Metaphysics without Ontology?

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This symposium contribution discusses some issues of ontology involved in the metaethics of Hilary Putnam’s book *Ethics without Ontology*.

Pragmatism was introduced into philosophy as a principle of logic, “a method of ascertaining the meaning of hard words and abstract conceptions” (Peirce 1931–58, vol. 5, §464). Its purpose was to clarify and in some cases to eliminate as meaningless traditional metaphysical questions (ibid. §2). In that sense, from the start, Putnam was a pragmatist: contemporary metaphysics is indebted to him for elucidations, which still play a central role in current debates, of the nature of properties, modalities, of the weight of our various metaphysical commitments in logic, mathematics, the philosophy of language or the philosophy of mind, to say nothing of such *loci classici* as the Brain in a Vat or the Twin Earth thought experiments (see in particular Putnam 1975a, 1975b, 1983).

Very early too, Putnam saw that, in order to reach a correct realistic position, the main enemy to overthrow was Metaphysical Realism (a variant of Platonism), i.e. the “parochial” illusion of a readymade world (or “dough”) out there, fixed once for all, dictating one single “true” description, and independent of our thoughts about it. The more Putnam moved from Internal realism to his current position, namely Commonsense (or “natural” or “pragmatist”) realism, the more it seemed obvious that metaphysical realism was not the only foe, but that we should free ourselves from any kind of metaphysical temptation, i.e. the illusion that we should “explain” what takes place, for example in mathematics or in ethics, by introducing extraneous reasons to those areas, instead of simply looking at what is going on there: “Metaphysics is almost by definition contrary to commonsense” (Putnam 2002, 124).

In *Ethics without Ontology*, still in line with the pragmatists, Putnam now attempts to bury Ontology, after a diagnosis of the “disastrous consequences” of metaphysics of all sorts, either inflationary (Platonist or Metaphysical Realist) or deflationary (whether they be eliminationist or simply reductionist) (2004, 18–20). We might think that Putnam limits his criticism to *that part* of metaphysics which, taken in its most classical and contemporary (more analytical than Heideggerian) sense, tries to answer the question: “What is there?” or to examine “what we are doing when we say that various sorts of entities ‘exist’”
But the criticism is so sweeping that the book might not only be
titled, as Peter van Inwagen suggested, “Everything without Ontology” (2005, 11), but “Everything without Metaphysics.” However is this so clear? In what
follows, I shall advance some reasons why it might not be so: reasons which
have to do, of course, with the fact (emphasized by Peirce, but first of all by
Aristotle) that any project of getting rid of all metaphysics is from the start
doomed to failure, since “everyman of us has a metaphysics,” and “becomes
more or less imbued with philosophical opinions, without being clearly aware of
it” (1931–58, vol. 1, §134). But there are further reasons which may have to do
with the implicit metaphysics which is at the heart of Putnam’s own inter-
pretation and consequent rejection of ontology.

It is important to note that Putnam’s aim, in this book, is not primarily a
strategy of destruction (to cure a “disease”) but of positive “replacement.”
Putnam always dismissed hand-waving strategies, considering that “the true task
of philosophy ... is not to rest frozen in a gesture of repudiation that is as empty
as what it repudiates” (2002, 101). As a “strategic optimist,” a man of the
Enlightenment, his aim it to give up the vehicle, while retaining the philo-
sophical insights (2004, 18, 85), so as to replace a dead and stinking corpse
(linked to the view, in particular, that such terms as “object” or “exist” have a
unique and determinate meaning) by something alive, i.e. pragmatic pluralism,
defined as “the recognition that it is no accident that in everyday language we
employ many different kinds of discourse, discourses subject to different
standards and possessing different sorts of applications, with different logical
and grammatical features.” But Putnam’s aim is even wider: in keeping with his
ongoing stress (see 1978) on the impossible demarcation between epistemology
and ethics and, in general, between scientific and “non scientific” knowledge, he
insists on the relatedness of the issues in the philosophy of mathematics and in
ethics, clearly aspiring to an integrated (should we say architectonic?) vision of
philosophy, eager to “take the ways of thinking that are indispensable in
everyday life much more seriously than the onto-theological tradition has been
willing to do,” hence, in so far as ethics is defined as “being concerned with the

With such a wide aim, the therapy itself should be wide enough. Indeed,
metaphysical attempts of all sorts are being condemned. First, the inflationists,
with their systems of substantive, necessary, established, infallible, cast in
marble principles, on which criticism, experimentation, inquiry – which are yet
so decisive, when we walk on “swampy ground” (2002, 102; 1995) and use
“wobbling tables” (2004, 28) – seem ineffective. They postulate mysterious,
invisible, supersensible, or supernatural forms which we would have a special
intuition of and which would be required behind our language games to deter-
mine such things as ethical value and obligation, what the Good life is, what
Justice really is. We must get rid of such “Platonizing”; conceive reason not as
“a transcendent metaphysical faculty” but rather as “what is and what is not
reasonable given the concerns of the ethical life” (2004, 71); reject the idea of a