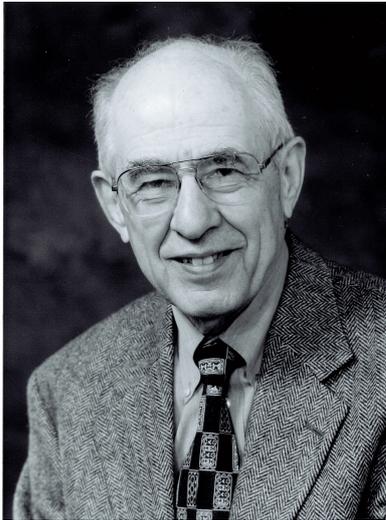


Hilary Putnam: Embodying Philosophy

By Massimo Dell'Utri



1. When in a couple of decades historians of philosophy will take the task of writing a history of contemporary philosophy, Hilary Putnam (1926–2016) will undoubtedly feature as a prominent figure. There are at least two reasons for this.

The former is that Putnam virtually tackled all the domains of philosophical inquiry worth investigation, contributing with a wealth of innovative and ingenious ideas. Resorting to the famous, if somewhat mysterious, adage by the Greek poet Archilochus — “The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing” — we may say that Putnam definitely was a fox. After all, it’s no coincidence that John Passmore referred to him as “the history of recent philosophy in outline” (Passmore 1988: 97).

The latter reason is that the very development of his career, marked by changes of mind and moments of bold self-criticism, showed the relevance that philosophical reflection has not just for philosophy but life itself. Indeed, decade after decade Putnam made it clear how philosophy can provide substantial food both for thought and our actual existence. This is why for him a philosophy that doesn’t ‘speak to us’ — doesn’t help to tackle the real problems we unavoidably encounter in the course of daily living — is of no use.

For Putnam, as for Socrates, the central philosophical question was *how to live our lives and how to order our societies*.

Hence the focus on *practice* and its inherently moral nature by a philosopher who in the Fifties started addressing deep metaphysical questions in the philosophy of science and mathematics, before becoming more and more aware of the fact that “metaphysics without ethics is blind” (Putnam 1976: 92). But what does this mean?

2. For a philosopher of science who takes science at face value, the world as it arises from our best scientific theories constitutes the whole or part of our picture of the world — our metaphysical picture. Moreover, the natural sciences provide a genuine knowledge of the world, and this kind of knowledge constitutes the whole or part of our conceptual system. This is the point of view called ‘naturalism’, which — as the repeated phrase points out — can come in at least two varieties.

The former variety is an instance of reductionism in that it reduces all the knowledge worthy of the name to the knowledge provided by the natural sciences (the other non-reducible kinds of knowledge being deemed no knowledge at all), and it also reduces all the complexity we see in the world to the world described by the natural sciences. Tables and chairs don’t actually exist, despite appearances: it is atoms and electric charges constituting them that do exist.

At the beginning of his career Putnam inclined toward this radical variety of naturalism, but already by the Seventies he realized that it was a wrong standpoint to take, and utterly denied that scientific knowledge, however important, is all of our knowledge:

"I do not believe that ethical statements are expressions of scientific knowledge; but neither do I agree they are not knowledge at all. The idea that the concepts of truth, falsity, explanation, and even understanding are all concepts which belong exclusively to science seems to me to be a perversion. That Adolf Hitler was a monster seems to me to be a true statement (and even a 'description' in any ordinary sense of 'description'), but the term 'monster' is neither reducible to nor eliminable in favour of 'scientific' vocabulary" (Putnam 1975: xiii-xiv).

This quotation discloses the latter variety of naturalism, which following Mario De Caro and David Macarthur, Putnam called *liberal naturalism*. It allows for the existence of non-scientific entities and forms of understanding — e.g. art criticism, social analysis, and political evaluation — while avoiding commitment to anything supernatural. In order to realize the revolutionary impact liberal naturalism may have on our culture suffices it to appreciate how it leads to dismantling the traditional dichotomy between natural sciences and human sciences, in particular the dichotomy between facts and values it embeds.

3. The idea that the human sciences are utterly distinct from the natural sciences was based on the conviction that only the latter possess the resources to acquire genuine objective knowledge, given that they purportedly deal with mind-independent facts about the natural non-human world. In contrast, human sciences are the realm of values which, notoriously, are tied to a given cultural milieu and are therefore subjective in character. Thus, it seems that no objective conclusion can be drawn from them, no conclusion susceptible to be true and to express an actual piece of knowledge. It seems, in other words, that the task of the human sciences isn't that of describing and explaining facts, for the simple reason that nothing to describe and explain appears in their fields.

References:

- Passmore J. 1988. *Recent Philosophers*. London: Duckworth.
 Putnam H. 1975. *Mathematics, Matter and Method*, Philosophical Papers, Vol. 1. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
 Putnam H. 1976. *Literature, Science and Reflection*. *New Literary History* 7.3, 483–91. Repr. in Putnam 1978, 83–94.
 Putnam H. 1978. *Meaning and the Moral Sciences*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

This is the view that has been informing our culture at least from the birth of modern science in the 1600's, went through the Enlightenment and was revived by Neopositivism till mid of the last century. Putnam contributed to the reformation of this secular tradition in the following way.

He emphasized that this presupposes a notion of fact as exclusively tied to our sensory experience, and made us aware that, if we work on the basis of such an impoverished notion, then it is no wonder that ethical judgments turn out not to be 'factual'. A more careful look reveals not only that scientific knowledge is about facts regarding not directly observable entities, but also that it presupposes a specific kind of values — *epistemic values* such as coherence, comprehensiveness, instrumental efficacy, plausibility, reasonableness, simplicity and the like. Once we realize that facts and values are deeply intertwined even in the field of the natural sciences, the alleged dichotomy between them collapses, and this collapse uncovers the possibility of talking about facts in the field of the human sciences too — facts guaranteeing the objective validity of the many claims we make about ethical, aesthetical, political, social issues. The revolutionary impact on our culture I alluded to above resides precisely in broadening rational discussion to cover spheres mistakenly deemed entirely subjective.

Failing to realize this leads to attempts at gaining a picture of the world that don't take into account the values that make us human — the values that guide us in envisaging ways of understanding how *to live our lives and how to order our societies*. It leads to a metaphysics that appears to be blind when not sensibly backed up by ethics — and all the other human sciences, for that matter. Hence the rare versatility of the fox Putnam who, year after year, came to embody philosophy itself.

Massimo Dell'Utri is Professor of Philosophy at University of Sassari, Sardegna