PUTNAM’S MORAL REALISM

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Putnam’s Moral Realism

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I hereby certify that all material in this final year project which is not my own work has been identified and that no work is included for which a degree has already been conferred on me.

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Abstract

Moral realism is the view that there are such things as moral facts. Moral realists have attempted to combat the skeptical problem of relativism, which is that the truth of an ethical value judgment is often, or always, subjective, that is, relative to the parties it involves. This essay presents, discusses, and criticizes Hilary Putnam’s attempt at maintaining moral realism while at the same time maintaining a degree of epistemological relativism. Putnam’s positive account originates in moral epistemology, at the heart of which lies truth, as idealized rational acceptability or truth under ideal conditions. The bridge between moral epistemology and normative ethics stems from Putnam’s disintegration of facts and values. His theory is finalized in the construction of a normative moral theory, in which the central notion is incessant self-criticism in order to maintain rationality. After presenting Putnam’s core thesis, the criticism raised by Richard Rorty, is deliberated upon. Rorty is critical of Putnam’s attempt at holding on to objectivity, because he does not understand how objective knowledge can be both relative to a conceptual scheme, and at the same time objective. The conclusion is that Putnam is unable to maintain his notion of truth as idealized rational acceptability and is forced into epistemological relativism. Putnam’s normative ethics has characteristics in common with virtue ethics, and is of much interest regardless of whether it can be grounded epistemologically or not.

Keywords: Moral realism, moral epistemology, relativism, idealized rational acceptability, ideal terminus, fact-value distinction, Hilary Putnam, Richard Rorty
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Introduction

Moral theory is typically divided into normative (or substantive) ethics, and meta-ethics. Normative ethics refers to claims regarding what is right or wrong, and includes general systems, such as Kantian deontology or Act utilitarianism. Normative ethical theory attempts to provide answers to general questions such as:

- What features of actions make them either morally right or morally wrong?
- What characteristics of persons make them morally good or bad?
- What features of things, events, and states of affairs make them good or bad?

In contrast, meta-ethics refers to the nature or status of moral claims, and instead of asking whether or not something is right or wrong, the notion of right or wrong, in itself, is put to question. What do we mean when we say that something is right or wrong? Are ethical judgments factual, or value-laden, and in either case, are such judgments possible to justify? Questions such as these have led skeptics to doubt the possibility of acquiring moral justified belief, moral knowledge, and moral truth.

Walter Sinnott-Armstrong divides meta-ethics into moral linguistics, moral metaphysics, deontic logic, definitions of morality, moral epistemology, and moral psychology. These different sub-fields overlap and are hard to keep track of in most meta-ethical arguments, nevertheless, in a broad sense, this thesis will primarily regard moral epistemology – the field that questions how moral knowledge is possible – but will inevitably branch out in other philosophical fields.

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6 Ibid., 6.
The metaphysical or ontological aspects of morality have led to the creation of two camps, moral realists and moral anti-realists. Moral realists (or objectivists) state that there are moral facts that are independent of human attitudes, social conventions or beliefs. Moral anti-realists (or subjectivists) deny the existence of moral facts, or assert that moral facts are dependent upon human attitudes, social conventions or beliefs. (This is, admittedly, a very rough sketch that only serves the purpose of introducing the issues at hand.)

Moral realists claim that some moral sentences are true in virtue of corresponding to the moral facts and properties that those moral sentences describe. Moral anti-realism denies, in one way or another, that morality can be objective. Put in other terms, subjectivity has been used as a way of saying “from someone’s point of view,” whereas objective has been used as “from no one’s point of view.” Intersubjectivity refers to the overlap in subjective opinion. Take, for instance, the proposition “blueberries are tasty”: many people would agree with such a proposition, and would therefore be in intersubjective agreement. (This is merely used as a way of exemplifying intersubjectivity. Different philosophers would feel differently about the epistemic status of such a claim.)

The strongest moral realist position states that there is a single true morality, which is usually referred to as a type of absolutism, or ontological objectivity. This radical position has most commonly been held by theologians and is a consequence of the conception of an omniscient, and omnipotent God. John Searle’s has referred to such positions as

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7 Timmons, Morality without Foundations, 16.
10 Harry J. Gensler, Earl W. Spurgin and James C. Swindal, Ethics: Contemporary Readings (London: Routledge, 2005), 3. Kant’s deontology is also a good example of such a philosophy.
ontologically objective,¹¹ because they consider the nature of ethics as being fundamentally independent of subjective experience. Thus, ontological objectivity refers to the existence of entities, or objects, whereas epistemological objectivity refers to the epistemic status of claims. This distinction can be summarized in the following way:

Moral absolutism or ontological objectivity: There is at least one principle that ought never to be violated.

Moral objectivity or epistemological objectivity: What is morally permissible or impermissible is a matter of fact, and does not depend solely on social contracts or subjective notions.

A non-ethical example of the difference between epistemological and ontological objectivity, is the supposed existence of abstract numbers. One such example is Kurt Gödel, who believed in the existence of abstract numbers in a Platonic sense,¹² which means that he believed that mathematical objects existed, in some sense, somewhere in the Universe. An epistemologically objective claim, on the other hand, would only have to do with knowledge, not existence. This distinction is admittedly problematic, for instance, all philosophers would not agree that there is such a thing as an objective claim, at all. Yet, this distinction is instrumental in order to distinguish between different levels of ethical objectivity. J. L. Mackie famously denounced the concept of objective values and put forth a collection of skeptical challenges. One such challenge was his so called *argument from queerness*, Mackie elaborates on the first part of the queerness argument in the following way: "If there were

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objective values, then they would be entities or qualities or relations of a very strange sort, utterly different from anything else in the universe.”

Mackie’s second part of the argument is that human beings would have to possess some type of special faculty of moral perception in order to grasp these strange moral attributes, Mackie’s first part of his queerness argument is an ontological argument, because it refers to the existence (or rather, nonexistence) of ethical entities; and the second is an epistemological argument, because a special psychological faculty would be knowledge related. (Mackie is being used to exemplify the difference between epistemology and ontology in ethics, his argument from queerness will not be of relevance throughout the rest of this thesis.) Hilary Putnam agrees with Mackie in stating that ontological objectivity is not necessary. Abstract entities make no difference to the world we live in, because if these peculiar objects stopped existing, would mathematics really stop working? The success of mathematics is independent of abstract entities, because we do not interact with them, nor do they interact with the rest of the empirical world. Thus, it should follow that everything would be the same if they did not exist. Because Putnam, who is the central figure of this thesis, agrees with Mackie that ontological objectivity is not very interesting – this thesis will simply grant that ontological objectivity is not what matters – epistemological objectivity is what matters; thus, moral objectivity will henceforth refer to epistemological claims, not ontological claims.

My primary aim is to present the moral epistemology of the highly influential 20th century philosopher, Putnam. Putnam is not primarily known as a philosopher of meta-ethics, but his views on epistemology has been used as a foundation to extend onto the field of moral epistemology by Timothy Mosteller (among others). This thesis will rely on Mosteller’s

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framework regarding Putnam’s meta-ethics, because Mosteller confronts the issues in a serious, fair, and balanced way.

In order to avoid turning into relativists or skeptics, moral realists have made attempts at grounding morality in objective claims. Putnam holds one type of moral realist position, which in his case is an attempt at sustaining an objective notion of moral knowledge while maintaining some relativist notions. First, Putnam’s view on relativism will be discussed. Second, what two concepts Putnam refers to as idealized rational acceptability, and ideal terminus of inquiry will be presented, and discussed. These two concepts serve as Putnam’s bridge between meta-ethics, and normative ethics. Third, Putnam’s attempt at linking moral epistemology and normative ethics comes from the collapse of the fact-value distinction and Putnam’s conception of rationality. Fourth, Richard Rorty has offered comprehensive criticism of Putnam’s philosophy during the last four decades. In this thesis, the criticism Rorty directs towards the objective strands in Putnam’s epistemology is focused on. The conclusion includes two things: first, Putnam is unable to sufficiently defend his epistemology and ultimately must be considered a relativist, and second; Putnam’s normative ethics is an interesting approach to practical ethics despite the lack of epistemological grounding.

**Epistemological Relativism**

This section will first present a general theory of epistemological relativism (ER). Second, Putnam’s conceptual relativism will be presented and compared to ER. Third, Putnam’s conceptual relativism will ultimately be forced to offer something in addition to ER, in order to not fall back into relativism; this addition is what Putnam refers to as the ideal terminus which will be the last consideration of this section.
Defining Relativism

In this thesis I will follow the same definition of epistemological relativism that
Mosteller employs, because it not hold specific to any standard, and therefore applies well to
Putnam. Mosteller, in turn, borrows his view from Harvey Siegel who gives the following
definition:

First, there is a standards conjunct which states:
For any knowledge claim p, p can be evaluated (assessed, established, etc.) only
according to (with reference to) one or another set of background principles and
standards of evaluation \( S_1 \ldots S_n \).

Second, there is a no neutrality conjunct which states:
and, given a different set (or sets) of background principles and standards \( s_1', \ldots s_n' \),
there is no neutral (that is, neutral with respect to the two (or more) alternative sets of
principles and standards) way of choosing between the two (or more) alternative sets
in evaluating p with respect to truth or rational justification. \( p \)'s truth and rational
justifiability are relative to the standards used in evaluating \( p \).

To put this in other terms: there is no neutral or independent way to “measure” the epistemic
status of a claim. Epistemic evaluation can only occur from within a conceptual scheme, or
what Siegel calls “standards of evaluation.” Thus, a relativist of this sort believes that a
knowledge-claim cannot be acceptable from the outside of a limited context.

Putnam’s Rejection of Relativism

Putnam rejects cultural relativism by arguing that the relativist is making an absolutist
claim, he writes: “After all, is it not obviously contradictory to hold a point of view while at
the same time holding that no point of view is more justified or right than any other?”

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15 Timothy Mosteller, *Relativism in Contemporary American Philosophy* (London: Continuum
International Publishing Group, 2006), chap, 1.

16 Ibid., 3.

17 Harvey Siegel, *Relativism Refuted: A Critique of Contemporary Epistemological Relativism*

relativist would perhaps answer that the claim is not absolute at all, but relative to a culture. This seems equally unsatisfactory, according to Putnam, because if the claim is not absolute, it must be relative, which means that the truth of the statement is itself relative. The relativist’s way out of this has been to suggest that the claim is true for a given person, or in a given culture. Putnam is critical of the relativist’s defense that there is no difference between the statements: “I am right” and “I think that I am right,” because holding such a position is a sort of “mental suicide,” because equating the two propositions turns speaking into making “noises in the hope that one will have the feeling one is right,” and thinking is merely making “images and sentence-analogues in the mind in the hope of having a subjective feeling of being right.” Additionally, Putnam argues that the relativist cannot distinguish between thinking one’s thought is about something and the thought actually being about something, thus, the relativist’s thoughts are apparently devoid of content.

One common counter-argument relativists present, is to say that being right just means being right in accordance with what is justified by the beliefs and standards of rationality generally accepted by the culture one lives in. From a moral perspective, the cultural relativist’s position allows for a stronger defense than a completely relativistic position. Consider the proposition, “murder is wrong”. The cultural relativist can claim that murdering is wrong, even “objectively” wrong, because murdering is considered wrong in the culture the relativist lives in. The cultural relativist, only substitutes “being right” to “what I, or those

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19 Ibid., 121.
20 Mosteller, Relativism in Contemporary American Philosophy, 79.
22 Ibid., 123-124
23 Ibid., 123-124
24 Ibid., 124
25 Mosteller, Relativism in Contemporary American Philosophy, 82.
belonging to this culture, think is right.” One difficulty with this position is that one can easily imagine a culture that condones all kinds of awful behavior, from a common-sense perspective (e.g., slavery). The crucial point being: is the discrepancy between whether or not one considers something awful or great just a matter of culture? Is morality entirely a social construct? The cultural relativist is forced to say “yes,” and commit to the notion that moral right and wrong is entirely about what is right or wrong in a culture.  

Putnam’s Affirmation of Relativism

As has been shown, Putnam is skeptical towards the relativist, but he embraces several relativistic premises. William Throop and Katheryn Doran have provided a thorough analysis of Putnam’s rejections, and affirmations of relativism. According to them, the premises (with relevant references) are:

Putnam's relativist theses:
(1) Norms of rationality evolve.
(2) Several incompatible sets of norms of rationality would be acceptable even in an ideal world.
(3) There is no such things as the WORLD’s own norms of rationality.
(4) Truth is in part a function of the conceptual system one adopts, and what objects exist depends in part on one's conceptual scheme.

Putnam's objectivist theses:
(5) Some views are objectively better than others.

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26 Mosteller, *Relativism in Contemporary American Philosophy*, 82-86.
(6) Our norms of rationality are attempts to approximate an ideal of transcultural rationality.\textsuperscript{33}

(7) There is an ideal terminus to the human dialogue.\textsuperscript{34}

(8) Ordinary objects really do exist; commonsense realism is roughly correct.\textsuperscript{35}

Putnam calls this quasi-relativist position \textit{conceptual relativity},\textsuperscript{36} which will subsequently be described. In Mosteller’s analysis of the above stated premises, he notes three features of Putnam’s conceptual relativity.

First, truth involves some sort of objective correspondence to reality, but is nevertheless internal to a conceptual scheme.\textsuperscript{37} Accordingly, Putnam argues that we cut up the world into objects and then insert them into different conceptual schemes, but that is not the same thing as saying that objects do not exist at all. Thus, to Putnam, objects are as much made as discovered, because we conceptualize objects by categorizing and labeling the world.\textsuperscript{38}

Because one cannot provide a single correct and full description of the world independently of any conceptual-scheme, the best we can do is offer a pluralistic (i.e., conceptually relative) view.\textsuperscript{39} Additionally, Putnam claims that signs do not intrinsically correspond to objects. The correspondence is dependent on how the signs (words) are used, and by whom. Furthermore, there is not much interesting to say about the correspondence (or reference) between a word and an object from within a language, because the word “rabbit” simply refers to rabbits.

There is nothing interesting to say about the reference in itself, or the nature of the

\textsuperscript{33} Putnam, \textit{Realism with a Human Face}, 124-125.

\textsuperscript{34} Putnam, \textit{Reason, Truth, and History}, 216.

\textsuperscript{35} Putnam, \textit{The Many Faces of Realism}, 1987, 70.


\textsuperscript{37} Mosteller, \textit{Relativism in Contemporary American Philosophy}, 96.

\textsuperscript{38} Putnam, \textit{Reason, Truth, and History}, 52-54

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 52.
correspondence between the words and objects.⁴⁰ This is to say that our language cannot be divided into two parts, one part that describes the world as it really is, in itself, and one part that describes our conceptual apparatus. “This does not mean that reality is hidden or noumenal; it simply means that you can’t describe the world without describing it.”⁴¹

Second, truth, justification, knowledge, and rationality involve the interests of the individual.⁴² That is to say that truth does not transcend the use of language. Statements are true by virtue of how they are used within a conceptual scheme and not because the words mean something “in themselves.”

Third, truth, and knowledge depend on conceptual schemes, but that does not mean that “anything goes.” It does not make sense to ask whether our concepts correspond to something “totally uncontaminated by conceptualization”⁴³ but that is not to say that every conceptual scheme is as good as every other. Putnam does not deny that our conceptual scheme is capable of reform (improvement), for instance through 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.”⁴⁴ To put this in a slightly different way, I believe Putnam is saying that we form knowledge with the help of our conceptual apparatus, and that this function is not representing the world as it really is, but nevertheless provides a working description that can be revised through experience. The concepts we put into use will be contaminated by other concepts, and by the mere fact that they will not represent the world accurately. There are better and worse

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⁴⁰ Ibid., 52.
⁴² Mosteller, Relativism in Contemporary American Philosophy, 97.
⁴³ Putnam, Reason, Truth, and History, 54.
⁴⁴ Ibid., 54.
conceptual schemes (what makes a conceptual scheme better or worse has to be postponed until later), and that is why relativism does not follow.

Putnam provides an example of how this can work. Consider a world in which there exist three objects: $x_1$, $x_2$, and $x_3$. Depending on how one looks at such a world, there can simply be three objects, or there can be seven objects: $x_1$, $x_2$, $x_3$, $x_1 + x_2$, $x_1 + x_3$, $x_2 + x_3$, $x_1 + x_2 + x_3$, depending upon whether or not one counts the sums as particulars of the “original” objects.\(^{45}\) What Putnam describes is that different conceptual schemes will adhere to different uses of language. It is nonsense to talk of how many objects that really exists, because one’s value system will correspond to the conceptual scheme one applies.\(^{46}\)

Does Putnam’s conceptual relativism go far enough to be considered epistemological relativism or does he manage to stay away from the relativist trap? According to Siegel’s definition\(^{47}\), the standards conjunct states that any knowledge claim can only be assessed from within a conceptual scheme; and the no neutrality conjunct states that there is no neutral conceptual scheme, a knowledge claim’s truth is always relative to the standards used in evaluating the claim. Putnam, surely, falls into the category of relativism when it comes to the standards conjunct, because of his explicit position that knowledge claims are evaluated from within a conceptual scheme. The issue of no neutrality is more difficult to assess. The status of a conceptual scheme, and whether or not they “compete” is hard to answer. Is Putnam saying that the two different views of how many objects there are in the world are just as good?

Putnam provides the following example: an argument between a monist and a dualist (regarding the philosophy of mind) may include that the monist find it more reasonable to

\(^{45}\) Putnam, *Realism with a Human Face*, 97.

\(^{46}\) Putnam, *Ethics without Ontology*, 40-42.

simply discard the notion of, for instance, a substance, because it creates unnecessary problems. The dualist can counter by arguing that it is more reasonable to believe that mental events are non-identical with physical events. There is no way to decide who is right about such a matter. Even if one believes that neither party is correct, that too, is a non-neutral position. Putnam is not denying the possibility of rationality in philosophical inquiry. What he denies is appeals to public norms when it comes to deciding what is rationally justified to believe in philosophy. What follows from this? Putnam poses just that question, himself:

The correct moral to draw is not that nothing is right or wrong, rational or irrational, true or false, and so on, but, as I said before, that there is no neutral place to stand, no external vantage point from which to judge what is right or wrong, rational or irrational, true or false. But is this not relativism after all?

Despite this statement, Putnam remains steadfast that he is not subject to the general criticism relativists usually suffer. The fact that knowledge claims can only be evaluated with reference to the conceptual scheme one chooses (Siegels’s standards conjunct), and that there is no neutrality between conceptual schemes (the no-neutrality conjunct), apparently, does not make Putnam a relativist, because Putnam believes that there is an ideal terminus for inquiry.

**Attempts at Retaining Objectivity**

Ideal Terminus and Idealized Rational Acceptability

The issue here is to determine, on Putnam’s account, whether or not a conceptual scheme can be better (in the sense of being a superior arbiter of knowledge) than any other conceptual scheme. He attempts to do this by positing that truth is a matter of idealized
rational acceptability (or idealized justification\textsuperscript{52}). Rational acceptability is relativistic claim, but by asserting that there is something ideal about truth, he attempts to maintain an objective strand.\textsuperscript{53} Putnam describes what he calls \textit{idealized rational acceptability}, as:

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. They depend upon our biology and our culture; they are by no means 'value free'. But they are our conceptions, and they are conceptions of something real. They define a kind of objectivity, \textit{objectivity for us}, even if it is not the metaphysical objectivity of the God's Eye view.\textsuperscript{54}

He further describes idealized rational acceptability as an \textit{approximation} of truth. What this means is that a statement such as “the earth is flat” was rationally acceptable in ancient times, but is not so now. This does not mean that the shape of the earth has changed, only that our conception, and knowledge, of the shape of the earth has changed.\textsuperscript{55} Truth is a matter of approximation and degree, take for instance the statement “the earth is a sphere,” which is approximately true. Putnam asserts that this shows that truth is an idealization of rational acceptability, because we speak as if there were epistemically ideal conditions, which, in fact, is never the case. Putnam analogizes epistemically ideal conditions with Galilean frictionless planes, and concludes that we cannot attain ideal conditions in either case. However, we can speak of both in a meaningful way because we can have a very high degree of approximation or reliability.\textsuperscript{56}

\textsuperscript{52} Putnam, \textit{Realism with a Human Face}, 115.

\textsuperscript{53} Putnam, \textit{Reason, Truth, and History}, 55.

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 54-55.

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 55.

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 55-56.
To further expand his notion of objectivity, Putnam draws inspiration from the work of Thomas Kuhn.\textsuperscript{57} Putnam’s interpretation of Kuhn focuses on an elaboration of his paradigm shifts. Put simply, Putnam is dismissive of Frege’s idea that objects and concepts correlate to words and sentences, and therefore adopts an idea of linguistic paradigm shifts that are not exclusive to just science. For language in general to make sense, there needs to be context, and with enough general context, it is possible to circumvent the problem of relativism. In other words, Putnam uses the Kuhnian notion of trans-cultural or \textit{nonparadigmatic} terms (e.g., rationality and justification).\textsuperscript{58} Putnam’s argument in support of these trans-cultural concepts is that they are somehow maintained in the practical activity of criticizing and inventing paradigms that are not themselves defined by any single paradigm.\textsuperscript{59} Putnam does not offer much in the way of argument in support of how these trans-cultural terms are possible, but merely posits that if one denies their existence, one ends up being a relativist.\textsuperscript{60}

It seems that Putnam’s defense of idealized rational acceptability only moves the problem one step further away from the original issue, which does not do much in terms of resolving it. Instead of holding a strong objectivist position regarding truth or justification, he posits that \textit{some} concepts are nonparadigmatic, and follow a standard of idealized rational acceptability. The ideal epistemic conditions that Putnam proposes allows him to collapse the distinction between “being right,” and “thinking that I am right,” but because ideal conditions are never instantiated in practice, the non-ideal conditions leads to the possibility of being justified in believing something, and still be wrong.

\textsuperscript{57} Putnam, \textit{Realism with a Human Face}, 125.

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 125.

\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., 125.

\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., 125.
Putnam’s point here is to provide an informal elucidation of truth, in which the key ingredients are: first, that truth is independent of justification here and now, but not all justification always; and second, that if a statement and its negation can both be justified, it makes no sense to speak of a statement holding a truth-value. The key here is “not all justification always”, which refers to what Putnam calls “the ideal terminus of inquiry,” which will help us in the selection between competing knowledge claims in a conceptual scheme. The most detailed explanation Putnam provides is this one: “Is there a true conception of rationality, a true morality, even if all we ever have are our conceptions of these? ... The very fact that we speak of our different conceptions as different conceptions of rationality posits a Grenzbegriff, a limit-concept of the ideal truth.” Paul Forster has commented on Putnam’s notion that there is some type of ideal epistemic conditions, by writing: “[T]he more abstract the notion of an ideal limit, the more we are in the dark of the progress towards it.”

In summary, Putnam’s epistemology states that knowledge is a true statement that any rational being with similar experiences would accept. The true statement will practically never reach an idealized condition of rational acceptability, and is therefore fallible. The statement will refer to a fact, and reference is only realized within a conceptual scheme, because it is only inside a conceptual scheme that an object remains fixed, and can be properly described. Furthermore, Putnam asserts that our inability to formalize justification conditions for an arbitrary sentence is the same reductionist problem one faces in the attempt

62 Ibid., 216.
63 Ibid., 216.
65 Putnam, *Reason, Truth, and History*, 64.
to formalize rationality itself. How human beings acquire knowledge is not something one can apply an algorithm to, and therefore, one must look to practice instead.  

The Fact-Value Distinction

Up until now, Putnam’s epistemology has been presented, but the ethical implications of his views remain unspecified. This section will elaborate on the intersection between moral epistemology and normative ethics. Putnam’s attempt at conjoining epistemology and normative ethics is comprised of his criticism of the fact-value distinction.

The fact-value distinction is a concept that distinguishes between what can be discovered by science, or reason, and what ought to be. This distinction originates in David Hume’s argument that one cannot derive an *ought* from an *is*, which is to say that all the facts in the world does not say anything about how we value and use those facts. There is a distinction to be made between objective facts, and how we value those facts. The fact-value distinction is very important in ethics, because whether or not it is possible to say that something is merely a value judgment, or a hard fact, is vital to what one makes of ethical statements. Hume was not the only empiricist who attempted to uphold such a distinction, it continued with the logical positivists, especially Rudolph Carnap, in his attempt to reduce hypothesis-seeking to an algorithm. Contrary to the logical positivists, Putnam draws inspiration from the classical pragmatists – Peirce, James, Dewey, and Mead – who all held that values permeate all of our experience. On their view, value-laden judgments did not only refer to ethical statements, but to statements scientists use when they create scientific hypotheses. Thus, theory selection always presupposes values.

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68 Ibid., 30-31.

69 Ibid., 30.
Putnam’s own view regarding the entanglement of facts and values comes, in large part, from John Dewey. Putnam creates an opponent he refers to as the “crude empiricist.” The crude empiricist argues that there can be no such thing as “value facts,” because we are unable to detect values with any of our sense organs. We can detect yellow with our eyes, but we cannot detect the notion of “goodness” with any sensory organ.\textsuperscript{70} Putnam’s counter-argument is that the crude empiricist bases his entire position on a naive view of perception. Consequently, Putnam asks us to consider the question: “How could we come to tell that people are elated?”\textsuperscript{71} We have no particular sense organ to detect elatedness, and yet we are able to determine if someone is elated, presupposing that we have acquired the concept of elation. The same perceptual apparatus is at work when one forms the concept of a friendly, or a malicious person. The judgments we make about these matters are not infallible, but that is not a problem, according to Putnam.\textsuperscript{72} The important thing here is to realize that our value judgments are not neutral, because experience itself is not neutral. One’s values starts in infancy, when one experiences food, drink, cuddling, and warmth as good, whereas pain, hunger, and loneliness are experienced as bad. This process becomes more sophisticated as we grow older. Putnam gives the example of a wine taster’s description of wine, as someone who combines fact and values. I take him to mean that, upon drinking wine, a good wine taster will provide both factual and aesthetic descriptions, which are all loaded with values.\textsuperscript{73}

Dewey recognized, as Putnam does, that being valued is not the same thing as being valuable, thus, Putnam writes: “Objective value arises, not from a special ’sense organ,’ but from the criticism of our valuations.”\textsuperscript{74} Valuations are intimately connected to all human

\textsuperscript{70} Ibid., 102.  
\textsuperscript{71} Ibid., 102.  
\textsuperscript{72} Ibid., 102.  
\textsuperscript{73} Ibid., 103.  
\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., 103.
activity, including science, and it is only through criticism, which in this situation means something like “intelligent reflection,” that we can conclude whether or not one is justified in holding a particular belief. \(^75\) On this account, how can one determine whether or not one is justified in holding a belief? According to Putnam’s reading of Dewey, one learns, not through strict criteria, or decision procedures, but through the general conduct of inquiry. General inquiry ought to be conducted in an intelligent, and democratic manner, which means avoiding hierarchies and dependence that obstructs the formulation of hypotheses. \(^76\)

Putnam finds the idea of equating objectivity with description problematic. Statements such as “correct,” “incorrect,” “true,” “false,” “warranted,” and “unwarranted” are not descriptions, they are “governed by standards appropriate to their particular functions and contexts.” \(^77\) Language has more functions than just the function of describing the world. Once we free ourselves from a metaphysical objectivity that requires direct, and perfect, correspondence, we can pursue truth with epistemic values. There is a distinction to be made between ethical and epistemic values, but both are dependent on the set of practices in which we establish what is objective. Putnam awaits what he calls the pragmatist enlightenment, \(^78\) in which the focus of moral philosophy will change. Ethics should not be about predictable arguments from Kantian or Utilitarian perspectives. It should be about engaging in “messy” problems with an open and reflective mind. Ethics should be about an inquiry into human life, rather than something that is only relevant to students and professors in philosophy departments. \(^79\)

\(^{75}\) Ibid., 103.

\(^{76}\) Ibid., 104-105.

\(^{77}\) Ibid., 33.

\(^{78}\) Putnam, Ethics without Ontology, 96.

\(^{79}\) Ibid., 107.
Furthermore, ethical values cannot be separated into descriptive and prescriptive components. Take the word “brave,” for instance; one cannot separate the descriptive meaning of being brave without using the word brave in the description. Alternatively, one could equate bravery with “not afraid to risk life and limb,” but then there is no difference between being foolhardy and brave. Putnam’s position is ultimately that one is never in a position of having a pile of factual judgments and no value judgments, because one always brings background valuations that are not specific to the situation at hand. Putnam introduces one very concrete example of how facts and values combine:

That there are mountains in the area bounded by 70°W and 75°W and by 40°N and 45°N is an objective fact if anything is; but given that it is part of the concept of a mountain that mountains are big enough to see, it necessarily follows that if there are mountains in that area, and if appropriate conditions exist (people who know their own latitude and longitude are there to see them, and there is nothing to interfere with their seeing the mountains, etc.) it will be warrantedly assertable [justified] that there are mountains in the area in question.

In order to understand the claim that there is a mountain in that area, one needs to understand what a mountain is, and how it looks; and further, one needs a perspective.

**Discussion and Criticism**

One could argue that theoretical matters are only as interesting as what they come to in practice. On this basis, it is time to discuss whether or not Putnam is successful in grounding objective normative moral claims in his epistemology. During most of Putnam’s long career he had critical debates with Rorty, whose criticism is mainly directed towards Putnam’s epistemology, especially the notion of an ideal terminus. The discussion is divided into three sections. First, Rorty’s criticism on the epistemological level will be taken into consideration. Second, Putnam’s take on whether or not it is possible to rationally discuss how one ought to

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live one’s life. Third, a few concluding remarks, including a very brief account of Putnam’s normative ethics will be discussed.

Rorty’s Criticism

Rorty argues that there is a friction between maintaining that truth is both idealized rationality and that truth is internal to a conceptual scheme. Mosteller has summarized the issue accordingly: “…if one maintains that knowledge is relative to conceptual schemes, then knowledge of just what counts as idealization of rational justification is also relative to a tradition or conceptual scheme.” It is not obvious that this criticism applies to Putnam, because Putnam can return to the claim that some words are nonparadigmatic (e.g., rationality and justification). However, Rorty questioned just this move when he wrote:

In the final sentence of his book, Putnam says that ‘The very fact that we speak of our different conceptions as different conceptions of rationality posits a Grenzbegriff, a limit-concept of ideal truth.’ But what is such a posit supposed to do, except to say that from God’s point of view the human race is heading in the right direction? Surely Putnam’s ‘internalism’ should forbid him to say anything like that.

Rorty condemns the ideal terminus as some type of scientistic remainder of Putnam’s earlier philosophy, because the root of scientism, according to Rorty, is the desperate clinging to some type of objectivity or criteria-specific rationality. The ideal terminus serves the same function as a belief such as: “a nonexistent God would, if he did exist, be pleased with us,” which for Rorty makes no sense whatsoever. Hence, Rorty concludes that the nonparadigmatic terms is an attempt to hold on to something absolute, which is exactly what Putnam has been critical of throughout his writings. Thus, Rorty sees the following problem: Putnam tries to maintain an ideal terminus and hold on to nonparadigmatic terms, while at

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82 Mosteller, Relativism in Contemporary American Philosophy, 110.
83 Ibid., 27.
84 Ibid., 27.
the same time claiming that knowledge is not absolute, which in Rorty’s eyes is completely untenable.  

According to Rorty, idealized rational acceptability can only mean “acceptability to an ideal community,” because justification can only be determined in a community. Further, Rorty does not know what to make of the notion of an ideal community because such a community can be nothing more than “us as we should like to be.” What Rorty refers to as societal reform is simply better ways of talking and acting; where better means that the new ways seem, to us, to be better, because they allow us to cope better with the world.

Now I would like to point to what Rorty makes of the notion of truth, if only to illuminate what is at stake between Rorty and Putnam. Rorty writes that: “…‘knowledge’ is, like ‘truth’ simply a compliment paid to beliefs which we think so well justified that for the moment further justification is not needed.” Truth, in other words, is just something we say that marks the boundary between those with whom we agree, and those with whom we disagree. Rorty’s own account of truth, that “there is only dialogue” is, according to Putnam, self-refuting relativism. But Rorty cannot see how the claim that something (truth) does not exist, is the same thing as the claim that something is relative to something else. It is exactly this position that Putnam attempts to avoid and according to Rorty, fails to avoid.

In a further criticism of Rorty, Putnam tries to deal with Rorty’s supposed relativism by introducing a possible world thought experiment. In this possible world there is a neofascist

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86 Ibid., 451.
87 Ibid., 451.
takeover in the Western world. Putnam argues that Rorty’s notion of “coping better” would, in this world, equate to “dealing savagely with those terrible Jews, foreigners, and communists.”91 Putnam accuses Rorty of being a relativist, because Rorty cannot appeal to any fact of the matter which makes the Nazi takeover objectively wrong. Putnam’s criticism is that Rorty’s notion of what is seemingly “better” must be mean something like “based on the right metaphysical picture,” and how can Rorty, possibly speak of better and worse, or right and wrong?92 Rorty agrees that neither he, nor the relativist (Rorty denies being a relativist) can talk of better or worse metaphysical pictures, but he can talk about ethical, practical, and political reasons.93 He further argues that it can be rational to be a Nazi, but it cannot be so from within the conceptual scheme that finds Nazis deplorable. Had there been a Nazi takeover, their ideology would be common-sense and thus, the Nazi values would be inherent in the conceptual scheme.94

Rationality and How to Live

A question that is intimately connected to objectivity in ethics, is the question of whether it is possible to rationally discuss the question “how to live?” Putnam believes that this is what almost everyone does, every day. People make rational decisions about how to behave and what to believe. If a person has a style of habits, or is the type of character that reflects on his actions, and accepts or at least attempts to accept criticisms of his character (e.g., that a choice he has made is irrational or stupid because his choice of means will terminate in a certain set of ends). If this is so, he will not answer that criticism by saying something like “well, this type of living suits me.” It is of course possible that a person would

91 Rorty, Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth, 23.
92 Ibid., 25.
93 Rorty, Putnam and the Relativist Menace, 455.
94 Ibid., 451.
answer in such a way, but if most people did, Putnam believes that a moral community would not be possible. To phrase this in slightly different terms, Putnam is arguing that morality, as we know it, would not be possible without a social contract of sorts, and that this social contract is not entirely arbitrary. If people regularly provided arbitrary reasons for why they did things, the moral “institution” would not be feasible and therefore, Putnam argues, it is evident that rationality plays some role in morality.

Putnam continues by stating that it is an important psychological fact that most people attempt to justify their actions and reflect on their characters. The question of whether or not there is one objective morality that is better than all other moralities, is for Putnam a question of which long list of principles that would yield most general appeal. Further, Putnam argues, that whether there is such a group of principles is, in the terminology of John Rawls, a question of which morality that could best survive wide reflective equilibrium, which is a state of balance among a set of general principles that has been accepted in a culture through a process of deliberation. Putnam clearly assumes that there is such a thing as a set of principles that would work better than all other sets, albeit, we are unable a priori to figure out what those principles would encompass. Ultimately, such principles would be better by merit of their width of appeal and ability to withstand certain kinds of rational criticism.

Douglas Rasmussen has summarized a number of premises which he argues is the core of Putnam’s view of rationality. These premises are not related in any significant way to the premises explicated previously by Throop and Doran; but merely concern Putnam’s view on rationality. To meet the full employment of human intelligence, inquiry:


96 Ibid., 84.


(1) must be a cooperative activity and not done in isolation. It must involve working together to actively intervene with and manipulate the environment in order to form and test ideas. This in turn involves trying different solutions to problems or at least considering ways of solving problems others have tried and reflecting on the consequences;
(2) must treat its judgments as fallible—as open to being revised or falsified;
(3) must respect autonomy, symmetric reciprocity, and follow principles that are much akin to those that characterize Jürgen Habermas’s ‘discourse ethics.’ These principles are:
   (a) communicating honestly and authentically, trying to win by the force of the better argument and not by manipulation or involvement in relations of hierarchies of dependence;
   (b) not excluding persons affected by any proposed action from participating in the discussion;
   (c) not preventing the consideration of any proposal or the expression of any person’s attitudes, wishes, or needs;
   (d) neither assuming there will be no disputes over which valuations are warranted nor trying to eliminate all such disputes;
   (e) keeping the communication going by not allowing coercion or violence or total refusal to discuss; and
(4) must insist on applying the criteria noted in (1)–(3) to more and more institutions and relationships.99

These criteria are supposed to provide an informal basis for whether a judgment is warranted or not, and they do just that without appealing to metaphysical realism. On the whole, Putnam argues that there is no reason to believe that one cannot believe in epistemologically objective morality (i.e., believe in moral facts) without being a metaphysical realist.100 There is of course a difficulty with these premises regarding as well, because they are themselves dependent on. There is no view from nowhere from where one can say that the premises are truly rational. One can accept them as good, or dismiss them as bad, or something in between. As a conversational virtue, they may be attractive, but there is still nothing outside of a conceptual scheme to which one can appeal, that makes such maxims objectively true.

Putnam draws inspiration from Levinas, Kant, and Aristotle; incorporating the parts from the respective philosophies he considers useful. From Levinas, he borrows the situationist obligation one ought to feel towards an individual that is in need of help, most importantly, one should realize the personal obligation to help someone, rather than relying on someone else. From Kant, he adopts a certain aspect of the Categorical Imperative, specifically, the idea that ethics is universal; thus, one should worry about everyone's suffering, and everyone's wellbeing. Lastly, what influences Putnam in Aristotle is the classical notion of *eudaimonia*, specifically, the question: “what makes a human life admirable?” It is reasonable, at this point, to wonder which principle that takes precedence over the others. Putnam does not answer this question, but instead imply that all are useful, but none should be held in all situations. A pragmatists point Putnam continuously express is that he wants morality, used in the broadest sense possible, to include fallibilism. That is, one should always be able to admit that one is wrong, upon realizing that this is the case.

Putnam recognizes that there is a tension in this seemingly arbitrary array of philosophers.\(^{101}\) He comments that many ethicists, down to this day, still hold on to a school of thought (e.g., Utilitarianism), because they want ethics to be “noble statue standing at the top of a single pillar.”\(^{102}\) This is not what Putnam tries to achieve. Instead, Putnam wants to convince us that ethical knowledge is something one has to practice. There is no science that teaches us how to behave like a moral person. It is a process, a process that takes a lot of time and work. One gets the impression that Putnam is displeased with normative systems because he reckons that they are not dynamic enough, in the sense that they rely too heavily on principles, rather than on critical thinking and moral learning.

\(^{101}\) Putnam, *Ethics without Ontology*, 27.

\(^{102}\) Ibid., 28.
Putnam refers to the learning process as *reflective transcendence*,\(^{103}\) which is the process of being critical towards one’s handling of problematic situations. Being a good person requires non-stop questioning of both one’s means and ends. Putnam’s position is essentially that we cannot adhere to any a priori principles that guides us through life, but instead, we (both as individuals and as a society) should try to move away from bad things, by rationally criticizing norms and standards, and even criticizing our own criticism.

Thus, Putnam’s attempt at uniting his meta-ethical stance with a normative theory is founded on the collapse of the fact-value distinction. The collapse allows Putnam to assert that what is factual or conventional is dependent on the context in which one speaks. We discover values that are better than our previous values by dealing with problematic situations in a critical, evaluative process, which can be described by the premises (concerning rationality) explicated by Rasmussen.

Putnam’s position will now be briefly summarized. Putnam’s conceptual relativism encompasses that there is not an ontologically objective reality that is readily accessible to all human beings. That is not to say that there is not a world at all, but rather that how one views the world is dependent on the conceptual schemes one employs. Recall the worlds in which there exist three or seven objects, depending on one’s perspective. How many objects there are in the respective world is clearly dependent on how one categorizes the world. Putnam’s conceptual relativism does not mean that there are “only words,” or what Throop and Doran have called *linguistic idealism*,\(^{104}\) because there is still a fact of the matter when one has chosen a conceptual scheme.

The problem that arises is that there seems to be no fact of the matter as to which way of counting objects that is the better way. Both ways of counting will result in the possibility of

\(^{103}\) Ibid., 96.

\(^{104}\) Throop and Doran, *Putnam's Realism and Relativity*, 360.
making a true statement in the respective worlds, but that does not include an explanation of
which conceptual scheme is the best. If they are just as good, Putnam’s position must be a
relativistic one. In order to avoid relativism, Putnam’s attempts to solve the challenge of
relativism by utilizing the two concepts idealized rational acceptability and ideal terminus of
inquiry. However, he does not make either of these notions very clear, which has been
previously been presented in the form of criticism by Rorty.

The collapse of the fact-value distinction allows Putnam to break down the line between
objective and subjective. He criticizes the crude empiricist argument that one would need a
psychological faculty in order to perceive the color yellow, which in turn allows him to
undermine the idea that experience is neutral. Objective values emerge in the process of
evaluation, which happens when something is subject to criticism and becomes valuable (as
opposed to being valued). By what criteria do we decide that some evaluations are justified
and some are not justified? This is done with the use of intelligence and adheres to the general
premises of rationality. One should not try to ground inquiry in a set of strict criteria or
attempt to apply an algorithm, because such attempts will always be incomplete. Instead,
Putnam believes that we learn something about inquiry from the conduct of inquiry.
Intelligent inquiry does conform to the (Rasmussen’s) premises of rationality. By this loosely
defined method, we can tell if ethical valuations are defended in a responsible way. Putnam’s
philosophy culminates in a normative virtue ethics in which the main notions are intelligence,

rational criticism and fallibilism.

For Putnam, the fact-value distinction is intimately related to relativism, and is highly
relevant in moral philosophy. Putnam does not believe that morality can be turned into a
science in any foreseeable future, but he does believe that there are objective values

nonetheless. He claims that the exact sciences (physics etc.) are the best examples of a

rational process. They depend on “cognitive virtues” like coherence and functional simplicity.
One could argue that coherence and functional simplicity are value terms and just stand for properties that we do value. Putnam foresees this and claims that words like coherent and simple are often used as terms of praise. The problem being that the words have too many characteristics in common to be separable. Putnam writes: “Our conceptions of coherence, simplicity, and justification are just as historically conditioned as our conceptions of kindness, beauty, and goodness.”

I find this view problematic, because it is subject to the same criticism that has been issued against the notion of an ideal terminus. I do not see why it would not be equally feasible to say the opposite: coherent and simple are without truth-value altogether. In the same way that Rorty argues that the notion of truth is the same thing as saying that something matches one’s other beliefs; saying that something is coherent or simple is the same thing as saying that you like or value it in some way.

In any case, to tie this into the analogy of wine tasting, Putnam argues that one could create a science of wine tasting based on objective criteria. Such a science would be uninteresting at the moment, because the measurement of good cooking or a good wine is merely a satisfied palate. Wine tasting or cooking could be reduced to a science “in principle,” but “in principle” has nothing to do with human life in the foreseeable future. Our current inability to reduce cooking (or the question of how one ought to live) to a science does not mean that we cannot reflect rationally on these matters.

Concluding Remarks

I do not believe that Putnam is able to convincingly defend his ideal terminus, which is the only aspect of his philosophy that keeps him from being an epistemological relativist. The balancing act Putnam attempts between relativism and absolutism intermittently tips over into

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absolutism. One way to combat the absolutist criticism presented by Rorty could perhaps be attempted by viewing objective and subjective as non-dichotomous. However, this move would reduce the strength behind the notion of an ideal terminus, which is exactly the thing one wants to retain in order to preserve some idea of objectivity.

In throwing away the ideal terminus, we can commit to deflated criteria of objectivity and hence, a weaker moral realist position. I believe that this is the only possible way to maintain Putnam’s position. The apparent drawback is that one either ends up in relativism or a notion of objectivity that is not at all founded in epistemology, but merely in normative practice. The latter becomes questionable, because it is difficult to see what objectivity in normative practice could mean apart from a quite weak objectivist position.

My interpretation of Putnam’s normative ethics is that it is basically a virtue ethical system. The reasoning behind this is that it is not possible to create an algorithm that applies to the world perfectly. A first principle by which we can measure all human affairs as good or bad, right or wrong. What we can do is commit to rational, critical and intelligent thinking and acting, because that is the best method we currently have. It may not prescribe a perfect answer to all possible questions, but it may help in terms of being a loosely defined guide. Unlike the more traditional virtues such as honesty, or courage, Putnam highlights intelligence and falliblism. He dislikes what I will refer to as the more objective schools, such as Utilitarianism, because of their rigid approach to philosophy. For Putnam, establishing a first principle (e.g., happiness) is an idea that hinders critical thinking. For Putnam, right and wrong is not something you can put into a machine and get a clear answer. You have to think, act, and think again.

This conception of normative ethics is something I wholeheartedly agree with. I believe that Putnam has essentially constructed a normative theory in which falsification is the main idea. I believe that the quite loosely defined method regarding how one ought to conduct
one’s behavior is very attractive, but I am unable to point to any epistemologically objective fact in support of this claim. In other words, it may be that I may share the same intuition as Putnam. Ultimately, like Putnam, I would simply like people to behave in accordance with Putnam’s description of a good person.

I also agree with both Mosteller and Rorty, in their arguments that Putnam’s epistemology is unable to stand its ground. In regards to Putnam’s epistemology, Putnam does not provide a convincing argument in support of an ideal terminus. It seems to me that, impressive as it is, Putnam’s attempt at a middle ground between relativism and absolutism does not withstand Rorty’s criticism. I believe that one must conclude that Putnam’s conceptual relativism falls into Siegel’s definition of epistemological relativism. Had Putnam been able to point to an ideal terminus, a middle ground would perhaps be feasible.

In conclusion, I do not see how Putnam’s conceptual relativism can be maintained without making weaker claims in support of objectivity. Being that Putnam already stands on the brink between ER and absolutism, the process of making weaker claims undermines the attempt at maintaining a strand of objectivity. However, his idea of a learning process on a societal level remains attractive and may be possible to insert into another framework.
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