

ARGUING ABOUT REALISM: ADJUDICATING THE PUTNAM-DEVITT DISPUTE*

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I want to adjudicate the dispute between those philosophers who do and those who do not think that the philosophy of language can illuminate metaphysical questions. To this end, I take the debate between Devitt and Putnam as a case study and diagnose what I take to be illuminating about their disagreement over metaphysical realism. I argue that both Putnam and Devitt are incorrect in their assessment of the significance of the model theoretic argument for realism. That, whilst Devitt is entitled to claim that truth does not have anything to do with realism, Putnam's challenge can still gain traction and seriously call into question our ability to engage in realist metaphysics. I argue that even if a completely semantically neutral conception of realism can be successfully articulated, doing so has the potential to bankrupt the methodology of metaphysical realism. Having taken this debate as a case study, I then offer some brief remarks on how to understand the philosopher who claims that realist metaphysicians should care about discussions of metasemantics and truth. Whilst I want to be cautious about generalising on the basis on this case alone, I think there are important lessons to be learned about the way in which considerations to do with language can shed light on the concerns of metametaphysics.

Keywords: *Metaphysics, Metametaphysics, Reference, Indeterminacy, Truth, Hilary Putnam, Michael Devitt*

1. Introduction

Putnam claims that his model theoretic argument “has profound implications for the great metaphysical dispute about realism which has always been the central dispute in the philosophy of language.” (Putnam

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1980, 464) Putnam's claim captures the kind of view about the relationship between metaphysics and language that I interrogate in this paper. Specifically: the view that the question of realism is not exclusively the remit of metaphysics, but rather is a problem in the philosophy of language. If this were the case, then philosophical problems pertaining to truth, semantics, and our systems of linguistic and mental representation would indeed be relevant to discussions of metaphysical realism. There is a tendency in some contemporary discussion of realism to think that this kind of view is outdated, and that it merely derives from a conflation of the philosophy of language and metaphysics. Such philosophers hold that considerations to do with language cannot determine or limit the enterprise of metaphysics: that reflecting on problems in metasemantics cannot deliver any insights about metaphysical realism.

In this paper I want to progress the dispute between those philosophers who do and those who do not think that the philosophy of language can illuminate metaphysical questions. To this end, I take the debate between Devitt and Putnam as a case study and diagnose what I take to be important about their disagreement. I argue that both Putnam and Devitt are incorrect in their assessment of the significance of the model theoretic argument for realism. That, whilst Devitt is entitled to claim that truth does not have anything to do with realism, Putnam's challenge can still gain traction and seriously call into question our ability to engage in realist metaphysics. I argue that even if a completely semantically neutral conception of realism can be successfully articulated, doing so has the potential to bankrupt the methodology of metaphysical realism. Having taken this debate as a case study, I then offer some brief remarks on how to understand the philosopher who claims that realist metaphysicians should care about discussions of metasemantics and truth. Whilst I want to be cautious about generalising on the basis on this case alone, I think there are important lessons to be learned about the way in which considerations to do with language can shed light on the concerns metametaphysics.

The paper proceeds as follows. In section two, I present Putnam's model theoretic argument. I argue that the argument, if successful, is capable of motivating a radical metametaphysical thesis: that realist metaphysics cannot be sensibly pursued (§ 2). I engage with Michael Devitt's criticisms of Putnam's attack on realism. I entertain the possibility that Putnam's model theoretic argument is not in good standing as his characterisation of metaphysical realism is incorrect. Thus, given a more apt characterisation of the commitments of metaphysical realism, Putnam's arguments are unsuccessful in establishing the robust metaphysical conclusions he has in mind (§ 3).

I then evaluate Devitt's criticisms of Putnam along two dimensions. First, I briefly consider the possibility that Devitt's own characterisation of

realism cannot escape Putnam's attack, as the notion of dependence that Devitt espouses could be understood in semantic terms (§ 3). Second, I argue that even if Devitt is right about the effects of the model theoretic argument on metaphysical realism (if this is understood as a thesis about the independence of what exists and that is all), there may be an equally dangerous threat to realism. The final section, therefore, is devoted to explaining this new challenge. I argue that even a metaphysics-first approach to metaphysics is not immune to Putnam's argument, as even though the argument may not be able to motivate a rejection of realism, it could motivate a rejection of our realistic theorising. Therefore, the challenge posed by the model theoretic argument, when understood how I suggest, would be one which could totally undermine the notion of accurate representation in our theorising (§ 4). I conclude by offering some brief remarks what I take to be the metametaphysical and methodological significance of the proceeding discussion (§ 5).¹

2. Putnam's attack

Putnam's model theoretic argument aims to advance a devastating challenge to metaphysical realism. It aims to show that given plausible considerations from model theory, we are misguided in believing that our language can be hooked up with a mind-independent world in right way; where "right way" is to be understood as "the way the metaphysical realist purports they are hooked up". Putnam thinks this motivates a move away from metaphysical realism towards his preferred 'internal realism'.²

Before turning to the argument itself, I need to outline how Putnam characterises the commitments of metaphysical realism. On his view, the realist is not committed to one thesis but three interrelated theses. First, a claim about the world: "THE WORLD" is to be characterised as independent, in the sense of independent of any representation of it. Second, a claim about language: that the reference relation for the realist is one of correspondence; that is, that there is a determinate reference relation which holds between expressions of our language and the parts of the world to which they refer. Third, a uniqueness thesis: that there is a *singular* correspondence between the terms of a theory and the objects and the properties to which they refer. (Putnam 1981, 49)

Expressing the uniqueness thesis requires some subtlety. Putnam claims that there is a singular correspondence. We might think this is too strong a requirement and as such Putnam is overstating the realist commitments.

¹ Thanks to John Divers, Robbie Williams, Sam Symons, the participants of the Putnam's Path conference at the University of Maribor, and two anonymous referees for helpful comments and discussion.

² For some excellent discussion of Putnam's position see Button (2013).

There are some forms of semantic indeterminacy that do not seem, *prima facie*, to be a problem for metaphysical realism. There is a prevalent phenomenon of indeterminacy in natural language: vagueness. It is not particularly controversial to claim that natural language is vague: reference is not always determinant.³ Paradigm terms that exhibit this indeterminacy would be, ‘tall’, ‘heap’, ‘bald’, etc. Such terms admit borderline cases; cases where it is not clear whether the predicate applies. (Keefe 2000, 6) Such terms apparently lack clear extensions.⁴ Given that there are vague expressions in a language, it seems that we need to make sense of the reference of a term not being wholly determinant. In offering an explanation of this phenomenon, a semantic approach has been historically most popular: theorists have tried to explain this vagueness in terms of features of the language, and have offered a semantics and a logic for the suspect expressions. (Merricks 2001, 146) We might think, therefore, that the existence of vague predicates suggests that a one-to-one correspondence is too committal. Consider your total theory of reality. Perhaps you quantify over colours. There could be two properties, red and red*, which the word "red" in the theory could pick out. If our total theory quantifies over “red”, and yet there are two equally good candidate referents for “red”, this might seem like enough to suggest that there is not a singular correspondence, but rather that there may be multiple equally good ones.

I think that the realist could make two moves. First, perhaps she could retreat. A one-to-one correspondence is too committal, and as such the realist accepts that in some instances there is not a singular correspondence. The theory can correspond to greater and lesser degrees, and the realist prefers those theories which correspond more. However, there can still be a degree of flexibility, especially in those cases of mun-

³ There is a distinction between vagueness and indeterminacy. As Van Inwagen clearly puts it, “Vagueness is a special case of indeterminacy—semantic indeterminacy. It may be indeterminate whether a sentence is true or false, indeterminate whether a term denotes a certain object, and indeterminate whether a given set is the extension of a certain predicate. I take the word ‘vague’— my universe of discourse here comprises only linguistic items—to be entirely appropriate only in application to predicates and certain of their constituents. A predicate is vague if it is indeterminate, or, at any rate, possibly indeterminate, which set is its extension—or if it is possible that, for at least one object, it is indeterminate whether that object belongs to the extension of that predicate.” (Van Inwagen 2009, 1)

⁴ It is worth noting that the view that extensions are not determinant only fits with some explanations of vagueness. For example, according to Williamson’s epistemicism about vagueness (1994), the referents of vague terms are determinant; the source of the vagueness is in our own ignorance.

-dane indeterminacy considered.⁵ The second option is stricter. This type of realist may object to the putative problem, and they will say that no metaphysical theory would quantify over colours simpliciter. Perhaps this is because they think that colours are not the types of things that belong in the fundamental description of reality, or perhaps it is because the language we use to talk about colours in metaphysics do not contain the predicates of everyday English but rather precisified technical predicates. Thus, this realist maintains the one-to-one correspondence, by eradicating instances of mundane indeterminacy by some means. Putnam seems to be levelling his argument against realists of this second variety. For our purposes, what is important is the thought that there should be an intended interpretation for our theory (allowing to the refinements above). The realist contention is that the intended interpretation is the one that matches the terms of the theory to the way the world is.

And so, we return to Putnam's characterisation of realism. Once we have these three theses, it should be clear that it is possible that we may be unable to represent THE WORLD at all. To put it in Putnam's terms: truth is, for the metaphysical realist, radically non-epistemic. (Putnam 1977, 485) The theory which is epistemically ideal, in the sense of meeting all our theoretical virtues, might still be false. Of course, it might be the case that ideal theory *is* true; the claim is not that ideal theory must fall short of truth. Rather the claim is that, for the realist, idealness does not constitute or guarantee truth. The realist must hold that there is a gap between ideal theory and true theory. At the heart of Putnam's attack, therefore, is a distinction that realist must be committed to, but, according to Putnam, cannot be maintained:

Here again, the realist – or, at least, the hard-core metaphysical realist – wishes it to be the case that *truth* and *rational acceptability* should be *independent* notions. He wishes it to be the case that what, e.g., electrons are should be distinct (and possibly different from) from what we believe them to be or even what we would believe them to be given the best experiments and the epistemically best theory. Once again, the realist – the hard-core metaphysical realist – holds that our intentions single out “the” model, and that our beliefs are then either true or false in “the” model *whether we can find out their truth values or not*. (Putnam 1980, 472)

Now, let's turn to the argument. I should note that *the* model theoretic argument doesn't strictly speaking pick any one thing out. Putnam forwards several arguments which are similar in spirit, and, whilst they

⁵ Perhaps this could be metaphysically spelled out in terms of a commitment to ontic vagueness. This would not be to move away from realism as we can be realist about what is metaphysically indeterminate. For some illuminating discussion please see Barnes and Williams (2011).

differ in precise target and technical machinery, they all aim to forward the same conclusion.⁶ Some of his discussion focuses on mathematical language and employs the Löwenheim-Skolem theorem,⁷ whereas other discussion employs permutation models and focusses more on ordinary language.⁸ Here, I focus on the so-called permutation argument.

The model-theoretic conception of a theory is one whereby there is a language *L* with a given interpretation function *I*, which maps the expressions of *L* onto a world of objects and properties. Putnam places some methodological constraints on what can fix the intended interpretation. First, there are what Putnam terms ‘theoretical constraints’. These include the standard axioms of set theory, as well as principles and theories from other branches of science. Second, there are the ‘operational constraints’. These are the various empirical observations and measurements that we make in the course of scientific investigation. There is a dual constraint on the assignment of extensions to the subsentential components of the sentences of the language. First, this must be constrained by facts about usage, understood in a suitably naturalistic way. I take it that by “naturalistically acceptable” Putnam intends to acknowledge his Quinean heritage and thus this means taking a somewhat behaviouristic view of the data for semantic theorising. Second, assignments must be constrained by getting the coarse-grained truth conditions of whole sentences correct. The data which must constrain our semantic theorising is the semantic values of sentences, and the success conditions for a theory of reference are to fit this data set. Importantly, if there are multiple theories which both equally fit the data, then it is indeterminate which theory is correct.

The argument then shows that for every theory *T1*, it is possible to find a permutation function *K*, such that each item in *L* is interpreted “in violently different ways, each of them compatible with the requirement that the truth value of each sentence in each possible world be the one specified”. (Putnam 1981,33) The mechanism functions as the “crazy assignments of reference to names can be ‘cancelled out’ by a compensating assignment of extensions to predicates, so that, overall, the truth value of sentences is unaffected.” (Williams 2007, 369)

What we find is therefore worrying. There are multiple interpretations, all of which meet the requisite constraints. Although these considerations only apply to the set-theoretic language in question, Putnam argues that an argument such as this be generalised: it can apply to all languages.

⁶ This claim is contingent on how finely you individuate the conclusions. When I say similar in spirit, therefore, I mean Putnam uses both arguments to attack metaphysical realism.

⁷ See for example, Putnam (1980).

⁸ See for example, Putnam (1981) and (1977).

Different interpretations of a sentence can produce the same truth value at every possible world, but assign different extensions to the subsentential expressions. That is: in both the intended and permuted interpretations, 'cat' is true of radically different things, but true in exactly the same circumstances nonetheless. Given how we defined the constraints on our metasemantic theorising, neither interpretation can be said to be any better than any other, and it is therefore indeterminate which is correct.

This is deeply in conflict with the commitments of Putnam's realist. Given the realist's commitment to uniqueness, we would have hoped that there would be a single true interpretation function which takes us from terms of the theory to the world. However, we find that reference is *radically* indeterminate. This is not the innocuous sort of indeterminacy we considered at the start. It is the claim that even with all the constraints on reference assignment in place, and even for precise languages like mathematical language, reference is still indeterminate. These considerations put pressure on another supposed commit of realism: the non-epistemic nature of truth. Putnam's realist needs it to be the case that there is an independence of ideal theory and truth. However, for any consistent theory, that theory has a model, and Putnam's argument shows us that if there is one truthmaking model, then there are infinitely many permuted variants. The realist wants to be in a position to say that of all these models, one of them is getting it right and the others are getting it wrong. But even with all the constraints on reference assignment in place, they are still not able to discriminate. So, if the realist is going to persist in maintaining the distinction between ideal theory and truth, then they need to invoke some kind of magical relation. They cannot say anything principled about why one model is getting it right and the others are getting it wrong. Putnam claims that these considerations are sufficient to undermine the prospects for robust metaphysical realism.

If we were to try to resist such an argument, in which direction would we go? Perhaps a more sophisticated theory of reference could show that we were wrong? Putnam claims that this cannot save our intuitive notion of reference as whatever additional constraint we bring in to save some sensible realist notion of reference, could be likewise subjected to a permutation.⁹ That is: the new constraint itself needs interpretation and each model will interpret it in different ways. The point of Putnam's argument is that no first order theory can, by itself, determine its own objects up to the point of isomorphism. Putnam states the point thus: "The problem as to how the whole representation, including the empirical theory of knowledge that is a part of it, can determinately refer is not a problem that can be solved by developing a more and better empirical theory." (Putnam 1980, 477) There are some philosophers who hold that

⁹ Again, for more in depth discussion of this aspect of Putnam's argument see Button (2013).

the arguments for radical indeterminacy these must not be in good standing as they are self-defeating. For example, Scott Soames claims that if the conclusions to the arguments were true, we couldn't even state them. (Soames 1998, 213) There are other philosophers who have argued that the arguments are not in good standing as they are too stringent in what they allow to be taken as the constraints for providing a theory of reference. David Lewis, for example, argues that we need not be worried as some interpretations are more eligible than others and so the type of indeterminacy in question does not arise. (Lewis 1984, 227)

There is of course a great deal more to be said about these responses. For my present purposes, however, I want to precede by assuming that Putnam's argument for radical indeterminacy is in good standing; that the metamathematics of Putnam's argument is correct.¹⁰ I am interested in working out the conditional: *if* an argument like Putnam's is right, what can that tell us, if anything, about metaphysical realism? I now turn to assess a response to Putnam according to which even if we allow that Putnam's conclusions about reference and truth are correct, this does not show us anything about the prospects for metaphysical realism.

3. Devitt's response

Michael Devitt asks this question: "What does truth have to do with realism?" (Devitt 1983, 292) An obvious initial answer to Devitt's question: it depends who you ask. First, let's consider Putnam. Putnam tells us that a central commitment of metaphysical realism is that it is possible for ideal theory to be false: there is independence of ideal theory and true theory. He tells us that the notion of truth that we are interested in as metaphysical realists is one which matches up with reality, in an appropriate way. Thus, if we find out that we have a crazy metasemantics, then given that some of the central commitments of realism are semantic ones, we are in trouble.

Devitt, however, tells us we do not need to worry. His answer to the question of what truth has to do with realism is "nothing at all". (Devitt 1983, 292) Devitt captures the notion of realism he is interested in, and according to him the one metaphysicians should be interested in, in terms of two commitments. These commitments run along two dimensions. First: existence. Realism commits us to a view about what exists. If I am a realist about some entity, or class of entities, I am committed to those things existing. The second commitment is trickier: "words that frequently occur in attempts to capture the second are 'independent', 'external' and 'objective'. The entities must be independent of the mental;

¹⁰ This view has been defended at some length. For some good discussion see Button (2011).

they must be external to the mind; they must exist objectively in that they exist whatever anyone's opinions." (Devitt 1983, 292)

The doctrine of realism according to Devitt should be construed thus: "Common sense, and scientific, physical entities objectively exist independent of the mental." (Devitt 1983, 292) Construed as such, I can see the temptation to claim that truth does not have anything to do with realism. It makes no mention of semantic notions at all and it does not seem clear, at least *prima facie*, how this characterisation might implicitly rest on the sort of semantic commitments required to get Putnam's attack going. Devitt claims that the type of indeterminacy Putnam espouses only has metaphysical significance if you endorse a language first approach to metaphysics.

Perhaps we can view Devitt's criticism of Putnam as a plea not to conflate metaphysics and the philosophy of language. It is only by conflating the two that one might be inclined to think that considerations from the philosophy of language could impact upon the realist status of the world. Of course, language is a tool for theorising. We do theorise *using* language, but we must not let this confuse us. The *content* of our theorising has nothing to do with language, truth or any kind of semantic concerns, and so we should not be alarmed by Putnam's putative challenge. Metaphysics, realist metaphysics, is concerned with the world, not language.

Additionally, perhaps we can see some immediate appeal to Devitt's position. There is intuitive appeal; what we can and cannot say, what we can and cannot theorise about, should not effect what actually is the case. That there is a world, and that that world exists mind-independently, should not be effected by any concerns pertaining to model theoretic languages. In misrepresenting the commitments of realism Putnam gets away with far more than he should. Whilst we may still have cause for concern about the significance of Putnam style arguments in the case of metamathematics or metasemantics, this does not force us to any conclusions about the viability of metaphysical realism. Realism, so construed, has minimal commitments (i.e. an existence thesis and an independence thesis), and neither of these commitments are effected by the semantic concerns forwarded by Putnam.

There are two responses to Devitt I want to consider. The first is a direct concern about his explicit separation of realism from any semantic notions. Specifically: do we need any semantic notions to make sense of his independence thesis? The question to ask at this stage is: exactly how should we understand mind-independence? This is of course a well-rehearsed subject matter: there has been much discussion, especially in recent years, about dependence. But in the face of the challenge from Putnam, it is worth thinking about exactly what notion is at stake.

There might be some who chose to reduce their notions of dependence to

semantic notions, and perhaps we can see the motivation for this. Historically, philosophers have been very cautious about using metaphysically primitive notions. You find a lot of engagement with reductive projects which aim to analyse away the metaphysically primitive in favour of some more familiar notions. Rather than dependence being something that exists between things (in the world) perhaps it could better (and more parsimoniously) be characterised as a relationship between propositions? Analysing dependence in terms of, for example, the truth of propositions, we can do away with primitive metaphysical ideology. And perhaps we can see motivation for this: many metaphysicians want to think of some truths holding in virtue of some other truths.¹¹ But the bearers of truth are propositions, not objects. However, thinking about things in this way, a concern emerges: if we decide to explicate dependence in such terms and place at the centre of our understanding of realism a claim about the relationship between true propositions, then Putnam's argument can gain traction even with Devitt's characterisation of realism.

However, we can circumvent such problems by keeping dependence metaphysical. Exactly what would this consist in? To say that something exists mind independently is to say that the thing does not require the existence of minds for its existence. This requires some clarifications. First, there is a sense in which the laptop in front of me is mind dependent as, if it were not for the existence of minds, if human beings had not designed and built my laptop, it would not exist. This is not a metaphysically interesting sense, and not what we are concerned with when we are concerned with realism. Second, talk of "minds" needs some unpacking. Whose minds exactly? Is it my mind? Your mind? Some kind of collective consciousness? When talking of minds, as it concerns debates about dependence, we are (mostly) concerned with not just our actual mental lives, but rather with the mental lives of any being with a "finite extension of our cognitive powers". (Jenkins 2005, 199)

Given these two clarifications, there are still two ways we could read a claim of mind independence. Jenkins makes a distinction between modal independence and essential independence. First, we could characterise mind independence as a modal thesis. According to this construal, something is mind independent just in case, "there is a possible world where that thing is the case although our mental lives are not such that ...". (Jenkins 2005, 200) This ellipsis will be filled in differently depending on the nature of domain under consideration. For example, if we were considering moral properties, we would say that moral properties exist mind independently is there is a possible world at which moral properties are instantiated even though no minds exist at this

¹¹ For example, in "Fundamental and Derivative Truths", Williams uses a "truth-in-virtue" relation to characterise the fundamental-derivative dependence relation (2010).

world. The second option characterises mind independence as an essentialist thesis. According to this second sort: “p’s being the case is independent of our mental lives iff it is no part of what it is for p to be the case that our mental lives be a certain way”. (Jenkins 2005, 200) Whilst I do not hope to settle which of these characterisations of mind independence is preferable, they both provide Devitt with the requisite resources to disarm Putnam. Neither of these types of independence theses seem to immediately require any semantic notions and as such we might hope that the Devitt response is in good standing.

For the purposes of argument, then, let’s suppose that Devitt’s characterisation of metaphysical realism is correct and not susceptible to criticism.¹² Is Putnam well and truly defeated? I think there is a larger, perhaps more pressing, worry which faces realist theorising in light of Putnam’s attack. By way of a second response, therefore, I pursue a more indirect route in the next section. Perhaps we concede the point to Devitt: we should not take realism to consist in any commitment to a particular view of truth or reference, and therefore Putnam’s criticisms are inert. But, against what are his criticisms inert? Devitt’s rebuttal of Putnam’s attack on realism was supposed to preserve the world. Any considerations from metasemantics should have no impact on whether there is a mind independent existing world. Fine, we will allow this. But now we can perhaps reconstruct a Putnamian attack: we may have got the world, but can we theorise about it?

4. Adjudicating the dispute: realism and representation

Suppose Devitt is right. Suppose that Putnam’s arguments cannot gain any traction in the realism debate, as realism is concerned with the nature of reality, not representing reality, and that further these two concerns are discrete. What I want to suggest in this section is that we may be able to mount another challenge in the Putnamian spirit. The challenge I forward here accepts Devitt characterisation of realism, and, as such, holds that Putnam’s arguments cannot have *metaphysical* significance. However, I argue that they carry great significance for the prospect of realist *theorising*. It should be clear, therefore, that the picture I propose is not one that endorses any kind of anti-realism; I am not making any claims about what exists or the mind-independent/dependent nature of what exists. Rather my point is that Putnam’s arguments can generate trouble for any metaphysician who aims at faithful representation.

¹² I could imagine someone who is sympathetic with Putnam’s anti-realist project thinking that I am being too concessionary; that I am conceding too much ground to Devitt. If my primary concern was how we should characterise realism then I think such a charge is reasonable. However, my present concern is to show that even when conceding this ground to Devitt, realism still isn’t out of the Putnamian woods.

I take it that realist theories aim at providing a representation of reality. The notion of representation carries with it some notion of correctness. We can get it right, and we can get it wrong. So, what does getting it right or wrong consist in; what grounds ‘getting it right’? You might think that getting it right merely requires truth. This still does not tell us enough. There are many different conceptions of truth, and not all of them are going to be compatible with realism. A realist theory is one that aims to represent reality *as it is*. The realist has a robust notion of representation. When thinking about realist representation, therefore, we want metaphysical perspicuity; the theory needs to be true for the right reasons. The elements of the theory correspond to the elements of reality that the theory aims to represent.

This presentation of the requirements of successful representation seems compatible with the practice of realistically minded metaphysicians. Let’s consider two examples as a means of illustrating the point. Let’s suppose we are realist metaphysicians. We want to offer a metaphysical theory about the nature of, say, time. As a crude toy example: we have the A theorists and the B theorists; let’s say a presentist (who thinks that only the present exists) and a moving spotlight theorist (who thinks that all times are equally real, and the present is a matter of perspective) are having a discussion. The thing that they are trying to offer a theory of (i.e. the nature of time) is the same, irrespective of the explanation they offer. So, let’s say the presentist has a go first. Time is like thus and so. Then the moving spotlight theorist has a go. Time is like this and that. Both theorists, in aiming to explain and account for time, offer a representation of what they think that aspect of reality is like. They think it is this way, I assume, for good reason. They have data and arguments which urge us to adopt their side. But, only one of these ‘gets it right’.

This description of theorising seems like a reasonable characterisation of what many realist metaphysicians seem to be doing. What appears to be a key notion for the metaphysical realist, is that we have a secure notion of accurate representation. Even if we do not want to build a view about the intended interpretation of a theory into the definition of realism, the realist metaphysician must be committed to a view about this.¹³ If this is not what they are concerned with, it seems challenging to say exactly what is the concern. By way of contrast, consider second toy example: an instrumentalist about science. Their theories do not aim to accurately represent the way the world is; they do not try to explain the mechanisms which govern natural processes. A successful theory need not say anything true or false about the world. Rather, they aim to provide a tool of prediction and as long as they have a theory which is empirically

¹³ Whether the realist wants to develop their preferred view of the structure of theories in terms of models or sets of sentences, I take it that the point equally well applies: we need to be able to pick out an intended interpretation. Thank you to an anonymous referee for pushing this point.

adequate, this is good enough. This conception of the purpose of theorising seems in stark contrast to the realist.

Theorising about the world (which is what I take it is we are doing when we engage in realist metaphysics) is a practice of theory construction. This theory, as a representation of that world, has semantic properties; properties such as content, reference, truth conditions, truth values, etc. It is these semantic properties which Putnam's argument can make trouble for as the model theoretic argument shows that the extension of the terms of the theory are radically indeterminate.

The model theoretic argument was supposed to damage realism by showing that there is mass indeterminacy in interpretation. Devitt's criticism of Putnam's argument aimed to show that metaphysical realism is safe from any such attack, as realism is not about interpretation, it is about the world. What I have considered in this section is the possibility that realism is not so safe. If realism is understood as a thesis about what exists and the independence of what exists, a criticism can still be mounted. The same old Putnamian criticisms now attach themselves to the theories that the realist wants to give about what the world is like. The realist's theories come out true (as all Putnam's permuted models come out true), but not for the right reasons. If we wished to resist this what might we say? Perhaps we could argue that theorising does not require semantic notions. I do not see how this can get off the ground. Some minimal notion of accuracy in our theorising is needed, and, in as much as this is the case, Putnam can gain traction. I conclude this section therefore by noting that Devitt does not win by shifting the goal posts. Putnam's argument can yet present a challenge, even if not a *metaphysically* anti-realist one. This challenge, I have argued, bankrupts the realist's method for theorising about the world.

5. Some Concluding Remarks

Let's take stock. The primary aim of this paper was to assess whether we could derive any substantial metametaphysical conclusions from Putnam's argument for semantic indeterminacy. That is: if we accept the permutation argument, must we reject metaphysical realism? The answer to this question is no. If realism is understood as a claim about the nature of reality, then the argument is not capable of showing anything of metaphysical interest about reality.¹⁴ However, the discussion raises a different concern. The significance of Putnam's argument for semantic indeterminacy arises at the level of representation. If we aim to accurately represent reality in our metaphysical theories, then the foregoing arguments seem to make this task impracticable.

¹⁴ Except perhaps something about the factuality of meaning.

I claimed that this debate between Putnam and Devitt speaks to wider issues about how to understand the relationship between language and truth, and metaphysical realism. It would require a much longer study to fully taxonomise the contemporary debates pertaining to this issue, and that is sadly beyond the scope of this paper. Whilst I want to be cautious about over generalising the significance of my present discussion, I want to close with a brief remark on what I think is the take home message from the disagreement between Devitt and Putnam.

When thinking about the relation between metametaphysics and the philosophy of language, I urge that we separate two different kinds of issues. That is: the idea of the philosophy of language as having methodological, if not metaphysical, import. There is a question about what it takes for a position to count as realist. If I claim to be a realist metaphysician I take it that there are two methodological presuppositions which are necessary for me to engage in theorising in the first place. First, I must think that I have some kind of access to the world. This could be seen as an epistemological presupposition. Second, I must think that I am capable of representing the world in my theories. This could be viewed as a metasemantic presupposition. Whatever I take the *metaphysical* characterisation of realism to be, it seems plausible that I must hold these two presuppositions as given if my metaphysical theories are to do what any realist would want them to do. I take the upshot of my argument against Devitt to be that there are certain kinds of arguments and problems in the philosophy of language that are capable of calling into question the legitimacy of these presuppositions. In conclusion, therefore, we must be careful and prudent if we want to try and dismiss the significance of the philosophy of language to realism. Merely claiming that realism is about the nature of reality and not language or truth is, in many cases, not sufficient to rebut attacks on realism which come at it from this angle. Whilst the scope of the significance of such attacks might not be what some philosophers have taken it to be historically, there is a substantial sense in which assumptions about the nature of truth and representation ground the enterprise of realist theorising.

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