

# Hilary Putnam (Chicago, 1926 - Boston, 2016)

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## *In memoriam*

### **Hilary Putnam** **(Chicago, 1926 – Boston, 2016)**

Printed media noted that Hilary Putnam, one of the most influential American philosophers, died on 13 March 2016. His publications have left recognisable trace in many philosophical disciplines, notably in metaphysics, theory of knowledge, philosophy of science, philosophy of mind, philosophy of language, and philosophy of logic, and in his later phase in philosophy of politics, ethics, and philosophy of religion. His powerful insights and original thought experiments were stimulating for the critical thinking not satisfied with overused interpretations.

Putnam was a member of American Academy of Arts and Sciences, American Philosophical Society, as well as corresponding member of British Academy and French *Academie des Sciences Politiques et Morales*. For his work he received multiple awards (among others, Prometheus Prize of the American Philosophical Association and Rolf Schock Prize in philosophy), and a number of honorary doctorates.

From the subjective perspective of a young graduate student, who as Balokovic scholar had an opportunity to study philosophy at Harvard University in the academic year 1976–1977, Hilary Putnam (with whom I took a course in the philosophy of science) unavoidably got a position of a “third”, next to two giants of the department – Willard van Orman Quine and Nelson Goodman. It was the time when this powerful group dominated American philosophy of that time and when the “third” among them (who sometimes appeared to be close to one, and then to the other of his senior colleagues) made his own way to philosophical personality whose ideas have become an unavoidable part of discourse and a challenge that proved to be so productive for the philosophical discourse.

Hilary Whitehall Putnam was born on 31 May, 1926 in Chicago. Early years he spends in France, from where his family returns back to Pittsburg before the outbreak of the Second World War. There he meets Noam Chomsky; it was the beginning of a long lasting friendship in spite of the fact that their views often diverged. Putnam studied mathematics and philosophy at Pennsylvania, and after that at Harvard University and UCLA. His doctoral thesis *The Meaning of the Concept of Probability in Application to Finite Sequences*, under mentorship of Hans Reichenbach, he completed and defended at UCLA in 1951.

Putnam first taught philosophy at Northwestern University, and after that at Princeton, where he received a tenure in both the department of philosophy and department of mathematics. It is the time of his rising interest in math-

emational logic and also logical positivism (and Rudolf Carnap in particular). He also worked on some unsolved mathematical problems, as formulated by David Hilbert at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and was specifically engaged in finding the general algorithm for solving the so called Diophantine equations. Together with two other collaborators he successfully proved that the problem is in principle unsolvable. During his two-years stay at the Institute for Advanced Studies (where he is again with Chomsky, and where he, during the seminar of Paul Ziff, met Jerry Fodor and Jerrold Katz), John Austin comes for a visit. The encounter impressed Putnam so much that shortly after, in the academic year 1960–1961, he is, as a Guggenheim Fellow, at the University of Oxford, where he had an opportunity to get in touch with the ordinary language philosophy from the first hand. In that year Austin died and his position was taken by Paul Grice. Upon the return Putnam joined the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and since 1965 he was a full professor at Harvard, where he was teaching for many years, that is until his retirement in 2000.

Instead of an attempt to provide a concise overview of Putnam's entire work, it may eventually be more appropriate to single out and briefly present some of his outstanding ideas and theses that became a sort of trade mark of his philosophy. One of the most remarkable trades of his philosophy is his *realism* – a belief that between the language we use and some from the mind independent reality there exists a correspondence which is not arbitrary, but is rather a kind of representation which is objectively founded. Putnam extends his realism consequently even on the realm of quantum physics, which, as generally accepted, resists all forms of application of objectivism. Contrary to the beliefs of many physicists, Putnam is convinced that quantum mechanical measurements represent real physical states; it is only that logical operations one uses are not in accord with those of classical physics. He later softens such a view and got closer to the somewhat more moderate interpretation as expounded by David Bohm.

Under the obvious impact of Quine, he became a proponent of the view that mathematical language is universally applicable, and that it is impossible to doubt in its foundation in reality. He then based his realism on mathematics applied to virtually all disciplines. Though his realism gets modified throughout time (he operates with the term “internal realism”, later also “metaphysical realism”, then talks also about “common sense realism” or simply “realism”, as opposed to “Realism”) it remains his lasting philosophical preoccupation, representative of which is the article “Why There Isn't a Ready-Made World” (1983). No wonder that, as some analysts observe, the most frequent word in the titles of his papers is – reality.

The basic premise of his philosophy of language can be comprised in the phrase: “meanings just ain't in the head”). In his “The Meaning of ‘Meaning’” (1975) he advocates the view that meanings are not a construct of the world-independent and self-contained mind but rather dimension of the immediate interaction of subject and world. That is what in the philosophy became known as *semantic externalism*. If it is so, if utterances are neither arbitrary nor conventional but are rather capable of a more immediate correspondence with reality, then it can be taken by epistemology as a strong argument that grants knowledge a capacity of an objective insight into the world order. Putnam seemingly makes a step further than Wittgenstein (and a step closer to Adam Smith) claiming that meanings are not defined only by usage but also by expert knowledge and skill. Like John Searle (particularly

in his Chinese Room Argument), he also claimed that mentality is not shaped merely by means of syntax; it is semantics that is constitutive of mental states. By the thesis that meanings are not in the head Putnam simply means that they cannot be reduced to internalist concepts. He emphasized the importance of *context* in which every speech act takes place, and also showed that meanings are not stable and fixed but rather dependent on the changing (external) circumstances. That what Putnam calls “causal constraint” witnesses also boundness to the really existing world.

In order to prove that language is not determined by (internally) intended meanings, he initiated a thought experiment, which could be briefly described in the following way: imagine that there exists a Twin Earth, a planet in all aspects identical to ours and inhabited by people that are our twins. There is though one difference: whereas water on Earth is representable by the form  $H_2O$ , on the Twin Earth it is composed of the elements XYZ. Both the inhabitants of Earth and those of Twin Earth use the same word (and intended meaning) “water” but they refer to different substances. To talk thus of meanings in some *a priori* sense or devoid of the empirical is thus dubious.

Philosophy of mind is another branch of philosophy in which Putnam has left influential trace, probably primarily because of the idea of *functionalism* of which he was the originator. Its basic premise is that it is irrelevant what kind of substance underlies mental processes to which they are causally connected; what matters is the functional organisation. It is a critique of psycho-physical reductionism, theory of identity, and similar theories which all claim that it is features of the material that define the nature and content of the mental. In his article “Philosophy and Our Mental Life” (1975) he concludes that the same mental states emerge from very different material bases. That was the ground for the *multiple realizability thesis* that opposes the causal connection between the material and the mental, claiming roughly that any substance can generate any kind of mentality. It is the function that determines the mental; whether the role of the “brain” is fulfilled by the neurons, chips or Swiss cheese, it is of no relevance (“*We could be made of Swiss cheese and it wouldn't matter*”).

Another Putnam’s thought experiment that has caused a bounty of comments since it was published (with still actual disputes) is that of the “brains in a vat”, published in the collection of essays *Reason, Truth, and History* (1981). Not only philosophers, laymen too, time and again ask: Is the world we experience real or not; is it a mental fancy or a representation from the senses independent reality? In order to answer the question Putnam invites us to imagine that we are “brains in a vat”, brains connected to the computing machine whose “experience” of the world is dictated by the computer program. This thought experiment (a kind of modern version of Descartes’ argument from *Meditation on First Philosophy*) is meant to refute scepticism in regard to the possibility of the knowledge of the world. If by means of logical induction we come to conclusion that we are not “brains in a vat” then, according to Putnam, it follows that metaphysical scepticism is unfounded. Bringing together this argument, externalist semantics and functionalism is, however, not without problems and has been commented by a number of outstanding contemporary philosophers (e.g. Nagel, Davidson, Wright, Weiss, Forbes, etc.).

His later works make a detour from the analytic philosophy of which he is was a prominent proponent. Among his last publications there is a book on Jewish philosophy (*Jewish Philosophy as a Guide to Life*, 2009) in which he deals with philosophical ideas of Franz Rosenzweig, Martin Buber, Emmanuel Levinas, and Ludwig Wittgenstein. There is further a collected vol-

ume (in collaboration with Vivian Walsh) devoted to philosophy of economics (*The End of Value-Free Economics*, 2011). His last published work is a collection of essays *Philosophy in an Age of Science* (2012).

Throughout his life his ideological and spiritual inclinations switched from the far leftist ideology (probably not without influence of his father who was a columnist at the communist *Daily Worker*) to the no less enthusiastic acceptance of Judaism. He was activist of the Progressive Labor Party – a Maoist organisation – but gradually disappointed with Marxist ideas and ideals, in the seventies he shifted toward religion which he actively practiced personally and in the family. He was also engaged in the campaign for civil rights, for student rights, and against the Vietnam war.

Human–machine relation and virtual reality – themes that Putnam so thoroughly explored, inspired producers of the “Matrix”, a science-fiction film and one of the big Hollywood blockbusters that brings the story of creatures physically identical to us but powered by computer “mind”, programmed by the artificial intelligence of evil intensions. On the one hand, “Matrix” was inspired by the philosophical ideas and, on the other hand, it was inspiring for philosophers, such as for instance Hubert Dreyfus, for whom it was an opportunity to combat Cartesianism.

Though Putnam surely did not intend any popularisation of philosophy as he developed these ideas, we have reasons to believe that he would have nothing against consideration that philosophy is a part of real life to whose complexity and beauty (taking into account his realism) it has to tune to.

**Zdravko Radman**