

Putnam's Last Papers

Hilary Putnam: Naturalism, Realism, and Normativity,
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It is beyond question that the recently deceased Hilary Putnam (1926–2016) was one of the most important contemporary philosophers. He made groundbreaking contributions to the philosophies of science, mathematics, mind, and language. Very few philosophers in recent times have had such a wide and deep influence on philosophy.

The book under review is presumably Putnam's final collection of essays. It gathers together articles that were not included in earlier collections, the previous being *Philosophy in an Age of Science* (2012). This new work consists of 13 essays published in different forums. Most of the articles are from the 2010s, and the collection thus represents well Putnam's "final views" on various issues. Although ethics is not absent in this collection, the focus here is, after Putnam's books *Ethics without Ontology* (2002) and *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy and Other Essays* (2002), once again more on theoretical philosophy.

Putnam is famous for changing his views, sometimes even quite dramatically. Most importantly, from 1976 onwards, he started to criticize the view he called "metaphysical realism." He advocated instead a view he labeled "internal realism." The latter was a combination of *conceptual relativism* of a sort and *an epistemic theory of truth*—the notion that truth amounts to justification under epistemically ideal conditions. By "conceptual relativity," Putnam means the claim that sometimes two scientific theories have different "ontologies," yet there is a systematic way of interpreting each theory in the language of the other that renders them empirically and explanatorily equivalent.

Putnam is admirably honest and open about what he thinks is wrong with his earlier views. If there is any common thread in the various essays in this collection, or at least in many of them, it is Putnam's complex relation to the realism issue—in various senses of "realism." The five essays in the second and the third sections of the collection, "Realism and Ontology" and "Realism and Verificationism," especially focus on this theme.

Putnam still holds to conceptual relativity, but now emphasizes repeatedly that he does not accept the epistemic theory of truth any longer, and consequently he has ceased to advocate "internal realism." Putnam appears a bit frustrated that many philosophers have ignored this change of view, which took place already around 1990. He is even ready to grant the *correspondence* picture of truth in the case of descriptive empirical truths, although he does not find it useful in the case of logical, mathematical and moral truths, for example, thinking it is misleading in such cases. Putnam also now distances himself from the *Wittgensteinian quietism*, whose influence he was under, by his own admission, still in the 1990s. He now rejects all versions of the "end of philosophy" story.

Many essays in the collection are responses to other influential philosophers: to Bernard Williams, Richard Boyd, Ernst Sosa, Michael Dummett, Crispin Wright, John McDowell, and Ned Block. Nevertheless, the articles are sufficiently self-contained and as such are useful sources for Putnam's own thinking.

After the editor's helpful introduction, the collection begins with the title essay, in which Putnam places his late view in a wide context. The essay discusses various meanings of "naturalism" and "realism," theories of truth, Quine's meaning skepticism and, at the end, ethics. This is followed by a response to Williams, which deals with the different interpretations of *philosophy* and *science* and their mutual relations. The third article argues that the answer to the question "to what extent can we understand the roots and complexity of ethical judgments from a Darwinian perspective?" is "not very much."

In his response to Sosa, Putnam aims to clarify what he has and has not meant by "conceptual relativity" as he endorses it. In his comment on Boyd, Putnam analyses different variants of *scientific realism* and offers his own take on them. He insists that he has always believed that theories of the mature sciences are typically approximately true, and their terms typically refer. In his "internalist realism" period, he thought that verificationist semantics could be consistently combined with them. Putnam now thinks this was a mistake.

In one essay, Putnam examines his former teacher, Hans Reichenbach, who is commonly classified as a logical positivist. Putnam presents a more charitable and careful reading of him and argues that Reichenbach advocated a sort of realism. Putnam even finds in Reichenbach's work what he considers a deep argument against the traditional positivist idea of an "egocentric language," which views my whole language as a device for predicting what sense experiences *I myself* will or could have. However, Reichenbach invites us to consider *my* statements about events after *my own death*, for example, about how purchasing life insurance will affect my family. It seems to make no clear sense to claim that such statements predict only *my* future experiences. Putnam also recalls the argument in his comment on Dummett. The latter is a sympathetic yet critical discussion of Dummett's attempts to ground semantics in the notion of justification and on the epistemic theory of truth. Putnam's response to Wright deals with certain difficulties with the epistemic theory of truth.

The three papers in the fourth section, "Naïve Realism, Sensation, and Apperception," present Putnam's views on perception, experience, and qualia. Putnam advocates a version of *direct realism*, or "naïve realism", and thus rejects the traditional view that we can directly perceive only our own subjective sense data. However, he now abandons the *disjunctivism* that he still held in the 1990s. Putnam also rejects McDowell's view that all experience, sensations, or qualia, must be *conceptualized*. As an alternative to McDowell's view that it is experiences that *justify* beliefs, Putnam borrows from William James the distinction, which dates back to Kant and beyond, between *sensation* and *apperception*—a recognition of what one is perceiving. The line between them is sometimes fuzzy and they become fused, but they are different things. According to Putnam, unconceptualized sensations do exist; however, it is apperceptions and not sensations that justify beliefs, and apperceptions are conceptualized. Nevertheless, they are not the same as perceptual beliefs either: for example, one may apperceive something but know that it is an illusion and not believe it.

The fifth and final section, "Looking Back," consists of two retrospective essays. The first essay focuses on the development of the *externalist theory of meaning* in particular, in which Putnam has been a key figure. In the second essay, Putnam apparently surveys more generally his philosophical development. A large part of this second paper reviews Putnam's externalism about language and thought, too. The latter discussion extends to

Putnam's famous externalism-based "The Brain in a Vat" thought experiment against skepticism, and externalism's apparent implications (in Putnam's view) for the theory of perception.

Understandably at this late point in his life, Putnam is not so much presenting wholly new arguments and conclusions, but is rather clarifying and elaborating his views, correcting what he takes to be misunderstandings of them by others, and defending them against critics. His views on perception, though, seem to have been permanently in flux.

There are few absolutely conclusive arguments or universal agreements in philosophy, and one can certainly disagree with Putnam on various issues. However, "one can learn from a philosopher without believing everything he says," as Putnam himself writes (92). Even in his eighties, Putnam did not lose his touch; he still argued clearly and wrote well. He is a joy to read. Right or wrong, Putnam is always an interesting philosopher. All in all, the collection under review is a quite useful source for the correct understanding of this important thinker and a dignified final product of his brilliant career.