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Book Review

Ethics Without Ontology is the second collection of essays by Hilary Putnam dealing at least partially with issues in ethics to be published in the last three years, following *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy and Other Essays* (2002). The essays in *Ethics Without Ontology* are divided into two sections, each section corresponding to a series of lectures given by Putnam in 2001. The first four lectures, presented as the Hermes Lectures at the University of Perugia, contain the titular argument. The final two lectures, Putnam's Spinoza Lectures at the University of Amsterdam, are tied together under the heading "Enlightenment and Pragmatism." This review is divided into three sections: in the first, I will explore the contents of this collection of lectures by first providing some background on Putnam's project and then by briefly summarizing each of the lectures, along the way examining, in some detail, several of Putnam's more challenging or troubling claims. In the second, I will raise several criticisms of his project. In the final section, I will consider some of the virtues of the book and offer a conclusion.

§1. Hilary Putnam's lengthy philosophical career has been wide-ranging in terms of both his areas of interest and his philosophical and metaphilosophical approaches and arguments. He is probably most widely known for his work in the philosophy of mind, the philosophy of language, logic, and metaphysics, but has also published a fair amount in ethics, including *Meaning and the Moral Sciences* (1978) and *How Not to Solve Ethical Problems* (1983). But Putnam is not widely studied as a moral philosopher; a cursory glance at the indexes to several recent companions and anthologies in ethics finds few direct references to Putnam's contributions to normative ethics, meta-ethics, or applied ethics. Where Putnam's influence is found in moral philosophy, in most cases, it is in the application of his famous "Twin Earth" thought experiment (Putnam, 1973) to issues in meta-ethics (see, for instance, Horgan and Timmons, 1990, 1992a, 1992b, 2000 and Timmons 1999). This is not to say that Putnam has not been a contributor to moral philosophy, only to note that his influence has been, primarily, found in the undercurrents of contemporary work. However, with the publication of the two recent collections of his lectures, Putnam seems to be moving his moral philosophy more directly into the spotlight.

Putnam is, to a large degree, unapologetic that the lectures contained in this volume focus more on the philosophy of logic and mathematics than on ethics itself. In fact, the focus of the volume is on ontology, with some sidesteps into the applications his view has for moral philosophy. He is also unapologetic that he will be "painting with a broad brush" in the lectures, which is both a virtue and a vice of this collection. I will examine these issues later, but first will endeavor to very briefly

summarize the contents of each of the lectures. I will focus on the first set of lectures, and comment only briefly only the second set.

Lecture One, "Ethics Without Metaphysics," lodges the challenge against both inflationary metaphysics (metaphysical claims that introduce things that are unknown to ordinary sense perception and common sense in order to explain objects or events) and deflationary metaphysics (which try to either reduce phenomena down to the most basic and fundamental levels or eliminate phenomena for the sake of metaphysical neatness). He wishes to pronounce, once and for all, the death of ontology, both inflationary (Platonic Forms, G.E. Moore's non-natural ethical qualities) and deflationary (Democritus' atoms and void, Berkeley's ideas), and offer an obituary for all forms of ontology. In place of ontology, he offers us **pragmatic pluralism**: the recognition that, in our everyday lives we "employ many different kinds of discourses, discourses subject to different standards and possessing different sorts of applications" (21-22) that all contribute to the description of reality. In fact, it would be foolish to think that any one of these kinds of discourse (he calls them 'language games', borrowing from Wittgenstein) could be sufficient for describing reality. The key difference, however, is that Putnam is not interested, as both the inflationary and deflationary ontologists are, in finding the "mysterious and supersensible objects *behind* our language games" (22). The pragmatic pluralist is content merely with the language game itself and does not care to see what, if anything, goes on beyond it.

In Lecture One, Putnam gives us his clearest and most interesting claim regarding ethics itself: ethics is not a principle or system of principles, but is the emphasis on "alleviating suffering regardless of the gender or class of the sufferer" (23). Putnam then lionizes certain elements of the moral philosophies of Levinas (the emphasis on the personal recognition of the suffering of others), Kant (the universalization of the Categorical Imperative) and Aristotle (the emphasis on human flourishing and *eudaimonia*) in an effort to highlight the things he seeks to place into the realm of the ethical. Putnam's ethics, then, seems to be an ethics of empathy and sentiment that binds all universally and leads to a variety of kinds of human flourishing. While each of the moral theories he addresses has its own faults (Levinas' situationalism, Kant's inflationary ontology and impersonal approach, Aristotle's misguided belief that there is only one admirable kind of human life), Putnam blends and merges them together, creating a moral *bricolage* from the materials at hand that provides him an ethics that will either (*pace* Dewey) help solve specific problems or provide methodological guidance in more general cases. He is not aiming for a "textbook of universal ethical truths that will infallibly guide all future generations" (31-32) but instead looking to simply find some recommendations that can help us deal with specific evils in our world (hunger, violence, inequality) at the present time. This, he says, is Dewey's project for ethics, and also his own.

Lecture Two, "A Defense of Conceptual Relativity," argues for the claim that, in certain cases, "what exists may depend on which of various conventions we adopt" (39). The things we acknowledge as existing may change based on the conceptual system we utilize, and this is made most clear by considering the difference between a universe (containing three individuals) according to Rudolf Carnap (where there are only the three objects: x_1, x_2, and x_3) and a universe according to Stanislaw Lezniewski (where there are a total of seven distinct objects that can be made from the three individuals, including the sums of distinct members and the totality of the three members along with each member individually: x_1, x_2, x_3, x_1+x_2, x_1+x_3, x_2+x_3, $x_1+x_2+x_3$). Lezniewski's

approach to the relationship between things (I use 'things' as a term of art here, following Putnam) was to ignore traditional philosophical distinctions between existing 'objects' and make the sum of any two things is, in itself, another distinct thing. This is one of Lezniewski's contributions to logic and metaphysics: **mereology** (the calculus of parts and wholes). So, as Putnam points out, the "sum of my nose and the Eiffel Tower is regarded as a perfectly good object in mereology"(36). The (possibly infinite) collection of diverse mereological objects is a way of rejecting the "philosophical parochialism" of ontology, and leads to Putnam's defense of **conceptual relativity**, the linguistic disavowal of "correct" uses of the term exists.

Putnam carries on the rejection of the parochialism of ontology in Lecture Three, "Objectivity Without Objects," by jettisoning the idea that, for the sake of objectivity, there must be objects and, hence, an ontology of the 'real' objects that make for objectivity. According to the standard view on objectivity, Putnam says, for any claim that asserts something objective (for example, the claim that an act is right or wrong) there must be a corresponding object (*rightness* or *wrongness*) that serves as the truth-maker for the statement. These objects have been posited as both natural objects and non-natural objects or properties (for instance, Plato's Forms or G.E. Moore's intuited property of goodness) but this need not be the case, according to Putnam's conceptual relativity. Objectivity without objects is possible if we consider that we can have *conceptual truths* which need not be known incorrigibly, but only need to be known through interpretation which may be relative to a language game or a linguistic schema. Putnam gives us a clear definition of a conceptual truth: a truth is conceptual if "it is impossible to make (relevant) sense of the *assertion* of its negation" (61). Mathematical objectivity can be defended, according to Putnam, not by the assertion of natural or non-natural mathematical objects, but by the shared linguistic conventions that make up mathematics. What we need to avoid doing, however, is to Platonize the truths of mathematics by assuming that there are some real mathematical objects that lurk behind those truths.

Lecture Four, "Ontology: An Obituary," proposes to pronounce the end of the road for ontology as a philosophical focus. In this lecture, he also intends to provide some evidence for the titular claim of the lectures: that ethics can be provided without ontology. In the second section of this lecture, on ethical judgments, he points out that there are a host of ethical judgments which are "not formulated using the moral philosopher's favorite words, *ought*, *must*, *mustn't*, *good*, *bad*, *right*, *wrong*, *duty*, and *obligation*" (73). It is a form of "philosopher blindness" to assume that all ethical issues can be addressed using this "meager vocabulary." If ethical truths are, like the truths of mathematics, simply *conceptual truths* that do not correspond to any natural or non-natural objects, than the truths of ethics (much like the truths of mathematics or logic) are not necessarily descriptions. There may be some overlap, but some ethical statements are simply "valuings", expressions of moral condemnation or praise, while others are "descriptions" of what are, presumably, conceptual truths. Putnam never clearly offers any examples of ethical statements that are descriptions; he offers us examples of valuings ("terrorism is criminal" and "wife-beating is wrong") but seems to steer clear of making any ethical statement appear to be an example of an ethical description. I will say more about this shortly, in §2. The remainder of the lecture addresses Quine's revival of ontology and Quine's reluctant Platonism (interesting topics which I will not address here) as well as the difficulty of comprehending non-scientific language. He concludes with his kiss-off to ontology's "stinking corpse" (85) that, at least, offers a good word: even though ontology is useless, at present, it served as a (now outdated) vehicle for many important philosophical insights. But now that vehicle is a rusted-out shell and needs to be sold for scrap, if

we take Putnam's metaphor seriously.

Lectures Five and Six, the Leibniz Lectures, focus on "Enlightenment and Pragmatism," and further detail Putnam's endorsement of Dewey's pragmatism. He compares the three historical periods that are the hallmarks of "enlightenment." For Putnam, these are the Platonic/Socratic enlightenment, the familiar Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and finally the pragmatic enlightenment exemplified by John Dewey. For Putnam, the genius of Dewey's project (and the reason it serves as an enlightenment) is his emphasis on philosophy as a new form of education and his refusal to allow philosophy to be compartmentalized into subgenres and disciplines. For the pragmatist, the enlightenment project is to consider philosophy (as 'criticism of criticisms') as a unified entity, not a collection of sub-specializations. It is clear that the scope and style of these lectures is meant to reinforce this element of Putnam's pragmatism.

The final lecture, "Skepticism About Enlightenment," concludes his attempt to defend a pragmatic holism about philosophy in the face of attacks from both the analytic tradition (relativists like Richard Rorty and Bernard Williams) and the continental tradition (poststructuralists/deconstructionists like Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida). While Putnam is not comfortable with the rigid distinction between analytic and continental philosophy, the thing these seemingly disparate figures have in common is skepticism about the possibility of enlightenment and the "possibility of progress" (110). Be it the cultural relativism of Williams and Rorty or the "bottomless regress of interpretations" (119) found in Derrida, Putnam finds little consolation for his hope for enlightenment and progress. The pragmatist move that Dewey endorses, and Putnam supports, is "the idea that there is such a thing as a *situated* resolution of practical and ethical problems and conflicts and that claims concerning evaluations of-and proposals for the resolution of-problematical situations can be more or less *warranted* without being *absolute*."(129). What is missing from the Williams/Rorty and Foucault/Derrida perspectives is the "very possibility of pragmatism" and, therefore, the possibility of enlightenment (129).

§2. There are several problems with Putnam's project, on the whole, and I will attempt to formalize at least three of them here. The first challenge lies in his move, in Lecture Two (34-47), to mereology as an escape route from ontology. Mereology serves Putnam's purposes quite well, as it provides an alternative to a more rigid ontology: mereology provides a fluid and multifarious world of 'objects' to play with but claims that "to ask whether mereological sums *really exist* would be stupid" (37). Mereology avoids the traps of ontology (where it is assumed that there must actually be objects) because it is "a matter of convention whether we say that mereological sums exist or not" (37). Essentially, Putnam seems to be endorsing mereology as a practical replacement for the commitment that ontology requires of us. He replaces the world of presumably real objects with a world of objects made "real" only by convention.

I cannot offer an in-depth criticism or study of mereology here (see Simons, 1987 for background on the topic), but I will raise two related problems for Putnam's reliance on it. First, he explicitly relies upon the fact that it is a "matter of convention" whether it is believed if mereological sums exist or not. If this is the case, and the sum of Putnam's nose and the Eiffel Tower is a perfectly good object in mereology, I'm not really sure which set of conventions acknowledge those kinds of objects. Put another way, I'm not really convinced that mereology is a very conventional convention! And even if mereology is a common convention, mustn't there be some sort of commitment to the ontological existence of the linguistic community that, itself, grounds the set of

merelogical conventions? My second concern with the reliance on mereology is simply that Putnam seems to offer it as the only alternative game in town to compete with ontology. It seems that we're either mereologists or ontologists, and there's little room in between. If we're ontologists, we have to posit the existence of "real things" behind our conventions: real numbers, real ethical properties, real Forms of the Good. If we're mereologists, on the other hand, we can avoid having to posit our mereological sums as "real things" provided we acknowledge them as merely linguistic conventions. In short, it seems that Putnam endorses mereology because it is an alternative to ontology. It is not clear if there are other, non-mereological, alternatives to ontology (excluding some version of irrealism about existence), but even if there are not alternatives, then I reiterate my first concern. It is not clear that a system that considers the sum of my nose and the Eiffel Tower to be a viable object is really a system that would be taken as a conceptual truth by very many linguistic communities. Putnam really doesn't offer much of an argument for mereology here: what argument there is seems to rest on the rejection of ontology, and not on the merits of mereology itself. A stronger defense of mereology as a conceptual apparatus, one that focused on the merits of mereology as opposed to the pitfalls of ontology, would have benefited the argument here.

My second criticism of the book is that, Putnam's warning in the Introduction notwithstanding, there is very little ethics in it. I write this a moral philosopher whose expectations might have been different from someone who regularly reads Putnam's work outside of ethics. There's a slight feeling of "bait and switch" when a book titled *Ethics Without Ontology* fails to really address many ethical issues satisfactorily. A more appropriate title for the volume would be, simply, *Without Ontology*. The specific discussion of ethical issues is limited, primarily, to Lecture One's discussion of Aristotle, Levinas, and Kant (pp. 22-32), and to some discussion of meta-ethical non-naturalism in Lecture Three (pp. 68-70). The bulk of the ethical workload is carried in the fourth lecture (pp. 71-78) where Putnam explicitly explores the possibility of conceptual moral truths in ethics. I want to briefly address four questions that were left in my mind after reading Putnam's attempt to provide an ethics without ontology.

First, while Putnam explicitly rejects the fact that all ethical judgments should be formulated using the "moral philosopher's favorite words, *ought*, *must*, *mustn't*, *good*, *bad*, *right*, *wrong*, *duty* and *obligation*" (73), it seems he falls victim to the same mistake (of trying to reduce all ethical judgments down to a favorite term) when he 'defines' ethics as the emphasis on "alleviating suffering regardless of the class or gender of the sufferer" (23). If the fallacy of the moral philosopher is to assume that moral judgments can all be described as variations of the favored moral terms how does Putnam think that he avoids this fallacy himself? Unless Putnam's depiction of ethics as alleviation of suffering is meant as a description and not a normative claim, he seems to make the same mistake. It is not clear that he means to be making a descriptive claim, and when he explicitly rejects an ethics of machismo (and Nietzsche's ethics as well), he rejects them as being a "ridiculous throwback," which seems to indicate a normative project.

Second, it isn't clear whether Putnam ever explicitly gives us examples of ethical conceptual truths. Recall that Putnam's argument rests not on the existence of unrevisable truths but on conceptual truths known in correlation with a certain language game or linguistic schema. A conceptual truth, then, is a statement whose negation is non-sensical. In the handful of examples Putnam seems to offer as possible ethical truths ("terrorism is criminal," "wife-beating is wrong," "killing of the innocent is wrong"), it does not at all seem clear that no sense can be made of the negation. Moral

philosophers have spilled much ink doing just that: making sense of the claims "terrorism is justified in certain cases" or "sometimes, killing the innocent is not wrong." If Putnam wanted to bring in the notion that ethics is concerned with alleviating suffering, he could try to do so here, but he does not. Instead, he simply responds by saying that the belief that killing the innocent, cheating, and robbery are wrong is "something accepted by morally conscious people everywhere" (75), clearly distancing himself from the relativist position that he rejects more explicitly in the last two lectures. If these are some of the ethical conceptual truths, Putnam seems to offer little more to support them than an argument from popular opinion. If "killing the innocent is wrong" is a conceptual truth, a better argument should be offered that the simple claim that morally conscious people believe it to be so. This claim is, at best, underargued and, at worst, question-begging.

Third, it's not entirely clear where Putnam's ethical project fits on the landscape of moral philosophy. He seems to avoid making any claims from the *normative* ethical perspective, although one could easily build a normative theory out of Putnam's central principle of the alleviation of suffering. A tradition of sentimentalist-driven normative ethics has existed for some time (usually characterized by the work of Shaftesbury, Francis Hutcheson, David Hume, and Adam Smith) and has recently been reclaimed by Michael Slote (see Slote 2001), but Putnam seems not to be particularly concerned with the normative ethical project. He seems, then, to be working mainly in meta-ethics, particularly the language and metaphysics of ethics, but yet he doesn't seem happy making merely meta-ethical claims. He stresses (with Dewey) that ethics should be concerned with finding the solution to *practical* problems, which seems to put him in line with those who work in applied ethics. But he really avoids dealing with any particular topic in applied ethics in detail, making a passing reference to the abortion debate. Even there, however, he avoids the issue to some degree: his reference to abortion is another attempt to point out the problems that ontology can bring into the debate, and not an attempt to make an ethical claim about the topic. Given his Deweyan leanings, it seems that Putnam might have wanted to spend more time on showing how one solves practical problems without ontology.

My final question relates to Putnam's meta-ethics. Leaving aside questions of HOW one gets practical answers from Putnam's ethics, it's not clear exactly where Putnam fits in the meta-ethical landscape. The first four lectures are certainly engaged in a heavy duty project of meta-ethical antirealism, but he seems to gloss quickly over the expressivist and emotivist projects, denying that all value statements are evaluative (or expressive) in nature (73-74). It's possible that what Putnam is providing is a version of what Simon Blackburn calls "quasi-realism", the attempt to preserve our evaluative commitments as if they had truth-conditions (as opposed to being merely expressive of attitudes) even though they do not have a "real" underlying ontology. (See Blackburn, 1984, esp. Chapter 5). Blackburn calls this a "projective metaphysics" and an "as-if" philosophy;" we speak as if there are moral facts or physical facts (and we act as if there is an underlying ontology) when there are in fact none (See Blackburn 1993, p.55). But Putnam himself disavows Blackburn's quasi-realism as being a version of a deflationary eliminationist metaphysics (p.20, note 6). So, it's not at all clear that Putnam has any meta-ethical allies, and maybe that's his goal. But his position, as it appears in these lectures, seems to have more in common with quasi-realism than any other position on the table. If one wants to preserve **objectivity** (and avoid relativism) without accepting any form of **moral realism**, it seems that one has to bite the bullet and accept either emotivism, norm expressivism, or quasi-realism. Putnam seems to want no part in any of the three, but it's not clear how he can get any meta-ethical purchase by distancing himself from them, at least with the

argument as he presents it here.

My third criticism regards the general style and structure of the book. While this is a collection of lectures, and as such has a generally conversational tone, to some degree Putnam seems to shy away from really dealing a knockout argument for any of his proposals. As I've already mentioned, Putnam acknowledges that there is as much philosophy of mathematics and logic as there is ethics in the lectures, but for a collection called *Ethics Without Ontology*, that seems to leave the reader wanting more. Similarly, it seems that Putnam alternates between trying to avoid the overly technical details (presumably for the lecture audiences) and relying on footnotes to answer open questions (he dispenses with Blackburn's quasi-realism in a sentence long footnote). While he notes that he is "painting with a broad brush" in the lectures, it sometimes seems that the broad brush strokes obfuscate the clarity and cogency of the arguments themselves. It is hard to tell, at times, if this is supposed to be a rigorous argument, a conversational lecture, both, or something in between.

§3. However, that same criticism also explains one of the virtues of the book: it is a well-written, informal, and invigorating discussion of the pitfalls of ontology. Putnam clearly has staked out a nice position in the metaphysical (or anti-metaphysical) landscape, and he explains it well here. His discussions of the philosophy of mathematics and logic are clear and free of jargon, and serve the reader with little formal background in those areas well. The text reads well (and was probably a very entertaining lecture series to hear in person) and moves quickly through difficult materials.

At least two other features make the book appealing. First, Putnam makes a strong case for his rejection of the 'division of labor' in contemporary academic philosophy, and seems to long for the days when the philosopher was not expected to have areas of specialization and areas of competence; philosophers, he seems to want to say, should be competent in philosophy! It is hard to argue with these claims, and these arguments should interest all philosophers. Secondly, Putnam's emphasis on the Deweyan picture of ethics as field of practical problem solving is a position I find quite helpful. There sometimes appears to be a feeling in the field of philosophy that applied ethics isn't real philosophy. The fact that Putnam wants to place it right in the middle of the philosophical landscape (on a par with metaphysics, language, and logic) reinforces the hope that applied ethics can get the credit it deserves in the field.

Ethics Without Ontology is a sometimes frustrating and puzzling collection, and it leaves the reader who might be expecting moral philosophy and meta-ethics somewhat cold. Given the breadth and depth of Putnam's interests, and given his position on the contemporary over-specialization of philosophers, it isn't surprising that his essays are broad in scope. The reaction of puzzlement from some readers, or the complaint that the book doesn't focus enough on moral philosophy, might simply play into Putnam's complaint about the level of specialization in philosophy itself. That being said, these essays may not have much appeal to moral philosophers, generally, but might be appropriate as supplementary readings in upper-level undergraduate and graduate courses in meta-ethics. The book also offers some interesting insights on ontology (many of them, admittedly, are not new insights but restatements of positions Putnam has been developing for over thirty years) and provides, to some degree, a nice summation of Putnam's commitment to ontological pluralism, and might fit in well for a brief and non-technical discussion of Putnam's rejection of ontology in upper level undergraduate or graduate courses in metaphysics.

In his "Lecture on Ethics," Wittgenstein said that to make ethical or religious claims and arguments

was to "run against the boundaries of language" (Darwall, Gibbard, and Railton, 70). In this series of lectures, Putnam begins to try to respond to this claim by attempting to show how moral talk can fit within the language games we play, but he leaves as many questions unanswered as he answers, particularly those dealing with the types and origins of the conceptual truths of ethics. But he leaves us with fertile ground for future analysis and discussion, and has made an interesting and promising attempt to extend those Wittgensteinian boundaries of language into the realm of moral philosophy.

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