HILARY PUTNAM AND CONCEPTUAL RELATIVITY

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INTRODUCTION

“As the circle of science grows larger, it touches paradox in more places.”

Friedrich Nietzsche

In *The Many Faces of Realism*, Hilary Putnam suggests that although the phenomenon of conceptual relativity has become pervasive in contemporary scientific practice, “contemporary logicians and meaning theorists generally philosophize as if it did not exist.” Putnam suggests that since the end of the nineteenth century, modern scientists have begun to take note of a variety of ‘non-classical’ phenomena, in particular the idea that “there are ways of describing what are (in some way) the ‘same facts’ which are (in some way) ‘equivalent’ but also (in some way) ‘incompatible’.” Rather than concluding that we are presented in such situations with a factual contradiction between two competing descriptions that must be decided one way or the other, Putnam urges us instead to recognize the way in which the employment of different concepts at a fundamental level can generate incompatible descriptions of the same phenomena that are, in some sense, equivalent.

In addition to scientific examples, Putnam describes a variety of situations in mathematics and logic which he claims exhibit the same kind of conceptual relativity. To describe these kinds of situations as characterised by a disagreement in fact, Putnam suggests, is to ignore the way in which many of the fundamental concepts that we use to describe the world do not possess a unique, correct interpretation. In other words, Putnam argues that “there is nothing that dictates a sublime ‘right sense’ upon words like ‘individual,’ ‘object,’ ‘exist’ in that way.” Putnam’s suggestion, therefore, is that some disagreements only appear substantial because we assume (incorrectly, according to Putnam) that we operate with common and fixed interpretations of fundamental notions such as existence, object or individual.

The phenomenon of conceptual relativity plays a central role in Putnam’s rejection of a cluster of positions he unites under the banner of *Metaphysical Realism*. For Putnam, metaphysical realism boils down to the idea that the facts of the world (or the truth of propositions) are fixed by something mind-independent and language-independent. As a consequence of this idea, Putnam suggests that the Metaphysical Realist is committed to the existence of a unique correspondence between statements in a language or theory and a determinate collection of mind and language-independent objects in the world. Such talk of correspondence between facts and objects, Putnam argues, presupposes that we find

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3 Ibid., p. 29.
5 Putnam makes use of capital letters here to distinguish these views from the one he later adopted and called ‘metaphysical realism’ in the lower case. Following his usage, we will use the capitalised notation from here on in.
ourselves in possession of a fixed metaphysically-privileged notion of ‘object’. Since it is precisely this possibility of dictating a right notion of concepts such as ‘individual’ and ‘object’ that Putnam takes the phenomenon of conceptual relativity to undermine, he naturally concludes that conceptual relativity presents a deep and insurmountable challenge to Metaphysical Realism.

There are, however, some aspects of Putnam’s notion of conceptual relativity that are not particularly clear. First, Putnam describes conceptual relativity as a unified and rather specific phenomenon, yet the examples that Putnam employs in his presentation of conceptual relativity range broadly from situations in empirical science to abstract descriptions of logic and mathematics. If situations of conceptual relativity revolve around ways of describing the ‘same facts’ in ‘equivalent’ but ‘incompatible’ ways, then what are we to make of the idea that what notions of fact, equivalence and incompatibility amount to in logic might differ from what the same notions amount to in scientific cases? In other words, the apparent differences between empirical and more formal cases of conceptual relativity seems in tension with Putnam’s suggestion that it represents a single, well-defined phenomenon.

Second, Putnam wishes to distinguish the phenomenon of conceptual relativity from the acknowledgement of conceptual relativity. Putnam insists that it is possible that one might accept his description of a particular situation as an example of conceptual relativity without adopting the right kind of attitude as a result, but says very little about what he takes this extra acknowledgement to involve. It would seem that to see conceptual relativity in the right philosophical light requires more than simply assenting to a particular description of a situation – one must take seriously the implications that such conceptual conflicts have for certain (metaphysical) questions of correctness, facts, reality and so on. More than simply a set of particular phenomena, conceptual relativity in this sense appears more like a philosophical doctrine that emphasises the difficulty that certain situations create for a particular view of the world (i.e. Metaphysical Realism).

The first and second chapters of this thesis will attempt to shed light on what might seem unclear about these two aspects of Putnam’s notion conceptual relativity. In the first case, we will suggest that Putnam’s representation of conceptual relativity as a narrow and specific phenomenon is somewhat misleading. Rather, we might distinguish several species of conceptual relativity that relate to notions of fact, equivalence and incompatibility in different ways. In thinking of conceptual relativity as a loosely related family of phenomena, we might make better sense of the relationship between the phenomenon of conceptual relativity and Putnam’s rejection of Metaphysical Realism. It is for this reason that while the notion of conceptual relativity might have its roots in references to ‘equivalent descriptions’ in scientific practice, many of Putnam’s more central cases involve the interplay of both formal and empirical concepts.

In the second chapter, we will attempt to give a more developed sense to Putnam’s notion of acknowledging conceptual relativity in the right way. In doing so, we will examine several reactions to conceptual relativity that Putnam sees as denying the broader implications of the phenomena at hand, including those that insist on a ‘basic worldly dough’ (typified by
Boghossian) and Kant’s suggestion that the implications of such situations relate to our lack of knowledge rather than to any matter of the meaning of our concepts. We shall suggest that the problem with these reactions, on Putnam’s view, is that in one way or another they represent attempts to recognise conceptual relativity while retaining the notion that one of the descriptions at hand is the one that is, in some sense, metaphysically ‘serious’. For Putnam, the recognition of conceptual relativity is incompatible with the retention of such a notion, and it is this suggestion that best captures what the ‘acknowledgement’ of conceptual relativity amounts to.

Having attempted to clarify some of Putnam’s thought on these two points, the third chapter of this thesis will respond to some prominent criticisms of Putnam’s notion of conceptual relativity. In doing so, we will bring to bear some of the observations developed in the preceding two chapters regarding the variety of situations of conceptual relativity and Putnam’s rejection of certain reactions to conceptual relativity. In particular Peter van Inwagen has presented two arguments that reject Putnam’s assessment of the implications of such situations in ways that seem problematic. Since his original move to internal realism, Putnam remained unwavering in his insistence that the phenomenon of conceptual relativity represented an insurmountable challenge to Metaphysical Realism. In clarifying some of the ambiguities that surround the notion of conceptual relativity and its implications, we might find ourselves in a better position to respond to those philosophers that wish to hold fast to some form of Metaphysical Realism in the face of the situations to which Putnam calls our attention.
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FLAVOURS OF CONCEPTUAL RELATIVITY

“When we examine what we should say when, what words we should use in what situations, we are looking not merely at words (or "meanings", whatever they may be) but also at the realities we use the words to talk about: we are using a sharpened awareness of words to sharpen our perception of, though not as the final arbiter of, the phenomena.”

J.L. Austin

The task of arriving at an understanding of the notion of conceptual relativity is somewhat complicated by the fact that Putnam does not offer a general definition or characterisation of the notion. Rather, he assembles a myriad of examples from science, mathematics, and logic, attempting to sketch a picture of what it is that these various situations have in common. In both The Many Faces of Realism (1987) and Ethics Without Ontology (2004), Putnam’s flagship example of conceptual relativity is that of mereological sums in logic. The mereologist holds that for any two particulars, there is an object which consists of their sum, and so is inclined to suggest that a world of three individuals contains, in fact, seven objects (ignoring the ‘null object’). Naturally enough, this seems at odds with the traditional logical picture which would describe a universe of three individuals as containing three objects. Putnam’s suggestion is that this disagreement does not turn on any fact which remains to be discovered (or argued for), but rather on differences in the fundamental concepts of ‘individual’ and ‘object’ that are employed in the expression of the disagreement in the first place.

In addition to the example of mereological sums, Putnam cites a variety of other situations that he takes as instances of conceptual relativity. These include, amongst others, the ontological status of the Cartesian plane, the description of space-time as made up of points or limits, and the translation of field theory into particle theory. For Putnam, these situations are all broadly characterised not by genuine factual disagreement but by conflict between “ways of describing what are (in some way) the ‘same facts’ which are (in some way) ‘equivalent’ but also (in some way) ‘incompatible’.” In other words, conceptual relativity refers to situations in which we can describe the same states of affairs in ways that are incompatible but equally true.

In this chapter, we will examine several of these examples of conceptual relativity in some detail. In doing so, we will push upon the questions neatly suggested by Putnam’s turn of phrase above: in what way do the competing accounts describe the ‘same facts’? In what way

2 Putnam, The Many Faces of Realism, p. 29.
are they ‘equivalent’? In what way are they ‘incompatible’? What we hope to highlight by focussing on such questions is that some of the examples of conceptual relativity put forward by Putnam may exhibit these characteristics in different ways. Establishing the equivalence of the two descriptions given by field theory and particle theory in quantum mechanics, for instance, might involve a great deal of empirical investigation that would seem misapplied in the mereological case. In the mereological case the incompatibility seems rather pronounced, in that we will give different answers to apparently simple questions such as ‘how many objects are there?’, depending on the description that we adopt. Yet in the case of the Cartesian plane, Putnam stresses the fact that the adoption of either of the competing descriptions does not impact the practice of mathematics in any meaningful way.

In this way, we will arrive at a picture of conceptual relativity as a phenomenon that may manifest itself in a variety of ways depending on the context in which we find ourselves, and thus one that is more profitably viewed as a loosely related family of phenomena. Putnam’s interest in the phenomenon of conceptual relativity is primarily motivated by the challenge that it appears to present to Metaphysical Realism, and some of his proposed examples of conceptual relativity certainly bear this challenge out in a more direct fashion than others. In other words, some examples of conceptual relativity are more central to the case against Metaphysical Realism that Putnam wishes to present, and so it is worth examining what it is that connects these cases more intimately to this line of argument. In doing so, we will suggest that not everything that might seem like an example of conceptual relativity forms a particularly persuasive case against Metaphysical Realism, especially in cases where what is at stake is little more than the particular metaphysical gloss that we place on pursuits that seem practically equivalent.

**MEREOMETRY AND THE POLISH LOGICIAN**

In introducing the notion of mereological sums in *The Many Faces of Realism*, Putnam invites the reader to “consider ‘a world with three individuals’”, adding that “Carnap often used examples like this when we were doing inductive logic together in the early nineteen-fifties.” The question is: how many objects are there in this world? The traditional logical picture, Putnam suggests, is that there are simply three objects in our world, in the sense that “we can identify ‘individual’, ‘object’, ‘particular’, etc., and find no absurdity in a world with just three objects which are independent, unrelated ‘logical atoms’.”

There are, however, alternative pictures available. Inspired by methods in mereology, the calculus of parts and wholes developed by Polish logician Stanisław Leśniewski, we might consider the ‘sum’ of any two objects to be a further object in its own right. On this view, our universe would contain more than three objects, since we must also recognise that the various combinations of our original three individuals are, themselves, objects. More explicitly, if X₁, X₂, and X₃ are our three individuals, then on the mereological picture the list of objects in our world would also include X₁ + X₂, X₁ + X₃, X₂ + X₃, and X₁ + X₂ + X₃. We might therefore

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3 Ibid., p. 18.
4 Ibid.
suggest that our ‘world with three individuals’ in fact contains seven objects (discounting the null object).\(^5\)

Putnam suggests that there is no deep factual disagreement in this situation. We may, if we would like to, “speak as Lezniewski taught us to speak – we can say that there are such things as mereological sums, we can tell which mereological sums are identical and which are not identical, we can say that mereological sums are not identical with sets, etc.”\(^6\) In other words, we can adopt the language of mereology, and in doing so we will find ourselves pushed to respond differently to fundamental questions about the situation at hand (such as ‘how many objects are there in this world?’ and ‘what are they?’).

What we should not expect, on Putnam’s view, is that there will be any fact of the matter about which is the ‘correct’ way to describe the situation, or whether mereological sums ‘actually’ exist. That is to say that it is “a matter of convention whether we say that mereological sums exist or not.”\(^7\) By convention, Putnam means here merely that the question of whether mereological sums exist is left open by the structure of our natural language, and so we can simply decide to say either that mereological sums exist or that they do not. That is not to say that such a decision is made, as it were, once and for all. Rather, depending on our particular inquiry and its focus, emphasis, structure and so on, we might at different points decide (not) to adopt a mereological description of a particular situation. We are left, then, with the suggestion that “what logicians call ‘the existential quantifier’ […] and its ordinary language counterparts, the expressions ‘there are,’ ‘there exist’ and ‘there exists a,’ ‘some,’ etc., do not have a single absolutely precise use but a whole family of uses.”\(^8\) In short, neither the traditional logical description nor the mereological description can claim to occupy a metaphysically or factually privileged position with respect to our world of three individuals.

We return then to some of our key questions. In what sense do the mereological and traditional logical pictures describe the ‘same facts’? Given the formal nature of the mereological case, this seems relatively uncomplicated. Both the Polish logician and the traditional logician recognise in this case that they are presented with a world with three individuals, before proceeding to give more conceptually-involved descriptions of the situation in terms of objects, existence, and so on. Were both logicians sitting at a table upon which sit three marbles, they would both agree on how many marbles there are on the table, but not on how many objects there are on the table.

The sense in which we might consider the two descriptions to be ‘equivalent’ and ‘incompatible’ in the mereological case appears slightly more complicated. Putnam refers to the descriptions in the mereological case, as well as those involved in other purported cases of conceptual relativity, as ‘cognitively equivalent’, by which he means both that the

\(^5\) More generally, this view would suggest that a world of \(n\) individuals would contain \(2^n - 1\) objects. For any set \(X\) with cardinality \(n\), there are \(2^n\) ways to combine the elements of that set (or more technically \(X\) has \(2^n\) subsets). We must then subtract one if we do not want to count the null object corresponding to the empty subset of \(X\) (or the way of combining none of the elements of \(X\)).


\(^7\) Ibid.

\(^8\) Ibid.
descriptions do not differ in their ability to predict or explain the phenomena at hand, and that we are able to interpret the statements of one description in terms of the other. Given the debate between Putnam’s two hypothetical logicians operates at a reasonably abstract level, it is not clear that notions of prediction or explanation quite have the same traction that they might, for instance, in a scientific example of conceptual relativity. The mereologist might certainly be able to explain in some sense that there are different ways of determining how many objects are contained in such a world, but this certainly seems a different task to that of presenting some explanation of the phenomena at hand (i.e. our world of three individuals). There is not, it would seem, anything causal at stake. If merely asserting that there are seven objects in our world of three individuals is not to be considered an ‘explanation’ of the phenomena at hand, then it is not clear that there is anything about our world of three individuals that stands to be explained in this way.

At least on some level, however, it does seem that we can translate between the two descriptions of our world with three individuals. When the traditional logician hears the mereologist say that there are seven objects in our world of three individuals, he or she might simply interpret this as the statement that the cardinality of the power set of our world of three individuals, minus the null object, is seven. That is to say that any statement that emerges from the mereological description can be understood as corresponding to a particular fact in the traditional logical description. In the sense that this correspondence between equivalent facts is not given by a formal translation scheme, we might characterise it as practical. In other words, while it might not be possible to derive some formal equivalence between the two descriptions, we can certainly practically interpret statements arising from one description in terms of the other. The mereological and traditional logical descriptions are equivalent, then, in the sense that we may translate between them on a practical level and neither allows us to better predict or explain the phenomena at hand (in the trivial sense that notions of explanation and prediction do not seem applicable to the mereological example as Putnam presents it).

However, if the two descriptions strike us as cognitively equivalent, they also seem incompatible at least in a surface-level metaphysical sense. As previously noted, if asked to list the objects that are contained in our world of three individuals, the list produced by our mereologist would differ clearly from that produced by the traditional logician. In the sense that this disagreement revolves around a term of metaphysical import (i.e. object), the two descriptions are metaphysically incompatible. On a metaphysical level, the mereologist is prepared to count as objects things that the traditional logician simply would not. As Putnam observes, “the sum of my nose and the Eiffel Tower is regarded as a perfectly good object in mereology.”

In summary: we have two descriptions that begin from a common understanding of the situation at hand (the ‘same facts’), between which we can translate practically, if not formally, by way of interpretation (they are ‘equivalent’), but which diverge sharply in terms of the metaphysical picture they present (they are ‘incompatible’). In light of the observation that the two descriptions proceed from the same facts and are characterised by some form of

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9 Ibid., p.36.
equivalence, Putnam suggests that the incompatibility of the two descriptions arises not because of a contradiction in terms of fact but because we find ourselves in a situation where the universe does not dictate a correct metaphysical use of the term ‘object’.

GEOMETRY AND THE EUCLIDEAN PLANE

Immediately following his presentation of the mereological example in *The Many Faces of Realism*, Putnam offers the dispute about the composition of the Euclidean plane as another instance of conceptual relativity. Concerning the points in the plane, Putnam asks: “Are these parts of the plane, as Leibniz thought? Or are they ‘mere limits’, as Kant said?”10 The Leibnizian might suggest that the Euclidean plane is made up of points, and that regions are mere collections of points, where the Kantian might argue that the Euclidean plane is really just a collection of regions, and that points only come in to play as limits involving regions (perhaps as the limit of a series of concentric discs of strictly decreasing radius, or as the intersection of convergent 2-dimensional balls – there are many ways to construe points as limits).

In what sense do the Kantian and Leibnizian describe the ‘same facts’? In this case we are not considering particular individuals or objects, and so we do not seem obviously presented with a pool of common facts that each description might address. In the mereological case, we at least had our common world of three individuals, or three marbles on a table. When the Leibnizian and Kantian sit down to compare their descriptions, it is not clear what is on the table in front of them besides the concept of the Euclidean plane itself. At the very least, the Kantian and Leibnizian certainly have a common understanding of the Euclidean plane – how it is used, what it enables, how to draw and interpret it, and so on. We might say that they agree on a common understanding of the Euclidean plane that encompasses more or less everything except whether it is primitively made up of points or regions. This might include all of the facts that involve the Euclidean plane: facts about linear geometry, curves, tangents, and so on. But now we appear to have an incredibly broad notion of the sense in which the Leibnizian and Kantian describe the ‘same facts’, in the sense that we have suggested that their descriptions both address a common pool of facts made up of an understanding of the Euclidean plane and the sum total of true geometrical statements it involves. What emerges is that in this case the notion of ‘fact’ is not particularly relevant as far as it relates to what is at stake in these two competing descriptions.

It is much easier to outline the sense in which the two descriptions might be considered ‘equivalent’, however. To begin with, the descriptions in question seem ‘cognitively equivalent’ in the same way as the descriptions involved in the mereological case. They do not differ in predictive or explanatory force in a trivial sense because such (causal) notions are not in play, and we may easily translate from one to another. When the Leibnizian speaks of points, the Kantian can understand such talk as shorthand for some limit procedure, and when the Kantian speaks of limit procedures (instead of points), the Leibnizian may interpret this as a highly developed description of points.

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Yet we might go further than ‘cognitive equivalence’. Despite the fact that the descriptions of the mereologist and the traditional logician are cognitively equivalent, they still produced statements that were incompatible on a theoretical level. The statements ‘there are seven objects in this world’ and ‘there are three objects in this world’ are not meta-statements but statements about the phenomena at hand, and they cannot both be asserted at once. Yet no such problem seems to arise in the case of the Euclidean plane. There are no statements within geometry whose truth value will fluctuate depending on whether one takes points as primitive or mere limits, nor do the competing descriptions produce statements within geometry that cannot be simultaneously asserted. We might say on this basis that the two descriptions are theoretically equivalent.

As a result of this stronger theoretical equivalence, the purported incompatibility of the two descriptions seems much narrower. The two descriptions are incompatible in the sense that there are statements about the Euclidean plane and its constituent parts that seem to contradict each other. On the Leibnizian view, points are concrete objects and part of the Euclidean plane, whereas the Kantian insist that they are abstract entities of an entirely different kind. In this sense, the dispute between the Kantian and Leibnizian appears to revolve around the particular metaphysical gloss that we wish to place on the constructions that appear in our geometry, the practice of which remains unchanged regardless of which option we choose.

CONCEPTUAL RELATIVITY IN SCIENCE

We next turn to the kind of example of conceptual relativity to which we referred at the beginning of this thesis – the scientific kind. As examples of conceptual relativity in scientific contexts, Putnam has at various points cited: electrons as waves or particles, the determination of systems at rest in special relativity, the matrix mechanics of Heisenberg and the wave mechanics of Schrödinger, and action between charged particles as mediated by ‘fields’ or by ‘point-source retarded potentials’. These examples are almost all highly technical, although a clear exposition of the particle/wave situation above is given by Putnam in ‘Mathematics Without Foundations’, where he writes:

“The description of the world as a system of particles, not in the classical sense but in the peculiar quantum-mechanical sense, may be associated with a different picture than the description of the world as a system of waves, again not in the classical sense but in the quantum-mechanical sense; but the two theories are thoroughly intertranslatable, and should be viewed as having the same physical content. The same fact can be expressed either by saying that the electron is a wave with a definite wavelength $\lambda$ or by saying that the electron is a particle with a sharp momentum $p$ and an indeterminate position. What 'same fact' comes to here is, I admit, obscure. Obviously what is not being claimed is synonymy of

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13 Ibid., p. 40.
sentences. It would be absurd to claim that the sentence 'there is an electron-wave with the wavelength $X'$ is synonymous with the sentence 'there is a particle electron with the momentum $\hbar/x$ and a totally indeterminate position'. What is rather being claimed is this: that the two theories are compatible, not incompatible, given the way in which the theoretical primitives of each theory are now being understood; that indeed, they are not merely compatible but equivalent: the primitive terms of each admit of definition by means of the primitive terms of the other theory, and then each theory is a deductive consequence of the other. Moreover, there is no particular advantage to taking one of the two theories as fundamental and regarding the other one as derived. The two theories are, so to speak, on the same explanatory level. Any fact that can be explained by means of one can equally well be explained by means of the other. And in view of the systematic equivalence of statements in the one theory with statements in the other theory, there is no longer any point to regarding the formulation of a given fact in terms of the notions of one theory as more fundamental than (or even as significantly different from) the formulation of the fact in terms of the notions of the other theory. In short, what has happened is that the systematic equivalences between the sentences of the two theories have become so well known that they function virtually as synonymies in the actual practice of science.”

Let us, therefore, take the above as our paradigm case of conceptual relativity in the scientific context, and consider how this might differ from the geometrical and mereological cases we have previously discussed. We might recall that in the geometrical and mereological contexts, articulating the sense in which the descriptions at hand dealt with the ‘same facts’ was relatively unproblematic. In the scientific context, this task is far more complex. It is easier to begin by saying what ‘same fact’ does not amount to. It does not amount to a simple re-coordination of definitions, in the sense that by simple formal redefinition of the primitive terms of one description we may seamlessly arrive at the facts of the other description. This is what Putnam refers to above as a ‘synonymy of sentences’, and roughly represents the positivist move attempted by Hans Reichenbach in The Philosophy of Space and Time, generally considered to have been thwarted by Quine in ‘Two Dogmas of Empiricism’.

We might also say that by ‘same facts’ we do not mean that, as in the mereological case, there is a common pool of facts to which we might assent on either description of the situation. In the case of electrons as particles or waves, we do not even have a shared set of ‘observation sentences’ or something similar that we might identify as the core of some shared situational understanding. For the most part, there will be very little overlap between the wave and particle representations across descriptions of, for example, experimental observations or even theoretical conditions.

Putnam does insist, however, that “the two theories are thoroughly intertranslatable, and should be viewed as having the same physical content.” We might say, then, that in

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17 See Willard Van Orman Quine, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism," The Philosophical Review 60(1951).
speaking of electrons as waves or as particles, we describe the ‘same facts’ in the sense that any fact about electrons that one might express in terms of waves in one theory can be re-interpreted in terms of particles to play the same function in the other, and vice versa. They are not formally or semantically synonymous, as Reichenbach suggested, but they are *practically* synonymous. As assertions about the world, they communicate what can be practically interpreted as the same content, insofar as it is possible to translate between the two descriptions and in both cases say something that is empirically sound. In other words, the empirical dimension of scientific practice allows us to recognise that two descriptions represent ways of describing the ‘same facts’ in the absence of a literal shared body of facts in a way that we simply cannot in geometrical and logical contexts.

This might seem similar to the sense in which we suggested that the descriptions in the Euclidean and mereological cases are ‘cognitively equivalent’. In the scientific context, the process of articulating what exactly the ‘same facts’ amounts to reflects directly on the sense in which the descriptions are equivalent or incompatible. In the mereological case, it was clear that there was a strictly shared body of facts from which both descriptions proceeded – the fact that the world contained three individuals. The questions of equivalence and incompatibility therefore seemed to pertain to questions of further interpretation or translation. Yet having suggested that the two descriptions of electrons both describe the ‘same facts’ in the sense that we may interpret the statements of one as *theoretical analogues* of the other, we also seem to have captured the sense in which they are ‘equivalent’. We might say that in the scientific case, in sharp contrast to the mereological cases, the idea that two descriptions relate to the ‘same facts’ is not particularly distinct from the idea that they are ‘equivalent’.

The scientific example of conceptual relativity contrasts with the other two cases in another way: the sense in which the descriptions are incompatible is somewhat more earthly. Treated as statements about the world, if we were to simply conjoin the wave and particle descriptions we would get an immediate contradiction. That is to say that the incompatibility arises at first glance, rather than at the point that we begin to give more meta-theoretical explanations of what the statements amount to (in the Euclidean case) or consider the relation of particular concepts of object to our formal scenario (in the mereological case). In short, we might say that in the scientific case, the sense in which the two descriptions present us with an instance of conceptual relativity is deeply tied to the empirical and practical intertranslatability of the theories, in the face of what looks to be an *obvious* contradiction.

**PENUMBRAL CASES**

What this all amounts to is a picture of the landscape of conceptual relativity that is far more complex than the one *explicitly* presented by Putnam. On this view, the various examples that Putnam cites are continuous enough with each other that we might meaningfully refer to them all as instances of conceptual relativity, while admitting of several loose subcategorisations. If an instance of conceptual relativity is roughly one in which we are presented with, in Putnam’s words, two “ways of describing what are (in some way) the ‘same facts’ which are (in some way) ‘equivalent’ but also (in some way) ‘incompatible’”,
then we might say that the bracketed ‘in some way’ leaves room for the scientific, mereological and Euclidean cases to retain their own distinct flavour.\textsuperscript{19}

One result of the more complex picture of the landscape of conceptual relativity that we have presented in this chapter is that some ways of engaging with Putnam’s remarks on the matter begin to look somewhat fruitless. For instance, Decock and Douven attempt to use the mathematical apparatus of metric spaces\textsuperscript{20} to restate Putnam’s remarks in terms of distance metrics and formal threshold functions that provide necessary and sufficient conditions to determine whether or not a situation is a genuine example of conceptual relativity.\textsuperscript{21} In a similar vein, Horgan and Timmons look to ground the phenomenon of conceptual relativity in the semantics of contextually variable parameters that exhibit some form of ‘affirmatory conflict’.\textsuperscript{22} If these kinds of situations manifest a rather loose set of characteristics in different ways, and are united most saliently by a series of family resemblances (in a Wittgensteinian sense),\textsuperscript{23} then it seems unlikely that such rigid, formal approaches will add very much at all to our understanding of conceptual relativity.

In describing situations of conceptual relativity, Putnam means to unsettle the Metaphysical Realist’s confidence that the fundamental concepts employed in the statement of facts about the world admit of a ‘uniquely right’ or ‘definitive’ sense. With this in mind, we might suggest that some of these flavours of conceptual relativity are far more central to the thrust of Putnam’s notion of conceptual relativity than others. The dispute between the Leibnizian and Kantian regarding the ontology of points, for instance, is so far removed from the practice of geometry that it pertains to little more than the kind of metaphysical gloss we wish to place on statements that involve the Euclidean plane. In this respect, Putnam’s insistence that there is no fact of the matter regarding whether the points of the Euclidean plane really exist seems to amount simply to an exhortation not to ask ontological questions in these cases. In fact, this is precisely what Putnam means to say – in the introduction of his (pointedly named) \textit{Ethics Without Ontology} Putnam suggests that “the renewed (and continuing) respectability of Ontology […] has had disastrous consequences for just about every part of analytic philosophy.”\textsuperscript{24}

But such exhortations are only likely to have the impact that Putnam intends once the foundations have been unsettled. If we already take it that concepts such as ‘object’ and ‘existence’ admit of a multitude of equally workable formulations, then it follows naturally

\textsuperscript{19} Putnam, \textit{The Many Faces of Realism}, p. 29.

\textsuperscript{20} In topology, a metric space is comprised of a set together with a metric that defines the distance between any elements in that set. The metric must satisfy certain axioms, and many sets can give rise to different metric spaces depending on the metric applied to them.

\textsuperscript{21} Lieven Decock and Igor Douven, “Putnam’s Internal Realism: A Radical Restatement,” \textit{Topoi} 31, no. 1 (2012).


\textsuperscript{24} Putnam, \textit{Ethics without Ontology}, p. 2.
that we should judge there to be no fact of the matter as to whether points exist or not. But if we have not yet accepted the notion that existence is not univocal, then it is not clear that the example of the Euclidean plane will give us any compelling reason to abandon such ground. The Metaphysical Realist might well accept that there is no fact of the matter in the case of the Euclidean plane without conceding that this acceptance must be extended to cases involving more fundamental concepts. In other words, the Metaphysical Realist might agree that a sort of relativity is sometimes at play in the somewhat abstract and axiomatic realm of Euclidean geometry, but insist that this relativity does not speak to whether or not we should think there to be a matter of fact about the application of the concepts of object and existence. As an example of conceptual relativity, the example of the Euclidean plane is isolated – there is very little at stake.

The scientific case of conceptual relativity does not appear to fare much better in this task of unsettling what Putnam takes to be the central intuition of Metaphysical Realism. In a way, these scientific cases are too fluid and unstable. Enormous amounts of empirical work seem necessary to even verify that the descriptions address the same facts and are empirically equivalent. Moreover, it seems constantly possible that the apparent conflict might in fact be settled at some point in favour of one or other of the descriptions as the result of some fresh empirical breakthrough, at which point it would seem that they no longer qualify as examples of conceptual relativity. In other words, it seems that any purported scientific example of conceptual relativity may only be established as such according to present empirical inquiry. If Putnam’s aim is to push back against intuitions that concern such fundamental concepts as object and existence, it does not seem particularly helpful to invoke situations of conceptual relativity that revolve around equivalences that rely, as it were, on the winds of empirical fortune.

CENTRAL CASES (THE POLISH LOGICIAN RETURNS)

Fortunately for Putnam, however, not all of the flavours of conceptual relativity he presents appear so peripheral to the case he wishes to prosecute against Metaphysical Realism. In particular, it is his flagship example of mereological sums that seems most central to this task. In Representation and Reality, Putnam rephrases this examples of mereological sums in slightly more concrete terms. He imagines asking someone to count the objects in a room containing a chair, a table, a pen, a lamp and a notebook, and nothing else (aside from Putnam and his interlocutor, of course).25 Putnam’s companion first suggests that there are five objects in the room, and once queried about his decision not to include Putnam and himself in the count, amends his answer to seven. When asked about whether the pages of the notebook count as object, the interlocutor becomes less cooperative, but Putnam remains insistent: how many objects are in the room?

Putnam suggests that a logician in this situation is likely to distinguish between an ordinary or metaphysical notion of an object “according to which, perhaps, the pages of the notebook are not ‘objects’ as long as they are still attached,” and a logical notion of an object as an

‘entity’, “according to which anything we can take as a value of a variable of quantification (anything we can refer to with a pronoun) is an ‘object’.” Something quite close to this logical notion is captured by Quine’s famous slogan: “to be is to be the value of a bound variable.”

Yet even if we simply agree to use such a logical notion, the task of counting the objects in the room still seems problematic. Suppose there are \( n \) elementary particles in the room. It seems at the very least that we have \( n \) objects, since we can refer to these particles and thus include them in variables of quantification. Putnam then asks: what about groups of elementary particles? We might count Putnam’s hand or his entire body as a mereological object, made up of elementary particles, but what of the object made up of his nose and the lamp? If we wish to insist with Husserl that, in fact, only certain ‘organic’ wholes are real objects, then we need to outline a criterion that distinguishes mereological sums that are objects from those that are not, and Putnam suggests that there is no clear way of drawing such a distinction. Aristotle, for instance, suggests that such a criterion might be that the parts stay together as the object moves, but lamp shades fall off and gum can find itself stuck to the side of a lamp – does that mean that either lamps are not objects or that the gum + lamp is? So it is that we might find ourselves saying: “Either you should consider only elementary particles to be objects, or you should allow arbitrary mereological objects.”

If we allow such arbitrary mereological objects, we will finally answer that there are \( 2^n \) objects in the room. If we insist that only ‘organic wholes’ count as objects, our answer will be a much smaller number. Which of these is right? On this point, Putnam suggests that:

“To me it seems clear that the question is one that calls for a convention. As a layman might well put it, "It depends on what you mean by an object." But the consequence is startling: the very meaning of existential quantification is left indeterminate as long as the notion of an "object in the logical sense" is left unspecified. So it looks as if the logical connectives themselves have a variety of possible uses.”

Thus presented, the mereological example seems far more central to Putnam’s push against Metaphysical Realism than do the other two cases. In each of the cases of conceptual relativity that we have examined, we find that the world does not determine a unique version of the relevant concepts and so we may decide whether to adopt one or the other conceptual framework. Metaphysical realism, Putnam suggests, relies on the suggestion that there is no decision to be made (by us) regarding the application of the concept of object – such applications are right or wrong as matters of fact. In contrast to the case of the Euclidean plane, the mereological example strikes directly at the notion of a metaphysically privileged concept of object that Putnam takes to be at the heart of Metaphysical Realism. At the very least, then, there is something important at stake, whether or not you accept or deny the conclusions Putnam draws (or, indeed, his characterisation of the situation). On the other

26 Ibid., p. 111.
29 Ibid., p. 113.
hand, this mereological example seems far less susceptible to changing empirical consensus than the scientific example. Of course, as Quine points out, when we invoke notions of convention or choice in these situations we are assuming a broad background of empirical facts. But this broad background of facts seems importantly different to the kind of empirical facts that are at issue in the course of ordinary scientific inquiry, if only in the sense that they are much further away from the frontier of our web of belief.

We have argued in this chapter that if we understand the purpose of Putnam’s presentation of conceptual relativity as challenging the foundations of Metaphysical Realism as a cluster of views, then we ought to keep two things in mind. First, we should take note of the way in which the purported examples of conceptual relativity that Putnam musters do not form a homogenous, neat whole, but rather exhibit the core characteristics that Putnam outlines in a variety of ways. Second, we should treat the mereological example, amongst the others, as the case most central to Putnam’s philosophical agenda regarding Metaphysical Realism. There are, naturally, issues of tremendous mathematical, scientific and philosophical interest wrapped up in some of the other examples that Putnam presents, but his pronouncements on these examples are unlikely to seem particularly compelling unless one already sees the force of his argument on these points. For the most part, these pronouncements amount to exhortations against particular forms of philosophical activity, and it would seem generally that some form of conversion ought to precede preaching to the choir. In this sense, the mereological example carries the force of this metaphorical attempt at conversion, and so should be placed front and centre in our examination of conceptual relativity.

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30 This is one of the central points of Quine’s ‘Two Dogmas of Empiricism’. See Quine, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism," p. 24.
ACKNOWLEDGING CONCEPTUAL RELATIVITY

“Acknowledgment goes beyond knowledge. (Goes beyond not, so to speak, in the order of knowledge, but in its requirement that I do something or reveal something on the basis of that knowledge.)”

Stanley Cavell

In *Ethics Without Ontology*, Putnam suggests that the notion of conceptual relativity encompasses more than simply assenting to a particular description of the kinds of situations we examined in the previous chapter. In this sense, Putnam writes that:

“What I call ‘conceptual relativity’ is not the mere recognition that there are cases of this kind. After all, one might recognize that there are cases of this kind and do something analogous to what Kant did in the Second Antinomy; one might say that the question “Do mereological sums really exist?” is an antinomy, that the mind (which is allegedly unable to get down to ‘things as they are in themselves’) can’t know whether the question is appropriately conceived or not, and must tangle itself in contradiction if it tries to answer it. That attitude is not the attitude that I am calling ‘conceptual relativity’. Conceptual relativity, as I already indicated, holds that the question as to which of these ways of using ‘exist’ (and ‘individual,’ ‘object,’ etc.) is right is one that the meanings of the words in the natural language, that is, the language that we all speak and cannot avoid speaking every day, simply leaves open.”

For Putnam, the notion of conceptual relativity encapsulates not only the recognition of the phenomenon of conceptual relativity, but the right kind of acknowledgement of the lessons we might learn from such situations. That is to say that to recognise a situation as an instance of conceptual relativity involves more than simply assenting to a particular description – it involves taking seriously the implications that such conceptual conflicts have for certain (metaphysical) questions of correctness, facts, reality and so on. On this view, to say that a particular disagreement is an instance of conceptual relativity is not merely to make an observation about the mere facts of the situation, but also involves the suggestion that there is, as it were, no fact of the matter that may legislate between particular uses of language in this instance.

In this chapter, we will attempt to make sense of what it might be to acknowledge a situation as an instance of conceptual relativity, above and beyond “the mere recognition that there are

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cases of this kind.” This extra requirement might be made clearer when contrasted with certain reactions that Putnam sees as denying the conceptual relativity at play. It is not immediately clear, however, what entitles Putnam to use the language of denial and acknowledgement in these situations. Of course, philosophers very often believe that others who reject their point of view are denying or failing to acknowledge some important aspect of the phenomena at hand, but to some extent this seems par for the course insofar as philosophical disagreement is concerned. In short, we wish to ask: what is it about the kind of reactions that Putnam highlights that differentiates them from ordinary philosophical disagreements? Why is it that Putnam wishes to talk about the denial and acknowledgement of conceptual relativity, rather than merely the acceptance or non-acceptance of particular positions?

In answering such questions, we will distinguish the ‘phenomenon’ of conceptual relativity from the ‘doctrine’ of conceptual relativity. The phenomenon of conceptual relativity is simply the particular description that Putnam gives of the situations we examined in the first chapter, whereas the doctrine of conceptual relativity is the set of implications that Putnam takes to follow from that description. In brief, we will suggest that what Putnam attempts to highlight by using the language of acknowledgement and denial is the way in which some philosophers that seek to demonstrate that the doctrine does not follow from the phenomenon of conceptual relativity eventually accomplish little more than endorsing an alternate description of the situations at hand. In other words, where such philosophers purport to accept the phenomenon of conceptual relativity in order to show that it does not necessarily give rise to the doctrine of conceptual relativity, their remarks reveal that they hold a view of the situations at hand which is incompatible with the description they original purport to accept.

**BOGHOSSIAN AND THE ‘BASIC WORLDLY DOUGH’**

In *Ethics Without Ontology*, Putnam considers a ‘typical’ criticism of his interpretation of the mereological case of conceptual relativity. On this view, what Putnam highlights in his description of the mereological case is merely that there is a change of meaning in the terms involved. If the term ‘exist’ has the same meaning in the statement ‘there exists an object which is the mereological sum of X₁, X₂, and X₃’ and ‘there does not exist an object which is the mereological sum of X₁, X₂, and X₃’, then contrary to Putnam’s suggestion the two descriptions simply do contradict each other in fact. If there is no contradiction here, as Putnam suggests, then the mereologist and the traditional logician must be using the word ‘exist’ in different ways. On this view, what the traditional logician means by ‘there exists’ is something like ‘there exist something that is not a mereological sum’. In other words, the traditional logician is quantifying over a restricted universe of discourse that does not include mereological sums. That is to say that the meaning of their respective uses of the phrase ‘there exists’ differs not in the underlying concept that they employ (as Putnam would suggest) but in the domain to which they are applying a common concept of ‘existence’.

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3 Ibid.
What this reaction to the notion of conceptual relativity (at least insofar as it relates to the mereological examples) wishes to protect is the notion that there might remain an invariant, correct concept of ‘existence’ (or ‘object’) which might in certain circumstances be applied to larger or smaller domains of discourse. That is to say that this view pushes back against Putnam’s suggestion that concepts such as ‘existence’ pull together a whole family of uses and notions which might differ or provoke conflicts in various situations. The problem with such reactions, as Putnam points out, is that such an interpretation of the situation is not quite as ‘neutral’ as it might appear at first glance. To say that the traditional logician ‘does not include’ mereological sums in the universe over which she quantifies is to suggest that, in some sense, there are mereological sums, but that the traditional logician does not pay them any mind when she considers existence claims about objects. This is already a partisan description of the situation, offered from the point of view of our hypothetical mereologist. We might offer a similarly partisan description from the point of view of the traditional logician by suggesting that there are no such objects as mereological sums, but that the mereologist is merely applying the same notion of existence to a broader universe of discourse – one that roughly corresponds to the power set of whatever universe the traditional logician considers.

The point here is that this attempt to diffuse the force of Putnam’s notion of conceptual relativity through talk of ‘differences in meaning’ simply amounts to adopting one or the other way of speaking on a fundamental level. In suggesting that the traditional logician simply does not ‘include’ mereological sums in her ontology, it might seem that we have preserved some notion of ‘existence’ as a single concept – after all, we now appear to have a situation in which the mereologist and traditional logician are both applying an identical concept of existence (or at the very least of existential quantification), merely over more or less inclusive sets of objects. Yet in order to interpret the mereological situation in this way, we are forced to assume that there simply are mereological sums in some sense, or conversely that there are not mereological sums. In other words, what might look at first glance like an explanation of the phenomenon of conceptual relativity that preserves the idea of a definitive notion of existence appears rather as a denial of conceptual relativity, insofar as it requires that we assume that one or the other description is correct in the first place.

In *Fear of Knowledge: Against Relativism and Constructivism*, Paul Boghossian offers a similar reaction to Putnam’s comments on conceptual relativity. Boghossian considers Putnam’s use of the example of mereological sums as an attempt to demonstrate the description-dependence of facts. Boghossian agrees with Putnam’s suggestion that the incompatibility between the descriptions is only apparent, in the sense that they “no more contradict each other than my saying that there are eight people at the party contradicts my saying that there are four couples at that very same party.” Yet he rejects the idea that this observation entails that the facts in our mereological situation are relative to our particular concept of object, since:

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“[…] for any such example to work, we need to start with some basic facts—for example, that there are three circles—that we can then truthfully redescribe in a variety of different ways. Given that the little world contains three circles, we can then introduce a notion of “object” on which it is true to say that there are three objects, and a different notion of “object” on which it is true to say that there are seven objects or nine objects or whatever.

But for this sort of strategy of redescription to make sense, it must be assumed that there are some basic facts—the basic worldly dough—on which our redemptive strategies can get to work.”

In other words, these different notions of object are merely two ways of slicing the same otherwise invariant “basic worldly dough”. By conceding that our concept of object may be extended in different and superficially incompatible ways, Boghossian hopes to protect the notion of a common set of independent facts that underpins these differences (i.e. a basic worldly dough).

Yet this might prompt the question: what is this dough made up of? That is, what are the parts of this dough? If the answer in the mereological case is simply that the parts of the dough are $X_1, X_2, X_3$, $X_1 + X_2$, $X_1 + X_3$, $X_2 + X_3$, and $X_1 + X_2 + X_3$, then we appear simply to be in the same situation we found ourselves previously; in that we have committed to a partisan description of the situation. In other words, if the basic worldly dough in this case consists of the fact that ‘there exist’ three circles (to use Boghossian’s presentation) and that the mereologist then ‘combines’ those circles and refers to the resulting arrangements as objects, then in describing our worldly dough we appear to have already taken the side of the traditional logician. Conversely, if our basic worldly dough includes the mereological sums in question then it appears that we have already settled the question of their existence in favour of the mereologist—the traditional logician, then, simply does not count them as objects for her purposes.

In describing an initial set of basic, description-independent facts, it seems clear that Boghossian has in mind the first case, where the worldly dough amounts to the fact “that there are three circles.” After accepting Putnam’s presentation of situations of conceptual relativity, Boghossian employs the dough-slicing metaphor in order to stifle Putnam’s emphasis on the point that “there is no fact of the matter how many objects there are in this word.” Boghossian argues that since situations of conceptual relativity involve descriptions which are underpinned by a common, description-neutral set of facts, there is no reason to think that the notion of a fixed sense of object is under threat. Yet as we have seen, this common pool of facts is not description-neutral in the way that Boghossian might imagine. We might say then that Boghossian’s reaction is problematic insofar as it is inconsistent: it purports to recognise the sense in which the two descriptions do not conflict, but in doing so insists upon a basic worldly dough of facts that implicitly paints one of the descriptions as correct.

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5 Ibid., pp. 37-38.
6 Ibid., p. 36.
At this point, Boghossian might ask: how is the notion of a basic worldly dough any different from the idea that the two logicians describe the ‘same facts’, as you suggested in the first chapter? In other words, if one of the requirements for situations of conceptual relativity is that the two ways of speaking describe (in some sense) the ‘same facts’, then why can we not simply say that this basic worldly dough is made out of whatever these ‘same facts’ are? There is a difference, however, between suggesting that the two descriptions address some shared pool of facts and that the descriptions are underpinned by an external set of facts which they both merely attempt to redescribe. In the first chapter, we suggested that the apparent conflict between the mereologist and traditional logician was made possible in part by the fact that there was some degree of factual overlap between the two descriptions, whether phrased in terms of individuals, logical atoms, mereological simples, and so on. Boghossian’s suggestion extends beyond this, to the notion that the mereologist and the traditional logician are engaged simply in the project of redescribing some worldly dough that is external and antecedent to the two descriptions at hand. Where we suggested that there were simply two separate descriptions that made reference to the same facts, Boghossian suggests that the two descriptions in some sense arise from a description-neutral, external worldly dough. In this sense, there seems to be a clear distinction between Boghossian’s talk of worldly dough and the notion of the ‘same facts’ that we employed in the previous chapter.

TARGETING IMPLICATIONS

What is it about such reactions to the phenomenon of conceptual relativity that entitles Putnam to describe them in particular as a denial, rather than simply as mistaken, unpersuasive or misunderstood? It would seem that there are two ways in which the Metaphysical Realist might go about resisting the notion that conceptual relativity represents a substantial challenge to their picture: they might dispute Putnam’s description of the phenomena at hand, or they might accept Putnam’s description and contend that it does not carry the implications he suggests. We might call the first reaction a ‘denial’ of conceptual relativity in the rather obvious sense that in reacting this way the Metaphysical Realist denies that there is such a phenomenon as conceptual relativity, at least as Putnam describes it. But this kind of denial of conceptual relativity is, at least for our purposes, rather superficial – it merely asserts that Putnam is mistaken about some detail or other of the situations he describes, whether they be mathematical, scientific or logical. At the very least it is certainly not what Putnam means when he says that the metaphor of a basic worldly dough “denies (rather than explaining) the phenomenon of conceptual relativity.”

Insofar as the target of the sort of philosophical reaction highlighted above is not Putnam’s description of the phenomenon of conceptual relativity but rather the implications he draws from his description of the phenomenon, the reactions we have examined take the second of the two above routes. In objecting to Putnam’s use of conceptual relativity as a challenge to Metaphysical Realism, Boghossian’s strategy above was to by and large accept Putnam’s description of conceptual relativity and demonstrate that, in fact, we can only make sense of such a phenomenon by assuming the existence of a basic, invariant worldly dough. It is not

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7 Putnam, *The Many Faces of Realism*, p. 34.
the phenomenon of conceptual relativity that is the target of such a challenge, but rather the suggestion that such a phenomenon creates difficulties for the Metaphysical Realist by undermining the notion of a metaphysically privileged concept of ‘object’ or ‘existence’.

How might we understand the deeper sense in which Putnam takes some of these reactions as denying the phenomenon of conceptual relativity? At the very least, it does not seem that every attempt at undermining the implications that Putnam draws from the phenomenon of conceptual relativity ought to be considered a denial, properly speaking. Both the reaction considered by Putnam and the one offered by Boghossian purport to recognise the phenomenon of conceptual relativity more or less as Putnam presents it, specifically in the sense that the descriptions at hand do not conflict in any deep sense. Yet in attempting to combat the implications of such a presentation of conceptual relativity, both Boghossian and Putnam’s hypothetical objector seem to rely on a picture of the phenomenon at hand in which one of the descriptions is implicitly correct or more fundamental.

We might say that such reactions constitute a denial of conceptual relativity in the sense that while they purport to accept Putnam’s description of conceptual relativity (the premise) in order to attack his comments on the concepts of object and existence (the implication), they do so on the basis of a redescription of the situation at hand in which one of the descriptions is assumed implicitly to be correct. As we saw, Boghossian’s suggestion that the descriptions are simply different ways of slicing the same basic worldly dough leaves us with the question: what is this dough made up of? Does it, for instance, include mereological sums or not? In either case, it seems that one of the descriptions is taken implicitly to be the correct or definitive one, on which the other is merely derivative. It is this view that gives rise to the suggestion that mereological sums are simply not included in the ontology of the traditional logician, or that the basic worldly dough consists of the fact that there are ‘simply’ three circles (and not their mereological combinations) which the mereologist then proceeds to combine to form more objects.

In either case, what is invoked in the defence of Metaphysical Realism (specifically the notion of a metaphysically privileged notion of object and existence) is a picture of conceptual relativity that does not accord particularly well with the presentation of the phenomenon that the objector purports to accept. In this sense, it seems fitting to call such a reaction a denial of conceptual relativity in that it amounts to a redescription of the situations at hand, and so does not succeed in attacking the implications that Putnam draws on the basis of the phenomenon. Rather, it amounts to a more sophisticated form of the first kind of denial described at the beginning of this section. In attempting to argue that Putnam’s presentation of conceptual relativity does not present a meaningful case against certain key tenets of Metaphysical Realism, reactions of the kind we have discussed rely on a picture of the phenomenon that directly conflicts with Putnam’s.

THE KANTIAN REACTION

Another reaction to the phenomenon of conceptual relativity that Putnam wishes to avoid is one inspired by Kant’s treatment of his four antinomies in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. These antinomies are collections of theses and antitheses that Kant takes at the same time to be
contradictory and equally rational.\footnote{8} In the case of the second antinomy, Kant considers the thesis that every composite substance is made up of simple parts (and so all that exists is the simple and what is composed of the simple), and its antithesis that no composite substance is made up of simple parts (on which view there do not exist any properly simple objects).\footnote{9} In the face of this antinomy of reason, Kant suggests that the answer belongs to the ‘ noumenal’ world as a fact about things-in-themselves, and therefore is beyond the rational capacities of the human mind.\footnote{10}

On Putnam’s view, the problem with such a reaction to the phenomenon of conceptual relativity is that it clings to the notion that, on some level or other, there is a fact of the matter regarding whether mereological sums do or do not exist. Where the ‘dough-slicing’ metaphor appears to \textit{implicitly} suggest either that mereological sums do or do not exist by tacitly endorsing one description or the other, the Kantian reaction explicitly states that the world-in-itself legislates a fact of the matter, even though the limits of human reason may prevent us from discovering whether the traditional logician or the Polish logician is right. In short: this hypothetical Kantian accepts Putnam’s description of the mereological case of conceptual relativity but also insists that, as a matter of \textit{ding an sich}, one of the two descriptions is the correct one.

Where the Kantian holds that we simply cannot know whether mereological sums are objects or not, Putnam insists that there is no fact to be known in this case. Discussing Carnap’s comments on such examples, Putnam remarks that “his attitude to such questions was the one I recommend here, that this is a question of the adoption of a convention, and not a question of fact.”\footnote{11} On Putnam’s view, the Kantian response represents a sort of skepticism in the face of these ontological disputes that does not take into account the sense in which these disputes revolve around conceptual conventions more than they do around facts. While the Kantian reaction avoids the more straightforward difficulties we associated with reactions such as Boghossian’s, Putnam insists that Kant retains too fixed (or metaphysical) a notion of ‘object’ in the phenomenal world, relying as he does on the construction of forms of intuition and categories.

The conflict between Putnam and Kant on this point relates also to the former’s insistence on the adoption of the ‘agent point of view’ in philosophy. Putnam takes the notion of the agent point of view to lie at the heart of the pragmatism of both William James and John Dewey, in the sense that they insisted on “the supremacy of the agent point of view. If we find that we must take a certain point of view, use a certain ‘conceptual scheme,’ when we are engaged in practical activity, in the widest sense of ‘practical activity,’ then we must not simultaneously advance the claim that it is not really ‘the way things are in themselves.’”\footnote{12} In other words, Putnam aims to do justice to the full normative demands of the practice he is attempting to study, and so is not interested in engaging in rational reconstruction of our practice according

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\footnote{9} Ibid., A467/B95.
\footnote{10} Ibid., A466/B94.
\footnote{12} Putnam, \textit{The Many Faces of Realism}, p. 69.
to certain theoretical desiderata. For Putnam, to suggest that our practice (in the broadest possible sense) leaves open the question of whether or not mereological sums exist but that there must be some answer to the question as a matter of ‘things-in-themselves’ is to adopt a picture that does nothing but give us a kind of metaphysical comfort.

**THE DOCTRINE OF CONCEPTUAL RELATIVITY**

For our purposes, what is important about the Kantian reaction is not necessarily its viability, since few modern defenders of Metaphysical Realism explicitly adopt the kind of skepticism that it involves. Rather, the Kantian reaction throws into sharp relief what Putnam at different points refers to as the *doctrine* of conceptual relativity. Unlike the dough-slicing reaction, Putnam does not describe the Kantian reaction as a denial of conceptual relativity, since the Kantian reaction does not seem inconsistent in the way that the dough-slicing metaphor does. Rather, the Kantian rejects the lessons that Putnam wishes to draw from the examples of conceptual relativity. In this sense, we might say that the Kantian accepts the phenomenon of conceptual relativity as presented, but does not acknowledge what we might describe as the *doctrine* of conceptual relativity. Putnam summarises this doctrine in the preface to *Realism with a Human Face*, where he writes that:

“The doctrine of conceptual relativity, in brief, is that while there is an aspect of conventionality and an aspect of fact in everything we say that is true, we fall into hopeless philosophical error if we commit a ‘fallacy of division’ and conclude that there must be a part of the truth that is the ‘conventional part’ and a part that is the ‘factual part.’”

While the Kantian reaction does not seem to deny the phenomenon of conceptual relativity, neither the Kantian nor the Metaphysical Realist in the style of Boghossian accept the doctrine of conceptual relativity. Both reactions push back against Putnam’s suggestion that “notions of ‘object’ and ‘existence’ are not treated as sacrosanct, as having just one possible use.”

On Putnam’s view, the philosopher who denies conceptual relativity in the way that we have described goes some distance towards recognising that the notions of existence and object can be employed in a variety of ways that are perfectly consonant with the rules of formal logic. Where such a philosopher errs, however, is in the fact that they “accept this idea, and then go on to single out one use of the existential quantifier […] as the only metaphysically serious one.” While Boghossian does not necessarily adjudicate one way or the other, the notion of a basic description-independent worldly dough implies that one of the descriptions (or perhaps a third) is somehow definitive or correct. As has been suggested, such a reaction misfires quite tangibly, in the sense that implicitly treating one of the descriptions as metaphysically serious in the first place amounts to a redescription of the phenomenon of conceptual relativity rather than a genuine challenge to its implications.

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15 Ibid.
The Kantian reaction is far more explicit in its rejection of the doctrine of conceptual relativity, since it is rooted in the notion that the fact of the matter in such situations is simply inaccessible to the human mind. In this sense, the Kantian attempts to preserve the notion “that at least one Category – the ancient category of Object or Substance – has an absolute interpretation.”¹⁶ Putnam’s dispute with the Kantian on this front runs much deeper to questions of criteria and conceptual schemes, since:

“What is wrong with the notion of objects existing ‘independently’ of conceptual schemes is that there are no standards for the use of even the logical notions apart from conceptual choices.”¹⁷

Nonetheless, the continuities and discontinuities between the Kantian reaction and the so-called denial of conceptual relativity do serve to highlight two things. First, the Kantian represents someone who accepts the phenomenon of conceptual relativity in a consistent fashion, while rejecting the doctrine outright. This contrasts with a philosopher like Boghossian, who claims to accept an account of the phenomenon conceptual relativity while rejecting the associated doctrine, but in fact simply denies Putnam’s account in the first place. Second, we see how fundamental the dispute between Putnam and the Kantian is, in the sense that the doctrine of conceptual relativity amounts on Putnam’s view to the “renunciation of the notion of the ‘thing in itself’.”¹⁸

As a result, we have a clearer view of the landscape. We find ourselves in a position to narrow down the challenges to Putnam’s notion of conceptual relativity that might turn out to be most compelling. Such a challenge should avoid painting conceptual relativity as a simple, unified phenomenon, or at least ought to focus on the cases most central to Putnam’s philosophical focus. In addition, it is important that the objection neither devolve into a superficial denial of conceptual relativity, nor run so deep as to concern noumena and ding an sich (if only because very few modern defenders of Metaphysical Realism are willing to commit themselves to that kind of approach). That is not to say that there are not fruitful philosophical conversations to be had on such fronts, but rather it is to suggest that the thrust of Putnam’s use of the phenomenon of conceptual relativity is aimed squarely at Metaphysical Realism, and that the Kantian focus on things in themselves might make the dispute seem more foundational and intractable than it otherwise is. In the final chapter that follows, we shall present and engage with some responses to Putnam on the topic of conceptual relativity that appear to navigate the two challenges we have outlined in this chapter.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 36.
¹⁷ Ibid., p. 35-36.
¹⁸ Ibid., p. 36.
DEFENDING CONCEPTUAL RELATIVITY

“But my view is not a view in which the mind makes up the world (or makes it up subject to constraints imposed by ‘methodological canons’ and mind-independent ‘sense-data’). If one must use metaphorical language, then let the metaphor be this: the mind and the world jointly make up the mind and the world.”

Hilary Putnam

It might prove useful to summarise the terrain we have covered up until now. We have seen in the first chapter that Putnam presents various examples of conceptual relativity as challenges to what he takes to be a core assumption of Metaphysical Realism, and that these examples relate to each other in a more complex way than Putnam has generally suggested. As a result, we suggested that reactions to Putnam’s remarks on conceptual relativity that attempted to provide strict criteria for situations of conceptual relativity in full generality were unlikely to be particularly helpful in assessing Putnam’s challenge to Metaphysical Realism. We then examined some further reactions to conceptual relativity, and suggested that those such as Boghossian’s amounted more to a denial of the phenomenon of conceptual relativity than a refutation of Putnam’s challenge to Metaphysical Realism. Although the Kantian reaction does not fit into this category, we suggested that it denies explicitly what the reactions previously considered deny implicitly. That is, it does not attempt to explain away conceptual relativity but in some sense embraces it head on, relegating any knowledge about such situations to the noumenal world.

We might ask, however: what exactly is it about the implications that Putnam draws from the phenomenon of conceptual relativity that threatens Metaphysical Realism? We recall that for Putnam, Metaphysical Realism boils down to the idea that the facts of the world (or the truth of propositions) are fixed by something mind-independent and language-independent, and that this presupposes a fixed and metaphysically-privileged notion of object. Roughly, Putnam suggests that if you wish to speak of language-independent or mind-independent facts, you need some way of settling definitive versions of the concepts that are going to allow the articulation of these facts. The task of arriving (discovering) such definitive versions of the concepts at play seems deeply problematic in light of the phenomenon of conceptual relativity, and as a result Putnam suggests that Metaphysical Realism as a whole becomes untenable.

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2 There has been some disquiet on this front, with some defenders of Metaphysical Realism suggesting that they are not necessarily committed to the kind of metaphysically-privileged notion of object that Putnam suggests. See George Alfred Wrisley, “Realism and Conceptual Relativity” (University of Iowa, 2008).
In recent years, Peter van Inwagen has taken issue with Putnam’s presentation of conceptual relativity on the basis of two distinct arguments. First, van Inwagen holds that the close connection between the concept of number and the concept of being, along with the notion that being and existence are identical, suggests that the concept of existence is *univocal* – it means the same thing even when applied to radically different kinds of objects. Second, van Inwagen argues that mereology presents one theory of parts, wholes and objects amongst many, and that the disagreement that plays out between these theories is serious and reasoned. In this sense, van Inwagen argues that the descriptions in the mereological case do not merely *appear* incompatible but in fact *are* “as incompatible as ‘a world that contains immaterial souls’ and ‘a world that contains only material things.’”

As reactions to Putnam’s presentation of Metaphysical Realism, neither of these arguments seem to qualify as the kind of denial of conceptual relativity examined in the previous chapter. In the first case, van Inwagen grants Putnam’s presentation of the phenomenon of conceptual relativity and attempts to show that it does not present us with a compelling reason to think that the concept of existence is not univocal. This might seem similar to the strategy employed by Boghossian, which *did* appear to count as the kind of denial of conceptual relativity that Putnam had in mind. For now, though, it will suffice to note that van Inwagen does not try to argue against the implications drawn by Putnam on the basis of a redescription of the phenomenon of conceptual relativity, and so does not fall into the kind of inconsistency that characterised Boghossian’s attempt. In the second case, van Inwagen rejects Putnam’s characterisation of the phenomenon of conceptual relativity in the mereological case from the very start, especially as far as Putnam’s comments on the incompatibility of the two descriptions are concerned.

Where the first two chapters of this thesis were dedicated to elaborating a more nuanced view of the phenomenon of conceptual relativity and dealing with some reactions to Putnam’s comments on the matter that, for different reasons, do not form genuine challenges to his view, this final chapter will be dedicated to dealing with some challenges that are not so easily dismissed as denials or misunderstandings. The two arguments offered by van Inwagen present distinct and substantial challenges to Putnam’s use of the phenomenon of conceptual relativity, and as such outlining and responding to them will be the main focus of this chapter.

VAN INWAGEN ON BEING AND NUMBER

In ‘Being, Existence and Ontological Commitment’, Peter van Inwagen seeks to defend an essentially Quinean view of ontology. Van Inwagen presents this Quinean meta-ontology in the form of five theses, the second and third of which are particularly relevant for our

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5 As van Inwagen very straightforwardly says; “the meta-ontology presented in this essay is essentially Quine’s.” van Inwagen, "Being, Existence and Ontological Commitment," p. 476.
purposes. The first thesis is that being is not an activity – that is to say, not something that things actively do. In articulating this, van Inwagen uncharacteristically quotes J. L. Austin, who said of existence that “the word is a verb, but it does not describe something that things do all the time, like breathing, only quieter—ticking over, as it were, in a metaphysical sort of way.”6 The second meta-ontological thesis that van Inwagen presents is that being is the same as existence. That is to say that “in general, to say that things of a certain sort exist and to say that there are things of that sort is to say the same thing.”7 As a result of this second thesis, van Inwagen rejects both the suggestion that there are things that do not exist and the notion that only physically or spatially extended objects exist.8

This second thesis flows neatly into van Inwagen’s third: existence is univocal. Van Inwagen frames this thesis in opposition to the notion that when the concept of existence is applied to agreements and causal links it means something different from what it means when applied to tangible objects. Although attractive, van Inwagen declares that this suggestion is false, and goes on to offer an argument that he claims “will show why it is, if not false, then at least not obviously true.”9 Van Inwagen borrows from Frege the notion that the concepts of existence and number are closely related. In the Foundations of Arithmetic, Frege suggests that “existence is analogous to number. Affirmation of existence is in fact nothing but denial of the number zero.”10 Yet, van Inwagen does not hold fast to Frege’s suggestion that existence is a ‘second-level’ predicate of concepts rather than objects, clarifying that “when I say that affirmation of existence is denial of the number zero, I mean only that to say that Fs exist is to say that the number of Fs is not zero.”11

On van Inwagen’s view, this connection between the concepts of number and existence provides a firm basis for the suggestion that existence is a univocal concept. Where Gilbert Ryle argues that it would seem a strange joke indeed to say “that there exist prime numbers and Wednesdays and public opinions and navies; or that there exist both minds and bodies,”12 van Inwagen insists that there is nothing about these various uses of exist that suggests that the concept is applied in any significantly different fashion, since there is nothing about the concept of number that differs in its application to plays or houses or prime numbers. In each case, the application of the concept of existence amounts to the statement that the number of navies, prime numbers, Wednesdays, and so on, is not zero.

With all of the above machinery in place, van Inwagen turns to Putnam’s argument. In doing so, van Inwagen is happy to grant Putnam the premise that debates about whether there are mereological sums are in some sense futile, but does not accept Putnam’s suggestion that this carries further implications for the notion of existence, on the basis that he does not see “how

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8 Ibid., p. 481.
9 Ibid., p. 482.
the meaning of ‘there is’ can possibly be ‘extended by convention’.”

To understand the thrust of van Inwagen’s objection here, it will be helpful to quote him at length.

“Suppose one is contemplating extending the meaning of a term by adopting new conventions governing its use; let’s say that one is contemplating extending the meaning of ‘person’ in such a way that corporations are to be called ‘persons’. One will, presumably, contemplate such a thing only if one believes that there is at least one corporation for ‘person’ to apply to. Similarly (I should think) one will contemplate extending the meaning of ‘there is’ in such a way that ‘there is’ applies to sums only if one believes that there is at least one sum for ‘there is’ to apply to. But if one thinks that there is a sum (or number or universal) for ‘there is’ to apply to, one already thinks that ‘there is’ applies to at least one sum (number, universal), and the purpose of the contemplated convention has therefore been accomplished antecedently to adopting it. […] A single, ‘fixed in advance’ meaning for ‘there is’ (Putnam in several places describes the thesis he opposes as the thesis that there is a single, ‘fixed in advance’ meaning for ‘there is’) seems to be a presupposition of any attempt to extend the meaning of any term by convention: you need a fixed-in-advance sense of ‘there is’ to express your belief (a belief you must have if you are contemplating such a convention) that the class of ‘new’ things that the term is to apply to is not empty.”

In other words, van Inwagen suggests that if we view statements about the existence of sums as denials that the number of sums is zero, then it is difficult to see in what sense one might ‘extend’ the concept of existence to a particular kind of object, since in doing so one must already implicitly think that there is an object of this kind (and therefore that such objects exist). The question, van Inwagen suggests, is settled before we can even ask it (or perhaps in our asking it).

In defence of Putnam on this point, we might suggest that several aspects of van Inwagen’s approach seem suspect. Van Inwagen suggests that since the concept of number is univocal, the close connection that it shares with the concept of existence “should convince us that there is at least very good reason to think that existence is univocal.” It is not clear, however, how it is that these two points combine to defeat Putnam’s suggestion that the concept of existence is not univocal. Questions of the ontological status of various objects might strike us as incredibly different when compared. Does a piece of music consist in the various pages (or PDFs) on which it is recorded, or in its public performances, or in all of its performances, or in some other aspect (its essence)? Such considerations contrast sharply with what might be involved in establishing the ontological status of a table or some other piece of furniture. It might be that to say that a particular Bach cello suite exists and that a certain desk exists is simply to deny that the number of either object is zero, but this does not appear to speak to the fact that what is involved in making such an assertion seems markedly different in each case.

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13 Van Inwagen suggests that “perhaps a debate about sums is silly for some reason peculiar to sums, a reason that does not apply to other ontological debates.” See van Inwagen, “Being, Existence and Ontological Commitment,” p. 490.

14 Ibid., pp. 490-91.

15 Ibid., p. 482.
That is to say that there still seem to be differences in what is involved in asserting and establishing the existence of particular kinds of objects, and it is not clear that the univocacy of number smooths these differences over in the way that van Inwagen suggests. On van Inwagen’s view, the sense of ‘there is’ does not change between the statements ‘there is one Bach cello suite in G major’ and ‘there is one desk in this room’, since statements such as ‘there exist \( n \) F’s’ simply boil down to statements of the form ‘the number of F’s is \( n \)’. This seems puzzling. If I have printed two copies of suite BWV 1007, why do there not exist two Bach cello suites in G major? If two performances differ slightly in emphasis, timing, interpretation and so on, why do we not count these as two distinct cello suites? Why is it that we hold fast to the notion that there is one cello suite even if one is printed with misprints, corrupted, performed mistakenly, and so on? We certainly do not encounter similar difficulties when we speak about the existence of desks.

There simply seems to be more to say about differences in ontology between pieces of music and tables that the connection between number and existence does not illuminate at all. More specifically, we might accept that statements of existence boil down to statements of number without accepting that the concept of existence is therefore univocal. If we have a red table and paint it black, it would seem that the statement ‘in this room there exists a black table’ is now true, where once it was not. Yet if someone takes Bach’s ‘Suite No. 3 in C major’ and transcribes it into F major, it does not seem as though the statement ‘there exists a Bach cello suite in F major’ is now true – at the very least it is ambiguous. The person is playing a Bach cello suite, and the suite is in F major, but it does not obviously follow from this that there exists a Bach cello suite in F major (since questions arise of canonical versions, original authorship, and so on) in the way that ‘there exists a black table in this room’ immediately follows from the fact that there was a red table in this room and that someone has now painted it entirely black.

What we are attempting to highlight is the fact that what is involved in making, understanding and establishing existence claims does seem to differ markedly depending on the kind of object in question, as does the way that the truth of such claims seems vulnerable to particular questions of alteration and interpretation. In this sense it seems perfectly sensible, pace van Inwagen, to suggest that despite the univocacy of number and its intimate connection with the concept of existence, affirmations of the existence of different kinds of objects do not always mean the same thing. In the face of the differences involved in the ontological questions surrounding different kinds of objects, van Inwagen’s insistence that all existence claims mean the same thing because they boil down to statements about number seems a rather hollow response.

We might also question van Inwagen’s suggestion that “a single, ‘fixed in advance’ meaning for ‘there is’ […] seems to be a presupposition of any attempt to extend the meaning of any term by convention.”16 In arguing as such, van Inwagen considers the case of extending the notion of a person to include corporations, suggesting that it does not make sense to consider such an extension unless one has already decided that there is at least one corporation for such an extension to capture. In deciding that there is at least one corporation which could

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16 Ibid., p. 491.
plausibly count as a person, van Inwagen suggests that we have already settled the issue before any questions of extending a concept by extension can arise. He makes an analogous point regarding mereological sums, suggesting that in order to consider extending the concept of existence to mereological sums, one must already think that there is (exists) one mereological sum to which such an extension will apply.

What van Inwagen rejects is the notion that we can phrase the question of extending the concept of existence by convention without implying that the objects in question exist. Asking ‘should we say that these sums exist?’ is unsuitable in this sense because by referring to the sums we have already implicitly committed to their existence (presumably by referring to them). But this does not seem the only way that we can phrase the question. We might view the mereological picture as consisting in what Putnam would later refer to as an ‘optional language’ – a proposal to extend our use of language in one or another way and thus to extend our concepts in one direction or other.17

Suppose that the proposal of the mereologist amounts to something like: given object A and object B, we may say that there exists a third object, A+B, the spatial location of which will correspond to the physical union of the spatial location of A and the spatial location of B. It does not seem that any part of this requires that we have already made up our mind as to the questions of whether these sums exist antecedently or not. This dynamic seems even more intuitive in van Inwagen’s example of corporate personhood. When we ask ourselves if we ought to extend the concept of personhood to include corporations of a particular kind, van Inwagen suggests that we must believe already that there are corporations to which the concept of person applies. Yet it would seem that questions of extending the concept of personhood to corporations arise precisely because we are unsure how to proceed. Perhaps the idea of extending our concept of personhood in this way might be provoked by some kind of loose analogy, legal precedent, pragmatic policy outcome, and so on. There is no reason that we must assume the proposal to extend our concept of person in this way must come from someone who has already preordained that corporations are, in fact, persons.

VAN INWAGEN ON THEORIES OF PARTS AND WHOLSES

In ‘The Number of Things’, van Inwagen offers a different reason for rejecting Putnam’s comments on the matter of conceptual relativity. Discussing the mereological case, van Inwagen notes that mereology is simply one amongst many possible theories of parts and wholes, and that these theories differ from one another in pronounced and specific ways. For instance, the mereological nihilist holds that nothing has any proper parts, while the mereological pluralist insists that any set of objects gives rise to at least one mereological sum (and perhaps more). Van Inwagen insists that the nihilist or pluralist are not simply articulating different versions of mereology, but rather that “Nihilism, Pluralism, and any version of mereology are competing theories, full stop.”18 So it is that the dispute between

18 van Inwagen, "The Number of Things," p. 190.
Putnam’s Carnap and the Polish Logician is characterised by the truth or falsity of various descriptions of the world:

“If Putnam's Carnap says that a world that contains exactly three simples contains exactly three objects or exactly three individuals full stop, then he must reject Mereology—he must contend that Mereology is a false theory. And the "Polish logician" must hold that the description 'a world that contains three simples and nothing else' is an impossible description.”

On van Inwagen’s view, therefore, it makes perfect sense to ask which of the two theories is right, or whether there could be a world that contained nothing but three simples. If mereology is correct, van Inwagen argues, the answer to this question is no.

As a theory of parts and wholes (and therefore as a description of the world), van Inwagen rejects mereology. Considering his dog Sonia and his cat Moriarty, van Inwagen notes that if mereology is a true theory, there is an object that corresponds to the sum of Sonia and Moriarty. That is to say that “there exists a scattered object that weighs about twenty-five pounds and has two maximally connected parts each of which is now asleep, is about forty feet from the other, and is covered with fur.” Van Inwagen’s response to such a suggestion is that there is simply no good reason for thinking that such an object exists, since “nothing has the set of properties a thing would have to have to be that sum.” That is to say that, as theories of parts and wholes, Putnam’s mereologist and traditional logician do not present equivalent descriptions of the world because we do not, in some situations, have any reason for believing that the kinds of objects the mereologist describes exist, or at least that any object possesses the kind of properties that it must in order to be a mereological sum. In short: simply because a theory exists which tells us that we must posit strange, discontinuous objects does not mean that we must accept this theory.

To this kind of metaphysical objection, it seems that there is what might seem a similarly metaphysical rejoinder: is it not the case that many of the objects that feature most prominently in our daily lives (not to mention in our philosophy) are some variety of strange, discontinuous objects? Chairs, bodies, solar systems, galaxies, buildings, and so on? There are many kinds of objects that we take to be unproblematic that might strike us, upon reflection, as unnatural in somewhat the same way as the mereological sum of van Inwagen’s two pets might seem unnatural. Is the solar system not something like the mereological sum of its constituent planets along with the sun? Does it consist of all of the empty space in between? We might say that modern astrophysics presents us with more compelling reasons to treat the solar system as somehow more continuous an object than the sum of Sonia and Moriarty, but we seem on thin ice here. If we say that the sum of Sonia and Moriarty does not exist because we cannot tell a plausible enough physical story about their interaction qua object, then we appear very close to suggesting the questions of existence can be answered only once we consider the plausibility of the various physical stories we might tell about

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19 Ibid., p. 191.
20 Ibid., p. 192.
21 Ibid.
certain collections of objects. As van Inwagen might otherwise ask: how can we begin to consider such explanations when questions of existence have not yet been settled?22

The problem appears to be that van Inwagen wishes to hold both that there is a univocal, objective formulation of the concept of existence and that certain applications of this concept might be rejected on the basis of (what appear to be) pragmatic value judgements. Van Inwagen appeals to some notions of ontological parsimony and conceptual simplicity in rejecting the mereological picture of the world, reminding us that “after all, that there is a theory that says there is something with certain properties is, taken by itself, a rather unimpressive reason for believing that there is something that has those properties.”23 True as this undoubtedly is, there seems something out of place here. Van Inwagen’s suggestion is that questions of conceivability, simplicity and parsimony allow us to adjudicate between correct and incorrect formulations of the concept of existence, and that conflict between theories of parts and wholes may be settled objectively on the basis of such considerations. We might think of the process in this way as following the pattern of modern scientific thought, in the sense that, as Putnam himself notes, “normative judgements are essential to the practice of modern science itself.”24

Yet there is at least something empirical that guides the employment of normative value judgements in the scientific case. Even if one believes that scientific facts can be neatly disentangled from scientific values, it is not clear that the same kind of disentanglement is possible in situations that do not turn on the same kind of body of empirical data. When van Inwagen himself looks to defend his rather eccentric view that only parts that form living organisms qualify as coherent wholes (objects), he does so on the basis of the implications of such a formulation on usage and neighbouring concepts, as well as considerations of what we can conceive, imagine and plausibly discuss.25 Given his self-stated debt to the classical American pragmatists, Putnam certainly does not object to this way of proceeding. Indeed in some ways such an approach resembles Dewey’s vision of philosophy as a kind of “intellectual disrobing” whereby we may inspect our concepts and habits critically “to see what they are made of and what wearing them does to us.”26 What Putnam does object to, however, is the notion that this process is capable of furnishing us with any facts about the definitive formulations of the concepts in question.

In short: what is problematic about van Inwagen’s response to Putnam is not its reliance on broadly pragmatic, value-based methods of adjudicating such disputes per se, but rather the concurrent insistence that such disputes are genuine conflicts of fact and as such that there is a definitive and metaphysically-privileged formulation of the concepts of ‘object’ and

22 Van Inwagen himself summarises his argument from Material Beings in similar terms: “if a thing doesn’t exist, it isn’t there for you to establish a convention to the effect that it shall be called an ‘object’ (or anything else); if it does exist, the term ‘object’ applies to it, since the term applies to everything.” See ibid., p. 196, footnote 23.
23 Ibid., p. 192.
‘existence’ that we might uncover. In offering this second argument, van Inwagen hopes to demonstrate that Putnam is wrong to insist that the descriptions of the mereologist and the traditional logician are in some sense ‘equally good’, since we are able to reject the mereological theory for principled reasons. As such, van Inwagen suggests that we should feel no discomfort in holding fast to the notion that there is one definitively correct formulation of the concept of object rather than many equally workable ones. Yet he encounters two difficulties. The first is that the principled reasons to which van Inwagen points seem to open up something of a metaphysical problem, in that they do not provide particularly clear criteria for judging what is or is not natural, plausible, sensible enough to be considered anything other than a strange and discontinuous object.

The second difficulty, however, runs far deeper. In the absence of any rigorous explication of how strange (discontinuous, implausible, unnatural, etc.) an object must be before we are unable to countenance its existence, van Inwagen justifies his rejection of mereology and his insistence on the seriousness of the conflict at hand by reference to a variety of pragmatic concerns. In the face of this move, his insistence that there is, in fact, a correct formulation of the concepts of existence and object seems hollow. Is it not the case that what seems implausible, unnatural and so on shifts depending on our theoretical perspectives, focuses and needs?

So it is that the thrust of Putnam’s notion of conceptual relativity carries through into such metaphilosophical territory. In such metaphilosophical matters, the spectre of Dewey looms large over Putnam’s approach. In Experience and Nature, Dewey writes:

“It [philosophy] has no call to create a world of “reality” de novo, nor to delve into secrets of Being hidden from common sense and science. It has no stock of information or body of knowledge peculiarly its own.”

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Putnam does not doubt the sincerity of the kinds of disagreements that van Inwagen describes, and would likely even grant the suggestion that “Putnam’s Polish logician and I disagree not only about simple, imaginary worlds, but about the real world.” 28 Yet in the absence of any empirical pronouncement on the matter, Putnam insists along with Dewey that philosophy is not in a position to adjudicate these conceptual disputes as matters of fact. In situations of conceptual relativity, we find ourselves free to extend (or not) our concepts in various directions, and the role of philosophy in this endeavour is to take stock of what is at stake in the decision before us. Van Inwagen and the Metaphysical Realist hope for what Dewey calls “the recovery of a primitive naïveté”, 29 but on the basis of his examination of the phenomenon of conceptual relativity, Putnam insists that the best we can hope for is to cultivate a sense of what is at stake in each situation and address our practical needs as best we can.

Once pragmatic methods of adjudication make their way onto the scene, we find ourselves confronted with the fact that there are inevitably different, equally reasonable ways of

28 van Inwagen, “The Number of Things,” p. 194.
applying such principles. In other words, with respect to these pragmatic principles, a kind of de jure pluralism reigns which the Metaphysical Realist finds intolerable. In the face of such situations of conceptual relativity we may agree and disagree on the basis of all of the pragmatic principles employed by van Inwagen, but to suggest that what is at stake is the ‘real’ or ‘definitive’ version of the concept of existence or object is, as Putnam says, to find ourselves already wandering in Cloud Cookoo Land.\(^{30}\)

Word count: 16445

\(^{30}\) In full, Putnam writes that “once we assume that there is, somehow fixed in advance, a single ‘real’ and a single ‘literal’ sense of ‘exist’ – and, by the way, a single ‘literal’ sense of ‘identity’ – one which is cast in marble and cannot be either contracted or expanded without defiling the statue of the god, we are already wandering in Cloud Cuckoo Land.” Putnam, *Ethics without Ontology*, p. 84.
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