FORGETTING FOUNDATIONALISM

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A thesis submitted to the
School of Graduate Studies
in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

Department of Philosophy
Memorial University of Newfoundland

December 1997

St. John's Newfoundland

ABSTRACT

Foundationalism is a traditional metaphilosophical position which holds that reality can be explained and described absolutely. Foundationalists maintain that our questions about reality inquire beyond the capabilities of our ordinary language and that, therefore, these questions require absolute answers that are phrased in a *metaphysical* vocabulary which reaches beyond ordinary language to an absolute reality or *metaphysical* foundation. I maintain that we should forget foundationalism because the notion of a metaphysical foundation is a needless presupposition that results from incoherent assumptions about the nature of language and reference.

In order to make a case against foundationalist philosophy I investigate its application to traditional questions addressed by Richard Rorty and Hilary Putnam in the current realism/antirealism debate. I examine both Rorty's and Putnam's critiques of metaphysical realism, which is a clear example of a foundationalist approach to questions about reality, and I compare the kinds of nonfoundational pragmatism with which they attempt to replace it.

Although Rorty and Putnam agree that metaphysical realism is incoherent, Putnam professes that he does not agree with Rorty's replacement - ethnocentric pragmatism. However, my comparison of Rorty's ethnocentric pragmatism with Putnam's natural realism reveals that, despite Putnam's criticism of Rorty's position, both positions are remarkably similar. In his arguments against metaphysical realism Putnam clearly recognizes the incoherence of foundationalism, but Putnam's charge of relativism against Rorty contradicts the very arguments that Putnam himself employs against metaphysical realism. I contend that Putnam's discomfort with Rorty's ethnocentrism suggests that Putnam has not quite succeeded in forgetting foundationalism.

The postmodern recommendation to forget foundationalism is not a new one; Wittgenstein proposed it in his *Philosophical Investigations* fifty years ago and Rorty and Putnam are proposing it now. I am reiterating this recommendation in order to show that the criticism Rorty (especially) and Putnam have received is an unwarranted and often dogmatic refusal to accept the limits of philosophical inquiry.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to acknowledge the instruction and supervision of Dr. David Thompson whose commitment to students and teaching has been a more valuable influence on my future in philosophy than any other. I would also like to acknowledge Dr. James Bradley, Dr. Brian Penrose and Dr. Philip Rose, three important philosophers who are perhaps unaware of how and why they motivate me. I would like to thank the school of graduate studies for helpful financial support as well as others in the department of philosophy, particulary Jennifer Dawe, for lively conversation. Lastly, I would like to thank my parents, without whom none of this would have been possible.

This thesis marks the end of something important to me and the beginning of something more important to me; for this reason it is dedicated to Mary.

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I take it as a fact of life that there is a sense in which the task of philosophy is to overcome metaphysics and a sense in which its task is to continue metaphysical discussion. In every philosopher there is a part that cries, "This enterprise is vain, frivolous, crazy--we must say 'stop!'" and a part that cries, "this enterprise is simply reflection at the most general and most abstract level; to put a stop to it would be a crime against reason." *Of course* philosophical problems are unsolvable; but as Stanley Cavell once remarked, "there are better and worse ways of thinking about them."

Hilary Putnam, *Realism With a Human Face*, p. 19.

CHAPTER 1

THE DEVELOPMENT OF FOUNDATIONALIST PHILOSOPHY

Metaphysics is motivated by a profound, philosophical ambition to understand and explain reality. This ambition is similar to the explanatory aims of scientific or humanistic investigations into the nature of the universe because like metaphysics the aim of each of these investigations is to provide us with a language that describes reality. However, what distinguishes metaphysics from these other investigations is its *foundational* criteria. In one comprehensive language under which all other descriptions of reality can be subsumed, metaphysics intends to reveal the *absolute foundation* upon which all other descriptions of reality rest.

Traditionally, metaphysical investigations into reality explore the relationship between human experience and the rest of the experienced world. By examining the nature of consciousness and the nature of the causes of our experience of the world, traditional metaphysicians hope to reveal the foundational structures of reality and explain what it means to say that something is real. In our more recent past, however, philosophers have placed considerable emphasis on the role that language plays in revealing metaphysical foundations. As a result of this "linguistic turn" the foundationalist intentions of traditional metaphysics since Plato have become suspect in our present historical context.[1] The controversy is apparent in the fact that much of this century's philosophy has been spent either questioning

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[1] See the introduction to Richard Rorty's, *The Linguistic Turn* for an explanation of why we eventually turned to an analysis of language for answers to our philosophical questions.

the relevance of foundationalist metaphysics or justifying its continued practice. However, for those who are currently justifying metaphysics, at times it seems that their desire to understand reality *foundationally* is compromising the desire just to understand.

The last twenty years of questioning the tradition of philosophy have partly loosened the grip foundationalist metaphysics has on the direction of philosophical discourse. Hilary Putnam and Richard Rorty have led this recent attack on our traditional assumptions, and their new pragmatist discourse is the subject of this thesis. However, while both philosophers offer challenging, nonfoundationalist suggestions for the future of philosophy, there are times when it seems that the challenge these suggestions pose is greater than our desire to engage them. For this reason I feel it is important that we regain our perspective and learn to accept the reasons why foundationalism has been under attack for the past one hundred years. The nonfoundationalist pragmatism with which Rorty and Putnam attempt to renew contemporary philosophy deserves more enthusiastic consideration than it has recently received. Therefore, my objective in this thesis is to help re-establish this enthusiasm towards a responsible commitment to ensure that philosophy is pertinent to the interests of the culture in which it is practiced.

The next section (1.1) of this chapter will provide a brief account of how foundationalism became the dominating theme throughout the history of philosophy. The first half of section 1.2 will show how foundationalism culminated in the metaphysical realism of Ludwig Wittgenstein's early *Tractarian* philosophy. The second half of section 1.2 will show how Wittgenstein's later position in the *Philosophical Investigations* exposed the

presuppositions of absolutist metaphysics and introduced a new nonfoundationalist approach to the philosophy of language. Understanding Wittgenstein's influence is important because both Rorty and Putnam draw heavily from the later position in his *Philosophical Investigations*, and appreciating the depth of Wittgenstein's later philosophy will invoke a greater sensitivity to the new pragmatic recommendations suggested by Putnam and Rorty. Section 1.3 of this chapter will introduce the realism/antirealism debate which reflects the deep confusion caused by foundationalist methodology. Currently, this debate and the foundationalist concerns that cause it are most clearly exhibited in productive exchanges between Putnam and Rorty. These exchanges and the metaphilosophical issues surrounding them are the focus of this thesis, and they will be introduced in the last section of this chapter.

1.1 OUR FOUNDATIONALIST HISTORY

The history of philosophy is filled with complex systems and methods that exemplify the labors of foundationalist answers to the great metaphysical questions. These metaphysical systems and the methods that have grown out of foundational questions permeate just about every philosophical epoche. Prior to the enlightenment, metaphysical systems sought to ground their inquiries in the immutable foundations of an absolute or mind-independent reality on which absolute certainty was thought to be grounded. Ancient philosophers debated about the proper place of soul, form and matter and about the relationship between these things in the larger context of nature. These debates usually posited some kind of fixed, absolute reality, such as Plato's world of Forms, and it was thought that, because this absolute reality

exhibited the way the world *really* is, in order for human beliefs to be justified or true they must conform or accord with this absolute reality.

Medieval philosophers turned these ancient debates into debates over the nature of spirit, intellect, universals and particulars in an attempt to reconcile the earlier Classical philosophy with the concerns of Christian theology. Like Greek philosophy, medieval metaphysics grounded reality in absolute foundations. It posited God as the absolute creator whose power governs reality, determines the nature of all things and grounds human belief. In this general manner medieval philosophy is the Christian version of ancient foundationalist metaphysics.

Like his medieval predecessors, Rene Descartes supported the Christian theology of his time, but he was also keenly aware of the importance that mathematics, geometry and science held for foundationalist metaphysics. Cartesian dualism necessitated the reconciliation of these two apparently exclusive approaches to absolute certainty and the mind/body problem began. This dualism inaugurated modern philosophy by translating the older, ancient and medieval debates into the language of a modern audience who were struggling with the problems that Galilean science posed for Christian philosophy. The arrival of Cartesian dualism was an important foundationalist event because it moved the unknowable, otherworldly, absolute reality of ancient and medieval philosophies into the knowable, earthly, inhabitable world. That is, Descartes attributed to philosophy an ability to attain absolute certainty from within *this* world (as opposed to the world of forms, heaven, etc.) because he believed that science could arrive at these absolutes - the existence of God and the

immortality of the soul - without relying on such nonphilosophical criteria as faith or fear of persecution.

Therefore, to the modern inheritors of Cartesian dualism foundationalist metaphysics became more than just a grand search for absolute certainty. Through the new scientific methods, absolute certainty became a rational, attainable goal that developed into an anthropocentric obsession to beat nature at her own deceptive game. This goal eventually resulted in what we now call the Enlightenment. During this period new science flourished as it produced valued results that even the theologians of the time could not sensibly reject. The enlightened societies tested the capacities of human understanding with new scientific methods, while philosophers deliberated over truth theories with the foundationalist conviction that an absolute explanation of the universe was now inevitable. Foundationalism had secured its place in our philosophical history.

Around the time of the Enlightenment and in response to the modern rationalist and empiricist theories inspired by Cartesian dualism, Kant attempted to reverse our philosophical focus and turn our attention to the role minds play in *constituting nature*. That is, prior to Kantian Idealism, most philosophers investigated a ready-made, mind-independent world for foundations, but afterwards their philosophical attention turned mostly to the human mind and the possibility that its capacities might reveal foundational structures and absolute certainty. Kant's reversal of philosophical focus was very important to metaphysical projects that attempt to explain the relationship between human thought and the world because it transformed the original strategy of investigating the absolute nature of a mind-independent

reality into an investigation into the intrinsic features of human minds that shape or constitute reality. Both rationalists and empiricists quickly began to recognize the important role our minds or brains played in the constitution of our world.

It makes sense to see Kantian Idealism as the natural foundationalist result of an increasingly anthropocentric history. Scientists and philosophers were gradually recognizing the power and control that human interpretation exerted over our perception of the universe. Considering the new significance placed on human interpretation, it is not surprising that the last major historical turn in the world of philosophy was linguistic. Up to the turn of this century versions of Kantian philosophy examined perception and human experience in order to establish absolute foundations for knowledge in the mind's pervading structures, but the linguistic turn translated these foundationalist investigations into examinations of the structures of language and meaning.

After Frege's distinction between *Beudeutung* (reference) and *Sinn* (sense) many foundationalist philosophers supported the idea that a proper analysis of language would reveal metaphysical foundations and explain the relationship between human thought and the world. The drive for absolute certainty that motivated foundationalist philosophy therefore turned its investigation to the area where our words 'connect' with the objects they designate (reference). The younger Wittgenstein, for example, and other foundationalists of this tradition believed that by making the right connections between words and objects they would reveal a final vocabulary that describes the world absolutely. The problem of establishing this

connection between words and objects is now the 'problem of reference,' and current foundationalist hopes of discovering a final vocabulary rest on its solution.

A discussion of the philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein is perhaps the most appropriate way to introduce the problem of reference and the state of contemporary foundationalist philosophy. As I've mentioned, Putnam's and Rorty's criticisms of absolutist metaphysics are strongly influenced by Wittgenstein's work. Consequently, the force of their current pragmatist solutions to the problem of foundationalist philosophy will be more deeply appreciated if we understand his critique of this tradition.

Wittgenstein's philosophical development is rich, and at times the results are conflicting. There are two distinct stages in his thinking and they manifest in two distinct approaches to contemporary philosophy of language: ideal and ordinary language philosophy. In my estimation this division is evidence of the general state of philosophy today as an uncertain discipline confused between foundationalist and nonfoundationalist philosophy. My central worry is that we are failing during this period of transition between modern and postmodern eras to make sense of, and convince ourselves of, the critical importance of philosophical reflection. The next section will examine the events leading up to our present confusion so that this confusion may be more clearly understood.

1.2 WITTGENSTEIN AND THE PROBLEM OF REFERENCE

Around the time of Wittgenstein philosophers became increasingly interested in the possibility that language could reveal the foundational relationship between humans and their

world. These philosophers of language sought to acquire certainty by establishing an absolutely fixed connection or reference between our words and the objects to which they refer. Wittgenstein attempted such a project with his picture theory of meaning in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. However, in his *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein later refuted the foundationalism that motivated his earlier philosophy. An understanding of his reasons for rejecting the picture theory of meaning is crucial to understanding the current state of philosophy.

In his picture theory of meaning Wittgenstein argues for a correspondence theory of truth which holds that meaningful propositions are pictures that are direct symbolic copies of the world. Since meaningful propositions are symbolic 'stand ins' for the world, truth about the real structure of the world is revealed through meaningful propositions. According to Wittgenstein, when names are contained within the context of propositions they 'reach out' to simple objects, and the formal structure of these combinations of simple objects shapes the logical structure of the atomic sentences which are concatenations of the corresponding names. Thus there are what Wittgenstein calls atomic facts, which are composed of concatenations of simple objects, and these atomic facts correspond to true, meaningful atomic sentences which in turn are composed of simple names. On this model of representation the world has a formal structure that the logical structure of language must imitate in order to represent the real world accurately. Ultimately, meaningful propositions refer by picturing real state of affairs whose formal structure is shown through the logical

structure of the propositions. In this manner, meaningful propositions exhibit the metaphysical structure of the world.

It is important to note that 'the world' for Wittgenstein is a world of 'facts': "The world is the totality of facts, not of things."[2] This is a difficult proposition, for we ordinarily speak of the world as comprised of things and not of facts. It seems that things are physical, hard and real, whereas facts are intangible linguistic representations, or mere symbols, of that reality. However, Wittgenstein's theory reflects his recognition of the problems associated with many correspondence theories of truth. What Wittgenstein recognized was that the notion of an epistemological distance between words and objects, a distance that must be bridged with reference, causes much confusion. Ultimately, Wittgenstein argues that this epistemological distance has generated many philosophical problems and fostered the need for foundationalist philosophy to solve them.

Wittgenstein's picture theory of meaning attempts to bridge the gap between language and the world by putting language and the world in *direct* logical correspondence; that is, Wittgenstein's picture theory of meaning asserts that there is no real gap between the logic of our language and the logic of the world. He contends that the correspondence between language and the world is not across a distance in space or time but, rather, that reference is fixed through the structure of the world which is exactly expressed in meaningful language. The world, says Wittgenstein, exists as facts which show themselves to us through meaningful

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2 Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, p. 31, proposition 1.1.

propositions. However, in order for an object or thing to be 'known' to exist it must first be captured within the meaningful structure of a language, for we can only speak coherently of what can be clearly referred to. Ultimately, Wittgenstein's picture theory of meaning supports the view that if we obey the universal logic of our grammar, which is identical to the logical space that orders the world, then we will have true pictures of the facts which comprise the world. Rorty's and Putnam's criticisms of these 'true pictures' will be explained in chapters two and three; however, the remainder of this section will present Wittgenstein's own criticism of his earlier philosophy so that Putnam and Rorty will be more clearly understood in these later chapters.

Not long after Wittgenstein wrote the *Tractatus* he began to doubt the notion of an ideal language. Initially, Wittgenstein believed that his picture theory of meaning explained the absolute, mind/language-independent reality that the tradition before him sought to explain. However, in sharing a common goal with this tradition, the early Wittgenstein also shared its assumption that there is a reality which can be *meaningfully* posited and explained as being *independent* of human thought. That is, Wittgenstein assumed that an absolute language could turn itself inside out and describe its underlying reality. This assumption is the central target of Rorty's and Putnam's criticisms presented in the next two chapters, and I will be refer to it - and others like it - as the "foundationalist assumption."

Wittgenstein came to realize in the *Philosophical Investigations* that the *Tractarian* model of language does not account for the *innumerable* ways in which language operates. In the *Investigations* Wittgenstein analyzes ordinary language and describes many ways that

language works, illustrating that an ideal language philosophy which maintains one static logic simply misunderstands the dynamic and diverse functions of language. In reference to the problems associated with one ideal picture of language Wittgenstein writes:

> The paradox [in this case the status of mental events] disappears only if we make a radical break with the idea that language always functions in one way.[3]

The main point of Wittgenstein's critique of his earlier philosophy of language is not simply that language has more than one function; rather it is that language cannot have the one function that the *Tractatus* and much of analytic philosophy presumes it to have. That is, according to the later Wittgenstein, the function of language cannot be to produce true propositions whose truth lies in the accurate representation of a language-independent world.

In the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein shows that our words get their meanings in innumerable ways which are not simply determined by the formal universal structure of a language-independent world. Rather, the use of our words is determined by contingent socio-historical forces that shape the particular behaviors and conventions of various cultures or 'forms of life'. As Wittgenstein states, "the term 'language-game' is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life."[4] Meaning is therefore *created* through the particular uses of language within an established public sphere, a 'language-game' that lays down the rules of linguistic convention through

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[3] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, p. 304.

[4] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, p. 11, paragraph 23.

ordinary, practical behavior. There are many 'forms of life' and therefore many language-games and meanings.

However, if the reference relations between our words and objects can change from one language-game to the next, then what becomes of the fixed reference relations and the one, absolute reality that our philosophical tradition aims to describe? The assumption that permeates and often directs the history of philosophy, that a mind-independent world is needed to justify a correspondence theory of truth, suggests that there is one privileged language-game. But the grounds for determing the nature of such a privileged language cannot be disassociated from the reason used to justify those grounds. However, the metaphysical assumption that there is a mind-independent world necessitates this incoherent disassociation in the interests of the privilege of absolutism. Any notion of absolute truth or metaphysical reality is excluded from Wittgenstein's investigations through his discovery that the logic of language is as dynamic as human behavior. This rejection of absolute concepts is the first step in the transition to a nonfoundationalist approach to philosophy. In the remainder of this section I will briefly discuss what Wittgenstein means when he uses words like 'truth' and 'reality' nonfoundationally.

The following passage from the *Investigations* may help us understand a nonfoundational language:

> 'But mathematical truth is independent of whether human beings know it or not!'-- Certainly, the propositions 'Human beings believe that twice two is four' and 'Twice two is four' do not mean the same. The latter is a mathematical proposition; the other, if it makes sense at all, may perhaps mean: human beings have *arrived* at the mathematical proposition. The two propositions have entirely

> different *uses*.--But what would *this* mean: 'Even though everybody believed that twice two was five it would still be four'?--For what would it be like for everybody to believe that?--Well, I could imagine, for instance, that people had a different calculus, or a technique which we should not call 'calculating'. But would it be *wrong*? (Is a coronation *wrong*? To beings different from ourselves it might look extremely odd.)[5]

Despite the absence of a substantial theory of truth in Wittgenstein's later work, I see this passage as expressing a naturalistic account of truth in terms of contingent linguistic activities that lack any reference to an independent extra-linguistic ground. That is, Wittgenstein asks us 'to what do we appeal when we try to imagine truth to be different from what it is in our language-game'? He says that we must imagine a different language-game in which different 'techniques' are used. But notice that when he puts the question of the truth of this new language-game to his readers Wittgenstein doesn't ask if its propositions could be *false*. Rather, he chooses to use the more explicitly normative question, 'But would it be wrong'? In other words, he is rephrasing objective epistemological questions about truth and relativism so they have a normative, ethical content, and, as a result, *truth-values of propositions* are replaced with *descriptions of context and evaluation of activities*. Consequently, Wittgenstein is not claiming that mathematical objects do not exist; rather, he is simply pointing out that their existence can add nothing to the meaning or the context of the propositions in which they are described.

According to Wittgenstein, local, nonfoundationalist truth is a language-user's endorsement of her language or form of life. This endorsement is justified through the

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[5] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, p. 226.

grammatical rules of the language-user's particular language-game. However, there are innumerable language-games and, therefore, innumerable truths. The above passage from the *Investigations* suggests that any perspective from which we use language must *necessarily* be a value-laden and language-dependent perspective; thus there are no value-free, language-independent perspectives. Because we cannot, says Wittgenstein, approach other forms of life without the prejudice of our own form of life, we cannot then objectively judge them to be true or false. We can see them as different or wrong by the standards of our own language-game, but this is all. Wittgenstein notes this within parentheses in the above quotation when he writes: "Is a coronation wrong? To beings different from ourselves it might look extremely odd."

Ultimately, for Wittgenstein, we cannot stand at a neutral Archimedean point and determine which truths are absolutely true. As Wittgenstein states, "What has to be accepted, the given, is--so one could say--*forms of life*."[6] We can only judge other forms of life to be better or worse according to the standards of our own form of life. Thus the foundationalist assumption of one, absolute description of a common universe (Truth) and the metaphysical project which endeavors to justify this assumption, overlook the prejudice with which each culture must view its world.

In spite of Wittgenstein's ordinary but profound recommendations in the *Philosophical Investigations*, many philosophers still continue to ask the great metaphysical questions. They

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[6] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, p. 226.

still want confirmation of an objective reality that exists independently of human thought and language. Despite the fact that some of the elaborate metaphysical systems that attempt to do this are a far cry from common sense, these complex systems are invented in the interests of justifying our common beliefs and behaviors. At this stage in history foundationalist answers are the most accepted answers to questions about the relationship between language and the world, but they have become increasingly difficult to maintain. This difficulty has led to narrow reductionist positions like scientistic positivism and other more elaborate metaphysics. David Lewis' system of possible worlds is one example of suspiciously abstract and complex metaphysics that can sometimes serve to discredit philosophy in the eyes of nonphilosophers. But how far should we go in defense of foundationalist convictions? Do they even need metaphysical defense? And should we accept the notion that our realist intuitions have been formed through a history of well intended but narrow philosophical attitudes and that we should now take steps to explore new approaches?

These are some of the questions that lie at the heart of the realism/antirealism debate today, especially as it is discussed by Putnam and Rorty. These questions differ from many previous questions in the history of philosophy because they are not simply questioning the details and arguments of a particular side in the debate. Rather, they are metaphilosophical because they question the debate itself. This particular attack on the presuppositions of traditional philosophy has its origin in Wittgenstein's later critique of his ideal-language philosophy in the *Tractatus*, and it has contributed much to the current wave of pragmatist criticism of the same tradition. At this point I will describe the realism/antirealism debate as

I see it today. This will allow me to introduce the problem of realism as it is discussed in subsequent chapters.

1.3 THE REALISM/ANTIREALISM DEBATE

In its most basic form realism is the foundationalist position that there is an objective reality that exists independently of human thought. For those who are satisfied with their ability to make sense of such a claim, the problem of realism is how to demonstrate and verify this objective reality. While there are varying positions which attempt to solve the problem, I will be concerned with the most accepted version: metaphysical realism. Metaphysical realism, or traces of it, can be found in many branches of philosophy. Various philosophies of logic, epistemology, ethics and aesthetics are constructed on the foundationalist assumption that there is an independent, objective reality that grounds these disciplines. However, such foundationalist assumptions, as we shall see, require impossible justification.

The position I am calling metaphysical realism contains three theses. The first is that real objects exist; the second is that these objects exist independently of our experience of them; and the last is that real objects have properties and functions whose structures are formed independently of thought and language. In its epistemological guise metaphysical realism entails that truth lies in the correspondence of concepts or words to real objects. The metaphysical realist, then, holds that we formulate concepts about the real world and that we can use these concepts to make true statements that correspond to the real world. It has

already been mentioned and will become more apparent that for my purposes Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* is the paradigm piece of metaphysical realist work.

Metaphysical realism is contested by anti-realists of many sorts. One version of anti-realism is idealism. Idealists hold that metaphysical realists are mistaken about reality and the nature of truth. That is, the idealist argues that reality is not independent of our thinking about it, for reality is at least partially, if not wholly, constituted by the structure of our experience, thought or language. For example, in what he considered to be a defence of common sense, George Berkeley argues that all that exists are finite and infinite perceivers and perceived objects. On this view physical objects only become real when they are perceived because, according to Berkeley, to exist is to be perceived. One of his famous arguments for this view is that it is impossible to conceive of an unperceived object, for the act of conceiving must involve the sensible ideas that comprise the actual object.

However, despite the obvious differences between realists and idealists, there is a point where both intersect. That is, both realists and idealists can hold that what is real is what is known. For example, some realists can claim that a physical reality does exist independently of thought and that it exists in exactly the way that we think it. This 'reality' may not necessarily be all that different from the one posited by certain idealists who say that reality is what the mind says it is. In both cases the reality described is the same, but whereas the realist's ontology is based on a reality in-itself, the idealist's is based on reality as we think it. One's tendency to side with either the metaphysical realist or the idealist ultimately depends on what one considers to be the most significant ground for a metaphysics. A realist

tendency uses the reality that we question as its ground, whereas the idealist tendency uses the human perspective from which we ask the questions.

The latest tendency in the realism/antirealism debate belongs to a rather unique group of philosophers who reject realism on quite different grounds and whom I will label 'nonfoundationalists'. Like many reactive movements and eras in philosophy, nonfoundationalism is not defined by any established set of theses or arguments; rather, it is best explained as a scattered attack on various foundationalist presuppositions in modern philosophy. And one of the key forerunners of this attack on realism and metaphysics is Wittgenstein and his later work in the *Philosophical Investigations*. Many contemporary postmodern critiques, especially in metaphysics and the philosophy of language, are developments of Wittgenstein's suggestions in the *Investigations*.

As I mentioned earlier, Wittgenstein's approach to the problem of realism and practically all foundationalist problems is quite fundamental. He does not directly criticize the various answers to these problems, but, instead, he offers a naturalistic description of language which shows that the problems themselves are "houses of cards"[7] that have no sensible foundation in language. Similarly, contemporary postmodern critiques of metaphysical realism, like the ones offered by Putnam and Rorty, do not directly contest realist solutions; rather, they simply dismiss, as unintelligible, the foundational questions that the realist (and the idealist as well) attempts to answer and therefore do not see the sense in

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[7] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, p. 48, paragraph 118.

contesting the realist answer. The question as I am formulating it here (there are other ways of formulating it) is, "what is the true relationship between thought or language and the world?" As I explained above, the metaphysical realist holds that there is an objective world that is independent of our thinking and the idealist holds that there is not. Putnam, Rorty and the postmodernists mentioned here argue that it is this question itself that is fundamentally mistaken.

1.4 RORTY AND PUTNAM: THE CURRENT DEBATE

As I have mentioned, the postmodern, nonfoundationalist criticism contained in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* has had remarkable influences on many thinkers. Wittgenstein's work stands as a crucial signpost in the development of our increasingly postmodern perspective. The central focus of my thesis is the realism/antirealism debate as it is currently taking place within the works of two philosophers who are very richly inspired by Wittgenstein's investigations: Richard Rorty and Hilary Putnam.

Rorty and Putnam are both influenced by Wittgenstein's discoveries and this common thread is the source of their similar philosophical positions. However, Putnam claims that his pragmatism differs from Rorty's in its formulation of truth and recommendations for the future of philosophy. The supposed difference between them goes like this: whereas Rorty sees Wittgenstein's dissolving of the language/world distinction as implying the end of the philosophical problems that are grounded in this distinction, Putnam does not. Instead, Putnam argues that many of the philosophical problems are still present, but that we must

avoid using a vocabulary that goes beyond our ordinary uses of words to solve them; thus for Putnam the problems and their answers become ordinary. I argue that Putnam's formulation of these philosophical problems does not conflict with Rorty's pragmatism.

This thesis will concentrate on both Rorty's and Putnam's arguments against metaphysical realism and contemporary foundationalism in order to demonstrate that, whether they know it or not, their philosophical positions coincide on the question of what is real. That is, despite Putnam's claims that his natural realism and his recommendations for the future of philosophy are at odds with Rorty's pragmatic recommendations, I will argue that, while their positions take somewhat different approaches to the problem of realism, they both say the same thing about what is real and what philosophy should do about it.

In order to analyze this debate in the depth that I consider it deserves, I have concentrated mostly on the work of Rorty and Putnam. And because this debate has been ongoing for several years now there is plenty of worthwhile, first-hand commentary provided by these two philosophers. I do not claim to survey all of the philosophical developments of their positions in the past several years. It would require more room than I have here just to track Putnam's movement. As James Conant writes of Putnam in the introduction to *Realism With A Human Face*:

> Thus the membership of Putnam's constellation of heroes, not unlike his own substantive philosophical views, tends to exist in a condition of perpetual flux; at any given point in his career, one has only to glance at the current membership of

this constellation to ascertain the general philosophical direction in which he is (often quite rapidly) moving.[8]

My main focus is on three of Putnam's latest books: *Realism With a Human Face*, *Renewing Philosophy*, and *Words and Life* as well as his "Dewey Lectures." From these works I have assembled what I consider to be a pervading position supported by different parts of each of these texts. On Rorty's side of the debate I have focussed mostly on *Philosophy and The Mirror Of Nature*, for his position has not changed greatly from its first articulation. The few revisions that have been made since then have been due, in part, to exchanges with Putnam and these revisions, with the exception of some changes presented in *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, are neatly packaged in an article called "Putnam and the Relativist Menace" in the 1994 *Journal of Philosophy*.

The next chapter will examine Rorty's argument that contemporary philosophy is afflicted with a useless and unnecessary foundationalism that has been inherited from the history of philosophy and is exemplified in metaphysical realism. We will see how Rorty's nonfoundationalism leads him to his pragmatic, naturalist answer to the question of what is real, which is characterized by a strong linguistic conventionalism in which there is no extra-linguistic relationship between language and the world and where what is real is ethno-dependent.

Chapter three will present Putnam's arguments against metaphysical realism in order to reveal his natural realist answer to the question of what is real. Like Rorty, Putnam is

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[8] Putnam, *Realism With a Human Face*, p. XVII.

uncomfortable with foundationalism, and his natural realism offers a picture of reality that doesn't seek to ground itself in permanency. According to Putnam, what is real is also linguistic, where "linguistic" means the place where both facts and values meet.

In chapter four I will argue that Putnam's and Rorty's arguments against metaphysical realism amount to similar positions on the nature of reality and the future of philosophy. Although Putnam's position appears to be less radical and a little more restrained than Rorty's, this is simply a matter of the sympathetic vocabulary Putnam employs. However, Putnam's criticism of Rorty as an inconsistent relativist suggests that Putnam does see a substantial difference between his natural realism and Rorty's ethnocentric pragmatism. In chapter five I will argue that this difference is actually a result of a deep discomfort with Rorty's truly nonfoundationalist vocabulary. I show that this discomfort is a manifestation of a philosophical tendency that many contemporary philosophers justify through the presupposition that our ordinary behavior needs absolute justification. My intention is to show that this presupposition is unnecessary and, like Rorty, I think we could benefit by exploring other nonfoundationalist options.

CHAPTER 2

RORTY'S ETHNOCENTRIC PRAGMATISM

In *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* Richard Rorty argues that the central assumption of traditional philosophy is the notion of the mind as a mirror which pictures or represents a mind-independent world.

> The picture which holds traditional philosophy captive is that of the mind as a great mirror, containing various representations - some accurate, some not - and capable of being studied by pure, nonempirical methods.[1]

According to Rorty this entire notion of a mind representing a world that is independent of it does not make sense. He argues that philosophers have turned away from more important social issues by narrowly thinking that necessary foundations of metaphysics and epistemology could be found in such a model of mind. He claims that these contemporary philosophical pursuits are essentially formed around this model of the representing mind, and once the model is shown to be useless so will epistemology and metaphysics.

In this chapter I will outline Rorty's criticism of metaphysical realism, which he claims presupposes this particular epistemological model, in order to show how Rorty thinks the problem of realism should be addressed. Like the later Wittgenstein, Rorty does not engage the metaphysical realist on typical grounds; that is, he does not directly attack the realist's *answer* to the question of realism. Instead, as Wittgenstein did before him, Rort raises the stakes by attacking the coherence and utility of the question itself, thereby discrediting any

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[1] Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 12.

of its answers. Simply put, the question of realism inquires into the nature of the relationship between language or thought and the world. It asks if there is an independent reality consisting of real, tangible objects that are not just mental or linguistic constructions. Metaphysical realism is one answer to this question, and Rorty's attempts to show that the question of realism is incoherent and useless, if successful, will have drastic consequences for the metaphysical realist. It will become apparent, however, that Rorty's own position with regard to the question of realism is not simply negative criticism. With his ethnocentric pragmatism Rorty sees the world through a Darwinian lens and offers a positive, naturalistic account of what is real, suggesting that we should be more closely attuned to the diverse, nonfoundational functions of language when considering what 'reality' can mean.

The next section (2.1) will describe Rorty's account of the origins of foundationalism which he says are found in an optional, optical metaphor introduced by Plato. Then section 2.2 and 2.3 will present Rorty's Wittgensteinian criticism of the result of Plato's metaphor - metaphysical realism - and introduce Rorty's nonfoundationalist approach to language. Sections 2.4 and 2.5 will review Rorty's general criticism of the foundationalist preoccupations of contemporary philosophy and piece together a positive, ethnocentric position out of Rorty's negative critique.

2.1 FOUNDATIONALISM AND THE PERCEPTUAL METAPHOR

Rorty explains that the epistemological model of the mirror is rooted in the perceptual metaphor that Plato used to explain the acquisition of knowledge. Of Plato's metaphor Rorty writes,

> knowing a proposition to be true is to be identified with being caused to do something by an object. The object which the proposition is about *imposes* the proposition's truth.[2]

Plato's explanation therefore compares knowing to the causal process of perceiving in which the world 'imposes' itself upon the waiting mind. Plato's metaphor, says Rorty, produced the current model of the mind as a mirror reflecting and representing the imposing causes, laws, and objects of nature and, from this point in history on, philosophy was mainly concerned with the interaction of two distinct realms: the inner world of thought and the outer world of things. However, according to Rorty,

> Plato... did not discover the distinction between two kinds of entities, either inner or outer. Rather,... he was the first to articulate what George Pitcher has called the "Platonic Principle" - that differences in certainty must correspond to differences in the objects known.[3]

Plato's perceptual metaphor, says Rorty, is an optional approach to knowledge, for Plato could have chosen another. For example, he could have simply decided, as Kant later did, that the mind is a filter through which noumenal matter receives form. Or he could have decided that there were no such things as minds altogether.

Rorty goes on to argue that, because of Plato's choice of metaphor to explain how knowledge works, philosophy became dominated by a strong desire for foundations. Plato's metaphor suggested that if knowing is analogous to perceiving, then knowledge is just as

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[2] Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 157.

[3] Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 156.

susceptible to illusion as perception. Plato made his culture aware of this problem by making it evident that much of what they believed was often unfounded and sometimes clearly false. What they needed, according to Plato, was a system of determining which beliefs were true and false and which needed further inspection. That is, they needed a system which could lay immutable universal foundations for the advancement of knowledge. These foundations would secure truth and allow humanity to piece together the complex puzzle of the universe by discerning the difference between true beliefs and false beliefs. Once certain beliefs about the world were known to be true, philosophers could then speak with absolute authority on important moral and political issues. Each revelation of truth would dispel illusion, appearance and falsity and bring humanity closer to the true understanding of reality. For Plato the philosophical searcher for truth picks his way through the cavernous shadows of deception in the physical world and emerges into the illuminated realm of pure, spiritual reality or truth.

In this manner, according to Rorty, Plato's metaphor inaugurated 'philosophical thinking' by distinguishing between appearance and reality, matter and spirit and falsity and truth.

> Plato developed the idea of such an intellectual [metaphysical realist] by means of distinctions between knowledge and opinion, and between appearance and reality.[4]

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[4] Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, p. 22.

Rorty contends that it was these distinctions that brought the Ancients to a need for certainty and eventually necessitated the creation of grand philosophical systems and solutions that would 'ground' knowledge in immutable foundations. But, as Rorty has already explained, because Plato's metaphor was optional, epistemology and metaphysics should not be the only inheritors of philosophy. Instead, Rorty states that if

> we think of 'rational certainty' as a matter of victory in argument rather than of relation to an object known, we shall look toward our interlocutors rather than to our faculties for the explanation of the phenomenon.... Our certainty will be a matter of conversation between persons, rather than a matter of interaction with nonhuman reality.[5]

Thus, for Rorty, the desire for foundations that still afflicts contemporary philosophy has been an unfortunate intuition carried throughout the history of philosophy. This intuition, he says, has produced unnecessary metaphysical systems which have interrupted the pragmatic 'conversation between persons'.

Since Rorty's main contention with the whole of philosophy is with its insistence on immovable foundations it only seems appropriate that I discuss his criticism of the one area of contemporary philosophy that is mostly concerned with foundations: metaphysics, and, more precisely, metaphysical realism. The rest of this chapter will review Rorty's pragmatic picture of what is real through his specific critique of metaphysical realism (section 2.2) and his general critique of the foundationalism in contemporary philosophy (section 2.3 and 2.4). The metaphysical realism that Rorty attacks is described in section 1.4 of my chapter one, and

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[5] Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 157.

Rorty's criticism of it consists of a sustained Wittgensteinian attack on its central thesis: the notion of a language-independent reality. The other two theses of metaphysical realism, the notion that a language-independent reality can be described in a final vocabulary and the notion that knowledge of this reality is confirmed in a correspondence theory of truth, rest upon the first and, thus, the implications for these theses will be discussed throughout section 2.2, 2.3, and section 2.4 as well.

2.2 A CRITICISM OF LANGUAGE-INDEPENDENT REALITY

According to Rorty, contemporary analytic philosophy considers language to be a medium which represents or mirrors a language-independent world, and linguistic analysis is responsible for "inspecting, repairing, and polishing the mirror."[6] Metaphysical realists in the analytic tradition assume that such a polishing of language will endow it with a greater number of true sentences which provide a more accurate representation of the language-independent world. It is this notion of a language-independent world that Rorty rejects as an unfortunate assumption handed down through the history of philosophy. This foundationalist assumption is precisely the one Wittgenstein held in the *Tractatus* when he argued, with his picture theory of meaning, for an ideal language. In this respect the early Wittgenstein is a paradigmatic metaphysical realist.

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[6] Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 12.

As I explained in section 1.2, Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* argues that propositions are pictures of the facts of which the world is composed and, therefore, the meaning of a word "is the object for which the word stands."[7] On this model of language we can best understand our relationship to the world by grasping the ideal meanings of our words, for this would mean that we grasp the object itself. In other words, Wittgenstein and the analytic tradition he founded - the tradition that Rorty is currently criticizing - believe that absolute foundations (the logical structure of the world) can be revealed through logical analysis of language.

In the same way that Rorty's metaphor of mirroring appears to be borrowed from Wittgenstein's metaphor of picturing, Rorty's criticism of the metaphysical realism in analytic philosophy is also well in the spirit of Wittgenstein's later criticism of the *Tractarian* philosophy. According to Rorty, today's metaphysical realists fail to realize that the idea of a language-independent reality simply has no content; therefore, constructing a metaphysics to explain - or to even suggest the necessity of - such an absolute reality makes little sense. For example, the absolute truth that is common to metaphysical realism is not an entirely useful concept because it has no real content.

> The trouble with Platonic notions (like truth) is not that they are "wrong" but that there is not a great deal to be said about them--specifically, there is no way to "naturalize" them or otherwise connect them to the rest of inquiry, or culture, or life.[8]

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[7] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, p. 2, paragraph 1.

[8] Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 311.

As Rorty explains, these empty realist notions lead to a host of philosophical problems and attempted solutions that are empty as well:

> Those who wish to ground solidarity in objectivity - call them "realists" - have to construe truth as correspondence to reality. So they must construct a metaphysics which has room for a special relation between beliefs and objects which will differentiate true from false beliefs. They must argue that there are procedures of justification of belief which are natural and not merely local. So they must construct an epistemology which has room for a kind of justification which is not merely social but natural.[9]

Similar to Wittgenstein, Rorty holds that language is a form of life, a dynamic ethnocentric structure that adapts itself to changing socio-economic demands and cannot be sensibly separated from the world. On this view there is no reference to a mind-independent reality and ultimately no metaphysical or permanent structure is represented by language. Thus, there is no reason to 'construct an epistemology' with the desire to accurately refer to such a metaphysical structure.

> Those who wish to reduce objectivity to solidarity - call them "pragmatists" - do not require either a metaphysics or an epistemology. They view truth as, in William James' phrase, what is good for *us* to believe. So they do not need an account of a relation between beliefs and objects called 'correspondence,' nor an account of human cognitive abilities which ensures that our species is capable of entering into that relation.[10]

Rorty therefore takes the foundationalist content out of terms like 'reality' and 'truth' in the same way the later Wittgenstein does, by undermining the ideal picture of language that

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[9] Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, p. 22.

[10] Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, p. 22.

the central thesis of metaphysical realism presupposes. Like Wittgenstein before him, Rorty argues that language cannot refer to extra-linguistic entities and, therefore, the metaphysical realist concept of a language-independent reality is not that coherent or useful. And since the other two secondary theses of metaphysical realism rest on the first, they are implicated in Rorty's criticism here as well. Consequently, the notion that there is a final vocabulary that can describe a mind-independent reality and the notion that knowledge of this reality is achieved via a correspondence theory of truth are lacking in sense and utility also.

2.3 RORTY'S NONFOUNDATIONALIST LANGUAGE

In Rorty's pragmatic accunts of language, meaning or truth cannot lie fixed in a language-independent world waiting to be discovered and accurately represented by language; there is no language-independent world and therefore nothing to be represented in this system. As Rorty writes of the realist:

> He [the realist] thinks that, deep down beneath all the texts, there is something which is not just one more text but that to which various texts are trying to be "adequate." The pragmatist does not think that there is anything like that. He does not even think that there is anything isolatable as "the purposes which we construct vocabularies and cultures to fulfill" against which to test vocabularies and cultures.[11]

The real, says Rorty, cannot be a fixed, language-independent world that language mirrors, for language does not mirror. Consequently, there is nothing to be said about the world in this regard. Language, according to Rorty, cannot be foundational, in the sense of

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[11] Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, p. XXXVII.

providing us with truth as accurate descriptions of a language-independent world, because the descriptions that it offers will only reflect the contingent belief structures of the culture that uses it.

> For the pragmatist... "knowledge" is, like "truth," simply a compliment paid to the beliefs which we think so well justified that, for the moment, further justification is not needed. An inquiry into the nature of knowledge can, on his view only be a sociohistorical account of how various people have tried to reach agreement on what to believe.[12]

Ultimately, on Rorty's view nothing is represented in language. A language-independent world is not *referred to* by bits and pieces of language; rather, bits and pieces of language, as Wittgenstein points out, are parts of what makes up our world. The world just happened to allot these bits and pieces of itself the peculiar position of being very complex expressions of a culture's form of life.

What then becomes of truth in such a view of language? For Rorty, "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."[13] Rorty contends that, as a result of the changing structures of language and convention, our use of language and our procedures of justification change as well. For Rorty, as for Wittgenstein, truth is an entirely contingent matter and traditional attempts to establish a theory which uncovers metaphysical truths are misguided.

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[12] Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, p. 24.

[13] Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, p. 23.

According to Rorty, a true proposition is not one that accurately represents a language-independent state of affairs that causes the proposition to be true, because there are no language-independent states of affairs. "Although there are causes of the acquisition of beliefs, and reasons for the retention or change of beliefs, there are no causes for the *truth* of beliefs."[14] A true proposition, then, is simply one that a particular culture's ethnos endorses as the *best* way to think about the belief expressed in the proposition. Therefore, the word "true" is "merely an expression of commendation"[15] that we add onto our statements to reinforce the prejudice of our form of life. By claiming that certain propositions are true we indicate to ourselves and to others a value-judgement which says that believing what this proposition states at this point in time is more important (where 'important' is determined by the same standards that formed the true proposition) than believing what other propositions state about the same matter. In other words, truth is a redundant and circular endorsement of a form of life that gets expressed when we add "is true" onto the particular beliefs that constitute a form of life.

Rorty's criticism of the metaphysical realism of analytic philosophy, then, is that its questions do not make sense because they are based on misunderstandings of the way language operates. According to Rorty, the mind/language-independent (metaphysical) reality that the metaphysical realist claims exists is an unnecessary postulate of a nonsensical model

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[14] Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, p. 121.

[15] Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, p. 23.

of language. Language, says Rorty, does not refer to language-independent objects; in fact, language cannot refer in that way at all. As Rorty writes of reference:

> no matter what nonintentional relation is substituted for "cause" in our account of how the things in the content reach up and determine the reference of the representations making up the scheme, our theory about what the world is made of will produce, trivially, a self-justifying theory about that relation.[16]

Thus, for Rorty, our theories about the nature of reference relations will always reflect and reinforce the interests and intentions with which we approach the problem of reference relations.

Rorty's view of language also suggests that the referring subject that the metaphysical realist posits as the frame of the mirror of the language-independent world is a useless notion when one considers that nothing can be referred to which is independent of language. Since there is nothing independent of language that a linguistic subject could mirror, why preserve the notion of the epistemological subject? According to Rorty, Plato's perceptual metaphor and Descartes', 'eye of the mind' were based on misleading distinctions that the metaphysical realist still holds dear. If the realist could see that these distinctions are the results of a contingent choice of metaphor, then the split between the epistemological subject and the metaphysical world could be closed and realist talk about subjects and objects replaced by talk about language and culture.

> But once we drop the notion of "consciousness" there is no harm in continuing to speak of a distinct entity called "the self" which consists of the mental states of the

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[16] Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, p. 295.

> human being: her beliefs, desires, moods, etc. The important thing is to think of the collection of those things as *being* the self rather than as something which the self *has*. The latter notion is a leftover of the traditional Western temptation to model thinking on vision, and to postulate an "inner eye" which inspects inner states.[17]

As Rorty's view of language suggests, nothing exists independently of language, including truth. Once this is realized, the subject/object split is sealed within the confines of language, and the realist does not need an epistemology or a system of representation to explain the relationship between them. Like Wittgenstein, Rorty simply urges us to inspect our traditional philosophical questions for linguistic errors so that we can reveal any incoherence that may result from an inappropriate use of language and discontinue asking those questions that are incoherent.

2.4 A NONFOUNDATIONALIST NARRATIVE

Ultimately, the fundamental point underlying much of Rorty's criticism of the metaphysical realism in analytic philosophy is that realism is motivated by an unnecessary foundationalism that has seeped into contemporary philosophy of language from the modern period. The linguistic turn did not quell the Kantian need for absolute certainty, and instead of leaving foundationalism and modern problems behind, it mistook language as the source of this certainty. Rorty points out that the metaphysical and epistemological reactions - realism and idealism - to the problems of modern philosophy have been mistakenly transferred

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[17] Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, p. 123.

to contemporary philosophy of language as the same problems differently stated. But for Rorty,

> "philosophy" is not a name for a discipline which confronts permanent issues, and unfortunately keeps misstating them, or attacking them with clumsy dialectical instruments. Rather, it is a cultural genre, a "voice in the conversation of mankind" (to use Michael Oakeshott's phrase), which centers on one topic rather than another at some given time not by dialectical necessity but as a result of various things happening elsewhere in the conversation... or of individual men of genius who think of something new... or perhaps of the resultant of several such forces. Interesting philosophical change... occurs not when a new way is found to deal with an old problem but when a new set of problems emerges and the old ones begin to fade away. The temptation... is to think that the new problematic is the old one rightly seen.[18]

Adopting this position, then, would allow the contemporary metaphysical realist to stand back from the problem of the external world and realize that the problem is not one that is relevant to (or it is not one that makes sense in) the present culture.

Rorty's pragmatic project shows that the metaphysical realism in analytic philosophy, as a consequence of Wittgenstein's earlier metaphysical realism, is the unfortunate result of the foundationalism that developed throughout the history of philosophy. He points out that because analytic philosophy presupposes the epistemological subject, a language-independent reality, and a system of representation which can accurately explain the relationship between the subject and a language-independent reality, it assumes the same unnecessary foundationalist conception of knowledge as the rest of philosophy. Through his method of historical narrative Rorty shows that the increasingly dogmatic need of philosophers to

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[18] Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 264.

establish firm foundations for knowledge is keeping philosophers from addressing the concerns of the *contemporary* culture on whose behalf it operates.

Rorty points out that at the commencement of the twentieth century the demands of Husserl and Russell for a 'rigorous' and 'scientific' method of philosophy brought the secularization of culture that began with Descartes, Locke and Kant to a point where:

> the scientists had become as remote from most intellectuals as had the theologians. ...The result was that the more "scientific" and "rigorous" philosophy became, the less it had to do with the rest of culture and the more absurd its traditional pretensions seemed.[19]

Considering that the work of Wittgenstein, and others like Heidegger and Dewey, are pivotal rejections of the kind of foundationalism presupposed in modern philosophy, it is not surprising that Rorty feels a strong kinship with these philosophers. They abandon representationalist epistemology and the Cartesian model of mind from which it began and replace them with what Rorty calls therapeutic or edifying philosophy. According to Rorty they revolutionize philosophy

> by introducing new maps of the terrain (viz., of the whole panorama of human activities) which simply do not include those features which previously seemed to dominate.[20]

Similarly, Rorty's attempts to expose the presumptions of contemporary analytic philosophy and, more specifically, metaphysical realism, operate within the same revolutionary, postmodern tradition of Wittgenstein, Heidegger and Dewey. Like these philosophers, Rorty

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[19] Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 5.

[20] Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 7.

does not simply caution the metaphysical realist against her foundationalist preoccupations but, rather, he exposes her assumptions and, indeed, her entire project, as fundamentally confused and ultimately disposable.

For Rorty, the foundationalist attitude of metaphysical realism narrows the minds of philosophers with a tunnel vision that excludes the colorfully human elements from philosophy. Just as Feuerbach had criticized Hegel's idealist philosophy of religion as an abstract, speculative metaphysical system that was alien to the material world, Rorty criticizes the scientistic foundationalism of analytic philosophy's metaphysical systems as a useless assumption which has alienated philosophy from its culture. And to make matters worse, this foundationalism is borrowed from a bygone tradition that evoked it to deal with its own unique problems. According to Rorty, epistemological and metaphysical problems are no longer problems for our present culture. We have quite different problems that require different solutions. Whereas Feuerbach's vision was a 'philosophy of the future' that did not include the abstracted rational theology of speculative metaphysics, Rorty's is a post-philosophical culture which does not include the foundationalism that has confused modern philosophy. Through the development of foundationalism, says Rorty, "'Philosophy' became, for the intellectuals, a substitute for religion."[21] He then points out that just as religion was an optional explanatory approach to the relationship between human thought and the world, so too is philosophy. Thus, because Rorty believes the foundationalist questions addressed

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[21] Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 4.

by analytic philosophy are not relevant to our present culture, he can, in good conscience, urge us to choose another option.

2.5 RORTY'S ETHNOCENTRIC REPLACEMENT

At this point one might be puzzled when considering what Rorty means by 'reality'. Although his pragmatism is largely a negative project meant to discredit foundationalist uses for words like 'reality' and 'truth,' these words still exist, and they can make sense once they are drained of their foundationalism. Rorty describes human beings in Darwinian terms and therefore describes language as a naturalistic phenomenon, a tool that helps us cope with the world. This approach is nonfoundational because it does not profess to express a truth that corresponds to the way the world really is. Instead, Rorty is offering a more coherent picture than the one foundationalists propose. And with this coherent picture we can

> think of beliefs as tools for handling reality, determinations of how to act in response to certain contingencies, rather than as representations of reality. On this view, we no longer have to worry about, e.g., the question "Does physics correspond to the structure of the world as it is, or merely to the structure of the world as it appears to us?" because we cease to think of physics as *corresponding* to anything.[22]

On this view, words and sentences are nothing more than 'marks and noises' that have no privileged relationship to the world; ultimately, language is simply one part of the natural world. But then is the natural world real? For Rorty it is, because the consensus in the form

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[22] Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, p. 118.

of life in which he has been initiated says it is. However, Rorty is aware that "we *must*, in practice, privilege our own group, even though there can be no noncircular justification for doing so.[23] (my italics) And for this reason Rorty labels his pragmatism 'ethnocentrism' because he can offer no noncircular justification for the *ethnos* that his naturalism expresses.

The usual objection at this point is that different forms of life cannot possibly determine what is and is not real because there are innumerable forms of life, and this would mean either that there is more than one reality, or that there is no common reality at all, which is absurd. However, by 'reality' Rorty means nothing more than what a culture's language says reality is. The point we must not overlook is that what Rorty means by 'real' here is not something metaphysical or absolute. If he did mean something more absolute, something beyond culture and language, then he would be attempting to do the same kind of senseless philosophy that he charges the metaphysical realist with.

Thus, Rorty's naturalistic view of reality is the kind of justified prejudice with which we must view other language-games or forms of life. Rorty calls this view ethnocentrism. But by ethnocentric Rorty means what Wittgenstein means when he states that "What has to be accepted... is...*forms of life*."[24] Rorty's form of life just happens to be one that involves the ethnocentric acceptance of his naturalistic prejudice. But Rorty is aware that this prejudice is necessary.

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[23] Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 29

[24] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, p. 226.

> To be ethnocentric is to divide the human race into the people to whom one must justify one's beliefs and the others. The first group - one's *ethnos* - comprises those who share enough of one's beliefs to make fruitful conversation possible. In this sense, everybody is ethnocentric when engaged in actual debate, no matter how much realist rhetoric about objectivity he produces in his study.[25]

2.6 CONCLUSION

Rorty's recommendations have drastic consequences not only for the metaphysical realist, but also for the entire future of traditional philosophical inquiry. His suggestion to leave metaphysics and epistemology behind appears to be a radical move to a new and unfamiliar area which makes many of us uncomfortable; and this discomfort is an indication of just how deeply the foundationalist attitude is woven into our philosophical approach. Wittgenstein's attempts to accomplish similar ends were met with some approval, but many philosophers today are not convinced that we should give up on traditional philosophical inquiry. Hilary Putnam is one such philosopher who is uncomfortable with Rorty's pragmatic recommendations, but like Rorty he too is heavily influenced by Wittgenstein's *Investigations*.

Putnam agrees with much of Rorty's criticism of metaphysical realism, just as he agrees with the later Wittgenstein's views on foundationalism. However, he considers Rorty's suggestion that we abandon traditional philosophical inquiry to be radical, relativist and premature. Putnam's solution to the problem of metaphysical realism, then, is much more sympathetic to the history of philosophy and the tradition of philosophical problems. It

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[25] Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, p. 30.

appears as if Putnam's recommendation, natural realism, while written in a vocabulary that is quite distanced from Rorty's, is not that distant from Rorty's recommendation at all. The next chapter will reconstruct Putnam's critique of metaphysical realism and present his natural realism.

Putnam chooses to retain the vocabulary of traditional philosophy in what I will argue in chapter 4 and 5 to be a commendable but confusing attempt to salvage parts of the tradition and, at times, an unfortunate slip back into the foundationalist picture. That is, the abandonment of foundationalism and incoherent philosophical inquiry is explicit in Putnam's natural realism, but his criticism of Rorty as a relativist reveals a deep foundationalist urge. (Rorty's response to the charge of relativism will be discussed throughout chapters 3, 4 and 5.) While I do not consider Putnam's pragmatic realism to be as clear an approach to the problem of realism as Rorty's, I do consider its confusion valuable because it is an important manifestation of our frustration with philosophical transition. Therefore it tends to show others who are struggling to leave foundationalism behind where to step if they wish to avoid falling back on an incoherent language.

CHAPTER 3

PUTNAM'S PRAGMATISM AND NATURAL REALISM

Hilary Putnam has some serious recommendations for contemporary analytic philosophy that are very much like the changes Richard Rorty recommends. Putnam shares Rorty's intolerance for dogmatism and charges many analytic philosophers with an uncritical, reductionist scientism. Professional philosophers, he contends, operate with the same kind of narrow, foundationalist focus that Rorty claims has lost touch with the present culture. Analytic philosophy, says Putnam, is "hell-bent on eliminating the normative in favor of something else, however problematic that something else may be."[1] Rorty calls this narrow focus a desire for objectivity, which he says has misled philosophical inquiry with dreams of eternal, unassailable truth. Similarly, Putnam urges today's philosophers to see through this foundationalism and recognize that eternal truths and a mind-independent reality may be the motives of a previous era whose problems have become outdated and too far removed from current interests. On Putnam's view, "the dream of a description of physical reality as it is apart from observers, a description which is objective in the sense of being 'from no particular point of view'"[2] has led to a philosophy that has "lost all interest outside of the philosophical community."[3]

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[1] Putnam, *Renewing Philosophy*, p. 79.

[2] Putnam, *Realism With a Human Face*, p. 11.

[3] Putnam, *Realism With a Human Face*, p. 51.

This chapter will show how Putnam's convincing arguments against metaphysical realism support his diagnosis of the current state of analytic philosophy. It will also present the kind of realism that Putnam sees as the most sensible solution to the current realism/antirealism debate. Much like Rorty, Putnam rejects any conventional or traditional approach to this debate; rather, in the same way that Rorty urges us to experiment or 'play' with our words and concepts in ways that broaden the spectrum of our understanding and facilitate better social interaction, Putnam too urges us to change our traditional understanding of concepts such as truth, objectivity and realism. Putnam, however, is not entirely comfortable with Rorty's call to end traditional philosophical pursuits.

According to Putnam, Rorty's suggestion to discard a history of credible philosophical progress and abandon important issues of truth and realism is a reaction which lies on the other side of the absolutist coin. That is, Putnam suggests that Rorty's disappointment with the failure of metaphysical realism has resulted in his premature and *absolute* rejection of metaphysical realism. Putnam then charges that the metaphysical impulse motivates Rorty's position as much as it motivates metaphysical realism. While there are many similarities between Putnam's and Rorty's answers to metaphysical realism, the main point of difference between them is that although both recognize the need to change our approach to the problem of realism, Putnam's recommendations are much more cautious and refuse to give up on certain parts of the tradition. Putnam's pragmatism therefore attempts a different approach than Rorty's to the ways in which we have traditionally understood certain philosophical concepts such as truth, objectivity and realism. Unlike Rorty, Putnam is not suggesting that

we move without abandon onto unfamiliar ground; instead, Putnam's suggestions are guidelines for walking on familiar ground in a way that does not reject that ground but which avoids some of the pitfalls that previous ways of walking could not.

3.1 THE REALISM ATTACKED

Since Putnam diagnoses contemporary philosophy with the same incoherent foundationalism I discussed in sections 1.1, 1.2 and 2.1, it is not surprising that his most sustained criticism of the analytic tradition is aimed at metaphysical realism. I have explained and discussed metaphysical realism throughout the previous two chapters (sections 1.3 and 2.2), but here is Putnam's formulation of his foundationalist target:

> On this perspective, [1] the world consists of some fixed totality of mind-independent objects. [2] There is exactly one true and complete description of 'the way the world is'. [3] Truth involves some sort of correspondence relation between words or thought-signs and external things and sets of things.[1]

According to Putnam, each of the metaphysical realist's theses involves what he calls an impossible "God's-eye view" of the world.[2] Putnam calls this view, which requires that the world be seen independently of our perception, an "epistemic ideal of achieving a view from an 'Archimedian point' - a point from which we can survey observers as if they were not *ourselves*, survey them as if we were, so to speak, *outside our own skins*."[3] For Putnam the

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[4] Putnam, *Realism, Truth, and History*, p. 49.

[5] For a detailed discussion of the notion of a God's-eye View see part 1 of Putnam's "Realism With a Human Face" in *Realism With a Human Face*, pp. 2-18 where he discusses the God's-eye View assumed in Einstein's approach to quantum mechanics.

[6] Putnam, *Realism With a Human Face*, p. 17.

metaphysical realist's attempts to find one true description of the world are incoherent attempts to describe the world in the absolute language of God. These attempts are incoherent, says Putnam, because the point of view from which metaphysical realists claim the descriptions must come is unattainable; we cannot step 'outside our own skins' in metaphysical speculation. However, Putnam's rejection of the God's-eye view requirement of metaphysical realism is best captured in his criticism of the first thesis which explicitly postulates a 'fixed totality of mind-independent objects.' Putnam makes its fallacy quite apparent by arguing that we cannot perceive or describe anything independently of our perception or perspective? He explains that each metaphysical inquiry must begin with some kind of socio-historical perspective or vantage point that permits the objects of the world to have meaning.

Putnam's point against the first thesis of metaphysical realism, then, is that the notion of mind-independent objects does not make sense. Our minds are inherently involved in the content of our perceptions and the meanings associated with our language; our view of the objects of the world must entail our current interests and other normative elements. Consequently, a description of the world as it is in itself, independent of perspective, just doesn't make sense. As Putnam sometimes puts it, metaphysical realism requires a "View from Nowhere," "a view which is the dream of a description of physical reality as it is apart

from observers, a description which is objective in the sense of being 'from no particular point of view.'"[7]

In response to Putnam's criticism, however, the metaphysical realist can make an epistemological concession without affecting the idea that a language-independent reality does exist; that is, she can reply that we may not be able to know the world in itself, but that doesn't refute its existence. This objection misses the point of Putnam's criticism. Putnam argues that indeed knowledge of a language-independent reality is impossible. But, additionally, the concept of a language-independent reality itself is senseless and, therefore, such a reality is neither a possibility nor an impossibility because the concept has no content. The only recourse left to the metaphysical realist is to argue that, perhaps, if God exists, then a language-independent reality makes sense because God is surely not bound by the limits of language. However, when the metaphysical realist makes reference to God she is making a nonsensical attempt to force language outside itself into a language-independent world. If language must refer to God, then God must lie within its bounds.

> Metaphysical realists to this day continue to argue about whether points (space-time points, nowadays, rather than points in the plane or in three-dimensional space) are individuals or properties, particulars or mere limits, and so forth. My view is that God himself, if he consented to answer the question "Do points really exist or are they mere limits?" would say "I don't know"; not because His omniscience is limited, but because there is a limit to how far questions make sense.[8]

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[7] Putnam, *Realism With a Human Face*, p. 11.

[8] Putnam, *Realism With a Human Face*, p. 97.

And, according to Putnam, metaphysical questions exceed this limit.

Putnam addresses the second thesis of metaphysical realism, which claims that there is only 'one true and complete description' of the world, by arguing that such an *absolute* description is impossible. Any description of the world must come from within a particular theory, and not just any theory, but a human one that involves human interests. Putnam argues that the metaphysical realist's objection that truth lies outside language and can transcend contingent theories to get at the absolute picture is senseless. This objection itself is made from within a particular theory, yet it nonsensically attempts to refer to a realm which is outside language. According to Putnam, then, the realist question, which inquires into the absolute nature of the objects that comprise the world is misguided, for we can only operate from within the internal confines of some structured theoretical approach which cannot refer outside itself to provide an absolute picture. Without some normative linguistic structure (theory) consisting of grammatical rules which are themselves a part of the world of objects under description, we cannot even attempt to describe these objects. In other words, our descriptions cannot come from *nowhere*, and the *somewhere* that they come from must include normative judgements and other human interests:

> Although our sentences do "correspond to reality" in the sense of describing it, they are not simply copies of reality. To revert for a second to Bernard Williams' book, the idea that some descriptions are "descriptions of reality as it is independent of perspective" is a chimera. Our language cannot be divided up into two parts, a part that describes the world "as it is anyway" and a part that describes our conceptual contribution. This does not mean that reality is hidden

> or noumenal; it simply means that you can't describe the world without describing it.[9]

Putnam points out that since our descriptions of the objects of the world must come from somewhere, the metaphysical realist's claim that there is one true description of the world involves the assumption that the world has some kind of semantic preference for a particular description. The physicist, for example, who professes that only physics correctly describes the true state of the universe assumes that the language of physics is the language in which the universe is written. Putnam exposes these kinds of assumptions:

> What is wrong is that Nature, or 'physical reality' in the post-Newtonian understanding of the physical, has no semantic preferences. The idea that some physical parameter or some relation definable in terms of the fundamental parameters of physics, simply cries out for the role of mapping our signs onto things has no content at all.[10]

Putnam reminds the metaphysical realist, who claims that this idea does have content, that she is again attempting to force language outside itself to achieve a view from nowhere. Therefore, the second thesis of metaphysical realism, like the first, makes a claim that lacks any sense, for the metaphysical realist cannot single out one true description of the world when she must operate within the bounds of *her* language.

The third thesis of metaphysical realism is perhaps the most interesting of the lot, for not only does it posit a mind-independent world of objects, but it also makes the even more

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[9] Putnam, *Renewing Philosophy*, p. 122.

[10] Putnam, *Realism With a Human Face*, p. 83.

controversial claim that truth consists of the correspondence of our language with this mind-independent world. Putnam fully rejects the notion of truth as correspondence. His basic argument is that this thesis assumes the impossible God's-eye view because not even God could confirm the direct kind of correspondence between our mind-dependent words and the world's mind-independent objects. This problem is sometimes called the problem of reference, and it is one that the metaphysical realist feels very acutely, for how can she identify *the* true relationship between words and objects?

The physicalist response to this question is to use causation to fix reference; that is to say that the world has a unique causal structure which fixes the correspondence relationship between certain words and certain objects. But Putnam quickly shows that the causal theory of reference only rewords reference questions in the form of causation questions.

> My present use of the word "cat" has a great many causes, not just one. The use of the word "cat" is causally connected to cats, but it is also causally connected to the behavior of Anglo-Saxon tribes, for example. Just mentioning "causal connection" does not explain how one thing can be a representation of another thing.[11]

For example, David Lewis', natural-property theory of reference, which attempts to explain the correspondence between language and the world, involves what Putnam calls 'spooky' notions. "Rather than solving the problem of reference, what the ideas of a constraint built into nature and of 'elite classes' does is to confuse the materialist picture by throwing in

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[11] Putnam, *Renewing Philosophy*, p. 23.

something 'spooky.'"[12] Lewis talks of 'natural constraints', which are nature's determiners of reference that are imposed upon our language by the 'intrinsic distinction' of 'elite classes' of objects that are 'out there.'[13] Putnam claims that these concepts are quite mysterious and while they attempt to explain reference they turn causation into a vague and unhelpful answer to the problem.

What lies behind Putnam's criticism of the third thesis of metaphysical realism is his refusal to accept the fact/value distinction. Physicalist explanations of reference and correspondence truth, such as those held by Lewis in his *Counterfactuals*, hold strongly to a distinction between objective facts and subjective values. These explanations fail, according to Putnam, because they do not allow reference-relations or any relation that attempts to explain the metaphysical realist version of truth in a way that includes normative elements[14]. The metaphysical realist's notion of truth as correspondence requires that reference between language and the world be absolutely fixed; therefore psychological and normative factors are excluded from the metaphysical realist's version of truth because they taint truth with the indeterminancies of human behaviour. But Putnam argues that we cannot exclude the normative from reference relations and truth because there is a bit of fact and a bit of value

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[12] Putnam, *Realism With a Human Face*, p. 38.

[13] For Lewis' discussion of these 'spooky' notions see his "Putnam's Paradox," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 62 (1984), 221-236.

[14] For Putnam's discussions of Lewis' way with reference see p. 38 of *Realism With a Human Face* and pp.72-73 and 358-360 of *Words and Life*.

in all our truths. The fact/value distinction, he contends, is untenable[15]. We will see his arguments for these claims in the following section, as I discuss Putnam's own version of truth which includes the normative and does not rely on any kind of fixed correspondence.

3.2 PUTNAM'S NATURAL REALISM

Putnam's opposition to metaphysical realism can be summarized in these three main objections: a) we cannot have a mind-independent perspective of the world, simply because such a view from nowhere doesn't make sense; b) since we must view the world from somewhere, to claim that only one particular view is the right one is to assume without any basis that the world has a semantic preference for that particular view; and c) not even God could confirm the mysterious kind of absolute reference (the kind that excludes psychological or normative factors) that the correspondence theory of truth requires.

It should be clear by now that Putnam's main concern is with metaphysical realism's presumption that it can provide the one true description of the world. That is, his arguments are directed at the absolute metaphysical requirements in metaphysical realism and not at realism itself. As I will explain in what follows, Putnam believes that realism can be supported without reference to absolutes; the result is realism without metaphysics. I will show how Putnam explains that today's fashionable relativist reaction to the failure of metaphysics is also an absolute position that is equally as misguided as metaphysics itself. It

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[15] The essays in part two of Putnam's *Realism With a Human Face*, pp. 135-213 demonstrate the problems with the fact/value distinction.

is this insight that gives his natural realism its importance as well as its elusive nature. Putnam argues that relativism is an absurd answer to metaphysical questions. He demonstrates that if the questions of metaphysics are meaningless, then how can relativism be a meaningful answer? That is, in the same way as metaphysical realism, relativism, as the antithesis of metaphysical realism, attempts to answer meaningless questions.

> But if we agree that it is ***unintelligible*** to say, "We sometimes succeed in comparing our language and thought with reality as it is in itself," then we should realize that it is also unintelligible to say, "It is *impossible* to stand outside and compare our thought and language with the world."[16]

Putnam's argument for this claim places the relativist in a very awkward position.

Putnam argues that to move from the philosophical position that the questions of metaphysics are misguided philosophical endeavors to the practical position that we must abandon these projects is to remain in the grip of metaphysical absolutism. For example, a frustrated metaphysical realist who concludes that our language cannot represent anything because there is no absolute way of knowing what our language represents is merely transferring his desire to know absolutely into skepticism, another form of absolutism. As Putnam writes of Rorty's current position:

> But why is Rorty so bothered by the lack of a *guarantee* that our words represent things outside themselves? Evidently, Rorty's craving for such a guarantee is so strong that, finding the guarantee to be "impossible," he feels forced to conclude that our words do not represent anything. It is at this point in Rorty's position that one detects the trace of a disappointed metaphysical realist impulse.[17]

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[16] Putnam, *Words and Life*, p. 299.

[17] Putnam, *Words and Life*, p. 299.

I disagree with Putnam's evaluation of Rorty's ethnocentric pragmatism, but the underlying argument in this bit of psychology is that, in claiming that the guarantee is impossible, the relativist (in this case Rorty) is actually answering the question that he claims is unintelligible. If the relativist claims that the question, "Does language represent anything outside itself?" is unintelligible, then why would he bother answering, "No, that's impossible!" Such an answer partakes of the same senselessness that the relativist (the 'disappointed metaphysical realist') attributes to metaphysical realism.[18]

According to Putnam, then, the relativist solution is not only unintelligible, but it is also another manifestation of absolutism.

> The attempt to say that warrant (and truth) is just a matter of communal agreement is, then, simultaneously a misdescription of the notions we actually have and a self-refuting attempt to both have and deny an "absolute perspective." Are we then forced to become "metaphysical realists" - at the end of the day, if not at the beginning? Is there no middle way?[19]

As elusive as Putnam's recommendations are, he does not leave this question rhetorical. He offers his natural realism as the 'middle way' between the two absolute poles of metaphysics and relativism.

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[18] Putnam's argument against relativism is simple and successful; however, in section 4.34 I will show that his characterization of Rorty as a relativist is mistaken. Also, in section 5.22 I will argue that this mistake is an inappropriate slip back into the foundationalist attitude.

[19] Putnam, *Realism With a Human Face*, p. 26.

Putnam writes that "what we have learned since Newton is that metaphysics is not a possible subject."[20] According to Putnam, then, the questions of metaphysical realism exceed the bounds of our language and understanding by inquiring into the nature of entities that exist outside of our language. Such metaphysical inquiries, says Putnam, are driven by a desire to know absolutely. And, conversely, the relativist reaction is also motivated by such absolute requirements. The desire to know is one that Putnam respects, but it is the desire for absolute knowledge that he cannot accept, for it places impossible requirements, such as the God's-Eye View or the View from Nowhere, on epistemology. On Putnam's account, this metaphysical absolutism with regard to truth and knowledge fails to acknowledge the normative elements that are interwoven into the objects of human knowledge through the procedure of knowing. As we will see, Putnam's own position, natural realism, takes a more humble, human approach to truth and objectivity and presents a realism that avoids the hubris of the metaphysical brand by avoiding metaphysics in both its absolutist and relativist forms. The result is *realism with a human face*.

In his *Words and Life* Putnam makes an important point that captures his central contentions with the metaphysical realist and leads into the heart of his own position on truth, objectivity and the realism/antirealism debate. He states:

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[20] Putnam, *Realism With a Human Face*, p. 39.

> Given a definite language in place and a definite scheme of "objects," the relation between "words and objects" is not at all indescribable; but it does not have a single metaphysically privileged description any more than the objects do.[21]

This point seems to amalgamate the first two objections summarized above by including the notion that we cannot have a View from Nowhere, for we must proceed with a 'definite language in place,' and the notion that we cannot assume that the language we proceed with is the metaphysically privileged, semantic preference of the world because the 'relation between words and objects' is not absolute. This point, however, is not merely destructive criticism for the metaphysical realist, for it does make a constructive claim.

That is, here Putnam expresses his realist spirit in claiming that within fixed parameters we can describe the relationship between thought or language and the objects within those parameters. However, before I discuss Putnam's natural realism I should preface it by again saying that this realism does not satisfy the strong desire for objectivity and absolute truth that's contained in the metaphysical realist's correspondence theory of truth, for it rejects any notion of correspondence between language and mind-independent objects. Putnam does not dismiss objectivity and truth from his realism. Rather, what his natural realism does is take the strong metaphysical requirements out of realism by avoiding the following: any reference to 'fixed totalities of language-independent objects'; any notion of 'one true and complete description' of this totality, and, the idea of 'correspondence' between

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[21] Putnam, *Words and Life*, p. 309.

language and a 'language-independent world'. Thus, natural realism is realism without metaphysics or realism without the

> appeal to something that *underlies* our language games: a mysterious property that stands behind - both in the sense of remaining invisibly in the background and in the sense of guaranteeing - our ordinary ways of speaking and acting.[22]

I think the best way to understand Putnam's realism and his notions of truth and objectivity is through his discussion of 'conceptual relativity'. This 'pervasive phenomenon', as Putnam calls it, is extremely important to his project and in the preface to *Realism With a Human Face* Putnam remarks that Since *Reason, Truth, and History* he has shifted "from emphasizing model-theoretic arguments against metaphysical realism to emphasizing conceptual relativity."[23] His latest works, *Renewing Philosophy* and *Words and Life* continue to emphasize the importance of conceptual relativity. For Putnam conceptual relativity means that.

> the number and kind of objects and their properties can vary from one correct description of a situation to another correct description of the same situation.[24]

An example of conceptual relativity could go as follows: there are people who believe that their explanation of a thunderstorm as the act of an angered God is a correct description of a particular event. There are also people who believe that the correct explanation of a

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[22] Putnam, "Sense, Nonsense, and the Senses: An Inquiry Into the Powers of the Human Mind," *The Journal of Philosophy*, 91 (1994), p. 500.

[23] Putnam, *Realism With a Human Face*, p. X.

[24] Putnam, *Renewing Philosophy*, p. 122.

thunderstorm is a scientific or meteorological one. But which explanation is truly correct in the metaphysical sense? Well, for Putnam, this question doesn't make sense. The scientific explanation may be an improvement on the previous explanation, and it may provide us with better methods of predicting the weather. This would mean that we could be more prepared for thunderstorms, and, in a pragmatic sense, the scientific explanation is a better one for *us*. But it is not *the* correct explanation. However, the point here is that once we take away the metaphysical question of absolute correctness, then different explanations of the same event can both be correct. Ultimately, the principle of conceptual relativity means that "objects are theory-dependent in the sense that theories with incompatible ontologies can both be right."[25]

Putnam's own example in *Renewing Philosophy* might give us more insight into the notion of conceptual relativity. He states:

> Points in space (or nowadays one often refers instead to points in space-time) can be regarded as concrete particulars of which space consists (the ultimate parts of space) or, alternatively, as "mere limits." Geometrical discourse can be adequately formalized from either point of view; so can all of physics. And whether formalized or left unformalized, both ways of speaking will do perfectly well for all the purposes of geometry and physics.[26]

Here Putnam puts his conceptual relativity to work; he says that these two schemes, or different ways of speaking, can provide different descriptions of the same state of affairs. He also says that although the same state of affairs can be differently described by these two different schemes, in this case it nonetheless "makes no difference to our predictions or

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[25] Putnam, *Realism With a Human Face*, p. 40.

[26] Putnam, *Renewing Philosophy*, p. 115.

actions which of the two schemes we use."[27] If it did make a difference, then we would choose the scheme that better fulfilled our interests.

Now, when Putnam explains that two different language-schemes can describe the same state of affairs one might ask just what Putnam means by the 'same state of affairs.' It seems that Putnam himself is adopting the View from Nowhere by referring to some kind of transcending, language-independent realm. However, such a charge forgets the fact that Putnam is not doing traditional metaphysics here. When Putnam speaks of the same state of affairs he does so from a particular language-game and does not mean anything more than that language-game permits.

> In saying that they [different language schemes] are used to describe the same states of affairs, I am not introducing a transcendent ontology of states of affairs. By a "state of affairs" I mean something like a particle's being at a point, or a place X's being between a place Y and a place Z; in short, I assume a familiar language to be already in place. I am not saying that Noumenal Reality consists of states of affairs.... In short, what I meant by a "state of affairs"... is just what anyone would mean by that phrase who was *not* giving a metaphysical emphasis.[28]

Thus Putnam is not adopting a View from Nowhere; rather, he is making a simple claim from within a particular language scheme which does not refer to any 'states of affairs' outside that scheme.

Putnam remarks that to ask metaphysical questions such as, "Do these two different sentences describing the same event have the same meaning?" is to "try to force the ordinary-

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[27] Putnam, *Renewing Philosophy*, p. 117.

[29] Putnam, *Renewing Philosophy*, p. 117.

language notion of meaning to do a job for which it was never designed."[29] That is, when dealing with different linguistic schemes it makes no sense to cross linguistic borders and speak of same or different meanings, for that would require the senseless task of leaving both schemes behind and finding a linguistically neutral ground. As Putnam repeatedly stresses, our descriptions of the world must come from some point of view; what must be kept in mind is that conceptual relativity cannot make sense of metaphysical talk. We may speak of different schemes having different uses for their words, but "whether such a change of use is or is not a change of 'meaning' is not a question that need have an answer."[30]

Conceptual relativity, then, entails an *ordinary* conception of what is real. The state of affairs that is described by two different schemes is a real state of affairs, and the two different schemes are both legitimate ways of using words to describe that real state of affairs. But we cannot sensibly ask which of these descriptions are truly accurate; that is, it is incoherent to ask whether one or the other is metaphysically correct in its description. But what can the real state of affairs that both descriptions describe possibly be? If we can only refer to it with a language-game already in place, then does it even have a reality outside of language? Putnam has an answer:

> There are many ways of describing things, some better and some worse and some equally good but simply different, but none which is Nature's own way.... [Two different] descriptions describe what is before me; neither describes it "in itself,"

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[30] Putnam, *Renewing Philosophy*, p. 118.

[31] Putnam, *Renewing Philosophy*, p. 120.

> *not because the "in itself" is an unreachable limit, but because the "in itself" doesn't make sense.* (my italics)[31]

According to Putnam, because there can be two legitimate ways of describing the same reality does not make it reasonable to conclude that either there are two different realities, or there is no reality. There is a reality and it can have various descriptions that come from different uses of language. If one asks us to describe that reality in a way that does not make reference to either scheme of use, then one is doing incoherent metaphysics.

> But why should one suppose that reality can be described independent of our descriptions? And why should the fact that reality cannot be described independent of our descriptions lead us to suppose that there are only the descriptions? After all, according to our descriptions themselves, the wold "quark" is one thing and a quark is quite a different thing.[32]

With this remark Putnam is emphasizing the notion that because the in itself is not a sensible field of inquiry, this does not mean that our ordinary notions of truth and reality are senseless too. After all, there is a difference between words and objects; actual chairs are not the same things as the words we use to describe them. According to Putnam then, our descriptions are about something, but the something that they are about is not *independent* of our descriptions because we can't make sense of that something apart from the standpoint from which we make the descriptions.

This complicated notion of conceptual relativity has the ability to make Putnam sound as if he holds either a very weak and culturally relative notion of truth, or no notion of truth

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[32] Putnam, *Words and Life*, p. 302.

[33] Putnam, *Renewing Philosophy*, p. 122.

at all. As far as the most foundational notion of truth - metaphysical Truth - is concerned, Putnam rejects it, but he does claim that truth is not merely 'culturally determined'. "Of course, our concepts are culturally relative; but it does not follow that the truth or falsity of what we say using those concepts is simply 'determined' by the culture."[33] According to Putnam, conceptual relativity does not mean that we must deny the commonsense notion that something outside our language and thought plays a role in determining truth; however, what we must do is recognize that how truth is determined depends upon the nature of the conceptual scheme.

> Accepting the ubiquity of conceptual relativity does not require us to deny that truth genuinely depends on the behavior of things distant from the speaker, but the nature of the dependence changes as the kinds of language games we invent change.[34]

As he repeatedly stresses, the world and human convention are inherently integrated, and each conceptual scheme will have different conventions which cast different lights on the world. The result is not a denial of the fact that language sometimes makes contact with the world, but a denial of the fact that there is one contact that is *the* correct contact. That is, the result is not a denial of truth, but a denial of absolute truth. The key to appreciating this insight of Putnam's natural realism "is seeing the *needlessness* and the *unintelligibility* of a picture that imposes an interface between ourselves and the world."[35] The idea that there is

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[34] Putnam, *Realism With a Human Face*, p. 98.

[35] Putnam, *Words and Life*, p. 309.

[36] Putnam, "Sense, Nonsense and the Senses: An Inquiry Into the Powers of the Human Mind," *The Journal of Philosophy*, 91 (1994), p. 487.

no philosophical interface between our language and the objects our language describes is essential to understanding conceptual relativity and the notion that truth is neither absolute nor relative. For Putnam, although truth is affected by conceptual relativity, there is still a need for a picture of truth that doesn't demote truth to a property of sentences. Language does make contact with the world through the beliefs contained within our sentences, and, he contends, we are philosophically motivated to describe the nature of this contact.

Putnam believes that accepting the notion that language can make contact with the world is essential because he claims it exonerates him from the relativism with which he charges Rorty. Because Rorty believes that truth is an empty concept and not something which we can have a sensible theory about, he is often criticized for holding an inconsistent, relativistic version of truth; however, Putnam does not consider truth to be an empty concept.[36] For Putnam,

> meaningfulness in a public language is indeed a culturally relative property; but warranted assertibility cannot be identified with a culturally relative property any more than truth can be. I do not believe that very many philosophers would regard the problem of truth as *solved* if they had to agree that the solution involves the notion that rightness (in any objective sense) is a culturally relative property.[37]

Whereas Rorty dismisses the problem of truth as hopelessly and senselessly foundationalist, Putnam feels that there is something more serious and positive to be said about truth.

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[37] A discussion of Putnam's relativist charge against Rorty receives more detailed attention throughout my chapter 4.

[38] Putnam, *Words and Life*, p. 324.

> I am saying that our "realism" (note the small "r") about the past, our belief that truth and falsity "reach all the way to" the past, and "do not stop short," *is* part of a picture, *and the picture is essential to our lives.*[38]

Putnam's reference to an *essential* picture in which a positive notion of truth is contained indicates one difference between his and Rorty's versions of pragmatism. But I will address this difference and other supposed differences between Putnam and Rorty in the next chapter. For now it will suffice to say that Putnam considers his notion of conceptual relativity to avoid relativism as well as absolutism, and he first tried to accomplish this task with his theory of truth as "idealized rational acceptability" in *Reason, Truth and History*.

Idealized rational acceptability is the theory of truth that accompanies Putnam's earlier "internal realist" position espoused in *Reason, Truth and History* and *Realism With a Human Face*. But Putnam has since dropped "internal" as a misleading description of his realism[39] and now prefers to describe it as "natural." This change of label does not significantly alter the body of Putnam's realism; instead, the change is merely a result of difficulties with the notion of truth as idealized rational acceptability. Putnam initially believed that this earlier theory of truth avoided both relativism and absolutism; however, in his later publication, *Words and Life*, he "no longer defend[s] that theory of truth at all,"[40] presumably because it fit too comfortably into Rorty's 'culturally relative' pragmatism. However, Putnam's

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[39] Putnam, *Words and Life*, p. 277.

[40] See the preface to Putnam's *Realism With a Human Face* for Putnam's discomfort with misinterpretations of internal realism and truth as idealized rational acceptability.

[41] Putnam, *Words and Life*, p. V.

philosophical reasons for moving away from this earlier characterization of truth are due to the fact that certain propositions can conceivably be true while lacking imaginable ideal epistemic conditions. Assume, for example, that it is true that mathematical objects do not exist. Verifying this proposition would require a set of ideal epistemic conditions that extends beyond our current capacity to verify. As a result, only the impossible God's-eye view, which incoherently purports to contain all imaginable epistemic conditions, could justify them.

As I've mentioned, Putnam criticizes Rorty for being a relativist and has devoted some effort to distinguishing his views from Rorty's. Putnam's abandonment of truth as idealized rational acceptability is partly a result of this effort, and it changes Putnam's realism by making it more consistent with his criticism of metaphysical realism.[41] In *Words and Life* Putnam refuses to provide a positive theory of truth and prefers instead to show how other so-called solutions to the problem of truth - such as Tarski's 'disquotational' theory and Rorty's 'agreement of one's cultural peers' version[42] - are inadequate explanations of the nature of truth. Putnam argues that to accept that there is nothing interesting to say or theorize about truth because it has been proven to be a redundant assertion or an empty compliment is to deny the importance of truth as a *natural*, intuitive notion; hence Putnam's decision to

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[42] In section 4.13 of the next chapter I discuss Rorty's convincing interpretation of Putnam's idealized rational acceptability and the concern it raises for Putnam's pragmatism. Rorty incorporates Putnam's truth theory into his ethnocentric pragmatism and presents it as the same position that Putnam has previously criticized as relative.

[43] For Putnam's discussion of these "solutions" see "On Truth" in his *Words and Life*, p. 315.

change his realism from *internal* to *natural*. Whereas internal realism espouses a positive theory of truth that is inconsistent with the rest of Putnam's pragmatism, natural realism modestly alters his pragmatism by avoiding a discussion of the details of a positive theory and, instead, emphasizes the importance of our natural inclination to search for such a positive theory. Thus, unlike Rorty, Putnam believes there is a problem of truth to be solved by philosophers; however, he chooses to leave us with our own intuitions regarding this problem, and for this reason I think we will benefit from a brief discussion of the earlier theory of truth that he has more recently - and reluctantly - retracted.[43]

In *Realism With a Human Face* Putnam explains that within each conceptual scheme truth is idealized rational acceptability. He argues that truth is attained when epistemic conditions are ideal enough to allow us to make a clear rational justification for its verification. The idealization is based on the cultural practices of our present conceptual scheme; and thus it is revisable. Such idealization accounts for the normative elements of truth and leads Putnam to deny that there can be truth in any system of epistemic conditions (in any language or culture) that "totally *outruns* the possibility of justification."[44] Therefore, for Putnam in *Realism With a Human Face*, truth is an attribute of those statements which

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[44] A large component of this thesis intends to show that Rorty's and Putnam's versions of pragmatism (despite Putnam's resistance) are converging at a number of points. My discussion of Putnam's earlier theory of truth is meant to help justify this claim. In chapter four I will return to Putnam's retracted theory through Rorty's criticism of it in "Putnam and the Relativist Menace," *The Journal of Philosophy*. 90 (1993), pp. 443-461; this will also help accentuate other points of convergence.

[45] Putnam, *Realism With a Human Face*, p. IX.

"*could be justified were epistemic conditions good enough,*"[45] and his reason for asserting this version of truth is that there are better and worse epistemic conditions which allow one to verify the truth of statements. Putnam emphasizes that this theory of truth does not *limit in advance* what we can use to verify statements because, although truth is idealized rational acceptability, the ideal epistemic conditions are not pre-established justificatory structures or any kind of rigid verification criteria.

Consequently, this notion of truth is pragmatic, and the beliefs to which it is attached make a positive impact on the culture, for truth is an ideal parameter by which beliefs are judged to be better or worse. Our desire to know is satisfied, but it is satisfied only through

> the position we are fated to occupy in any case, the position of beings who cannot have a view of the world that does not reflect our interests and values, but who are, for all that, committed to regarding some views of the world - and, for that matter, some interests and values - as better than others.[46]

On this version, truth is defined through the ideal justificatory structures which are pragmatically constructed by a practical reason that is subject to historical change. This view of truth is not one to satisfy the traditional demands of metaphysics and epistemology, for there is no absolute, language-independent truth. Where the metaphysical realist "wants truth to be something that *goes beyond* the content of the claim and to be that in virtue of which the claim is true,"[47] Putnam shows that truth cannot *go beyond* the socio-historical content

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[46] Putnam, *Realism With a Human Face*, p. VII.

[47] Putnam, *Realism With a Human Face*, p. 178.

[48] Putnam, "Sense, Nonsense, and the Senses: An Inquiry Into the Powers of the Human Mind," *The Journal of Philosophy*, 91 (1994), p. 501.

and the pragmatic ideals with which it is imbued because "truth - that is, the rightness of what is said - is a normative notion."[48]

Putnam reiterates that this notion of truth is not relativism. It is important to remember that even though different conceptual schemes allow different correct explanations of the same event, there is no need to jettison a positive concept of truth and conclude that all truth is relative. Within each conceptual scheme the truth and falsity of statements is determined in part by a reality which is partly defined by the conventions of the language in use and partly by the objects or facts that cause the conventions. However,

> while there is an aspect of conventionality and an aspect of fact in everything we say that is true, we fall into hopeless philosophical error if we commit a "fallacy of division" and conclude that there must be a part of the truth that is the "conventional part" and a part that is the "factual part."[49]

The 'philosophical error' here would be to attempt to ground a metaphysical notion of Truth on one side of a division of fact and convention. Such a division is an incoherent metaphysical endeavor which exceeds the bounds of language and sense.

In hindsight, the above quotation taken from the preface to *Realism With a Human Face* has more weight than perhaps it should. That is, it is not surprising that Putnam's conviction that the fact/value distinction should be dropped[50] would make a substantive theory of truth difficult to maintain. For if the normative and factual elements of reality are

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[49] Putnam, *Renewing Philosophy*, p. 77.

[50] Putnam, *Realism With a Human Face*, p. X.

[51] Putnam reiterates this conviction in the preface to *Words and Life*.

hopelessly bound together, then truth cannot really be grounded in an absolute manner because our normative contribution is contingent. Putnam's original intention in his earlier work was to show that a substantive theory of truth need not be abandoned just because it's mixed up with contingency. However, he later discovered that the difficulty with this insight is that an epistemology like Putnam's - one that maintains that language is an inseparable mixture of fact and value - cannot consistently hold such a substantive theory of truth. This follows because if truth is a substantive property, then there must be something essential about our normative contribution. Putnam realized that describing this essential feature would render his position open to Rorty's ethnocentric interpretation. Since Putnam cannot provide a positive nonethnocentric theory of truth, he chooses to focus his attention on debunking negative theories. While this tactic does not directly support the notion that a positive or substantive theory of truth can be coherently described, it does support the intuition that there is problem of truth to be considered. Putnam's more recent natural realism, however, makes no real attempt to address the problem, and he simply retracts his earlier substantive theory of truth. Putnam's reasons for retracting idealized rational acceptability will be discussed further in chapter four in which I will show how Rorty's criticism of Putnam's pragmatism has brought their versions of pragmatism closer together.

3.3 CONCLUSION

Putnam's natural realism, then, avoids the reductive absolutism of both cultural relativism and metaphysical realism. By incorporating the common sense notion that it is not

impossible for language to make contact with the world, it avoids cultural relativism, and by including the indeterminacy and normativity of convention, it also avoids metaphysical absolutism. According to Putnam, the union of fact and value is one that realism cannot do without. As Putnam emphasizes, we cannot divide through fact and convention and separate out the determinate and the indeterminate elements of truth. We can make sense of neither fact nor convention when we consider them as distinct from each other. Since the real for Putnam is exactly what our language-games and theories say it is, then reality is a combination of states of affairs and the interests that motivate our descriptions of those states.

The next chapter will take a closer look at Putnam's and Rorty's versions of pragmatism. I will argue that when we are done making sense of Putnam's position, it is much closer to Rorty's than Putnam would like to admit, and Putnam's retraction of his earlier idealized rational acceptability theory of truth is one explicit indication that his and Rorty's versions of pragmatism are converging. Putnam's conviction that language does make contact with the world is the questionable component of his pragmatism and, as I will argue, this conviction is all that separates their positions. The admission of the failure of idealized rational acceptability is a strong step in Rorty's direction, but Putnam still refuses to abandon his conviction. As a result, my conclusion in the next chapter is that Putnam must embrace Rorty's ethnocentric pragmatism or inconsistently cling to this conviction at the expense of his own position. In chapter five I will argue that this conviction as well as Putnam's criticism of Rorty as a relativist reveals a deep foundationalist urge for certainty that Putnam maintains with little support.

CHAPTER 4

REALISM, RELATIVISM AND ETHNOCENTRIC PRAGMATISM

The intent of this chapter is to discover the reasons why Putnam and Rorty continue to agree on certain issues of metaphysics, truth, realism and the future of philosophy and disagree on others. Both philosophers offer very similar positions on these topics, but Putnam is determined to distinguish his pragmatism from Rorty's. While Rorty claims that his and Putnam's positions are essentially the same, Putnam claims that they're quite different, and he demonstrates this by criticizing Rorty. However, Putnam's criticism of Rorty actually contradicts his own pragmatism, and if Putnam is to remain consistent, then his position requires further development.

In a recent article[1] Rorty attempts to get at the underlying differences between himself and Putnam. He first takes five passages from Putnam's *Realism With a Human Face* and claims that they are points on which he 'wholeheartedly concurs' with Putnam and that they summarize the kind of pragmatism that he and Putnam both share. Rorty's list of Putnam's passages goes as follows:

> (I)...elements of what we call 'language' or 'mind' *penetrate so deeply into what we call "reality" that the very project of representing ourselves as being 'mappers of something 'language-independent' is fatally compromised from the start.* Like Relativism, but in a different way, Realism is an impossible attempt to view the world from Nowhere (RHF 28).
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> (II) [We should] accept the position we are fated to occupy in any case, the position of beings who cannot have a view of the world that does not reflect our interests

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[1] Rorty, "Putnam and the Relativist Menace," *The Journal of Philosophy*, 90 (1993), pp. 443-461.

and values, but who are, for all that, committed to regarding some views of the world--and, for that matter, some interests and values--as better than others (RHF, 178).

(III) What Quine called 'the indeterminacy of translation' should rather be viewed as the *'interest relativity of translation'*...'[I]nterest relativity' contrasts with absoluteness, not with objectivity. It can be objective that an interpretation or an explanation is the correct one, *given* the interests which are relevant in the context (RHF 210).

(IV) The heart of pragmatism, it seems to me--of James' and Dewey's pragmatism, if not of Peirce's--was the insistence on the supremacy of the agent point of view. If we find that we must take a certain point of view, use a certain 'conceptual system', when we are engaged in practical activity, in the widest sense of 'practical activity', then we must not simultaneously advance the claim that it is not really 'the way things are in themselves'. [*The Many Faces of Realism*, p. 83]

(V) To say, as [Bernard] Williams sometimes does, that convergence to one big picture is required by the very concept of knowledge is sheer dogmatism.... It is, indeed, the case that ethical knowledge cannot claim absoluteness; but that is because the notion of absoluteness is incoherent (RHF 171; roman numerals added).[2]

Rorty then addresses three other points that Putnam uses in *Realism With a Human Face* to separate himself from Rorty's pragmatism. Rorty claims that these three points are entirely inconsistent with the five passages that summarize their shared pragmatism, and he argues that in order to avoid this inconsistency Putnam must embrace ethnocentric pragmatism. The first two controversial points are Putnam's reference to the 'nature of human life' and Putnam's notion of reform. The third point of contention is one that Putnam himself has accepted as problematic: the notion of truth as idealized rational acceptability. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, Putnam's retraction of this earlier theory of truth is evidence that his natural realism is converging on the ethnocentric picture proposed by Rorty.

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[2] Rorty, "Putnam and the Relativist Menace," *The Journal of Philosophy*, 90 (1993), p. 144. With the exception of passage IV, the text Rorty is quoting here is Putnam's *Realism With a Human Face*. Passage IV is taken from Putnam's *The Many Faces of Realism* (see reference list for complete citations).

In this chapter I will present Rorty's criticism of Putnam's earlier theory of truth in order to show why Putnam has since dropped it and why, without a sensible replacement for idealized rational acceptability, Putnam's most sensible option is to embrace Rorty's disquotational, ethnocentric picture of truth.

In the first half of this chapter I will explain why Rorty thinks each of these points contradicts his and Putnam's own pragmatism. I will show that these contradictions make it apparent that Putnam's intentions are different from Rorty's. That is, whereas Rorty wishes to abandon the foundationalism of our philosophical vocabulary by using a different vocabulary, Putnam's aim is to preserve our philosophical vocabulary while deflating it of absolutism. However, despite Putnam's objections, I will argue that the differences of intention between Rorty and Putnam are not explicitly found in the final content of their similar positions. It is true that Putnam is more sympathetic to the tradition of philosophy than Rorty, but Putnam's sympathy clouds his pragmatism, and we are left to interpret a rather undeveloped position.

Therefore, the later half of this chapter will analyze Putnam's use of certain concepts - representation, truth and realism - in order to clarify his pragmatism and free it of self-contradiction. My analysis will first show that in order to escape mystery and contradiction, Putnam's use of these concepts needs explanation. I will argue that once we add the missing explanation, the content of Putnam's pragmatism is essentially the same as Rorty's.

4.1 Part 1: Understanding Three Contradictions

4.11 THE NATURE OF HUMAN LIFE

In *Realism With a Human Face* Putnam criticizes Rorty's zealous desire to abandon issues like the realism-antirealism debate. Putnam claims that we cannot simply ignore philosophical controversies because "the illusions that philosophy spins are illusions that belong to the nature of human life itself."[3] Rorty is surprised at Putnam's reference to the 'nature of human life' and responds to Putnam by charging that he is "too kind to the problematic and vocabulary of modern philosophy."[4] Such a vocabulary, argues Rorty, is not compatible with the kind of pragmatism espoused in the five passages on which they wholeheartedly concur.

> The *nature* of human life? For all the ages to come? Talk about *the* nature of human life does not fit in well with the pragmatism sketched in (I) -(v) above, nor with Putnam's view...that "our norms and standards of warranted assertibility...evolve in time."[5]

There are numerous passages such as this in "The Relativist Menace" where Rorty is perplexed at Putnam's apparent contradiction of his own philosophical position. Rorty notes that, at times, Putnam offers devastating criticism of modern, foundationalist philosophy and

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[3] Putnam, *Realism With a Human Face*, p. 20.

[4] Rorty, "Putnam and the Relativist Menace," *The Journal of Philosophy*, 90 (1993), p. 445.

[5] Rorty, "Putnam and the Relativist Menace," *The Journal of Philosophy*, 90 (1993), p. 446.

in the same breath evokes foundationalist talk about the *nature* of human life. He argues that if Putnam is to remain consistent with his critique of modern foundationalism and metaphysical realism, as well as remaining consistent with his professed pragmatism, then he cannot use the vocabulary of these incoherent philosophical movements.

At this point we get the first glimpse at the difference between Putnam's and Rorty's intentions. Putnam's desire to preserve substantial notions of representation, truth and realism is much stronger than Rorty's, and this is evident in the fact that Putnam risks mystery and contradiction through refusal to reject the vocabulary. Rorty feels no need to stand close to the tradition that he is attempting to overcome and therefore abandons that tradition's vocabulary.

However, two controversial issues remain that will shed light on Putnam's intentions with regard to natural realism. The first of these two is Rorty's problem with Putnam's concept of reform.

4.12 THE PRINCIPLE OF REFORM

I will show that Putnam's principle of reform is actually incompatible with *Putnam's* pragmatism, and, so far, only Rorty's sensible interpretation of Putnam's principle avoids the contradiction. Putnam's principle of reform goes as follows:

> Our norms and standards of *anything*--including warranted assertibility--are capable of reform. There are better and worse norms and standards.[6]

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[6] Putnam, *Realism With a Human Face*, p. 21.

In his *Consequences of Pragmatism* Rorty's version of the reform principle states that:

> in the process of playing vocabularies and cultures off against each other, we produce new and better ways of talking and acting--*not better by reference to a previously known standard, but just better in the sense that they come to seem clearly better than their predecessors.*[7] (my italics)

Putnam argues that this formulation of the principle of reform is actually "a rejection, rather than a clarification, of the notion of 'reforming' the ways we are doing and thinking"[8] because it is relativistic and does not include any substantial notion of reform. Putnam argues that

> it is internal to our picture of "reform" that whether the outcome of a change is good (a reform) or bad (the opposite) is logically independent of whether it *seems* good or bad. (That is why it makes sense to argue that something most people take to be a reform in fact isn't one).[9]

For Putnam the possibility that reforms are determined as good or bad according to whether a society feels them to be good or bad is relativistic because any change, even fascism, could then be considered a reform. It is this possibility that makes Putnam uncomfortable with Rorty's notion of reform.

Rorty takes the opportunity in "The Relativist Menace" to express his ethnocentric, anti-relativist strategy, and he responds to Putnam by revising his original formulation of reform in *Consequences of Pragmatism* to avoid the charge of relativism. The revision changes the original formulation of reforms as those changes which 'come to seem clearly better than their predecessors' to the more explicitly ethnocentric version of changes which

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[7] Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, p. XXXVII.

[8] Putnam, *Realism With a Human Face*, p. 23.

[9] Putnam, *Realism With a Human Face*, p. 24.

"come to seem *to us* clearly better than their predecessors."[10] And by 'us' Rorty means "language users whom we can recognize as better versions of ourselves."[11]

Thus, Rorty emphasizes the point that it is the politics and ethics of the *particular* society under examination that determine whether reforms are good or bad. Social change, claims Rorty, can only be interpreted through the interests and values of the individual societies that effect such change. This does mean that there are many different standards of reform and that something like fascism cannot be excluded, but, as Rorty points out, how can it be otherwise? Since we cannot step outside the politics and ethics of our society, our judgements regarding reform and our standards of warranted assertibility must remain within these social structures as well.

At this point it is important that we consider whether Rorty is correct in claiming that Putnam's vocabulary is too kind to modern philosophy or whether he simply misunderstands Putnam's position. Does Putnam's natural realism include something that Rorty fails to see? If so, then perhaps Rorty is wrong in asserting that Putnam's work is riddled with contradiction and that he should embrace ethnocentric pragmatism. But to argue that Rorty has misunderstood Putnam here is to oversimplify a complex relationship between two philosophers who, while offering very similar and final criticisms of foundationalist

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[10] Rorty, "Putnam and the Relativist Menace," *The Journal of Philosophy*, 90 (1993), p. 453.

[11] Rorty, "Putnam and the Relativist Menace," *The Journal of Philosophy*, 90 (1993), p.454.

philosophy, have very subtle recommendations for the continued practice of philosophy without foundations. A clear example of this kind of oversimplification occurs in a recent article by Jennifer Case in the *Southern Journal of Philosophy*.

However, it is not the oversimplication that is most important here. Rather, In response to Rorty's interpretation of Putnam's natural realism, Case, in her article, "Rorty and Putnam: Separate and Unequal," argues that "Rorty fails to undermine a significant portion of Putnam's criticism."[12] Case argues that Putnam's pragmatism is separate from Rorty's because Putnam's principle of reform is incompatible with Rorty's pragmatism. But I will show that Case's arguments are unsound, and, therefore, she has failed to distinguish Putnam's position from Rorty's. To be more precise and to repeat my point here, Case does show that Putnam's intentions (to salvage truth and realism) are different from Rorty's intentions (to abandon truth and realism), but she fails to show how their versions of pragmatism differ as a result.

According to Case, Rorty's revised, ethnocentric endorsement of the reform principle misses the point of Putnam's original criticism. She states:

> Putnam's criticism is no less effective after the adjustment ["seems *to us*"] than it was before. If it is the case that whether a change is a reform is logically independent of whether its outcome *seems* good or bad, then whether a change

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[12] Case, "Rorty and Putnam: Separate and Unequal," *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 33 (1995), p. 170.

> is a reform is logically independent of whether its outcome seems good or bad *to us* or, for that matter, to *anyone*.[13]

But it seems to me that here Case misses Rorty's point! By adjusting his principle of reform to make it more explicitly ethnocentric Rorty is emphasizing the notion that appeals to nonsociological standards for logical independence do not accord with either his or Putnam's pragmatism. In fact, it flies in the face of the second of the five points that summarize their shared pragmatism:

> [We should] accept the position we are fated to occupy in any case, the position of beings who cannot have a view of the world that does not reflect our interests and values, but who are, for all that, committed to regarding some views of the world--and, for that matter, some interests and values--as better than others.[14]

If nature has placed us within a world of our interests and values, then where exactly can we look for the logical independence that Putnam wants here? If our standards of reform are logically independent of whether the outcome of a reform seems good or bad to us, then they must lie outside our world in some kind of absolute Platonic realm. But surely Putnam would reject the notion of Platonic forms as logically independent standards of reform. Such eternal and static ideals embody the kind of absolutist metaphysical talk that he is trying to overcome. Rorty's revised reform principle is quick to point out that anyone who places our standards of reform in some outside realm which is logically independent of our judgements is simply not making sense. After all, they are *our* standards. The problem then is making

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[13] Case, "Rorty and Putnam: Separate and Unequal," *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 33 (1995), p. 173.

[14] Putnam, *Realism With a Human Face*, p. 178.

sense of Putnam's use of the concepts of warrant and logical independence without reference to absolute standards.

What can Putnam mean when he says that 'whether the outcome of a change is good (a reform) or bad (a corruption) is logically independent of whether it seems good or bad'? Also, what can Case possibly mean when she says that 'whether a change is a reform is logically independent of whether its outcome seems good or bad ... to *anyone*'? The only possibility that I can suggest is that Putnam and Case simply mean that anyone can make a mistake about whether a change is a reform or a corruption. Consequently, a majority can be mistaken in its assessment of a minority opposition and, therefore, what a minority says is a reform can conceivably be a reform despite the majority's claim that it is a corruption. This meaning of 'logical independence' makes perfect sense, but it is rather empty as a standard of judgement until it is imbued with normative content. It is true that whether a change is a reform is 'logically independent' of whether its outcome seems good or bad; but sociological standards of justification are still necessary to determine the normative status of that change, that is, to determine whether it is a reform or a corruption. Ultimately, the truth in a minority's claim may be so, but it is not realized and has no force without justification, and for the truth to be justified the majority must sway in the direction of the claim.

This interpretation of Putnam's notion of logically independent standards of reform seems to me to be more coherent with the rest of Putnam's pragmatism. For example, unlike the uncertain importance that Case and Putnam seem to give logical independence, this modest ethnocentric interpretation supports Putnam's statement that: "our norms or standards

of warranted assertibility are historical products; they evolve over time."[15] However, this notion of logical independence fails to express anything more substantial about standards of reform than Rorty's ethnocentric account does.

Both Case and Putnam argue that a standard of reform must be logically independent of the opinion of the majority for it to be *really* justified, but the only plausible interpretation of logically independent standards brings justification back to the opinion of a majority. Do Putnam and Case miss the point of Rorty's ethnocentrism and prematurely dismiss it as relativistic? The following is what I think is happening here.

On the one hand, Rorty is using the concept 'reform' in its naive sense; that is, 'reform' lacks philosophical (metaphysical) weight and simply means what seems better to us. On the other hand, Putnam wants to attach philosophical importance to his concept of reform; that is, in spite of his suggested moratorium on metaphysics and epistemology, he wants to preserve a philosophical concept of reform that will *never* make room for certain beliefs that he considers to be unacceptable. Putnam wants an anti-absolutist pragmatism which has at least one absolute. This he cannot have.

Again it is evident that Putnam does not want to abandon the vocabulary of the tradition and lose the moral comfort that modern foundationalism had to offer (even if it never made sense). Unless Putnam or Case can explain what Putnam means by a standard of reform that is logically independent of what reformers think, then we are left with one of three

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[15] Putnam, *Realism With a Human Face*, p. 21.

possible options. In increasing order of credibility they are: leave the notion of logically independent standard of reform as a contradiction; leave it as a mystery; or attempt to make sense of it. However, as it turns out, the only sense that has been made of logically independent standards of reform thus far is by Rorty and his sociological version of reform. The mystery, on the other hand, deepens when we consider that the first of Putnam's passages listed by Rorty states:

> elements of what we call "language" or "mind" *penetrate so deeply into what we call "reality" that the very project of representing ourselves as being "mappers" of something "language independent" is fatally compromised from the start.*[16]

When observed in the light of this passage, a passage that is crucial to both Putnam's critique of metaphysical realism and his natural realism, it is very difficult to see what he could mean by logically independent standards of reform. Unless he is willing to reveal the mystery, then the only sensible option here is Rorty's.

Another area where Putnam stops short of the mark is his earlier theory of truth as idealized rational acceptability. Rorty takes Putnam to task on this rather vague concept and attempts to make sense of it. However, in response to Rorty's criticism and his assimilation of Putnam's position to his own ethnocentric pragmatism, Putnam rescinds idealized rational acceptability rather than accept what he considers to be a culturally relative version of truth. The next section will present Rorty's interpretation of Putnam's earlier theory of truth and examine why Putnam refuses to accept it.

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[16] Putnam, *Realism With a Human Face*, p. 28.

4.13 IDEALIZED RATIONAL ACCEPTABILITY

Originally, in *Reason, Truth and History* and *Realism With a Human Face*, Putnam presents idealized rational acceptability as a theory of truth that is nonabsolute and, at the same time, nonrelative; but, argues Rorty, this theory of truth is inconsistent with the pragmatism that he and Putnam both share. In an attempt to make sense of idealized rational acceptability Rorty finds that it must either be reduced to ethnocentrism or left as a contradiction; however, we must first review Putnam's attempt at a nonrelative/nonabsolute version of truth.

As I discussed in section 3.2 of the previous chapter, Putnam introduces his earlier idealized rational acceptability as a way to explain truth. On this view truth is attained when epistemic conditions are ideal enough to allow us to make a clear, rational justification for its verification. Putnam initially considers this version of truth to be nonabsolute because the idealization here is based on the cultural practices of a particular conceptual scheme; thus truth cannot outrun the possibility of justification. However, it is the label 'nonrelative' that Putnam has had difficulty justifying here.

Putnam explains that truth for the natural realist is not entirely constructed by the contingent practices of different cultures or forms of life. He says that "In ordinary circumstances, there is usually a *fact of the matter* as to whether the statements people make

are warranted or not."[17] (my italics) And when the reasons we give for uttering warranted statements are justified within ideal epistemic conditions, then these statements are true. However, we must remember that this truth is not absolute because our statements and our reasons for justifying them change as our practices change.

Rorty's puzzlement in "The Relativist Menace" concerns Putnam's use of 'fact of the matter' with regard to warrant. In *Realism With a Human Face* Putnam actually anticipates Rorty's reaction here and states that "Rorty is certain to disagree [with Putnam's use of 'fact of the matter']."[18] Putnam claims that assertions are warranted because there is a 'fact of the matter' which makes them so; but, unfortunately, he does not tell us why he thinks Rorty would object to this claim. And since Putnam doesn't explain why he is certain that Rorty will disagree with 'fact of the matter', then we have little to work with. At least Rorty makes an attempt.

For Rorty warrant is "a sociological matter, to be ascertained by observing the reception of S's statement by her peers."[19] And he explains that if this is what Putnam means by 'fact of the matter,' then he has no disagreement. But Putnam also states that "whether a statement is warranted or not is independent of whether the majority of one's cultural peers

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[17] Putnam, *Realism With a Human Face*, p. 21.

[18] Putnam, *Realism With a Human Face*, p. 21.

[19] Rorty, "Putnam and the Relativist Menace," *The Journal of Philosophy*, 90 (1993), p. 449.

would *say* it is warranted or unwarranted."[20] Thus, we know that an exclusively sociological explanation of warrant is unacceptable for Putnam. But how can warrant be independent of the agreement of one's cultural peers? According to Putnam I am warranted in asserting p because the epistemic conditions under which I assert p are ideal enough for me to justify p. But what warrants me in asserting that the epistemic conditions are in fact ideal? Unless I have recourse to some other nonsociological standard, then I must make an additional assertion, q, to establish which epistemic conditions are the best one's in which to assert p. And so Putnam's notion of truth as idealized rational acceptability is reduced to a regress of warranted assertions.

Rorty therefore attempts to make sense of warrant from a nonsociological perspective. But the problem is that any nonsociological explanation of warrant conflicts with the pragmatism that is summed up in the five of Putnam's passages that Rorty listed earlier. For example, passage (I) states:

> elements of what we call 'language' or 'mind' *penetrate so deeply into what we call "reality" that the very project of representing ourselves as being 'mapper's of something 'language-independent' is fatally compromised from the start.*[21]

From this passage it is clear that Putnam's vague fact of the matter explanation of warrant is certainly not independent of language and cultural opinion. Putnam has argued that metaphysical realism is inconsistent because it fails to account for the contingent structures

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[20] Putnam, *Realism With a Human Face*, p. 21.

[21] Putnam, *Realism With a Human Face*, p. 28.

of our language which are partly shaped through our interests and values. It is therefore puzzling that Putnam would contend that our judgements of warranted assertibility, which are ultimately determined by our interests and values, are both linguistically structured *and* nonsociological.

This brings me to another problem that Jennifer Case has with Rorty's interpretation of Putnam's work, a problem that concerns Rorty's insistence that in the face of the problems with idealized rational acceptability Putnam is 'poised to embrace' ethnocentrism. Case argues that in his attempts to make sense of Putnam's notion of truth as idealized rational acceptability Rorty "begs the question against the possibility of making sense of the notion of idealized rational acceptability *without reference to an ideal community*."[22] However, as Rorty puts it in "The Relativist Menace":

> I cannot see what 'idealized rational acceptability' can mean except "acceptability to an ideal community." Nor can I see how, given that no such community is going to have a God's eye view, this ideal community can be anything more than *us* as we should like to be. Nor can I see what 'us' can mean here except: us educated, sophisticated, tolerant, wet liberals... the sort of people, in short, who both Putnam and I hope, at our best, to be.[23]

Rorty continues and challenges Putnam to either make sense of idealized rational acceptability or to propose another version of an ideal community.

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[22] Case, "Rorty and Putnam: Separate and Unequal," *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 33 (1995), p. 177.

[23] Rorty, "Putnam and the Relativist Menace," *The Journal of Philosophy*, 90 (1993), p. 451.

At this point Case comes to Putnam's aid and charges Rorty with circularity. She states that:

> Rorty's inability to "see any promise" in this alternative is inconsequential....Putnam, for one, carries on as though he does see promise in the alternative Rorty dismisses....But any appeal to visions of promise that Putnam might make would count no more in favor of his understanding of idealized rational acceptability than Rorty's appeal to a lack of vision counts against it.[24]

What Case fails to consider here is that idealized rational acceptability is Putnam's creation, and he has offered no clear explanation of it. Rorty has made an attempt and his explanation is that it means acceptability to an ideal community of wet liberals. In other words Rorty may beg the question in favor of ethnocentrism by not offering justification for the claim that idealized rational acceptability cannot be anything other than acceptability to an ideal community, but Case's charge is inappropriate because no other alternative explanation has been offered, not even by Putnam. Rorty cannot be charged for his inability to provide another explanation.

Ultimately, the problem here - a problem that Putnam himself eventually accepts in *Words and Life* - is that any notion of ideal, or indeed, any notion of rational acceptability, in order to make sense, must be given shape or meaning by something human; that is, something sociological and contingent. The notion of idealized rational acceptability is therefore faced with an ethnocentric explanation or it is void of content. Perhaps Rorty did not think this point needed mentioning. Regardless, the onus here is clearly on Putnam to

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[24] Case, "Rorty and Putnam: Separate and Unequal,", *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 33 (1995), p. 177.

give some nonethnocentric meaning to idealized rational acceptability by explaining how language can make substantive contact with the world, or else he must embrace ethnocentrism and the view that there is no such contact. Unfortunately, Putnam does not revise his idealized rational acceptability and provide us with this missing explanation.

The problems Putnam encounters with his earlier theory of truth are the same problems he encounters when he insists that in order for a change to be a reform it must be judged from a standard that is *logically independent* of whether it seems good or bad - a point that Jennifer Case fails to mention. The 'logical independence of standards of judgements of reform' is equally as vague as idealized rational acceptability. Putnam provides no explanation of these terms and Case adds nothing to his cause.

Unless I am missing someone's point here, Case fails in her defense of Putnam's natural realism against Rorty's ethnocentrism. However, Case does help highlight the central point of departure between Rorty and Putnam. That is, unlike Rorty, Putnam is unwilling to completely abandon a substantive notion of truth. While Putnam's and Rorty's criticisms of contemporary foundationalism are essentially the same, Putnam still insists that there is something worthwhile that remains of philosophy, but he cannot yet explain it. I would suggest that at this point Putnam should reconsider the possibility that Rorty's ethnocentric pragmatism may not be a case of inconsistent relativism after all.

But is it possible that Rorty is misunderstanding Putnam's position and failing to see where Putnam's project is heading? If so, then I fail here as well. Case, however, seems to think that Putnam is on to something, but she makes no attempt at an explanation and seems

content to wait for Putnam to come forward with one. I can commend Putnam for his patience (at times it does seem that Rorty is in a hurry), but this certainly doesn't mean that his project is onto something new which will save philosophy from the perils of postmodernism. I hope it does, but Putnam will need more than mysterious optimism if he is to make sense of natural realism.

4.14 SUMMARY

Rorty's three points of concern with Putnam's natural realism have now been made clear. Firstly, Rorty demonstrates that Putnam's use of modern vocabulary with talk about the nature of human life leads him to contradict the body of his professed pragmatism which supposedly excludes such absolutist concepts. Rorty also shows that Putnam's notion of a nonsociological principle of reform that is in some way logically independent from human interests cannot be reconciled with Putnam's own pragmatism or, more precisely, with his view of the depth of language. And, lastly, Rorty's ethnocentric interpretation of Putnam's notion of truth as idealized rational acceptability is the only complete and substantial presentation of this vague concept. The way Putnam presents idealized rational acceptability in *Realism With a Human Face* is inconsistent with his commitment to a nonabsolute/nonrelative notion of truth. At least Putnam has acknowledged the problem with this theory of truth; however he has simply dropped it without any positive replacement, and therefore his convictions that language does make contact with the world and that there is a problem of truth are lacking philosophical support.

However, to be more charitable to Putnam, perhaps his concepts of the nature of human life, logical independence and idealized rational acceptability do contain components that avoid these inconsistencies. But these components have yet to be clearly explained, and for the time being Rorty's interpretations of them seem the most sensible. In my judgement Rorty is not misunderstanding Putnam; Rorty is merely trying to make sense of a position that is not yet clearly developed. Case even admits that:

> for the time being, there is simply no formulating Putnam's "position." There are better and worse interpretations of what Putnam is up to, however, and Rorty's interpretation is one of the latter.[25]

I find this claim to be entirely unsubstantiated. I concur with Rorty, and since Putnam's attempts to make his case are shrouded in mystery, and Case offers no interpretation of her own, Rorty's interpretation is the only one available. So where are the better interpretations that Case mentions?

What I think is most important about Rorty's interpretation of Putnam's work is that we can now clearly isolate their different intentions. After his critique of metaphysical realism Putnam intends to salvage certain parts of the tradition of philosophy (representation, truth and realism) and incorporate traditional concepts into his pragmatism. Rorty intends to leave these concepts behind with the tradition.

Now that Putnam's intentions have been clearly identified as distinct from Rorty's, it remains to be seen whether these different *intentions* result in a different *theory* of

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[25] Case, "Rorty and Putnam: Separate and Unequal," *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 33 (1995), p. 176.

pragmatism. As I intend to prove in the next section of this chapter, in Putnam's case, his patiently optimistic intentions do not culminate in a coherent pragmatism. What we are left with after Putnam has rested his case is a vague and mysterious position that needs a demystifying interpretation. The unfortunate part here is that the demystification of Putnam's pragmatism reduces his hopeful attempt at salvaging representation, truth and realism to a rejection of these concepts. Unless Putnam, or anyone for that matter, can clarify what he means by the 'nature of human life,' 'logically independent standards of reform,' and the notion that language does sometimes make contact with the world, we can either deem his project a failure or wait in mystified suspense. Rorty has already offered coherent interpretations of these notions, and the remainder of this chapter will determine whether Putnam should reconsider them.

4.2 Part 2: Understanding Putnam's Pragmatism

As we have just seen, both Rorty and Putnam make remarkably similar cases against metaphysical realism. Therefore, it is not surprising that the kinds of pragmatism that they offer in its stead are also very similar. Rorty acknowledges this similarity and often provokes Putnam by referring to Putnam's pragmatism as if it were the same as his ethnocentric pragmatism. Putnam, however, disagrees, claiming that Rorty's pragmatism is an obvious form of self-refuting relativism and that his own pragmatism is not. I will show that, despite Putnam's resistance to Rorty's assimilation of their positions, Rorty's interpretation of Putnam's pragmatism is the only one that makes sense. Since Putnam is the dissenter here we must determine whether his attempts to distance himself from Rorty's version of pragmatism are successful.

Rorty's position is quite clear about the role of philosophy after metaphysical realism, but Putnam, as usual, is not content to abandon representation, truth and realism just yet. He is still attempting to work things out. That is, he refuses to allow metaphysics and epistemology to fall with modern foundationalism, at least not without making attempts to salvage anything useful that might still remain. This sentiment is summed up nicely in the opening sentence to Putnam's Dewey Lectures, delivered at Columbia University in March of 1994:

> 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. Today, we stand near the end of a century in which there have been many new

> insights in philosophy; but at the same time there has been an unprecedented forgetting of the insights of previous centuries and millennia.[26]

The fact that Putnam has not yet professed to have abandoned the traditional vocabulary of modern philosophy means that he has not yet finished a complete analysis of the possibility that these concepts can still have useful roles in the contemporary vocabulary of philosophy. And this is where he differs from Rorty. Putnam remains optimistic that postmodern philosophy does not have to reject everything from the tradition that it is succeeding. Whereas Rorty believes that the consequences of his arguments against metaphysical realism mean leaving traditional philosophical problems behind, Putnam argues that the incoherence of metaphysical realism and traditional philosophical problems does not warrant such a ban on philosophy. Putnam proceeds to redefine words like 'representation', 'truth' and 'realism' in order to re-invigorate and re-establish the old vocabulary with what he considers to be the insights of Wittgenstein's later philosophy. However, as I intend to show, the result to date, regardless of Putnam's intentions, is a version of pragmatism that actually looks and feels like Rorty's.

Thus, the remainder of this chapter will assess Putnam's attempts to preserve the traditional vocabulary of philosophy with a *renewed* philosophy that has been purified of foundationalist metaphysics. This assessment will also consider whether the distance these attempts create between Putnam and Rorty is actually as great as Putnam claims. Firstly, I

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[26] Putnam, "Sense, Nonsense, and the Senses: An Inquiry Into the Powers of the Human Mind," *The Journal of Philosophy*, 91 (1994), p. 445.

will present Putnam's renewed concepts of representation, truth, and realism as they are explained in his more recent work. And, secondly, I will show that Putnam's use of these renewed concepts is quite compatible with Rorty's ethnocentric pragmatism.

My conclusion here is that Putnam fails to distinguish his pragmatism from Rorty's. Putnam's intentions, as I explained in the previous section, are certainly different from Rorty's (Putnam intends to salvage substantial notions of representation, truth and realism whereas Rorty intends to drop them). However, I will now argue that Putnam fails to justify and support his intentions with a coherent theory of pragmatism. If Putnam's pragmatism is to be coherent, then he must end his sympathy for the tradition, reconsider his conviction that there is a problem of truth and, as Rorty argues, embrace ethnocentric pragmatism. This means that Putnam would then be opening himself up to what some of Rorty's critics call relativist consequences. However, I will show that these critics (Putnam included) are mistaken.

4.21 REPRESENTATION

On a number of occasions Putnam has made quite explicit attempts to distinguish his views from those of Rorty. Since I am assimilating their views, I will attend to a recent and thorough attempt of Putnam's to distance himself from Rorty.

In his latest book, *Words and Life*, Putnam, in agreement with John McDowell, argues that Rorty prematurely dismisses the notion of representing minds. He points out that it is the assumption that thoughts are symbols which are independent of what lies *outside* them

that leads to this premature dismissal. Like Rorty, Putnam explains that if thoughts are entirely independent symbols, then any direct correspondence between thought and the world can only be established via some mysterious force of reference. Putnam also endorses Rorty's refusal to appeal to mysterious forces to establish reference, but he disagrees with Rorty's conclusion that we should drop the entire notion of representation. Putnam considers a possibility of representation that he says Rorty overlooks: the possibility that thinking is the manipulation of items that do have some intrinsic relation to what is outside the head. Putnam states:

> We can even agree with Rorty that the idea that there is a genuine problem about "how language hooks on to the world" is one we should get over; but we should not get over it by reviving Bergson's unfortunate idea that, since language is rightly viewed as a product of evolution, our statements and verbalized thoughts should be viewed as simply tools which enable us to survive *as opposed to* correct representations. Rather we should reject the assumption that thinking is manipulating items with no intrinsic relation to what is outside the head.[27]

The rejection of the assumption that thought is independent of the outside world, argues Putnam, makes it possible to have "representation without representations."[28] Without this assumption thinking can be postulated as the manipulation of items that do have some intrinsic relation to what is outside the head, as opposed to symbols which do not have such an intrinsic relation. According to Putnam, the intrinsic relation between objects and thought in representation without representations is that relation fixed by both the grammatical and

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[27] Putnam, *Words and Life*, p. 307.

[28] See Putnam's "Representation", *Words and Life*, pp. 306-308.

cultural practices of the language game and the objects around which the vocabulary and practice are formed. Additionally, the items manipulated here are not symbolic stand-ins for real objects. These items, as the content of our thoughts, are "individuated in part by the sort of environments we inhabit, and therefore...'meanings aren't in the head'"[29] because thoughts are simply "exercises of object-involving abilities." [30] These abilities are nonmysterious, practical abilities that enable us to represent objects, not with object-independent mental symbols, but by incorporating objects into a linguistic system in which meaning is the pragmatic compound of both the objects and our interpretations of them.

On this nonsymbolic model of representation, says Putnam, there can be correct representations.

> Given a definite language in place and a definite scheme of "objects," the relation between "words and objects" is not at all indescribable; but it does not have a single *metaphysically privileged* description any more than the objects do. In sum, we can think of our words and thoughts as having determinate reference to objects (when it is clear what sort of "objects" we are talking about and what vocabulary we are using); but there is no one fixed sense of "reference" involved. Accepting the ubiquity of conceptual relativity does not require us to deny that truth genuinely depends on the behavior of things distant from the speaker, but the nature of the dependence changes as the kinds of language games we invent change.[31]

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[29] Putnam, *Words and Life*, p. 306.

[30] Putnam, *Words and Life*, p. 306.

[31] Putnam, *Words and Life*, p. 309.

This model of representation takes much of the mystery out of representation and reference by doing away with the notion that representations are entirely in the head. This can be accomplished, says Putnam, if we

> distinguish carefully between the activity of "representation" (as something in which we engage) and the idea of a "representation" as an *interface* between ourselves and what we think about and to understand that giving up the idea of representations as interfaces requiring a "semantics" is not the same thing as giving up on the whole idea of representation.[32]

According to Putnam, Rorty's dismissal of representation (and all that goes with this dismissal - truth, realism, etc.) on the grounds that it requires magical powers of reference is premature, for he does not stop to consider this middle ground. But is this middle ground as different from Rorty's own position as Putnam would like?

It seems that, despite Putnam's criticism of Rorty's naturalistic view of language, representation without representations does not contradict the notion that language can be a complicated, evolutionary survival tool. As Putnam states, the representations in his model are not fixed in the metaphysical sense. I think Rorty would have no objection at this point. But Putnam does claim that something is represented in language and that this representation is not an independent mental symbol or meaning; rather, it is a product that is dependent on the interplay of both the world and human convention. Each representation is fixed by the vocabulary we use in describing the world. But what do these representations represent?

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[32] Putnam, "Sense, Nonsense, and the Senses: An Inquiry Into the Powers of the Human Mind," *The Journal of Philosophy*, 91 (1994), p. 505.

That is, what are the objects outside the head that are represented by language? Putnam's opposition to metaphysical realism will not allow him to place these objects outside of language, so by outside the head he cannot mean outside of language.

To return to my original point, it seems that Putnam's theory of representation does not contradict Rorty's Darwinian picture of language. If representation in language operates as Putnam describes it - as an object-involving ability whose only intrinsic relation to the world is one that is fixed through that vocabulary and the conventions of a language game - then it is difficult to see why Putnam doesn't make the further claim that this ability does nothing more than enable us to successfully cope with the world. Are Putnam's representations anything more than the marks and noises that Rorty says comprise language? I think that Rorty would readily accept the notion that Putnam's representations as object-involving abilities are effective survival tools. Putnam insists, however, that these representations are more than just marks and noises because they are sometimes accurate; that is, sometimes these representations are meaningful and accurately represent the world. But the important point to consider here is that both the world and the accuracy of our representations are defined within the parameters of the language game in use. Such accuracy is the same as Rorty's claim to accuracy when he argues that a tolerant, liberal society is the better society. Rorty calls this accuracy of representation ethnocentrism and claims that these are the parameters of accuracy laid down by the vocabulary and convention of his tolerant, liberal, North American language-game.

As far as I can tell the only problem Rorty would have here is that Putnam's use of the term 'representation' could be misleading, for why does Putnam use a metaphysically loaded word that is so closely associated with the foundationalist tradition when we can just drop it and choose other words? But Putnam has given representation a new, nontraditional sense. And with this new sense he means an object-involving ability that does not entail any epistemological split between language and the world, for outside the head does not mean outside the language game. Thus, the epistemology that Putnam is offering is more like a 'meta-epistemology' which says that epistemologies are determined by the semantics of the language-game in which they occur. Seen in this light, Putnam's epistemology is a remarkable formulation of Rorty's ethnocentrism.

Ultimately, the representations in Putnam's model can be nothing more than contextual descriptions of objects, and by objects he means the objects as defined by the language game. I contend that this formulation of representation is not one that Rorty would contest, for it is a nonmirroring, nonmetaphysical form of representation that does nothing more than describe the world as it is seen from within a particular language-game. In other words, representation without representations is nothing like the kind of representation that Rorty resists. It is a completely different picture of representation that happens to be quite similar to the picture that Rorty offers. But, whereas Putnam uses the term 'representation,' Rorty simply drops this term because it suggests the notion of symbols connecting with a language-independent world. Rorty takes pains to avoid the metaphysically loaded vocabulary of the tradition and instead chooses words that distance him from the confusion that he associates

with this vocabulary. Putnam is unsettled by this distance and therefore he prefers to retain the traditional terms. Contrary to Putnam's claim that Rorty overlooks the middle ground of representation without representations, this is exactly the position - but not the vocabulary - that Rorty adopts.

4.22 TRUTH AND RELATIVISM

According to Rorty, pragmatism comes at great philosophical cost, for it means that there is nothing between us and the world; that is, there is no subject/object split, with language as the medium between subject and object. Consequently, any metaphysical inquiry or epistemology that attempts to discover the true relationship between us humans and the world as it is in-itself is unnecessary. Putnam is uncomfortable with this position because he believes it prematurely discards a substantive notion of truth for an entirely relative notion. But Rorty is not doing epistemology, and neither is Putnam in any traditional sense; however, unlike Rorty, Putnam continues to call his own nontraditional project epistemology.

In his earlier attempt to make truth more substantial in *Realism With a Human Face*, Putnam does not completely disagree with Rorty's naturalist description of truth; however, he does insert a set of conditions into the naturalist scheme through which truth gains what he calls a more substantive and nonrelative content. These conditions are the ideal ones contained in truth as idealized rational acceptability. I think Putnam would agree with the naturalist that our evolutionary success is closely linked to our ability to use language; but, for Putnam this ability is not simply a tool whose use is entirely decided by pragmatic

consensus. According to Putnam there is a history or tradition of language use that has determined the ways in which we presently approach the world with language. He states, "one cannot discover laws of nature unless one brings to nature a set of *a priori* prejudices,"[33] and these prejudices come from the tradition which has formed the habits of reasoning we now have.

> And, indeed, the history of science does not support the view that it [the discovery of the laws of nature] was all trial and error, either in the sense of random trial and error or systematic search through all possibilities. Galileo discovered the Law of Inertia by thinking about and modifying fourteenth-century ideas, which themselves were a modification of Aristotle's ideas.... Einstein was working in the general ballpark provided by philosophical speculations about the relativity of motion, themselves centuries older than the evidence, when he produced the special theory of relativity.... There does not seem to be anything common to all the good theories that scientists succeeded in producing except this: each was suggested by some line of thinking that seemed *reasonable*, at least to the scientist who came up with the theory.[34]

Thus, according to Putnam, language and the reason which guides its use are not merely Darwinian survival tools given to us through the evolutionary whims of nature. Reason, for Putnam, is also a product of our history, and, therefore, sometimes what we discover is the way things actually work. Putnam's suggestion is that we "shift our way of thinking to the extent of regarding 'the world' as partly constituted by the representing mind."[35] In this way, even though the inquiry is guided by our lights, we can sometimes get it right because the world is at least partly dependent on our conceptual framework.

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[33] Putnam, *Realism With a Human Face*, p. 160.

[34] Putnam, *Realism With a Human Face*, p. 161.

[35] Putnam, *Realism With a Human Face*, p. 162.

But is Putnam's picture of language and truth actually that different from Rorty's picture? The 'set of a priori prejudices' or 'reason' that Putnam says has developed cumulatively throughout history and with which we must approach the world sounds very much like Rorty's ethnocentric position that we must describe the world frow an *ethnos* or set of ethnocentric prejudices.[36] Putnam calls these prejudices 'a priori' because they are necessary for us to be capable of describing. However, it is only *a* set of prejudices or ethnos that is a priori necessary and not a set of *particular* prejudices. In other words, it is the general set of prejudices itself - and not the particular prejudices - that is a priori. Putnam's use of 'set of apriori prejudices' is inconsistent with the remainder of his pragmatism, but this inconsistency can be avoided if, instead, Putnam uses the more ethnocentric 'apriori set of prejudices.' I contend that the only reasonable interpretation of Putnam's natural realism is one that depicts it as a version of Rorty's pragmatism told in a vocabulary that looks like the vocabulary of traditional philosophy but which simply redefines the meanings of terms such as 'realism', 'truth', 'objectivity', etc. Putnam's natural realism is either inconsistent or vague, and when we supplement it with consistent explanation we have Rorty's story told in a reformulated version of traditional philosophical vocabulary where the only semblance of the tradition is the appearance of terms such as 'truth,' 'representation,' 'realism,' etc. The reformulated meanings of these terms are quite different from those of the philosophical tradition that both Rorty and Putnam criticize.

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[36] See my section 2.5 for a discussion of Rorty's ethnocentrism.

From Putnam's viewpoint, then, Rorty's distance from the tradition has led him into relativism, and from Rorty's viewpoint Putnam is in the same boat, except it isn't relativism. What Putnam is calling relativism here is essentially the same as his own natural realism which he claims is not relativism. My concern here is that when Putnam is faced with the uncertain possibilities of Rorty's nonfoundational approach to philosophy, he slips back into the comfortable foundationalist picture. (This point will receive further explanation in the next chapter). And this slip is most explicit in his conviction that language does make contact with the world through a set of a priori prejudices and that, therefore, truth is a sensible goal of inquiry.

Putnam charges that by asking us to abandon our commitment to the problem of truth Rorty is asking us to be relativists and abandon our natural intuitions about the necessity of truth and the real world. But to interpret Rorty as a relativist is to force him directly into the tradition that he has explicitly abandoned[37]. The usual analytic response to Rorty's refusal to engage the traditional questions in the traditional manner is to cry "Not fair! How can I argue if you won't speak my language?" From there he is either ignored as a hopeless radical, or dismissed as a relativist. The relativist, linguistic idealist interpretation of Rorty's pragmatism is not a charitable one, but it is understandable for those who have trouble with his nonfoundationalist vocabulary.

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[37] See Rorty's "Solidarity or Objectivity" in his *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, pp. 21-34 for Rorty's response to charges of relativism.

It seems that the most reasonable and charitable interpretation of Rorty is one that excludes metaphysical or epistemological issues. That is, when we ask Rorty about the consequences of his pragmatism we had better not be preparing to show him how those consequences lead to absurd and puerile relativist philosophies because the absurdities, says Rorty, are the results of incoherent philosophical questions. There is no *Philosophical* talk of objectivity, truth or realism taken seriously in Rorty's post-philosophical culture.

4.23 REALISM

Must we then abandon our desire to confirm our realist intuitions in Rorty's post-philosophical culture? If by confirming realist intuitions we mean providing correct descriptions of how language hooks onto a language-independent world, then the answer is "Yes." What Rorty wishes us to do is forget such philosophical lines of thinking that lead us to pursue the incoherent questions of metaphysics and epistemology. But abandoning these metaphysical ways of thinking does not mean abandoning our most common and naive realist intuitions about reality. Rather, the real world is the naive and obvious reality or form of life in which our everyday lives take place.

Putnam finds this position very disturbing, for he believes that *philosophical* thinking is a crucial component of human progress and development. Of metaphysics Putnam states: "It has failed not because it was an illegitimate urge--what human pressure could be more worthy of respect than the pressure to *know*?--but because it goes beyond the bounds of any

notion of explanation that we have."[38] Consequently, the sensible course of action, according to Putnam, is to put a moratorium on metaphysical projects. Unlike Rorty's call to abandon metaphysical projects, the moratorium, says Putnam, is:

> the opposite of relativism. Rather than looking with suspicion on the claim that some value judgements are reasonable and some are unreasonable, or some views are true and some false, or some words refer and some do not, I am concerned with bringing us back to precisely these claims, which we do, after all, constantly make in our daily lives.[39]

For Putnam, realizing that our realist intuitions are confirmed through the presence of the obvious reality that we see before us, the reality that we interact with, talk about and, most importantly, the reality that we live, is a step in the right direction.

> Accepting the "manifest image," the *Lebenswelt*, the world as we actually experience it, demands of us who have...been philosophically trained that we both regain our sense of mystery...and our sense of the common (for that some ideas are "unreasonable" is, after all, a *common* fact--it is only the weird notions of "objectivity: and "subjectivity" that we have acquired from Ontology and Epistemology that make us unfit to dwell in the common).[40]

Putnam's recommendation, after 2500 years of failed metaphysics, is not that we abandon metaphysics for good, but that we try and return to the common and naive ways of thinking and talking about the world. And this is precisely what he does with natural realism; he takes the metaphysics out of realism and offers us realism with a naive and common, human face.

However, is Realism With a Human Face not what Rorty means when he speaks of

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[38] Putnam, *Realism With a Human Face*, p. 118.

[39] Putnam, *Realism With a Human Face*, p. 117.

[40] Putnam, *Realism With a Human Face*, p. 118.

a world without bizarre and incoherent philosophical interpretations? I don't think Rorty is asking us to abandon anything more important than Putnam. Both want to stop talking absolutist metaphysics, but Rorty thinks this involves chucking the old vocabulary and leaving philosophy behind. Putnam, however, believes that keeping the old vocabulary and placing a moratorium instead of a ban on metaphysics will salvage philosophy. But how much of our foundationalist philosophical tradition can be salvaged by a temporary return to the naive and common uses of our words? As I will argue later in the next chapter, the common uses of our words are entirely nonfoundational and, therefore, Putnam's moratorium may turn out to be more than just temporary. In fact, it may turn out to be the same as Rorty's recommendations for change. Rorty's suggestions only appear to be more radical because he wants to avoid any possible confusion by fully engaging a new, nonfoundationalist vocabulary.

Both Putnam and Rorty offer the same diagnosis of metaphysics as incoherent and failed, and their recommended therapies are similar as well, despite their continued debates. The question of realism in Rorty's post-philosophical culture is not a philosophical question, but a *naive* one whose answer is as obvious as the need not to ask the question. However, for Putnam, the question of realism can be a philosophical one, where 'philosophical' means the same as 'naive' above. Putnam's natural realism therefore makes the same recommendation in suggesting that we return to the naive uses of our metaphysically loaded words as Rorty makes in suggesting that we stop using metaphysically loaded words and try some new ones.

4.3 CONCLUSION

While Putnam's and Rorty's projects are very similar, the two positions differ in one aspect: they disagree at what appears to be a metaphilosophical level. That is, they disagree about what course of action to take after their criticisms of contemporary philosophy. Rorty claims that his pragmatism calls for a change in our ways of doing philosophy which abandons metaphysics and epistemology as fatally compromised and pragmatically useless areas of inquiry. Putnam argues in a manner close to Rorty that traditional metaphysics and epistemology are indeed fatally compromised, but that we can no more abandon these areas of inquiry than we can abandon our reason. Philosophy, for Putnam, must continue with metaphysical and epistemological pursuits, but it must be careful to avoid traditional pitfalls. Putnam's difficulty, however, is finding a sensible nonnaturalist account of reason.

Putnam claims that his position has positive philosophical content, for, although he dissolves the fact/value distinction and denies the correspondence of our beliefs and statements to mind-independent objects, he still wishes to maintain a theory of truth and, therefore, an epistemology. But notice what kind of unique epistemology this is. Traditionally, truth could only be attributed to those beliefs and statements that stand in an appropriate and accurate relation to mind-independent objects. Putnam, nontraditionally, brings truth back inside the human realm of convention and language and maintains a connection between words and objects in the process. However, the disclaimer is that this connection cannot be foundational.

While I am very sympathetic to Rorty's desire to avoid the confusion associated with traditional philosophical problems, I am also very supportive of Putnam's attempts to make sense of those traditional problems. If it is true that today we stand on the edge of a postmodern era, but with one philosophical foot still very firmly planted in our modern tradition, then it would seem that the most historically understandable (not necessarily tenable) philosophical position to take here would be one that attempts to fuse the modern tradition with the postmodern tradition-to-be. Natural realism makes such an attempt.

Some philosophers (Rorty, Foucault, Derrida) have shed their modernism, leaped the modern/postmodern chasm and have landed, somewhat shakily, on the postmodern side. Others have simply refused to make the leap for a variety of reasons. But Hilary Putnam has carefully attempted to straddle the chasm which has opened up before our tradition. I therefore see his pragmatism partly as a patient and commendable struggle to make sense of contemporary metaphilosophical issues. However, in the next chapter I suggest that Putnam's patience may simply be unnecessary stagnation in the comfort of foundationalist philosophy. Perhaps it is time he completed the move to a truly nonfoundational philosophy and avoided the certain confusion that an ambiguous position such as his natural realism generates. Consequently, the next and final chapter will argue that the confused criticism directed at nonfoundationalist philosophy by contemporary critics reflects the deep struggle we have in leaving traditional foundationalist philosophy behind. Putnam's relativist charge against Rorty's pragmatism is one clear example that this struggle is deeper than we think for even

professed nonfoundationalists like Putnam fall back on foundationalist pictures when faced with Rorty's recommendations.

CHAPTER 5

COPING WITHOUT FOUNDATIONALISM

The new pragmatist recommendations for contemporary philosophy are significant for they come at the end of a century that began with serious philosophical re-examination. By exposing the shortcomings of modern foundationalist metaphysics, Putnam and Rorty are playing crucial roles in revamping our philosophical approach. As a deep and final inquiry into the absolute nature of reality, metaphysics has traditionally held a privileged position throughout the history of philosophy. Metaphysical realism is the most appropriate example of foundationalist thinking, and, as I explained in chapter one, it consists of three theses: real objects exist; real objects exist independently of experience; and we can know these real objects through a final vocabulary in which our words directly correspond to these objects. The past fifty years of philosophy raises new concerns about the integrity of these three presuppositions. Putnam and Rorty recognize the historical relevance of these concerns, and their recommended changes are worth considering.

In the spirit of Putnam's and Rorty's criticism of metaphysical realism, I too contend that if philosophy is to make sense in the next century, then indeed it must first be rid of incoherent foundationalism. However, in the light of their criticisms presented in chapters two and three, I see no benefit in repeating the reasons why metaphysics is incoherent. It will suffice to say that, for the same convincing reasons Rorty and Putnam offer, I can see no way to make sense of metaphysical realism. However, I do feel it necessary to explain why some

contemporary philosophers still assume that foundationalist thinking is necessary and why they proceed to redefine it in spite of its fundamental incoherence. I contend that the time these philosophers spend redefining confused concepts - like representation, truth and reference - could be better spent practicing a coherent, nonfoundationalist language. Therefore, this final chapter will first present what I consider to be a likely reason for our current reluctance to embrace nonfoundationalism, and then it will suggest a way of getting beyond it.

The first section of this chapter will show that even though we recognize the incoherence of metaphysics, some philosophers still have difficulty overcoming foundationalism because they inappropriately tie it to our most ordinary beliefs about the world. I will then disassociate our ordinary talk about the world from foundationalism in order to show that a nonfoundationalist language, such as the one Rorty employs, is both coherent and relevant to contemporary society.

5.1 THE FRUSTRATION OF NONFOUNDATIONALISM

5.11 JUSTIFYING ORDINARY LANGUAGE

I first read Rorty's *Philosophy and The Mirror of Nature* about six years ago, and ever since I've been struggling to come to grips with what I thought was a serious concern with his new pragmatism: if there is no common reality (in the traditional, metaphysical sense) that underlies the array of different languages that describe our world, then what is it that we are describing? and what is language? To put it another way, how does one philosophize about reality without using a foundationalist language? Both Rorty's persuasive anti-foundationalist

narratives and Putnam's arguments against metaphysical realism left me without a coherent language to justify my ordinary belief that everyone on our planet and beyond shares the same universe. After *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* I could no longer make sense of representationalist epistemology and correspondence theories of truth, and, at times I feel compelled to abandon theories of representation, truth and reference. But in spite of this compulsion there are times when Rorty's nonfoundationalist pragmatism seems to entail absurd relativist consequences, and I become wary of abandoning traditional methods. Considering Rorty's rocky reception within the North American philosophical tradition, it is clear that many others share my reservations as well.

I suggest that the reason for much of the current reluctance to embrace nonfoundationalism is not that these philosophers are convinced that foundationalism is coherent because, as with any metaphilosophical position, there is plenty of room for skepticism and debate. Rather, I hold that our frustration about Rorty's approach is due to our philosophical tendency to attach foundational weight to ordinary beliefs such as 'everyone on our planet and beyond shares the same reality,' beliefs that only appear to be absolute. I say 'appear' because, as I will show in the later half of this chapter, such ordinary beliefs are more like ethnocentric expressions of the prejudices inherent in a form of life. But the problem I see is that today's metaphysical realists and those of us who struggle to leave foundationalism are still gripped by the belief that absolute justification is necessary to justify our ordinary and intuitive behavior. Thus at times we have difficulty rejecting

foundationalism because we fear our most fundamental and natural attitudes towards our world must go with it.

I consider philosophy to be a context or justification for our ordinary activities and intuitive behavior. Rorty seems to take a similar view. As Rorty explains it, the attempts of enlightenment philosophy to separate science from theology first resulted in the separation of philosophy from both science and religion.[1] When Descartes invented the knowing subject, says Rorty, he turned philosophy into a theory of knowledge and thereby distinguished it from ordinary intellectual activities. Philosophy then emerged as a separate discipline, an epistemology that provided absolute justification for ordinary activities in the form of theories of truth, perception, reference, etc.

But the need for absolute justification appeared long before Cartesian dualism turned philosophy into epistemology. Plato's theory of forms, as it appears in the *Republic*, is a complicated metaphysics created to justify or ground Greek culture in absolute certainty. Plato thought it necessary to distinguish between appearance and reality,[2] and this subsequently facilitated the justification of ordinary beliefs in something extraordinary, where reality is the extraordinary something. Whereas Descartes aimed to ground common beliefs by finding their cause in an immaterial mentalistic world, Plato grounded common beliefs in

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[1] See Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. p. 131.

[2] See Plato's *Meno* and *Phaedo* where the theory of forms originate and the dualism of appearance and reality is formed.

an immaterial world of eternal, unchanging forms. Both systems are foundational, and both assume that our common beliefs and practices require absolute justification.

Putnam agrees that most philosophers believe philosophy acts in the interests of our ordinary activities. Of contemporary analytic philosophy he writes:

> most analytic philosopher[s] nowadays consider themselves to be providing something like (or at least "continuous with") a scientific explanation of the success of ordinary ways of thinking and talking.[3]

In fact, he argues in *Realism With a Human Face* that we should *renew* philosophy by returning to ordinary, naive language. Putnam's solution is quite different from the one that Descartes and Plato offer because Putnam has openly rejected the God's-Eye View that these philosophers attempt to reach. However, Putnam's reluctance to go all the way with Rorty indicates that, for him, a nonfoundationalist language is somehow incomplete. I attribute this hesitation to the belief that our ordinary language is foundational.

Putnam's discomfort with a truly nonfoundationalist language is quite evident in *Realism With a Human Face*. Here he accuses Rorty of taking philosophy to be the pedestal upon which culture rests and then berates him for thinking philosophy can dictate a change in our natural intuitions. Putnam writes that for Rorty:

> The failure of our philosophical "foundations" is a failure of the whole culture, and accepting that we were wrong in wanting or thinking we could have a foundation requires us to be *philosophical revisionists*. By this I mean that, for Rorty or Foucault or Derrida,

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[3] Putnam, *Renewing Philosophy*, p. 140.

> the failure of foundationalism makes a difference to how we are allowed to talk in ordinary life.[4]

But Putnam misinterprets Rorty. Rorty is puzzled over this philosophical revisionist accusation and his response is, simply, "I think Putnam is just wrong about what I say."[5] Rorty is not asking that we alter our ordinary activities on philosophy's authority; rather, he is asking that philosophy change on his ethnocentric authority.

> The pragmatist, dominated by the desire for solidarity, can only be criticized for taking his own community *too* seriously. He can only be criticized for ethnocentrism, not for relativism.[6]

I contend that Putnam's misinterpretation, as well as his reluctance to go all the way with Rorty, lies in thinking that embracing a truly nonfoundational language means changing the ways we explain things in ordinary life. In other words, I think Putnam retains some traces of foundationalism, for he would not take Rorty's position to be a change in our ordinary ways of talking if he thought our ordinary ways of talking were nonfoundational.

It is true that Rorty calls for a change in the uses of our words, but these changes are recommended only to metaphysical realists and other foundationalist philosophers who use words quite differently than we do in everyday language. Since Putnam is calling for a return to our common uses of terms such as 'truth,' it is difficult to see why he then considers there to be a philosophical problem with truth. Here we see that Putnam's shaky conviction that

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[4] Putnam, *Realism With a Human Face*, p. 20.

[5] Rorty, "Putnam and the Relativst Menace," *The Journal of Philosophy*, 90 (1994), p. 445.

[6] Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, p. 30.

language does make contact with the outside world is causing his natural realism serious problems because if language can make contact with the world, then we need an epistemology and a theory of truth to explain how it does this. But Putnam is unwilling to accept an *ethnocentric* explanation of how language is connected with the world, and we have yet to see a coherent theory of how this contact is possible in the way Putnam intends it.

5.12 FOUNDATIONALISM AND THE RELATIVIST MENACE

Putnam's repeated characterization of Rorty as a relativist is additional evidence of Putnam's foundationalist tendencies. Putnam shows that relativism is inconsistent because it is the converse of inconsistent foundationalism. He then claims that Rorty's pragmatism is simply the converse of foundationalism and is therefore relativist. Thus, for Putnam, Rorty's position is inconsistent because it is "simultaneously a misdescription of the notions we actually have and a self-refuting attempt to both have and deny an 'absolute perspective.'"[7] However, Putnam has previously argued that an absolute perspective is an inconsistent and untenable View from Nowhere because such perspectives cannot be achieved. Does Putnam really consider Rorty's pragmatism to be an answer to a senseless question? But why would he consider Rorty's pragmatism to be an answer to the absolutist question when Rorty has spent the better part of his career trying to convince philosophers to drop these very kinds of questions? In the case of metaphysical realists on the other side of the absolute/relative coin,

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[7] Putnam, *Realism With a Human Face*, p. 26.

Putnam tries to show them that the question their metaphysics is meant to answer is meaningless and that, therefore, their answers are also meaningless. However, Putnam makes no attempt to show how Rorty misunderstands the same question because Putnam should be well aware that Rorty is not intending to answer that question.

In light of Putnam's middle-of-the-road tendency to walk the line between debates such as the realism/antirealism debate (what Rorty calls 'paradox mongering'), as well as his apparent discomfort with nonfoundationalist language, I believe that Putnam's relativist charge is an indication that he is slipping back into some kind of foundationalism. Rorty has a similar complaint about relativist charges in *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, which was written before Putnam's latest relativist interpretation of Rorty's pragmatism. Rorty writes: "The realist is, once again, projecting his own habits of thought upon the pragmatist when he charges him with relativism."[8] It is worth noting that implicit in Rorty's use of the phrase, 'habits of thought,' is the notion that our metaphysical intuitions are the results of a long history of foundationalist philosophy. His frustration with continued relativist charges is agitated by the difficulty contemporary philosophers have breaking the deep habits generated by this history.

Why does Putnam unfairly charge Rorty with relativism? I contend that Putnam accepts the general sense of Rorty's pragmatism but then he slips back into foundationalism

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[8] Putnam, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, p. 30.

by charging Rorty with relativism. Putnam speculates that Rorty's pragmatism is a consequence of his disappointed reaction to the impossibility of metaphysics.

> But why is Rorty so bothered by the lack of a *guarantee* that our words represent things outside themselves? Evidently, Rorty's craving for such a guarantee is so strong that, finding the guarantee to be "impossible," he feels forced to conclude that our words do not represent anything. It is at this point in Rorty's position that one detects the trace of a disappointed metaphysical realist impulse.[9]

Perhaps Rorty is disappointed, but I don't think his disappointment has made him blind to his own criticism of metaphysical realism. I will therefore explain why I think Putnam's characterization of Rorty's pragmatism is an indication that Putnam is slipping back into the foundationalist picture.

As I have been arguing, foundationalist philosophy has been too closely tied to our common beliefs about our world, and now we have problems reconciling a nonfoundationalist language with this philosophy. Putnam's hesitation to break fully with foundationalism is detectable in his ambiguous natural realism (that work still in progress) and obvious in his relativist charges against Rorty. But I contend that it is Putnam's conviction that ordinary language is in some way foundational that leads to these relativist charges. As I mentioned, Putnam cleverly argues that relativism is a View from Nowhere because it inherits the inconsistency inherent in the absolutist question. He then proceeds to demonstrate the inconsistencies and absurdities associated with the loss of reference, truth and so on. But these responses ultimately beg the question for they are phrased in the very foundationalist

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[9] Putnam, *Words and Life*, p. 299.

vocabulary that Rorty rejects as senseless. It is concepts like truth, reference and even, as Putnam himself shows, relativism, that Rorty deems to be incoherent. This is why he argues that a nonfoundationalist language is the better choice. Unless Putnam and relativist critics can make these concepts coherent, then Rorty's nonfoundationalism is in no danger of being a relativistic View from Nowhere. Rorty's ethnocentrism is as clearly a view from somewhere as views get. I therefore contend that in the face of Rorty's position Putnam has an unfortunate tendency to fall back on some kind of foundationalism.

The charge of relativism, in my opinion, is a serious case of a tendency towards foundationalism, and most of Rorty's critics see his pragmatism as some form of relativism.[10] Thus, I think many of Rorty's critics exhibit this tendency. I think this is what's going on. Ordinarily, we believe that our different descriptions of the world describe the same reality; but we don't ordinarily question this belief. However, the critics who charge Rorty with relativism consider that ordinary language needs absolute justification, and since foundationalism tries to justify such common belief in the given, its failure means there are many different realities or that there is no common reality. They ultimately find this consequence both philosophically and ordinarily inconsistent. But the philosophical inconsistency lies in the inherent inconsistencies of the foundationalist language in which these critics phrase their criticism. And since, ordinarily, the question of whether or not our

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[10] See Jennifer Case, for example, in her article, "Rorty and Putnam: Separate and Unequal," *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 33 (1995) pp. 169-184. Case argues that relativism is implied in Rorty's ethnocentric pragmatism, but this criticism is a clear case of the foundationalist tendencies I am describing.

different descriptions describe the same reality doesn't arise, there are no inconsistencies in Rorty's nonfoundationalist language.

Ultimately, it is the assumption - still held by many philosophers - that ordinary ways of talking about reality need foundationalist justification that warrants these charges of relativism and encourages tolerance of an impossible metaphysical language. Because of this philosophical assumption, critics who cry 'relativism' are both philosophically and ordinarily uneasy about nonfoundationalism. In other words, because Rorty's pragmatism doesn't look right, they see no point in trying it on. But unless we make an attempt to distance ourselves from a metaphysical vocabulary by *playing* with other vocabularies, a nonfoundationalist philosophy will never begin to make sense. That is, if metaphysical realists and other foundationalists refuse to jump into the unfamiliar, nonfoundationalist water, they will continue to recoil from its cold surface with unwarranted charges of relativism.

An unfortunate result of this discomfort is that many of Rorty's critics, and others who struggle with the foundationalist urge, often miss the crucial possibility that maybe our ordinary belief that everyone shares the same reality is not an endorsement of a metaphysical vocabulary. That is, the discomfort that some philosophers suffer, because of the assumption that a metaphysical vocabulary is necessary to justify ordinary language, inappropriately dismisses possibilities like Rorty's ethnocentric pragmatism, possibilities that take language, ordinary and philosophical, to be nonfoundational and in no need of absolute justification. In the remainder of this chapter I will explore this underappreciated possibility and suggest a way of overcoming the discomfort we feel as we forget foundationalism. I think this can

be accomplished or at least facilitated if philosophers retract the metaphysical import that they have inappropriately brought to ordinary language.

5.2 FORGETTING FOUNDATIONALISM

In this final chapter I have argued that the philosophical reluctance to embrace nonfoundationalism originates from the philosophical assumption that ordinary language requires absolute justification. On this assumption foundationalism is invoked by philosophers who think it necessary to establish absolute justification for our naive attitudes and ordinary beliefs about reality. But we have already seen in chapters two and three that a metaphysical vocabulary, as we currently 'understand' it, will not achieve the kind of absolute certainty that metaphysical realists covet. We have also seen in those chapters that in a modest nonfoundationalist language there is no coherent reason to covet such aspirations. In what remains of this thesis I will contest the foundationalist conviction that ordinary language requires absolute justification. I contend that once we have a clear ethnocentric picture of ordinary beliefs, beliefs such as 'everyone shares one common reality', then maybe we will feel less kinship with our foundationalist assumptions. The hopeful result is a philosophical community that is less reluctant to embrace nonfoundationalist language.

My first concern with advocating the use of such language is with the possibility of slipping back into foundationalism. For example, the question "Could ordinary language be more appropriately described in a nonfoundational language?" often causes problems. That is, I have found that when others hear me respond to this question with an admittedly

reluctant "Yes," I am immediately asked to provide and *justify* a nonfoundationalist description of language. This is my response. The biologists and linguists of my linguistic community have convinced me (for now) that language is very complex behavior, a useful extension of our bodies. That is, like a long arm, or better yet, a longer club, we use language to our advantage. Those members of the species who lack linguistic behavior will be at a disadvantage and may not survive nature's selection process. Therefore language allows us to reach out and touch places that we could not otherwise touch; this is usually - and, in fact, has been - beneficial. My problem, however, arises when I am asked to justify this nonfoundationalist description.

My justification consists of the bits of evolutionary biology and linguistics that I've learned, and I usually accompany this justification by adding that this naturalist theory of language is but one story, one among many explanations of language; it just happens that it's the one that I and people like me find most convincing. However, for many of my *philosophical* companions this justification doesn't cut it, and I'm asked to justify my use of evolutionary biology. But at this point I simply explain that of all the theories and stories that I've heard about our acquisition and use of language, the naturalist theory makes the most sense to me. I might also spend some time explaining why I think other explanations make less sense to me, but this response hardly suffices, and my philosophical interlocutor is usually discontent with my appeal to a *preference* for a particular explanation. In other words, for my interlocutor, appeals to personal preference, that is, appeals to what 'makes the most sense

to me,' are insufficient justification. But, if absolute justification is unavailable, then what more can I say? Is there any sensible reason for further justification?

When I exclaim that the naturalist view of language 'makes the most sense to me,' I am providing all the justification I have available. That is, the statement, 'what makes the most sense to me,' expresses a very powerful justification of my belief in the naturalist description of language because it expresses my *form of life;* it is a way of calling up one's entire belief system and the language in which these beliefs are expressed. To completely explain 'what makes more sense to me' would require an exhaustive description of one's entire web of beliefs. Some explanations make more sense than other explanations, and making more sense simply means that certain explanations cohere, or fit better among an earlier, established set of beliefs. Justification stops here because there is no *sense* in further justification; one's web of beliefs must, so to speak, be presupposed.

The kind of justification just described is not unlike Donald Davidson's view that beliefs can only be justified by other beliefs. Davidson argues that reference (that which foundationalists hold responsible for fixing the meaning and justifying the use of our words) is not a relation that can be described from outside the particular language or theory in which the reference is made.[11] Thus the foundationalist notion that justification must come from reference relations that are independent of the language in use is unwarranted. Rorty summarizes this quite nicely:

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[12] See Davidson's "The Inscrutability of Reference", *Inquiries Into Truth and Interpretation*, pp. 227-241.

> If we have causal relations (like that between the opening of the door and the acquisition of a belief) holding between the World and the Self, as well as relations of justification ("being a reason for") internal to the Self's network of beliefs and desires, we do not need any further relations to explain how the Self gets in touch with World, and conversely.[12]

The tendency to interpret this attack on extralinguistic reference as an annihilation of the obvious world that we ordinarily take for granted exemplifies the confusion caused by foundationalist thinking. This confusion is the running together of our ordinary attempts to justify our beliefs to those who share our world and the philosophical desire to explain how these beliefs are justified on a deeper, more foundational, level. Such justification, according to the foundationalist, will explain our ordinary tendency to believe, naively, in one shared reality, that is, to take the real world for granted. But the the explanation of the causes of our beliefs goes no deeper than the causes themselves. "For, although there are causes of the acquisition of beliefs, and reasons for the retention or change of beliefs, there are no causes for the *truth* of beliefs."[13] The familiar mistake of foundationalists, however, is to conclude from this lack of an extralinguistic explanation that there are no causes whatsoever and therefore our common world is lost. But this is an unnecessary reaction. It is comparable to the reaction of those who charged the later Wittgenstein with espousing a behaviourism that seemed to empty the notion of a mental event of its real content. Wittgenstein's words of comfort for these critics apply to disappointed foundationalists as well. Wittgenstein writes:

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[13] Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, p. 120.

[14] Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, p. 121.

> It [a mental event] is not a *something*, but not a *nothing* either! The conclusion was only that a nothing would serve just as well as a something about which nothing could be said. We have only rejected the grammar which tries to force itself on us here.[14]

In the same way that nonfoundationalists do not dispute the presence of what common sense says is reality, Wittgenstein does not disput the presence of mental events.

Thus it is only my more philosophical companions who are unsatisfied with my ethnocentric justification of a naturalist description of language. In *ordinary* circumstances ethnocentric justification is quite sufficient. There will always be room for ordinary debate about ethnocentric justification, but these debates take place within the ethnos and are usually about the implications of the belief in question for the coherence of the ethnos. For example, ordinarily, someone may argue that my naturalist view of language excludes important spiritual considerations in life. This ordinary language user therefore challenges me to make my naturalist belief cohere with my web of belief or form of life. If spiritualism is very compelling in my form of life, then I am forced either to show how naturalism is compatible with spiritualism or show why spiritualism makes less sense to me and therefore change my form of life by reweaving the new naturalism into it and the old spiritualism out of it. Whereas ordinary justification requires one to account for the content and coherence of one's particular beliefs, philosophical justification, that is, justification with a tendency towards foundationalism, requires one to account for ordinary justification as a whole. However, as I pointed out, ordinary justification of a particular belief consists of the claim that this belief

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[15] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, p. 102, paragraph 304.

'makes more sense than other beliefs.' This justification is a way of backing one belief with a coherent system of other beliefs that constitute a form of life or ethnos.

Ordinary beliefs, such as 'everyone shares one common reality,' are natural, ethnocentric expressions of a form of life. And forms of life, because they exhibit the dynamic movement of history and human interests, are intertwined with the changing web of beliefs that comprise them. Thus, our ethnocentric expressions exhibit our forms of life and endeavor to appeal to others with whom we wish to share our form of life. Ultimately, we need not be foundationalists to assert our most basic, ordinary beliefs. But, as the recent controversies in contemporary philosophy indicate, it isn't always easy to separate our philosophical intuitions from ordinary practices. These controversies persist because it is often difficult to distinguish between the ethnocentric propaganda that we use to persuade others of our form of life and the tendentious foundationalism that philosophers have invented to transform this propaganda into Truth. This difficulty delays our engagement with a nonfoundationalist language and impedes our acceptance of the new pragmatist recommendations.

5.3 CONCLUSION

It seems to me that the most contentious issue at this stage in our philosophical development is the philosophical belief that foundationalism is necessary to justify ordinary language. I have already explained that this assumption originated out of the Platonic desire to ground ordinary practices of ancient Greek culture in absolute certainty. Plato, for

example, understandably saw the need to ground Greek culture in absolute certainty and the metaphysics explicated in *The Republic* was a means to achieve such certainty. Rorty has also explained that Descartes reaffirmed the foundationalist assumption by placing new epistemological emphases on the need for absolute justification with respect to knowledge and truth. Descartes also understandably saw the need to justify belief in God and the immortality of the soul so that the religious, political climate might be more receptive to a threatening Galilean science.

However, the historical locations of Plato, Descartes and most philosophers up until the twentieth century did not permit them fully to appreciate the incoherence inherent in metaphysical projects, and for this reason I think that the foundationalist assumption is more understandably held in these past traditions. But I think the past century of increasingly convincing antifoundationalist argument has thickened the foundationalist air and made it more difficult to breathe. As these arguments compel re-examination of traditional assumptions the foundationalist position is becoming clearer. But as foundationalism becomes clearer it is clear that it is confused, and the confusion is quite deep. The struggle we currently have rejecting the tradition reflects a philosophical community shifting between two very different philosophical pictures. We are undoubtedly in transition and the degree to which we are gripped by the foundationalist picture will determine the duration of this transition.

This thesis and particularly the last chapter are meant to help loosen the grip of our current foundationalist assumptions. As I've indicated, the incoherence of foundationalism

has been recognized by many contemporary philosophers, but there remains a strong tendency for these same philosophers to lapse into foundationalist criticism of the new nonfoundationalist language. I have also shown that this tendency exposes the foundationalist assumption that ordinary language is a naive way of talking about a reality that is independent of observers. Allow me to summarize briefly my assessment of the problem with this foundationalist resistance to nonfoundationalism.

Neither Putnam nor any critic of Rorty's nonfoundationalist language offers what I consider to be legitimate reasons for clinging to foundationalist vocabulary. It is true that many critics demonstrate the inconsistencies and absurdities associated with the loss of reference, truth and so on, but these responses ultimately beg the question of foundationalism. That is, the foundationalist charge of relativism can only apply to theories espoused in a foundationalist vocabulary because this charge is ultimately a foundationalist concept. Therefore, relativist criticism employs the very language that Rorty rejects as senseless; and it does so on the basis that foundationalism acts in the basic interests of ordinary language.

My intentions have been to show that ordinary language neither implies nor implores foundationalist justification and, therefore, there's no reason, ordinary or philosophical, to retain foundationalism, especially since it has already been shown to be incoherent. But this is no worry to those who truly believe that ordinary language is nonfoundational. The problem is that not many of us are entirely convinced that nonfoundationalism is a safe alternative. I do think we need to be cautious about our decision to abandon foundationalism, and this note of caution is voiced in Putnam's careful criticism of foundationalist metaphysics.

His replacement, natural realism, may not be the clearest philosophical picture, but perhaps its obscurity is hiding something more profound. However, it seems to me that, for now, this possible profundity is simply unfortunate backsliding into incoherent foundationalism. Nevertheless, we need positions like Putnam's to prevent reckless disregard for the significance of our tradition. I have argued that nonfoundationalism does not erase our world and that the absurdity in thinking that it does is indicative of the absurdities generated by foundationalism itself. I understand that regardless of the reasons for rejecting foundationalism, embracing sensible alternatives is still a difficult task that requires substantial effort; but this does not excuse us from trying. The foundationalist picture has been with us for a very long time, and forgetting it will require a great deal of frustration as we practice to become more at home in a nonfoundationalist language.

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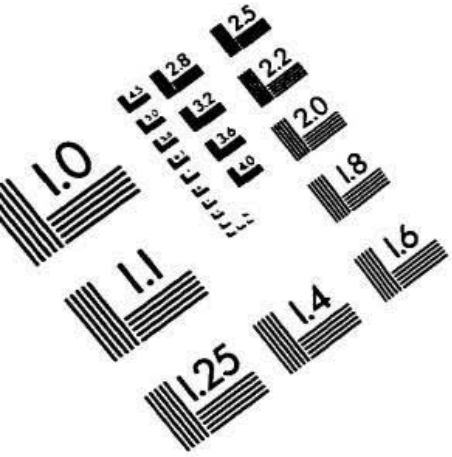

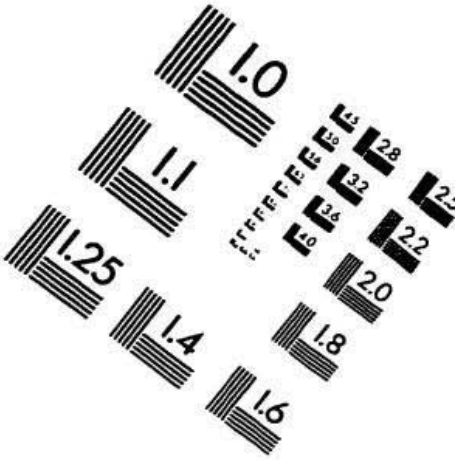

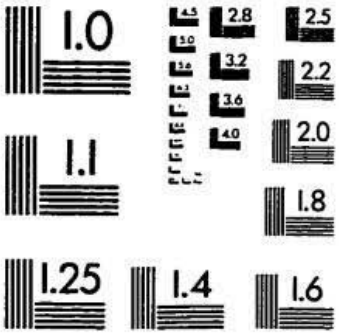

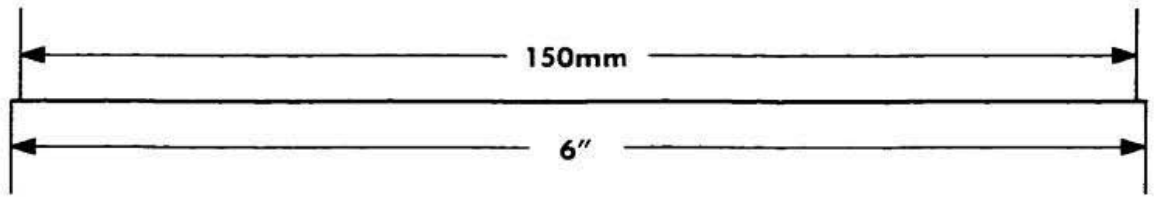

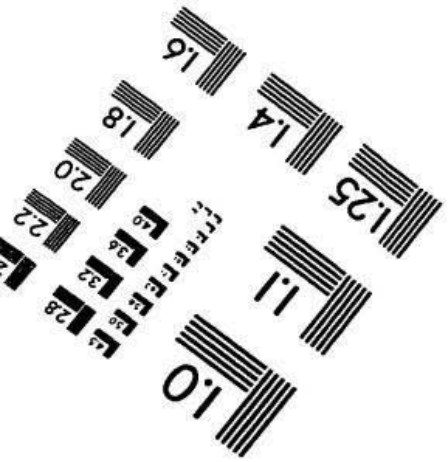

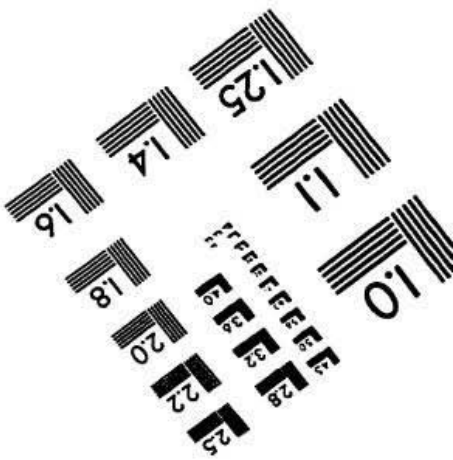

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