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MEANING, MORALITY, AND THE MORAL SCIENCES

In the John Locke Lectures, included in *Meaning and the Moral Sciences*, Hilary Putnam argues that "the 'softness' of social facts may affect the 'hard' notions of truth and reference" ([19]*, p. 46). Without fully endorsing Putnam's argument, I hope to show that a similar argument could be constructed for a slightly different conclusion: that the 'softness' of *ethics* may affect the 'hard' notions of truth and reference.

Putnam's argument can be divided roughly into two movements. The first is an attempt to show that an understanding of notions of truth and reference requires an understanding of translation. Here Putnam's primary claims are as follow:

(1) Though Tarskian semantics adequately captures the formal logic of 'true' and 'refers', the concepts of truth and reference are underdetermined by their formal logic. Acceptance of a Tarski-style truth-definition for one's language does not itself dictate whether truth and logical connectives are to be understood realistically or idealistically, 'classically' (i.e., in terms of classical truth and falsity) or 'intuitionistically' (i.e., in terms of provability in a theory). (See esp. [19], pp. 1–38.)

(2) A second 'dimension' of underdetermination appears in contexts of translation. In applying 'true' and 'refers' with regard to a language other than our own, we require not only a concept of truth adequate to our own language but also a mapping of the other language on to our own. (See esp. [19], pp. 38–46.)

The first movement of Putnam's argument is roughly from truth and reference to translation. The second movement is from translation to 'social facts'; wants, desires, and interests. Here a further set of claims is of importance:

(3) As Quine has shown, a principle of charity in translation — whereby we maximize the reliability of foreign utterances — is not enough; an infinite

number of different possible translation manuals would equally satisfy
charity ([19], pp. 38—40).

(4) What we actually rely on in translation are assumptions of wants and
intentions on the part of the foreign speaker. Translation involves rationalizing
and explaining the foreign speaker's behavior; what it is to be a correct trans-
lation or truth-definition is to be the translation or truth-definition that best
explains the behavior of the speaker ([19], p. 41).

(5) The desires and intentions we attribute to a foreign speaker in ex-
plaining his behavior are those most 'natural' to us given our interests. Ex-
planation is 'interest-relative'; the appropriateness of 'why questions' and the
adequacy of explanations presuppose ranges of interest. (See esp. [19], pp.
41—52.)

If an understanding of truth and reference requires an understanding of
translation in the way Putnam maintains, and if translation involves 'interest-
relative' explanation, it is clear how Putnam can conclude that notions of
truth and reference may be affected by 'social facts'. On this basis he goes on
to argue for a form of *Verstehen* theory within the social sciences and a fairly
unorthodox view of the relationship between the social and natural sciences.

I remain suspicious of the first movement of Putnam's argument, but will
not pursue my suspicions here. My attempt will be rather to show that *if*
the first movement is legitimate, a 'foundational' status for ethics can be
argued on much the same grounds that Putnam argues for a 'foundational'
status for 'social facts'. As a corrective to the atmosphere of unreality which
pervades philosophical considerations of translation, I will try in a final
section to show the relevance of some of the claims made concerning ethics
and translation for a real anthropological case: that of the Ik.

I. ETHICS AND TRANSLATION

It is by tying translation to 'social facts' that Putnam argues that the latter
may affect 'hard' notions of reference and truth. My strategy will be to tie
translation to ethics in much the same way.

There are a number of arguments which might be presented for such a tie
between ethics and translation. I will consider two somewhat more traditional
arguments before sketching a third approach more closely parallel to Putnam's
own.

(A) Putnam's argument, as noted above, relies on a principle of translation

stronger than a principle of charity (and stronger than simplicity as well; see esp. [19], p. 44). But an argument for the influence of ethics within translation is possible also on the grounds of more traditional principles of translation.

One quite plausible principle of translation is a principle of charity, whereby one maximizes the truth or reliability (in some sense) of a foreign speaker's utterances. To the extent that such a principle is operative in translation generally, it would at least *ceteris paribus* appear to be operative with respect to *ethical* utterances in particular, or with respect to those utterances translated as ethical.[1]

Precisely how strong this *ceteris paribus* connection is I'm not sure, and it may depend on what principles of translation other than charity are at stake. But with an eye to charity alone, it would appear that a maximization of the truth or reliability of the entire set of foreign utterances would at least *generally* call for a maximization of the truth or reliability of that subset of foreign utterances translated as ethical. We *might*, in certain cases, be forced to be uncharitable to a particular subset of foreign utterances in order to be maximally charitable to foreign utterances as a whole, but the class of ethical utterances would not seem a particularly likely candidate for sacrifice.

To the extent that ethics is genuinely autonomous, moreover — to the extent that an 'is/ought gap' genuinely exists — it would appear that general maximization of reliability would quite strictly *require* maximization of the reliability of those utterances translated as ethical. With an eye to charity alone, a consequence of the autonomy of ethics would be that sacrifices of reliability within the class of utterances translated as ethical would buy us no greater reliability for utterances *outside* of that class. Thus it would appear that a general maximization of truth or reliability for foreign utterances would require a similar maximization of truth or reliability for that subset which we translate as ethical.

In the attempt to *be* charitable, of course, we must fall back on our own theories. Without any other relevant linguistic or behavioral data, and if we've translated all but the last term of 'e-thay orld-way ee-say ound-ray' as 'the world is ...', we will be more likely to translate 'ound-ray' as 'round' than as 'flat' or 'a marshmallow'. It is our theory of world shape that we rely on for the truth, and thus the attempt to maximize the truth of foreign utterances forces us to a low-level theoretical imperialism.

The same will be true of our attempts to translate ethical utterances,

though here the theory imposed will be a normative one. Without any other relevant linguistic or behavioral data, and if we've translated all but the last term of 'urder-may ee-say ways-alay ong-wray' as 'murder is always ...', we will be more likely to translate 'ong-wray' as 'wrong' than as 'obligatory' or 'hospitable'. Our own normative ethical theory informs our translation of utterances as particular ethical utterances in the same way that our descriptive theories inform the translation of other utterances.

Thus clearly normative ethics is of importance to translation in *some* respect; under a principle of charity, it informs the translation of ethical utterances. But this alone would not suffice to show that *all* translation involves ethics. If notions of truth and reference are somehow reliant on a notion of translation, as Putnam claims, and if the translation of foreign utterances as particular ethical claims is informed by our normative ethical theory, it would appear that the most we could conclude on this basis alone would be that notions of truth and reference *as applied within ethics* are in some way grounded in our normative ethics. A similar argument with respect to utterances translated as concerning wants and desires (or astronomy) would show only that truth and reference as applied in psychological (or astronomical) contexts are in some sense grounded in our psychological (or astronomical) theory. No wider importance of ethics, psychology, or astronomy for translation, truth, or reference in general would appear to follow.

A stronger conclusion might follow, however, given other principles of translation in addition to a principle of charity. Consider, for example, a principle of simplicity which required us to temper charity with consistency — perhaps merely syntactical consistency. On other grounds, we may have translated 'now-say ee-say ite-way nigi ry-day' and 'urder-may ee-say ong-wray nigi ight-ray' as 'snow is white and dry' and 'murder is wrong, not right'. But if we demand a simple and univocal translation for the connective 'nigi', one of these translations will have to be revised, giving us perhaps either 'murder is wrong and right' or 'snow is white, not dry'. If we find it easier to live with the latter translation of one utterance than with the former translation of another, our translation of one utterance as a particular ethical utterance (informed by our own normative ethics) will have influenced our translation of a non-ethical utterance as well. Thus with some principles in force in addition to a principle of charity our translation of ethical utterances will be tied to our translation of others; a neat division between modes of translation for ethical and non-ethical utterances (or utterances translated as

each) will break down, and both our non-ethical theories and our normative ethics will inform translation more generally.

(B) The argument presented above for a tie between ethics and translation is more traditional than Putnam's simply in that it relies on translational principles of charity and simplicity more traditional than the further reliance on explanation that Putnam proposes. We might also construct an argument for a tie between ethics and translation by grafting Putnam's argument onto older arguments for the influence of ethics within the social sciences or within science in general.

Putnam's argument, if correct, shows that even the 'hard' notions of truth and reference are affected by the 'soft' notions of the social sciences. If it could also be shown that the 'soft' notions of social science are grounded in ethics in some way, we would be able to conclude that the 'hard' notions of truth and reference are in the end affected by the 'softness' of ethics.

What such an argument requires above and beyond Putnam's work is the claim that the social sciences (at least) rest on an ethical base; that they are in some sense *normative*. And of course various arguments to that effect (whether ultimately adequate or not) are quite familiar, from the work of Max Weber ([27]) to that of MacIver ([15]), Mannheim ([16]), Parsons ([18]), Schutz ([23]), Berlin ([2], [3]), von Mises ([26]), Collingwood ([7]), Hanson ([9]), and Winch ([28]). More recently, similar arguments have been proposed by George J. Stack ([24]), Andrew McLaughlin ([17]), Robert E. Alexander ([1]), and Mario Bunge ([5]).[2] If any of these arguments is correct, and if Putnam's attempt to ground truth and reference in the social sciences is also legitimate, it is clear that the foundational character Putnam proposes for the social sciences with respect to truth and reference can similarly be argued for normative ethics.

Here I will rehearse only one such argument. In 'The scientist *qua* scientist makes value Judgments' ([21]), Richard Rudner argued that the methodology of all science involves straightforwardly ethical evaluation.[3] What constitutes evidence *adequate* or *sufficient* for acceptance of an hypothesis is in part dependent on the social and ethical consequences of acting on such an hypothesis, and thus a prime concept of scientific procedure is inevitably tied to normative evaluation. C. West Churchman ([6]) has proposed that the relevance of observations, the number and variety considered sufficient, the adequacy of controls, and the appropriateness of particular 'models' are considerations essential to science which rest on a similarly normative

base.[4] Though Rudner and Churchman are concerned with arguing the case for natural sciences, the conclusions would seem no less apt as applied to the social sciences in general or to translation in particular. Thus one might argue that the methodology of translation — involving criteria for adequate confirmation of translational hypotheses, and in the end for adequate translations — unavoidably involves an ethical aspect. If Putnam is correct in 'grounding' notions of truth and reference in translation, it is clear how ethics can play the same role with respect to truth and reference that Putnam proposes for 'social facts'.

(C) Neither of the attempts to tie truth and reference to ethics sketched above fully parallels Putnam's attempt to tie truth and reference to 'social facts', though each relies on Putnam's 'first movement' and results in a roughly similar conclusion. The argument presented in (A) is something *less* than Putnam's argument in that it relies on translational principles of charity and simplicity alone. The argument presented in (B) requires something *more* than Putnam's argument: a claim that the social sciences are in some way essentially normative. It is also possible, however, to construct an argument more closely parallel to Putnam's own.

Having tied truth to translation, Putnam goes on to argue that translation involves an attempt to explain the behavior of a foreign speaker:

> I am not just contending that it is *good methodology* in *finding out* what a speaker 'means' to try to *rationalize* his behavior in this way! I am suggesting that what it is to be a correct translation or truth-definition is to be the translation or truth-definition that best explains the behavior of the speaker ([19], p. 41).

From this point on there are actually two argumentative routes which Putnam pursues, though he doesn't clearly distinguish them. The first and simplest is to argue that the explanation involved in translation involves the ascription of wants, desires, and intentions to the foreign speaker, and that in social scientific explanation and translation we supply those wants, desires, and intentions most 'natural' to us; those which most naturally accord with *our* interests.

Putnam makes the first point — that translation involves explanation, and that the explanation at issue involves an ascription of wants, desires, and intentions — both as a general thesis and in the context of a particular example:

I think in actual translation we start out with assumptions as to what the speaker *wants* or *intends*, at least in many situations. After hours without food, we assume he wants food; after hours awake, he may want to sleep (especially if he is rubbing his eyes), etc. We also assume that his 'reliability' in the abstract sense of truth-probability is not unconnected with his functional *efficiency*. If a speaker accepts a sentence S when he is looking at *water*, and he reaches for the water in question whenever he is deprived of water and accepts S, then S might mean 'there's water' or 'there's something to drink', etc.; but it is *unlikely* (to put it mildly) that S means '3 is a prime number' ([19], pp. 40–41).

Well, if I go to a gas station, and say *bedok et hashemen* and the attendant punches me in the nose (and the same thing happens at other gas stations), my faith in my translation of *bedok et hashemen* as 'check the oil' will be shaken. But notice what is going on! I am assuming (1) the attendant wants to sell gas and oil, (2) it is not *obligatory* in Israel to say 'bevakasha' (*please*) when making a request; (3) if someone wants to sell oil, and a customer asks 'check the oil' in the language of the seller (and no obligatory politeness-rules have been violated) the seller will check the oil (or, perhaps, say 'I'm out of oil' in his language, or – rarely – 'I'm too busy', but *not* punch the customer in the nose); (4) someone driving up to a gas station will be treated as a customer. Each time I check my 'analytical hypothesis' (i.e., my translation skills) in a new context, a *new* list of psychological/sociological hypotheses of the order of (1) – (4) will be imported from 'general background knowledge', or whatever ([19], p. 69).

The explanatory wants, desires, and interests on which translation relies (in order to be a correct translation), however, are those which seem most natural to us in our own case:

Let us apply the idea that *translating* is *rationalizing behavior*. Consider this case: the native, Karl, sees something and says *gavagai*. He shoots it, and takes it home and eats it. Why do *we* find it so much more natural to translate 'gavagai' as *rabbit* than as *undetached rabbit-part*? ... The fact is that we find the simplest *explanation* of Karl's behavior to be something like this: 'He believes he sees a rabbit. He wants a rabbit to eat. So he shoots it.' And 'He believes he sees an undetached rabbit-part. He wishes some undetached rabbit-parts so he shoots at one of the undetached rabbit-parts he sees' seems absurd to us, *given the way we structure the explanation-space*, given what *we* consider the relevant classes of cases to generalize to, etc. ([19], pp. 44–45).

Putnam's conclusion is not merely that truth and reference rest on translation, which in turn involves the attribution of social-psychological notions of wants, desires, and intentions. Because of his thesis of 'interest-relativity', Putnam's conclusion is stronger than this; that the wants, desires, and intentions involved in translation are those tied to *our* interests.

This shorter argument can fairly easily be recast so as to emphasize the role of normative ethics in translation. It is clear that ascriptions of moral sentiments, attitudes, and beliefs play a similar role in explaining behavior to that which ascriptions of wants, desires, and intentions do. In the gas station case, Putnam explicitly emphasizes a role for perceived obligations; one of the 'background assumptions' at issue is that "it is not *obligatory* in Israel to

say 'bevakasha' (*please*) when making a request." But of course there are an
indefinite number of other assumptions regarding moral attitudes, moral
sentiments, and ethical beliefs operative in such a case: that it will be ethical-
ly acceptable to act forthrightly and declare desires openly and in the presence
of perfect strangers, that a certain degree of honesty and trust is appropriate,
that neither what is asked nor the way it is asked will be taken as insult or
ground for moral indignation. We might also add to the list subtle assump-
tions of prerogatives, responsibilities, rights and obligations which go with
assuming a relationship of customer and entrepreneur.

In at least many cases, those moral sentiments, attitudes, and beliefs we
attribute to a foreign speaker in explanation of his behavior and translation
of his language will be those most 'natural' to us. Thus it is not merely that
translation will depend on certain assumptions classifiable as descriptive
ethics; *normative* ethics will also play a role. Putnam's original argument is
that the attribution of wants and interests will be guided by our own interests;
that is, our own wants and desires. The attribution of moral sentiments,
attitudes, and beliefs will likewise be guided by our own.

Putnam also appeals to a significantly broader argument. The narrower
argument considered above demands only that the explanation of human
behavior in the context of *translation* relies on our own interests. But Putnam
also seems willing to argue that *all* explanation is 'interest-relative'. " 'Why
questions' — and hence explanations — *presuppose ranges of interests*," and
do so in cases of explaning why 1-inch square pegs don't fit into 1-inch round
holes as well as in cases of explaining Professor X's presence, stark naked, in
the girls' dormitory at midnight ([19], p. 42).

Clearly there are different forms (if not different senses) of 'interest-
relativity' at issue in Putnam's work. In explaining human behavior we find
it necessary to assume certain wants and desires on the part of the subject,
and supply those most 'natural' to us. Thus our interests shape explanation
by 'exportation'; interests attributed to the subject of explanation play a role
in explanation, and which interests we attribute to the subject is to some
extent dictated by our own. We attempt to explain the subject's behavior, in
part, in terms of interests analogous to our own. But if explanations of pegs
failing to fit into holes are also 'interest-relative', they are 'interest-relative'
in a quite different way. We aren't — by exportation, analogy, or in any other
way — attributing interests to the peg. Putnam terms this latter form of
'interest-relativity' *'methodological'*.

Putnam's broader argument, based on this more general 'methodological' 'interest-relativity', is as follows. Truth and reference are grounded in translation. But translation involves explanation, and all explanation is 'interest-relative'. Thus even the 'hard' notions of truth and reference are ultimately affected by the 'softness' of our interests.

This broader argument is at least quite close to forms of argument considered in (B) above, and to that extent is the less novel of the two lines of argument Putnam pursues. The claim that explanation is 'interest-relative' is at least very close to Rudner's claim that the application of basic scientific notions involves 'value-judgments', and quite similar examples could be used to support each. Thus a strategy for re-casting Putnam's broader argument as an argument for the influence of ethics would be very similar to that rehearsed with respect to a 'grafted' argument in (B). Certainly some of our methodological interests in explanation (as Rudner argued) are ethical in character, and this would appear to be even more so in explanation regarding people. If so, we can conclude not only that truth and reference are 'grounded' in our own interests (through explanation involved in translation), but that truth and reference are similarly 'grounded' in our ethics as well.

My attempt here has been a limited one; to suggest several arguments for a 'foundational' status for ethics closely related to Putnam's argument for a 'foundational' status for 'social facts'. If Putnam's argument is a good one, then so are one or more of the parallel arguments with respect to ethics. But in the end I am not sure that I would want to subscribe fully to either Putnam's original argument or my ethical parallels. All rely on Putnam's 'first movement', tracing notions of truth and reference to translation, and I have doubts about the legitimacy of that crucial move. I leave the much needed critical work on that aspect of Putnam's argument to another paper or to others.

II. AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL POSTSCRIPT

Quine's claims regarding translation are justly notorious for their paradoxical quality, which Putnam fully realizes; *real* translation doesn't seem to be like that. On the assumption that there is at least some reason to avoid philosophical theses concerning translation which clash with the actual practice of translation, it is perhaps appropriate to mention in conclusion a case in which real translation *does* exhibit some of the ethical aspects claimed for it above.

Colin Turnbull ([25]) portrays the Ik as a selfish, cruel, and greedy people, and alternates between pity and loathing in his attempt to understand and describe them.

In this curious society ... there is one common value, apart from language, to which all Ik hold tenaciously. It is *ngag*, 'food'. This is not a cynical quip – there is no room for cynicism with the Ik. It is clearly stated by the Ik themselves in their daily conversation, in their rationale for action and thought. It is the one standard by which they measure right and wrong, goodness and badness. The very word for 'good', *marang*, is defined in terms of food. 'Goodness', *marangik*, is defined simply as 'food', or, if you press, this will be clarified as 'the possession of food', and still further clarified as '*individual* possession of food'. Then if you try the word as an adjective and attempt to discover what their concept is of a 'good man', *iakw anamarang*, hoping that the answer will be that a good man is a man who helps you fill your own stomach, you get the truly Icien answer: a good man is one who *has* a full stomach. There is goodness in being, but none in doing, at least not in doing for others ([25], p. 135).

There are a number of questions which arise immediately regarding ethics and this translation, whether the translation is Turnbull's own or is based on the work of a bilingual interpreter. If *marang* and its variants are defined by the Ik in terms of 'food', why translate *marang* as 'good' at all, and why consider it an *ethical* term? Surely other translations are possible. If we translate *marang* as an ethical term and accept what the Ik say of it, we end up (as Turnbull does) portraying the Ik as a people with a set of perversely distorted ethical views. But of course we might also translate *marangik* as 'satisfaction' or 'contentment' rather than (moral) 'goodness', at least in the limited context Turnbull explicitly presents. With such a translation the Ik might be portrayed as a people *without* ethical views, or with a developed code of egoistic prudence instead, rather than a people with a set of bizarrely egoistic *ethical* views.[5]

The difficulties of translating particular Icien terms as ethical or not can fairly easily be portrayed in terms of Putnam's 'interests'; it is because their interests seem so different from our own in some respects that translation becomes difficult and problems of alternative translations such as those mentioned above arise. An *ethical* translation for *marangik* and its variants seem appropriate to the extent that the Icien interests it expresses play roughly the role in Icien life that our ethical interests play in ours; to the extent that they are 'ultimate' interests and grounds of evaluation, for example. But a *non*-ethical translation seems appropriate to the extent that the interests expressed in terms of *marangik* and its variants are the selfish motives of our darker moments, suppressed and resisted in the name of altruism and

the impersonality of justice. A Putnamian emphasis on interests seems to have a great deal of plausibility in such a case; at least some of our difficulties in even translating the Icien tongue arise from the fact that their interests are structured so differently from our own.

It also seems plausible that variant interests, though most obvious in translations of Icien utterances as ethical, will also affect in subtler ways the translation of non-ethical utterances. Here one need only consider the troublesome assumptions which would be at issue in asking a hypothetical Icien rather than Israeli gas station attendant to 'check the oil'.

I would not want to maintain that the Ik offer, in any strong sense, empirical justification for a philosophical thesis, nor that they can be understood *only* in the manner sketched above. But to admit that the case of the Ik is 'merely' suggestive is not to deny that it *is* suggestive; suggestive of the extent to which human understanding may at base be an ethical matter.

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NOTES

* The author gratefully acknowledges permission given by Routledge and Kegan Paul to quote passages from Putnam's work ([19]).
¹ Whether a foreign utterance or class of foreign utterances is to be translated as *ethical* at all is also an important issue, dealt with more thoroughly in the final section. With regard to which foreign utterances are to be classed as ethical utterances, see Brandt ([4]) and Ladd ([13]).

At various points in the paper I propose that our translation of foreign utterances as particular ethical utterances is in some way guided by our own normative ethics. I would similarly propose that our translation of foreign utterances as ethical at all (rather than non-ethical) is guided by our ethical interests.
² Frank Cunningham discusses a number of such arguments critically in *Objectivity in Social Science* ([8]). See also Leonard Krimerman's *The Nature and Scope of Social Science* ([11]) and Gresham Riley's *Values, Objectivity, and the Social Sciences* ([20]).
³ See also Rudner's more recent work ([22]).
⁴ Such a view has of course not gone unchallenged. See particularly Richard C. Jeffrey's 'Valuation and acceptance of scientific hypotheses' ([10]), A. Levy's *Gambling With Truth* ([14]), and Henry Kyburg's discussion of acceptance theory in *Probability and Inductive Logic* ([12]).
⁵ Richard Brandt ([4]) and John Ladd ([13]) use subtly different criteria for isolating ethical utterances and beliefs among the Hopi and Navaho respectively; see esp. Ladd's discussion of the differences in ([13]), chapter eighteen. It may be that these rival criteria would dictate different conclusions regarding the ethical or non-ethical status of at least some Ik utterances.

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