Realism and Idealism
Internal realism

Owen Griffiths
oeg21@cam.ac.uk

St John's College, Cambridge

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Easy answers

- ▶ Last week, we considered the metaontological debate between Quine and Carnap.
- ▶ Quine put forward a methodology for approaching ontology and Carnap sought to undermine it with his toolkit of linguistic frameworks and internal/ external questions.
- ▶ A Carnapian approach can, and often is, applied to the realism/ antirealism debate more generally.
- ▶ It can be used to show that there is no real disagreement: the two agree about contentious statements read internally and, externally, the statements are meaningless.
- ▶ I ended by warning caution against such apparently easy answers.
- ▶ Today we think about why.

The Cartesianism principle

- ▶ Perhaps Carnapian methods can be used to deflate the Independence and Correspondence principles, but how about the Cartesianism principle?

  Cartesianism Even an ideal theory might be radically false.

- ▶ Carnap would have rejected this principle. When we are discussing the truth or falsity of a theory, we are asking an external question. This is either nonsensical or, more charitably, pragmatic.

- ▶ If we take it as a pragmatic question, it amounts to: should we endorse this theory?

- ▶ It is confused, then, to say that a theory is *ideal* (and so, surely, worthy of endorsement) but false.

- ▶ Such sceptical hypotheses are ruled out by Carnap, largely because talk of the truth of a theory has been ruled out.

Internal realism

- ▶ Putnam too considered the rejection of the Cartesianism principle in response to the model-theoretic argument.
- ▶ He first presented the model-theoretic argument in his 'Realism and Reason' (1977) and, in the same paper, introduced a position called 'internal realism'.
- ▶ As Tim Button (*The Limits of Realism*, Part B) is careful to present, there is no one position that Putnam calls 'internal realism' throughout his career. Button distinguishes three positions in particular.
- ▶ What the three all have in common, however, is the rejection of the Cartesianism principle.
- ▶ It is understandable that Putnam would reject this principle: recall it was the Catresianism principle that landed external realism in trouble by entailing incoherent semantic scepticism.

Scepticism

- Internal realism accepts Independence and Correspondence, but rejects Cartesianism.
- But what exactly does it mean to reject the Cartesianism principle, and how does the internal realist justify their rejection?
- There are many forms of scepticism. We can be sceptics about meaning, reference, the external world, etc.
- Different internal realist positions can therefore be generated by varying the amount of scepticism they are willing to tolerate.
- The external realist entertains all forms of scepticism. But we saw that they can't possibly be right, since semantic scepticism is self-refuting: it cannot even be formulated.

Putnam's BIVs

- Recall Putnam's response to BIV scepticism.
- The BIV hypothesis is that everyone, always and everywhere, is a permanently envatted brain.
- He argues against this scenario as follows:
  1. The BIV word 'brain' doesn't refer to brains.
  2. My word 'brain' refers to brains.
  ∴ 3. I am not a BIV
- Premise 1 is defended by a modest semantic externalism.
- And the sceptic needs premise 2 to be true, otherwise they cannot formulate their position.

A BIV variant

- Putnam's argument here seems sound, as far as it goes. But it doesn't go all that far.
- We can easily vary the case so that the same argument is no longer sound.
- Consider this scenario: a few seconds' ago, everyone on Earth became an envatted brain.

A BIV variant

- ► Now consider the argument again:
  1. The BIV word 'brain' doesn't refer to brains.
  2. My word 'brain' refers to brains.
  ∴ 3 I am not a BIV
- ► After the envatting, it doesn't seem like 1 is likely to be true.
- ► After all, the BIV will have spent most of its life interacting with brains normally, so the causal links do seem to be in place.
- ► Putnam's argument can, therefore, show that we are not eternally envatted brains, or that we have not been recently envatted.

BIVs more generally

- We can clearly generate infinitely many sceptical scenarios. For example, consider the case where everyone was envatted x seconds ago, for all values of x.
- Some of these sceptical scenarios we can probably solve, e.g. when we were envatted so long ago that the majority of our information about brains really is from brains-in-the-image.
- Some of these sceptical scenarios we probably cannot solve, e.g. when we were envatted very recently.
- It's not at all clear where the cut-off is, and it seems arbitrary indeed to assume that there is one.

Internal and external realism

- This is, of course, only a brief overview of the range of sceptical hypotheses that we can cook up.
- There is enough here, however, to see that the extent to which we should accept, and the extent to which we should reject, Cartesianism is unclear.
- We shouldn't accept Cartesianism outright, as the external realist does, since many sceptical hypotheses can be refuted.
- But then we shouldn't reject it outright, as the internal realist does, since some sceptical hypothesese cannot be refuted.
- If we are a realist, then, it seems we should place ourselves somewhere between the poles of internal and external realism.

Back to Carnap

- Carnap, we have seen, rules out scepticism: it makes no sense to ask whether an ideal theory could be false.
- And neo-Carnapians tend to characterise their position in response to scepticism.
- In effect, they rule out all sceptical hypotheses: we are not misled, since to be misled would be to speak nonsense.
- But what does it mean to rule out sceptical hypotheses?
- We can rule out some, but certainly not all.
- Carnapians are, then, internal realists.

Conceptual relativism

- At around the same time that Putnam began to subscribe to internal realism, he began to endorse *conceptual relativism*.
- Quine endorsed a similar view, *ontological relativity*, which can be considered a version of conceptual relativism.
- Considering this view will round off our discussion of Putnam's internal realism.

Conceptual relativism

- *Relativism* is, roughly, the view that something has its properties only in virtue of a certain framework.
- Famously, moral relativism is the view that the moral properties of an act are only possessed relative to cultural standards.
- *Conceptual* relativism is a metaphysical doctrine. It is the view that the world is not *in itself* structured: human minds impose structure by applying their categories.

A mereological example

- Putnam's favourite example involves mereology: the study of parts and wholes.
- Putnam says that the example – and the approach – is inspired by Carnap.
- Consider a table with objects on it. Putnam argues that a commonsense view would count 3 objects on the table: A, B and C.
- A mereologist then comes along and argues that there are not 3 objects on the table but 7: A, B, C, $A + B$, $A + C$, $B + C$, $A + B + C$.

A mereological example

what is (by commonsense standards) the same situation can be described in many different ways, depending on how we use the words. The situation does not itself legislate how words like 'object', 'entity', and 'exist' must be used. What is wrong with the notion of objects existing 'independently' of conceptual schemes is that there are no standards for the use of even the logical notions apart from conceptual choices. (Putnam, Representation and Reality, p. 114)

Counting

- Putnam concludes from this discussion that we should be *tolerant* of the commonsense and mereological views.

- In the *Grundlagen*, Frege notes that we can only count things under concepts:

    > if I give a deck of playing cards with the words 'determine the number thereof', he does not thereby know, whether I want to find out the number of cards, or of complete games, or perhaps of the point cards in skat. ... I must add a word: card, game, or point-card. (§22)

- In this way, we may put the apparent disagreement between the commonsense theorist and the mereologist down to an ambiguous instruction.

Disagreement

- ▶ Of course, we don't want to say that they are both *correct*, since that would land us in contradiction.
- ▶ The commonsense theorist could offer the usual formalisation of 'there are exactly 3 things', the mereologist 'there are exactly 7 things', and those cannot both be true.
- ▶ Instead we should say that the commonsense theorist is correct *relative to their conceptual scheme* and the mereologist is correct relative to theirs.
- ▶ But now that we have relativized truth to conceptual schemes in this way, there is no longer any good sense in which the two sides *disagree*.
- ▶ And, as with Carnap's internal/ external distinction, if there's no disagreement, there's no real debate: we should reject mereology and other metaphysical questions.

Problems

- The problem with conceptual relativism – as with many forms of relativism – is how to formulate it in a way that is non-trivially true.

- Donald Davidson, in his well-known critique 'On the very idea of a conceptual scheme' (1973), notes the following issue:

  > *We cannot attach a clear meaning to the notion of organizing a single object (the world, nature, etc.) unless that object is understood to contain or consist in other objects. Someone whos sets out to organize a closet arranges the things in it. (1973: 14)*

Problems

- The thought is that not every notion can be scheme-relative.
- In particular, the world cannot be scheme-relative when we set about dissolving the commonsense/ mereological debate.
- To make sense of there being many ways to conceptualise the world (organize the closet), we must have a world (closet) and objects in it.

Cookie cutters

- A common metaphor is to think of the world as a lump of dough.
- To be an object in a conceptual scheme is to be a chunk of that dough, sliced out by a cookie cutter.
- The cookie cutter is a conceptual scheme.
- An object is clearly relativized to a conceptual scheme.
- But there is still just one piece of dough that transcends any conceptual scheme.

Quantifiers

- The mereologist says that there are more things than the commonsense theorist thinks.
- If the commonsense theorist thinks that they are speaking about *all* the objects, therefore, they are wrong.
- We could instead charitably think of the commonsense theorist as using restricted quantifiers.
- But then we hardly have relativization in any interesting sense.
- And we have no reason to reject the debate.

Formulating conceptual relativism

- The conceptual relativist wants to say something like the following:

  > *There is no real debate about mereology. Wherever the commonsense theorist finds objects, the mereologist finds more objects. But they don't really disagree: they are each correct relative to their conceptual scheme.*

- But the conceptual relativist must formulate their position within a conceptual scheme. And that scheme had better countenance all of the objects: in this case, the sparse commonsense objects and the abundant mereological objects.

Formulating conceptual relativism

- The conceptual relativist's scheme, therefore, had better include in its domain all of the objects in the sub-domains discussed.

- And this is exactly the scheme-transcendent position that the conceptual relativist denies.

- The point generalises: give me a conceptual relativism R that says both A and B are correct relative to their schemes. R must be formulated in a scheme that transcends A and B. This transcendence is ruled out by R itself.

Conclusions

- That concludes our discussion of realism and antirealism.
- The commonsense position of external realism cannot be correct: the model-theoretic argument showed us that.
- Antirealism stands in direct opposition to external realism: it takes reality to be in part constructed by human minds, and so rejects bivalence.
- Its formulation is not easy and, especially when developed in an inferentialist direction, its cogency is unclear.

Conclusions

- Internal realism stands somewhere in between but it rejects Cartesianism and we have seen that this can be done in infinitely many ways.

- Alongside these views are various attempts to undermine metaphysics: Carnap's external/ internal questions and conceptual relativism being two major examples. These are not easy views to formulate, though.

- It's surprising, too, that the themes of semantics and scepticism have been so utterly central to these metametaphysical debates.