Biographical review

Hilary Putnam (1926-2016):
a tireless and sensitive mind

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On the morning of Sunday, March 13th, 2016 Professor Hilary Putnam died in Boston. He was almost 90 years old and was retired from teaching but not from intellectual activity. The news strongly shocked the philosophical community of his country and worldwide: not only for the breadth, depth and creativity of his work but particularly for his warm, encouraging and dialoguing personality.

Since the 1960s his name has been at the center of several crucial problems of contemporary theoretical philosophy, mainly in the areas of philosophy of mind, philosophy of language and philosophy of science. To some extent we can say that Putnam has been especially known for five problems and philosophical arguments of great relevance and impact, as well as challenging mental experiments that accompanied several of them. Namely: his intervention on an important stretch of the controversy about the analytic and synthetic statements (1975); his article *The meaning of 'Meaning'* (1975) with which he consolidated his externalism in semantics and helped founding, along with Saul Kripke, the causal theory of reference; the argument against the identity of mental and physical states based on his hypothesis of the multiple realizability of the mental and the thesis of functionalism (1960; 1963); the famous thought experiment about "brains in a vat" (1981) and his thesis on "the collapse of the facts/value dichotomy" (1981; 2002). They all dealt with crucial problems of theoretical philosophy in the second half of the twentieth century and for a long time will be essential references in the treatment of these topics. Even traditional areas of philosophy, such as the theory of knowledge and metaphysics or philosophy of logic and mathematics, received his sharp contributions.

He wrote approximately fifteen books (some of them compilations of series of lectures) and around two hundreds articles, being the main ones collected in three volumes of his *Philosophical Papers* (1975a; 175b; 1983), although many of his articles remain outside this list. He has also referred to issues related to history of philosophy, especially the thought of Wittgenstein, pragmatism and some Jewish thinkers. In addition to the breadth of his interests, Putnam was characterized by the rigor with which he went back on his own conceptions which led him to change the position of some of his basic thesis more than once. Different stages have been defined in the evolution of his thought: metaphysical realism, internal realism and finally direct or natural realism. Also, his famous functionalism in philosophy of the mind even received criticism from Putnam himself.

Putnam studied mathematics and philosophy at the University of Pennsylvania and then philosophy at Harvard University and the University of California, where he received his doctorate in 1951 with a thesis titled *The meaning of the concept of probability applied to infinite sequences* under the supervision of Hans Reichenbach and under the decisive influence of Rudolf Carnap. After completing his doctorate, he taught at Northwestern University, Princeton University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). In 1965 he transferred to Harvard University where he remained until his retirement in 2000. In the 1960s and early 70s he had an active participation in the Civil Rights Movement and demonstrating against the American military intervention in Vietnam. In 1963 he promoted at MIT an association of teachers and students against the war. He later moderated his political participation but never abandoned his belief that academics must make a strong ethical commitment to social problems. This commitment is manifested in many features of his work, but especially in *How not to solve ethical problems* (1983) and *Education for democracy* (1993).

Given the breadth of his work, it is obviously impossible to give a minimally representative picture of Putnam´s thought in this note, however we believe it may be enlightening to review some of the fundamental problems and arguments in his book *Reason, truth and history* (1981), a work that somehow tried to be an instance of synthesis of several of his basic concepts.

From the start Putnam states that the basic purpose of the book is to "break the strangle hold" that certain dichotomies exert on the thinking of both philosophers and laymen; the main one is the dichotomy between objectivist and subjectivist conceptions of truth and reason. The task is divided into three stages: first, he exposes a conception of truth that aims to "unify the objective and subjective components" of truth (chapters 1 to 4); then the author applies that perspective to review and improve the dominant conceptions of rationality (Chapters 5 and 6) and finally, he applies his findings to the fact-value distinction and to the task of a rational grounding of ethical estimations (Chapters 7-9).

In the first two chapters, the overall strategy of Putnam is to show the difficulties of externalism and of the so called "God's eye" perspective, based on the analysis of the insurmountable difficulties of the classical theory of reference (reference-similarity) and of truth (true-copy). In chapter 3, Putnam points out that this issue has given rise to two basic philosophical perspectives. One of them, the oldest, is metaphysical realism; he calls this perspective as "externalist", because somehow it believes that a view from God's eye can be possible. The other, opened by Kant, he calls it "internalist", on the basis that its central thesis is that "[...] what objects does the world consist of? It is a question that only makes sense to ask within a theory or description" (1981, p. 49). Putnam admits that there is more than one true description of the world. From his point of view:

> "Truth", in an internalist view, is some sort of (idealized) rational acceptability, some sort of ideal coherence of our beliefs with each other and with our experiences as those experiences are themselves represented in our belief system – and not a correspondence with a mind-independent or discourse-independent "states of affairs" (Putnam, 1981, p. 49-50).

According to Putnam, externalism lives beset by the problem of reference it cannot solve. Instead for the internalist the problem is solved because objects do not exist independently of conceptual schemes, but only since we cut the world into objects when entering certain categories and descriptive schemes. If, as claimed by internalism, "objects" themselves are as much made as discovered, as much products of our conceptual invention as of the "objective" factors in experience (Putnam, 1981, p. 54).

> "Objects" do not exist independently of conceptual schemes. We cut up the world into objects when we introduce one or another scheme of description. Since the objects and the

signs are alike internal to the scheme of description, it is possible to say what matches what (Putnam, 1981, p. 52).

Putnam is concerned about clarifying that, although internalism denies sense to the question of the relationship between our concepts and something totally uncontaminated by conceptualization, this should not lead to think that internalism is an "easy relativism" that argues that "anything goes", that is to say that any conceptual scheme is as right as any other. The undesirable practical consequences of acts based on faulty conceptual schemes are eloquent.

He defines the concepts of rationality and objectivity starting from the ideas mentioned above: "What makes a statement, or a whole system of statements – a theory or a conceptual scheme – rationally acceptable is, in large part, its coherence and fit [...] with one another and with more experiential beliefs" (Putnam, 1981, p. 54-55).

At the same time, our conceptions of coherence and rational acceptability depend on our psychobiological characteristics and on our culture, and are not exempt from values. "They define a kind of objectivity, objectivity for us"(p. 55). Not an absolute objectivity and rationality that could only emanate from the rejected God´s Eye view.

Chapter 5 is devoted to analyze the dominant conceptions of rationality in contemporary analytic philosophy: on the one hand, the positivist and criterial conceptions, and on the other, the concept of relativism and incommensurability. He is going to find both of them to be contradictory. To begin with, as it has already been pointed out, the verifiability criterion of logical positivism is self-refuting, because the criterion itself is neither analytic nor empirically testable. Putnam recalls this, but he adds that not only logical positivism falls into self-refutation, but all criterial's conception of rationality does as well. According to him, also logical positivism, Wittgenstein and some of the philosophers of ordinary language shared this view. He argues that such conceptions fall into these neglected logical missteps because ultimately they disregard a transcendental argument, that "arguing about the nature of rationality [...] is an activity that necessarily presupposes a notion of rational justification" not only wider than positivist notion but "wider than any institutionalized criterial rationality" (1981, p. 113).

On the other hand, according to him the relativistic conception, in its contemporary version, was introduced by Thomas Kuhn in *The structure of scientific revolutions* (1962), and retaken by Paul Feyerabend. After an extensive critique of the theory of incommensurability, Putnam points out the inconsistency of total relativism: if no view is more justified than any other, relativism and anti-relativism are equally correct. According to Putnam, it is Wittgenstein who completes this strategy against relativism. Wittgenstein's argument against private language shows that relativism cannot provide any criterion for distinguishing between being right and believing to be right. Still, relativism could make an attempt at the distinction by adopting the concept of truth as an idealization of rational acceptability. But this implies the admission of subjunctive conditionals that realistically interpreted by relativism would lead him to recognize certain types of absolute truths; and construed in an internalistic way, this would result nevertheless in assuming certain conditions of objective justification, which relativism is prohibited from by definition. In short, at the origin of all these difficulties of relativism it´s the fact that it "does not realize that the existence of some sort of objective rightness is a presupposition of thought itself" (1981, p. 124). For Putnam these inconsistencies in the two outlined epistemologies have been originated in the fact that both are the result – the first of the success, the second of the failure – of the scientific thinking (and logical thinking) ideal of rationality of the nineteenth century. None of them managed to find a conception of rationality without tying itself in various ways, to that model.

Having reached decisive chapter 6, Putnam attempts to apply his conception of knowledge and rationality to the problem of distinguishing facts from values, then proposing an outline of rational justification of estimations. At the beginning he rehearses, against the majority opinion, the thesis that the institutional and absolute distinction between factual judgments and value judgments (Hume-Moore-Weber) is at least very diffuse. The concept of truth is only specified having a certain criteria of rational acceptability and if we examine the idea of rational acceptability used in scientific activity, we will realize that there are certain values that guide it: they are values that go somehow beyond the merely cognitive. We prefer this type of representation because it "is part of our idea of human cognitive flourishing and therefore part of our idea of the total human flourishing or *eudaimonía*" (p. 138).

It has been said – Putnam argues – that we must discard all discourse about justice or about the idea of good for being an unscientific discourse, but what does this mean so far as ethics does not conflict with science? Surely it is meant that there are terms that are not reducible to physical terms. However, he shows that not all the notions we use in describing the world are reducible to physical terms, and it is not unscientific; therefore, if the irreducibility of ethical terms to physical shows that values are projections, then so would colors, mathematical entities and the physical world itself. "But being a projection in this sense is not the same thing as being subjective" (1981, p. 147) or arbitrary. On the contrary, such statements have their conditions of objective justification when they allow us to describe the facts as they are to us, that is, as they are in a human world built by and for human practice. Another thing is not possible for us. Then, here we have a redefinition of the concept of objectivity consisting of clearly anthropocentric standards.

Putnam has been particularly concerned with the claim that even certain minimum ethical statements could not be regarded as objectively valid. He was referring to statements such as: '*A person who has a sense of human brotherhood is better than one that has not got it*' and '*A person capable of thinking for himself about how to live is better than someone who has lost or never acquired such capacity*'. The overall strategy to show the validity of these statements will be to show that ethic values are not separated from cognitive values and through them they are linked to our ideas of rationality and objectivity. As already mentioned, according to Putnam truth and objectivity depend on the criteria of idealized rational acceptability. At the same time, our conceptions of coherence and rational acceptability depend on our psychobiological characteristics and our cultural patterns, and are not exempt of values. As a result, what we accept as a fact, as objectivity and as rationality, is largely conditioned by our values, which ultimately depend on our idea of good. The distinction between the sphere of facts and values, which are now interdependent, is then diluted. This does not imply for Putnam to relapse on relativism because in spite of the fact that all knowledge and every assessment is culturally conditioned, he is going to point out that the knowledge that allows a better description of the world is more correct, adjusted to our cognitive values as a part of our idea of human flourishing, and the assessment that allows a better description of the social world adjusted to our basic moral values, as the other part of our idea of the human ideal.

Putnam does not fall in an unhistorical absolutism because he believes there are no canons of supra-historical rationality or invariant moral principles, but indeed only an evolving idea of cognitive and moral virtues as a guide. Thus, our author establishes a strong relationship between rationality and morality. Rationality appears conditioned by values, since cognitive schemes reflect purposes and interests and, in turn, morality is linked to a particular way of understanding the world and of dealing with it. "Any choice of conceptual scheme presupposes values, and the choice of a scheme for describing ordinary interpersonal relations and social facts [...] involves, among other things, one´s moral values" (1981, p. 215).

Putnam shows that contemporary moral skepticism was derived from a modern notion of instrumental rationality, its basic core idea being that the choice of ends is neither rational

nor irrational and only the choice of means can be described in such terms, if they were or not suitable for the intended purposes. However, to begin with, this dichotomy loses its apparent solidity when we realize that it relies on a psychological theory (Bentham) today overly simplistic and static, that conceives purposes as given once and forever, without any possibility of evolution, a typical idea of an essentialist and conservative anthropology. However, if we open the alternative of conceiving the creation of new purposes, it will begin to be a place for its rational criticism. Putnam takes the parameters that Bernard Williams has proposed to base such criticism, namely: the possibility of reassessing the existential appeal of certain goals; the ability to consider alternatives and unperceived goals; the possibility of conceiving what would actually be to obtain those goals and new specifications thereof.

Can we then demonstrate the irrationality of the instrumentally rational Nazi? Indeed; first of all, we can prove the irrationality of his goals. The irrationality of a goal can be demonstrated when its acceptance leads either to support it in failed arguments, false data or to accept an irrational alternative scheme to represent descriptive and moral facts. "A culture that repudiates ordinal moral notions [...] would lose the ability to describe interpersonal relations, social events and political events adequately and perspicuously" (1981, p. 212).

That is to say, the descriptive background associated with a moral system does not allow to choose any value (e.g. Hold the need to eliminate a certain ethnic group) because that would contradict cognitive achievements. Besides, the evaluative background of the descriptive facts would not allow explaining the facts in any way (e.g. by falsifying evidence or altering certain inferential principles). From this revised conception of justification Putnam concludes that we are entitled to consider that some extreme evaluative inclinations are indeed unhealthy (and indeed all of us do it) as much as we do with some cognitive schemes.

However, for Putnam this implies not a rejection of pluralism or an adherence to any kind of dogmatism or authoritarianism, as these are different conceptions of human flourishing. But believing in the multiplicity of ideals does not imply arguing that any idea of *Eudaimonia* is as valid as any other. It is remarkable how the conclusion that opposition to all forms of political or moral authoritarianism should not commit us to ethical skepticism and that the rejection of all forms of cultural imperialism should not lead us to an "easy relativism".[1]

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