Between Realism and Relativism:

Putnam's Narrow Path

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September, 1989

A thesis submitted to the Faculty
of Graduate Studies and Research
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts.

Abstract:

In what follows I will examine problems surrounding Hilary Putnam's defense of 'internal' realism. I will begin by considering his motivations for rejecting what he calls 'metaphysical realism' and the theory of truth that this leads him to adopt. This theory, idealized rational acceptability, in turn raises doubts that 'internal' realism could be an undesirable form of 'relativism'. Putnam tries to show that his position is distinct from relativism, giving several specific arguments that the latter is inconsistent in various ways in which 'internal' realism is not. These arguments will constitute the main focus of this work. I shall argue that the arguments only succeed against a very narrow and naive class of relativist positions. I will then consider a more careful formulation of a sophisticated relativism offered by Chris Swoyer. From this it will be seen that other relativist doubts can be eliminated and I will then briefly consider what other resources the 'internal' realist position can make use of to deal with some remaining difficulties.

Cette thèse a pour but d'étudier certains problèmes portant sur les théories anti-réalistes de Hilary Putnam. Je considère, en premier lieu, les motivations pour la réjection du 'réalisme métaphysique' et la théorie de la vérité avec laquelle Putnam remplace celui-ci. Cette théorie, 'l'idéalisation de l'affirmation rationnel' entraine certains doutes que la doctrine anti-réaliste pourait etre une forme non-désiré du relativisme. Putnam essaie de démontrer que sa doctrine n'est pas relativiste en proposant plusieurs arguments que le relativisme est inconsistant dans une manière qui ne touche pas l'anti-réalisme. Ces arguments sont le sujet principal de la thèse. Je soutiens que les arguments de Putnam ne traitent que d'une classe restrainte des formes du relativisme. Par la suite, je considère la présentation, par Chris Swoyer, d'un relativisme plus sophistiqué. L'argument de Swoyer aidera à éliminer d'autres soucis relativistes.

N.B. References to works by Putnam are given in brackets directly following the quotation, using the abreviations below.

RTH: *Reason, Truth and History*

MFR: *The Many Faces of Realism*

WRCBN: 'Why Reason Can't Be Naturalised', in Putnam 1983

WRMW: 'Why There Isn't A Ready-World', in Putnam 1983

The following abreviation is used for references to Chris Swoyer's paper:

TR: 'True For'

Complete references on cited texts is contained in the bibliography.

In what follows I will examine problems surrounding Hilary Putnam's defense of 'internal' realism. I will begin by considering his motivations for rejecting what he calls 'metaphysical realism' and the theory of truth that this leads him to adopt. This theory, idealized rational acceptability, in turn raises doubts that 'internal' realism could be an undesirable form of 'relativism'. Putnam tries to show that his position is distinct from relativism, giving several specific arguments that the latter is inconsistent in various ways in which 'internal' realism is not. These arguments will constitute the main focus of this work. I shall argue that the arguments only succeed against a very narrow and naive class of relativist positions. I will then consider a more careful formulation of a sophisticated relativism offered by Chris Swoyer. From this it will be seen that other relativist doubts can be eliminated and I will then briefly consider what other resources the 'internal' realist position can make use of to deal with some remaining difficulties.

Chapter 1 : The Motivations For 'Internal' Realism.

In *Reason, Truth and History*, Putnam gives perhaps his clearest and most straightforward characterisations of the debate between realism and anti-

realism.[1] Metaphysical realism, on Putnam's description, consists of the following three claims:

> 1) The world consists of a fixed totality of mind-independent objects.
>
> 2) There is exactly one true and complete description of 'the way the world is'.
>
> 3) Truth is a correspondence relation between words (signs, mental representations etc.) and external things or sets of things.

Putnam also calls this the 'externalist perspective', dependent on a "God's eye point of view". In contrast, he calls his own version of anti-realism 'internal realism', and characterizes it by three alternative claims:

> 1) The question: 'What objects does the world consist of?' only makes sense within a theory or description.
>
> 2) There is more than one true theory or description of the world
>
> 3) Truth is some sort of (idealized) rational acceptability, an ideal coherence of our beliefs with each other and with our experience as those experiences are themselves represented in our belief system. Truth is not 'correspondence with mind-independent states of affairs'.

What is being denied, in particular, is the conceivability of a 'God's eye point of view'. Instead, "there are only the various points of view of actual persons reflecting various interests and purposes that their descriptions and theories subserve".

From the outset, one of the weaknesses of Putnam's argument in *Reason, Truth, and History* is that the position he sets out to attack may be too strong and thus incredible. It is not clear that any 'realist' holds all *three* of these views, or

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[1]See RTH p. 49

holds each of them as catagorically as Putnam states them. For instance, a realist coud perhaps hold views (1) and (3) but think that though the ways of describing 'the way the world is' is constrained, it is not unique, thus holding a much weaker version of (2). It must also be granted that the characterisation is quite vague and informal. For example, what is meant by a 'fixed totality'?

The crucial point in Putnam's characterisation of metaphysical realism is the notion of mind-independence. If the world consists of mind-independent objects then the arrangement they are in will be one which is so regardless of anything we might say or think It is this assumption that leaves the way open for the further claim that, although it may appear to us that the world can be described in several different ways, there is only one true description of how it is *in itself* . The correspondence notion of truth thus appeals strongly to a picture, the dualistic picture of two completely distinct things that are being related, i.e. our thoughts or language on the one hand and the mind-independent objects on the other

Conversely, the view Putnam wishes to call internal realism is mainly concerned with rejecting the notion of mind-independent objects. Internal realism maintains that we see the world from the perspective of a theory -- more accurately: we can only see it that way. Consequently, we can have several 'true' descriptions, on the understanding of truth as 'internal' to a theory.

The problem for Putnam's position is that he wants to maintain that it makes no sense to hold that our concepts 'match' something "totally uncontaminated by conceptualization", while also maintaining that there is objective truth. These requirements seem, *prima facie* , incompatible. The first demand would seem to force one into a species of subjective idealism, the second, to accept a mind-independent world. Traditionally, it is objective truth

that one wants at all cost to preserve, hence the deeply entrenched intuition . favor of mind-independence In order to account for Putnam's anti-realism, therefore, it is necessary to examine his arguments against the different forms of what he calls metaphysical realism.

Of Correspondence Theories In General

Putnam's arguments against metaphysical realism are centered around discussions of reference. In general, Putnam is careful to distinguish between theories about what reference is and theories about how reference is fixed It will turn out that theories of the first sort are impossible in any formal or non-trivial sense. while theories of the second sort are of the kind that Putnam has been concerned with giving and which are the only kind that can be given The metaphysical realist, in this context, wants to discover what the relation we call reference is, in the strong sense of specifying necessary and sufficient conditions for the concept Furthermore, the realist intends that his account of what reference is will, de facto, provide the mechanism of how reference is fixed. In other words, the realist has conflated two quite distinct issues

Much of Putnam's argument against metaphysical realism consists in attacking the correspondence theory of reference and truth Let us begin by stating the general problem to which such an account gives rise and then examine it in more detail in first terms of the strongest form that the theory takes, the physicalist theory of reference, and then in its most pervasive form, the similitude theory of reference.

In its most general form the correspondence theory preserves truth through an abstract isomorphism or mapping of concepts onto things in the mind independent world The problem is not that this theory is false --that is, that there is no way in which to do this --but that there are too many such correspondences. This then conflicts with the demand that there is only *one* 'true and complete' description. To pick out just one correspondence as the intended one, we shall see later, would require already having access to mind independent objects.

Putnam cites the intertranslatability of incompatible theories as a demonstration that an abstract mapping cannot capture reference and truth. Theories explaining electro-magnetic forces in terms of particles acting at a distance can be mathematically translated into theories which explain those forces in terms of fields. But these are metaphysically incompatible since, a realist would say, there either are or are not such things as 'fields'. But if two theories are intertranslatable, and there is a mapping between either of them and the world which makes that theory true, then there is also a mapping to the other which makes it true. Thus, if an abstract correspondence is all that is required, then incompatible theories can both be true. It is the failure of this abstract form of correspondence which leads the realist to maintain that there must be some form of *causal* connection from the world to our terms, mental representations, etc. So let us now examine the strong form of this argument, the physicalist causal theory of reference.

Causal Theories of Reference

The realist wishes to maintain that language refers to mind-independent states of affairs in the world and that it is these states of affairs that fix the reference of our terms. The initial attempts at this were made, as Putnam points out, by way of truth-conditional semantics on whole sentences. These attempts must rely on operational and theoretical constraints to pick out the set of true sentences But using operational and theoretical constraints to pick out the set of true sentences does not fix the reference of the *terms* occurring in those sentences:

> Even if we have constraints of whatever nature which determine the truth-value of every sentence in a language in every possible world, still the reference of individual terms remains indeterminate In fact, it is possible to interpret the entire language in violently different ways, each of them compatible with the requirement that the truth-value of each sentence in each possible world be the one specified. In short, not only does the received view not work; no view which only fixes the truth-values of whole sentences can fix reference, even if it specifies truth-values for sentences in every possible world. (RTH p.33)

Putnam demonstrates this with a 'permutation argument', taking the two sentences "The cat is on the mat" and "The cherry is on the tree" and giving them an interpretation, *, inter-changing their referents such that cat* refers to cherries, mat* refers to trees and vice-versa. He then defines their truth-functions such that whenever the sentence "The cat is on the mat" is true, so is the sentence "The cat* is on the mat*" An objection to the effect that one can surely verify what the terms refer to by, say, seeing or examining, does not help since the permutation can be extended to these terms too, generating the new operations seeing* and examining* such that one would verify* that "cat" refers to cats*,

i.e. to cherries. In other words, if one is prepared to permute widely enough, w. can bring about more or less any permutation we like.[2] Consequently, on the view that the reference of terms is fixed by truth conditions on sentences containing them, "cat" could refer to cherries and "mat" could refer to trees without our being able to notice any difference. In fact, generalising, if there are infinitely many different objects in the world, then any given term in the language could refer to infinitely many different things, preserving the truth of all sentences currently considered true.

The cornerstone of Putnam's argument is the reliance on "operational and theoretical constraints". These are *all* that we have to go on. More pertinently, they are supposedly all that we *could ever* have access to in order to settle questions of reference and truth. If this is so, then criticisms that Putnam's argument is just implausible or counter-intuitive have no purchase without presupposing the notion of reference which is being explicated.

We want to account for our ability to pick out particular objects using language. By 'operational and theoretical constraints' Putnam means the ideally maximal information that we, as rational beings, could possibly have in fixing reference. We can think of this information as imposing constraints on what a given term in our language could pick out. Thus, even given the optimal refinement of our concepts, including a system of truth conditions, together with the success of all our actions in the world (even given the knowledge of the success of all future actions) involving the relevant bits of language and sets of objects, the radical indeterminacy of reference brought to light by arguments like

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[2]Putnam also makes this point very forcefully in "Models and Reality" (in Putnam 1983), using the Lowenheim-Skolem results concerning denumerable models of set theory to demonstrate the indeterminacy of reference of cardinality terms.

Putnam's permutation argument cannot be blocked. Total reinterpretations oi the language are assumed to satisfy operational and theoretical constraints, hence they do not allow us to distinguish what the actual referents of our terms are by the success of our actions. As Putnam puts it, sets of objects, cats and cherries for instance, may be distinct in an individual's notional world, for example, in an individual's introspection of his own consciousness But, because of the existence of unintended interpretations, the non-problematic notional sets do not pin-down disjoint sets of *objects-in-themselves* .[3]

Causal theories are an attempt to take up this slack between truth conditions and r'erence. If reference can be accounted for by defining a causal relation from objects in the world to the terms in our language, then we would have achieved the realist's goal. Once reference was pinned down in such a way, the correspondence theory of truth would have some bite and would Thus provide an account of how our terms pick out the one real world. Putnam examines one version of the causal theory of truth, the physicalist causal theory defended by Hartry Field, in order to show how such a notion is fundamentally

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[3]'Notional world' can be taken to mean a sort of 'narrow content' - clearly Putnam is thinking of mental representations, (see RTH p. 45). So far Putnam is taking what John McDowell calls the less radical line of attack on mental individualism (see McDowell and Pettet's introduction to *Subject Thought and Context*), compatible with his position in "The Meaning of 'Meaning'" (in Putnam 1975b) This line preserves some notion of narrow content and then takes a non-individualistic strategy in connecting it with the external world. Considering the influence of Wittgenstein's Private Languege Argument on Putnam, which will be discussed below, it is questionable whether any notion of narrow content can remain. In the recently published *Realism and Representation* adopts the more radical strategy of denying narrow content altogether.

incoherent. For Field, we want reference to be a physicalistic relation, the natui of which is to be determined empirically by natural science. Thus

(1) x refers to y iff x bears R to y   (RTH p. 45)

where the relation, R, is definable in natural science vocabulary without using any semantical terms, such as refers, intends, means etc..[4]

The problem is that we still have to rely on operational and theoretical constraints in order to verify *this* theory. If we grant the theory, that is, if we grant that 'x bears R to y' fixes 'x refers to y', then we have done nothing more than just push back the problem.[5] For the reference of 'x bears R to y' is *itself* indeterminate and subject to the previous permutation arguments. That is, even for some determined relation R, we must still interpret what it is for something to bear that relation R to something else. The radical indeterminacy can simply be iterated for the interpretation of the relation (and so on for the interpretation of the interpretation etc.). To assume that this is already fixed by the theory itself is to beg the question. For any given R we could give indefinitely many different interpretations of the whole language such that *anything* could bear that relation to some other thing. And this is for *one* given R.

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[4]That is, R is describable in the object language of natural science. What is precisely at issue here is whether theorectical notions such as reference *can* be reduced to terms in the object language and whether there is any metaphysical or epistemological necessity for doing so in the first place. Putnam has always opposed such attempts at reduction (see for instance, the early "What Theories Are Not" - first published in 1962 - in Putnam 1975).

[5]For another version of the same point see Putnam's "Models and Reality" (in Putnam 1983), p. 18).

Field's project seems hopeless for what he wants it to do. It establishes relation within any admissible model, within any whole interpretation of the language, but it does not serve to cut down the number of admissible models. This sort of internal relation is obviously not what Field *intended* his rule to accomplish, i.e. what he wants to show is that there is a determinate unique relation between words and things or sets of things. But if we let the intention into the rule we simply beg the question. The question precisely is: How is a *unique* and *intended* object of reference picked out. The answer: 'By the uniquely determining relation R' is vacuous, for what the rule is supposed to explain is precisely how reference could be uniquely determining. Instead, for the rule itself to be applicable, it requires the notion that reference is uniquely determining as an assumption. Thus, it is not even possible to state Field's position coherently without presupposing the notion of reference. The only option left for the causal theorist is to stubbornly maintain that there is a determinate physical relation R which just *is* reference independent of how we describe it. But this would leave us with a notion of reference as something which was not a consequence of our intention to refer or a result of theoretical and operational constraints. It would be a completely inaccessible and inexplicable notion.

The point is this. Taking (1) as an empirical proposition, one based on operational and theoretical constraints, we can define a relation R, but cannot narrow down the number of admissible models interpreting R. But in taking (1) as a surd metaphysical fact, we do not even have a means for picking one relation R out of the infinite number of possible relations (assuming a universe of infinite objects) that could stand for the relation of reference. Assuming a world of mind/discourse-independent objects and the necessity of providing a

correspondence, the physicalist theory leaves us with infinitely many correspondences to choose from on just one interpretation of R, and also, infinitely many interpretations of R. Putnam shows that if we take the physicalist notion of reference as something expressible it is incoherent, and if we take it as independent of our ability to express it, then reference becomes an epistemically inaccessible phenomenon, explainable only by a "magical theory" which posits non-natural mental powers.

The Similitude Theory and Reductionism

As we have just seen, one strong form of the causal theory, physicalism, fails. Perhaps by way of a broader, less metaphysically (or at least ontologically) restricted notion, the correspondence theory can be rescued. The notion which has been most pervasive and long-lived in doing so is that of similarity.
The similitude theory overlaps the physicalist causal theory. It says,

(2) x refers to y iff x is similar to (resembles etc.) y with respect to

It is a theory of how the mind's symbols (concepts, ideas, representations, etc.) get into a unique correspondence with objects in the mind-independent world. So (2) should be fleshed out as,

(3) A mental representation, x, refers to a mind-independent object,
 y, iff x is similar to y,

leaving the notion of similarity free from any ontological commitments. If the relation of similarity is taken as a physical one then this reduces to a Fieldian

causal theory, where R is some physicalistic account of what it is for one thing to resemble another thing. But there are many other ways of interpreting (2), as testified by the long and varied career of the theory and the different metaphysical positions of its proponents. Putnam explicitly lumps together Aristotle, Locke and Berkley not only as holders of the similitude theory but as metaphysical realists. If this seems extravagant, it is accounted for by comments which Putnam makes about reductionism:

> Reductionism, with respect to a class of assertions (e.g. assertions about mental events) is the view that assertions in that class are 'made true' by facts which are outside of that class. For example, facts about behaviour are what 'make true' assertions about mental events, according to one kind of reductionism. For another example, the view of Bishop Berkeley that all there 'really is' is minds and their sensations is reductionist, for it holds that sentences about tables and chairs and other ordinary 'material objects' are actually made true by facts about sensations.
> (RTH p. 56)

Consequently, one does not need to be a naive realist, a believer in everyday objects such as tables and chairs, to be a metaphysical realist. One can be at the same time a realist and a reductionist as long as one holds to the correspondence theory for the sentences of the *reducing* class --in the case of Berkeley, the classes of minds and their sensations. Reductionists may disagree amongst themselves about what exactly the fixed totality of mind-independent objects consists of while agreeing that there is one (and only one) and that truth is to be explained by a correspondence to it. It is these latter views on which they agree that makes them realists. As Putnam points out, to endorse any form of non-realism one must be non-realist *"all the way down"*.

The physicalist theory of reference is a completely reductionist theory: reference, indeed all semantic notions, turns out to be made true by facts about

physical relations. Reductionism also plays an important role in the similitude theory. For if the theory is to have any substance in providing an explanatory causal connection between the world and our mental representations, concepts and, ultimately, the terms of our language, it must be able to account for how we refer to things with which we do not have any direct contact. Reductionism provides a mechanism by means of which the similitude theory can explain how one is able to refer to, say, an 'extra-terrestrial': such terms can be analysed into more basic terms, such as 'intelligent being' and 'not from this planet'. The latter can be further analysed into 'not from this place' and 'planet'. In this way, such problematic terms are reduced to terms that our minds do, it could be argued, have direct contact with.

But, far from being restricted to some narrow class of terms, this problem arises with *all words* . The word 'horse', for instance, refers to horses that we have not and never will interact with. From this we can see that reductionism is not just a convenient mechanism but is an essential feature of the similitude theory. For to say that it is via the similarity of our mental representation of horses to mind-independent horses in the world that our term 'horse' refers to horses, is to say that there is also a similarity between all the things that we would call horses, such that they are all of the same kind. It is necessary to be more specific in order to bring out the strength with which this is meant: it is not that we find a similarity between all the individuals of a kind, but that, independently of us, of our classification, they are similar in themselves, of the same kind in themselves. The realist assumptions entail that some kind of categorical system is imbeded in the mind-independent world which determines what properties of a thing do and what properties do not count as similarities.

The implicit assumption, derivative from the basic assumptions of metaphysical realism, is that the world sorts things into kinds which we then perceive as such, that the objects making up the world are both mind independent and self-identifying. This requires a reduction of all characteristics of things to some set of basic elements with which we can interact The privileged medium to fulfill this role is our sensations, or sense data.

Remember that the problem for the realist, from his assumptions and in the absence of predicating any non-natural mental powers, is to account for how the mind's symbols get into a unique correspondence with independent objects No sign necessarily corresponds to one thing rather than to another, so the realist must suppose a causal connection, or 'chain', between minds and the world. The problem then is that there are infinitely many such relations, forcing the realist to modify his requirement to pick out a causal chain 'of the appropriate kind'. Another problem is that we do not have any direct contact, or even could not have any direct contact, with many of the things that we refer to meaningfully, forcing the realist to build a reductionist mechanism into his account. Considering that we only interact with a finite number of the members of a given kind, all of which we mean to refer to by the name of that kind, we see that even for everyday words picking out common objects in the world the notion of reduction is built into the very heart of the realist programme

So the similitude theory must, at the very least, hold for the correspondence between our ideas and our sensations. This is the primary case of reference from the epistemological point of view, so if it succeeds the realist can build his whole theory of reference on this foundation. We must ask what the question, 'Is A similar to B?', means here. For as Putnam remarks, everything is similar to everything else in infinitely many respects. The question makes sense

only when restricted by some particular context or other, but to ask simply whether A and B are similar with no specification is empty. With this in mind, Putnam wields Wittgenstein's private language argument against the minimal requirement of the correspondence theory, the correspondence between our ideas and our sensations. Consider a person who tries to invent a private language in order to describe his own sensations to himself: He focuses his attention on a particular sensation, X; then he introduces a sign, E, for entities qualitatively identical with X. "E" applies to all and only entities that are similar to X But if he does not specify the respect in which the sensations are similar his intention is empty Everything is similar to X in some respect "E" is meant to pick out some group of sensations, just like our word 'horse' is meant to pick out some group of things. So he must have in mind some respect in which they are similar, he must think 'A sensation is E if and only if it is similar to X in respect R'. This move is exactly parallel to the one which the realist has to make if he maintains that reference is a causal relation. In some way or another everything is related to everything by a causal chain. So the causal theorist must spell out his theory in terms of a particular kind of causal chain, he must maintain that '"E" refers to X if and only if it is related to X by causal-chain-of-the-appropriate-type R'.

As we saw in the latter case, the notion of picking out a causal chain of the appropriate type already presupposes the notion of reference. The similitude theory runs into the same dilemma To see this, consider how our private linguist is to go about specifying a respect, R, in which his sensations are similar. He could say that a sensation is similar to X in respect R if it is similar in just the way in which two other sensations Z, W are similar. But this fails because any two things Z and W are themselves similar in infinitely many different respects. Trying to specify the relation of similarity in this way leads to an infinite regress. Instead

of accounting for the notion of reference by means of similitude, we can only make sense of the notion of similarity by presupposing the ability to refer in the first place. The similitude theory makes no more progress then any other version of the causal theory. Like them, it either presupposes the notion it is attempting to explain or is empty.

The Realist Notions of Causation and Similarity

As we have seen, neither of the main metaphysical realist accounts of reference prove satisfactory Instead of explaining or defining reference, both the causal theories and similitude theories presuppose the notion of reference The metaphysical realist is unavoidably wedded to some form of the correspondence theory. As we have seen, there are infinitely many possible correspondences between our concepts and the objects they pick out For our minds to be capable, through an act of will or intention to pick out just the relation, C, to be designated the correspondence relation, we would need already to be able to think about the correspondence C. But, by hypothesis, C is a relation to things external and mind independent and must, therefore, be itself outside the mind Unless we we accept some theory based on non-natural mental powers, whereby the mind just has the magical power of grasping noumenal forms directly, no mental act can give it the ability to single out a particular correspondence.

So far I have been examining Putnam's attacks on the causal and similitude theories of reference, showing them to be incoherent. From the above line of reasoning, however, one may wonder how anyone would ever think that

these theories could provide an account of how we single out one specia correspondence. In "Why there isn't a ready-made world" (in Putnam 1983), Putnam examines some metaphysics assumptions which clarify these realist projects. As Putnam points out in this paper, metaphysical realists, or materialists, take the notion of causation itself to be a *physical* relation, a built-in structure of reality. Exactly the same points hold for the notion of similarity as well. This explains why the realist would want to give an account of correspondence in terms of these. Putnam's arguments against these assumptions will help to clarify his alternative anti-realist position. In fact, the arguments up to now may have begun to give the impression that there could be no coherent notions of reference, cause or similarity at all. This we shall now see is not where Putnam's position leads him.

Let us consider whether causation is a physical relation, that is, one that can be captured within the parameters of natural science. For simplicity (and in the realist's favour) we will ignore quantum mechanics and take physics to be a theory whose fundamental magnitudes are defined at all points in space and time. To be physical a property or relation must be definable in terms of these. In accordance with this Putnam proposes the general Humean definition that 'A causes B' is equivalent to 'whenever an A-type event happens, then a B-type event follows in time' For the sake of the argument, let us grant that it is possible to form such a physical definition for this sense of 'cause' and that it would apply to genuine causal laws but not to coincidental or other non-causal sequences of events This sort of definition would capture a sufficient condition for causation: whenever the cause occurs, the effect must follow. Mill calls this a 'total cause' and Putnam spells out its parameters in the following way:

An example of a total cause at time t(0) of a physical event 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) (inside a sphere S whose center is x and whose radius is sufficiently large so that events outside the sphere S could not influence events at x occurring at t(1) without having to send a signal to x faster than light, which I assume, on the basis of relativity, to be impossible) (WRMW p. 212)

As is readily pointed out by Putnam, and Mill before him, the sense in which we ordinarily use the notion of cause is rarely, if ever, this sense of total cause. The differences are brought out by a few examples, one for each sense In the appropriate circumstances we would quite reasonably maintain that 'failure to put out the campfire caused the forest fire'. However, this omits many factors in order to be a sufficient condition· the dryness of the leaves, their proximity to the campfire, the temperature, the presence of oxygen in the atmosphere, etc Ordinarily, certain parts of a total cause are regarded as 'background' and we refer only to some of the variable factors that interest us as *the cause* Consider on the other hand Putnam's example of a total cause: a professor is found naked in a girl's dormitory room at midnight The professor's being naked in the room at midnight - x, where x is some amount of time small enough so that he could neither put his clothes on nor leave the room without moving faster than the speed of light, is a total cause of his being naked in the room at midnight. It is not, however, anything we would accept as a cause for his being in the room at that time and in that state.

This pair of contrasting cases shows that the physically defined notion of cause may on the one hand encompass far more than we mean to pick out and, on the other, not capture anything at all of what we want to know; the former is not a fatal problem, but the latter is. The cases show that 'causes' usually means something like 'explains'. The occurrence of the forest fire is explained by the

fire's not having been put out, given some other background conditions. But the situation at midnight - x cannot be considered an *explanation* of the state of affairs at midnight. Similarly, when the realist maintains that a word refers to y just in case it is connected to y by a 'causal chain of the appropriate type', the notion of causal chain that is being invoked is really the intuitive notion of an explanatory chain. So even if some notion of total cause were physically definable, it would not be a usable definition in either philosophy or daily life.

The question now becomes can this notion of *explanation* be defined in physical terms? The problem here is that this explanatory sense of cause is a very abstract and flexible notion. We can, for instance, imagine a possible world containing non-physical things and properties, disembodied spirits for instance, and still conceive of them causing things to happen. A definition of cause that was too 'first-order', too tied to the particular fundamental magnitudes of our physics, would make it conceptually impossible that a spirit be a cause.

Of course, it may be argued that these notions of 'cause' are merely 'folk' notions and that part of his project is precisely to do away with these and formalise the only rigorous - the real - notion of cause.[6] But the realist would be missing the point of Putnam's varied and contrasting cases, which is that the notion of cause is based on something more basic than what is captured by the physical definition What we count as a cause is dependent on what we take to be the line distinguishing salient variables from background conditions. This distinction is not a fixed one but depends on our background knowledge and

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[6] Such an objection is what Imre Lakatos calls "monster barring" in Proofs and Refutations. Indeed, the comparison is apt since they are both rejecting formalism and foundationalism in favour of paying closer attention to our ordinary, scientific and mathematical practices.

particular reasons for asking the question in each individual case. Different causes may be ascribed to the same event viewed from (conceptually) different perspectives:

> Imagine that Venusians land on Earth and observe a forest fire. One of them says, 'I know what caused that --the atmosphere of the darned planet is saturated with oxygen'. What this vignette illustrates is that one man's (or extraterrestrial's) 'background condition' can easily be another man's 'cause' (WRMW p. 214)

Putnam's point does not depend on inventing remote possible worlds or even on varying the event at all. What we take to be causation will not only vary from situation to situation but also from different perspectives in a given situation. For a given situation, like that of the forest fire, the number of background conditions could be indefinitely large, limited only by our imaginative ingenuity and the time available to list them No purely formal relation between events can capture the relativity of causation to background knowledge and interests.[7] This is why Putnam maintains that it is a mistake to take causation as built into the world itself. Rather, it is dependent on our attributions of salience and relevance and these are part of inherited traditions and practices. They are attributes of our thought and reasoning and not part of nature. Putnam views the tendency of

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[7]In support of this position, Putnam invokes some results of Nelson Goodman's with respect to induction. Taking causation in the sense of 'explanatory argument' it can be more narrowly understood as inductive argument with respect to natural science In *Fact, Fiction, and Forecast* Goodman demonstrates that no purely formal criteria can distinguish between arguments that are intuitively sound inductive arguments from ones that are unsound. In other words, for every sound inductive argument there is an unsound one of exactly the same form. Goodman shows that it is the occuring predicates which makes the difference, distinguishing between projectible and non-projectible predicates.

realists to project causation into the world-in-itself as an incoherent mixture of objective idealism and materialism:

> This would not be a 'near miss' for materialism, but a total failure. 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. And if that is true, then materialism cannot be true. (WRMW p. 216)

A realist will also hold that the notion of similarity is likewise built into the world. As we have already seen there are infinitely many respects in which any two things are similar (and dissimilar for that matter). We can construct the same sort of contrasting cases to show that different things will or will not count as being similar in different situations or from different perspectives. In just the same way as there are indefinitely many different causal explanations to be given due to the unfixed distinction between background conditions and salient variables, we can pick out indefinitely many different similarity relations. This is not a skeptical problem for Putnam. It only seems like one if we make the metaphysical assumption that 'is similar to' is a mind-independent relation determined by the world-in-itself. Instead, Putnam adopts the pragmatic view that picking out similarities is something *we* do, that the proper way to begin to examine what is involved is to take it as a purposive human activity relative to particular interests.

Putnam's Notion of Reference

Some of the implications of the vaguely characterised notion of metaphysical realism with which we began should now be clearer. The correspondence theory of truth, causal theories of reference, reductionism, the similitude theory, physicalism are interdependent and mutually supporting parts of the same world view, the view that "the world and not thinkers sorts things into kinds" (RTH p. 54). What Putnam has shown is that the realist has incompatible requirements for his metaphysics. The realist wants his objects to be both self-identifying and mind-independent. The burden of his argument has been to show that if the objects of the world are mind-independent then there is no way for us to pick out any particular relation to them, i.e. for them to identify themselves to us. Conversely, if there is any sense in which they are self-identifying, then they cannot be completely mind-independent.

Though Putnam rejects the realist's conception of metaphysical truth, he does preserve the notion of the coherence of beliefs with each other and with our experience. This coherence requirement that Putnam sees as integral to the notion of rational acceptability, his 'internal' realist substitute for the notion of metaphysical realist truth, can be applied here. The claims which the metaphysical realist wants to defend do not hold together coherently, so some of his requirements must be dropped. The one which Putnam feels is most reasonable to eliminate is that of mind-independence. he can, as we shall see, accommodate the notion of self-identification and even a form of correspondence without postulating some kind of non-natural mental power. There are, of course, other possibilities. As Putnam himself points out, some modern philosophers such as Godel and Kripke do take the route of positing non-natural mental

abilities, an 'intellektuelle Anschauung', to grasp mind-independent objects directly. But Putnam focuses on strand that pursues a 'naturalised metaphysics' because he considers it the one that is currently "the view with clout".[8]

The denial of realist theories of reference and of mind-independence does not imply that there are no metaphysical facts about reference. Putnam and Kripke both maintain, for instance, that 'Water is H_2O in all possible worlds' is a metaphysical truth.[9] But this is of a very different kind from the realist's metaphysical definitions of reference. The former is consciously dependent on the notion of reference. It is saying that, given that *we already have the ability to refer to it* , water is H_2O in all possible worlds. It is not attempting to say anything about what reference *is* or how we have that ability. Note that 'possible worlds' is a technical term; it is not meant to imply a host of ontological commitments about the existence of other 'worlds', but just to express a particular kind of necessity. Putnam is preserving a form of essentialism, but without any realist implications. Essentialism without realism presupposes that we have referential intentions in the first place, that all along we meant to count as water whatever has the same composition as the paradigm samples of water that we have around us:

> I claim that this was our intention even before we knew the ultimate composition of water. If I am right, then, given those referential intentions, it was always impossible for a liquid other than H_2O to be water, even if it took empirical investigation to find it out. But the

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[8]See in this respect WRCBN   Michael Dummett pursues a different version of anti-realism by focussing on the rejection of the notion of bivalence with respect to truth.   See for instance his "The Philosophical Basis of Intuitionistic Logic".

[9]See Putnam's "The Meaning of 'Meaning'" (in 1975b) and Kripke's *Naming and Necessity* .

> 'essence' of water in this sense is the product of our use of the word, the kinds of referential intentions we have: this sort of essence is not 'built into the world' in the way required by an essentialist theory of reference itself to get off the ground. (WRMW p.221)

The distinction between the kinds of things that can be said about reference is far from trivial or accidental We can only talk 'intra-theoretically' about reference, taking speakers' intentions to refer as "mundane facts" (RTH p 47) It is conceptually impossible to define reference in other (non-semantic) terms. On the contrary, the notion of reference is an unavoidable presupposition for any other semantic facts.[10]

The realist not only holds that the objects of our thought and language - the objects of reference - are built into the world mind-independently, he goes on to claim (if not as simply part of the initial claim then as a necessary corollary in his attempt to defend it) that abstract notions like causation, similarity and reference are also part of the furniture of reality. Far from denying that there is such a thing as reference or that we can say anything about it, Putnam is only denying that we can say the sorts of things that the realist wishes to say about it And this is no loss because reference is not the sort of thing that the realist takes it to be. For Putnam reference is the same sort of notion as causation and similarity. It is a human activity, something that speakers do, engaged in with particular interests and purposes, and not a built-in feature of the world. We

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[10]Putnam's conception of reference seems reminiscent of Wittgenstein's notion of 'hinge propositions' (see On Certainty , sections 341-346, 490-515): doubts as to its holding can only arise in very odd circumstances in which there is a prticular, real doubt, in general, one can only doubt its holding at the cost of doubting absolutely everything. Similarly, Putnam ends up maintaining that the notion of reference is inextricably linked with what it is to be humanly rational.

count certain things as referring in particular circumstances depending or background knowledge and purposes.

The important question is not realist's "What is reference (metaphysically speaking)?" but rather, "How do we fix reference (empirically speaking)?". Once we take reference to be a human activity we can begin to examine what sort of circumstances count as successfully referring. Thus, another aspect of Wittgenstein's influence on Putnam's views can be seen in Putnam's emphasis on determining what are the meaningful questions to be asking, getting us to abandon certain kinds of questions in favour of others. The private language argument is meant to show that only certain kinds of questions regarding reference make sense. It is meant to show that referring is essentially a public activity carried out to accomplish certain kinds of purposes and pursue certain kinds of interests.. An important factor, is that explicating the nature of notions like reference and causation will require a restriction to certain *kinds* of interests and purposes. The private linguist, for instance, could claim that he has a purpose in referring to his private sensations, just the purpose of denoting sensations to oneself. But this presupposes the ability to *distinguish* sensations from each other. Wittgenstein argues that that ability presupposes certain kinds of 'public' purposes involving shared standards of correctness.

Chapter 2: 'Internal' Realism and Refutations of Relativism

Putnam's 'Internal'-Realism

We can now consider Putnam's characterisation of 'internal' realism in *Reason, Truth and History* . Instead of truth being correspondence to mind-independent states of affairs, Putnam claims that the truth of a theory consists in its fitting the world as the world presents itself to some observers Signs do not intrinsically correspond to objects independently of how and when they are employed. Moreover, the objects to which a sign that is actually employed in a particular way by a particular community can correspond are objects *within the conceptual scheme* of those users. Hence, Putnam does preserve some notion of correspondence. But, within the 'internal' realist framework correspondence is no longer problematic since objects do not exist independently of conceptual schemes. *We* cut the world up into objects when we introduce a scheme of descriptions. Since both the objects and the signs we use to refer to them are internal to the scheme it is possible to say what corresponds to what The metaphysical dilemma of reference becomes a non-problematic series of tautologies of the form 'horse' refers to horses, etc. So what makes all horses that I have not interacted with of the same kind as those with which I have interacted is simply that they are horses. The interesting problems come in at

the level of how we apply this notion in our actual practices or in our descriptions   But this is a problem that we can actually examine and produce results for. In a way, Putnam's internalism leaves everything the way it was. That is why it is called 'internal' *realism* ; it is a form of realism. Everything on the mundane empirical level is preserved as what it is at face value. We can still speak of correspondence, causation and reference. What is changed is the *metaphysical* picture of what it is we take the nature of these to be. Putnam's point is that all there is to these notions is their face value as empirical practices.

Putnam's essentialism can be stated another way in this context. Since objects are as much made as discovered, since they are products of our conceptual intentions, then they do intrinsically belong under certain labels. These labels do not reflect a mind-independent state of affairs, they are tools that we use to construct a version of the world with just such objects as those labels pick out. In this sense, the objects in the world are self-identifying, though not mind-independent.

Putnam maintains that it does not follow from these claims that 'anything goes', that we are left with "a facile relativism" (RTH p. 54). Not every conceptual scheme we can come up with will be as good as every other. In natural science, for instance, we regularly replace one set of theories with another because the new set is better. Someone who adopts a conceptual system which leads them to believe they can fly, and jumps out of a window to do so would see the weakness of their view, says Putnam. In other words, giving up the metaphysical realist's conception of correspondence to a mind-independent world does not mean giving up the notion of 'experiential inputs'. Our 'theoretical' beliefs must be coherent with our more 'experiential' beliefs. This is what Putnam calls 'fitting' the world, and in doing this we do not just have internal coherence, we also have experiential inputs. As Putnam says,

> Internalism does not deny that 'here are experiential *inputs* to knowledge; knowledge is not a story with no constraints except *internal* coherence; but it does deny that there are any inputs *which are not themselves to some extent shaped by our concepts* , by the vocabulary we use to report and describe them, or any inputs *which admit of only one description, independent of all conceptual choices* ...The very inputs upon which our knowledge is based are conceptually contaminated.
> (RTH p. 54)

He phrases it in the cautious way that he does because the line between thought and the world is not so sharp as the realist conceives it to be. This is because any experiential inputs we can have are themselves already shaped by our concepts. There is no absolute separation between the data and the vocabulary we use to report and describe them

The notion that our most basic experiential inputs are necessarily 'contaminated' is the crux of Putnam's anti-realism.[11] He stresses the arguments that even our knowledge of our own sensations is affected by our conceptual choices - as he says, to be non-realist one has to be non-realist all the way down. Thus, instead of the realist's notion of absolute truth, based on the correspondence theory, Putnam relies on a notion of rational acceptability, where

> What makes a statement, or a whole system of statements - a theory or conceptual scheme - rationally acceptable is, in large part, its coherence and fit; coherence of 'theoretical' or less experiential beliefs with one another and with more experiential beliefs, and also coherence of experiential beliefs with theoretical beliefs. Our conceptions of coherence and acceptability are, on the view I shall develop, deeply interwoven with our psychology.

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[11]As Putnam acknowledges repeatedly, this insight comes originally from Kant and has since been repeated by James, Husserl, Wittgenstein and Austin.

they depend upon our biology and our culture; they are by no means 'value free'. (RTH p. 55)

Thus, the conceptual 'contamination' of our basic experiential inputs is what most clearly differentiates Putnam's rational acceptability from its realist counterpart. Rational acceptability is a normative notion, resting on our interests and purposes as these, in turn, are determined by our psychology, our biology and our cultural history. Putnam notes other important differences between rational acceptability and truth. Whereas truth is a property which cannot be lost, rational acceptability is "both tensed and relative to a person" (RTH p 55) It is tensed because, though 3000 years ago the thought 'the earth is flat' may have been rationally acceptable, it is not so now. It would not however have been *true* 3000 years ago. Similarly, though a certain fact may be rationally acceptable to one person due to evidence at his disposal, it may not be for someone else who does not have access to that evidence; again, this is not a difference that truth respects. Rational acceptability is also a matter of degree; certain theories can be more justified than others, whereas truth is an absolute property. Putnam raises these issues in order to make the point that rational acceptability cannot be identified with truth:

> To reject the idea that there is a coherent 'external' perspective , a theory which is simply true 'in itself', apart from all possible observers, is not to *identify* truth with rational acceptability. Truth cannot simply *be* rational acceptability for one fundamental reason; truth is supposed to be a property of a statement that cannot be lost, whereas justification can be lost. (RTH p. 55)

When we say that something is true we tend to mean both that there is a fact of the matter despite what we or some other individual may think or feel about it, or

whether we are in an epistemic position to account for it, and that it will remain a fact of the matter permanently. In other words, when we ascribe 'truth' to a proposition, thought, or theory, we attribute some sort of transcendence with respect to our ability to justify it at a given time and stability. Perhaps these inclinations explain how we have acquired the realist picture according to which truth becomes a metaphysical property mysteriously attached to some propositions and not others. Putnam's rational acceptability, on the other hand, lacks these features because it is a radically epistemic notion. The rational acceptability of a statement or theory is tied to our actual ability to provide some sort of justification, it cannot transcend our ability to have knowledge.

The Idealization Theory of Truth[12]

Putnam still has to provide some interpretation of the notion of *truth* within the 'internal' realist framework. Thus, he takes truth to be an *idealization* of rational acceptability:

> We speak as if there were such things as epistemically ideal conditions, and we call a statement 'true' if it would be justified under such conditions. 'Epistemically ideal conditions', of course, are like 'frictionless planes': we cannot really attain epistemically ideal conditions, or even be absolutely certain that we have come sufficiently close to them. But frictionless planes cannot really be attained either, and yet talk of frictionless planes has 'cash value' because we can approximate them to a very high degree of approximation. (RTH p. 55)

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[12] I am indebted to David Davies for parts of this treatment of Putnam's theory of truth, in particular, the analysis of his 'frictionless planes' analogy.

The idealization theory of rational acceptability is meant to capture the features that truth transcends present justification and that truth is stable or convergent. Thus, though a view that is rationally acceptable now could later be rejected, to say that a view is *ideally* rationally acceptable is to claim that it is "independent of justification here and now, but not independent of *all* justification" (RTH p. 56). Conversely, from the 'internal' realist perpective, "To claim a statement is true is to claim it could be justified"

Putnam later refines this notion of idealized rational acceptability by also idealizing the standards of justification we use. On the one hand, we have epistemically ideal conditions. This could be some kind of ideal extension of observing long enough, carefully enough, having access to all possible data etc. On the other hand, are the standards of justification, or standards of rationality, that we use in interpreting and reasoning from that data. Putnam does not see these standards as fixed:

> Our task is not to mechanically *apply* cultural norms, as if they were a computer programme and we were the computer, but to interpret them, to bring them and the ideals which inform them into reflective equilibrium. (WRMW p. 240)

Thus, idealized rational acceptability also involves the application of ideal standards of justification. Truth becomes the ideal limit of a complex, evolving and mutually adjusting system involving our epistemic position and our methods and standards of enquiry:

> We use our criteria of rational acceptability to build up a theoretical picture of the 'empirical world' and then as that picture develops we revise our very criteria of rational acceptability in the light of that picture and so on and so on forever. (RTH p. 134)

There are several tensions within this conception of 'internal' realist truth First of all, let us consider Putnam's analogy of frictionless planes Though frictionless planes cannot be attained, talk of them has 'cash value', he maintains, because we can approximate them to a every high degree of approximation. In other words, in the case of frictionless planes, such talk has 'cash value' because we have some knowledge of what conditions would have to be satisfied to obtain them and consequently of how we fall short Thus, Putnam's analogy puts strong constraints on the notion of 'epistemically ideal conditions'. For if epistemically ideal conditions were so removed from our actual epistemic conditions that we could have no conception of what it would be for them to hold, then talk of idealized rational acceptability would not have any 'cash value'. In fact, if this were the case, then the 'internal' realist would be in exactly the same position as the metaphysical realist with regards to truth It is crucial for Putnam that we must be able to recognise what it would be like to approach or to have ideal conditions, so these cannot depart far from our current notion of epistemic justification. But the closer we are tied to just our current notion of epistemic justification, the closer we are to some form of relativism since current justification does not guarantee truth.

The situation does not improve when we consider the added factor that our standards of rationality also must be taken in the ideal limit. Putnam sometimes talks of this limit in such a way that it does not seem possible we could ever know whether we approached it:

> Hegel, who introduced the idea that Reason itself changes in history, operated with two notions of rationality: there is a sense in which what is rational is measured by the level to which Spirit has developed in the historical process at a given time ...And there is a limit notion of rationality in Hegel's system; the notion of that which

> is destined to be stable, the final self-awareness of Spirit which will not itself be transcended. When present day relativists 'naturalize' Hegel by throwing away the limit-concept of true rationality, they turn the doctrine into a self-defeating cultural relativism. (RTH p. 158)

If real rationality is dependent on this Hegelian limit case, then there is no way for us to tell if our standards are rational; we would have no idea of what it would be for such conditions to obtain. In fact, Putnam almost seems to saying that just those views will be rationally acceptable which would turn out to be true. This passage also indicates that Putnam takes very seriously the claim that the idealization theory of truth preserves the notion that "truth is expected to be stable or 'convergent' (RTH p. 56). But Putnam is also committed to the notion of equally acceptable incompatible versions, as we saw in examining his attack on the correspondence theory of truth. Earlier in *Reason, Truth and History*, Putnam considers the intertranslatability of incompatible theories and concludes that

> To an internalist this is not objectionable: why should there not sometimes be equally coherent but incompatible conceptual schemes which fit our experiential beliefs equally well? If truth is not (unique) correspondence then the possibility of a certain pluralism is opened up. (RTH p. 73)

And in his review of Goodman's *Ways of World making* Putnam states this pluralism even more strongly:

> Nor will it help to hope for an ideal limit in which uniqueness will finally appear: if there were an ideal limit, and some cognitive extensions of ourselves actually reached it, then they would have nothing left to do but construct equivalent incompatible versions of the ideal limit - and, given ingenuity, I am sure they would succeed! (Putnam 1983 p. 164)

In other words, there is no stability to our ontological commitments. Putnam maintains that his 'internal' realism is not a 'facile relativism', that it is not the case that every version is as good as every other In order to support this claim he has to formulate an 'internalist' account of truth. The tensions in this account which we have been examining result from the opposing pulls of metaphysical realism in one direction and relativism in the other. His internalism requires him to stress ontological pluralism and epistemic accessibility, but the more he stresses these the more his position seems like relativism The features of truth which he needs to preserve force him to stress ideal limits, stability and convergence; but these weaken his internalism.

Conceptual Relativity

The tensions in Putnam position can be separated into two strands. There is the tension between epistemic accessibility and the idealization of epistemic conditions and then there is the tension between ontological pluralism and requirements for stability and convergence. In *The Many Faces of Realism* , Putnam devises a means of resolving of the second of these tensions using the notion of 'conceptual relativity'. On this view, truth is stable *within a version* , or theory, and one accepts that there are many versions. If the world is always the world-as-we-have-structured-it, by imposing categories, classifications, and terminologies -- in short, a conceptual scheme -- then everything we say or claim about the world must be relative to some conceptual scheme. Putnam distinguishes between this 'conceptual relativity' and 'relativism', or what he calls radical cultural relativism. The notion of conceptual relativity is used by Putnam to indicate how, once the notion of a mind-

independent world is rejected, we are not left with just internal coherence, that we still have experiential inputs, though those inputs will be shaped by our concepts.

Putnam illustrates the notion of conceptual relativity with the following example Consider a world of three individuals, x1, x2, x3. Now consider the question 'how many objects are there in this world?' It would seem perfectly reasonable to answer, 'three'. There is no absurdity in imagining a world containing only three logically distinct and unrelated entities (Putnam refers to this as a 'Carnapian world'). But it does not follow that this is the only possible answer. We can construct another perfectly reasonable logical doctrine which gives us different results.   Consider for instance, the Polish logician, Lezniewski's logic of parts and wholes. In this logic, for every two particulars there is an object which is their sum. Ignoring the null set, the world of three individuals actually contains seven objects, thus:

World 1	World 2
x1, x2, x3	x1, x2, x3, x1 + x2,
	x1 + x3, x2 + x3,
	x1 + x2 + x3
A world à la Carnap	Same world à la Polish logician

A metaphysical realist, someone who maintains that such questions are settled absolutely by the way the (mind-independent) world just is, may try to counter such an example with some claim of the form of the 'cookie cutter' metaphor. This is to maintain that there is a single world, which we can think of as a piece of dough, which we can slice into pieces in different ways. But this

attempt to drive a wedge between our descriptions and 'reality' is futile. For we only have to ask 'what are the "parts" of the dough?' The realist cannot give a 'neutral' answer. If he answers that x1, x2, x3 are the parts of the dough then he is implying that x1 + x2 is not a part but a conjunction of parts, which is precisely what the alternative logic denies. The metaphysical realist's system cannot cope with the phenomenon of conceptual relativity because

> it turns on the fact that the logical primitives themselves, and in particular the notions of object and existence, have a multitude of different uses rather than one absolute 'meaning'. (MFR p.19)

From the 'internal' realist perspective basic notions such as 'object' and 'existence' are human conceptual tools rather than features built into the structure of 'Reality'. Part of the point is that it is not a 'failure' on our part not to be able to answer such metaphysical questions. We simply have gotten the wrong idea of what knowledge and reality consist in to be asking such questions in the first place. As Putnam maintains,

> God himself if he consented to answer the question, 'Do points really exist or are they mere limits?', would say 'I don't know'; not because His omniscience is limited, but because there is a limit to how far questions make sense. (MFR, p.19)

The point, or so Putnam claims at any rate, is that this kind of relativity is innocuous; that is, it does not compromise the objectivity of truth. Conceptual relativity does not imply -- indeed it is incompatible with -- any form of radical cultural relativism consisting of notions like 'there is no truth to be found, 'truth' is just what a group of people decide to agree on'. Given a theory, the question 'how many objects are there?' does have a determinate, unambiguous, and objective answer, i.e. three in the Carnapian version, and seven in the Polish

logician's version. Once we specify what is meant by an 'object', or by `exists`, then the facts are not at all determined by convention.

> Our concepts may be culturally relative, but it does not follow that the truth or falsity of everything we say using those concepts is simply 'decided' by the culture. But the idea that there is an Archimedean point, or a use of 'exist' inherent in the world itself, from which the question 'How many objects really exist?' makes sense, is an illusion. (MFR p.20)

There is no metaphysically favoured version underlying all the particular versions that we construct. When we say that two versions are different versions of the 'same world' (event, phenomenon), what we mean is that we can define a function that relates the two -- or in less formalised cases, that we can construct some 'explanatory chain' relating the two -- and that to see the two as being so related is not only coherent with our other beliefs but also is of some interest or use.

So far Putnam has articulated a notion of objectivity within a theory, or conceptual scheme, or framework. He has also claimed in very strong terms that there is no metaphysical fact of the matter which one of a set of incompatible frameworks is the correct one. Well, isn't this just radical cultural relativism? The problem is that if the only truth we have access to is intra-theoretic, or internal truth, then we have no neutral standpoint for adjudicating between theories or world views. Putnam brings this dilemma into sharp focus at the end of his review of Goodman's *Ways of Worldmaking*,

> Goodman would, no doubt, reply that any superiority of our versions over other versions must be judged and claimed from *within* our collection of versions; there is no neutral place to stand. I heartily agree; But what I hope Goodman will say something about in the future is what makes our versions superior to others *by our lights* , not by some inconceivable neutral standard. 'Our versions are true, or closer to the truth' is purely formal; even the

relativist can say his versions are 'truer for me': truer for *him* . (Putnam 1983 p.168)

Refutations of Relativism

Putnam maintains that his internal realism does not fall into radical cultural relativism, and also that such a position is incoherent and self-refuting. One problem is that Putnam never very clearly formulates the position in the first place. So let us look at what exactly he does say about it and consider the arguments he gives to show that it is self-refuting. It is not clear that these arguments work, mainly due to vagueness and equivocation on the formulations of the position being attacked.

In Reason, Truth, and History, Putnam says

> When one first encounters relativism, the idea seems simple enough. The idea, in a natural first formulation is that every person (or, in a modern 'sociological' formulation, every culture, or sometimes every 'discourse') has his (its) own views standards, presuppositions, and that truth (and also justification) are relative to *these* . One takes it for granted, of course, that whether X is true (or justified) relative to these is *itself* something 'absolute'.
> Modern Structuralists like Foucault write as if justification *relative to a discourse* is itself quite absolute - i.e. not at all relative. But if statements of the form 'X is true (justified) relative to person P' are themselves true or false *absolutely*, then there is, after all, an absolute notion of truth (or of justification) and not only of truth-for-me, truth-for-Nozick, truth-for-you, etc. A *total* relativist would have to say that whether or not X is true *relative* to P is *itself* relative. At this point our grasp on what the position even means begins to wobble, as Plato observed.

Here Putnam gives us two kinds of relativism. The first is just the conceptual relativity we have already seen. As he makes clear in this passage, this preserves a notion of absolute truth since it will be absolutely true that 'X is true

relative to P'. The really problematic notion is what he calls "*total* relativism", the notion that 'X is true relative to P' is itself relative. It looks as if the problem is that this leads to an infinite regress. But Putnam does not think that is exactly the problem. He discusses the naive, Protagorean formulation of relativism. This is the subjective, first person formulation that when I say X, I should really say 'I *think* that X' In other words, it is the view that truth really means 'true-for-me'. But about Plato's argument that it leads to an infinite regress, Putnam comments,

> Plato's argument is not a good one as it stands. Why should Protagoras not agree that his analysis applies to itself? It doesn't follow that it *must* be self-applied an infinite number of times but only that it *can* be self-applied *any finite number of times* . (RTH p. 121)

For Putnam, the real problem with relativism is that it implies that truth be dependent on agreement or convention. In setting out conceptual relativity, Putnam contrasted it with the view that "there is no truth to be found.... "true" is just a name for what a bunch of people agree on". In "Why Reason Can't Be Naturalized" Putnam characterises Richard Rorty as a relativist because "he defines truth as right assertability by the standards of one's cultural peers". He then presents an argument, based on a "well-known argument" against 'methodological solipsism', attempting to show that cultural relativism is self-refuting.

By methodological solipsism, Putnam has in mind positions such as those of Carnap in *Logische Aufbau* or of Mach in *Analyse der Empfindungen*. The methodological solipsist, as Putnam describes him, holds that everything that he can conceive of is, in the ultimate logical analyses of his language, identical with some complex of his *own* experiences. The reason that he is a *methodological* solipsist instead of a real solipsist is that he goes on to claim

that anyone else is the 'I' of this construction when he or she performs it. In other words, he claims that *everyone* is a (methodological) solipsist. The argument against this view is that the methodological solipsist is holding two incompatible stances. His solipsist stance implies a huge asymmetry between persons: within the system, my body is a construction out of my experiences, but *your* body is also a construction out of *my* experiences. Your experiences, viewed from within the system, are a construction out of your bodily behaviour, which in turn is a construction out of *my* experiences So my experiences are privileged within the system because they are what everything else is constructed out of. My understanding is limited to what can be logically constructed out of my own experiences; anything that cannot be so reduced is, *ex hypothesis* , not intelligible. But the methodological solipsist goes on to make the transcendental claim that *its all symmetrical* This claim is transcendental because it presupposes a standpoint outside of the system from which the subjective perspective can be abandoned Thus, when he says that *you* are the 'I' of the construction when *you* perform it, the 'you' he addresses these higher order remarks to cannot be the empirical 'you' of the system. Putnam concludes that

> if it's really true that the 'you' of the system is the only 'you' he can *understand* , then the transcendental remark is *unintelligible* . Moral: don't be a methodological solipsist unless you are a *real* solipsist! (WRCBN p.237)

He then goes on to characterise the relativist claim in the following way:

> Consider now the position of the cultural relativist who says 'When I say something is true, I mean that it is correct according to the norms of my culture.' If he adds, 'When a member of a different culture says that something is true, what he means (whether he knows it or not) is that it is in conformity with the norms of *his* culture', then he is in exactly the same plight as the methodological solipsist. (WRCBN, p.237)

The plight of the methodological solipsist which Putnam is referring to is that of holding two incompatible stances simultaneously. Thus, Putnam maintains that the cultural relativist makes two claims, one 'internal', or empirical, and the other 'transcendental', which are incompatible. The claim that truth is simply 'correctness according to the norms of my culture' is the internal claim. There is no problem with this claim on its own since it is not inconsistent for the truth of the claim itself to be determined internally. Thus, though Putnam neglects to point this out, the relativist can, and to be consistent *must* , say that the claim that truth is correctness according to the norms of his culture is itself only correct according to the norms of his culture and not *true* in some absolutist sense of true. But the relativist does not want to make a claim only about his own culture; he wants to make a claim about the nature of truth in general. In other words, his intention is to make a claim about truth *for all cultures* and Putnam maintains that in order to do this he must follow his internal claim with the *transcendental claim* that 'When a member of a different culture says that something is true, what he means is that it is in conformity with the norms of *his* culture'. Putnam's argument is that, having made the internal claim, the cultural relativist cannot coherently make the transcendental claim. He spells this out with the example of a cultural relativist, R.R., interpreting a German speaker's statements about snow:

> When Karl says 'Schnee ist weiss', what Karl means (whether he knows it or not) is that snow is white *as determined by* the norms of Karl's culture
>
> (which we take to be German culture).
>
> Now the sentence 'Snow is white as determined by the norms of German culture' is itself one which R.R. has to *use*, not just mention, to say what Karl says. On his own account, what R.R. means by *this* sentence is
>
> 'Snow is white as determined by the norms of German culture' is true by the norms of R.R.'s culture
>
> (which we take to be American culture).

Substituting this back into the first displayed utterance, (and changing to indirect quotation) yields:

When Karl says 'Schnee ist weiss', what he means (whether he knows it or not) is that it is true as determined by the norms of American culture that it is true as determined by the norms of German culture that snow is white (WRCBN p.237)

The relativist needs to make a *transcendental* claim in order to introduce symmetry into the picture of the dependence of truth on the norms of a given culture. The relativist starts off formulating relativism from his own perspective, for his own culture. He then wants to say that the same holds for every other culture. But if the initial claim about the dependence of truths on his culture's norms is correct, then his transcendental claim about the relation between truths and the norms of Karl's culture is itself something that can only be determined according to the norms of the relativist's culture In other words, it is not a transcendental claim at all Putnam's point is that if the relativist's internal claim is correct, then he cannot make any transcendental claims at all The relativist "must understand his own hermeneutical utterances, the utterances he uses to interpret others," also as determined by his own cultural norms. He concludes·

Other cultures become, so to speak, logical constructions out of the procedures and practices of American culture. If [the relativist] now attempts to add 'the situation is reversed from the point of view of the *other* culture' he lands in the predicament ..[that] the transcendental claim of a *symmetrical* situation cannot be *understood* if the relativist doctrine is right And to say, as relativists often do, that the other culture has 'incommensurable' concepts is no better. This is just the transcendental claim in a special jargon. (WRCBN p.238)

Putnam then concludes that relativism is unacceptable because it does not allow us to fully acknowledge the reality of the members of other cultures as thinking human beings. It is impossible to do so "if you think that the *only*

notion of truth there is for *you* to understand is 'truth-as-determined-by-the-norms-of-*this* -culture'" (WRCBN p.238).

Just as Putnam concluded that the methodological solipsist is forced to abandon his transcendental claim and be a real solipsist so, he argues, the cultural relativist must abandon his transcendental claim in order to be consistent. Consistent cultural relativism, which Putnam calls 'cultural imperialism', simply maintains that "truth - the only notion of truth I understand - is defined by the norms of *my* culture" (WRCBN p.238). Putnam points out that this consistent relativism is no longer relativist at all, since it postulates an objective notion of truth truth is here defined by our culture's criteria Because this position accepts an objective difference between what is true and what is merely thought to be true, Putnam calls it a form of realism It is distinguished from metaphysical realism by the fact that truth cannot go beyond right assertability. For the culture imperialist,

> the notion of of right assertability is fixed by 'criteria', in a positivistic sense: something is rightly assertable only if the norms of the culture specify that it is; these norms are, as it were, an *operational definition* of right assertability, in this view. (WRCBN p.239)

Putnam maintains that this view is "contigently self-refuting", that is, self-refuting in our culture but not necessarily in another The reason is that our culture, unlike a totalitarian or theocratic culture which erects its norms into a required dogma, does not have 'norms' which decide philosophical questions This is brought out by considering the philosophical statement of cultural imperialist truth:

CIT   A statement is true (rightly assertable) only if it is assertable according to the norms of modern European and American culture.

For this view of the nature of truth to 'oe coherent it would have to also apply to itself. In other words, the statement would itself have to be true only if it is assertable according to norms of European and American culture Putnam gives the following argument that this view is contigently self-refuting·

> The philosophical statement is itself neither assertable nor refutable in a way that requires assent by everyone who does not deviate from the norms of modern European and American culture. So, if this statement is true, it follows that it is not true (not rightly assertable) Hence it is not true QED (I believe that *all* theories which identify truth or right assertability with what people agree with, or with what they would agree with in the long run, or with what educated and intelligent people agree with, or with what educated and intelligent people would agree with in the long run, are contingently self-refuting in this same way) (WRCBN p 239)

Putnam admits that cultural imperialism would not be self-refuting if, as a matter of contingent fact, our culture was a totalitarian one that erected its norms into a required dogma He then adds, "But it would still be wrong. For every culture has norms which are vague, norms which are unreasonable, norms which dictate inconsistent beliefs " (WRCBN p 239)

At the outset of his argument Putnam admits that it will be "somewhat messy", and this is probably his only statement that is not highly disputable. Leaving aside any possible problems with the argument against methodological solipsism on which it is based, Putnam's argument breaks down at several points So let us assume that Putnam is correct about methodological solipsism and spell out some of the assumptions he makes in making the analogous argument by which cultural relativism is also self-refuting. For the moment we are only dealing with the first half of Putnam's argument, before he considers cultural imperialism It is clear that Putnam thinks that this first half is self contained and does show some version of

relativism to be inconsistent since he introduces cultural imperialism as a modification of 'inconsistent relativism' in an attempt to make it consistent.

Putnam accuses the relativist of being inconsistent because on the one hand he makes a relativist claim about the nature of truth which commits him to an internalist cultural perspective but, on the other, he makes a culturally transcendental claim about the relationship of truth to cultures in general. Putnam's argument hinges on the assumption the relativist in referring to 'the norms of someone else's culture' in his transcendental claim must make use of some perspective which is external to the necessarily culturally bound perspective postulated by his relativist stance But what makes Putnam assume that the relativist is making a *transcendental* claim? He is surely right that the relativist wants to say something about truth in general, about the relation between truth and the norms of cultures *other* than his own, but that does not necessarily entail that the relativist is making a culturally transcendental claim. If the relativist's point is to reject the notion of transcendental truth in favour of the view that truth is determined by cultural norms, he had better not then turn around and assume that any of his references to other cultures and what is determined by their norms transcends the assertability conditions that he is restricting himself to Nor is it clear that he has to. Rather, statements about other cultures, just like any other statements in the relativist's view, are dependent upon cultural norms Thus the relativist should be construed as saying that the truth of *our* interpretive statements about relations holding in some other culture, just as any of our other statements, will depend on *our* norms. Putnam makes the relativist's position seem contradictory by the way in which he substitutes the relativising function into the middle of the statement:

> When Karl says 'Schnee ist weiss', what he means (whether he
> knows it or not) is that it is true as determined by the norms of
> American culture that it is true as determined by the norms of
> German culture that snow is white. (WRCBN p.237)

Instead, the relativising function should be applied on the outside, to the
statement as a whole:

> It is true as determined by the norms of American culture that when
> Karl says 'Schnee ist weiss', what he means (whether he knows it
> or not) is that it is true as determined by the norms of German
> culture that snow is wh te. (WRCBN p.237)

By interpreting the relativist on the model of the methodological solipsist
Putnam imposes an interpretation on his claims that is not warranted   Thus,
when the relativist says 'When a member of a different culture says that
something is true, what he means is that it is in conformity with the norms of his
culture' it would be more natural to view this claim as itself one which is only
correct according to the the norms of the relativist's culture and not a
transcendental claim.   It is Putnam, in other words, who seems to be imposing
externalist assumptions and thus being inconsistent.   Inconsistency is not the
only thing that Putnam charges the relativist with at this stage of his argument
Putnam also maintains that the relativist cannot "fully acknowledge the reality of
others, their equal validity" if he thinks that "the *only* notion of truth there is . .to
understand is 'truth-as-determined-by-the-norms-of-this-culture'" (WRCBN p.
238).   This criticism is quite independent of the charge of inconsistency
however   So Putnam seems to have conflated two quite different criticisms of
cultural relativism   The argument that he so far gives for the first, that it is
inconsistent, only stands up to the naivist relativism.   The second criticism he
only states without really giving any argument at all.   He does defend it

elsewhere though, and later on I will consider the arguments that he gives for the view that relativism does not allow us to consider others, or ourselves, as thinking persons. For now, let us look at the second part of Putnam's argument.

In the discussion of what he calls "cultural imperialism", Putnam is supposedly considering what happens if the relativist abandons any pretense to making culturally transcending claims. He concludes, remember, that cultural imperialism is contigently self-refuting in our culture. Putnam's argument hinges on how he interprets his own characterisation of cultural imperialist truth, where a statement is rightly assertable "only if it is assertable according to the norms of" a given culture. It is worth noting the subtle variations in how Putnam characterises relativism within just a few pages of 'Why Reason Can't be Naturalised' I have separated the quotations into three groups, using italics to highlight the differences·

Introduction to the Argument:

"a claim is right *whenever those who employ the language* in question would *accept it* as right in its context" (p. 234); "he identifies truth with right assertability by *the standards of one's cultural peers* " (p.235); "the only kind of truth it makes sense to seek is to *convince one's cultural peers*" (p.235); "reason is whatever the *norms* of the local culture *determine it to be* " (p. 235);

Cultural Relativism:

"When I say something is true, I mean that it is *correct according to the norms* of my culture" (p.237); "[truth is] *conformity with the norms* of his culture" (p.237); "true as *determined by the norms* of Karl's culture" (p. 237);

Cultural Imperialism:

"truth is *defined by the norms* of my culture" (p. 238); "[truth] is *fixed by criteria* in a positivistic sense" (p. 239); "[truth] is [assertability] *according to the norms* of modern European and American culture" (p 239).

What it is important to notice here is how the charaterisations of relativist truth, which vary greatly, generally shift back and forth between something like *'conformity with the norms* of the *culture* ' and 'whatever the *members* of the culture *agree* on'. But these do not mean at all the same thing. To say that the notion of truth is to be understood as conformity with cultural norms leaves much open. So far it does not specify what sorts of things are to be counted as norms, or what is to count as being in conformity with them, or what determining any of these things involves. On the other hand, saying that truth is whatever the members of the culture agree on specifies a *particular* way of unpacking the general relativist view; it is *one* specific and quite rigid interpretation of that general position. Putnam exercises a slight of hand throughout his discussion. When he wants to disparage relativism he talks of it in terms of explicit agreement of the individuals who make up a culture, but when he presents his argument he shifts to talking in terms of the notion of conformity with the *norms* of the *culture* itself In this way, in the first part of the argument, he gives the *impression* of talking about relativism in general But when he begins to discuss cultural imperialist truth, there is a subtle shift from *conformity with* the norms of the culture, to *definition by* the norms of the culture. The latter is then spelled out in terms of being fixed by criteria in a positivistic sense. Putnam then claims that *this* view, this specific *kind* of relativism, is self-refuting But in the actual argument he gives that it is self-refuting he *shifts back* to the formulation of the *general relativist position* , the view that simply says that truth is accordance with the norms of the culture *without* specifying what that may

mean. He then argues that *this* view, the general view, is "itself neither assertable nor refutable in a way that requires *assent by everyone who does not deviate from the norms of modern European and American culture*" (WRCBN p.239, my emphasis). So whether or not Putnam's argument goes through depends on what it is considered to be refuting. If the philosophical statement of cultural imperialist truth were alternatively given as

CIT'   A statement is true (rightly assertable) only if it agreed to by everyone who does not deviate from the norms of modern European and American culture,

then Putnam could validly argue that this statement itself is neither assertable or refutable according to its own criteria, and that it is thus self-refuting. Instead, he shifts back to the more general formulation. If we are to take Putnam as addressing the general relativist position, then we must conclude that his argument begs the crucial question of how that position is to be spelled out and thus does not show it to be self-refuting. [13]

We have now to consider the argument which Putnam alludes to in 'Why Reason Can't Be Naturalised' but which he does not actually give, viz. the argument that relativism does not allow us to acknowledge others as *thinkers*. He defends this claim in chapter five of *Reason, Truth, and History*. More particularly, Putnam states that it is an argument showing that the relativist

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[13]More sophisticated versions of relativism can be constructed by relying on relativisation to the conceptual frameworks used by a culture rather than the agreement or assent of the those users. The conceptual framework may entail certain consequences that the members of the culture would not automatically assent to. Conversely, the members of a culture may assent to certain statements which would be false for their framework.

cannot make any sense of the distinction between *being* right and *thinking* he is right.   Putnam takes the ability, in principle, of being able to support this distinction in one's conceptual scheme as essential or constitutive of thought. Thus, if the relativist's resources are not sufficient for making the distinction between being right and thinking he is right, then he has no way of distinguishing "between asserting or thinking, on the one hand, and making noises (or producing mental images) on the other" (RTH p.122), i.e. he cannot make sense of the notion of being a *thinker*.   The argument is stated in first person terms, i.e. showing that the relativist cannot consistently treat *himself* as a thinker, but Putnam states that it can easily be extended to show that he cannot consistently treat others as thinkers   Once again Putnam characterises his argument as one showing that relativism, more precisely, *total* relativism, is inconsistent.   Putnam is very loose and broad in his characterisation of total relativism, it is, let us recall, the view that whether or not some statement, X, is true relative to P is *itself* relative, where P stands for the views, standards, presuppositions, of every person, or culture, or 'discourse'   Putnam contrasts it with what can be called *objective* relativism, whereby whether or not X is true relative to P is itself absolutely true or false.   But Putnam immediately glosses total relativism as the view that "*no* point of view is more justified or right than any other" (RTH p 119), which is in no obvious way implied by the formulation of total relativism.

What Putnam takes to be the problem is that "if all is relative, then the relative is relative too" (RTH p.120).   He sees one aspect of Wittgenstein's Private Language Argument as using that insight to show that relativism is inconsistent.   The model for relativism is again methodological solipsism. Although Putnam uses the Private Language Argument in his refutation of metaphysical realism, specifically, to show that the similitude theory of reference

fails even for reference to one's own sensations, he thinks it is also directed against a kind of non-realism. A methodological solipsist, or 'verificationist', is a non-realist since he takes truth not to go beyond a kind of rational acceptability. He is a also a kind of relativist because he holds that "all justification is ultimately in terms of experiences that each of us has a *private* knowledge of" (RTH p. 122). If any statement an individual holds is justified purely by his or her own private experience than every statement would have a different, and private, sense for each individual.

Putnam's strategy is to consider how such a relativist could attempt to draw the distinction between being right and thinking he is right with the resources that he has available:

> The relativist might borrow the idea that truth is an *idealization* of rational acceptability. He might hold that X is true-for-me if 'X is justified-for-me' *would* be true provided I observed carefully enough, reasoned long enough, or whatever. But subjunctive conditionals of the form 'If I *were* to..., then I would think such-and-such', are, like all statements, interpreted differently by different philosophers. (RTH p. 122)

Metaphysical realists would interpret such conditionals just as they interpret any other sentences, that is, as being true or false in an absolute sense, independently of whether we ever will be *justified* in accepting or rejecting them This interpretation is obviously not open to a relativist as it involves recognising a class of absolute truths. A relativist must interpret such statements in some sort of non-realist way. Putnam considers whether a relativist has the option of interpreting them the way an 'internal' realist' would. According to the internal realist, we understand such statements by grasping their *justification conditions* . Putnam claims that doing so is not to abandon the distinction between truth and justification but just to take truth as a concept

which we grasp "as we grasp any other concept", that is, "via a (largely implicit) understanding of the factors that make it rationally acceptable to say that something is true" (RTH p.122). Bearing in mind that for Putnam truth is idealized justification and that he treats justification, or justified assertability, interchangeably with rational acceptability, we can make the appropriate substitutions. Putnam's charaterisation of the internal realist's ability to make the requisite distinction is thus something like: 'we grasp idealized justification via a largely implicit understanding of factors that justify us in saying something is ideally justified', where the crucial mediating notion of justification must be our *current* practices of justification. In other words, it is difficult to see how truth, or idealized justification, goes beyond the ordinary justification that we already have since we can only grasp what idealized justification would be like on the basis of current justification practices.

Though it is not clear to what extent or how an internal realist's resources allow him to make the distinction between being right and thinking he is right, for the moment what is important is why Putnam thinks that an internal realist can make the distinction whereas a total relativist cannot. The difference, in the end, turns out to be that the internal realist position "assumes an *objective* notion of rational acceptability... rejecting the metaphysical 'correspondence' theory of truth is not at all the same thing as regarding truth or rational acceptability as *subjective* ", whereas

> the whole *purpose* of relativism, its very defining characteristic, is
> ...to *deny* the existence of any intelligible notion of *objective* 'fit'.
> Thus the relativist cannot understand talk about truth in terms of
> *objective* justification-conditions. The attempt to use *conditionals*
> to explicate the distinction between *being right* and *thinking one is*
> *right* fails, then, because the relativist has no *objective* notion of
> rightness for these conditionals any more than he does for any
> other sort of statement. (RTH p. 123)

But it is not at all obvious that a total relativist is committed to denying the existence of any intelligible notion of objective 'fit'. It *may* follow from the view that '*no* point of view is more justified or right than any other' and Putnam seems to be sliding this characterisation back in, essentially changing definitions of relativism in such a way as to beg the question Of course, Wittgenstein's Private Language Argument may succeed in showing that a *methodological solipsist* does not have access to any notion of objective 'fit', and we may accept Putnam's observation that methodological solipsism is a *kind* of relativism, but we do not have any reason to accept Putnam's view that "Wittgenstein's argument seems to me to be an excellent argument against *relativism in general* " (RTH p. 122, my italics), or against total relativism in particular as he characterises it

From total relativism it does not follow that there is no objective 'fit' but that the only intelligible concept of objectivity, like any other concept, is a relative concept. A relativist must deny that there is any absolute notion of objectivity That does not mean, as Putnam also seems to imply, that he is left only with the 'subjective', but that objective and subjective are both understood as relative to the standards of, say, one's culture A *total* relativist further accepts that the reasonableness of such a claim about the nature of these notions can itself only be justified on the basis of those same cultural standards. But Putnam seems to run into exactly the same kind of circularity, or reflexivity, in his own characterisation of the internal realist's ability to make the distinction between *thinking* he is right and *being right* or, which is what it comes down to, between justification and *idealized* justification. It follows from this that the 'internal' realist's resources for having a notion of objective 'fit' are also limited. The 'internal' realist cannot after all, rely on some straightforwardly absolutist

notion of 'objectivity'. Rather than elucidating why it is a problem that 'the relative is relative too', Putnam seems to be in exactly the same position A total cultural relativist, as opposed to a sollipsistic relativist, could claim to have access to a relative notion of objectivity. A total cultural relativist could maintain that there are no higher standards than the standards of his culture, and that any claims that something is assertable by the standards of his culture are only assertable by the standards of his culture. Working within the standards of his culture, he could hope to reach rational and justified consensus with other members of his culture as to what things do or do not follow from the standards of his culture as applied by the members of the culture.[14] On such a model, it is not the agreement of the members of the culture that determines wether a statement is true, but the standards of the culture which those members discuss and reflect on. It still seems possible to maintain a total relativistic view of truth with respect to cultural standards and carry out intelligent and reasonable debates with others whom we presume to share those cultural standards It seems perfectly reasonable that such a community would be able to make the distinction between what is assertable for them now and what would be assertable for them under a future set of conditions.

Thus, Putnam's arguments that relativism is self-refuting run into trouble in two ways First of all, he is too vague and equivocal about what position it is he is attacking and, secondly, the tensions within his account of what his own 'internal' realist position are make it difficult to see how that position differs from more sophisticated versions of cultural relativism.

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[14] I am indebted to David Davies for this formulation.

Chapter 3: The Limits of Sophisticated Relativism

Putnam does not clearly separate the different ways in which relativism poses a problem, the reasons for which he wants to reject relativism and keep 'internal' realism distinct from it. The foregoing discussion shows that to attack "relativism" is very ambiguous since many different kinds of positions can be given this name. Putnam returns to the issue repeatedly as a foil for his own position, as a way to negatively define the boundaries of 'internal' realism. The source of the problem stems from the explicit rejection of any kind of metaphysical absoluteness in favour of the view that truth must be relative to prior conceptual choices, that truth cannot consist in matching our statements, theories or world view with unconceptualised reality. Making such a move makes it seem as if truth, meaning and rationality are being deprived of some kind of essential guarantee of their 'correctness', such that they will be 'completely dependent on us' in the sense of being made into subjectively arbitrary notions . In a sense 'internal' realism does imply that truth, meaning and rationality are dependent on us and the problem is to elucidate that sense. So let us try to distinguish the

specific issues that Putnam seems to be concerned with, that is, the different relativistic threats that he is trying to fend off.

Firstly, Putnam does not want 'internal' realism to imply that 'anything goes', that truth can just be whatever we happen to want it to be. This worry involves the most extreme and the most naive relativism and seems to be mainly what his arguments that relativism is inconsistent are directed at. The argument in *Reason, Truth and History* does refute this kind of relativism in the individual's case and the argument in 'Why Reason Can't be Naturalized' that is directed at cultural imperialism refutes this kind of relativism in the social case Secondly, there can be relativistic worries that accept that some kind of coherence exists within a culture's conceptual scheme, that the members of that culture do not simply decide what will be true or false. The worst of these worries is that since there is no one metaphysically true system of categories for describing the world it could turn out that some culture takes a particular statement as true whereas a different culture takes the same statement as false and there would be no way of arbitrating which was 'correct' Thirdly there is a more mild version of the previous case such that though we do not have some particular dramatic clash, the relativist maintains that there is something mysteriously hidden and in principle inaccessible about the conceptual scheme of another culture Their notions are simply *their* notions and we cannot really grasp them and thus make any judgements about them Fourthly, there is the problem of moral relativism, where we can assume that there are no cognitive problems in understanding another's conceptual scheme but two people differ over fundamental premises in moral outlook Putnam's arguments that relativism in inconsistent really only deal with the first of these problems

In a paper called "True For", Chris Swoyer is particularly careful to distinguish between Protagorean, or solipsistic, forms of relativism and relativism based on social agreement - the kinds of relativism that Putnam mainly considers - and more sophisticated forms of cultural relativism. He starts from the same point as Putnam, rejecting externalist metaphysics and assuming that truth has to be accounted for in assertabilist terms. But he then assumes, contrary to Putnam, that one thus *accepts* relativism with respect to truth. Given this, the task is to analyse the notion of the relativity of truth and see how much of what we want from the notion of truth can be accounted for in these terms. So Swoyer is dealing with the same issues as Putnam, but he is coming at them from the opposite direction.

Conceptual Frameworks

Swoyer's discussion will require him to clarify the notion of conceptual scheme and then the notion of translation between schemes in order to be able to compare truth values. He begins by noting the most general of the views that some thing is relative: this is the view that some quality thought to be invariant or absolute is then seen to

> call for one more argument place or parameter than was
> formerly thought to be needed, and as a first approximation
> we may view relativism as the thesis that some concept ø
> requires relativisation to some parameter π (TF p.85)

The parameter which Swoyer will argue that concepts should be relativised to is conceptual frameworks He takes 'conceptual frameworks' to be an idealised theoretical notion designed to help us understand and explain thought and action and maintains that the use of the notion is justified by its success in doing so The notion of 'framework' has to be kept broad enough to characterise relativism in general, including all the possible species of relativism. anthropological (or biological), historical, cultural, linguistic, economic, social, religious, scientific, etc. If truth, concepts, and standards are to be functions of conceptual frameworks, the frameworks themselves have to be determined by something else. The nature of the conceptual framework that those notions are going to be relativised to will be determined by the different relativistic positions at issue. Thus, a framework could be grounded on biological makeup, historicism, different cultures or languages, economic and social factors, etc. The different relativistic positions can be viewed as the independent variables and the conceptual frameworks as the dependent variables which, in turn, determine the notions of truth, concepts, and standards for that framework.

The relativist's point is that there is no preferred basis, no exclusively correct ground for conceptual frameworks and, thus, no one preferred or correct framework. Frameworks themselves are usually viewed by relativists as the common property of sharers of a language, or culture, etc Another important consequence of the generality imputed to the notion of conceptual frameworks is that their means of individuation is left open. Swoyer maintains that it is unreasonable to demand necessary and sufficient conditions for something being a conceptual

framework, but that this does not detract from the intelligibility of the notion, citing the well known examples of notions like games and tables which also cannot be individuated by means of necessary and sufficient conditions. In particular, contra Davidson[14], the inability of communication or translation cannot be required in order to maintain the distinctness of two conceptual frameworks. The more open the notion of conceptual framework we maintain the wider we will be able to keep the range of relativistic problems.

Instead of prescribing conditions for the differentiation of conceptual frameworks, Swoyer proposes the more pragmatic and descriptive approach of taking clear examples of putative cases of conceptual schemes differing from our own, such as the cases of the Hopi or the Azande, and considering what kinds of differences in their beliefs, concepts and practices motivate us to count them as having a different conceptual framework. It is not on the strength of just any differences that some group will be considered to have a different world view. Swoyer proposes, tentatively, that the important differences are differences in what can be called 'basic beliefs' and 'central concepts':

> Central concepts have much in common with the items on traditional lists of categories. among our central concepts are those of object, cause, and person And a basic belief is one that is so fundamental that a person could not abandon it without surrendering many other beliefs as well. These may embody rather specific claims, for example that most events have causes, that others have minds, that some things which aren't actual are possible, or more general standards for explanation and intelligibility, as that

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[14]See his "The Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme" in Donald Davidson, *Truth and Interpretation*, Oxford University Press, 1985.

induction by enumeration is a reasonable way to gather evidence. (TF, p.89)

Swoyer grants that 'basicness' and 'centrality' are matters of degree, so that the question is still open as to how much of a difference in beliefs and concepts is needed in order to amount to a difference in world view. Thus, the individuation of conceptual frameworks is a matter of degree and will depend to some extent on the interests and purposes involved in particular cases.

Having introduced conceptual frameworks, Swoyer can then consider formulations of a notion of relative truth. He follows the standard Tarskian procedure of relying on the recursive criterion of adequacy, T:

T   'S' is true in L iff p

where S is a structural characterisation of a sentence in an object language, L, and p is the translation of that sentence in the metalanguage. He notes that this allows truth to be relative in certains ways which do not bear on the sort of relativism under discussion First of all, Tarski does not attempt to give a definition of truth for variable L, but only for particular languages. So we are not interested in the possibility that some particular syntactic string could happen to be a sentence in two distinct languages and thus have differing truth values.[15]

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[15]This is important since, as will be discussed below, speakers of the same'language' can be considered to be users of different conceptual frameworks, in which case homophonic translation will be required in order to compare the truth values of their respective sentences.

Secondly, Tarski's account is for closed sentences, free of demonstratives. Sentences of natural languages contain indexical terms such as 'I', 'that', and 'now', which relativise them to particular persons, objects, places and times. Finally, truth can be relativised to an interpretation in a way that just involves different ways of assigning extensions to the non-logical vocabulary. These relativisations involve minor complications and do not imply the more serious, interesting relativism at issue. They are eliminated simply by by restricting our attention to unambiguous sentences free of any indexical constructions. Thus, Swoyer characterises a strong and weak form of relative truth. The strong form is the base case and what we familiarly tend to think of as radical cultural relativism:

> As a first approximation we can then say that relativism would result if a sentence S could be true in L for some speakers of L, false for others, or if a correct translation manual paired a sentence S of L with a sentence S' of L', and S were true in L, S' false in L'. A situation of either sort would involve what I shall call *strong relativism* . (TF, p.92)

Contrasted with it is weak relativism, which also involves a change in truth values but only, as it were, by default since

> a sentence could be true in the language of one framework and simply inexpressible in that of another. It should be stressed that neither thesis involves an empirical claim that there actually are cases of different frameworks which provide instances of strong or weak relativism; the two doctrines merely affirm the coherence and intelligibility of the notions of strong and weak relative truth. (TF, p.92)

Relativism and Belief

The important differences with more naive, Protagorean relativism can now be brought out. The locution 'true for' is often used in expressing relative truth, but in such a way as to confuse it with 'believes that'. For instance, we say "It is true for Henry that God exists", as a way of saying "Henry believes that God exists". Thus, in the *Theaetetus*, Plato attributes to Protagoras the view that

P   x(x believes that p -> S is true for x).

The qualifying 'for x' later gets dropped resulting in

P'   x(x believes that p -> S is true).

Swoyer maintains that many contemporary criticisms of relativism are actually criticisms of P'. For instance, it is easy to raise the objections that P' leads to violations of the laws of the excluded middle and noncontradiction. If everyone suspends belief with respect to S, then neither S nor its negation will be believed and the law of the excluded middle fails to hold. Even worse, if one person believes S and another its negation, then both S and not-S come out true and the law of non-contradiction fails. The problem with these criticisms, however, as is apparent from P', is that they rely on a notion of absolute truth But since the relativist is engaged in denying precisely such a notion, criticism on this basis is missplaced. The same kind of objections do not hold of P. In P truth is not absolute but relativised to agents Contradiction does not

result if S is true-for-*a* and false-for-*b*, where *a* and *b* are different people. An individual could fail to have any beliefs about S however, resulting in neither S nor its negation being true for him. Swoyer does not see this as a serious problem, but as simply requiring an account of relativised truth-value gaps.

The serious problem that does occur for the view expressed by P results from the fact that it is rare for a person not to hold some inconsistent beliefs. In virtue of P this results in such a person holding inconsistent truths and, thus, by standard logic, all sentences will be true for that individual. Of course, the truth of the principles of logical deduction must also be relativised to the agent, but if these turn out to be non-standard for the agent in question, it is likely that other problematic results will follow. Swoyer notes two further problems with the linking of relative truth with individual belief, and he then rejects the doctrine:

> Furthermore, changes of belief lead to changing truth (-for) values for a single sentence. Finally, the possibility of mistaken beliefs, even in one's relativised world, is ruled out. Such difficulties show, I think, that if someone's believing something makes it true for him, then our notion of true for does not come close enough to truth to be of any philosophical interest at all. (TF, p.95)

When truth is relativised to conceptual frameworks, on the other hand, these problems do not arise. One of the requirements on the general notion of conceptual frameworks is that the latter are *social*. A conceptual framework is intersubjective and shared by the members of the community whose framework it is. Thus, truth in a framework is not truth for particular individuals, but truth for *groups* of people. Swoyer further stresses the generality of the notion of frameworks by pointing out

that it need not correspond to languages. It is possible for a relativist to accept that speakers of different languages share a conceptual framework if those languages are similar enough, and also to maintain that speakers of the same language have different frameworks if their basic beliefs about religion, science etc. differ enough. It is easy to articulate, on this formulation of relativism, how a particular individual's beliefs do not make anything true for that individual:

> We can thus speak of sentences being true (in L) for a conceptual framework F, though for most purposes we do not need to mention the language. And by analogy with speakers of a language, we may talk of users of a framework. We now see how Sam's believing S need not make S true for him, or anyone else, for he may be a user of F, believe S, and yet S might be false in F. (TF p.96)

Though P may not pose a serious problem for this more sophisticated form of relativism, an analogue of P does For if all or most of the users of F believe S, then it would seem that S must be true in F. Swoyer maintains that such a position does not *necessarily* follow from a relativist conception of truth. We have strong intuitions that our beliefs can turn out to be false, that something which no one believes could turn out to be true, and that it is possible to change some of our beliefs without changing our world view. Swoyer suggests that conceptual frameworks be individuated in terms of *basic* beliefs and *central* concepts. Given this distinction, he maintains it is possible to preserve those intuitions about the distinctness of truth, belief, and conceptual scheme within a relativist framework:

> Most Western Europeans in the early sixteenth century believed that the earth was flat, but they were wrong. The

discovery that it was not flat changed one of their beliefs. But there is reason to resist the conclusion that it changed their conceptual framework, since it was in terms of concepts and standards of evidence of their framework that they came to change this belief. So mistaken beliefs within a framework, even ones shared by most of its users, are possible. (TF, p.96)

Constraints on Relative Truth

On the version of relativism that Swoyer is defending, the whole community's thinking something is so does not make it so. To hold this view the relativist must accept certain 'conditions of adequacy' for the notion of relative truth. Swoyer argues that the relativist must accept at least two general constraints on what can be true within a framework. The first is that of a framework-independent "world". Swoyer recognises that a prime motivation of relativism stems from a constructivistic epistemology according to which the mind organises or conceptualises all inputs, such that there can be no neutral facts. He accepts this Kantian point about knowledge, but allows that ther' could be preconceptual givens:

> But a relativist may reject the notion of the given altogether, holding that by the time anything enters experience it already possesses some conceptual component. Views of the latter sort may make for a more thoroughgoing version of the doctrine, but relativism does not require them. The critical point is that all knowledge involves a framework of concepts. (TF, p.86)

The framework-independent "world" Swoyer postulates provides the input which is then conceptualised and organised. It underdetermines

experience and thought but provides constraints. He sees this "world" as a Kantian limiting notion which can only enter into experience as mediated by concepts, language, etc., but which is necessary to avoid falling into subjective idealism and to "account for the possibility of intraframework communication and objectivity" (TF, p 97) The second constraint on relative truth is what Swoyer calls the notion of 'collateral commitment'. The idea is that basic beliefs and concepts of the framework involve a collateral commitment to other truths within the framework, regardless of the opinion of the users of the framework. Swoyer has in mind logical and evidential relations, providing what amounts to a coherence requirement for frameworks Though these constraints allow for many of the beliefs of the users of a framework to turn out false, not *all* their beliefs could turn out to be false·

> In particular, not all, and on some accounts not any, of [F's] basic beliefs could be false in F. Whether any of a framework's basic beliefs could be false depends on how frameworks are individuated. It is not implausible to hold that basic beliefs are essential properties of a framework, so that if a basic belief of framework were given up, the framework would change But one might instead treat frameworks as analogous to cluster concepts, so that few, if any, basic beliefs are essential to a framework, although a large portion of them must be maintained if it is to retain its identity. (TF, p.97)

The "world" together with the basic beliefs and concepts of a framework, due to the collateral commitments of the latter, determine truth for that framework. The important point for the relativist is that the "world" is not some prestructured, mind independent set of facts and relations, but is itself in part constituted by the basic beliefs and central concepts that cognitive beings employ. In other words, we can concede that truth

involves correspondence to a "world", but "worlds" are themselves relativised to frameworks, so truth also turns out to be relative.

Relative Truth

Swoyer admits that much in this account of relativism is problematic. But he wants to grant the relativist as much as possible in terms of the underpinnings of the position in order to see how strong a case can be made out on that basis for a theory of relative truth. Let us now consider the doctrine that truth is relative in the strong sense. The difficulties with this doctrine become clearer if we assume that different frameworks are couched in different languages. Since sentences in one language are not characteristically found in that of another, a given sentence cannot be true in one framework and false in another. Thus, the notion of translation is central to the issue of relative truth, and differences of framework within a 'same' language can be taken to involve homophonic translation. If, on the other hand, the difference in frameworks makes it in principle impossible to translate between frameworks, then weak relativism results since what is expressible in one framework cannot be expressed in the other. But, as Swoyer points out, relativists such as Whorf, Feyerabend and Kuhn all consider translation to be possible in extreme cases of different frameworks, that it is precisely on the basis of his translations of the Hopi, for instance, that Whorf imputed to them a different conceptual framework. And of course, the really interesting notion of relativism involves actual clashes between

world views where disturbing questions concerning objectivity and justification are raised. Thus, Swoyer concludes that in order to consider whether truth could be relative in the strong sense, the relativist is committed to the joint claims that

(1) the world is constituted by the conceptual framework through which it is known, and

(2) translation between frameworks is in principle possible,

since strong relative truth requires that there be a statement expressible in both frameworks, but which varies in truth value But though translation between languages which share a framework may not pose a problem, translation between frameworks is not so straightforward

If the relativist claims that it is just a metaphysical fact that two sentences in different frameworks somehow express the same thing, share the same meaning, or sense, or whatever but vary in truth value, then such a relativist risks subscribing to a notion of absolute truth For such a view would seem to be saying that it is just *the truth* that $T(S)=S'$, and that S is true in F while S' is false in F', making the relativity of truth derivative of a prior absoluteness This raises the issue of the status of the relativist claims themselves. From what has gone before, the relativist, if he is to be consistent, must allow that the claim that something is true in F and false in F' may *itself* be true in one framework and false in another. In other words, the relativist's claim for the relativity of truth in general (for all frameworks, not just his own) is itself a framework bound statement. Remember that frameworks are assumed to be determined by sets of basic beliefs and central concepts shared by the members of a

community. The truth of relativism is not dependent on anyone's opinion but must be tenable on the basis of the basic beliefs and central concepts of the framework in which the relativist is making the claim. Of course, what this really means, as the claim is meant to be taken as significant, is that it is tenable on the basis of *our* framework. Thus, it is in the relativist's interest to individuate frameworks as broadly as possible in order to minimize the damage of having to accept that his claim about the nature of truth is itself relative If the relativist's thesis about truth is true in our framework, he must be able to argue that the objectivists' supposedly objective concepts and beliefs presuppose the same framework as the relativists' does and that in the context of that shared framework the notion of relative truth is the most reasonable To do as much would be to show that the relativist claim is no worse off than anything else we hold true.

Returning to the issue of strong relative truth, it follows from the foregoing discussion that, whether we are considering translation between two third party frameworks, or whether between our own and another, it is *in our own framework* that it is true that S is true in F while S' is false in F' The main point of Swoyer's paper is that even granting the plausibility of this relativised notion of correct translation, granting that the relativist can give a relativistic formulation of his claim and carry out the project of convincing the objectivist of its justifiability, still, strong relativism does not follow The problem is that we need something that could be true in F, false in F', i e two sentences, S and T(S), having roughly the same meaning, or expressing the same sense or what not. But, by the relativist's own lights, the semantics of a sentence involves the world of the framework to which the sentence belongs. Since F and

F' involve different worlds it is problematic to assume that there could be some thing in each having roughly the same meaning As Swoyer puts it, "The problem is that the sentences of of F and F' are *about* different things, and any move from F to F' seems simply to involve a change of subject" (TF, p 101)   When dealing with translation between languages sharing a common framework, we can speak of them as being about things in *the world* , in the same world   But in the case of translation between frameworks, it is not just a question of different languages categorizing things in *the world* differently, *the worlds themselves differ.* Here the extensions of terms in each language involve objects in different worlds, and it is not clear how there could be any overlap or intersection between the extensions of the terms   Thus, the relativist is unable to give a convincing account of *what it is* that can be true in a relative sense "the problem involves specifying *identity conditions* for something across frameworks, and the only way to do so seems to be in terms of shared meanings, beliefs, and concepts" (TF, p 105), precisely what is absent, *ex hypothesis* , when dealing with radically different frameworks

This problem is a direct outcome of holding claims (1) and (2) simultaneously (1) entails that different frameworks will involve different worlds. For a sufficiently important truth claim to be relative in the strong sense would require radically differing frameworks But the more radical that difference the more problematic (2) becomes, and hence so does the possibility of truth being relative in the strong sense   On the other hand, the greater the feasibility of translation is, the less difference there would seem to be in the nature of the frameworks involved   But to the extent

that this is the case, the less sense we can make of the possibility of the truth values differing:

> But either different frameworks involve very different worlds or they do not. If they do, a move from one framework to another is, if possible at all, more akin to acquiring a first language than it is to normal cases of translation. Thus a sentence S of F will not be true in F while its counterpart is false in F' simply because no counterpart of S exists in F'. On the other hand, if F and F' are sufficiently similar to contain some one thing of the sort required for translation, they will involve many of the same objects and concepts, and the picture that tempted us to view truth as relative dims (TF, p.103)

Swoyer concludes that while the picture of relativism that emerges from his considerations is compatible with the view that truth might be relative in the weak sense, it does not follow from the picture that truth is relative in the strong sense The latter notion pulls us in opposite directions at the same time,

> For if the frameworks are radically different, they deal with different worlds and have little subject matter in common. As we imagine one or both evolving to become more like the other, we can begin to make more sense of their containing resources for expressing the same thing, but less sense of their assigning it different truth values. Nor is it at all clear what it would mean to catch this change in the middle, at a point where talk of strongly relative truth could be given a modicum of sense The general difficulty is simply that a strong version of relativism is most naturally stated, *first*, in terms of something that can be shared by different frameworks and, *second*, in the form of the claim that this something can receive different truth-values in those frameworks The first point may be elaborated by appeal to propositions, shared meanings, or shared obje s of reference. But none of these fit well with the secoi.d aspect of the thesis, for the very picture that lends plausibility to talk of relative truth leaves little room for them. (TF, p 105)

In so concluding Swoyer does not mean to abandon relativism altogether. Without asserting that there are in fact alternative frameworks or that, if there are, there are things which actually resist translation between them, he maintains that weak relativism, the notion that there could be things that were true in one framework but that were not expressible, and thus not true, in another, remains conceptually plausible

Thus, though the second relativist problem does not seem to be a serious concern, Putnam still has to fend off the weaker version which could support the claim that we somehow cannot have access to the world view of another culture. Translation is central to the problem and Putnam's view of translation may give him a way of coping with it Putnam sees translation as a normative interpretive practice There is no externalist perspective from which we can pair equivalent sentences in different languages. But we do construct translation schemes from within our own conceptual scheme to interpret the behaviour and beliefs of other cultures or past versions of our own culture at least relative to the use to which we intend to put the translation. It is only in the context of this empirical practice that it makes sense to raise questions as to the ability of our translations to capture the sense of another cultures terms

> It is not, after all, as if we had or were likely to have criteria for sameness of sense or reference apart from our translation schemes and our explicit or implicit requirements for their empirical adequacy One can understand the assertion that a translation fails t ˮapture exactly the sense or reference of the original as an admission that a better translation scheme might be found; but it makes only an illusion of sense to say that all possible

translation schemes fail to capture the 'real' sense or
reference. (RTH p.117)

Thus, if someone maintains that a translation does not capture the sense
of the terms in another language, we would naturally expect him to
indicate the ways in which it is deficient, provide glosses of problematic
terms and indicate how it could be improved   Our translations are
theories about what terms in different conceptual schemes refer to in the
terms of our own conceptual scheme, of how to best explain the overall
behaviour of the users of the language.   Putnam's argument that the
consensus theory of truth is self-refuting shows that it is constitutive of our
rationality to be constantly interpreting our own standards, concepts and
truths, including our standards of rationality.   Thus the relativist's charge
that we cannot understand the standards of another culture loses its
force.   We have as good a grasp of the standards and concepts of
another culture as we do of our own since we can only understand our
own standards and conepts in terms of our own standards and concepts.

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