

## ***Rorty through and with Putnam: a viable anti-foundationalism***

Fabrizio Trifirò

ftrifiro@hotmail.com

### **ABSTRACT**

The article attempts to clarify the main issues underlying the debate between Richard Rorty and Hilary Putnam, with a view to showing how it is possible to see emerging from it a viable anti-foundationalist conception of normativity capable to eschew the corrosive pitfalls of radical scepticism and relativism. It is argued that this conception is centred on three key distinctions: between a *physical* and *grammatical* sense of the impossibility of foundationalism; between a view of the universalistic aspirations of normativity as *grounds for* our normative judgments as opposed to their *scope*; and between a view of the transcendent aspirations of normativity as *self-transcendence* as opposed to *self-reflexivity*.

### **1. Introduction**

The debate in which, over the last thirty-odd years, Richard Rorty and Hilary Putnam have engaged with each other positions on the nature of normativity has been one of the most fruitful, let alone interesting, debates in contemporary philosophy. I believe, in fact, that from their dialectical exchange it is possible to see emerging a viable anti-foundationalist view of normative validity capable to address the traditional criticisms of radical scepticism and relativism made of anti-foundationalist positions, and thus able to maintain a place for normativity in a disenchanted world.

In order to arrive at this anti-foundationalist conception that synthesises both philosophers' views on knowledge and rationality it is necessary, however, to undertake a work of clarification, not only of their respective positions, but in particular of the reasons underlying their (apparent) disagreement, as these are often puzzling in the face of their many points of convergence. Of the two philosophers the one who seems to be more aware of these similarities and less incline to keep the debate going is Richard Rorty, who has explicitly waived his perplexity about what keeps them apart, and in particular about why Putnam thinks of him as a relativist (Rorty 1998: 44).

True, Rorty himself seems at time to contribute to their reciprocal misunderstanding by attributing to Putnam's 'common sense' realism a metaphysical residual, for such a claim could only be made by a radical relativist

opposed to *any* form of realism. Nonetheless, we must consider that this attribution comes as a response to the charge of relativism that Putnam makes against Rorty in the first place. In fact, to accuse of corrosion of normativity someone who explicitly rejects radical sceptical and relativist positions, as we will see Rorty does, is similarly likely to be a symptom of an entrenched desire for metaphysical objectivity.

However, I do not think, and as I have suggested neither I believe does Rorty, that this is the case with Putnam. His rejection of the previous support of metaphysical realism, expressed in his claims that ‘the God’s-Eye view is forever inaccessible’ (Putnam 1990: 17), that ‘the enterprises of providing a *foundation* for Being and Knowledge are enterprises that have disastrously failed’ (ibid: 19), seems to be genuine and coherently held throughout his subsequent philosophical investigations. Indeed I cannot see any substantial difference between their positions. Rather, as I will try to show in what follows, their positions should be regarded as two different versions of the same pragmatist third way out of what Richard Bernstein has called the metaphysical either/or of objectivism-relativism (Bernstein 1983).

Since Putnam seems unshakable in his conviction that his and Rorty’s refusal of metaphysics are qualitative different, as Rorty would draw radical relativist conclusions from it, I will proceed in my attempt at bringing to the fore their common pragmatist view by showing why his criticisms of Rorty are misplaced, thus hoping to satisfy his request ‘to explain why [Rorty] *isn’t* a cultural relativist.’ (Putnam 1983a: 235).

## 2. Rorty’s pragmatic ethnocentrism

Rorty’s anti-foundationalist approach entered into the contemporary philosophical arena with the publication in 1979 of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. The central part of the book is the chapter entitled ‘privileged representations’, in which Rorty introduces the main themes of his pragmatist approach to knowledge and normativity making use of the holistic and behaviouristic criticisms that Wilfrid Sellars and William V.O. Quine made of ‘the Kantian foundations of analytic philosophy’ (Rorty 1979: 170): the ‘datum/non-datum’ and the ‘analytic/synthetic’ distinctions.

According to Rorty, the importance of Quine’s critique of the analytic/synthetic distinction (Quine 1953) and of Sellars’ attack on the ‘Myth of the Given’ (Sellars 1997 [1956]) has been to outline a holistic and propositional image of justification that denies the foundationalist interpretation which conceives of our body of knowledge as standing on a privileged, non-

propositional, atomistic relationship with the objects of our concepts and beliefs, and as fixed by necessary conceptual relations between our beliefs. The resulting alternative view of our epistemic predicament is that which is best expressed by Neurath's metaphor of the seamen being able to repair their boat only afloat and through piecemeal process, always having to stand on some part of it in order not to sink into unintelligibility (Neurath 1959).

Once we endorse such a view of justification we are led, on the one hand, to regard as impossible the foundationalist attempts to extend our justifications outside the whole of our values and beliefs in order to anchor our knowledge on reality in itself – the attempts 'to step outside our skins – the traditions within which we do our thinking and self-criticism – and compare ourselves with something absolute' (Rorty 1982: xix). On the other hand, we are brought to recognize the conversational character of our justificatory practices, 'that justification is a matter of conversation, of social practice' (Rorty 1979: 178), namely, that the working of our normative faculties is inseparable from the practice of giving reasons to each other and to ourselves.

This double recognition is what lies at the heart of Rorty's pragmatism central conviction that our normative judgements are always internal to some practice of justification, that justification is a matter of conformity to the norms of our social practices rather than a matter of conformity with reality in itself, that rationality and normative authority is to be explained by reference to what the norms of the social practice we are engaged in lets us say, and that there is no way to get outside our whole normative system so as to ground them on something absolute (ibid: 174, 178).

What needs to be stressed is that the impossibility of the attempts 'to get outside our beliefs and our language so as to find some test other than coherence' (ibid: 178) should not be regarded as due to some physical deficit in our human cognitive setting, which could in principle be overcome by some technological advancement, but as inherent to the very concept of reality towards which those attempts aim in their search for foundations. The epistemic assurance which the project of metaphysics has always been after could be offered, in fact, only by a reality that *by definition* is placed beyond our cognitive reach, for this is supposed to be 'a reality which exists independently of any thought and experience' (Williams 1978, p.64).

This is the sense of Rorty's Wittgensteinian and pragmatist remarks that "when we hypostatize the adjective 'true' into 'Truth' and ask about our relation to it, we have absolutely nothing to say" (Rorty 1998: 4); that 'the project of grounding is a wheel that plays no part in the mechanism' (Rorty 1982: 168); that there is "no place for the notion of philosophy as picking out the 'foundations' of the rest of knowledge, as explaining which representa-

tions are ‘purely given’ or ‘purely conceptual’” (Rorty 1979: 170). We can put an end to Philosophy as the foundational search for a non-conceptualised reality because we could never have a clue about what could put an end to this search, and because our practices swing free from any metaphysical foundation. We have to acknowledge that our justificatory practice, and hence the normative notions internal to them, stand on metaphysical neutral ground.

However Rorty does not think that this metaphysical neutrality of normativity implies normative neutrality. As he once observed, ‘the pragmatist can only be criticized for taking his community *too* seriously. He can only be criticized for ethnocentrism, not for relativism’, since “there is a difference, between saying that every community is as good as every other and saying that we have to work out from the networks we are, from the communities with which we presently identify” (Rorty 1991: 29).

This is the crucial point that needs to be grasped if we want to fully appreciate his abandonment of the metaphysical tradition. For, in recommending us to drop the metaphysical framework of thought, Rorty also wants us to drop the radical relativist and anti-realist temptations that corrode our critical faculties and their bearing on reality, as these are rooted in that very same framework. Indeed, “The view that every tradition is as rational or as moral as every other could be held only by a god, someone who had no need to use (but only to mention) the terms ‘rational’ or ‘moral’, because she had no need to inquire or deliberate. Such a being would have escaped from history and conversation into contemplation and metanarrative” (ibid. 202).

Rorty here is making the point that only someone who is still in the grasp of the metaphysical view that a normative judgment can be valid if and only if it corresponds to how things *really* are, would be driven from the recognition of the impossibility to reach reality in itself to conclude that our thoughts and practices are unconstrained from the world and that therefore nothing or anything goes.

Yet, as he made clear in *Consequences of Pragmatism*, these radical forms of scepticism and relativism do not represent a threat to his pragmatist position, for this regards the metaphysical project of grounding as a wheel that plays no part in the mechanism of our practices, which means that the realization of its impracticability cannot affect those practices, let alone jeopardize them. In particular, ‘The association of pragmatism with relativism’, he explained, ‘is the result of a confusion between the pragmatist’s attitude towards *philosophical* theories with his attitude towards *real* theories.’ (Rorty 1982: 167) “Relativism only seems to refer to a disturbing view, worthy of be-

ing refuted, if it concerns *real* theories, not just *philosophical* theories” (ibid: 168).

Rorty then, as he says of James and Dewey, is only a meta-philosophical relativist. He certainly regards any philosophical proposal for grounding our theories and practices to be as good as any other. But this does not imply a relativist and antirealist attitude towards *real* theories and practices. When we look at these real theories and practices in the light of our values, interests and beliefs – the only light of interest for the pragmatists – it is simply not true that they are as good as any others. As Rorty puts it, “We do care about alternative, concrete, detailed cosmologies or alternative concrete, detailed proposals for political change. When such an alternative is proposed, we debate it, not in terms of categories or principles but in terms of the various concrete advantages and disadvantages it has” (ibid.). “We must, in practice, privilege our own group, even though there can be noncircular justification for doing it...we should accept the fact that we have to start where we are, and that this means that there are lots of views which we simply cannot take seriously” (Rorty 1991: 29).

Realizing the absence of a metaphysical criterion of discrimination, therefore, does not prevent us from continuing to discriminate in the way we have always done between better and worse alternatives in any circumstance of our lives. It only makes us recognize that the context of these discriminations cannot be the metanarrative of contemplation and foundations, but, rather, the contingent, ethnocentric, concrete narratives that emerge from our needs, values and interests.

Rorty’s ethnocentric anti-foundationalism then escapes the dangers of radical scepticism and relativism precisely by placing the source of normative authority in that same dimension of practice which foundationalists try to escape in their search for an untainted reality. We thus finally come to realize that the corrosion of normativity and the loss of the world as an external constraint to our normative stances do not flow from the anti-foundationalist realization of our inescapable ethnocentric condition, but, *rather*, from the very foundationalists’ attempts at getting in touch with the world ‘in itself’. Although these attempts originate from a concern to save the normative momentum and the bearing on the world of our thoughts and practices, they ultimately blow up our very capacity of thought and action because they do not realize that we must always stand on some unquestioned ground in order to be able to do and think anything at all.

### 3. Putnam's pragmatic realism

In his 1978 collection of essays *Meaning and the Moral Sciences* Putnam started his retreat from metaphysical realism by turning to what he then named 'internal realism.' He presented the difference between these positions in the following way: "Metaphysical realism...purports to be a model of the relation of any correct theory to all or part of THE WORLD... Minimally there has to be a determinate relation of reference between terms in L and pieces of THE WORLD... What makes this picture different from *internal* realism (which employs a similar picture *within* a theory) is that (1) the picture is supposed to apply to *all* correct theories at once...; and (2) THE WORLD is supposed to be *independent* of any particular representation we have of it – indeed it is held that we might be *unable* to represent THE WORLD correctly at all" (Putnam 1978: 125).

Here we find at the centre of Putnam's *internalist* view the same interrelated convictions that we found in Rorty's rejection of foundationalism. Primarily, that "the world is not describable independently of our description" (ibid: 138); that – as Putnam made clear when in a successive book he explained the choice of the expression 'internal realism' – "it is characteristic of this [*internalist*] view to hold that '*what objects does the world consist of?*' is a question that it only makes sense to ask *within* a theory or description" (Putnam 1981: 49). Secondly, the conviction that, for that very reason, we cannot find intelligible the metaphysical picture of the truth of our beliefs and theories as consisting in their correct description of, or their correct correspondence to, a non-conceptualized world; for 'to pick out just one correspondence between words or mental signs and mind-independent things we would have already to have referential access to the mind-independent things' (ibid: 73), and "if one cannot say *how* THE WORLD is theory-independently, then talk of all these theories as descriptions of 'the world' is empty" (Putnam 1978: 125). And thirdly, the conviction that the sceptic's doubts depend on the very metaphysical conception of the world as "a world so 'independent of our knowledge' that" as Rorty has put it, 'it might, for all we know, prove to contain none of the things we have always thought we were talking about' (Rorty 1982: 14), so that once that conception goes the sceptical worries go too. As Putnam made it clearer a few pages after the first formulation of internal realism we are considering: "The [sceptic's] 'How do you know?' question assumes a theory-independent fact of the matter as to what a term in a given theory corresponds to – i.e. assumes the picture of metaphysical real-

ism; and this is a picture the *internal* realist need not (and better not) accept” (ibid: 136).

It is better not to accept this picture because “the supposition that even an ‘ideal’ theory (from a pragmatic point of view) might *really* be false appears to collapse into *unintelligibility*” (ibid: 126). This unintelligibility is of the same kind as that of the notion of a ‘thing in itself’; and just as for Rorty, for Putnam too that notion makes no sense “*not* because ‘we cannot know the things in themselves’... [but because] we don’t know what we are talking about when we talk about ‘things in themselves’” (Putnam: 1987: 36).

Hence, Putnam also agrees with Rorty on the consideration that the impossibility to give a God’s-Eye view description of the world is not due to a physical deficit on our part, which would engender the sceptical doubts that he regards as unintelligible. It is rather a pragmatic impossibility due the familiar circumstance that we need to stand somewhere in order to be able to think and do anything at all, that “one cannot summon up real doubt at will... [that] ceasing to believe anything at all is not a real human possibility” (ibid: 68), that, as Rorty conversely puts it ‘the fact that nothing is immune from criticism does not mean that we have the duty to justify everything’ (Rorty 1991: 29). Indeed, the acknowledgment of the grammatical dimension of the impossibility of metaphysics amounts to the recognition of what Putnam identifies as the central insight of American pragmatism, ‘that one can be both fallibilistic *and* antisceptical’, for ‘fallibilism does not require us to doubt *everything*, it only requires us to be prepared to doubt *anything* – if good reasons to do so arise’ (Putnam 1995: 21).

The last antisceptical considerations are connected to a further point of convergence between Putnam’s internalism and Rorty’s ethnocentrism, their common disenchanted or modest realism. For both philosophers, in fact, to denounce the impossibility of making any sense of the metaphysical notions of reality and truth does not mean that we cannot find any sense anymore in *any* notion of reality and truth, or that we must drop our everyday talk of the world ‘making our beliefs true’, and of our beliefs ‘representing’, ‘corresponding’, ‘discovering’, and ‘referring to’ the world. Just as the combination of fallibilism and antiscepticism was at the centre of traditional pragmatism, similarly we find at the centre of Putnam’s internal realism (which he now regrets not having called ‘pragmatic realism’) ‘the insistence that realism is *not* incompatible with the conceptual relativity’ (Putnam 1987: 19), namely with the anti-foundationalist point that “the idea that there is an Archimedean point, or a use of ‘exist’ inherent in the world itself, from which the question ‘How many objects *really* exist?’ makes sense, is an illusion” (ibid: 20).

This is an unproblematic point because it has “none of the ‘there is no truth to be found’ implications of relativism” (ibid: 17). On the contrary, it is part of its claim that that, “once we make clear how we are using ‘object (or ‘exist’), the question ‘How many objects exist?’ has an answer that it is not at all a matter of ‘convention’” (ibid: 20). Thus, “accepting the ubiquity of conceptual relativity does not require us to deny that truth genuinely depends on the ‘antics’ of things distant from the speaker” (Putnam 1980: 178).

This realist stance towards the dependence of truth on the objects around us, however, is unproblematic too, because “the nature of the dependence changes as the kinds of language games we invent changes” (Putnam 1992a: 435). Thus “when one has adopted a way of speaking, a language, a ‘conceptual scheme’”, ‘we can and should insist that some facts are there to be discovered and not legislated by us’ (Putnam 1988: 114), that “there are ‘external facts’, and we can say *what they* are” (Putnam 1987: 33), “we can describe the ‘facts’ that make the sentence of that language true and false in a ‘trivial way’ – using the sentences of that very language” (ibid: 40). “Indeed it is trivial to say what any word refers to *within* the language the world belongs to, by using the word itself” (Putnam 1981: 52).

Similarly, for Rorty speaking of the world making our beliefs and sentences true and of our beliefs and sentences corresponding and referring to the objects and facts in the world is utterly unproblematic when “the world” is taken to refer to “just whatever that vast majority of our beliefs not currently in question are currently thought to be about” (Rorty 1982: 14); to the world, that is, that emerges together with the beliefs and theories that best satisfy the norms of our current holistic and ungrounded practices of justifications. In this sense, “in which we now know perfectly well what the world is like”, Rorty says, “there is no argument about the point that it is the world that determines truth”, and “we can return to the simple Aristotelian notion of truth as correspondence with reality with a clear conscience.” Now, in fact, we can come to realize that “all that ‘determination’ comes to is that our belief that snow is white is true because snow is white, that our beliefs about the stars are true because the way the stars are laid out, and so on” (ibid); and that all the ‘correspondence’ conception of truth depends on is the simple fact that “every belief no matter how primitive or vicious, corresponds to some ‘world’ – the ‘world’ that contains the objects mentioned by the belief.” (Rorty 1998: 1-2). Indeed “Given a language and a view of what the world is like, one can, to be sure, pair off bits of the language with bits of what one takes the world to be in such a way that the sentences one believes true have



internal structures isomorphic to relations between things in the world” (Rorty 1982: 163).

However there is no metaphysical enchantment in this modest realism, for the point remain that when we turn from the evaluation of our assertions and theories from within our practices of justification to the evaluation of the practices of justification themselves there is no way to escape circularity without falling into an unintelligible talk of reality in itself. Hence, as the two American philosophers respectively put it, “when we turn from individual sentences to vocabularies and theories, [our] critical terminology naturally shifts from metaphors of isomorphism, symbolism, and mapping to talk of utility, convenience and likelihood of getting what we want” (ibid); “our image of the world cannot be ‘justified’ by anything but its success as judged by the interests and values which evolve and get modified at the same time and in interaction with our evolving image of the world itself” (Putnam 1990: 29).

These passages express clearly their common pragmatist legacy, their convergence on what Putnam regards as “the heart of pragmatism – of James and Dewey’s pragmatism if not of Peirce’, i.e. the insistence on the supremacy of the agent point of view” (Putnam 1987: 70), and Rorty as the lesson to be drawn from James and Dewey’s conception of truth, i.e. that ‘it is the vocabulary of practice rather than of theory, of action rather than contemplation, in which one can say something useful about truth’, that ‘the vocabulary of practice is ineliminable’ (Rorty 1982: 162,163),

It is indeed difficult to see how their positions can substantially diverge given this wide ground of agreement. Yet, Putnam would not agree with my account of their similarities, he still thinks there is a significant difference between their conceptions of normativity. Let us turn then to consider Putnam’s account of this difference and his critique of Rorty.

#### 4. *Putnam’s critique*

##### 4.1. *Philosophical revisionism*

Putnam believes that his agreement with Rorty stops at the rejection of the intelligibility of metaphysical realism, because he believes that ‘Rorty is committed to rejecting the intuitions that underlie every kind of realism (and not just metaphysical realism)’ (Putnam 1987: 16). According to Putnam, “the idea of reality as it is ‘in itself’... is apparently the only possible meaning that Rorty sees for the notion of ‘objective reality’” (Putnam 2003: 99),

for this reason he would leave us “with the conclusion that there is no metaphysically innocent way to say that our words *do* ‘represent things outside themselves’”; he would not ‘go on to recover the notion of representation (and of the world of things to be represented)’ (Putnam 1994: 300), thus failing to complete the pragmatist journey back to our everyday practices. Namely, Putnam believes that Rorty would deny the legitimacy of our realist talk even when taken to remain within the theories and languages emerging from our practices of justification. As he once remarked: “I have often argued that it makes no sense to think of the world as ‘dividing itself up’ into ‘objects’ (or ‘entities’) independently of our use of language...but – and here is the likely disagreement [with Rorty] – it does not follow that *when a particular use of ‘object’, ‘event’, etc. is already in place*, we cannot say how the particular statements we can make in that particular vocabulary relate to those objects” (Putnam 1992b: 434).

As previously shown, this corrosive anti-realist position is hardly Rorty’s, since he thinks, exactly as Putnam does, that once we break with ‘the view of knowledge as the result of manipulating *Vorstellungen*’, and conceive of ‘the world’ as ‘whatever that vast majority of our beliefs not currently in question are currently thought to be about’, ‘we can return to the simple Aristotelian notion of truth as correspondence with reality with a clear conscience’ (Rorty 1982: 14); and that, ‘given a language and a view of what the world is like one can, to be sure, pair off bits of the language with bits of what one takes the world to be’ (Rorty 1982: 163).

True, in the last passage Putnam wrongly ascribes to Rorty that corrosive position as a reply to an article in which Rorty (Rorty 1992: 415), equally wrongly, criticised him for still retaining the metaphysical idea of ‘statements *made true* by *matters of fact*’ on the basis of metaphysically innocuous passages like the following: “There is a realist intuition that there is a substantive kind of rightness (or wrongness) that my statement that I had cereal for breakfast this morning possesses as a consequence of what happened this morning [...] which must be preserved even if one finds *metaphysical* realism unintelligible” (Putnam 1983b: 56).

And, of course, being criticised of having metaphysical residuals for simply saying that the world contribute in deciding of the rightness or wrongness of our assertions makes it understandable that one may come to think that he is being criticised for simply being a commonsense pragmatic realist, and thus to think that the criticism must be coming from a radical sceptical position.

However, before concluding that Rorty is an idealist and a relativist after all, we have to understand that Rorty’s doubts about the character of the re-

alist intuitions Putnam wants to preserve are induced by the criticisms of relativism and idealism Putnam made of Rorty *in the first place*. It is exactly because Rorty endorses the same commonsense realism that Putnam endorses, according to which “every belief, no matter how primitive or vicious, corresponds to some ‘world’ – the ‘world’ that contains the objects mentioned by the belief” (Rorty 1998: 1), that he thinks that “those who want to hang on to a notion of ‘correspondence’ [in opposition to the internalist one he regards as acceptable] have to take the idea of how things really are seriously” (ibid: 2), and thus that, for Putnam, “the term ‘matter of fact’... must mean something more than that [i.e. the objects mentioned by our beliefs], or Putnam would not be so sure that I would disagree with it” (ibid: 50). In order to clarify the debate that still divides the two American philosophers we need then to bring to the surface the reasons underlying Putnam’s conviction that Rorty’s pragmatic realism differs from his own.

At the bottom of Putnam’s charges of cultural relativism and linguistic idealism there is the conviction that Rorty retains the inclination of the metaphysical realist to observe our practices from the God’s-Eye point of view even after having rejected the possibility to obtain it. That is, as he has recently clarified, Putnam regards Rorty as a ‘disappointed metaphysical realist’ (Putnam 1994: 300), as someone who, although persuaded of the impossibility of the attempt ‘to step outside our skins and compare ourselves with something absolute’ (Rorty 1982:xix), is still in the grasp of the metaphysical view of normative validity as adherence to the dictates of reality in itself. In particular, he believes “that Rorty has failed to explore the sort of ‘impossibility’ that is at issue when he concludes that such a guarantee [the guarantee that our words represent things outside themselves] is impossible” (Putnam 1994: 300). He believes that Rorty takes the impossibility of metaphysical realism to be of a physical sort rather than a grammatical one, thus remaining blind to the way in which the sceptical rejection of metaphysical realism partakes of the same impossibility.

Putnam already expressed the conviction that Rorty is a disappointed metaphysical realist of this sort when he ascribed to him the position that “the failure of our philosophical ‘foundations’ is a failure of the whole culture”, i.e. that “accepting that we were wrong in wanting or thinking we could have a foundation requires us to be *philosophical revisionist*.” By this Putnam meant that, for Rorty, “the failure of foundationalism makes a difference to how we are allowed to talk in ordinary life – a difference as to whether and when we are allowed to use words like ‘know’, ‘objective’, ‘fact’, and ‘reason’. The picture is that philosophy was not a reflection *on* the cul-

ture but a *basis*, a sort of pedestal, on which the culture rested, and which has been abruptly yanked out” (Putnam 1990: 20).

The repercussions on our ordinary way of thinking and talking that Putnam thinks follow from Rorty’s rejection of foundationalism are precisely the consequence of those anti-realist theses according to which we can no longer say that our words ‘represent things outside themselves’, as well as, as he says in a subsequent article, the consequence of those relativistic theses according to which ‘there is no such thing as one language game being better than another; there is only being better *relative to this, that, or the other interest*’, so that “we cannot say that Newton’s physics is superior to Aristotle’s physics, or that there are things that Aristotle’s physics got wrong and that Newton’s physics got right” (Putnam 1995: 38).

However, as we have seen, Rorty entirely agrees with Putnam that relativism is a metaphysical symptom. He claims for example to “fervently applaud, his [Putnam’s] relativist-bashing remark: ‘Relativism, just as much as Realism, assumes that one can stand within one’s language and outside it at the same time’”, as he shows by remarking that “the view that every tradition is as rational or as moral as every other could be held only by a god, someone who had no need to use (but only to mention) the terms ‘rational’ or ‘moral’, because she had no need to inquire or deliberate” (Rorty 1991: 202) Furthermore he explicitly points out to Putnam that to accuse him of relativism or idealism is ‘to try to put a metanarration in [his] mouth’ that is not there.

Indeed by accusing Rorty of philosophical revisionism Putnam overlooks the many passages reported above testifying that Rorty openly rejects the idea that philosophy is the basis of culture, as well as those passages in which he makes clear that the impossibility of metaphysical realism is of a grammatical kind. Responding directly to Putnam, Rorty clarifies once more his position as follows: “I do not think that I have ever written anything suggesting that I wish to alter ordinary ways of using ‘know’, ‘objective’, ‘fact’, and ‘reason’. Like Berkeley, James, Putnam and most other paradox-mongering philosophers, I have urged that we continue to speak with the vulgar while offering a philosophical gloss on this speech which is different from that offered by the Realist tradition. I have written at tedious length against the idea that philosophy has been a pedestal in which our culture rests [...]. So I think that Putnam is just wrong about what I say” (Putnam 1991: 44).

I think so too. We have seen that Rorty’s conception of normativity is the ethnocentric one which maintains that ‘we have to work out from the networks we are, from the communities with which we presently identify’, and

that this position, as Rorty specifies, “is no more relativistic than Hilary Putnam’s suggestion that we stop trying for a ‘God’s-Eye view’ and realize that ‘We can only hope to produce a more rational conception of rationality or a better conception of morality if we operate from within our tradition’” (Rorty 1991: 202).

We have seen that the import of Rorty’s ethnocentrism is “that our own present beliefs are the ones we use to decide how to apply the term ‘true’, even though ‘true’ cannot be *defined* in terms of those beliefs”, and that therefore, he has no problem to “admit that the internal coherence of either Aristotle or Galileo does not entitle their views to the term ‘true’, since only coherence with *our* views could do that” (Rorty 1991: 150). This ultimately means that the fact that we can regard a conception as good or better than another only relatively to particular interests and values does not imply for Rorty, as it should not for Putnam, that we cannot say that what satisfies *our own* interests and values is truer or better, than what satisfies different interests and values; after all, as both philosophers recognize, our interests and values constitute the only background upon which we can make our normative judgements. There is therefore no problem for Rorty, as for Putnam, in saying that ‘Newton made progress over Aristotle, and Einstein over Newton’, even if ‘neither came closer to the truth, or the intrinsic character of reality than any others’ (Rorty 1991: 7). “Einstein got no closer to the way reality is ‘in itself’ than did Newton, but’, as Rorty recently restated, ‘there is an obvious sense in which he progressed beyond Newton’ (Rorty 1997: 40). This obvious sense is, of course, the Baconian one of increase in predictive power and control over the environment, the only one that Putnam is ready to acknowledge too (for their shared Baconian view of scientific inquiry, in opposition to Bernard Williams ‘absolute conception of the word’ (Williams 1978, p.64) – see Rorty 1991: 46-62, 113-125 and Putnam 1981: 127-149, 201-215)

There is no reason then to think that Rorty is a greater philosophical revisionist than Putnam. Indeed *both* are philosophical revisionists, but only in the literal sense of the expression. What is subject to revision is exclusively philosophical enquiry. Our everyday practices remain untouched. Instead of our practices waiting for philosophy to ground them, it is philosophy now that turns to them. Philosophical reflection stops being considered as the research for the *objective* reality beyond the *subjective* interests, values and beliefs that shape our practices, and come to be seen instead as part of that multifaceted, holistic, ethnocentric critical reflection upon those same interests, values and beliefs that constitutes the only way through which our practices can ever be reformed and improved.

#### 4.2. *Truth as consensus*

It might be that, despite Rorty's willingness to reject radical relativism and anti-realism, and his recognition of the crucial role that normative notions play in our critical and evaluative attempts at coping with our environment, his ethnocentric account of normativity is not enough to defend our rational faculties from those corrosive relativist and anti-realist threats. It might be that Rorty still overlooks some essential characteristic of our use of normative notions.

Putnam is exactly of this opinion. Thus, after having explained that 'to say that truth is a *normative* property is to emphasize that calling a statement true and false is *evaluating* it', and that 'our standards of truth are extendable and reformable; not a collection of algorithms', and having stressed that still "for all that, there are statements that meet them and statements that do not: and that is what makes truth a 'substantial' notion", he goes on to add that "Rorty's reply would be that evaluating a statement (or anything else) does not require that we ascribe or withhold a normative *property*; it only requires that we possess *interests*... It is not the idea that 'true' is *normative* that Rorty objects to, but the idea that the predicate corresponds to a property. On Rorty's account, 'true' is just a word we use to pay 'compliments' to sentences, to disquote, to 'caution', etc." (Putnam 1992b: 436-437).

I take it that Rorty would have nothing to say against the first characterization of what makes truth a 'substantial' notion, if we like to describe in this way its normative momentum. But he would not understand why, and in what sense, that evaluative account of normativity, as that which meets the requirements of our 'extendable and reformable non-algorithmic' evaluative standards, would require us to conceive of normativity as a property transcending the account he gives of our employment of 'truth' in terms of its endorsing, disquotational and cautionary uses (Rorty 1991: 126-150).<sup>1</sup> It is

---

<sup>1</sup> In his 'Pragmatism, Davidson, and Truth', in which he intended to show how Davidson's position can be seen as the final point in the process of 'pragmatisation' of analytic philosophy, he gives an account of the role the notion of 'truth' plays in our thoughts and practices which he believes would lead us to 'the dissolution of the traditional problematic about truth'. Such an account, whose origins he attributes to Davidson, he claims:

would start from the claim that 'true' has no explanatory use, but merely the following uses:

- (a) an endorsing use

- 
- (b) a cautionary use, in such remarks as ‘Your belief that S is perfectly justified, but perhaps not true’ – reminding ourselves that justification is relative to, and no better than, the beliefs cited as grounds for S, and that such justification is no guarantee that things will go well if we take S as a ‘rule of action’
  - (c) a disquotational use: to say metalinguistic things of the form ‘S is true iff ...’

The *endorsing* use of ‘true’ coincides with the ultimate circularity of our procedures of justification when justification reaches the bottom line. It points us to the fact that every time we say that our beliefs and theories are true, intending to say not that they conform to the norms of our justificatory practices but that they are the *real* true ones, that *our practices themselves* are the correct ones, we are doing nothing else but ‘paying an empty compliment’ to them, for we do not possess other criteria for correctness except the very same set of norms on which the practices we wanted to justify stand.

The force of the *cautionary* use of ‘true’, as he clarifies in a subsequent paper, ‘is to point out that justification is relative to an audience and that we can never exclude the possibility that some better audience might exist, or come to exist, to whom a belief that is justifiable to us would not be justifiable’, keeping in mind that ‘as Putnam’s ‘naturalistic fallacy’ argument shows, there can be no such thing as an ‘ideal audience’ before which justification would be sufficient to ensure truth’ (Rorty 1998: 2).

Referring to the *disquotational* use of ‘true’ Rorty wants to make the point that the force of Tarski’s theory of truth is not that of identifying truth with some substantial property – for the principle of equivalence that claims that to say of any sentence that it is true must be equivalent to asserting that sentence itself, is metaphysically neutral; namely it is neutral between different conceptions of the truth-conditions for our statements and theories – but rather that of stressing the function of ‘true’ in enabling us to pass from the sentence “‘p’ is true” to the simple assertion of ‘p’.

As for the claim that ‘true’ has no *explanatory* use, the opposition here is against metaphysical realist views in general and metaphysical realist view of science in particular, such as that put forth by Bernard Williams’, which take the expediency of scientific theories and beliefs as proof of their correspondence to reality in itself, correspondence which would precisely explain their expediency. According to Rorty, the problem with explanations such as those required by Williams is that, unless we are able to furnish a criterion of truth that is not the conformity of our beliefs and theories with the system of beliefs and values that we already accept, we will never be able to say that we have explained ‘non-vacuously’ the success of science, its progress, and the convergence of its results and theories (Williams 1985: 140). However “many centuries of attempts to explain what ‘correspondence’ is have failed”, the reason being that ultimately,

[there is] no way of formulating an *independent* test of accuracy of representation – of reference or correspondence to an ‘antecedently determinate’ reality – no test distinct from the success which is supposedly explained by this accuracy (Rorty 1991: 6).

passages like this that makes Rorty suspect that ‘Putnam at the end of the day slides back into the metaphysical realism that he rightly condemns in others’ (Rorty 1991: 27).

We need then to investigate the character of the property which Putnam regards truth to be, and see whether Rorty does, or does not, adequately account for it. We need to see whether the sense in which Putnam maintains our evaluations of truth to refer to interests and values enables us to support a notion of the dependence of the truth of our statements to ‘the antics of the familiar objects’ which is more substantial than that allowed by Rorty’s pragmatic ethnocentrism.

Let us thus turn our attention to the desideratum of ‘objectivity’, which Putnam claims an adequate account of the notion of truth must satisfy together with the desideratum of ‘conceptual relativity’ (Putnam 1988: 109), and see if it is sufficient to differentiate his position from that of Rorty. The desideratum of objectivity serves, in fact, as *memorandum* of that property which enables normative notions to back the critical faculty of our thought even once its relativity to the different systems of values and beliefs in which we might be placed has been recognised. What is then this property? What does objectivity consist of, for Putnam?

Putnam tells us that “to say that intentional phenomena are ‘objective’ is not to say that they are independent of what human beings know or could find out (it is not to say that they are Objective with a capital ‘O’, so to speak). If we take ‘truth’ as our representative intentional notion, then to say that truth is objective (with a small ‘o’) is just to say that it is a property of truth that whether a sentence is true is logically independent of whether a majority of the members of the culture believe it to be true. And this is not a solution to the grand metaphysical question of Realism or Idealism, but simply a feature of our notion of truth” (ibid).

In this passage we find stated once again the familiar idea that once we have abandoned the chimera of metaphysical foundations for our practices of justifications we are not forced to abandon those practices and with them “the idea that there are what Dewey called ‘objective resolutions of problematic situations’ – objective resolutions to problems which are *situated* in a place, at a time, as opposed to an ‘absolute’ answer to ‘perspective-independent’ questions” (Putnam 1990: 178). Yet, this idea of objectivity is formulated here in the puzzling terms of ‘logical independence of the opinion of the majority of members of one’s culture’. The reason of this formulation is that Putnam is here trying to distinguish his conception of normativity from that of cultural relativists, of which he takes Rorty’s to be the paradigmatic example. He takes it that Rorty, “in his *Philosophical and the Mirror of Na-*



ture, [the only text Putnam considers on this matter] defined truth in terms of the agreement of one's 'cultural peers'" (Putnam 1988: 109).

Rorty replies to Putnam that he does not remember 'having said that truth or justification are determined by majority vote' (Rorty 1998: 55). Indeed he never said it. On the contrary in the context of a restatement of his opposition to both metaphysical realism and radical relativism, of the ethnocentric idea that "all that can be salvaged from the traditional appearance-reality distinction is the fact that an 'is-seems' distinction is built into any discursive practice", he agrees with Putnam that any "such practice must distinguish between what the community believes and what is the case" (Rorty 1997: 174).

I believe that behind Putnam's conviction that Rorty holds the thesis of truth as the opinion of the majority of the members of one's culture lies a double misreading of the two different senses in which Rorty refers to society, and of the two different perspectives from which he deals with normativity, when he makes two different kinds of assertions. On the one hand, when he formulates his pragmatist conception of normativity asserting that its essence consists of 'explaining rationality and epistemic authority by reference to what society lets us say, rather than the latter by the former', and that if we follow this approach we 'will take 'S knows that p'... as a remark concerning the status of S's reports among his peers [rather than] a remark about the relation between subject and object, between nature and its mirror' (Rorty 1979: 174). On the other hand, when, with a different intention, he claims that "our only usable notion of 'objectivity' is 'agreement' rather than mirroring" (ibid: 337); that – as he restated more recently – 'there is nothing to the notion of objectivity save that of intersubjective agreement' (Rorty 1998: 7). On the basis of these sorts of passages Putnam concludes that "in his *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature...* Rorty identified truth, at least truth in what he called 'normal' discourse, with the agreement of one's cultural peers ('objectivity is agreement'). It is natural on first meeting with this formulation to take it in a relativistic spirit. So taken it says that truth in a language – any language – is determined by what the majority of the speakers of that language would say" (Putnam 1992a: 67).

However this is not the right way to read Rorty's quoted passages. In the first kind of passages he is just stating his ethnocentric conception of the source of normativity as resting upon the set of currently unquestioned values and beliefs that constitute the last justificatory resort for our practices of justification, pointing out at the same time the social character of these practices. This social aspect consists in the fact that the interests, values and beliefs at the bottom of our justificatory practices are generally shared by other

persons, usually those belonging to our communities of birth. This fact depends on the plain circumstance that we learn to think and speak about the events of the world and to give them a meaning – that we learn to distinguish between true and false, right and wrong, etc. – through a process of acculturation and education that takes place within a social environment. This is the same fact acknowledged by Putnam when, for instance, he writes that “the language games we play are alterable by our will only to a very limited extent. They are cultural formations, which have an enormous amount of inertia”. The point Putnam wants to make here is that, as he continues, “rightness and wrongness in a language game is internal to that language game, it’s not something that was invented by you” (ibid: 73).

That claims of rightness and wrongness are internal to some socially formed, usually inherited, language game is just the idea that Rorty was stating in the first kind of assertions we are considering. And, since Rorty acknowledges that “an ‘is-seems’ distinction is built into any discursive practice”, we can see then that it is Rorty’s conviction, as much as Putnam’s, that within a particular practice of justification with its own standard of rationality – within what, after Kuhn (1962), Rorty calls ‘normal discourse’ – there is a sense of correctness and wrongness which is independent of the opinion of the majority of the participants in that practice. Within a practice of justification correctness (or wrongness) is determined by the conformity (or not) of our judgments to the norms and standards of justification of that practice. This means that nothing excludes the possibility that the majority of the members of a social group, intended as a group of people sharing the same norms of justification, may be wrong, wrong, that is, in the respect of those shared norms.

What Rorty meant to assert when he stated the essence of his pragmatist conception of normativity is, then, that (paraphrasing his definition) ‘rationality and epistemic authority is to be explained by reference to what the social practices *we are engaged in* let us say’, i.e. by reference to the norms, the values and interests that constitute the justificatory practice we are engaged in, and that, *as generally is the case*, we share with other people. The epistemologically relevant point is the ethnocentric, and not relativist, one that normativity does not rest on a property acquired by a direct confrontation with reality as it is in itself, but on the different ungrounded assumptions on the basis of which the different social groups judge the rightness and correctness of statements. There is no hint of the idea that the source of epistemic authority is the consensus amongst the majority of the members of our culture.

Of course, the majority of the members of a culture – always intended as a group of people sharing the same practice of justification and engaging in

‘normal’ discourses – *usually* will agree on what is right or wrong. But this is another matter altogether, it is not a matter of epistemic authority. This general agreement on judgments is just the criterion on the basis of which we establish that some persons share the same normative practice and belong to the same social group. The agreement of the majority of the members of a certain social group is thus merely the criterion of the sharing of the same *practice of right and wrong*, it is not the criterion itself of *what is right and what is wrong*. This means that, although there is nothing that speaks against the possibility that the majority of the members of a social group might be *wrong*, we cannot make sense of *most* of the people *sharing the same* normative practice being wrong *most of the time*, precisely because the criterion by which we establish who shares the same practice with whom is a substantial convergence *over time* on the same judgments of right and wrong. Hence, if over a long *enough* period of time we do not find a convergence of judgments between people, we are usually inclined to conclude that these people, after all, are engaged in different, possibly conflicting, practices of right and wrong.

If this turned out to be the case, we would be facing a dissent substantially different from that occurring between people sharing the same practice of justification, because, as opposed to the latter case, here there is no neutral normative ground to which the conflicting parties could turn to in order to settle the disagreement. In this case we would be facing that kind of situation that Rorty – again following Kuhn – calls ‘abnormal discourse’, where it is not possible to resolve discursive/normative contrasts other than ethnocentrically, that is, by turning to the same norms of the practice we are engaged in and whose validity is being questioned.

When Putnam observes that “the phenomenon of the controversial, of what cannot be settled to the satisfaction of everyone who is ‘linguistically competent’, is however ubiquitous” (Putnam 1992a: 76), he thus correctly remarks that “Rorty will of course say that such sentences [the controversial ones] are not part of ‘normal’ discourse, that to call them true is only to ‘pay an empty compliment’” (ibid: 77). However, Rorty will say this for exactly the same pragmatist reason that induces Putnam to write that ‘what is right to say in a given context cannot always be established to everyone’s satisfaction; but it’s nonetheless the right thing to say’ (ibid). It is the right thing to say because we do not have any other criterion of right and wrong except our own particular ethnocentric ones, although they cannot be established to unanimous satisfaction. Hence, it seems that Putnam cannot use Rorty’s allegiance of the endorsing use of truth in circumstances of abnormal discourse as evidence of the relativism of Rorty’s ethnocentrism, unless he is also ready

to admit that, for the same reason, his own pragmatic realism should be regarded as relativist too.

Focusing on Putnam's appeal to the phenomenon of the controversial as a critique to Rorty will enable us to shed some light on the misunderstanding that leads Putnam to think that Rorty holds the 'majority consensus' conception of truth. Consider, in fact, Putnam's remark after the passage in which he characterized – thinking in this way to criticise Rorty's relativism in its own terms – the desideratum of objectivity as independence of the opinion of the majority. He there says: "This feature of our notion of truth (and also of our notion of warrant) [its independence of the majority opinion], is one that cultural relativist themselves rely on, one that they themselves cannot help relying on in their practice. For the relativist, after all, knows perfectly well that the majority of his cultural peers do not accept his relativist views. But he does not conclude that his views must therefore be false, because that he feels that it is irrelevant to the question of truth (and to the question of warrant) of those views" (Putnam 1988: 109).

Putnam cannot use this remark to criticise Rorty's conception of normativity because the sense in which Rorty refers to our cultural peers when he formulates his conception of normativity is not the same sense in which Putnam refers to our cultural peers when he points out the phenomenon of the controversial. Putnam is here referring to a broader sense of culture (or society), the sense according to which members of a culture (or society) do not need to share the same standards of rational justification. This is the sense in which we usually refer to pluralistic societies, where people live together holding different opinions on the right or wrong.

Yet, in formulating his conception of normativity Rorty was referring to society in the stricter sense of a group of persons sharing the same practices of justification. In this sense, for example, it is not true that the relativist, whoever she is, *knows* that the majority of her cultural peers do not accept her relativist view, because her cultural peers, *in this restricted sense* of culture, should be taken to be the persons who share her same relativist conception of normativity. It is exactly to this same restricted sense of society which Putnam refers when he affirms that 'rightness and wrongness in a language game is internal to that language game'; when he defends, that is, the central idea of his internal realism that, once we abandon the project of stepping outside our belief and language to see reality as it *really* is, we still can distinguish between true and false, and make all the normative judgments we normally do. We can do so once we have a language; i.e. once we participate in a particular language game, in a particular practice of justification, *in a particular social group*, in the strict sense of 'social group.'

It is between the cultural peers in this restricted sense of social group that there is, *most of the time*, general agreement. However we have seen that this general agreement is not a criterion of truth, it does not exclude that the majority of people may be wrong; it is just the criterion for telling whether people share the same practice. And, of course, if we apply Rorty's first kind of assertions about normativity to a society intended in the broad sense, as a community of people having different opinions, then the idea that most of the people agree on what is true most of the time, will appear false and absurd, for in these *broad* societies there is no shared normative background. But by now we can be confident that reading this idea in Rorty's conception of the source of normative authority is not the correct way to understand it.

I think that Putnam is led to this misreading by overlooking the difference between the first and the second kind of assertions that Rorty makes about normativity. It is in fact when Rorty turns to the thesis that objectivity consists in intersubjective agreement that he refers to the broader sense of society. Although Rorty endorses the values and institutions of democratic pluralistic societies, however, when he says that objectivity is nothing other than intersubjective agreement he is not identifying the source of normative authority in the opinion assented to by the majority of the members of the society, he is not identifying the majority-vote procedure with an heuristic procedure for knowledge. He is not saying that only those statements on which there is general consensus are true. The criterion of truth remains, for him, the one specified by the first kind of expressions we have considered, that is, the satisfaction of the particular norms at the basis of one's procedures of justification, even if these are followed only by a small proportion of persons in a *broad* society.

By identifying objectivity with intersubjectivity Rorty is doing something else. He is giving a reading, coherent with his holistic and conversational conception of normativity, of a particular feature of our normative notions, what we may call their *absolutistic* or *universalistic* character. This is the character underlying our conviction that there is *only one* truth for everyone at any time and place, that points of view different from ours do not get things right, and that thus motivates our attempts at persuading the others of our own standards of normativity. Since Rorty's conception of normativity, as much as Putnam's, denies the possibility of appealing to a neutral order of things antecedently given to us upon which to ground our convictions and practices, it also denies that these attempts at rational persuasion have an *a priori* guarantee of success. And this means that on his anti-foundationalist reading there is no other neutral ground of agreement on which to set the dispute between conflicting practices except the *eventual*, but

*not guaranteed a priori*, concrete shared ground which the persons engaged in these conflicting practices might come up with in their pragmatic conversational attempts at rational discussion. It means that there is no other way to instantiate the absoluteness or universality of our normative notions except through the concrete shaping, and universal sharing, of one and the same practice of justification, and not through the discovery of the unconceptualized reality that being independent of our conceptualisations of it *a fortiori* would be the same for everyone, whatever we may think of it. That *this* is the import of his intersubjectivity thesis Rorty makes it clear when he claims that: “For pragmatists the desire for objectivity is not the desire to escape the limitations of one’s own community, but simply the desire for as much intersubjective agreement as possible, the desire to extend the reference of ‘us’ as far as we can” (Rorty 1991: 23).

Of course, it does not mean that if agreement does not occur our practices of justification lose normative force and thus we are forced to embrace relativism. As Rorty says: “Truth is, to be sure, an absolute notion, in the following sense: ‘true for me but not for you’ and ‘true in my culture but not in yours’ are weird, pointless locutions. So is ‘true then, but not now’” (Rorty 1998: 2).

These are weird and pointless assertions to make because according to Rorty’s ethnocentric view, (as well as to Putnam’s internalist one, as we will see better later), absoluteness or universality requires that what is regarded true by you (or what was regarded true then) is, exactly, *regarded as true only* by those who share the same standard of justification *on the basis of* which you (or the people of that time used to) distinguish what is true from what is false. For me, your truth, or the old truth, is a falsehood, since I cannot judge but on the basis of the norms of my current evaluative practice. What is true for you, or what was true then, cannot be as true *for me* as that that is true *for me now*.

Hence, by means of the intersubjectivity thesis Rorty is not doing anything else than restating his opposition to both sides of the unintelligible notion of the God’s-Eye point of view: the metaphysical realist’s conviction that we are getting closer to the ‘absolute conception of the world’, and the opposite relativistic and idealist denials that ‘truth’ and ‘real’ are absolute notions even in the above ethnocentric/internalist sense. He is showing that, just as our normative and realist talks remain untouched by the demise of metaphysics, so does the sense of absoluteness or universality characteristic of those talks; but that now, instead of pointing towards an uninterpreted reality beyond our practices, and hence the same for everyone, the sense of uni-

versality is taken to point, ethnocentrically, towards the sharing of the same evaluative practice by everyone.

#### 4.3. *Idealized rational acceptability*

I have advanced the hypothesis that Putnam is led to attribute to Rorty the ‘majority consensus’ conception of truth because he conflates Rorty’s statements of his pragmatist conception of normativity with his pragmatist formulation of the universalistic character of normative notions. We have seen that, in doing so, he is led to take the assertion that correctness and wrongness makes sense only within a practice of justification, and the related circumstance that, *generally*, the opinion accepted by most of the participants of a practice of justification is the correct opinion in the light of the norms of that practice, as the corrosive assertion that the correct practice of justification, (and thus the correct opinion *in absolute*) is the practice which *happens* to be played (the opinion which happens to be accepted) by the majority of the people. In this way Putnam is led to miss the crucial parallels between their conceptions of normativity. He misses that Rorty’s rejection of metaphysical realism is not being conducted from within the metaphysical framework, but is instead a rejection of the whole metaphysical imaginary altogether, of both metaphysical realism and radical relativism and anti-realism. In particular he misses that Rorty, as he is doing for example with his intersubjective thesis, accounts in the same way for that same characteristic of objectivity that Putnam himself regards as an essential desideratum for any adequate account of truth, and of normativity in general, i.e. truth’s independence from opinion.

In fact, independence from the majority opinion is only a particular instance of the more general requirement of the independence of truth from opinion *in general*, i.e. the more general distinction between *ordo essendi* and *ordo conoscendi*. It is this more general distinction that Putnam at the end believes Rorty is sweeping away. Since his first retreat from metaphysical realism, for instance, he asserted that “the only direction I myself see as making sense, might be a species of pragmatism, ‘internal’ realism: a realism which recognizes a difference between ‘*p*’ and ‘I think that *p*’, between being *right*, and merely thinking one is right without locating that objectivity in either transcendental correspondence or mere consensus” (Putnam 1983a: 225)

Now, there are two ways of taking this ‘is-seems’ distinction. We can look at it from within a society intended as a group of people sharing the same practices of justification, and in this sense we have seen that Rorty has no problem in accounting for it, as he acknowledges that the “fact that an ‘is-

seems' distinction is built into any discursive practice" is being saved from the traditional appearance-reality distinction. Alternatively, we can look at it from outside our practices of justification. This way of looking at the 'is-seems' distinction gives us a broader sense in which truth can be taken to be independent of opinion, a sense that, after all, could be compatible with an attribution of relativism to Rorty's ethnocentric conception of epistemic authority even when this is correctly read as referring to a group of people sharing the same norms of rationality. This is the sense behind our fallibilistic intuitions that, what is *now* considered from our current practices of justification to be rationally acceptable, may in the *future* turn out to have just *seemed to be* so, and thus our norms of rationality replaced by better ones. In this sense truth is taken to be transcending even the norms of rationality shaping our practices of justification. It is on the correct interpretation of this practices-transcending aspect of normativity, dangerously teetering on the edge of metaphysics, that the debate between Rorty and Putnam ultimately turns to.

Putnam accounts for this transcendent aspect by formulating his conception of truth as '*idealized* rational acceptability'. Trying to distance himself from Rorty's claim that 'nothing counts as justification unless by reference to what we already accept, and that there is no way to get outside our beliefs and our language so as to find some test other than coherence' (Rorty 1979: 178), he formulated his position in the following, *apparently* different, terms: "'Truth' in an internalist view, is some sort of 'idealized' rational acceptability – some sort of ideal coherence of our beliefs with each other and with our experiences *as those experiences are themselves represented by our belief system* – and not correspondence with mind-independent or discourse-independent 'states of affairs'. There is no God's-Eye point of view we can know or usefully imagine; there are only the various points of view of actual persons reflecting various interests and purposes that their descriptions and theories subserve" (Putnam 1981: 49-50).

The central point in stressing the *idealized* character of truth is to avoid a particular form of relativism, that to which James and Dewey, for example, sometimes tended to give into, and that Putnam thinks Rorty is still giving in to, namely, the relativism that falls into the naturalistic fallacy of reducing truth to coherence with the standards of rational acceptability of the different persons' practices. "To reject the idea that there is a coherent 'external' perspective, a theory which is simply true 'in itself', apart from all possible observers", Putnam is in fact eager to make clear, "is not to *identify* truth with rational assertability."



However, if we look at the reasons he gives for this transcendent character of truth they do not seem to differ from those behind Rorty's account of its absolute character and of its cautionary use (see note 1). Thus, Putnam continues the last clarification by saying that 'truth cannot *be* rational acceptability because truth is supposed to be a property of a statement that *cannot be lost*, whereas justification can be lost' (ibid: 55), which very much reminds us of Rorty's claim that "'true for me but not for you' and 'true in my culture but not in yours' are weird, pointless locutions" and that "so is 'true then, but not now'"; especially if we consider that Putnam specifies that his last remark *does not* show "that the externalist view is right after all". Indeed it is this absolute character of truth that Putnam regards as the second of the two key ideas of his idealization theory of truth. This, he says, is the idea that "truth is expected to be stable and 'convergent'; if both a statement and its negation could be 'justified', even if conditions were as ideal as one could hope to make them, there is no sense in thinking of the statement as *having* a truth-value" (ibid: 56).<sup>2</sup>

If we then turn to the first key idea of the idealization theory of truth, and compare it with Rorty's account of the cautionary use of truth, we can conclusively acknowledge the lack of contrast between their conceptions of normativity. In fact, Putnam tells us, that idea is the belief "that truth is independent of justification here and now, but not independent of *all* justification. To claim a statement is true is to claim it could be justified" (ibid).

By making this point Putnam shows that, by referring to 'ideal epistemic conditions' in order to account for the practice-transcendent character of truth, he is not falling into the other form of reductionism that haunted classical pragmatism, Peirce's reduction of truth to the opinion *fated* to be held at the end of the inquiry. Taking this Peircian step would take us back into the metaphysical idea of an intrinsic nature of the world that our intellectual faculties would be able to represent correctly. But, as the last passage quoted makes clear, Putnam is not making this externalist step after all. The absoluteness of truth, and thus its transcendence from our current norms of rational acceptability, which Putnam is referring to, is in fact still internal to the dimension of practice, it does not escape from our pragmatist justifications.

What the two key ideas of the idealization theory of truth taken together show is, then, that even if the realist intuition which an adequate account of normativity must preserve is the idea that 'a statement can be rationally ac-

---

<sup>2</sup> Of course if both a statement and its negation could be justified *within* a *same* normative practice.

ceptable *at a time* but not *true*', this account still has to balance that intuition with the recognition that 'there is an extremely close connection between the notions of *truth* and *rationality*, that the only criterion for what is a fact is what it is *rational* to accept' (Putnam 1981: x).

Putnam's idealization theory of truth does not differ from Rorty's account of the irreducible and transcendent character of truth. In fact, also according to Rorty's account of the cautionary use of our normative notions truth cannot be reduced to our *current* practices of justification without this meaning that we must take it as transcending practice *tout court*. His opinion is that "that the entire force of the cautionary use of 'true' is to point out that justification is relative to an audience and that we can never exclude the possibility that some better audience might exist, or come to exist, to whom a belief that is justifiable to us would not be justifiable" (Rorty 1998: 2). In particular, he takes the cautionary use to be "a gesture toward future generations – toward the 'better us' to whom the contradictory of what now seems unobjectionable may have come, via appropriate means, to seem better" (ibid: 60). It is exactly in this ethnocentric sense that Rorty, in the following passage, balances Putnam's talk of 'idealized rational acceptability' with his 'naturalistic fallacy' argument: "I cannot see what 'idealized rational acceptability' can mean except 'rational 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 would like to be" (ibid: 52).

Putnam shows his agreement with this reading when, after having specified that we do not only change our norms and standards 'but that doing so is often an improvement', he gives to the question 'An improvement judged from where?' the ethnocentric answer: "From within our picture of the world, of course" (Putnam 1981: 26).

By way of concluding our investigation on the convergence between Putnam and Rorty's conceptions of normativity we can note that by suggesting an ethnocentric interpretation of Putnam's idealization theory of truth Rorty intended to answer Putnam's relativist reading of a passage in his *Consequences of Pragmatism* where he maintained 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" (Rorty 1981: xxxvii).

Putnam thought that this passage "amounts to a rejection, rather than a clarification, of the notion of 'reforming' the ways we are doing and thinking", because, he says, "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” (Putnam 1990: 24). This logical independence of the value of a reform from our opinion, though, does nothing but restate the transcendence of truth from our current justifications which is here at stake, and therefore it cannot be taken as supporting the reading that Rorty, in the incriminating passage, is jeopardizing the critical faculty of our thought. Especially because, as we are now able to fully appreciate, in that passage Rorty meant to give an account, in pragmatist terms, exactly of such transcendence, in *all its generality*.

From my reading, in fact, what Rorty meant to claim was that the absence of a metaphysical ground does not prevent us from evaluating, reforming and improving our beliefs, theories and vocabularies. Such an absence obliges us only to be ethnocentric, to regard as better what best conforms to *our* practices of justification. For this reason if we try, *now*, to envisage possible future progress, we are able to do it only by reference to *our current* standards of rational acceptability, that is, we must consider it as a progress of *our* practices, as a walking towards ‘us at our best.’ Yet, and this is what I mean by saying that Rorty intended to account for truth’s independence of opinion in *all its generality*, the future may have ‘undreamt of alternatives’ in store for us, for, as both philosophers acknowledge, ‘not only new evidence, or new hypotheses, but a *whole new vocabulary*, may come along’ (Rorty 1991: 23), since ‘language (like imagination) has no limits.’ As Putnam makes the same point: “not only may we find out that statements we now regard as justified are false, but we may even find out that procedures we now regard as justificatory are not, and that different justification procedures are better” (Putnam 1983a: 85).

Namely, we may change not only a belief or a theory, but the very standards by which we establish what beliefs or theories are rationally acceptable. Because of this possibility, it is not always easy to imagine the character of our future practices of justification, of our future ‘us’. This means that if we try to place ourselves in some distant future practices, we will not be able to do this placement from any *particular* point of view. We know that we (or, more plausibly, our descendents) will be playing some language game or another, but we are not able now to say which one. *In this sense* we say that future reforms will *seem* better than their predecessor, because we are not yet able to appreciate the details of those future points of view to a sufficient degree to say, as we (or our descendents) will legitimately say, that they *are* better.

I believe that we have thus shown that Rorty agrees with Putnam that ‘reason is both immanent (not to be found outside of concrete language

games and institution) and transcendent (a regulative idea that we use to criticize the conduct of all activities and institutions)' (1983a: 234); and that Putnam agrees with Rorty that, "all [a pragmatist] can mean by 'transcendent' is 'getting beyond our present practices by a gesture in the direction of our possibly different future practices'" (1998: 61). We have come to see, that is, that both converge on the same balance between the two facts that, as Putnam puts it just after the last passage quoted, "talk of what is 'right' and 'wrong' in any area only makes sense against the background of an *inherited tradition*; but traditions themselves can be *criticized*." The same balance that, with the appreciation of Rorty, Putnam expressed in the conclusive remark of *Reason, Truth, and History* by pointing out that "we can only hope to produce a more rational *conception* of rationality or a better *conception* of morality if we operate from *within* our tradition (with its echoes of the Greek agora, of Newton, and so on, in the case of rationality, and with its echoes of scripture, of the philosophers, of the democratic revolutions, and so on, in the case of morality); but this is not at all to say that all is entirely reasonable and well with the conceptions we now have. We are not trapped in individual solipsistic hells, but invited to engage in a truly human dialogue; one which combines collectivity with individual responsibility" (Putnam 1981: 216).

We can therefore confidently claim, thus replying to the criticism that follows this passage, that Rorty's assertion that 'there is only the dialogue' differs from radical relativism in the same way that Putnam's own assertion that 'we are invited to engage in a truly human dialogue' does. In fact, this invitation coincides with Rorty's exhortation to put aside the metaphysical interpretation of the absolute and ideal character of truth – the interpretation that makes us posit a *Grenzbegriff* to our dialogues and to our inquiries beyond the contingent dimension of practice in which only our thoughts and actions can be carried through – and '[to accept] the contingent character of our starting-points', 'to accept our inheritance from, and our conversation with, our fellow-humans as our only source of guidance' (Putnam 1981: 166). And this exhortation amounts to the recognition that "there are no constraints on inquiry save conversational ones – no wholesale constraints derived from the nature of the objects, or of the mind, or of language, but only those retail constraints provided by the remarks of our fellow-inquirers" (ibid: 165).

It amounts to the recognition that the process of rational criticism of our practices is carried out through the Neureathian activity of placing ourselves in other points of view, in other practices of justification, and seeing whether these satisfy our basic, yet always revisable, intuitions, needs and values better than our current ones. It amounts to the recognition that, as Putnam

puts it, “we are standing within a tradition, and trying simultaneously to learn what in that tradition we are prepared to recommend to other traditions *and* to see what in that tradition may be inferior – inferior either to what other traditions have to offer, or to the best we may capable of” (Putnam 1990: 178).

I cannot see what, as Putnam himself once remarked, to hanker for more than this responsible commitment to a rational confrontation with practices, points of view and communities different from ours can mean, except nostalgia for ‘our old unsatisfiable yearning for Absolutes?’ (Putnam 1983a: 204).

## 5. *Conclusion: a viable anti-foundationalism*

I believe that the above clarification of the debate between Putnam and Rorty and of their respective views of normativity contains the necessary resources for elaborating a viable anti-foundationalist view of normative validity capable to eschew the corrosive epistemic nihilist and anarchist excesses of radical scepticism and relativism: i.e. nothing or anything goes.

In particular, it is my conviction that this view enables us to appreciate how it is possible to maintain a place for normativity in a disenchanted world by tracing three key, and often overlooked, distinctions that I have shown to be shared by both neo-pragmatists: 1) between a *physical* and a *grammatical* sense of the impossibility of the foundationalist project of metaphysics; 2) between a conception of the universalistic moment of normativity in terms of *justificatory ground* for our normative judgments as opposed to their *scope of application*; 3) between a conception of the transcendent aspirations of normativity as *self-transcendence* as opposed to *self-reflexivity*.

In this conclusive section I will clarify further, where it is necessary, such distinctions and illustrate how they enable us to answer to the charges of scepticism and relativism.

### 5.1. *Grammatical vs. physical impossibility*

As we have seen above, the Wittgensteinian expression ‘grammatical impossibility’ conveys the consideration that the impossibility of the foundationalist project of metaphysics should not be regarded as due to some physical deficit in our human cognitive setting, which could in principle be overcome by some technological advancement, but as inherent to the very concept of reality towards which it aims in its search for certainty.

The two American philosophers by tracing this distinction enable us to realize that that it is only if we conceive of the impossibility of metaphysics as of the physical order, and thus still remain in the grasp of the received view of normativity validity as adherence to the dictates of reality as it is in itself, that from the rejection of possibility to reach the God's-eye view of that reality we will be led to radical sceptic corrosive conclusions (see for instance Putnam 1990: 22, Rorty 1991: 202).

If, instead, we break free from the metaphysical framework altogether we open the way for an alternative conception of normativity that places the source of normative authority in that same dimension of practice, laden with our values, needs and interests, which foundationalists attempt to transcend. In the light of this pragmatist conception of normativity we are then able to appreciate that metaphysical neutrality does not have to entail normative neutrality; that normative validity does not have to rest on universal transcendent ground; that the fact that our views, principles and practices ultimately rest on some ungrounded set of fundamental – yet *not foundational* – beliefs and values, is not an impediment to the exercise of our reflective and critical faculties, to the formation of more or less precise ideas of what is right and wrong, better and worst in any circumstance of our lives. It is on the basis of this pragmatist epistemic ethnocentrism that Rorty and Putnam are capable to account for the universalistic and transcendent aspirations of normativity without having to relapse into metaphysical realism.

### 5.2. *Ground vs. scope*

The two neo-pragmatists enable us to offer an anti-foundationalist account of the universalistic aspirations of our normative notions by helping us distinguish between the *justificatory ground for* and the *scope of application* of our normative judgments. With this distinction in mind we can finally realize that the fact that we cannot obtain universal *ground for* our views and practices does not mean that we cannot or should not hold them to be valid, and thus *apply*, universally. As Putnam (2003: 45) puts it, ‘recognizing that our judgments claim objective validity and recognizing that they are shaped by a particular culture are not incompatible’; for, as Rorty (1998: 2) points out, “granted that ‘true’ is an absolute term, its conditions of application will always be relative.” Normative claims, then, are indeed universal, but their universality is culturally grounded, not metaphysical. They are universal in *scope* not in *ground*.

Thanks to this distinction we are in a position to answer two criticisms traditionally associated to the charge of relativism, those of self-contradiction

and of violation of the law of non-contradiction. On the one side, in fact, we are able to see that a coherent anti-foundationalist will assert that anti-foundationalism is the correct epistemology (the *universally valid* one) *only* according to (on the *ground of*) its ethnocentric view of normativity, that is, on ethnocentric grounds. Equally, we can appreciate that anti-foundationalists have no problems in acknowledging that foundationalists are legitimated in maintaining that the *universally valid* conception of normativity is the metaphysical one, yet only on the ground of *their* foundationalist standpoint. From the anti-foundationalist standpoint the foundationalist conception of normative validity remains a *grammatical* impossibility. This assertion of impossibility, however, does not lead anti-foundationalist to contradict themselves after all, as every grammatical claim, on their standpoint, rest on our *ethnocentric* grammatical intuitions.

On the other side, we are able to understand that it is only if we blur the distinction between ‘scope of’ and ‘ground for’ normativity, as this is usually conveyed in our normative language by the distinct expressions ‘*true for*’ and ‘*true according to*’, that from a circumstance of normative conflict we will be led to the contradictory statement that ‘*p is true for A (not according to A) and non-p is true for B (not according to B)*’, intending with it to say the assertion *p* ‘is *at the same time – on the same ground – both true (for A) and false (for B).*’ If, however, we observe the above conceptual and linguistic distinctions our inference from ‘*p is true for A*’ and ‘*p is false for B*’ to ‘*p is both true and false*’ should be reformulated as follows: ‘*p is true for everyone according to A*’ and ‘*p is false for everyone according to B*’, therefore ‘*p is universally true according to A and universally false according to B.*’ No contradiction is involved here, but only a conflict of standards of normative validity; and the acknowledgement of disagreement, no matter how fundamental, is surely not the same as radical relativism. Indeed, this formulation clearly illustrates how normative disagreement, no matter how fundamental, presupposes the normative force of our critical faculties rather than corroding it, as it is a conflict between universal claims of normative validity.

### 5.3. *Self-transcendence vs. self-reflexivity*

Such an ethnocentric epistemology not only does not violate the law of non-contradiction and does not contradict itself, it also maintains intact the distinction between *ordo essendi* and *ordo conoscendi* that anti-foundationalism is also typically criticised of dissolving. The valuable contribution of the two American neo-pragmatists here lies in their distinction between *current* justificatory practices and practices of justification *tout court*, as formulated for

instance in Putnam's description of the first of the two key ideas of his idealization theory of truth (Putnam 1981: 56) and in Rorty's account of the cautionary use we make of 'true' and all normative notions in general (1998: 22).

As I have observed above, by distinguishing between justification *hic et nunc* and justification *sans phrase* the two American neo-pragmatists allow us to appreciate that the transcendent dimension of normativity does not require us 'to step outside our skins and compare ourselves with something absolute' (Rorty 1982: xix), but only entails our capacity to 'get beyond our present practices by a gesture in the direction of our possibly different future practices' (Rorty 1998: 61). They allow us to appreciate that 'reason is both immanent (not to be found outside of concrete language games and institution) and transcendent (a regulative idea that we use to criticize the conduct of all activities and institutions)' (Putnam 1983a: 234).

With this distinction in mind we can then understand that the circumstance that we can always make cautionary claims of the sort 'you *think* p is true, but it *may not be* true' does not require relying on the metaphysical distinction between reality 'in itself' and appearance. We do indeed distinguish between 'thinking that x is y' and 'x being y', but this distinction can only make sense if made from within concrete practices of justification, current ethnocentric practices of right and wrong. It cannot be applied meaningfully to whole practices of justification, for, on the anti-foundationalist view, there is no other reality or standard of justification to resort to in our attempts at proving the truth of our overall normative settings than the very one conveyed by our whole set of normative standards and justificatory practices itself.

From this epistemic ethnocentric consideration, however, we should not be misled to conclude that we cannot endorse a self-reflexive stance toward our current normative settings, and thus that we are trapped within our normative traditions. According to the anti-foundationalist predicament we surely can reform and change our practices of justification in any of their part whenever there is need to, but like the seamen on Neurath's boat, *only* afloat and piecemeal, always having to stand on some part of it in order not to sink into unintelligibility. In this way, through a continuous process of piecemeal reform, we might even end up within a normative standpoint fundamentally different from the one we started with. But, still, we will be making our normative judgements from within a particular, ultimately circular, practice of justification, for, as Putnam insists, even though 'traditions can be *criticized*', "talk of what is 'right' and 'wrong' in any area only makes sense against the background of an *inherited tradition*" (ibid). The transcendent aspirations of our normative notions, therefore, do not require standing on



transcendent reason, but can safely rest on the *self-reflexive* use of immanent reason.

### *Bibliography*

- Bernstein, R. (1983): *Beyond Objectivity and Relativism*. Oxford: Blackwell
- Kuhn, T. (1962): *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago: University Chicago Press
- Neurath, O. (1959): 'Protocol Sentences'. In *Logical Positivism*. Ayer A. J. ed. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press
- Putnam, H. (1978): *Meaning and the Moral Sciences*. London: Routledge & Keagan Paul.
- (1981): *Reason, Truth, and History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- (1983a): *Realism and Reason*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- (1983b): 'On Truth'. In *How Many Questions? Essays in Honor of Sidney Morgenbesser*, Cauman L. S., Levi I. et al. eds. Indianapolis: Hackett, pp.35-56.
- (1987): *The Many Faces of Realism*. LeSalle, Ill.: Open Court.
- (1988): *Representation and Reality*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT.
- (1990): *Realism with a Human Face*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- (1992a): *Renewing Philosophy*. Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press.
- (1992b): 'Truth, Activation Vectors and Possession Conditions for Concepts'. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, vol.52, pp.431-47.
- (1994): *Words and Life*. Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press.
- (1995): *Pragmatism: An Open Question*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- (2003): *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy*. Cambridge, Mass. and London, Harvard University Press.
- Quine, W. V.-O.: (1953): *From a Logical Point of View*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Rorty, R. (1979): *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Oxford: Blackwell
- (1982): *Consequences of Pragmatism*. Brighton: Harvester Press
- (1991): *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth: philosophical papers vol.1*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- (1992): 'Putnam on Truth'. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, vol.52, pp.415-18.

— (1997): ‘What Do You Do When They Call You a ‘Relativist?’’. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, vol.57, pp.172-77.

— (1998): *Truth and Progress* , Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Sellars, W. (1997): *Empiricism & the Philosophy of Mind* Cambridge. Mass. And London: Harvard University Press.

Williams, B. (1978): *Descartes: The Project of Pure Enquiry*. Brighton: Harvester Press.