

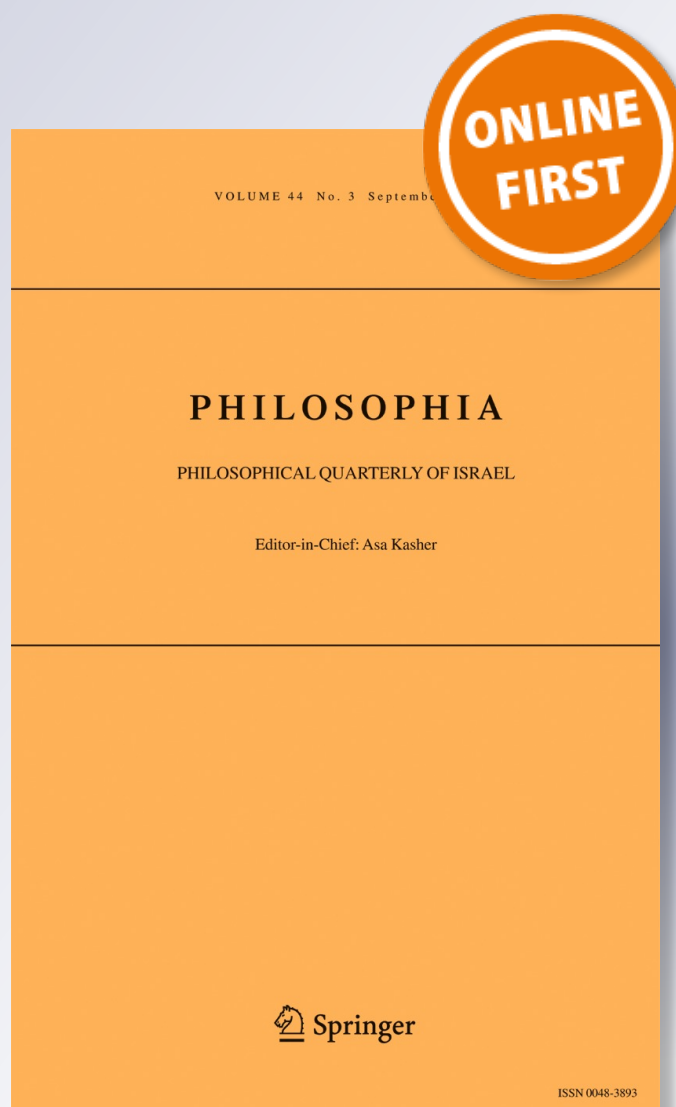
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Hilary Putnam: An Era of Philosophy Has Ended

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Leading philosophy towards constant dynamic expeditions and holding on to an incredible style of self-critique, Hilary Putnam (1926–2016), over the five decades, has been in the process of making laudable contributions in philosophy and philosophy of science by being a beacon to a series of philosophical generations. He was a profound scholar full of wisdom, morality and love of humanity, in a word a ‘Philosopher’s Philosopher’. In a personal communication Noam Chomsky once told me that ‘Hilary Putnam is one of the most distinguished philosophers of the modern era, and just speaking personally, one of the smartest and most impressive thinkers I have ever been privileged to meet.’¹

He is often called the ‘Renaissance man of philosophy’ in the sense that he could make highly original and pathbreaking contribution to the emerging fields of Epistemology, Metaphysics, Ethics, Philosophy of Mind, Philosophy of

¹I am personally thankful to Professor Noam Chomsky for permitting me to quote from our personal correspondence.

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Language, Logic, Mathematics, Computer science, and Political philosophy. He was especially erudite in matters of science, imaginatively plumbing the depths of scientific theories, with special contribution to mathematics, logic and physics. He contributed many results here including the resolution with M Davis, J Robinson and Y Matesevitch of Hilbert's tenth problem and he was appointed in the mathematics department at Princeton as a young assistant professor. But he also focused on humanistic ideals concerned with how to orient himself toward a good and meaningful life. For Putnam, 'Philosophy is not only concerned with changing our views, but also with changing our sensibility, our ability to perceive and react to nuances.'² Like his old friend Stanley Cavell, Putnam strongly considers philosophy as the 'education for the grownups'.

Throughout his long academic career, he was actively engaged in persuasive philosophical writings. He authored and edited around 28 books and wrote more than 360 articles and comments in renowned journals and edited volumes. He taught in the Department of Philosophy and Mathematics in several universities such as Northwestern University (1951–1952), Princeton University (1953–1961), MIT (1961–1965) and since 1965 at Harvard University, where when he died he held the *Cogan University Emeritus* Professor in the Department of Philosophy. His last two collections of papers, both published by Harvard University Press, were entitled *Philosophy in the Age of Science* in 2012 and *Naturalism, Realism, and Normativity* in 2016. Very recently in 2015, *The Library of Living Philosophers* published a prestigious honorary volume in the name of *The Philosophy of Hilary Putnam*. Putnam's last two papers entitled 'Naturalism, Realism and Normativity' and 'Against Perceptual Conceptualism' appeared in the journals *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* (2015) and *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* (2016) respectively. In 2014, his co-authored paper with Hilla Jacobson entitled 'The Needlessness of Adverbialism, Attributeism and its Compatibility with Cognitive Science' was published in *Philosophia*. He produced some brilliant thinkers in philosophy and mathematics like Paul Benacerraf, Jerry Fodor, Ned Block, Hartry Field, Jerrold Katz, George Boolos, and Richard Boyd and so on.

Putnam is very well-known for his 'changes of mind'. His profound vision was to apply an equal degree of criticism and scrutiny to his own philosophical thoughts as that which he applied to his opponents' views.

In **Philosophy of Mind**, one of Putnam's seminal contributions was the doctrine of functionalism, according to which mental states should be understood functionally (specified in terms of their inputs, relations to other states, and output). Putnam originally espoused a 'machine functionalism,' on which the relevant specification of a mental state was given by a machine table, which explicitly mentioned the inputs, outputs, and relations to other states. Putnam's theories about mental states drew on the idea of 'Turing machines' and this idea of functionalism become later a fundamental in cognitive science.

² Putnam, Hilary, (1999). Hilary Putnam, The vision and arguments of a famous Harvard Philosopher In Andrew Pyle (Ed.), *Key Philosophers in Conversion* (pp. 44–54), London and New York: Routledge.

In **Philosophy of Language**, his notable idea is famous as the ‘causal theory of reference’ for which he argued by way of his famous ‘twin earth thought experiment’. The burden of the thought experiment was to show that ‘meanings ain’t in the head,’ since two otherwise internally-indistinguishable subjects might nevertheless express different judgments (make different statements) when they use the term ‘water’, since one of them is referring to H₂O (the thirst-quenching liquid that flows in its streams and comes out of its taps) while the other referring to what we imagine is a superficially similar but liquid but which is of a different chemical kind (not H₂O). According to Putnam, there are two considerations that (together with relevant speaker intentions) go into fixing the reference of a speaker’s words: other people (who as relevant experts are in the best position to know of the nature of the kinds to which we purport to refer) and the external world itself (which provides those natures). Putnam’s notable idea of ‘division of linguistic labor’ introduces language as a social phenomenon by refuting any sort of ‘mentalese approaches’. Meaning of a natural kind term should be implicitly known by the causal-relational wide content and the linguistic practices (depend on the ‘knowing how’ process) of the agents. This view is familiar in the name of ‘semantic externalism’ that preserves a naturalistic stand towards human beings in the external world. Semantic externalism entails externalism about both the mind and the words. Mind contains thought and the content of the thoughts needs to be linked to an environment in the proper way (causal interaction). The words or the concepts become meaningless if and only if they have no causal link to the references of the world.

In **Epistemology**, his remarkable contribution was an alleged proof refuting Cartesian skepticism about the existence of the external world. His famous ‘Brain in a Vat’ (BIV) thought experiment appeals to his theory of reference in an attempt to show that whether one is a brains-in-a-vat or not, one cannot truly state of oneself that one is a brain in a vat (BIV). Briefly: if an agent is *not* a BIV, then the statement that one is a BIV is false, whereas if one *is* a BIV, then the statement one would make with ‘I am a brain in a vat’ is not the statement that one is a brain in a vat (since, given how reference is fixed, the meanings of one’s terms would be different). Although one can question the success or the scope of this ‘refutation’ of Cartesian skepticism, there is little doubt but that Putnam’s reflections on the BIV have influenced subsequent generations of epistemologists interested in semantical responses to skepticism.

In **Metaphysics**, Putnam’s views evolved from metaphysical realism to a view he called ‘internal realism’. ‘Internal realism’ depends on construing the semantics of one’s terms in terms of ‘idealized conditions for warranted assertibility’ – the idea being that the nature of the world does not outstrip the best evidence we could have for confirming hypothesis about that world. This sort of anti-realism rejected the misleading nature of ready-made world as a ‘realistic myth’ to argue that the reality of the world relied on our conceptual scheme. In the period of his ‘internal realism’, Putnam often described his view as realism ‘with a human face’. Putnam clarified:

During my internal realist period whether we have such causal connection was just a part of our “theory”, and thus also mind-dependent, whereas now, as a realistically minded naturalist, I say that whether we have such causal connection

or not isn't a matter of whether our beliefs are or could be confirmed. In other words, sometimes a proposition—not a belief, necessarily, but a conjecture, or a guess—can be true but impossible to verify. So “assertible with the concept of causal connection to our external world” is a confusing phrase. The confusion is that “causal connection to our external world” is understood differently by the internal realist and by the, so to speak, “*real* realist”. For the internal realist, the so-called external world—the world outside my brain and body—is itself *mind dependent*. For a real realist, it isn't. Moreover, for the internal realist, truth has everything to do with assertibility; for a real realist, truth and assertibility are logically independent properties.³

By the end of his life, his ideas had become much closer to common sense realism, a theory where perceptual experience takes an important role in the case of world involving transaction. In his last few writings, Putnam changed his long-standing critical idea on ‘truth’. Putnam fixes the meaning of the terms in the sense of externalism yet in this case, he strongly believes that the (possible) truth conditions of the sentence can be changed depending on the context of its uses. Putnam fervently believes that context sensitivity based truth conditions are determined by the ‘reference’ of the constituent terms of the sentence. So, changeability of the ‘reference’ in terms of context sensitivity can construe ‘truth-evaluable contents’ as more context sensitive. He writes:

Truth is context sensitive *in the sense that* truth is relative to the meaning of the sentence (which is, roughly speaking, context insensitive) and to the context, but once the meaning and context are fixed, there is no further relativity.⁴

In **Ethics**, he was much more ambitious to establish the claim that there is a collapse of the fact/value dichotomy, a dichotomy that is regarded as a trademark of scientific thinking. He argued from a methodological ground that we could not detach the world of facts from the world of values; they are interdependent. Normative or epistemic values are typically intertwined with factual discourse; this point is apparent in economics, and especially in the notable work of Amartya Sen. Here Putnam's key ambition is to collapse the dichotomy between fact and values. Putnam holds that we impose to ourselves and our norms even in discourse of the allegedly fact-stating sort; illustrative examples include thick ethical concepts like those expressed by ‘sensitive,’ ‘kind,’ ‘cruel’ etc. Putnam firmly believes that the vocabulary of norms would be meaningless if there is no human manifold of values. Putnam also believes in the ethical maxims that contained ‘thick ethical terms’ are relative to particular communities.

In *Philosophy of Science and the Formal Disciplines*, Putnam's contributions were numerous. In **Philosophy of Mathematics**, with great philosopher W.V Quine, Putnam developed a very crucial argument against the foundation of mathematics that mathematics is not entirely logical, but it is actually ‘quasi-empirical’. On their view,

³ I am personally indebted to my mentor Hilary Putnam for this note.

⁴ I am personally indebted to Hilary Putnam for his valuable comment.

mathematics is nevertheless indispensable to empirical theorizing about the world. This thesis is well known as the ‘Quine-Putnam Indispensability Thesis’.

In the field of **Computer Science**, from a logical perspective, Putnam along with Martin Davis devised a procedure of propositional logic to check the validity of a first order logic formula that would be recursively innumerable. As a genuine mathematician, Hilary Putnam made a notable contribution to Hilbert’s tenth problem in mathematics and logic. Even with two of his best students and later with famous logician George Boolos and Richard Boyd, he investigated a ramified theory of ‘analytical hierarchy’ with connections to Turing degrees and constructible hierarchy in the field of computer science and logic.

In **Philosophy of Science**, Putnam has written many papers especially in Physics and (more particularly) in Quantum Mechanics. His aim in the philosophy of science was to stop fetishizing science itself. In *Philosophy in the Age of Science*, his slogan was ‘scientific realism without scientific imperialism’!

Hilary Putnam in his personal life was a great follower of Judaism and has written a book entitled *Jewish Philosophy as a Guide to Life: Rosenzweig, Buber, Levinas, Wittgenstein* and several articles on Jewish philosophy. Mahatma Gandhi was a hero for him and like Gandhi, he also dislike to add any sort of ‘ism’ in his philosophy. He is a childhood friend and schoolmate of Noam Chomsky. However, though they are opponents of one another in most of the philosophical arguments (especially on language learning procedures, innateness hypothesis, computer model of brain, thought precedes language, and externalism versus internalism debate etc.), they have had a 75-year friendship of deep intimacy with one another.

Because of his outstanding contribution in Philosophy and Logic, he was awarded very prestigious *Rolf Schock* prize in 2011 and *Nicholas Rescher* prize for his notable contribution of ‘Systematic Philosophy’ in 2015. Also, various universities and institutions honored him in different ways. He was the elected *President of American Philosophical Association* and was elected fellow of the *American Academy of Arts and Science* and the *British Academy*. We can remember Hume’s magnificent quotation that well suits to Putnam’s personality: ‘Be a philosopher, but amidst all your philosophy be still a good man.’ He had given his last Skype talk on “Thought and Language” in an International Conference on *The Philosophy of Hilary Putnam*, organized by Sanjit Chakraborty and Dr. Ranjan Panda at the Indian Institute of Technology, Bombay from 3rd-5th October, 2015.

He is a man who made clear that the best contribution that a philosopher can make depends not only on kinship, personal meeting, teaching etc., but also on devotion, truth, sincerity, moral life and genuine generosity that a good soul can exchange with anyone. He is a constant inspiration to my life and work; he taught me how to devote and quest for truth in philosophy as well as in life (good life). In his last few communications, Putnam told me: *I feel grateful that I had so many good years!*

Hilary Putnam was born in July 31, 1926 in Chicago and took his Ph. D from UCLA, under the supervision of great logical positivist and the close friend of Einstein, Professor Hans Reichenbach in 1951. The title of his Ph. D dissertation is *The Meaning of the Concept of Probability in Application to Finite Sequences*. The light of an era has been extinguished on early morning of 13th March 2016 at Arlington, Massachusetts in his own home. Hilary Putnam is survived by his wife, Ruth Anna Putnam, Emerita in Wellesley College, as well as their four children

(Erika, Polly, Sam and Josh) and four grandchildren and numerous followers who have been privileged to work with him in different ways. During the last 55 years of his academic service to the world, he taught generations how a wonderful guidance cum friendly relationship can be maintained between a teacher and students. The world lost one of its geniuses who was perhaps the only philosopher, other than Aristotle or even more than Aristotle (because of Putnam's notable contributions in the areas of philosophy of language and computer science) who contributed to most of the fields of science and humanities. His most productive and intellectual contributions for humanity will remain as an unattainable ideal for all of us.

Acknowledgments My personal thanks for this writing go to my mentor late Hilary Putnam, and my good friends Noam Chomsky, Sanford Goldberg, Erika Chin and the reviewer(s) for their valuable suggestions and help.