

## REVIEWS

Hilary Putnam, *Words and Life*, ed. James Conant. Harvard University Press, 1994. pp. ixxvi + 531 price £35.95.

Hilary Putnam, *Pragmatism*, 1995, xii + 106, Blackwell, price £39.99 (pb £9.99).

H. O. Mounce, *University of Wales, Swansea*

Putnam is known as a philosopher who changes his mind. Some consider this a fault. But even as a fault it is distinctive. Most philosophers, one feels, would benefit by changing their minds more often rather than less. Moreover Putnam's changes are not arbitrary. In a collection of essays published a few years ago, he rejected most of the views that made his reputation; in the present volumes he rejects some of the views he advanced in the last; in his next volume he will no doubt reject some of the views advanced in these. Yet throughout the changes there is a central problem and a real line of development. The central problem is not so much science as scientism, that view of the world so effortlessly acquired by so many contemporary philosophers. After some years under the sway of this view, Putnam became restive; then he became still more restive and now he is in open revolt. Here then is a man, rare in any generation, who has turned his critical powers not on accepted targets but on the assumptions which his contemporaries consider immune from criticism. In short, he is one who has fulfilled the task of the philosopher.

How then have his views developed? To assess this, it will be useful to consider the historical background. The champions of science, in the present century, fall into two categories. On the one hand, we have the scientific realists; on the other, the scientific positivists. The scientific realist emphasizes the distinction between appearance and reality. That is not the distinction which is found in ordinary experience but the one, found in Greek philosophy, according to which ordinary experience itself figures as appearance. For example, in

ordinary experience objects appear as solid but in reality they are not solid at all; sensation is different from motions in the brain, but science will show they are really identical; and so on. In short, science has proved that reality transcends human experience and reality is therefore revealed not in ordinary experience but in science. For the positivist, by contrast, as for the Greek Sophist, science cannot reveal that reality transcends human experience. For it is an illusion to suppose that there is any such reality. It is only *within* experience that one can distinguish between reality and appearance. The atomic theory does not disprove that objects are solid but explains why they are as solid as they seem. Thus reality is not alien but close at hand and everything wears a human face.

At first sight, the advantage lies with positivism. Scientific realism, it is true, has behind it the immense prestige of science. But then so does positivism and in addition it appeals to the heart. Thus on the scientific realist view, man is diminished by the reality he measures; on the positivist, he is the very measure of reality. But appearances are deceptive. Entwined in positivism are certain distinctions which deliver the doctrine over to its opponents. Thus the positivists of the 1930's distinguished very sharply between, for example, the analytic and the synthetic, fact and value, means and end. In each of these distinctions, the subjective is contrasted with the objective and the human appears on the subjective side. For example, the statements of science are synthetic but the analytic merely reflects the structure of our language; it is science which investigates objective reality. That is scientific realism. The positivists of the 1930's, however, were somewhat out of date. In the pragmatism of John Dewey there was already a solution to their problems. In each of his works, Dewey launched an attack on precisely those distinctions. The effect is to eliminate the very contrast between the world as it is and as it appears in human experience. All reality is within experience and man is the measure of all things. In a celebrated exchange, Reichenbach attempted to convince Dewey that anyone who reasons consistently will arrive at the scientific distinction between reality and appearance simply by extending the ordinary one. Grant that an oar in water is not as it appears and one can establish that stones are not as solid as they seem. But Dewey would have none of this. For him the only distinction between reality and appearance falls *within* experience. One may have sympathy with Reichenbach's argument but one must acknowledge that Dewey has the sharper eye

for the consistent position. Allow that reality transcends experience at *one* point and positivism or empiricism is threatened at *every* point.

Now, as we shall see in a moment, Putnam in developing his view seems to assume that the above positions exhaust the field. This is not so. It will be useful to consider another possibility. The essence of scientific realism is that it takes science to have pictured the world not as it appears but as it really is and therefore as being at least approximately complete. In other words, it treats scientific knowledge as absolute not as relative. Now in the nineteenth century there were numerous philosophers who rejected that view without embracing positivism. We may mention the Scottish school, Cournot, Peirce, Boutroux and Poincaré, these philosophers having in common that they understood both the limitations and the importance of Kant. Thus in his great work on the foundations of knowledge, Cournot showed that science has made progress because it has avoided questions about the ultimate nature or substance of the world and has concentrated on its structure and relations. Peirce became convinced, long before most of his contemporaries, that the Newtonian System was approximate and developed the view that knowledge is perspectival and therefore relative. But the view that knowledge is relative does not entail anti-realism. Earlier in the nineteenth century, indeed, William Hamilton had shown that it is realism which entails the relativity of knowledge. It will be useful to demonstrate the point. The essence of realism is that objects exist independently of being known. It follows that they can be known only so far as they enter into relations with the mind. But the *existence* of an object does not depend on the relations by which it is known. It is only knowledge that is thus relative, not the object itself. For example, one cannot see an object unless it reflects light. But it exists whether or not it reflects light. Consequently one has no reason to suppose that what one knows about the object through its reflecting light exhausts the object itself.

In short, knowledge exists only in relation to an object but on any realist view the object exists whether or not it is in relation to knowledge. It is now evident that the relativity of knowledge follows from realism about its object. Moreover it is not simply our knowledge of the world which is thus relative; our conception of the world must also be relative. For we have no such conception which does not depend on our knowledge. It follows that we have no absolute conception of the world in its ultimate nature but only a conception of

the world in its relations to the mind. For that reason, it is evidently absurd to suppose that science is approximately complete. We have no positive conception of the completeness to which it might approximate. We may note, in passing, that exactly the same view follows from that very naturalism which is embraced by every scientific realist. If the doctrine of naturalism has a clear sense, which may be doubted, it entails that everything has its natural conditions. But then knowledge has its natural conditions. Conditions are limits. What falls outside the conditions for knowledge cannot be known. Consequently to treat science as absolute or unlimited is to treat it as a process akin to the magical. For it is to treat it as a process falling outside all natural conditions. In short, the world is exhausted neither by ordinary experience nor by science, for it transcends both.

The above view might be termed *classical* realism, the view which until the nineteenth century was held by almost every great philosopher in the history of the subject. The source of our knowledge lies in our relations to a world that transcends both our knowledge and ourselves. In short, man is *not* the measure of all things. In the present century, this view has not been much considered. The scientific realist will acknowledge that reality transcends ordinary experience but nothing will prevent his identifying it with the latest findings of science. The positivist will not even acknowledge that reality transcends ordinary experience. Moreover in contemporary discussions of these issues it is assumed that the relativity of knowledge is incompatible with realism about its object. Thus the anti-realist denies the independent existence of the object; the realist, the relativity of knowledge. In classical realism the two elements are held together in perfect harmony.

Now Dewey's view might be termed *internal* realism. There is a difference between reality and appearance but only *within* experience. For some years, Putnam advocated a similar doctrine. In short, in his reaction against scientific realism he turned towards Dewey. That step, it seems to me, was retrograde. Putnam had exchanged one form of scientism for another. For Dewey differs from the positivists only because he is further along the same road. In Putnam's version, internal realism ran somewhat as follows. *Within* a conceptual scheme, I can distinguish between truth and falsity but I cannot step *outside* that scheme to compare it with the world. Consequently the difference between truth and falsity is relative to such a scheme. The realism is internal. Take a parallel argument. *Within* my own mind, I can distin-

guish between truth and falsity but I cannot step *outside* my mind to compare it with the world. Consequently the difference between truth and falsity is relative to my own mind. That too might be termed internal realism. It seems indistinguishable from solipsism. Internal realism depended for its plausibility on a certain unclarity about what precisely was relative to a conceptual scheme. Sometimes it seemed to be the *concept* of the world which was thus relative; sometimes it seemed to be the world itself. The former view is trivial; the latter, absurd. Internal realism sustained itself by a rapid oscillation between both views, thereby creating the illusion of a third.

In *Words and Life*, Putnam's present collection of essays, internal realism nowhere appears. It seems evident that he has dropped the doctrine. One suspects that some of the credit is due to Richard Rorty. Mirrored in Rorty's views, Putnam saw his own and he did not like what he saw. James Conant, in his interesting introduction, gives a different explanation. On his view, Putnam has come to appreciate that internal realism is merely a distorted image of metaphysical realism and that the correct move is to reject both, thereby returning to the concepts embedded in ordinary discourse. This occasions two remarks. The first is that metaphysical realism is a somewhat elusive doctrine and it is not clear that it would be acknowledged by many philosophers who have defended a realist view. On the evidence of the present collection, a metaphysical realist is one who believes that science will eventually produce a single theory of the entire universe, the sentences of which will correspond physically to what it represents. But it is very difficult to believe that any philosopher who defends a realist view is thereby committed to so wild a doctrine. The second is that ordinary discourse itself seems committed to a thoroughgoing realism. Putnam himself makes the point. As he says, for example, there is a realism implied in all our statements about the past (p. 277). We may go further. In ordinary discourse, there is implied not simply the independent existence of the world but also its transcendence. Any statement about the past will illustrate the point. For example, the other day I recalled, for some reason, an occasion in the early 1960's when I was walking in the countryside with my dog Maxie. I saw him quite vividly striding resolutely forward, against a slight slope, his fur flattened by the wind. But that was all I could recall. I could not even recall what was occurring in our immediate vicinity. Nevertheless I am certain something was occurring, not simply in our vicinity but throughout

the entire world. Moreover my certainty about the occurrence of these innumerable events which I do not know and could not even in principle discover is intimately related to what I recalled. For unless I were certain that what I recalled had these innumerable events as its context, occurred in relation to them, I could not believe it occurred at all. It would be a figment of my imagination. Similarly, every historical event presupposes an infinity of others which we cannot know but without which it would not be a historical event. In this way, in all our knowledge, there is presupposed the transcendence of the world.

*Words and Life* has essays on Aristotle, Dewey and Reichenbach which contain hints of a positive view that may replace internal realism. But the strength of the book lies on its destructive side, where Putnam has his sights on scientific reductionism. For example, Mackie's arguments against the objectivity of value presuppose a view of the world based on physical science. But that view presupposes, in its turn, that physical science is not simply approximately correct but also approximately *complete*. In fact we have less reason to believe that physical science is approximately complete than that values are objectively real. The point is the more evident when one considers that the practice of science itself involves assumptions of value. Consequently if values lack objective reality, so does science. Putnam returns repeatedly to the notions of reference and meaning and to the inability of physicalism to account for the intentionality involved in those notions. Thus Dretske proposes to explain reference in terms of information and information in terms of probability. In fact probability cannot be assessed without information and information presupposes reference. *A Comparison of Something with Something Else*, the seventeenth chapter, contains a classic demolition of Quine. Elsewhere Putnam deflates the pretensions of artificial intelligence, rejects the redundancy theory of truth, and argues against a unitary view of science. Throughout, the book bears the stamp of a restless and engaging intelligence.

The lectures on pragmatism are a slighter work. Indeed, of the three lectures which constitute the book, one is on Wittgenstein and it is the most interesting of the three. Also, Putnam's account of pragmatism is remorselessly laudatory. No doubt, he feels that the pragmatists have been neglected and that in an introductory survey he should emphasize their strengths. But the impression he conveys seems to me misleading. For example, he treats Peirce, James and

Dewey as though they held a common doctrine. In fact the pragmatism of Peirce is radically different from that of James and Dewey; indeed it is radically different from anything which passes as pragmatism in contemporary philosophy. Moreover it seems clear that the pragmatism of James and Dewey is based on a *misunderstanding* of Peirce. Thus it was James who made pragmatism famous, basing his account on Peirce's paper, *How to Make our Ideas Clear*. That paper, however, was written in 1878, when Peirce was still confused in some of his ideas. As a result it contains views which are in direct conflict with his mature thought. The most obvious is his view of conditionals. In that paper, his account of meaning is a conditional one. Thus in calling an object hard, one means it *would* resist scratching *were* it tested. But he made the fatal mistake of analysing conditionals in nominalist and empiricist terms. Hardness is thereby reduced to its sensible effects. Indeed, Peirce even suggests it is *meaningless* to say that an object is hard between testing for its effects (as distinct from saying, between testing for its effects, that it is hard). James followed him in this, thereby reducing pragmatism to a form of extreme empiricism. Now the whole of Peirce's mature thought depends on *rejecting* that view and adopting a strictly *realist* view of conditionals. It is this which forms the basis for his objective idealism, the view that ultimate reality is more accurately reflected by the mental than by the physical. Peirce arrived at this view because he became convinced that the generality which is involved in conditionals, which is essential to all meaning and to any form of scientific law, is *irreducible*. It cannot, for example, be reduced to the physical. Judging by what he says in *Words and Life*, Putnam should find that a congenial idea.

*Dept. of Philosophy,  
University of Wales,  
Swansea SA2 8PP*