Phil 420: Metaphysics  
Spring 2008  

[Handout 4]  

Hilary Putnam:  
Why There Isn’t A Ready-Made World  

§ Putnam’s Main Theses:  

1. There is no “ready-made” world.  

* [A ready-made world]:  
_____ The world itself has to have a ‘built-in’ structure since otherwise theories with different structures might correctly ‘copy’ the world (from different perspectives) and truth would lose its absolute (non-perspectival) character.  

2. Contemporary materialism and essentialism are inconsistent with each other.  

* [Contemporary materialism]  
_____ On the one hand, the materialist claims that physics is an approximation to a sketch of the one true theory, the true and complete description of the furniture of the world.  
_____ On the other hand, he meets the epistemological argument against metaphysics by claiming that we don’t need an intellectual intuition to do his sort of metaphysics: his metaphysics is as open ended, as infinitely revisable and fallible, as science itself. In fact, it is science itself! This is to “naturalize” metaphysics: placing metaphysics within the bounds of science.  
_____ There is somewhere “one true theory”. This belief in one true theory requires a ready-made world.  

§ Two Leading Metaphysical Views:  

Two ideas that have become part of our philosophical culture stand in a certain amount of conflict. Q: What is the conflict?  

1. [Metaphysical realism]  
_____ We can think and 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 sorts of mind-independent entities.  

2. [Non-Essentialism]  
_____ It only makes sense to speak of an “essential property” of something relative to a description…. The question “what are the essential properties of the thing in
itself” is a nonsensical one. The denial of essence is also a denial of intrinsic structure.

§ Non-essentialism

“essential property”
___ a property \( P \) is an essential property of \( x \), iff without \( P \), \( x \) would cease being \( x \)
(Or: \( x \) has \( P \) necessarily)

[The argument against “essential properties”]

1. Suppose a piece of clay has been formed into a statue.
2. That piece of clay = that statue.
3. However, the essential property of the statue is being a statue, which is not the essential property of that clay.
4. The essential property of clay is being clay, which is not the essential property of that statue.
5. Therefore, whether a property is essential is relative to a description.
6. Therefore, there are no intrinsically essential properties.

§ The trouble with “correspondence”:

___ There are many different ways of putting the signs of a language and the things in a set \( S \) in correspondence with one another, in fact infinitely many if the set \( S \) is infinite (and a very large finite number if \( S \) is a large finite set).

___ How can we pick out any one correspondence between our words (or thoughts) and the supposed mind-independent things if we have no direct access to the mind-independent things?

* The incompatibility between metaphysical realism and non-essentialism:
___ If the denial of intrinsic properties is right, then it is not more essential to a mental event that it stands in a relation \( C_1 \), to any object \( x \) than it is that it stands in any other relation \( C_2 \), to any other object \( y \). Nor is it any more essential to a non-mental object that
it stand in a relation C to any one of my thoughts than it is that it stand in any one of a myriad other relations to any one of my other thoughts.

If there are no essential properties or intrinsic structure, then no relation is metaphysically singled out as the relation between thoughts and things. We can’t get “correspondence” at all.

§ On contemporary materialism:

Contemporary materialists assume that there is a ready-made world with its built-in structures. These built-in structures include

1. causal relations: Events have causes; objects have ‘causal powers.’
2. reference

What makes it the case that I refer to chairs is that I have causally interacted with them, and that I would not utter the utterances containing the word ‘chair’ that I do if I did not have causal transactions of the appropriate type with chairs.

§ [Putnam’s Arguments against Contemporary Materialism]

1. Is causation a physical relation?
2. What on earth could make anyone think that reference is a physical relation?

What we learn from Kant:

The whole enterprise of trying to demonstrate the existence and nature of a supersensible world by speculation leads only to antinomies.

1. The universe must have a cause.
2. But that cause would have to have a cause.
3. But an infinite regress is no explanation.
4. Self-causation is impossible.
5. So, ???

When I have a memory of an experience this is not, contrary to Hume, just an image which ‘resembles’ the earlier experience. To be a memory the interpretation has to be ‘built in’: the interpretation that this is a past experience of mine.

The notion of past involves causality and that causality involves laws and objects. Past experiences are not directly available; saying we ‘remember’ them is saying we have succeeded in constructing a version with causal relations and a continuing self in which they are located.

Therefore, all experience involves mental construction.

Wittgenstein: rabbit/duck experiment:

While the physical image is capable of being seen either way, no ‘mental image’ is capable of being seen either way: the mental image is always unambiguously a duck
image or a rabbit image…. We might express this difference by saying the interpretation is built in to the ‘mental image’; the mental image is a construction.

Truth becomes a radically epistemic notion. Truth is assertability (by creatures with our rational natures) under optimal conditions (as determined by our sensible natures).

§ Putnam on Causation

Two possible definitions of ‘causation’:

[1] causal laws – whenever A-type event happens, then a B-type event follows in time.

[Few philosophers believe today that this is possible.]

[2] sufficient condition – A cause is a sufficient condition for its effect; whenever the cause occurs, the effect must follow (at least in a deterministic world).

e.g. \{striking the match, oxygen in the air, phosphorus on the stick, the force exerted, the structure of the surface, \ldots\} \Rightarrow \{igniting the match\}

[total cause]:

An example of a total cause at time $t_0$ of a physical event $e$ occurring at a later time $t_1$, and a point $x$ would be the entire distribution of values of the dynamical variables at time $t_0$.

However: [The Argument against Causation being a physical relation]

1. In ordinary language ‘cause’ rarely (if ever) means “total cause”: Even if the notion of ‘total cause’ were physically definable, it would not be possible to use it either in daily life or in philosophy.
2. We regard certain parts of the total cause as ‘background,’ and refer only to the part of interest as ‘the’ cause.
3. What we point out as the relevant or salient features in causation is our way to explain why event C causes event E.
4. Therefore, in its ordinary sense, ‘cause’ can often be paraphrased by a locution involving explain.
5. But this notion is certainly not physically definable.
6. Therefore, causation cannot be a purely physical relation. Our explanation is already built into this relation.
* What is and what is not a ‘cause’ or an ‘explanation’ depends on background knowledge and our reason for asking the question (our interest). Salience and relevance are attributes of thought and reasoning, not of nature.

Hence, contemporary materialism is incoherent:

1. If events intrinsically explain other events, if there are saliencies, relevancies, standards of what are ‘normal’ conditions, and so on, built into the world itself independently of minds, then the world is in many ways like a mind, or infused with something very much like reason.
2. And if that is true, then materialism cannot be true (it would be objective idealism instead).

§ Putnam on Reference

Contemporary materialists assume that reference is a physical relation:

The cat is on the mat. → the words ‘the cat’ in the particular sentence-analog stand in a physical relation R (the relation of reference) to some cat and the words ‘the mat’ stand in the relation R to some mat.

Lewis’ suggestion is that reference is a member of such a batch of properties: not functional properties of the organism, but functional properties of the organism-environment system.

Typical examples of functional properties come from the world of computers…. Functional properties are typically defined in batches; the properties or ‘states’ in a typical batch (say, the properties that are involved in a given computer program) are characterized by a certain pattern. Each property has specified cause and effect relations to the other properties in the pattern and to certain non-functional properties (the ‘inputs’ and ‘outputs’ of the programs).

* Putnam’s criticism:

1. The crucial point is that functional properties are defined using the notions of cause and effect.
2. But cause and effect is not a physical relation (as argued above), since it is heavily based on background condition and our interest in explanation.
3. Hence, ‘reference’ cannot be defined in purely physical terms. Reference is not a purely physical relation.
[The Argument against Reference being a physical relation]

1. The Materialist thinks that we refer to objects in the world in one particularly correct way: that reference is a physical relation.
2. But reference is a flexible, interest-relative notion: what we count as referring to something depends on background knowledge and our willingness to be charitable in interpretation.
3. Therefore, the relation of reference cannot serve as a proof of materialism.

§ Conclusion:

1. Contemporary materialism is false because it cannot find any relation (neither causation nor reference) that is built into the world itself.
2. The approach to which I have devoted this paper is an approach which claims that there is a ‘transcendental’ reality in Kant’s sense, one absolutely independent of our minds, that the relative ideal of knowledge is to copy it or put our thoughts in ‘correspondence’ with it, but (and this is what makes it ‘natural’ metaphysics) we need no intellectual intuition to do this: the ‘scientific method’ will do the job for us.
3. But the idea of a coherent theory of the noumena; consistent, systematic, and arrived at by ‘the scientific method’ seems to me to be chimerical.
4. There is, then, nothing in the history of science to suggest that it either aims at or should aim at one single absolute version of ‘the world.’

If all this is a failure, as Kant saw, where do we go from there?

§ Putnam’s proposal: Internal Realism

One direction, the only direction I myself see as making sense, might be species of pragmatism, internal realism: a realism which recognizes a difference between ‘p’ and ‘I think that p’, between being right, and merely thinking one is right without locating that objectivity in either transcendental correspondence or mere consensus.

Goodman: ways of world-making
___ We should give up the notion of ‘the world’.
___ We make many versions [many worlds]; the standards of rightness that determine what is right and what is wrong are corrigible, relative to task and technique, but not subjective.

Putnam:
1. All experience involves mental construction.
2. The dependence of physical objects concepts and experience concepts goes both ways: The mind and the world together make up the mind and the world.

Discussion Questions:

1. What is the view of “metaphysical realism”?
2. What is the trouble with “correspondence” according to Putnam?
3. What are the basic assumptions of Materialism on causation and reference?
4. What does Putnam mean by the claim that the notion of causation involves human perspectives? (What is “total cause”? What is the connection between “causation” and “causal explanation”?)
5. What is Putnam’s “internal realism” or “pragmatic realism”? Is it still a form of “realism” in your opinion?

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<th>Searle</th>
<th>Putnam</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reality</td>
<td>Reality is independent of our representations of it.</td>
<td>The mind and the world make up the mind and the world.</td>
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<tr>
<td>The world</td>
<td>There is a way the world is.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Conceptual relativity</td>
<td>Yes. Complete epistemic objectivity is difficult, sometimes impossible.</td>
<td>Objectivity lies neither in transcendental correspondence nor in mere consensus.</td>
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