

Realism and Conceptual Relativity (Dissertation Abstract)

The nature and possibility of humans understanding and representing the world through thought, language, and perception has been at the center of western philosophy since at least Descartes. Accounting for the possibility of true representations was one of Kant's most explicit concerns. Firmly situated in this tradition, Hilary Putnam has long grappled with the nature and implications of how language hooks onto the world. Putnam's views on these issues have changed radically over his career from a kind of realism to a kind of antirealism.

According to the realist view, the mind essentially attempts to mirror the world through its representations. Truth consists of a correspondence between language and a world whose nature is independent of our representations. Call this form of realism *alethic realism*. According to the antirealist view, the mind does not simply mirror the world; rather, it somehow contributes structure and content to the world. Language and reality are not cleanly separable as the alethic realist believes.

Putnam abandoned alethic realism due to perceived problems with its being able to account for true representations of reality. Putnam became convinced that alethic realism leads to skepticism; since mind/representation and world are separable, it is theoretically possible that even an ideal theory or description of the world could be false. Further, because alethic realism holds that the world is representation-independent, Putnam takes it to imply that there is only one true description of the world. Conversely, if there is more than one true description of the world, then the world is not representation-independent.

Putnam's continued rejection of alethic realism is due principally to his argument from conceptual relativity. The central idea of which is that 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 the purported possibility of being able to describe what Putnam calls three "individuals," x_1 , x_2 , x_3 (three marbles, say) as either three objects or seven objects. If one countenances mereological sums, i.e., the idea that the sum of *any* two things is itself an object, then there are supposed to be 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 , 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 . But if one denies that there are mereological sums, then there are only three objects.

According to Putnam, the realist will insist that both counts cannot be right, since she is supposed to be committed to a fixed totality of representation-independent objects. Against this, Putnam claims that we can choose to talk either way and still speak truthfully. However, we cannot simply conjoin the descriptions into one description the way we can "John's hair is brown" and "John's eyes are green." The descriptions need to be non-conjoinable because they are supposed to be about the "same" state of affairs without "object" having a different meaning in each description. If the descriptions simply differed in meaning, then they would be about different things; and if they were contraries or contradictory, then they could not both be true. And if they differed in meaning or couldn't both be true, then the purported examples of

conceptual relativity would *not* pose a problem for alethic realism.

Much of Putnam's effort is spent defending the idea that there can be incompatible but equally true descriptions. As we began to see above, he faces a dilemma. Two descriptions, A and B, are either consistent or not. If they are not consistent, then the proponent of conceptual relativity is committed to the truth of contradictions. If they are consistent, then they are simply about different things and are thus conjoinable. So, Putnam's views on conceptual relativity are either irrational or they are consistent with alethic realism.

In order to try to steer his way through this dilemma, Putnam distinguishes between the *meaning* and *sense* of a word. The idea is that the meaning of "object" is in some sense the same when counting mereological sums or leaving them out; however, "object" differs in regard to its use or sense. So, when one person says, "There are three objects," and another says, "There are seven objects," they are using "object" with its ordinary meaning but in different senses. Thus, according to Putnam, they do not contradict one another, nor do they talk past one another.

I criticize Putnam's views on conceptual relativity along three lines. First, I argue that despite his meaning/sense distinction, Putnam's views on conceptual relativity still fall prey to the second horn of the above mentioned dilemma. Thus his attempt to hold that there are (in some sense) incompatible descriptions of the "same" state of affairs is untenable. The problem is that it is not clear why the supposed incompatible descriptions cannot be conjoined once it is clear that "object" is used in different senses. For example, "There are three non-mereological objects and there are seven mereological objects" is as unproblematic as, "There are three square objects and there are seven triangular objects." However, the question still remains as to whether *any* two concrete objects are themselves an object.

Therefore, second, I call into question Putnam's views on mereological sums, specifically the claim that *any* two concrete objects are themselves an object. While it is less problematic to think that some objects are mereological sums of their parts, e.g., a fleet of ships or an archipelago, it is not clear that just any two concrete objects are themselves an object. It is not my intention to argue that Putnam's views on mereology are false, but rather to emphasize that they are not as unproblematic as Putnam seems to believe.

Third, I argue that since "object," is not a true sortal term, i.e., it does not provide for individuation of objects on its own, Putnam's mereological sums example fails to undermine alethic realism. That is, Putnam asks the alethic realist to count the number of objects, and then argues that there is no determinate, representation-independent answer. However, we should not be surprised if there is not some fixed totality of objects *qua* "object." Rather, the totality of objects to which our language corresponds, and which we can count, are objects *qua* trees, rivers, tables, rocks, houses, etc.

Lastly, I close the dissertation by arguing that from the remains of Putnam's views on conceptual relativity, the alethic realist can salvage the idea that knowledge is objective even though it may be relative to different perspectives. Different languages or conceptual schemes can provide for different ways of conceptualizing the world without that entailing any form of radical subjectivism or relativism. Recognizing this objective but perspectival nature of knowledge is only a problem for the alethic realist if she also endorses a kind of scientism according to which it is finished science alone that tells us what really exists.