Phil/Ling 375: Meaning and Mind
[Handout #12]

Hilary Putnam: “Two Dogmas” Revisited

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§ Main Goal
__ To argue that Quine is actually attacking the notion of *apriority*
__ To defend Quine’s attack on a particular notion of *analyticity*: the *a priori* conception
__ To argue that Quine’s attack on the first dogma should be cast as the rejection of the *a priori* and *a posteriori* distinction
__ To argue in favor of keeping the notion of *analyticity* — *contextual apriority*
__ To present whole scale Fallibilism.

§ Analyticity

*[the linguistic notion of analyticity]:*
___ A sentence is analytic if it can be obtained from a truth of logic by putting synonyms for synonyms — so its negation reduces to a contradiction (e.g. The bachelor is not married.)

*[the *a priori* notion of analyticity]:*
___ An analytic statement is true by virtue of definition; it is confirmed *not matter what.*

Putnam: Quine’s attack on the first notion is based on *circularity* and *vagueness*, but that is a bad argument. Quine’s attack on the latter notion of analyticity, on the other hand, is correct.

Putnam’s position:
___ The notion of *synonymy* in the first sense is legitimate and linguistically useful, whether we have a good ‘definition’ of it or not.

§ Apriority

Quine’s argument against the notion of a truth which is *confirmed no matter what*, is not an argument from the circularity of definitions, but from what is a normative description of the history of science.

Quine’s claims (according to Putnam):

1. Proposals to use non-standard logic in quantum mechanics cannot be ruled out by any legitimate principle of science.
2. Fallibilism in science extends to the laws of logic as well — even logic is not immune to revision.
3. Open-mindedness even to the extent of being prepared to revise logical law is necessary in the scientific enterprise.
4. Laws of logic are not *a priori* truth and are not immune to revision.
The history of science leaves no room for the notion of an analytic statement in the sense of being a priori or unrevisable.

Putnam’s position:
1. There is no a priori truth.
2. There is no sensible distinction between a priori and a posteriori truth.
3. Quine’s conflating analyticity and apriority does not invalidate his argument apriority.
4. However, we can establish the notion of contextual apriority so that we don’t have to give up the empiricist idea that a posteriori statements are empirical in the sense that they have specifiable confirming and disconfirming experiences.

§ Contextual Apriority

A statement is contextually a priori in the sense that they have a sort of apriority prior to the invention of the new theory which challenges or replaces them.

E.g. logical laws have the status of contextual apriority, so are statements like “All vixens are foxes,” or “All bachelors are unmarried.”

Putnam’s proposal

One can hold that there are no a priori truths but still hold that there are analytic (in the sense of contextual apriority) truths.

Even a statement that really is analytic is not immune from revision. A putatively analytic statement may not really be analytic, not because we were confused about meanings or confused about logic, but because the logic of the world may be different from what we suppose it to be, as a matter of empirical fact.

Therefore, even a really analytic statement will not be a priori. Fallibilism applies to all analytic statements, including the laws of logic.

Q: Do you believe that the logic of the world may be different from what we suppose it to be, as a matter of empirical fact?

§ Conclusion

1. Quine is right: Nothing is true by virtue of meaning. Nothing is true by convention.
2. There are no truths by language alone.
3. But there are analytic truths: truths by logic and language, but analytic truths are not unrevisable — no truth is.