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'Pencil', 'Water', 'Christianity': Digging into Externalist Semantic Theories

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'Pencil', 'Tiger', 'Christianity'. What kind of reference (if any) do these terms have? Do they have the same semantics? In his celebrated *The Meaning of 'Meaning'* (1975), Hilary Putnam suggests so when arguing that they have externalist semantics. However, this claim is highly controversial. A lengthy discussion has been going on the matter. So far, neither Putnam's nor other defenses of Externalism proposed within this debate have actually succeeded in showing that the terms at stake (and their likes) are semantically on a par. Here I examine further options left to the externalist. I conclude that, still, none is a viable alternative for defending that Externalism applies to the mentioned terms (and their likes).

Introduction

Consider the following, not very popular, but interesting thought experiment by Hilary Putnam:

1. Imagine that somewhere in the galaxy there is a planet, Twin Earth, that is exactly like Earth, except that the things that appear to share all of the aspects of our pencils are not artifacts but a species of organisms.
2. These objects are called 'pencils' by the Twin Earthlings.
3. What would happen if a spaceship from Earth ever visited Twin Earth? The visitors' initial supposition would be that 'pencil' on Twin Earth has the same meaning (and reference) as 'pencil' on Earth. However, that belief would be corrected once verified that 'pencils' on Twin Earth are not artifacts but organisms.

4. However, before this discovery, Twin Earth speakers would not have been aware of pencils' real nature. Moreover, Earthlings and Twin Earthlings would have had the same beliefs regarding the word 'pencil': namely, that this term refers to things that share (at least superficially) the same properties.
5. Nevertheless, before as well as after the stated discovery, the reference (or extension) of the word 'pencil' on Earth would be a set of artifacts, whereas, on Twin Earth, this term would refer to a set of organisms.
6. Hence, though Earthlings' and Twin Earthlings' beliefs were the same, they would have used 'pencil' with a different extension[1].

Moreover, Putnam adds:

7. What would happen if the pencil-organisms case were to be proven on Earth? In other words, what would happen if one were to find that all the pencils that exist and have always existed in our world are actually organisms? We would say: "*Pencils* (these objects) have turned out to be organisms".
8. Therefore, it is the nature of our local pencils (as opposed to our beliefs about this term) that actually establishes whether or not the extension associated with the term used in other possible worlds is correct.

Putnam modeled the described thought experiment on his celebrated Twin Earth one about 'water'[2], which is considered quite successful in showing that terms for natural substances and species (such as 'water', 'gold', 'tiger', etc.) have an externalist reference. By both thought experiments, in his celebrated article of 1975[3], Putnam tries to show that the previous, traditional semantic theory does not explain how the semantics of the terms at stake works. The traditional view, also known as *Descriptivism*, holds that a term's reference is determined by the set of properties commonly associated with that term[4]. Putnam claims that both artifactual (e.g., 'pencil')

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[1] This argument is meant to be formulated in the exact same way of the celebrated Twin Earth one about 'water' (cf. H. PUTNAM, *The Meaning of 'Meaning'*, in *Mind, Language and Reality*, «Philosophical Papers», II, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1975, pp. 215-271). By both arguments Putnam tries to show that if we apply to our (kind) terms a descriptivist theory, namely, the previous, traditional theory that holds that a term's reference is determined by the set of properties commonly associated with that term, we reach an absurd conclusion (cf. on this my, I. OLIVERO, *Putnam on Artifactual Kind Terms*, «Review of Philosophy and Psychology», 9/2018, pp. 197-212, §1, 2).

[2] H. PUTNAM, *The Meaning of 'Meaning'*, cit.

[3] Ivi.

[4] Traditionally, the opposition is between *externalism* and *internalism* and between *referentialism* and *descriptivism*. However, the traditional theory under attack here is usually regarded as holding that the reference of our terms is given by a description (or a cluster of descriptions) specifying the properties associated with their alleged referents. I will then henceforth refer to this account simply as Descriptivism.

and natural kind terms share a common semantics: an externalist semantics. The reference of artifactual as well as of natural kind terms is determined by an objective relationship between the term and the world. All speakers (even fully competent or *expert* speakers) may be ignorant of or mistaken about this relationship[5].

Putnam's semantic theory, also known as *Physical Externalism*, holds that meaning is a variable, the value of which is established by the physical environment (by the nature of the referents). This variable's value can be mistaken by or utterly unknown to all speakers (even the fully competent or expert ones)[6]. To this extent, meaning has an *indexical* component. Putnam shows that terms such as the natural kind ones are indexical because they refer to sets of things that share the *same nature* of some particular sets of objects that serve as paradigms (in the *actual* world) for the relevant extension. In this respect, the notion of indexicality is also defined in terms of rigidity, in the sense that once the relevant object or set of objects are picked out in the actual world, the reference of a given term no longer shifts from possible world to possible world[7]. The word is constant in meaning; it always *rigidly* refers to the same set of objects, with a certain nature, even though we may be mistaken about the properties that individuate that set of things (about their nature).

This semantic picture seems quite convincing when thinking about natural kind terms. Think about 'tiger'. Putnam argues that we would not refer to a lookalike tiger with a reptile DNA with the word 'tiger'. That we would not do that is because it seems convincing that 'tiger' and the like terms refer *rigidly* (in all possible worlds in which that set of objects exists) to whatever

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[5]   Putnam notoriously holds that there is *division of linguistic labor*, which rests upon and presupposes the division of labor *tout court* (cf. H. PUTNAM, *The Meaning of 'Meaning'*, cit., pp. 227-229). This phenomenon – Putnam explains – accounts for the fact that «the "average" speaker who acquires [a certain term] does not acquire anything that fixes its extension» (ivi, p. 229). Putnam explains that common speakers have to acquire words like 'gold', 'tiger', 'water', etc., but not the method of recognizing that the things to which they apply these terms are really gold, tigers, water, etc. *Non expert speakers* can rely on a special subclass of speakers: the *experts*, whose judgment they can trust in case of doubt. So, ultimately, this knowledge (the criteria for recognizing a term's extension) is possessed by the collective linguistic body, even though it is not possessed by each individual member of the body.

[6]   Note that by "expert speakers" is intended whoever or whatever can embody the semantic norm: lexicographers, experts in the fields, dictionaries, etc.

[7]   Putnam's is not the traditional notion of "indexicality", for which a word's extension changes depending on the context of usage (cf. D. KAPLAN, *Demonstratives*, in J. ALMOG, J. PERRY, H. WETTSTEIN (eds.), *Themes from Kaplan*, Oxford University Press, New York 1989, pp. 481-563). However, this peculiar notion of indexicality is crucial to Putnam's theory (cf. my, I. OLIVERO, *Function is Not Enough: An Externalist Defeat for Artifactual and Social Kind Terms*, «Grazer Philosophishe Studien», 96/2019, pp. 105-129). I dedicated another paper to spell out this difference and its importance.

set of objects shares the exact same nature (i.e., the same DNA) with the set of things we have paradigmatically called with that term, independently of our epistemic knowledge about that nature[8].

As anticipated, the pencil-organisms scenario is conceived to show the resemblance between artifactual and natural kind terms. It aims to indicate (passages 1-6) that we would not refer to lookalike pencils that are not artifacts with the word 'pencil'. Therefore, Putnam concludes: 'Pencil' is just as *rigid* and *indexical* as 'tiger' or 'water'. Actually, Putnam extends this idea even to terms such as 'Christianity' and the likes, the so-called social kind terms (e.g., 'pediatrician', 'money', 'university', etc.). He does so by resorting to another fictional scenario, suggesting that if we can conceive that the referents of social kind terms may turn out not to have the nature we thought them to have, these terms also must have externalist semantics[9].

These last two claims about artifactual and social kind terms have been highly debated. Some authors have argued that it seems more plausible that the extension of cultural kind terms (i.e., artifactual and social) is given not by a nature, as Putnam suggests. Their reference is determined by conjunction or cluster of properties (e.g., that of being an object with the purpose of writing, marking, drawing, etc.), in accordance with the traditional semantic view[10]. Moreover, since cultural kinds are human products, dependent on

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[8]   Putnam claims that (natural kind) words are *rigid* and *indexical*: *rigid*, because they refer to the same set of objects in every possible world in which that set of objects exists; *indexical*, because they designate whatever set of objects shares the same nature with what we have paradigmatically called by those terms. This is the core of his semantic externalism (cf. H. PUTNAM, *The Meaning of 'Meaning'*, cit.).

[9]   Specifically, Putnam imagines: «Couldn't it turn out that pediatricians aren't doctors but actually Martian spies? Answer 'yes', and you have abandoned the synonym of 'pediatrician' and "doctor specializing in the care of children"» (ivi, p. 244).

[10]   The main authors engaged in the mentioned debate include: H. PUTNAM, *The Meaning of 'Meaning'*, cit.; S. SCHWARTZ, *Putnam on Artifacts*, «Philosophical Review», 87/1978, pp. 566-574, *Natural Kinds and Nominal Kinds*, «Mind», 89/1980, pp. 182-195, and *Reply to Kornblith and Nelson*, «The Southern Journal of Philosophy», 21/1983, pp. 475-479; H. KORNBLITH, *Referring to Artifacts*, «Philosophical Review», 89/1980, pp. 109-114, and *How to Refer to Artifacts*, in E. MARGOLIS, S. LAURENCE (eds.), *Creations of the Mind: Theories of Artifacts and Their Representation*, Oxford University Press, New York 2007, pp. 138-149; J. NELSON, *Schwartz on Reference*, «The Southern Journal of Philosophy», 20/1982, pp. 359-365; D. PUTMAN, *Natural Kinds and Human Artifacts*, «Mind», 91/1982, pp. 418-419; B. ABBOTT, *Nondescriptionality and Natural Kind Terms*, «Linguistics and Philosophy», 12/1989, pp. 269-291; C. ELDER, *Realism, Naturalism, and Culturally Generated Kinds*, «The Philosophical Quarterly», 39/1989, pp. 425-444, and *On the Place of Artifacts in Ontology*, in E. MARGOLIS and S. LAURENCE (eds.), *Creations of the Mind: Essays on Artifacts and their Representation*, Oxford University Press, New York 2007, pp. 33-51; A. L. THOMASSON, *Realism and Human Kinds*, «Philosophy and Phenomenological Research», 67/2003, pp. 580-609, *Artifacts and Human Concepts*, in E. MARGOLIS, S. LAURENCE (eds.), *Creations of the Mind: Theories of Artifacts and Their Representation*, Oxford University Press, New York 2007, pp. 52-73, and

humans for their existence, it does not seem plausible to be utterly ignorant or entirely mistaken about their identification properties[11]. Nonetheless, other authors have tried to defend that 'pencil' or 'Christianity' and the like terms have, indeed, externalist semantics[12]. None of them, though – as my *Putnam on Artifactual Kind Terms* (2018)[13] and my *Function is not Enough* (2019)[14] point out – succeeds or may succeed in this respect. This lack of success is because none of the arguments provided – not even the one by Putnam – meets (or can meet) two fundamental requirements for a defense to be a persuasive and genuinely externalist one.

A genuine externalist argument must show:

> PER 1. that the referents of the terms belonging to each category of terms at stake (natural, artifactual, social) share a "nature" (i.e., a common essence possessed only by all the members of the term's extension); and

> PER 2. that linguistically competent speakers can be ignorant of or mistaken about such nature[15].

The requirements above come from the two conditions that any given term needs to fulfill to have an externalist semantics:

Public Artifacts, Intentions, and Norms, in M. FRANSSEN et al. (eds.), *Artefact Kinds. Ontology and the Human-Made World*, Springer 2014, Dordrecht, pp. 45-62; D. MARCONI, *Pencils Have a Point: Against General externalism About Artifactual Words*, «Review of Philosophy and Psychology», 4/2013, pp. 497-513, and *Externalism about Artifactual Words and the Taxonomy of Artifacts*, «Grazer Philosophishe Studien», 96/2019, pp. 130-153; and my own, I. OLIVERO, *Putnam on Artifactual Kind Terms*, cit., and *Function is Not Enough*, cit.

[11]   An ongoing debate about what is an artifact or an artifactual kind is in place. I cannot discuss this matter at length here. For a brief overview, see M. CARRARA, D. MINGARDO, *Artifact Categorization. Trends and problems*, «The Review of Philosophy and Psychology», 2013, pp. 351-373. I will here take for granted the broad definition according to which an artifactual kind is one designed and manufactured by humans, which depends on human intentions and actions. For the same reason, I will not consider the dispute about whether beaver dams, anthills, beehives, and so on, are also artifactual kinds.

[12]   In particular, H. KORNBLITH, *Referring to Artifacts*, and *How to Refer to Artifacts*, cit.; J. NELSON, *Schwartz on Reference*, cit.; D. PUTMAN, *Natural Kinds and Human Artifacts*, cit.; C. ELDER, *Realism, Naturalism, and Culturally Generated Kinds*, and *On the Place of Artifacts in Ontology*, cit. For a discussion of their arguments cf. D. MARCONI, *Pencils Have a Point: Against General externalism About Artifactual Words*, cit.*,* and my own, I. OLIVERO, *Putnam on Artifactual Kind Terms*, cit., §4.

[13]   I. OLIVERO, *Putnam on Artifactual Kind Tems*, cit., §4.

[14]   I. OLIVERO, *Function is Not Enough*, cit., §1.

[15]   Cf. my own, I. OLIVERO, *Putnam on Artifactual Kind Terms*, cit., p. 206. Specifically, it has to be shown that possession of such a common nature determines the term's reference independently of whether the linguistic community is aware of that nature (ignorance) or is able to describe it (error).

ER 1.   its referents must be characterized by a "nature" (i.e., a common essence possessed only by all the members of the term's extension) shared among all members of that extension; and

ER 2.   all speakers (including fully competent ones) may be ignorant of or mistaken about such nature.

In other words, if one aims to prove that 'pencil' or 'Christianity' has the same semantics as 'water', one must propose a valid candidate to represent the "nature" of pencils and Christianity. Moreover, one ought to show that we could be ignorant of or mistaken about this "nature".

Meeting this challenge is far from easy; arguably, it is untenable to do so – as Diego Marconi's *Externalism about Artifactual Words and the Taxonomy of Artifacts* (cit.) and my *Function is Not Enough* (cit.) point out. Nevertheless, one may still be convinced that other ways to defend that Putnam's Externalism applies across the board exist. These are strategies to preserve that Putnam's Physical Externalism applies both to natural and cultural kind terms. Here I will sketch three tactics to defend this *Global Externalism* while arguing that they all run into problems. In Section 1, I will illustrate (and refute) the first strategy: that of arguing that to have externalist reference, a given term only needs to be *originally believed* to refer to a set of things that *purportedly* share a common structure, whereas it refers to something else. Section 2 points to a second approach's problems. This stratagem underlines the importance of the linguistic norm over the indexical component of the meaning. That is a strategy that claims that what counts is only that meaning determination is external and not that it depends on the referents' nature. Lastly, in section 3, I criticize a third tactic, which maintains that reference must be secured through the connection to a historical paradigm rather than to a nature or hidden structure. Reference determination depends on the paradigm, historically chosen, the referents of a certain term are pegged to, independently of whether the paradigm has a nature (in the physical sense).

1. Purported Externalism: Theory and Problems

1.1. Purported Externalism (PE)

From Putnam's thought experiment about pencil-organisms described above (cf. *Intro*), it can be derived that an artifactual kind term can either be:

a. one that *refers* to artifacts, or

b. one that is *originally regarded as* referring to members of an artifactual kind[16].

Putnam's thought experiment plays with this ambivalence. In steps 1 to 6 of the pencil-organisms thought experiment, 'pencil' refers rigidly to artifactual pencils, i.e., to pencils designed and manufactured by humans. On the other hand, in steps 7 to 8, it is *presumed* that 'pencil' refers to artifacts, whereas *in fact* refers rigidly to organisms. This ambiguity is precisely why Putnam's thought experiment fails in arguing that 'pencil' and the like terms have externalist semantics – as I showed in my *Putnam on Artifactual Kind Terms*[17]. If a., namely, if an artifactual kind term is one that refers to artifacts (i.e., to objects designed and manufactured by humans), Putnam's argument tells us nothing about the semantics of our well-functioning artifactual kind terms – i.e., when 'pencil' as an artifactual kind term *does* refer to artifacts. The argument only tells us something about a situation in which we thought that 'pencil' referred to artifacts, whereas, in fact, it designates organisms (i.e., a natural kind). If b., namely, if we take artifactual kind words to be terms that are only *presumed* to be referring to artifacts, Putnam's argument does not prove what it was meant to prove either. It does not tell us what semantics a term has when it is *intended* to refer to artifacts, and such an intention is not frustrated. Either way, Putnam's argument shows, at most, that we could be mistaken regarding the category (natural or artifactual) to which a given term is supposed to belong[18].

Nevertheless, one might object that this is just what is needed. That if we loosen the two requirements for a term to be genuinely externalist (cf. *Intro*: ER1, ER2), we get evidence that Global Externalism is true. One can even extend this view to social kind terms[19]. Following this suggestion of loosening the mentioned requirements, for any word to have an externalist reference, it would be sufficient that:

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[16]   Cf. ivi, p. 205.

[17]   I argued that Putnam's argument is logically faulty – it is an *ignoratio elenchi*, that is, it does not prove what it is meant to prove, for it rather proves something else. The argument suggests that it can turn out that an artifactual term (e.g., 'pencil') refers in fact to a species of organism. This «only proves that we could be wrong about whether a term is artifactual or a natural kind term [for it refers to natural kinds]» (I. OLIVERO, *Putnam on Artifactual Kind Terms*, cit., p. 209). However, it does not say anything about whether an artifactual term that actually refers to artifacts has externalist reference.

[18]   Cf. ivi.

[19]   Recalling Putnam's claim: «...the points we have made apply to many other kinds of words as well. They apply to the great majority of all nouns, and to other parts of speech as well» (H. PUTNAM, *The Meaning of 'Meaning'*, cit., p. 242).

PER 1. it refers to sets of things that we think/believe to belong to a certain kind (natural, artifactual, or social) supposedly identified by a certain nature; and

PER 2. linguistically competent speakers may be ignorant of or mistaken that the term at stake refers to that certain kind.

This loose interpretation, which I label *Purported Externalism*, differs from Physical Externalism in the following respect. According to the former, but not to the latter, terms have externalist reference if it can be discovered that they refer to something to which they were not originally believed to refer. According to Purported Externalism, then, we only need to *presuppose* that the extensions of our kind terms belong to the kind with which we formerly associated them. It can always turn out that any category term has not referred to what we initially thought it to be designating. If this were the case, this would show that the word has externalist semantics.

Consider a further fictional case reported by Putnam[20]. He holds that if we were to discover that *all* the cats on Earth are and have always been robots (remotely controlled from Mars), we would claim: "*Cats* (these objects) have turned out to *be* robots". Accordingly, we would keep the term 'cat' for all the objects to which we have always applied it, provided that they share the same "nature" as the paradigmatic robotic cats. From this scenario, one can conclude that the following is sufficient for the word 'cat' to have externalist reference: 'cat', i.e., a word that *allegedly* designates a natural species, turns out to be referring to an artifactual kind.

Following this strategy, one may claim that in arguing for his thesis Putnam is only committed to showing that words like 'tiger', 'pencil', or 'Christianity' do not refer to what we *originally thought* them to refer to. If this were the case, Putnam or any defender of Externalism would not really need to outline arguments from ignorance and error about any alleged artifactual or social "nature" – as EAR2 instead affirms. One would only have the burden of proving that we could be in error about the category of objects to which belong most of the referents of the terms we normally use (as indeed PER2 states). As such, Externalism can be applied to natural and cultural terms, as long as they fulfill the two fundamental (loosen) requirements (PER1, PER2) mentioned above[21].

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[20]   Cf. H. PUTNAM, *The Meaning of 'Meaning'*, cit.

[21]   This version of externalism can be further grounded on a semantic corollary of Putnam's theory: the idea of "semantic markers". Putnam grants that we intuitively tend to associate certain words with certain categories of objects, as well as that some inferential associations seem to be more central and irrevocable than others. In his own words: «It seems to me reasonable that, just as in syntax we use such markers as "noun", "adjective", and, more

1.2. Objections to Purported Externalism

The core of Putnam's Physical Externalism is, ultimately, subsumable in the following claim: «The extension of our terms depends upon the *actual* [italics mine] nature of the particular things that serve as paradigms, and this actual nature is not, in general, fully known to the speakers»[22]. What matters in reference determination is the *actual* nature of the things that serve as paradigms. Thus, what matters is not that we could be mistaken about the category of objects to which the term at stake refers. In this respect, Purported Externalism is too vague of a semantic theory.

For the same reason, it is also untenable. Within Purported Externalism, we can only aspire to vaguely suppose to which category of entities a given term refers. Something that we can confirm only through empirical research. But this seems to lead to a too underdetermined of a theory. It would lead to a semantic approach for which the semantics of the terms at stake will always be opaque, for we cannot have any *a priori* criterion to determine the term's semantics. This approach does not seem desirable or even feasible. Moreover, Purported Externalism runs into the same objection that Putnam's argument about pencil-organisms faces. It does not tell us what semantics a kind term has when it is *intended* to refer to a given kind and when such an intention is not frustrated.

2. Social Externalism: Theory and Problems

2.1. Social Externalism (SE)

One of the most famous arguments in favor of Global Externalism, i.e., Externalism applied to both natural and artifactual kind terms, is that of Hilary Kornblith. He spells out this argument in his *How to Refer to Artifacts* (cit.).

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narrowly, "concrete noun", "verb taking a person as a subject and a abstract object", so in semantics these category indicators [such as "natural kind", "artifactual kind", and, more narrowly, "animal", "utensil", …] should be used as markers» (ivi, p. 268). However, Putnam specifies that those semantic markers never provide necessary and sufficient conditions for membership in a kind, nor do they provide any analytic specification of the meaning of the terms they are associated with. Although – Putnam admits – it is hard to imagine, it can always turn out that we were wrong, and that cats *are* robots or that pencils *are* organisms. The fact that we could discover that their designators do not refer to the category of objects they were initially purported to refer, does not invalidate their having an externalist semantics. It rather confirms that.

[22]   Ivi, p. 245.

Kornblith's main move consists of stressing the importance of the social component of meaning over the indexical one. Kornblith underlines that there are some kinds of artifacts (e.g., pencils, tables, chairs, etc.) that competent speakers can characterize by a description (or a cluster of descriptions). Yet, this does not pertain to all kinds (e.g., in the case of rheostats, Chippendale furniture, etc.).[23] Still – Kornblith notices – «the fact that a speaker does not know a uniquely individuating description does not seem to prevent the speaker from referring»[24]. Think about complex artifacts such as high-tech equipment or artifacts specific to a certain field or discipline. If I am not a chef, I may not know any description that distinguishes a blast chiller from a regular freezer. I may even be unable to tell the difference even in the presence of the two objects. Yet, I can still use those terms and succeed in referring (granted that I have some minimal competence about using these terms). My correct referring is ensured by the phenomenon of linguistic labor.

The *division of linguistic labor* – introduced by Putnam for natural kind terms (cf. *Intro*, footnote 5) – explains why a speaker can correctly refer to something without precisely knowing all its individuating properties. The division of linguistic labor rests upon and presupposes the division of labor *tout court* and explains how ordinary speakers can rely on a particular subclass of speakers, the *experts*, in case of doubt in applying certain words. It is the deference to these experts that secures our correct referring. Deference suffices – Kornblith believes – to hold that Externalism applies to both kinds of words. «For artifactual kind terms are just as susceptible to the phenomenon of the division of linguistic labor as are natural kind terms»[25].

As I pointed out elsewhere, Kornblith's is not a genuinely externalist argument[26]. However, since most authors take this reading of Externalism for granted, I believe it warrants further examination.

Kornblith states that «the division of linguistic labor is just as much a part of the world of artifacts as it is a part of the world of natural kinds and individuals»[27]. Following Putnam's line of reasoning, Kornblith affirms that what fixes the references of both kinds of terms is not a uniquely individuating description a single speaker has in mind, but rather whatever in a given linguistic community embodies the semantic norm. The semantic

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[23] I will here focus on Kornblith's argument about artifactual kinds. However, similar points can be shown also about social kinds.

[24] Ivi, p.139.

[25] Ivi, p.148.

[26] Cf. my own, I. OLIVERO, *Putnam on Artifactual Kind Terms*, cit., §4.

[27] H. KORNBLITH, *How to Refer to Artifacts*, cit., p. 144.

norm established in a linguistic community secures our terms' extension, for it can discriminate between correct and improper uses of these words.

As anticipated, this argument seems to work perfectly for a defender of Global Externalism. Such a defender, as Kornblith is, may in fact try to argue that this is what Putnam intends in his article of 1975, basing such a conclusion on the fact that Putnam states several times that the reference of our terms is *socially determined*[28]. To this respect, let us not forget that Putnam's main aim is to prove that – contrary to what the previous, traditional account held – «the extension of our terms is not fixed by a concept that the individual speaker has in his head»[29]. One may get the stated impression for Putnam even designs some of the examples he sketches with the precise aim of showing that «it is *only* [italics mine] the sociolinguistic state of the collective linguistic body to which the speaker belongs that fixes the extension»[30]. A famous example in this respect is the argument from ignorance that Putnam addresses about the words 'elm' and 'beech'. Putnam – as he confesses – cannot distinguish elm trees from beech trees; nevertheless, the term 'elm' and the word 'beech' refer respectively to elms and beeches. We would not say that they refer to the same set of objects only because one cannot distinguish the two sets of things. Putnam stresses that these terms' reference is determined by the objective relation between him and the world, not by his mental states. Commenting further on this example, Putnam remarks: «the reason my individual "grasp" of 'elm tree' does not fix the extension of 'elm' […] is rather that the extension of 'elm tree' in my dialect is not fixed by what the average speaker "grasps" or doesn't "grasp" at all; it is fixed by the community, including the experts, through a complex cooperative process»[31]. Following this reasoning, it seems sound to think, like Kornblith does, that Putnam endorses, ultimately, the importance of the social component of the meaning. The elm and beech example appears to show indeed that what matters for a word to have externalist reference is only the objective relationship between the term and the *social* environment in which it is uttered; that the experts play a crucial and reference-determining role[32].

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[28]   In Putnam's own words: «We have now seen that the extension of a term is not fixed by a concept that the individual speaker has in his head, and this is true both because extension is, in general, determined *socially* – there is a division of linguistic labor as much as of "real" labor – and because extension is, in part, determined *indexically*. The extension of our terms depends upon the actual nature of the particular things that serves as paradigms» (H. PUTNAM, *The Meaning of 'Meaning'*, cit., p. 245).

[29]   Ibidem.

[30]   Ivi, p. 229.

[31]   Ivi, p. 263.

[32]   Quoting Putnam: «in many cases, extension is determined socially and not individually,

2.2. Problems of Social Externalism

The reading of Externalism sketched above is not only independent from but even incompatible with the form of Physical Externalism that Putnam defends in *The Meaning of 'Meaning'* (cit.). The version of Externalism described above, which can be classified as *Social Externalism*, is, in fact, a form of "masked" Descriptivism. In this semantic view, what matters in determining our words' extension is exclusively the linguistic norm established in a given linguistic community[33]. Every linguistic community adopts a certain semantic norm. Speakers belonging to a particular linguistic community acquire the terms they use according to the semantic norm conventional to that linguistic community. They acquire words in the way they are used in their social environment and apply those terms to whatever their linguistic community members apply them. Thus, the same word could be applied to different kinds of entities in different linguistic communities when the semantic norms respectively adopted by these linguistic communities say so.

This form of Externalism is not what Putnam's argument implies, even implicitly. Putnam claims that what really matters in determining a given word's reference is the indexical component, i.e., the nature of the things that serve as paradigms for that term[34]. The nature of the paradigmatic sample originally dubbed by a certain term governs the term's extension, independently of anyone's concepts or beliefs.[35] As already remarked (cf. *Intro*, ER1, ER2), even expert speakers may be massively mistaken about, if not even utterly ignorant of, what this nature could be – as Putnam's real and fictional examples are meant to show. Think about the celebrated thought experiment about the word 'water' – his famous Twin Earth scenario. Putnam conceived this thought experiment to show that we would not call 'water'

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owing to the division of linguistic labor» (ivi, p. 226).

[33]   Social Externalism is the semantic account commonly attributed to Burge and his *Individualism and the mental* (T. BURGE, *Individualism and the Mental*, «Midwest Studies In Philosophy» 4/1979, pp. 73-121). According to this view, what determines the meaning and the reference of our words is solely the semantic norm adopted by the linguistic community in which these words are employed – no empirical fact or discovery is to be taken into account. In cases of error or ignorance, layman speakers of a certain linguistic community accept the experts' corrections or directions, and revise their previous beliefs in accordance with those corrections and directions. For, the expert speakers of that community fix the terms' reference used in that community. Here I argue that Kornblith extends this form of Externalism to artifactual kind terms.

[34]   In Putnam's own words: «The extension of our terms depends upon the actual nature of the particular things that serves as paradigms» (H. PUTNAM, *The Meaning of 'Meaning'*, cit., p. 226).

[35]   Cf. my own, I. OLIVERO, *Putnam on Artifactual Kind Terms*, cit.; and *Function is Not Enough*, cit.

something that resembles water for its superficial characteristics if it does not share the same nature of what we have paradigmatically dubbed as such (i.e., H_2O). This hypothesis, Putnam endorses, also applies to the time in which we did not know that water had a chemical structure. We would not refer with the same term 'water' to both the H_2O-liquid and a superficially similar compound, not even when (as it was before the discovery of chemistry) we had no epistemological access to their respective nature (i.e., their chemical structure). This scenario and other similar cases are conceived to attest that we could be ignorant or entirely wrong about all the properties associated with a specific term's extension. Yet, these properties that constitute the nature of the relevant extension establish that term's reference.

Contrary to what Kornblith affirms, ignorance and error do not arise solely because of the division of linguistic labor[36]. Putnam's Physical Externalism presupposes that we might never come to know the *real* individuating properties of the referents of our terms. Yet, these individuating properties fix our terms' reference. As Putnam puts it: «if there is a hidden structure, then generally it determines what it is to be a member of the natural kind, not only in the actual world, but in all possible worlds. Put another way, it determines what we can and cannot counterfactually suppose about the natural kind»[37,38]. What Putnam is endorsing is not a form of cluster-descriptivism, for which we may be ignorant of or wrong about *some* of the properties associated with a given term. Rather, he claims that the individuating properties (i.e., the nature) that characterize a given term's extension are entirely *independent* of anyone's beliefs and knowledge about that extension. Nonetheless, these properties are what determine that term's reference.

The role of the expert in Putnam's Externalism is *pragmatic* and never semantic[39]. Indeed, suppose we found out that we were wrong about the properties typically associated with a given term's extension. In that case,

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[36] In Kornblith's own words: «And this point by itself is sufficient to ground Arguments from Ignorance and Error in the case of artifacts which are exactly parallel to those which underwrite the new theory of reference for names and natural kind terms» (H. KORNBLITH, *How to Refer to Artifacts*, cit., p. 144).

[37] H. PUTNAM, *The Meaning of 'Meaning'*, cit., p.241.

[38] This is exactly what Putnam means when he talks about rigid designations. It is because we refer to the nature of water, to its chemical formula, which is the reference-determining property of water, that we can imagine and describe counterfactual cases about *water* (that very substance).

[39] From Putnam's standpoint, semantics and pragmatics are very distinct. He admits, for instance, that the nature of the required minimum competence depends heavily upon the culture and the topic; however, this has nothing to do with the way our terms' extension is determined. Grounding a term's reference is one thing; practical purposes of communications are another.

we will be immediately willing to give them up in favor of the discovered ones – as the fictional case of pencil-organisms is supposed to show (cf. *Intro*). By contrast, in a social externalist view, the expert speakers' role is always *semantic*: the reference of our kind terms is governed by the linguistic norm adopted by a certain community and does not vary on empirical factors. If the definition associated with 'pencil' is "a sharpened *artifact* with the purpose of writing, drawing, marking, …", then 'pencil' could never apply to the organisms of Putnam's thought experiment. The role of the experts is *prescriptive* rather than purely descriptive.

In Putnam's Externalism, the indexical component "dominates" the social one in determining the reference. This "dominance" explains why his account is independent of and even incompatible with the other *alleged* form of Externalism described in this section. Kornblith's claim that «there are interesting metaphysical differences between artifactual and natural kinds, but these metaphysical differences play no role in the semantics for terms which refer to these kinds»[40] is misleading. In sum, this form of disguised Descriptivism cannot be a valid strategy to defend Global Externalism.

3. Historical Externalism: Theory and Problems

3.1. Historical Externalism (HE)

According to Simon Evnine, «Essentially contested terms and natural kind terms both, then, apply to something now just in case it has a certain relation to an original sample or an historical exemplar»[41]. We may construe this defense of Externalism as one that takes as central the fact that reference is determined by the word at stake bearing the same objective relation to a certain group of objects that serve as the *paradigm* of the kind to which that word is meant to refer[42]. No nature individuation is required, as long as this paradigm can be singled out. Such a theory holds that «current uses of [a given] term continue to be connected to the original sample […] through the (causal) historical connection between the sample baptism and current

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[40]   H. KORNBLITH, *How to Refer to Artifacts*, cit., p. 149.

[41]   S. EVNINE, *Essentially Contested Concepts and Semantic Externalism*, «Journal of the Philosophy of History», 8/2014, p. 128.

[42]   The idea for this defense of Externalism is inspired by Simon Evnine's *Essentially Contested Concepts and Semantic Externalism*, cit.. However, the one reported is not faithfully the theory that Evnine argues for.

usage»[43]. In this view, in grounding a term's reference, it matters that the term «bears a certain kind of relation to samples or exemplars that have played a historical role in the use of the term»[44].

This view may be considered an attempt to defend Global Externalism. For, to pin a certain term to a particular sample is to reject the idea that the meaning of essentially contested terms or, in general, social and artifactual kind terms is given by some descriptive content that constitutes their definition. Consider the term 'Christianity': if its meaning were given by some descriptions constituting its definition, there could be no genuine dispute between what may be called "the Christian Right" and "the Christian Left". On the contrary, the dispute is legit. Moreover, the debate is still going on because there is a historical phenomenon, an exemplar, «and each of the contesting parties claims for itself a certain relation to that historical phenomenon, a relation such that if it obtains in one case, it cannot obtain in the other»[45,46].

For the parallelism with natural kind terms to hold, such a defense of Externalism needs to maintain that a given word has an externalist semantics iff:

> HER 1. it refers to things that are in the same objective relation to a certain exemplar that serves as their paradigm; and

> HER 2. linguistically competent speakers may be ignorant of or mistaken about what constitutes such a paradigm.

Following this view, «Natural kind terms and essentially contested terms are two species of the same semantic genus»[47], for an objective relation occurring between the speakers and the world (intended as a natural or cultural environment) is what gives their meaning. Even though there are clear metaphysical differences between both exemplars, the analogy between the semantics of their designating terms still stands.

3.2. Objections to Historical Externalism

The defense of Externalism described above, which can be labeled *Historical Externalism*, seems persuasive when it comes to securing that both natural

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[43]   Ivi, pp. 126-127.

[44]   Ivi, p. 127.

[45]   Ibidem.

[46]   Specifically, the objective relation in this case is "being the heir of" that phenomenon. Leaving aside this notion, which may be problematic to define, we may simply construe such a theory as one according to which essentially contested terms refers to whatever bears the same objective relation to a paradigmatic exemplar.

[47]   Ivi, p. 119.

and artifactual kind terms refer externalistically. A paradigmatic exemplar to refer to in grounding a kind term's reference exists – a standard with which all the referents of that designating term are in an objective relation. Following Historical Externalism, then, natural kind words have externalist reference because they share a certain sameness relation with the inner structure (or nature) of the things that serve as paradigms. Artifactual kind terms have externalist reference because they share an objective connection with some things or phenomena regarded as paradigmatic for these kinds.

In this semantic view, the category of entities to which the terms refer is fixed *a priori*. This represents an advantage over Purported Externalism. What it takes to belong to the same kind as the paradigmatic exemplars is left for empirical discovery. No other description plays a semantic role. This makes Historical Externalism a more viable defense compared to Social Externalism. To this extent, Historical Externalism seems to represent a desirable defense of Global Externalism.

However, an important question arises: what does it take to resemble artifactual and social kinds' selected paradigmatic exemplars? No "nature" in Putnam's sense (cf. *Intro*: ER1) is specified. The first requirement for being an effective, genuine externalist defense is not fulfilled. Nor is it clearly specified what it takes to be "part of" the same kind. Moreover, it seems that – as it happens for Social Externalism – it cannot be the case that *all* speakers (including fully competent or expert speakers) may be utterly ignorant of or mistaken about the referents of the terms at stake. Whoever defined the paradigmatic historical exemplars will know their main individuating features. EAR2, namely, the second requirement for being a genuine externalist argument, is not satisfied either.

Historical Externalism inherits the difficulties faced by its stronger and weaker alternatives. By ignoring Putnam's notion of indexicality, it proves to be a form of "masked" Descriptivism. By not providing a clear criterion that fixes our kind terms' reference runs into the same problems that Purported Externalism confronts.

Conclusion

A given term has an externalist semantics iff:

ER 1.   its referents must be characterized by a "nature" (i.e., a common essence possessed only by all the members of the term's extension) shared among all members of that extension; and

> ER 2.   all speakers (including fully competent ones) may be ignorant
>   of or mistaken about such nature.

Elsewhere, it has been pointed out that none of the (alleged) externalist arguments advanced in the literature has actually succeeded in proving that words like 'pencil', 'tiger', 'Christianity', and the like terms *all* fulfill these two fundamental requirements. That is to state that it has not been shown that Putnam's Physical Externalism can unitedly explain the semantics of all the kinds of terms at stake. In this paper, I designed (as with PE) or reconstructed (as with SE) or reshaped (as with HE) and discussed further externalism versions – a strong, a weak, and a moderate theory – modulated on Putnam's original semantic view. Each form – I concluded – runs into problems, leaving us, once again, without a tenable, genuine externalist argument for all the terms in question.

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