FALLIBILISM AND PUTNAM *

I

From the many topics in Putnam's philosophical writings which might profitably be discussed I am going to choose one in the present paper : fallibilism.

It might be agreed that one major obligation imposed upon philosophers is to seek an intelligible account of the whole reality or, if you like, of the world as a whole. Hilary Putnam, in his attempt to offer a view about the world, claims that there may be, and in fact are, different views of the world as a whole at the same time. For, according to him, any view of the world emerges essentially from within a specific conceptual scheme and is intelligible only if considered in terms of that particular scheme. This, if true, at once gives birth to the thesis that there could simultaneously be different intelligible world-views, since there could simultaneously be different viable conceptual frameworks. In this way, Putnam concludes that '...there is more than one true version of reality...'[1]

Now a question may be raised whether or not any such true version of the world is true once and for all. Putnam replies in the negative. He argues, to put the point briefly, that since man is essentially fallible, no such view could be taken to be immune to revision. Thus Putnam makes the eesential uncertainty of any world-view contingent on man's essential fallibility. This is how, as I see, Putnam exploits the thesis of *fallibilism*. In the sequel, I shall deal with this trend of Putnam's philosophy.

II

Let me start the discussion of Putnam's fallibilism with the following statement : "Even a statement that really is analytic

is not immune from revision, for even if a statement is *in fact* a law of logic, ...we are not *prohibited* by any methodological canon from revising it; we shall just be making a mistake if we do... (...'Fallibilism' does not become an incorrect doctrine when one reaches the truth in a scientific inquiry)"[2].

Let us accept Putnam's view that we can never urge that any statement is immune from revision. In the light of this, Putnam's assertion, that we would be *mistaken* in making a revision with respect to 'really analytic' statement, seems to be rather unwarrented or at any rate idle speculation. For one thing, we could never be in a position to ascertain that any statememt is 'really analytic' and hence is immune from revision, and consequently we could never seriously ascertain that we would be *mistaken* in making revision with respect to any statement whatsoever.

If, on the other hand, it is admitted that we could see and ascertain that a given statement is 'really analytic' and hence *is* immune from revision, then Putnam's position, as expressed in the above lines, would become hopelessly problematic. For, this admission entails that we can legitimately claim to have revised a certain statement even if we acknowledge that the statement is immune from revision and hence we *are* mistaken in revising it. That is, a revision would make sense and be legitimate even if it is mistaken. It would be quite silly to treat ourselves as fallible if it is *simultaneously* admitted that we have made a genuine revision with respect to a certain statement and that we are mistaken or even may be mistaken in making the revision, so that the statement in question may nevertheless well be true. How could we be said to be fallible if our fallibility can never ensure falsity?

In the same article, Putnam remarks: 'We never have an absolute guarantee that we are right, even when we are'.[3] This suggests that we can never assuredly conclude that we *are* wrong on a certain issue, since it may be that we *are* right on that particular issue. In other words, it is possible—really *possible*—that we are all the while right, although we cannot claim that we are right on any given issue. But this entails a rather serious point about our fallibility. It is usually agreed that to say that

we are fallible is to say that it is *possible* that we are always committing mistakes. But then if we can *never* ensure that we *are* wrong on *any* issue, how could we ensure that we *are* fallible? If we never have an absolute guarantee that we are right, could we ever have an aboslute guarantee that we are wrong? If Putnam is to be consistent, he must answer, No. So we never have an absolute guarantee that we are *wrong*. Consequently, we could never ensure that we are fallible. It thus seems that, if we accept the statement just quoted with all its implications, we could never conclude that man is a fallible creature.

In another article, Putnam writes : 'The claim of the moderte doctrine [which Putnam accepts] is that there are no truths which it would never be rational to give up; for every truth or putative truth, there *are* circumstances under which it would be rational to accept its denial'.[4] But, then, Putnam immediately warns us that the statement that there are no *a priori* truths should not itself be taken to be true *a priori*. For, as Putnam argues, this position, that there are no *a priori* truths, has been reached and acknowledged 'on the basis of an induction from the history of science'.[5]

Now the crucial question is whether induction could ever give us the licence to *conclusively* affirm that a certain position necessarily holds good. The answer should be, No, and Putnam would, I hope, agree, since Putnam does not take inductively reached conclusions to be *absolutely* true once and for all.

But, then, he himself concludes, as just quoted, that 'for every truth..., there *are* circumstances'that *would* lead us 'to accept its denial'. This suggests that, according to Putnam, *every* truth *would* someday turn out to be rationally unacceptable. How is he so sure of it? Does he obtain *this* truth from some non-inductive grounds? If so, and if this is absolute, then there *is* at least one *absolute* truth, namely, no truth that is inductively obtained is absolute. To avoid this self-inconsistent position, Putnam should have rather said that a truth which is now taken to be rationally acceptable *might* (and not *would*) turn out someday to be rationally unacceptable.

At one place Putnam urges that whatever statement we

take to be true or rationally acceptable, we do so from 'within a theory of rationality'.[6] As long as we continue to accept this theory of rationality, we could not rationally judge the statement in question to be not true or rationally unacceptable. And *if* a change takes palce in future with respect to the theory of rationality we endorse, the rational status of the alleged statement would in all likelihood be affected. But this does not—and this I want to emphasise—entitle anyone to conclude that any such change *is forthcoming.*

Putnam believes[7] that anyone at any point can speculate whether 'an ideal theory of rationlity' would permit us to believe in the truth or rational acceptablity of the statement as we now do believe, and hence Putnam treats every truth as theory-relative and 'Provisional'. So he considers it to be "a really important thesis' that 'no statement is totally immune to revision'[8]. But this view commits Putnam-whether he is aware or not—to accept that *no* given theory of rationality could strictly be regarded as 'an *ideal* theory of rationality', since, on Putnam's view, *any* statement that is regarded as true in *any* theory of rationality is not totally immune to revision. Surely it would not be in order to regard a theory of rationality as an *ideal* one if every statement it ensures as true is open to be discarded.

But if *no* given theory of rationality could be regarded as *ideal,* the claim that in future 'an *ideal* theory of rationality' would or even might emerge becomes baseless or at any rate dubious-even as a speculation.

But even this view-which seems to be a consequence of Putnam's claim that any statement is revisable—that no given theory of rationality could be regarded as ideal is confronted with a difficulty. The trouble consists in specifying the exact ground on which one could conclude that no given theory could be regarded as ideal. Putnam might answer: this is the lesson we should take from the history of science. History of science teaches us that a theory which was acknowledged to be a quite rational theory at a given period of time came to be rejected at a subsequent period. But this sort of argument – which is basically inductive in character—at best entitles us to conclude that the theory of rationality that we now acknowledge to be

true *might* (again not *would*) fail to continue to be so in future, and consequently that the 'truths' that we now endorse in terms of our theory of rationality *might* (not *would* once again) fail to be so endorsed in future.

All this shows, once more, that what Putnam should and could claim is that all truths *may be* or are possibly provisional and not *are* provisional. This being so, Putnam appears not justified when he states, '...our answer [i.e., an affirmative answer to the question, 'Is it rational to believe in the truth of s?'] itself *is* a provisional one and... the true shape of future theory *will be* different in many unforeseen ways, from what we now envisage'.[9] He should have replaced 'is' by 'may be' and 'will be' by 'might be'.

It is important to notice what implications the 'possibly provisional' thesis bears for our *fallibility*. The most important point that is entailed by the 'possible provisional' thesis is that man's fallibility does not imply the awkward thesis that every statement is fated to be rejected or revised. It (fallibility) rather implies that man should always remain prepared that what he now finds quite rational to accept *may* turn out to be rationally unacceptable, that what he now finds unquestionably true *may* eventually become modified and even cancelled. There is no denying that man commits mistakes. But there is no necessity that man is systematically committing mistakes. No doubt man is always in the *risk* of error. But it would be too much to hold that man is all the time in the midst of error. Furthermore, if the fallibilist argues that *every* statement *is* false or (more weakly) *is* liable to be false, then the fallibilist's own statement would not itself hold water. Put in these terms, fallibilism becomes self-defeating.

Truly speaking, in order to sustain his thesis, the fallibilist need not deny the thesis that as long as we do not come across any good reason to question or abandon the truth of a statement, we have every right to be totally sure that the statement *is* true and not is *likely* to be true. It is sometimes urged that, at any rate, the reasons that people find, at any point of time, for acknowledging the truth of, say, s are to be inadequate, since s might turn out in future to be false.

But it is crucial to recognise that so long as we do not find any good reason to abandon s, we are entitled to claim the reasons for accepting s to be *adequate*. Or else, we must not claim that s is true in the first place. To be sure, to hold that the reasons on which we accept s as true are not adequate is virtually to withdraw the claim that s is true. We cannot really claim *truth* on admittedly inadequate reasons. To do so is to render all truths tentative, and in that case we would have constantly to wonder if we are ever able to establish the *truth* of any statement. I am not saying that the reasons we provide in support of the truth of any statement *have to be* final. But then it is silly to say that they *have to be* inconclusive. To repeat, we are entitled to treat the reasons we now find to be the reasons for the truth of s as convincing and adequate, until we come to have further convincing grounds to question the former as adequate reasons for the truth of s. So there is nothing for the fallibilist to be constantly haunted by the thought that we are mistaken. Only we must not dogmatically hold on to a so-far-accepted truth, if convincing reasons are found for questioning it. But to say this is *not* to say that we must always accept that our *present* views are not free from error.

At this point, I want to add a rather interesting and unnoticed point about our fallibility. It is often urged, quite correctly in my opinion, that man can never claim that the 'truths's he now admits of are ultimate or final; they *might* be questioned, revised and even abandoned in futhre. Thus I entirely agree with Putnam when he puts the revisability—thesis in a guarded manner: "...we cannot be sure that it would *never* be rational in *any* context to give up a statement that is regarded (and legitimately so, *in a given context*) as a 'necessary' truth"[10].

But then it is rarely noted that the same holds good equally of falsity.[11] If man might be erroneous in acknowledging some statement as true, he might, by the same token, be equally erroneous in concluding that a certain statement is false. Fallibility, provided it holds, must hold in either case in the same way. This, if correct, entails an extermely important point which is this: Man can never conclude either (a) that any experiment—however

crucial—has *proved* or established a theory *for ever*, or (b) that any experiment—however severe—has refuted a theory *for ever*. If, because of human fallibility, there could be no terminal foundation in respect of *truth*, then, by the same token, there could be no such foundation with respect to *falsity* either. The attitude to the fact of human fallibility is different on the part of pessimists and optimists in philosophy. The former say that our knowledge is an endless chain of errors and delusions, whereas the latter view it (knowledge) to be an endless chain of better, less faulty understanding of the world. In truth, however, as just noted, there is no ground for our being either a pessimist or an optimist with respect to our knowledge, if only for the reason that, because of our essential fallibility, at no point we can ensure that what we (now) know is incorrigibly erroneous or irrevocably correct. In brief, if nothing can be asserted finally and irrevocably, then all assertions, comprising acknowledgments *and* refutations are tentative.

The implication of all this for the present context is clear. The 'version' which man *rejects* as a correct version of the world might well turn out at a later time to be a *correct* version of the world, since man might be erroneous in acknowledging something as rejectable. So, just as an admittedly true version of the world, i.e., a version we may have reason to accept, might turn out to be a false version of the world, similarly an admittedly false version of the world, i.e., a version we may have reason to reject, might turn out to be a true version of the world. To deny any of the two possibilities is to assume our own infallibility. Invoking Hume, we can say : A true fallibilist will be diffident of his philosophical doubts as well as of his philosophical convictions.[12]

If I am correct in the foregoing, then I have something of consequence to observe about Putnam. Putnam seems to endorse the view that man's fallibility indicates that his judgements are infinitely perfectible.[13] In other words, on his view, the discourse of human judgements is, in terms of man's fallibility, getting progressively, more and more 'perfected'. But, as just noted, because of man's fallibility, there could be no guarantee that a subsequent world-view would be *better* version of the world than an earlier one. Since man may be erroneous in rejecting

as well as accepting a world-version, there could be no guarantee that every subsequent world-view would be more perfect than the (preceding) one which replaces or revises; on the contrary, it might transpire on a still later revision that it is the former world-view that is really the correct version of the world. No doubt this rarely happens. But the possibility of this cannot be *a priori* excluded. Consequently, it would be a hasty, if not faulty, observation that the 'striving forward' would necessarily be *progressive* in nature. Human fallibility, rightly understood, reveals that the growth of any human study does neither presuppose its imperfection nor entail its development.

I shall conclude my essay by saying something more about Putnam's thesis of 'ideal rational acceptability'. In an article, Putnam writes: 'A statement is true, in my view, if it would be justified under epistemically ideal conditions for many sorts of statements...'[14] In another article, he remarks : '...truth itself, on my view, is an idealization of rational acceptability'[15]. He reaffirms this view again in yet another article in which he says : '...I... believe that the only notion of truth that makes coherent sense is the... view that sees truth as an idealization of rational acceptability'.[16]

Now all these statements entail Putnam's favourite thesis that genuine truth can be had only from 'the ideal rational theory', only if deemed acceptable, from the 'ideal perspective of rationality'.

It might be enquired whether man could ever come to own the 'ideal perspective of rationality' ensuring thereby genuine truth, i.e. the truth that is not subject to further revision only because it has been ensured in an ideal perspective of rationality. Putnam would respond in the negative. He unambiguosly declares: '...we [i.e., men] cannot really attain epistemically ideal conditions, or even be absolutely certain that we have come sufficiently close to them'.[17] Indeed, Putnam must insist that man can never ensure genuine truth, i.e. the truth once and for all, for otherwise Putnam would not be able to maintain his other pet thesis that all human truths are revisable. (In fairness to Putnam, I must report in parenthesis that he exempts at least and perhaps at best one proposition, viz. 'Not every statement is true', from

the scope of revisability.[18] But I think this concession would not affect or alter Putnam's overall position that all important human truths are revisable. He himself considers the above truth as a 'trivial' one[19]).

Now from both of these theses—one, man could never come to own the 'ideal perspective of reationality' which alone could ensure, eternal truth, and the other, every human 'truth' is revisable— it follows as a corollary that man can never *know* genuine truth. For we cannot say that we *know* a truth to be genuine and eternal, *and* admit at the same time that this truth is revisable We cannot have the cake and eat it at the same time. To make room for human knowledge to encompass genuine truths, Putnam would have to say either (a) that a revisable truth is still a genuine truth thereby abandoning the thesis that genuine truth is to be had only in the 'ideal perspective of rationality'; or (b) that it is at any rate possible for man to own the 'ideal perspective of rationality' and hence to know genuine truths, thereby abandoning the thesis that all human truths are revisable.

Putnam (or a Putnamian) might urge at this point that even the 'ideal perspective of rationality' is relative to us, i.e., relative to a particular spatio-temporal human discourse. But were it so, the alleged 'ideal perspective' would become contingent and subject to change, i.e., would be itself revisable. In *that* case, it would be difficult to miantain the all-important *ideal* character of the said perspective. Worse even, it would also be then difficult to make sense of the revisable character of *human* truths. You cannot say that a truth is revisable in terms of a perspective which is itself revisable.

Putnam, however, gives the impression in one of his books that he is against *dehumanisation* of any ideal perspective of rationality. There he appears to be against the idea that there could be any perspective— however 'ideal' or 'rational' it might be—which would be totally free of human mistakes in interpreting the world.[20] Here Putnam deprecates the notion of absolute perspective of rationlity and regards each and every perspective as temporary and revisable. He holds at another place: 'Truth, in the only sense in which we have a vital and working notion of it, is

rational acceptability (or, rather, rational acceptability under sufficiently good epistemic conditions; and which conditions are epistemically better or worse is relative to the type of discourse in just the way rational acceptability itself is'[21].

So any rational acceptability under sufficiently good epistemic conditions' derives its rationale or credibility from the 'appropriate type of discourse', i.e., the type of discourse in which it is acknowledged to be operative. But if so, then—and it is crucial—no 'rational acceptability under sufficiently good epistemic conditions' could be said to suffer any jolt, as long as the 'appropriate type of discourse' would obtain for it. In the 'appropriate kind of discourse', each is *absolute*. You might say here that *a certain rational acceptability under a certain set of sufficiently good conditions* would at any rate lose its rationale or operative force only if the 'appropriate type of discourse' ceases to obtain. So how could be any of them *absolute*? But, then, it is important to keep in mind that any such ratioanl acceptability is claimed to be absolute *only* in relation to the particular appropriate type of discourse; that is to say, each 'rational acceptability' is meant and expected to be valid *only* in 'the appropriate type of discourse'. So every 'rational acceptability under a set of sufficiently good epistemic conditions' is *absolutely* valid *within* its appropriate type of discourse. Consequently, it makes little sense to treat any specific 'rational acceptability under a ṡet of sufficiently good conditions' as better or worse in respect of *its* appropropriate type of discourse. If any such 'rational acceptability' is deemed better or worse in respect of some *different* type of discourse, that would clearly be not its virtue or fault, only because it has not been meant to sustain itself as 'rational acceptability' in any *alien* discourse.

Putnam, in any case, contrary to his humanisation of 'rational acceptability', does not seem ultimately to like the idea that truth be confined to the territory of any particular spatio-temporal discourse. He concludes one of his essays with these words: 'We don't have an Archimedean point; we always speak the language of a time and place; but the rightness and wrongness of what we say is not *just* for a time and a place'.[22]

Given Putnam's discourse-relative view of truth I find these lines a bit puzzling. His discourse-relative account of truth suggests

that we invariably acknowledge something as true solely in terms of the rules and criteria available and prevalent in our discourse. *If* Putnam allows that we could and do exploit rules and criteria of any alien discourse for recognising the rightness or wrongness of what we say, then his view that 'we always speak the language of a time and place' would lose its poignancy. And if *this* be the case, then it must be admitted that *some* rules and criteria are present and operative in both of the two discourses in question. But, then, inasmuch as what *we* say is right (or wrong) is *also* right (or wrong) in another discourse, it is not strictly true that we always speak *only* in the language of our time and our place.

It might be urged that there is after all a difference between *saying something* and *recognising the rightness or wrongness of what is being said.* Well, nobody ever denies that people at a certain time and place always *speak* in the language available to them, i.e., the language of their time and place. But then this question would be raised: Do they *recognise* the truth-value of what they say solely in terms of the rules and criteria available in their language alone? If Putnam replies, Yes, then he would have to revoke his thesis that the rightness or worngness of what we say is not *just* for a time and a place. If he replies, No, then he would have to admit that we do *not* recognise the rightness or wrongness of what we say invariably in terms of the rules and criteria available in our own language alone. And this admission would ultimately lead to the acceptance of some *universal* rules and criteria present in all human languages. I do not know whether Putnam would concede this.

To put the above point slightly differently : It is true that *saying that X is right* has to be governed solely by the rules and criteria of a particular space-time-bound language. But, as Putnam, himself admits, it is the *rational acceptability*—and not just syaing—of X's being right that ensures the rightness of X. Now Putnam urges in the lines quoted above that the rightness (or wrongness) of what we say is not confined to a particular space-time-bound discourse. Consequently, Putnam has to accept that the *rational acceptability* of rightness (or wrongness) of what we say transcends, at times at least, the limits of

the given language and hence of the given discourse. I do not know, once again, whether Putnam would accept this.

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Hilary Putnam, 'Models and Reality' in his *Realism and Reason: Philosophical Papers*, Vol.3 (henceforth *RR*) Cambridge University Press, Cambridge. 1986, p. 19.

2. "'Two Dogmas' Revisited" in RR, p. 96.

3. *Ibid.*

4. 'There is at least one *a priori* truth' in RR, p. 98. My emphasis.

5. *Ibid.*

6. 'Analyticity and Apriority' in *RR*, p. 130.

7. Cf. *Ibid.*

8. "'Two Dogmas' Revisited" in *RR*, p. 95.

9. 'Aanlyticity and Apriority' in *RR*, p. 130.

10 Hilary Putnma, *Reason, Truth and History* (henceforth *RTH*), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge. 1987, p. 84.

11. Karl Popper once speaks of 'the uncertainty of every empirical falsification', and he adds that this uncertainty "should not be taken too seriously... There are a number of important falsifications which are as 'definitive' as general human fallibility permits". (See his *Realism and the Aim of Science*, Hutchinson. London. 11983, p. xxiii.)

12. Cf. David Hume. *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Book-I (Edited by D.G.C. Macnabb), The Fontana Library, 1962, p. 322.

13. See *RTH*, p. 167.

14. 'Reference and Truth' in *RR*. p. 84.

15. 'Philosophers and Human Understanding' in *RR*. p. 200.

16. 'Quantum mechanics and the observer' in *RR*. p. 267.

17. *RTH*. p. 55.

18. See *RTH* p. 83.

19. See RTH. p. 84.

20. See Hilary Putnam. *Representation and Reality*. A Bradford Book. The Press, Massachussets, 1988, pp. 91-92.

21. 'Why reason can't be naturalized' in *RR*. p. 231.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 247.