Putnam, Languages and Worlds

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Abstract

The key argument of Hilary Putnam for conceptual relativism, his so-called mereological argument, is critically evaluated. It is argued that Putnam's reasoning is based on confusion between languages and theories.

Until mid-seventies, Hilary Putnam was one of the leading defenders of realism in philosophy. However, in 1976, partly influenced by Dummett, he converted to the view that he himself calls *internal realism*, or *pragmatic realism*;[1] more realistically minded philosophers tend to take it rather to be a sort of anti-realism and relativism.

Putnam opposes his own internal realism with what he calls *metaphysical realism*. This is a complex doctrine. According to Putnam,[2] it is committed to the following doctrines:

1) There is exactly one true and complete description of the way the world is.

2) It requires "a ready made world"; the world itself must have a built-in structure.

3) Truth involves some sort of correspondence relation between words or thought-signs and external things and sets of things.

Putnam's internal realism is opposed to each of these. According to this view:

1′) There is more than one true theory or description of the world.

2′) There is not a "a ready made world".

3′) Truth is some sort of idealized rational acceptability; it is not correspondence.

I think it is fair to say that Putnam's original model-theoretical and brain-in-a-vat arguments for his internal realism have had quite a critical reception; they have been widely discussed in the literature and found in general rather unconvincing and problematic. There is, however, a more recent argument of Putnam that has not been

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[1] See Putnam's *Meaning and the Moral Sciences* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978).

[2] *Reason, Truth and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 49–50.

much discussed, viz. his *mereological* or "Carnapian world" argument; and the few published critical discussions of it[3] I know do not to my mind get to the core of it, even if some of them seem to have a hunch.

It certainly looks as though Putnam himself thinks that this is an important argument, as he has given it in detail repeatedly[4] and sketched it or appealed to it in many of his most recent publications.[5] He sometimes even appears to be saying that this argument amounts to an *explanation* of his internal realistic or conceptual relativistic standpoint.[6]

In his careful critical discussion of Putnam's pragmatic realism, Ernest Sosa[7] says that of the various arguments of Putnam, this argument seems to him 'deepest, most richly suggestive, and most effective' and 'far the most powerful and persuasive'. And in his monumental defence of Putnamian view, Sami Pihlström writes: 'The most important of Putnam's recent arguments against metaphysical realism and in favour of "conceptual relativity" is, in my view, his "Carnapian world" argument …'.[8] Putnam's argument also plays a key role in Michael P. Lynch's recent book *Truth in Context*[9] defending what the author calls "metaphysical pluralism".

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[3] N. Brenner-Golomb and J. van Brakel, "Putnam on Davidson on Conceptual Schemes", *Dialectica* 43 (1989), pp. 263–269; Ernest Sosa, "Putnam's Pragmatic Realism", *Journal of Philosophy* XC (1993), pp. 605–626; Simon Blackburn, "Enchanting Views", in Peter Clark and Bob Hale (eds.), *Reading Putnam* (Cambridge, USA and Oxford UK: Basil Blackwell, 1994), pp. 12–30; John Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* (New York: Free Press, 1995); Susan Haack, "Reflections on Relativism: From Momentous Tautology to Seductive Contradiction", in James E. Tomberlin (ed.), *Philosophical Perspectives 10: Metaphysics* (Cambridge, USA and Oxford UK: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), pp. 297–315.

[4] See *The Many Faces of Realism* (LaSalle: Open Court, 1987), chs. 1, 2; and "Truth and Convention: On Davidson's Refutation of Conceptual Relativism", *Dialectica* 41 (1987), pp. 69–77 (reprinted in H.Putnam, *Realism with a Human Face* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1990), pp. 96–104; in M. Krausz (ed.), *Relativism: Interpretation and Confrontation* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), pp. 173–181; and in part in P. van Inwagen and D.W. Zimmerman (eds.), *Metaphysics: The Big Questions* (Oxford: Blacwell Publishers, 1998), pp. 392–398.)

[5] *Representation and Reality* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: A Bradford Book, M.I.T. Press, 1988), ch. 7; *Renewing Philosophy* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1992), ch. 6; *Words and Life* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1994), chs. 14, 15, 18.

[6] See *The Many Faces of Realism*, p. 32.

[7] Sosa, "Putnam's Pragmatic Realism", *ibid*.

[8] Sami Pihlström, *Structuring the World*, Acta Philosophica Fennica, vol. 59 (Helsinki: The Philosophical Society of Finland, 1996), p. 118.

[9] Michael P. Lynch, *Truth in Context: An Essay on Pluralism and Objectivity* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: A Bradford Book, The MIT Press, 1998).

Putnam has now given up one ingredient of his original "internal realism", namely his identification of truth with idealized warranted assertability.[10] However, he still holds onto another part, namely *conceptual relativism*; and he seems now to take the above-mentioned mereological argument to be his best argument for this. This argument is thus arguably the key argument of the later stage of Putnam's pragmatic realism. Hence the argument is worthy of careful analysis.

Although I do actually feel sympathy towards some of Putnam's aims and agree with him about some of his conclusions, I think that at a closer look this particular argument simply fails to prove what it is supposed to prove. In fact I find the argument to be seriously confused. In what follows, I shall first present the argument, and its alleged conclusions, following almost word for word Putnam's presentation.[11] After that, I attempt to give an analysis of its shortcomings.

Putnam's Argument

In his argument, Putnam invites us to imagine a world with three individuals **a**, **b**, **c**. He then asks: How many objects are there in this world? Mustn't there be three objects? Can there be non-abstract entities which are not individuals? According to Putnam, one possible answer is "no", i.e. we can identify "individual", "object", *etc.* and find no absurdity in a world with just three objects which are independent, unrelated logical atoms. But, Putnam continues, there are perfectly good logical doctrines which lead to different results. He asks us to suppose, for example, that like some Polish logicians, we believe that for every two particulars there is an object which is their sum. Then we will find, so the argument goes, that the world of "three individuals" actually contains seven elements:

World 1 (a world á la Carnap):
a, **b**, **c**

World 2 ("same" world á la Polish logician):
a, **b**, **c**, **a+b**, **a+c**, **b+c**, **a+b+c**

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10   See Putnam's "Sense, Nonsense, and the Senses", *Journal of Philosophy* XCI (1994), 445–517.

11   In "Truth and Convention: On Davidson's Refutation of Conceptual Relativism" and in *The Many Faces of Realism*.

According to Putnam, the classical metaphysical realist way of dealing with such problems is to say that there is a single world which we can slice into pieces in different ways; but this cookie cutter metaphor founders on a question "What are the parts of this dough?". If the answer is that **a**, **b**, **c**, **a+b**, **a+c**, **b+c**, **a+b+c** are all the different pieces, then, Putnam says, we have not a neutral description, but rather a partisan description —just the description of the Warsaw logician! And, Putnam continues, it is no accident that the metaphysical realist cannot really recognize the conceptual relativity — for that phenomenon turns on the fact that the logical primitives themselves, and in particular the notions of object and existence, have a multitude of different uses rather than one absolute meaning.

Choice of a Language and Ontology

To begin with, it is quite unclear what exactly this argument is supposed to show. Obviously Putnam has certain particular, less immediate aims: in *The Many Faces of Realism*, Putnam is attacking, among other things, strong scientific realism which denies the existence of ordinary common sense physical objects; in "Truth and Convention" the main target is Davidson's criticism of conceptual relativism. The argument is always given as showing some sort of conceptual relativism to be correct; the exact content of this conceptual relativism is, however, rather unclear.

Now I take it to be a central part of Putnam's conclusion drawn from this argument that the choice of a *language* determines one's ontology in these cases. As this is the main target of my criticism, it is proper to justify my ascription of this claim to Putnam by giving some textual evidence, showing that the claim is not just due to a momentary slip, but is an essential part of his argument:

How we go about answer the question, 'How many objects are there?' — the method of 'counting', or the notion of what constitutes an 'object' — depends on our choice (call this a 'convention'); but the answer does not thereby become a matter of convention. If I choose Carnap's *language*, I must say there are three objects because that is how many there are. If I choose the Polish logician's *language* … I must say there are seven objects, because that is how many objects (in the Polish logician's sense of 'object') there are. There are 'external facts', and we can say what they are. What we cannot say — because it makes no sense — is what the facts are independent of all conceptual choices.[12]

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[12] *The Many Faces of Realism*, p. 33; my italics.

In another context, Putnam refers in similar spirit to the Carnapian principle of tolerance in the choice of *language*:

… [Carnap] would have said that the question is one of a choice of a *language*. On the some days it may be convenient to use what I have been calling "Carnap's *language*" (although he would not have objected to the other *language*); on other days it may be convenient to use the Polish logician's *language*. … And I agree with him.[13]

And Putnam has continued to use such formulations in his more recent writing:

I imagined a mini-world in which there are just three individuals, and at least one of them is wholly black and at least one is wholly red. If our ontology includes individuals but not mereological sums, then the sentence:

(A) There is an object which is partly red and partly black.

is false. (I call a particular *first order language* with this ontology "Carnap's *language*"). However, if we adopt an ontology which includes mereological sums, then the sentence (A) becomes true. (I call a particular *first order language* with this second ontology "The Polish logician's *language*"). My claim was that the question

"Do mereological sums *really* exist?"

is a senseless one. We can use the words "object" and "exist" so that such "objects" as mereological sums exist (by adopting the Polish logician's *language*) or we can use the same words so that it will be true to say that "there are no such objects" (by adopting Carnap's *language*). If we make the latter choice, we shall have to say that there is no object in the mini-world which is partly red and partly black. But the mini-world itself does not force us to talk one way or to talk the other way.[14]

In other contexts, Putnam speaks rather about conceptual schemes; nevertheless, Putnam explicitly identifies a conceptual scheme, or framework, with a language:

… according to me, how many objects there are in the world … is relative to the choice of a conceptual scheme.[15]

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[13] "Truth and Convention", p. 76; my italics.

[14] "Comments and Replies", in Peter Clark and Bob Hale (eds.), *Reading Putnam* (Cambridge, USA and Oxford UK: Basil Blackwell, 1994), pp. 244–245; my italics.

[15] *The Many Faces of Realism*, p. 32.

We can and should insist that some facts are there to be discovered and not legislated by us. But this is something to be said when one has adopted a way of speaking, a *language*, a 'conceptual scheme'. To talk of 'facts' without specifying the *language* to be used is to talk of nothing; the word 'fact' no more has its use fixed by reality than the word 'exist' or the word 'object'.[16]

Putnam even explains his whole internal realism, or pragmatic realism, and conceptual relativity, with the help of this argument:

… take the position that one will be equally 'right' in either case. Then you have arrived at the position I have called 'internal realism'![17]

Internal realism is, at bottom, just the insistence that realism is not incompatible with conceptual relativity.[18]

Mereology and Languages

To understand properly what is really going on here, one has to take a closer look on Mereology. Originally, Mereology was a logical system created by Polish philosopher and logician Stanislav Lesniewski in the 1910s[19] to function as a substitute for set theory. Actually he developed a wholly alternative logic, consisting of what he called Protothetics, Ontology and Mereology; these were his highly non-standard counterparts for propositional logic, quantificational logic and set theory, respectively.[20]

But fortunately, we do not have to go on these unorthodox logics, as the relevant features of Mereology can be expressed also in more familiar logical vocabulary; there are versions of Mereology which use the usual first-order logic. In that case, Mereology

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16 *The Many Faces of Realism*, p. 36; my italics.

17 *The Many Faces of Realism*, p. 35.

18 *The Many Faces of Realism*, p. 17.

19 Stanislav Lesniewski, "Podstawy ogolnej teoryi mnogosci I", *Prace Polskiego Kola Naukowe w Moskwie*, Sekcya matematyczno-przyrodnicza, 2. Moscow, 1916; cf. Lesniewski, "O Podstawach Matematyki", *Przeglad Filozoficzny* 30 (1927), 164–206; 31 (1928), 261–91; 32 (1929), 60–101, 33 (1930), 75–105, 142–170.

20 See E. C. Luschei, *The Logical Systems of Lesniewski* (Amsterdam: North-Holland, 1962); Peter Simons, *Parts — A Study in Ontology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987).

is simply boolean algebra without null element.[21] And as Putnam himself assumes that Mereology is based on ordinary first order logic (see the third quotation above, from Putnam's "Comments and Replies" (note 14)), we can safely follow this line.

Putnam is not at all specific about what "Carnap's language" and "Polish logician's language" are supposed to be. However, it seems natural to interpret him as assuming that the former has only two monadic predicate symbols (e.g. $R(x)$ and $B(x)$), intended to denote "Red" and "Black", whereas the latter has, besides these, one binary relation symbol (e.g. $P(x, y)$) for part-relation, the basic concept of mereology. The concept of mereological sum (denoted here by +) used so heavily by Putnam, is usually a defined concept of Mereology.

Now I am arriving at my crucial point: one may very well have the latter *language* (the *language* of Mereology), and yet have just three objects. The mere language simply does not guarantee the existence of mereological sums. What one has to do to get seven objects in the above example is to add *an extra-logical postulate* saying: "for all x and all y, there exist their mereological sum $z = x + y$" (besides the ordinary *non-logical* axioms of order for the part-relation). In fact, Putnam himself imagines for his own purposes Professor Antipode, a fanatic opponent of Mereology. But note now that Professor Antipode may very well use exactly the same language as Mereologist, but instead of accepting the basic postulate of Mereology, assert its explicit denial, that "it is not the case that for all x and all y, there exists their mereological sum $z = x + y$". That is, and this is my decisive point, essentially the question of the existence of mereological sums is *not* at all a question about *choice of language*, but one about *accepting* a robust *postulate*.[22]

It is obviously true that in a poor enough language (e.g. the language I ascribed to Putnam's "Carnap" above) one cannot even discuss the issue. But it does not follow that extending the language in itself implies the existence of mereological sums. It must be postulated — and it can as well be denied in the very same language. The language of Mereology in itself does not make such ontological claims. This is the case just as

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[21] See Simons, *Parts*.

[22]   A word of explanation may be in order here. A number of people have wondered at this point whether I am making a mistake, or tacitly assuming some sort of free logic. Namely, they have pointed out that in the standard logic (in contradistinction to free logics) a term, $x + y$ in particular, must have a reference, i.e. must denote some object. This is, of course, true. However, what is crucial here is that without the non-logical axioms (of Mereology) there is no guarantee that $x + y$ is *different* from both x and y. And it is only in the latter case that one can have, in Putnam's example, seven rather than three objects.

little as it is the case that mere inclusion of a binary predicate symbol (e.g. $\in$) to one's language implies that there are infinite, uncountable sets: one has to postulate set theoretical axioms for that. It is completely possible to include a binary relation symbol in one's language and explicitly deny that there exist any mereological sums, or infinite sets. Language does not create existence.

In fact, in some occasions Putnam himself implicitly admits the above point, e.g. when he writes: 'But there are perfectly good logical *doctrines* which lead to different results. Suppose, for example, that like some Polish logicians, we *believe that* for every two particulars there is an object which is their sum. (This is the basic *assumption* of "mereology"…)'.[23] Here he is not at all speaking about a choice of a language, but about believing an assumption, or a doctrine.

Now it certainly begins to look as though Putnam has in his argument completely confused languages and theories.

Concluding Remarks

It is not only the case that Mereology is a theory, not a language; standard Mereology with its unqualified claim about the existence of mereological sums and extensionality (individuals are identical if and only if they have the same parts) is a highly *controversial* and *counter-intuitive theory*. Many philosophers have found the fundamental assumptions of Mereology suspect, and applicable at most in certain specific domains, e.g. among events. It leads immediately to difficult philosophical problems.[24]

Things would be of course quite different, if standard Mereology turned out to be indispensable in science. Then we should, at least tentatively, accept the basic postulates of Mereology. But this just isn't the case; there is apparently no such need for the unqualified assumption of the existence of mereological sums. There is no evidence for it outside Mereology itself. Hence Mereology seems to be successful neither as a good explication of our pre-theoretical commonsensical notion of part-relation nor as a scientific explanatory theory.

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[23] *The Many Faces of Realism*, p. 18; my italics.

[24] See Simons, *Parts*, ch. 3.

But be that as it may, for my aim here is not to undermine the plausibility of Mereology, but rather to emphasize the simple and in fact quite noncontroversial point that Mereology is a theory, not a language. The claims that Mereology makes are substantial and questionable metaphysical claims that are anything but stipulations related to a conventional choice of one's language.

Before leaving the issue, let me discuss one potential objection for my criticism. There is still one possible move left for Putnam. Namely, following Quine one can claim that the very distinction between language and theory is illusory. And moreover, I do believe Quine is more or less right here. So is my criticism, after all, based on untenable dichotomy? No, I don't think so. What we are considering here are exact formalized first-order languages and theories (as the quotations from Putnam above make evident), and in this domain, the distinction between languages and theories is perfectly clear and well-defined. Or, to quote Quine himself: 'The term "theory" has a technical sense … This concept has its uses when … we work within preassigned logical framework — ordinarily the apparatus of quantifiers and truth functions … many theories, even conflicting ones, can be couched in one language. Language settles the sentences and what they mean; a theory adds, selectively, the assertive quality or the simulation of selective belief. A language has its grammar and semantics; a theory goes farther and asserts some of the sentences.'[25] Hence such an appeal to Quine cannot justify Putnam's conclusions.[26]

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[25] W.V. Quine, "Replies", *Synthese* 19 (1968), p. 281.