

# Putnam's Moral Realism

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## 1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to clarify Hilary Putnam's moral realism. Although Putnam has been arguing for a kind of moral realism for many years, his position is not paid the attention it deserves. In fact, his stance is almost wholly neglected among contemporary metaethics theorists.<sup>1</sup> I believe the reason for this neglect is that Putnam's arguments for his moral realism are scattered among his many writings, making it difficult to see the overall connections of his arguments. Here I shall illustrate his moral realism and show that his position is indeed a feasible form of moral realism, or at least a very interesting one.

Because Putnam's position is neglected, the primary goal of this paper is not to evaluate it but to clarify it. To this end, I will first map out Putnam's philosophy, which is certainly not restricted to the domain of metaethics, and will then investigate the relationship between his overall philosophy and his moral realism, trying to pinpoint where this realism is located on

1. Timmons (1991) is an excellent exception.

the map. The reason for this approach is that Putnam's moral realism is one aspect of his attempt to try to offer a vision of science, common sense, language, and so on. If we merely see his arguments with the level of interest metaethics theorists tend to have and ask only such questions as, "Is he an internalist or an externalist?" then we cannot grasp the significance of his moral realism.

## 2. Putnam and Contemporary Metaethics

As mentioned above, if we merely see Putnam's arguments with the narrow interest of a typical metaethics theorist, we cannot grasp the significance of his moral realism. However, I believe it is at least helpful to give a rough characterization of his position in the contemporary metaethics scene. Accordingly this section briefly explains the relationship between his position and those of other contemporary philosophers in the domain of metaethics.

The term *realists* here refers to philosophers such as Moore and Cornell Realists who think that moral statements describe supernatural or natural reality, and also to those such as John McDowell and Putnam, who believe we have normative abilities that allow us to judge the truth of moral statements. Conversely, the term *anti-realists* is used to describe error theorists and various non-cognitivists who deny that reality plays a part in deciding the truth values of moral statements. The debate about realism and anti-realism in metaethics is best seen as a controversy regarding the objectivity of moral statements. Philosophers involved in this debate have different views on the proper explanation of why our moral statements *seem* to us to be objectively true or false. Realists contend that we should take the apparent objectivity of moral statements at face value. Such statements seem to be objectively true because they are objective in a perfect sense. The objectivity of moral statements is not inferior to that of scientific statements in any important sense. Anti-realists argue instead that the apparent objectivity of moral statements needs explanation of a kind different from that required for scientific statements. Error theorists claim that moral statements seem to be objectively true because we are forced to make errors to think so, while non-cognitivists typically maintain that it is because we project

our conative sentiments on the world. For example, Simon Blackburn, one of the most prominent non-cognitivists, says, “[a realist] holds that moral features of things are the parents of our sentiments, whereas the Humean [an anti-realist] holds that they are their children” (Blackburn 1981, p.165).

Note that anti-realists do not necessarily reject the objectivity of moral statements. They are not relativists. For example, Blackburn claims that because we have a second-order attitude towards the moral attitudes, the truth values of moral statements are not decided only by the particular attitudes of a particular person or group of people at a particular time (Blackburn 1981, p.179). That is, we have a negative attitude toward the moral view that if we all had a positive attitude to murder, murder would be morally good. We can therefore say that the truth of the statement that murder is wrong is objective. The point is not that anti-realists deny the objectivity of moral statements but that they require an explanation of objectivity different from the explanation such as correspondence to reality, through which the objectivity of scientific statements is supposed to be explained.

Now let me try to elucidate the notion of objectivity: The truth (or falsehood) of a statement is objective if it becomes true (or false) not just by the fact that a particular person or group of people at a particular time believes it to be true or justified. While this explication may not be completely clear, I believe it is clear enough to allow a continuation of my argument in this paper.

### **3. Framework-making Arguments**

Putnam has given many arguments for his realism, which are now well known and much discussed in contemporary analytical philosophy. By way of example, his reasoning includes model-theoretic arguments, meaning externalism, denial of the fact/value dichotomy, emphasis on the importance of pragmatism, and so on. It seems that these are now common grounds among students of analytical philosophy. However, it also seems that many or even most of his readers fails to understand the precise aim of these arguments or the connection each of them has with Putnam’s overall vision. To many, his precise position is not clear. In fact, relativists sometimes attack him as a realist and realists attack him as a relativist or an anti-

realist.

I will try to clarify his precise position by classifying his arguments into three groups, each of which I refer to as (i) framework-making arguments, (ii) diagnosis and therapy arguments, and (iii) the seeing of practices. This section explains the first one.

I refer to the first group of Putnam's arguments as framework-making arguments because their purpose is to establish a framework for the issue of realism, or what he calls the "antinomy of realism" (Putnam 1999, p.12), by characterizing his realism and showing its feasibility. In his framework-making arguments, Putnam offers alternatives that a person might take in the controversy about realism, and investigates the tenability of each one. In doing this, he outlines us two kinds of arguments: one consists of positive views characterizing and defending the alternative he prefers, and the other involves negative views criticizing the other alternatives.

These negative arguments include criticism of metaphysical realism, logical positivism, relativism, deflationism and, after the 1990s, Dummettian anti-realism and his own internal realism. To explain all these criticisms in detail here would be impossible and perhaps unnecessary because the arguments are well-known to contemporary analytical philosophers. Here, I simply give a brief explanation of the arguments against metaphysical realism, logical positivism and relativism.<sup>2</sup>

Metaphysical realism is characterized by Putnam as a position that accepts the following: (1) the world consists of a fixed totality of mind-independent objects [and properties]; (2) there is exactly one true and complete description of the way the world is; and (3) truth involves some sort of correspondence (Putnam 1990a, pp.30ff).<sup>3</sup> When he criticizes metaphysical realism, his main target is the type that endorses scientism or materialism.<sup>4</sup> The basic idea of metaphysical realism says that the world is independent of us and recognition-transcendent, and that the truth of scientific theory consists in the recognition-transcendent correspondence

2. For Putnam's criticism against deflationism and Dummett, see Putnam (1999) part 1, Lecture 3, and for his former position, see Putnam (1999) part 1, Lecture 1 and p.183 note 41.

3. For Putnam's recent comments on the assumptions of metaphysical realism, see Putnam (1999) pp.5-9.

4. See Putnam (1983)a p.208.

between the theory and the world. We normally think that scientific theory is objectively true; according to metaphysical realists, this objectivity is created by the correspondence between the theory and the world.

Putnam's assertion against metaphysical realism includes the arguments such as model-theoretic argument and conceptual relativity argument, which are rather technical. However, the essence of his criticism of it is very simple: the notion of the recognition-transcendent correspondence that is independent of the mind does not make sense. The central point is that words and mental representations are just one entity of the correspondence relation, and they cannot fix their own correspondence with the world. As there may be many correspondence relations, we cannot maintain the notion of recognition-transcendent correspondence.

Putnam's attack on logical positivism focuses on the logical positivists' conception of rationality. Rudolf Carnap — a frequent target of Putnam — tried to give a formalization of the language of science.<sup>5</sup> Carnap's formal language contains deductive and inductive logical relations, meaning that all relations between experience and theoretical statements are formalized as logical consequences. His goal was the complete formalization of scientific rationality, which would allow us to answer every question almost automatically by reference to the formal language scheme.<sup>6</sup> Against this, Putnam argues contrarily, with the spirit of Quine's holism but not with that of naturalism, that it is impossible to completely formalize rationality because the formal language scheme itself is subject to rational evaluation.<sup>7</sup>

The point Putnam makes against relativism, which disregards the notions of rationality and objectivity, is that it is self-refuting. Now consider the incommensurability thesis, which asserts that people in different cultures, different "paradigms," hold different conceptual schemes, so

5. According to Carnap, the purpose of philosophy is to make language clear and through it to remove fruitless debates and misunderstandings. See Carnap (1963) pp.44-45.

6. Thomas Ricketts argues that Carnap's program was more limited, at least in his *Logical Syntax of Language* (Ricketts 1994). According to him, for Carnap, clarification and objectivity are not necessarily connected with formalization. However, Putnam disagrees with Ricketts, saying, "Ricketts's Carnap... is not the Carnap I knew and loved (Putnam 1994b, p.281)." Here I will not try to settle the matter, as the aim of this paper is not to present what Carnap thought but to understand Putnam's criticism of Carnap.

7. One of Putnam's important criticisms of Carnap concerns inductive logic. See Putnam (1963). Also see Putnam (1981) pp.105-113, for his general criticism of logical positivism.

cannot understand each other. Against this thesis, Putnam argues with Davidson and Quine that if the things other people say cannot in principle be understood, then we do not have a reason to think of their utterance as a language or conceptual scheme. Putnam also points out, mentioning Wittgenstein's private language argument, that relativists cannot make the distinction between actually being right and simply thinking one is right. Therefore, Putnam argues, relativists see *thinking* as nothing "beyond producing images and sentence-analogues in the mind in the hope of having a subjective feeling of being right" (Putnam 1981, p.124). According to Putnam, therefore, relativism cannot allow either others or oneself to be held in the role of thinker, so it cannot "assert" relativism itself.

In light of these negative arguments against metaphysical realism, logical positivism and relativism, it is easy to understand Putnam's positive arguments, which (i) characterize his own alternative and (ii) aim to show that it is viable. The argument by which he tries to characterize his alternative is based on the notions of rationality and objectivity, which are different from those of metaphysical realism, logical positivism and relativism. First, by rejecting metaphysical realism, Putnam casts aside its notion of objectivity, which is independent of our epistemic rationality. Metaphysical realists adhere to the notion of objectivity that consists of a recognition-transcendent correspondence of the mind and the world, i.e., a correspondence independent of our epistemic rationality. Putnam, on the other hand, rejects this view and suggests that our notion of objectivity should be internally related to the notion of rationality. That is, according to Putnam, we can ascertain the objective truth or falsehood of the statements using our rational abilities. Second, by rejecting logical positivism, Putnam also rejects its conception of rationality. As outlined above, Carnap's conception of rationality is based on a formal language scheme that algorithmically determines the truth values of statements. Putnam rejects this conception and asserts that our rationality is informal. Finally, he rejects relativism, which asserts that our rationality is relative to our cultural scheme rather than being objective. In light of these points, we can see that Putnam's own alternative — his realism — can be characterized as a position asserting that *we have rational judgmental ability, or rather abilities, that are informal, but with these abilities we can objectively and non-relativistically*

*ascertain the truth or falsehood of the statements.*

The arguments which aim to show the feasibility of Putnam's own realism concern the notion of value. According to him, our rational judgments sometimes involve the use of values. In his arguments against the fact/value dichotomy, especially his "companions in guilt" argument, he contends that we can objectively judge the correctness of value statements.<sup>8</sup> He claims that we cannot address science without an objective recognition of epistemic values such as the simplicity and coherence of theory, and therefore we cannot say that judgments on the correctness of moral values or aesthetic values are not objective solely because they are judgments about values. Through this argument, Putnam tries to show that value judgments can be objective and that his realism is viable in many areas, including those of morality and aesthetics as well as science.

The following three points about framework-making arguments should be noted:

(i) Let us see what each position says on the issue of moral realism. Logical positivism and relativism are moral anti-realism. The both deny either a) that moral statements are objectively true in the same sense as scientific statements are so, or b) the objectivity of moral statements. A metaphysical realist can be either a moral realist or an anti-realist. If such a person says that there is moral reality (either natural or super-natural) that is recognition-transcendent, then he or she is a moral realist. If, however, a person says that there is no such thing as moral reality and explains the function of moral statements, for example, as expressing our sentiments, then he or she is a moral anti-realist.

(ii) One might wonder whether Putnam's argument against the fact/value dichotomy (which I classified as the positive argument to show the possibility of his realism) must be classified as a negative argument because its aim is to deny the conception of fact, on which metaphysical realism or logical positivism depends. This question is in a sense valid. I believe Putnam's arguments against the fact/value dichotomy can be separated into two parts. One is the argument to show metaphysical realists' and logical positivists' conception of fact, such as something described by an

8. See Putnam (1981) pp.127-137.

ideal scientific theory or verified by experience.<sup>9</sup> This kind of argument is certainly negative. However, on the basis of these arguments, Putnam contends, especially “companions in guilt” argument that judgments, which are conventionally said to be about values, can be objective. According to this argument, judgments about epistemic values such as simplicity or the coherence of a theory must be objective, so judgments about other kinds of values may be objective. (Note that this argument depends on the assumption that metaphysical realism’s conception of fact and objectivity is wrong. If we can say with metaphysical realists that epistemic value is not objective and is irrelevant to the truth of fact statements, the argument does not hold.) This argument tries to show that Putnam’s realism is feasible in areas considered to be about values, and this positive goal is the main point of the argument against the fact/value dichotomy.

(iii) It is important to note that framework-making arguments do not establish that Putnam’s moral realism is *correct* per se; they show only that it is *feasible*. Consider, for example, the “companions in guilt” argument. It says only that judgments about values other than epistemic values *can be* objective; it does not say that moral or aesthetic values *are* in fact objective.

#### 4. Diagnosis and Therapy Arguments

The second group of Putnam’s contentions consists of diagnosis and therapy arguments. Since taking on more of a Wittgensteinian approach from the 1990s onward, he has made more arguments that diagnose the sources behind the antinomy of realism and provide therapy to them.

The main source of “the antinomy of realism” is, according to Putnam, the assumption that we need “an interface between the knower and everything ‘outside’” (Putnam 1999, p.18). He claims philosophers assume that, in order for mental representations and words to be about the world, we need an interface that connects them. This interface is considered to be “sense-data” or “qualia”, which materialists claim to be identical to the brain processes. However, according to Putnam, this interface is not internally related to the world it is about, and as a result, philosophers cannot

9. See Putnam (2002)b, chapter 1 and 8.



explain why connections between “Mind and World” are possible.<sup>10</sup>

As a therapy to this antinomy of realism, Putnam claims that we should throw away the interface model concerning minds and words and get back to the common-sense idea that we directly perceive and talk about the world. To this end, he argues, in a Wittgensteinian way that talk of such an interface does not make sense.

I believe it would be a digression to evaluate these Wittgensteinian arguments in detail here because they are not directly related to the issue of moral realism. I will therefore simply comment on one point about Putnam’s meaning externalism here. It is well known that he advocated meaning externalism to support a kind of metaphysical realism in the 1970s. Since rejecting metaphysical realism, he has continued to accept meaning externalism. However, the purpose of the argument for this externalism is now different: it does not support any position. Especially since the 1990s, it has become an argument for denying pure mental states that serves as an interface between mind and world.

## 5. The seeing of Practices

I call the final group of arguments “the seeing of practices.” As outlined above, framework-making arguments do not establish the correctness of Putnam’s moral realism; they merely show its feasibility. Putnam thinks, in the spirit of Wittgenstein and American Pragmatists, that we must see our various practices in order to say something about the objectivity and rationality of moral statements. According to him, to assert that our moral statements are objective or subjective on metaphysical grounds without seeing the details of our moral practices is empty. Commenting on Wittgenstein’s rejection of metaphysical realists’ conception of truth, he says:

Instead of looking for a freestanding property of “truth,” in the hope that when we find what that property is we will know what the *nature* of propositions is and what the *nature* of their correspondence to real-

10. “Mind and World” is of course the title of McDowell’s well-known book. Putnam is influenced by McDowell’s argument.

ity is, Wittgenstein wants us to *look* at ethical language (and not the kind of ethical language that only occurs in philosophy), to look at religious language, to look at mathematical language, which is itself, he says, a “motley,” to look at imprecise language that manages to be perfectly “clear” in context (“Stand roughly here”), to look at talk that is sometimes nonsensical and to look at the very same sentences when they function perfectly well (talk of “what is going on in so-and-so’s head” is an example of this), to look and *see* the differences in the way these sorts of discourse function, all the very different ways in which they relate to reality (Putnam 1999, p.68).

“Looking at ethical language” here, of course, is not just looking at sentences, marks and noises. It involves looking at the practice in which the language is used. That is, Putnam, along with Wittgenstein, recommends we try to see the details of our various practices. According to Putnam, one of the lessons of Wittgenstein’s argument about rule-following is that we cannot describe the use of words without understanding the practice in which they are used.<sup>11</sup> He says:

...consider the following description of the use of “electricity is flowing through the wire”: “One uses a voltmeter, etc., to tell if electricity is flowing through the wire. A voltmeter is constructed in such and such a way —(here, imagine an explanation of how a voltmeter ‘works’ — *not* in observation language). In using a voltmeter it is important to be sure that no electromagnetic fields be present which might affect the accuracy of its readings...”

Knowing the “use” of “current is flowing through the wire” is knowing things like *this*. Of course, much else is presupposed; in fact, acculturation in a technical society, with all that that entails. *Understanding a language game is sharing a form of life*. And forms of life cannot be described in a fixed positivistic meta-language, whether they be scientific, religious, or of a kind that we do not have in Western

11. The same interpretation of Wittgenstein’s argument on rule-following is provided by Winch (2008) and McDowell (1981).

industrial societies today (Putnam 1995, p.48).

To see, say, a moral statement outside the practice in which it is uttered is empty. To see a practice is to understand it from the inside, and by understanding which kinds of statements are objective in the practice, we understand the objectivity of moral statements. Here, one might say that such understanding tells us only which kinds of statements *are said to be* objective; it does not tell us whether moral statements *really* are objective. However, Putnam rejects such a distinction. According to metaphysical realists' conception of objectivity, a statement is objectively true if it corresponds to reality. Logical positivists also claim that a statement is objectively true if it is verified by experience through the formal language scheme of science. Putnam rejects both conceptions of objectivity. Both metaphysical realism and logical positivism presuppose that the conception of objectivity is common to all human practices. They do not see the details of, say, our moral practices. Instead of the conceptions of objectivity that are supposed to be common in all our practices, Putnam emphasizes the importance of understanding the objectivity that is woven into and inseparable from a particular human practice.

In this way, Putnam stresses the importance of seeing the details of a particular practice. Then, how does he see the moral practice? It seems to me that he does not say much about this. Here, I will simply touch upon three points that strikes me from Putnam's writings. The first involves his claim that our moral practice has variety. He asserts, referring to John Dewey (whom he admires on this point), "we neither have nor require single 'criterion' for judging warranted assertability in ethics any more than we do in any area. In particular, the authority of philosophy is not the authority of a field vested with knowledge of such a criterion or set of criteria" (Putnam 2002a, p.21). Secondly, citing Levinas, Kant and Aristotle, Putnam claims that morality concerns the suffering and well-being of everyone, and thus that it is important for a person to be morally good that he or she cares about the suffering and well-being of others as well as himself or herself.<sup>12</sup> Thirdly, again citing Dewey, he claims that morality concerns

12. See Putnam (2004) pp.22-28.

solutions to practical problems. Here, the term “practical problems” means “‘problems we encounter in practice’, specific and situated problems, as opposed to abstract, idealized, or theoretical problems” (Putnam 2004, p.28). So, according to Putnam, an objective moral solution is not a solution that is applicable to every possible situation. What we want is not such a solution but one that is “more reasonable” and suited to the situation.<sup>13</sup>

Two comments on the seeing of practices:

(i) Although Putnam emphasizes the importance of seeing a particular practice, he also claims that there are some common characteristics among our various practices:

We have learned from, Deweyans insist, that inquiry which is to make full use of human intelligence has to have certain characteristics, including the characteristics which I have elsewhere referred to by the phrase ‘the democratization of inquiry’. For example, intelligent inquiry obeys the principles of what Habermasians call ‘discourse ethics’; it does not ‘block the paths of inquiry’ by preventing the raising of questions and objections, or obstructing the formulation of hypotheses and criticism of hypotheses of others. At its best it avoids relations of hierarchy and dependence; it insists upon experimentation where possible, and observation and close analysis of observation where experiment is not possible. By appeal to these and kindred standards, we can often *tell* the views are irresponsibly defended in ethics as well as in science (Putnam 2002a, p.21).

As we can see from this citation, Putnam thinks that objectivity is achieved through rational inquiry. According to him, although our rational judgmental abilities are not formal or automatically applicable to every situation, we can use these abilities to find good solutions, or even better, reasonable ones in our various practices.

(ii) Until now, one might suspect that Putnam is not a moral realist. As outlined above the point of moral anti-realism is that it requires an explanation of the objectivity of moral statements that is different from the one

13. See Putnam (1990)b, for more on this point.

given for the objectivity of scientific statements, and it might now seem that Putnam gives an explanation of moral objectivity different from that of scientific objectivity.

It is true that Putnam sees moral objectivity and scientific objectivity as being different. He does not claim that the science of morality could exist. However, he still is a moral realist, as he does not require any special explanation of moral objectivity, such as the one that claims objectivity of moral statements consists in the projection of our sentiments, etc. It is true that a typical moral statement is not a *description* of reality but it is also true that the explaining the objectivity of scientific statements by saying that they are descriptions of reality is empty unless we see the details of “the description.” In science, many different things (such as electron, virus, black hole and so on) are described.<sup>14</sup> In the sense that there is variety in our practices, scientific objectivity and moral objectivity are indeed different. However, in the sense that we achieve objectivity through rational inquiry, there is no difference between the two.

## 6. The Regulative Ideal

So far, I have illustrated Putnam’s philosophy with particular focus on his moral realism: I have drawn a map of his philosophy, as it were. I think it is now clear that his moral realism is a position worth paying attention to. However, it seems to me that there is at least one point lacking in his approach that needs to be compensated for and that Putnam himself does not discuss enough. In this section, I try to make up for this shortcoming and render his moral realism more acceptable.

Now, one may object that reason is not important in our moral practices, contrary to what Putnam thinks. If we really look at the details of our practices, the objection continues, we will surely find many conflicts that cannot be resolved even after rational inquiry. Putnam seems to assume that we can know objectively that some act is right (or wrong) by such inquiry. However, in many cases, when groups of people hold different opinions on a controversial moral issue, it is not possible to find a rational way that

14. See Putnam (2004) pp.98-99.

establishes agreement among them. Therefore, according to the objection, Putnam's reliance on reason has no ground in our actual moral practices.

There are two things Putnam can say to answer this objection. I will explain the first one in this section and the second in the next. The first begins with his adherence to fallibilism, which he regards as an important insight of American Pragmatism.<sup>15</sup> His fallibilism is closely related to his claim that moral practices are rational inquiry: If we find enough reason, according to him, we should revise our prior moral judgments.

The objection to Putnam outlined above is tantamount to a claim that it is unnecessary to ask for reason and accept fallibilism in order to continue our moral practices. According to the objection, even when someone changes their view on a moral issue, we need not think of this change of mind as a correction or a corruption. Rather, we might see it simply as a conversion from one opinion to another because we cannot find reason to decide which opinion is right. We neither need nor have the notion of correction and corruption that Putnam's fallibilism requires.

Note that this objection rejects the objectivity of morality. It denies that we can objectively decide which one among conflicting alternatives is right. To see this, let us consider how a metaphysical realist, who thinks that a moral statement is objectively true when it corresponds to the fact in the supernatural moral reality, would respond to the objection. He or she might say, "Maybe we can't find any reason to settle a moral controversy, but this just means that our epistemic abilities are limited. It doesn't mean that there is no fact of matter about which of the conflicting opinions is right. An opinion is morally right when it corresponds to fact in supernatural moral reality." Such a metaphysical realist thus accepts the objectivity of morality by referring to the notion of recognition-transcendent correspondence of a statement and supernatural reality. He or she even accepts fallibilism, believing even our best moral opinion is false if it does not correspond to reality.

Putnam has rejected the metaphysical realist's notion of recognition-transcendent correspondence. Then, how is it possible for him to accept

15. Putnam says that important theses of pragmatism include (i) anti-skepticism, (ii) fallibilism, (iii) the rejection of the fact/value dichotomy and (iv) the emphasis on the primacy of practice. See Putnam (1994) a, p.152.

the objectivity of morality and fallibilism (which implies that our moral opinions could be *false*, and not just that we may *change* them) without endorsing metaphysical realism's conception of objectivity?

His answer in *Reason, Truth and History* was that our judgments can be corrected by judgments about the truth of statements in an idealized epistemic condition.<sup>16</sup> However, this answer is unsatisfactory, as Putnam himself later acknowledged.<sup>17</sup> Can we know that we are in an idealized epistemic condition? If not, then the truth of statements can be recognition-transcendent in principle. If we can, then how? If we can know without argument, then we must assume mysterious intellectual intuition. If we can know with argument, then again the question of whether the argument is made under an idealized epistemic condition arises, which leads to infinite regress. Accordingly, the problem for Putnam is to make the notion of correction intelligible without endorsing metaphysical realism.

What Putnam needs here is the Kantian notion of the regulative ideal.<sup>18</sup> That is, we correct our moral judgments because *our ideal about what a good life or society is requires us to look for better, more reasonable and more comprehensive judgments*. Mastering moral practices implies an understanding of this ideal about what a good life or society is — that is, the ideal of human moral flourishing. Putnam's adherence to the objectivity of morality and fallibilism is supported by this ideal although he does not say so explicitly. It is required by our commitment to the ideal when we are engaged in moral practices rather than being brought in by the notion of transcendent correspondence between a statement and reality.

Imagine people who *always* stick to their previous judgments, refuse to reflect on them and say "This is the way we do it." Or again, imagine people who *always* see changes in their own or other people's judgments simply as shifts and cannot understand the question of whether they are

16. See Putnam (1981) pp.55-56. However, even here, Putnam says that he is "not trying to give a formal definition of truth, but an informal elucidation of the notion" (Putnam 1981, p.56).

17. See Putnam (1999) pp.17-18.

18. Below I apply Kant's use of the notion of the regulative ideal in the first antinomy to morality. It may be said that Putnam's position must be called "transcendental idealism" rather than "realism." I don't object to call it "transcendental idealism." However, my aim in this paper is to show the importance of his position in contemporary philosophical scene, rather than argue it in Kantian context. Therefore, I continue to call it "realism."

corrections or corruptions. Such people could not be said to have mastered moral practices. Suppose that a culture in which many people believe that women ought to stay at home begins to change, and some of its members, say young people, come to believe that it is good for women to have capabilities equal to those of men. If one cannot understand the question of whether the change is a correction or a corruption, then he or she cannot be said to understand the situation as it relates to morality. Both groups may think that the question of which opinion is right is one of taste. Young people think that old people are old-fashioned, while old people think that young people are odd. Both say "We don't like old/young people's way of living but don't care about it because this is the way we do it and that is the way they do it." If they regard the question this way, they cannot be said to see it as a moral question. This is because a moral judgment aims to achieve a good life for all people, and therefore if it is said that the good life of some is impaired by the present way of living, it is a real challenge; we cannot simply leave it and say, "This is the way we do it" or "That is the way they do it."

In this way, mastering moral practices implies a mastery of the regulative ideal, according to which we should revise our prior judgments when there is reason to doubt them, such as if they are blind to people's sufferings or they fail to secure a good life for people. Unless we understand a judgment as something that constitutes part of our practice of aiming to create a good life or society, we cannot describe it as a *moral* one. If we simply want to find a way to *get along in*, or to *cope with* the situations that are presented to us, then we can merely rely on our prior judgments and say, "This is the way we do it." However, such judgments are not *moral judgments*. As Kant emphasized, moral judgments must be universal. In order to describe a judgment as moral, it must be understood as part of the search for a good life or society. When it is understood as such, we must not say, "This is the way we do it"; rather, we must be ready to withdraw prior judgments, as there might be a situation in which it is desirable to do so in order to achieve our goals, no matter how watertight these previous views might have looked.

So, my first answer to the objection that there seems to be many conflicts that cannot be resolved by rational inquiry is this: A moral conflict



must be understood as a real conflict, not as a conflict of tastes. A real conflict is something for which we must investigate reason to find a solution; we should not leave it if we think of it as concerning morality, as our ideal about morality requires us to look for better judgments when there is reason to do so.

Three comments on this section:

(i) The regulative ideal is not material but formal. Understanding it does not mean that a good society or a good life is really available. It is a formal requirement that says, “Don’t satisfy with the present conditions. Look for a better judgment when necessary, because you might not notice someone else’s suffering or other problems.”

(ii) The regulative ideal also applies to theoretical practice such as science, in which we also accept fallibilism because the regulative ideal of human cognitive flourishing requires us to revise accepted judgments when necessary.<sup>19</sup>

(iii) We cannot always establish agreement by rational inquiry. We may feel that the gap between conflicting groups is huge even after such inquiry. However, I do not say (and neither does Putnam) that we can always reach the correct judgment by rational inquiry. As seen above, finding the answer to the moral questions is finding the solutions to practical problems. If misunderstanding and prejudice are removed and the difference between oneself and others can be understood by rational inquiry, then it will become easier to find solutions.

## 7. Reason, and Life and Death

The second answer Putnam might give to the objection that reason does not seem to play a part in our moral practices is this: a morally good or acceptable judgment is one that is intrinsically connected to the fact that it is the result of one’s rational inquiry. In this section, I will explore this answer and thereby show one way in which Putnam’s position is related to problems concerning life and death.

19. In Putnam (1981) pp.134, he talks about our ideal. However, he hasn’t developed this theme further.

In response to the objection outlined above, I assert that if we examine the details of our moral practices, we will notice that reason is considered important. Of course, we cannot expect that a final solution applicable to every possible problem is to be found. However, if we recall Putnam's contention that seeing the details of particular practices is important, we understand that such a final solution is not something we need. What is necessary for a particular judgment to be morally good or acceptable is *not* for it to be based on reason that applies to everyone in every possible situation. Rather, the judgment must be connected to rational inquiry that is suitable and sufficient for that particular situation. In this modest sense of "rational inquiry", we understand a morally good or acceptable judgment as something intrinsically connected to the fact that it is the result of one's rational inquiry. Accordingly it is intrinsically connected with reason.

This is especially the case when the judgment is required in a serious situation, such as one concerning a matter of life and death. In a trivial case, various moral principles might provide the same answer. However, in a serious situation, they say different things as well as how to apply them is unclear. Therefore unless we investigate reasons carefully, we are morally light-minded. To scold a junior high-school girl who steals something minor from a supermarket, perhaps we don't need a detailed investigation of the reason for our action. However, if we see a serious problem concerning life and death, we cannot say that reason does not play a part.

As an example, let us consider a high-school girl who accidentally becomes pregnant and is considering an abortion. Suppose that she was careful not to become pregnant and used contraception whenever she had sex, but unfortunately got pregnant. Now she is thinking about an abortion because it would be difficult for her to be a mother and to take responsibility both financially and mentally. Now let us ask what it is that makes her personal decision on an abortion right or wrong, or rather, acceptable or unacceptable. I say "her personal decision" because I would like to confine my argument to this particular case of abortion rather than to talk about the legal issues involved. If we concentrate our interest on the question of the rightness or wrongness of this personal decision, then a mere the general consideration of the status of fetuses and women's rights, which are discussed much in the debate about abortion, does not give us a solution.

If the high-school girl says, “I have the right to have an abortion; there is no problem here!” soon after she discovers her pregnancy and is troubled little, then we might think she takes matters too lightly and feel her decision to have an abortion is not right. Alternatively, if someone says to her, “The fetus has a claim to live, so you shouldn’t have an abortion anyhow!” and doesn’t listen to the details of her story, then we might also think that he or she makes judgments with little thought and does not understand her problem.

In serious situations like this one, what makes the subject’s judgment morally right or wrong (or acceptable or unacceptable) is that it is the result of one’s struggle, which must include rational inquiry. In this sense, our moral judgments are intrinsically connected to reason.

Here, one may object and argue that if this is all Putnam can say, then it is trivial. All I have said so far is that it is important to think carefully in serious situations, and this is something that almost anyone facing the actual problems would do. So, according to the objection, Putnam’s moral realism cannot provide any new suggestions or solutions to those facing problems concerning life and death.

In response to this objection, I admit that Putnam’s moral realism cannot give new solutions to the problems concerning life and death by itself. It merely recommends that we look at the details of actual situations. However, it’s wrong to say that Putnam’s moral realism is trivial. At least one of the tasks of philosophy is to understand our lives as human beings. That is, the philosopher’s task is making sense of humanity,<sup>20</sup> and Putnam’s realism helps us understand people’s practice of thinking carefully when involved in serious situations concerning life and death as an intelligible moral practice rather than simply as a way of getting along in the situation.

By way of comparison, let us consider what a typical consequentialist would say about our high-school girl’s decision. Here, I refer to consequentialism as a philosophical theory that says what makes an action right is that it promotes the relevant values.<sup>21</sup> Thus, according to a consequential-

20. “Making sense of humanity” is the title of Bernard Williams’ paper (Williams 1991). There he claims that cultural and historical understanding is important for that, which point I cannot argue in this paper.

21. This position is defended in Pettit (1997).

ist, the girl's rational inquiry or struggle is no more than a heuristic device to identify what promotes the values relevant to the situation; it has no intrinsic relationship with the rightness or the acceptability of the action. Even if the consequentialist adopts the two-level theory of R. M. Hare<sup>22</sup> and emphasizes the importance of critical investigation, then according to him or her, what makes the girl's action acceptable or not is whether it promotes the relevant values rather than whether it is the result of her rational inquiry. General philosophical theories such as consequentialism fail to give a correct understanding of our moral situations, as they aim only to identify the general characteristics of right actions and general solutions to moral problems.<sup>23</sup>

I do not mean to imply that general consideration is of no help; I simply refute the idea that it is all we need. I would like to oppose the idea that the task of ethics or moral philosophy is merely to find, through general consideration, a principle that automatically decides whether an abortion is right or wrong. We cannot ever find such a principle. The fact is that we now accept various principles that more or less contradict each other, and none of them has supremacy. Therefore, the important point is to seek reasonable solutions for particular situations, through general consideration and consultation with principles whenever necessary. The girl who is troubled with pregnancy and considering an abortion should think about matters such as the status of the fetus, women's rights, her own financial circumstances and those of society, her age and that of her partner as well as her desire and partner's wish and should then make a decision accordingly. Unless she engages in such consideration and investigates her reasons for whatever decision she makes, then her decision is light-minded and morally problematic even if it corresponds to some general moral principle. To understand the *moral* problem that she is facing and evaluate her decision, we must investigate the reasons behind it — her struggle in relation to the problem.

Putnam's moral realism helps us to see these aspects of human life, especially those related to serious problems. If "solution" of them is the phi-

22. See Hare (1981). Hare argues, in a paper on abortion, that philosophers' chief task is to construct a theory that teaches us how to think on an abortion. See Hare (1975).

23. For example, Pettit defend the idea that people share the presumptions that fix the reference of the term "right." See Pettit (1997) pp.103-106, 117.

losopher's purpose, then Putnam's position may be of little help. However, it does help us to understand humanity, which is an important task of philosophy.

## 8. Conclusion

Putnam's moral realism is an interesting option in contemporary debates. In this paper, I have attempted to clarify the interrelationship that binds his various arguments and his overall picture, and have investigated the implications of his insight into the problems concerning life and death. I could not evaluate each of his arguments in detail, so I must admit that they will invite many criticisms, which neither Putnam himself nor I have not answered. However, once we understand his real position, then clearly it is an interesting task to investigate his moral realism.

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