

Conceptual Relativity and the Intelligibility of Metaphysical Realism

In the last thirty years, Hilary Putnam's views have traversed a nearly circular curve, going from scientific/metaphysical realism, to a kind of antirealism, and most recently back to a *non*-metaphysical, pragmatic and pluralistic, realism. Over the years Putnam has employed a number of arguments against metaphysical realism. The one with which we will be concerned, namely, the argument from conceptual relativity, goes back to the late 1970s, though he has continued to develop it through his more recent 2004 publications.¹ Importantly, Putnam understands his arguments against metaphysical realism to imply *not its falsity*, but its *unintelligibility*. The purpose of this paper is to evaluate the soundness of Putnam's argument from conceptual relativity and to specify the sense in which that argument is supposed to show the unintelligibility of metaphysical realism. While I believe there is much that is of interest and value in Putnam's work, I argue that Putnam's argument from conceptual relativity is unsound and that it thus does not show the unintelligibility of metaphysical realism. I begin with a discussion of Putnam's views on realism followed by a brief explanation of his account of conceptual relativity. In the final two-thirds of the paper I critically evaluate Putnam's argument. In what follows I will use "realism" and "metaphysical realism" interchangeably.

Putnam and Realism

Though Putnam's reasons for rejecting realism have changed over the last thirty years, he still faults the realist for holding on to a certain fantasy: "The metaphysical fantasy is that there is a totality of Forms, or Universals, or 'properties,' fixed once and for all...."² The point of the

¹ Putnam 1978, 2004a, and 2004b.

² Putnam 1999, 6.

“fixed once and for all” is that reality itself is supposed to determine the forms or properties that exist independently of our representations of them; alternative linguistic forms or descriptions would not alter or determine different properties or objects. (He is not claiming that the realist holds that the totality of properties never undergoes change.) Further:

The traditional realist assumes that general names just correspond more or less one-to-one to various “properties” of “objects” in some sense of “property” and some sense of “object” that is fixed once and for all, and that knowledge claims are simply claims about the distribution of these “properties” over these “objects.”³

Thus, according to Putnam, the realist believes that true descriptions stand in a unique correspondence relation to a representation-independent world consisting of objects, properties and relations.⁴ Further, according to Putnam, since what exists is supposed to be representation-independent, realism is supposed to imply that there is only one way of truly and completely describing the totality of determinate and fixed objects properties, and relations.

Part of what worries Putnam about realism is his belief that it ultimately leads to skepticism—representation and world are separable, and our representations may be radically mistaken in a way that they couldn’t be if reality were in some sense partially constituted by our representations. Further, because of his identification of realism with reductionist/eliminativist scientific views concerning the ultimate constituents of reality (particles, fields, or whatever finished physics figures out), he claims that realism leads to the denial of the human agent’s point of view with all of its variety. The existence of conceptual relativity is supposed to show that language and world are not clearly separable and that there is more than one way of truly describing reality such that there is no single, universal ontology. Conceptual relativity is thus

³ Putnam 1999, 8.

⁴ Putnam 1999, 9. The realism in question here is often glossed in terms of “mind-dependence/independence”; however, due to the fact that “mind” can be misleading, it is better to speak of representation-dependence/independence. This is in part because the realism here is not in opposition to idealism.

supposed to go some way toward undercutting the possibility of ultimately reducing (or eliminating) particular aspects of the agent-centered-view, e.g., value, meaning, and the medium-sized dry goods that make up daily experience, to an ontology of scientific entities.

Putnam's Account of Conceptual Relativity

The central idea of conceptual relativity is that reality, insofar as it makes sense to speak of reality as a kind of singular object, is in certain respects indeterminate independent of certain ways of describing it. The nature of this indeterminacy can be seen by Putnam's claim that in certain important instances the "same" state of affairs can be described in *incompatible but equally true ways*. Putnam denies that the incompatibility is such that the descriptions are contraries; nevertheless, he holds that they cannot be simply conjoined into a single description. Over the years Putnam has illustrated conceptual relativity with a number of different examples, but there is one that he returns to repeatedly. It involves a hypothetical Polish Logician and a Carnapian.⁵ The Polish Logician countenances mereological sums, i.e., the idea that the sum of *any two things* is itself an object, and the Carnapian denies the existence of such objects.⁶ If asked to count the number of objects when presented with what Putnam calls three "individuals," x_1, x_2, x_3 (three marbles, say), the Carnapian says, "There are three objects," and the Polish Logician, ignoring the null object, says, "There are seven objects." That is, the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd objects are each of the three individuals, the 4th the sum of x_1 and x_2 , the 5th the sum of x_1 and x_3 ,

⁵ This hypothetical Carnapian is not meant to be representative of the real Carnap who Putnam thinks would have no problem with mereological sums.

⁶ As Putnam points out, mereological sums, unlike sets, have spatial location. The mereological sum of two marbles is located in the same space as the two marbles. See Putnam 2004a, 34-37. Further, there are different mereological theories; their aim is to account for part-whole relations. See Simons 1987 for a good discussion of the philosophical issues involved in mereology.

the 6th the sum of x_2 and x_3 , and the 7th object is the sum of x_1 , x_2 , and x_3 .⁷ This example is supposed to illustrate the idea that independent of a scheme of description, the number of objects is indeterminate. But why exactly is this supposed to follow from the mereological sums example?

Let us say that the three individuals, x_1 , x_2 , x_3 , are three marbles. Putnam is not saying that the three marbles admit of just any description. That is, he is not claiming that they can be described as marbles and also be described as not being marbles—he is not saying that whether or not they are marbles depends on whether we represent them as such. Rather, the idea is that whether two marbles are a further object consisting of the two marbles as its parts will depend on our way of representing them. The Polish Logician describes them as a further object; the Carnapian denies that they are an object. According to Putnam, the realist will insist that the Carnapian's and the Polish Logician's statements cannot both be true, since the realist is supposed to be committed to a fixed totality of representation-independent objects. Against this, Putnam argues that once we see that there is not just one sense of "object," we will see that it does not make sense to say that reality "in-itself" determines whether the two marbles are an object or not. Rather, we can choose to talk like the Carnapian or talk like the Polish Logician. Reality does not force us to speak one way or the other if we are to speak truthfully.

Earlier I said that the central idea of conceptual relativity is that there can be *incompatible* but equally true descriptions of the "same" state of affairs. The nature of the incompatibility remains unclear so far, but at this point we can say that it is supposed to prevent our simply conjoining the descriptions. This incompatibility as non-conjoinability seems to be central to conceptual relativity, since conceptual relativity is supposed to imply that there is not a

⁷ It is not entirely clear why Putnam thinks that the Polish Logician would stop at seven objects. That is, it is not clear why the sixth and seventh objects wouldn't sum to form an eighth, the seventh and eighth to form a tenth, and so on ad infinitum.

single true description of certain states of affairs.⁸ That is, if we are to have more than one true description of the *same* state of affairs, where the descriptions are not “about” different things, then the descriptions of the two marbles, for example, where one describes them as an object and the other denies that they are an object, cannot be conjoinable in the way that “John’s hair is brown” and “John’s eyes are green” are conjoinable. For if they were conjoinable, then we would not have the denial of the claim that Putnam attributes to the metaphysical realist, namely, that any given state of affairs admits of only one true description.

However, conceptual relativity’s requiring this kind of non-conjoinability of the statements involved, leaves Putnam facing the problem of making sense of that non-conjoinability. Typically two statements are non-conjoinable because they cannot both be true at the same time.⁹ However, Putnam does not want to claim that contradictory or contrary statements can be true at the same time. Thus, Putnam needs an account of non-conjoinability that does not involve inconsistency.

The Central Problem with Putnam’s Account of Conceptual Relativity

As Putnam himself sometimes seems to acknowledge, a central difficulty in accounting for conceptual relativity is making sense of the claim that there can be *incompatible but equally true* descriptions of the “same” state of affairs. Let us look at what Putnam says about the incompatibility involved in conceptual relativity to see exactly the difficulty he faces. In

Renewing Philosophy, Putnam discusses an example of conceptual relativity concerning whether

⁸ I say “certain states of affairs” instead of “any given state of affairs” since the mereological sums cases are limited to states of affairs involving parts and wholes, and not all states of affairs involve parts and wholes. Further, while there are other types of conceptual relativity, e.g., that of space-time points mentioned below, it does not seem that Putnam wants to say that every state of affairs is subject to conceptual relativity of one kind or another. And he needn’t make such a sweeping claim in order for conceptual relativity, if true, to pose a problem for realism.

⁹ There may be other reasons against conjoining, or at least asserting, two statements, e.g., “It is raining outside” and “I don’t believe it is raining outside”—the so-called Moore’s Paradox. But even here the absurdity of the conjunction consists, at least in part, in the inconsistency of such an assertion.

space-time should be seen as dividing into points as concrete particulars or points as mere limits.

He writes:

If the sentence, “points are mere limits” is a contrary of the sentence “points are not limits but parts of space”, even when the first sentence occurs in a systematic scheme for describing physical reality and the second occurs in another systematic scheme for describing physical reality *even though the two schemes are in practice thoroughly equivalent*, then we are in trouble indeed. But the whole point of saying that the two schemes are in practice thoroughly equivalent is that, far from leading us to incompatible predictions or incompatible actions, it makes no difference to our predictions or actions which of the two schemes we use.¹⁰

Bringing these comments to bear on the mereological sums example, it certainly seems that the Carnapian and Polish Logician are contradicting each other. We can imagine the Carnapian saying, “What do you mean there are mereological sums? Look, can’t you see that there are only three objects?” To which we can imagine the Polish Logician responding, “Yes, there are three individuals, but whenever you have three individuals, you have seven objects.” But while it seems they are contradicting each other, Putnam claims that there is no real contradiction. Indeed, the incompatibility is merely *apparent* once we realize that each description is “thoroughly equivalent.” Whenever “There are three (Carnapian) objects” is true, “There are seven (Polish Logician) objects” will also be true:

it makes no difference to our predictions or actions which of these schemes we use. Nor are these schemes equivalent only in the weak sense of what is sometimes called “empirical equivalence”, but...each sentence in one of them can be correlated in an effective way with a “translation” in the other scheme, and the sentence and its translation will have the same truth value and the same explanatory power.¹¹

¹⁰ Putnam 1992, 116-117.

¹¹ Putnam 1991, 405.

However, if the contradictory nature of the Carnapian's and Polish Logician's claims is merely apparent, because the statements are thoroughly equivalent, it is unclear why we should take the statements to be incompatible in a way that would preclude us from conjoining them.¹²

In a more recent work, Putnam again addresses the issue of incompatibility. He writes that the examples of conceptual relativity that he has used:

all involve statements that *appear* to be contradictory (if we simply conjoin them, ignoring the different uses that they have in their respective optional languages, we get a contradiction), but *are not in fact contradictory*, if we understand each of them as belonging to a different optional language, and recognize that the two optional languages involve the choice of incompatible conventions. *What are "incompatible" are not the statements themselves, which cannot simply be conjoined, but the conventions [my emphasis].*¹³

So, the idea seems to be that the statements cannot be conjoined because they each belong to, or have their content in part determined by, a different set of conventions, i.e., what Putnam has come to call optional languages, where those different optional languages are incompatible with each other.¹⁴

We should ask, then, in what sense the conventions, or optional languages, can be incompatible with each other. Taking the example concerning the existence of mereological sums, it seems the Carnapian and Polish Logician optional languages are incompatible if the conventions are incompatible. According to Putnam, if we choose to speak like the Polish Logician and say "There are seven objects," then we are adopting as a conventional truth,

¹² Though their equivalence might lead us to wonder about how distinct the statements actually are in regard to their meaning. Further, even if the statements were conjoinable, one could still question the sense in which it is true that there are seven objects. These two issues will raise their weighty heads toward the end of this paper.

¹³ Putnam 2004a, 46.

¹⁴ The "languages" are optional in the sense that they are optional ways of speaking—not "determined" or "necessitated" by reality—using a preexisting natural languages such as English or German. Part of what Putnam is trying to do is to distance his account of conceptual relativity from what he might call a metaphysical notion a conceptual scheme; that is, the notion of a conceptual scheme as a language that is an entity that stands apart from, yet "structures," another entity, namely, reality. The latter notion of a conceptual scheme is one that Davidson attacks in his well-known "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme." See Davidson, 2001.

“Mereological sums are objects.” If we choose to speak like the Carnapian and say “There are three objects,” then we are adopting as a conventional truth, “Mereological sums are not objects.”¹⁵ These kinds of conventional truths are not, according to Putnam, statements of fact.¹⁶ They are explicit formulations of the sense being given to “object,” how “object” is to be used. These conventional “truths” are certainly inconsistent, since the one denies and the other affirms that mereological sums are objects. So, perhaps this is the way in which the *optional languages* are incompatible. However, if that is right, then the only way that the *statements* in question are “incompatible” is in the sense that you cannot use the word “object” in both ways, with the same sense, at the same time. That is, you cannot use the same token of the word “object” as the Carnapian uses it and as the Polish Logician uses it. Thus, when presented with x_1, x_2, x_3 , one cannot say “There are seven objects and I am using ‘object’ as both the Carnapian and Polish Logician use it,” for the way the Carnapian uses “object” there are three objects, not seven.

If this is all the incompatibility amounts to, then it is not going to amount to the incompatibility that Putnam needs for equally true but incompatible descriptions of the “same” state of affairs. If it is unclear that there are two different uses of “object,” then it may sound odd, even downright contradictory, but there is no real logical or “metaphysical” problem in saying, “The Carnapian truthfully described x_1, x_2, x_3 , as three objects and the Polish Logician truthfully described x_1, x_2, x_3 , as seven objects.” There is no problem as long as what is meant by

¹⁵ While the notions of convention and truth by convention have suffered a beating, particularly in the context of the analytic-synthetic debate, Putnam does think that there is a legitimate way of understanding conventional truth. Following David Lewis’s early work on convention, Putnam says that we can legitimately think of a convention as “a *solution to a certain kind of coordination problem*” (Putnam 2004a, 44. Putnam’s emphasis). As Putnam explains in an earlier paper, the heart of the conventional is a kind of arbitrariness, but one that is constrained by the non-arbitrary. So, while it is not at all arbitrary given the goals of transportation and preserving life that cars should drive on the same side of the road, what is arbitrary, what is conventional, is which side of the road the cars drive on (Putnam 1983, 174-175). Lewis’s discussion of the conventional is obviously much more detailed than this. However, this is the general idea that Putnam appeals to in order to explain conceptual relativity.

¹⁶ Putnam 1994, 247.

the latter is “The Carnapian truthfully described x_1, x_2, x_3 , as three objects_{non-merological use} and the Polish Logician truthfully described x_1, x_2, x_3 , as seven objects_{mereological use}.” If this line of criticism is correct, then we are back to the question of *whether it is true* that there are mereological sums of the kind that *any* three individuals would truly be seven objects. A question Putnam has failed to give reasons to answer affirmatively. And thus, Putnam has not shown metaphysical realism to be unintelligible.

A Possible Rejoinder and the Intelligibility of Metaphysical Realism

So far I have been arguing that Putnam’s account of conceptual relativity is untenable, since we cannot make sense of the requisite notion of incompatibility. But perhaps I have been misunderstood the importance of the incompatibility for his overall critique of metaphysical realism. It is true that Putnam, at times, emphasizes the incompatibility of the optional languages involved in conceptual relativity. And other philosophers’, e.g., Horgan and Timmons, and Lynch,¹⁷ have focused their efforts on making sense of conceptual relativity by attempting to make sense of the (apparent) incompatibility of descriptions. But perhaps conceptual relativity can only be seen in the right light if we shift the emphasis off of the supposed incompatibility and onto something else.

Let us begin this shift of focus by considering a passage from Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*.¹⁸ Given Putnam’s continued, and one might say increasing, interest in Wittgenstein, this will prove useful.¹⁹ In a discussion of both his Tractarian notion of

¹⁷ See Horgan and Timmons 2002, and Lynch 1998.

¹⁸ I owe this suggestion to David G. Stern.

¹⁹ This can be seen, in part, by noting that several chapters from several of Putnam’s recent works explicitly concern Wittgenstein (e.g., Putnam 1992, chapters 7 and 8); but more importantly it is Putnam’s understanding of Wittgenstein’s way of doing philosophy that is important. As James Conant writes: “...what is it about Wittgenstein that Putnam professes to admire? The answer would appear to be the *manner* in which Wittgenstein

a simple and Russell's notion of an individual, and the idea that a "true" name ought to signify such simples or individuals, Wittgenstein writes:

If I tell someone without any further explanation: "What I see before me now is composite", he will have the right to ask: "What do you mean by 'composite'? For there are all sorts of things that that can mean!"—The question "Is what you see composite?" makes good sense if it is already established what kind of complexity—that is, which particular use of the word—is in question. [...]

We use the word "composite" (and therefore the word "simple") in an enormous number of different and differently related ways. [...]

To the *philosophical* question: "Is the visual image of this tree composite, and what are its component parts?" the correct answer is: "That depends on what you understand by 'composite'." (And that is of course not an answer but a rejection of the question.)²⁰

While Putnam is not concerned with the idea that a true name is meaningful only insofar as it signifies a simple, let us consider the similarity of Putnam's response to the idea that there is a representation-independent world of determinate objects to Wittgenstein's response to the idea that "simple" and "composite" each have a single, absolute sense.

Focusing on "composite," let us assume that answering the question: A) "Is X composite?" requires an answer to the question: B) "What do you mean by 'composite'?" It seems that Wittgenstein (or one of the voices in the *Investigations*)²¹ is claiming that A)'s requiring B) actually entails the rejection of A) as a possible question. But why would that be the case? A possible answer lies in our distinguishing between two different ways of understanding A). That is, we could either take "composite" to have a single, absolute sense, or we could take "composite" to have more than one possible sense. Wittgenstein's point, then, is that having to ask B) shows that "composite" in A) does not have a single, absolute sense. For if

philosophizes: his means of arriving at insight into what fuels and what relieves tensions of philosophical controversy" (Putnam 1990, xxx).

²⁰ Wittgenstein 1985, §47.

²¹ An important issue concerning the *Philosophical Investigations* is whose voice is "speaking" at any given moment in the text. There is an ongoing debate regarding whether any of the positive views seemingly put forth there are the author's. See, e.g., Stern 2004.

“composite” had a single, absolute sense, there would be no need to ask “What do you mean by ‘composite’?” We might, therefore, think that A) should be rejected if, and only if, “composite” is claimed have a single, absolute sense.

If it is correct that A) should be rejected if, and only if, its “composite” is understood as having a single, absolute sense, then we might have reason to think that it is *unintelligible* to claim that “Is X composite?” has an absolute sense. Clearly it is not unintelligible in the sense of “Cor dst dat ilt” or even “Broad silvers red to” are unintelligible. Rather, the claim: “The question ‘Is X composite?’ has an absolute sense” is unintelligible insofar as a part of that claim necessarily lacks sense (since there is no absolute sense of “composite,” or so we are assuming for the sake of argument). “Is X composite?” may always seem to be intelligible and unproblematic, we might say, because whenever we say it or think it, we are doing so with one of a number of the different senses of “composite” in mind; if we think that we have its absolute sense in mind, then we are simply not seeing that we have just latched onto one of its many possible senses. Assuming that that is correct (and I am not necessarily saying that it is correct), let us apply this interpretation of Wittgenstein to Putnam’s account of conceptual relativity.

From what we have already seen, we can summarize Putnam’s understanding of metaphysical realism as follows. The metaphysical realist claims that the world is representation-independent—what exists is what it is independent of our ways of representing it in thought and language. Putnam takes that to imply that there is a determinate set of objects, properties, and relations that are representation-independent. The latter, in turn, implies that there is a determinate *totality* of objects that is representation-independent. Further, such a totality is supposed to imply that the question “How many representation-independent objects are there?” makes sense (as well as the further question “What are they?”). Finally, and central to

Putnam's line of reasoning, the question as to how many representation-independent objects there are is supposed to imply that there is a single, absolute sense of "object."²² At this point Putnam brings in his examples of conceptual relativity, particularly the mereological sums example, which is meant to show that there is not a single, absolute sense of "object." Therefore, Putnam claims, the question "How many representation-independent objects are there?" doesn't really make sense, and so the notion of a totality of representation-independent objects doesn't make sense, and therefore, neither does metaphysical realism. That is, metaphysical realism is unintelligible insofar as it implies, or perhaps better, is partially constituted by, a notion that is unintelligible, namely, that there is a representation-independent totality of objects.

The above line of reasoning to the conclusion that metaphysical realism is unintelligible did not (seem to) require any appeal to incompatible descriptions. It merely (seemed to) require that "object" not have a single, absolute sense. Thus, we might have reason to think that my earlier criticism of conceptual relativity—concerning the incompatibility it (seemed to) require—is besides the point. In examining whether that is correct, with the foregoing comparison of Wittgenstein and Putnam in mind, let us look at a telling passage from Putnam:

What I meant by my doctrine of scheme dependence (or to use my own preferred term, conceptual relativity) is that (1) the notion of an "object" is an inherently extendable one; we extend it when we speak of the strange 'objects' of quantum mechanics as objects; we extend it (in an unfortunate way, I think) when we refer to *numbers* as "objects"; we extend it when we invent such *recherché* notions as "mereological sum" and begin to refer to mereological sums as "objects"; and we shall undoubtedly continue to extend it in the future. (The same is, of course, true of such technical-sounding variants as "entity".) Because the notion is inherently open in this way, the very notion of a "totality of all objects" is senseless. (2) certain things are paradigmatically objects, for example tables and chairs, but other uses of the term "object" are, to a greater or a lesser degree, optional. Thus there is no fact of the matter as to whether numbers, or mereological sums, are objects or not (and since "object" and "exist" are conceptually linked, there is no fact of the matter as to whether "numbers exist" and no fact of the matter as to

²² In addition to the criticisms I will make below, we should question whether saying that there is a totality of objects implies that "object" has a single, absolute sense. The realist, it seems to me, could say that there are different senses of "object," the question is: what properly counts as an object and is it representation-independent?

whether “mereological sums exist”). (3) As a consequence of (2), apparently incompatible schemes—for instance, a scheme that quantifies over mereological sums and one that denies that there are any such things—may serve equally well to describe one or another state of affairs. For example, the state of affairs that would ordinarily be described by saying “there are three objects on the table” would be described in a scheme that countenanced mereological sums as objects by saying “There are seven objects on the table.”²³

This passage coheres well with the suggested shift in focus from incompatibility to the Wittgensteinian point of the open-endedness of object just covered. Putnam seems to say quite explicitly that the reason there is no scheme-independent fact of the matter concerning the number and kinds of objects in the world is that “object” (and, therefore, “exist,” Putnam tells us) are truly open-ended. While we may not be able to help talking about paradigmatic objects like tables and chairs, there are other senses of “object.” Further, it is completely up to us whether we admit that there are mereological sums like that of my nose and the Eiffel Tower. The world in-itself does not determine the answers to such questions as to whether mereological sums exist, since there is no sense to be had to the notion of a “world in-itself.” We can choose to say they do or to say that they don’t. And, as Putnam says in the above passage, it is because of this open-endedness of “object” and “exist” that we can have apparently incompatible descriptions as in the example with the Polish Logician and the Carnapian. But, Putnam seems to be saying, representation-dependency does not follow from such apparent incompatibility.

What can the metaphysical realist say in response to this change of perspective? Well, if Putnam is here admitting that there really isn’t any incompatibility between the different uses of object, then it seems the metaphysical realist *could* just say that the totality of objects that constitutes the world includes all those “strange” mereological sums that we can think of; thus, there is a totality of objects, properties, and relations to which our statements can correspond

²³ Putnam 1992d, 367.

(many more than we perhaps initially thought), and thus, there is no problem for realism. But not every realist will want to admit such arbitrary objects as the mereological sum of my nose and the Eiffel Tower into her ontology. So now we are back to a dispute between realists affirming and denying what counts as an object. And Putnam's point is that we can choose either to count mereological sums as objects or not.

At this point, the realist should respond by questioning whether incompatibility isn't a central feature of conceptual relativity after all. Let us remember that Putnam needs the descriptions from the different optional languages to be about the "same" states of affairs. These "same" states of affairs are supposed to be specifiable by using our natural languages to say what it is that admits of the different descriptions, e.g., three marbles, my nose and the Eiffel Tower, etc. Further, the descriptions using the different optional languages are "thoroughly equivalent" in the sense that whichever optional language we adopt will not affect our predictions or explanations. But here we can begin to reintroduce the importance and centrality of the (supposed) incompatibility of the descriptions. That is, the Polish Logician's and the Carnapian's statements need to be equivalent and about the "same" state of affairs *without being mere notational variants*.

To better see what is at issue here, let us look at Lynch's description of what he calls the consistency dilemma:

The real problem for pluralism [conceptual relativity] is not the *inconsistency* but the *consistency of schemes*. In other words, given the consistency [between two optional languages/descriptions] *A* and *B* that the relativization of fact apparently implies, the pluralist must explain how it is legitimate to talk about *incompatible* but equally true schemes in the first place. Specifically, if *A* and *B* are consistent, then either (1) *A* and *B* are expressing the same truths in different languages (they are "notational variants") or (2) *A* and *B* are simply concerned with different subject matters altogether.²⁴

²⁴ Lynch 1998, 29.

I take it that for Putnam what keeps *A* and *B*, e.g., the Carnapian's statement, "There are three objects," and the Polish Logician's statement, "There are seven objects," from being mere notational variants despite the fact that they are supposed to be *consistent, equivalent* descriptions of the "*same*" state of affairs, is that they are in some sense incompatible. The possibility of conceptual relativity thus depends on 1) "object" not being open-ended in the sense that the Carnapian and the Polish Logician are talking about different things, i.e., talking past each other, and 2) their not just saying the *same thing* in different notations. These two requirements are supposed to be met by the optional languages' consisting of incompatible conventions specifying what counts as an object. Therefore, *pace* Putnam, the incompatibility is at the heart of conceptual relativity, it is not just a byproduct of the open-endedness of "object." But as I argued above, the incompatibility that conceptual relativity seems to require—incompatibility that is not inconsistency but which precludes conjoining certain statements—is not to be had. Statements involving different senses of "object" *can* be conjoined into a more complete true description, *if* both statements *are* true: and that indeed can be difficult to ascertain.

Concluding Remarks

Whether there *really* are mereological sums is a question that Putnam rejects. However, his account of conceptual relativity does not, so I have argued, give us reason to reject it or metaphysical realism more generally. Moreover, since Putnam's account of conceptual relativity is unsound, it fails to show that metaphysical realism is unintelligible. Of course, that implies neither that metaphysical realism is true, nor that Putnam's other arguments against metaphysical realism are unsound. However, it is a substantial result given Putnam's philosophical influence,

his continued appeals to conceptual relativity, and his attempt to steer a middle way between realism and antirealism by way of conceptual relativity.

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