WORDS & LIFE

HILARY PUTNAM

Edited by James Conant

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In philosophizing, I have to bring my own language and life into imagination. What I require is a convening of my culture's criteria, in order to confront them with my words and life as I pursue them and as I may imagine them; and at the same time to confront my words and life as I pursue them with the life my culture's words may imagine for me: to confront the culture with itself, along the lines in which it meets in me.

Stanley Cavell

Preface

The essays that James Conant has selected for the present volume have been mainly written in the last four years; in this respect this volume differs from its companion volume *Realism with a Human Face* (Harvard University Press, 1990), which consisted largely of papers written in the early 1980s. Yet there is a continuity between the two volumes. The preface to *Realism with a Human Face* explained that the view of truth I put forward in *Reason, Truth, and History* (1981)—the view that a statement is true if and only if acceptance of the statement would be justified were epistemic conditions good enough—was not "emphasized" in the papers in that volume, although metaphysical realism—the view that truth involves a fixed correspondence (a correspondence relation which is one and the same no matter what sort of statement is under consideration) to a fixed set of "objects" and "properties"—was repeatedly attacked. That much might be said to be even more true of the papers in this volume, since I no longer defend that theory of truth at all, while, as in the earlier volume, I continue to argue that metaphysical realism is not the friend of common-sense realism that it claims to be, and that, in many ways, metaphysical realism and the fashionable antirealisms stand in a symbiotic relation; philosophical illusions require one another for sustenance. Indeed, all the ideas listed in the last paragraph of the preface to *Realism with a Human Face* are as central to this volume as they were to the earlier volume (these were "that the fact/value dichotomy is untenable, that the fact/convention dichotomy is also untenable, that truth and justification of ideas are closely connected, that the alternative to metaphysical realism is not any form of skepticism, that philosophy is an attempt to achieve the good"). I also remarked that these ideas "have been long associated with the American pragmatist tradition" and that both James Conant and I want that tradition "to

be more widely understood in all its manifold expressions"; the essays in Part III of the present volume continue the effort to realize that goal.

Nevertheless, there are significant differences, some of which will be evident from a glance at the table of contents, starting with the fact that the previous volume had only one historical section, while the present volume begins with three consecutive such sections. More significant, in my own view at least, are two other facts about these essays. One is the fact that the essays on "ethics and aesthetics" in the earlier volume were primarily attacks on the fact/value dichotomy, whereas the essays in Part III ("The Inheritance of Pragmatism") of the present volume, while continuing the criticism of that dichotomy, go on to develop a positive view of the nature of social/ethical problems which I (together with Ruth Anna Putnam, the co-author of two of these papers) find in the writings of John Dewey. I say "social/ethical" rather than simply "ethical" because, as I remark in Chapter 8 ("Pragmatism and Moral Objectivity"), it is a feature of Dewey's approach to blur the distinction: when we have solved a problem in our communal life, we may not know—or care—whether it was an "ethical" problem or not, and also because I would be the last person to claim that the social ethics that I so much admire in Dewey is all there is to ethics. The other fact is that many of the papers in the present volume (for example, those in Part VI, "Mind and Language," as well as Chapters 14 and 15, "Realism without Absolutes" and "The Question of Realism") attack illusions associated with the rhetoric of "cognitive science." Indeed, even the papers in Part I ("The Return of Aristotle") are concerned to attack the idea that intentionality, the directedness of thought to objects, is either to be reduced to facts of physics or to be "eliminated" as an illusion, and readers of the papers in Part I may want to look ahead at Chapter 24 ("Why Functionalism Didn't Work") as they read those papers. If there is a single unifying theme in this volume, it may well be the attack on a certain set of prejudices—prejudices which pretend to be "scientific," but which confuse respect for science with uncritical acceptance of a materialist ideology.

I should like to say a word here about the reason for the "historical sections." I am convinced that the history of philosophy is not only a history of gaining insights—and I do think philosophers gain insights—but also a history of neglecting, and even actively repressing, previously gained insights. It will be clear to the reader, I believe, how

that view informs Part I ("The Return of Aristotle") and Part III ("The Inheritance of Pragmatism"). But what in the world, some may ask, is Part II ("The Legacy of Logical Positivism") doing here? Am I saying that there were, after all, real insights in logical positivism? Was not logical positivism the chief expression in this century of the very scientism that I am concerned to attack?

To those questions my answers are, respectively, "yes" and "no." There were real insights in logical positivism. Some of those insights are to be found in the course of Hans Reichenbach's profound examination of the question "In precisely what sense is relativistic physics a refutation of the Kantian view that Euclidean geometry is synthetic *a priori*?" in *Relativity Theory and Apriori Knowledge*. And even if the attempts of some positivists to deductively "vindicate" induction failed, the investigations that resulted from those attempts represent the beginnings of modern formal learning theory, as I point out in Chapter 7 of the present volume, "Reichenbach and the Limits of Vindication."

More important, some of the crude philosophical ideas that are rampant today—claims that neurobiology has solved the problem of intentionality, for example, or that the computer model of the mind has enabled us to answer metaphysical and epistemological questions—are more extreme (and cruder) versions of scientism than logical positivism ever was. Many philosophers think that *because* they have "refuted" a straw man version of logical positivism—refuted a doctrine that never actually existed in the form they describe—they cannot themselves possibly be guilty of the charge of scientism. (The real logical positivists, for example, did not need Thomas Kuhn to tell them that observation terms are "theory laden"—they had been saying that, in those very terms, since the early 1930s. And—see Chapter 6, "Reichenbach and the Myth of the Given"—far from accepting the idea of the given, they were its keenest critics.)

In saying there were real insights in logical positivism, I am not defending the verifiability theory of meaning, or the identification of cognitive value with predictive value, or the sharp fact/value dichotomy that characterized that tendency. But it is important to see why logical positivism *really* failed, for example, to see that positivism has a deep problem in refuting the charge of solipsism (this is the gravamen of Chapter 4, "Logical Positivism and Intentionality"); that some philosophers have failed to see this is evidenced, I believe, by the current revival of the "disquotational theory of truth"—that is, of a re-

dundancy theory of truth coupled with an "assertibility conditions" account of understanding. (See Chapter 13, "Does the Disquotational Theory of Truth Solve All Philosophical Problems?" as well as Chapters 16 and 17, "On Truth" and "A Comparison of Something with Something Else," for an explanation of this remark.)

Finally, I want to say a word about the fourth and the seventh parts of this volume. Part IV is not exactly "historical," although it does try to rescue Wittgenstein from persistent misinterpretations; rather it consists of papers in which I believe I have *learned* from Wittgenstein, though not from the stock Wittgenstein who has a "use theory of meaning" and a "disquotational theory of truth." Indeed, the first paper in the section, Chapter 12 ("Rethinking Mathematical Necessity"), simultaneously corrects the way I myself misread Wittgenstein's philosophy of mathematics in the past (for example, in "Philosophy of Mathematics: Why Nothing Works," Chapter 28 of this volume), and presents a way of thinking about the issue that I find attractive; similarly, Chapters 14 and 15 ("Realism without Absolutes" and "The Question of Realism") correct the commonplace idea that Wittgenstein was an "antirealist" and begin to work out a way of thinking that I intend to follow up in the coming years. Finally, the papers in Part VII, although grouped together because in one way or another they all have to do with science and the impact of the idea of science on philosophy, also continue the antireductionist and broadly pluralistic themes of the preceding parts of the book.

Hilary Putnam, 1994

Introduction by James Conant

> Any philosophy that can be put in a nutshell belongs in one.
> Hilary Putnam

In a number of the essays in this volume, the author discourages us from taking a certain view of his thought. He says that what he is offering should not be taken for a philosophical *theory* in the traditional sense. He is not setting forth a *position*, but attempting to sketch a *picture* (sometimes one he deplores, sometimes one he recommends as a corrective to some coercive alternative picture); and he has some things to say about what pictures are and how to use and abuse them. He also goes out of his way, at various points, to explain what he now finds misleading about this or that label he has in the past applied to his own views, saying that he has now discarded the label because he no longer wishes to invite the impression (which the label made irresistible) that his rejection of one philosophical thesis was meant to imply his endorsement of its traditional antithesis.

Even if the reader were eager to conclude that the author is quite mistaken about all this—that he is as deep in questionable theses and theories as he ever was—the reader would still be hard put to conclude that the essays here all form part of a single system. Not only were they written at different times and for very different occasions,[1] but often one essay will devote itself to tearing out individual pieces from the overall puzzle that another happily assumes still remain firmly in place. Thus some essays clearly represent earlier, and others later, way stations along a single winding journey of thought.

Having thus cautioned the reader not to expect from this introduction an overview of the author's system, I will now proceed to proffer a handful of nutshells, each of which affords (I hope) some glimpse of—but none of which contains—the philosophy of Hilary Putnam.

Putnam and Baudelaire

> I have tried more than once to lock myself inside a system, so as to be able to pontificate as I liked. But a system is a kind of damnation that condemns us to perpetual backsliding; we are always having to invent another, and this form of fatigue is a cruel punishment. And every time, my system was beautiful, big, spacious, convenient, tidy and polished above all; at least so it seemed to me. And every time, some spontaneous unexpected product of universal vitality would come and give the lie to my puerile and old-fashioned wisdom . . . Under the threat of being constantly humiliated by another conversion, I took a big decision. To escape from the horror of these philosophical apostasies, I arrogantly resigned myself to modesty; I became content to feel; I came back and sought sanctuary in impeccable naïveté. I humbly beg pardon of academics of every kind . . . for only there has my philosophic conscience found rest.
>
> Charles Baudelaire, "The Universal Exhibition of 1855"

In recent years, Putnam appears to have taken "a big decision"—not unlike the one Baudelaire reports himself as having taken, and for not altogether dissimilar reasons. Putnam has become increasingly disenchanted with putting forward new philosophical "positions" of his own (or revamping ones to which he was previously committed), and increasingly concerned with articulating his dissatisfactions with the prevailing forms of orthodoxy in Anglo-American philosophy (some of which he himself was instrumental in ushering on to the scene). Investigating the sources of these dissatisfactions has become an abiding preoccupation of his recent work. But this preoccupation has, in turn, led to a more positive and constructive concern—a concern not only with the structure and history of the philosophical controversies which he himself has participated in, but also, more generally, with the nature of philosophical controversy *überhaupt:* with what fuels it and with what might allow it to attain and confer satisfaction. This shift in the focus of his work has only gradually become fully explicit and self-conscious. The shift is reflected in a change in the tone of his work: from the authoritative tone of someone explaining the solution to an outstanding problem (functionalism, the causal theory of reference, and so forth) to the unhurried tone of someone who is concerned above all to convey an appreciation of the *difficulty* of the problems. The change in philosophical voice is from that of someone who is excited to be able to announce that we are on the verge of a revolution (in our thinking about the nature of mind or language or whatever) to that of someone who has become distrustful of such an-

nouncements and impressed with how—to paraphrase one of Putnam's heroes[2]—those who are unfamiliar with the history of a problem (even its *recent* history) are condemned to repeat that history.

None of the essays in the present volume begins by announcing a solution to a long-standing philosophical problem. This is not to say that Putnam has come to despair of the possibility of making progress in philosophy. But his conception of the form in which he himself is able to contribute to the achievement of such progress has evidently undergone some transformation. Several of the essays in this volume begin with a historical prelude (often in order to illustrate how a popular contemporary "solution" to a philosophical problem is a disguised version of a much older proposal).[3] Some of the essays begin on an autobiographical note (tracing the development perhaps of Putnam's own present, usually ambivalent, attitude to a particular philosophical school, author, or doctrine).[4] Some of them begin with a dialectical overview of a philosophical controversy (often in order to try to bring out how the crucial presuppositions are ones which both parties to the dispute share).[5] The proximate goal of these essays therefore is not to attempt to have the last word about a philosophical problem, but rather to give the reader a sense of the *shape* and the *depth* of the problem—of how, for example, in a particular philosophical dispute, thesis and counter-thesis bear one another's stamp and how each of the pair comes with its own false bottom, hiding the true dimensions of the problem from view.

The opening remarks of Putnam's most recent work suggest he has come to see in stretches of the history of philosophy a version of Baudelaire's vision of a kind of damnation that condemns one to perpetual backsliding:

> The besetting sin of philosophers seems to be throwing the baby out with the bathwater. From the beginning each "new wave" of philosophers has simply ignored the insights of the previous wave in the course of advancing its own . . . I want to urge that we attempt to understand, and to the extent that it is humanly possible overcome, the pattern of "recoil" that causes philosophy to leap from frying pan to fire, from fire to a different frying pan, from different frying pan to a different fire, and so on apparently without end.[6]

The essays collected in the present volume should be read as addi-

tional piecemeal contributions to such a project of attempting to understand—and, to the extent that it is humanly possible, overcome—this characteristically philosophical oscillation from one source of excessive heat to another.

Many of the essays in the present volume offer criticisms (and, in some cases, official recantations) of views that Putnam himself has previously held. Indeed, in many cases, what is under indictment is a philosophical view which not only continues to be widely associated with Putnam's name (generally because he either originated or helped to originate it), but which also continues to exert considerable influence within analytic philosophy. Every essay here seeks in some way to bring into sharper focus an "unexpected product of universal vitality" whose existence "gives the lie" to some piece of wisdom to which Putnam himself was previously strongly attracted. Thus, if there is a single over-arching doctrine—a single teaching which underlies every essay here—it would seem to be that one's ability to make progress in philosophy depends, above all, on one's continuing willingness to reexamine the grounds of one's philosophical convictions.

The parallel between Putnam's (most recent) metamorphosis and the one which Baudelaire reports extends not only to the resolve no longer to lock oneself inside a system, but also to the resolve arrogantly to resign oneself to modesty and return to "sanctuary in impeccable naïveté." In Chapter 14, "Realism without Absolutes," Putnam formulates the problem which that essay seeks to address in the following terms: "The difficulty is in seeing how such a move in the direction of deliberate 'naiveté' can possibly help after three centuries of modern philosophy, not to mention a century of brain science and now cognitive science. The problem now is to *show the possibility* of a return to what I called 'deliberate naiveté' . . . it seems to me that that is the direction in which we need to go." Putnam is here describing a philosophical move which he finds in Wittgenstein and which he himself wishes to emulate. It is, he says, a move which seeks to head off our tendency, when philosophizing, to repudiate our ordinary ways of talking and thinking ("we can't actually *see* physical objects, all we really see are appearances"), and to restore our conviction in such ways of thinking and talking.

Before we further explore what is involved in cultivating such a "deliberate naiveté" in philosophy, we need some further sense of the nature of Putnam's dissatisfaction with traditional forms of philosophical sophistication; and we might as well begin at the beginning.

Aristotle *after* Wittgenstein?

> I never thought that Anaxagoras, who said that such things were directed by the Mind, would bring in any other cause for them . . . This wonderful hope was dashed as I went on reading and saw that the man made no use of Mind, nor gave it any responsibility for the management of things, but mentioned as causes air and ether and water and many other strange things. That seemed to me much like saying that Socrates's actions are all due to his mind, and then in trying to tell the causes of everything I do, to say that the reason I am sitting here is because my body consists of bones and sinews . . . If someone said that without bones and sinews and all such things, I should not be able to do what I decided, he would be right, but surely to say that they are the cause of what I do, and not that I have chosen the best course, even though I act with my mind, is to speak very lazily and carelessly. Imagine not being able to distinguish the true cause from that without which the cause would not be able to act as a cause!
>
> Socrates, *Phaedo*

Some problems won't go away. The topic of Socrates' quarrel with Anaxagoras—whether when "I act with my mind" the true cause is something in my body—is one such problem. It recurs in the pages that follow in a number of guises, perhaps most provocatively in the guise of a quarrel between Aristotle and contemporary cognitive science—a quarrel in which Putnam always awards the last word to Aristotle.

The opening essay of this volume begins with the question whether the subject of Aristotle's *De Anima,* the *psyche,* is to be identified with what we now call "the mind." Here is how Putnam explains the motive behind this sudden departure on his part into matters of classical philology:

> In this century people talk as if the mind is almost a self-evident idea. It is as if the phenomena themselves required us to classify them as mental or physical in the way we do. Yet the present notion [of mind] is not very old, or at least its hegemony is not very old. The words *mind* and *soul,* or their classical ancestors, the Latin *mens* and the Greek *psyche,* are of course old. The habit of identifying notions which are actually quite different leads us to think that therefore the present notion of the mind must be equally old, but nothing could be more false . . . My hope is that whatever our interest in the mind—whether as philosophers or as psychologists or as "cognitive scientists" or just as curious and puzzled human beings—we may find that this bit of intellectual history may also have the benefit of making

> usual ways of thinking about our "mental phenomena" seem less coercive.

Putnam goes on to argue that nothing in Aristotle's thought corresponds to "the mind." Aristotle's notion of *psyche* is considerably more comprehensive, and his notion of *nous* much narrower, than the modern notion of mind. *Psyche* is the "form" (which Putnam paraphrases, somewhat controversially, as the "functional organization") of the whole living human organism (encompassing digestion and reproduction, as well as desire and thought); while *nous* is an exclusively intellectual faculty (which Putnam paraphrases, less controversially, as "reason") which does not encompass either sensation or desire. Putnam's preoccupation with these matters derives from his interest in wanting to show that the mind/body problem is of relatively recent vintage. Hence the significance he attaches to the following observation: "One can generate questions about how *nous* is related to body, how *psyche* is related to body, and so on, within the Aristotelian system; and Aristotle says things about those questions (for example, he says 'active *nous*' is separable from body but the *psyche* as a whole is not), but one cannot find the modern 'mind/body problem.'"

One of the aims of the essay as a whole is to argue that "each previous period in the history of Western thought had a quite different idea of what such a term as 'mind' or 'soul' might stand for, and a correspondingly different idea of what the puzzles were that we should be trying to solve." Thus, along the same lines, Putnam goes on to develop a claim about the relation between our contemporary views and those of Thomas Aquinas, this time focusing on the question where to locate the faculty of *memory*. Here, too, Putnam argues that we tend to read our contemporary conceptions back into our predecessors. We read the idea that memory is a mental faculty back into earlier writers because "it has come to seem such a central function of the mind to us." To us it seems simply *obvious* that memories are in the mind. Whereas, Putnam claims, Aquinas's view was that—unless they happened to be in the process of being actively recalled—it was obvious that memories were in the body (that is, the brain). This fact—that the answer to this question seemed as obvious to Aquinas as it now does to us—helps prepare the way for one of the conclusions of the essay: "If there is one value which a historical survey of what

has been thought on these matters can have, it is to caution us against thinking that it is obvious even what the questions are."

Putnam has an additional interest, however, in giving us a brief tour of the history of thought about (what we now call) "the mind." It is his conviction that there is not only something arbitrary and accidental about our contemporary philosophical way(s) of drawing the contours of the realm of the mental, but also something coercive and confused:

> The *nous*/body distinction that Aquinas would have drawn is not at all the same as the modern mind/body distinction. Yet, when I think about it, it doesn't sound worse than the modern one! *Is it* obvious that there is something called the mind whose contents include all of my memories, whether I am actively recalling them or not, but whose functions do not include digestion and reproduction? Or are we in the grip of a picture whose origins are somewhat accidental and whose logic, once examined, is not compelling?

Putnam's claim that neither Aristotle nor Aquinas drew the modern mind/body distinction may not come as a shock, especially in light of the widely disseminated notion that it is, above all, Descartes who should get credit for first elaborating the distinction in its modern form. On one influential version of this story, Gilbert Ryle traces (in order then to criticize) what he takes to be the modern idea of mind—the idea that the mind exists in the body as a ghost in a machine—back to Descartes's conception of *res cogitans* (and of its relation to *res extensa*). Putnam, however, wishes to contest the standard account in three respects, claiming (1) that the modern notion of the mind is of even more recent vintage—its origins should be traced to developments within the history of *empiricist* thought; (2) that the standard account fails to interest itself sufficiently in certain developments internal to the history of the modern notion of the *body*—the reason the mind/body problem has come to seem so intractable is that the ghost has received all the blame while the machine has escaped suspicion; and (3) that the direction of progress in our thought about the relation of mind to body lies in large measure in a *return* to Aristotle—a recovery of a moment in the history of thought prior to the rise of modern science. I will briefly review each of these claims.

Putnam suggests that the source of our contemporary puzzles about the nature of mind should in part be traced to the emergence of a

conception of mind according to which the paradigmatic mental phenomena are sensory. For Aristotle and Aquinas, it was reason *(nous)* which was most unlike body, while sensation was held to be "clearly on the side of matter and body". Descartes, according to the interpretation that Putnam favors, held that sensations were modes neither of *res cogitans* nor *res extensa,* but of that organic unity known as the human being (or, in Descartes's technical vocabulary, "the substantial union of mind and body").[7] Sensations, Descartes thought, have a dual ontological status, possessing both a corporeal and a mental aspect. In this respect, Descartes's conception appears to stand poised halfway between that of Aristotle (who locates sensation firmly within the body) and that of Hume (who locates it firmly within the mind). Putnam argues that there is a sense, nonetheless, in which Descartes should be placed squarely within "the tradition that goes back to Aristotle, the tradition of thinking of sensations as 'material.'" For the features of sensation which most preoccupied the empiricists—for example, their affinity with images—belonged for Descartes to their corporeal aspect. For Descartes, insofar as they were considered under this latter aspect, sensations were "material images in the body rather than 'mental' phenomena in the Cartesian sense" (where the term "Cartesian" is now taken by Putnam to name a conception of mind Ryle opposes rather than one Descartes espouses). Thus our contemporary philosophical conception of the mind remains in the thrall of a post-Cartesian "Cartesian" picture.

In this same essay, after reviewing some of his own earlier arguments for functionalism, Putnam writes:

> What interests me when I read the writing of my former self is how obvious it seemed to me that the mind/body problem concerned, in the first instance at least, *sensations,* and how the "usual arguments for dualism" were all arguments against identifying sensations with anything physical. Nor was I alone in this impression . . . Everybody "knew" the mind/body problem had to do with whether sensations were material or not. Obviously something had happened in philosophy—at least among English-speaking philosophers—between Descartes's time and ours to bring this about.

What happened? Without reviewing the steps by which Putnam arrives at his conclusion, let me jump to the end of the story. The real villains turn out to be Berkeley and Hume:

> Since British empiricism virtually identified the mind with images (or "ideas" as they were called in the seventeenth century), *we* have come to think of images as paradigmatically "mental," and—unless we are materialists—as immaterial . . .
>
> Berkeley did not think the world consisted *only* of "ideas," however . . . There were, for Berkeley, also the *subjects* of the "ideas" . . . the world consists of "Spirits and their Ideas" . . . For Hume, however, a Spirit is nothing but a bundle of Ideas . . . With Hume's step of identifying the mind with a "collection" (that ambiguous word!) of sensations and feelings and images, the transformation of the mind/body problem into what I knew it as in 1960, and into what my teachers and my teachers' teachers knew it as, was complete.
>
> The mind/body problem has become (among English-speaking philosophers) the problem of the relation of these apparently immaterial sensations (now thought of as the paradigm of the "mental") to the physical world.

After a brief interlude of relative lucidity, English-speaking philosophy, Putnam claims, "reverted to its traditional empiricist way of conceiving mind/body issues." The reversion was due to the advent of logical positivism (and the concomitant decline of idealism and pragmatism), the interlude of lucidity to the English-speaking world's first try at assimilating Kant's philosophy. Putnam credits Kant not only with launching a powerful *ad hominem* critique of the British empiricist tradition, but also with having addressed to that tradition "the central Kantian question." Putnam's first crack at formulating this question (in Chapter 1) runs as follows: if I confine myself to the sort of description of the nature of thought which is appropriate to a scientific discipline (such as empirical psychology)—that is, if I describe the phenomena as a sequence of representations ("images or words with certain causes and effects")—then how am I to discover that I am dealing with a *rational* being ("that I am dealing with something which has truth, value, freedom, and meaning, and not just causes and effects")? Later in this volume, Putnam reformulates "the central Kantian question" as follows: how can an investigation (say, into the nature of thought) which confines itself to examining the realm of natural law—that is, the realm of entities governed by law-like relations of cause and effect—ever bring within its view the realm of freedom (the realm in which we act and think and mean what we say)?