ROUTLEDGE REVIVALS

Meaning and the Moral Sciences

Hilary Putnam

Routledge Revivals

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AUTHOR'S NOTE ABOUT THE REISSUE:

This volume, which includes the Locke Lectures I gave at the University of Oxford in 1976, captures the precise point at which my attention turned to many of the questions that have preoccupied me ever since. Apart from the single lecture which constitutes the final Part, "Realism and Reason", the views I defended in this book are views I still largely agree with, although my arguments have, not surprisingly, changed and developed in the more than thirty years since those Locke Lectures were given. I am delighted that *Meaning and the Moral Sciences* will be available once again.

One further remark: in the Introduction I say that "the final essay ["Realism and Reason"] represents a recent turn in my thinking". That turn—to "internal realism"—is one I have regarded as a mistake since 1990. But the problems raised by "Realism and Reason" were, I still believe, deep problems, and that essay has been so widely discussed and quarrelled about that I am glad that it too is included, even if it *was* mistaken.

Hilary Putnam
Cambridge, Massachusetts, Nov. 2009

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CONTENTS

Preface vii

Introduction 1

Part One Meaning and Knowledge (The John Locke Lectures, 1976) 7

Lecture I 9

Lecture II 18

Lecture III 34

Lecture IV 46

Lecture V 55

Lecture VI 66

Part Two Literature, Science, and Reflection 83

Part Three Reference and Understanding 97

Part Four Realism and Reason 123

Index 141

PREFACE

The lectures that make up this volume were written during a period of two years that were extraordinarily eventful years for me. The invitation to give the John Locke Lectures at Oxford University in 1976 combined with the fortunate accident of my having a sabbatical year due from Harvard University to give me both the time and the stimulus for prolonged writing. The Locke Lectures grew out of reflections stimulated by Hartry Field's provocative article on Tarski's theory of truth. As the first draft flowed from my pen I was amazed at the conclusions I found myself coming to (e.g. that there is something to Quine's 'indeterminacy of translation' thesis) and pleased that I could connect my interest in the epistemology of ethics (which is at a very preliminary and undeveloped stage, I must hasten to add) with my dissatisfaction with what I call 'scientific utopianism' in the lectures. Still, when I arrived at Oxford with six lectures to give in the (happily named) Hilary term of 1976, I had only the first drafts of four or five with me. Somehow I managed to finish them without ever actually showing up for a lecture unprepared, and I know that the peace, the stimulation, and the warmth of the Oxford atmosphere helped me to work with intensity.

So many people showed me kindness and friendship during that brief stay that I could not begin to mention all their names (nor would a list be likely to be of general interest). But I must add that the opportunity to give the Shearman Lectures at the University of London gave me the excuse to see a good deal of

my friends in London, and that this stimulation (social as well as philosophical) was important to me, and that the talks I had with friends in Cambridge left me with questions to brood about for many months afterwards.

I also want to say that being John Locke Professor was not only an honour, but for an anglophile and a Zuleika Dobson fan like myself, a splendid opportunity to fulfil a great many donnish fantasies. In particular, living in University College was an experience I shall always cherish (and I *have* to mention George Cawkwell, who did so much to ease the culture shock and to make me feel at home). That winter was the winter of the drought (although we didn't yet realize it was a drought), so there was no rain or snow, and spring came early – by mid-February. So there were marvellous opportunities for looking at the architecture of Oxford, for weekends in the country, and so forth.

After Oxford, I went to Israel, which I had never seen, so once again there was the danger of culture shock happily averted by the help of warm friends (I have to mention Yehuda Elkana) and the beauty of the country and of Jerusalem. Since the University of Jerusalem sponsored an international conference on philosophy of language at that time (unfortunately, Yehoshua Bar Hillel died earlier in the year, so that his contribution to the conference was prevented) this was also a time to see more of Peter Strawson and of Michael Dummett.

Since I had missed most of Dummett's William James Lectures (which took place at Harvard while I was at Oxford), I was delighted that he could come to Jerusalem and that he commented on 'Reference and Understanding', which was in large part a reaction to the William James Lectures (to the ones I heard and to the typescript of the others). His comments were very important for my thinking, and while there are still many points of disagreement in our views, the turn in my thinking represented by 'Realism and Reason' is, in part, the result of our dialogue.

'Realism and Reason' was, however, not written in the sabbatical year, but rather during the fall of 1976. And the most important event of that fall for my work was Nelson Goodman's suggestion that he and Willard van Quine and I do a series of three joint meetings of our seminars at which we would discuss

each other's views. I knew that I found these three 'shows' (as the graduate students irreverently called them) tremendously stimulating, and that this intense interaction with Goodman's views (as well as with Quine's – however the influence of Quine's thought on my work is of long standing) also shaped 'Realism and Reason'.

I trust that I have given the impression that I had a good time while I was writing these lectures. I hope the reader will have a good time reading them.

And, of course, my gratitude to the National Endowment for the Humanities for making it all possible.

INTRODUCTION

Before Kant almost every philosopher subscribed to the view that truth is some kind of correspondence between ideas and 'what is the case'. However puzzling the *nature* of the 'correspondence' may be, the naturalness of the idea is undeniable. There is a world out there; and what we say or think is 'true' when it *gets it the way it is* and 'false' when it doesn't correspond to *the way it is*.

With Kant a new view emerges: the view that truth is radically mind-dependent. It is not that the thinking mind *makes up* the world on Kant's view; but it doesn't just mirror it either.

To the present time, views of truth can be divided into two kinds: 'realist' views, which interpret truth as some kind of correspondence to what is the case, and 'verificationist' views, which interpret truth as, for example, what would be *verified* under ideal conditions of inquiry. (I choose Peirce's form as my example of a verificationist view because it seems to me the most tenable; but, of course, there are many versions of both the realist view and the verificationist view in the literature.)

In the early decades of the twentieth century, there were many philosophers of an empiricist stamp who held neither sort of view, however. These philosophers *rejected* the whole notion of 'truth' as 'metaphysical'. (An example is John Dewey, who always spoke of 'warranted assertibility', and not of 'truth'.) In particular, many of the Vienna positivists shared this attitude of suspicious hostility toward the concept of truth until the work of Alfred Tarski.

The reader will find an account of Tarski's work in the first Lecture in this volume; what is important is that this work was taken by the philosophers to be *deflationary*. What Tarski does is show how, in the context of a formalized language, one can define 'true' (or a predicate which can be used in place of 'true') using *only* the notions of the object language and notions of pure mathematics. In particular, no semantical notion – no such notion as 'designates', or 'stands for', or 'refers to' – is taken as primitive by Tarski (although 'refers to' gets *defined* – defined in terms of non-semantical notions – in the course of his work). Thus anyone who accepts the notions of whatever object language is in question – and this can be chosen arbitrarily – can also understand 'true' as defined by Tarski for that object language. 'True' is just as legitimate as any notion of first order science.

What is essential is that Tarski verifies the correctness of his 'truth-definition' in any particular case by seeing that it satisfies a certain equivalence condition. This condition is that to say of any sentence that the sentence is true must be equivalent (in fact, Tarski requires it to be *provably* equivalent) to the sentence itself. To use Tarski's famous example, if 'Snow is white' is a sentence of the object language, then 'true' must be so defined (for that object language) that it becomes provable (in the language in which the definition is given – Tarski calls this latter the *meta-language*) that

'Snow is white' is true if and only if snow is white.

An example of the use that empiricist philosophers made of this is the following: a minor pragmatist called Felix Kaufmann had argued that 'true' is a metaphysical' notion ('metaphysical' being a pejorative word) on the ground that (he alleged that) ascriptions of the predicate 'true' could never be verified or falsified. We can tell if a statement is *confirmed* to a given degree, Kaufmann said, but since *perfect* confirmation is impossible, we have never verified that the statement is absolutely *true*. Carnap, relying on Tarski's work, replied to Kaufmann as follows: liberal empiricists (including Kaufmann himself) do not require that ascriptions of a predicate be verifiable with certainty in order that the predicate be allowed into an empiricist language. For example, we can test with probability high enough for all practical (and even scientific) purposes whether or not current