

PUTNAM'S DEWEY LECTURES[†]

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ABSTRACT: This paper points out several difficulties to understand Putnam's views in his recent "Dewey Lectures", which involve a certain move away from his "internal realism". The main goal is to set into relief tensions in Putnam's thinking probably provoked by his philosophical development. Two such tensions are touched upon. In the first place, Putnam wants to reject an account of phenomenal consciousness (sensory experience in particular) he had subscribed to during his realist times, which he calls "Cartesianism cum Materialism", CM. He puts forward what he takes to be an alternative, apparently based on the traditional Chisholmian "Theory of Appearing". The paper suggest firstly that, in view of the facts to be accounted for, a theory along those lines cannot count as a real alternative to CM. In the second part, the paper develops an analogous tension between the views on truth Putnam seems to be willing to defend in the Dewey Lectures, and previous criticisms of the semantic conception of truth by him that he claims still to be willing to subscribe.

Keywords: truth, realism, conscious experience.

Putnam's Dewey Lectures (Putnam 1984) examine a wide range of topics. Undoubtedly because of that, they sometimes leave the reader baffled, confronted with small pieces of argument purporting to establish controversial views on the basis of claims of dubious cogency, or which do not appear to be sufficient to support the views. I will presently offer two examples of this. However, more importantly, there seem to me to be some glaring inconsistencies. These inconsistencies could be dissolved under the malicious hypothesis that, after his journey across the dark seas of internal realism, Putnam is once again where he started in 1975 -but "recoils" (a word of which he makes much use these days) at acknowledging it. Or maybe the inconsistencies are real, a combined result of his appreciating real difficulties in the views he has espoused in recent years, together with his still undeniable sympathies towards (how should I describe them?) "soft" metaphysical stances. Without attempting to substantiate any explanation, malicious or otherwise, the purpose of this note is to expose two of these inconsistencies; the first concerns claims

about sensory qualities made in the second lecture, the second claims about truth in the third. But before presenting them, I will start with the two examples I mentioned above.

Right at the beginning, the claim is made that it is a "metaphysical phantasy" to believe that "there is a totality of 'forms' or 'universals' or 'properties' fixed once and for all, and that every possible meaning of a word corresponds to one of these 'forms' or 'universals' or 'properties'." (448) This is supposed to formulate one of the tenets of "metaphysical realism" that Putnam still rejects. However, it is difficult to think of anybody that has ever thought that "every possible meaning of a word" corresponds to some objective universal.¹ Is it necessary, to be a metaphysical realist, to think that 'grue' corresponds to such an objective property? In that case, metaphysical realism is easily disposed of. This can be taken as evidence that there has been some slip here, and the intended claim attributed to the metaphysical realist is rather that *some* possible meanings of *some* words correspond to objective properties.

Assuming then that this is how we are supposed to understand this allegedly specious tenet of metaphysical realism, the problem then lies with the only explicit reason that Putnam appears to give to discredit it:

One tends to think that the meaning of a word is a property shared by all the things denoted by the word. Now, there is indeed a property that all instances of pure gold have in common, namely, consisting of (a mixture of isotopes of) the element with atomic number 79, but the English word 'gold' is not synonymous with 'element with atomic number 79'. Indeed, the ordinary meaning of the word 'gold' cannot be expressed as a property or a conjunction of properties at all. (449)

But why is it necessary, for it to be true that an objective property "corresponds" to the word 'gold' as (in some sense) its "meaning", that "its meaning be expressed as a property or a conjunction of properties"? Compare: "for the word 'Hesperus' to "correspond" to an objective individual as its meaning, its meaning should be expressed as an individual or conjunction of individuals". That sounds absurd, and its absurdity suggests the idea which the realist is probably to deploy to substantiate his view. He will probably defend that some words are related to objective properties by having resort to some form of the distinction between sense and reference. His claim will be that some words denote, or refer, to objective properties -which is, of course, compatible with their full meaning being something more than a property, or conjunction thereof. In fact, this is the view that one finds in Putnam's writings before 1975.

One more example of the sort of difficulty I am trying to illustrate, before I go on to expose the two more probing inconsistencies I mentioned at the beginning. At one point, Putnam is arguing for the controversial view that 'exist' does not have "univocal" uses in, say, "there exist brick houses on Elm street" and in "there exist prime numbers greater than a million" (He warns that this is not "saying, flat-footedly, that 'exist' has several different meanings" (550, fn), although he does not explain in what sense 'exist' is then not "univocal" in the two cases.) The reason he advances seems to be expressed in the following:

the assumption that the meaning of words, in any conventional sense of that phrase, determines exactly what is said on each occasion of the use of the words reflects a picture of how language functions which I would argue is deeply misguided. (*ibid.*)

Now, it is indeed true that the meaning of words does not determine exactly what is said on each occasion of their use. We do not need to go any farther to find examples of this fact. To understand a quantifier, it is crucial to know the domain of quantification. Nevertheless, what the domain is is clearly not exactly signified by conventional rules of meaning, but inexactly, by contextual clues. But it is difficult to get from here to Putnam's conclusion; for this is compatible with the quantifiers having a univocal *indexical* meaning on each occasion of their use, which indicates what is left open for the context to settle. The entry stating the conventional meaning of 'for all' or 'there exist' would start by saying something like: *where \mathcal{D} is the contextually indicated domain, ...,* followed by some standard explanation.

It may well be the case, then, that the inconsistencies I want to present are merely apparent, and arise merely from my lack of clarity or understanding of Putnam's intentions. Still, if I am not the only befuddled reader, it may be useful to make clear the nature of the befuddlement. Let me start, then, by examining the contentions about sensory qualities in the second lecture. Putnam is strongly critical, throughout the lecture, of a family of views which he refers to as 'Cartesianism *cum* materialism' (CM, in the following) - a version of which, he says, he himself subscribed to in his very influential "functionalist" writings of the sixties and early seventies. For the sake of having something more or less definite to fix the discussion, let me state briefly a version that I myself would accept. I will not attempt, however, to elaborate on its nuances; I take this to be just a convenient way of gesturing towards the sort of view which is being disputed.

Suppose S enjoys a perceptual experience E, the intentional content of which is (intuitively speaking) that there is a pink cube of medium size one foot in front of him. CM

holds that the truth-condition constitutive of the intentional content of E (and determining that E is indeed a *perceptual* experience, as opposed to a merely apparent one) is fixed in this way: (i) S is related, by a (typically) non-intentional relation of phenomenal awareness, to a complex sensory event as of medium-sized 'pink' cube' in-front', and (ii) the truth-condition of E is realized if and only if the event causing E is of a type of events actually being in a causal-explanatory relation, in normal conditions, to sensory events phenomenally experienced by S as of medium-sized 'pink' cube' in-front'.

Some brief comments by way of clarification. Firstly, sensory events are complex "Erlebnisse" (to borrow Carnap's term), whose simple parts are *qualia*; I borrow from Chris Peacocke the use of primed expressions to refer to their aspects (see Peacocke, 1983). There are good reasons to think that the typically complex sensory events of which we are aware can be so decomposed in simpler parts, reasons mainly coming from the "systematicity" of our sensory experiences: a subject who is able to have experiences like the one I have described will also be able to be phenomenally aware of cubes' in different sizes', colours', located to different distances' in his visual field, and so on. Indeed, in some rare situations almost simple qualia are phenomenally experienced. However, it is potentially confusing to think of our phenomenal consciousness in terms of simple *qualia*; the most devastating confusion is to think that intentionality, or representational content, can be separated from phenomenal consciousness and phenomenal "content". If the items of which we are phenomenally aware are isolated atoms, then it is easy to think of the philosophical problems posed by them as separable from other problems in the philosophy of mind, like the problem of intentionality. This is a common attitude in contemporary American philosophy. However (as pointed out, to be fair, by at least an American philosopher, Wilfrid Sellars) ordinary relations of phenomenal awareness involve not only "acquaintance" with isolated items, but also recognition that an individual item belongs to a remembered type, expectations that a phenomenally experienced process will go on in some specific way, relations of order and similitude between types, and so on.² Moreover, it is in virtue of these complex relationships that experienced phenomena can play the role that CM attributes to them, in serving as a sort of "modes of presentation" which contribute to determine the objective contents of perceptions and other mental states. In this view, therefore, the problem of consciousness and the problem of intentionality are inextricably linked.

Secondly, by saying that S is typically only *non-intentionally* related to the relevant sensory event, what I mean is that subjects of perceptually experience need not have the

concept of a sensory event, to enjoy the perceptual experiences made possible by them (and do not typically have them, as a matter of fact). Possession of such a concept is indeed necessary to understand a philosophical account of what it is to enjoy a perceptual experience, like the present one, but not to be intentionally related to external, objective events by experiencing the sensory episodes. In other words, CM is philosophically far away from traditional Cartesianism. Being an internalist theory, traditional Cartesianism assumes an intentional relationship to internal episodes, on the basis of which the content of every other intentional relationship can be accounted for in terms of inferential relationships. CM is not committed to this view. On the contrary, it is compatible with CM the externalistic claim that the basic intentional relationships on the basis of which the others (including intentional relationships with sensory episodes) should be specified (be it in terms of inferential connections or otherwise) are relations with external, objective entities.

Notice in this regard that, although my term 'non-intentional' sounds like Evans' and Peacocke's 'non-conceptual', and although the two technical terms are invoked to give philosophically congenial accounts of the same facts, the intent and the meaning of theirs is very different. Evans' and Peacocke's term applies to the external, objective contents of some mental states (typically, perceptual states), while mine applies to the relationship with internal, "mental" entities which is involved in some mental states, specially in perceptual ones. More importantly, their term is intended to set apart a class of intentional states, which are basic both epistemically and also in that adult human beings share them with less rational organisms. Although I sympathize with this philosophical goal, I do not think that any important ontological divide lies at the border between conceptual and nonconceptual content. Some philosophical confusion, moreover, regarding the way to characterize the ontologically important distinction -that between states with real intentional content and states that merely "carry information"- has been engendered by the notion of nonconceptual content.

Finally, the (crucial) function of 'actual' and 'normal', I trust, can be gathered from contemporary discussions (see Johnston, 1992).

Needless to say, much more should be added to clarify further this view, not to say to make it acceptable.³ But it is enough for present concerns if it coincides sufficiently with proposals already elaborated in the literature, so that its general drift can be grasped. Moreover, there are well-known difficulties with any view of this sort, no matter how detailed its exposition. In particular, nobody can claim today to understand properly a feature of CM on which this summary has remained so far silent; namely, how any sort of privileged

"access" which is granted to the subject of a sensory event, on the basis of his phenomenal awareness of it, is to be compatible with sensory events being fully natural entities. In particular, Cartesian materialists expect them to be *theoretically identified* with physical entities -to be sure, brain states: that is why this is Cartesianism *cum materialism*. The relevant sort of theoretical identification should be whatever is reasonable to assume regarding entities posited in "special sciences". In particular, it must be compatible with the well-known fact of "multiple realization." This, however, is by no means enough to solve the difficulty of understanding how this "identification" will take place. Perhaps I should say here that, indeed, a view like this was suggested earlier by Putnam (see, for instance, Putnam 1975, 366-370).

Now, as I said, Putnam disparages any view like this in the Dewey lectures. He points out, for instance, that "it is not clear that there is a *theory* of 'sense data'" (478); but, of course, one is needed for them to be "theoretically identified" to something else. Similarly, he observes "how plausible is it that one should be able to reduce (hypothetical) 'laws' involving the notion of *consciousness* without becoming involved in 'reducing' the propositional attitudes?" (481). These are fair critical remarks, which I do not intend to answer. It would be impossible to do so without elaborating on the details of the particular view which one adumbrates; and, in any case, the most that can be done about them, at the present stage, is to suggest some plausible considerations which could perhaps take the sting out of the criticisms. It is pretty clear that CM is, at present, a bold conjecture, which is adopted only on the basis of general considerations, without a clear understanding of what it is that we are embracing. The only strong contention that I am prepared to make in this regard is that no conceptual argument that I know of is sufficient to cogently disprove such a view. I fully accept that CM is a very problematic view, and that both empirical and philosophical work is needed before we can embrace it with something like full conviction.

What I cannot see, however, is how the view Putnam himself advances in the lectures is sufficiently different from the family of views I have gestured towards, and, therefore, how he thinks he is free from the objections he takes to be devastating against CM. This is then the first inconsistency of the two I mentioned: Putnam's rejection of CM, together with his acceptance of a allegedly alternative view.

When it comes to stating his own views, Putnam is also very sketchy. However, we can extract some definite commitments from what he says. Take, for instance, this claim:

Mind talk is not talk about an immaterial part of us, but rather is a way of describing the exercise of certain abilities we possess, abilities which supervene upon the activities of our brains and upon all our various transactions with the environment, but which do not have to be reductively explained using the vocabulary of physics and biology, or even the vocabulary of computer science. (483)

The crucial thing is, of course, what these "abilities" are thought to be. For the particular case of colours, we find the following elaboration:

If you like, you may say that the colour is the potentiality of having those "looks" under those various conditions. And the "looks" themselves are certainly *relational* properties. The relational nature of the looks of colours does not require us to say that the colour is the potentiality of causing certain "sense data" in human beings (...) it is (...) metaphysically advantageous (...) to think of the looks of things as irreducible (though relational) properties of things (properties that depend in ascertainable ways upon the way those things reflect light, the conditions under which they are viewed, etc.) (485-6).

(The reason why this is considered "advantageous" with respect to conceiving of "looks" in terms of relations between external properties and "sense data" is that Putnam's "abilities" are not "private", but, of course, the "sense data" of CM are not held to be private in any problematic sense. This is precisely what is achieved by abandoning the traditional Cartesian assumption of a basic intentional relationship to sensory events.)

Now, these two quotations indeed contain sentences that attempt (not very wholeheartedly, it must be said) to distinguish the stated view from CM. Thus, Putnam's "abilities", and the "looks" which relate to them, "do not have to be reductively explained"; and their relational nature "does not require us to say that the colour is the potentiality of causing certain "sense data" in human beings". Notice, however, that they are supposed to "supervene" or "depend" on brain states and on specific external factors. If you add to these crucial contentions the fact which I have already pointed out, namely, the systematicity of the "abilities" -and consequently the "looks"- which we are considering (taking just colours into account: human beings are able to recognize shades in a certain range, and they are also able to order them, in a robust manner, according to hue, brightness and saturation), you are left wondering how the two dependences (supervenience on brain states, and (causal?) dependence on external factors) can be substantiated without the view entirely collapsing into a form of Cartesianism *cum* materialism.

Because of the facts about systematicity, Putnam would do better to ascribe to subjects "abilities" relating them to shades they have not actually experienced; also, and again for

well-known facts, subjects might be related to the "looks" under consideration even in non-standard situations (situations where the looks are clearly not caused by the ordinary external factors on which they normally depend). Finally, "looks" are conscious experiences: knowing "what it is like" *is* knowledge of some variety. These facts make clear that the abilities in question cannot be reduced to simple behavioural dispositions (as can be shown more precisely by a form of argument originally produced by the powerful philosopher who invented Super-Spartans). If we add to this that Putnam's "looks" can be instantiated as a result of non-standard causes, and that they are supposed to supervene upon the brain and its transactions with the environment, it is difficult for me to escape the conclusion that "looks" do not differ at all from the sensory events envisaged by CM. In any case, more elaboration on the intended difference is certainly necessary, to dispel the strong feeling that, to the extent that Putnam's criticisms against CM indeed disparage this view, they are powerful enough to refute his own views too.

My first perplexity, in a nutshell, consists in that I cannot see how Putnam's "looks" -which are (not merely behavioural) "abilities" which systematically depend on the external factors on whose presence or absence depends that an apparent perception be a veridical one, and which conveniently supervene on brain states and depend on external factors-differ from the sensory events of Cartesian materialists (Putnam's earlier self among them) any more than in the fact that Putnam refuses to call them so.⁴

My second perplexity concerns Putnam's views on truth, and can be presented briefly. In previous work (Putnam 1985), Putnam made a criticism of Tarskian, disquotational analyses of 'truth' which proved to be influential: writers like Etchemendy (in Etchemendy 1988) and Soames (in Soames 1984) presented their own versions of it. In the Dewey lectures, Putnam still endorses the criticism:

In 'A Comparison of Something with Something Else,' I argue that Tarski's so-called 'truth-definitions' are at best *extensionally correct*; they do not yield correct characterizations of truth under counterfactual circumstances, and they certainly do not tell us what 'true' *means*. (511, fn.)

The criticism can be seen by comparing the two following counterfactuals:

- C₁ if we had used the word 'white' differently, 'grass is white' might have been true
- C₂ if we had used the word 'white' differently, grass might have been white

On the face of it, they do not look equivalent. Intuitively, C_1 seems true, while C_2 looks false, or strange enough to lack truth-value, or true on the basis of facts independent altogether of those on which the truth of C_1 depends. Putnam's previous argument against Tarskian analyses of 'truth' was that, if 'true' is interpreted the way Tarski defines it, then the two counterfactuals *are* equivalent. The reason is that, if 'true' is defined in that way, it is a "theorem of logic" (or logic plus set-theory) that the consequent of the first counterfactual is equivalent to that of the second (such equivalence is a usual T-sentence); and, therefore, they should be substitutable, even in modal contexts like these.

In the lectures, however, Putnam *endorses* a disquotational account of 'truth' -one which, he says, has points of contact with Tarski's views and also with Wittgenstein's (see especially pp. 510-6). The obvious question is, then, how does Putnam think that he can escape his own previous criticism? In fact, I think that there exists such an escape; Putnam himself suggests it when he emphasizes that the truth predicate applies, not to syntactic shapes, but to what Wittgenstein called a 'Satz' -a syntactic shape plus its actual meaning. (515-6) If so, as I have argued elsewhere (see García-Carpintero 1996), the disquotationalist can correctly argue that the two counterfactuals are not equivalent, given his account of 'truth'. A T-sentence, in other words, is not a mere "logical" truth, holding even under counterfactual circumstances where the same sentence belongs to what in fact is a different language (that is to say, counterfactual circumstances where the same sentence is a different *Satz*).⁵ Now, the difficulty is that this same reply (as I in fact argued in the work just-mentioned, on behalf of Tarski, and in reply to Etchemendy, Putnam and Soames) is perfectly open to the Tarskian; indeed, that reply is based on the only sensible interpretation of Tarski's work on truth. This second inconsistency, then, takes the form of a dilemma. Either Putnam's present views on truth are incompatible with his endorsement of his previous arguments against disquotational accounts, and he should abandon them; or he should abandon the endorsement of his previous criticism.

Notes

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- ¹ Josep Corbí pointed out to me that Jerry Fodor's recent version of extreme atomistic externalism is a possible example. Even Fodor, however, acknowledges that his views have obvious counterexamples, and that he needs some story about them.
- ² See Sellars 1963.
- ³ A version of the view briefly sketched here is more fully developed in García-Carpintero 1996a, ch. 3, and especially in García-Carpintero (forthcoming).
- ⁴ I explain in more detail in García-Carpintero (forthcoming) the well-known problems I set into relief here for theories of "looks" or "appearances" to avoid collapsing into sense-data theories (of the form, at least, that Cartesian Materialists contemplate).
- ⁵ Putnam said that this would be his reply when I presented this note in the seminar mentioned in the previous footnote.

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