

# THE THREAT OF CULTURAL RELATIVISM: HILARY PUTNAM AND THE ANTIDOTE OF FALLIBILISM

MASSIMO DELL'UTRI

Dipartimento di Scienze dei Linguaggi, Sassari

## ABSTRACT

The polemical target of the paper is 'radical cultural relativism'—according to which the validity of principles, values, statements, theories and the like is exclusively relative to the culture within which these have developed. Drawing heavily on Hilary Putnam's thinking, the paper aims to show how this kind of relativism is fundamentally false.

An element that is central to Putnam's philosophy is addressed, i.e. *truth*—a substantive normative notion discussed by Putnam in connection with the issue of realism, thereby inheriting the achievements gained in the course of his "long journey from realism back to realism". Some of these achievements are then isolated. Since they seem to compel Putnam to leave no room whatsoever for the notion of objectivity, preventing him from envisaging any anti-relativist position, another element of his philosophy which substantiates the notion of objectivity is tackled: that of *fallibilism*.

Distancing itself somewhat from Putnam's later work, the paper then goes on to show how fallibilism enables the formulation of an anti-relativist stance based on epistemic premises.

The paper ends with an analysis of the bearing of this kind of anti-relativism on the notions of universality and absoluteness, as well as a brief discussion of fallibilism itself.

**Keywords:** Hilary Putnam, relativism, fallibilism, truth, objectivity

## 1. A possible route to relativism

We may define cultural relativism as the view according to which the validity of principles, values, statements, theories and the like is exclusively relative to the culture within which they have developed. There might be other forms of cultural relativism—forms which relativize some but not all the fundamental notions of a conceptual scheme—but this is the most radical one. The 'threat' the title of this paper alludes to is a consequence of the view of human beings which would arise, should the radical cultural relativists be right. If this were so, then it would be as if human beings were segregated into groups, each group corresponding to a different culture, with no possibility of actual rational communication and understanding among groups. If *this* is the real human situation, then the disagreements which are bound to occur between groups have just one solution: war. In fact,

the principal source of conflict  
between human communities is

the belief that I have no reason to justify my beliefs to you, and none in finding out what alternative beliefs you may have, because you are, for example, an infidel, a foreigner, a woman, a child, a slave, a pervert, or an untouchable. In short, you are not “one of us”, not one of the *real* human beings, the *paradigm* human beings, the ones whose persons and opinions are to be treated with respect. (Rorty 2000a, p. 15)

Hence, the threat which radical cultural relativism (from now on just “relativism”) represents.

However, is relativism right? Let us briefly see how it may be presented as a plausible position. A quick look at what happens around us everyday reveals that people do agree on a number of questions, and disagree on a number of others as well. She or he who we can take as an average ordinary person may basically assume the following two lines of reasoning, depending on how much weight she/he is attaching to our agreements and how much to our disagreements: on the one hand, she/he may think (or, better, *intuit*) that what makes an agreement on a given question possible is the existence of a *fact of the matter* regarding that question, a fact of the matter which allows a ‘yes or no’ answer—giving content to what on a philosophical level is known as the *principle of bivalence*. Accordingly, cases of disagreement are explained as the result of the impossibility to know the relevant fact of the matter. On the other hand, if she/he pays more attention to the wide variety of disagreements than to that of agreements, if in other words she/he is struck by the fact that on some questions which divide different cultures we have not arrived at a solution—even after decades of discussion—she/he may think (or, better, *intuit*) that this is because different fundamental principles belonging to different cultures cannot be directly compared, and inevitably clash. Now, whereas in the former case our person would implicitly subscribe to what in philosophy is called *realism*, in the latter case she/he would subscribe to *relativism*. So, as to the latter, we have a possible route which leads from taking note of an empirical state of facts to relativism as the philosophical explanation of that very state of facts. And such a route makes relativism appear a plausible option.

This kind of realism and this kind of relativism are based on two contrasting intuitions—two immediate and spontaneous feelings as to how things stand, which we may call ‘pre-philosophical intuitions’. Though I do believe that pre-philosophical intuitions are a deep source of philosophical thinking, I do not go thus far to claim that they are always trustworthy. On the contrary, I think that they must be carefully evaluated, and that they could eventually be proved utterly false. In particular, the two pre-philosophical intuitions we hinted at above are wrong, and so I would rather say that both realism (that kind of realism) and relativism (that kind of relativism) are false. The aim of this paper is to show why relativism is false, relying heavily on Hilary Putnam’s thinking.

## 2. Fallibilism and objectivity

One feature which emerges clearly from Putnam's thought is the role of *truth*. Truth is and always has been a central ingredient to his philosophy, being a substantive notion with a distinctive normative import—a notion which is deeply reflected in Putnam's treatment of the question of relativism. Truth has been discussed by Putnam in connection with the issue of realism, and thus inherits the achievements gained in the course of his “long journey from realism back to realism (but not [...] back to the metaphysical version of realism with which [he] started)” (Putnam 1999, p. 49). Among these achievements there is the denial of a metaphysical and epistemological image—the image of the so-called *God's Eye View*, i.e. a superhuman perspective, the sole position from which—as supporters of this image claim—one can correctly see the world, the connection between language and the world, and the truth value our sentences possess, thereby judging all possible epistemic situations. Another important achievement is the denial of *convergence*, i.e. the idea that the many forms of research human beings are engaged in are destined to proceed toward a common point of arrival, one point for every kind of research. Those who subscribe to this idea believe that the availability of these points should allow human beings to find an answer to every question (*the* only possible one, the *true* answer) and a solution to every problem (*the* only possible one, the *right* solution), so that—provided that research is carried out long enough—the human genre shall enjoy a common stance on every question, at least *in principle*. By the way, note how the rejection of convergence impinges on the issue of relativism, and how, in a sense, it can be considered an example of Putnam's intellectual honesty. In fact, note how difficult the task of presenting an anti-relativist position becomes as soon as one realizes that there is no metaphysical guarantee of reaching shared solutions—no guaranteed shared solutions to ethical controversies, no guaranteed shared solutions to religious, aesthetic, and, for that matter, scientific controversies. In brief, note how difficult the task of opposing relativism becomes if “the model of everyone ultimately converging to one view has [...] no relation to reality”.

I would like to stress another achievement of Putnam's long journey, an achievement which is connected with the previous ones. It is the idea that in some contexts there is *no fact of the matter* to appeal to, that in these contexts the very notion of ‘fact of the matter’—the one already encountered in the first section of my paper—is senseless. These are, for instance, contexts which involve *quasi-necessary statements*, in Putnam's own term—i.e. statements which are ‘necessary relative to a conceptual scheme’ (cf. Putnam 1994b, p. 251)—and contexts which involve ethical questions. In all these cases the principle of bivalence has no grip, and it is difficult—if not impossible—“to attach metaphysical weight to” it (Putnam 1994b, p. 259). Thus, as far as the issue of relativism is concerned, it may seem that Putnam has given the relativists all they need to win the dispute. It may seem, to borrow a useful distinction made by Stephen L. White, that *real relativism* (the obtaining of actual examples of relativism around us) cannot help but give way to *philosophical relativism* (the idea according to which things stand in principle so)—and thus that the notion of objectivity is empty.

However, is this the right moral? Do Putnam's achievements compel him to get rid of any room for the notion of *objectivity*?

The answer is in the negative. There is in fact a central element in Putnam's thought which allows us to believe that our tentative solutions to controversies, even on an intercultural level, can be really 'objective'—an element which therefore constitutes a sort of antidote to relativism. This is *fallibilism*.

Let us now examine what fallibilism is. It is 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. Error can crop up anywhere, anyhow and anytime. This strikes us as being very close to skepticism, but there is a fundamental difference, which lies in the strictness imposed on the criteria a belief has to fulfill in order to be taken as a piece of knowledge: while the skeptic purports that a belief must be based on 'perfect' evidence, the fallibilist "is willing to base claims of knowledge on evidence that is good enough though less than perfect" (Ben-Menahem 2005b, p. 150). Doubt is the fundamental epistemological tool for both skeptic and fallibilist, but whereas the former favors the application of doubt *across the board*, the latter stresses the requirement that doubt be *reasonable*, and grants that a large amount of what we believe *is* knowledge. We actually *do* know. The fact is that, since we cannot exclude that our most cherished beliefs will be proved false, we *cannot know that we know*—and, lacking knowledge at this meta-level, we are doomed to uncertainty forever. But this should not give way to despair. We are humans, not gods, and can do nothing but try to do our best with what is at our disposal, repairing our boat while it is afloat on the open sea—according to Neurath's well-known metaphor. We still have a great deal to do, mending and reshaping the planks of the boat, i.e. criticizing beliefs and behaviors when we have a plausible enough reason to do so.

The 'dignity of criticism'—this is the lesson we can take from fallibilism. And one of the clearest signs of this attitude is detectable, among others, in Putnam himself. In fostering a general program for the philosophy of the third millennium—the *pragmatist enlightenment*—Putnam recommends for philosophy what he calls 'reflective transcendence', i.e. a critical attitude toward every received view. In his own words, it is a

standing back from conventional opinion, on the one hand, and the authority of revelation [...], on the other, and asking "Why?" Philosophy [...] thus combines two aspirations: the aspiration to justice, and the aspiration to critical thinking. (Putnam 2004, p. 92)

Moreover, referring back to John Dewey, Putnam urges us to promote criticism at a higher level—criticism of our ways of criticism, i.e. "the 'standing back' and criticizing even the ways in which we are accustomed to criticize ideas" (Putnam 2004, p. 96).

Criticism, of course, is not an easy task to accomplish—and neither is assuming a general fallibilist outlook. There is no intellectual means given in advance, nor algorithm,

we could make use of, no formalizable procedure we could apply to every case, independently of its subject. On the contrary, we have to use ourselves, our sensibility, our insight, our mother wit. As Alfred Edward Housman once said, “to read attentively, think correctly, omit no relevant consideration, and repress self-will, are no ordinary accomplishments. [Yet, more is needed:] mother wit which [we] must have brought from [our] mother’s womb”. It is no mere coincidence that the room dedicated to mother wit in Putnam’s thought has increased over the last decades—at least from the ’80s onwards. It is what makes Putnam claim on several occasions and in different contexts—borrowing a phrase from John Austin—“enough is enough: it doesn’t mean everything” (cf. Putnam 1984, p. 121, and Putnam 2002, p. 110). And it is what accounts for the central role played by common sense and intuitions in his philosophical explanations (cf. Macarthur 2009).

Criticism, in short, involves use of our best insight for the singling out of the feasible ways to reach solutions and settle problematic situations. It requires our subtlest and finest capacity to realize how things stand, appealing to explicit and implicit aspects of our rationality. In particular, it requires our mother wit and our best capacity for *imagination*, the one which allows us to put ourselves in somebody else’s shoes and start ideal conversations with people who have or have had problems that are the same as or similar to ours. It is these conversations that, as Richard Rorty puts it, give

substance and concreteness to the otherwise thin and useless notion of “rationality”. [...] when we want to reassure ourselves of our own rationality—to convince ourselves that we are not being caught up by something merely vogueish or merely self-interested—we often hold imaginary conversations with people (our parents, our teachers, our friends) who might be imagined to have *doubts* about what we are up to. (Rorty 2000b, p. 89, my italics)

All these elements—common sense, (pre-philosophical) intuitions, mother wit and imagination—cooperate to project ourselves into other people’s frames of mind, in order to develop reasonable criticism and a better fixation of beliefs. In short, they cooperate to the formation of a plausible fallibilist stance. And—as I hinted above—it is just because of the urge to criticize theories, statements, behaviors and values (an urge raised by the very conviction that what everybody says and does is not in principle beyond doubt) that the notion of objectivity increasingly acquires its own content, pointing to fallibilism as an antidote to relativism.

### 3. Objectivity, absoluteness and universality

I feel very sympathetic with this line of thought. What is right and wrong, good or bad, true or false, emerges in the course of an endless and multifarious discussion—

within and among cultures—which finds in criticism its main drive. Not any discussion, however, will be good. In order to have an impact on the notion of objectivity this kind of discussion must fulfill at least two (commonsense) conditions: on one hand, it must avoid illusions, such as that it is possible to arrive at a shared position on *every* question, and, on the other, it must avoid dogmatic attitudes. The first condition may be fulfilled by avoiding any metaphysical position which could be responsible for those illusions. At the beginning of this paper I hinted at a position of this kind: a *non-epistemic type of realism*, according to which there are Objective (with a capital ‘O’) facts of the matter capable of settling any dispute one way or the other. The idea that every question has a solution provided we come to know the relevant fact of the matter (knowledge which, by the way, is far to be guaranteed by non-epistemic realism) is thus consequential. The second condition, then, is easily fulfilled by fallibilism itself. Therefore, the agreement that participants in a discussion may possibly reach must not be taken as ‘the only possible one’ given the question at stake. Many agreements could settle a question: it suffices that participants deem a solution good *enough*. This means that, when all the possible arguments in favor of or against that question have been put forth, thoroughly discussed and evaluated, when it is clear that no one could possibly come out with new unexpected evidence and consistent arguments, then the argument which results from the participants’ careful analyses and trade-offs counts as ‘the’ solution—given the knowledge, needs, desires, interests the discussants have *at that moment*. Enough is enough: it does not mean everything. An intersubjective agreement of this kind shows what we can take as ‘objective’ about a given question, what we can say is ‘true’ or ‘false’, ‘right’ or ‘wrong’, and so forth, giving content to the notions of objectivity, truth and rightness. Thus, since these contents arise from the cognitive procedures by means of which we promote discussions, and do not therefore transcend the power of the human cognitive faculties, those notions reveal themselves as *epistemic* ones.

All this helps to outline a viable anti-relativist position. Now, a question naturally arises: even though we did *not* make room for a strong kind of anti-relativism—i.e. the kind based on a strong non-epistemic conception of objectivity, allowed by the God’s Eye View—still we made room for a position which denies that values, norms, principles and the like are valid if exclusively relating to a particular conceptual scheme. Is this anti-relativist position entitled to make use of the favorite anti-relativist terms like “absolute” and “universal”? A quick reaction would prompt us to answer in the affirmative, just because “absolute” is the opposite of “relative” and “universal” that of “particular”. But things are not that simple.

Both terms, “absolute” and “universal”, are usually kept together and taken on a par, even if they have different meanings. “Absolute” (etymologically) means ‘untied from any particular  $x$ ’—where “culture” can be here the value of the variable  $x$ —or, in other words, ‘independent of any perspective whatsoever’. Now, if “absoluteness” is taken as a property of beliefs or statements, little reflection suffices for us to realize that, accord-

ing to the *epistemic* anti-relativist position we described above, such independence is a chimera. Any belief, idea, statement, theory or the like is inevitably tied to the culture it is produced by, so that no belief a human being might develop can exist, as it were, in a vacuum—in a sort of Platonic realm of entities quite independently of any human practice. On the other hand, if “absoluteness” is to be taken as a property of the *validity* of beliefs or statements, we should have beliefs or statements that are valid independently of any perspective, i.e. quite apart from the standpoints human beings may come to adopt—a validity which, again, may be situated in a supernatural dimension detached from human practices and cultures and, so to speak, surveying them from above. If this is the case, then that validity would be *common* (in principle) to every culture. It would be a *universal* validity, since the term “universal” means just this, i.e. ‘common to all perspectives and all cultures irrespectively of their spatial or temporal placement’. And this, by the way, may account for the fact that “absolute” and “universal” are often used as an inseparable couple.

So, what about the term “universal”? Are there universal beliefs—beliefs common to human beings independently of their epoch and place? And, for that matter, is there something *universal*, i.e. common to every culture? Putnam does speak of ‘universal’, for instance, he very carefully stresses the idea according to which ethics is *universal*. In his words,

insofar as ethics is concerned with the alleviation of suffering, it is concerned with the alleviation of *everyone’s* suffering, or if it is concerned with positive well-being, it is concerned with *everybody’s* positive well-being. (Putnam 2004, p. 25)

Here the universality resides in the fact that what ethics aims at regards *all* human beings—with no distinction of age, social position, color of skin and so on—since ‘suffering’ is such an ineluctable ingredient of human life. Thus, it is not particular beliefs or statements that are universal, but a very general problem which people have in common. Ethics is universal because its topic, broadly conceived, is universal. However, note that in the passage just quoted Putnam speaks of a general *concern* or *attitude*, the attitude of being fully aware of questions which regard all of us. May it be that ethics is universal because the concern it deals with is universal? In other words, may the universality of the problem of human suffering give rise to a universal concern? And, moreover, may universal beliefs and statements be guaranteed by such a universal concern? The answers would seem to be in the negative.

The concern with the alleviation of suffering and positive well-being is far from being common to everybody. It is not an ‘intrinsic’ feature of human beings, something one directly possesses in virtue of her or his human nature. Not all of us have such an attitude, but only—as Putnam himself claims—“people who stand within the ethical life” (Putnam 2004, p. 75). Therefore, if ethics is universal because of the concern it is based on, its universality is confined within the boundaries of the set of morally con-

scious people. In fact, we could not deny that there were and are many ‘morally unconscious people,’ people whose existence makes it difficult to obtain anything resembling intercultural rational discussion on moral issues—and, for that matter, on *any* issue whatsoever. These are people, moreover, whose existence makes it difficult to envisage beliefs or statements that we might reasonably term “universal”.

Does this mean that relativism wins after all? Does this mean that at the bottom of every (or, at least, some) culture there remains a residue of non-ethical beliefs which thwarts rational discussion? Actually, differences among cultures usually come down to differences in moral beliefs and behaviors, and it seems that the persistent presence of morally unconscious people and the lack of beliefs common to *every* human being independently of the culture she or he belongs to, paves the way to relativism—at least, to *real* relativism (remember Stephen L. White’s distinction mentioned above), i.e. to actual cases of strong disparity in forms of life and the absence of rational discussion. But what about *philosophical* relativism, i.e. the philosophical idea according to which things stand *in principle* so?

Well, it seems to me that Putnam’s brand of anti-relativism entails a breaking of the dichotomy between things we can do in principle and things we can do in practice, or at least a warning to the effect that talk of ‘possibility in principle’ is slippery ground. Putnam’s general stance is characterized by a sort of *primacy given to practice*, and practice tells us that argument and discussion sometimes have very limited power: one cannot convince everybody, especially if she or he stands outside the ethical life. As Putnam claims:

I do not believe that someone who stands outside the whole circle of related concerns [...] constitutive of ethics can be brought to share any one of them by argument alone, and if such a one were brought to act ethically by the force of a *non-ethical* reason, although the conduct that resulted might be “ethical”, the *person* would not have become an ethical person (not at that stage, anyway).  
(Putnam 2004, p. 29)

Could we reasonably say that—despite what happens in practice—it is *in principle* possible to bring more and more morally unconscious people into the circle of the ethical life? Could we reasonably say that this circle may be enlarged so that virtually all human beings will behave according to moral principles, showing thereby the existence of *universal* moral principles and beliefs? Well, we *could* say that, but it would be a mere *façon de parler*. It would make no difference to practice, given the enormous obstacles we encounter. And since, according to a pragmatist maxim Putnam subscribes to, “what does not make a difference to practice should not make a difference to philosophy”, we have that believing that it falls within the cognitive powers of human beings to reach agreements on any question, and that we indeed shall agree on any question, even if *in principle*, is a patent illusion, a piece of utopian philosophy which runs



against the first condition we put on a successful discussion—the condition which imposes to avoid illusions.

However, this does not entail that philosophical relativism is right. Granted, we cannot reach ‘universal’ agreement on a given question—i.e. we cannot have something like a *convergence* of *all* cultures on the solution of a given problem. But it simply is not true that, if convergence is excluded from the epistemic horizon of human beings, then it is plausible to say that some problems are *irresolvable*—even in principle. To contrast philosophical relativism it suffices to show that two or more cultures may agree on the solution of a given problem, and therefore that cultures are not imprisoned, so to speak, in their respective conceptual schemata. Indeed, they are far from being shackled in this way, as we soon realize if we pay attention to the fact that—as we said above—there are many different ways of settling a discussion about a given question, none of which coincides with ‘the last word’ to be said on that question. As a matter of fact, no problem of intercultural interest may admit that a solution may be good once and for all. As fallibilism urges us to consider every agreement as being temporary and open to renegotiation, in case new evidence is acquired, and every belief may be put into discussion and, eventually shared. The very aim of discussion is ‘enlarging commonality’, and effort can be made in many different ways in order to find an epistemic connection between cultures.

Roughly speaking, what is *common* to different cultures is a matter of degrees on a spectrum the opposite ends of which are (very broad) beliefs shared by virtually every culture, on the one hand, and beliefs deeply rooted in single definite cultures, on the other. But even the most deeply-rooted beliefs can be put into rational discussion and, eventually, abandoned or shared by more than two cultures. Of course, in situations like these—cases which involve the most cherished beliefs of both parties in the dispute—even the best argument may be ineffective in order to make the opponent modify her or his position. But there still remains one chance (the ‘last one’, so to speak), i.e. being brought to modify one’s position by *rational persuasion*. Persuasion is what comes “at the end of reasons” (Wittgenstein 1969, § 612), to use Wittgenstein’s words. It is what we are committed to

when we try to argue with, say, the Azande [and realize that] we cannot find reasons that are reasons for them; the world views are so totally different that we sometimes find that in an argument with an intelligent Azande we cannot resort to ordinary argument based on premises that we share with the Azande but have to resort to persuasion. (Putnam 1995, p. 55)

Briefly, there are two relevant outcomes of a persuasive procedure (i.e. the effort to make room for premises which could be ‘shared’): either changing one’s mind, or better understanding of the opponent’s point of view. In the former case, one could change one’s mind and accept a given belief in virtue of what we may call a ‘Why not?’

argument, i.e. an argument to the effect that, even though there are no rational *positive* reasons to appeal to, neither are there any *negative* reasons. In the latter case, one could come to appreciate where the disagreement actually lies. In both cases, however, the fact is that a change is brought about as the result of a real intercultural discussion which is not at all *rhetorical* but *rational*—we have to use mother wit, for one thing, and mother wit would hardly allow rhetorical arguments.

So where do we stand with the question of the existence of ‘absolute and universal’ beliefs? We saw that it is possible to bring absoluteness to universality, and, then, that about important questions which sometimes divide cultures thinking that we might come to an universal agreement is an illusion. In fact, whenever we come to share beliefs with other cultures—beliefs we may reasonably take as ‘objectively’ true or false—this is hardly due to convergence. And this does not hold only for ethical, religious or theoretical questions, given that there are also genuine “factual estimates on which it is difficult if not impossible to ever get convergence” (Putnam 2004, p. 76). Thus, since convergence seems to require possession of beliefs universally agreed on, we have that, contrary to a pervasive conviction, the notion of objectivity, on the one hand, and those of absoluteness and universality, on the other, are to be divorced.

#### 4. Empirical and quasi-empirical fallibilism

We have seen that what gives Putnam’s anti-relativism its distinctive character is fallibilism, since it constantly aims at inflating beliefs with objectivity. Now, fallibilism comes at least in two varieties, and I would like to end this paper by highlighting the distinction and asking whether it is a distinction which really makes an essential difference.

We may call the two varieties of fallibilism ‘empirical’ and ‘quasi-empirical’, respectively. The slogan of the former could be “Experience can strike anywhere”, so that actually *no* belief is immune to revision—from ordinary empirical beliefs to ethical, mathematical and logical ones. Quine, Rorty and Popper rank among the empirical fallibilists, but—of course—we may take Quine as the main representative. The latter’s kind of fallibilism denies that experience can strike anywhere. In fact, doubt is deemed ‘senseless’ if directed toward those beliefs which are the cornerstones of our present body of knowledge—e.g. laws of logic and elementary mathematics, basic commonsense beliefs and the like. Who is the advocate of the ‘quasi-empirical’ kind of fallibilism? The answer is: “Hilary Putnam”. In fact, he maintains that our body of knowledge contains beliefs “which cannot be overthrown merely by *observations*, but only [...] by thinking of a whole body of alternative theory as well”. As we mentioned above, those beliefs he refers to as “*quasi-necessary*”, i.e. necessary in relation to our present conceptual scheme (cf. Putnam 1994b, p. 251). The moral is straightforward: “to insist [...] that *all* statements must be falsifiable—is to make falsifiability a third (or is it a fourth by now?) dogma of empiricism” (Putnam 1994b, p. 258).

I feel that this specification of the status of our beliefs, and the correlative distinction between two kinds of fallibilism, are of great importance. Moreover, I do not think that Putnam's quasi-empirical kind is a *softening* of fallibilism, as it has been claimed (cf. Ben-Menahem 2005b, p. 151). The unassailability of 'contextually' necessary truth is contained in the very idea of fallibilism from the start. Fallibilism is not skepticism, and does not recommend that we question a belief just for the fun of it. Doubt, as we stressed above, must be reasonable, and in certain cases plausible reasons are available only if 'a whole body of alternative theory' is present, otherwise we happily make do with the beliefs we have. I think this is the same point made by Peirce and Wittgenstein when they pointed to *common sense* as the foundations of knowledge. Common sense may be rejected as well (as every other part of our body of knowledge), but it does not seem advisable to try relentlessly to do that. Even if fallible, common sense is *grounding enough*. However, what I want to say is that the same attitude is detectable in Quine himself—the representative of the 'empirical' variety of fallibilism. Indeed, according to Quine,

To disavow the very core of common sense, to require evidence for that which both the physicist and the man in the street accept as platitudinous, is no laudable perfectionism; it is a pompous confusion, a failure to observe the nice distinction between the baby and the bath water. (Quine 1955, pp. 229-230)

So, to conclude, I think that Putnam's qualification of fallibilism is important, but that it was already contained in Quine's thought—even if implicitly. On the one hand, Quine—like Putnam—maintains that some beliefs should be preserved and shielded; on the other hand, Putnam—like Quine—maintains that quasi-necessary beliefs may be abandoned, although in very special circumstances. But then, where does the difference actually lie?

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Dipartimento di Scienze dei Linguaggi  
Università di Sassari  
Via Tempio 9  
07100 Sassari, Italy  
dellutri@uniss.it