

Handout 9

Putnam's paradox: Lewis

THE PARADOX RESTATED. Considerations from the theory of reference, Putnam has argued, undermine realism. How? Because there is no one single way to ‘glue’ terms to their referents. There is no internal/mental glue, for the reasons of the Twin Earth thought experiment. [...] And there is no externalist glue, either. Suppose that reference *is* fixed by causal chains. Well, but what’s the guarantee that the causal chain is the ‘right’ one? For example, I am able to refer to horses by using the plural ‘horses’ because I am myself causally connected directly to horses, or because I am connected to some horse-expert and I fall back on his proper use of ‘horses’. Yes, but my success depends on my (or the expert’s) ability to identify different ‘somethings’ as *horses*—that is, as objects of the same kind. And the externalist does not supply us with a metaphysical ‘lassoo’ for grouping them as the same kind of object.

Instead, we must go back to the internal glue. We should fix reference by the intention to refer in a way that would make our theory come out true. But there is more than one way to do, since the world has various ways to accommodate our intention—i.e., various ways to make our sentences true. Hence, in RTH, Putnam suggests changing our metaphysical stance and endorse internal realism. That’s the ‘bomb’ that he dropped on us.

GLOBAL DESCRIPTIVISM. Lewis begins by explaining why we can’t fix reference exclusively by descriptions. We may begin very modestly with descriptively fixing reference of some select terms, like ‘Jack the Ripper’. But for this to work, we need to first fix the reference of the terms we used to fix the reference of ‘Jack the Ripper’. That is, we need a theory of reference for the ‘old’ language which we have now used as our metalanguage.

Hence, we might try ‘global descriptivism’. It attempts to apply the same method on the grandest scale: to the entire vocabulary of the language. We assume that the term-introducing theory is the *total* theory itself. The intended interpretation is the one (or ones) that makes the total theory come true (or near enough to true). We avoid the need to worry about how the ‘old vocabulary’ got its reference, since there is none (save for some logical vocabulary).

Well, it turns out, by Putnam’s model-theoretic argument (or something more ‘trivial’) that the consistent interpretations may be produced in ‘countless ways’.

PHYSICALIST ELITISM. To refute Putnam’s argument, and to dismiss internal realism encouraged by it, we need to insist on some *C* that would weed out all the interpretations (=models) that trivially satisfy the theory (=assign reference so as to make the theory’s sentences true). Lewis’ candidate for *C* is physicalism that isolates ‘privileged’, ‘elite’ properties that carve the world at its joints.

This solution is not to pile more theory on top of theory. This, as Lewis says, won’t help, since, as already mentioned, theory’s terms can be interpreted and re-interpreted in ‘countless ways’. There should, instead, be some form of egalitarianism among properties. Physics discovers what elite properties are.

This strategy, Lewis insists, does not amount to piling more theory on top of theory. We do not select *C* so as to satisfy our theory. We rather demand that the theory conform to *C*.

But what could be the ground for elitism? Lewis insists that it will be based on objective sameness and similarity. Only a minority of properties are eligible for being among the elite, and they will reflect just that sameness. Most of the properties that yielded consistent interpretations, like mereological sums and grue-like ones, will be excluded.

Lewis’ proposal, I think, can’t be seen as a refutation of internal realism. It is patently question-begging. The internal realist/relativist denies that the very possibility of objective resemblance. It’s better to think of Lewis’ proposal as offering a coherent realist alternative. *If* you already accept the realism that we all ‘love’, then this is your best shot in the debate with the anti-realist.

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