What Is at Stake Between Putnam and Rorty?  

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1. INTRODUCTION.

The disagreements between Hilary Putnam and Richard Rorty worry sympathetic pragmatists. While Rorty claims that his view is "almost, but not quite, the same as...[Putnam's] 'internalist conception of philosophy'" (1984b, p. 7), Putnam is uncomfortable with this association. Putnam claims to be preserving the realist spirit but he takes Rorty to be "rejecting the intuitions that underlie every kind of realism (and not just metaphysical realism)" (1988a, p. 16). Putnam views Rorty's pragmatism as a self-refuting relativism driven by a deep irrationalism that casts doubt on the very possibility of thought. Yet in the paper Putnam cites to support his charge Rorty insists that he shares Putnam's desire for a middle ground between metaphysical realism and relativism and that his pragmatism fills the bill. Putnam does not concur. What is the average pragmatist-in-the-street to do?

This paper explores what is at stake in this debate. Rorty's pragmatism is defended from Putnam's objections and is shown to be immune from problems associated with Putnam's limit theory of truth. While the reading of Rorty presented may seem revisionary to some, it is faithful to his writing.
and, more importantly, it presents the view to which he must be committed if he is to be saved from the charge of self-refutation.

2. RORTY AS RELATIVIST.

Rorty’s pragmatism is often portrayed as a nihilistic dismissal of thought. Such readings typically mistake an attack on a particular conception of philosophy (philosophy with a capital ‘P’) for an attack on intellectual activity. But Rorty wants no part of the latter project. That our most cherished practices persist, while Philosophical groundings for them come and go, suggests to Rorty that they will survive the demise of Philosophy.

Rorty’s target is the discipline that (i) sees itself as “discussing perennial and eternal problems” (Rorty, 1979, p. 3) and (ii) attempts to “debunk claims to knowledge by erecting a permanent neutral framework for inquiry and thus for all of culture” (1979, p. 8), a framework that will provide “non-historical conditions of any possible historical development” (1979, p. 9). This picture of Philosophy has served to define a set of problems for the discipline, and to sustain the image many philosophers have of themselves and of their relation to the rest of culture. Rorty also holds this picture responsible for a tendency to dismiss the arts and humanities, for the isolation of philosophy from other disciplines and the culture at large, and for intolerance towards alternative intellectual traditions and towards the history of the discipline. Thus Rorty’s motives are as political as they are intellectual. His aim is to reconstruct a normative image of the discipline by changing the way philosophers describe and practice their craft “in the hope of forging a new form of intellectual life” (1982, p. 20).

Against the thesis that philosophical problems are eternal, Rorty argues that the assumptions that underlie current problems are the products of quite specific historical developments. The contingency of these assumptions argues for their optionality. What is more, the persuasiveness of these assumptions is undermined by Quine’s attack on the analytic-synthetic distinction, Sellars’s attack on the “given”, and Davidson’s rejection of conceptual schemes. By undercutting the dichotomies of scheme and content and mind and world as traditionally understood, epistemology has sown the seeds of its own destruction.5 Rorty’s challenge is thus quite specific, either philosophers redefine their mission or face extinction. Suffice it to say that Rorty’s respect for the work of Rawls, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Dewey and others reveals his confidence that a reorientation is possible.6

5 This argument is overlooked by Prado (1987) who seems to think that Rorty’s only argument against Philosophy is that it has yet to succeed.
6 Rorty’s suggestion that philosophers emulate literary critics is often mistaken for a call for the elimination of philosophy departments. But criticism is offered only as an example of the kind of cultural role to which philosophers should aspire. When arguing that the “liberal ironist poet” should supplant the Philosopher Rorty intends to broaden the
So far everything I have attributed to Rorty would be endorsed by Putnam. Yet Putnam still sees Rorty as a radical relativist. His reading is as follows. In *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Rorty wrote that knowledge "is what we are justified in believing" (1979, p. 3), where justification "is to be judged by the standards of our own day" (1979, p. 178). Later, Rorty denied having offered a theory of truth in his earlier book and conceded that equating truth with warranted assertibility would not do justice to our intuitions about truth. However, he also suggested that we should abandon those intuitions and think of "truth" as a compliment people pay to their favorite beliefs (1982, pp. xxiv–xxxii). More recently, Rorty appears to have suggested that rationality and irrationality are to be judged in terms of community membership, that “ethnocentrism” and “solidarity” are to be preferred to objectivity as the aims of inquiry, and again 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. (Rorty, 1984b, p. 7)

On Putnam’s reading, Rorty argues that “truth” and “falsity” merely mark the boundary between those with whom we agree and those with whom we disagree. If so, then attempts at trans-community evaluation are disguised expressions of communal preferences with no universal force; normative authority is hopelessly intracultural and intralinguistic. Thus Rorty is caught in his own web of belief, unable to avoid self-refuting relativism.8

If this slide to relativism cannot be stopped, Rorty’s work is neither original nor interesting. Fortunately, a better reading is possible; one that recognizes that Rorty’s commitment to the contingency of language, selfhood and community does not force him to abandon commitment altogether.9

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7 Putnam argues that relativism is self-refuting since claims of the form “X is true relative to standards S,” are either absolutely true (in which case relativism is false) or are themselves relative (in which case “our grasp on what the position even means begins to wobble” (1981, p. 121)). This argument is not assessed here, it is the relevance to Rorty’s view that is questioned.

8 Prado (1987) also claims Rorty is a radical relativist. He recognizes that Rorty does not oppose coherentism to realism, rather he rejects that dichotomy altogether. Yet Prado claims Rorty trivializes truth (even with a lower case "t") by ignoring the importance of testing beliefs and by making truth a matter of comparing sentences to other sentences. He also argues that Rorty overlooks the special place of science in the western tradition (p. 12) and that philosophy “has a special nature and is not merely so much more ‘conversation’” (p. 5). While there is evidence for this reading, it is the least interesting one. It also ignores Rorty's appeals to Dewey, Davidson and Kuhn (none of whom is a relativist) and his own disavowals of relativism.

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3. REREADING RORTY

The source of Putnam’s worry is Rorty’s “ethnocentrism”, the thesis that:

there is nothing to be said about either truth or rationality apart from descriptions of the familiar procedures of justification which a given society—ours—uses in one or another area of inquiry. (Rorty, 1984b, p. 6)

It is easy to read the qualification “ours” as an endorsement of radical relativism, but on the same page Rorty notes that “a theory according to which truth is simply the contemporary opinion of a chosen individual or group...would of course be self-refuting”. For this reason Rorty asks that he not be read as advancing any positive theory of truth at all. But then it looks like he escapes the charge that his theory is self-refuting merely by denying that it is a theory. But Rorty can do better. To see how, two issues which Putnam often runs together must be distinguished. The first is Rorty’s view about Truth as a Philosophical notion. The second is his view of normative claims and critical practices once pragmatism is embraced. These issues are related but it is only when the attack on Truth is mistaken for an attempt to offer a positive theory that the relativist reading becomes inescapable.

A. Truth and Interpretive Understanding.

Rorty’s ethnocentrism is based on a view of interpretive understanding influenced by Gadamer, Davidson and Kuhn. Rorty recognizes that attention to our culture’s history and to contemporary non-western cultures reveals sharp discontinuities in belief, institutions and evaluative standards. It is notoriously difficult for contemporary Westerners to comprehend practices such as medieval alchemy and Gnau puberty rites. Yet such activities can often be understood by learning the norms which govern them and the skills required to execute them, and by grasping the point of these practices and their place in the social-epistemic tradition(s) of which they are a part. Understanding here is not merely a problem of translating what others say and noting what they do, but of learning how they justify what they say and do. Thus understanding unfamiliar practices involves assimilating, and accommodating oneself to, the rules of the relevant language game (Winch), the appropriate version (Goodman), the local paradigm (Kuhn), prevailing social schemata (Hesse and Arbib), or the relevant styles of reasoning (Hacking).1

10 See Lewis’s (1980) account of the Gnau and many examples of medieval science in Grant (1974). Wagner (1975) also offers a rich account of the feelings of incompetence that can occur when confronting other cultures.

11 See Goodman (1978), Winch (1958), Kuhn (1960) and Hacking (1982). There are important differences among these writers but they agree on this point.
What goes for other cultures goes for our own. Our practices are to be understood as emerging within a particular social-epistemic tradition. It is through participation in these practices that we define ourselves in relation to those things we are not and also, thereby, give content to conceptions of what is true (or justifiable) and of what constitutes reality.\footnote{Of course pragmatists deny that "truth" and "objectivity" have an essence; the uses of these terms in various practices may be related only by a family resemblance. See Williams (1980) and Hesse and Arbib (1986).} Since one cannot separate the content of beliefs from the reasons advanced to support them, any understanding of our practices will include reference to the styles of reasoning we use and the context in which they have developed, whether or not any of our current conceptions proves sustainable.

This view casts doubt on the legitimacy of using Truth and Rationality to explain the presence or persistence of practices in various traditions. Appeal to ahistorical constraints is undermined by the failure to develop convincing candidates for such constraints, by the ability to explain cultural universals in terms of contingently shared prudence, instead of a common rational essence, and by the recognition that "Truth" and "Rationality" have no fixed content in history and thus are not self-evident or self-explanatory notions.

In addition, one cannot explain adherence to styles of reasoning solely in terms of their faithfulness to the facts, since claims that any particular set of facts is authoritative presuppose, rather than demonstrate, the authority of that style of reasoning. While the notion of "unconceptualized reality" is not senseless—as a thought experiment about stuff persisting after knowers have ceased to exist—it is without positive content. To articulate what makes up unconceptualized reality is already to invoke normative practices for the individuation of objects, for determining membership in relevant kinds and so on. To suppose that criteria of relevance are in nature is to anthropomorphize.\footnote{Sorell (in Malachowski, pp. 12-15) faults Rorty for failing to show how a belief in the world's intrinsic nature commits us to belief in a creator or to thinking of the world as having its own point of view. However as Goodman (1978) and Putnam (1983a, pp. 205-8) argue, sorting and individuating objects involves criteria of relevance. To suppose that there are, what Putnam calls, self-identifying objects is to endow nature with a set of interests.}

Finally, the claim that truth explains the success of theories adds nothing to our understanding. For Pragmatists, claims to truth in concrete inquiries are better described as claims that theories in question are defensible in light of the best criteria available. However, the means by which we assess truth and the means by which we determine success are identical. Thus to use truth to explain the success of theories amount to little more than
saying that theories are better because they are more successful and that they are more successful because they are better.14

From the general thesis that there is no content to such terms as "fact" and "reason" independent of practices embedded in a tradition it follows that as situated inquirers we are able to make sense of these notions only through participation in contemporary reasoning practices. As Putnam notes:

We do not have notions of the "existence" of things or the "truth" of statements that are independent of the versions we construct and the procedures and practices that give sense to talk of "existence" and "truth" within those versions. (1983a, p. 230)

But this is all that Rorty's ethnocentrism involves. The thesis conveys the "purely negative point that we should drop the traditional distinction between truth as correspondence to reality and truth as a commendatory term for well-justified beliefs" (1984b, p. 6). Thus Rorty should not be committed to a theory of what truth is, on the basis of his claims about what truth is not. Rather than an avowal of relativism, "ethnocentrism" simply acknowledges the perspectival aspects of inquiry central to Putnam's own pragmatic realism.15

While this view is at odds with the idea that styles of reasoning can be legitimated from a transcendental point of view, it does not in itself cast doubt on either the efficacy or the importance of argument in the evolution of beliefs or practices.16 Of course if one insists that it is only by reference to transcendental standards that one can rationally vindicate styles of reasoning, any attack on epistemology will be viewed as an attack on reason. But it is the contention that styles of reasoning are rational if and only if they are ahistorically defensible that pragmatists deny.17 Indeed, for Rorty, one reason for abandoning the search for timeless principles is that we have developed rich ways of relating to our surroundings without them.

14 For related criticism of the use of truth as an explanatory notion, see Williams (1986) and Horwich (1990).
15 Passages Putnam reads as avowals of relativism are easily reinterpreted on this view. For example, Rorty says "the term 'true' means the same in all cultures just as equally flexible terms like 'here', 'there', 'good'...mean the same thing in all cultures. But the identity of meaning is of course compatible with diversity of reference, and with diversity of procedures for assigning the term" (1984b, p.6). The point is that what it is to claim something is true evolves internally to practices and traditions. Rorty is again denying an explanatory role for Truth and Rationality.
16 Of course if there are no working notions of truth and rationality that are independent of cultural versions then such notions have none of the normative force traditionally claimed by epistemologists.
17 When Quine says there is no analytic/synthetic distinction, he does not mean that every statement is synthetic, he means the distinction itself should be dropped. So too, to say there is no transcendental objectivity is not to say that everything is subjective. It is to say that "truth...is something we grasp...via a (largely implicit) understanding of the factors that make it rationally acceptable to say that something is true" (Putnam, 1981, p. 122).
B. From Explanation to Evaluation.

Using Putnam's words to explicate Rorty's is intended to highlight the substantial agreement between their views. In addition to having doubts about foundationalism Putnam shares Rorty's worries about the correspondence theory of truth, the subject-object split and the fact-value distinction. He endorses pluralism and the cognitive import of art and morality. Nonetheless, Putnam and Rorty part company over how to construe the authority of norms once pragmatism is embraced. Each articulates his views by means of analogies to cases in which our intuitions are clear and uncontroversial (or so they hope). The differences between these analogies helps account for their broader philosophical differences.

1. Putnam's Limit Theory of Truth. Putnam's intuitions about truth and rationality stem from his earlier work on reference and natural kinds.\textsuperscript{18} Despite the fact that there has been a number of different conceptions of substances, such as gold, it is intelligible to speak of the discovery of the nature of gold by modern science. This claim implies that although past scientists had different beliefs about gold (some thought that it was formed out of quicksilver and red sulphur), interpretive charity enjoins us to say that they were referring to the same stuff we intend to refer to by the term "gold". Furthermore, were there a community of experts prior to the advent of modern chemistry that would have accepted some alloy as gold, on the basis of its passing all the available tests, Putnam claims we should not conclude that their term "gold" also referred to that alloy. After all, these scientists would still have intended "gold" to refer to a substance and would have endorsed the idea that all bits of the same substance must exhibit the same behavior. Thus, assuming this case to be actual, we should say that they:

\textit{did not have a way of knowing} that they were dealing with something that had neither exactly the same behavior nor exactly the same constitution as the paradigm examples of gold. They did not know that the alloy was not really gold. But what they meant by "gold"...was what we mean by "gold." (Putnam 1988b, p. 37)

Putnam insists that the fact that gold has been picked out as a separate kind of material reflects human interests, but within the context of the relevant version it makes sense to say that science has discovered that gold is the element with atomic number 79 and that past theories of gold were incorrect, even though warrantedly assertible by prevailing standards.

Of course we too are subject to correction by later experts. But should this occur it would mean that current science had been wrong, not that

\textsuperscript{18} For example, Putnam continues to use his early arguments to show that knowing the meaning of a term is not just a matter of being in a certain (dispositional) psychological state and to show that sameness of intension does not entail sameness of extension (see Putnam (1981) and (1988b)).
"gold" did not refer to anything. The ability to imagine the sorts of reasons that would force changes in current theory suggests to Putnam that it at least makes sense to talk about which among the possible gold theories is true.

With considerable qualification, Putnam extends this analysis to the case of rationality. The chief disanalogy is that rationality is more complicated than gold. It is unlikely that science will develop powerful generalizations obeyed by all instances of rational behavior. As a result, any conception of rationality is likely to be limited in scope and highly controversial; one should not expect the same level of consensus on a theory of rationality that has been attained in gold theory. But the complexity of rationality is an important discovery of which any adequate theory must take account. The difficulty of the task and the failure to complete it thus far do not imply that it is senseless. In fact the ability to understand and assess different theories of rationality presupposes an object of debate:

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. (Putnam, 1981, p. 216)

For Putnam, rationality, although neither independent of conceptual schemes nor interest-free, is transcultural. That versions are interest-laden does not mean that conflicts among them cannot be resolved rationally, it means only that interests are part of what is at stake in these conflicts:

It is true that some judgments of 'reasonableness' must be made simply on the basis of ultimate intuition...[and that] careful thinkers may disagree...But this is very far from saying that our attempts to be rational are a fraud. (Putnam, 1983a, p. 203)

Thus truth, for Putnam, is what ideally rational humans would accept; "objectivity and rationality humanly speaking are what we have; they are better than nothing" (Putnam, 1981, p. 53).

The immediate worry about Putnam's limit conception of truth has been raised by Rorty himself (among others). He asks:

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...Positing Grenzbegriffe seems merely a way of telling ourselves that a non-existent God would, if he did exist, be pleased with us. (Rorty, 1984b, p. 10)

The posit of ideal epistemic conditions seems symptomatic of a vain hope for an ultimate legitimation of our practices. However, the more abstract the

19 "The way to develop a better understanding of the nature of rationality...[is] to develop better philosophical conceptions of rationality (an unending process but that is as it should be)" (Putnam, 1981, p. 105).
notion of an ideal limit, the more we are in the dark about our progress towards it. The more closely the limit is tied to specific practices of inquiry, the more it is rooted in the particular standpoint of historically-conditioned and limited knowers and the more doubtful is the reification of those standards as ideally rational.

Of course, Putnam’s limit is a conceptual commitment, not a bit of space-time on which we are fated to converge. Furthermore the limit must have some practical import since Putnam claims we are committed to positing it on the basis of our current practices. Putnam notes that we cannot attain an ideal perspective but he argues that we cannot do without positing one:

We speak as if there were such things as epistemically ideal conditions and we call a statement “true” if it would be justified under such conditions. (Putnam 1981, p. 55)

Positing an ideal limit preserves the gap between justification at a particular time and truth. To preserve this gap is to save the realist intuition that a statement might be false even though it follows from the best theory currently available. Close the gap between justification and truth and critical activity collapses; to say someone is wrong is only to say that they have different opinions. Thus Putnam concludes we must either adopt a limit notion of truth, thereby ensuring that fallibilism and criticism remain intelligible, or become radical relativists.

As in all transcendental arguments, Putnam takes the cogency of the practice under analysis for granted; he appeals to intuitions that criticism is possible and valuable, that the world did not change shape when it was discovered to be round, that Nazis are immoral even if they do not think so, and so on. The attractiveness of these intuitions, in conjunction with his arguments that relativism is self-refuting, makes the case compelling.

However Putnam’s case also depends on the contention that the limit theory of truth is the only way pragmatists can preserve intuitions about normative matters and to account for critical practices. But Rorty is right to question whether the limit has sufficient content to do this. On Putnam’s own account resolving conflicts among versions cannot not proceed upward to transcendental principles, rather it must proceed backward to the source of the “ultimate intuitions” that frame the conflict, and to an assessment of the reasons for continued adherence to those intuitions in light of current problems, goals and interests—precisely the strategy Putnam himself exploits against metaphysical realism. In so far as the limit cannot function as a criterion in relation to which concrete conflicts can be mediated it can play no role in accounting for the history of ideas or in settling concrete disputes, especially when norms are themselves implicated. Thus the authority and dynamics of evaluative standards in particular courses of inquiry must

20 Particularly in (1981, chaps. 3 and 9) and in his (1988a) Carus Lectures.
be otherwise explained. It is the dialectical features of inquiry, in the absence of transcendent principles, that Rorty is most concerned to highlight. By making sense of criticism without appeal to ideal standards, even as a posit, Rorty can reject the limit theory of truth and yet avoid self-refuting relativism. The result is “almost but not quite the same as...[Putnam’s] ‘internalist conception of philosophy’” (Rorty, 1984b, p. 7).

2. Pragmatism without the Limit. Rather than follow Putnam in drawing examples from natural science, where talk of the “discovery” of “natures” which are in some sense “out there” awaiting detection comes easiest (and where Putnam’s account of reference works best) Rorty uses cases of critical debate where positing objects with enduring natures seems unnecessary, if not completely implausible.

For example, games involve created meanings structured by normative rules. Although it makes sense to discuss the merits of rule changes in chess such debates do not typically involve claims that a particular set of rules constitutes the real game of chess. It is odd to suggest that chess was played incorrectly before the introduction of castling and en passant yet it is intelligible to debate whether it was improved by the addition of these moves. What frames such debate are conceptions (more or less widely shared and of varying degrees of generality) of the point of the game and of, what MacIntyre calls, its internal goods.

Similarly, it is possible to discuss the relative merits of alternative political arrangements and to debate changes in particular institutions without postulating an enduring entity to which such proposals must answer. Current debates about changes in the composition and power of the Canadian senate, for example, proceed without viewing the design of that institution, or of the Canadian federal system, as having a nature which the current arrangements fail to capture.

21 Failure to admit the possibility of a conception of norms that requires neither relativism nor absolutism is common among Rorty’s critics; for example, see Vision’s paper in (Malachowski, 1990, pp. 82–83).

22 Internal goods are those definitive of a practice that distinguish it from other activities. Such goods can be attained and appreciated only by learning the relevant practice. Playing chess is not merely a means to the attainment of its internal goods, since attaining these goods is constitutive of good chess playing. Note that I am not claiming that Putnam is committed to the view that chess has an essence, I am only citing cases of ungrounded, yet not arbitrary, debate. See MacIntyre (1984).

23 There is, of course, a long tradition of attempts to ground political theory by appeal to metaphysical theories of human nature, to historical laws, or to the nature of justice. However, I am referring to the debate among members of the general Canadian public (some of whom are scholars) in which foundational claims and claims to timeless truth have yet to be made with respect to senate reform. Rorty is equally critical of attempts to treat individuals as independent variables in terms of which the form and content of social arrangements can be explained, and of attempts to treat history as an independent variable to which social and individual life can be reduced. He recognizes that people make choices,
Of course scientists do intend to theorize about enduring objects, but such inquiry can be understood analogously. The persistence of objects through time does not underwrite the permanence of their description. This is not to deny that there is causal feedback from the world, but only to say that the significance of that impinging is implicated in a network of contingent and variable interpretive structures. Conflicts among theories are not resolved by appeal to neutral essences, but rather by appeal to the comparative effectiveness of theories in providing ways of sustaining meaningful interaction with the surroundings, that is, ways of relating to objects as means to carrying practices forward.

The importance of this can be illustrated with Putnam's gold example. When Putnam insists that the early scientists described above referred to gold, and not to both gold and the alloy that passes all the available tests for gold (call it alloy X), the Rortyan objects that his story converts the eventual outcome of investigation into an antecedent reality. It involves the retrospective reification of the products of inquiry (the development of new ways of relating to objects) as somehow subsisting in the world, or as latent in these early scientists' practices and thus binding on them. Rorty tries to acknowledge some of Putnam's intuitions about the growth of knowledge while rejecting the retrospective character of his history, by re-describing the case in light of the foregoing discussion.

As noted above, understanding the meaning of terms involves learning and enacting the relevant practices for individuating objects, and of interacting with those objects (and with other people) in order to learn their significance. To understand what these early scientists meant by "gold", as opposed to what we now mean, one must learn the relevant techniques of gold detection. As described by Putnam, these early inquirers not only have a different evidential base for their theory, they have a different repertoire of paradigm cases (one that includes samples of alloy X) and different techniques and apparatus for isolating the extension of the term "gold". Thus any interpretation on which "gold" was taken to apply to gold and X would yield reliable expectations about their verbal behavior. In addition, since these early experts would agree that items made from X were "gold" (although, as Putnam notes, there may well be a number of controversial cases), and since the sentences held true of these substances would be widely shared among speakers of the language, this interpretation would not run afoul of, what Putnam calls, the linguistic division of labour. Finally, such an interpretation would not violate interpretive charity by ascribing unduly bizarre, inexplicable, incoherent, or incommunicable beliefs to these scientists. In fact it would be consistent with Davidson's general principle of ty-

languages, and institutions, and that choices, languages, and institutions make people. See his (1989) and his paper in Malachowski (1990).
ing the interpretation of the word “gold” to the salient features of the environment (properties shared by bits of gold and by X that their tests detect) that would cause speakers to consistently apply the term.24

In short, these early scientists relate to objects differently than we do insofar as they think any “gold” theory should include an account of what we would now call “alloy X” and insofar as their procedures for individuating and classifying objects do not embody distinctions we now make. Even if these experts would agree that our stereotypes of gold are “gold”, what these objects are stereotypes of might well be disputed. These scientists are not simply wrong about the correct application the (our) term “gold”, since part of what is at stake between early and later speakers is what the vocabulary for describing objects and what the salient criteria of classification should be. Thus the dispute is not merely about truth value assignments (content) but also about the classification of objects (form).

Of course Putnam also contends that these early scientists, if confronted with a situation in which gold behaved differently from alloy X, would have concluded that alloy X was not “gold”. He takes this to show both that “gold” means the same in their idiolect as in ours and that their use of “gold” to refer to alloy X is at odds with their linguistic intentions. However, even granting a general disposition among these scientists to treat salient differences in the behavior of samples as indicative of differences in substance, this commits them only to the recognition that alloy X and gold are (and always were, perhaps) different substances, not to the view that “gold” never referred to alloy X; in fact since, ex hypothesis, these earlier scientists have accurate information about every feature of the substances that they consider relevant to applying the term and are consistent in their application of the term to both gold and alloy X, there is every reason to think they do not mean what we mean by “gold”.

Furthermore, this disposition regarding the notion of a substance exists alongside other dispositions such as the disposition to say “‘Gold’ refers to stuff with the same nature as this thing” in cases when “this thing” refers to alloy X and the disposition to refuse to call something “gold” if it fails to meet the tests satisfied by samples that we determine to be “alloy X”. One cannot determine which of these dispositions is more central to their linguistic intentions and practices before the anomaly has been discovered and the requisite reconstruction of their practices has been worked out. Thus, while the anomaly clearly poses a problem for these inquirers, given their intentions, beliefs and practices, there is no reason to suppose that the eventual solution is implicit in their intentions or their practices prior to its occurrence. There does not seem to be a univocal privileged intention that de-

24 Ramberg (1989) has an excellent discussion of the difference between Davidson’s semantic principle of charity and epistemic principles of charity, such as that invoked by Putnam.

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terminates that "gold" always and only referred to gold, or that pre-determines the relevance of the new information to past practices. Positing an ideal classification of substances (even humanly speaking) preserves realist intuitions about error attribution, but it does so only by perpetuating the tendency to reify criteria of relevance and the products of inquiry and thereby contributing to the teleological myth that objects are self-identifying—that they carry their preferred descriptions with them.25

On Rorty's view, modern chemistry is seen, not as merely articulating pre-existent referential intentions and practices, but as extending, reforming and reconstructing them. To give up earlier practices may be a small price to pay for the advantages of modern chemistry, but the entrenchment of current practice is the result of debates about the relative merits of various possible reconstructions of past ways of relating to objects, in light of the initially problematic and anomalous results of modern chemical experiments. Any such debate takes place among situated inquirers and is not resolvable by appeal either to stuff independently of the alternative modes of individuation or to transcendental standards; the ability of various theories to provide solutions and the costs and consequences of their adoption is always a function of the particular beliefs, values and desires of the subjects implicated in the debate. Yet nothing in this example precludes critical discussion. What frames such debate is not simply unconceptualized material but also the significance of its impingement on the practices and instruments by which the material is gauged and detected, general conceptions of the questions theories should answer, of the purpose of science and its cultural role and so on—none of which is antecedently in the world and each of which may simultaneously be implicated in the dispute. There is no need to deny the role of causal feedback in such discussions, one need only deny that reality is an independent variable in the knowledge relation. The significance of such feedback is inseparable from the theories and apparatus by which such input is gauged and assimilated. Thus, this account is intended to capture what Putnam's retrospective realism glosses over, namely, that insofar as current practices embody distinctions that cut across those of earlier inquirers our

Hesse (1988) notes that for 19th-century atomists "negative charges" are particles with properties (such as attracting positive charges). In electrodynamic field theory "negative charge" is an epiphenomenon of the cut-off of a line of electric force at the outer surface of conducting matter. Putnam would say that early and later scientists intended to refer to whatever "repels like charges and attracts opposite charges." But even though this was essential to the notion of "charge" in 19th-century atomism, that charges were particles was also an essential trait. "If we wait until [both theories are] before us, it is trivially true that we can reconstruct the meanings of some concepts to make rival theories and their observations commensurate in meaning (though not, of course, in all their truth values). But this reconstruction throws no light on the nature of the theory change that has taken place. It does not account for the subtle inferences and shifts of meaning that take place as new theories are developed, or the final transformation of the physical picture...that has occurred" (Hesse, pp. 321-22).
practices are the result of past reconstruction in which the meanings of terms and the significance of objects are altered, resulting in new ways of relating to the surroundings.

The examples of chess, politics and gold, though not uncontroversial, are intended to undermine Putnam's claim that rational debate must be construed as the attainment of absolute conceptions of objects under study or as being legitimatable from some ideal perspective—even an ideal "humanly speaking". Not even in science can the posit of such a perspective determine or decide the course of debates about the merits of theoretical alternatives.  

The moral is not, as Sorell claims, that we must substitute talk of invention for talk of discovery, or that reality must be construed as being projected rather than revealed. To insist on this would be to presuppose an absolute distinction between that which is "given" and that which is "added". Such a distinction could be drawn only on the basis of some epistemological theory about the relative contributions of mind and world to knowledge; a project which is itself intelligible only given the separation of subject and object that pragmatism strives to undercut. By claiming that there is no fundamental difference between debate in science and debates in politics, or debates over rule changes, pragmatists urge that we not view talk of discovery or invention as being capable of doing serious philosophical work. We can talk of the discovery of the nature of water, but so too of the discovery of abstract art, or national health care. In each case what is involved is the reconstruction and innovative extension of past modes of relating to the world in some domain of cultural practice in response to problematic situations.

It should now be evident that Rorty's tendency to shift from talk of truth and falsity to talk of better and worse is important for a number of reasons. First, "better" and "worse" are comparative terms, the use of which involves essential reference to a range of alternatives. Furthermore, the sense of these terms is more easily construed as being context-dependent. Talk of better and worse makes sense only after some points of comparison have been articulated; and such comparisons typically presuppose some purpose. Finally, if debate involves assessing the concrete consequences of enacting competing alternatives within some shared domain, then claims to truth can be redescribed as claims to improvement in some respect relevant

26 In one passage Putnam does seem to admit that debate does not require such a posit: "Seeing that an adjudication of an ethical dispute is reasonable (at a given time, for a given dispute, and for a given group of people)...is like seeing that one 'reading' is better than another. We are not committed to the existence of an unimaginable 'absolute perspective' in ethics, an ethical theory that contains and reconciles all the possible perspectives on ethical problems in all their dimensions; we are committed to the idea of 'better and worse opinions'" (Putnam, 1983b, 6). I have argued that Putnam's limit is itself such an "unimaginable absolute perspective."

27 See his paper in (Malachowski, 1990, p. 19).
to the practice in question. Thus, truth, in this commendatory role is interpretable as, “in James’s phrase, what is good for us to believe” (Rorty, 1986, p. 5).

Of course in practice “us” always refers to some historically conditioned community of (more or less closely united) practitioners and “better” is always judged from some historical standpoint. But this means only that there is no transcendental or ideal point of view from which to adjudicate disputes among rivals. The authority of theories is not an inherent property of them, but rather a function of their relative fitness, under some more or less widely prevailing set of contingent conditions, to resolve or dissolve current problems. With no ideal limit or perspective to appeal to we cannot ground the process of inquiry “there is only the dialogue” (Rorty, 1984b, p. 10).

C. Summary.

One way of putting the difference between Putnam and Rorty is that for Putnam, intuitions about criticism and fallibilism must be explained by recourse to a limit notion of truth. For Rorty, it is our intuitions about the regulative role of truth that are to be explicated and it is in terms of the notion of criticism, or “conversation” as Rorty calls it, that this is to be achieved. We are driven to fallibilism on the latter view, not by the suggestion that we cannot be absolutely certain if our current versions approximate some ideal, but rather by the hope that by continuing the process of critical inquiry we may some day develop versions which solve, or circumvent, current problems. On this view, inquiry is not motivated by the fear that our current versions are wrong-headed from some ideal perspective (we can only evaluate wrong-headedness from within some version) but rather by the hope that better times may be ahead. The search for truth is better construed as a search for better, richer, more fulfilling and humane ways of relating to our surroundings and better, richer, more fulfilling and humane conceptions of what “better”, “richer”, “more fulfilling” and “humane” mean. The process is one of perpetual reconstructive bootstrapping in which the criteria embodied in our practices are reinterpreted in light of new examples and our repertoire of examples is amended and reinterpreted in the face of new criteria. In both cases we are likely to speak of progress, but in neither case is progress measured or legitimated by appeal to a final destination or an overarching structure of standards. New theories, by providing new exemplars, give new content to our general vocabulary of theoretical

28 And of course progress can only be measured in terms of the concrete problems which face available theories, not by reference to some ideal limit.

29 Thus “to say what is rational for us now to believe may not be true is simply to say that somebody may come up with a better idea” (Rorty, 1984b, p. 5).
virtues and new interpretations of what theoretical merit consists in. In so doing they at once exemplify and redefine those virtues by extending the application of our evaluative terms to new contexts.$^{30}$

Rorty should not be read as offering a theory of truth or a set of criteria for determining truth. To say that there is only the conversation, is to say that there is no rationality that is not the rationality of some particular culture and that evaluation is a matter of negotiation, a matter of comparing concrete alternatives within the context of more or less widely shared interests and purposes. Inquiry, the quest for Solidarity as Rorty describes it, is the continued attempt to reshape our theories and practices in an effort to retain that for which we see no reason to give up, while pursuing avenues which hold promise of improvement:

to accept the contingency of our starting-points is to accept our inheritance from, and conversation with, our fellow-humans as our only source of guidance...In the end the pragmatists tell us, what matters is our loyalty to other human beings...not our hope of getting things right. (Rorty, 1982, p. 161)

Thus in practice Rorty’s quest for Solidarity involves nothing more radical than Putnam’s own observation that:

we operate from within our tradition (with its echoes of the Greek agora, of Newton and so on, in the case of rationality, and with its echoes of scripture, of the philosophers, of democratic revolutions, and so on, in the case of morality);...this is not to say that all is entirely reasonable with the conceptions we now have...we are invited to engage in a truly human dialogue. (Putnam, 1981, p. 216)

4. CONCLUSION.

Put too simply, the criteria philosophers have taken to be authoritative in constructing epistemologies fall under three headings: “world” (facts or evidence), “mind” (categories, laws of thought) and “culture” (communal conventions). If taken as being mutually exclusive these sets of criteria are associated with naive causal realism (or naive empiricism), naive idealism (or naive rationalism) and naive cultural relativism, respectively. In each case appeals to a particular set of criteria are taken to be capable of halting the regress of giving reasons for, or justifications of, beliefs and actions; they are construed as ultimate criteria of epistemic authority.

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$^{30}$ Prado (1987) and Sorell (in Malachowski, 1990, p. 19) claim that predictive success provides an unambiguous standard of progress. But it is misleading to suggest that prediction has the same sense or value from Aristotle, to Newton, to contemporary physics. Nor is it a necessary or universal criterion of cognitive progress, as developments in the social sciences and evolutionary biology show. We tend to keep the same vocabulary but reinterpret it as we go and in so doing forge new meanings out of old ones. Thus the meanings of our terms grow.
Putnam’s accusation that Rorty defends radical relativism is apt only if Rorty embraces the latter of the above options. But this would mean that Rorty holds some evaluative criteria, those of his cultural peers, to be capable of halting the aforementioned regress. On the interpretation offered here this accusation is misplaced. Rorty is not suggesting that cultural standards are ultimate epistemic principles, rather he is denying that the regress of justification can be halted in this way at all! It is his rejection of a transcendental point of view from which to judge ultimate authority that lies behind his ethnocentrism. Neither form nor content, mind nor world, serves as an independent variable to which the products of inquiry can be finally reduced.

Nothing about this view precludes the critical (re)assessment of beliefs and standards. The pragmatist need only insist that critical conversation proceeds by comparing the practical, concrete advantages of various alternatives under consideration. Such debate can only take place against a backdrop of more or less widely shared beliefs, habits and interests which are themselves defensible only in terms of more beliefs, habits and interests (and by further comparisons with alternatives). There is no fixed, determinate or permanent content to “better” and “worse”, no normative vocabulary that may not itself be implicated in the disputes it attempts to resolve, and thus no ideal perspective (not even a human one) from which to adjudicate disputes.

Pragmatists claim that truth is a species of the good; even for Putnam truth has no content apart from our practices, and these practices help define, and gain intelligibility from, our conception of eudaemonia. Yet, in the end, Putnam reasserts the priority of truth. He holds that inquiry is directed at discovering the ideal (true) conception(s) of eudaemonia and that this standard provides our practices with universal aims. However, this gives rise to an insuperable problem. If legitimacy depends on approximation to an ideal limit, we have no reason (not even good fallible reasons), for claiming our current conceptions are authoritative. Thus the posit of ideal epistemic conditions cannot serve to explain or justify our practices.

This problem can be avoided by rejecting the limit theory of truth and by insisting on the integration of norms and practices. Beliefs and practices are to be valued insofar as they better enable us to cope with the world and render experience significant, a function they can exercise only under some limited set of (more or less widely operative) conditions. But there are no fixed standards of assessment; there are only the standards embodied and implicated in the forms of life of particular traditions past, present and envisaged.

Of course Putnam insists that his ideal is pluralistic, there may be many acceptable conceptions of the good life for humans, but the limits of this pluralism are, nonetheless, absolute.
There are no aims of inquiry beyond those of historically-constituted inquirers. Inquiry is the search for solutions to, or means for the circumvention of, current problems, for enrichment through the extension, redescription and reconstruction of the traditions and practices to which we are heir. With no ideal limit to underwrite or legitimate the conversation, the dialogue in which Putnam asks us to engage is a human one after all.

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