# PUTNAM'S CONCEPTION OF TRUTH*

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*ABSTRACT*

*After stressing how the attempt to provide a plausible account of the connection between language and the world was one of Putnam's constant preoccupations, this article describes the four stages his thinking about the concepts of truth and reality went through. Particular attention is paid to the kinds of problems that made him abandon each stage to enter the next. The analysis highlights how all the stages but one express a general non-epistemic stance towards truth and reality—the right stance, according to Putnam, in order to develop full-blooded realism. Since the last stage combines a version of direct realism with a pluralist conception of truth, the article proceeds by focusing on Putnam's alethic pluralism, carefully distinguishing it from alethic deflationism. Finally a suggestion is made as to where Putnam's alethic pluralism may be placed within the constellation of current pluralist positions about truth.*

*Keywords:* *Truth, alethic pluralism, alethic deflationism, realism, Hilary Putnam*

## 1. Introduction

The aim of this article is to analyse Hilary Putnam's last conception of truth, making explicit the aspects he left implicit. Since, on the one hand, one of the major traits of this conception is its being *pluralistic* and, on the other, a pluralist spirit permeates alethic deflationism, an effort will be made to appreciate the distance—however small—that separates Putnam's conception from alethic deflationism. In the course of the analysis, the question is tackled as to whether Putnam's pluralistic notion of truth renders the word "true" semantically ambiguous—a question that

seems to have been ignored in the literature so far. In order to show Putnam's last conception of truth in its own light, the article starts by following the stages that led up to it over fifty years or so of philosophical reflection.

## 2. Truth and Reality

The first thing to say in addressing Putnam's conception of truth is that he envisaged a strong link between the concept of truth and the concept of the world, so that an analysis of the former is unavoidably intertwined with an analysis of the latter, and vice versa.

Indeed, one of the constant traits of his thought is the conviction that "the major problem of philosophy [is] the problem of the way language and thought 'hook on' to the world" (Putnam 1983, 315), where the implicit idea is that a correct understanding of truth gives both a grasp of that "hooking" and what that hooking hooks onto. This may happen because, intuitively, when a proposition is true, truth can be taken to show the existence of a relation between that proposition and the portion of reality it is about—whatever the interpretation of truth we are willing to take on board. And not only does what we say is true highlight what intentionality amounts to, but it shows something of that portion of reality as well. Putnam himself revealed that "the problem of intentionality has been a lifelong preoccupation of mine, and […] various changes in my position were occasioned by the realization that one or another assumption about the nature of reference led to deep difficulties" (Putnam 2013a, 24).

One aspect that represents another constant trait of Putnam's thought and had an influence in the development of his conceptions of truth and reality is his *anti-positivist stance*. It constitutes perhaps the main source of his realistic attitude, since he regarded any positivist perspective as heavily slanted towards idealism. The *binary development* of Putnam's notions of truth and reality went through four stages. In chronological order:

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| 1) Alethic correspondentism | ⇔ | metaphysical realism |
| 2) Alethic correspondentism | ⇔ | sophisticated metaphysical realism |
| 3) Alethic pragmatism | ⇔ | internal realism |
| 4) Alethic pluralism | ⇔ | natural realism |

Roughly, Stage 1 took place during the Sixties, and combined a view Putnam a decade later called "metaphysical realism" with a correspondence account of truth. He also made an ingenious attempt to provide a definition of correspondence, which he later deemed hopelessly flawed. The attempt was centred on the notion of "compositional mapping", and elaborated the idea according to which "a true sentence is *not* one which bears a certain relation to extra-linguistic facts, but one which bears a certain relation to extra-linguistic facts *and to the rest of the language*. (The 'correspondence' is triadic rather than diadic.)" (Putnam 1960, 82). This definition was an integral part of the metaphysical realism he subscribed to at that time, a view which also had three more assumptions: the idea that there exists (a) a fixed totality of all objects, (b) a fixed totality of all properties, and (c) a sharp line between properties we discover in the world and properties we project onto the world (cf. Putnam 1999, 183).

Stage 2 took place during the Seventies. It inherited the general framework of Stage 1, except that Putnam became aware of the impossibility of any definition of truth as correspondence. Moreover, he recognized the phenomenon of equivalent descriptions[1] (which amounted to a rejection of (c) above and made his metaphysical realism "sophisticated": cf. Putnam 1978, 51 and 131).

Internal realism triggered Stage 3. This is a stage for which there are precise starting and ending dates: 1976 and 1990, respectively. In Boston, on December 29, 1976, he delivered a talk entitled "Realism and Reason" (which was then published as the last part of Putnam 1978) where the phrase *internal realism* made its first appearance, while in the course of the Gifford Conference held at the University of St Andrews, November 23-6, 1990, in replying to the talk given by Simon Blackburn he explicitly renounced the view (cf. Putnam 1994b). Internal realism has it that "the mind and the world jointly make up the mind and the world. (Or […] the Universe makes up the Universe—with minds—collectively—playing a special role in the making up.)" (Putnam 1981, xi), so that what reality and truth really are stems from our best cognitive procedures. Truth, in particular, gets a pragmatist interpretation, in that it is seen as what can be asserted in epistemically-good-enough-conditions—an idea reminiscent of Charles Sanders Peirce's account of truth, although different in an important respect.[2]

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[1] This is the phenomenon represented by the *cognitive equivalence* of sentences, theories, or conceptual systems which, when taken at face value, are *incompatible*: e.g., two sentences saying different things about the same portion of reality and being, nevertheless, both true (cf. Putnam 2013a, 23-24).

[2] There is no reference in Putnam to a purported ideal limit of inquiry.

Stage 4 officially opened in March 1994 on the occasion of the John Dewey Lectures Putnam held at Columbia University (cf. Putnam 1994c). In these lectures Putnam's realist attitude is influenced by William James, John Dewey, the later Wittgenstein and John Austin, and is tied to a view of perception which drops every interface between the human sensory apparatus and the world in favour of a *direct* connection between them. It is also deeply steeped in common sense. This position was termed *natural realism*, paying homage to the "natural realism of the common man" (Putnam 1999, 10). With it Putnam combined the idea that truth amounts to many different things—as many different things as many kinds of true propositions there are, and as many domains there are in which a proposition can be true: empirical, mathematical, logical, ethical, juridical, religious, and so on. In brief, truth is not one, but many.

All four stages represent an effort at showing how "language and thought 'hook on' to the world". With an important difference: Stage 3 is the expression of an *epistemic conception* of truth and reality, i.e. a conception according to which what is true and what is real are a function of our best conceptual scheme, and are therefore expressed by the propositions this scheme allows to justify, whereas Stages 1, 2 and 4 are enlivened by a *non-epistemic conception*, i.e. one to the effect that what is true and what is real may sometimes outrun justification, "because what goes on in the world is sometimes beyond our power to recognize" (Putnam 1999, 69). But, notice: the non-epistemic conception in 4 is of a different flavour to the one in 1 and 2, owing to the specific new views on reality and truth which manifest that conception— equivalently, owing to the specific new views on how "language and thought 'hook on' to the world".

The chief difficulty confronting Stages 1 and 2—the one that made Putnam shift to Stage 3—is how to account for the purported relation of correspondence linking two sharply separate elements (language/mind, on the one hand, and the world, on the other). In fact, a relation of this kind would be *external* to both the elements it puts in relation—in particular it would be external to language and mind, so that it turns out impossible for a human being to conceive it, let alone describe its nature. (Let us call this the *Kantian problem*.) Such a correspondence would only be grasped from what has been termed a "God's Eye View", i.e. a superhuman perspective which, in contexts like these, serves no useful explicative purpose. The moral is hence obvious:

> Elements of what we call "language" or "mind" *penetrate so deeply into what we call "reality" that the very project of representing ourselves as being "mappers" of something "language-independent" is fatally compromised from the very start*. […] Realism is an impossible attempt to view the world from Nowhere (Putnam 1990, 28),

where the realism in question (which Putnam was fond of writing with a capital "R") is metaphysical realism. As I hinted above it was this idea[3] that triggered his epistemic move toward Stage 3—a stage in which the interlacement of mind and the world appears at its best, vindicating the label "internal" for that kind of realism.

However—despite the term "realism" in *internal realism*—Putnam came to realize that this was not realism enough, beginning his way back to a view in which the *independence* of the world from the mind and its theoretical products is more definite. This called in turn for a novel account of the "hooking", one which would avoid the Kantian problem and the implausible account based on mind and the world jointly offering good enough epistemic conditions for what is true and what is real.

This novel account followed the realization that the "'how does language hook on to the world' issue is, at bottom, a replay of the old 'how does perception hook on to the world' issue" (Putnam 1999, 12). The traditional idea according to which we perceive a given object thanks to the myriad *sense data* giving us information about the many features of the object, so that what we are directly connected with is not the object but the sense data, raises the same epistemological difficulty in which Descartes found himself entrapped: the distinction between a mental and a physical substance that are so neatly separated to justify the hypothesis that we might after all be brains in a vat. Indeed, what could ensure that the cause of the sense data we perceive is an object existing in the world out there and not just some computer software linked to the synapses of those deluded brains?[4] Even if we were not brains in a vat, what could ensure that sense data do give us a faithful representation of the object and do not distort perception itself in inscrutable ways?

So, according to Putnam, if we keep endorsing the traditional account of perception, we will find ourselves at a loss as to how to account for the connection between mind and the world, since it appears unavoidable that we appeal to interfaces between ourselves and the world, in the form both

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[3] It seems that this idea became a somewhat constant trait in Putnam's thought (therefore valid in his last non-epistemic stance too: see Stage 4 below). In fact, it appears that in Stage 4 there is a coexistence of two apparently contrasting beliefs. On the one hand, the belief according to which the dichotomy between properties we discover in the world and properties we project onto the world—cf. assumption c) above—is unjustifiable (a belief that, as we saw, amounts to the acknowledgment of the phenomenon of the equivalent descriptions, and that shows how Putnam was still maintaining that language and mind penetrate deeply into reality. On the other hand, the belief according to which there can be statements that are true or false and whose truth value is doomed to be beyond our ken even in principle: e.g., "There are no intelligent extraterrestrials in the Universe" (cf. for instance Putnam 2015d, 142). Statements of this kind show that, possibly, part of the world is *impenetrable* by language or mind, even in principle.

[4] For the brains in a vat hypothesis, cf. Putnam 1981, chp. 1. For a useful discussion of the hypothesis, cf. Thorpe 2017.

of sense data and conceptual schemes:

> on the "internal realist" picture it is not only our experiences (conceived of as "sense data") that are an interface *between* us and the world; our "conceptual schemes" are likewise conceived of as an interface. And the two "interfaces" are related: I saw our ways of conceptualizing, our language games, as controlled by "operational constraints" that ultimately reduce to our sense data (Putnam 2013a, 26).

Hence natural realism, which—as we saw above—is a form of direct realism. According to this metaphysical picture there is no separation between the human mind and its environment, so that the problem of their relationship does not even arise. But, Putnam hastened to clarify, it does not arise provided that we have a conception of the mind different from the traditional conception, the one inherited and revitalized by Descartes: a mind conceived of as a thing, an organ, a self-sufficient entity already endowed with all its powers. Rather, the human mind is a system of interconnected abilities that involves the world and its objects from the start:

> Mind talk is not talk about an immaterial part of us but rather a way of describing the exercise of certain abilities we possess, abilities that supervene upon the activities of our brains and upon all our various transactions with the environment but that do not have to be reductively explained using the vocabulary of physics and biology, or even the vocabulary of computer science (Putnam 1999, 37-8).

Thus, the elimination of sense data from the account of perception and the functioning of the human mind allows Putnam to discard not only "the model of the mind as something 'inside' us" (Putnam 1992, 357), but also the assumptions that remained to be discarded in the non-epistemic conception embedded in Stage 1. In particular, the notion of truth as correspondence.

Indeed, the need to appeal to a metaphysical relation of correspondence in order to give substance to the "hooking" vanishes, given that "the relation of statements to states of affairs 'out there' is too *internal* to be thought of as a 'correspondence'" (Putnam 2015b, 790). Above all, correspondence may account for some truths, but not all the truths. This has to do with what Michael Lynch has called the *scope problem*, i.e. "for any sufficiently robust characterized truth property F, there appears to be some kind of proposition K that lacks F but that are intuitively true (or capable of being true)" (Lynch 2009, 4). This is clearly a problem any correspondentist interpretation of truth must face: even if we admit the plausibility of a correspondentist explanation of the truth of empirical propositions, it turns out to be much more difficult to apply the same explanation to the truths in ethics, mathematics and the like.

In fact, Putnam's later work puts ever more stress on the irreducible and unpredictable variety that has to do with the concept of truth: the high variety of "scopes" in which truths can be stated, where the empirical scope is but one of many; the high variety of the contexts of usage of linguistic expressions within just one scope, each governed by distinct norms of rightness; the high variety of the kinds of evaluation of the propositions' truth-value. All this nourishes his latter conception of truth, a sort of *alethic pluralism* which combines the idea that there is an extendable family of uses of the terms "true" and cognates—an extendable family of ways of characterizing the answerability to reality truth consists of in new areas of discourse—with the idea of *normativity*, i.e. that "to regard an assertion or a belief or a thought as true or false *is* to regard it as being right or wrong" (Putnam 1999, 69), such that "it is a property of the notion of truth that to call a statement of any kind […] true is to say that it has the sort of correctness appropriate to the kind of statement it is" (Putnam 2013b, 97-8). But, again,

> just what sort of rightness or wrongness is in question varies enormously with the *sort* of discourse. *Statement*, *true*, *refers*, indeed, *belief*, *assertion*, *thought*, *language* […] have a plurality of uses, and new uses are constantly added as new forms of discourse come into existence (Putnam 1999, 69).

Let us try to characterize this sort of pluralism in more detail.

## 3. Taking into Account the Plurality of Kinds of Truths

In the current literature there seem to be just two elucidations of truth that take the plurality of kinds of truths in due account, and one may ask which of the two is Putnam's position to be ascribed to: *alethic pluralism* proper and *alethic deflationism*. Both are families of theories, rather than compact unified theories on their own.

Broadly conceived, alethic pluralism can be identified with the thesis that there are many ways of being true (cf. Pedersen and Wright 2016). Within this vast receptacle one can find both authors who maintain that there is just one property of truth which is multi-faceted, i.e. possessing many forms, and authors who think there are many different properties in virtue of which a statement can be true, combined with the thesis that the property that makes a statement true may vary from discourse to discourse. Usually, some of the properties so countenanced are "substantial", namely refer to a purported nature or substance of truth.

On the other hand, alethic deflationism is the view according to which all there is to truth are instances of the so-called *equivalence schema*, i.e. *p* is

true if, and only if, *p*—where *p* varies on one's favourite truth-bearer.[5] This is all speakers need in order to have a full mastery of the concept, according to deflationists. It follows that truth has no nature (it is not substantial) and that either the predicate "is true" is not genuine—according to the radical wing of deflationism—or it has only an expressive utility, not an explanatory one—according to the moderate wing. In Paul Horwich's words, truth is "merely a useful *expressive* device, enabling certain generalizations to be formulated—for example, 'All propositions of the form, <p or not-p>, are true', and 'A belief is correct if and only if it is true'" (Horwich 2016, 100).

Deflationism and pluralism are incompatible views about truth, since the former denies "the key pluralist idea that there is a multitude of substantive properties that are alethically potent within specific domains" (Pedersen and Wright 2013b, 10), or just one substantive property susceptible to many different uses. Yet, both militate against the scope problem—pluralism solves and deflationism dissolves it. As to the latter, the "scope problem […] will be regarded by the deflationist as little more than a mildly diverting irrelevance" (Dodd 2013, 315). But why?

The fact is that deflationism about truth has a sort of intrinsic pluralist flavour. Since you can substitute whatever sentence from whatever region of discourse to the *p* in the equivalence schema, you can take the plurality of truths into account in one fell swoop. And you can do this without any appeal to a purported special truth property (or properties), according to the deflationists. Such an appeal would just be a sort of "double counting":

> it is a kind of double counting to think that [the distinctions of truths] strike at the conception of truth involved. They strike at the level of the proposition: they mark distinctions of subject matter […]. But why add to a distinction of content, another, mirroring, distinction, one only applying to kinds of truth or conceptions of truth? (Blackburn 2013, 265).

For Blackburn, there is only one counting, as it were, and it has to do with the *content* of the propositions involved. A similar idea was already expressed by another important alethic deflationist—W.V. Quine—who, arguing against the thesis that the word "true" is ambiguous, claimed that

> There are philosophers who stoutly maintain that "true" said of logical or mathematical laws and "true" said of weather predictions or suspects' confessions are two uses of an ambiguous term "true".

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[5] I will not take a stand on this question here, and so will bracket the philosophical differences involved in taking sentences, propositions or the like as truth-bearers. I will also speak in places of the disquotational version of the equivalence schema—'*p*' is true if, and only if, *p*—without calling attention to the distinctions relevant in choosing this version over the other.

[…] What mainly baffles me is the stoutness of their maintenance. What can they possibly count as evidence? Why not view "true" as unambiguous but very general, and recognize the difference between true logical laws and true confessions as a difference merely between logical laws and confessions? (Quine 1960, 131),

namely, again, as a difference in the content of the propositions expressed in different areas of discourse.

Quine's claim was recently echoed by Charles Parsons (cf. Parsons 2013, 194), and toward the end of the last century by Mark Sainsbury, according to whom

even if it is one thing for "this tree is an oak" to be true, another thing for "burning live cats is cruel" to be true, and yet another for "Buster Keaton is funnier than Charlie Chaplin" to be true, this should not lead us to suppose that "true" is ambiguous; for we get a better explanation of the differences by alluding to the differences between trees, cruelty, and humour (Sainsbury 1996, 900).

Discounting Quine's and Sainsbury's reference to the ambiguity of truth, Julian Dodd draws the following moral regarding the plurality of truth-apt discourses:

the sorts of differences between truths described by pluralists can be construed, not as differences in *the way* these propositions can be true, but as differences in the respective *subject matters* of these propositions […] the relevant difference in the truths […] is ultimately a difference concerning the things in the world they respectively concern, not in how they are true (Dodd 2013, 305-306).

What is relevant, in a nutshell, is the extra-linguistic ontological level, not the metalinguistic one: decidedly a straightforward and beautiful way to account for the pluralism inherent in truth-talk on the part of deflationism.


## 4. Is Putnam's a Pluralism of a Deflationary Variety?

Now, one may be tempted to attribute this line of reasoning to the latter Putnam, maintaining that his alethic pluralism is merely a pluralism *of content*. The temptation is strong, owing to a couple of claims made by Putnam, but I think that it does not reflect his actual stance.

Here is a possible source of this temptation. In the course of his criticism towards the metaphysical realism of Stages 1 and 2, he stated that

what makes the metaphysical realist's response *metaphysical* is its

acceptance of the idea […] that our ordinary realism […] presupposes a view of truth as a "substantive property" (Putnam 1999, 55).

Given that the thesis that truth is not a substantive property is a central tenet of deflationism, this claim may give the idea that Putnam subscribes to deflationism. However, on a closer reading it is possible to realize that what he was actually criticizing is not the notion of "substantive property" per se, but the idea that there is one and the same (substantive) property in *every* case of true statement. In fact, he was criticizing the metaphysical realist for postulating

that there is some single thing we are saying (*over and above what we are claiming*) whenever we make a truth claim, no matter what sort of statement we are discussing, no matter what the circumstances under which the statement is said to be true, and no matter what the pragmatic point of calling it true is said to be (Putnam 1999, 55; emphasis added).

The stress is here on the phrase "some single thing" that—according to the metaphysical realist's rendering of the truth-talk—would be in place in *every* true statement, irrespective of its subject matter. A single thing—i.e. the property of being in a relation of correspondence with a portion of reality—that would transcend the content of what we are saying when we simply assert a claim. Putnam's denial that there is such a thing brings grist to the alethic pluralist's mill, since it is natural to think that the underlying idea is here that there are many alethically potent properties, domain by domain and, moreover, they are *embedded* in what is said, not over and above it.

All this applies also to another source of the temptation to say that Putnam is a deflationist, namely his claim that "What is right in deflationism is that if I assert that 'it is true that *p*', then I assert the same thing as if I simply assert *p*" (Putnam 1999, 56). But, again, this is too poor a basis to warrant his being deemed a militant in the deflationary camp. Actually, this claim both is a restatement of the previous idea—i.e. that truth does not go beyond the content of a statement—and shows nothing else but the *disquotational property* of truth—which in turn is a general logical trait of truth, therefore taken into account by every interpretation of the concept. That Putnam's stance is far from deflationism is apparent in the following passage:

I believe that the disquotational property of "true" is an extremely important one, [but not that it] is all there is to say about truth, which is the characteristic thesis of what is called "deflation" (Putnam 2013b, 97).

Throughout his career Putnam was a fierce critic of alethic deflationism,

and perhaps it comes as no surprise that a favourite argument of his criticism had to do with the central question of how "language and thought 'hook on' to the world". In fact, he maintained that deflationism runs the risk of *losing the world*, because of its deplorable verificationist nature (cf. Putnam 1999, 53 ff)—more precisely, because of the *verificationist account of understanding* and *meaning* it requires. The reason is clear: having deflationism banned truth from the set of the philosopher's explanatory tools, truth-conditions appear useless—they cannot explain anything, let alone meaning and understanding. Given that one of the traditional competitors of truth-conditional semantics is verificationist semantics, to ascribe the latter to deflationism requires just one step. However—and this is the linchpin of his criticism—the verificationist account of understanding ends with bracketing or downright expunging the things in the world: to put it roughly, if "what exists" is being taken as "what exists for a subject *S*" (even a collective subject *S*) thanks to her best verificationist procedures, then the *idealistic danger* of losing the world becomes obvious.

I think that Putnam's is a remark in point, even though I find the reference to verificationism unnecessary in order to show that deflationism is at risk of losing the world. Let me briefly explain this before going back to Putnam.

Rather than being tied to verificationism, I think the risk in question is inherent in the Horwichian claim that truth is "merely a useful *expressive* device", a claim heavily suggesting that truth-talk has just to do with language (cf. Dell'Utri 2016). Consider the following typical deflationary allegation:

> To explain the utility of disquotation we need say nothing about the relation between language and the world. [Our theory of the concept of truth] seems to rest only on the most general *formal* features of our language—for instance, the fact that our language has somewhat the structure of quantificational languages—the utility for us of the concept of truth seems to be a fact which is quite independent of the existence or non-existence of interesting "picturing" or referential relations between our language and the world (Leeds 1978, 44).

Deflationists correctly detect the crucial point of any elucidation of truth in the capacity to offer a plausible explanation of the "referential relations between our language and the world", and quite reasonably see that taking these relations as having a "picturing" nature may cause more of a problem. But drawing from this the conclusion that truth has nothing to do with relations of some kind between language and the world, be they referential or not, appears a self-defeating move—even granting that these relations are not strictly required when it is just the explanation of the *expressive* utility of the word "true" that is at stake. And that move is

self-defeating just because of the losing-the-world issue: if truth and the world are detached one from the other in this way, then the solipsistic picture of individuals mechanically using language as if they were robots or brains in a vat imposes itself on us.

However, coming to Putnam, it is interesting that he eventually dropped the argument based on the purported tie between deflationism and verificationism, and argued for the idea according to which deflationists run the risk of losing the world along different lines. His argument may be succinctly reported as follows. In order to function properly, the disquotational schema presupposes the notion of translation, or sameness of meaning: there are plenty of cases in which the quoted sentence in one side of the biconditional belongs to a language different from the one in which the rest of the biconditional is couched, so that in the other side of the biconditional a translation of that sentence has to appear. But there are also plenty of cases in which among the constituents of the sentence in question there are words, and a correct translation of the sentence requires knowledge of what these words refer to. So, the notion of translation presupposes the notion of reference. To quote Putnam:

> That the notion of translation is needed for disquotation and therefore needed by deflationists (since their thesis is that grasp of disquotation is all that is needed for an understanding of truth) is widely recognized. But what I have not seen discussed by deflationists, let alone taken seriously, is the thought that translating sentences presupposes knowing what their descriptive constituents refer to. It is an illusion that disquotation does not presuppose the relation of reference (Putnam, 2015a: 324).

Notwithstanding their scant regard for reference, Putnam went on to remark, and despite the formal level on which they place the analysis of truth, deflationists unhesitatingly keep uttering claims such as "electrons really exist" and the like, taking for granted that the relevant words in these claims refer to actual entities out there, just as a realist philosopher would have it—as though it was perfectly obvious that this was so. Thus the following revealing moral:

> This "semantics-free" version of realism seems to amount to the claim that to be a realist it suffices to sincerely write or utter the right realist-sounding *sentences*, regardless of the account one gives of *what one is doing* by writing or uttering them (Putnam 2013c, 125).

Since the implicit accusation is that the deflationists do not have a plausible account to offer of how a speaker manages to talk of the worldly objects and states of affair their statements are about—because of their refusal to link the issue of truth with any substantive metaphysical

issue[6]—the upshot is a picture of human beings using language as if they were in a sort of void: again, as we noticed, as if they were brains in a vat. Hence, the loss of the world, a loss that the deflationists attempt to disguise "by means of a superficial terminological conservatism" (Putnam 1999, 55).

As to Putnam's own position, it is the direct realism of Stage 4 that does the job, as it were: it is the idea that we are directly connected to the world via perception, and the idea that perception is combined with our practical, intellectual and linguistic abilities—which come in a whole and are intrinsically *world-involving*—that ensure a reference to the terms we employ. Speaking a language is not a mere syntactic manipulation of empty symbols (cf. Putnam 1999, 49), phenomenologically appearing as marks and noises that we have to associate with senses. To the contrary,

> sentences that I think, and even sentences that I hear or read, simply do refer to whatever they are about—not because the "marks and noises" that I see and hear (or hear "in my head", in the case of my own thoughts) intrinsically have the meanings they have but because the sentence in use is not just a bunch of "marks and noises" (Putnam 1999, 46).

All this distances Putnam from deflationism and cooperates to shape his pluralist conception of truth, in the wake of the later Wittgenstein:

> Instead of looking for a freestanding property of "truth", in the hope that when we find what that property is we will know what the nature of propositions is and what the nature of their correspondence to reality is, Wittgenstein wants us to *look* at ethical language (and not the kind of ethical language that only occurs in philosophy), to look at religious language, to look at mathematical language, which is itself, he says, a "motley", to look at imprecise language that manages to be perfectly "clear" in context ("Stand roughly here"), to look at talk that is sometimes nonsensical and to look at the very same sentences when they function perfectly well (talk of "what is going on in so-and-so's head" is an example of this), to look and *see* the differences in the way these sorts of discourse function, *all the very different ways in which they relate to reality* (Putnam 1999, 68; emphasis added).

From this follows "a rejection of the idea that we can speak of one single 'truth predicate' whose meaning is fixed once and for all" (Putnam 1999, 68), a rejection which far from amounting to the claim that there are many truth predicates, one for each area of discourse, suggests the anti-Quinean idea we mentioned at the end of the third section, namely that there is an extendable family of *uses* of the predicate "true". But, it would

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[6] Cf. "truth is metaphysically trivial" (Horwich 1998, 146).

be natural to ask, does this not amount to conceding the point to Quine? "Does Putnam, in saying that 'true' has a variety of uses, mean to imply that the word is systematically ambiguous" (Lynch 2001b, 618) in its meaning, showing indirectly that Quine was after all right in his criticism?

## 5. On the Purported Ambiguity of "true"

I do not think so. First of all, we would be allowed to say that we have here a case of *semantic ambiguity* only if it were reasonable to assume that the use of an expression *rigidly* determines its meaning, so that even the slightest change in the use counts as a change in the meaning of that expression—an assumption that fails to have even the faintest semblance of plausibility.[7] Secondly, a clear case of semantic ambiguity is given by homonyms such as "bank" or "step", which convey different meanings in different contexts in such a way that we have to learn those meanings separately; but there is no apparent reason to think that "true" belongs to this category. Indirect evidence of this is given by Lynch who, after giving the name *simple alethic pluralism* (SAP) to the view according to which the meaning of "true" is context-sensitive, claimed "I'm not sure anyone actually advocated SAP" (Lynch 2009, 54), thereby implicitly answering his own question quoted above. Thirdly, since every version of alethic pluralism has it that we use the term "true" in many ways, if this were at all a firm sign of ambiguity in the meaning of the term, then each alethic pluralism on the scene would immediately suffer from this kind of flaw—a possibility so implausible that it is not even worth mentioning. Fourthly, even when we want to stick to the meaning-centred reading represented by SAP, it should be stressed that a far better interpretation of this kind of alethic pluralism has been put forward (but not supported) by Wright, who detaches it clearly from any ambiguity case and more reasonably sees it as a case of *stretching* the use of the word "true", exploiting the *elasticity* of its meaning in a way that "you don't have to learn each type of use separately" (Wright 2013, 126).

In sum, Quine was too drastic in suggesting that whoever believes that there is an ever-growing family of uses of the word "true" renders this word semantically ambiguous. And this implies in turn that we are not obliged to follow Quine and take the differences between truths as *just*

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[7] It would even run afoul of the famous Wittgensteinian claim to the effect that "For a *large* class of cases—though not for all—in which we employ the word 'meaning' it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language" (Wittgenstein 1953, § 43).

regarding their subject matters, thereby embracing a pluralism of content[8] (as Blackburn and Dodd also urge). In particular, as to Putnam, owing to the strong link he envisaged between the concept of the world and the concept of truth, these differences have repercussions on the concept of truth itself.

## 6. Conclusions

The upshot of the foregoing analysis is that Putnam's conception of truth belongs to the variegated constellation represented by alethic pluralism: as we have seen, he maintained that different kinds of statement are responsible to reality in their own way. This means that different uses of "true" are allowed by different properties, and these are all genuine— *substantial*, to use the anti-deflationist jargon, where the substance is normative in character and is given by the world, in the broadest sense of the word. Beside these substantial normative properties— correspondence, warranted assertibility, coherence etc.—there is the disquotational property which, owing to its formal character, allows us to use the word "true" across the board, revealing that the latter "belongs to the family of the logical words (for example, the connectives and quantifiers), which also are used in every area of discourse" (Putnam 2015c, 559-60). It is therefore the disquotational property that gives the concept of truth its unity.

The discussion about alethic pluralism has been very lively for decades, and the relevant literature does not fail to pick out the different problems encountered by the many pluralist proposals. Putnam did not address this literature, and it is hard to say which proposal he was most consonant with. However, it seems that, on the one hand, he was deeply aware of some of the problems in question, primary among them the difficulty "to do justice simultaneously to the plurality of our uses of 'true' and to the logical unity of the concept of truth" (Putnam 2015c, 560), and, on the other, he would not object to the idea according to which the many properties allowing the plurality of uses of 'true' represent a sort of ground on which the property of truth may be placed, with the overall

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[8] A word of clarification is in order here. We might say that the pluralism of content is a sort of default position, owing to the "plurality" of contents being just a plain *fact*. Indeed, it is undeniable that the many statements we utter have a multifarious content pertaining to different areas of discourse. From this default position at least three stances may ensue: (1) a *deflationary stance*, according to which truth presupposes no relation between mind-language and the world (being the question of truth *only* a linguistic question); (2) a *metaphysical realist stance*, according to which truth involves a fixed relation between any statement and the world (making truth to go beyond the content of a statement); (3) a *pluralist stance*, according to which there are many ways in which a statement can be responsible to reality (ways that, in Putnam's case, do not make truth to go beyond the content of statements); and possibly others.

result that there is

> a single property of truth, and there are many other satellite properties hanging around in its vicinity which […] are somehow doing something to service the application of the truth-property (Wright 2013, 138).[9]

But whether or not this is a plausible interpretation of the picture of truth Putnam wanted to give in Stage 4 of his philosophical life is the topic of another paper.[10]

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[9] In a nutshell, my hypothesis is that Wright's pluralism is the right alethic context in which to place Putnam's contention to the effect that the truth of a statement does not go beyond the content of that statement, so that there is nothing *over and above a truth claim*. This means that a statement can have an "alethically potent" property (say, coherence), which is a property embedded in it, and this property in turn moulds a ground for the truth-property—embedded in the same way. Moreover, according to both Putnam and Wright truth has a normative dimension. Again, this dimension does not go beyond the content of a true statement: it does not transcend the level of language placing itself in a metaphysical sphere (it rather belongs to the dimension of inquiry Akeel Bilgrami speaks of: cf. Bilgrami 2007); to use Putnam's wording, it is "a sort of correctness that is appropriate to the kind of statement" in question and varies with that kind. Being part and parcel of the concept of truth, also the normative dimension is embedded in the statement.

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