

Hilary Putnam: On Mind, Meaning and Reality

Interview by Josh Harlan

HILARY PUTNAM IS Walter Beverly Pearson Professor of Modern Mathematics and Mathematical Logic at Harvard University. His many books have explored the philosophies of mind, mathematics, logic, science and language; they include *Reason, Truth and History* (Cambridge 1981) and *Representation and Reality* (MIT 1988). Dr. Putnam received his B.A. in philosophy from the University of Pennsylvania and his Ph.D. from U.C.L.A. He has taught at Northwestern, Princeton, and MIT, and at Harvard since 1965.

HRP: What are the ultimate goals of the philosophy of mind? What distinguishes the philosophy of mind from such fields as neuroscience, cognitive science, and psychology?

Putnam: Like all branches of philosophy, philosophy of mind is the discussion of a loose cluster of problems, to which problems get added (and sometimes subtracted) in the course of time. To make things more complicated, the notion of the “mind” is itself one which has changed a great deal through the millenia. Aristotle, for example, has no notion which exactly corresponds to our notion of “mind”. The *psyche*, or soul, in Aristotle’s philosophy is not the same as our “mind” because its functions include such “non-mental” functions as digestion and reproduction. (This is so because the “soul” is simply the form of the organized living body in Aristotle’s philosophy. Is this obviously a worse notion than our present-day notion of “mind”?) And the *nous*, or reason, in Aristotle’s philosophy, excludes many functions which we regard as mental (some of which are taken over by the *thumos*, the integrative center which Aristotle locates in the heart).

Even in my lifetime I have seen two very different ways of conceiving the mind: one, which descended from British empiricism, conceived of the mental as primarily composed of sensations. “Are sensations (or *qualia*, as philosophers sometimes say) identical with brain processes?” was *the* “mind-body problem” for this tradition. (The mind conceived of as a “bundle of sensations” might be called “the English mind”.) The other way conceived of the mind as primarily characterized by reason and intentionality — by the ability to judge, and to refer. (This might be called “the German mind”.)

Interestingly, the rise of the computer, and of computer models for cognition, lead to a decline in talk about “sensations” and an increase in talk about thinking and referring in English language philosophical literature. But the concern of materialistically inclined English speaking philosophers with “mind body identity” did not decline. Instead, the

question got reformulated as, “Are thinking and referring identical with computational states of the brain?”

In my present view, these “identity” questions are misguided, although it took me many years to come to this conclusion (which I defend at length in *Representation and Reality*). I think the search for an “identity” between properties having to do with the description of thought and reference and physical, or at least computational, properties is driven by a *fear* — the fear that the only alternative is to return to dualism, to the picture of a ghost in a machine. But that is not the only alternative. The right alternative — an alternative defended, in different ways, not only by myself but earlier by Wittgenstein, by Austin, by Strawson, by Donald Davidson (and, even, much earlier, in a peculiar way, by William James) — is to see the natural scientific description of the living human organism (a description which systematically abstracts from purpose and meaning) and the “mentalist” description in terms of purpose and meaning as complementary.

Neither is reducible to the other, but that does not mean that they are in any sense competitors. Of course, this involves rejecting the claim that the scientific description is the only “first class” description of reality, i.e., that it is the “perspective free” description of the whole of reality. And that claim has deep roots in the Western way of thinking since the 17th century. Thus the discussion in philosophy of mind today has become uncontrollable — discussions in philosophy of mind become discussions in metaphysics, in epistemology, in metaphilosophy, etc.

Coming back to the question as you posed it, the question of the “ultimate goals” of philosophy of mind, one might say that there are two competing answers today. The answer of traditional philosophy is that the goal is to answer the identity questions I listed, that is either to tell us in materialistic terms exactly what is constitutive of thinking, referring, perceiving, etc. — in short, to squeeze the conceptual scheme of purpose and meaning inside the scientific scheme — or, failing that, to establish that dualism is correct, that we have immaterial souls over and above our bodies and brains. The answer of the competing current I described, in which I include myself, is that the goal should be to render philosophy of mind, as traditionally conceived, obsolete.

The first current, in its reductionist form, does expect answers to the problems of philosophy of mind (as *it* conceives them) to come from neuroscience, cognitive science, and psychology). The second current thinks that these subjects give us information that *constrains* what we can say about human beings in the language of purpose and meaning, but that the project of reducing our mentalistic concepts to “scientific” ones is misguided.

HRP: When discussing certain issues, you occasionally have referred to fictional creations such as “Isaac Asimov’s robots.” What role can



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science fiction play in philosophy?

Putnam: Philosophy, almost by definition, is interested in exploring the bounds of the possible (*The Bounds of Sense* is the title of a famous work by Peter Strawson). Science fiction is a fertile source of scenarios, of possibilities that we might be tempted to overlook. Or at least I have found it so.

HRP: You are credited with modeling Cartesian scepticism with the notion of a world in which all sentient beings are “brains in a vat.” What does this thought experiment show us? Could our notion of reality be an illusion?

Putnam: My discussion of the “brain in a vat” model of Cartesian scepticism is too long to summarize here, but I can say what my purpose was: my purpose was to argue that concepts and world involve each other, that the concepts you have depend on the world you inhabit and how you are related to it. The idea that we first have concepts in some purely “private” medium and we must *then* proceed to see if anything corresponds to them has had a powerful grip on our thinking ever since Descartes, but it is at bottom completely incoherent. Or that, at least, is what I claim to show. Our notion of reality is necessarily subject to correction (that is part of what makes it a notion of *reality*), but the thought that it could be an “illusion” has only the appearance of making sense.

HRP: Please tell us about your recent book *Realism With a Human Face* (Harvard University Press 1990). How does it reflect a change in your earlier views?

Putnam: *Realism with a Human Face* does not reflect a change in my views as compared to, say, *Reason, Truth and History* written about ten years earlier, but it does reflect a development of them in several directions. For one thing, the sorts of criticisms I made of metaphysical realism in *Reason, Truth and History* are now being used by Rorty and others to defend relativism, and I regard relativism as a bogus alternative. So I have had to examine Rortian relativism in some detail. In addition, I have had to try to show that the philosophical view I proposed under the name “internal realism” really is a *realism*, that giving up the idea that there is just one true and complete description of reality, say the scientific description, does not mean abandoning the notion of an objective world to which our descriptions must conform.

Perhaps most important, I try to defend the idea that the theoretical and practical aspects of philosophy depend on each other. Dewey wrote (in *Reconstruction in Philosophy*) that “philosophy recovers itself when it ceases to be a device for dealing with the problems of philosophers and becomes a method, cultivated by philosophers, for dealing with the problems of men”; I think that the problems of philosophers and the problems of men and women are connected, and that it is part of the task of a responsible philosophy to bring out the connection.

HRP: Can you illustrate the connection you are thinking of?

Putnam: Quite easily. Doubts as to whether normative judgements, and

particularly ethical judgements, can be “objective” are almost universal nowadays, and clearly connected with the view that there is a fundamental dichotomy between “facts” and “values” — a view that is the product of the philosophy shop. I see the task of undermining this dichotomy as one of the central points at which one can address a real world malaise and a set of issues in theoretical philosophy at the same time.

HRP: What projects are you currently working on? Do you have any plans for the future?

Putnam: With my wife, Ruth Anna Putnam, I am currently working on a book on William James. This project grows naturally out of the orientation I have been describing. For example, James defends the idea that perceptual data and concepts are interdependent, that percepts cannot be thought of as “prior to” concepts (or vice versa) — an idea of obvious importance for the philosophy of mind — and the idea that all facts depend on values (and vice versa) — an idea of obvious relevance to my concern (and Ruth Anna’s as well) with getting beyond the fact/value dichotomy. In recent years I have found the work of the classical American Pragmatists — Peirce, James and Dewey — full of insights in connection with all these problems. In the longer run, I hope to find more to say about the problem of “intentionality” — that is, the difficulty we feel in understanding the relation of thought to the world — which is behind both “the mind-body problem” and “the fact-value problem”.

HRP: Harvard’s philosophy department seems little concerned with modern continental philosophy. Why is this so?

Putnam: I know that that is how it seems to many undergraduates, but in fact in our graduate teaching we are much more involved with continental philosophy than are most mainline philosophy departments. I have taught Habermas’s philosophy more than once, and also dealt with some of Derrida’s views, Stanley Cavell has taught the work of Heidegger and Lacan, among other continental thinkers, and Fred Neuhausser and Charles Parsons both teach German philosophy, including that of Marx and Husserl.

It is, however, very difficult to do justice to this work at the undergraduate level. Remember that European students have three years of philosophy at the *lycée* (high school) level. A continental philosopher takes this background completely for granted. One cannot discuss his work responsibly unless one can assume a substantial preparation in the history of Western philosophy. I know that there are people who parrot Derrida’s words without having studied what Derrida has studied, but that is not the kind of student this department wants to produce.

HRP: Jacques Derrida’s philosophical positions have been described by Hazard Adams as “a radical challenge to prevailing notions of ‘meaning’ or ‘rationality.’” What is your view on Derrida?

Putnam: Although Derrida’s position may seem to support irrationalism, that is certainly not how Derrida wants to be seen. Nor, I think, is his challenge to the notions you mention wholly without parallel in our tra-

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dition. In my next book (*Renewing Philosophy*, to be published by Harvard University Press in the fall), I compare Derrida's and Nelson Goodman's positions — there is, in fact, a significant overlap. Incidentally, Derrida's challenge to the notion of meaning is not claimed

by him to be wholly original — he repeatedly gives credit to Saussure, especially to the *Cours de Linguistique Generale*. What is most novel in Derrida is a way of *reading*, characterized by the discovery of fatal contradictions between the official “meaning” of a text and the tropes used in the text. That way of reading has, I think, value; but not as a way of reading *every* text. It is striking to me that a philosopher who claims to be a “deconstructionist” and who deplors the “assertoric tone” in philosophy is himself relentlessly assertoric and a relentless generalizer. The problem that remains open after one has read Derrida is this: granted that Jacques Derrida is horrified when people see him as an irrationalist, has he, in fact, left himself the resources to *answer* the charge? I won't try to answer *that* question today!

HRP: On a more personal note, can you make any generalizations about your work habits? What is the process by which you choose areas to explore and develop new ideas?

Putnam: I find two things that help me to develop new ideas: self criticism, that is, criticism of whatever I have previously published, and reading great philosophers. With regard to the first, I am *always* dissatisfied with something

or other about what I have previously written, and locating that something, and trying to think why I am dissatisfied and what to do about it, often sets the agenda for my next piece of work. But that way of proceeding can also lead to going in circles, and I find that reading — Kant, or Aristotle, or Wittgenstein, or John Dewey, or William James, or Habermas, or one of my colleagues here at Harvard — always opens new possibilities. As I get smarter, Kant, Aristotle, etc. all get smarter as well. As far as work habits goes, I am a pacer. I have to walk many miles to write a paper, and I prefer to do it out of doors. For me, philosophy is a healthy life! φ

