Truth, Pragmatism and Morality

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Abstract
1. Hilary Putnam's conception of ethics is not best understood as a form of 'moral realism', but as a position consequent upon the pragmatist understanding of the relation between truth and rational acceptability – ideas that Putnam argues are not confined to laboratory science. Just as our conception of the visible world is founded in reason as informed by sense perception, why cannot our moral notions appear to reason itself as that is shaped or informed by our situation and our nature, our vital needs and our capacity to respond to those needs through the invention and refinement of ethical notions? In following out this proposal, I try to show how well Putnam's conception of rational acceptability can consist and cohere with the constraint upon enquiry that C. S. Peirce calls 'secondness'. 2. Putnam writes 'we invent moral words for morally relevant features of situations, which lead to further refinements of our moral notions'. Enlarging on this claim, the paper reconstructs some of the ways in which human beings can arrive through a practical reason of the unforsakeable at an *ethos* – a shared way of living – and at what Putnam calls 'a moral image of the world'. 3. The paper then sets out some of Putnam's conclusions concerning agreement and disagreement, the supposed dichotomy of fact and value, the supposed problem of the perception of value, and the implausibility of Lionel Robbins's claim that economics and ethics can have no closer relation than mere juxtaposition. 4. In conclusion, the paper touches upon the merits or demerits of the very idea of a 'moral reality'.

1. According to a widely held philosophical opinion, truth is not to be found among moral, political or aesthetic judgments. Fact is fact, value is value, and never the twain shall meet. Having said my say against that opinion in a book of 2006,[1] I shall not repeat what I said there but collate and consider the contentions which over the years Hilary Putnam has made in this matter.

I am told that among full-time moral philosophers some are tempted to see Putnam as offering 'yet one more questionable attempt to establish "moral realism"'. But moral realism is a poor entry point into his thinking about the prospects for objectivity and truth in the field of ethics.

[1] See *Ethics: Twelve Lectures on the Philosophy of Morality* (London & Cambridge Mass: Penguin and Harvard 2008), Chapter Eleven.

doi:10.1017/S0031819113000375 © The Royal Institute of Philosophy, 2013

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819113000375 Published online by Cambridge University Press

2. A better place to begin is with Putnam's 'pragmatism' – provided that we are prepared to undo the popular association of pragmatism with the idea that truth is what it pays to think and we prescind also, at the opposite pole, from a questionable idea that C. S. Peirce sometimes put about. This was that truth is what is fated or destined to be agreed, at the very end, by all who enquire.[2]

What Putnam intends by truth and fact is something more serviceable and more ordinary than either of these. It is neither deflationary nor yet metaphysical. Nor is it a redefinition of truth itself. In *Reason, Truth and History* (Cambridge, CUP 1981), he writes:

> 'The notion of a fact is an idealization of the notion of a statement that it is rational to believe. "Rationally acceptable" and "true" are notions that take in each other's wash' (201).
>
> 'The only criterion for what is a fact is what it is *rational to accept* . . . there can be value facts on this conception. But the relation between rational acceptability and truth is a relation between two distinct notions. A statement can be rationally acceptable *at a time* but not *true;* and this realist intuition [is] preserved in my account . . . Another feature of the view is that rationality is not restricted to laboratory science, nor different in a fundamental way in laboratory science and outside of it' (x).

Enlarging on the last of these proposals, which bear more closely upon what it is to search for truth and what is to be expected of that which is a candidate for truth than upon the ultimate nature of truth itself, Putnam argues in chapter 8 of *Reason, Truth and History* (RTH) that, however impressive are the achievements of the physical sciences, these sciences have no demonstrable monopoly on the idea of reality. Nor are the methods of science, whether Bayesian or other, independent of the pre-theoretical notions of coherence, simplicity, relevance, best available explanation (for instance) which scientists have tacitly but constantly to draw on, even as they avail themselves at need of the putatively projectible thing-kinds and other categories prompted to them by ordinary pre-scientific reason. But then, the argument continues, if the idea of cognitive rationality cannot be narrowed down to the officially recognized and proprietary methods of empirical science or of Bayesian methodology, nor then can the ideas of objectivity, truth or reality be restricted to that which is

[2] See Peirce's essay 'How to Make our Ideas Clear', Pt 4. (This essay is the second of a series of which the first is 'On the fixation of belief', referenced at note 8 below.)

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revealed to science. Other sorts of enquiry can have an objective bearing upon reality (the rest of it, dare one say?).

3. What difference does it make to insist on this? Well, it makes a difference to the philosophy of morality. But let us begin – even if we do not have to – outside the area of dispute concerning truth, fact and value. Here is Putnam applying his pragmatic conception of reality to human vision – but applying it in a manner which will prompt a moralist to analogy:

> 'Vision does not really give us direct access to a ready-made world, but gives us a description of objects which are partly structured and constituted by vision itself. If we take the physicist's rainbow to be the rainbow in "itself", then the rainbow "in itself" has no *bands* (a spectroscopic analysis yields a smooth distribution of frequencies); the red, orange, yellow, green, blue and violet bands are a feature of the *perceptual* rainbow not the physicist's rainbow. The perceptual rainbow depends on the nature of our perceptual apparatus itself, on our visual "world-making", as Nelson Goodman has termed it. (The physicist's *object* also depends on our "world-making", as is shown by the plethora of radically different versions physics constructs of the "same" objects.) Yet we do not consider vision as *defective* because it sees bands in the rainbow. Someone who couldn't *see* them would have defective vision. Vision is certified as good by its ability to deliver a description which fits the object for us, not metaphysical things-in-themselves. Vision is good when it enables us to see the world "as it is" – that is, the human, functional world which is partly created by vision itself' (*RTH*, 146).

In a different context one might seek to disambiguate, transplant and adjust some of these claims (not least the difficult penultimate sentence) to the framework of sense and reference or of conception and thing conceived.[3] But here, and on another tack, let me adduce instead something Putnam says at page 52 of *The Many Faces of Realism* (LaSalle, Illinois, Open Court 1987):

[3] And attend even to Frege's doubt that the rainbow ranks as an object of public reference. See his essay 'Negation' at page 376 in *Gottlob Frege: Collected Paper in Mathematics, Logic and Philosophy*, (ed.) Brian McGuiness (Oxford: Basil Blackwell 1984). I must add that it will not matter decisively if the rainbow fails to qualify as a good instantiation of Putnam's more general contention.

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> 'Kant's glory in my eyes is to have seen that the very fact that we cannot separate our own conceptual contribution from what is objectively there is not a disaster.'

A pragmatist who explores the 'human functional world' and explores it by sight needs to be ready to accept a conception of the world that is shaped or created (the conception, that is) by vision itself – and be ready in principle to accord reality to that which the conception presents to us. There is illusion of course, but not all human vision can be illusion.[4] More generally, and vision apart, what harm does it do for our conception of something to be shaped by the way in which we have access to it – or to be angled, so to speak, from our perspective? (Let us distinguish perspective from distortion.)

Now let us exploit the suggested analogy. Just as the rainbow as we know it appears to ordinary, non-defective reason itself when reason is informed by human sense-perception, why should not our moral notions reveal themselves to reason when reason comes to be shaped or informed by our practical predicament, our constitution or nature, and the needs which, having that nature, we cannot forsake? In pursuit of this last suggestion, suppose we avail ourselves (if Putnam will permit) of certain familiar thoughts of Hume and say that, in its practical manifestation, reason's grasp of our predicament will be shaped and enriched not only by self-love but also by a natural weak benevolence which countervails little by little against self-love, is extended (reason, I mean) by imagination and shaped yet further by deep-seated, in part instinctual (however defeasible) tendencies[5] – tendencies to the recognition by the one of benefits received from the other, to reciprocity and to human solidarity.[6] Suppose we then insist

[4] In *Our Knowledge of the External World* (London, Allen & Unwin 1914) Bertrand Russell pointed to the validity of the following argument. I note that Putnam's pragmatist, rather than temporize (as others have) with Russell's conclusion, will deny the physicists their title to issue the comprehensive ruling that makes up their second premise.

[5] Tendencies that reason is ill-placed, I remark, to disapprove – and without which there would, I suggest, be no Homo sapiens.

[6] Before it is afforced or enriched in all these ways, this is reason *more or less* (see my *Ethics: Twelve Lectures on The Philosophy of Morality*, 37 fn 4, and section 2.11) as Hume conceived it in his quarrel with Reason as his predecessors Clarke, Cudworth and others conceived it. For the addition of solidarity to the other tendencies mentioned above, see my 'Solidarity and the Root of the Ethical', *Tijdschrift voor Filosofie* 71/2009, 239–269.

The affinity will not escape notice between the way we attempt here to link morality with truth or fact, and the way in which John Mackie sought in his *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1977) to keep

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that it is reason itself (but reason as supplied, enriched or afforced in these ways) that directs, oversees or endorses the human effort to answer – from the viewpoint not only of *each one* but also of *us* – the distinctive questions that creatures with our nature and our necessity of living together simply have to answer. In so far as enquiry of this kind can reach conclusions that seem decisive, what disqualifies their candidature, so far as truth and objectivity are concerned, to count among or alongside 'matters of fact'?

In the face of such proposals, positivists, prescriptivists and moral sceptics will protest together that any such parallelism is not only not authorized by Hume but utterly specious. But I reply that Hume's reason, which concerns itself with matters of fact and the comparing or relating of ideas, would be powerless unless it were supplied and afforced by sense perception. (So much is acknowledged in Hume's definition of reason.) But if so how can it be insisted that reason (as the faculty stands before Hume marks off *his* conception of reason) should undergo no other or further afforcement? Just as perception supplies or afforces reason when reason raises questions about the material world and looks to perception for assistance in its engagement with those questions, why cannot vital unforsakeable need, in its way, supply or afforce reason when reason enquires how we are to live and looks for the considerations that will constrain its answer to that question?[7] Only a prior presumption against the objectivity of a field of enquiry with such a content can explain the refusal to recognize any such parallelism.

In his essay 'On the Fixation of Belief' Peirce declares that the search for truth presupposes something that is independent of the enquirer, 'some external permanency which affects or might affect every [enquirer]'. In the same spirit he insists elsewhere on the indispensability to enquiry of *secondness*, the forceful element in our experience. There is no enquiry, Peirce suggests, in the absence of some element that will wear out our attempts to resist it. Where

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them apart. For a friendly comment on this situation, see my op. cit. *Ethics: Twelve Lectures,* 330. Indeed like many other philosophers I am much indebted to Mackie's work.

[7] On the indispensability to practical thinking of the idea of non-hypothetical need, see my 'Claims of Need' in *Morality and Objectivity,* (ed.) Honderich, London: RKP 1985, reprinted in *Needs, Values, Truth* (Oxford, OUP), 1987, 2002. See also Ruth Anna Putnam 'Creating Facts and Values' in *Philosophy,* vol 60, April 1985. For the idea of a vital need, one which we simply cannot forsake, see *Ethics, Twelve Lectures*, op. cit., 329.

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morality is concerned, I wish Putnam had touched upon the question how to meet this requirement. But Peircean secondness, I submit, is precisely what is furnished to ethical enquiry by the practical and conceptual indispensability of the idea of need and the non-negotiability of the vital needs which tauten the web of ideas that make up our conception of the ethical.[8] Where unforsakeable needs furnish too few constraints to force upon us the answer we should like to have for a given ethical question, the case for the truth will fail, of course. But so equally may the case for persisting in that judgment. What else would you expect?

4. If Hilary Putnam has speculated in his published work about our first ethical notions or the way in which our natural tendencies or instincts enter the realm of practical reason, I have failed to find the place where he does. But at the point in *RTH* where he seeks to contrast a pragmatist account of ethics with a 'projectivist' one, he furnishes one indispensable part of the story that I think pragmatists will have to tell:

> 'All humans have, to some extent, a sense of justice and some idea of the good. So we respond (intermittently) to such appeals as "Be kind to the stranger among you, *because you know what it was like to be a stranger in Egypt*". Our sympathy becomes broader, partly because we are persuaded it ought to be broader; we feel that an atrocity is wrong (sometimes) even when we don't easily or spontaneously find the victim a person we can sympathize with. We come to see similarities between injuries to others and injuries to ourselves, and between benefits to others and benefits to ourselves. We invent moral words for morally relevant features of situations, which lead to further refinements of our moral notions, and so on' (*RTH*, 144).

[8] Peirce also demands that this external permanency be something 'on which our thinking has no effect'. (See vol 3, 253–5, in *The Writings of C. S. Peirce*: a *Chronological Edition*, (ed.) M. Fisch, C. Cloesel, N. Hauser, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1982)). But we can satisfy *this* demand, I suggest, by insisting not that we cannot refine or reshape our idea of our need (for we do so constantly) but that our thinking can never take away from the reality of our unforsakeable need itself or remove the originary source of our striving.

On secondness more generally, see further Cheryl Misak, *Truth and the End of Enquiry: a Peircean Account of Truth* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1991), 83.

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5. I shall come back to the last sentence. First though something else. In response to the very idea that unforsakeable shared needs might secure secondness to moral enquiry and eventually force upon practical reason thoughts such as those I have just quoted from Putnam about how we are to live, it might be suggested that in the last analysis this sort of reason is at best instrumental or end-relative reason – mere Zweckmittelrationalität – and well short of the fully fledged categorical reasonableness that inspires Putnam's kind of pragmatism. And instrumental reason, it might be complained, must presuppose some answer to the crucial question of the rational end to be achieved. Against that sort of objection, however, Putnam could insist – as at pages 97–8 of chapter 6 of *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy* – that:

> '[It should not be supposed that] the judgment that one way of solving a problem is better than another must always be a purely "instrumental" judgment in the classical sense, that is, must be no more than a judgment to the effect that putative solution A is more efficient that proposed solution B with respect to values and goals already assumed (with respect to what Dewey calls ends-in-view) . . . [E]nquiry . . . in the widest sense . . . [like all] human dealings with problematical situations, involves incessant reconsideration of both means *and* ends . . . [I]t is not the case that each person's goals are cast in concrete in the form of a "rational preference function" that is somehow mysteriously embedded in his or her individual mind, or that all we are allowed to do as long as we are "rational" is look for more efficient means to these immutable but idiosyncratic goals or values . . . If resolving our problem is difficult, then we may well want to reconsider both [means and ends']' (97–8).

Suppose however that someone persists in the objection, saying that implicit in the kinds of deliberation and reconsideration that Putnam is describing there *must* nevertheless be certain, grounding or enabling ends. Suppose the objector then asks what I say qualifies *these* ends as rational. Having touched on this matter elsewhere (*Ethics: Twelve Lectures*, op. cit., 328, 383), and despite having concurred there in a view similar to Putnam's and Dewey's (and J. L. Mackie's), let me answer here that, *if* final ends or ultimate concerns could be identified that grounded all other ends, then such ends or concerns would have to qualify as non-hypothetically rational ends precisely by virtue of their underlying or being implicit in the deliberations, explorations and contestations of the kind of reasonable beings that we must take ourselves for when we seek to

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deliberate.[9] The commitment to those ends would have then to constitute one part of what such deliberators themselves *are* – or serve to constitute, as some say, their identity. But rather than hunt around in this spirit for final ends for instrumental reason to pursue, it will be more illuminating (I suggest) to try to understand and salute the reasonableness of a kind of thinking by which we are to discover not means to a preselected end but rather a state of being in whose achievement we can find contentment, relief or respite from the forces of unforsakeable vital need.

6. With so much said in defence of the capacity for non-hypothetical deliberative reason – a form of reason at once exploratory *and* categorical – let us return now to the last sentence of the citation from *Reason, Truth and History*: 'we invent moral words for morally relevant features of situations, which leads to further refinements of our moral notions and so on'. There is something off the page here. Let me offer a small elaboration.

Human beings, in seeking to concur collectively in actions and attitudes by which to minister so far as possible to the unforsakeable needs of each and almost all of us, and in seeking constantly to renew that concurrence (or to adjust it in the face of doubt or dissent), arrive at a whole variety of ethical or proto-ethical concerns – concerns for certain acts not to be done and other acts to be done, or else for certain outcomes to come to pass and other outcomes to be prevented from coming to pass. But what acts and what outcomes exactly? At the outset the needs that call these concerns into being will be much louder and more demanding than any specification of the said acts or ways-for-things-to-be can be complete or determinate. If the specification is to be made more determinate, then *names* have to be invented for the kinds of action and the ways for things to be that answer negatively or positively to the concerns that arise from our vital needs; and among names we need what Hume calls 'epithets of praise and blame'.[10] As Darwin says in a

[9] For 'reasonable,' see Hume *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* IX.1 (Selby-Bigge, 276).

[10] See *Enquiry into the Principles of Morals* v. 1 (Selby-Bigge, 186):

'Every man's interest is peculiar to himself and the aversions and desires that result from it cannot be supposed to affect others in like degree. General language, therefore, being formed for general use must be moulded on some more general views and must affix the epithets of praise and blame in conformity to sentiments which arise from the general interest of the community.'

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passage of *The Descent of Man* (Part 2, chapter 21) which makes one think of Hume, we must have signs we can 'affix to all sorts of objects and qualities . . . [signs] exciting trains of thought which would never arise from a mere impression of the senses, and if they did arise could not be followed out'.

How do names help? Well, once we have names such as *considerate, kind, brave, grateful, brutal, injury, crime, disaster, murder, desert, injustice, betrayal, restore, promise, care, trust, proportionality* or whatever it may be – understood in each case as standing for a character trait, a kind of action, a sort of outcome or whatever it may be – we can argue about how to apply them. In the business of applying or withholding the name, thought and feeling can prompt us to join with others in trying to understand better how the thing to be appraised (action, outcome, trait or whatever) has to be if it is to answer (or precisely fail to answer) the concerns or unforsakeable needs that occasioned the invention of the name. It is in disputing thus, back and forth, about how to apply a word for something that we join together in trying to pin down that we can examine what we are to mean by 'considerate', 'brave', 'grateful', 'brutal' … It is in this way, and against this background that, concern by concern, epithet by epithet, idea by idea, an ethos can come into being – a way of living together – and then (in due course) what Putnam calls a moral image of the world, 'a picture of how our virtues and ideals hang together with one another and what they have to do with the position we are in' (*The Many Faces of Realism*, 151).

7. At this point one catches sight of some other things that matter to Putnam. The first has to do with agreement and disagreement. Putnam says:

> 'Robert Nozick reports being asked whether one could give an argument that would convince Hitler himself or a Nazi. The only answer to this demand . . . is to point out that probably no statement except the Principle of Contradiction has this property'. (*The Many Faces of Realism*, 68. See also *Ethics without Ontology*, 75 ff)

This is exact. But isn't there at least one more thing to be said? When we explore the full multiplicity, stringency and cumulative force of the constraints which must shape any first-order ethic that can answer to the needs, aspirations and expectations that almost no ordinary human being can really forsake, is there really no prospect of showing in detail how and why, for a reasonable

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person, there is *nothing else to think but that* the Nazis were making a truly terrible mistake – a mistake it was criminally insane to make?[11] By *there is nothing else to think but that* . . . I intend a condensation of the general idea of truth – and a celebration of Peircean secondness – which will be hospitable to the huge variety of statements which may be put forward as true – the empirical (embracing the perceptual, historical, geographical . . .), the logical or conceptual, and the ethical or political.[12] It is fully consonant, I observe, with further thoughts that Putnam is still appealing to at the time of his writing *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy:*

> 'There is no reason to suppose that one cannot hold . . . that some "value-judgments" are true as a matter of objective fact without holding that moral facts can be recognition-transcendent facts. If something is a good solution to a problematical human situation, then part of the very notion of its being a good solution is that human beings can recognize that it is. We need not entertain the idea that something could be a good solution [for a question about human living] even though human beings are *in principle unable to recognize that it is*' (109).

[11] Let me try to indicate how there is indeed that prospect: It is one thing to maintain, as did John Stuart Mill in chapter 16 of *Considerations on Representative Government* (1861), that: 'a portion of mankind may be said to constitute a Nationality if they are united among themselves by common sympathies which do not exist among them and any others – which make them cooperate with each other more willingly than with other people, desire to be under the same government and desire that it should be government by themselves, or a portion of themselves, exclusively'. It is another thing to hold, as Carl Schmitt held, that politics is prior to and transcends all order, transcending the state as well as law, and that 'the basis for all political activity and impulses is the distinction between friend and enemy'. (See *The Concept of the Political* [1932] trans G. Schwab, New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Press 1976, 20, 26–27, 35. Here I am much indebted to Cheryl Misak.) It is yet another thing, a third thing, having reached such a point in Nazist thinking to seek to implement such ideas not from scratch and on a virgin continent but in despite of the most fundamental prohibitions that the rational development of morality can provide. For these last, see my 'Solidarity and the Root of the Ethical', *op. cit.* at note 6 above.

[12] It will widen the appeal of this form of words, I hope, if I remark that it forced itself upon me before Cheryl Misak and Hilary Putnam made me appreciate more fully the merits of pragmatism as a philosophy of enquiry. See my *Needs, Values, Truth* (Oxford: OUP 1987, 2002), Essay V, Section 10.

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8. Now we come to fact and value and the supposed dichotomy between them. Consider the hopes and expectations that support the use – and thus the sense, reference and extension – of the names and other terms already spoken of. Those hopes and expectations were conceived in particular circumstances but not *specifically for* those circumstances. Their ambit extends to any circumstances at all which can impinge on the conditions of human life. Those conditions, however, are indefinitely variable. As Aristotle remarks in Book V of the *Ethics*, 'the stuff of the practical [the motley of concerns and conditions that bear upon action] is without limit'. But, if so, then the same variability must affect the demands which we can foresee will flow from our unforsakeable standing needs and affect equally the precautions we shall find we have to take against what Geoffrey Warnock referred to in his book *The Object of Morality* (1971) as the tendency for things to turn out badly. It is against that background that we arrive at the yard-stick (the practical understanding) by which to estimate whether a person is considerate, an action generous, a judgment just, or an outcome fortunate . . . There can be no question of tying down the extension of ethical language in constant terms that relate only to the material world as it would appear independently of our human effort to colonize it and spread our multiple cares and concerns upon it. For in the absence of the ethical interest with which we look out upon the world, it would be utterly mysterious why there should be any terms with extensions such as belong to ethical predicates.[13] (In the way just described, the properties that they denominate are indeed highly non-natural.)[14] But once it becomes clear where our ethical interest comes from and how it enables such predicates to function, their reference and extension are (however intricate and open-textured) only one or two degrees more mysterious than are ordinary dispositions. (Or even scientific dispositions. Consider *reflectancy,* which Putnam has pointed out 'does not have one uniform physical

[13] Putnam rightly credits this insight to John McDowell and to Iris Murdoch, reporting McDowell as saying that in order to apply an ethical term it is necessary, regardless of what else one is attempting, to feel or know the appeal of the relevant ethical point of view and to know how to identify with it. See Putnam's *Philosophy in an Age of Science* (Cambridge, Mass, Harvard 2012), 295.

[14] See *Twelve Lectures* op. cit., 76 note 6, and 175–76, citing Hume's words 'Natural may be opposed either to what is unusual, miraculous or artificial' and deriving from these words three possible meanings for 'non-natural' in order then to focus upon the third. See also section 11 below.

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explanation. A red star and a red admiral and a reddish glass of water are red for quite different physical reasons . . .' Or consider even *solidity*. See *The Many Faces of Realism*, 5–7.)

9. In *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy* (44) Putnam reports Bernard Williams as saying that he did not see how a metaphysical explanation could ever be provided for the possibility of ethical knowledge. But why can't it count as a metaphysical explanation for us to show how the ethical judgments in which we concur are undergirded by the construction that practical reason has made from our peculiar perceptions of our shared necessities? The thing that is to be understood may be marvellous, but it is scarcely unearthly.

> 'The belief that there is such a thing as justice is not a belief in *ghosts*, nor is "a sense of justice" a para-normal sense which enables us to perceive ghosts. Justice is not something anyone proposes to *add* to the list of objects recognized by chemical theory' (*RTH*, 145).

Nor, it may be added, does the determination of considerateness or generosity or justice require a special faculty for their detection. We determine these things by simultaneously paying heed to the ordinary world, bringing an ethical interest to bear upon it, and deploying the concepts that that interest secures to us:[15]

> 'How could there be "value facts"? After all, we have no sense organ for detecting them . . . Consider the parallel question: "How could we come to tell that people are *elated*? After all we have no sense organ for detecting elation". . . [Answer] Once I have acquired the concept of elation I can see that someone is elated . . . Perception is not innocent; it is an exercise of our concepts' (*Collapse*, 102–103).

On these reasonable terms what remains to exclude the claim that such perceptions can be perceptions of fact and find expression in judgments that are true?

10. A partial summation one might be tempted to offer of the simplification that Putnam helps to make room for is this. The concept *judgment with a truth-value* (or *factual judgment*) and the concept

[15] Compare the position that W.D. Ross really occupied. On this see my *Ethics: Twelve Lectures*, 334 note 14.

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ethical judgment are different concepts. One has a much wider extension than the other. But the distinctness of these concepts is no reason why ethical judgments should not fall under both. Compare the way in which what it is to be a mammal is different from what it is to be a mouse, even though mice are both mammals and mice.[16] Inside or outside philosophy there has never been a good argument against this possibility. After a century or more spent under severe but ill considered cross-examination, the ethical emerges unscathed – wiser and less dogmatic perhaps, yet unscathed, a worthy participant in the ordinary search for truth(s).

In *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy* and elsewhere, Putnam has traced the twists and turns, the confusions and the misconceptions which have darkened these questions. He has also documented (see page 62) the way in which, at a crucial moment in the histories of economics and of philosophy, positivist doctrines of meaningfulness and meaninglessness prompted or else reinforced the economists' conviction that they must put aside the work of many of their predecessors – not least the work of the early economists of welfare – and fashion economics thereafter upon the natural sciences. It was in the same spirit that they concurred in Lionel Robbins's finding that:

> 'It does not seem logically possible to associate the two studies [ethics and economics] in any form but mere juxtaposition. Economics deals with ascertainable facts; ethics with values and obligations' (see *Collapse*, 63).

First must come the *facts*, it was insisted, and only then, from the political process or elsewhere, the so-called 'value judgment'. Since Robbins, the economists may have cheated a little maybe – in the work of cost-benefit analysis (contingent valuation), for instance. (Pulling rank, they often seek to steer the so-called 'political process' in the direction they think they know is best.) But few countenance the prospect of ethics having official release from the quarantine imposed on it by Lord Robbins. They still scoff if one insists that among the facts are the vital needs of human beings and one insists that in moral and political deliberation these have to be singled out *as such* for priority over other human interests.[17] Such is the power,

[16] See further *Ethics: Twelve Lectures*, 332.

[17] Those who insist on the priority of needs among human interests are not compelled to insist that human needs enjoy absolute priority over every other kind of concern. See my 'Nature, Respect for Nature and the Human

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even today, of confusions which were nurtured long ago in philosophy itself before they were spread abroad. Or such was their power until Amartya Sen and others such as Putnam's collaborator, Vivian Walsh, pointed out:

> '. . . how feeble a measure of [true] economic well being money and gross economic product are by themselves, and how seriously our "information base" is restricted when . . . information [is not gathered] about what results flow from given levels of income or production under various conditions' (*Collapse*, 57–58).

In the place of conventional economic measures of gross economic product, Sen has proposed that, despite Robbins, economists should recognize that the proper characterization of human well-being involves an extended and irreducibly ethical investigation of the 'functionings that [a person] has reason to value'. This is the so-called Capabilities Approach. It remains to be seen what will be its long term effect on the rest of the economics profession. If economics proves impermeable to Sen's contentions, that will not be Sen's fault – or Putnam's.

11. Going only by the particular claims I have picked out from *Reason, Truth and History* or elsewhere and consolidating these with a claim that I quoted from page 109 of *Collapse*, it might seem that the position that emerges is as follows:

(1) No well considered assertoric discourse is to be excluded from aspirations to truth or objectivity as pragmatically conceived; least of all is ethical discourse to be so excluded.

(2) Ethical predications are a sub-class of assertoric would-be factual predications – or else, if you prefer, rank alongside them in respect of objectivity – and their chief peculiarity precisely derives from the particular way in which they get their sense (see sections 4 and 6). One result of that is this: that in describing *x* in ethical terms – in doing this *locutionary* speech-act in a certain context – one may also approve, praise or condemn *x*, where approving, praising or condemning are *illocutionary* speech-acts done by means of the locutionary act of describing *x* there in that particular context and

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Scale of Values', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, vol **100**, 1–32. (The correct text is given only in the bound *Proceedings*.)

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describing it by the use of a term with that special and particular kind of sense.[18]

(3) An ethical true judgment, precisely by virtue of what has been required for it to have sense or significance and to refer to things or properties of ethical concern, points to a reality.

Someone might be led by Putnam's writings to embrace such a position. But this is not quite Putnam's position. The discrepancy appears not so much under the head (1) as under (2) and (3).

Against the finding (2) one must place such statements as this from *Ethics without Ontology* (Cambridge Mass & London: Harvard 2004):

> '. . . *some* valuings [or value judgments], in fact some ethical valuings, *are* descriptions (though not of anything "non-natural") and *some* valuings are not descriptions. Valuings do not contrast *simply* with descriptions. There is overlap, in my view, between the class of descriptions and the class of valuings' (74, compare *RTH*, 138 ff).

Thus Putnam says that 'Vlad the Impaler was an exceptionally cruel monarch' is a description. 'But "terrorism is criminal" and "wife-beating is wrong" are not descriptions; they are simply evaluations that convey moral condemnations'. I have drafted (2) in a way that conveys my doubt whether Putnam is obliged to say this. If 'true' can play a general role in philosophy, why cannot 'describe' do so too?[19] But I am not sure how important this disagreement really is.[20]

It is under (3) that a more important discrepancy appears. In *Ethics without Ontology* (54–5) Putnam gives unqualified endorsement to a

[18] For the locutionary and the illocutionary see J. L. Austin *How to do Things with Words* (ed.) J.O. Urmson (Oxford, OUP 1962 and 1975).

[19] See Sabina Lovibond 'Reply to McNaughton and Rawling', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society,* **104** (2003–4) 185–201. See also my *Ethics: Twelve Lecture,* 378–80. Nor is Putnam obliged by his position to enter the disobliging parenthesis about the non-natural. The non-natural is integral to the answer to Williams which was offered at Section 8 above.

[20] Indeed, in other connections, Putnam insists that 'all evaluation presupposes description'. See page 70 in his *Philosophy in an Age of Science,* (eds) M. De Caro and D. Macarthur (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University 2012).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819113000375 Published online by Cambridge University Press

statement by James Conant explaining the position that he, Putnam, occupies. Let me reproduce one part of that statement:

> 'Ethical and mathematical thought represent forms of reflection that are as fully governed by norms of truth and validity as any other form of cognitive activity. But [Putnam] is not friendly to the idea that in order to safeguard the cognitive credentials of ethics and mathematics one must therefore suppose that ethical and mathematical thought bear on reality in the same way as ordinary empirical thought, so that, in order to safeguard the truth of such [a] proposition . . . as "it is wrong to break a promise", one must suppose that, like ordinary empirical propositions, such a proposition . . . describes[its] own peculiar state of affairs'.

Against this I point out that, if a philosopher reaches the claims (1) and (3) by going along the route that Putnam's work has led me to travel with him, then there can be no question of invoking the idea of reality *in order to* safeguard the cognitive credentials of ethics.[21] They have been safeguarded already. The idea of reality comes at the end not the beginning. First comes the ethical judgment itself, its possibility, its sense and its prospects – according to the pragmatist – of objective truth. Only where all these things are present and objective truth is already attained, can one be moved to insist that the judgment points to a reality.[22] That is why I insisted at the beginning that moral realism was a singularly poor entry point into Putnam's pragmatic conception of ethics.

If we are to make any use at all of the ideas either of reality or a reality (if we do not prefer to abandon the noun 'reality' altogether), then we must distinguish between *reality* (at large) and *a* (particular) *reality*. The claim (3) relates to *a reality* that a true moral judgment may point to. But, particular realities apart, Conant prefers in the

[21] Nor is that how Sabina Lovibond arrives at the conclusion Putnam reports Conant and Blackburn as criticizing from page 36 of her book, *Realism and Imagination in Ethics* (Oxford, Blackwell 1983).

[22] So there is no proposal here to revive a correspondence theory of truth. Such particular 'realities' can never play the role that fact/facts have to play in the correspondence theory. For it is the particular truth that imports the relevant reality, not the other way about. Rather than say that the statement is answerable to that particular reality or fact, it might be better to say that the reality or fact in question is singled out only through the mediation of a true sentence that points to it.

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passage I have cited to make reference to the idea of reality as such – reality in the large, so to say. But then I insist against Conant that, if a judgment is ethical in character, then one who makes the judgment *not only need not but simply cannot* suppose that the sentence 'bears on reality [in the large] in the same way as an ordinary empirical thought'. (These are Conant's words.) How could it? An ethical judgment does not have the content of an empirical judgment. Indeed, if reality in the large is what is at issue, there will be as many distinct ways for statements to bear upon reality as there are different things to say.

Back then to the idea of *a reality*. What sort of thing is a particular reality that some true ethical judgment might point to? It is an earthly reality. Where we are tempted to behave badly, it is the sort of thing that can get in our way – a kind of obstacle. The obstacle is not a part of nature. It is something that owes its existence to the construction that gives sense to the sentences which point to it as a reality. It is a sort of artefact. But it is no less a reality on that account.[23] Think here of the legal realities, not changeless but not fictitious or imaginary either, which lawyers and legislators create. If we are lucky, such legal realities (benign ones) control or regulate the world we live in. Now though, in contrast with the professedly provisional character of most (not all) law or legislation, consider the however contestable larger and more permanent aspirations for a human life worth the name that find expression in the moral construction which is the counterpart of the legal construction. Is it not precisely these aspirations that Putnam must have in mind at the points where he seeks to invoke 'our moral image of the world'?

12. One who takes the position here defended and elects to speak of true moral judgments as judgments of fact (or as all of a piece with judgments of fact) runs the risk of seeming to elide the difference between the empirical and the ethical. But that is not the import of the pragmatist position. The ethical draws upon the empirical but the distinction between the concepts *ethical* and *empirical* is intact. (See sections 8 and 9.) One who takes the position defended here may seem to lose hold of the difference between what people do do and what they ought and ought not to do. But the reality of what people do and the reality of the demands that lie upon them are quite different realities. (See section 11 above.) One who takes the position here defended may seem to lose hold of the difference between the concepts *matter-of-factual* and *ethical* or

[23] See *Ethics: Twelve Lectures,* 76, also 327.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819113000375 Published online by Cambridge University Press

valuational. But that difference too is intact. (See section 10, paragraph one.)[24]

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[24] This text derives from a lecture given at the Fifth International Lauener Symposium on Analytical Philosophy in Bern in June 2012 dedicated to the work of Hilary Putnam and marking the award to him of the Lauener Prize for lifelong achievement in Analytical Philosophy. A longer version of the article with a reply by Putnam will be forthcoming in 2013/14 in M. Frauchiger (ed.) *Themes from Putnam* (Lauener Library of Analytical Philosophy, (eds) W. K. Essler and M. Frauchiger, volume 5) (Berlin, Boston, Peking: Walter de Gruyter).

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