substratum, for instance. The recognition dawned upon him that computational functionalism contained a touch of reductionism. Essentially, equating mental states with computational states amounted

to reducing the former to the latter. This, in Putnam's view, provided adequate grounds for disassociating oneself from this position.

But the decisive blow to functionalism came from one of the most important results achieved by Putnam in the philosophy of language, namely that the meaning of most of our words—as well as the content of most of our thoughts—are not simply determined by our functional organization, are not uniquely a function of what happens within our heads, but depend in large part on the world external to the mind. Far from amounting to internal computational capacities, mental abilities are operative and interactive, versatile ways of functioning in continuous contact with the surrounding environment and realizable in constitutionally different systems (cf. Putnam 2013, 24–25). Let us see the conception of meaning in more detail.

The Causal Conception of Meaning:

During the Seventies Putnam published a series of essays dedicated to the analysis of the meaning of physical magnitude and natural kind terms, a series which peaked with *The Meaning of* '*Meaning*'—an essay which shows, among other things, the impact his semantic conception had had on a general philosophical level.

Putnam starts the essay by talking about how to distinguish between an expression's intension and extension in terms of meaning. Putnam observes that in the philosophical tradition, the concept of "intension" had not been adequately defined and was vaguely understood. Hence, the idea according to which meaning (in the sense of intension) is a *mental* entity, given that in this tradition concepts have usually been taken as something mental. This can be summarized in the following principle (I): understanding a term (i.e. knowing its meaning) amounts to being in a certain psychological state.

The idea that two terms cannot differ in meaning while having the same extension is another one that the secular meditation on language finds to be evident. The extension is the same if the intention is the same. From this one can easily draw the principle that (II) ''the meaning of a term (in the sense of 'intension') determines its

extension'' (Putnam 1975e, 219). The main aim of the opening part of the essay is to show that there is no notion—let alone a notion of meaning—able to satisfy both principles: in order to achieve this aim Putnam criticizes a *consequence* of the two principles, i.e. the idea that a term's extension depends on the speaker's mental state at the time of use. He does this by exploiting a scenario destined to be cited and discussed in various forms upto the present day: the *Twin Earth case*.

Suppose that in a galaxy far, far away there is a planet exactly identical to our Earth but for one detail: the liquid with the chemical composition H_2O that we on Earth call ''water'', on this planet has a different chemical composition, say XYZ. In saying that the planet is exactly identical to ours Putnam means that for every object, person, feature of the Earth there is an analogue on that planet; there is for instance a Doppelgänger for every terrestrial English-speaking person: it is a Twin Earth (TE) to all intents and purposes, apart from the chemical composition of the liquid which, just like on Earth, is used for quenching one's thirst, washing and cooking, that fills lakes, rivers and oceans, and is called ''water'' by the twin English-speaking persons. Notice that if we were to judge on the basis of the external appearance, the two liquids would be utterly indistinguishable, so that any terrestrials who landed on TE would fail to detect any difference, and would unhesitatingly call ''water'' the liquid that they would drink or use to wash on TE.

Assume for the moment that a time machine transports us to a period, say 1750, when chemistry had not yet advanced to the point where it was possible to distinguish between the two liquids. No terrestrials landing in 1750 on TE would have been able to become aware of the difference: therefore, the mental state of a terrestrial using the word ''water'', and that of a twin terrestrial using the same word would have been the same—allthe beliefs of the one about water would have been the beliefs of the other, and vice versa. Yet, the extension of the terrestrial's word ''water'' would have been constituted by all the

samples of H_2O, just like in the present day, whereas the extension of the twin terrestrial's word would have been constituted by all the samples of XYZ, just like in the present day. And this shows that the extension of a term is not determined by the psychological state of the speakers who are using that term: the above-mentioned consequence of the two pivotal principles of traditional semantics is false. ''Cut the pie any way you like, 'meanings' just isn't in the *head*!'' (Putnam 1975e, 227). Yet this begs the question, where are they?

One partial response is that, while each speaker's mind cannot have all the necessary and sufficient factors to determine whether a word should be extended or not, knowledge of such criteria is nevertheless possession of the whole linguistic community, and this according to Putnam shows that, besides the well-known social division of labour, there is a *social division of linguistic labour*. So, if we want to pick out meanings, it is the society to which a given speaker belongs that should be examined in the first place.

This however is just a part of the answer; in fact, there is another more fundamental one. Before seeing what it consists of, let us try to answer another question. We have just seen that (in most cases) I can fail to know which object a natural kind term refers to, and despite this—in virtue of the social division of linguistic labour—I can use the term with the right reference. But how did I acquire the capacity to refer to the right objects in using that term?

In the same years in which Putnam was developing his ideas on the meaning of physical magnitude and natural kind terms, Saul Kripke was analysing proper names along lines that were to reveal more than one point of contact with Putnam's ideas (cf. Kripke 1972). Putnam acknowledged his debt toward Kripke in at least one aspect: just the way a speaker acquires the capacity to correctly refer to a given individual or a given set of individuals by using a term—this comes about thanks to a *causal chain of communication* (or *of reference*).

When a name is being given to a child, an animal, an unknown plant, a just discovered subatomic particle or a just manufactured object, a

‘‘baptismal ceremony’’ takes place whose *effect* is the introduction of a name in the language and its attribution to an object, a particle, a plant, a child and so on. The verbal and non-verbal actions performed by one or more persons *cause* a once-non-existent situation. Afterwards, the baptists’ verbal inter- actions with other speakers bring about a transmission and circulation of the word throughout the linguistic community: those who learn the correct use from the baptisers in turn pass on this use to other speakers, shaping a chain of which every speaker constitutes a link tied to the preceding and succeeding ones by a causal relation. In substance, what is essential in order to correctly use a term are three things: (1) belonging to a causal chain,(2) possessing a minimum amount of information about the referent (the ‘‘stereotype’’, as Putnam calls it), and (3) intending ‘‘to use it with the same reference as the man from whom [one] heard it’’ (Kripke 1972, 96): the last aspect (the *referential intention*) is of crucial importance, if one does not want to risk breaking the chain of communication.

With this in hand, let us go back to the question ‘‘where are the meanings?’’ and see which part of the answer we have yet to consider—the more fundamental one. In order to grasp where the meanings of the terms analysed by Putnam are, recall that with the TE example he has shown the falsity of a *consequence* of the two pivotal principles of traditional semantics, (I) and (II). What we should now understand is which of the two principles is responsible for the falsity of the thesis that the psychological state of a speakerusing the term ‘‘water’’ determines the extension of the term. To see this, consider what weimplicitly mean when we point to a glass of water and say ‘‘This liquid is water’’ (in the case where we want to teach the use of the word to somebody, or just give her a piece of information). Our statement implies an empirical presupposition, i.e. that the sample of liquid in the glass is *identical* to most of the substance we and other speakers in our community have in other situations called ‘‘water’’—the substance existing in our natural environment and to which we are causally linked from birth thanks to a

myriad of direct and indirect interactions: H_2O. When we use the word ‘‘water’’ we cannot but mean the liquid existing in our world: therefore, everything that counts as water for us cannot but be H_2O, and everything that does not have this chemical composition *is not water for us*. In brief, for us water is H_2O in every possible world: the correct explanation of the meaning of the word ‘‘water’’ is that it is a relative meaning, and it does not mean on Earth what it means on TE. This implies, in the final analysis, that what determines the meaning of a natural kind word is the substance the word refers to, the substance a linguistic community is causally tied to: meanings are in the world. Thus, it is principle (I) that is to be ditched, because it amounts to saying that the meaning of ‘‘water’’ is not relative in the specified sense, despite the relativity of the extension.

Moral Philosophy:

That one of the constants in Putnam’s thought is a general anti-reductionist stance has been already stressed by describing his conception of mind. It is however in his reflection about ethics that this stance stands out even more prominently: in fact, Putnam argued in favour of the genuineness of the judgments regarding values, and held them to be susceptible to having a truth-value. In doing so he strongly opposed a secular tradition which is so rooted as to affect the basic intuitions of all of us.

Indeed, according to Putnam the ethical attitude of the majority of people reveals the conviction that there is a sharp and ineliminable dichotomy between beliefs about facts and beliefs about values. Yet, Putnam maintained it a rationally indefensible dichotomy. He followed two paths to show this: the first leads us to reason on what a fact is, and shows that the dichotomy presupposes a narrow conception of fact, whose origin is traced back to Hume.

For Hume facts were the objects of sensory experience, *impressions* gained by means of one or more of our five senses. But ‘‘if this is the notion of a fact, then it is hardly surprising that ethical judgments turn out not to be ‘factual’!’’ (Putnam 2002, 22): nobody has

ever had a sensory experience of ethical, aesthetical, juridical facts. It then becomes clear how this notion of fact (typical of classical empiricism and which survived until the twentieth century thanks to the backing of Neo positivism) is too *narrow*: it is the development of scientific research itself that has made this more and more clear. Facts regarding entities that a strict empirical perspective would consider unobservable and hence non- existent have been considered legitimate and a part of what any scientist worthy of the name would unquestionably take as an object of analysis. Given that talk about facts regarding bacteria, atoms, subatomic particles, spatiotemporal curvature and many others besides are by now quite widespread, ‘‘the idea that a ‘fact’ is just a sensible ‘impression’ would hardly seem to be tenable any longer’’ (Putnam 2002, 22).

The second path leads to the realization that facts and values are inextricably *inter- twined*—an intertwining which lies beneath our description of facts both in scientific and ordinary language.

Putnam makes us notice that scientific research presupposes a particular kind of values: *epistemic* values. All we have to do is pay attention to what scientists actually do in order to realise that they try to build a representation of the world endowed with features such as coherence, comprehensiveness, instrumental efficacy, plausibility, reasonableness, simplicity, preservation of past doctrines and even beauty. These are, according to Putnam, epistemic values.

Scientific facts and epistemic values are therefore intertwined. However, it is our language in general that reveals a deeper intertwining between facts and ethical, aesthetical, juridical, political, religious values, and it is this intertwining that prevents the dichotomy between descriptive and evaluative linguistic uses from arising in the first place. It shows up especially in the case of some particular adjectives.

Among them there is the adjective ‘‘cruel’’. It can be used both for evaluative aims (e.g. when we say things such as ‘‘He acted in a very cruel way towards her’’) and descriptive aims (e.g. when an historian claims ‘‘He was a very cruel king’’). In metaethics, concepts which preside over

the use of these adjectives are called *thick ethical concepts*, in order to distinguish them from *thin ethical concepts* presiding over the use of expressions such as ‘‘good’’, ‘‘right’’, ‘‘ought’’ and the like—which have just an evaluative character.

The discussion on thick concepts has been very lively for decades, and several points of view have been put forward. According to one thick concepts are actually factual, according to another they should be broken down and analysed into two constituents, the descriptive and the evaluative ones, and according to yet another perspective this breaking down is an impossible task. Putnam subscribes to the latter and takes the inseparability of the descriptive and evaluative aspects of thick ethical concepts as evidence of the untenability of the fact/value dichotomy, since the irreconcilable contrast that is often underlined between ethical statement and empirical descriptions is nothing more than a linguistic version of the dichotomy. For him an adjective like *cruel* ‘‘simply ignores the supposed fact/value dichotomy and cheerfully allows itself to be used sometimes for a normative purpose and sometimes as a descriptive term’’ (Putnam 2002, 35). So, given that ‘‘every fact is value loaded and every one of our values loads some fact’’ (Putnam 1981, 201), we have that without values we would fail to have not only a physical world, but a human world as well:

> The world we inhabit, particularly when we describe human beings for purposes other than the purposes of physics or molecular biology or some other exact science […] is not describable in ‘value-neutral’ terms. Not without throwing away the most significant *facts* along with the ‘value judgments’ (Putnam 2003, 112). In brief, ‘‘metaphysics without ethics is blind’’ (Putnam 1976, 92).

Conclusion

In closing, I would like to say that what I have always found remarkable in Putnam is not only the great breadth of his reflection—so rare, especially nowadays—, but also his constant preoccupation to link that reflection to the actual practice we are daily immersed in, with all its

troubles and uncertainties, which shows, on the one hand, that he was taking the central question of philosophy to be the one with which it started, ‘‘how to live’’, and, on the other, that accepting ‘‘the world as we actually experience it’’ (the *Lebenswelt*) means regaining ‘‘our sense of mystery’’ (Putnam 1986, 118). I therefore find it appropriate to address to him the very same words he addressed to a thinker he greatly admired—William James (cf. Putnam 1995, 23)—and say that if there is one overriding reason for being concerned with [Putnam’s] thought, it is that he was a genius who was concerned with real hungers, and whose thought, whatever its shortcomings, provides substantial food for thought—and not just for thought, but for life.

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