

## ARGUING AGAINST THE STREAM: HILARY PUTNAM ON INTERNAL REALISM

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### Introduction

We are all either realists or anti-realists about the world whether we think of it or not. The way we see the world is the totality of objects. It is supposed or intended that there are things such as tables, chairs, trees, and rocks, etc., but how do they exist in the world? There are two theories about how objects exist in the world or how the world appears to us, such as idealism and realism. Idealism is a metaphysical view that holds that reality depends on the mind, on the contrary, metaphysical realists maintain that reality does not depend on our mind. George Berkeley (1685-1753) was one of the main proponents of idealism. He is claimed to be a subjective idealist because for him nothing exists outside our minds and their ideas. For Berkeley, ordinary objects are nothing but a collection of ideas, which are not independent of our mind but rather dependent on it. However, the dichotomy between the subjective and the objective worldview on reality has been discussed, contested, and evolved through a sustained period of time in the history of philosophy. Starting with Plato and Aristotle, the contemporary scenario as well is ripe with such tensions between the contesting world views. For Plato ideas alone are real which are universals as well. Aristotle on the other hand criticized Plato to espouse a realist worldview.

In the twenty-first century, American philosopher, Hilary Putnam (1926-2016) offers an alternative view of the world which he calls ‘internal realism’ or ‘pragmatic realism’. As an analytic philosopher, his prominent field of work is the philosophy of language. His epistemic investigation on the brain in a vat has been a seminal contribution to late twentieth century philosophical studies of mind. In the realm of language, he has contributed to the causal theory of reference, semantic externalism. As a semantic externalist, he intended that meaning of sentences are determined by some external factor and that “meanings just are not in the head”<sup>1</sup>. The

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<sup>1</sup> Anders, O. (2011). *Hilary Putnam on meaning and necessity*. Uppsala University. Department of Philosophy. p. 52

key objective of this paper is to show Putnam's journey to conceptualize internal realism, distinct from the notions of metaphysical realism. And the paper will show the arguments he provides in favor of internal realism and his criticisms against metaphysical realism. Putnam is very well known for repeatedly changing his philosophical position. He has changed his philosophical positions several times throughout his career, but his position on 'Internal Realism' which will be discussed in the paper, has been defended by Putnam from the mid- 1970 until around 1990.

**Putnam's Understanding of Metaphysical Realism** Metaphysical realism is an objective worldview about the nature of reality in metaphysics. Metaphysical realism is a worldview in which the world exists independently of the human mind and language. Putnam, in his seminal work *Reason, Truth and History* (1981) characterized metaphysical realism in the following way, "The world consists of some fixed totality of mind-independent objects. There is exactly one true and complete description of 'the way the world is.' Truth involves some sort of correspondence in the relation between words or thought- signs and external things and sets of things. Putnam calls this perspective the externalist perspective, because its favorite point of view is a God's eye point of view"<sup>2</sup> The term 'independent' in metaphysical realism which gives uniqueness to metaphysical realism from idealism, means ontological and not causal independence. Assuming a set of components, A and B, it can be said that A is ontologically independent of B if A does not depend on B for its existence and that it can even exist in the absence of B. For example, the pen used by a writer is causally dependent on the mind of its designer because someone has designed it. At the same time, it is ontologically independent because it may continue to exist even after its designer's death. Following this proposition, the metaphysical realists claim that the world consists of some fixed totality of mind-independent objects, by way of which the world becomes ready-made.

**The Ready-made World:** Putnam says that the idea of the ready-made world of the metaphysical realists is nothing but a realist myth, and so he concludes that there

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<sup>2</sup> Putnam, H. (1981). *Reason, Truth, and History*. Cambridge Cambridge shire: Cambridge University Press. p. 49

cannot be a ready-made world. Metaphysical realist presupposes that the world has a structure or substantial form that is independent of the human mind. But Putnam argues against this assumption by showing that the so-called ready-made world is a misnomer. Putnam says that what metaphysical realists hold to be true is, as Putnam argues, “We can talk about things as they are, independently of our minds, and that we can do this by virtue of a ‘correspondence’ relation between the terms in our language and some sort of mind-independent entities”<sup>3</sup>.

This assumption has been previously challenged in the eighteenth century by Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) as well, who claimed that the world that we can know is the construction of our two forms of sensibility and the twelve categories of understanding. His seminal work *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) explicitly deals with such claims. According to Kant, therefore, when the mind perceives something, it is not merely a passive faculty, but rather it takes an active role in shaping things. Thus, the role of the perceiver using his/her mind is not minimal. The world as it appears to us, according to Kant, is the phenomenal world that is distinguished from the noumenal world. And Kant says that the phenomenal world is empirically real but transcendently ideal. Kant and on his line, Putnam argue, that the phenomenal world is not a mind-independent world as it is constituted by our mind. On the contrary, metaphysical realists argue that the world exists independently of our mind and language, although the question of reference, how such a reality can be referred to at all and how it can be represented in our language, has been hardly argued by the school.

**The Internalist View Point:** The non-presence of a ready-made world can be easily demonstrated through the internalist point of view, following Hillary Putnam’s argument. Putnam’s internalist position does not deny the reality of the world but denies that the world is independent of human perception. Putnam says that the world depends on the theory or system of description which represents the world. So, according to Putnam, it can be said that the world is internal to the system of description which represents the world. This internality is a requisite condition to substantiate the correlation point of view. Putnam distinguished between objects and

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<sup>3</sup> Pradhan, R.C. (2001). Recent Developments in Analytic Philosophy. ICPR. p. 419

concepts. The way objects are represented by the theory or system of description is concepts. In the language of Kant, the world does not come ready-made and what the world consists of, is determined by the human mind's interaction with the world. So according to Kant, we are looking at the world through a spectacle which contaminates reality. Similarly, Putnam says that the world is relative to our conceptual schemes. If according to Putnam, the world is relative to our conceptual schemes, it leads us to a theory of conceptual relativity which is the central tenet of Putnam's internal realism. By making this idea central to his thought, he conceptualizes the theory of description which will again be relevant in presenting the propositions of conceptual relativity. Hence, he argues that "I shall refer to it as the internalist perspective, because it is characteristic of this view to hold that what does the world consist of? is a question that it only makes sense to ask within a theory of description."<sup>4</sup>

**Conceptual Relativity:** Metaphysical realist assumes that there is one correct and complete description of reality. But Putnam opposes such an assumption of metaphysical realist and contradicts them by declaring that there are many different ways through which the world can be described. He thus embraces conceptual relativity to visualize reality, which can be said to be the heart of Putnam's internal realism or pragmatic realism. Putnam has not provided any particular definition of 'Conceptual relativity', rather he assembled a myriad of instances of it from science, mathematics and logic. Putnam's conceptual relativity refers to a situation that can be described in multiple ways which are perhaps incompatible with each other but equally true in their assumption. Putnam's most well-known example of conceptual relativity is Carnap and the Police logician's argument.

The example is briefly discussed below. Putnam asks us to imagine that somewhere in this universe there is another planet where there are three individuals, such as X, Y, Z. Then Putnam asks his first question, 'how many objects are there in that universe?' If we employ the ordinary concept of the object then the answer, of course, is that there are exactly three objects in this world: X, Y and Z. Three objects in the sense that we can identify 'individual', 'objects', 'particular' etc. However, by

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<sup>4</sup> Pradhan, R.C. (2001). Recent Developments in Analytic Philosophy. ICPR, p.422

contrast, someone who admits particular mereology of objects, accordingly accepts that for every two particulars, the third is an object which is their sum. He counts the objects and reports that there are exactly seven objects in this world: X, Y, Z, X+Y, X+Z, Y+Z, XYZ. There are seven objects in the sense that the various combination of the original three individuals are themselves object. This is the view of police logicians. So, the Police logician's answer is not the same as Carnap but yet each is true within their conceptual framework. Thus, what is real about the world is relative to our conceptual schemes. We cannot thus readily describe the world apart from the use of the term which reflects our choice of conceptual scheme and we choose the conceptual scheme that determines how we will answer the question about the world.

As a conceptual realist Putnam insists that the question, 'how many objects are there in this world?' has no sense. In the language of Putnam "what objects does the world consist of?"<sup>5</sup> is a question that only makes sense within a theory or description. In short, there is no sense of this question without first establishing a theory of description or defining what counts as an object. Such that the assumption that what does the world consists of is a question that has an absolute answer which Putnam has never accepted. If there are myriad ways through which the world can be described then it follows that there is more than one true description of the world. Thus, Putnam concludes that there is more than one true theory and complete description that can be used to adequately describe the same situation.

**Putnam on God Eye's Point of View:** The idea of God's Eye point of view is found in the third chapter of Putnam's seminal work *Reason, Truth and History* (1981) where he criticizes the metaphysical realists. He claims that the metaphysical realists presuppose a 'God's Eye view of Reality' or 'No Eye view of Reality', which is different from Putnam's internalist perspective. Putnam says that there is no God's Eye view of reality because we can't remove ourselves from our human perspective and explore the world as it really is from the point of view of an omniscient being. Putnam illustrates this through his seminal thought experiment 'Brains in a Vat',

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<sup>5</sup> Forrai, G. (2001). Reference, Truth and Conceptual Schemes: A Defense of Internal Realism. Kluwer Academic Publishers. p. 134

developed in his book *Reason Truth and History* (1981). In the thought experiment, he says that if all human beings in this world are brains in a vat, then a God's Eye View or No Eye View of reality is possible. Putnam contends that, if metaphysical realism is true, it could be possible that we are brains in a vat. But Putnam cancels out the possibility of brains in a vat as it is a self-refuting supposition, which will be discussed later in detail. According to him, metaphysical realism assumes the existence of a gap between how man conceives the world and the way the world really is. Putnam tries to bridge this notion of the gap between man's concept of the world and the way the world is. Metaphysical realist view of truth is, therefore a non-epistemic relation of correspondence between language and reality. But Putnam says that truth is an "idealization of rational acceptability"<sup>6</sup>.

Further Putnam had already contended, that there cannot be "exactly one true and complete description of 'the way the world is'"<sup>6</sup>; in the way metaphysical realists require. That we cannot go outside to see the reality or the things in itself and become an observer with a God's eye point of view. According to Putnam, metaphysical realism is therefore false because we cannot have a God's Eye view of reality as we are limited to our conceptual schemes. Putnam does not deny the idea of the correspondence relation between signs and what signs stand for only within our language. He only rules out the correspondence between the language and the language-independent world. If the world is independent of language and our conceptual scheme then it can never be represented in our language. But Putnam says that the world must be internal to the language and the system of representations. Thus, it can be said that "truth wears a human face and not the "cosmic face" as Smart likes to call it"<sup>7</sup>. Apart from God's Eye point of view, Putnam has also criticized global skepticism through this 'brains in a vat' experiment. Global skepticism leads us to think that we might be under an illusion or dream created by an evil demon. This argument was presented by Descartes in his book *Meditations on*

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<sup>6</sup> Anders, O. (2011) *Hilary Putnam on meaning and necessity*. Uppsala University. Department of Philosophy. p.61

<sup>6</sup> Putnam, H. (1981). *Reason, Truth, and History*. Cambridge Cambridge shire: Cambridge University Press. p. 49

<sup>7</sup> Pradhan, R.C. (2001). Recent Developments in Analytic Philosophy. ICPR. p. 427

*The First Philosophy* (1641). Putnam denies this kind of skepticism by illustrating the 'Brain in a Vat' thought experiment.

**Brain in a Vat:** Putnam allows us, through his thought experiment, to imagine a situation where everything that one believes, everything that one says, and everything that one does in this world is not real, but rather one is a brain in a vat. So 'brain in a vat' means one is just a brain, a person doesn't have both body and sense organ together. This thought experiment outlines that a mad scientist has removed a person's brain from his body or skull and suspended it in a vat where that brain can stay active. The mad scientist has also connected that brain to a powerful super-scientific computer that sends neurological signals to the brain as our brain normally receives sensation from the external world. The super scientific computer is smart enough because if the person who is a brain in a vat tries to raise his hand, the computer sends the same neurological signal to the brain, as a result, the person who is a brain in a vat does not understand that he is being deceived by the super scientific computer or someone. Putnam says that instead of having just one brain in a vat we could imagine that all human beings are brains in a vat. If it is true or if we are brains in a vat, the whole world will be a collective hallucination for us. From this hypothetical situation the question has been raised by Putnam that is if we are brains in a vat, could we imagine or say or think that we are not brains in a vat?

Putnam says that although brains in a vat do not violate any physical law yet it cannot be true. Its truth value is absent precisely because, according to Putnam, in a certain way, it is a self-refuting supposition. By self-refuting supposition, Putnam means, a supposition whose truth implies its own falsity. For example, if someone says that 'I do not exist' and if it is true then the statement 'I do not exist' on the contrary implies his existence, in the similar logic which Rene Descartes(1596-1650) substantiated in his book *Meditations on the First Philosophy* (1641). So, one can be certain of his existence by thinking of his non-existence. Similarly, Putnam says that brain in a vat supposition is a self-refuting supposition because it implies its own falsity. Before entering into the main theme at first, understanding the Turing Test becomes inevitable to negotiate the impossibility of the brains in a vat condition.

Turing Test is intelligence as well as an imitation game. The idea of the Turing Test was first introduced by British mathematician Alan Mathison Turing (1912- 1954) in his article *Can Machines Think?* (1950). The aim of this game was to discover whether a computer can think or not. In this game, there are three players suppose that player A is the man and player B is the computer and player C is the interlocutor, who is tasked to find out the non-human computer through their conversations or by using a keyboard, each of them separately performing. The interlocutor will be talking to both A and B from different places. Whether one is talking to a computer or a man will have to differentiate by the interlocutor through the conversations. The computer is smart enough because it tries to show itself as a man. Suppose that if you ask him: 'Do you like Apples?' 'yes', I like apples, it is very sweet and good for health.

How can the interlocutor identify the computer? If he/she can't differentiate between them or if the interlocutor can't identify as the computer, then the computer will pass the game. But Putnam slightly modified this game which he designated as Turing Test for Reference. The purpose of this game is to determine whether the computer can refer to apples or not when it says apples as we do in the actual world. In short, we can say that Putnam tries to find out the existence of reference through this Turing Test for Reference. Putnam argues that if the computer can refer to actual apples the way we do it in the actual world, then the computer will pass the game. The example that I have mentioned before that if it is asked the computer that 'Do you like Apples? The computer can give you a perfect description of apples which is similar to actual apples but it can't say what actually apples are, since it has no real experience with apples. Therefore, it can be said that according to Putnam, Turing Test for Reference is not definitive because it cannot refer to anything more than what has been recorded in the computer.

According to Putnam, the computer can beautifully describe the world in the way it is programmed by its designer or creator but it could not recognize or refer to an actual apple because it has no causal connection with Apple. In the same way, it can't recognize or refer to the sun, the moon, the rock and so on. So, when we say there is an apple on the table it refers to an apple which is not the same as when the computer says apples. Similarly, Putnam says that when we are brains in a vat, our

words do not refer to actuality. Putnam, therefore, concludes that the brains in a vat can't refer to trees when they say 'there is a tree in front of me'. Finally, through this argument, Putnam illustrates against the supposition that 'we are brains in a vat'. Putnam argues that the brains in a vat cannot refer to anything external at all as they cannot say that they are brains in a vat world. Putnam objected that there is no close connection between the word 'trees' as used by the brains in a vat and the actual trees. Brains in a vat can even think and define trees even if trees do not exist. Putnam suggests that the brains in a vat follow the truth condition when they say that 'there is a tree in front of me' since there is a close connection between the word tree in vat English and the presence of the tree in the image. The truth condition of seeing or experiencing a tree is right since the brain is right in thinking. Similarly, Putnam argues that the vat in vat- English doesn't refer to a vat in the actual world. And neither it has any intimate relation to the real vats. Therefore, we are not brains in a vat because the brains in a vat only refer to an image of a brain in a vat that has no causal connection to the actual world. One may thus conclude that if we are brains in a vat, then, 'we are brains in a vat' refers to brains in the image, thereby making it false. If we are not brains in a vat then the supposition 'we are brains in a vat' is false because it refers to actual vat.

**Internal Realism:** The term 'internal realism' was first introduced in "Realism and Reason", his 1977 address to the American Philosophical Association but later developed in his book *Reason, Truth, and History* (1981). It has already been mentioned that Putnam's internal realism is completely different from what a metaphysical realist implies. Through his criticisms, as has been developed in the essay, reality can be characterized in the following ways:

1. There cannot be a ready-made world.
2. There cannot be a God's eye point of view.
3. There can be more than one true and complete description of the way the world is.
4. Truth from an internalist perspective is "some sort of ideal coherence of our belief with each other and with our experiences as those experiences are

themselves represented in our belief system – and not correspondence with mind-independent or discourse-independent ‘states of affairs’<sup>8</sup>.

Metaphysical realist's view of truth is non-epistemic but Putnam suggests that truth is an epistemic notion which he calls ‘idealized justification’. Much of his notions on truth comes from Michael Dummett, whose works have helped him in conceptualizing the epistemic view of truth. For Putnam, thereof, truth is idealized justification rather than ordinary justification. Putnam then characterizes the internalist notion of truth as follows:

“Truth, in an internalist view, is some sort of (idealized) rational acceptability. We speak as if there were such things as epistemically ideal conditions and we call a statement ‘true if it would be justified under such conditions’<sup>9</sup>.”

Putnam's internal realism asserts that no description of the world is completely independent of our conceptual scheme. Thereby making it possible to state, that from an internalist point of view, there is no fact, objects, properties that are independent of our conceptual scheme. Putnam, of course, is a realist in the sense that he does not deny the reality of the world but denies that objects exist independently of the human mind and language as it traditionally has been underscored. Putnam's internal realism also extends to other fields such as morality. For him, there are no absolute answers to our moral questions because the rightness and the wrongness of an action depend on the context to some extent. Internal realism can therefore be read as a combination of a certain form of realism and idealism, roughly. Whereas in a broader sense, one can negotiate such a worldview by assessing Immanuel Kant's idea of empirical realism and transcendental idealism. Putnam's internal realism thus moves against the prevailing notions of truth and reality. In a way, it stands in between realism and relativism. For the realist, the world makes up the mind. Whereas relativists argue that the mind makes up the world. And Putnam negotiates a middle path stating that “the mind and the world jointly make up the mind and the world”<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> Putnam, H. (1981). *Reason, truth, and history*. Cambridge Cambridgehire: Cambridge University Press. p. 49-50

<sup>9</sup> Pradhan, R.C. (2001). Recent Developments in Analytic Philosophy. ICPR. p. 427

<sup>10</sup> Putnam, H. (1987). *The Many Faces of Realism*. Open Court Press. p. 1

**Conclusion:**

The difference that Putnam brings about in his work to argue against the prevalent stream of thought, i.e., metaphysical realism, manifests into a new field of knowledge altogether. Internal realism becomes a vital epistemic domain in understanding the multiple realities of life. It also works to resolve the age-old dualisms of different schools and walk past the schisms. It privileges not a single epistemic tradition, but seeks to incorporate differences and discrepancies pertaining to these worldviews. Also, his comparatist approach or the conceptual relativity that justifies a covalency of worldviews, is intimidating to the modern and post-modern readers alike, to resort to a middle ground in juxtaposing the nature of reality, truth and simulation. Further, his epistemic investigations on 'brain in a vat', reading Turing's test through semantic relationality, validates internal realism as a possibility, contrary to the metaphysical reality worldview. The implications of internal realism are far-reaching in the field of mind, philosophy of mind and history of truth. Thus, one can thoughtfully argue that Hilary Putnam, through his contestations of the metaphysical realist viewpoint and consequent theorization of internal realism, has successfully revolutionized our understandings about the ontology of things, truth value and reality of the world.