Finitude as Mark of Excellence. Habermas, Putnam and the Peircean Theory of Truth

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Resumen. *Finito como señal de excelencia. Habermas, Putnam y la teoría pierceana de la verdad.*

Hilary Putnam y Jürgen Habermas comparten la convicción de que la finitud de la mente humana es una virtud y no una deficiencia. En este trabajo analizo esta convicción filosófica de ambos mediante la comparación de sus formas de renunciar a la concepción pragmática de la verdad y con una revisión de debate en torno a la objetividad de los valores y normas.

Palabras clave: objetividad, pragmatismo, realismo, rectitud moral, verdad.

Abstract

Hilary Putnam and Jürgen Habermas share the conviction that the finitude of the human mind is a virtue and not a shortcoming. In this paper I track this shared philosophical conviction by comparing their ways of withdrawing the pragmatist conception of truth and by reviewing their debate on the objectivity of values and norms.

Keywords: objectivity, pragmatism, realism, moral rightness, truth.

In spite of working in areas rather distant from one another, J. Habermas and H. Putnam share some basic assumptions. For instance, both of them have strived to reconnect portions of the continental and analytical ways of philosophizing, have rejected the encapsulation of highly specialised fields, and have consequently arrived at comprehensive philosophical views. Moreover, both philosophers openly declare that they have learned from each other and acknowledge the relevance of the other's philosophical claims for their own philosophical discussions. While the last Habermas is particularly indebted to Putnam's internal realism when he articulates his own pragmatic position about the relations between truth and justification, Putnam has been interested above all in Habermas' discourse ethics in order to reinforce his own positions in moral and political philosophy. In this article I

will approximate to their shared Kantian conviction that the finitude of the human mind is not a shortcoming, but a mark of excellence (Habermas 2002a, p. 284). I will do this by comparing their renouncing the pragmatist doctrine of truth as ultimate opinion and by showing how such withdrawals appear in their debate on values and norms to support opposed moral theories.

According to the Peircean account of truth, a sentence, a belief or a theory are true when they form part of an *ultimate opinion* after a sufficiently lengthy research process. In other words, they are true when they could be the result of an agreement reached by the community of inquirers as the ideal point of convergence in the scientific research. As Charles Sanders Peirce defined it, "the opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate, is what we mean by the truth" (Peirce 1960, 5.407), and this "opinion that would finally result from investigation does not depend on how anybody may actually think" (Peirce 1960, 5.408). Since "the object represented in this opinion is the real" (Peirce 1960, 5.407), such idealization of the convergent truth comes to terms in the limit with reality: "And what do we mean by the real? … The real, then, is that which, sooner or later, information and reasoning would finally result in, and which is therefore independent of the vagaries of me and you. Thus, the very origin of the conception of reality shows that this conception essentially involves the notion of a COMMUNITY, without definite limits, and capable of a definite increase of knowledge" (Peirce 1960, 5.311).

Habermas's reception of Peirce theories, under the influence of his friend Karl-Otto Apel, began during the 1960s and took place especially in the second part of his book *Erkenntnis und Interesse* (Habermas, 1968; 2002b, pp. 206-207). Since the beginning of 1970s, Habermas developed an epistemic conception of truth heavily indebted to Peirce's pragmatic account of truth (Habermas 1984). This consensus (later called discourse) theory of truth was the key piece of the communicative (later called discourse) ethics. In his mature, openly Kantian version of this moral theory (Habermas 1985) there were certainly several important revisions of his previous account of truth. In particular, Habermas rejected both his former idea that the discursive consensus reached in the long run under the ideal speech situation works as the criterion of truth of any sentence and his earlier interpretation of such speech situation as an anticipation of an ideal form of life. Nevertheless, Habermas basically maintained that the justification under the ideal conditions or presuppositions of argumentation was constitutive for the truth claims and that truth was ultimately an epistemic concept and, as such, only a special case of a wider notion of validity. And he stood by the central theoretical strategy of modelling the moral rightness on analogy with this anti-realist concept of truth, because this move allowed him to defend a cognitive conception for the moral validity of norms uncoupled from any dubious moral facts or metaphysical properties. This truth-analogous conception of the moral validity was the touchstone for the cognitivism of the discourse ethics.

In early 1990s, Habermas still defended the discursive version of the Peircean theory of truth in order to ensure, by analogy, the *cognitive* and *deontological* character of moral validity[1]. Certainly, both dimensions of moral validity define each other: the universal bindingness is defined epistemically as what is ideally justified and the binary code of right and wrong (analogous to the binary code true/false) is defined in terms of what we all are categorically obligated to do or not to do. Habermas reiterated then that the unconditionality we associate with truth (and moral rightness) as a validity claim that transcends all possible contexts is brought back to a quasi-transcendental presupposition of our discursive practices. Besides the projection of an ideal convergence in the long run that works as a necessary presupposition into the actual discursive practices of truth-tracking inquiry, the unconditionality of validity claims appears as a kind of intramundane transcendence here and now. And Habermas again attributed to Peirce this sort of reconciliation with human finitude in the view of our parochialism toward future epistemic scenarios. As he wrote in the central essay of his book *Erläuterungen zur Diskursethik*,

> Peirce explains truth with the contrafactual reference to the vindication of a criticisable validity claim under the communication conditions of a community of interpreters that extends ideally across social space and historical time. The projection of an *unlimited* communication community serves to substitute for the moment of eternity (or the time-transcending character) of "unconditionality" by the idea of an open, but goal-directed process of interpretation that transcends the borders of social space and historical time from within, from the perspective of a finite existence situated within the world" (Habermas, 1991a, 158)[2].

Oddly enough, Habermas also wrote not only in the middle of the 1980s[3], but in various texts until the mid nineties that such reinterpretation of the pragmatist theory (or a slightly weaker version, one that emphasizes the anticipation of rebutting every possible

1. See Habermas 1990, pp. 125-6, 131-3; 1991a, pp. 120-5, 129-31, 157-9; 1991b, pp. 9-33, 123-6; and 1992, pp. 28-35, 53-57, 391-2.
2. The translations of German and Spanish quotes in this article are my own.
3. Habermas and Putnam met for the first time during a lecture the later gave the summer of 1980 in Frankfurt. There was no evidence that they knew each other's works before this time, as it is evident in their major books of 1981 *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns* and *Reason, Truth, and History*. Nonetheless, that personal encounter seemed to awake a sense of curiosity and mutual interest. In any case, an intellectual sympathy between them was growing during the following years and it would be manifest in the last two Paul Carus Lectures of 1985 (Putnam 1987, pp. 41-86), as well as in Habermas's conference of 1987 "Die Einheit der Vernunft in der Vielfalt ihrer Stimmen" (Habermas 1988, pp. 153-186). In this text, Habermas expressed sympathetically his (Kantian, but also Peircean) affinities to Putnam's conception of truth as idealization of rational acceptability.

objection[4]) was compatible with a central thesis of Putnam's philosophy. The discourse theory would have in common with internal realism an epistemic conception according to which the truth would be interdependent with the discursive conditions for the ideal rational acceptability.

Certainly, Putnam had previously defended a roughly similar position[5]. In *Reason, Truth and History*, he understood the truth as a property of propositions that cannot be lost and, therefore, as independent and not reducible to justification here and now on the basis of the available evidence, but he also argued that truth can be identified as an idealization of rational acceptability and that "to claim a statement is true is to claim it could be justified". He even claimed that a statement is true if it would be warrantedly assertable under "epistemically ideal conditions". Moreover he compared such conditions with the frictionless planes of the thought experiments in physics, by arguing that -despite we cannot really attain such ideal conditions and planes or even be sure that we have come sufficiently close to them- talk of them "has "cash value" because we can approximate them to a very high degree of approximation" (Putnam 1981, 55-56). Not only Habermas, but many others took Putnam as a Peircean or read passages like that as supporting the idea that the true belief would be that that would be justified by all the researchers under ideal conditions of inquiry. For instance, Richard Rorty still insisted in June 1996 that "some actual philosophers, like Hilary Putnam or Jürgen Habermas, attribute to Peirce an importance I estimate excessive. Both of them accept Peirce's definition of 'truth' as that toward which the opinion is fated to converge at the end of inquiry, as well as Peirce's definition of 'reality' as what is believed to exist in such point of convergence. In my opinion, this notion of convergence is neither clear nor useful" (Rorty 2000, p. 29).

Obviously, this apparent family resemblance should be questioned, at least for two reasons: (i) the interconnectedness of truth and justification we find in Habermasian writings during the eighties and until the middle of the nineties is different from that maintained by Putnam; (ii) and since the beginning of the 1990s Putnam distanced himself from his former internal realism and from that time onwards he rejected any radically epistemic conception of truth and the pragmatist theory of truth in particular.

(i) For Habermas, the unconditionality of truth and validity in general is rescued in the idealizations built into the pragmatic presuppositions of the argumentation. This implies that truth claims and deontological claims are not confined into the spatio-temporal context in which they are raised, but their "transcendence from within" works in every discourse performance under the supposition of (a surrogate of) the ideal community

4. See Habermas 1992, pp. 53-55; 1995, pp. 152-153, 1996, pp. 52-54, 342-343, 354-356, 364; 1998, pp. 409, 418-419, 426.

5. See H. Putnam 1981, esp. chapter 3; "A Defence of Internal Realism", in Putnam 1990, pp. 30-42; Putnam 1983, esp. pp. vii-xviii, 69-86 y 229-47; or "On Truth", in Putnam 1994a, pp. 315-29.

of communication. Thus, Habermas interpretation of the cautionary use of the truth predicate, the use that reminds us that the best reasons can be invalidated in light of future evidence, does not seem to necessitate any explicit realist compromise, but only the idealization of this sort of ideally cross-contextual justification. Putnam on the contrary does not admit a Peircean reading of his appeal to the epistemically ideal conditions[6]. And he does not think that the conditions for warranting the truth would be sufficient only if they would be ideal, or that such conditions overcome from within the local borders only if they approximate sufficiently to ideal conditions. Rather, he thinks "there are *better and worse* epistemic situations *with respect to particular statements*" (Putnam 1990, viii), and he defends that the epistemic conditions necessary for the fixation of truth are ideal only if they are sufficiently good.

(ii) Since the beginning of the 1990s Putnam turns to the natural realism of the common man[7], while defending a kind of "pragmatism without the pragmatist theory of truth" (Hookway 2002, 93). As a successor of the pragmatist heritage, Putnam subscribes the main theses of the central classical pragmatists, especially William James and also John Dewey: fallibilism and anti-foundationalism, pluralism and anti-scepticism, the rejection of pernicious dualisms and dichotomies such as the fact-value dichotomy, and the primacy of practice (Putnam 1994a, pp. 151-181). This last thesis, the defense that practice is primary in philosophy and the consequent "insistence on supremacy of the agent point of view", can be considered as the very core of pragmatism (Putnam 1987, p. 70). In fact, Putnam sees the normative idea of indispensability, internally connected to the priority of the first person perspective, as the very heart of pragmatism, both old and new[8]. However, he considers untenable the old theory that the truth is the opinion fated to be accepted as the ultimate outcome of inquiry, and he argues that pragmatism today must go without the idea that truth can be "defined" in terms of verification. Putnam raises accordingly a set of objections against the "classical" identification of the true with what would be

6. "Many people have thought that my idealization was the same as Peirce's, that what the figure of a "frictionless plane" corresponds to is a situation ("finished science") in which the community would be in a position to justify *every* true statement (and to disconfirm every false one). People have attributed to me the idea that we can sensibly imagine conditions which are *simultaneously ideal* for the ascertainment of any truth whatsoever, or simultaneously ideal for answering any question whatsoever. I have never thought such a thing, and I was, indeed, so far from ever thinking such a thing that it never occurred to me even to warn against this misunderstanding when I wrote *Reason, Truth, and History*… Thus, I do not by any means *ever* mean to use the notion of an "ideal epistemic situation" in this fantastic (or utopian) Peircean sense" (Putnam 1990, pp. vii-viii).

7. See Putnam 1992, pp. 356-357. The 1994 "Dewey Lectures" corroborate the turn from the internal realism to the new realist variation (Putnam 1999, pp. 1-70).

8. "The heart of pragmatism is the idea that notions that are indispensable to our best practice, are justified by that very fact; and in this respect, I am a pragmatist" (H. Putnam 1994b, p. 260). On the importance of the indispensability arguments in Putnam's pragmatism, see Gil and Vega 2008.

verified in the long run[9]. To begin with, this theory has unacceptable consequences, such as the well-known one that the truth of statements about past events would depend on what will happen or on how the opinion will be in the future. Moreover, there are plain truths that cannot ever be confirmed, truths that we know that do not depend on our agreement notwithstanding how long we research about them, or probable truths that are beyond our capacities for detecting or for verification even under ideal conditions. On the other hand, actual science has questioned various metaphysical assumptions of the trust on the possibility of finding the right answers if inquiry were indefinitely prolonged, such as Peirce's stipulation that future time is infinite and that no information is ever irretrievably destroyed. Finally, Peirce's -but not James's- theory of truth could prevent the epistemological pluralism, not only because the common end to every researcher seems to be solely to contribute to the grown of knowledge, but also because in the end the theory requires an "absolute conception of the world" which would demand the God's Eye View[10]. However, "if the notion of an absolute point of view is unintelligible, then not being able to speak from the absolute point of view is not an incapacity" (Putnam 1991, 404)

This last sentence, with its tribute to human finitude, contrasts with that other of Habermas on Peirce we have cited some pages back. However, there is an obvious affinity between Putnam and Habermas around the Kantian flavour of such a tribute.

I have said that, although Putnam had argued from the beginning of the 1990's onwards against the temptation to assimilate truth with warranted assertability even in ideal conditions, Habermas maintained until the mid nineties that his own anti-realist account of truth was akin to Putnam's elucidation of the notion in *Reason, Truth and History*. According to Habermas's position at that time, the procedural conditions of discourse do not anticipate a definitive agreement which would make all further argumentation superfluous, but they only favour an ongoing process of critical discussion by which objections are weakened and the acceptable becomes what survives criticism[11].

However, Habermas gives up his previous, radically epistemic concept of truth in *Wahrheit und Rechtfertigung* as well as in subsequent texts, where he goes on to defend a realist and pragmatist account of truth within a new theoretical framework under the label of Kantian pragmatism[12]. He says again that his new position adheres to Putnam's

9. See for instance Putnam 1992, pp. 357-8, 363; 1995a, pp. 5-12; 1995b; 1997; 1998; 2002a, 123-124.

10. See in this respect the comparison between Peirce and Williams in "Bernard Williams and the Absolute Conception of the World", in Putnam 1992b, 80-85; see also Hookway 2002.

11. "One must conceive the discursive redemption of validity claims as a metacritical, *ongoing* process of rebutting objections. Here I am attempting to use discourse theory to explain what Hilary Putnam has, in the context of philosophy of science, called 'rational acceptability under ideal conditions' " (Habermas 1998, p. 418). See the other references cited in note 3.

12. See Habermas 1999; 2001a; 2001b, pp. 153-170; 2003. Habermas's turn to Kantian pragmatism could not be developed without the criticism of Cristina Lafont (1999).

understanding of realism "as the idea that thought and language can represent parts of the world which are not parts of thought and language" (Putnam 1994a, p. 299). This time the main reasons for this philosophical affiliation have to do with connecting the (non-epistemic) notion of truth to those of direct reference and discursive justification.

On the one hand, the notion of truth presupposes reference to a single objective world that exists independently of our descriptions and is the same for all of us. This concept of reference allows us understand the fact of learning in realist terms, by taking account of competing descriptions of the same states of affairs and by making the ontological primacy of the objective world congruent with the epistemic primacy of a linguistically articulated lifeworld[13]. On the other hand, Habermas now emphasizes that the connection between truth and justification is epistemically, but not conceptually necessary: "Although we cannot sever the connection of truth and justification, this *epistemically unavoidable* connection must not be turned into a *conceptually inseparable* connection in the form of an epistemic concept of truth" (Habermas 1999, p. 52). The connection is epistemically unavoidable because "argumentation remains the only *available* medium of ascertaining truth since truth claims that have been problematized cannot be tested in any other way" (Habermas 1999, p. 51). But such connection cannot be conceptually inseparable, because truth transcends all possible justification. There is an epistemic access to truth conditions in terms of "discursive redemption" of truth-claims, but not an epistemic notion of truth. While truth is not exhausted by reaching consensus, Habermas does maintain that "an agreement about norms or actions that is reached discursively under ideal conditions has more than merely an authorizing power; it *warrants* the rightness of moral judgments. Ideally warranted assertibility *is* what we mean by moral validity; it not only signifies that the pros and cons of a controversial validity claim have been exhaustively considered, but it exhausts the meaning of normative rightness *itself* as the worthiness of recognition" (Habermas 1999, p. 297). In contrast with his realist turn and his defense that all language users who raise truth claims refer to one and the same world, Habermas continues claiming his moral constructivism and still explains the notion of moral justice in epistemological terms of ideal justifiability.

The contrast between truth and rightness has played a role in the debate between Habermas and Putnam around the objectivity of norms and values[14]. Both philosophers

13. "Hilary Putnam has dealt with the question of how it is possible for learning processes to traverse the bounds of different time periods and forms of life specifically in terms of the sameness of objective reference... If an interpretation that was rationally acceptable under certain epistemic conditions is to be recognizable as an error in a different epistemic context, then the phenomenon to be explained must be preserved in switching from one interpretation to the other. Reference to the *same* object must remain constant even under *different* descriptions" (Habermas 1999, pp. 44-45).

14. This debate began with Putnam's paper "Werte und Normen", in Wingert, Günther 2001, pp. 280-313. There is a slightly different version of this text in Putnam 2002a, pp. 111-134. Habermas' reply was the opening conference to the Symposium "Putnam und die Tradition des Pragmatismus" (Habermas

reject non-cognitivist redescriptions of our norms and values (and of our moral life in general) and uphold that the reasons for being ethical are not apparent from a non-ethical or external standpoint. However, Putnam argues for a moral realism or, as he prefers to call it, for a "moral pluralism" that applies basic pragmatist thesis to the moral contents and practices. Besides defending anti-scepticism and anti-foundationalism, this ethical position gives good reasons for the indispensability of our normative vocabulary (and of the actions and forms of life with which this vocabulary becomes interwoven) and for the entanglement of facts, norms and values. Of course, pluralism reaches the very core of this moral *theory*: "It is as if they [most ethicists] wanted to see ethics as a noble statue standing at the top of a single pillar. My image is rather different… [T]hat is how I see ethics: as a table with many legs, which wobbles a lot, but is very hard to turn over" (Putnam 2004, p. 28). Putnam's image of ethics as a system of interrelated concerns has in fact four splendid legs, those of the traditions associated with the names of Aristotle, Kant, Levinas and Dewey.

These pluralist and pragmatist convictions move Putnam to argue against the alleged dichotomy between norms and values behind the Habermasian differentiation between the moral and ethical uses of practical reason. His main objection is that discourse ethics both involves an implausible moral minimalism about norms and endorses an ethical anti-cognitivism or a sociological relativism about values. This objection combines in a new way a sort of indispensability argument and a "companions in the guilt" argument (Vega and Gil 2008). It claims that evaluative vocabulary is indispensable in our moral form of life and that there can be no valid norms without objective values. Therefore, some value judgments must be correct, even "true", for the norms to have content and be valid at the same time. In contrast, discourse ethics sees the universal norms as outcomes of the filtering moral procedure that would attain their objectivity by neglecting the inevitable ethical entanglement of our thin moral concepts with thick terms and by displacing the contextual, non-universalizable values as the contingent social outcomes of particular life-worlds. However, if our evaluative vocabulary is indispensable for the alleged universal norms, then joining an *ethical* relativism about values to a *moral* minimalism about norms would undermine the alleged universal validity of norms. "Relativism of any kind with respect to value-terms cannot leave the objectivity of 'norms' unaffected" (Putnam, 2002a, 120).

On the other hand, Putnam argues that discourse ethics is still trapped in an untenable Peircean account of moral truth or rightness. For Putnam, the concepts of truth and justification are not linked by definition. Neither truth nor rightness is definitionally the outcome of an ideal conduct of inquiry. It was not only that we find difficulties making

2002a). This symposium held in honour of Putnam's birthday brought together about sixteen important philosophers and experts in his work, but his unique written response was a "Reply to Jürgen Habermas"; see the reasons why he singled out Habermas's paper in Putnam 2002b, p. 306.

sense of an ideal dialogue without admitting thick ethical terms. It was also that "there is no reason to believe that the outcome of an ideal and sufficiently prolonged discussion of ethical questions would inevitably be correct" (2002a, p. 126). Consequently, Putnam conclude his reply to Habermas claiming that the discourse ethics would be an attempt to speak from a God's Eye View (2002b, pp. 319-320) -the standpoint to which tend by other routes Peirce's conception of truth or Williams' absolute conception of the world.

We don't discuss here Habermas's responses in defense of the anti-realism of both his strong moral cognitivism about norms and his weak ethical cognitivism about values. Suffice it to say that objectivity is in both cases an intersubjective result of justificatory practices from the common perspective of the participants and not from an external, Eye God's perspective. On the one hand, Habermas insists on the idea that our moral point of view grows from within the ethical conditions of a community and its shared form of life. Only from this standpoint can we make a distinction *internal* to our normative discussion between the questions regarding justice and the questions regarding goodness, a distinction somehow neglected in Putnam's philosophy. On this view, conceiving objectivity of norms as the worthiness of recognition does not entail sacrificing pluralism in behalf of an alleged convergence between competing views of the good life. On the other hand, values can be rationally debatable in ethical discourses concerning the self-understanding and life-projects of persons and groups, as when we the affected deliberate to select our best values and to identify the common good from the point of view of what is the best "for us". In Habermas's constructivist account values are objective only insofar as they deserve acceptance because are subject to rational scrutiny and intersubjectively recognized by means of good reasons. Moreover, values are not completely separate from norms; they are authorized by rational procedures and can also be subject to universality constraints.

Certainly, on Putnam's realist view values have a sort of "objectivity without objects" (Putnam 2004). Habermas was therefore misguided when he objected that Putnam would be a thoroughgoing realist (*Realist auf ganzer Linie*) that treats value statements as descriptions (Habermas 2002a, pp. 297-298). Evaluative and normative truths bear on reality and are revisable through learning processes, but they are not made true or false by (intrinsically non-natural) objects and properties. However, Putnam does uphold that there are no recognition transcendent facts in ethics. What is true (or valid) with regard to value judgments and to norms does not diverge from what is endorsed by the best justification. "In the case of ethics (unlike science), the true view cannot differ from the view for which there are the best reasons" (Putnam 2002a, p. 175). Again we can see here the human face whose acknowledgment so closely binds Putnam's and Habermas's philosophies. Such acknowledgment is in fact the beginning of the real discrepancies between them.

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