

INTRODUCTION

There is no need to explain who Hilary Putnam is in light of the sheer number of books and articles on his work that have appeared over the past several decades. For the sake of the youngest readers, it is enough to say that he is one of the leading philosophers of our time and that he has dealt with nearly every topic in analytic philosophy, producing fundamentally new theories and opening new routes to further research in virtually every area he has discussed. On November 6, 2007, the four essays contained in this volume were presented to Putnam in a Conference dedicated to his philosophy, organized by Mario De Caro at Università Roma Tre.

The essays collected here treat several of Hilary Putnam's contributions to some of the most controversial debates in contemporary philosophy. Stephen White looks at Putnam's commonsense realism in the context of theories of perception and meaning and considers its bearing on the appeal to a transcendental argument in response to skepticism. David Macarthur examines Putnam's metaphysics in relation to the question whether, within a pragmatist and naturalist framework, metaphysics can be given any positive content. Mauro Dorato highlights Putnam's philosophy of physics and the complex issues raised by the Special Theory of Relativity in the context of considerations of the reality of the future. Massimo Dell'Utri discusses Putnam's current conception of objectivity as it bears on the threat posed by radical relativism and examines the possibility of a fallibilist response.

The Conference benefited from Putnam's replies to each essay, which pointed out lines of agreement and disagreement. The reader will find Putnam's replies in what follows. Now a brief description of the content of the essays is in order.

Stephen White addresses one of the most central features of Putnam's recent thought—the idea that there is no perceptual or cognitive interface between human beings and the world. The upshot is that our relation to the world is *direct*. This means—among other things—that there is no such thing as *narrow content*, i.e. a kind of content that supervenes on what is inside the subject's head, since this would give us precisely the interface in question. The idea that there is no interface is one to which White himself subscribes, but he claims that Putnam's arguments on behalf of broad content—arguments that he has been making at least since the Seventies—do not rule out the possibility of there being narrow content as well. White, however, presents an argument to this effect—a *transcendental* one, according to which *object involving thought* “is necessary to our having a meaningful language” (p. 15)—and of course the ‘object involvement’ provides the directness our relation to the world is meant to have. Here is an outline of White's transcendental argument.

In order to be meaningful, language must be grounded in a connection to objects and states of affairs in the world. To this first necessary condition on the existence of a meaningful language White adds a second: that this grounding must satisfy Frege's constraint. This is the requirement that if a subject believes obviously incompatible things of the same object and is not irrational, there must be different modes of presentation of the object under which the beliefs are held. A subject might, for example believe incompatible things of Venus without being irrational as a result of thinking of Venus under two different descriptions and failing to recognize that these are two modes of presentation of the same object. The difficulty arises in demonstrative cases—**cases in which a subject has two different views of the same object and fails to believe that the object presented in these two ways is the same.** In such a case there may be no descriptive modes of presentation, and a question arises as to what the modes of presentation in such demonstrative cases could be.

White warns us at this point against supposing that the modes of presentation in the demonstrative case consist in *sense-data*. Such a supposition leads either to skepticism, via an argument of Hume's, or to 'phenomenalism', according to which our terms for external objects are (in principle) reducible to terms in a *sense-datum* language. Phenomenalism, however, seems incapable of providing a genuine grounding of our language for external objects, because all we could meaningfully talk about in this case are patterns and regularities among our sense-data. Moreover, phenomenalism involves an even more serious problem that White points out: our talk about past, future, possible, and counterfactual sense-data, as well as the sense-data of others, must itself be reducible to talk about our own, actual, present sense-data. And White suggests that this is "too thin a 'definitional base' for anything we might think of as a genuine language" (p. 18). According to White, then, the appeal to sense-data to provide the modes of presentation through which our language connects to the world leads not just to epistemological skepticism, as many have supposed, but to meaning skepticism—**skepticism about the possibility of our having a meaningful language.**

The final step of the transcendental argument exploits this skeptical consequence of any version of *representational realism* to support a picture that takes object-involving content as basic—a form of *direct realism*. It is this realism, then, that has to be reconciled with Frege's constraint. White claims that this reconciliation is made possible through his talk of different packages of "basic action possibilities"—talk that he claims does not presuppose a way of characterizing our experience that is neutral as regards the existence of external objects. Hence, according to White, it is a reconciliation that does not lead to either epistemological or meaning skepticism.

If White's paper is concerned with a specific question in metaphysics, David Macarthur's addresses the question of the tenability of metaphysical inquiry in general. Does Putnam, Macarthur asks, share the 'end-of-metaphysics' spirit of most of contemporary philosophy? The guiding idea of the paper is that "clarity can be shed

on this region of Putnam's thought only if it is understood as the latest incarnation of a pragmatist approach to metaphysical systems exemplified in different ways by the work of William James and John Dewey" (p. 34). Macarthur accordingly starts by clarifying what the attitude toward metaphysics of these great pragmatists of the past amounts to.

Both James and Dewey oppose the traditional conception of metaphysics as an a priori inquiry aimed at revealing a purported hidden structure of reality constituted by eternal essences and necessary structures, and both appeal to the pragmatic significance of metaphysics. The difference between them, in a nutshell, lies in the fact that this appeal is "vindicatory" for James and "undermining" for Dewey. What, however, does it mean to have a pragmatic attitude toward metaphysics? It means opposing 'intellectualist metaphysics', which in the end offers nothing but abstraction and verbal disputes, and considering instead the practical effects of endorsing a particular metaphysical conception. Among these practical effects there could be beneficial feelings of confidence or comfort and a principled guarantee of an ideal moral order. By means of a number of quotations, Macarthur shows that James regards these practical effects as 'non-epistemic' reasons that are useful in assessing good and bad metaphysical pictures. James therefore advances a positive conception of the role of metaphysics, and considers such practical effects sufficient to vindicate the metaphysical enterprise.

According to Macarthur Dewey draws a very different moral from his pragmatist outlook. For him metaphysics is nothing but a blunder or a piece of self-deception that causes philosophers to regard concepts and conclusions arising from a particular context as absolute and ahistorical. Thus, "in contrast to James, he does not think that a consideration of the practical significance of metaphysical systems provides any vindication of them" (p. 38), and Dewey completely renounces even the use of the word "metaphysics".

Macarthur's thesis is that Putnam's stance is best characterizable as a third path between James and Dewey. Indeed, Putnam seems to think that some parts of traditional metaphysics are endowed with cognitive content and valuable insights, and Putnam reveals a Jamesian side when he claims that "there is much of permanent value in the writings of... traditional metaphysicians" (p. 41). On the other hand, according to Macarthur, Putnam's Deweyan side emerges when he attacks metaphysical realism and tries to make room for common sense in the description of the relation that obtains between human beings and the world. What, then, is Macarthur's final diagnosis of the fate of metaphysics as it is characterized in Putnam's writings? It is that metaphysical inquiry survives in Putnam's analysis of the general features of our conceptual network—e.g., "uses of language, concepts as employed in judgments" and the like—even if this means "changing the subject" (p. 45).

One major concern of Hilary Putnam's from early on is the philosophy of physics, especially the analysis of the philosophical consequences of the Special Theory of Relativity

(STR) and quantum mechanics—topics that offer a wealth of material for philosophical discussion. Mauro Dorato examines a view Putnam put forward in 1967, to the effect that STR implies the actual reality of future events. This means that “reality ought to be understood *tenselessly*, so that existence is coextensive with ‘what has occurred, what is occurring now, and what will occur’, [and] that all propositions possess a well-defined truth-value independently of the time of assertion” (p. 52). One of the interesting features of Dorato’s paper is the fact that he develops his discussion along the lines of the distinction between the *scientific image* and the *manifest image*, a distinction due to a philosopher with whom Putnam is quite sympathetic—**Wilfrid Sellars**. Indeed, on several occasions Putnam has endorsed Sellars’ idea that the aim of philosophy consists in understanding “how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term”—an idea that for obvious reasons recurs in Macarthur’s paper too. The way in which things hang together is here explored in an attempt to ascertain whether and how the scientific image and the manifest image can be made to cohere. Putnam, Dorato argues, seems to give primacy to the scientific image, thereby suggesting that he holds a view called “eternalism” (past, present and future events are equally real), which he tries to bring into conformity with the manifest image of the man-in-the-street, who holds a view called “presentism” (only what exists now is real). Adding a third option called “possibilism” (the future is empty—only past and present events are real), Dorato reconstructs Putnam’s argument and shows that, and why, it is at odds with Howard Stein’s account, according to which “possibilism turns out to be implementable (and uniquely so) in the structure of Minkowski space-time” (p. 61). Who wins the dispute between Putnam and Stein?

Neither of them, according to Dorato, since the *ontological* issue which opposes presentists, possibilists and eternalists lacks a clear meaning, and the most plausible way to address it consists in dissolving it into a *practical* one. As he puts it, “sometimes, according to our different purposes, we rely on the tensed sense of existence, and then we take a *perspectival* attitude toward reality; some other times, for different purposes, we rely on a tenseless sense of existence, and we look at reality from ‘nowhen’” (p. 67).

The methodology of giving importance to practice is something Putnam employs in a number of cases—for instance in his discussion of the issue of *relativism*. This is the issue at the center of Massimo Dell’Utri’s paper. Dell’Utri argues that the thesis of *radical* cultural relativism entails the existence of a threat to the peaceful co-existence of human societies, since it describes a situation in which differences cannot be resolved by an appeal to rational considerations. If the thesis is true, then people living on the basis of different cultural networks cannot really communicate, and their inevitable disagreements can be reconciled only through the use of nonrational persuasion or force. If, on the contrary, we assume that an anti-relativistic position is correct, we are committed to thinking that the notion of objectivity has a content, and thus to envisaging a common ground for an intercultural confrontation. How, then, is it possible to give content to objectivity?

In search of an answer, Dell’Utri rehearses Putnam’s criticisms of the so-called *God’s Eye View* of the world and truth, pointing out how difficult it is to defend an anti-relativistic position once we abandon ideas like ‘convergence’, ‘fact of the matter’ (at least in some contexts), and in general the strong notion of objectivity that the God’s Eye View allows. The way in which Putnam gives content to the notion of objectivity, according to Dell’Utri, is through an appeal to *fallibilism*, “the idea that there is no (metaphysical or semantic) guarantee that what we say is right, no guarantee that our statements are beyond doubt, that they are immune to revision” (p. 78). Fallibilism—a central element in Putnam’s thought from the very beginning of his philosophical career—rules out *certainty*, but still allows room for an enormous amount of knowledge on the basis of which we may pursue our ordinary lives. However, because we cannot be sure of the continued strength of the justification of the things we assume we know, we have to test and criticize it when we have a plausible enough reason to do so. “The ‘dignity of criticism’—this is the lesson we can take from fallibilism”, as Dell’Utri puts it (p. 78), where the exercise of criticism is seen as something which, on particular occasions, could help to assess what is right or wrong, good or bad, true or false (and objectively so). This is why we can take fallibilism as an ‘antidote’ to the threat posed by radical relativism.

Having isolated the *mild* notion of objectivity stemming from fallibilism, Dell’Utri discusses whether it could be used to characterize plausible notions of absoluteness and universality. His idea is that the very repudiation on Putnam’s part of the notions of convergence and (in some contexts) facts of the matter makes it difficult, if not impossible, to gain beliefs absolutely and universally valid. Dell’Utri suggests, however, that this does not rule out the possibility of an anti-relativistic position. Simply put, anti-relativism need not be grounded in a notion of absoluteness and universality—contrary to a traditionally widespread point of view.

To conclude, *direct realism*, *metaphysics*, *time* and *relativism*—four Putnamian topics, four papers. A tribute to a philosopher of wide-ranging scope, whose reflections over the past several decades have provided nourishment not just for thought, but for life.

Massimo Dell’Utri
Guest Editor