

PRAGMATISM AND THE ORDINARY:

The Rorty-Putnam Debate from a Different Angle¹

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In his essay „Philosophy and Ordinary Experience” Stanley Rosen claims that when philosophers become increasingly interested in the question of the Ordinary—ordinary language or ordinary experience—it always indicates a crisis of philosophy. Both the phenomenological and the analytical school of modern philosophy included important thinkers who supposed that philosophical activity as such had reached a theoretical dead end, and therefore urged a return to the Ordinary. This enterprise itself can be carried out in a more or less theoretical way. The more theoretical approach is represented by Husserl or Heidegger. The less or sometimes even antitheoretical way of returning to the Ordinary is exemplified by Oxonian philosophers such as Ryle and Austin, and the later Wittgenstein. As Rosen adds, „Perhaps it would be fair to classify pragmatist like James and Dewey in this camp.”²

Although the latter suggestion is not indisputable, I think Rosen has a point. If we put the scientific vein aside that is common in some works of Peirce, Dewey and Sidney Hook, classical pragmatism with its firm critique of metaphysical dualisms and its emphasis on the practical character of human concerns could be seen as a philosophical movement that takes side with everyday life rather than pure theory. However, my aim is not to consider whether this classification of James and Dewey proves to be useful. I would rather focus on two influential contemporary pragmatists, Richard Rorty and Hilary Putnam, and especially on their relation to the question of the Ordinary. This investigation provides a new perspective on the two philosopher’s relation to each other

¹ Preparation of this essay was supported by the Móricz Zsigmond Scholarship of the Hungarian Ministry of Education and Culture.

² Stanley Rosen, „Philosophy and Ordinary Experience”, in *Metaphysics in Ordinary Language*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1999, 220.

and thus, as I will argue, sheds light on the real stakes of the much discussed Rorty-Putnam debate.

The two decade long intellectual quarrel between Rorty and Putnam, as an important chapter of the history of contemporary pragmatism, has received a considerable critical attention. Joseph Margolis serves as an example, who devoted a whole book—his *Reinventing Pragmatism*—to this topic.³ However, the Rorty-Putnam debate is a strikingly controversial phenomenon. On the one hand, several interpreters are convinced that the debate is a substantial one that touches a nerve of pragmatism itself. But on the other hand, from a certain distance it does not seem clear whether there is a deep disagreement between the two philosophers. As Rorty remarks in his „Hilary Putnam and the Relativist Menace“: „Hilary Putnam says that he is »often asked just where I disagree with Rorty.« I am often asked the converse question. People ask us these questions because Putnam and I agree on a number of points that a lot of philosophers do not accept.”⁴

The title of Rorty’s paper anticipates the concept that proves to be central to their controversy. This concept is relativism. Putnam constantly accuses Rorty of being a relativist, while Rorty responds that this charge only shows that Putnam is still clinging to a notion of objectivity that is inconsistent with the pragmatist insights of his recent work, especially with the rejection of the philosophical attempt to find a description of reality that is free from any particular agent’s point of view. I have to admit that I take Rorty’s side in this argument: I think he is right in refusing the relativist label. However, I also understand what motivates Putnam’s critique of Rorty’s views. To see this more clearly, I think it is worth differentiating between relativism as a philosophical position and a certain tendency in Rorty’s thought that could be—in my opinion—Putnam’s real target.

Let me first explain why do I think that Rorty is obviously not a relativist in a narrow, philosophical sense. „Relativism” is not an unambiguous term; we can use it either in a cultural or moral sense, or in an epistemic one. However, I think that in both cases relativism goes hand in hand with the idea of incommensurability. In the cultural or

³ See Joseph Margolis, *Reinventing Pragmatism. American Philosophy at the End of the Twentieth Century*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 2002.

⁴ Richard Rorty, „Hilary Putnam and the Relativist Menace”, in *Truth and Progress*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1998, 43.

moral sense, a relativist claims that different cultures, moralities or systems of values are incommensurable, therefore we cannot say that one of them is better than the others or, what is worse, we have to recognize all of them as equally good. Rorty explicitly rejects this idea. For example, he firmly believes that democratic societies are *better* than totalitarian ones, even if he thinks that evaluative statements like this do not require philosophical foundations. Putnam is or, more precisely, has gradually become aware of this. As he writes in his *Ethics without Ontology*, „Rorty’s position, in the terminology of one of my critical essays long ago, is properly described as a form of cultural *imperialism* rather than cultural relativism.”⁵ If we put mockery aside, we might say that Putnam grasps the difference correctly between cultural relativism and what Rorty calls ethnocentrism in his paper „Solidarity or Objectivity?”⁶

In the epistemic sense, relativism is closely connected to the idea of incommensurable conceptual schemes. This idea presupposes a metaphysical picture that is the main target of Rorty’s criticism. According to this picture, there is a gap between conceptual schemes and uninterpreted content. People with different conceptual schemes organize this content—that is, the World or Reality—in different ways. What the relativist adds is the assumption of a radical difference between possible conceptual schemes that makes them incommensurable in a strong sense—to use Kuhn’s unfortunate early metaphor, a difference that makes people with different conceptual schemes inhabitants of different worlds. Rorty’s reaction to this picture is twofold. First, as a good Davidsonian, he recommends the application of Occam’s razor on the idea of incommensurable conceptual schemes, as well as on the idea of languages that cannot be translated to each other. There will be no reason to acknowledge something as a language or as a conceptual scheme expressed by a language if we have nothing common with its users—if we do not share any common true beliefs. Second, he claims that both metaphysical realism and relativism are answers to a bad question that is motivated by the above mentioned picture: how can we bridge the gap between the world and our conceptual schemes? Rorty says that we had better avoid both realism and relativism, by

⁵ Hilary Putnam, *Ethics without Ontology*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2004, 121. Emphasis in the original.

⁶ See Richard Rorty, „Solidarity or Objectivity?”, in *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991.

rejecting the theoretical assumption of a sharp contrast between the world and mind or language, and getting rid of the vacuous notion of the World or Reality as uninterpreted content.⁷

If there are good reasons to think that Rorty's position is not only different from, but even opposed to relativism in this narrow, philosophical sense, then why does Putnam still insist that he is a relativist? Here enters the question of the Ordinary. In his recent writings Putnam is also looking for a *via media* between metaphysical realism and relativism. After leaving his former theory called „internal realism” behind, in *The Threefold Cord* he argues for a so-called naïve realism which has philosophical precursors such as William James's *Radical Empiricism* and John Austin's *Sense and Sensibilia*. The aim of the first part of this book is to deplore both metaphysical realism and relativism by returning to our ordinary, commonsensical picture of the world. As Putnam writes, „If, as I believe, there is a way to do justice to our sense that knowledge claims are responsible to reality without recoiling into metaphysical phantasy, then it is important that we find that way. For there is, God knows, irresponsibility enough in the world”.⁸ I will focus on two ideas appearing in this quotation: on doing justice to our common sense, and on the notion of irresponsibility.

When Putnam claims that we can avoid both metaphysical realism and relativism only if we do justice to our commonsensical picture of the world, he occupies a position which is very close to that he attributes to Stanley Cavell, the *par excellence* American philosopher of the Ordinary. According to Putnam's interpretation, Cavell claims that skepticism and metaphysical realism have common theoretical roots, because both the skeptic and its realist opponents deny the priority or even the reality of the everyday world.⁹ From this perspective it seems that the main problem with Rorty's philosophy is not that it is being relativistic in the received sense, but that it commits the same mistake as skepticism and metaphysical realism—it questions our commonsensical picture of the world. And in Rorty's case it is worse than a mere philosophical mistake. Putnam thinks

⁷ See Richard Rorty, „The World Well Lost”, in *Consequences of Pragmatism*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1981.

⁸ Hilary Putnam, *The Threefold Cord: Mind, Body and World*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1999, 4.

⁹ See Hilary Putnam, „An Introduction to Cavell”, in T. Cohen – P. Guier – H. Putnam (eds.), *Pursuits of Reason: Essays in Honor of Stanley Cavell*, Texas Tech. University Press, Lubbock, 1990.

that by getting rid of the concept of the World or Reality Rorty throws out the baby with the bathwater: he gives up the whole notion of answerability, that is, our ordinary conviction that in a certain way we are responsible to reality. That is why Putnam charges Rorty with irresponsibility; according to him, Rorty regards any kind of discourse as a free play that is not constrained by reality in any sense.

Rorty's response to this charge would be that he was not questioning answerability as such, only the idea that we are answerable to a language-independent reality. According to him, we are answerable only to fellow human beings. If once we have given up the scheme-content distinction, then we will not need to ask the question „how does language hook onto the world” anymore. Thus, for Rorty, returning to the Ordinary—to our ordinary picture of the world—seems to be a very suspicious philosophical move. As he writes in the volume *Rorty and His Critics*, responding to Putnam's paper: „Putnam's recent alliance with Stanley Cavell, Cora Diamond and James Conant—his emphasis on the Ordinary and on the need to avoid putting forward theses in philosophy—seems to me an unfortunate throwback to pre-Hegelian attempts to find something ahistorical to which philosophers may pledge allegiance. The Ordinary strikes me as just the latest disguise of the *ontos on*.”¹⁰

So if we examine the Rorty-Putnam debate in the light of the question of the Ordinary which is posed by the recent writings of Putnam, we will see the standpoints of the two parties as follows. On the one hand, Putnam claims that Rorty puts forward a theory that questions the everyday picture of the world and therefore proves to be counter-intuitive and, in the worst case, intellectually irresponsible. On the other hand, Rorty claims that Putnam, in spite of his pragmatist convictions, makes a reactionary move and steps back to something that seems to be another theory of the „really real”. However, I still feel the same as those who ask where do the two philosophers disagree. Because if my former interpretation is correct, then we might say that the main reason of the disagreement is that both Rorty and Putnam attributes too much to his opponent—namely, a theory that is actually not held by him in a strict form. I will try to show why do I think this in both cases.

¹⁰ Richard Rorty, „Response to Hilary Putnam”, in Robert Brandom (ed.), *Rorty and His Critics*, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford, 2000, 90.

Not only Putnam, but several other critics assume that Rorty occupies an extremist position. However, there are textual evidences against this. Rorty does not think as Derrida does—if he does—that „there is nothing outside the text”.¹¹ He only rejects the sharp contrast between language and the world as a successor notion of the sharp contrast between subject and object established by the epistemological tradition of philosophy. Although Rorty is often carried away by his own rethoric, for him „the loss of the world” does not mean that there is no world in the everyday sense and there are no things independent from us and our linguistic practices. As he writes, „If one accepts the Davidson-Stroud position, then »the world« will just be the stars, the people, the tables and the grass—all those things which nobody except the occasional »scientific realist« philosopher thinks might not exist.”¹² His seemingly one-sided picture that puts linguistic practices in the first place is not a straightforward theory but only a rethorical critique of the very need for a theory of the language-world connection. And since this picture serves exclusively philosophical purposes, it does not affect the ways in which the common man thinks and talks about the world.

Rorty’s pragmatism not only affirms but in certain cases even defends our everyday use of language. To see this it is worth comparing his views on mental vocabulary with that of Paul Churchland. Churchland thinks that our common way of attributing beliefs and desires to each other—„folk psychology”, as he refers to it—is founded on a false theory because there are no such things as beliefs and desires. Even in his early eliminativist period, Rorty did not accept this view. He thought that there *are* beliefs and desires as long as we attribute them to each other. Later, under the influence of Davidson, he has adopted a non-reductive physicalism that accepts not only the coexistence of mental and physical descriptions of the same events, but also the fact that mental descriptions are—and perhaps always will be—much more useful for ordinary purposes.¹³ For Rorty, folk psychology is not a bad theory but a good practice. Another example could be the concept of truth. While many critics think that Rorty has an excentric theory on truth, he simply claims that „truth is not the sort of thing one should

¹¹ See Richard Rorty, „Nineteenth-Century Idealism and Twentieth-Century Textualism”, in *Consequences of Pragmatism*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1981.

¹² Richard Rorty, „The World Well Lost”, 14.

¹³ See Richard Rorty, „Non-Reductive Physicalism”, in *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991.

have to expect to have a philosophically interesting theory about.”¹⁴ It means that Rorty neither denies truth, nor attempts to define it in any unusual way. He rather claims that all we have to know about truth is simply the ordinary use of the word „true”.

I think that Rorty does not question our commonsensical picture of the world because what he questions are theories, and the commonsensical picture is not a theory. However, if we defend Rorty in this way—and I am sure that it is not an un-Rortian way—then we have to accept the same in Putnam’s case, too. I think when Putnam urges a return to the Ordinary, he looks for a pretheoretical or antitheoretical stance, rather than a theory of the „really real” as Rorty assumes. To put it another way: Putnam’s naïve realism is actually not a kind of realism in the sense that it is not a theory of the underlying common features of the stars, the people, the tables, the grass and so on. Putnam, just as Rorty, differentiates between reality as the sum of ordinary things and Reality as a „superthing”. He is aware to „the common philosophical error of supposing that the term *reality* must refer to a single superthing instead of looking at the way in which we endlessly renegotiate—and are *forced* to renegotiate—our notion of reality as our language and our life develop.”¹⁵ Given this difference, it seems to me just a matter of detail whether we say with Rorty that there is no need for the concept of the World or Reality for philosophical purposes at all; or we say with Putnam that we had better use these concepts in a commonsensical, rather than a philosophical way.

Nevertheless, one might say that Putnam’s naïve realism remains committed to a theory that seems to be „outdated” from Rorty’s point of view, namely to the philosophical theory of perception. And in *The Threefold Cord* Putnam uses the concept of perception and experience frequently, indeed. However, what Putnam presents here is not a theory of perception but a critique of the classical sense-data theory of perception—in order to do justice to our ordinary experience. Experience, of course, is still a suspicious concept for Rorty. According to him, we had better dissolve all philosophical talk about experience in talk about language and, following Sellars, treat perceptual reports simply as „language-entry transitions”. But I have to say once again that in this case it seems to be a matter of detail. As I have mentioned before, Putnam’s critique of

¹⁴ Richard Rorty, „Introduction: Pragmatism and Philosophy”, in *Consequences of Pragmatism*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1981, xiii.

¹⁵ Hilary Putnam, *The Threefold Cord*, 9.

classical theories of perception relies on Austin's *Sense and Sensibilia*, that is, a book which is concerned with linguistic expressions as „looks”, „seems” or „appears”, rather than experience as such. It shows that the question of ordinary experience can be dissolved in the question of ordinary reports about such experience and thus, more generally, in the question of ordinary language. Which means that Putnam's attempt to return to the Ordinary is not necessarily a return to a „pre-linguistic turn” form of pragmatism.

That is why I think, despite Putnam's and Rorty's understanding of their own debate, that the main differences between their positions concerning the Ordinary do not reflect an irreconcilable theoretical antagonism. Rorty is not committed to a theory that questions our everyday picture of the world, while Putnam's defence of this picture is not an attempt to find a new theory of the „really real”. However, it does not mean that these differences are merely verbal. I think that Putnam's and Rorty's different relations to the question of the Ordinary or, more precisely, the fact that they attribute considerably different importance to this question reflects not a doctrinal but another kind of philosophical disagreement—namely, different conceptions of the nature and task of philosophy itself.

While Putnam thinks that the Ordinary is an important philosophical topic, Rorty thinks that it is unimportant or, at least, uninteresting. One might say, what Rorty is concerned with is not the Ordinary but the Extraordinary. He is not interested in ordinary ways of speaking but in new ways of speaking; his aim is to emphasize the innovative character of language and the transformative potential of new vocabularies. And this affects inevitably his conception of philosophy, too. According to Rorty, good philosophy also plays a transformative role, since it provides a new understanding of ourselves as human beings. This picture of philosophy is more ambitious than the picture that Hilary Putnam shares with Ruth Anna Putnam, and which she formulates as follows: „taking pragmatism seriously means to me: to try to philosophize in ways that are relevant to the real problems of real human beings.”¹⁶ The difference between these pictures is exemplified well by the different reasons why do the two philosophers think that we had

¹⁶ Ruth Anna Putnam, „Taking Pragmatism Seriously”, in Hilary Putnam, *Pragmatism and Realism*, edited by James Conant and Urszula Żegleń, Routledge, New York, 2002, 11. See also Hilary Putnam's response in the same volume.

better put many received problems of philosophy aside. According to Putnam, most of these problems are not „real” problems of „real” human beings because, as the problem of the external world or other minds, they originate in doubts which seem to be simply unjustified in the light of our everyday practice. In contrast, Rorty thinks that the question is not whether these problems are „real” ones; the question is whether they are productive ones which are able to open new horizons to us. And according to Rorty, the received problems of philosophy became hopelessly unproductive in this sense.

We will see it more clearly how differently do Rorty and Putnam think about the nature of philosophical problems, if we turn to an early and a later text by Rorty which are partially concerned with ordinary language philosophy. One of them is Rorty’s introduction to the volume *The Linguistic Turn*, and the other one is his essay „Wittgenstein and the Linguistic Turn”.¹⁷ In both writings Rorty argues that philosophers of ordinary language or, following the terminology of the latter essay, „therapeutic Wittgensteinians” see philosophical problems in an ahistorical way. According to them, philosophical problems are the products of the misuse of language or conceptual confusion, and thus they will emerge again and again. From this perspective philosophy seems to be a constant battle against the same problems or, to use another metaphor, a neverending cure of a disease that is an inevitable feature of the human condition. I think it’s fair to classify Putnam in this therapeutic camp. Rorty contrasts this view with that of historicist philosophers, who see all philosophical problems as products of specific historical contexts which could be replaced with another problems in new contexts. The most important representatives of this historicist camp are those thinkers who were successful in the substitution of old philosophical problems with new ones.

Thus, regarding Putnam’s and Rorty’s relation to the Ordinary, we can differentiate between a therapeutic and a transformative approach to philosophy. The therapeutic approach attempts to do justice to common sense by dissolving philosophical problems which seem to undermine it, while the transformative approach is indifferent to common sense, and pictures philosophy as a constantly self-renewing activity. Here and now I do not want to judge which one is more adequate or more promising than the other.

¹⁷ See Richard Rorty, „Metaphilosophical Difficulties of Linguistic Philosophy”, in Richard Rorty (ed.), *The Linguistic Turn*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1967, and „Wittgenstein and the Linguistic Turn”, in *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2007.

However, I have to remark that the two approaches are not necessarily as irreconcilable as the Rorty-Putnam debate suggests. To see this, it is worth referring to Rorty's and Putnam's different interpretations of the classical pragmatists. Rorty provides a „transformative” reading of James and Dewey—following James, he even compares the significance of pragmatism to that of the Protestant Reformation—while Putnam provides a „therapeutic” reading which regards them as naïve realists. The reason for such divergent interpretations might be that classical pragmatism has both the therapeutic and the transformative vein. The question is, whether this fact shows that there is an inherent tension within classical pragmatism or rather that the reconciliation of Putnam's and Rorty's approaches to philosophy is far from being impossible.

One might say that the main obstacle in the way of an attempt to reconcile these two approaches would be the question of historicism. Granted, philosophers of the Ordinary often oppose historicism, but I think it would be a mistake to ignore what might be called the deep historicity of the Ordinary. Although many philosophers treat it in an ahistorical way, ordinary language itself is a historical phenomenon that changes from time to time. Perhaps we might say the same about the commonsensical picture of the world. Let me quote William James who wrote the following about common sense: „when we look back, and speculate as to how the common-sense categories may have achieved their wonderful supremacy, no reason appears why it may not have been by a process just like that by which the conceptions due to Democritus, Berkeley, or Darwin, achieved their similar triumphs in more recent times. In other words, they may have been successfully *discovered* by prehistoric geniuses whose names the night of antiquity has covered up; they may have been verified by the immediate facts of experience which they first fitted; and then from fact to fact and from man to man they may have *spread*, until all language rested on them and we are now incapable of thinking naturally in any other terms.”¹⁸ James points out that our commonsensical truths can change or evolve from time to time, even if this process is neither a fast, nor an easy one. Perhaps pragmatism can show us how to think about the Ordinary in historicist terms, without denying its priority or reality. But this could be the topic of another essay.

¹⁸ William James, *Pragmatism*, Dover Publications, Mineola, 1995 [1907], 70. Emphasis in the original.

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