PUTNAM, TRUTH AND INFORMAL LOGIC

Jeffrey L. Kasser & Daniel H. Cohen

The discourse of Argumentation Theory, like every other vital philosophical discussion, can appear from a distance to be a cacophony of different voices, with every single one speaking at cross-purposes to each and every other. A closer inspection reveals identifiable fault lines running through the field separating some voices from others – the rhetoricians from the dialecticians, for example, and both of them from the logicians – but still not enough organization to make all that noise into a symphony. It would seem a foolish optimism to think that what is necessary is the addition of yet another voice. However, when the voice belongs to Hilary Putnam, philosophically good things happen.

Throughout his career, Putnam has repeatedly struck notes that resonate with what others say about argumentation. His insights on commensurability and revisability, his analyses of meaning and rationality, and his articulation of internal realism all bear importantly on the processes of critical reasoning. One good point of entry is provided by the striking harmonic convergence of Putnam's arguments about realism and relativism and the tightly focused debate over the truth-requirement as a criterion in the evaluation of arguments. Putnam, we will argue, defends the importance of a norm of truth distinct from rational acceptability. But he does so while taking our practices of inquiry and argumentation as primary. He offers a defense, from within our practices, of a notion of truth that permanently transcends our practices.

1. The Three-Fold Word

Much of the fragmentation of the fields of Informal Logic and

Argumentation Theory is due to the presence of three very different root metaphors for thinking about arguments.[1] One conception of arguments is as *proofs*, the products of logicians and mathematicians.[2] An argument in that sense is a sequence of sentences with a specifiable inferential structure. Since this model completely ignores any arguers, the argument-as-proof model is of limited help for understanding any actual, embodied arguments. At the other extreme, arguments are thought of as verbal *wars*, agonistic moments in discourse. Arguments are born of disagreement, so the adversarial component is essential. In this model, it is as if any logical structure to the exchange were incidental.[3] The third prominent conception, one that is often presented as a mediating third way, is that arguments are *presentations*.[4] The paradigm is neither mathematicians' proofs nor debaters' exchanges, but someone, a lawyer perhaps, *making a case* before an audience. These three models correspond, roughly, to Logic, Dialectic, and Rhetoric respectively. Each model defines a family of approaches to arguments and argumentation, complete with its own conceptual vocabulary, its own methodology, and its own criteria for evaluation.

The inferential component from the logical model and the adversarial aspect from the dialectical model are both present in the rhetorical model of arguments. There are important relationships among rhetorically commendable, dialectically successful, and logically good arguments. On the one hand, the most persuasive inferences tend to be regarded as logically valid. And, conversely, obviously valid inferences all tend to be very persuasive. Whether this is a happy accident of our evolutionary development or an analytic feature of the development of our notions of logical validity, rhetorical argumentation does involve logic. On the other

---

[1] For discussions of metaphors for arguments, see Lakoff and Johnson 1980, Ayim 1988, and Cohen 1995.

[2] Groarke 1992 exemplifies this approach: the subject of argumentation theory is identified with the finished product. Agents and processes take a back seat.

[3] For example, the analysis of argumentation in Gilbert 1997 focuses largely on the issue of conflict resolution, necessarily highlighting the adversarial component and downplaying the inferential components.

[4] Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969 is now the "recent *locus classicus*" for the rhetorical orientation to arguments. Tindale 1999 has continued to develop this approach.

hand, there is a counterpart to be found in the relationship between rhetoric and dialectic: the dialectical efficacy of rhetorical excellence is even more pronounced than that of logical validity, and dialectical success inevitably requires some rhetorical competence.

How did it come to pass, then, that despite these virtues, "rhetoric" has been something of a pejorative term in the history of philosophy? John Locke's rhetoric was nowhere more passionate than when denouncing rhetoric:

> But yet if we would speak of things as they are, we must allow that all the art of rhetoric, besides order and clearness; all the artificial and figurative application of words eloquence hath invented, are for nothing else but to insinuate wrong ideas, move the passions, and thereby mislead the judgment; and so indeed are perfect cheats; and therefore, however laudable or allowable oratory may render them in harangues and popular addresses, they are certainly, in all discourses that pretend to inform or instruct, wholly to be avoided; and where truth and knowledge are concerned, cannot but be thought a great fault, either of the language or the person that makes use of them. (*Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, bk. III chap. X, 34)

The ideal of rational persuasion, even with its dialectical and logical components, is not enough. Philosophically, more is wanted: it is the discourse *par excellence* that "pretend(s) to inform or instruct" and in which "truth and knowledge are concerned." The urge to objectivity seeks truth and knowledge, even if they are finally elusive, not just rationally grounded beliefs.

From one perspective, this looks like a pathology of philosophy. If an arguer is still dissatisfied even after being persuaded to his own satisfaction, then perhaps we ought to look for the problem in the arguer rather than the argument itself — but not necessarily.[5] We can, after all, accept the conclusion of an argument in many ways. It can be embraced whole-heartedly or half-heartedly, with a reluctant acquiescence or with full enthusiasm, as a working hypothesis or as the last word, in the spirit of political compromise or in the wake of coercive reason, and so on.

---

[5] The meta-rational grounds upon which the resistance to dialectically satisfactory arguments can be justified are explored in Cohen 2001.

The methodology of philosophical inquiry, with its biases towards certainty as a virtue of beliefs, is simultaneously biased towards skepticism as a virtue of believers, so it may be that the philosophical stance sets the bar impossibly high – though philosophers have traditionally argued that no lowering of the standard is compatible with philosophy's special epistemic mission.

The rhetoric of rhetoric is also partly at fault for its disrepute. The art of rational persuasion ought to be an esteemed public art, especially in a civic democracy, but its practice has fallen far short of the mark. There are obvious and appreciable benefits to be had from demonstrated excellence in the art of public speaking. Unfortunately, the benefits to be had from the art of rational persuasion that are the easiest to identify and appreciate all stem from the act of persuasion, not from the exercise of rationality. Rhetoric has, in consequence, allowed itself to be identified with, and then distorted by, the imperatives of persuasion simpliciter, with a correspondingly lesser amount of attention – an insufficient amount – paid to the complementary imperatives of rationality. Logic, as it were, took possession of the concept of truth. The accepted account of "logical goodness" for arguments is *soundness*: deductively valid inferences from true premises. The conclusions of sound arguments come with a guarantee that they are true; the conclusions of rhetorically good arguments do not.

2. Truth and Argument

Should we then, insist that a good argument must have true premises? Many introductory formal logic texts do make that claim.[6] There is, however, a near-consensus among argumentation theorists and informal logicians now that a truth requirement for arguments' premises is unreasonable. What is appropriate is that the premises must all be, in some sense, rationally acceptable.[7] There are, not surprisingly, some

---

[6] Logic textbooks often tacitly identify good arguments with sound arguments, which, by definition, require that the premises be true. Goldman 1995 calls this the "logical" notion of a good argument.

[7] Hamblin 1970, ch. 7, famously critiqued truth as a requirement, favoring a "dialectical" rather than an "alethic" measure.

very good arguments against a truth-requirement for good arguments justifying this consensus – but it is worth noting that of all the arguments for abandoning the truth requirement, the arguably best ones have arguably true premises! The issue needs to be revisited in order to discern the proper role for truth in evaluating arguments.

The arguments against a truth requirement range from the pragmatic and epistemological, to the conceptual and metaphysical. Let us briefly note three such lines of reasoning.[8] (1) A skeptical argument: Ultimate truth is inaccessible. If we can never know whether the premises are really true, and truth is a requirement for good arguments, then we could never know whether the arguments that confront us are good. Making the truth of the premises a requirement for a good argument is counterproductive. A practical corollary to this is that a truth requirement is useless. If we have no way of decisively determining what is true, apart from argumentation, then the requirement cannot be deployed. Argumentation is simply the sum of the methods we have for determining the truth of propositions, so the question could not but be begged. In either case, whether truth relies on good argumentation, or the other way around, a truth requirement would be otiose. (2) Logical and epistemological arguments: The truth requirement is neither necessary nor sufficient. There are good arguments without true premises, and bad arguments with true premises. There are cases where one *should* be persuaded by arguments whose premises are, in fact, false. The history of science provides abundant examples of very good arguments – arguments that rightly persuaded their contemporaries – from premises that we now know to be false. Conversely, many of the arguments from premises that we now recognize as true would not have been good when they were first presented, and they should not have been persuasive. (3) A metaphysical argument: If there were no truth, there would be no good arguments. In the absence of truth, however, argumentation is just what we have left: considered critical reflection yielding our best possible judgments. Thus, truth cannot be a prerequisite for good argumentation. An important application and extension of this line of reasoning holds that critical reasoning is certainly possible in the absence of truth. Ethical,

---

[8] These arguments are raised and considered in Allen 1998 and Johnson 1998, 1999, and 2000.

political, aesthetic, and interpretive standpoints can all be the subjects of rational argumentation, regardless of whether one thinks that assertions in those areas take truth-values.

Two of the arguments leading to the contrary conclusion that good arguments must have true premises deserve special attention. The first line of reasoning for a truth requirement stems from an analysis of the conceptual vocabulary of argument evaluation. The concepts of validity, consistency, entailment, contradiction, etc. all involve tacit reference to the concept of truth.[9] If, for example, an argument can be legitimately criticized as having inconsistent premises or invalid inferences, and the concepts of inconsistency and invalidity invoke the concept of truth, then truth is indeed implicated in argument evaluation. The force of logical contradictions, for example, at the conclusions of *reductio* arguments is not that they cannot be warranted or rationally assertible; it is that they cannot be *true*. What this line of reasoning succeeds in showing is that the concept of truth as a regulative ideal plays an important role in argument analysis; what it fails to do is justify the requirement that each individual premise must be true.

A more common line of thinking develops by rejecting premise acceptability, which serves as the main alternative to a truth requirement, as unacceptably relativistic. Presumably, the requirement that the premises be acceptable means that the premises have to be acceptable to the target audience.[10] An arguer who uses premises acceptable to herself, but not to her audience has done something rhetorically unacceptable. To persuade you of something, I must use premises that are acceptable *to you*. I need not accept them, any more than I need accept the hypotheses of *reductio* arguments. (But beware the Devil quoting Scripture!) Does this make it an acceptable discourse move to present an argument whose premises are relevant to the conclusion, sufficient for the intermediary inferences, and acceptable to the target audience, while knowing that one of the premises is false? That cannot be right. Parents

---

[9] Johnson 1999, p. 412, characterizes this as "a line of reasoning for the truth-requirement that I take to be very strong."

[10] For example, in the "ARG" test for cogency, Govier 1992, p. 69, writes "[An argument's] premises are all *acceptable*. That is to say, it is reasonable for those to whom the argument is addressed to believe these premises."

who tell their children, "Behave or Santa Claus will leave you coal instead of presents at Christmas" have not presented a good argument, despite the beliefs the children may have in Santa Claus. Such arguments should not be held up as examples of good argumentation. It may be an *effective* argument but it is not a *good* argument.

An obvious counter to the Santa Claus example would be to require that the premises must be acceptable to the arguer, too. Perhaps premise acceptability can suffice because, in general, any negative evaluation of an argument on the basis of false premises is really a criticism on the basis of unacceptable premises – viz., that they are unacceptable *to the evaluator*. The pragma-dialectical approach to critical discussions addresses this by explicitly stipulating premise acceptability to the arguer as one of the necessary preconditions on arguments.[11] While that serves to block this case, it prevents too much. It *prima facie* excludes all attempts by one interlocutor to reason critically from an opponent interlocutor's standpoint. One moral to be gleaned from the Santa Claus example is that arguments serve many purposes. They can be evaluated as good or bad in a number of different ways. They need to be evaluated rhetorically, dialectically, and logically.

Together these two lines of reasoning converge on the notion that truth is necessary for argument analysis, at least as a regulative ideal in critical evaluation. The standard evaluative measures – relevance, sufficiency, and acceptability[12] – all come in degrees in a way that truth does not. Argument analysis needs the fixed point of an ideal limit. If the premises of an argument are criticized as irrelevant, it may be that more can be added to establish their relevance. If they are criticized as insufficient to warrant the conclusion, perhaps supplemental premises can be offered. And if they are rejected as unacceptable, further support can be adduced to make them more acceptable. But if they are criticized as *false*, the game is over. In most cases, charging an argument as involving a fallacy ought to be an invitation to further argumentation (Johnson and Blair 1977, p. 200). Critical argument analysis ought to be undertaken in

---

[11] For example, van Eemeren and Grootendoorst 1992, p.30f, explicitly include "responsibility conditions" on arguers in critical discussions.

[12] This is the "RSA Test" from chapter three of Johnson and Blair 1994. The "ARG" conditions in Govier 1992 are comparable.

the same spirit. The charge that there are false premises, however, is a show stopper. It is, at least putatively, a trump card.

3. Truth and Philosophy

Many of Putnam's recent essays are animated by the project of articulating and defending a "truth requirement" of his own. Mercifully, this is not (at least not directly) a requirement that philosophers say only true things. It is, instead, a defense of the philosophical importance of a substantive notion of truth.

It might seem odd to those familiar with Putnam's internal realism to attribute a truth requirement to him after he has so famously distanced himself from his earlier metaphysical realism. Truth, however, did play a crucial and irreducible role in the most lucid formulations of internal realism. As Putnam has deepened his critiques of attempts to substitute idealized assertibility for truth, he has broadened his account of our need for truth as an independent and irreducible norm. That need may be most keenly felt in philosophical analysis, but makes its presence felt in other inquiries as well. The evolution of Putnam's philosophy is not simply a series of reversals, critiques, extensions, and repudiations of earlier positions, although that is part of it. There has been an accompanying change in what can be called his philosophical style. He is less polemical and combative as a philosopher; his arguments are no longer simply exemplifications of the agonistic, adversarial mode. His pragmatic turn, doctrinally, has been accompanied by a pragmatic turn in methodology. His arguments now more nearly approximate the ideal "critical discussions" that inform the pragma-dialectical account: arguments designed not so much to persuade (or even convince) but arguments designed to reach more critically sophisticated resolutions. His critiques of metaphysical realism should not be read as parts of larger arguments *on behalf* of anti-realism, anymore than his critiques of anti-realism are arguments for metaphysical realism. His arguments are therapeutic reminders, in the Wittgensteinian mode. But for all that, they are still arguments, operating under the dialectical assumption that genuine resolution (and not mere settlement) is possible. And, in metaphysical discourse, this assumption should be taken as commitment to the pre-philosophical realist "picture" (but not theory) of the world, i.e., that

there is a world to be understood, and that there are truths that can be learned about it.

Putnam has repeatedly argued that our scientific, philosophical, and everyday practices of assertion are beholden to a norm of truth that cannot be rendered trivial or explained away into other terms. Up through the essays collected in *Words and Life*, Putnam defended the need for a "substantive" notion of truth. In his 1994 Dewey Lectures (reprinted in TC), he backed away from that language,[13] but the "natural realism" he currently defends remains inveterately hostile to attempts to deny truth the status of a distinctive norm governing beliefs and assertions. Putnam does not simply reject the view that truth is "an empty notion"; he pronounces it "shocking" (WL 331). Though Putnam considers the metaphysical realist's conception of truth (a robust correspondence theory) unduly ambitious, he is equally hostile to the disquotationalist's excessively modest understanding of truth.[14] By disquotationalism, Putnam means "a redundancy theory of truth coupled with an 'assertibility conditions' account of understanding" (WL viii).[15] On such a view, calling a statement true does not involve ascribing a property to the statement; it simply amounts (roughly) to reasserting the statement. Disquotationalists

---

[13] See TC, p. 56. For the purposes of textual citation, the following abbreviations are used here: TC = *The Threefold Cord*; WL = *Words and Life*; RR = *Realism and Reason*; RTH = *Reason, Truth and History*: and RHF = *Realism with a Human Face*.

[14] Note that the issue of substantive vs. redundancy theories of truth is different from the (general) realism/anti-realism issue. It (perhaps) divides realists from anti-realists *about truth*, but one can be a realist without being a realist about truth. At any rate, Field and Popper seem to hold such a view. For Putnam calling Popper a realist despite his claim that Tarski solves the philosophical problems about truth, see WL 316. But also see RHF 32 for an apparent argument that Field's view isn't worthy of the name "metaphysical realism."

[15] "Assertibility" has its home in the philosophy of language, while "acceptability" more commonly figures in the argumentation theory, epistemology and philosophy of science literatures. Furthermore, "warranted" typically modifies "assertibility," while "rational" tends to travel with "acceptability." And, of course, many statements can be acceptable without being assertible (for familiar Gricean reasons, among others). We propose to ignore the nuances, if any, which distinguish these concepts. For our purposes, both notions can be taken to refer to the central epistemic norm, which contrasts with alethic norms (if any). For an explicit identification of rational acceptability with assertibility, see Wright 2000, p. 337. Putnam identifies assertibility and justification at RHF 114-5.

further hold that we know what content we are affirming (or reaffirming) when we know under what conditions our statement is assertible. Truth is, for the disquotationalist, a convenient logical device which also has a normative function. To call a statement true is to endorse the statement, at least along one avenue of evaluation. Such theories provide the framework which allows philosophers like Richard Rorty to consider truth little more than a compliment we pay to sentences we are willing to assert.

Because of his well-known arguments critiquing the intelligibility of metaphysical realism, Putnam (at least "middle period" or "internal realist" Putnam) might well be expected to be sympathetic to the disquotationalist project. He has, after all, denied that we possess a notion of truth that is radically non-epistemic. Putnam has insisted that "factual" questions about truth and reference cannot be understood apart from "value" questions about reasonableness and rationality (since reference depends in part on the most reasonable reconstruction of referential intentions). Consequently, we cannot attach any clear sense to a notion of truth that is completely divorced from our conception of what it is reasonable to believe.[16] In fact, however, Putnam thinks that metaphysical realism and disquotationalism share misguided reductionist aspirations. Such aspirations have been generated, Putnam suggests, by a mistaken philosophical understanding of what a scientifically responsible conception of the world requires. Like the metaphysical realist, the disquotationalist thinks that a *real* vindication of the truth of our judgments would involve stepping outside of the practices and theories which give sense to the judgments and justifying the claim that they are in touch with an independent reality. The latter claim, of course, is just another of our judgments, and so unintelligibility quickly threatens. The typical disquotationalist has "recoiled" against the metaphysical demands of such a picture, but still remains in its grip, Putnam thinks. Since truth

---

[16] In TC, Putnam defends the "recognition transcendence" of truth. As Putnam himself notes, it is not clear how much of a departure from internal realism this need involve. See TC 130, where Putnam writes, "whether I am still, to some extent, an internal realist is, I guess, as unclear as how much I was including under that unhappy label." For the most part, we will focus on the writings of "internal realist Putnam." Most of Putnam's recent misgivings need not concern us (and some of them perhaps need not have concerned him; see Wright 2000).

cannot be understood as a relation between bits of language and mind-independently-individuated bits of the world, the disquotationalist infers that there is no genuine property to be expressed by "true." As a result, one finds anti-realist thinkers like Richard Rorty on the one hand, and such realists as Michael Devitt and Richard Boyd on the other, all insisting that we are connected to the world only causally, not semantically (WL 284-5). While the disquotationalist rejects the central *theses* of metaphysical realism, she remains committed to the realist's metaphysical *picture*, and this is where the real damage is done. "Metaphysics – especially empiricist metaphysics – frequently appears disguised as the rejection of metaphysics" (WL 265). Though we cannot make sense of such notions as truth and reference apart from the norms which govern our inquiries, Putnam maintains, we are nevertheless committed to objective properties of rightness governing our assertions and thoughts, and truth figures among these properties.

One of the major reasons that the disquotationalist project looks hopeless to Putnam is that the notion of an assertibility condition (and thus the notion of rational acceptability) cannot, ultimately, be understood apart from that of a truth condition.[17] At first glance, anyway, a statement S is assertible if statements justifying S are simply true (WL 266).[18] Similarly, one knows the assertibility conditions for a statement when one knows the circumstances under which it is true or at least likely to be true (WL 271). A specification of assertibility conditions for a given statement, Putnam thinks, can only be generated from within a practice, a language game. And a practice cannot adequately be characterized by a description in which "participants" make certain noises in observable circumstances. In short, from within a practice, assertibility will be characterized with reference to truth. From outside a practice, the notion of assertibility makes no sense; assertion gets reduced to the mere

---

[17] Like the first argument for a truth requirement discussed above, this argument does not by itself yield a requirement that individual assertions or premises should be true, in addition to rationally acceptable.

[18] One can try to make do by relying on the assertibility of some statements to warrant the assertibility of others, but at some point (e.g. with perceptual reports in sense-datum language), assertibility conditions will be identical with truth conditions. Compare RR 233, where Putnam claims that "rational acceptability does the lions's share of the work in fixing the notion of 'truth.'"

uttering of noises. Our knowledge of such things as that we can *disagree* with each other (rather than merely making the sound "no" after an "interlocutor" has made a certain sound) must, Putnam thinks, be taken as basic. The attempt to reduce the assertion-governing norm of truth to something more descriptive, like acceptability to an audience, is doomed to failure because the latter notion depends on the former (once it is realized that acceptance cannot be reduced to making sounds or inscriptions). Certain fundamental norms governing our everyday practices of thought, speech, and inquiry are inescapable, and truth figures among those norms.

The importance of truth is not exhausted by its role in explaining acceptability.

> [T]here is a realist intuition – namely, 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, and not as a consequence of my present memory and experience – which must be preserved even if one finds *metaphysical* realism unintelligible (as I do). Preserving this philosophical intuition is not, of course, just a matter of making it right to utter this *noise*. (WL 329).[19]

Our practices require appeal to a norm of truth distinct from that of epistemic justification, and the deflationist can make no room for such a norm. Crispin Wright's recent development of the point is useful here.

> [W]hat the deflationist clearly *cannot* allow is that 'true,' when used to endorse, has the function of commending a proposition for its satisfaction of *some distinctive norm* which contrasts with epistemic justification and which only 'true' and equivalents serve to mark. For if there were a distinctive such norm, it could hardly fail to be reckoned a genuine property of a proposition that it did, or did not

---

[19] Along these lines, Putnam denies that Tarski's work illuminates this intuitive notion of truth. "Schnee ist weiss" is L-true in all worlds in which snow is white, including worlds in which it means that water is a liquid – provided, of course, that water is liquid in those worlds. (WL 318).

comply with it.[20]

And if there is a genuine property picked out only by "truth" and its variations, then "is true" would have to express a property. But precisely this is the case.

> An acceptance that grass is green... may be open to censure if there is no warrant for accepting that grass is green; but it is bad standing in quite another way if, warranted or not, it is actually not the case that grass is green.[21]

The fact that our practices appeal to such a norm is not incidental, eliminable, or trivial. Following Cavell, Putnam insists that it makes an enormous difference to our lives whether we think of claims about the mental lives of other people as *true* or merely as assertible or useful. Similarly, our ordinary thinking about the distant past holds itself responsible to faraway facts and does not see itself as responding to present or future assertibility conditions. This realist picture does not explain or vindicate our ways of thinking and speaking; it is itself part of those ways. For just that reason, however, the picture merits a strong presumption in its favor.

> That truth is not *just* 'disquotational,' that truth genuinely depends on what is *distant,* is part of a picture with enormous human weight (WL 277).

This picture follows logical tradition in insisting on the inescapable importance of truth. It also respects the dialectical (in the sense given above) tradition in situating the importance of truth within our practices

---

[20] Wright 1999, p. 42. See ibid pp. 41-2 for an argument that if, as disquotationalism requires, truth is not to be a distinct norm, then it must be identified with epistemic justification.

[21] Wright 1999, p. 45. Wright also argues that the Equivalence Schema, which the disquotationalist considers virtually a complete account of truth (the Schema says that, for all propositions P, it is true that P if and only if P) prevents the identification of truth and epistemic warrant. We can infer "it is the case that not-P" from "it is not the case that P," but we cannot infer "it is the case that not-P is warranted " from "it is not the case that P is warranted."

of giving and taking reasons. And above all, we shall argue, it organically rises from the humanistic rhetorical tradition with its sense that there is no deeper grounding than our common practices of reasonableness, practices that can, however, be modified from within in our ongoing project to further human flourishing. In sum, Putnam's picture of truth is particularly well-suited to the needs of argumentation theory.

Part of the challenge for argumentation theorists is integrating the normative and analytic dimensions with their descriptivist, naturalizing vocation. From within our argumentative practices, we recognize an objectivity to reason that transcends those practices. Putnam insists that, more generally, from within all our discourse practices, we must implicitly recognize truth as transcending these practices (RR 234). An appreciation of the importance of argument mandates a claim that reasons hold beyond the here and now. However, he has had a difficult time capturing the sense in which he wants to regard reason as transcendent, and his attempts to do so have involved forging links between truth and idealized rational acceptability. He concluded *Reason, Truth and History* with the remark that

> [t]he very fact that we speak of our different conceptions as different conceptions of *rationality* posits a *Grenzbegriff*, a limit concept of ideal truth (RTH 216).

Since the late 1980's, Putnam has, apart from a few incautious formulations, avoided *identifying* truth and ideal rational acceptability, though he has repeatedly linked them. He has instead emphasized the much weaker claim that we have no conception of truth that totally outruns the possibility of warrant.[22]

However ambiguous Putnam's positive account of the relationship between justification and truth may be, he is unambiguous in thinking that some of his contemporaries cannot do justice to the transcendence of reason and truth. This is nowhere more evident than in his "fruitful ongoing exchange" with Richard Rorty, whose ethnocentrism provides a defining contrast to Putnam's own realism. According to Putnam, Rorty's position lacks the resources necessary even just to preserve a sense of

---

[22] As noted above, TC departs to some indeterminate extent from this claim.

ourselves as genuine thinkers (RHF 114). Still less, Putnam thinks, can Rorty claim to do justice to our practices of inquiry. Putnam agrees with Rorty that we cannot invoke permanent criteria of rationality with which to assess our current theories and practices. Rationality is itself an object of theorizing, and our theories of rationality are subject to change. And Rorty, in turn, agrees with Putnam that some ways of talking, acting and thinking are better than others. But by "better" here, Rorty means, 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."[23] Putnam regards this as a "betrayal" of the idea that our standards of warrant are capable of reform, not an interpretation of that idea (RHF 23). When Rorty claims that "there is nothing to be said about either truth or rationality apart from descriptions of the familiar procedures of justification which a given society – *ours* – uses in one or another area of inquiry,"[24] Putnam replies that the familiar procedures of justification that our society uses demand that there be something more to be said – about both truth and rationality. For one thing, as noted, our procedures require us to recognize that truth and rational acceptability are quite different. For another, Putnam denies that truth and rationality can be exhausted by *descriptions* of our practices or of anything else. Rorty's defenders grant that his view "is at odds with the idea that styles of reasoning can be legitimated from a transcendental point of view," but maintain that Rorty's naturalism "does not . . . cast doubt on either the efficacy or the importance of argument in the evolution of beliefs or practices."[25]

For his part, Rorty sees Putnam as unable to relinquish the God's eye view and accept a picture according to which "there is only the dialogue."[26] The posit of a limit-concept of ideal truth is an empty gesture at metaphysical comfort; it merely expresses a hope that from God's point of view the human race is heading in the right direction.[27]

---

[23] Rorty 1982, p. xxxvii.

[24] The quote is from Rorty 1991, p. 23.

[25] Forster 1992, p. 590.

[26] Rorty 1991, p. 27.

[27] Rorty 1991, p. 27

Ideal rational acceptability cannot help us settle disputes or explain the success of science.[28] Barring an appeal to transhistorically certifiable canons of reasoning, all that "ideal rational acceptability" can mean is acceptability to an ideal community, and since no community has a God's eye view, that, Rorty thinks, can only mean us as we would like to be. Solidarity thus replaces objectivity as the deep norm underlying our practices of acceptance and assertion. Once metaphysical realism has been given up, the transcendence of reason can only mean transcendence in the direction of possibly better future practices. We can still talk in terms of truth and falsity, but when we are being philosophically reflective, we will understand such talk in terms of what works well and what works poorly. Paul Forster, a defender of Rorty, writes that,

> for Putnam, intuitions about criticism and fallibilism must be explained by recourse to a limit notion of truth. For Rorty, it is our intuitions about the regulative role of truth that are to be explicated, and it is in terms of the notion of criticism, or 'conversation' as Rorty calls it, that this is to be achieved. (1992, p. 599)

Inquiry, for a Rortyan, is motivated by a hope of a better life, not a fear that one's views are wrong when seen in the light of some ideal perspective, and the uses of such notions as truth and rationality will be accounted for accordingly. The Rortyan presumably will explain what is wrong with using arguments that involve inconsistent premises or invalid inferences in terms of "what we let each other get away with saying." The inappropriateness of making such argumentative moves ultimately explains our use of such truth-presupposing notions as "inconsistent" and "invalid." Finally, the Rortyan offers a reduction of truth to a somewhat peculiar kind of premise acceptability. To call a statement true is roughly to say that it could be justified to us as we would like ourselves to be.

Putnam, we think, *agrees* with (one interpretation of) the idea that there is only the dialogue, but he (and we) maintain that there is more to the dialogue than is dreamt of in Rorty's philosophy. Our practices of conversation and inquiry do not construe truth along the lines of "could be justified to ourselves at our best." The Rortyan can reply that our

---

[28]   Clearly, this echoes several of the arguments against the truth requirement in argumentation theory; see p. 89 above.

practices would be better if they were reformed along such lines, but the suggestions that have so far been put forward are little more than prophecies.[29] We have offered brief indications of how a norm or notion of truth beyond that which Rorty permits seems to figure variously and importantly in many of our pursuits. Rorty's position has difficulty accounting for a number of other familiar phenomena. For instance, it is sometimes appropriate and important to disagree radically with one's cultural peers. Radical innovators are sometimes *right* even if their arguments (or, if Rorty prefers, "proposals") are not acceptable to those around them, since central community norms figure among the things about which error is possible. Some of the more technical features of our commonsense notion of truth also have some human weight and also appear recalcitrant to Rortyan treatment. Truth is timeless; if a proposition is ever true, it is always true. And truth, as noted above, does not come in degrees. Rortyans, no doubt, have resources for handling these and similar cases.[30] But they cannot handle them as straightforwardly as can those who are willing to appeal (even if only fallibly) to the truth. It does not follow from the fact that we have no access to truth except via rational argumentation that truth can serve no function that cannot be served by rational acceptability. A more-or-less robust notion of truth allows us to say things that we could not otherwise say. And it matters to be able to say these things, especially in reflective philosophizing. We cannot measure progress in terms of a standard external to our practices, but we need to hold ourselves, from within our practices, to something that surpasses our practices.

4. Argumentation and Philosophy

It is worth noting how far any of these reflections about the irreducibility of truth fall short of committing us to anything like metaphysical realism. For one thing, all that has been established so far is that truth is something quite distinct from justification and from any idealization of

---

[29] See the cited works by Rorty and Forster.

[30] See Throop 1989 for arguments that the relativist (a distant cousin of Rorty's) can do a better job of accounting for error than Putnam allows.

justification.[31] What has not been established is that truth is univocal, much less that it everywhere consists of correspondence to a fixed totality of mind-independent objects.[32]

Mathematical truth might be differently constituted from moral truth, or from truth in physics. In fact, much of the spirit of deflationism might still be preserved. If truth is differently instantiated in different realms of discourse (or if, more radically, and more troublingly for Putnam, "truth" names different properties in different discourses), then the disquotationalist might at least be right that truth does not have a single nature that might be captured by a substantive correspondence or coherence theory.[33] Instead, the unity of truth would consist of such platitudes as its timelessness, inability to come in degrees, aptness for embedding, etc.[34] We are neither defending nor repudiating alethic pluralism;[35] we are merely pointing out that a commitment to the importance of an independent norm of truth is compatible with a surprising amount of flexibility about its function and nature. Mathematical truth might involve a kind of coherence while truth in physics might be better understood as what would be believed under some ideal circumstances. In some realms, we hold ourselves responsible to things not of our own making, while in others we might not. Though Putnam writes as if truth is the same thing everywhere, this is not a consequence of his arguments for the indispensability of truth.

Alethic pluralism is to be distinguished, not just from metaphysical realism, but also from a position that runs along parallel lines but which proves rather more threatening to Putnam. Grant that the above considerations show that our usual norms of inquiry and conversation demand notions of truth and reason that transcend the conversation or inquiry. It has not yet been shown that our ordinary norms demand a

---

[31] It is unlikely that truth can be *identified* with *any* idealization of rational acceptability. For a recent discussion of this issue, see Wright 2000.

[32] See Wright 1999, p. 47.

[33] This is distinct from Frege's indefinabilism, which says only that no nontrivial analysis of truth is possible. On such a view, truth has a general nature, but nothing useful can be said about its nature. See Wright 1999, p. 33.

[34] See Wright 1999, p. 60.

[35] We take the phrase from Wright 1999.

single standpoint of transcendent reason, a single *Grenzbegriff*. A sophisticated relativist could claim that reason (or truth) is, as it were, multiply transcendent. We must, in order to account for the possibility that some of the central norms of a culture (or a person, or whatever) might yet be wrong, invoke a notion of reason that transcends the norms of that culture or individual. (With respect to our own central norms, of course, we can invoke such a notion only from within). This holds of all standpoints. Thus, each standpoint needs to be able to make sense of transcending itself, i.e., it needs a notion of truth. But it is a further question whether the same transcendent notion is always invoked. "Good enough for us" is never good enough for us, at least not in philosophy, but it does not yet follow that there is a single norm to which all serious inquiries hold themselves responsible. Our sophisticated relativist might claim that rational criticism of the norms of any particular practice can only be offered from the standpoint of some other practice, while denying that there is some notion of reason apart from all practices or common to all practices from which criticism can be ventured. Norms of etiquette might be criticized from the standpoint of moral practices, which could be criticized in the light of certain aesthetic standards, which are themselves criticized in still other ways, and various cultural and individual versions of such relativism can be generated. Such a relativist might then escape Putnam's criticisms that she self-refutingly eliminates normative notions in favor of descriptive ones. She could grant that all critical activity presupposes some norms or others, but she need not grant that there are any norms presupposed by all critical activities. As William Throop puts it, this position differs from internal realism in that "it requires no reason which is binding on all humans independently of what anyone thinks."[36]

The question of alethic pluralism echoes an earlier discussion in the infancy of the informal logic movement. Stephen Toulmin, after distinguishing different "fields" in which we argue, asked,

> What things about the form and merits of our arguments are *field-invariant* and what things about them are *field-dependent*? (1958, p. 15; His italics)

---

[36] Throop 1989, p. 685.

Even more than his question, his answer can be read as foreshadowing Putnam's:

> The use of a modal term like 'cannot' in connection with arguments from quite different fields involves, as we have seen, a certain common force, like the common force recognisable in a wide range of uses of the word 'good'... Here, as in ethics, two conclusions are tempting, both of which are to be avoided. On the one hand, it will be wrong to say, merely on account of this variation in criteria, that the word 'cannot' means quite different things when it figures in different sorts of conclusions; not for nothing are physical, linguistic, moral and conceptual 'cannots' linked by the use of a common term. It will also be a mistake, and a more serious one, to pick on some one criterion of impossibility and to elevate it into a position of unique philosophical importance. Yet in the history of recent philosophy both of these conclusions have been influential – the latter, I shall argue, disastrously so. (1958, p. 34)

Putnam's move away from hyper-realism to internal realism responds to the dangers of the second sort of mistake, viz., elevating the criteria of rational acceptability in the sciences to the criteria of rational acceptability simpliciter. The nuanced account of our reason-giving practices that is characteristic of Putnam's internal realism reflects a continued sensitivity to the dangers of the first, viz., balkanizing the concept. Thus, regardless of whether the criteria for truth ultimately turn out to be field-dependent, the normative force of such a concept would have to be, in Toulmin's terms, field-invariant.

The possibility of the pluralist position helps sharpen the case for the truth requirement. There is indeed room and need for a notion of rightness distinct from rational acceptability to anybody. At least some of our practices of inquiry require a single norm governing assertion which does not come in degrees and is not perspectival. Calling a claim false involves appealing to a norm governing belief[37] according to which nobody should believe the claim. This is compatible, of course, with holding that a given person or culture might be subject to epistemic, moral or other norms which support or mandate believing the claim. One

---

[37] We switch, harmlessly we think, from understanding truth and falsity as governing statements to treating them as governing beliefs or believings.

might regard norms of truth as *overriding* (or, at least, overriding for purposes of argumentation), but we are not defending such a position here. Truth can be defended as an indispensable norm without being regarded as an overriding one. And the possibility of alethic pluralism means that the defender of a truth requirement need not commit herself to the claim that truth is everywhere instantiated in the same way. We think that the considerations noted above can be combined with other elements from Putnam's writings to solidify the defense of universal (whether monistically or pluralistically realized) norms of truth and rationality. One way to answer the relativist's challenge would be to follow Gilbert Harman, who suggests, in a critique of Putnam, that we could not argue with each other if we did not share (largely unformulated) principles of reasoning. Putnam does not go as far as that. His account of reference explains how to commensurate deeply different accounts of rationality.[38] The crucial datum is that we can always argue – precisely because we can always begin by arguing about how to argue! Even if there are no principles of reasoning that can be formulated without reference to particular cultures or practices, different *accounts* of rationality can still be different accounts of *rationality*. An important part of being rational is being prepared to reason about rationality itself.

Putnam's attractive picture of argumentation and inquiry is nicely captured in his expansion of Neurath's boat into a fleet.

> The people in each boat are trying to reconstruct their own boat without modifying it so much at any one time that the boat sinks, as in the Neurath image. In addition, people are passing supplies and tools from one boat to another and shouting advice and encouragement (or discouragement) to each other. Finally, people sometimes decide they don't like the boat they're in and move to a different boat altogether. (And sometimes a boat sinks or is abandoned.) It's all a bit chaotic; but since it is a fleet, no one is ever totally out of signalling distance from all the other boats. (RR, p. 204)

Communication is always possible. No matter how far apart boats may be, they are always within hailing distance; and no matter how different

---

[38] As Gary Ebbs argues, Putnam's account of reference is itself grounded in our commonsense norms of inquiry. See Ebbs 1992.

their crews' norms of communication may be, they are always within "arguing distance." Discourse space is argumentative space, and philosophy is the permanent possibility of argumentation.

5. Conclusion

This, we think, amounts to a provisional vindication of Putnam's doctrine of the immanent transcendence of truth and reason, of both the conceptual necessity from within our cultural practices of the possibility of transcending those practices and the practical impossibility of ever actually doing so. We have also tried to show that this doctrine does not have some of the consequences it has often been taken to have. More positively, we have tried to make the position independently plausible and attractive to argumentation theorists.

The connection with argumentation is palpable: Putnam's thought can be used to reharmonize the logical and rhetorical traditions of argument analysis with their contrasting emphases on truth and acceptability. He gives voice to the central idea of the logical tradition, viz., that our intellectual practices implicitly recognize – and occasionally demand – the conceptual possibility of transcending the limits of our time, our culture, and even our human perspective. Putnam has made the case that the difference between truth and even ideal rational acceptability makes a difference. A concept of truth that is distinct from rational acceptability grounds validity and allied notions; it explains why belief and assertion are subject to a norm that does not come in degrees; and it makes it clear how and why the charge that a premise is false functions as an argumentative show-stopper. The truth requirement for premises is simply an expression of argumentation's internal aspiration to transcendence.

Putnam complements this emphasis on the transcendence of truth with a major theme from the rhetorical tradition by locating the importance of a practice-transcendent account of truth within our practices of argument and inquiry. After all, argumentation ranges freely over everything. Nothing is beyond argument. And, as all the literature on the subject clearly demonstrates, that certainly includes the concept of truth itself! Truth is an ideal, a limit. It is the end of argumentation, yet it simultaneously regulates argumentation. We need to account for the permanent possibility of asking whether something really is true as well

as the finality of falsity as a criticism of an argument's premises. At the same time we need to explain how and why argumentation is the only rational road to the truth even if it never gets there. What is needed, and what Putnam has provided, is a concept of truth that grounds a categorical desideratum for argumentation. What we find rationally acceptable is, of course, good enough *for us* but sometimes that is just not *good enough* for us.

Colby College

REFERENCES

Allen Derek (1998), 'Should We Assess the Basic Principles of an Argument for Truth or Acceptability?', in *Argumentation and Rhetoric: Proceedings of the Ontario Society for the Study of Argumentation*, CD-ROM.

Ayim Maryann (1988), 'Violence and Domination as Metaphors in Academic Discourse', in T. Govier (ed.), *Selected Issues in Logic and Communication*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Co.

Cohen Daniel H. (1995), 'Argument is War... and War is Hell: Philosophy, Education, and Metaphors for Argumentation', *Informal Logic* **17**, pp. 177-188.

Cohen Daniel H. (2001), 'Evaluating Arguments and Making Meta-Arguments', *Informal Logic* **21**.

Ebbs Gary (1992), 'Realism and Rational Inquiry', *Philosophical Topics* **20**, pp. 1-33.

Eemeren Frans H. van and Rob Grootendoorst (1992), *Argumentation, Communication, and Fallacies: A Pragma-dialectical Perspective*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Field Hartry (1982), 'Realism and Relativism', *The Journal of Philosophy* **79**, pp. 553-67.

Forster Paul (1992), 'What Is at Stake Between Putnam and Rorty?', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* **52**, pp. 585-603.

Gilbert Michael (1997), *Coalescent Argumentation*. Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Goldman A. (1995), 'Argumentation and Interpersonal Justification,' in F. van Eemeren e.a . (eds), *Proceedings of the Third International Conference of the International Society for the Study of Argumentation*. Amsterdam: SIC SAT).

Govier Trudy (1992), *A Practical Study of Argument*, 3rd edition. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company.

Govier Trudy (2000), Review of Johnson, *Informal Logic* **20**, pp. 281-290.

Groarke L. (1992), 'In Defense of Deductivism: Replying to Govier', in F. Van Eemeren e.a. (eds), *Argumentation Illuminated*. Amsterdam: Sic Sat.

Hamblin C. L. (1970), *Fallacies*. London: Methuen.

Harman Gilbert (1982), 'Metaphysical Realism and Moral Relativism: Reflections on Hilary Putnam's Reason, Truth and History', *The Journal of Philosophy* **79**, pp. 568-575.

Johnson Ralph (1998), 'Commentary on Allen's "Should We Assess the Basic Principles of an Argument for Truth or Acceptability?"', *Argumentation and Rhetoric: Proceedings of the Ontario Society for the Study of Argumentation*, CD-ROM.

Johnson Ralph (1999), 'The Problem of Truth for Theories of Argument', in F. van Eemeren e.a. (eds.), *Proceedings of the Fourth International Conference of the International Society for the Study of Argumentation*. Amsterdam: SIC SAT).

Johnson Ralph (2000), *Manifest Rationality: A Pragmatic Study of Argumentation*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Johnson Ralph and J. Anthony Blair (1997), *Logical Self-Defense*. Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson.

Lakoff George and Mark Johnson (1980), *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Perelman Chaim and L. Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969), *The New Rhetoric*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.

Putnam Hilary (1975), 'The Meaning of "Meaning"', in *Language, Mind & Knowledge*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Putnam Hilary (1981), *Reason, Truth and History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Putnam Hilary (1983), *Realism and Reason*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Putnam Hilary (1990), *Realism with a Human Face* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press).

Putnam Hilary (1994), *Words and Life*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Putnam Hilary (1999), *The Threefold Cord: Mind, Body, and World*. New York: Columbia University Press).

Rorty Richard (1982), *The Consequences of Pragmatism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Rorty Richard (1991), *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Rorty Richard (1998), *Truth and Progress*. Cambridge: Cambridge University

Press.

Tindale Christopher (1999), *Acts of Arguing*. Albany: State University of New York Press).

Throop William (1989) 'Relativism and Error: Putnam's Lessons for the Relativist', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* **49**, pp. 675-686.

Toulmin Stephen (1958) *The Uses of Argument*. London: Cambridge University Press.

Wright Crispin (1999), 'Truth: a Traditional Debate Reviewed', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, **Supplementary Volume 24**, pp. 31-74.

Wright, Crispin (2000), 'Truth as Sort of Epistemic: Putnam's Peregrinations', *The Journal of Philosophy* **97**, pp. 335-364.