

Hilary Putnam

Philosophy in An Age of Science: Physics, Mathematics, and Skepticism,
ed. Mario De Caro and David Macarthur.

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The word on the street, according to the editors of this book and according to Putnam himself, is that Putnam changes his mind about everything. Putnam says of himself that he “never wanted to be the sort of philosopher who pretends to have the final answer to all the big questions” (Preface, x). I take Putnam to mean that he cares less about developing definitive positions than he cares about living the philosophical way of life. The purpose of this review of Putnam’s book, accordingly, is to provide some clues to interpreting Putnam’s theory of the philosophical way of life. My remarks are intended to construct a frame of reference for thinking about the essays in this book.

One wrong way to approach the reading of this book is to think that Putnam’s philosophical approach can be found in his educational background with the logical positivists and former members of the Vienna Circle, Hans Reichenbach and Rudolf Carnap. However, logical positivism and Putnam’s attempts to counter the views of his educational legacy are in Putnam’s past. It would be more on the mark to approach Putnam’s work from the framework of the American Pragmatism of Charles Sanders Pierce and John Dewey. However, Putnam’s shifting answers to his problems need to be noted as revealing that his allegiance to pragmatism is only from a broad perspective: the fallibilism, pluralism, experimentalism, anti-foundationalism, openness to uncertainty, and the down-to-earth or naturalistic and concrete framework of pragmatism. Putnam does not bind himself to any specific doctrine of Pragmatism: he only binds himself to the stance, talk, and walk of Pragmatism.

However, there is a deeper background that can be missed on a casual reading of this collection. Moreover, recognition of the deeper background is needed to gain an appreciation of how Putnam has contributed to the philosophical scene in Anglo-American philosophy. This deeper background is perhaps the background problem of all philosophy after Kant.

Most philosophers accept Kant’s dictum that we are stuck on the side of experience and intellect as opposed to reality. Putnam’s philosophical project is from this broad perspective, an answer to Kant: by philosophically examining the sciences and mathematics, and other products of the intellect, we can gain fallible clues to reality or nature. But in the way that Putnam practices philosophical examination, it always turns to self-examination and so is recursive.

Here is where we need to examine more closely the point of the recursive nature of Putnam’s essays in this collection.

Putnam only ever asks one question, with several variations applied to several fields, with only one answer, with several variations applied to several fields. Putnam modifies this one variously through all his articles, books, and collections of articles. The question is: Do we learn

anything about reality from our intellectual endeavours, and does what we learn about reality bear on how we conduct our lives? In specific, Putnam's book variously answers the variations on that question by recursively containing everything he ever thought or at least wrote.

The recursive character of Putnam's essays is not just due to an attempt to "improve" his views (Preface, x) but is used as a technique to face the deep Kantian chasm between the products of our minds and reality without blinking an eye. Putnam demonstrates how the very recursive nature of thought or intellect impels and drives its constant self-examination and thereby helps us examine the Kantian problem to its bottom.

One can see a good example of how the recursive self-examination of Putnam's writing functions by looking at the pivotal essay of the book, Chapter 28, "Wittgenstein: A Reappraisal".

It is a brand new essay. It is intended to recast not only Putnam's writings on Wittgenstein selected in this book, but also his Wittgensteinian critiques of scepticism selected for this book. The view he advances here in this essay on Wittgenstein is the one he attributes to Stanley Cavell, of Wittgenstein as looking at philosophy as more of an attitude and approach to problems and daily living—as opposed to philosophy as a specialized field with self-generating problems. So, Putnam's recursive re-examination of his arguments against scepticism, based on the standard interpretation of Wittgenstein, where Putnam argues that scepticism is based on the wrong grammar for "knowledge-language", is recast in this essay, as scepticism is based on a wrong attitude toward life. His most succinct statement of this view of philosophy as a way of life in this collection of essays, and his view of scepticism as a wrong approach to life, is, I think, found in his essay on Stanley Cavell, Chapter 32, "Philosophy as the Education of Grownups: Stanley Cavell and Skepticism". Putnam says: "scepticism universalized, scepticism that refuses to acknowledge any human community, is, to the extent that it is possible, a posture that negates not only its own intelligibility but also the very existence of a speaking and thinking subject, negates, the sceptic's own existence and the world's." (564) Skepticism involves adopting a nihilist philosophy when it comes to living one's life.

Putnam's viewpoint of philosophy as a way of life or a kind of posture towards existence, living, and the world leads us to Putnam's own contribution to philosophy: "The moral I wish to draw is a simple one. It is not from any one 'type' or 'school' of philosophy that enlightenment comes. Enlightenment can come from any type of philosophy... It is when different insights from different sources are connected with each other that philosophy truly educates us." (Chapter 19, "The Fact/Value Dichotomy and Its Critics", 298) Taking into account the perspective of the inescapable Kantian chasm, I interpret this as saying that we get a better comprehension of the chasm between experience and reality when we examine it from all philosophical angles. In specific, the philosophical "enlightenment" we acquire "educates us" about the depth of experience. Putnam writes: "That experience is intrinsically deep is the heart of the Kantian conception. It is not something that was overthrown by the collapse of Kant's 'synthetic a priori' and the metaphysics Kant tried to base on it." (Chapter 33, "The Depths and Shallows of Experience", 573)

In light of what Putnam says in Chapter 19 about deploying a multi-dimensional approach in philosophy and about not being bound to one type of philosophy, Putnam's theory in

Chapter 1 concerning philosophy's role in a scientific age may need to be recast.

Chapter 1, "Science and Philosophy" is the thematic essay of the book. Putnam argues in Chapter 1 that philosophy has two roles: firstly, "a theoretical face" (44), which provides a synoptic world-view for the sciences and technology, and, secondly, a "moral face", where philosophy provides a social conscience for us. Furthermore, in Chapter 28 Putnam seems to reinforce the synoptic and social critique aspects of philosophy by denying his former assent to the standard view of Wittgenstein (both when it comes to the *Tractatus* and to the *Philosophical Investigations*) as providing an anti-philosophy philosophy: "the idea that metaphysics as a whole, starting with Socrates, is valueless and, indeed, a sort of illness, explained by 'grammar' going wrong and to be cured by a mysterious sort of therapy, is, I believe quite wrong." (482–3) However, in Chapter 19, Putnam argues for a multi-dimensional approach in philosophy where we achieve "enlightenment" through connecting "different insights from different sources". Thus, we need to recast what Putnam says in Chapter 1 as follows: only a multi-dimensional approach integrating different perspectives can provide a synoptic vision with a social conscience.

Furthermore, Putnam's Kantian view of experience as "intrinsically deep", as discussed in Chapter 33, may require reassessment in light of this collection's final essays, in which Putnam argues for direct realism. Does direct realism contradict the Kantian view that experience, intellect, and conceptual systems are all on one side of the chasm between experience and reality? As Putnam says about the Kantian tradition, "To challenge the conceptual system 'as a whole' would require standing outside one's own concepts, and there is no place from which to do that." (Chapter 30, "Skepticism and Occasion-Sensitive Semantics", 526) But do Putnam's arguments for direct realism contradict the thesis that there is no place to stand "outside one's own concepts"? In Putnam's disclaimer to one of his essays in this collection arguing for direct realism (Chapter 34, "Aristotle's Mind and the Contemporary Mind"), Putnam now finds some value "to the notion of a mental representation" (584). Putnam in his recursive re-examination of direct realism proffers a view he calls "liberal functionalism" (Chapter 36, "How to Be a "Sophisticated Naive Realist", 637). Putnam writes that "what we perceive depends on a *transaction* between ourselves and the environment, and ... the properties we perceive depend on our nature as well as the nature of the environment." (636) If so, direct realism and Putnam's "liberal functionalism" both require recursive re-examination and re-evaluation because philosophical theories too are products of our "transaction between ourselves and the environment". Putnam teaches that recursive re-examination of all thought is part of the "education of grownups".

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