Engaging Putnam

Edited by
James Conant and Sanjit Chakraborty

DE GRUYTER

Series Editors
Prof. Dr. Günter Abel
Technische Universität Berlin
Institut für Philosophie
Straße des 17. Juni 135
10623 Berlin
Germany
e-mail: abel@tu-berlin.de

Prof. Dr. James Conant
The University of Chicago
Dept. of Philosophy
1115 E. 58th Street
Chicago IL 60637
USA
e-mail: jconant@uchicago.edu

ISBN 978-3-11-076916-6
e-ISBN (PDF) 978-3-11-076921-0
e-ISBN (EPUB) 978-3-11-076934-0
ISSN 2365-1601

Library of Congress Control Number: 2022933783

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek
The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available on the Internet at http://dnb.dnb.de.

Typesetting: Integra Software Services Pvt. Ltd.
Printing and binding: CPI books GmbH, Leck

www.degruyter.com

James Conant

An Introduction to Hilary Putnam

> The holes in our lives that the dead leave behind should not be ignored.
>
> Hilary Putnam[1]

The hole that the death of Hilary Putnam left behind, not only in the lives of those who knew him as a philosophical colleague and interlocutor, but also in the landscape of contemporary philosophy, is as capacious in extent as it is unique in shape. Perhaps no one of the respects in which Putnam is an unusual philosopher – his colorful life, his distinctive conception of philosophy, his extraordinary intellectual breadth, his proclivity for changing his mind, the metamorphoses in his forms of political and religious engagement – is fully peculiar to him, but what is unique is the manner in which he combines and blends them into a single lifelong way of doing philosophy and exemplifying what it means to be a philosopher.

I From Paris to Jerusalem and From Positivism to Judaism

The richness of Putnam's thought and the many-layered character of his philosophical identity may in part be traced to the unusual trajectory of stations his life traverses, geographically as well intellectually: first from Paris to Philadelphia, then from MIT and Harvard to Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, while never ceasing to think of himself as a citizen of the world – from logical positivism and computational theories of the mind, to Marxism and externalism, and, finally, to Pragmatism and Judaism, while never ceasing to think of himself as an analytic philosopher.

Hilary Whitehall Putnam was born in Chicago on July 31, 1926 to a Jewish mother and a father who, though from a Christian family, was himself the farthest thing from a practicing Christian. Samuel Putnam (1892–1950) practiced journalism as his first métier and at one time wrote for the *Daily Worker*, a publication of the American Communist Party. Shortly after Hilary's birth his family moved to France. The Putnam family lived in Paris until the Nazi occupation of

1 Joost Alleblas and Randy Eisinger, "An Interview with Hilary Putnam," *Cimedart* (Magazine of the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Amsterdam), 2001.

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110769210-001

Paris rendered it no longer safe for them to remain there. As a child, Hilary Putnam grew up hearing and speaking both French and English. Later in life, in his Harvard classes on the philosophy of language, his favorite example of co-referential names was an autobiographical one. He would contrast the name by which he was mostly known as a child with the one by which he was known as an adult. To bring the example into auditory view for the class, he would first pronounce it in the accent, tonality, aspiration, and stress on each of the four syllables characteristic of the French pronunciation of his name, following it up with the very different American pronunciation of "Hilary Putnam."

Samuel Putnam conducted both his active literary working life – as a critic, editor, and translator – and his no less lively and no less literary Parisian social life largely within the walls of the family's apartment. He wrote a best-selling autobiography, *Paris was Our Mistress*, about the community of expatriate literary and artistic figures who formed his circle of friends and contemporaries in Paris during the 1920s and early '30s and who stepped in and out their door every day.[2] The book brings vividly to life how the Putnam family domicile doubled as a Bohemian salon at which much of the anglophone literary and artistic community then resident in Paris would gather with their Francophone counterparts to debate intellectual, political, and aesthetic issues of the day. Hilary's father's Parisian autobiography thereby depicts not only the extraordinary intellectual milieu but also, indirectly, the chaotic household in which his one and only child first tried to make sense of the world around him.[3] One of those who frequented that salon, the young Ernest Hemingway, in his own posthumously published memoir of that same Parisian epoch, spoke not only for himself at the time, but also for many of those who belonged to the Putnam circle he frequented, when he observed in a remark that Hilary Putnam later

2 Samuel Putnam, *Paris Was Our Mistress: Memoirs of a Lost and Found Generation* (New York: Viking, 1947; most recent reprint: Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1970).

3 The Viking Press's press release for the original 1947 edition of the book not only nicely summarizes its aim, but therewith also the character of the milieu which formed the backdrop to Hilary's childhood: "This is much more than a Left Bank record – it is autobiography, it is a critical appraisal, and highlights the background of the new American school of writers, from the Chicago group to the start of the flow towards Paris. It is chatty, anecdotal – a collection of pen sketches, vignettes and profiles of leading figures, American, English, and French, writers largely, but artists as well. Here was that decade, 1922–1933, in Montparnasse and Montmartre – the figures who made literary history then, Gertrude Stein, Elliott Paul, Ernest Hemingway, Ezra Pound, Elliot, Joyce, Ford Madox Ford, Aldington, and Ehrenburg, Cocteau, Aragon, Derain, Picasso, Pirandello. A very distinguished sidelight on the passing literary scene, perceptive, humorous, entertaining, written by a critic and editor who was one of the group of which he writes."

liked to quote: "If you are lucky enough to have lived in Paris as a young man, then wherever you go for the rest of your life, it stays with you, for Paris is a moveable feast."[4] Samuel Putnam made his living translating classic literary works from a variety of Romance languages into English. His most lasting contribution has proved to be his monumental translation of Cervantes's *Don Quixote*.[5] It is a thousand pages in length, each of which is elegantly rendered, and supplemented with scholarly endnotes providing background into a dazzlingly wide array of historical, literary and intellectual matters – including one footnote thanking his undergraduate son, Hilary Whitehall Putnam, by that point in life now an aspiring logician, for help with a logical matter.[6] Daniel Eisenberg, comparing the available English-language translations of *Don Quixote*, singles out the Putnam translation as the most "sensitive," as well as being by far the best annotated.[7]

The Putnam family returned to the U.S. in 1934, when Hilary was nine years old, and settled in Philadelphia.[8] It was while attending Central High School there, that Hilary first met his lifelong friend Noam Chomsky, who was one year his junior. Their lives moved along parallel tracks for a stretch. They both went on to attend the University of Pennsylvania and the two of them rapidly distinguished themselves from their undergraduate classmates, not least through the prodigious number of graduate seminars in which they enrolled. The most formative of these for both of them was the one taught by Zellig Harris, called *Linguistic Analysis*. There were the only two undergraduates in the class; the course material was difficult and filled with technicalities.[9] Looking back many years later,

4 Ernest Hemingway, *A Moveable Feast* (New York: Vintage, 1964).

5 Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote de la Mancha: The Putnam Translation* (New York: Viking, 1947).

6 In Chapter 51 (on page 842 of the Putnam translation), in a ruling handed down by a judges' tribunal adjudicating the fate of Sancho Panza, a paradox figures – one in which a reason is adduced for why the defendant should be hanged, but also why, if he is for that reason to be hanged, then he should go free. The commentary in the footnote thanks the young Hilary for assisting the author with some of the details supplied there regarding the history of such logical paradoxes (see pp. 1019–1020 of the Putnam edition of "*Don Quixote de la Mancha*").

7 "Samuel Putnam (1949) is of all the English translators the one who shows the most sensitivity, and gives us the most information about competing editions of the Spanish text." (Daniel Eisenberg, "*Don Quixote* as Seen through the Eyes of Its Modern English Translators," *Cervantes: The Bulletin of the Cervantes Society of America*, Spring-Fall (2006): 104)

8 Some of the sentences in the paragraphs to follow draw on ones originally written for the headnote on Hilary Putnam in James Conant and Jay Elliott (eds.), *The Norton Anthology of Western Philosophy*. Vol. 2: *After Kant*: *The Analytic Tradition* (New York: Norton, 2017), 1577–1581.

9 At the time, Harris was completing work on his *Methods in Structural Linguistics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951).

Putnam writes: "[T]he powerful intellect and personality of Zellig Harris drew me like a lodestone, and, although I majored in Philosophy, I took every course there was to take in Linguistic Analysis from then until my graduation."[10] Though he enrolled in and audited numerous courses in physics and mathematics, in addition to ones in linguistics, his favorite undergraduate courses at Penn were in philosophy, especially those taught by C. West Churchman and Morton White.[11] Putnam received his B.A. from Penn in 1948. He then began work on a Ph.D. in philosophy at Harvard, where he studied briefly with W.V.O. Quine and C.I. Lewis. Harvard at that moment in its history, however, soon came to seem to the young Hilary Putnam not to be the most exciting place in the United States to study philosophy. He was drawn at that moment especially to the ideas of the logical empiricists. For this reason, as well as others (primarily financial in nature[12]), he decided to transfer to the University of California, Los Angeles, where he completed his Ph.D. in 1951.[13] This allowed him to write his dissertation, on the concept of probability,[14]

10 Hilary Putnam, "Preface" to *The Form of Information in Science*, edited by Zellig Harris et al. (Berlin: Springer, 1988), xi.

11 Putnam describes Churchman as "the first teacher who really influenced me." For the full context of his account of Churchman's influence on him, as well as that of White, see Michela Bella, Anna Boncompagni and Hilary Putnam, "Interview with Hilary Putnam," *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy* 7, no. 1 (2015), 1–2.

12 He reports in his intellectual autobiography: "In fact, my year of graduate study at Harvard was only made possible by the generosity of my uncle Peter Sampson. I obviously needed a scholarship, but when I asked about the possibility, the Harvard Department told me that I would have to pass the full set of 'prelims,' the written exams for Ph.D. candidates. Those exams were not to be given until the spring, and it seemed foolish to me to wait that long to find out if I would have any support the following year. So I applied for admission and financial assistance elsewhere. I don't know how many schools I applied to, but I do recall that I was offered teaching assistantships at Penn, where I had already spent four years, and UCLA, and I naturally chose to go to UCLA where I would meet a new set of philosophers." (Hilary Putnam, "Intellectual Autobiography," in *The Philosophy of Hilary Putnam*, edited by Randall E. Auxier, Douglas R. Anderson, and Lewis Edwin Hahn (Chicago, IL: Open Court, 2015), 15)

13 He spent a total of two years in the UCLA Ph.D. program, matriculating in fall, 1949 and successfully defending his dissertation and graduating in spring, 1951.

14 *The Meaning of the Concept of Probability in Application to Finite Sequences* (1951). It was reprinted in 1990 by Garland Press – the year in which I defended my own Ph.D. Upon completing my own defense, Putnam presented me a copy of the reprint, hot off the press. On the inside cover it bears in Hilary's handwriting the following four-line inscription, with the first, second, and fourth lines written from left to right and the third from right to left: "May 14th, 1990. From one Ph.D. to another. טוב מזל. Hilary."

under the supervision of the philosopher whose work most excited him at that particular moment, namely Hans Reichenbach.[15]

After a research year at Rockefeller University and a teaching year at Northwestern, Putnam moved to Princeton in 1953, where he was hired into a tenure-track position as a philosopher of science. The bulk of Putnam's work during his early Princeton years was in mathematics and mathematical logic.[16] Though he receives tenure on the strength of this work in mathematical logic, it is during these early years that he first begins to nourish the seeds of philosophical ideas that later bear fruit. He gets to know Carnap already during his first year at Princeton. The encounter proves to be a decisive one:

> Although I worked very hard at becoming a mathematician during my years at Princeton, I also needed to learn to be a philosopher . . . . [W]hen I arrived in Princeton in the fall of 1973 I did not yet have any original philosophical ideas, or even a program of research . . . . [I]t was the mentorship of someone who was at the Institute for Advanced Studies that got me started. The "someone," in this case, was Rudolf Carnap, who was still at the Institute in 1953–54, my first year in Princeton.[17]

It is only after receiving tenure at Princeton in 1957 that he publishes the first of his characteristically bold and original papers in philosophy, "The Analytic and the Synthetic."[18] Looking back on the paper many years later, Putnam concludes:

> A lot of my later philosophy is already in "The Analytic and the Synthetic": the idea of externalist semantics (although I did not realize it at that time), the idea that reference is preserved across theory change, contrary to Carnap's view, and therefore also preserved across changes in method of verification, the idea of law-cluster concepts – they are all in

15 "Reichenbach . . . fascinated me from day one. A wonderful human being and one of the greatest teachers on the planet . . . Reichenbach was a great teacher. It was not just a natural gift, although a natural gift he certainly had, it was not just his charisma: he loved pedagogy, he loved thinking about how to teach. But he also could do it and not just think about it." (Bella, Boncompagni and Putnam, "Interview with Hilary Putnam," 2–3)

16 See the section titled "Becoming a Mathematician" in Putnam, "Intellectual Autobiography," 27–30, and especially the engaging quotations from Martin Davis about his collaboration with Hilary Putnam on work that eventually, several years later, led to their important co-authored publication with Julia Robinson, which contributed decisively to the solution of Hilbert's Tenth Problem: Martin Davis, Hilary Putnam, and Julia Robinson, "The Decision Problem for Exponential Diophantine Equations," *Annals of Mathematics* 2, no. 74 (1961): 425–436. For some colorful background on the Davis-Putnam collaboration during Putnam's Princeton years, see Martin Davis's remarks in "Interview with Martin Davis," *Notices of the American Mathematical Society* 55, no. 5, 564–5.

17 Putnam, "Intellectual Autobiography," 30.

18 "The Analytic and the Synthetic" (1962), reprinted in *Mind, Language, and Reality*: *Philosophical Papers*, Vol. 2, 33–69 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975).

> that paper . . . . I really think that "The Analytic and the Synthetic" is the paper in which I found my philosophical voice.[19]

Many of the ideas touched upon in these remarks only start to be more fully elaborated by Putnam in the mid-1970s. In the meantime, he lays an additional layer of groundwork for those further developments by first returning to the set of interests that most captivated him in his undergraduate years when he and Noam Chomsky were studying with Zelig Harris at Penn.

This formed part of the reason for his deciding to switch departments, going on to spend four formative years at MIT from 1961 to 1965. At MIT, he had two colleagues, Jerry Fodor and Jerrod Katz, who were also close to Chomsky and equally fascinated by his project of generative linguistics. The four of them together advanced a new research program – one that was animated by the conviction that the right blend of methods and ideas drawn from generative grammar, the newly emerging science of semantics, and computational modeling of the mind would hold the key either to solving all outstanding problems in philosophy of mind and language or for allowing them to be reformulated and outsourced as strictly scientific problems. It is difficult to overstate how influential this MIT research program proved to be on the subsequent development of analytic philosophy. As it gradually moved from the periphery to the center of mainstream philosophical research, Putnam himself, however, gradually moves in the opposite direction: from being one of its foremost proponents to – starting in the late 1980s – being its foremost critic.

This fundamental shift in Putnam's overall philosophical orientation had numerous enabling causes, the first of which, no doubt, was his move from MIT to Harvard in 1965. From thenceforth the Harvard Philosophy Department would become the center of his intellectual life for the next three and a half decades. He taught there until his retirement in 2000, at the age of 74. Characteristically, he does not just allow himself to be influenced by, but also reacts against this new academic environment – above all, against the ways in which he perceives it to be a bastion of the privileged and the wealthy, as well as an intellectual product of the political status quo.

Shortly before arriving at Harvard, and for all of the next decade, he becomes immersed in a wide range of left-wing political causes and groups, including the civil rights movement, as well as several of the movements at the forefront of opposition to the war in Vietnam.[20] Already at MIT in 1963, he had helped to organize

---

19 Putnam, "Intellectual Autobiography," 35.

20 For a summary of Putnam's anti-war engagement in this period, see Lance Hickey, "Hilary Putnam," in *American Philosophers, 1950–2000*, edited by Philip B. Dematteis and Leemon

one of the first faculty cum student committees against the war. It is only after he moves to Harvard, however, that such activities move to the center of his life for a time. For a time, he sees his intellectual and political work as integrally intertwined strands in a single endeavor: studying the writings of Marx, Lenin, and Mao on his own, teaching courses that challenge the reigning philosophical orthodoxies of the day in the classroom, while overseeing campus protests outside the classroom in his capacity as the main faculty advisor at Harvard to the anti-Vietnam war organization Students for a Democratic Society. On campus, he co-organized frequent protests, featuring civil disobedience initiatives and the public burning of draft cards; off campus, as a member of the Progressive Labor party (promoting, in his own words, an "idiosyncratic version of Marxism-Leninism"), he would stand outside factory gates at 7am to sell copies of the magazine *Challenge* and discuss politics with the workers. Aside from the Vietnam War, his activist public ventures and experiments were conducted in opposition to forms of racism and social and political inequality – especially as these manifested themselves within the walls of the academy. On campus, he disrupted the classes of Richard Herrnstein,[21] and he lived in a commune together with students. He became known as a brilliant, captivating teacher, but students at his lectures during these years were often sitting on the floor with the professor in their midst, needing to contort their bodies to look at him, because he wished to eschew all forms of hierarchy, refusing to stand at the podium at the front of the room. Needless to say, the Harvard establishment was often in despair over what they viewed as his politically theatrical antics. This brought him not only into very visible forms of public conflict with the university administration, but also into sometimes painful private forms of personal conflict with a number of his colleagues at the Harvard Philosophy Department – relationships that he subsequently strove to repair over the ensuing decades.

1972 is a watershed year in Putnam's biography – one in which he turns away from his immersion in Marxist political activity and back towards full time work on topics in the philosophy of science, language, and mind. He himself retrospectively describes the moment as follows:

B. McHenry, 226–236 (Detroit: Gale Group, 2003). For some retrospective reflections from Putnam on this topic, see the section titled "The Vietnam War" in his "Intellectual Autobiography," 80–82.

21 Richard J. Herrnstein, a professor of psychology at Harvard, advocated social policies – already not uncontroversial at the time (and which only gained in notoriety over the following decades) – based on purported connections obtaining between a person's race and their average intelligence and capacity for success.

> I resigned from the "Progressive Labor Party" in December 1972, after months of reflection and rethinking of my entire relation to Marxism and to communism. I decided to abandon political activism for the time being, apart from supporting Amnesty International. . . . The first fruit of that decision was "The Meaning of 'Meaning'" which I wrote that same month. I had been thinking about the issues for a long time, and evidently the text had been composing itself in my subconscious, because that paper flowed from my fingers via a new electric typewriter onto the paper as if it had been "there" waiting for a joyous release.[22]

The publication in 1975 of "The Meaning of 'Meaning'" (to which we will return below) no doubt marks a moment in which Putnam's philosophical work achieves a new degree of recognition and begins to draw the attention of philosophers working in areas not directly related to the philosophy of science, mind or language.[23] What it does not mark is a sudden shift in Putnam's views on topics in theoretical philosophy. That had already been underway for some time, starting almost a decade earlier. His break with radical political activism notwithstanding, Putnam's work in the philosophy of mind and philosophy of science in the late 1970s continues a trend already clearly discernible in his thought from the late 1960s on – one which reflects his commitment to the materialist and anti-individualist outlook he draws from his reading of Marx. He becomes an opponent of all forms of methodological solipsism – not just those that constituted the then regnant research programs in psychology, linguistics, and the philosophy of mind, but also those in economics, ethics, and political theory. Just as Marx had argued that Hegelian philosophy was upside-down and tried to stand it on its head, so Putnam in this period of his work is concerned to argue that much of mainstream analytic philosophy of mind was similarly upside-down and needed to be set on its feet. In this initial attempt to turn analytic philosophy right-side up, he strove to reveal the extent to which our capacity for thought depends upon the embeddedness of our minds in a physical, social, and linguistic environment.[24] Although Putnam publicly and vehemently came to abandon communism as a political stance in the early 1970s, he remained politically active and never lost his admiration for the anti-individualist and anti-reductionist strands of thought in Marx's

22 Putnam, "Intellectual Autobiography," 82.

23 Hilary Putnam, "The Meaning of 'Meaning'," in *Mind, Language and Reality: Philosophical Papers*, Vol. 2, 215–271 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975).

24 Putnam makes the connection between his Marxism and externalism explicit in a number of his later retrospective reflections on this period of his work. One contemporaneous context in which it is made explicit – which appeared two years prior to the publication of "The Meaning of 'Meaning'" – is in the opening pages of his 1973 essay "Explanation and Reference," in *Mind, Language, and Reality: Philosophical Papers*, Vol. 2, 196–214 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), see 196–197.

philosophical writings. Certain aspects of his late '60s political awakening therefore never ceased to exert an influence on his later philosophical work.

Putnam's wife Ruth Anna Jacobs, was not only his companion throughout much of his life, but also became his most important intellectual interlocutor. Her own biography is relevant to an understanding of her husband's later intellectual development in a variety of ways, especially with regard to two dimensions of reorientation that Putnam's later philosophy acquires when it seeks to incorporate ideas drawn from pragmatism, on the one hand, and, Judaism, on the other.

Ruth Anna was born in Berlin on September 20, 1927. Her parents were both German citizens, again one Jewish and one Christian. Like her husband's parents, they, too, saw themselves as committed atheists and communists. An only child, in the wake of the Reichstag fire, shortly before her sixth birthday, she was sent by them for her own protection to live with her Christian grandparents, while her own parents, who had actively protested against the Nazis, went into hiding. Ruth Anna emigrated to the United States in 1948, when she was 21, and it was only then, fifteen years later, that she was finally reunited with her parents in 1947 in Los Angeles. Those fifteen years marked a defining trauma of her life, one to which she returned in her activity as a philosopher, seeking to comprehend its significance. It formed a background against which she, in her later philosophical work, she sought to gauge the strengths and limitations of the analytic tradition in philosophy – the one in which she, like her husband, was originally been trained – measuring them against those of the comparatively capacious conception of philosophy she found in the American pragmatist tradition, and especially in the writings of William James and John Dewey.

Once they settled in the United States, Ruth Anna's father, having been a well-known Communist in Germany, was rightfully fearful of deportation from the United States. He therefore changed his name to "Martin Hall" and she herself went by this surname in public life as a young adult though, as she later told her family, she chose not to legally change her birth name until she married Hilary. Her initial work as a philosopher was in fairly technical areas of philosophy of science; and she, too, received her Ph.D. in philosophy at UCLA, though over a decade after Hilary, in 1962, with a dissertation titled *The Interpretation of Theoretical Statements*, written under the supervision of Carnap. Her own philosophical interests eventually broadened out as widely as did those of her husband. She became known, above all, as an important historian of American pragmatism, teaching at MIT and at Wellesley College during the years when Hilary taught at Harvard. One seminal intellectual influence she had on her husband was to teach him to take the philosophical achievement of especially James and Dewey with a degree of seriousness with which he had initially been reluctant to

credit their writings.[25] Their conversations and collaborations on these philosophers eventually culminated in their enormous, jointly authored book, *Pragmatism As a Way of Life*, edited by David Macarthur and published in the year after Hilary's death.[26] Another more gradual but no less profound philosophical influence she exerted on her husband's development as a thinker had to with the ways in which she encouraged and accompanied him through the various stages in his gradual transition from an unapologetically firebrand atheist to a practicing religious Jew. Ruth Anna and Hilary had each had been raised in a secular home with ambivalent relations to the Jewish side of its legacy, but the crucial difference is that hers had been one that was devastated and split asunder by the holocaust. As she grew older, she became ever more curious about this side of her original roots, as well as in the philosophical significance of the events that had exerted such an enormous impact on her early life, severing her from that side of her heritage. Her concern with these topics had been that of a secular Jew, until 1975 – the year in which the older of their two sons announced that he wanted to have a bar mitzvah. This first event of family participation in Jewish religious observance proved to be a decisive catalyst, leading to further such events, and gradually over time reshaping their lives. As Ruth Anna explored these avenues, from 1975 on Hilary became equally curious about his own Jewish heritage, as well as eager to seek instruction more broadly in all aspects of Jewish thought, history, and religious observance. Hilary began to take Hebrew lessons, to study the Torah and Talmud under the tutelage of Rabbi Ben-Zion Gold,[27] regularly to attend meetings at the Harvard Hillel Society, to observe the major Jewish holidays, and to familiarize himself with the writings of major Jewish thinkers – all

25 Putnam's first probing yet sympathetic published engagements with the writings of Dewey, James, and Peirce begin appear in the late 1980s and early 1990s; in the case of Peirce, see especially the discussion of Peirce on chance in *The Many Faces of Realism* (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1987), 80–86, as well as his essay "Peirce: The Logician," in *Realism with a Human Face*, edited by James Conant, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 252–260; in the case of James and Dewey, see especially "Pragmatism and Moral Objectivity" and "Pragmatism and Relativism" in *Words and Life*, edited by James Conant, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 151–181 and 182–197; as well as "The Permanence of William James" in *Pragmatism: An Open Question*, 5–26 (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995).

26 Hilary Putnam and Ruth Anna Putnam, *Pragmatism as a Way of Life*, edited by David Macarthur (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017). Ruth Anna and Hilary's earliest coauthored essays on these topics are their "William James's Ideas" (collected in *Realism with a Human Face, 217–231*) and their "Education for Democracy" (collected in *Words and Life, 221–244*).

27 Rabbi Gold was the Rabbi of the Hillel at Harvard University. For a brief discussion of Putnam's indebtedness to him, as well as of Putnam's own self-understanding of the distinctive kind of Jew he strove to be in his later life, see his "Intellectual Autobiography," 88–89.

of which, in turn, set the stage for his later book *Jewish Philosophy as a Guide to Life* in which he sets forth some of the ideas in the Jewish philosophical tradition he finds to be most significant.[28]

On a memorable occasion for all those who were present, at the age of 68, Putnam celebrated a much belated bar mitzvah in 1994. Four years later, Ruth Anna celebrated her bat mitzvah, in 1998, memorably remarking to those present on that occasion that part of the point of her doing so was to send the following message: "We are not going to finish Hitler's work for him. We are not going to assimilate!" Hilary retired from his regular faculty post at Harvard in 2000, and became Harvard's Cogan University Professor Emeritus. Though he had begun to teach and visit Israel, off and on, either at Tel Aviv University or at the Van Leer Institute in Jerusalem, starting in the late 1980s – taking his entire sabbatical years there and spending many a Harvard winter break during his non-sabbatical years in the country he came to regard as his second homeland – it was only after his official retirement from Harvard that the center of his teaching and intellectual activity shifted from Cambridge and Harvard to Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. Hilary Putnam died on March 13, 2016 at his home in Arlington, Massachusetts, at the age of 89.

II A Distinctive Conception of Philosophy and Its Practice

The first thing about Putnam as a philosopher, apt immediately to strike any newcomer to his work, is his astonishing combination of breadth with depth. He is well versed not only across a diverse range of areas of philosophy, but in an equally wide number of fields outside philosophy – mathematics, physics, economics, linguistics, cognitive psychology, artificial intelligence, and history of science. As he moves from one sort of debate to a very different one, he is seldom out of his depth and there appears to be hardly any area of philosophy and its allied fields about which he does not have something interesting to say. Yet he wears his prodigious learning extremely lightly and gracefully, never drawing

28 Hilary Putnam, *Jewish Philosophy as a Guide to Life* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002). In an interview in 2015, he says: "Judaism is my tradition, but I interpret it in my own way. When my friend, a wonderful critical philosopher, Sidney Morgenbesser, died . . . one of the speakers at his memorial, said that 'Sidney proved that one can be rooted in a tradition without being a plant.' I think that is what I want: I want to be rooted in a tradition without being a plant!" (Bella, Boncompagni and Putnam, "Interview with Hilary Putnam," 8)

upon it except where it is absolutely pertinent. This is in part due to the fact that the difference between the character of his philosophical conversation and that of his philosophical writing is remarkably slight. This is both because he was able to speak spontaneously in perfectly worded paragraphs and because his style of philosophical writing itself possesses a conversational fluidity and accessibility, punctuated with mischievous asides and friendly nods to his audience befitting a presentation to friends. His approach to philosophical problems is, in every sense of the word, *unassuming*. Each time he writes about a problem he seeks to make a fresh start on it: to motivate everything from scratch, to adduce non-canned examples, to purge his discussion of second-hand formulations of the problem, and to rethink every aspect of the issue from the ground up. The result is sometimes a philosophical style which can at first appear naïve and unlettered. But it usually requires only a short exposure to his work before it becomes evident that his philosophical naïveté is cultivated with Socratic ulterior motives.[29] When engaging with Putnam's work – at least when it comes to any philosophical topic about which he cares deeply – it is no mean feat to bring to bear a point of view on the discussion which he has not already considered and thoroughly explored. As his age measured in biological years gradually increased, he never ceased to strike his friends and acquaintances as philosophically youthful. He always brought to philosophy an exuberance and awe that usually wears off after extended exposure to the subject, while also bringing to his discussion of each problem a form of wisdom that can come only with age: never ceasing to wonder at how extraordinarily strange and deep philosophy's central problems are, while tempering his approach to them with a foresight stemming from having already traveled down the countless dialectical paths that branch off from each of them.

A second striking fact about all of Putnam's work is its philosophical *independence*. His work combines a protean capacity constantly to reexamine the grounds of his philosophical conviction with a deep passion for getting things right – a passion he hopes will infect his reader. His work is everywhere

29 In Putnam's writings from the mid-1980s on this involves the employment of a strategy he terms one of deliberate 'naiveté' – where the difficulty lies in showing how such a strategy is so much as possible and why it is necessary for the attainment of a philosophically uncluttered view of the nature of the human mind and the cognitive capacities it brings into exercise: "The difficulty is in seeing how . . . a move in the direction of deliberate 'naiveté' can possibly help after three centuries of modern philosophy, not to mention a century of brain science and now cognitive science. The problem now is to *show the possibility* of a return to what I called 'deliberate naiveté'. [I]t seems to me that that is the direction in which we need to go." (Hilary Putnam, "Realism without Absolutes," collected in *Words and Life*, 284)

characterized by a deep distrust of intellectual fashion and a tendency to recoil from any philosophical position – even if he himself helped to originate it – as soon as it begins to acquire the cast of a new philosophical orthodoxy. At no point in his life was he without philosophical heroes, but he made a point of always having several very different such heroes at once, both past and present. He had no compunctions about eventually outgrowing any of them and in trading them in for new philosophical exemplars. Yet he was also truly delighted and surprised by the small handful of philosophers (Aristotle, Kant, Wittgenstein) who proved to be much harder for him to outgrow than the others – those who seemed to have always already taken the next step in philosophical thinking ahead of him, somehow standing there waiting for him down the road, at the other side of the arduous recent dialectical turn he himself had just managed to complete.[30]

Not only is there a very significant sense in which Putnam never remained anyone's philosophical follower, but it was very much part of his aim in philosophy never to be one. He was eager to learn as much as he could from the great philosophers of the past and the present, but equally concerned not to allow his philosophical horizons to be defined by his admiration for any one of them. It is one thing to adopt this as one's aim in philosophy, quite another to make good on it. It requires a wonderful facility for not getting stuck in philosophy, as most of us do. Usually, as one's philosophical convictions mature, they harden: so that one's thought is able to move smoothly forward only along a single groove. If these once hardened convictions are then at a later stage undermined, usually the capacity for conviction itself sustains permanent damage in the process. (The result is a disillusioned skepticism, so familiar nowadays, and not only in departments of philosophy.) Putnam's sort of nimbleness of mind seems always only to deepen – rather than to corrode – his capacity for philosophical conviction. This requires, among other intellectual virtues, a remarkable ability to penetrate deeply into a philosophical problem along a single angle of approach without

30 The following is an example of a remark he makes in a wide number of contexts, sometimes just as an observation about his experience of reading some single philosopher to whose work he keeps returning – Aristotle, or Kant, or Wittgenstein – in this case as a more general remark about philosophers whom he admires: "I find that reading – Kant, or Aristotle, or Wittgenstein, or John Dewey, or William James, or Habermas, or one of my colleagues here at Harvard – always opens new possibilities. As I get smarter, Kant, Aristotle, etc., all get smarter as well" (Josh Harlan, "Hilary Putnam: On Mind, Meaning, and Reality," Interview with Josh Harlan, *Harvard Review of Philosophy*, Spring (1992): 24). An earlier and snappier version of such a remark is his quip: "As I get older, I find Aristotle gets smarter" (reported by Emrys Westacott, "Review Essay: Hilary Putnam, *Words and Life*", *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 1998 Vol. 24, 104).

allowing one's overall perspective on the problem in any way to narrow. It is this that allows Putnam repeatedly to articulate a genuinely fresh and subtle philosophical view, without ever precluding him, only shortly thereafter, from also being able completely and mercilessly to rethink or reject that very same view in the light of some sudden new insight.

A further striking feature of Putnam's work is that it operates with an extremely robust yet nuanced conception of the *difficulty* of philosophy. He is someone who not only thinks long and hard about both how and why certain philosophical problems are difficult, but also about what ought to count as making satisfying progress with them. His tendency when exploring a received philosophical view is generally not to consider it simply on its own terms, but rather to attain an understanding of the shape of the entire dialectic of which that particular view forms a part. The underlying methodological premise is that you are not going to be able to see clearly what is wrong with a philosophical view (and therefore reject it in a way that allows you to head out of the problem in the right direction) unless you are also able to see clearly what it is that makes the view seem so attractive to others. Hence when Putnam thinks about a philosophical problem, he often first attempts to formulate the problem in the sharpest possible terms, so that it assumes the form of an intolerable aporia, and then undertakes to map the topography of the most natural responses to it, partly in order to see how each response bears the image(s) of those it wishes to reject, and partly in order to isolate and examine the presuppositions that remain invariant throughout the established field of philosophical play. Though this dimension of his philosophical method becomes ever more pronounced in his later work, it runs throughout all of his work. The common denominator in the philosophical work of the figures in the history of philosophy whom he came most to admire – such as Aristotle, Kant, and Wittgenstein – their many differences notwithstanding, was that he regarded each of them as practicing a variant of some such method for making progress in philosophy.[31]

When it came to the process of making his philosophical ideas available to a wider public, writing always came a distant third after conversation and teaching for Putnam, in the order of genesis, clarification, and expression of thought. He would write once he was ready – as he liked to put it – "to write up" a set of ideas he had recently been trying out in various conversational and pedagogical contexts. This was no less exploratory a procedure in Putnam's hands than were

31 For a brief overview of Putnam's Aristotelianism, see *Words and Life*, xv–xxiv; of his Kantianism, see *Realism with a Human Face*, xvi–xxxiv; of his Wittgensteinianism, see *Realism with a Human Face*, xxxiv–xlii.

his improvisatory modes of conversation and teaching themselves. Each time he would "read out" a lecture he had "written up," he would – sometimes even while he was giving it – take his pencil out and begin to alter it. After dozens of such alterations, what would emerge was often a remarkably different article – and not always one that, in retrospect, he deemed superior to some of its predecessors, leading him to dive back into his earlier versions to recover an idea he felt he should not have been as quick to abandon. Working with him as the editor on two of his collections of essays – *Realism with a Human Life* and *Words and Life* – required carefully going back over a raft of mutually overlapping texts, both published and unpublished, selecting out the best versions of ones that did not substantially overlap one another, eliminating common paragraphs, adding ones from other versions of the papers, and simply leaving out altogether some nicely turned essays whose inclusion would have involved introducing too much repetition into the volume.[32] It is therefore in no way an exaggeration to say that Hilary Putnam's corpus of books and easily accessible published essays represents only a fraction of his overall body of work.[33]

More generally, Putnam's manner of practicing philosophy was one in which the role of philosophical conversation was preeminent. He would spend hours talking with students and colleagues, as well as attending conferences throughout the world – not only giving lectures and conducting mini-seminars, but also actively seeking out young philosophers to ask them what presently excited them in what they were reading and learning, self-consciously striving to expose himself to novel forms of philosophical provocation. Always eager to acquire fruitful new conversation partners, when he found someone with whom he wished to remain in contact, he was ingenious at devising ways to do so. Aside from conversation, the other great engine of intellectual exploration in his life was teaching. Given the choice, he would never teach his already published work – unless it was to criticize something in it – preferring to take advantage of the classroom environment to try out and refine his latest ideas.

Putnam approached almost everything in life – each new person, trip to a new country, or experience of an unfamiliar culture, religion, or way of life – as an opportunity to expand his education. One good way to get a sense of this

32 This is one of the reasons that there is a substantial number of published articles not collected in any of his volumes – because they overlap with ones that are published, even though the uncollected ones often also contain interesting philosophical insights that do not figure in any of the collected articles.

33 A further reason for this is that Putnam himself would simply lose track of things that he published in obscure venues.

side of his philosophical life – as well as of the impact he had on those whom he thus encountered – is to read some of the many reminiscences penned by those who thereby came to know him or even by those who had no more than a brief chance to meet and interact with him on a single occasion.[34] Here is Michael P. Lynch recollecting his first encounter with Putnam, when they met at Syracuse when Lynch was a graduate student there:

> I remember having dinner with Hilary Putnam when he came to Syracuse University around 1994 to give some lectures. I was a graduate student working on a dissertation on realism and truth. Putnam was my philosophical hero and he was incredibly generous with his time during the week he was there, meeting with me and offering me advice and philosophical wisdom. During this particular dinner he told me about traveling to Mexico when he was 18 and going to Diego Rivera's house and getting invited in for dinner by Frida Kahlo. He told me about his discussions with Einstein. Near the end of the dinner he turned to me and remarked on how lucky he was to have met such great minds, and how grateful he was to them for their willingness to talk to a young person. I remember thinking then, as I do now, that I was having the exact same experience talking to Hilary. How lucky I was, and am, for having met him. He was one of the greats.[35]

I have chosen this particular report because of the direct and unadorned manner in which it touches upon many of the things that recur throughout such reminiscences: the smiling openness with which Putnam would approach students, the active and warm interest he would take in them and their lives, his delight in sharing anecdotes and in adducing a perfectly fitting story (including especially ones drawn from his own life) to illustrate a point, his sense of how lucky he himself had been in life and especially in the gift of his teachers, his desire to pass this gift on to the next generation in philosophy, and – last but not least – the sense he often left on those with whom he came into contact that they had, indeed, been privileged to meet "one of the greats" and yet in the end were struck as much by his humility and generosity as by his brilliance and erudition.

III A Moving Target

Putnam is unusual among philosophers for the sheer number of times in which he alters his fundamental ideas, the openness with which he acknowledges those changes, and the vehemence with which he later turns on and seeks to

34 One nice collection of such reminiscences may be found in Roy T. Cook and Geoffrey Hellman, "Memories of Hilary Putnam," in *Hilary Putnam on Logic and Mathematics*, edited by Roy T. Cook and Geoffrey Hellman (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2018), 1–8.

35 Cook and Hellman, "Memories of Hilary Putnam," 3–4.

dismantle the very philosophical doctrines he himself originally pioneers.[36] Daniel Dennett's humorous publication, *The Philosophical Lexicon*, which compiles neologisms based on the names of famous philosophers, offers the following definition: "*hilary*, n. (from hilary term). A brief but significant period in the intellectual career of a distinguished philosopher." It includes an example of how to use the word in a sentence: "'Oh, that's what I thought three or four hilaries ago.'"[37] *The Lexicon* thereby suggests that a hilary might be roughly equivalent in length – and perhaps even etymologically related – to an Oxford Hilary Term, in effect suggesting the temporal unit in question is around six weeks. This surely involves a drastic underestimation of the average length of time for which Hilary Putnam tended to hold a philosophical view. Nonetheless, what is true in this bit of hyperbole is that Putnam arguably already begins wondering what might be wrong with the view he has just published, as soon as it appears in print and others begin developing an enthusiasm for it. He is often asked in interviews why he is so prone to change his philosophical mind and in response he suggests that his willingness to approach his own previous writings in this mercilessly critical manner proved to be essential to the very manner in which he found he himself was best able to make genuine progress in philosophy.[38]

His ready willingness to retract the philosophical doctrines for which he was most famous is not a feature of his philosophical development that Putnam ever feels the slightest need to apologize for. He tends rather to regard it as an expression of commitment to a central aspect of his own conception of the subject: "Philosophy is not a subject that eventuates in final solutions, and the discovery that the latest view – no matter if one produced it oneself – still does not clear away the mystery is characteristic of the work, when the work is well done[39] This remark of Putnam's – "philosophy is not a subject that eventuates in final solutions" – drew the ire of some of his critics. Indeed, for just this

36 Authors placed in the awkward position of having to provide an introduction to Putnam's thought therefore tend to begin by saying something like this: "Putnam, almost uniquely among the philosophical greats, is willing to rethink his views continuously and to reengage with the issues that have preoccupied him for six decades." Maria Baghramian, "Introduction" to *Reading Putnam* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 1.

37 Daniel Dennett (ed.), *The Philosophical Lexicon* (Newark, Delaware: American Philosophical Association, 1987), 11. Another neologism presented in that book is this: "*putname*, n. A presumed expert authorized by a society to name a natural kind and determine its members."

38 "I am always dissatisfied with something about what I have previously written, and locating that something, and trying to think why I am dissatisfied and what to do about it, often sets the agenda for my next piece of work." (Harlan, "Hilary Putnam: On Mind, Meaning, and Reality," 24)

39 Hilary Putnam, *Representation and Reality*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), p. xii.

reason, some of his most frustrated critics sometimes dismissively labeled him a "moving target." Why bother to criticize a philosopher's position, if the philosopher himself tells you he that is present view is not his final view and, in effect, acknowledges that he is about to abandon it anyway?

Others, however, have seen his refusal to regard as final any solution to a philosophical problem – including those he himself proposes – as itself constituting an important part of the singular character of what he came to stand for in philosophy. John Passmore, a distinguished historian of twentieth-century Anglo-American philosophy, documents some of the dazzling number of different influential philosophical views Putnam respectively originates and then abandons over the course of his career and then concludes: "Hilary Putnam is . . . the Bertrand Russell of contemporary philosophy in this respect."[40] We will touch below upon other reasons why a comparison of Putnam with Russell might suggest itself to someone writing an intellectual profile of him, but for now let us focus only on Passmore's reason for being drawn to such a comparison. He begins by noting that "Putnam shares Russell's capacity for changing his mind as a result of learning from his contemporaries" and remarks that any attempt to characterize "Putnam's philosophy [in particular, his swings between realism and anti-realism] is like trying to capture the wind with a fishing net."[41] But he resembles Russell in a further related respect for Passmore as well. Just as Passmore found in writing his celebrated account of the prehistory, origins, and development of the history of analytic philosophy – in his famous 1957 book *A Hundred Years of Philosophy* – that he could not confine his discussion of Russell to some isolated part of that book, he made a similar discovery when he turned to the task of writing its sequel.[42] In *A Hundred Years of Philosophy*, when it came to narrating the first three decades of the history of analytic philosophy, no matter which topic is at issue, it was impossible to discuss the period without some detailed presentation of Russell's views on the topic and his criticisms of other contemporaneous figures working on it. So, too, when Passmore, twenty-three years later, turns to writing his 1980 book *Recent Philosophers*, a history of the decades of philosophical activity not yet covered in his previous history, here he finds that some discussion of Putnam's work crops up in virtually every chapter, as if it were undeniably the case that several of the most important philosophers of that then recent period all happened to be

40 John Passmore, *Recent Philosophers* (London: Duckworth, 1988), 104. My discussion below of Passmore on Putnam draws on my editor's introduction to *Realism with a Human Face*.

41 John Passmore, *A Hundred Years of Philosophy* (London: Duckworth, 1957; the most widely accessible reprint is the 1978 Penguin edition).

42 Passmore, *A Hundred Years of Philosophy*, 92.

named "Hilary Putnam." Passmore himself notes the oddity of this, and the effect it has on his own procedure for narrating how these debates unfold in this later period of the history of analytic philosophy, pausing to remark at one point in the book: "Putnam's Russellian capacity for changing his mind makes him very useful for our purposes. He is the history of recent philosophy in outline."[43]

As noted above, Putnam's entire philosophical career takes the form of a series of pendulum swings, in which he first internalizes and creatively develops ideas he takes from his adopted philosophical teachers and heroes, and then turns on those ideas, subjecting them to rigorous and radical critique. Focusing on nothing more than Putnam's philosophical work up till the 1970s, it already becomes possible to say something like this:

> Philosophy experiences few seismic shifts in the course of centuries. Hilary Putnam has been responsible for at least two in a single generation: functionalism about mental phenomena, and externalism about meaning.[44]

What this leaves out, as we shall briefly see below, is that Putnam, starting in the mid-1980s, becomes a vociferous critic of standard functional accounts of mental states and vehemently repudiates the received understanding of what it is to be an externalist about meaning. It is impossible within the compass of an introduction such as this to document all of the shifts in Putnam's philosophy with respect to the diverse areas and topics of which he treats. This is a more sensible task for individual essays each devoted to one aspect of Putnam's philosophical development – as are some of the ones collected in this volume. Tim Maudlin's contribution to this volume, for example, provides a wonderful critical overview of the twists in turns in the development of Putnam's thought when it comes specifically to the philosophy of quantum mechanics. Mario De Caro performs a similar task, tracing a parallel trajectory of development, when it comes to the topic of how to reconcile the truth in determinism with the possibility of free will. A volume with many more contributions than this one could contain many dozens of further such overviews of main lines of development in some one aspect of Putnam's thought – pertaining to his conception of, say, the objectivity of ethical statements, or of the value of a religious way of life (to mention just two of the many philosophy topics about which his views shifted dramatically over the course of his life), or his successive attempts at interpreting and critically assessing, say, Aristotle's hylomorphism or Wittgenstein's rule-following considerations (to mention just two of the many interpretative

43 Passmore, *A Hundred Years of Philosophy*, 97.

44 Maxmilian de Gaynesford, "Introduction" to *Hilary Putnam* (Chesham: McGill-Queens University Press/Acumen, 2006), 1.

topics to which he recurred, and took up anew, once every decade or so over the second half of his life).[45]

In what follows, in charting some twists and turns in his philosophical development, I will not attempt descriptions of Putnam's thought anywhere near as fine-grained as those offered in the aforementioned individual contributions to this volume. My focus below will rather be on how the whole of this thought hangs together and alters its overall shape as it develops. The aim will be selectively to trace a handful of interrelated lines of thought and criss-crossing paths in his evolution as a thinker in a manner that conveys both how wide and how variegated the philosophical terrain is he traverses over the course of the whole of his life.[46]

IV Some Pendulum Swings in Putnam's Philosophical Development

As a young man who starts his graduate career in philosophy with an unusually strong background in theoretical linguistics, physics and formal logic, as well as in the foundations of probability and number theory, Putnam is drawn to the work of philosophers who take these disciplines seriously and wish to explore the intellectual challenges they pose for philosophy. The first major pendulum swing

45 For Putnam on Aristotle, see especially the first three essays – originally respectively published in 1986, 1992, and 1993 – collected in *Words and Life*, the second of which is the magisterial essay co-authored with Martha Nussbaum, "Changing Aristotle's Mind" (collected in *Words and Life*, 22–61) and also see his 2000 essay "Aristotle's Mind and Contemporary Science," collected in *Philosophy in an Age of Science*, edited by Mario De Caro and David Macarthur, (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 2012), 584–607. For Putnam on Wittgenstein on rule-following, see especially the chapters on Wittgenstein in that same book. Putnam himself believed there were deep philosophical affinities between Aristotle and Wittgenstein and tried to bring these out in the readings he sought to offer of each on these topics. This thought finds its first expression in his co-authored essay with Nussbaum: "We suggest that Aristotle's thought really is, properly understood, the fulfillment of Wittgenstein's desire to have a 'natural history of man' . . . As Aristotelians we do not discover something behind something else, a hidden reality behind the complex unity that we see and are. We find what we are in the appearances. And Aristotle tells us that if we attend properly to the appearances the dualist's questions never get going." (*Words and Life*, 55)

46 For a bibliographical essay on Putnam's oeuvre, as well as some of the most important secondary literature on it, see the appendix to Conant and Elliott (eds.), *The Norton Anthology of Western Philosophy*, Vol 2, A125–A126. For a straight bibliography of Putnam's publications, see Auxier, Anderson, and Hahn, *The Philosophy of Hilary Putnam*.

in his philosophical trajectory comes when, after sitting at Reichenbach's feet in UCLA, reading everything recent of Carnap's, and writing a Ph.D. dissertation under their mentorship, Putnam strikes out on his own in the philosophy of science and mathematics, largely by criticizing the views of these first two of his philosophical heroes. According to them and their fellow logical positivists or empiricists, mathematics should be conceived not as a substantive body of knowledge in its own right, but as a language for stating scientific truths. On this positivist view, mathematical language itself carries no ontological commitments. Its value is purely as an instrument in scientific investigation. In this way, the positivists sought to avoid the traditional controversy over the nature of mathematical entities, and especially the idea of a "Platonic" realm of mathematical objects existing outside of observable nature. The positivists were determined to avoid the idea of unobservable mathematical entities. The Hilary Putnam of the late 1950s, shortly after receiving tenure, parts company with his teachers on this point. He concludes for a time that Quine, over his series of recent publications, has managed successively to show that fundamental ontological questions – such as "Do numbers really exist?" – are well-posed: not only do they admit of an answer, but that Quine even succeeds in showing precisely how a scientifically-minded philosopher may go about answering them. This paves the way for Putnam to embrace a robust form of metaphysical realism for the next quarter of a century, only to vehemently abandon it in the mid-1970s.

In his 1960 paper "What Theories Are Not," Putnam seeks to build on Quine's criticisms of the central doctrines of logical positivism by mounting an internal critique of his own, in this case of the positivist dichotomy between observational terms and theoretical terms. Putnam seeks to show that even Carnap's most sophisticated and nuanced attempt to draw such a distinction still eventuates in problems that render the distinction itself untenable.[47] This turns out to be the first step in what becomes a lifelong philosophical project. The distinction between the merely observational and the purely theoretical becomes only the first of a series of dichotomies which Putnam identifies as central to the outlook of logical positivism and which he subjects to scathing critique. He eventually, however, also comes to think that none of these influential dichotomies constitutes a mere philosophical mistake on the part of their progenitors. Each such distinction harbors an important truth – one that it takes considerable intellectual work properly to tease out and formulate adequately – but the truth in

47 Hilary Putnam, "What Theories Are Not" (1960), collected in *Mathematics, Matter and Method: Philosophical Papers*, Vol. 1, 215–227 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975).

the underlying distinction becomes philosophically crippling as soon as it is erected into an absolute dichotomy. The philosophical task becomes one of rescuing the distinction while rejecting the dichotomy.[48]

The positivists were also skeptical of the traditional idea that geometry, as well as other branches of mathematics and logic, discovers necessary truths. By construing logic and mathematics on the model of a language rather than a body of fact, the positivists hoped to explain away necessary truth, in geometry and elsewhere, as merely a kind of trivial linguistic truth. Given certain definitions, certain truths would necessarily follow. But, they argued, the definitions could always be changed, and so the "necessary truths" could be changed, without changing our view of any "real" truth or matter of fact. The positivists had been particularly impressed by the way the advent of relativity theory challenged traditional views of geometry. Before the late nineteenth century, philosophers and scientists largely took it for granted that Euclidean geometry described the real structure of physical space. Relativity theory, however, showed that there were physical applications for non-Euclidean geometry. The positivists concluded that *no* geometry should be seen as "the real" geometry of space. Instead, different geometric languages can be adopted as a matter of convenience or utility in different scientific contexts. In "It Ain't Necessarily So" (1962), Putnam argued that the positivists had drawn the wrong moral from the success of relativity theory. In his view, the presuppositions of Euclidean geometry – such as that one never comes back to the same place when traveling along a single path in the same direction – were not merely convenient but *necessary* presuppositions from the point of view of classical Newtonian physics.[49] The shift to relativistic physics does not merely involve a change in the meaning of such terms as "place" or "path." It involves a fundamentally different conception of what a "place" or a "path" is – a conception that cannot be made consistent with the old Newtonian worldview. From Putnam's point of view, examples like the shift from Newtonian to relativistic physics show that it is possible to revise our mathematical beliefs for empirical reasons. In "It Ain't Necessarily So," he contended that all truths

48 This distinction – between a "distinction" and a "dichotomy" – continues to play a central role in Putnam's thought until the end of his life; see, for example, *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 9–11, 60–61.

49 Hilary Putnam, "It Ain't Necessarily So" (1962), collected in *Mathematics, Matter, and Method: Philosophical Papers*, Vol. 1, 237–249 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975). For a broader retrospective glance at his early disagreements with Carnap and Reichenbach on geometry, his critique of Grünbaum's account of physical geometry, as well as the development of his own positive views on the philosophy of geometry in this period, see his "Intellectual Autobiography," 38–39, 46–50.

were in principle empirically revisable – even basic logical truths such as the law of non-contradiction, which he suggested might be revised in the light of quantum mechanics.

At the same time, Putnam proposes that we might think of certain truths, such as those of logic and mathematics, as possessing a kind of *relative necessity*. The old idea that there is a body of truths, such as the truths of Euclidean geometry, which are "simply" necessary, he argued, should indeed be jettisoned. But a given statement can be necessarily true *relative to* a certain theory or body of knowledge, so that to give up that truth is at the same time to reject a whole set of fundamental theoretical commitments. Putnam argues that we need this idea of relative necessity in order to make sense of moments of radical scientific change, such as the shift from classical to relativistic physics. How exactly best to formulate the idea that certain truths are relative to a certain framework – as well as how to specify which truths these are, how to characterize the sort of necessity they possess, and how best to conceive of the framework in question (as a language?, a theory?, a certain tradition of thought?) – remains a task to which he repeatedly returns as his views within the philosophy of logic, language, and science themselves evolve.

His profound criticisms of the central doctrines of logical positivism notwithstanding, Putnam never ceased to credit the positivists with having taught him a number of important philosophical lessons. Looking back in later years, he would particularly single out the following as foremost among these: philosophy cannot be done simply independently of knowledge of the sciences – both of the history of science and of the present state of science. Putnam especially liked to remind certain sorts of readers that it had been Carnap himself who had not only hailed Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* but had also played an instrumental role in seeing to it that the book was published – and that what Carnap most appreciated about it was how Kuhn so convincingly made the case for the indispensability of the history of science to philosophy.[50] Putnam's own further engagements, however, both with the sciences of his day, as well as in his own investigations into certain moments in the history of physics, biology, linguistics and computer science led him to the conclusion that the picture of science with which both Carnap and Quine operated was rife with metaphysical assumptions – assumptions that he increasingly became concerned to make visible and criticize in his later work.

50 See the remarks about Carnap in this connection in Hilary Putnam, "A Half Century of Philosophy, Viewed from Within," *Daedalus: Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, Winter (1997): 176.

Putnam's conception of the relative a priori and his increasing disenchantment with especially Quine's philosophical worldview had their roots in a series of decisive philosophical encounters which took place when he spent a sabbatical semester in the fall of 1960 visiting Oxford University, where he found himself in constant philosophical conversation with Elizabeth Anscombe, Philippa Foot, and Paul Grice. Part of what impressed him about these three figures was the sheer breadth of their respective conceptions of philosophy, the way they did philosophy with one eye trained on the history of philosophy, and the robust intellectual independence with which they each followed out their own interests and developed their views. A description Putnam offers of the impression that Anscombe made on him in this period parallels remarks he would later make about other philosophers whom he came greatly to admire – not only about how Foot and Grice struck him at that time, but also in later years about what drew him to the writings of figures such as John McDowell and Bernard Williams. The description I have in mind is the following: "Anscombe was interested in just about every question of philosophy, and although she had been a student and close friend of Wittgenstein's, her own philosophical style is markedly different."[51] This came to represent a philosophical ideal for Putnam: to learn to be someone on whom nothing philosophical is lost – so that one is able to be interested in just about every question of philosophy and equally able to become fast philosophical friends with any one of the great philosophers of one's time whom one admires, while never falling under the spell of any one of them so as to become unable to develop a philosophical style of one's own, markedly different from theirs.

The decisive recent event in the history of Oxford at that time of his 1960 visit was that J.L. Austin had just passed away. The debate between Austin and Grice continued in his absence. Austin's followers maintained that the meanings of the words in a sentence do not themselves determine exactly what is being said in a given context; many different things may be said using those same words with those same meanings. Grice maintained, on the contrary, that there is such a thing as the standard meaning of a sentence and the various further non-standard things we can use a sentence to say are all to be explained by conversational implicatures. In his subsequent writings in the 1960s and 1970s, Putnam became increasingly interested in identifying and exploring examples of a sort to which he thought proponents on neither side of this debate could do full justice – examples of sentences whose truth-value do not fluctuate through a mere alteration of an Austinian context of use, yet whose significance

51 Putnam, "A Half Century of Philosophy," 184.

is not fixed once and for all in the manner required by a Gricean theory of language. By the mid-1980s – partly due to the influence of Charles Travis – he concluded that Austin's own views, properly understood, were far more compatible with his own earlier account of the contextual a priori and his own overall conception of language than he had originally supposed, eventually coming around to the view that he was in complete agreement with Austin – or at least with what Austin holds on Travis's reading of him.[52]

Putnam's move in 1965 from MIT to Harvard – that is, from one side of Cambridge, Massachusetts to the other side of the same town – did not mark a step towards Quine in anything other than a merely geographical direction. Though the early phases of the first pendulum swing away from positivism in Putnam's thought are mediated by Quine's criticisms of Carnap, they eventually lead, especially after Putnam's visit to Oxford, to no less vehement criticisms of Quine himself. As a former student of Reichenbach, Putnam never ceases to be engaged with questions about the philosophical presuppositions of the natural sciences and the proper place of a scientific outlook in philosophy. Early in his career, he embraced the details of Quine's criticisms of Carnap, and especially of the analytic/synthetic distinction; later Putnam, however, concludes that, in so doing, he implicitly committed himself to features of Quine's own strident brand of empiricism that were nothing short of philosophically disastrous. In his early enthusiasm for Quine's critique of Carnap, Putnam simply and unequivocally rejects the traditional empiricist distinction between the substantive content of a scientific theory and the conceptual vocabulary in which that theory is couched. Over the next three and a half decades of his life, he repeatedly revisits this issue, devoting considerable energy to trying to sift through and extract what he later thinks might still be sound in Quine's critique of Carnap, while endeavoring to hive off that sliver of philosophical insight from the larger portion of philosophical overkill he concludes characterizes most of the rest of Quine's overall conception of philosophy. This leads to the beginning of Putnam's subsequent lifelong concern not only to criticize philosophical scientism and related forms of naturalistic excess in analytic philosophy, but also to provide a philosophical account of the nature and depth of the forms of diversity within the natural sciences themselves,[53] as well as of the autonomy and irreducibility of the various forms of

52 For a brief discussion of his 1960 visit to Oxford, the debate between Austin and Grice, his early view of that debate, and his eventual later move towards Austin, see the section titled "Oxford in 1960" in Putnam, "A Half Century of Philosophy," 184–185.

53 See, for example, his 1987 essay "The Diversity of the Sciences," collected as Chapter 25 of *Words and Life*.

non-scientific knowledge – forms of knowledge he endeavors to show are fundamentally misconstrued when conceived on the model of the natural sciences.[54]

From this point on, a central point of continuity in Putnam's views across the decades is that our terms embody theoretical commitments and that these terms cannot be changed without overturning those commitments. This leads him also to a nuanced reconsideration of what is right and what is wrong in traditional ways of drawing the analytic/synthetic distinction, as well as in the related distinction between the a priori and the a posteriori. It fuels his later advocacy of what he calls "realism with a small 'r'" and the development of a philosophical conception of language fully consonant with such a form of realism.[55] By the mid-1980s Putnam regards the ensuing conception of language as a natural consequence of an appropriately metaphysically modest form of realist epistemology – one that is able to allow that what we say, and what we mean, reaches all the way to the things we talk about, and does not stop anywhere short of them. Rather than doing what he had originally been trained to do and continued to do throughout his Quinean and MIT periods – namely, to begin with issues in the philosophy of science and language and then work out from there to the implications of a putatively sound philosophy of science and language for other areas of philosophy – thereby essentially holding the rest of philosophy hostage to some preferred set of views about the nature of science and/or language – Putnam increasingly comes to adopt the reverse methodology. He concludes that one first think hard and long about what is distinctive about each of the diverse forms of knowledge we need to make room for in philosophy – how to do philosophical justice to the full diversity of our forms of scientific, logical, mathematical, ethical, aesthetic, and political discourse – and

54 In a comparatively late retrospective essay "Pragmatism and Nonscientific Knowledge" (2002), Putnam summarizes "what has been a focus for my philosophical interests for the past twenty years" as follows: "the existence of and the importance of knowledge outside of the exact sciences ('nonscientific' knowledge) and in particular the existence and importance of knowledge of values in the widest sense – what is it to know that something is better or worse than something else: a better way of life, or a better course of action, or a better theory (in science), or a better interpretation (of a text, etc.). This focus has naturally led me to point out how 'paradigmatic' science (physics) itself depends on judgments which are 'nonscientific'." (in James Conant and Urszula M. Zeglin (eds.), *Hilary Putnam: Pragmatism and Realism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002); reprinted in *Pragmatism as a Way of Life*, 55)

55 Putnam draws a distinction between what he calls "Realism with a capital 'R'" (which he took to be the then regnant metaphysical image of the world in analytic philosophy) and "realism with a small 'r'" (which is his label for a form of philosophy that seeks to recover our common-sense image of the world from philosophical distortions of it). The distinction is perhaps drawn in its sharpest terms by him in the 1988 title essay of *Realism with a Human Face*.

then to develop an adequate philosophy of knowledge and language in the light of such an overall conception of the task of philosophy.

This larger transition in Putnam's thought is encouraged through his increasing engagement with the writings of Ludwig Wittgenstein and philosophers influenced by him – including several already mentioned above: Anscombe and Foot in the 1960s, McDowell and Travis in the 1980s. When Putnam moves his office in 1965 to the Harvard Philosophy Department in Emerson Hall, it is to a building in which there are three philosophers passionately interested in later Wittgenstein: Rogers Albritton, Stanley Cavell, and Burton Dreben.[56] The respective influences they each have on him are diverse and in each case quite distinct.[57] The figure who has the most immediate impact is Albritton, with whom he discusses questions such as: could it turn out that pencils are really organisms? Is this so much as possible? If we are to allow that it is in some sense *possible*, what does it require of an adequate philosophical account of modality that it be able to do justice to such a possibility? If it is not even possible, then why not? What sort of *necessity* could it be that pencils cannot turn out upon further discovery really to be organisms? Dreben's influence on Putnam proves in the long run to be far more consequential than Albritton's, but largely for reasons having to do with ways in which Putnam himself strongly reacts against the conception of philosophy Dreben finds in Wittgenstein. What initially bothers Putnam most in that putatively Wittgensteinian conception is the feature he takes it to share with logical positivism: namely, the idea that the central aim of philosophy, if properly conducted, should be to free us from the illusion that when we grapple with the traditional problems of philosophy we have to do with a set of important issues.[58] In his philosophical conversations in Emerson Hall, Putnam was fond of quoting a passage from Étienne Gilson – "Philosophy always buries its undertakers."[59] – but whenever he quoted it, the undertaker of philosophy he most had in mind

56 See the section titled "Wittgenstein at Harvard" in "A Half Century of Philosophy," 191–195.

57 For some of Putnam's own subsequent major writings on Wittgenstein, see the essays collected as Chapters 12–15 in *Realism with a Human Face*; Chapter 2 of *Pragmatism: An Open Question*; chapters 7 and 8 of *Renewing Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992); Chapter 1 of *Jewish Philosophy as a Guide to Life*; and those collected as Chapters 22–28 of *Philosophy in an Age of Science*). His attitude towards Wittgenstein takes a markedly critical turn in the last of these essays – Chapter 28 – written in 2011: "Wittgenstein: A Reappraisal."

58 I am here paraphrasing remarks of Putnam's from "A Half Century of Philosophy," 193.

59 The remark comes from the concluding sequence of Gilson's *William James Lectures*, delivered at Harvard in 1936, reprinted as Étienne Gilson, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience* (New York: Scribners, 1965), 305–306. Here is an example of a context in which Putnam quotes the remark in print: "A simple induction from the history of thought suggests that metaphysical discussion is not going to disappear as long as reflective people remain in the world. As

was Dreben. In the writings and teachings of Cavell, on the other hand, Putnam finds a reading of Wittgenstein that he takes to be the diametric opposite of Dreben's: "For Stanley Cavell's Wittgenstein, philosophical confusions are not just matters of language gone wrong, but an expression of deep human issues that also express themselves in a variety of other ways – political, theological, and literary."[60]

Among the propositions that Putnam concludes an adequate philosophy must learn to make room for – and for which many philosophies fail to provide a coherent account – are the propositions we call upon when we ourselves philosophize: those propositions we come out with, for example, when we formulate philosophical truths about the nature of non-philosophical discourse. This initiates what proves to be a recurring project – one Putnam refines partly through the evolution in his own ways of reading Kant and Wittgenstein: the project of investigating the conditions of the very possibility of philosophical discourse, along with the related task of criticizing philosophical views that are self-refuting precisely on the ground that they fail to account for the status of the sentences in which they themselves are formulated. The roots of his interest in this issue may be traced back to Putnam's earlier criticisms of verifiability theories of meaning for resting on theoretical pronouncements about what is meaningful that cannot stand up to the theory's own test for meaningfulness, his related criticism of Carnap's propositions purporting to elucidate the analytic/synthetic distinction for being neither analytic nor synthetic, and his charge against putatively Wittgensteinian criterial theories of meaning (such as the one advanced by Norman Malcolm) for themselves failing to meet their own criteria. This concern eventually broadens out, as Putnam increasingly appreciates that the gambit he originally employed to showed that certain positivist and neo-Wittgensteinian views were self-refuting "is *deep* because it refutes every attempt to argue for a criterial conception of rationality."[61] What comes to disturb him most about such theories about particular topics in philosophy (what is meaningful, analytic, etc.) is that they implicitly commit themselves to "*philosophies which leave no room for a rational activity of philosophy*."[62]

The topic of the status of the propositions of *philosophy* and that of the status of genuinely *logical* propositions are seldom treated by Putnam as completed unrelated. In his mid-career writings on logical and mathematical necessity, Putnam

---

Gilson said at the end of a famous book, 'Philosophy always buries its undertakers'." (*Realism with a Human Face*, 19)

60 Putnam, "A Half Century of Philosophy," 194.

61 Hilary Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 111.

62 Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History*, 113.

struggles to retain the core of what he takes to have been true in the argument of "It Ain't Necessarily So," while reining in what he came to see as its worst excesses. The topic of logical necessity – and how it relates to the sorts of truths one formulates when doing philosophy – is one that he wrestles with throughout his philosophical career, with his changes of view in this area influencing his views in many other areas of philosophy, and vice versa. A characteristic expression of his mid-career wrestling with the issue may be seen in his article "There is at Least One A Priori Truth" (1978), in which he seeks to draw some limit to the extreme revisability of logic that he had defended in his early writings.[63] At least one truth is unrevisable, Putnam declares there, in the sense that it would never be rational to give it up. His candidate for such an a priori truth, at this point in his career, is (what he calls) the minimal principle of non-contradiction: the principle that *not every statement is both true and false*. Putnam argues that there are no circumstances under which it would be rational to revise this principle, and that it therefore provides us with an example of at least one "absolutely, unconditionally, truly, actually, a priori truth."[64] Twenty-two years later, in his even more historically informed 1990 paper "Rethinking Mathematical Necessity," Putnam again returns to the question: what is the status of the laws of logic?[65] Are they analytic or synthetic, a priori or a posteriori? As is typical of him, he once again approaches the question completely afresh. At the outset of the paper, he describes contemporary philosophy as faced with two equally unsatisfying alternatives – alternatives he associates with the names of Carnap and Quine respectively. The Carnapian view is a linguistic conventionalism, according to which the laws of logic are analytic truths. The Quinean view is a naturalized epistemology, according to which the laws of logic are synthetic a posteriori and hence not dissimilar in kind from ordinary empirical truths. Putnam then goes on to sketch a third way, whose roots he finds in Kant and Frege, which turns on the crucial idea that logical truths do not have negations that we are able to understand. The point is not that these propositions express a content that we grasp and then reject as false; rather, it is that we are simply unable to make sense of these propositions in a way that allows the question of their truth value

63 Hilary Putnam, "There Is at Least One A Priori Truth" (1978), collected in *Realism and Reason: Philosophical Papers*, Vol. 3, 98–114 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

64 Putnam, "There Is at Least One A Priori Truth," 101.

65 Hilary Putnam, "Rethinking Mathematical Necessity" (1990), collected as Chapter 12 of *Words and Life*, 245–263; for a brief discussion of the relation between the views of the 1990 article and his earlier work on the a priori, see Hilary Putnam, "Reply to James Conant" in *The Philosophy of Hilary Putnam*, edited by Christopher. S. Hill (Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press, 1992), 374–77.

to arise in the first place. As Putnam puts it there: "the negation of a theorem of logic violates the condition for being a thinkable thought or judgment."[66]

Putnam's work in the philosophy of mind moves along a track that parallels these shifts in his conceptions of language, logic, and philosophy. He begins from a challenge to one of the logical positivists' central themes. The positivists had been strong proponents of what they called the "Unity of Science": their ultimate ambition was to show how all of science, including psychology, sociology, and economics, could be reduced to fundamental physics. In "Reductionism and the Nature of Psychology" (1973), Putnam develops an influential criticism of this reductionist program, while at the same time showing how anti-reductionism can be consistent with a commitment to a materialist worldview and a scientific approach to the study of certain aspects of the mind.[67] Putnam's fundamental argument in this essay is that materialism – the belief that there are not any things that are immaterial – does not imply reductionism, insofar as reductionism requires that fundamental physics provides the complete *explanation* of all higher-level phenomena, such as psychological phenomena. To show that fundamental physics is limited in its explanatory scope, he points out that fundamental physics does not even include the complete explanation of biology. Even such basic biological phenomena as the existence of life on Earth do not follow merely from truths of fundamental physics, since the existence of life on Earth depends on what he famously calls "auxiliary hypotheses" that do not figure in fundamental physical theory, e.g., the presence of liquid water on the Earth's surface. Putnam's point is not that biology has to point to some mysterious *non-physical* fact, such as an *élan vital*. The auxiliary hypotheses required by biology, such as that there is liquid water on the Earth's surface, are themselves physical facts. But this fact about the Earth is not *relevant* to fundamental physical theory, and so is not included among the basic laws of physics. The presence of water on the Earth's surface is, however, essential for biology, and in this sense "higher-level" sciences such as biology do not simply follow from "lower-level" ones like physics.

This leads to a larger philosophical theme that Putnam brought to prominence in post-war analytic philosophy: the nature of emergent phenomena. His original interest in this topic stemmed from his having closely studied Marx's account of the nature of emergent economic phenomena. But Putnam saw a way of generalizing the insight and applying it across the entire panoply of

66 Putnam, "Rethinking Mathematical Necessity," 257.

67 Hilary Putnam, "Reductionism and the Nature of Psychology" (1973), not reprinted in its original form until it was collected much later as Chapter 23 of *Words and Life*.

natural and human sciences, arguing that psychology, economics, and sociology each study their own proprietary phenomena and that they each stand in a relation to biology that is logically akin (in the depth of difference in the forms of phenomena to be characterized) to biology's relation to physics. An economic development such as the rise of capitalism does not *follow* from a biological description of *homo sapiens*, even though it is, in principle, possible to explain how creatures with our biological constitution came to practice capitalism without introducing anything mysterious or supernatural.

Putnam had long opposed reductionism, initially favoring a functionalist view of the mind. In early essays such as "Psychological Predicates" (1967; later reprinted as "The Nature of Mental States"[68]), he argues that mental states cannot be identical with brain states or any material states because mental states are "multiply realizable" in different material substrates. Thus pain, for example, could be the same mental state in a human and a fish, even if the material composition of the nervous systems in a human and a fish were quite different. What matters for Putnam now is functional architecture, of which he initially proposes to conceive on the model of a digital computer and its computational states. On this model, the mind is to be identified with the functional structure of the computer and its program, not with their material realization in hardware and software. As Putnam pungently put it, "we could be made out of Swiss cheese and it wouldn't matter."[69] Shortly after it becomes a mainstream position in analytic philosophy of mind, however, Putnam rejects the functionalist view he himself had championed. His most famous statement of this recantation comes in his book *Representation and Reality* (1988).[70] Functionalism had initially seemed attractive to him as a way of preserving materialism without reductionism, but he subsequently broadens his reductionist target to include such methodological assumptions as the supposition that social structure can be reduced to individual psychology, and the idea that meanings can be reduced to decontextualized semantic structures. This eviscerates the foundations of his own earlier functionalism. Hence Putnam concludes – to the dismay of many of his earlier admirers – that his own earlier functionalism, its overt anti-reductionist ambitions notwithstanding, reflects just one characteristic and comparatively subtle species of a much broader misguided reductionist

68 Hilary Putnam, "The Nature of Mental States," collected as Chapter 21 of *Mind, Language and Reality*: *Philosophical Papers*, Vol. 2, 429–440 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975).

69 Hilary Putnam, "Philosophy and our Mental Life" (1973), reprinted in *Mind, Language and Reality*: *Philosophical Papers*, Vol. 2, 291–303 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975).

70 Hilary Putnam, *Representation and Reality* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988).

impulse that typifies what is philosophically most retrograde in the mainstream of post-war analytic philosophy.

Possibly Putnam's single most celebrated essay, "The Meaning of 'Meaning'" (1975), marks his first effort to extend his critique of reductionism into the area of the philosophy of language. The centerpiece of "The Meaning of 'Meaning'" is Putnam's much-discussed "Twin Earth" thought experiment. Imagine, Putnam writes, that in the future a spaceship from Earth lands on a distant planet that resembles Earth in many surprising respects, and which we may call "Twin Earth." On Twin Earth, there are large bodies of liquid that resemble, to the naked eye, our rivers and lakes. Also, on Twin Earth, there are people who use a language that looks and sounds exactly like English. So they refer to the stuff that constitutes these rivers and lakes using a word that looks and sounds exactly like our word "water." Now, as it happens, the stuff in the Twin Earth rivers and lakes is *not* water, i.e., it is not H_2O. It is instead another substance; Putnam memorably proposes we call it XYZ. His question is this: does the Twin Earth word "water" *mean* what our word "water" means? Putnam argues that the answer is *no*, and he takes this argument to have far-reaching implications.[71] In particular, Putnam argues that the meaning of our word "water" is not to be explained in terms of any set of associated appearances and ideas that ordinary English speakers have when they use the word, since these could be exactly the same for the speakers on Twin Earth. As Putnam memorably put it, "'meanings' just ain't in the head."[72] The meanings of many of our terms, including natural-kind terms like "water" are *beholden* to the way the world is, because when we use a natural-kind term we mean to refer to a single substance or kind of stuff, and thus what we mean depends on what kind of stuff we are referring to. In the case of "water," most grown-up English speakers today know that it's H_2O. But in many other cases – for example, when it comes to knowing what distinguishes an elm from a beech or aluminum from molybdenum – the average modern English speaker is not in possession of the relevant knowledge. Still, Putnam argues, lay-speakers can succeed in referring to elms and aluminum because 1) they can exploit the presence of a sample, and 2) they belong to a linguistic community in which someone – such as a botanist or a chemist – does have the relevant knowledge. Through what Putnam calls a

71 What exactly these implications should be taken to be is a matter that will preoccupy him for some years. Some of the problems that stem from Putnam's initial manner of formulating the twin-earth experiment and the ways in which he later seeks to address these are illuminatingly discussed in Sanjit Chakraborty, *The Labyrinth of Mind and World: Beyond Internalism-Externalism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2020).

72 Putnam, "The Meaning of 'Meaning'," 227.

"division of linguistic labor," a whole community of speakers can come to refer successfully to elms even if only some of its members know what distinguishes an elm from a beech. Putnam argues that traditional semantics, by focusing on what is in the head of the individual speaker, has missed two essential dimensions that enter into securing the meaning of a term like "water": first, the way the world is, and second, the speaker's linguistic community.

On the basis of his account of natural-kind terms in "The Meaning of 'Meaning'," Putnam then goes on to elaborate, first, a criticism of Quine's thesis of the indeterminacy of translation, and then later of Donald Davidson's conception of radical interpretation. He argues that the world- and community-involving character of natural-kind terms imposes substantive constraints on translation and interpretation that are not recognized by Quine and Davidson. Together with similar arguments made by Saul Kripke, Putnam's "Meaning of 'Meaning'" helped to initiate one of the central controversies of late analytic philosophy: the controversy over what has come to be called "externalism" in the philosophy of mind and language. This controversy revolves around the question: to what extent are the contents of our thoughts and utterances constituted by the environment in which they occur? The way this controversy is usually understood, there are two distinct self-standingly intelligible realms: the physical realm of the environment in which a thinker and speaker of language finds herself, and "the mental realm" in which her thoughts are "located" and to be individuated. In his later writings, this picture of two distinct self-standingly intelligible realms increasingly comes under pressure. As he memorably summarizes the crux of his later view in the preface to arguably his most famous book *Reason, Truth and History*:

> I shall advance a view in which the mind does not simply 'copy' a world which admits of description by One True Theory. But my view is not a view in which the mind *makes up* the world, either. . . . If one must use metaphorical language, then let the metaphor be this: the mind and the world jointly make up the mind and the world. (Or, to make the metaphor even more Hegelian, the Universe makes up the Universe – with minds – collectively – playing a special role in the making up.)[73]

The aspiration to make fully good on this picture eventually leads Putnam first to excavate and identify, then to reconsider and jettison, a surprising number of assumptions that he originally viewed as utterly trivial but now concludes are philosophically consequential and which underlay his own particular ways of arguing in his earlier writings for functionalist and externalist theses.

To take just one example: readers of "The Meaning of 'Meaning'" tended to assume Putnam's employment of the term "environment" in that essay aimed to

73 Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History*, xi.

refer to a realm utterly external to the mind – a realm fully relevantly describable in merely natural-scientific terms. Putnam himself deplored this misunderstanding of his work and it arguably gave rise to a very different focus to much of his subsequent philosophical life. Looking back, at the end of his life, on the subsequent reception of his most famous essay, he made of the following attempt to repudiate (what he termed) "the supposed scientism" that many readers attributed to that essay:

> In "The Meaning of 'Meaning'," I did not claim that what is and is not water (for example) is simply decided by science. In fact, I wrote, "To be water . . . is to bear the relation "same$_L$" [same liquid] to certain things. But what is the relation "same$_L$"?? And I replied that "in one context, 'water' may mean chemically pure water, while in another it may mean the stuff in Lake Michigan." In "Meaning Holism" I went even further to distance myself from a "scientistic" reading of my externalism, when I wrote: "In physics, 'water' means chemically pure water; in ordinary language, things are more complicated. On the one hand, 'water', in the ordinary sense, may have impurities; on the other hand, tea and coffee are not 'water'. What sort of or degree of departure from ideally "pure" taste, color, or odor disqualifies H_2O-cum-impurities from being 'water' in ordinary circumstances is interest relative and context-sensitive. But this is not to say that 'water', in ordinary language, is an operationally-defined word, pure and simple."[74] And I ended the section by saying, "Ordinary language and scientific language are different but interdependent."[75]

Only one year later, in *Meaning and the Moral Sciences* (1976), the scientistic assumption highlighted here (that Putnam himself never endorsed but which informed the generally received understanding of what "externalism" is) begins to become a central target of his work, and the contrary assumption (regarding science's entanglement in and dependence upon the ordinary) begins to become a central preoccupation of his work.[76] Putnam begins to attack (what he calls) "the very idea of metaphysical realism" in all its guises (of which regards scientism to be just one species) and instead argues for a form of "internal realism" – one in which the framework which is internal to our very capacity to form beliefs encompasses not only our "factual" beliefs about our "natural" environment, but much more. This marks the beginning of Putnam's ever more concerted effort to illuminate the extent of the entanglement of fact in value in every domain of human thought and activity, of non-scientific ways of thinking in a non-scientific background body of knowledge that makes scientific thinking possible, of scientific language in ordinary language, and of our intellectual

74 Hilary Putnam, "Meaning Holism" (1986), collected as chapter of *Realism with a Human Face*, 282.

75 Putnam, "Intellectual Autobiography," 80.

76 Hilary Putnam, *Meaning and the Moral Sciences* (London: Routledge, 1976).

present in a historical tradition of thought. The first book largely devoted as a whole to exhibiting and elucidating these forms of entanglement is *Reason, Truth and History* (1981). In it he develops his famous "brain in a vat" thought experiment in order to show how internal realism forms the basis of a response to radical skepticism. In the series of four books that follow – *The Many Faces of Realism* (1987), *Renewing Philosophy* (1992), *Pragmatism: An Open Question* (1995), and *The Threefold Cord: Mind, Body, and World* (1999) [77] – Putnam continues to prosecute his case against the varieties of philosophical dichotomy that obscure from view these forms of entanglement, while arguing now for the relevance of ideas he finds in thinkers outside the mainstream of analytic philosophy to the illumination of these questions.

The fourth of the aforementioned books, *The Threefold Cord*, contains Putnam's 1994 *Dewey Lectures* – "Sense, Nonsense, and the Senses" – in which he attempts to identify a widespread assumption that he claims runs throughout early modern philosophy – he dubs the assumption in question "the interface conception" – and he argues that, three centuries later, it continues to be responsible for many of the difficulties that plague contemporary philosophy.

Putnam characterizes the consequences of the continuing hold of this assumption on the philosophical imagination of our time as nothing short of a "disaster." His summary statement of how contemporary philosophy managed to place itself in its present disastrous position runs as follows:

> [T]he key assumption responsible for the disaster is the idea that there has to be an interface between our cognitive powers and the external world – or, to put the same point differently, the idea that our cognitive powers cannot reach all the way to the objects themselves.[78]

If we could overcome the assumption expressed by these words, Putnam suggests, we would be in a position to embrace with a sound philosophical conscience what Putnam (following William James) calls "the natural realism of the common man." This locution – "natural realism" – as Putnam deploys it, is not meant to be a label for an alternative philosophical position; rather it is meant to denote something both more familiar and more elusive: our own prephilosophical understanding of the character of our cognitive relation to the world, prior to its corruption by certain forms of philosophizing that have now come to seem to be forms of post-scientific common sense. In issuing his call for a return to a lost state of epistemological innocence, Putnam knows he is

77 Hilary Putnam, *The Threefold Cord: Mind, Body, and World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

78 Putnam, *The Threefold Cord*, 10.

bound to appear to many of his colleagues to be merely the most recent incarnation of the proverbial philosophical ostrich burying his head in the sands of our everyday ways of talking and thinking. What makes it inevitable that things will so appear to many of his colleagues, according to Putnam, is the interface conception: it is what makes it look as if the recommended species of naiveté cannot be anything other than mere naiveté. Putnam credits John McDowell, in his book *Mind and World*, with having identified (what Putnam calls in the passage above) the "key assumption."[79] The *Dewey Lectures* seek to expose the various guises this assumption assumes in contemporary philosophy of perception and mind, and in the theory of linguistic reference.

From the mid-1980s on, it is not an exaggeration to say that a whole new Hilary Putnam bursts onto the philosophical scene – often to the dismay of some of his earlier colleagues, past doctoral students, and former philosophical fellow travelers – someone whose philosophical thought is still concerned with the topics that animated him from the beginning, but whose horizon of philosophical reference points and favorite authors has now vastly expanded and whose overall philosophical orientation has dramatically shifted. He undertakes a closer study of historical figures such as Aristotle, Kant, and Wittgenstein, with a renewed interest in how each of them anticipates ideas that Putnam himself arrives at by a very different route, seeking now to refine and deepen his own formulations of those ideas by drawing upon theirs. He develops an interest in the philosophical relevance of the writings of literary figures, poets and novelists, devoting whole essays to authors ranging from Alexander Pope to Henry James. In parallel, he begins a careful study of Dewey, James, and Peirce, and begins teaching a seminar on the writings of William James – one which he retaught and rethought several times from the mid-1980s on. At the same time, the constellation of philosophers among his contemporaries with whom he enters into most immediate and fervent dialogue comes to broaden out considerably, featuring as his most frequent interlocutors now, no longer

79 John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994). Putnam later becomes quite critical of certain strains of thought in *Mind and World* which he originally celebrated; see, for example, Hilary Putnam, "McDowell's Mind and McDowell's World," in *Reading McDowell: On Mind and World*, edited by Nicholas H. Smith (London: Routledge, 2002), 174–190. This gives rise to a larger dispute between Putnam and McDowell, culminating in McDowell's "Putnam on Natural Reason," his contribution to Auxier, Anderson, and Hahn, *The Philosophy of Hilary Putnam* (3–110) and Putnam's response to McDowell in that same volume. For an overview of the terms of the initial shape of this dispute, see my "Two Varieties of Skepticism," in *Rethinking Epistemology*, Vol. 2, edited by Guenter Abel and James Conant (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012), 1–73.

Chomsky, Fodor, and Quine, but rather figures such as Jürgen Habermas,[80] Richard Rorty,[81] and Bernard Williams[82] – philosophers whose interests are not primarily centered around topics in the philosophy of logic, mind, or science. His list of philosophical heroes from the generation preceding his own comes also to foreground more prominently than before thinkers from the post-war British tradition, beyond his early Oxford friends Elizabeth Anscombe and Philippa Foot, one now encounters frequent allusions in his classes and articles to writings of Iris Murdoch,[83] David Wiggins,[84] as well as others already mentioned above, such as John McDowell and Bernard Williams. He also, in this same period, begins to make a close study of authors in the Jewish philosophical tradition such as Buber, Levinas, and Rosenzweig. As his list of favorite authors thus expands, so, too, does the list of contemporaneous philosophical heroes whose ideas he seeks to engage, inherit and

80 His serious engagement with Habermas begins in the late 1980s, beginning with *The Many Faces of Realism*, and continues throughout the 1990s and beyond. Perhaps his single most sustained response to Habermas is his "Antwort auf Jürgen Habermas," in *Hilary Putnam und die Tradition des Pragmatismus*, edited by Marie-Luise Raters and Marcus Willaschek (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2002), 306–324.

81 "Rorty influenced me – to *combat* Rorty. We were not enemies, we loved each other, but we differed very much, and the differences were stimulating. I think I clarified my own positions in my head by seeing where I disagreed with Rorty" (Bella, Boncompagni and Putnam, "Interview with Hilary Putnam," 6). For an overview of some of their disputes, see *Words and Life*, xxiv–xxxiii; his most intensive period of debate with Rorty was in the late 1980s and early '90s; see especially the three essays collected as Chapters 14, 15, and 17 in that book. His two earliest major critical statements of Rortian ideas predate this period and are collected as Chapters 12 and 16 of *Philosophical Papers*, Vol. 3. His two final major responses to Rorty are found in his "Richard Rorty on Reality and Justification," in *Rorty and His Critics*, edited by Robert Brandom, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 81–86; and in their conversation with James Conant about truth published as "What Is Pragmatism?" *Think* 8 (Autumn) (2004), 71–88.

82 For some of Putnam's most sustained engagements with Williams's philosophy, see, for example, Chapter 11 of *Realism with a Human Face*, Chapter 5 of *Renewing Philosophy*, and Chapter 2 of *Naturalism, Realism, and Normativity*, edited by Mario De Caro (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).

83 Putnam's interest in Murdoch is in part stimulated by his increasing interest in this period in the philosophical – and especially ethical – significance of literary works. He credits Martha Nussbaum with helping him to appreciate the importance of this topic; see, for example, his discussion of both Murdoch and Nussbaum in "Taking Rules Seriously," collected as Chapter 13 of *Realism with a Human Face*. This essay of Putnam's is discussed in Max de Gaynesford's contribution to this volume.

84 One essay that particularly captivates Putnam's attention in this period is David Wiggins's "Truth, Invention, and the Meaning of Life" (reprinted in his book *Needs, Values, Truth* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), 87–138).

modify. His seminars, conversations, essays and books begin regularly to feature names which at most only rarely occur in his writings prior to the mid-1980s – with perhaps the most prominent four such newcomers in the period between 1985 and 2000 being the following: Stanley Cavell,[85] Cora Diamond,[86] John McDowell, and Charles Travis.[87]

As he takes the turn into the twenty-first century, the themes Putnam is led to explore acquire a more public-facing aspect and acquire a renewed note of ethical and political urgency – one that becomes especially pronounced in books such as *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy and Other Essays* (2004) and *Ethics Without Ontology* (2005). In the former of these, he builds on and radicalizes ideas he finds in philosophically insightful economists, such as Amartya Sen and Vivian Walsh.[88] Putnam argues with a new passion now, not only that the central questions of contemporary meta-ethics are informed by dubious and dispensable metaphysical presuppositions, but that this has social and not just intellectual costs: it is itself an expression of a cultural and political, rather than (whatever this might mean) a merely philosophical, disorder of our age. The critiques that Putnam proposes in these two books aim not merely to transform how we think about our lives, but also at transforming our ways of living themselves – where the elicitation of the latter sort of change (in how we live) and the elucidation of the former (having to do with how we think) are conceived as two sides of a single form of philosophical activity. After having in the early 1970s gradually stepped back from the politically most activist period in his life, now thirty some years later, in the final decade and a half of his life, we again find Putnam expressing a conception of philosophy that has great affinities

85 For an overview of some of what Putnam takes from Cavell, see *Realism with a Human Face*, lvii–lxxiv. For his own homage to Cavell, see Hilary Putnam, "Philosophy as the Education of Grownups: Stanley Cavell and Skepticism" (collected in *Philosophy in an Age of Science*), 552–566.

86 For a discussion of some of what Putnam takes from Diamond, see *Words and Life*, xxxiii–lviii.

87 Putnam becomes fascinated already in the late 1980s in Travis's account of occasion-sensitivity and begins to draw on it throughout the 1990s and beyond in connection with the treatment of a range of philosophical problems. See, for example, the following two essays: "Skepticism and Occasion-Sensitive Semantics" (1998) "Skepticism, Stroud, and the Contextuality of Knowledge" (2001) respectively collected as Chapters 30 and 29 of *Philosophy in an Age of Science*.

88 Putnam, *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy*, is dedicated to Vivian Walsh. See also the essays (some of which are co-authored with Walsh) by Putnam in the jointly authored book: Hilary Putnam and Vivian Walsh, *The End of Value-Free Economics* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

with the one he embraced at the height of his overtly Marxist period – only now the philosophical blades he employs to sharpen the political cutting edge of his politico-philosophical thought are furnished by Kant, Dewey and Wittgenstein and the very distinctive readings of each of those three thinkers that Putnam himself had previously elaborated over the course of the 1980s and '90s.

In an interview Putnam gives in Amsterdam in 2001, we find him criticizing his Parisian Continental philosophical contemporaries, such as Jacques Derrida, in terms strikingly reminiscent of those he deployed at the heyday of his Marxist phase to criticize his Harvard analytic colleagues in 1968:

> The project of enlightenment is a double project of, on the one hand, *reflective transcendence*, which means standing back from the way we live both individually and socially, and seeing what needs to be criticized and criticizing it. And this means, as Dewey said, criticizing even our ways of criticism: the criticism of criticism. This means, on the other hand, making sure those criticisms issue in change, which requires the willingness to propose radical reform. To me it seems that for philosophers such as Derrida his political moment and his philosophical moment have become disjoined. There is a disjunction between the way he will talk when he sees himself as doing philosophy and the way he will talk when he sees himself as doing politics. But that is a pathological idea of philosophy – one which Kant rightly attacked, the idea that some things are 'valid in practice but not in philosophy': 'Das gilt in der Praxis, aber in der Philosophie nicht'. Pragmatists and Wittgenstein join Kant in rejecting that disjunction. It should be a constraint on philosophy that it be congruent with and can guide our practice.[89]

The swings in Putnam's philosophical development from 1951 to 2016 are not confined merely to particular varieties of philosophical doctrine he espouses over those six and a half decades; they exhibit equally dramatic zigzags in his conception of how best to conceive the relation between the higher reaches of abstract contemplative philosophical theory and the concrete ground of engaged everyday human practice. In the closing decade and a half of his life, in characteristic fashion, he once again strives try to rethink his whole conception of philosophy anew and from the ground up – seeking a new fulcrum for its reorientation in a new conception of how to strike the proper balance in philosophy between reflective detachment and activist engagement.

89 Alleblas and Eisinger, "An Interview with Hilary Putnam."

V Putnam's Later Conception in Which Philosophy, Like Virtue, Is Entire

When I first took courses from Hilary Putnam as an undergraduate, at Harvard in the late 1970s, I was a physics major, and the courses I took from him were courses in the philosophy of physics, mathematics, and/or logic. As I became both more serious about studying philosophy and as I came to know Putnam himself better, he chastised me for taking courses only in these areas. First, he urged me to take his own course on *Forms of Non-Scientific Knowledge*; thinking it would help to broaden my philosophical horizons. Then he enjoined me to enroll for credit in courses on ethics, aesthetics, political philosophy, and especially in the history of philosophy, taught by his colleagues in the Philosophy Department. I will never forget what he said to me then on that occasion: "You have to learn about all of philosophy and to understand why each part is *part of philosophy* in order to understand what philosophy is."

Once I entered the Ph.D. program and began to study more seriously with Putnam as a graduate student, I came to appreciate that this was only the tip of the iceberg with respect to what was heterodox in his conception of what a serious study of the subject of philosophy ought to require of a serious student. Putnam encouraged his students to resist the forms of institutionalization and professionalization that were then – and are certainly still – shaping the character of philosophical graduate training and credentialization. He deplored how these tendencies led to an ever further speciation of philosophy into putatively distinct subdisciplines that went out of communication with one another. He would reminisce about how even back as recently as in the 1960s and '70s there was always a canon of recent books or articles that you could count on all analytic philosophers to all have read and whose central terms and concepts would comprise a lingua franca among them, facilitating intellectual communication and debate. He deplored how by the later 1980s and early '90s, it was already the case that most admirers of John McDowell's writings would never have read anything by Jerry Fodor and vice versa.

Partially in reaction to this tendency within the academic profession of philosophy, Putnam in his own work, starting with *Reason, Truth and History*, becomes ever more concerned to push back against such developments, seeking to exemplify how the very possibility of doing path-breaking work in philosophy requires (what the Germans call) the attainment of an *Übersicht* – a synoptic overview – of the intellectual landscape of the subject as a whole. The aim was not merely to attain a wider view, one that encompassed a vaster intellectual terrain, but rather to see how each of the regions of that territory formed

aspects of an interconnected whole. Putnam became fond of the following passage from Paul Grice:

> [I]t is my firm conviction that despite its real or apparent division into departments, philosophy is one subject, a single discipline. By this I do not merely mean that between different areas of philosophy there are cross-references, as when, for example, one encounters in ethics the problem whether such and such principles fall within the epistemological classification of *a priori* knowledge. I mean (or hope I mean) something a good deal stronger than this, something more like the thesis that it is not possible to reach full understanding of, or high level proficiency in, any one department without a corresponding understanding and proficiency in the others; to the extent that when I visit an unfamiliar university and (as occasionally happens) I am introduced to, 'Mr Puddle, our man in Political Philosophy' (or in 'Nineteenth-century Continental Philosophy' or 'Aesthetics', as the case may be), I am immediately confident that either Mr Puddle is being under-described and in consequence maligned, or else Mr Puddle is not really good at his stuff. Philosophy, like virtue, is *entire*. Or, one might even dare to say, there is only one problem in philosophy, namely all of them.[90]

Putnam regarded this passage as articulating a touchstone which one could employ to distinguish two different types of philosophers. He was well aware that an increasingly small fraction of his philosophical contemporaries belonged to the type he hoped his students would become: philosophers who would resonate to Grice's remarks, regarding them as voicing something essential to the very nature of the philosophical enterprise – something that not only was in danger of being lost through its forms of institutionalization and professionalization, but also, once it was completely lost, would mark the death knell of philosophy itself. He knew that most of his colleagues belonged to the other type of philosopher: those who regard pronouncements such as Grice's as vestigial traces of a vanishing philosophical era – one we can leave behind without great intellectual cost to anything in philosophy about which we should care. He viewed this disagreement about how philosophy should be institutionalized – and hence how it should be pursued as a course of study – as itself constituting a significant crossroads within the heart of analytic philosophy. It was a disagreement in which he saw the very soul of philosophy – what it is, what it aspires to be, and what it shall become – at stake. That philosophy for him, like virtue, is entire – so that *au fond* there is only one problem in philosophy: namely all of them – is one of the reasons he was so fond of saying "any philosophy that can be put in a nutshell belongs in one."[91]

90 Paul Grice, "Reply to Richards," in *Philosophical Grounds of Rationality*, edited by Richard Grandy and Richard Warner (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 64.
91 Putnam, *Words and Life*, xi.

VI The View from 2004: A Figure of Russellian Intellectual Stature

In 2004, Putnam received an honorary degree from the University of Chicago. As it happens, I was asked to head up the honorary degree committee that solicited outside testimonials from distinguished academics around the world, in order to make the case that the nominee was fully deserving of the honor. Such testimonials were solicited not only from philosophers, but also from economists, political scientists, theorists of literature, physicists, and historians of science. It was in the context of looking over these letters to our committee that I first came fully to appreciate the degree to which Putnam was regarded as a towering figure not only by those who worked within the narrower world of academic philosophy, but also by writers, thinkers, and scientists of all sorts and types throughout the wider intellectual world.

At that time, Richard Rorty and Noam Chomsky were two of the other most prominent living examples of individuals whose career had started within anglophone philosophy of language and mind, but who in later life achieved widespread international recognition as public intellectuals. So it was natural for the University of Chicago honorary degree committee to solicit a letter from each of them regarding Putnam's candidacy. Rorty's letter – in sharp contrast to Chomksy's – somewhat surprised the committee by showing absolutely no interest in the wider intellectual significance of Putnam's achievements, instead focusing entirely on (what Rorty at least took to be) the uniqueness of Putnam's place within the discipline of philosophy itself:

> Putnam is unquestionably the most distinguished and influential of living American philosophers. Throughout a long career, he has always been at the leading edge of analytic philosophy – constantly coming up with original and provocative ideas. His range has been vast: from contributions to symbolic logic to restatements of Dewey's account of the relation between philosophy and democracy. All of us who teach philosophy have felt obliged to think about each of his books as they have appeared – to keep track of his changing views and to grasp the course of his thought.

In his testimonial, Amartya Sen, one of the world's leading economists, concentrated instead on the breadth of Putnam's achievements:

> Putnam is one of the leading philosophers of our age, whose contributions have transformed our understanding of a great many philosophical issues. The range of his contributions has varied from epistemology to metaphysics to ethics and the philosophy of mathematics, and from the understanding of communication to the assessment of natural and social sciences. Hilary Putnam's contributions in each of the particular areas in

> which he has worked could, taken separately, more than justify the award of an honorary doctorate by a leading university in the world. Taken together, they make a case that must be hard to question.

Peter Galison, one of the finest living historians of science, echoed this note, but also highlighted the fact that, unlike those of most contemporary analytic philosophers, it was reasonable to anticipate that Putnam's writings would continue to be read and studied well into the future:

> Hilary Putnam is, without any doubt, one of the leading philosophers in the English-speaking world. He has made major contributions in a staggering range of fields – from important articles in the history of physics, to classic articles on scientific realism, and philosophy of language . . . My own view is that in 50 years, Putnam will still be read, avidly, by philosophers but not only philosophers.

What all of the authors of the testimonials submitted to that committee emphasize, each in their own manner, is how there simply is no one among his own contemporaries with whom Putnam can easily be compared.

If one seeks a comparison, then it is hard to identify a comparable figure unless one goes all the way back to that towering figure of a previous generation, namely Bertrand Russell – to whom we already saw John Passmore comparing Putnam above. If one looks over the testimonials supplied to the Chicago honorary degree committee, the comparison recurs in this context for three reasons. First, Putnam, to a degree equaled by no one in the recent history of philosophy other than Russell, managed to do outstanding technical work in logic, mathematics, and the philosophy of science, while publishing a great many highly accessible and readable general works in philosophy that enjoyed – and still enjoy – a wide following. Second – as we already saw Passmore note – Putnam abandoned more original and influential ideas than anyone else in the recent history of philosophy other than Russell. Third, Putnam managed to remain extraordinarily productive for over three quarters of a century, showing no visible signs of a flagging in productivity in his later years.

If one looks at the comparison between Russell and Putnam in more detail, it becomes clear just how extraordinary Putnam's achievement really is. For a detailed comparison will show that Putnam enjoys the advantage over Russell on each of the three aforementioned points. Putnam's technical work is on a par with Russell's, including important contributions to logic (his first short book, titled *Philosophy of Logic*,[92] is still considered by some to be the best overview of the subject), to mathematics (he contributed toward the solution of

92 Hilary Putnam, *Philosophy of Logic* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971).

Hilbert's tenth problem), to philosophy of science (his famous early defense of quantum logic still enjoys many adherents), to cognitive science and the philosophy of mind (in particular, as the originator of the functionalist program for the explanation of the nature of mental states). Putnam's more general work in philosophy, beyond comparatively technical areas of specialization, however, is of a far higher quality than Russell's. Most of Russell's writings on ethics, political philosophy, and the history of philosophy are no longer taken seriously by those who work in those subjects, and even at the time of their appearance were largely regarded as merely popular publications – ones that many of his philosophical colleagues sometimes found to be embarrassingly casual in their treatment of serious topics. By contrast, Putnam's work outside of the core areas of theoretical philosophy – outside of logic, philosophy of science, epistemology and metaphysics – has been singled out as path-breaking by leading philosophers who work in history of philosophy, practical philosophy, philosophy of social science, and the theory of value. He has, in particular, done important and influential work in ethics (especially his critique of the fact/value distinction, his vindication of thick ethical concepts, and his refutations of various forms of proceduralism in ethics), in political philosophy (his defense of Dewey's conception of democracy, his critique of Habermas's account of norms of validity, and his criticisms of traditional welfare economics), and in history of philosophy (his proto-functionalist reading of Aristotle's *De Anima*, his defense of aspects of Kantian epistemology, his interpretation of William James as a common-sense realist, and, more broadly, his recovery and vindication of the pragmatist tradition in American philosophy). His contributions to these areas continue to enjoy a lively reception on the part of specialists working on the topics and figures on whom Putnam has published an article or book. Finally, whereas there is a widespread consensus that the quality of Russell's work gradually declined with each passing decade throughout the second half of his life, there is no such consensus about Putnam's work.

On the contrary, contemporary philosophers tend to be evenly split in their view of Putnam. About half of them hold that the high point of Putnam's career was his seminal papers in defense of functionalism, scientific realism, and cognitivism in the philosophy of mind, language, and science in the 1960s and '70s; while the other half hold that Putnam's deepest and most lasting contribution lies in his criticism of just those views, developed in his papers in 1980s and beyond, issuing in the anti-scientistic, anti-reductionist philosophy of mind and language that he continues to elaborate over the later phase of his career in opposition to his own influential earlier positions. Immediately prior to his nomination for the Chicago honorary degree, his book *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy* appeared in print. Though it was certainly not without

its critics, a number of leading philosophers and social scientists heralded it in contemporaneous reviews as ranking among his most important books. Amartya Sen made it a centerpiece of the case in his testimonial for why Putnam should be awarded the honorary degree: "*The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy*, for the methodology of the social sciences, is a work of very powerful relevance and impact." In the letter he provided to the honorary degree committee, Richard Rorty argued the same point in more general terms: "In his seventies, Putnam is still responding to critics with force and precision."

In 2004, the other notable figure who was both a professional anglophone philosopher and yet someone of an international intellectual stature comparable to that of a Rorty or a Putnam was my Chicago colleague Martha Nussbaum. It was therefore also natural for the degree committee to seek her view of the case. This is part of what she had to say in her testimonial submitted to the committee:

> Although Putnam is in his middle seventies, he is currently doing some of his most exciting work. *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy*, published last year and soon to appear in paperback, is one of his best books, and probably the most important for our public culture. Written from the vantage point of Putnam's immense expertise in philosophy of science and in technical notions of rationality, it attacks the facile use of a distinction between fact and value that pervades economic discourse and, through economics, much of our public life. Putnam argues effectively that an inclusive humanistic notion of objectivity is the best one we have available in both science and ethics, and that the attempt to build social choice upon a theory that treats preferences as utterly distinct from judgments about the world is scientifically naive as well as humanly impoverished. Similar conclusions have been defended by moral philosophers, but Putnam's technical mastery gives his argument a singular importance, making it impossible for economists to dismiss it. The book shows a great philosopher at the height of his powers making a crucial intervention in public debates.

Nussbaum here makes a crucial point. It is not just that Putnam happened to be someone with a laudable if peculiarly schizophrenic combination of forms of competence – so that he somehow managed to be someone with immense technical expertise (making path-breaking contributions to logic, philosophy of physics, and related technical branches of analytic philosophy) *and* someone who had an interest in contributing to philosophical topics with a wider bearing on human life (such as ethics, the philosophy of economics, social thought, and the theory of democratic institutions). Rather the way he was the one sort of philosopher cannot be understood apart from the way he was the other. It is precisely because he was the former sort of philosopher that he was uniquely able to intervene in debates about the latter variety of topics in the singularly influential manner that he did. Moreover, he sought to do this precisely in a way that would

help to heal the very rift in our contemporary intellectual cultural that makes it appear as if someone must suffer from an academically debilitating multiple-personality syndrome if she seeks to be a leading logician and philosopher of physics and, at one and the same time, a significant ethicist and critic of our democratic institutions. Now that Hilary Putnam is no longer amongst us, is there a philosopher alive today who even aspires to heal this rift?