PUTNAM AND RORTY ON OBJECTIVITY AND TRUTH

Some readers like to make jokes about Putnam’s swings in philosophical position; for instance, from ultra-realism to anti-realism in the philosophy of science, or from the first functionalist in the philosophy of mind to the paradigm’s profoundest critic. Unfortunately these jokes are a mere distraction from the broad constructive tendency of Putnam’s work in the last ten years or so. To describe it summarily: a systematic shifting of concepts (in particular, concepts of truth and objectivity) away from metaphysics and epistemology to ethics and politics. Besides withering criticism of the assumptions of “metaphysical realism,” Putnam sketches the outline of an alternative, non-metaphysical understanding of truth and of truth’s value, not as correspondence with reality but as ethical truthfulness, a dialogic rightness in speech with others. Viewing Putnam’s recent work in this way, it becomes clear that his polemic against Richard Rorty’s supposed relativism suggests greater difference than there is between Putnam’s pragmatic realism and Rorty’s ethnocentric pragmatism.

OBJECTIVITY

It is useful to distinguish Greek from modern (or Kantian) objectivity. Greek objectivity is a relation between an intellectual product (a logos) and the being of beings: Telling It like It is. This onto-logic mystified Kant; what is this mysterious relation to an object, he asked. He suggests instead that objectivity is nothing but a certain conceptual “unity of experience,” which is, in a sense, ultimately subjective, or at least subject-centered. An “objectively valid” concept becomes one in which everything particularizing, local, personal, or idiosyncratic about the knowing subject is washed out, leaving only what is common and essential to the impersonal, transcendental operation of understanding itself applied to intuitions. Kant tried to limit the subjectivism of his epistemologically


3 Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, A197/B242. I describe the Greek, or classical interpretation of truth as “onto-logic” because it is fundamentally determined by the assumption that a logically consistent predication owes its possibility of being true to the ontological possibility of the entity whose being (existence and identity) makes it true. Possibilities of truth and possibilities of being are therefore the same. See my Truth in Philosophy (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), esp. chap. 1.
reconstructed objectivity by claiming to have discovered universal or necessary conditions on any experience of an object, or in other words by positing a universal subject whose synthetic powers “constitute” all those objects, and thus “make nature,” at least insofar as nature can be known at all. But once philosophy sets out on this path, the lack of a “method” producing universally agreed upon results becomes a proof of non-objectivity, which is not an error about what is (das Seiende) but an undisciplined, irrational, idiosyncratic intrusion of subjectivity. The inevitable result is that any judgment, whether in science or morals, that purports to be objectively valid becomes a sitting target for “relativism,” which need only suggest that without any lapse of contextual or cultural rationality, someone somewhere might not agree.

Putnam proposes a pragmatic alternative to both Greek and Kantian views. For a judgment to be objective is for it to be made in a practical context in which in principle (a deliberate idealization) it can be evaluated, correctly and fairly, for its rightness for that context. When certain conditions of logical grammar are also satisfied this rightness is a sufficient condition for truth. But the point is that objectivity may be demanded, and the demand satisfied, through local norms of contextual reasonableness. It is such local, language-game relative reasonableness, and not Kant’s universality, that makes objective judgment possible in the only sense that should matter, namely, as a practical possibility of dialogical intersubjectivity.

Judgments acquire objectivity by a relation to practical reasoning and the dialogic reasonableness of others. Objectivity does not depend on our calling any belief “true,” but is instead the ideal that we must have in mind if it is so much as possible for us to care about objectivity and truth. As Putnam likes to say, “there is a fact of the matter” about rightness, about justification, about who, in some concrete situation, is more objective. This fact is not Kant’s fact of monological, subject-centered reason. Neither is it Parmenides’s fact that being is. The rightness attainable in dialogic practice is the fact Putnam describes as “the position we are fated to occupy in any case, the position of beings who cannot have a view of the world that does not reflect our interests and values, but who are, for all that, committed to regarding some views of the world—and, for that matter, some interests and values—as better than others” (RHF.178).

The rightness that objectivity and truth posit goes beyond justification-on-present-evidence (RHF.114). Putnam calls the particular species of rightness sufficient for truth “idealized justification” (RHF.115), or “right assertability” (PP.239). The “objective determination” of this value is its dialogically reasonable determination in cases, and does not depend on any de facto agreement however it may have been reached (RP.77). At the same time, however, objectivity becomes subjected to history, its “determinacy” a matter

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4 This may be the answer to Putnam’s question why “philosophers, of all people, should be the ones to think that the fact that certain ideas are intrinsically controversial indicates that there is no being objectively right or wrong about those ideas” (RHF.35). Interpret “objectively right or wrong” as “empirically (or scientifically) right or wrong” and one has Kant’s own position.
of local and interested practice. In Putnam’s words, “the judgment of better or worse . . . express[es] only a ‘local’ truth, a truth in a language game which presupposes the interests and practices of some social world or other” (RP.187).

Unlike Greek objectivity Putnam’s brand requires no “real” relation to an thing (Ding-an-sich). Unlike Kantian objectivity it does not posit a universal, transcendental subject. Putnam’s pragmatic alternative makes the objectivity of judgments rely on intersubjective, historically conditioned, and ultimately ethical ideals of rightness in how we respond to the speech of another. Objectivity is an ethical quality of conversations, of dialogic relationships to other people, and to ourselves at our best.

**TRUTH**

Putnam uses one of his most confusing expressions when he speaks of a so-called *substantial notion of truth*. If, as on his view, right assertability is a sufficient condition for truth, and truth “only a local truth, a truth in a language game,” one wonders how “substantial” truth à la Putnam can be. Insight into this problem comes from what for Putnam seems to be the germ of truth in the unruly growth he calls “metaphysical realism.”

Putnam thinks the idea “that truth *is* a property—and a property which, unlike justification, or probability on present evidence, depends on more than the present memory and experience of the speaker—is the one insight of ‘realism’ that we should not jettison” (RHF.32). The truth in realism is that there is a real difference between what Parmenides called “the motionless heart of well-rounded Truth,” and “the opinions of mortals, in which there is no true reliability.” Parmenides was not a Davidsonian; he did not think that truth is immanent in belief.\(^5\) Putnam finds something right about the classical dualism of opinion and truth (RHF.139). The problem truth therefore poses concerns how to hold onto the grain of truth in realism, while avoiding the Scylla of metaphysical realism and the Charybdis of relativism. He wonders, for instance, how “to keep the idea that statements are true or false, that language is not mere noise and scribbling and ‘subvocalization,’ without being driven to postulate mysterious relations of correspondence” (RHF.93).

Elsewhere Putnam suggests an answer to this question. “What makes speech more than just an expression of our momentary subjectivity is that it can be appraised for the presence or absence of this property—call it truth, or rightness, or paying its way” (RHF.106). The truth in realism is that there is a real difference between being right and

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thinking one is right, or between the truth and what passes for true. Yet Putnam’s
antirealism rules out the Parmenidean account of what makes this difference real: the
presence of What Is. His alternative is, first, to interpret the de facto “justification” any
given statement may enjoy at some time and for some interlocutors as its “justification-
on-present-evidence,” and then to claim that the “ideal” difference between assertions
being justified-on-present-evidence and their being ideally justified, that is, justifiable
“were epistemic conditions ideal” (RHF.vii), is a real difference in a pragmatic sense,
making a real difference for practice. On the one hand, then, truth is “ideal.” It is not the
de facto “output” of any mechanism or method. On the other hand, however, one must
remember what truth is an idealization of, namely, actual practices of justification, such as
they happen to be, here and there, now and then and, ultimately, without any ground in
transcendental or ahistorical reason.

I asked in what way Putnam’s is a “substantial notion” of truth. His best explanation
of this expression occurs in a remark directed against Quine’s disquotationism, which is
said to have “abandon[ed] the idea that truth is a substantial notion, [that is,] the idea
that truth-or-falsity is a genuine parameter with respect to which we appraise one
another’s utterances and writings” (RHF.93).

I assume that a “genuine” parameter for the evaluation of a speech act is one
whose appraisal is a practical possibility. To say that truth is a genuine parameter, then, is
to say that the difference between true and false enters “substantially,” or to serious
practical effect, in the evaluation of assertive speech acts. But what purchase has one on
this difference when evaluating what anyone says? How, exactly, does truth (as opposed to
justification-on-present-evidence) enter into the evaluation of what others say?

At this point Putnam, seems to invoke the practical efficacy or pragmatic “reality” of
what people ought to do if they want to be truthful or reasonable in their exchanges with
others. For Putnam, the fact that “a true statement is one that could be justified were
epistemic conditions ideal” (RHF.vii) implies the real (pragmatic) difference between the de
facto justification of a given statement for given interlocutors on some particular occasion
and in the light of some limited body of evidence, and its de jure warrant, or
reasonableness, or truth. Ideal justification is not the “last” justification (at the “end of
inquiry”), but the best justification reasonable for the context and subject matter, which
Putnam seems to regard as part of the “background” that de facto envelops every speaker
engaged in serious discussion.6

It is not surprising that Putnam should reject Quine’s disquotationism.7 Putnam

6 The idea of a “background” comes from Searle, via Heidegger, Husserl, and Hubert
Dreyfus. So far as I know, Putnam has not explicitly acknowledged the idea or its
usefulness, although I should be surprised if he took strong exception to it. See John
Searle, Intentionality (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), and Hubert Dreyfus,

7 For a recent statement see W. V. Quine, Pursuit of Truth, rev. ed. (Cambridge, Mass.:
Harvard University Press, 1992), §33. Quine’s view is a development of Tarski’s semantical
thinks that to say a statement is true is not merely to affirm it by the indirect route of semantic ascent (as in Quine). What the predication of truth adds to an asserted content is the further claim that that content is justified and will remain so should the conditions of its evaluation to approach the best that is practical in that context and for those interlocutors. That is Putnam’s pragmatic reconstruction of the truth in realism—his pragmatic explanation of how a claim to have the truth can be wrong even when others are right to assess the statement as warranted in the light of present evidence.

The truth in realism and, I think, the cash value of Putnam’s “substantial” notion of truth is that truth is something we can realistically aim for, although the aim (when we care for truth) is not to correspond with reality. This Greek or onto-logical interpretation of truth (as accuracy, correctness, the measured adequation of speech or intellect to beings-in-themselves) contrasts with what might be called biblical truth. The Hebrew word for truth, ehmet, also means “fidelity” and “trust,” but there is no suggestion of formal adequation to speechless things. Biblical truth enjoins not a mimetic relation to “objects” but a dialogic rightness in relationships with others.

He who tells the truth states what he is sure of, but a lying witness speaks deceitfully. (Prv.12:17)

The truthful witness saves lives, but he who utters lies is a betrayer. (Prv.14:25)
In their mouths there is no sincerity; their heart teems with treacheries. Their throat is an open grave. (Ps.5:10-11)

And they will deceive everyone his neighbor, and will not speak the truth: they have taught their tongue to speak lies, and weary themselves to commit iniquity. (Jer.9:5)

When Greek philosophers said that poets lie, they meant not that they are treacherous but that they neglect to tell It like It is. When the Evangelist says of Satan “the truth is not in him” (Jn.8:44), he does not mean that there is a discrepancy between his speech and the way things are, but that the devil is absolutely not to be trusted, not even (according to


\[\textit{Marcel Eck, Lies and Truth, trans. B. Marchland (London: Macmillan, 1970), p. 103. “If the Greek idea of truth is that of a proposition that is true because it is non-contradictory and verifiable, the Judeo-Christian idea of truth concerns sincerity, the absence of fraud or duplicity in personal relations.” R. Mehl, cited in P. Veyne, Did the Greeks Believe in Their Myths?, trans. P. Wissing (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 138. According to Louis Jacobs, the Talmudic teaching on truthfulness holds that while “truth is important it must not be made into a fetish. Truth is a value which exist for the benefit of society and may, on occasion, be set aside if the well-being of society demands it.” }\textit{Jewish Values} \textit{(London: Valentine Mitchell, 1960).} \]
St. John Chrysostom) when he tells the truth. Greek truth is onto-logical correctness, telling It like It is. Biblical truth is dialogical truthfulness, part of doing right by others in matters of speech. Its ideal is not adequacy to speechless thing in themselves but singleness of heart in relationships with other people.⁹

I see Putnam’s call for philosophers to recognize a “property” called “truth, or rightness, or paying its way” (RHF.106) as an bid to retrieve this older, unGreek and nonmetaphysical understanding of truth from the discreditation of metaphysics, to which Putnam’s antirealism is a formidable contribution.¹⁰ To emphasize, as he does, that “truth—that is, the rightness of what is said—is a normative notion” (RP.77) shifts the important questions to ask about truth from ontology to ethics, from questions about our adequacy to objects to questions of the rightness of our relationships with those with whom we speak.

Honest truthfulness does not imply a claim to the onto-logical truth of one’s assertion. Lying is an entirely intersubjective matter, a matter of beliefs and intentions; it makes no difference whether or not these beliefs are the onto-logical truth of being.¹¹ Yet while truthfulness obviously involves the absence of an intention to deceive, it also involves more than this sincerity. A truthful person does not merely refrain from deception but also accepts the responsibility to exercise critical judgment in what he or she says to others, for example by refraining from passing on rumor or gossip that reasonable critical reflection would render dubious. A truthful person cares not only not to deceive, but also to ensure that what he or she says to others is reasonable and justified. It may not be reasonable or justified, but the point is, first, that it is part of the ideal of truthfulness that one cares for the reasonableness or justification of what one says to others, and secondly that there is no practical difference between caring for the dialogical justification of assertions and caring for their truth. The more pragmatically we consider truth “itself,” the more it comes into view as dialogical truthfulness. Ideally truthful conversations not only lack the intention to deceive but also show what we can recognize as a familiar and


¹¹ Chisholm and Feehan propose an analysis of lying that makes plain the conceptual independence of truthfulness from any that the asserted content corresponds with reality:

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L \text{ lies to } D =_{df} \text{ There is a proposition } p \text{ such that (i) either } L \text{ believes that } p \text{ is not true or } L \text{ believes that } p \text{ is false, and (ii) } L \text{ asserts } p \text{ to } D.
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L \text{ asserts } p \text{ to } D =_{df} \text{ L states } p \text{ to } D \text{ and does so under conditions which, } L \text{ believes, justify } D \text{ in believing that } L \text{ not only accepts } p, \text{ but also intends to contribute causally to } D\text{'s believing that } p.
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necessary reasonableness, including a sincere concern for justification and a preference for persuasion over authority or force, while truth coincides with the justifiability that such exchanges realize.

Later I shall say more about the agreement between Putnam and Rorty. Rorty also wants to "modulate philosophical debate from a methodologico-ontological key to an ethico-political key," reframing an issue such as relativism "in moral and political terms, rather than in epistemological or metaphilosophical terms." Elsewhere he speaks of a wish "to replace both religious and philosophical accounts of a suprahistorical ground or an end-of-history convergence with a historical narrative about the rise of liberal institutions and customs," which he calls a "shift from epistemology to politics, from an explanation of the relation between "reason" and reality to an explanation of how political freedom has change our sense of what human inquiry is good for."  

Crispin Wright has argued that statement-making practices are regulated by two distinct norms: warranted assertability and truth. For Wright, these two are "distinct in the precise sense that although aiming at one is, necessarily, aiming at the other, success in the one need not be success in the other." Putnam might seem to agree with Wright when he says that there is "a desirable distinction ... between saying of a statement that it is warrantedly assertible on the basis of all the evidence we have to date and saying that it is (\'tenselessly\') true" (RHF.222). Yet a pragmatist would surely argue that justification or reasonableness and truth are really different only if it is possible for loyalty to the one to come into conflict with loyalty to the other, and as Rorty argues, "the kinds of things pragmatists have said about truth are motivated by the thought that the difference between justification and truth makes no practical difference." Although what is justified on present evidence need not be true, that does not prove that there are two distinct norms governing our speech acts, since "there is no way in which the desire for truth and that for justification could conflict," and "two norms which cannot get in each other's way are ... only one norm."  

Rorty and Putnam should agree that in practice the only truth that matters is dialogic truthfulness, which is entirely a matter of patterns of intersubjective belief. "Facts," "states of affairs," and the like are dispensable artifacts of the misguided effort to name the "being" whose presence "makes a statement true." Truth is not a metaphysical relation between a statement and a speechless being. Truth is truthfulness, and although truthful speech presupposes a lot of stage-setting in a language game, that is all it presupposes, the only kind of "presupposition" truth makes. Truthfulness may require

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honesty, frankness, courage, sometimes foolishness, but never mimesis, never correspondence, or a scholastic *adaequatio*. The responsibility of speaking truthfully is not the “monological” one of adequacy to beings-in-themselves. When philosophers think about the conditions or presuppositions of knowledge, they should not dwell on verisimilitude or a relation between a proposition and its onto-logical “truth-maker,” but should think rather of other speakers, the ones whose belief our assertions solicit. The only “being” you can be true to is another person.

**RELATIVISM, OR RORTY MISPRISIONED**

Putnam’s idea of truth as right assertability develops Nelson Goodman’s idea of the rightness of what Goodman calls “versions,” about which Goodman says “truth, as rightness of what is said, is a narrow species.” The responsibility of speaking truthfully is not the “monological” one of adequacy to beings-in-themselves. When philosophers think about the conditions or presuppositions of knowledge, they should not dwell on verisimilitude or a relation between a proposition and its onto-logical “truth-maker,” but should think rather of other speakers, the ones whose belief our assertions solicit. The only “being” you can be true to is another person.

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A passage from Goodman indicates how close their agreement is, and also shows a revealing difference:

We must obviously look for truth not in the relation of a version to something outside that it refers to but in characteristics of the version itself and its relationships to other versions . . . Obviously we cannot equate truth with acceptability; for we take it to be constant while acceptability is transient. . . . But ultimate acceptability—acceptability that is not subsequently lost—is of course as steadfast as truth . . . [and] serves as a sufficient condition for it. And since acceptability involves inductive validity, which involves right categorization, which involves entrenchment, habit must be recognized as an integral ingredient of truth. Though that may give pause, it follows as the day the night.

Putnam uses almost all of this: Truth is not a relation between a version and something that is not a version; yet “obviously” truth is not transient acceptability. To say that “ultimate” acceptability is as eternal as truth is a safe tautology, but Putnam gives it practical content by glossing ultimate as ideal or best, and interpreting Goodman’s neutral but logically sufficient condition for truth pragmatically, as a “genuine,” “realistic,” practical parameter for the assessment of anyone’s speech.

It would be possible to enlist Goodman’s “new riddle of induction” in Putnam’s anti-

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16 Goodman, *Mind and Other Matters*, p. 38. Elsewhere he remarks, “Any treatment of rightness may, of course, give rise to speculation concerning an application to moral rightness; but I willingly leave that to others. One point might be pondered though: in the present context at least, relativity of rightness and the admissibility of conflicting right renderings in no way precludes rigorous standards for distinguishing right from wrong.” *Ways of Worldmaking* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1978), pp. 109-110n. Putnam’s interpretation of objective judgment seems to be a development of this point.
realist argument against a “ready-made world” or an “absolute conception or reality.” No one has yet explained the reason why we have to project green rather than grue. Goodman’s “solution” is simply to begin with the contingent entrenchment of predicates in some inquiry already underway. “Rightness of categorization . . . derives from rather than underlies entrenchment.” To say a predicate is the right one to use in some context is to say that projecting it is “what we do.” It is difficult to see how future science could be so “absolute” as to contain the knowledge that its predicates owed their projectability to something more respectable than the contingent habits and history of Homo sapiens. Curiously, though, that is exactly what Putnam does not emphasize: the contingency of entrenchment, hence rightness; its ultimate dependence on what Goodman calls habit and Rorty calls us.

Putnam recoils from Rorty’s ethnocentrism because he misunderstands it. In his mind Rorty is the “relativist” par excellence. He says: “I count Richard Rorty as a cultural relativist because his explicit formulations are relativist ones (he identifies truth with right assertability by the standards of one’s cultural peers)” (PP.235). Putnam objects to this “cultural relativism” because in his view truth, rationality, and justification “are presupposed by the activity of criticizing and inventing paradigms and are not themselves defined by any single paradigm” (RHF.125). It must therefore be erroneous to identify any of these “normative” concepts with the de facto agreement one may obtain by following any given rule or reigning paradigm of discourse. Putnam runs a version of the old “self-refutation” argument against Rorty: “If one says (as Rorty recently has) that rightness is simply a matter of what one’s ‘cultural peers’ would agree to, or worse, that it is defined by the ‘standards of one’s culture’ (Rorty compares these to an algorithm), then the question can immediately be put: Do the standards of Rorty’s culture (which he identifies as ‘European culture’) really require Rorty’s ‘cultural peers’ to assent to what he has written? Fortunately, the answer is negative” (RHF.125).

Putnam’s criticism has less force than he seems to suppose. I cannot find a single passage in either Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature or Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity where Rorty actually says there is an algorithm for truth or justification. Nor can I find a passage where he makes an “appeal to the notion of an algorithm,” as Putnam says he does, for the purpose of “explaining how it is that certain things are true and certain things

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17 Goodman, Mind and Other Matters, p. 38. Neither Williams nor Nagel discuss Goodman’s “new riddle of induction” when they explain their ideas on the absolute conception or the view from nowhere. It is difficult to see how they could allow Goodman’s argument to stand without forsaking the absoluteness of future science. It is even more difficult to see how they could answer it. See Nelson Goodman, Fact, Fiction, and Forecast, 3d ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1979); Bernard Williams, Descartes: The Project of Pure Enquiry (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978), and Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985); and Thomas Nagel, The View From Nowhere (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

are false in the language of a community” (RP.67).¹⁹ I cannot see why Rorty should object to the suggestion that action according to norms of normal discourse probably requires all of the non-formalizable intelligence Putnam is now constantly emphasizing in his critique of functionalism.²⁰ Rorty explicitly rejects what he calls the logical positivists’ idea “that we all carry around things called ‘rules of language’ which regulate what we say when,” remarking that cultures “do not have axiomatic structures . . . [or] ‘criteria of rationality.’” He suggests that we think of rationality “not as the application of criteria (as in a tribunal) but as the achievement of consensus (as in a town meeting, or a bazaar).”²¹

Rorty thus seems much closer to Putnam’s own views than to the cultural relativist Putnam studiously refutes. In a reply to Putnam, Rorty says: “I cannot see what ‘idealized rational acceptability’ can mean except rational acceptability to an ideal community. Nor can I see how, given that no such community is going to have a God’s eye view, this ideal community can be anything more than us as we should like to be”—which is indeed Putnam’s view. Rorty adds: “Identifying ‘idealized rational acceptability’ with ‘acceptability to us at our best’ is just what I had in mind when I said that pragmatists should be ethnocentrists rather than relativists.”²² Elsewhere he explains the difference: Whereas the relativist pretends to assert the equal validity of any community’s ideas of justification or the good, “to be ethnocentric is to divide the human race into the people to whom one must justify one’s beliefs and the others. The first group—one’s ethnos—comprises those who share enough of one’s beliefs to make fruitful conversation possible. In this sense, everybody is ethnocentric when engaged in actual debate, no matter how much realist rhetoric about objectivity he produces in his study.”²³

It is important to appreciate how ethnocentric Rorty’s ethnocentrism is. He is not declaring the unqualified good (or “equal validity”) of anybody’s ethnocentrism, or of any

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¹⁹ In one place Rorty does suggest that we “construe the line between discourses which can be rendered commensurable and those which cannot as merely that between ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal’ discourse,” explaining that by “commensurable” he means “able to be brought under a set of rules which will tell us how rational agreement can be reached on what would settle the issue on every point where statements seem to conflict.” Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), pp. 320, 316. On this account, then, when discourse is “normal” there are rules which govern (if they do not “survey”) decisive evidence. But this modest assertion is far from the slavish reliance on an “algorithm” that Putnam attributes to Rorty. Note too the dismissive remarks about inductive method as “a string of platitudes hoked up to look like an algorithm” (Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth, p. 67).


²¹ Rorty, Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth, pp. 25-26, 217.


solidary “we.” The nerve of relativism is the claim that all claims to value are per se equally valid. Their normative force is relative to the individual, or to a culture or Gemeinschaft. The fundamental difference between such relativism and Rorty’s ethnocentric pragmatism is that unlike the relativist Rorty does not posit an indifferent, sociological “solidarity” that might equally well obtain among, say, fascists and social democrats, making their values equally valid. The ethnos Rorty puts at the center of pragmatism is historically particular: modern Euro-American liberalism. By mutual preference, fascists and racists are excluded from its conversations. The particular “we” Rorty refers to “prides itself on constantly adding more windows, constantly enlarging its sympathies. It is a form of life which is constantly extending pseudopods and adapting itself to what it encounters. Its sense of its own moral worth is founded on its tolerance of diversity.”

For Rorty, the only question that is really at stake in the argument about relativism is whether the future of liberal democratic societies depends on their proving to be “grounded” in something that is not contingent but universal, not historical but natural, not local or particular but everywhere the same. Rorty appears to have adopted what Charles Taylor wistfully calls “the prudent strategy,” adopting “a stripped-down secular outlook, without any religious dimension or radical hope in history.” For Taylor, “prudence constantly advises us to scale down our hopes and circumscribe our vision . . . A little judicious stifling may be the part of wisdom.” Where a radical Aufklärer like Holbach or Condorcet “wants to proclaim the innocence of nature and ultimately the benevolence of humans properly educated, thus opening for us the exciting prospect of a restored humanity,” the prudent are “content to remove the burden of impossible aspirations.”

Hume’s critique of religious belief can be seen in this light, which helps to understand his lack of atheist zeal. What Taylor calls Hume’s “neo-Lucretian spirit” also fits Rorty’s ethnocentric pragmatist. “What they see themselves as striving to undo is precisely the Judeo-Christian call to ‘holiness’ . . . What they want to restore is the pagan sense that man is and must remain below the gods.” The same point can also be made atheologically: No moral source honestly available in these late-modern times can sustain the universality and unconditional rationality claimed by the radical wing of European Enlightenment for the modern goods of autonomy and benevolence.

To admit that these “ethnocentric” goods may not be good for everybody is not to

24 This assumption vitiates practically all the criticism of Rorty in Kai Nielsen, After the Demise of the Tradition: Rorty, Critical Theory, and the Fate of Philosophy (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1991); see for instance, pp. 154-155.

25 Rorty, Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth, p. 204.


deny them to anyone who should claim them for their own. Without making any kind of onto-theological “claim to universality,” Rorty’s liberalism cultivates a principle of open-ended and politically adjustable inclusion. The result is neither relativism nor absolutism, but more like what Putnam calls “realism with a human face.” Referring to “the supposed incompatibility of universalist or ‘enlightenment’ and parochial [or ethnocentric] values,” Putnam says:

When we argue about the universal applicability of principles like freedom of speech or distributive justice we are not claiming to stand outside of our own tradition, let alone outside of space and time, as some fear; we are standing within a tradition, and trying simultaneously to learn what in that tradition we are prepared to recommend to other traditions and to see what in that tradition may be inferior—inferior either to what other traditions have to offer, or to the best we may be capable of. (RHF.178)

If this is what Putnam calls “pragmatic realism,” then it seems in all but explicit agreement with Rorty’s ethnocentrism pragmatism.

John Dewey believed that “inherent in all social life was an intimation of what it would be at its best.” Dewey had what Putnam regards as an appropriate sense of “the entanglement of fact and value”—a pragmatic theme neglected in Anglo-American philosophy after Dewey (RHF.165). Putnam appreciates this point as one of convergence among Dewey, the later Wittgenstein, and Goodman. For all three philosophers, “practices ... are right or wrong depending on how they square with our standards. And our standards are right or wrong depending on how they square with our practices” (RHF.304). So although Putnam insists on the “irreducibly normative” character of justification and truth, the point should not be made into a mystery. It does not prove a mysterious “transcendence” for rightness, or justification, or truth. It does not imply that anyone’s best idea of justification can be “right” in a sense that would depend only on a monological relation of correspondence between a statement and a speechless thing-in-itself.

Putnam is careful not to identify “what we would accept if we rationally reflected” with any de facto acceptability, however much in line it may seem to be with the best idea interlocutors have of what reasonableness, or dialogical truthfulness calls for in their case. Yet it would be wrong to think that the warrant or justification or truth of a statement is so independent of the implicit reasonableness that is there to be found and described by history or ethnography in actual historical practice—us at our best. To put this point another way, while it is a mistake to identify or define the ideas of warrant, justification, or truth in terms of any “mechanical” output of a method, rule, or recursive algorithm, the

28 On inclusion, see Rorty, Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth, p. 219.

existence and practical "reality" or "determination" of warranted, justified, genuinely true statements stands or falls with actual, historically contingent practice. Although warrant resists "sociological" definition, their existence and practical reality remain utterly subject to a "sociological" fact of our history and traditions of justification and styles of reasoning.

So while "there is no notion of reasonableness at all without cultures, practices, procedures," we must not forget that "the cultures, practices, procedures we inherit are not an algorithm to be slavishly followed." While "talk of what is `right' and `wrong' in any area only makes sense against the background of an inherited tradition," we must not forget that "traditions themselves can be criticized." In this way Putnam believes that reason is "both immanent (not to be found outside of concrete language games and institutions) and transcendent (a regulative idea that we use to criticize the conduct of all activities and institutions)” (PP.234).

The agreement I have noticed between Putnam and Rorty would not be surprising if one takes seriously each philosopher’s claim to return to the pragmatism of John Dewey. To Putnam, Dewey represents American pragmatism at its best, avoiding “both the illusions of metaphysics and the illusions of skepticism” (RP.180). Yet even though the renewal of interest in Dewey is in no small part due to Rorty, on this point it is Putnam and not Rorty who is truer to Dewey’s philosophy.40

Rorty and Putnam would agree wholeheartedly with Dewey that philosophy has no special stock of knowledge, and looks silly when it sets itself up as a rival to science. Both also share his view that philosophy has no special knowledge of “the good” that plain men and women do not know. The issue on which Putnam and Rorty differ most, and where Putnam remains much closer to the spirit if Dewey’s pragmatism, is not a “philosophical” one about the nature of truth or objectivity, but a “metaphilosophical” difference concerning the future of philosophy as a discipline.

Rorty revises Wittgenstein’s wish for post-philosophical peace of mind into a wish for a “post-Philosophical culture”—a version of ourselves without any erkenntnistheoretisch discipline “asking questions about the nature of certain normative notions (e.g., `truth,’ ‘rationality,’ `goodness’) in the hope of better obeying such norms.” He thinks that without “the Kantian assumption that the philosopher can decide quæstiones juris concerning the claims of the rest of culture,” the philosopher’s self-image as “knowing something about knowing which nobody else knows so well” must collapse. On his view, it would be better just to “drop the notion that there is something called ‘philosophical method’ or ‘philosophical technique’ or ‘the philosophical point of view’ which enables the

professional philosopher, *ex officio*, to have interesting views about, say, the respectability of psychoanalysis, the legitimacy of certain dubious laws, the resolution of moral dilemmas, the ‘soundness’ of schools of historiography or literary criticism, and the like.” Rorty agrees that philosophers “often do have interesting views upon such questions, and their professional training as philosophers is often a necessary condition for their having the views they do.” But he denies “that philosophers have a special kind of knowledge about knowledge (or anything else) from which they draw relevant corollaries.”

Putnam and Dewey both appear to believe that pace Rorty, philosophers *can* know something about knowing that nobody else knows so well. To be sure, their point is not that professional philosophers have some transcendental insight into cognition, or a super-science of knowledge but, on the contrary, that the philosopher’s “professional” interest in knowledge be explicitly conceived as *hypothesis*. Dewey, for instance, is much closer to Quine’s “naturalized” epistemology than to Rorty’s deconstruction of it. He views the knowing process as a natural process open to specialized investigation by a discipline that might equally well be called “epistemology” or “logic” or “theory of inquiry.” Its results that should help to release creative ideas for methods and tools for the intelligent resolution of novel problematic situations.

The point of a discipline and profession of philosophy, as both Dewey and Putnam conceive of it, is to act as a kind of intermediary between science, or knowledge at its best, and the values that animate everyday life. Dewey calls for philosophy that can “interpret the conclusions of science with respect to their consequences for our beliefs about purposes and values in all phases of life,” and thereby “facilitate the fruitful interaction of our cognitive beliefs, our beliefs resting upon the most dependable methods of inquiry, with our practical beliefs about the values, the ends and purposes that should control human action in the things of large and liberal human import.”

The problems of philosophy, insofar as they are genuine and not academic *Scheinprobleme*, flow from the difficulties that arise when we try to bring scientific knowledge to bear on the gaining of goals judged worth while by common values, “using that word to indicate whatever is taken to have rightful authority in the direction of conduct.” A pragmatically reconstructed discipline would be good for identifying the potential good in any given situation, distinguishing it from potential evil, and taking account of the best scientific knowledge of the day to come up with a creative plan of action for securing that good. Putnam cites *Experience and Nature*: “[Philosophy’s] primary concern is to clarify, liberate, and extend the goods which inhere in the naturally generated functions of experience. . . . [Its] purpose is criticism of beliefs, institutions, customs, policies with respect to their bearing upon the good.” Elsewhere Dewey writes:

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Man has beliefs which scientific inquiry vouchsafes, beliefs about the actual structure and process of things; and he also has beliefs about the values which should regulate his conduct. The question of how these two ways of believing may most fruitfully interact with one another is the most general and significant of all the problems which life presents to us. Some reasoned discipline, one obviously other than any science, should deal with this issue. Thus there is supplied one way of conceiving of the function of philosophy.\textsuperscript{33}

Putnam is seriously discontent with the state of the art in so-called analytic, or Anglo-American philosophy.\textsuperscript{34} But like Dewey, and unlike Rorty, he envisions some kind of reconstruction or renewal of professional philosophy, some renewed role for philosophers that would be “disciplinary” in the double sense of professional and normative or correctional. He carefully distances himself from the idea that philosophy is “a basis, a sort of pedestal, on which the culture rest[s]” (RHF.20). But he also thinks "there is no reason why we cannot seek to do what”—according to him—“philosophers have always done,” which is to order and criticize the beliefs and methods on which various departments of human life depend” (PP.302), “to bring them and the ideals which inform them into reflective equilibrium” (PP.240).

This suggestion for renewing the discipline is undeniably vague. Putnam’s recently published Gifford Lectures, entitled \textit{Renewing Philosophy}, offer nothing more definite. As usual, he has a lot to say about what he does not like, but makes practically no attempt to spell out an alternative conception of philosophy or its role in culture. Perhaps Putnam is no better at saying in detail what a renewed discipline would be like than Rorty is at saying in detail what a post-Philosophical culture would be like. My point is that the difference between them is this metaphilosophical and finally political one: How far would they go, what would they give up, to make the future new and different? Rorty is more radical, more impatient, possibly more utopian than Putnam, who would like to see the practice of philosophy as a discipline renewed, not relegated to the past.\textsuperscript{35}


\textsuperscript{34} Putnam regards analytic philosophy today as little more than a swamp of reductive, scientistic, methodologically uncritical speculation “dominated by the idea that science, and only science, describes the world as it is in itself, independent of perspective” (RP.ix), and “hell-bent on eliminating the normative in favor of something else, however problematic that something else may be” (RP.79). He deplores its “extreme deductivism” (RHF.181), observing how a professional-institutional dialectic “forces analytic philosophers . . . [into views] more and more bizarre, and which have lost all interest outside of the [professional] philosophical community” (RHF.51) — views that “do not extend the range of scientific knowledge, not even speculatively. They merely attempt to rationalize the ways we think and talk in the light of a scientistic ideology” (RP.141). See also RHF.67, 180, 307; and RP.138-139, 197.

\textsuperscript{35} I thank Richard Rorty, Michael Hymers, and David Davies for comments and discussion.