Putnam's Internal Realism in Retrospect

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1. Introduction

In this paper, I reconsider the internal realist position that Hilary Putnam defended from the mid-1970s to the early 1990s.[1] My way into the issue is to approach internal realism from the perspective of an epistemologist who endorses the traditional view that knowledge is justified true belief. We will leave that perspective behind as we come to grips with the details of the internal realist position. But it is, I think, a nice way to introduce the topic. Among other things, it draws attention to the fact that the internal realist is able to maintain a distinction between knowledge and justified belief despite adopting an epistemic conception of truth.

According to the traditional analysis of knowledge, an epistemic subject knows some proposition if and only if the subject believes the proposition, is justified in believing the proposition and the proposition is in fact true. On this analysis, the truth condition and the justification condition are distinct conditions that must separately be satisfied for the subject to have knowledge. But we may ask what the relationship is between justification and truth. What if they are the same thing? What if truth just is justification? If truth and justification are the same, there would be no difference between knowledge and justified belief. Knowledge would collapse into justified belief. In order to distinguish knowledge from justified belief, truth must be distinct from justification.

Here a distinction may be drawn between theories of truth which take truth to be a non-epistemic property or relation (e.g. correspondence) and theories which take it to be an epistemic property or relation (e.g. coherence). If truth is non-epistemic, justification may be distinguished from truth. A non-epistemic notion of truth avoids the collapse of knowledge into justified belief. By contrast, if truth is taken to be an epistemic notion, then knowledge may collapse into justified belief. This is evidently the case if truth simply is justification. If truth simply is justification, there is no difference between justified belief and knowledge.

The hallmark of Putnam's internal realist position is the idea that truth is an epistemic notion. But Putnam avoids the collapse of knowledge into justified belief. He is able to avoid the collapse because he proposes an epistemic view of truth on which truth is not simply identical with justification. Putnam takes truth to be ideal justified belief rather than ordinary everyday justification. Ordinary everyday justification is something less than ideal justification. If truth is ideal justification, knowledge and justification may be distinguished. For what is required for knowledge on Putnam's view is not just that a belief be justified in the ordinary everyday sense. It must also be true in the sense of being ideally justified.

With this as a foretaste of Putnam's internal realism, let us turn to the topic. My plan is to present the basic outlines of the internal realist position, and then to provide an overview

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[1] The dating is approximate. Michael Devitt refers to Putnam's internal realist phase as his "interim period". He specifies it as the period from 1976 to 1989 (Devitt 2013, p. 102). In his intellectual autobiography, Putnam appears to date his renunciation of the internalist view to the time of the Gifford conference in St Andrews in 1990 (2015, p. 83).

of some of the main themes of the critical reaction of realists to the internalist view. Putnam proposes internal realism as an alternative to a position that he characterizes as metaphysical realism. In section 2, I will consider Putnam's characterization of metaphysical realism. Then, in section 3, I will consider the main outlines of the internal realist position as Putnam presents the view. In section 4, I will canvas a number of objections that have been levelled on the part of realism against Putnam's characterization of metaphysical realism as well as internal realism. As we will see, an important task that realists must undertake in responding to Putnam is the task of dismantling the characterization of metaphysical realism that he seeks to impose on realists. I will discuss the metaphysical commitments of realism in section 5. In section 6, I will consider arguments that realists may present on behalf of their position, since arguing against internal realism is not all that needs to be done in order to establish realism. Finally, in section 7 I will briefly note the implications of Putnam's later direct (or "natural") realist theory of perception for the issue of realism.

2. Metaphysical realism

In developing the internal realist position, Putnam contrasts it with an opposing *external realist* position that he usually refers to as *metaphysical realism*. According to the metaphysical realist view, as Putnam construes the position, the world is independent of our thought about it. The world contains a determinate set of objects which exist independently of human thought and language. We employ the referring expressions of our language to speak about these mind-independent objects.

This metaphysical realist view of the independence of the world is associated with a certain way of thinking about the nature of truth. The independence of the world fits with a correspondence conception of truth. If we say that an object has a property, and the object does in fact have that property, then what we say corresponds to the way the world is, so is true. It is the way that the object is that determines that what we say about it is true (or false). Truth has nothing to do with what we believe about the object or with whether our beliefs about the object are justified (or not). Truth has to do with the way the object in fact is, independently of us or what we think about it.

The metaphysical realist view of truth and the mind-independent character of reality gives rise to a conception of truth as non-epistemic. As Putnam puts it:

> …. THE WORLD is supposed to be *independent* of any particular representation we have of it – indeed, it is held that we might be *unable* to represent THE WORLD correctly at all (e.g. we might all be 'brains in a vat' ….) …. The most important consequence of metaphysical realism is that *truth* is supposed to be *radically non-epistemic*…. (1978, p. 125)

For the metaphysical realist, truth is not defined in terms of epistemic criteria (e.g. justification, evidence, coherence). As such, it is "radically non-epistemic". To bring out the implications of such a non-epistemic conception of truth, Putnam reflects on the possibility of an ideal theory. The ideal theory is the theory that would result if science were pursued to the ideal limit of inquiry. Such a theory would maximally satisfy all epistemic constraints. What is the truth-value of the ideal theory?

> …. let T_1 be an ideal theory, by our lights. Lifting restrictions on our actual all-too-finite powers, we can imagine T_1 to have every property *except objective truth* – which is left open – that we like. E.g. T_1 can be imagined complete, consistent,

to predict correctly all observation sentences (as far as we can tell), to meet whatever 'operational constraints' there are (if these are 'fuzzy', let T_1 seem *clearly* to meet them), to be 'beautiful', 'simple', 'plausible', etc. The supposition under consideration is that T_1 might be all this and *still be* (in reality) *false*. (1978, p. 125)

An ideal theory is one that maximally satisfies all epistemic criteria. Truth is not defined in terms of epistemic criteria. So the fact that a theory maximally satisfies all epistemic criteria does not entail that the theory is true. There is a conceptual gap between truth and being an ideal theory. Thus, metaphysical realism allows that an ideal theory may in fact be false.

For Putnam, a philosopher who adopts metaphysical realism is placed in a precarious position. To see this, consider where the human subject is situated within the metaphysical realist scenario. In describing the world and the relation between human thought and reality, it is we who speak. We are the ones who formulate the metaphysical realist position. So it is we humans who describe ourselves as situated in the world surrounded by mind-independent objects. Putnam thinks this requires us to adopt a special perspective with respect to ourselves and the world. To describe the metaphysical realist scenario, we must occupy a perspective outside ourselves. We must adopt an external perspective:

On this perspective, the world consists of some fixed totality of mind-independent objects. There is exactly one true and complete description of 'the way the world is'. Truth involves some sort of correspondence relation between words or thought-signs and external things and sets of things. I shall call this perspective the *externalist* perspective, because its favourite point of view is a God's Eye point of view. (1981, p. 49)

Metaphysical realism presupposes the ability to step outside ourselves to occupy an external standpoint. It requires us to put ourselves in God's position. From God's position, we may describe the way reality is, as well as our relationship to reality. So metaphysical realism requires a God's Eye point of view.

The above passage brings out two further aspects of metaphysical realism. The first is that "the world consists of some fixed totality of mind-independent objects". The second is that "There is exactly one true and complete description of 'the way the world is'." That there is exactly one correct description of reality appears to follow from the claim that the world consists of a "fixed totality of mind-independent objects" together with the view that truth is a "correspondence relation". For if there is a fixed totality of objects, one might suppose that there may only be one true description that corresponds to the way those objects in fact are. Moreover, there will only be one complete description that accurately represents all those objects.

Let us now turn to Putnam's criticism of the position of metaphysical realism. I will begin with Putnam's objection to the God's Eye point of view. As we have seen, Putnam takes metaphysical realism to be committed to the possibility that we may adopt a God's Eye point of view. But no sense may be made of this. It is impossible to remove ourselves from our human perceptual and conceptual situation. We cannot step out of our heads to adopt an external view. We cannot place ourselves in the position of God to look down from on high at the human situation. As Putnam put the point:

There is no God's Eye point of view that we can know or usefully imagine; there are only the various points of view of actual persons reflecting various interests and purposes that their descriptions and theories subserve (1981, p. 50)

The upshot is this. We cannot shed our human perspective and occupy an external standpoint. So the metaphysical realist picture breaks down. It breaks down because it assumes that we may put ourselves in an external position in order to describe the metaphysical realist position. We cannot adopt such a position. So we cannot even adopt the position from which to propose metaphysical realism in the first place.

Apart from the God's Eye point of view, Putnam points to another problem. Metaphysical realism makes radical scepticism possible. It is unable to rule out the possibility that we are subject to a massive illusion. We might be under an illusion created by a Cartesian evil demon or, in Putnam's preferred scenario, we might be brains in a vat:

> ….imagine that a human being (you can imagine this to be yourself) has been subjected to an operation by an evil scientist. The person's brain (your brain) has been removed from the body and placed in a vat of nutrients which keeps the brain alive. The nerve endings have been connected to a super-scientific computer which causes the person whose brain it is to have the illusion that everything is perfectly normal. There seem to be people, objects, the sky, etc.; but really all the person (you) is experiencing is the result of electronic impulses travelling from the computer to the nerve endings. The computer is so clever that if the person tries to raise his hand, the feedback from the computer will cause him to 'see' and 'feel' the hand being raised. (1981, pp. 5-6)

Putnam holds that such radical sceptical scenarios are not genuine possibilities. In his view, this further undermines metaphysical realism. The problem is that metaphysical realism makes it seem as if something that is not a genuine possibility is a genuine possibility. Metaphysical realism mistakenly allows that we may be brains in a vat.

More specifically, Putnam presents an objection against the brain in a vat scenario that turns on considerations about reference. In the scenario, brains in a vat are connected to a computer. The language employed by a brain in a vat does not have appropriate referential connections to the world. The term 'vat', as employed by a brain in a vat, does not refer to a real vat at all. Because their words do not refer to items in the world outside the vat, they cannot say truly that they are brains in a vat:

> … 'vat' refers to vats in the image in vat-English, or something related … but certainly not to real vats, since the use of 'vat' in vat-English has no causal connection to real vats … part of the hypothesis that we are brains in a vat is that we aren't brains in a vat in the image (i.e. what we are 'hallucinating' isn't that we are brains in a vat). So, if we are brains in a vat, then the sentence 'We are brains in a vat' says something false (if it says anything). In short, if we are brains in a vat, then 'We are brains in a vat' is false. So it is (necessarily) false. (1981, pp. 14-5)

In other words, a brain in a vat may think the words "I am a brain in a vat". But the word 'vat' as used by the brain does not refer to a real vat. Given the failure of appropriate reference, the sentence "I am a brain in a vat" cannot be true. So I am not a brain in a vat.

The idea that, despite appearances, we might really be brains in a vat is a further instance of the idea that truth is "radically non-epistemic". As we have previously seen, Putnam employs the idea of an ideal theory to bring out the commitment of metaphysical realism to the non-epistemic nature of truth. The metaphysical realist allows that the ideal theory at the end of science might be false. In a similar way, the metaphysical realist allows that we might be brains in a vat even though all of the evidence available to us suggests

otherwise. In both the case of the ideal theory being false and our being brains in a vat, the truth is distinct from the way we are justified in believing the world to be.

In fact, Putnam opposes the view that the ideal theory might be false. Though metaphysical realism is right to distinguish truth from justification, this does not entail that truth is distinct from all justification. Putnam notes that the sentence 'The Earth is flat' might be rationally acceptable at one time but not at another (1981, p. 55). But it cannot be true at one time and not at another (or the Earth would change shape). The metaphysical realist captures this point by insisting that truth and justification are completely distinct. But it is not necessary for truth to be non-epistemic for it to be distinct from justification. It suffices for truth to be an idealization of rational acceptability. If truth is ideal rational acceptability, then it is distinct from ordinary rational acceptability. As for the issue of the ideal theory being false, suppose that truth is idealized justification. The ideal theory must satisfy all epistemic constraints perfectly. It must be epistemically ideal, i.e. it must be ideally justified. But, if truth is ideal justification, the ideal theory just is true, since it is ideally justified. So, if truth is ideal justification, the ideal theory cannot be false.[2]

3. Internal realism

Having considered some of Putnam's key objections to metaphysical realism, let us now turn to the position of internal realism with which Putnam proposed to replace metaphysical realism. As has previously been mentioned, the central idea of internal realism is that truth is an epistemic notion, namely, idealized justification. To distinguish truth from justification, Putnam says that truth is idealized justification rather than ordinary justification. Given that truth is taken to be a form of epistemic justification, internal realism adopts an epistemic conception of truth.

An important source of Putnam's internal realist view is an approach to the understanding of language that is verificationist in spirit. What Putnam described as "verificationist semantics" was not a strict empiricist conception of meaning in the sense of earlier logical positivism. Rather, Putnam took the view that linguistic understanding is to be analysed in terms of verification conditions as opposed to truth conditions. At this stage in the development of his thought, Putnam was closely engaged with the work of Michael Dummett who endorsed a similar anti-realist approach to understanding. Putnam also took a verificationist approach to linguistic understanding to be the only approach compatible with the functionalist view of the mind that he at that stage upheld (1983, p. 143; 2012, p. 78). One consequence of Putnam's verificationist approach to understanding is that the notion of truth itself is to be understood in verificationist terms. The notion of truth is to be understood in terms of the conditions under which it is appropriate to apply the term 'true' to an assertion. This is what gives rise to Putnam's internal realist notion of truth.

At one point in *Reason, Truth and History*, Putnam characterizes the internal realist notion of truth as follows:

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[2] Putnam offered a proof that an ideal theory cannot be false, which turns on model-theoretic considerations. Any consistent theory must have a model where a model is an interpretation of the terms of a theory that makes it true. An ideal theory will be consistent, since consistency is an epistemic criterion that an ideal theory must satisfy. Since an ideal theory satisfies all epistemic criteria and has a model, it must be true. This is a greatly simplified version of the argument given in (Putnam, 1978, pp. 125-6). For critical discussion, see Devitt (1991, pp. 225-30).

'Truth', in an internalist view, is some sort of (idealized) rational acceptability –
some sort of ideal coherence of our beliefs with each other and with our experiences
as those experiences are themselves represented in our belief system – and not
correspondence with mind-independent or discourse-independent 'states of
affairs'. (1981, pp. 49-50)

On this construal, truth is a thoroughly epistemic property which accrues to a belief in virtue
of being ideally justified. It is not a non-epistemic relation of correspondence that a belief or
assertion enters into with extra-linguistic reality. As such, the internalist construal of truth
stands in sharp contrast with the metaphysical realist conception of truth.

But the contrast between the internalist view and metaphysical realism is not restricted
to disagreement about the nature of truth. There is also significant contrast between the views
at a metaphysical level. Internal realism reflects an anti-realist metaphysical perspective. At
one point, Putnam comments that Kant may be regarded as having been the first advocate of
an internalist view of truth (1981, p. 60). The Kantian anti-realist aspect of internal realism
may be brought out by considering the status of objects. For the metaphysical realist, as we
have seen, there is a "fixed totality of mind-independent objects". In contrast with
metaphysical realism, the internalist throws the mind-independence of objects into question.

For the internal realist, the world is not carved up into objects and kinds of objects prior
to human classification. Rather, what objects and kinds of objects there are depends upon
conceptual scheme:

…signs do not intrinsically correspond to objects, independently of how these signs
are employed and by whom. But a sign that is actually employed in a particular
way by a particular community of users can correspond to particular objects within
the conceptual scheme of those users. 'Objects' do not exist independently of
conceptual schemes. We cut up the world into objects when we introduce one or
another scheme of description. Since the objects and the signs are alike internal to
the scheme of description, it is possible to say what matches what. (1981, p. 52)

On this view, reality is not divided up into objects and kinds in advance of human conceptual
activity. Nor do they exist as such independently of human thought. What objects and kinds
of objects there are depend upon choice of conceptual scheme. Thus, as opposed to
metaphysical realism, the internal realist takes the world to be divided up into objects and
kinds by our conceptual schemes.

4. Objections

I now turn to criticism of Putnam's characterization of metaphysical realism as well as of the
position of internal realism. There are numerous ways in which realists may respond to
Putnam. I focus on the objections that I find most telling. The first objection takes exception
to Putnam's characterization of metaphysical realism. Next we will see that the realist need
not be committed to there being just "one true and complete description" of the world or to a
"fixed totality of mind-independent objects". We will also see that it is possible to challenge
Putnam's treatment of the God's Eye point of view. Finally, we will consider an argument that
the epistemic concept of truth leads to idealism.

The first objection is to the way in which Putnam characterizes the position of
metaphysical realism. For Putnam, metaphysical realism involves assumptions about

reference, truth, the complete description of the world, a fixed totality of objects, etc. But a realist who wishes to endorse a realist view with non-trivial metaphysical commitments may well deny that all of these assumptions form part of realism properly so-called. A realist might define realism in a more minimal way that is not committed to all of these assumptions. Such a realist might rest content with the assertion that the world that we inhabit is an objective reality that exists independently of human language and thought. Or they might merely be committed to the existence of an "external world".

Michael Devitt is an important representative of this line of thought. Devitt is a realist who takes realism as primarily a metaphysical position, and who adopts a more minimal construal of the view. Devitt characterizes the view that he takes to be realism as follows:

> 'Realism': Tokens of most current common-sense, and scientific, physical types objectively exist independently of the mental. (2002, p. 13)

For Devitt, observable entities such as stones, trees and cats, as well as theoretical entities such as electrons, exist. His primary concern is with the existence of tokens (e.g. particular stones or electrons) rather than of types (cf. Devitt 1991, pp. 20-1). The point is not just that tokens of such types of entity exist. They are physical entities that exist objectively, independently of whether we think about them.

Such a minimal characterization of realism provides the basis for a first point of response to Putnam. We may simply challenge the way in which Putnam characterizes metaphysical realism. Putnam builds excessive commitments into the doctrine. A minimal, restricted form of realism may resist or simply avoid some of the objections that Putnam levels against metaphysical realism.

This is not a merely terminological point. Putnam is free to introduce a stipulative definition on which the expression 'metaphysical realism' refers to the position that he characterizes as such. The problem is that one might just as well have taken the expression to refer to a realist position which is metaphysical in nature, but without the detailed commitments that Putnam builds into the doctrine. One might just as well say that Putnam has misidentified the metaphysical realist position and attempted to burden it with a range of detailed commitments that the position need not take on. To speak for myself, I am more inclined to say that Putnam has simply mischaracterized metaphysical realism than that he has introduced a stipulative definition for the expression. It may seem as if I am mistakenly treating a terminological point as a substantive one. But I do think there is something positively misleading about the way in which Putnam employs the expression.[3]

Let us now consider some of the detailed commitments with which Putnam attempts to saddle the metaphysical realist. We may begin with the claim that, for the metaphysical realist, "There is exactly one true and complete description of 'the way the world is'". Why must the realist be committed to this claim? It seems to be a non-trivial and potentially troublesome addition to the basic ontological claim of the realist that there is a mind-independent reality.

To see this, consider Devitt's version of realism. According to Devitt's construal of the doctrine, the entities of common sense and science exist objectively. This is a claim about the objective existence of entities of certain kinds. It makes no mention of a "true and complete

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[3] In his intellectual autobiography, Putnam discusses the issue that arose from the way he understood metaphysical realism and its failure to mesh with other philosophers' understanding of the view. He writes: "Although I was usually impatient with critics who said "But you haven't refuted *my* form of metaphysical realism," when "their" form was not the one I was talking about, I now sympathize with them" (Putnam 2015, p. 84).

description" of the world. It does not require that there be *any* true and complete description of the world. It is entirely possible that no such true and complete description has ever been or ever will be formulated. Nor does the claim of objective existence entail that there is *only* one true and complete description of the world. So far as the existence claim is concerned, there might be more than one true and complete description of the way the world is.

It is, in any event, not clear what is meant by "one true and complete description of 'the way the world is'". Would it be an accurate, detailed description of every single moment in the entire history of the universe? This would be an extraordinarily long list! In practice, no such description is ever likely to exist. Perhaps one might think that such a description may in principle be formulated. But even to allow this is to concede too much. It is simply not clear that sense may be made of such a description.[4]

Having seen that the idea of "one true and complete description" is questionable, let us turn to the claim that for the metaphysical realist there must be "a fixed totality of mind-independent objects". A similar point to the previous one applies. A minimal Devitt-style formulation of realism says nothing about a "fixed totality" of objects. The claim that commonsense and scientific entities objectively exist fails to commit the realist to the further claim that there is a fixed totality of such entities.

Why might one think the existence claim entails a "fixed totality" of objects? One reason for this emerges once metaphysical realism is brought into contrast with internal realism. For the internal realist, objects depend upon conceptual scheme. There may be different conceptual schemes. So different sets of objects may exist, depending upon conceptual scheme. There is no fixed set of objects that exists independently of conceptual schemes. There are only the objects that exist within one or another conceptual scheme. By contrast with the internal realist, Putnam takes metaphysical realism to deny that what objects there are depends on conceptual scheme. Given that the metaphysical realist denies this, they may seem to be committed to a fixed totality of objects. But it is not entirely obvious that a more minimal Devitt-style construal of realism need be so committed. Perhaps one might think there are only the objects that there are, and there can only be one totality of such objects. But the issue is not as straightforward as this suggests.

I will now explore this question by considering some remarks due to Ian Hacking, who doubts that realism requires commitment to a "fixed totality" of objects. In *Representing and Intervening*, Hacking provides sustained discussion of Putnam's internal realism. At one point, he wonders whether the realist must be committed to the view that there is a fixed totality of objects:

> Why fixed? Why one totality? Consider only the banal example of Eddington's – there are two tables, namely the wooden table at which I am writing, and a certain bundle of atoms. A realist about entities can well hold (a) there are mind-independent tables, (b) there are mind-independent atoms, and (c) no set of atoms is identical with this table at this instant. Atoms and tables have to do with different ways of carving up the world. There is no fixed totality of objects. (1983, p. 94)

Here Hacking allows that there are different ways of "carving up the world". This may suggest that he agrees with the internalist. But that is not quite the point. Hacking does agree that there is no fixed set of objects. But he takes tables and atoms to be mind-independent. Tables and atoms reflect different ways in which the world may be carved up. But Hacking insists that the

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[4] My comments here are in the spirit of similar remarks of Hacking (1983, pp. 93-4).

objects, under different ways of carving the world up, do exist in a mind-independent manner. This is realist about the mind-independent existence of objects.[5]

We may now turn to Putnam's objection to the God's Eye view. Putnam calls metaphysical realism "externalist", since "its favourite point of view is a God's Eye point of view." Putnam's objection is twofold: (i) metaphysical realism requires a God's Eye point of view; (ii) it is impossible to adopt a God's Eye point of view. Putnam thinks that metaphysical realism requires a God's Eye point of view because it is expressed from a perspective outside the human situation. It is as if the metaphysical realist views our situation from God's perspective. But we cannot adopt such a viewpoint. Nor can we "usefully imagine" one.

To assess this objection, let us ask whether it really is necessary to adopt a God's Eye point of view in order to formulate metaphysical realism. After all, we humans are the ones who formulate the doctrine. We formulate metaphysical realism as a hypothesis about ourselves and our relationship to the world around us. Metaphysical realism is our own hypothesis about our situation in the world. We are able to propose the doctrine as a hypothesis about our own situation. So we are able to formulate the doctrine from within our human perspective. We are not required to adopt a God's Eye point of view. Nor is adopting an external perspective as problematic as Putnam suggests. In cognitive ethology, we are able to empirically study the cognitive capacities of non-human animals. Psychologists undertake the empirical study of our own human cognitive capacities. Thus, in a certain sense, we are able to adopt an "external perspective" from which to investigate the relationship between knowing subjects and their environment.[6]

So far in this section, I have considered problems which relate to Putnam's characterization of metaphysical realism. I wish now to consider an objection that arises specifically with respect to Putnam's internal realist position. Put simply, the objection is that internal realism leads to idealism. I will consider the objection in the form in which it is presented by Alan Musgrave. Musgrave focuses on the epistemic theory of truth endorsed by internal realism.

Musgrave raises the question of the relationship between the Tarskian T-scheme and epistemic theories of truth. For an epistemic theory of truth, truth is defined in terms of a property of belief, such as epistemic justification. What happens if an epistemic theory of truth is combined with the T-scheme? To illustrate what happens, Musgrave starts with a "silly epistemic truth theory". The "silly" theory is as follows:

Necessarily, S is true if and only if Musgrave thinks that P. (1997, p. 493)

Combining the silly theory with the T-scheme yields (MT):

(MT) P if and only if Musgrave thinks that P. (1997, p. 493)

An example of this is: "Frogs exist if and only if Musgrave thinks that frogs exist." Musgrave takes (MT) to be obviously absurd: "It states my omniscience: it is false if anything is the case that I do not think is the case. It is also false if I have a false belief" (1997, p. 493). The

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[5] Like Hacking, Alan Musgrave also doubts that realism is committed to a fixed totality of objects. Musgrave's concern turns on the question of how the term 'object' works: "the term 'object' is not an individuating expression or sortal predicate or 'count noun'" (2001, p. 41). The general question "How many objects are there…?" has no definite answer. The more specific question "How many books are there on the table?" may have a definite answer. But realism need not be committed to the existence of a "fixed totality" of specific kinds of things such as books or tables.

[6] I develop both of these points about the God's Eye point of view at greater length in my (2008, chapter 2).

Musgrave theory of truth can be defended if it is combined with "Musgrave-solipsism". On Musgrave-solipsism, if Musgrave thinks that P, P is the case. The way things are depends on what Musgrave thinks. If Musgrave believes that P is the case, P is the case. If Musgrave believes that P is not the case, P is not the case. But Musgrave dismisses Musgrave-solipsism as "a lunatic idealist metaphysic" (1997, p. 493).

According to Musgrave, similar absurdity applies to epistemic theories of truth of the kind proposed by internal realism. In developing the point, Musgrave employs Brian Ellis's version of internal realism rather than Putnam's.[7] For Ellis, truth is what is right epistemically to believe. Given this, Musgrave presents a similar argument to the one we have just seen. Ellis's theory of truth may be formulated as follows:

Necessarily, S is true if and only if it is epistemically right to believe that S.

Take the claim that electrons exist. Suppose it is epistemically right to believe that electrons exist. In this case, 'electrons exist' is true in Ellis's sense of 'true'. If we apply the T-scheme to 'Electrons exist', this yields:

'Electrons exist' is true if and only if electrons exist.

From this and Ellis's theory of truth, we arrive at:

(ET) Electrons exist if and only if it is epistemically right to believe that electrons exist. (1997, p. 494)

In a way similar to "Musgrave-solipsism", (ET) makes the way things are depend on what we think. It makes the existence of electrons depend upon our being in a certain epistemic state. That makes the existence of electrons depend on thought. Musgrave takes this to be a form of idealism. He takes this to be an absurd result, which should lead to the rejection of the epistemic theory of truth.

In presenting this objection to the internal realist conception of truth, Musgrave assumes idealism to be absurd. On that assumption, showing that an epistemic theory of truth leads to idealism constitutes a significant objection to the epistemic theory of truth. But not all philosophers will take this to be an objection. Philosophers sympathetic to idealism may not find it absurd. So, in order to carry through the case for realism, we must develop arguments for realism. But, before turning to the case for realism, let us further consider the ontological commitments of realism.

5. Realism

As we have seen, Putnam's characterization of metaphysical realism is problematic. Realists may adopt a more minimal characterization of their position than Putnam's characterization of metaphysical realism. For example, we have seen that Devitt formulates realism in terms of the objective mind-independent existence of tokens of commonsense and scientific physical types. No doubt, many realists would be prepared to adopt a characterization of realism similar to that employed by Devitt. Alternatively, they might simply rest content with the assertion that there is an objective reality or an "external world".

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[7] Rather than replace Ellis's terminology with Putnam's, I leave Musgrave's wording unaltered. However, it should be clear that Musgrave's argument may also be presented using Putnam-style terminology, e.g. ideal rational acceptability or ideally justified.

In Devitt's view, realism is a metaphysical thesis. It says nothing about truth. It has no semantic component. It is open to the realist to adopt a specific theory of truth, such as a correspondence theory or a minimalist account. But to do so is to adopt an optional extra that is added onto realism itself. Moreover, avoiding talk of truth in the formulation of realism has advantages. If the notion of truth is not employed in the formulation of realism, it may be possible to avoid objections which make crucial use of the notion of truth. In the next section, I will focus on considerations on behalf of realism which treat it as a metaphysical doctrine without a semantic component. Before turning to that topic, let us consider the metaphysical commitments of Devitt-style realism.

As we have seen, Devitt formulates realism as a claim about the objective existence of certain kinds of things, namely, tokens of most commonsense and scientific physical types. This reflects the fact that realists are typically not realists about every imaginable kind of thing. Most realists assert the existence of certain kinds of things while rejecting the existence of other kinds of things. The point may be put in terms of a distinction between global and local realism.[8] Global realism is unrestricted realism for which all kinds of thing exist. Local realism is realism about things of specific kinds. Typically, realists are local realists about specific kinds of things, and local anti-realists about some other kinds of things. The contrast between global and local makes most sense in the context of the contrast between realism and anti-realism. Some anti-realists are global anti-realists. Global anti-realists deny that there are any mind-independent things. Strong forms of idealism are examples of global anti-realist positions.

Devitt's characterization of realism combines two sorts of local realism. The first is commonsense realism. This is realism about items of ordinary common sense, such as tables. The second is scientific realism, which is realism about the well-established entities of the sciences, such as atoms. Devitt restricts realism to physical things recognized by common sense or science. Apart from entities of these kinds, one might be a realist about things of other kinds. For example, a moral realist might hold that there are moral facts. A mathematical realist might hold that numbers exist. A modal realist might hold that possible worlds exist. But one need not be a realist about these other things in order to be a realist in Devitt's sense.

Commitment to the existence of entities of a certain kind is an important part of being a realist. But commitment to the existence of entities of a certain kind does not distinguish realism from forms of anti-realism such as idealism. An idealist may agree with the realist that items of the kind in question exist. They exist in the mind or have mental existence. For the realist, it is not just existence that is important, but mind-independent existence. The things that exist must exist in an objective sense. They must exist independently of thought. For example, a table does not depend on human thought for it to exist. Similarly, atoms and electrons do not depend for their existence on our believing that they exist.

While the realist insists on mind-independent existence, some qualifications are in order. It is important to note that not all mind-independent things are mind-independent in the same way. Consider trees, rocks, atoms, mountains, oceans, the Earth, the solar system. These are naturally occurring entities. Such natural objects exist independently of us. They would exist even if we did not exist. But tables and chairs are not naturally occurring things. Would they exist if we did not?

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[8] The terminology of local and global realism is borrowed from Brock and Mares (2007, p. 11).

Tables and chairs are artefacts. Artefacts are built by us to perform specific functions. Because they are built to perform a function, they depend on us. We intend for an artefact such as a table or a chair to perform a specific function or set of functions. In this sense, an artefact depends upon our intentions. Because they depend on our intentions, there is a sense in which artefacts depend on our minds. But, despite depending on our intentions, artefacts are still mind-independent entities. The continued existence of tables and chairs does not depend on the continued existence of humans or their minds. We might cease to exist. If we cease to exist, the tables and chairs would still exist without us. One might perhaps wonder whether tables and chairs would still exist *qua* tables and chairs if there were no humans left who might describe them as tables and chairs. But, whether or not there is anyone around to apply the words 'table' and 'chair' to the objects, the tables and chairs could survive our disappearance.[9]

Realism of the kind that Devitt characterizes clearly extends to natural objects such as trees, birds, mountains, atoms, etc. It also applies to artefacts such as tables and chairs. It seems to be optional whether Devitt's version of realism must extend to such things as numbers or objective moral facts. For our purposes, it suffices to take realism to have the commitments to commonsense and scientific entities stipulated by Devitt. We may leave it open whether realism is to be extended to the other kinds of things that I have mentioned.

6. Arguments for realism

Now that we have a handle on realism, let us turn to arguments that may be presented on behalf of realism. I will begin with the disarmingly simple proof of an external world due to G. E. Moore. I will then present a second argument that employs inference to best explanation. Then I will consider Devitt's naturalistic defence of realism.

G. E. Moore's proof of the external world is often discussed in the context of Cartesian scepticism. But it may also be set within the context of a response to idealism or other anti-realist denial of the external world. Moore presents a proof of the external world which is meant to establish the existence of ordinary objects. As such, it may be seen as an argument for commonsense realism rather than scientific realism. There is no apparent way to extend the argument to scientific realism, since it makes crucial use of ostension of observable entities. Here is the crucial quote from Moore:

> I can prove now, for instance, that two human hands exist. How? By holding up my two hands, and saying, as I make a certain gesture with the right hand, 'Here is one hand', and adding, as I make a certain gesture with the left, 'and here is another'. And if, by doing this, I have proved *ipso facto* the existence of external things, you will all see that I can also do it now in numbers of other ways: there is no need to multiply examples. ([1939]1993, pp. 165-6)

Moore assumes that we are able to prove the existence of things such as hands in a perfectly mundane fashion, namely, by pointing to them. He notes that we routinely prove the existence of things such as typographical errors on a page by pointing to them ([1939]1993, p. 167). In a similar way, we may prove the existence of external things such as our hands by pointing to

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[9] There is a further type of entity worth mentioning. Social entities such as football clubs are an interesting case. They are not physical things. But they have physical entities (humans) as members. They may be associated with a physical location (e.g. a football ground). If a decision is made to disband the club, it will cease to exist. The existence of such things does depend on mental activity.

them. The procedure may be employed to prove the existence of countless other things apart from hands. Because the method is able to be employed to prove the existence of so many things, Moore takes it to serve as proof of the external world.

Interpretative questions abound with respect to the nature of Moore's proof. Moore himself claims that it constitutes a rigorous proof which satisfies three necessary conditions for proof ([1939]1993, p. 166). Some commentators, such as James Pryor (2004), think that the basis of the proof is perceptual evidence for the existence of external objects. Other commentators, such as William Lycan (2001), take Moore's proof to be a plausibility argument. Put simply, the claim that external things exist is more plausible than the controversial philosophical assumptions that are needed to argue that we may not know that external things exist. Moore's proof does not persuade everyone. Some think it incredibly naïve. But it is one way to argue for realism at the level of ordinary objects. As we shall see, it intersects with Devitt's naturalistic argument for realism.

The second line of argument for realism that I wish to consider is one that makes use of inference to best explanation (IBE). This line of argument may be attractive to the realist who finds Moore's proof unpersuasive and who is troubled by the prospect of Cartesian scepticism. Such a realist may think it possible that life is one big dream, that we are brains in a vat or subject to a massive illusion created by an evil demon. But, rather than succumb to scepticism, such a realist takes it to be a better explanation of our actual experience that our commonsense view of the world is correct. In particular, we inhabit a world of material objects that exist independently of our minds. Bertrand Russell presented an argument along these lines:

> There is no logical impossibility in the supposition that the whole of life is a dream, in which we ourselves create all the objects that come before us. But although this is not logically impossible, there is no reason whatever to suppose that it is true; and it is, in fact, a less simple hypothesis, viewed as a means of accounting for the facts of our own life, than the common-sense hypothesis that there are really objects independent of us, whose action on us causes our sensations. ([1912]1959, pp. 22-3)

Here Russell claims that the commonsense hypothesis is simpler than the hypothesis that "the whole of life is a dream". In effect, Russell takes the simplicity of the hypothesis to indicate that it is a better explanation of our experience than the alternative hypothesis that life is one big dream. As such, we should accept commonsense realism because it provides a better explanation than the alternative.

What is the relationship between the IBE argument for realism and the Moorean argument? The answer to this question depends on how Moore's argument is interpreted. As previously indicated, one way to interpret Moore's proof is that it appeals to the perception of external objects as the basis of the proof. External objects such as Moore's two hands are perceived rather than inferred entities. If we take the point of Moore's proof in this way, then his argument may differ significantly from the IBE argument for realism. For on the IBE argument external objects are inferred rather than perceived. But there is another way of reading Moore. On this other reading, Moore is taken to argue on the basis of comparative plausibility considerations. On this construal of the argument, the alternative to believing that he is holding up two hands may be ruled out due to the implausibility of the philosophical assumptions which must be made in order to throw into doubt the claim that he is holding up two hands. On this way of reading Moore, his proof has much in common with the IBE approach. One adopts the hypothesis that two hands are being held up because this hypothesis

has greater plausibility than the alternative. As such, the proof employs an inference rather than starting from perception. Moreover, the assessment that the hypothesis is more plausible than the alternative is similar to the assessment that the hypothesis is a better explanation than the alternative.

One problem with the IBE defence of realism is that it is non-demonstrative. This is characteristic of IBE arguments, which proceed by attempting to show that an explanation is better than alternative explanations, and should be adopted because it is the better explanation. The effectiveness of the IBE defence of realism depends on realism being shown to be the best explanation as compared with the alternatives. This in turn must depend on what the criteria of best explanation are taken to be. Though we may expect some agreement on explanatory criteria, such as simplicity or coherence with background knowledge, disagreement may be expected as well. Especially when it comes to metaphysical matters such as the issue of realism, there is room for disagreement. Some philosophers may simply fail to agree that realism is the best explanation of our experience. Indeed, some philosophers may find Putnam's internal realism or a Kantian position to be a better explanation of our experience than realism.

For a stronger case for realism, I turn to Devitt's naturalistic defence of realism. Devitt's argument on behalf of realism takes off from the point that realism about ordinary objects plays a central role in common sense:

> Realism about the ordinary observable physical world is a compelling doctrine. It is almost universally held outside intellectual circles. From an early age we come to believe that such objects as stones, cats, and trees exist. Furthermore, we believe that these objects exist even when we are not perceiving them, and that they do not depend for their existence on our opinions nor on anything mental. This realism about ordinary objects is confirmed day by day in our experience. It is central to our whole way of viewing the world. Common-sense realism is aptly named because it is the core of common sense. (2002, p. 18)

Realism about ordinary objects is the "core of common sense". And yet many philosophers reject commonsense realism. Devitt thinks the reason that philosophers reject commonsense realism in favour of anti-realist positions is to be found in epistemology. Indeed, it stems from *a priori* epistemological theorizing. From a naturalistic perspective, such *a priori* epistemological theorizing has little merit, and is no basis on which to reject realism.

According to Devitt, the problem may be traced back to Descartes and the need to respond to Cartesian scepticism. Descartes posed the problem of how we can know that there is an external world based on our senses. Traditional foundationalists respond that we may be certain of that which is given to us in immediate experience, e.g. sense data. But it is difficult to provide a conclusive argument that the external world exists on the basis of an appeal to our inner experiences. There is, Devitt says, "a 'gap' between the object known and the knowing mind" (2002, p. 20). Idealists sought to close the gap between mind and world by making the world mental. Kantians sought to close the gap by making the knowable world depend on our conceptual contribution. Devitt thinks that such epistemological theorizing prompted by the need to respond to Cartesian scepticism has led to "disaster". It results either in rejection of genuine knowledge of the external world or in "truly bizarre metaphysics" (2002, p. 21).

What is the source of the disaster? According to Devitt, the disaster is due to "epistemological speculations":

> …why should we have any confidence in these speculations? In particular, why should we have such confidence in them that they can undermine realism? Over a few years of living people come to the conclusion that there are stones, trees, cats, and the like, existing largely independent of us. This realism is confirmed day by day in their experience. A Moorean point is appropriate. Realism seems much more firmly based than the epistemological speculations that are thought to undermine it. Perhaps, then, we have started the argument in the wrong place: rather than using the epistemological speculations as evidence against realism, perhaps we should use realism as evidence against the speculations. (2002, p. 22)

Devitt takes realism about ordinary objects to be confirmed by our everyday experience. Epistemological speculation raises doubts about the existence of ordinary objects and threatens to undermine realism. But, Devitt asks, why should epistemological speculation carry weight against realism?

Devitt makes the "Moorean point" that the epistemological speculations should not be taken as seriously as realism.[10] Realism is too well supported by experience for the speculations to seriously threaten it. Devitt adds a naturalistic touch to this Moorean response. He notes that the epistemological speculations have an *a priori* character, and should be rejected in favour of a naturalistic approach:

> …what support are these troubling speculations thought to have? Not the empirical support of the claims of science, for that sort of support is itself being doubted. The support is thought to be *a priori*, as is the support for our knowledge of mathematics and logic. Reflecting from the comfort of armchairs, foundationalists and Kantians decide what knowledge must be like….

> …the troubling epistemological speculations have no special status: they are simply some among many empirical hypotheses about the world we live in. As such, they do not compare in evidential support with realism. Experience has taught us a great deal about the world of stones, trees, and cats, but rather little about how we know about this world. So epistemology is just the wrong place to start the argument: the sceptical challenge should be rejected. Instead, we should start with an empirically based metaphysics and use that as evidence in an empirical study of what we can know and how we can know it; epistemology itself becomes part of science, 'naturalized epistemology':

> empirical metaphysics -> empirical epistemology.

> And when we approach our metaphysics empirically, realism is irresistable. Indeed, it faces no rival we should take seriously. (2002, pp. 22-3)

In Devitt's view, the problems for realism stem from *a priori* epistemological speculation. If we reject *a priori* epistemology in favour of a naturalistic approach, we may uphold realism. We may uphold realism because realism about ordinary objects is confirmed by experience. By contrast, the evidence for the epistemological speculation is less impressive than the evidence for realism. So we should reject the epistemological speculation and adopt realism instead.

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[10] Given the way Devitt treats the "Moorean point", his reading of Moore appears closer to the Lycan-style plausibility comparison interpretation of Moore than to Pryor's perceptual warrant interpretation.

Devitt's naturalistic point against *a priori* epistemological speculations serves to bolster the case for realism. But, as Putnam himself came to see, there is perhaps a further element that can be added to the case for realism.

7. Direct realism

As is well known, Putnam changed his philosophical position on a number of occasions over the course of his career. Of particular relevance in the present context, Putnam came to regard the internal realist position as mistaken. By around 1990, Putnam had decided to renounce the position of internal realism that he had defended since the mid-1970s. A crucial part of his change of mind was due to his recognition of the importance of the theory of perception in thinking about realism. His later work on realism is characterized by a turn to direct realism, or, as he sometimes called it (following William James), "natural realism".

A direct realist theory of perception may be contrasted with an indirect realist theory of perception (though these are not the only available alternatives). The best-known modern indirect realist theory is the sense-data theory. According to the sense-data theory, in perceiving an external object what one actually perceives is not the object itself, but a sense-datum which is a mental object within the mind of the perceiving subject. By contrast with indirect realism, the direct realist holds that in perceiving an object in the world what is perceived is the object itself, not some internal mental state of the subject.

The contrast between direct and indirect realist theories of perception may seem to reflect a minor local dispute within the theory of perception. But in turning away from internal realism, Putnam came to recognize that the dispute is one with profound philosophical consequences. As he writes in his intellectual autobiography:

> I began to think that the problem of "access" to external objects ….was a replay of the older problem of epistemological dualism, even if the dualism was no longer a dualism of mental substance and physical substance, but one of brain states and everything outside the head. I came to believe, and still believe today, that "natural realism" with respect to perception can indeed be defended, and that with natural realism with respect to perception back in place the fear (or the bugaboo) that we may have no "access" to reality outside our heads can be dismissed as a bad dream. (2015, p. 83)

Thus, far from being a minor issue in the theory of perception, Putnam sees the direct realist theory of perception as playing an important role in the defence of realism. What had made realism appear so problematic was the "Cartesian predicament" which presents us with the problem of explaining how our minds come to accurately reflect the external world. What Putnam came to realize is that, with the adoption of a direct realist theory of perception, the problem of explaining how we may have access to reality is dissolved.

The point is not simply that adoption of a direct realist theory of perception may enable us to present a direct proof of external objects and thereby of the external world (though this may indeed be the case). The point, rather, is that with the adoption of direct realism the epistemological problem that has led philosophers down the well-worn path to anti-realist and idealist views is set aside. Once the Cartesian sceptical concerns that appeared to open a gaping chasm between mind and world are removed, the impetus toward such anti-realist positions disappears.

In sum, Putnam came to appreciate the important role played by perception in providing epistemic access to items in the mind-independent world. In this, he joins forces with a number of recent philosophers who hold that purported problems with realism are due to mistaken views about the nature of perception (e.g. Brewer, 2013; Searle, 2015). The shift to direct realism helps to extricate philosophy from the Cartesian predicament with its attendant threats of scepticism about the external world and idealist rejections of mind-independence. To my mind, the question that remains is whether direct realism can provide further support for realism about the unobservable entities of theoretical science.

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