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THE PHILOSOPHY OF HILARY PUTNAM

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I. The Theme: Wittgensteinian Baby-Throwing

Putnam began his Dewey Lectures by saying, “The besetting sin of philosophers seems to be throwing the baby out with the bathwater.” He drew attention to the pattern of “recoil” in philosophy, in which philosophers who “recoil from the excesses of various versions of metaphysical realism” take up peculiar views instead—forms of antirealism, idealism, or relativism—while those who recoil from what they take to be a giving up on the whole idea of an objective world, come up with attempts to rescue objectivity by such mysterious notions as that of cross-world identity or an “absolute” conception of the world.

In an earlier essay, “Does the Disquotational Theory of Truth Solve All Philosophical Problems?” Putnam examined two accounts of truth influenced by readings of Wittgenstein, those of Michael Williams and Paul Horwich. Putnam criticized their appeal to assertibility conditions in their accounts of truth, and argued that their attempts to show that the philosophical problems concerned with truth are pseudoproblems serve as an illustration of how philosophical attempts to reject metaphysics may lead philosophers into a kind of disguised metaphysics, in this case a kind of empiricist metaphysics. In his critical account of these approaches to truth, Putnam also questioned whether they really do reflect Wittgenstein’s ideas.

Putnam has had a long-term interest in throwings out of the baby with the bathwater by philosophers who take themselves to be getting rid of
objectionable forms of metaphysics, and to be making use of Wittgenstein’s later philosophy in doing so. The three such baby-throwers most important for Putnam’s writings are (I should say) Norman Malcolm, Michael Dummett, and Richard Rorty. Putnam’s objections to the antirealism and verificationism that have been drawn from Wittgenstein’s later writings go back to the earliest years of his career, when, as he says, much of his activity “was devoted to refuting Malcolm’s version of Wittgensteinianism,” and he adds that Stanley Cavell was at that time devoting much of his time to showing that the view that Putnam was criticizing was not indeed Wittgenstein’s. In his 1992 lectures on pragmatism, Putnam notes that Rorty’s interpretation of Wittgenstein is in some ways close to Malcolm’s, and (as he takes it) equally misleading as a reading of Wittgenstein. Section II of this chapter is about the dispute between Putnam and Rorty. Sections III through V look at Putnam’s ideas in relation to those of Ilham Dilman, a Wittgensteinian philosopher who resembles Rorty in taking his own views to be far closer to Putnam’s than they are. The appendix to section V is about Peter Winch’s treatment of magic, and his attempt to rule out certain kinds of criticism of forms of thought distant from our own. In section VI, I look at what makes baby-throwing attractive, and I draw some conclusions about Putnam and commonsense realism.

II. THE RELATIVIST MENACE?

A striking feature of the dispute between Putnam and Rorty is their disagreement about how far apart their views are from each other. This has been an issue in the dispute since its beginnings in the early 1980s. The most important statement by Rorty of how he sees the dispute, his essay “Hilary Putnam and the Relativist Menace,” takes its title from the disagreement about what the disagreement is about. By speaking of Putnam’s view of him as a “Relativist Menace,” Rorty distances himself from relativism (or at any rate intends to do so), and suggests that Putnam has been attacking a straw man. Rorty was responding to Putnam’s remark, in lectures which Putnam gave in 1981, that “cultural relativists usually deny that they are cultural relativists”—a remark that Putnam had explained by pointing to Rorty’s views, which combine an attack on relativism with a view of truth that is, so Putnam suggests, plainly committed to relativism. Rorty’s first response to the accusation was in “Solidarity or Objectivity?,” his Howison lecture, in early 1983. “Relativism,” he said, “is the traditional epithet applied to pragmatism by realists.” He distinguished three views which may get labeled “relativism,” the first of which is self-refuting and the second eccentric, neither of which he holds. The third view is Rorty’s version of
pragmatism, which he describes as a kind of ethnocentrism about truth and rationality. He adds that there is really no good reason for calling it “relativist,” since it does not involve holding of anything that it is relative to something else. The view might appear to be self-refuting if one took it to involve a theory of truth, identifying truth with the opinions of some group. But that, Rorty says, is a misinterpretation, which underlies the way realists respond to this sort of pragmatism. He adds that his view is in fact quite close to Putnam’s 1981 “internalism,” since Putnam rejects a God’s-eye view of things. The criticisms that Putnam had directed against “relativists,” Rorty says, do not apply to him. In particular, he does not hold the kind of “incommensurability” view for which Putnam had criticized Kuhn and Feyerabend; and there does not appear to be any other matter on which Putnam could take himself to be in disagreement with Rorty, or so Rorty says.9

Putnam was not convinced. In his Kant lectures, in 1987, he took Rorty’s formulations of his own views about truth and rationality to be deeply different from his own, and he argued that Rorty, though not a typical Relativist, is indeed a Relativist. Putnam expressed his own commitment to what, in Rorty’s terms, is a form of ethnocentrism: our norms and standards are our norms and standards and reflect our interests, but Putnam insisted on not drawing the kinds of conclusions that Rorty had taken to follow. According to Putnam’s principles, there usually is, in ordinary circumstances, a fact of the matter whether the statements people make are warranted or not; further, the possibility that our norms and standards may improve is not the same as saying that they will come to seem better to us, or come to be accepted by our cultural peers. “From within our picture of the world . . . we say that ‘better’ isn’t the same as ‘we think it’s better’.”10

“Hilary Putnam and the Relativist Menace” was Rorty’s considered response. He objected strongly to being confused with his evil twin, “the Relativist,”11 while reiterating the sorts of view that had made Putnam call him a relativist in the first place. For example, he committed himself to the view that all that can be meant by talk of “a fact of the matter about whether p is a warranted assertion” is “a fact of the matter about our ability to feel solidarity with a community that views p as warranted.”12 From Rorty’s point of view, the situation was extremely puzzling, since Putnam appeared to him to accept the same pragmatist principles which Rorty himself did. To bring out the extensive agreement between his own views and Putnam’s, Rorty listed five passages from Putnam’s writings, expressing principles that he himself wholeheartedly shared. In these passages, Putnam repudiates metaphysical realism and insists on the importance of our situatedness as thinkers, and on the inseparability of our interests and our values from any view we may have of the world. And that, for Rorty,
was the source of his puzzlement: what is it that Putnam thinks really differentiates Rorty’s thought from Putnam’s own? Without falling back into metaphysical realism, he asked, what sort of content can be given to any of the notions which Putnam uses in expressing his criticisms of Rorty?—It is possible to explain why Rorty thought that there was no room for a view between metaphysical realism on the one hand and on the other his own version of pragmatism. But here what I want to note is simply that Rorty took his philosophical commitments to be virtually the same as Putnam’s, but Putnam understood—and understands—those commitments very differently from Rorty. Putnam’s picture of Rorty’s views repeatedly elicited from Rorty a “Who, me?” response. Rorty’s “Who, me?” responses to criticisms are highly characteristic of his style of controversy, and I want to end this section by a brief look at this sort of response.

Suppose that there are indeed two philosophers, Rorty and his evil twin the Relativist. There is then a question why so many philosophers confuse them, and ascribe to Rorty the views of his evil twin. A part of the answer to the question is that, although Rorty regularly takes a stance of metaphilosophical purity in which he disowns philosophical positions, he combines it with down-and-dirty philosophical argumentation which appears (to many readers) to commit him to the views of his evil twin. He gives arguments that disallow certain sorts of possibility, but shifts from the arguments over to the metaphilosophical purity line, and says that he is not arguing for views like those of his evil twin, but is merely recommending shifts in how we talk. Here is an example of how the metaphilosophical purity line seems to be used by Rorty to provide a kind of plausible deniability for the philosophical views which his arguments seem to express. Putnam had criticized Rorty for his account of what it would be for our standards of warrant to become better, after Rorty had explained “betterness” in terms of what seems better to our cultural peers. Such an account of “better,” Putnam said, cannot be justified by an appeal to what we accept, since we have a very different picture of what it would be for our standards to be better; and so it looks as if Rorty is implicitly working with the idea that, from a God’s-eye view, there is nothing else for “betterness of warrant” to amount to. Rorty, in response, went metaphilosophical, and claimed that all he was doing was recommending that we replace our way of talking of “better” with what he thinks that we will find to be more convenient. But I have quoted above a passage which seems entirely inconsistent with such a description of what Rorty was doing, the passage in which he claims that all that can be meant by talk of “a fact of the matter about whether p is a warranted assertion” is a fact about what sort of community we can feel solidarity with. The idea is that there is no alternative to that sort of Rortian pragmatism; apparent alternatives will involve appeals to the way
God sees things, or to some other metaphysically fishy idea. Rorty says that he is only making recommendations, not analyzing meanings; but he in fact makes claims about what we can mean. He plainly appears to be arguing that there is no space for meaning anything by “better” but: what “will come to seem better to us.” That is, there is no room for Putnam’s “commonsense realism”—a view that does not take “bitterness” to be a matter of “what will come to seem better to us.” It is hardly surprising that Putnam suggested that, underneath all the wrappings, Rorty is still trying to say what, from a God’s-eye view, there is not. In Rorty’s approach to the issue there is visible a feature of much Wittgensteinian baby-throwing philosophy: the insistence that there are, in connection with some issue, only two alternatives: a metaphysically fishy one and the baby-throwing one. Commonsense realism is not seen at all, and the baby-throwing argument implicitly relies on a God’s-eye view of what there is not.

The difficulty of keeping Rorty’s views distinct from those of his evil twin can be seen also from what we might call the dinosaur angle. It is supposedly his evil twin, and not Rorty himself, who holds that there were no dinosaurs until, as our science progressed, they were “invented.” But Rorty does rather encourage one to confuse him with his evil twin when he says that, in a suitably broad sense, dinosaurs are “social constructions,” and when he tells us that neither giraffes nor dinosaurs are “out there” apart from human needs and interests. I shall return to the dinosaur line in section III.

III. With Friends Like These . . .

Putnam said that cultural relativists usually deny being cultural relativists. Wittgensteinian idealists characteristically deny being idealists of any sort. A very good example is Derek Bolton, who defended a view that he took to be Wittgenstein’s, and that he took to exclude every form of idealism. But on this view, a method of inquiry makes possible the empirical facts that it brings to light. Bolton might well have been using “makes possible” in a blurry sort of way. That is, he might not have distinguished between a method of inquiry making it possible for us to take in something as an empirical fact, and a method of inquiry making certain sorts of empirical facts possible simpliciter. His words do suggest that he meant the latter. As a response to the accusation by Bernard Williams that Wittgenstein’s later thinking is a form of idealism, Bolton’s response amounts to describing it so that it is indeed a form of idealism, and then denying that it is idealism. I shall look in more detail at a different view of this sort, that of Ilham Dilman. He, like Bolton, expounds a view that he takes to be Wittgenstein’s,
and that he denies is a kind of idealism. Dilman also takes himself to be in agreement with Putnam’s views about truth and realism, and with Putnam’s criticisms of Rorty. He puts forward a kind of idealism of exactly the sort Putnam ascribes to Rorty: “a doctrine of the dependence of the way things are on the way we talk.” Dilman, indeed, insists far more unequivocally than Rorty on such dependence. Putnam had said that Rorty’s retention of this “dependence” way of speaking “betrays his deep linguistic idealism.”

Dilman also takes a view far from Putnam’s on the incommensurability of what may be said in different languages. Thus, like Rorty, Dilman is someone who sees the distance between himself and Putnam to be far less than what it looks like from Putnam’s angle of vision. In this section and the two that follow, I try to bring out some of the ways in which Dilman, while taking himself to agree with Putnam, argues for views of which Putnam has been an acute critic.

It is very difficult, when one first formulates an approach to a topic, to see what kinds of misunderstandings of what one is saying are likely. It is indeed the responses of other philosophers to what one has said, responses that one may come to see as misunderstandings, that help one to better understand one’s own views and one’s commitments. This certainly is what happened with Putnam’s ideas about the “dependence” of the way things are on the way we talk. Putnam had in fact begun the passage that I just quoted, about Rorty’s “linguistic idealism,” by referring to Rorty’s claim that we are not in a position to formulate any kind of distinctively realist view if indeed “there are no objects which are what they are independent of our ways of talking.”

Putnam said that such talk of independence, which is not meant to be either ordinary causal or ordinary logical independence, makes little sense. He added that, for the reasons he was giving, he had recently been trying “not to state my own doctrine as a doctrine of the dependence of the way things are on the way we talk.” The suggestion is that his earlier way of talking, invoking a kind of dependence, was far less clear. He did not specify the earlier formulations that he had in mind, but one can see in *Reason, Truth and History* exactly the kind of talk he was now (in 1993) trying to avoid. What he had claimed was that “objects” do not exist independently of conceptual schemes, and that the kinds of objects that the world does indeed consist of are not mind-independent. That this way of talking could be taken to express a kind of metaphysics became clear; and that was one reason Putnam gave it up. But it was exactly that view, which Dilman thought he could see in Putnam’s writings of the 1980s, that underlay his sense that Putnam’s approach and his own were very close.

Dilman is less philosophically subtle than Rorty, and his response to Putnam’s 1993 remarks about independence reveals, without wrappings, the views that Putnam had taken Rorty to have held underneath wrappings and
despite disclaimers. Dilman wants to grant that the truth of what we say about dinosaurs is independent of our saying those things; but he wants to insist as well that what can be the case about dinosaurs is dependent on our having a language in which we establish what is so and what is not so about dinosaurs. This is in fact very close to the view that Rorty had put by saying that, in a suitably broad sense, dinosaurs were “social constructions.”

We can see the difficulties in Dilman’s view if we consider its application to a culture discussed by Dilman, that of thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Europe. He says that the skies of Dante’s *Divine Comedy* and the sky and stars of modern astronomy belong to two different “universes of discourse.” (He does not use the word “astronomy” except to speak of modern astronomy, and it is not clear whether there is anything that he would call “medieval astronomy.”) His discussion of medieval thought reflects a very strong conception of incommensurability between their modes of thought and ours, and an apparent denial of continuities between medieval thought and Greek and Islamic scientific traditions.) We might, Dilman says, take it to be an unfortunate thing that the people of the Middle Ages had lost interest in scientific investigation; and he adds that someone might say that their religious beliefs had prevented the development of scientific modes of inquiry, of the sort begun by the Greeks. But, he says, we cannot actually fault their conception of the universe on the basis of our astronomical knowledge; we cannot use our own criteria in criticism of their understanding of the universe. Their sky and their stars are not ours.

In Dilman’s discussion of the world view of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, we can see him throwing out the baby of the world with the bathwater of metaphysical realism. Some ideas of Robert Brandom’s can help bring this out. Brandom has argued that we have a “perspectival grip on a nonperspectival world.” He has an example which, almost exactly as it stands, is applicable to Dilman on the Middle Ages. Brandom’s example is: “Ptolemy claimed of the orbital trajectories of the planets that they were the result of the motion of crystalline spheres.” With a small change to make it fit the period discussed by Dilman, it becomes “Albertus Magnus claimed of the orbital trajectories of the planets that they were the result of the motion of crystalline spheres.” Brandom’s idea, then, is that we can use this *de re* way of speaking in giving the views of Ptolemy, or (if we like) those of Albertus Magnus. Here we take ourselves to have a different grip from that of Ptolemy or Albertus on the “nonperspectival” world, on what Putnam refers to as “the world.” One of the ways in which Dilman has given up on any idea of the world, on which we and others have this or that perspectival grip, is in refusing to countenance such *de re* talk, from our perspective, of things which were conceived by Albertus Magnus and his contemporaries in totally different terms, not (indeed) as planets in our
sense at all. It is not metaphysical realism to think of the planets as there to be thought about, in an admittedly very different way, by people very distant from ourselves in their conception of the world. What then is it that makes such an understanding of our relation to medieval thought—that we think about the same world, albeit in very different ways—unacceptable to Dilman? That is the question to which I turn in sections IV and V.

IV. THROWING OUT THE BABY

What rules out, for Dilman, the idea that we and the people of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries may think in very different ways about the same world and about such things in it as planets and their motion, is his understanding of objects of thought. He takes objects of thought to be available to us within our “universe of discourse.” Within the “universe of discourse,” there is a grammar through which such things can be thought about, a grammar which enables us to refer to them, and to make true or false statements about them. The things we talk about can be objects of thought through lying within our “universe of discourse.” What we can look into the truth of, wonder about the truth of, take to be or not to be the case—these are possibilities within the “universe of discourse”; they are dependent on our language. The world that we can think about, the only world that makes sense to us, “does not exist independently of our language.” Here it looks as if we have reached the conclusion that nothing that we think about could be thought about except within our “universe of discourse.” It has its possibilities only there, only within “our world.”

There are two sources of philosophical confusion in the views of Dilman’s that I have just summarized. One of them is a conception of grammatical rules and of the dependence upon such rules of the sensefulness of what we say. This conception is criticized by Putnam in “Rules, Attunement, and Applying Words to the World: The Struggle to Understand Wittgenstein’s Vision of Language.” I shall discuss Putnam’s view and its relation to Dilman’s ideas in section V. In the rest of section IV, I shall be concerned with the other source of confusion: Dilman’s view of objects of thought. To see what is problematic in his view, we should remind ourselves of the grammar of our language: the grammar of our talk of objects of thought. Dilman has (as I shall try to show) missed out what that grammar allows us to do.

I take my account of this grammar from Anscombe, from “The Intentionality of Sensation,” which begins with an account of intentional objects. She uses the vocabulary of “intentional object” and “material object” to lay out how we talk about such cases as that in which a man “aims at a stag;
but the thing he took for a stag was his father, and he shoots his father.”36
In this context, to say that he “aimed at his father” would be ambiguous. There is a sense in which it is true: he aimed at a dark patch in the foliage; that dark patch was his father’s hat, and his father’s head was in it. To say that what he aimed at was his father is to give the material object of aiming; it gives what, materially speaking, he aimed at. (This use of “material” is not the same as that in which we speak of things like tables or lumps of butter as “material objects.” Such things as a promise, or debt, or the sky, or a scandal might be the material object of someone’s thought, for example.) But “he aimed at his father” is false if it is meant to give the intentional object of aiming. In that sense, what he aimed at is given by the phrase “a stag.” The phrase “dark patch in the foliage” also gives the intentional object of aiming, and (in this example) that phrase also gives the material object. In some cases, questions about the identity of an intentional object are a matter of the identity of a material object. That is part of the grammar of intentionality, in cases in which there is a material object. If one is talking to a child about the planet Venus, one may pick it out for the child as “that bright thing in the sky.” This phrase gives what is both the material object and the intentional object of the child’s thought, as she looks at what you have pointed out. What you have drawn to the child’s attention is the planet Venus. The fact that we might say that “planets are not yet in the child’s thought-world” is not relevant to the question whether the child has had her attention drawn to is a planet, since that bright thing in the sky is the planet Venus. “The planet Venus” gives the material object of the child’s thought; and this has nothing to do with whether the child is capable of thinking about planets as planets. People in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries could talk of the planet Venus as “that bright thing in the sky,” as we do when we pick out such things. They could also talk about it, as we can, as one of the things of which it is true both that it can be seen in the night sky and that it appears in different positions relative to other luminous bodies in the night sky whose positions relative to each other appear fixed.37 Since they also thought of that bright thing in the sky as a luminous ethereal globe affixed to an ethereal sphere, we can say that they believed of the planet Venus that it was a luminous ethereal globe affixed to an ethereal sphere. The planet Venus is the material object of their thought, since that bright thing over there that they are talking about, one of the ones that appear in different positions relative to other luminous bodies in the sky, is the planet Venus. The intentional object of their thought is one of the “wandering stars” or planete, not a planet in our sense, for they do not have our conception of a planet—and the planete included the sun and the moon. It would have been utterly puzzling to have said that the Earth was a planeta, since it plainly was not a luminous celestial body. We can say that
planets, conceived as we conceive them, do not exist in their “universe of discourse”; but that does not imply that the planet Venus is not the material object of some of their thoughts. The grammar of intentionality allows us to speak of there being different ways of thinking about the things in the sky. It allows us to think about the difference between what people long ago believed of the motion of Venus and its distance from the Earth and what we believe about such things; it allows us to think about the development over time of very different ways of thinking and speaking about things in the world, like the planet Venus and its motion. This is not metaphysical realism; it is simply a matter of an application which our grammar allows of the distinction between material and intentional objects.

Dilman would not deny that we can give the material object (in Anscombe’s sense) of someone’s thought. But his view puts narrow limits on the language within which the material object can be given. If people do not have available within their “universe of discourse” some way of speaking, that way of speaking cannot be used in giving the material object of some thought of theirs. He says that the objects, events, and situations that they meet up with, or that they are thinking about, cannot be identified in any way that is independent of how they think of these things. Here are five points about this central moment of Dilman’s thought, the moment at which the baby of the world is going right down the drain.

A. It is by no means part of the grammar through which we speak of the identity of various sorts of things that we cannot identify what some people are talking about unless we use a way of speaking which is available within their “universe of discourse.” On the contrary, grammar does allow us to identify what they are speaking about, using our ways of speaking, even where these ways of speaking depart significantly from what would be available to the people themselves whose thought we are describing. This was Brandom’s point: that one main use of de re constructions is precisely to give what people are speaking about in terms which are different from theirs and which they themselves would not necessarily be able to take in.

B. The view which Dilman puts forward he takes to be Wittgenstein’s, but it is not. Wittgenstein is perfectly happy to speak of people whom he imagines, whose view of the moon is quite weird, as having views about the moon. They have no knowledge of physics; what they think the moon is, what they understand by where it is, or by what it would be to fly there, would be totally different from what we understand. But Wittgenstein uses our words, “the moon,” to give the material object of their thinking.

C. I mentioned Putnam’s argument that Rorty is engaged in a self-refuting attempt to have and at the same time to deny an “absolute perspective.” The same issues arise once again here. We do not actually take ourselves to be limited in our description of other cultures in the ways laid out by
Dilman. His account is wrong if taken as an account of *what we do*. But, if Dilman wants to hold that what we do is wrong or confused, such a line of argument might appear to require a perspective outside our own mode of thought from which philosophical criticism could be leveled at that mode of thought. But Dilman does not want to argue from a perspective outside all “universes of discourse.” But he does nevertheless want to generalize about them, and about the ways in which objects of thought can be spoken of, *in any “universe of discourse.”*

D. Underlying Dilman’s argument is the view that we cannot criticize a mode of thought from outside it. He has built up a metaphysical structure which rules out our saying such things as that our astronomy has got a much better account of the movements of Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn, as well as of their distances from the Earth and of what sorts of thing they are, than does the astronomy of Albertus Magnus. If, as Dilman says, the objects that our astronomy is concerned with were not in the “universe of discourse” of the Middle Ages, and if they therefore could not have been seen\(^ {39} \) or thought about by Albertus, then he cannot have had any views of their motion, and therefore cannot have had less adequate views of their motion than ours. I shall have more to say about this, because the desire to insulate modes of thought from criticism is a very strong motive for Wittgensteinian baby-throwing. But here I want only to lay out the connection to issues raised by Putnam in his criticism of Rorty on betterness of warrant. What most strikingly revealed to Putnam how far he and Rorty were from each other was Rorty’s view of what it is for our standards of warrant to become better. All that this can amount to, Rorty had said, was for new standards to seem better to our cultural peers. But, said Putnam, we have a very different picture of what it would be for our standards to become better. Rorty, Putnam argued, is ruling out judgments we do want to make. Here again, with Dilman’s insulation of “universes of discourse” from any judgments of “better” or “worse” apart from those available within the “universe of discourse,” we come up against the philosophical insistence that there is no room for the kind of judgment of betterness that we do want to make, and that our picture of the world does leave room for. Our picture of the world and our situation in it is of our coming in some cases to have much better knowledge of some objects than people had at some earlier time, where the people in question (about whom we say that our knowledge of these objects is better than theirs) had profoundly different modes of thought from ours. (This is an issue on which Dilman criticizes Elizabeth Anscombe, and I come back to it in section VI. For Putnam’s view, see, for example, *Pragmatism*, p. 38.)

E. Putnam gave up speaking of his own view as “internal realism” when he became aware of how open that way of speaking was to misunderstanding.
Dilman writes about Putnam’s worries here, and takes them to be inapplicable to the kind of view he is putting forward. He notes that a language and the modes of thought belonging to it can develop; and he allows that it is possible to think one’s way into the modes of thought of an alien culture. But these considerations are limited, and do not reach to the issue that I am labeling baby-throwing: getting rid of the world while seeking to avoid metaphysical realism. One sees only the two contrasting types of alternatives: of some version of metaphysical realism on the one hand, and on the other a conception of what we are thinking about which does not allow Albertus Magnus and ourselves to have different takes on the world, and which puts him and ourselves into different worlds. This is an equally metaphysical alternative, and it depends (as Putnam notes) on a deeply problematic idea of the dependence of the things we think about on our language.

V. WHAT WE CAN TALK ABOUT

On Dilman’s view, what we can talk about depends upon our “universe of discourse.” The rules of grammar of our language provide the logical space within which this or that can be the case or not the case, within which there are such-and-such sorts of objects, events, and situations. Through this grammar there is for us a world which we can speak about. What can sensefully be said is determined by this grammar; the grammar fixes the criteria for things being as we say they are. Some of Putnam’s most important criticisms of this view are developed in “Rules, Attunement, and ‘Applying Words to the World’.” He gives numerous examples of how words may be used in entirely new ways, and of how we pick up on such uses, although we have never come across them before, and although the grammatical rules of the language do not anticipate such uses. The sensefulness of what we say is not dependent upon rules already in place in the language. New metaphors are one sort of example; as Putnam points out, we do not need a structure of rules in order to recognize an entirely new metaphor as strikingly appropriate. Think of Wittgenstein’s: “The rose has teeth in the mouth of a beast”—which might appear to go against the grammatical rules which allow talk of teeth in the case of animals, various tools and machines, and the margins of leaves, but not in the case of flowers like the rose.

Putnam has in various contexts mentioned another kind of example: that of speculation. People can speculate about how things might be, whether or not they have any way of establishing that such things indeed are the case. He has taken as one kind of example things too small to be seen with the naked eye. That phrase does not depend for its intelligibility, he says,
on “the invention of an instrument that allows us to see things smaller than . . . the naked eye can see.”

But this already shows the problematic character of Dilman’s idea that the people of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries had a “universe of discourse” which did not include the objects of our astronomy. That would mean that their “universe of discourse” did not include celestial objects too far away and too small to be seen with the naked eye. But it is hardly the case that talk of such objects would have been senseless. Anyone who speculated about such objects might well have been asked why God would have made such objects, since the celestial objects were intended (according to the Bible) to be used by us as signs, to mark day and night, and the different seasons. But the possibility of such an objection would not mean that the speculation itself would have been unintelligible. There are in any case various replies that might be made to the objection, including the obvious point that our knowledge of God’s purposes is limited. The possibility of such speculation about things we do not yet have any way of establishing to be the case goes with another idea of Putnam’s, that we are “endlessly . . . forced to renegotiate . . . our notion of reality as our language and our life develop.” Speculation about what might lie too far off for us to see with the naked eye reflects the possibility that we might indeed have to renegotiate our notion of reality to take in things that have had no place in our “universe of discourse.” Here it is misleading to speak as Dilman does of the reality of the physical world as “internal to language,” for this appears to rule out the idea that our thinking and our language will have to accommodate “the reality of the physical world” in as yet unforeseen ways.

Dilman’s ideas about the dependence of what we can talk about on our “universe of discourse” are very close to those of Peter Winch and were influenced by Winch’s discussion of Azande rituals. Winch makes a contrast, which Dilman picks up, between magical practices within our culture and the practices of the Azande. What both Winch and Dilman say is that, within our culture, shaped by Christian ideas, we can reject as irrational magic and witchcraft as practiced within the culture; such a judgment rests on criteria available within our “universe of discourse.” In contrast, the system of magical beliefs and practices of the Azande is part of a very different “universe of discourse,” within which there are no criteria by which the practices could be judged to be irrational. If there is, within their “universe of discourse,” a conception of reality and clear ways of establishing which beliefs are and which are not in agreement with that reality, then individual Zande beliefs about (for example) whether a witch has caused some harm may, by their criteria, be rational or not so, but the practice itself cannot be judged to be irrational. The two halves of this philosophical conception are equally problematic.
(A) There is the general privileging of criteria available within a “universe of discourse” when those criteria are used to criticize practices that depart from mainstream practices and ways of establishing what is the case, or what is rational, and which make use of concepts taken from the mainstream discourse. The example, used by both Winch and Dilman, of black magic within our culture may make the general principle look better than it has any business looking. Because the example is important for both of them, and because the example itself, Winch’s argument about it, and the principle on which it rests are problematic, I have discussed it further in an appendix to this section. The principle has been the basis for criticism of Wittgensteinian ideas as socially conservative.\(^4\) Winch himself wanted to allow for critical thinking within a society about the concepts and practices of that society,\(^4\) but his own discussion of the case of black magic in our society suggests a tension within his views, and leaves it very unclear whether his views can accommodate genuinely revolutionary innovations if the innovations involve radical shifts in the ways old concepts are employed. The point to be made here, against both Winch and Dilman, is that, if some application of the concepts available within a culture deliberately departs from what is taken to be appropriate or allowable or sensible or rational in the established grammar of those concepts, the question of irrationality has to be examined in the particular case, and cannot be settled merely by noting that the established grammar apparently provides a basis for concluding that the application is irrational or unintelligible. There is no general philosophical argument for privileging criticism from the point of view of the established use of the concepts.

(B) Winch’s and Dilman’s approach also involves ruling out the possibility of criticism of a mode of thought or practice by standards which are not part of the “universe of discourse” within which the mode of thinking lies. I shall discuss this issue in the appendix to section V and in section VI, but here I want to focus on the particular issue raised by Putnam, of the impossibility of deciding what is or is not “intelligible” by reference to grammatical rules that determine what sorts of things can be established to be the case and in what ways. Such a principle makes problematic the sensefulness of many things that we take ourselves to understand perfectly well, as comes out in the examples of metaphor and speculation. It also makes problematic what one might call the ordinary skepticism that people have about many things that are taken to be unquestionable within some “universe of discourse.” Thus, for example, whatever the grammatical rules were about the reality of the resurrection of the dead, say in fourteenth-century France, it was entirely intelligible there, as in any culture where the resurrection of the dead is part of the established system of thought, to say, “You know, I don’t believe that. I think we rot after we are dead, and that’s all.”\(^6\)
How might Dilman have replied to the kinds of consideration I have been urging? He says that it is indeed possible, on his view, for someone to lack any apprehension of some of the realities which lie within the “universe of discourse” within which he lives. Such a person might express the kind of skepticism that I have just described. On Dilman’s view, then, such skepticism might evince a failure of sensitivity to the realities present in the skeptic’s “universe of discourse.” But this would not be an adequate response, as comes out if we note that the kind of skepticism that I mentioned, among ordinary people in fourteenth-century France, included skepticism about the Mass, calling into question the reality of the sacrifice and the reality of Christ’s presence, which were part of the system of thought taught to Catholics and accepted by most of them. Such skepticism is part of a continuing history, within which lie the Protestant criticisms of the Catholic understanding of the reality present in the Mass, from Wycliffe onwards. Dilman’s view seems to leave room for two alternative accounts of those criticisms: either the early reformers were oblivious to realities which were there to be apprehended within the world of their language and culture, or they were criticizing the Catholic world from the outside, and not genuinely speaking of the reality of the Mass, as it was apprehended within the “universe of discourse” of Western Christendom at the time. But the problem with Dilman’s view, then, is that in neither case can the critics be understood in their terms. Here we see sharply the objection to dismissing the fourteenth-century rural skeptics as blind to a reality present within their “universe of discourse.” In both cases—the fourteenth-century skeptics and the early Protestant critics—we have a form of thinking that calls into question, quite radically, fundamental ideas of a “universe of discourse”; and an important objection to a view like Dilman’s is that it does not allow for the real force of any criticism that might be taken to be a form of “skepticism.” While such accounts allow that there can indeed be such skepticism, they do not allow the reality internal to a “universe of discourse” to be genuinely challenged by skeptics. In “Rules, Attunement, and ‘Applying Words to the World’,” Putnam argues that skeptical claims, although they may involve the use of words “outside or apart from” their criteria, cannot be rejected a priori on the basis of some kind of general argument. Putnam’s argument can be applied also to the case mentioned above, of criticism of the Zande magical beliefs as irrational. The Putnamian argument would be that we cannot rule out such criticisms a priori on the basis of general philosophical argument, and in particular that we cannot rule out such criticisms on the basis of a general philosophical argument about the criteria on which such criticisms would supposedly depend. The rest of this chapter is about this disagreement between Putnam and Wittgensteinians like Winch and Dilman. I discuss the issues in relation to Winch’s treatment of magic in
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the appendix to section V, and in relation to Wittgensteinian baby-throwing more generally in section VI. A good example to keep in mind throughout this discussion is that of the medieval Karaite challenge to the rabbinc understanding of the authority of tradition. Dilman’s approach leads to the conclusion that the validity of the tradition is internal to the “universe of discourse,” and that the Karaites showed a failure to appreciate a reality present in that “universe of discourse.” They lose, by an a priori argument; on Putnam’s sort of view, the case cannot be settled in that way.

Appendix to Section V: Winch on Magic among Us

Winch lays out his account of magic within “our own culture” in connection with his argument that a “primitive” system of magic, like that of the Azande, can be taken to constitute a “coherent universe of discourse like science,” within which there is an intelligible conception of reality and clear ways of deciding which beliefs are and which are not “in agreement with this reality.” There is, he argues, a contrast between that sort of case and the case of magical beliefs and magical rituals in our culture. He makes the general claim that the concepts of witchcraft and magic in our culture have been “at least since the advent of Christianity . . . parasitic on, and a perversion of other orthodox concepts, both religious and, increasingly, scientific.” He then gives the case of the Black Mass as an “obvious example.” He says that “you could not understand what was involved in conducting a Black Mass, unless you were familiar with the conduct of a proper Mass and, therefore, with the whole complex of religious ideas from which the Mass draws its sense.” You could not understand the relation between the Black practices and the religious ideas from which those practices draw their sense, and on which they are parasitic, without taking account of the fact that, by the standards available within the system of religious ideas, the Black practices count as irrational. The Black practices have an “essential reference” to a system of ideas outside themselves; and it is that parasitic character that makes possible a demonstration of their irrationality. Hence, criticism of such practices as “superstitious” or “irrational” or “illusory” is not, Winch says, simply a matter of “being on the side of the big battalions”; his basic argument is that the beliefs and practices derive such sense “as they seem to have” from their relation to other practices within our culture, and the standards available within those other practices enable us to criticize the magical practices and beliefs in “culturally relevant” terms. I am going to examine Winch’s argument as he put it forward originally in 1964. Much of his argument depends on principles that he had laid out more fully in 1958, in The Idea of a Social Science and Its Relation to
Philosophy. In 1990, in his preface to the second edition of that book, he criticized some of the ideas in it, including in particular his conception of the “self-contained” character of such “modes of social life” as science or religion. This idea comes into his 1964 discussion of magic, but I do not think that his later criticisms of the book affect the fundamental line that he wanted to take in “Understanding a Primitive Society.” Although the detail of the argument would have been altered if he had reformulated it later on, the problems with the argument would remain. They are connected directly to the idea that the relation between reality and what is said or thought in some culture is internal to the language spoken by the people whose culture it is. What underlay Winch’s critique of Evans-Pritchard on the Azande was that Evans-Pritchard took Azande thought about the use of oracles not to accord with reality; he criticized the Azande by appeal to our system of thought. Winch held that you cannot do that.

Winch’s account of magic in our culture has two parts: (1) a general and very strong claim about what magic and witchcraft in our culture have been like since the advent of Christianity, including the claim that the character of these practices is well exemplified by the Black Mass, and (2) an argument that we have a “culturally relevant” basis for condemning the Black Mass, using standards belonging to the system of thought on which it is parasitic. The first claim, about the general character of concepts of magic and witchcraft within our culture, is not given any backing by Winch. It is indeed odd that, while Winch depends for his account of Zande magic on a classic anthropological study, he gives no source at all for anything he says about magic within our culture. I shall discuss the Black Mass below, but it is important that it is in various ways not an “obvious example” of what magic is like in our culture, but quite an odd case, since it is apparently a myth. Ordinary magical practices in our culture may have no connections with Christianity, for example the use of love potions, or of lodestones to attract business customers. It is certainly true that magical practices among us frequently do have Christian elements, in some cases added on to what were older pagan practices or imported practices from other cultures. Such practices as that of burying a statue of St. Joseph upside down to help sell a house, or that of saying a spell to get rid of the ants in your house, invoking this or that saint, have a Christian element, but they are merely superficially Christianized versions of the kinds of practices that people in all sorts of cultures go in for. There are problems with Winch’s argument based on the supposed “parasitism” of magical practices in our culture, but even supposing that the argument could go through in cases like that of the Black Mass, it requires a much stronger dependence of the magical practice on some other system of thought than is evident in many typical magical practices among us, like the practices I have mentioned. It is in fact notewor-
thy that Catholic discussion of whether the practice of burying a statue of St. Joseph to help sell one’s house is superstitious does not treat as relevant the question whether the practice is “parasitic” on other Catholic practices. The issue, as discussed in many Catholic websites, is the simpler one of whether, in the carrying out of the practice, one takes oneself to be doing something which is itself efficacious or itself brings “good luck.” In both those cases, the practice as one engages in it would be superstitious. A Protestant condemnation of the practice would be unlikely to use a distinction like that drawn by Catholics between superstitious and nonsuperstitious versions of the practice, but would involve an understanding, similar to that in Catholic discussions, of why the practice as normally carried out is superstitious. Again the issue of “parasitism” is not the point; what is crucial to taking the practice to be superstitious is belief by those who carry out the practice that it is efficacious or brings “good luck.” This would also be a central point for many non-Christians in our culture who would regard the practice as superstitious. If one wanted to provide an example of a superstitious practice, one could hardly come up with anything much better than the sale and use of “real estate spell kits.” The trouble, from Winch’s point of view, though, is that the simple condemnation of this practice as superstitious, on the sorts of grounds that I have mentioned, does not appeal to any standard internal to some system of beliefs on which the practice itself is dependent for its sense, and Winch is concerned to contain the force of any criticism of magic so that it does not reach to self-contained systems of magic like that of the Azande. That is why he gives an argument that is meant to apply only within our culture, and that depends upon the supposedly “parasitic” character of the magical practices in question. It is further plain that the Catholic and Protestant condemnation of the practices that I have mentioned is the same sort of condemnation that would be given of similar practices in other cultures. The Catholic understanding of what constitutes superstition developed in relation to pagan practices (a development that altered older notions of superstition), and the Protestant understanding developed partly in relation to Catholic practices, but neither understanding of what constitutes superstition depends on the practice in question making a kind of parasitic use of concepts internal to Christianity. Winch is concerned to head off anthropological and philosophical criticisms of magical practices in other cultures, but it is important that the cultural construction, within our own culture, of “magic” is historically tied to Christian condemnation of pagan practices. The criticism of what goes on in “alien” cultures, using our standards, is not a matter of recent anthropology and philosophy; it has been part of “our” form of life for a very long time.

It is worth emphasizing here how various the forms of magic and witchcraft and necromancy and fortunetelling (and so on) have been in our culture
in the period covered by Winch’s claim (the centuries “since the advent of Christianity”), how many strata of society have been involved in different ways and with different understandings of what they were doing, how many influences from the ancient world and from Jewish and Muslim thought have played a role, and how various, even within a single cultural context, may be the understandings that different individuals have of the same practice. Wittgenstein warned against a too thin diet of examples in philosophy, and Winch’s argument is un-Wittgensteinian in ignoring the significance of the variety in what we have taken, or may take, to be magical practices or beliefs in our culture. His argument about the grounds for criticizing magic and witchcraft in our culture depends entirely on the supposed parasitic character of these practices, and he provides no evidence that the practices do in general have such a character.

I turn now to Winch’s discussion of the Black Mass. He says that “you could not understand what was involved in conducting a Black Mass unless you were familiar with the conduct of a proper Mass, and with the whole complex of religious ideas from which the Mass draws its sense.” His idea that the concepts involved in the Black Mass depend on the Mass has a grounding somewhat different from what he takes it to be. The “Black Mass” is to a considerable degree a myth, constructed (indeed) from ideas about the Mass. The writings of Christian demonologists and witchcraft experts from the fifteenth century on contain accounts of the witches’ supposed Sabbats or Sabbaths, sometimes including desecration of the Host. The idea that witches perform inversions of Christian rituals played a role in Christian demonology, and descriptions of such rituals were frequently elicited under torture from those accused of witchcraft. The accounts of the witches’ supposed rituals were also frequently read out loud when witches were executed, and thus ideas about the Sabbats had wide currency. Winch’s argument about the practice of carrying out the Black Mass is based on the idea that it was not a self-contained practice. Interestingly, the Catholic and Protestant demonological theories, integrated into the respective religions and legal systems, and taken together with the practices of accusing witches, torturing them, and executing them or punishing them in other ways—all this seen together with the background of folk beliefs about witches, and the presence within early modern Europe of numerous healers, “cunning folk,” and so on—do appear to constitute self-contained systems of belief and practice. At any rate, they do not appear to be any less self-contained than the Zande system of thought and practice. Further, it does look as if Winch’s idea that the Zande system of magic constitutes a coherent universe of discourse, in terms of which there are an intelligible conception of reality and clear ways of deciding which beliefs are or are not in agreement with this reality applies (if it really does apply to the Zande) equally to the system
of witch-hunting beliefs and practices of Christian Europe. That culture too certainly had methods of determining which beliefs were or were not in agreement with their intelligible conception of reality—of determining, that is, which accusations that someone had made a pact with the devil and had used the powers she had thus acquired to harm her neighbors were true. As I have mentioned, ideas supposedly derived from Wittgenstein about realities as internal to a “universe of discourse” provide a kind of immunity to skepticism about such realities and a general argument about the position of skeptics. Someone within a culture may lack an awareness of one of the realities that is supposedly there to be apprehended within the “universe of discourse”; so anyone who doubted the whole witch-hunt business could (in accordance with these “Wittgensteinian” ideas) be said to be unaware of the relevant reality. This (it seems to me) is a perfectly appalling conclusion. The conclusion is equally appalling if put in a somewhat different form: we cannot coherently hold, of a self-contained system of thought, that it involves a collective delusion. But the idea that Europe had numerous men and women who had made pacts with the Devil, and who engaged in magical activities with the cooperation of demonic powers, activities which profoundly endangered the social world, together with the idea that the truth about these activities could be revealed through torture, was a collective delusion.

I have argued that the Black Mass is not a model for what magic in our culture is generally like, but there is in any case a further problem about Winch’s argument. It depends on a general principle which is hardly self-evident. Concepts and practices may well develop from and in response to some other set of concepts and practices, and (so far as this relationship is important in understanding the later set of concepts and practices) might be said to be “parasitic” upon those earlier concepts. Those who accept the original concepts and practices may appeal to them in condemning the new concepts and practices. But Winch is not arguing (what would be obvious) that those who accept the original concepts and practices may take themselves to have grounds for condemning the practice. His point about the Black Mass is not merely that Christians have grounds to condemn it as irrational, using their standards. He is trying to reach a stronger conclusion than that. His argument is aimed at showing that the condemnation on the basis of Christian concepts is a condemnation available to “us.” Given that the Black Mass is parasitic on Christian concepts, and given that, by the standards internal to the Christian “universe of discourse” on which it is dependent, the Black Mass counts as irrational, we can show it to be irrational. The Black Mass derives what sense it appears to have from the Christian concepts on which it is dependent; and its sense can be shown to be merely apparent by reference to those concepts. If we speak of the Black Mass as irrational or superstitious or illusory, we “have the weight
of our culture behind us.”62 I said in section V that Winch’s principle derives what appearance it has of plausibility from the particular example to which it is applied, of a practice which we are not eager to regard as having anything to be said for it. But even in relation to the Black Mass, the principle has problems. For suppose that, in the eighteenth century, a group of libertines performs some version of a Black Mass with the aim of doing something blasphemous and transgressive; the performance might have political meaning as well. Winch’s argument is essentially that what sense, if any, a performance of a Black Mass has is determined by the Christian concepts on which it depends, and that its sense can be shown thereby to be merely apparent. But the sense of the activity of the libertines is not determined by the Christian concepts. They live in a culture in which a blasphemous performance of a religious ceremony has a point; the Christian culture does not “own” the sensefulness of what is done when its concepts are taken over and deliberately misused. If we consider Winch’s principle in relation to cases other than the Black Mass, its problematic character comes out even more sharply. What if we think about Winch’s principle in relation to Judaism and Christianity? If the Black Mass, as Winch sees it, involves a perversion of Christian concepts,63 is Christianity vulnerable to the charge of involving a perversion of Jewish concepts? For it is certainly the case that central concepts of Christianity are dependent in complex ways on the concepts and practices of Judaism; and from the point of view of a Jew, why should Christian concepts and practices not appear to be a perversion of Jewish ones? What account might Winch have been able to give of the difference between a Christian criticism of the Black Mass as a perversion of Christian concepts and a Jewish criticism of Christianity as a perversion of Jewish concepts? Christians have, indeed, interpretations of the situation according to which the Jews fail fully to grasp what is internal to their own concepts, and so (from their point of view) the dependence of Christian concepts on the Jewish concepts cannot ground the kind of condemnation that Winch describes, but this defense depends upon specifically theological views, and is not the sort of argument that Winch could use to distinguish the cases. The conclusion I should want to reach here is that there is no general philosophical principle by which any such matter can be adjudicated. When concepts from one “thought world” are taken over and given a new use that remains partially dependent on the old use, and when those who hold to the old mode of thought and practice can use it as a basis for attacking the new as senseless or irrational or superstitious, philosophy can provide no general principle by which “we” can show that adherents to the older system are right in their criticisms.

Winch’s argument does not work. He has not shown that magical beliefs and practices in our culture are subject to criticism because of their
“parasitic” character, and hence has not been able to make out the kind of difference he wants to make out between Zande magical practices, which we supposedly cannot criticize as irrational, and magic in our own culture, which we supposedly can criticize as irrational, on the basis of the general considerations he has adduced. His argument was meant to be an application of Wittgenstein’s philosophical ideas, but how much support does Wittgenstein provide? Winch takes from Wittgenstein the idea that there is not one single form of intelligibility, and there is not one “norm for intelligibility in general.” He rejects as incoherent any idea that we can criticize a system of beliefs and practices through criteria which are “a direct gift of God.” But there is no obvious justification in Wittgenstein for Winch’s further idea that the criticism of a practice or belief must be based on criteria which are “culturally relevant” in that they belong to the “universe of discourse” to which the practice or belief itself belongs. Winch is using a form of the argument we have seen in Rorty and Dilman, in which a pair of alternatives is set up, a fishy metaphysical one on the one hand and a strong “Wittgensteinian” one on the other. The ruling out of the fishy metaphysical alternative is treated as if it left us with no alternative but the strong Wittgensteinian one—in this case, the conclusion that it is conceptually confused to think that a practice can be judged irrational by standards that do not belong to the “universe of discourse” of which the practice is part.

Winch’s “Wittgensteinian” argument is that it is not possible for there to be something against which the use, in language, of a conception of reality can be appraised; and he accuses Evans-Pritchard of “trying to work with a conception of reality which is not determined by its actual use in language.” But there is something odd in Winch’s argument, since it does appear to be Winch, more than Evans-Pritchard, who fails to attend to the actual use in language of conceptions of reality. In our culture, we have historically constructed a number of contrasts, various versions of which have been used in criticizing whole systems of belief and practice. The terms of these contrasts include (on the one hand) superstition and false religion, or superstition and irrationality, and (on the other hand) ordinary rationality, or what is in keeping with how things genuinely are—including, in some conceptions, a true understanding of God. These contrasts are highly contested in the particular forms they may be given. This sort of contrast is historically ancient, with a variety of roots in Christian, Jewish and Greek ideas, and should not be treated as if the use of such a contrast simply privileged scientific rationality. In some versions, what this sort of contrast very strongly unprivileges, as one might say, is certain forms of pagan thought and practice, as for example in the case of ancient Hebrew beliefs about neighboring tribes, and Jewish and Christian condemnations of forms of divination. One of the most characteristic uses of such a contrast has been in Protestant criticisms of
Catholicism. Some such contrasts are extremely crude; some have a simple scientistic character. But their existence is not a reason for thinking we ought to do without any such contrast, or to replace them with a philosophically purified version. An important feature of these contrasts, in many of their forms, is their connection with what we take to be real. Whole systems of thought have been, in our history, taken to be out of touch with reality, or to provide only a highly devious or distorted understanding of reality. This is one main use of the notion of reality among us. In the history of the use of our language, criticisms of magic and of idol-worship have frequently been tied to ideas that these systems of thought and practice involve a false and superstitious conception of reality. It is for this reason, then, that I am suggesting that Winch fails to attend to the use of the conception of reality in our language. I do not see how it can be argued that Wittgenstein, who asks us to attend to the ways we do use our language, provides a justification for thinking that such criticisms of whole systems of thought are fundamentally wrong. He provides impressive examples of misunderstandings of what goes on within systems of thought which we may think of as primitive. We should learn from him how difficult it is not to misconstrue what people in some other culture are doing. But that hardly shows that there can be no basis ever for concluding that some system of interwoven beliefs and practices constitutes a kind of collective delusion, or that it is false and idolatrous, or superstitious and irrational. Winch says that it is not possible for there to be something against which the use “in language” of a conception of reality can be appraised. But so far as the Azande have in their language a “conception of reality,” there is no impossibility of appraising it, any more than there is any impossibility of appraising other conceptions of reality. Our language has, in use, modes of appraisal of conceptions of reality; highly contested modes of appraisal, modes of appraisal which one might hope may be bettered as we continue to think about how people think and what they do, and as we continue to think about how we have with more or less confusion and self-deception thought about how people think and about what they do. If, following Wittgenstein, we attend to the ways we do use language, what can be seen is that there is no closing off of the questions here. I take this point, that there is no closing off of these questions, to belong also to Putnam’s thought about realism and his criticisms of Wittgensteinian baby-throwing. I shall return to this connection with Putnam in section VI.

VI. WHAT’S THE POINT OF GETTING RID OF THE WORLD?

Putnam has criticized “orthodox” Wittgensteinian philosophy for attempting to refute traditional philosophy, and in particular for trying to find a
general refutation of skeptical arguments. In this section, I shall consider the connection between that Wittgensteinian aim and Wittgensteinian baby-throwing, as well as the connection between baby-throwing and the desire for a general argument against “external” criticism of forms of thought. These connections are particularly clear in Dilman’s writings. Baby-throwing attracts philosophers for many different reasons, and I can discuss here only some of the things that make it attractive.

Consider a case described by Elizabeth Anscombe, of a man who is totally hallucinated, and shoots at something that he has hallucinated. His shot hits his father, but his father is not, in this case, the material object of his aiming. There is in this case no description of the intentional object which describes anything actual, and so there is no material object of aiming. Anscombe then gives an application of the point that there may be an intentional object but no material object. People may worship something, but if no intentional description of what they worship is also a description of something actual, then, “materially speaking, [they] worship a nothing, something that does not exist.” In such a case, there are sentences of the form “They worship such and such” which are true, as for example, “They worship Baal,” but this is compatible with giving the material object this way: “What they worship is nothing.”

There is an important contrast from the point of view of Dilman, between the shooting case and the worshiping case. His account leaves room for material descriptions of an intentional object, but only in terms which are available within the language of the people whose thought is being described. He can allow for the description of the shooter as having shot, materially speaking, at nothing, since this is a case imagined as within our own culture, and our language allows for a case in which someone is hallucinated and shoots at nothing real. But the case of the Baal-worshippers is different. On Dilman’s view, their language has internal to it what constitutes the reality of the things spoken of in the language. Since their understanding of the reality of what they are speaking about is determinative, there is no position from which we can say that what they worship is nothing. The reality that Baal has can be seen in the ways the beliefs and practices of Baal-religion enter their lives. So the kind of criticism that Anscombe evidently has in mind (of tribes who worship such gods as Baal) cannot be made, on the view taken by Dilman.

It should be evident that this sort of philosophical move, that treats all questions about material objects of thought as determined entirely by the standards of what counts as being the case, what counts as real, within a particular “universe of discourse,” provides (or seems to provide) a quick way with skepticism. General questions about the reality of physical objects (for example) cannot arise, since the reality of physical objects is internal to
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the “universe of discourse.” \(^72\) (This is consistent with holding that particular questions about particular intentional objects can arise, questions whether someone was hallucinated, for example, and aimed at nothing real.)

That there is something the matter with this quick way with skepticism might be suggested by its being too quick with the claim that Baal is nothing. Here we run up against the same problem that Putnam drew attention to in Rorty’s thought: it rules out a way of thinking that is characteristic of a culture, or was characteristic of a culture, and it seems to require an “absolute perspective.” For it certainly was an important part of the thinking of Jews and Christians that there are tribes that worship false gods. This was taken to be entirely consistent with the tribes in question having an understanding of the reality of their gods according to which the gods were as real as anything. The idea that that sort of external criticism of a religion can be ruled out a priori appears to clash with what was for a very long time the grammar of false-god-criticism within the Judaeo-Christian tradition. The issue of false-god-criticism is quite closely related to that of philosophical skepticism, and is an important kind of case for an understanding of Putnam’s commonsense realism and its relation to baby-throwing.

In discussing the problems here, we need to distinguish between a philosophical criticism of false-god-criticism and a kind of general attitude of tolerance towards the gods of other tribes. Such an attitude was prevalent in the ancient world, and is described by Anscombe in “Paganism, Superstition and Philosophy.” \(^73\) Similar attitudes have wide prevalence today. In the ancient world, the tolerant attitude of the pagans went with a condemnation of Jews and Christians for their intolerance, for their disdain for all the pagan gods, and their insistence on the importance of the contrast between the true God and false gods. Within contemporary Jewish and Christian thinking, one can find various views about other religions and their gods, including on the one hand an acceptance of “religious pluralism,” and on the other, a rejection of false gods and false religions, continuous with the older Judaeo-Christian view. While the attitude of tolerance for the gods is distinct from the philosophical view that rules out external criticism of a tribe’s or a culture’s religious views, someone who rejects the older Judaeo-Christian attitude to religions and gods may also hold some version of the philosophical view.

It is worth clearing up two possible confusions here. (1) A form of religious thinking that condemns some other religions as false and idolatrous, or as superstitious, may also regard idolatry and superstition as temptations even within the religion taken to be true. The Catholic catechism (for example), which condemns polytheism, also expresses as clearly as anything in The Concluding Unscientific Postscript the point that worshiping an idol can go on anywhere, including within a Catholic church. The idea
of a religion as true and of other religions as false is entirely compatible with such a conception of idolatry. (2) The philosophical view that rules out external criticism of a religion may involve an assumption that taking a religion to be true, or taking other religions to be false, must involve an understanding of religious belief as like scientific beliefs. I shall return to this issue, but it should be mentioned here as an unobvious assumption. In what follows I defend what I take to be a Putnamian view that there is no general a priori way of disposing of skepticism and false-god-criticism, while Wittgensteinian baby-throwing, in contrast, appears to offer just such a general way of disposing of these questions.

Wittgenstein's discussion of language games has been used as the basis for arguments against external criticisms of religious belief. An extremely well-known example of such a Wittgensteinian approach is Norman Malcolm's defense of an argument that he thinks can be found in Anselm. He argues that what is said within the “language games” of Jewish and Christian religion settles the coherence of the conception of necessary existence within those language games, and that therefore “There is no God” is not something that can be meaningfully said or thought, since it is not compatible with the necessity of God's existence, as spoken of within the language games. Dilman takes a view like Malcolm's, but it is couched in more general terms and has a consequence that goes beyond anything in Malcolm's account. Dilman invites us to imagine someone who is able imaginatively to understand the thought and the practices of an alien culture. He comes to see how people in this culture conceive of the reality of the things they speak about, and how their conceptions are applied in their lives. If he does achieve this, he will have, Dilman says, an enlarged conception of how one may think about reality. The person who has achieved this imaginative “internal” understanding will have got beyond the stage at which he might have been inclined to think that there was some error or illusion involved in their beliefs and practices. The inclination to think that the other people were in some way deluded in their beliefs or practices is, on this philosophical account, an indication only of failure to comprehend the realities internal to their language. What is the matter with the story Dilman gives us, of what goes on when one comes to a deeper understanding, is that he excludes the case in which the result of the deepened understanding is that one sees more clearly that their practices are (for example) idolatrous rubbish, that the “realities” they believe in are illusions. The idea that, if you were really to grasp how the practices are understood, you would lose the basis of your radical criticism of the practices involves a judgment that the kind of criticism that has been central in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam has invariably been based on failure of understanding or some sort of confusion. Dilman takes himself to be in disagreement with Anscombe,
not only about the situation of someone wanting to criticize another culture, but also about Wittgenstein’s view of the relation between people who have incompatible world pictures.

How then does Anscombe see the situation? She says that it may seem as if Wittgenstein’s arguments (in *On Certainty*) imply that, where world pictures are incompatible, we cannot speak of one of them being right and the other wrong. But she thinks that there are questions here. What Wittgenstein had spoken of as a world picture “partly lies behind a knowledge system.”

We indeed have a richly developed knowledge system. Here then are two questions that she raises about Wittgenstein’s view: “But when, speaking with *this* knowledge system behind one, one calls something error which *counts as knowledge* in another system, the question arises: has one the right to do that? Or has one to be “moving within the system” to call anything error?”

Her discussion of these questions is not complete, but it seems clear that her answer to the first one is that Wittgenstein did not hold that one would have no right to do so, and her answer to the second is that Wittgenstein did not hold that one would have to be “moving within the system” to call something error. One can call something error, even though within their system and by their standards, it is correct. She takes the answers which she thinks Wittgenstein gives to these questions (answers which she herself would also give) to mean that he avoids cultural relativism. The point about whether we can call something in “their system” error, even though we are not “moving within the system” would seem to apply not only to the kind of case which Anscombe was discussing—knowledge of such things as the character of the earth and moon, and of what would be involved in a human being getting to the moon—but also to the ethical views of some alien tribe, or to the (as it might be) evil nature of their god, as he is portrayed in their culture. There is no good philosophical argument that we cannot judge to be evil what the people in some tribe count as good, what counts by all their criteria as good. Some such judgments, and the inclinations to make them, are stupid and ill-judged, based on misunderstandings or complacent pride; such judgments may be profoundly ideological. But they need not be. Thus, for example, it may be that the British in India constructed the threat of the supposed religious sect of thugs and that it was a myth which served their purposes. But there is no good philosophical argument that, had there been a religious system of thuggee, part of a system of thought in which the ritualized killings of travelers constituted praiseworthy service of the god Kali, it could not have been condemned from an external point of view.

Anscombe’s point applies also to what we, with our knowledge system, take to be knowledge. It may at some time rightly be judged from an external point of view. We ourselves, or people of subsequent generations, or
people from some quite different culture, may some time rightly judge that we were wrong, by criteria of which we have no conception.

Wittgenstein’s authority is sometimes invoked for the philosophical view that I have been questioning. The first of his “Lectures on Religious Belief” has been taken to provide an argument that only within a language game can someone contradict what is said within the language game. This would apparently then provide support for the answer “Yes” to the question asked by Anscombe about Wittgenstein, whether (on his view) one has to be “moving within their system” to call something “they” say error. Such a reading of Wittgenstein’s Lecture is questionable, but since I have discussed it in detail elsewhere, I shall focus instead here on a striking passage in Wittgenstein’s Remarks on Frazer’s *Golden Bough*.

Frazer’s account of the magical and religious views of mankind is unsatisfactory: it makes these views look like errors.

Was Augustine in error, then, when he called upon God on every page of the *Confessions*?

But—one might say—if he was not in error, surely the Buddhist holy man was—or anyone else—whose religion gives expression to completely different views. But none of them was in error, except when he set forth a theory. The crucial ideas in this passage are those of “being in error” (im Irrtum) and of “setting forth a theory” (aufstellen eine Theorie). Thus, for example, someone engaged in practical efforts to arrest global warming might be said to be “in error” if her actions rested on a theory about the causes of temperature change, and if that theory was wrong. But it is not easy to see how to apply this sort of idea of error and theory in thinking about religion and about Augustine in particular. Augustine’s *Confessions* do not contain just invocations of God, but also an account of a false understanding of God, which had left Augustine mired in sin. As he tells the story of his becoming a servant of God, it is inseparable from the story of his coming to a true understanding of God. It is plain that he takes heresy to be a profound danger to the soul. There is no reason to think that he had not called on God frequently during the period that he later describes as involving his own being mired in sin through his inability to see what he later took to be the truth.

There seem to be two possible ways in which we can try to connect these earlier invocations of God to Wittgenstein’s remarks about error and theory, but neither way is satisfactory. (1) Wittgenstein’s view might be that, when Augustine called on God, in the early days, he was not in error
merely because he was a Manichean; he was no more in error through being a Manichean than is Wittgenstein’s Buddhist holy man in being a Buddhist. Augustine (on this reading) could be taken to be in error only when setting forth his theoretical (Manichean) account of God’s nature, the nature of evil and of Jesus, and so on. On this view, his actual invocations of God are not somehow turned all wrong because of his erroneous theological understanding. But this picture of Augustine is dramatically at variance with Augustine’s own narrative, in which (for example) his misunderstanding of the death of Jesus’s body is inseparable from the real death of his own soul, the real distance between himself and God. (2) The alternative account would be that Wittgenstein gave to the word “theory” a narrower sense than I was assuming there, and that the Manichean views that Augustine accepted were not a “theory” in Wittgenstein’s sense. So although Augustine describes himself as having been in error, we might try to read his views as not theoretical in the sense Wittgenstein means; we might say that what Augustine speaks of as error is not error in Wittgenstein’s sense. But this approach is no better than the first at enabling us to connect Wittgenstein’s remarks with Augustine’s own self-understanding. We can use the words “theory” and “error” in such a way that it will be correct to assert that Augustine’s Manicheanism is not a theory, and that his Manichean religious life is not a case of being in error; but then what are we to say about the pernicious errors from which Augustine took himself to have suffered? If these are errors in some other sense, they are nevertheless of central significance to Augustine’s religious understanding. Wittgenstein says that Frazer’s account of the religious views of mankind is unsatisfactory in making them look like errors; but it is not as if the only alternative to Frazer’s view is that the only errors in the religious realm occur in the setting forth of theories. Wittgenstein stresses that, of those who call on God, of those who accept some religion, “none of them” is in error, except when setting forth a theory; this seems simply to contradict the view of anyone like Augustine who takes heresy to involve a kind of fatal illness of the soul. The Manichees are deeply lost in their confusion, no matter how deep their religious feelings as they call on God; that, at any rate, was Augustine’s view. Wittgenstein once said to Drury that “all genuine expressions of religion are wonderful, even those of the most savage peoples.” That is a conception of religion profoundly at odds with Augustine’s; Augustine’s picture of the soul and of the needs of the soul is also at odds with that of Wittgenstein.

Augustine’s view, that heresy is akin to death of the soul, underlay the crusade against the Albigensians (among other things). But an idea like Augustine’s of the significance of religious truth does not have to exclude recognition of religious liberty. I am interested in a different issue here: the kind of conflict there is between Wittgenstein’s view of the relation between
religion and falsity and that of Augustine. I am suggesting that we see both views within a history of appraisals of whole systems of thought and practice and of contestation of such appraisals, in which terms like rational, irrational, superstition, idolatry, reality, truth, heresy, and magic have been taken up or rejected, appropriated or disowned, shaped and reshaped. Anscombe’s discussion of paganism (mentioned above) is helpful here, and in particular her remarks about the strand in contemporary philosophy influenced by Wittgenstein, in which there is a rejection of the idea of a religion’s being true, and in which it is taken to be “contemptible to be scornful” of any of the religions of different peoples. This way of thinking is related, she says, to the ancient pagan hatred of the exclusivity of the Jews, and her essay was an attempt to bring out the connection. She refrained from actually ascribing this sort of view to Wittgenstein himself, though she gives remarks of his that suggest that it was a view to which he was strongly attracted, and the remark I have quoted, from conversation with Drury, also suggests his strong attraction to the “pagan” view. But she also mentions remarks that suggest at least a degree of attraction to the opposite view, in at least some contexts. The context of thought about Frazer’s Golden Bough was one in which Wittgenstein’s inclination towards the “pagan” view of religions came out strongly. He hated Frazer’s treatment of magical and religious views, and takes up in response a view which (as I have argued) is profoundly opposed to Augustine’s. But if this is the expression of an inclination towards the kind of paganism that Anscombe describes, what philosophical significance do his remarks have, beyond showing that this is one kind of responsiveness to religion? As Anscombe mentions, philosophers who are attracted to this sort of paganism sometimes put the point that there is no such thing as a religion’s being true by saying that religious propositions are not like propositions of natural science. But this would hardly indicate that there is no such thing as a religion’s being true, unless the only possible way of understanding such truth was on the model of some other kind of natural scientific truth. The remarks of Wittgenstein’s about Frazer that I have quoted, while they evince an attitude towards religion, provide no argument that the opposite view is in some way philosophically confused. The fact that Wittgenstein was strongly attracted to the view opposed to Augustine’s is deeply interesting; but it leaves us just where we were.

I should like to put the issue here another way. On the view taken by Wittgensteinian philosophers of religion, a religious doctrine cannot be understood apart from the role of the doctrine in people’s lives; if it is so separated, it is treated as a kind of “theory,” and this is conceptual confusion. Typically, then (on this view) criticism of a religion as false is based on such a treatment of its doctrines as theories, and involves a confused failure to appreciate what is genuinely meant. Supposedly, then, the realities spoken
of by the believers are not seen; the critics are not then really criticizing the
doctrines, which they have not genuinely understood. On the opposite view,
though, there is room for the idea that Jews and Christians (for example)
might have had a particularly adequate view of the realities spoken of by the
pagans, a particularly adequate view of the emptiness and soul-killingness of
those realities. This is a matter not of ignoring the life within which lie the
beliefs and practices they are criticizing, and not of ignoring the role of the
beliefs within that life, but of seeing that life, as they think, more truly than
do those whose life it is. Anscombe once said, “I would rather a man were
like Bertrand Russell than that he were a worshipper of Dourga,” expressing
her sense of the spiritual dangers of Dourga-worship; Rhees said that worship
of Dourga “should have the respect due to a form of worship.”
I believe that it is a mistake to try to settle this sort of dispute, as some Wittgensteinian
philosophers have tried to do, by general a priori arguments about what is
conceptually confused. I think Putnam would agree. This would in no way
be incompatible with his expressed sympathy for the view that Wittgenstein
takes, or with his rejection of Franz Rosenzweig’s “exclusivist” response to
religions other than Judaism and Christianity.

Putnam’s essay “Rules, Attunement and ‘Applying Words to the World’”
engages with the “orthodox” reading of Wittgenstein, according to which
what makes sense is fixed by a framework of rules, and according to which
there is therefore available a criticism of uses of language that do not remain
“within” the framework, or that violate the rules—a criticism of such uses
as unintelligible, nonsensical or conceptually confused. What is or is not
intelligible, Putnam argues, is not determined by the rules of language, by
criteria which settle for us what makes sense. That refusal of Putnam’s to
allow sensefulness to be confined within a structure of rules and criteria
is inseparable from his realism, from the conception he has of our being
“forced to renegotiate . . . our notion of reality as our language and our
life develop.” Renegotiating means that what one might call the struc-
ture of old negotiations, embodied in existing rules and criteria, does not
constrain what we can go on to do with words. These renegotiations, not
constrained by existing rules, are essential to our being open to the
world. The practice of thought-being-in-relation-to-the-world involves this: that
there is no general philosophical story about “confusion” that will enable
one to rule out in advance any and all appraisals of systems of thought, as
for example that of the Azande, or that will enable one to rule out a priori
all philosophical skepticism, or all traditional metaphysical realism. All that
one can do (in the commonsense realism style of thought) is take things one
at a time. When the demand for justification makes sense, Putnam says, it
“is met in particular ways, depending on the particular claim that is called
into question.” He says also that “the philosopher’s claim to be justified in
using [words] outside or apart from their (Wittgensteinian) criteria cannot be rejected a priori." One has to listen, he says, to the story the philosopher tells; if indeed what she says is incoherent, one has to show why and how it is, in the particular case. The commonsense realism style of thought, just described, applies also to nonphilosophical skeptics, critics, and speculators who say things apparently not allowed for by established rules and criteria. Wittgensteinianism should be stripped of the appearance, Putnam says, of being a machine for refuting traditional philosophy. Such a machine works by enforcing a conception of the boundaries of sense; it puts what “can be spoken of” into an “inside”—whether of our “form of life,” our “universe of discourse,” our “language games,” “what our grammar allows.” When Putnam is read, as by Rorty and Dilman, as taking a view close to their own, this reflects the invisibility to them of the style of thought that commonsense realism is, its style of openness to the world. “Language,” Putnam says, “opens to us different kinds of form that the world already has.” In many of his writings Putnam has described himself as a pragmatist; and I have tried here to bring out, not “that he is a pragmatist” (as if there were one thing that that was, and we were already clear what that one thing is), but rather that he shows us a philosophical practice of openness to the world, and extends in that way what we can understand “pragmatism” to be.

NOTES

2. Ibid., 446. Putnam picks up this use of “recoil” from John McDowell’s Mind and World.
5. Ibid.
and Reality,” in Essays in the Philosophy of Mathematics (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1965), 23–41. Goodstein’s view is in some ways very like Rorty’s, and involves a similar mix of pragmatism with ideas derived from Wittgenstein. See especially Goodstein’s discussion of different norms for deciding whether it is true that objects of different weights, placed in a vacuum, fall with the same speed. One norm is that of looking in a book to see what Aristotle said about the matter. If that is the criterion of truth, Goodstein says, and if Aristotle said that large objects fall more swiftly, then Galileo was deluded. We can choose a different language but there is here no question of betterness of norms apart from the norms in question being part of a language that we have decided to use.


12. Ibid., 53.

13. Ibid., 60.


16. Ibid., 55.


26. See especially Dilman, Wittgenstein’s Copernican Revolution, 168–69. There is a criticism of this feature of Dilman’s thought in the review in Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews by Eric Loomis, who says that the obvious problem with a view like Dilman’s, which tries to treat facts as independent of language but their possibility as dependent on language, is that a fact cannot exist independently of its possibility.

27. See also Dilman’s refusal to make a distinction between the kind of dependence the reality of promises has on our practices and modes of talk and the supposed dependence of the reality of dinosaurs on our practices and modes of talk. Ibid., 118.

28. Ibid., 48–49.

29. See especially p. 49. I am not sure how extreme Dilman’s view is intended to be. I think he does want to deny that we could say such things as that medieval calculations of the distance to Saturn (as less than a hundred million miles) were wrong. I think he would want to deny that the planet Saturn about which we think and speak is the Saturn of which they spoke and thought. This would be a consequence of his view that the reality of what we are speaking of, and hence its identity, is internal to the “universe of discourse.” I discuss Dilman’s view in Diamond, “The Skies of Dante and Our Skies: A Response to Ilham Dilman,” Philosophical Investigations 35 (2012): 187–204. Sections 3 and 4 of that essay draw on some material from this chapter.


32. Dilman speaks both of Dante’s skies and of the universe of the “Middle Ages.” Albertus’s views are relevant here as one of the sources of Dante’s conception. My sentence about Albertus as it stands leaves unclear what was meant by “crystalline” in this context. For what the celestial spheres were thought to be made of, see Edward Grant, Planets, Stars, and Orbs: the Medieval Cosmos 1200–1657 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

33. Dilman, Wittgenstein’s Copernican Revolution, 151.

34. In Chantal Mouffe and Ludwig Nagl, eds., The Legacy of Wittgenstein: Pragmatism or Deconstruction (Frankfurt: Pter Lang, 2001), 9–23.


36. Ibid., 9–11.

37. Dante and his contemporaries were aware that what Aristotle had counted as the “fixed stars” themselves exhibited some shift, a degree every century. The shift had been discovered by Hipparchus, and was described by Ptolemy.

38. Dilman, Wittgenstein’s Copernican Revolution, 82.

39. This is indeed what Dilman says: our language gives us our world; it gives us the objects we see. Ibid., 81–82.

40. Unfortunately Dilman does not consider a very important point here, which is that even in the early stages of Putnam’s “internal realism,” he clearly rejected ideas of the incommensurability between different modes of thought. See especially Putnam, Reason, Truth and History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 113–19. Dilman’s distance from Putnam on this matter is indeed considerably greater than is Rorty’s.


42. Ibid., 452.


44. For a discussion of the questions whether Wittgenstein’s own arguments rule out criticism of a language game or form of life or system of thought, and whether his philosophy is therefore politically or socially conservative, see Alice Crazy, “Wittgenstein’s Philosophy in Relation to Political Thought,” in The New Wittgenstein, ed. A. Crazy and R. Read (London: Routledge, 2000), 118–45.


46. See Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, Montaillou (New York: Braziller, 1978) for a number of cases of such skepticism. Ladurie notes that such skepticism is in no way unusual. The context from which his evidence comes (evidence from inquisitorial investigations in Occitania) has some unusual features, in that there was not one single religion practiced there, but two quite distinct ones, so that many people within the culture had some familiarity with the central ideas of both. But skepticism about what happens to us after we are dead was not dependent upon that particular feature of the culture, and did not involve accepting the views of either the Catholics or the Cathars. We should not regard it as problematic that people can take up, in relation to some set of practices and beliefs, a critical stance not supported by any principles internal to the ways people establish such things within the culture. See also Naomi Scheiman, “Forms of Life: Mapping the Rough Ground,” in Cambridge Companion to Wittgenstein, ed. H. Sluga and D. G. Stern (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 383–410, especially 398–99. See also section VI on these issues.
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47. See pp. 50–51 for Dilman’s discussion of this sort of case.
48. On skepticism about transubstantiation, and more generally about the Mass, see Le Roy Ladurie, Montaillou, 266; see 311 for widespread knowledge by peasants of the notion of transubstantiation; also 304.
49. For a discussion of the corresponding issues in relation to Wittgenstein’s thought, see Crary, “Wittgenstein’s Philosophy in Relation to Political Thought.”
51. Ibid., 15.
52. Ibid.
53. Ibid., 16.
55. The Catholic discussions in general treat the practice as not invariably superstitious, since it need not be carried out with the idea that it is itself efficacious. There is a difference in the style of advertisements for the St. Joseph real estate kits, depending on whether they are offered on Catholic websites or sites for magical products. The former never use the word “spell.” Even so, some Catholic religious goods shops will not handle the kits, as they are all too plainly likely to be used in a superstitious way.
56. There are significant differences between religious and nonreligious understandings of superstition, as involved in practices thought of as bringing good luck or avoiding bad luck, but I cannot here discuss this complex issue.
58. See Michael D. Bailey, Historical Dictionary of Witchcraft (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2003), 18. The Black Mass “has no historical reality, and certainly no association with witchcraft, either historical or modern.” It was apparently thought up in the eighteenth century, and “projected back into earlier periods.”
59. The demonological theories made clear the need for judicial torture, in the face of the Devil’s efforts to prevent the accused witch from telling the truth about the rituals; and the confessions of accused witches, arrived at through torture, often provided extremely detailed corroboration of demonological theories of what witches did. An important part of demonological theory was the idea that a witch had no supernatural powers independent of the cooperation of demons or of the Devil. Hence the importance in the theory of the idea of the witch as making a pact with the Devil; hence the importance in the narratives produced by accused witches, of accounts of such commitments and of ritual occasions when the relation with the Devil was cemented, and the Devil gave instruction in magical operations. When interrogated, witches were pressed to provide the names of other witches, present on the supposed ritual occasions. The idea of a widespread conspiracy was thus supported by the testimony of accused witches. Another important part of this system of thought and practice in some parts of Europe was that those who expressed doubts of the reality of witchcraft could be charged with heresy, and the voicing of such doubts might even be taken to suggest that the doubters were witches. See Wolfgang Behringer, Witches and Witch-hunts (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004), 173.
60. Winch mentions the point made by Evans-Pritchard that there were in Zande society people who were skeptical about some of the witchcraft beliefs; there were certainly in European society during the witch-persecutions skepticism about the system of beliefs involved in witch-hunting. As Winch himself points out, the presence of such skepticism does not imply that the conception of reality internal to the system of thought and practice is problematic. Winch, “Understanding a Primitive Society,” 23.
Cambridge University Press, 1997), 110, Rhees questioned Mounce’s reading of Winch, and in particular questioned the importance of the notion of “parasitism” for Winch’s discussion of magic. But Mounce’s reading appears to be straightforwardly correct; Winch’s account of how a practice can be parasitic on another is intended as an explanation of what is involved in a “culturally relevant” criticism of a practice.


63. Winch’s use of the notion of “perversion” in connection with the relation between the Black Mass and the Christian Mass involves other questions which I shall just mention here. Many people would be quite unwilling to speak of anything, in propria persona, as a “perversion of the Mass.” Winch seems to be suggesting that the use of the word “perversion” can be justified purely on the basis of a philosophical account of the relation between the Black Mass and the Christian Mass. But for those who do not see a Mass at all as something which there is a right way to perform, the idea of a “perverted” performance of the Mass or a “perverted” concept of the Mass involves taking up a form of speech which they reject. This seems to me to be connected with some unclarity in Winch’s argument about what makes a description “culturally relevant.” The problem arises also in connection with Dilman’s description of the case.

64. Winch, Idea of a Social Science, 102.

65. Ibid., 100, See also p. xv.


68. See also Alasdair Maclntyre, “Is Understanding Religion Compatible with Believing?,” in Rationality, ed. B. R. Wilson (New York: Harper, 1970), 71; also the very valuable account of Western and Indian descriptions of sati in Sati: the Blessing and the Curse, ed. J. S. Hawley (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994). Rhees ascribes to Wittgenstein the view that we cannot understand what the practice of child sacrifice meant to those who engaged in it, or even to the children themselves (“Letter to Drury,” in Rush Rhees on Religion and Philosophy, 308). But the Hawley volume on sati shows that, whether or not this was indeed Wittgenstein’s view, if it was meant to apply to all practices involving sacrificial deaths of human beings, it is questionable. The complex and paradoxical character of sati certainly has made it difficult to understand, and not just for those outside Indian culture, but there are better and worse understandings of its meanings; and there is no reason to throw up our hands and say “we cannot understand what it means for those involved.”

69. See Putnam, “Rules, Attunement, and ‘Applying Words to the World.’”

70. Anscombe, “Intentionality of Sensation,” in Metaphysics and the Philosophy of Mind, 10.

71. Ibid.

72. Dilman, Wittgenstein’s Copernican Revolution, 34.


75. Dilman, Wittgenstein’s Copernican Revolution, 126–27; see also 91–95.


77. Ibid.

78. See Rhees, letters reprinted in Rush Rhees on Religion and Philosophy, 100–102 and Phillips, “Just Say the Word,” 182, for philosophical arguments that it is confused to
criticize ritual practices like human sacrifice as atrocities, or in any other way to judge such actions by the standards we use in judging actions in our own society.

79. For a wide-ranging discussion of Wittgenstein’s views on this topic, see Crary, “Wittgenstein’s Philosophy in Relation to Political Thought.”


83. The claim to have a particularly adequate view of the realities in some form of religious life may be based, as in the case of Augustine, on experience, or it may be taken to be based on revelation; cf. for example, Ezekiel 6, on which see Anscombe, 53. See also Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics, vol. 3, part I (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1958), 166, on what is lost within human life when heavenly bodies are divinized. The dispute between the “pagan” view of religions and the older Judaeo-Christian view is internal to contemporary Judaism and Christianity, and involves questions about the role and nature of revelation, questions which I cannot discuss here.

84. Rhees, Rush Rhees on Religion and Philosophy, 309.


88. Ibid., 23.

89. Putnam, in Putnam and Boros, “Philosophy Should Not Be Just an Academic Discipline,” in Common Knowledge 11, no. 1 (2005): 132. See the statement of a closely related view about the relation between form and language in Anscombe, “The Question of Linguistic Idealism,” 112–16. Dilman (110–18) argues against Anscombe’s view; this is another point at which it comes out that Dilman’s distance from Putnam’s views is far greater than he recognizes. Dilman plainly rejects the idea that “the world already has” different kinds of form, which are opened to us by language.

90. I am very grateful to Alice Crary for comments and suggestions.
Some years ago I described a collection of Cora Diamond’s essays as “showing the full range and power of one of the best philosophical minds I know.”1 The same power and wide range are visible in her present essay. In it she describes and interprets a good many of my own writings about Wittgenstein, and approves of my claims that (1) Wittgenstein should not be read as any sort of a verificationist; not as a verificationist of the strong Dummettian variety (on which variety see my Reply to Dummett in the present volume), nor as a verificationist of the subtler variety that one gets when one conjoins the “orthodox” Wittgensteinian reading of Wittgenstein’s philosophy as claiming that the meaning of a sentence is given by a set of “rules” for its “use” (so that every change in those rules would ipso facto have to be a change in the meaning of the sentence) with the idea that “use” means “assertibility conditions”; nor as a “linguistic idealist” like Winch or Dilman; and certainly not as a Rortian avant la lettre. (Diamond’s account of my debates with Rorty is the best I have seen anywhere.) And I am glad that she approves of all these claims, for it was reading her essay “The Face of Necessity” that suggested to me the possibility of reading Wittgenstein in a way that did not impute to him any of these metaphysical errors. (I vividly remember reading that essay for the first time: it happened when I was spending a semester in Tel Aviv in 1985; and I still recall the stunning impact that reading had upon me.)

In recent years I have taken to avoiding the term “commonsense realism,”3 not because I have changed my mind about the correctness of that position, but because the term turned out to be a sort of “Rorschach test”; each of my critics read a different meaning into it! But Cora Diamond does understand what I meant very well, and she sums it up beautifully in this essay. And she is right that an essential aspect of what I meant by the term is that language does not create the world, but rather it opens to us different kinds of form that the world already has.4 Diamond tries to reconcile my self-description as a commonsense realist with the fact that I sometimes
identify myself as a “pragmatist,” writing, “In many of his writings Putnam has described himself as a pragmatist; and I have tried here to bring out not ‘that he is a pragmatist,’ as if there were one thing that that was, and we were already clear what that one thing is, but rather that he shows us a philosophical practice of openness to the world, and extends in that way what we can understand ‘pragmatism’ to be.” But ever since I completely abandoned “internal realism” as an account of truth, I have tried to point out in my writings on pragmatism that my admiration for the classical pragmatists does not imply acceptance of their several theories of truth. So it is not ultimately important to me whether we change “what we can understand ‘pragmatism’ to be,” as Cora Diamond suggests, or simply say that we can learn from pragmatism without being ourselves “pragmatists.”

H.P.

NOTES


2. Needless to say, it is both conjuncts that I object to in the essays Diamond discusses.

3. I used that term to describe the view that replaced my (misguided, as I now see it) “internal realism” in The Threefold Cord: Mind, Body and World.

4. In The Threefold Cord, the other essential aspects of commonsense realism had to do with the rejection of what I called “interface conceptions” of both perception and conception.

5. The precise point at which I first abandoned the internal realist picture of “what truth comes to” in public was in my “Reply to Simon Blackburn” delivered at the Gifford Conference on me at the University of St. Andrews, in November 1990 (printed in Peter Clark and Bob Hale, Reading Putnam [Oxford: Blackwell, 1995], 242–43). In that reply I stated that “I no longer accept that picture [internal realism]” and “The point of the picture was to combine realism with a concession to moderate verificationism (a concession I would no longer make, by the way): the concession being the idea that truth could never be totally recognition-transcendent.” [Emphasis added]

6. For example, in my Pragmatism (1995), I wrote “Unlike the pragmatists, I do not believe that truth can be defined in terms of verification.” And my paper, “Pragmatism” (in Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society 95, no. 3 [March 1995]: 291–306), was almost entirely devoted to a rebuttal of the pragmatist theories of truth.

7. And likewise it goes without saying that one can learn from Wittgenstein without being a “Wittgensteinian,” with or without shudder quotes.