Internal Realism, Truth and Charity

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Recently Putnam and others have argued that empirical knowledge refers to an interpreted reality and that objectivity is an intra-cognitive notion: the demands of experience set constraints, but within the conceptual scheme in use. However, at least two points require discussion because of possible relativistic consequences: (i) Putnam's appeal to epistemically ideal conditions, and (ii) the introduction of a principle of charity to account for some sort of transcultural objectivity. We are going to argue about the first point that Putnam's reference to the use of idealised notions in physics is unwarranted, because in epistemology we have no means to assess what is meant by idealised notions. About the second, we are going to argue that a principle of charity is only applicable in hindsight. It supplies no guarantee for the future and hence cannot support a claim to transcultural objectivity. What the principle of charity does is that it demonstrates that notions and beliefs are shared to the extent that they are operationally identical.

John Austin's "enough is enough, enough isn't everything" derides the idea that unless the absolute were obtainable, anything would go. It encourages an attitude of modesty in particular towards the certainties of science, which should not to be thought of as secured by transcendental absolutes. Applied to epistemology Austin's remark may be seen as a warning that we have no God's eye and that, consequently, the extreme position of metaphysical realism is a contestable one.

Metaphysical realists take up the common sense feeling that the truth-conditions of assessments in science are provided by a mind-independent reality. Uncritically, we think, because they omit the preliminary examination of whether it makes sense to conceive of knowledge as possibly related to such a world and they do not indicate how one may recognize that these truth conditions obtain. They rightly hold on to the idea that knowledge is expected to be based on firm grounds, but overlook that these grounds cannot be obtained by refusing to discuss the nature of referring to a mind inaccessible world.

The appeal to a mind-independent world is however not only an unsuitable move to obtain a point of departure for epistemological analysis, it is also a redundant one since we possess already a sufficiently solid base for it in our own cognitive activity. Our cognitive activity is shaped to properly serve this purpose as it is accessible to public discussion and permits to obtain the intended goal of securing our knowledge of the world we live in. It is a given in experience that can be analysed and it has amongst its valuable characteristics that it is object-informative in virtue of its experiential intake.

Taking this point of departure has the merit of avoiding any dogmatic apriorism, although it may seem to have the serious disadvantage of leading to solipsism and preventing any consideration of external reality from the outset. However, this is only a first sight impression and it is not difficult to argue that it makes good sense within this approach to speak about an objective world and of knowledge that is true.

In the Western tradition we are used to distinguishing quite clearly between objects. The detailed elaboration of this distinction has worried generations of philosophers and is still doing so. There is, nevertheless, one outstanding aspect that is getting more emphasis in contemporary philosophy than ever before, that is the idea that knowledge is the outcome of an activity and that the objects we are dealing with are known objects, i.e. objects present in a conceptual context. The often associated view that the admission of this fact would give way to overall subjectivism is, however, mistaken and overreaches the point. The fact that we cannot but conceptualise our objects and that we do it in a process of social interaction does not mean that these conceptualisations take place *ad libitum*. They largely depend on experiential constraints which cannot be negated and which force us to say things exist in a certain way, and not in an other way (as for example that the blackboard in front of us is not black but green and that the atomic weight of gold is 97). Which particular colour or atomic weight something has, is as an outcome of cognitive activity, a result which has to be awaited for. It is not a result that exclusively (and arbitrarily) depends on the efforts of the knowing subject: theories get objective fits.

Devitt and others criticise this point of view, arguing that if experiential constraints are really constraints vis-à-vis the way we conceptualise things, they are themselves conceptually unshaped and must therefore be part of an as yet unconceptualised world. We think however, that Devitt's argument cannot be upheld since it starts from the underlying assumption of things being either mind-dependent or mind-independent. Of course, logically interpreted, it is a clear distinction, but one might question whether the distinction makes any sense in an epistemological context. Epistemological analysis is thought to bear upon our *knowledge* of things and is therefore confined to the domain of *known* objects. It is only by abstracting from our cognitive intervention that we can figure out mind-independent objects and that the artificial dilemma just mentioned can be taken up. This does not mean that we deny the existence of such objects. What we want to put forward is that we cannot say anything about the world that escapes our comprehension of it. There are numerous considerations, for example religious convictions, which force upon us a particular belief in the existence of a mind-independent world, but we would have to have strong feelings to call these beliefs epistemologically justified. As far as epistemological analysis is concerned, the idea of a ready-made world is an extrapolation beyond reach. We transcend methodological

boundaries and ask too much of the instrument of epistemological analysis if we pretend that such analysis gives access to a noumenal world. What can be argued for epistemologically is that we are dealing with objects present in a conceptual setting and that we experience our cognitive activity as empirically constrained, i.e. not constrained by the demands of the conceptual scheme as such (as would be the case with a formal system), but constrained by the demands of empirical evidence (in virtue of which horses are real in a way the number pi is not). Put this way, it is justified to claim that our knowledge refers to an objective world and might develop itself into an increasingly better knowledge of that world. There is no ground for Field's uneasiness with the idea that dinosaurs are created by the thoughts of men.

It will be clear from the above that according to this view there is no exclusive role for either a correspondence theory of truth or a coherence theory of truth. Because we are dealing with a conceptualised world and because it is impossible to abstract from our cognitive intervention, the assessment of knowledge is an intra-cognitive matter. And so is truth. Truth refers to our conceptualisation of reality and is the exponent of our evaluation of this conceptualisation on its (inter-) subjective and objective merits, i.e. on the basis of both coherence and correspondence. To be true, a statement has to fit the accepted theoretical context and the relevant empirical evidence, in compliance with the standards governing the process of acquiring knowledge in a particular community. It is in virtue of matching conditions of warranted assertability and not by reference to a mind-independent state of affairs that a statement is called true.

Surprisingly not all those who are sympathetic to the view that truth is an intracognitive notion, agree that 'truth' may be interpreted as warranted assertability. Obviously, there is a fear of extreme relativism, arising most likely from the otherwise proper idea that statements that have been warrantably assertible in the past, will not necessarily remain so. This comes across for example when Putnam states that "a statement can be rationally acceptable at a time but not true". Putnam takes truth to be an intra-cognitive notion, but stresses at the same time its absoluteness by interpreting truth as an idealised terminus of justifiability and rational acceptability. Warranted assertability is in Putnam's view a deficient qualification for the truth of a statement; in his view a statement is true if justifiable under epistemically ideal conditions. However, the elaboration of this notion of truth is very questionable:

(i) The idea behind Putnam's emphasis on idealisation, which indeed avoids any sort of relativism, is probably related to his essentialistic view on natural kinds. Putnam suggests taking truth as a natural kind in the same sense as gold is: ". . . what determines whether a belief is rational is not the norm of rationality of this or that culture, but an ideal theory of rationality, a theory which would give necessary and sufficient conditions for a belief to be rational in the relevant circumstances in any possible world". And this applies also to truth, since according to Putnam 'rationally acceptable' and 'true' are notions that take in each other's wash". Nevertheless, it is doubtful that this analogy would hold, since Putnam draws for it on a theory of natural kinds which was developed in the context of a metaphysical realist position. In *Reason, Truth and History*, where this particular notion of truth is dealt with, he had however already abandoned this position.

(ii) To this a more substantial criticism may be linked regarding the absoluteness Putnam attaches to the notions of rationality, justifiability and truth. Contrary to the obvious assumption that these notions play their role only within a particular conceptual scheme, Putnam takes the line that the conceptual scheme itself can be criticized and that it may be rational and justifiable to replace one scheme by smothers. The notions of rationality and justification - and the same holds for the notion of truth - are then considered as transcultural notions. It is however difficult to understand how a notion could be transcultural in any absolute sense. Putnam defends his idea by appealing to the principle of charity. In vain in our opinion, since it is of no use here. The principle of charity hinges on the idea that a shift of meaning of words does not always induce a shift of reference. Sometimes it does, as in the case of the words 'star' and 'fish' whose meanings have changed over the centuries in such a way that their present-day domains of reference differ from their earlier ones". Sometimes it does not, as in the case of the word 'electron' as **used by Bohr in 1912, in 1934** and in modern physics. Here the principle of charity permits us to take the word 'electron' as referring to the same objects over time despite the apparent shifts of meaning in that period.

However, it is of importance to note that only in hindsight can be seen whether the principle of charity is applicable to a particular situation. We have to wait and see whether the principle applies or not. If indeed empirical theories are revocable in principle, it is impossible to predict whether a future change in meaning of the term 'electron' may or may not induce a change of reference. Therefore, while it might make sense to claim that terms such as 'rationality', 'justification' and 'truth' have kept the same meaning and reference across bodies of theory change in the past, we cannot make the same claims about the future. Treating these notions as transcultural would make them far too absolute.

(iii) Finally, there is the intriguing question about what might be meant by the idea conditions under which statements should be called true. To answer this question, Putnam compares the notion of truth with the kind of idealisations that are currently made in physics, such as the notions of uniform motions, ideal gases, and frictionless planes. He even stresses that since talk of frictionless planes in physics has cash value,