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Philosophy Social Criticism 1998 24: 103

DOI: 10.1177/019145379802400108

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Emrys Westacott

Review essay

Hilary Putnam, *Words and Life*, ed. James Conant (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994)

In his Preface to *Words and Life*, Hilary Putnam describes this collection of essays as a 'companion volume' to his earlier collection, *Realism with a Human Face* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990). That is a fair description. Notwithstanding some shifts in his philosophical views (relatively minor, especially by Putnamian standards), these essays fill out our picture of how the philosophical scene – both present and past – appears from the standpoint Putnam has carved out for himself over many years of intense, restless thinking. Some of the essays represent renewed attacks on problems that have long exercised the author. For instance: Can the human mind be fully understood on the model of a digital computer? Can intentional notions be eliminated from philosophical accounts of mind, language and knowledge? Does a disquotational theory of truth exhaust worthwhile philosophical discussion of the concept of truth? (Putnam, of course, answers all these questions negatively.) Other essays explore new (though adjacent) territory, such as whether Aristotle's view of mind may be plausibly understood as offering a proto-functional account of the mind, or whether Dewey's non-instrumentalist view of reason can be defended against some recent objections. (Putnam thinks the answer to both these questions is yes.) Uniting them all, and linking them to the rest of his work, is an overarching concern to combat scientism in its many guises while respecting science. Given his primary interests, for Putnam this means talking about mind, reference, truth and rationality in a way which is scientifically informed, but which resists the temptation to eliminate the

PHILOSOPHY & SOCIAL CRITICISM • vol 24 no 1 • pp. 103–108

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[0191-4537(199801)24:1; 103–108; 002053]

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messy complexity of our received 'picture' of these notions by means of physicalism, phenomenalism, or any other type of reductionism.

As with the earlier volume, the 29 essays that make up *Words and Life* were selected by James Conant, who also provides a fairly long introductory essay. This 'Introduction', which is clear and illuminating, does not enter much into the (often quite technical) details of Putnam's arguments. Instead, it focuses more on the relation between Putnam's thinking and that of other thinkers such as Richard Rorty (with whom Putnam has had a running debate since the early 1980s), as well as Wittgenstein, Stanley Cavell, John McDowell and Cora Diamond, all of whom Putnam acknowledges as important influences on his recent thinking.

All the essays have appeared in print elsewhere: 11 of them prior to 1990, including 2 that date from the 1970s. In spite of the extended period represented, however, they constitute a generally consistent whole since most were composed after Putnam's two most significant philosophical reversals: his rejection of scientific realism in 1976 and his critique of his earlier functionalist philosophy of mind in *Representation and Reality* (1988).

The essays are grouped by topic into seven sections. The first three essays relate Putnam's views on the nature of mind and make reference to those of various canonical figures in the history of philosophy, particularly Aristotle. Elsewhere, Putnam has remarked that as he gets older, he finds Aristotle gets smarter. Whether Aristotle was smart enough to anticipate the broadly functionalist account of mental activity which Putnam favors will no doubt strike many as doubtful, although he and Martha Nussbaum (co-author of one of these essays) offer a lively defense of this reading against objections raised by Miles Burnyeat. Speaking generally, though, what Putnam finds salutary in Aristotle is his effort to construct a philosophy that, in recognizing constraints imposed by both scientific knowledge and our everyday experience, attempts 'to do justice to the world as we know it' (70). It is this willingness to settle for complexity that enables Putnam to enlist Aristotle as an ally against the many forms of reductionism that flourish in contemporary analytic philosophy.

Four essays on logical positivism serve a dual purpose. On the one hand, Putnam seeks to correct the supercilious and dismissive attitude towards this movement which prevails today. Philosophers like Carnap and Reichenbach, he argues, were far from being naive or simplistic. Reichenbach, for instance, anticipated arguments developed later by Wittgenstein, Quine and Sellars against the idea that reports of phenomenal experience are certain or describe what is simply 'given'. And he and Carnap showed a profound understanding of the problems they had to overcome if they were to realize their philosophical program: for

instance, avoiding solipsism, vindicating induction and analyzing causality. On the other hand, Putnam offers detailed criticisms of various aspects of the positivist program, the general import of which is that the intentional component in human understanding cannot be ignored, avoided, or eliminated. His critique of positivism thus supports his relentless attack on more recent attempts to do just that by behaviorists, physicalists, AI enthusiasts and others who, ironically, see themselves as having left logical positivism far behind.

This attack makes up a large part of the rest of the work, particularly in the last four sections which deal mainly with problems concerning realism, truth, reference, meaning, computational theories of the mind and the nature of science. Certain targets pop up with the regularity of clay pigeons for Putnam to shoot down using a technically impressive battery of arguments. These targets include: disquotational accounts of truth, physicalist (including causal) theories of reference, behaviorist views of language, computational models of the mind (including the 'narrow' functionalism to which Putnam formerly subscribed) and the uncritical privileging of the language and standpoint of physics. The rogues gallery contains some familiar offenders: Quine, Rorty, Fodor, Boyd. Two particularly interesting essays in this group, both accessible to a wider audience than many of the others, are 'Artificial Intelligence: Much Ado About Not Very Much' and 'The Idea of Science'. In the former, Putnam explains his reasons for remaining judiciously skeptical about the idea that developments in AI will soon yield valuable insights into the nature of human understanding. In the latter, he explores the tension between two reasons for viewing natural science (particularly physics) as the paradigmatic form of knowledge: its use of a certain method (the epistemological reason) and its claim to describe ultimate reality (the ontological reason). Both are roundly criticized and diagnosed as the unfortunate legacy of an outmoded metaphysical picture.

There is, in addition, a section containing four essays (two co-written with Ruth Anna Putnam) which serve to place Putnam's views within the tradition of classical pragmatism. These mesh easily with the other essays, but their orientation is more toward ethics and social philosophy. What Putnam finds especially wholesome in pragmatist thinking, particularly that of Dewey, is the rejection of certain dichotomies that he believes have been choking philosophy for most of this century: dichotomies such as those between mind and body, intellect and emotion, egoism and altruism, natural science and social science, theory and practice, facts and values and means and ends. He devotes considerable attention to criticizing the last two, and in doing so brings out the connections between them. According to Dewey, the Putnams argue, such things as science, education and democracy have to be viewed as

both ends and means. The fact that they have instrumental value does not mean that the ends they serve must be 'external' or simply 'given' and hence beyond rational discussion. Rather, as what Dewey calls 'ends-in-view', they simultaneously guide conduct and, when attained, become part of the situation in which we live and work. Democracy, for instance, understood as 'the precondition for the application of intelligence to social problems', is desirable both instrumentally and because we are beings who want to achieve our goals through our own efforts, working out precisely what our values and aims should be in the process.

The defense of a Deweyan view of rationality as something much more complex than a calculating faculty is ably conducted. Even so, there are tensions in the pragmatist view of value judgements that Putnam arrives at. The problem he faces is how to combine (1) a cognitivist account of value judgements with (2) a pluralistic view of legitimate human goods and conceptions of the good life while avoiding (3) value relativism (which he certainly wishes to do). It is not difficult to hold both (1) and (2) if one relativizes the truth or falsity of value judgements to particular communities, as canonical relativists like Sumner and Benedict do. But Putnam, of course, like Dewey, insists that we can also make objectively valid value judgements about entire communities and forms of life. This requires something like a general theory of human nature to provide the basis for a distinction between those needs and desires which are 'real' or 'genuinely human' and those which are not. Putnam seems to applaud Dewey for retaining this distinction, but also argues – controversially – that Dewey keeps his theory of human nature suitably 'thin'. The problem is that the more content there is to the theory of human nature, the more controversial it will be, while the thinner one makes it, the less resistance it offers to a thoroughgoing relativism.

Throughout the volume, Putnam returns repeatedly to what he variously describes as 'the problem of intentionality', 'the great question of realism' and 'the major problem of philosophy', namely: How does language hook on to the world? As he sees it, any acceptable answer to this question must be tied to a view of truth that recognizes it to be a 'substantive property' possessed by at least some of our assertions in virtue of their relation to something that lies beyond language. Defending this view, he is sharply critical of those like Rorty who, on the grounds that we can never adopt a 'sideways on' standpoint from which to compare our words with the world they purport to describe, dismiss 'the great question of realism' along with the idea that our words can correspond to or represent any non-linguistic reality. Against this argument, which he describes as 'terrible', Putnam offers a quick and dirty objection. By an exactly analogous argument, he claims, one could reach the absurd conclusion that I cannot know what other people are experiencing, or

even if they are experiencing anything at all, since it is impossible for me ever to compare my thoughts about what they are experiencing with their actual experiences. It seems to me, however, that this argument is a bit too quick and dirty; for the analogy drawn is not exact. It would be exact if Rorty were to argue that since we cannot compare our picture of the world to the world, *that picture* (e.g. the Newtonian view of nature) is empty. But Rorty does not say that. He only says that the *philosophical* account of truth as correspondence to reality is empty, and so cannot be used to explain why a certain picture is useful to us.

To those already familiar with Putnam's work, the most noteworthy aspect of his more recent discussions of realism is a drift towards what he calls 'naive' or 'direct' realism. Exactly what this amounts to is never made very clear; essentially it seems to be a philosophical endorsement of the 'natural' view that physical objects are not constructs out of sense-data but are themselves the immediate objects of perception, and that the truth of our assertions depends on how things are in the world. (Putnam claims this 'sophisticated naivety' is in the spirit of the later Wittgenstein, who, he argues, has been misunderstood by all who would interpret him as some sort of anti-realist.) Two considerations seem to be especially important in moving Putnam in this direction. First, he believes that an analysis of how representation is possible must start out by seeing cognition as an interaction between a creature and its environment, since if one proceeds by considering representation only from the subjective side the connection between thought and reality must always appear mysterious. Second, he is convinced that since the naive realism of common sense is a 'picture' that profoundly affects – is in fact essential to – the way we think, speak and live our lives, it is deserving of respect. And philosophical views that are wildly at odds with this picture are, for that very reason, idle; they do not help to make our world either better or more intelligible.

This appeal to common sense from within the pragmatist tradition is a forceful move. And Putnam evidently thinks that by this means he can hoist other *soi-disant* pragmatists like Quine or Rorty with their own petards. For the argument to be persuasive, however, he at least needs to explain more fully just why philosophy should be constrained by the common-sense picture of things. After all, science does not have to conform with that picture. Copernican astronomy, relativity theory and quantum mechanics all defy common sense; the only constraint put on them from that direction is that they should be capable of *explaining* how our everyday picture came about (e.g. why the sun seems to move, or why space and time seem to be independent of each other). Why philosophy should be judged by different criteria – if it should be – is an interesting question. Were he to address it, Putnam would have to articulate and defend more completely than he does here the nature

of his appeal to common sense and the conception of philosophy underlying that appeal.

In spite of the range of topics covered, *Words and Life* would not make a good introduction to Putnam's thought. For one thing, it is very long: almost 600 pages, including Conant's introduction. Also, many of the essays assume a fair degree of familiarity with the long-standing debates in which he has been such an active participant, and in places they can be technically quite demanding. Readers looking to become acquainted with Putnam's philosophy will find *The Many Faces of Realism* or *Reason, Truth and History* easier to digest. Those conversant with his previous writings will not come across much here to surprise them; but they will find a rich store of arguments and insights from one of the most sane and sophisticated critics of scientism within the analytic tradition.

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