

PUTNAM'S NATURAL REALISM AND THE QUESTION OF A PERCEPTUAL INTERFACE

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Introduction

In his Dewey Lectures,¹ Hilary Putnam argues that contemporary philosophy cannot solve nor see its way past the traditional problem of how language or thought hooks on to 'external' or mind-independent reality. This 'antinomy of realism' is generated, ultimately, by a broadly Cartesian picture of perception according to which, despite renouncing substance dualism for materialist monism, sense experience continues to be understood in terms of an interface between mind and world. At the interface there is supposed to be a 'direct' awareness of mental representations that bear only a causal, not a cognitive, relation to the external world. In response, philosophy oscillates interminably back and forth between the equally unsatisfactory metaphysical options of realism and anti-realism. Putnam urges that instead of thinking that we must choose one or other side of this philosophical debate, it is possible to step back and see that the whole problematic rests on a questionable presupposition about the nature of our cognitive relation to reality. We can see our way past this dilemma by coming to appreciate that 'our cognitive powers . . . reach all the way to the objects themselves' (1999, 10) both in perception and conception. A position Putnam refers to as 'common sense realism' (44) promises to provide a way of exorcising a false and widely popular picture of the mind, something that does not so much solve the traditional problems concerning realism as dissolve them.

The present paper will concentrate on the perceptual aspect of this new form of realism which Putnam also calls, following William James, 'the natural realism of the common man' (15). This is a version of a 'direct realist' account of perception that is supposed to do justice to the cognitive or reason-giving character of experience and to echo the various efforts of Aristotle, James, Austin and Wittgenstein in their defence of the common-sense world against metaphysical mystery-mongering. The importance of natural realism can perhaps be appreciated by noting that important strands of current philosophy of mind, most notably cognitive science, accept some version of indirect realism regarding perception.

However, there appears to be a tension in Putnam's presentation of natural realism between, on the one hand, thinking of it as a rejection of a 'veil-of-ideas' account of perception and, on the other, thinking of it as a rejection of a quite different causal theory of perception. This paper is an attempt to explore this apparent tension and to show that it rests upon a hidden complexity in Putnam's conception of a perceptual

'interface'. The aim is to show that natural realism is a more interesting view than it may, at first, appear, involving an extension of the doctrine of semantic externalism to sense experience itself. This is a more controversial view than Putnam leads us to expect, which raises a problem about the invocation of 'common sense' in characterizing the natural realist.

The Cartesian cum Materialist Account of Perception

According to Putnam, we are still in the grip of a Cartesian representationalist view of the mind even in spite of the widespread adoption of a materialist ontology. Putnam calls the resultant picture, 'Cartesianism cum materialism'. On this picture, the mind is conceived as an inner realm that is, literally, inside the head. Within the mind are internal representations that are identified with brain states. In perception, one is confronted with these internal representations which are putatively caused by and, perhaps, 'resemble', external objects. From these internal representations the mind makes a conscious or unconscious inference as to how things are in the external world. Let us call this an *inferentialist* account of perception.

On this view, one's cognitive contact with one's own internal representations is relatively unproblematic. What is problematic is the nature of the inference from inner realm to outer realm. If all one is ever confronted with are internal representations then how can one have any cognitive contact to the world beyond the mind? And that puts in jeopardy the common-sense truism that knowledge claims are responsible to a mind-independent reality (at least when their subject matter is not the mind itself). It was by tacitly assuming the inferentialist picture that Putnam was previously led to think that the problem of how language or mind hooks on to the external world is an *antinomy*: a problem that could neither be solved nor avoided.

In his famous Model-Theoretic Argument, Putnam (1983) argues that if we hold fixed the truth of empirical sentences and specify that certain observational predicates must apply to certain objects under specified perceptual conditions, model-theoretic considerations suggest that the reference of those sub-sentential terms not explicitly definable in terms of the operationally constrained predicates is radically underdetermined. We are left with the problem that, if there is no metaphysically privileged relation (say, causation), which fixes the reference of terms occurring in true sentences, in virtue of what do our terms, or thoughts or perceptions refer to determinate objects in the world beyond the mind?

At one time, under the influence of Dummett, Putnam (1981) had thought that the way beyond this problem lay in placing epistemic constraints on truth. According to this so-called 'internal realism', being true was identified with sufficient verification under good enough epistemic conditions.² However, in trying to avoid the idealism implicit in this position Putnam was forced to concede that whether we are in sufficiently good epistemic conditions is not settled purely 'internally' but is partly dependent upon the external world. Thus, on the internal realist position the antinomy arises again in a new form, now as the problem of how we can refer to (or know that we are in) sufficiently good epistemic conditions.

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If internal realism is not the answer, what is? According to recent Putnam we can *only* make progress here by coming to see that the thinking that motivates the question of realism rests, ultimately, upon *a false picture of perception and conception* as divisible into inner cognitive and outer causal components:

If one assumes that the mind is an organ, and one goes on to identify the mind with the brain, it will then become irresistible to (1) think of some of the 'representations' as analogous to the classical theorist's 'impressions' (the cerebral computer makes inferences from at least some of the 'representations', the outputs of the perceptual processes, just as the mind makes inferences from impressions, on the classical story), and (2) to think that those 'representations' are linked to objects in the organism's environment only causally, and not cognitively (just as impressions were linked to 'external objects' only causally, and not cognitively). (9–10)

If we focus on the perceptual aspect of this interface conception of the mind then whether we conceive perceptual intermediaries as immaterial or material, the immediate objects of perception are mental entities and not external things. We know external things, if we do, in virtue of an inference from reports of these mental entities. On Putnam's view, therefore, the Cartesian cum materialist tradition is to be understood in terms of a 'veil-of-ideas' account of perception, even though the nature of the 'veil' has changed to accommodate the shift to materialism and computer models of the mind. Of course, the idea that we are 'directly' or 'immediately' confronted with intermediaries makes it baffling that we could ever be in genuine cognitive contact with the external world.

The Rejection of Inferentialism

In rejecting the inferentialist account of perception in favour of natural realism, Putnam writes:

A natural realist, in my sense, does hold that the objects of normal, 'veridical' perception are usually 'external' things . . . successful perception is just a seeing, or hearing, or feeling, etc., of things 'out there' and not a mere affectation of a person's subjectivity by those things. I agree with James, as well as with McDowell, that the false belief that perception must be so analyzed is at the root of all the problems with the view of perception that, in one form or another, has dominated Western philosophy since the seventeenth century. James's idea is that the traditional claim that we must conceive of our sensory experiences as *intermediaries* between us and the world has no sound arguments to support it, and, worse, makes it impossible to see how persons can be in genuine cognitive contact with a world at all. (10–11)

Putnam officially characterizes natural realism in purely *negative* terms, as consisting in a rejection of the very idea of an interface between the merely causal impacts of unconceptualized perceptual intermediaries (e.g. sense-data or materialist analogues of sense-data) and the cognitive realm of the mind.³ Of course, natural realism also requires an alternative account of perceptual illusions, the very sort of experience that motivates the

veil-of-ideas in the first place. This alternative account is commonly known as a *disjunctive* conception of experience which, in its simplest form is the view that, say, the visual appearance of an oak tree is *either* a matter of actually seeing an oak tree *or* seeming to see one. On this view, veridical and deceptive experiences can be indistinguishable without the requirement that these mental states shares a 'highest common factor'.⁴ We shall return to discuss further implications of this view below.

In saying that 'successful perception is . . . of things "out there" and not a mere affectation of a person's subjectivity by those things', Putnam seems to be arguing against inferentialism on largely phenomenological grounds. Consider the case of an unobstructed observation of an oak tree. I look at its trunk, branches, leaves and so on. If I reflect on this visual experience and what it is introspectively like, focusing my attention on the experience itself, I find that I remain aware of the tree and not, say, some congeries of simple sensations of colour arranged into a tree-like pattern. There seems to be no other entity for me to attend to but the oak tree. Following Michael Tye (1995), we might call this feature of perception its *transparency*, since it strikes us as being transparent to the world.

In perception, we are almost always aware of more or less familiar worldly objects. This remains true even when we turn our introspective attention upon our own experiences themselves. True, we sometimes experience after-images, but these contrast sharply with ordinary perceptual experience. Having an after-image, like 'seeing double' or 'seeing stars', is an occurrence which has a typical causal history: looking at a bright light source. It is not the sort of experience which is typically confused with perception. One is aware of the distinctively non-perceptual character of an after-image on the basis of such features as the way it moves as one moves one's head, its lack of depth and hazy outline, its luminosity, and its being apparent in the dark or with one's eyes closed. After-images are not experienced as the colours of physical things. For that very reason they are not even *apparent* perceptions and so cannot qualify as candidates for the alleged material out of which worldly colours are constructed. And, furthermore, their apparent size varies depending upon the distance of the surface on to which they are projected. So far from being stable objects available independently of how the world presents itself, their own properties depend upon the physical environment against which they are 'seen'.

No objects modelled on after-images could plausibly be what we generally experience in perception; and there do not seem to be any other candidates to play this role except external objects. Putnam's call for a return to the natural realism of the common man is a reminder of the actual character of non-illusory experience and of the lack of fit between ordinary perceptual phenomenology and inferentialism.

The inferentialist has a reply to this. He, too, can appeal to aspects of perceptual phenomenology. For the main motivation of the inferentialist account of perception is a phenomenological fact about *illusory* experience: namely, that hallucinatory or deceptive perception can be *phenomenally indistinguishable* from non-deceptive perception. It is in order to explain this fact that the inferentialist posits a common object of awareness, an object that must be mental since it is available in *both* deceptive and non-deceptive cases. The idea is that, for example, one must be aware of the same kind of rabbit-like sense-datum in visually indistinguishable cases of hallucinating a rabbit and actually seeing one.

But Putnam defuses this response by replying that there is no requirement to posit a common object of awareness in such cases. There is no incoherence or implausibility in thinking that two quite different states of mind can *seem* experientially the same, in spite of their ontological differences.⁵ Thus to argue that there are sensory intermediaries and conscious or unconscious inferences from them to external objects is explanatorily otiose, in contravention of Occam's Razor.⁶

Nonetheless, the mere appeal to phenomenology cannot settle which is the right account of perception. That the things we perceive are 'external' or mind-independent is not itself an observable property of them. It is for this reason that Berkeley could think that the properties and objects he saw were 'internal' or mind-dependent, and that this view was compatible with common sense, without making a simple empirical mistake.

More tellingly, Putnam argues that insofar as the inferentialist posits unconceptualized intermediaries these cannot serve the cognitive role that they must serve if they are to provide *reasons* for beliefs about how things are in the world. Following the account of perceptual consciousness that John McDowell articulates in *Mind and world* (1994), Putnam holds that we ought not to think of experience as a non-conceptual input delivered to the mind which must be conceptually processed in order for it to have any cognitive significance for us. Unless experience itself plays a rational role in the formation of perceptual beliefs, it will seem a mystery how perceptual beliefs can be, by way of experience, about specific objects in the world at all. Experience, minimally conceived as a stream of non-conceptual items, might play a role in the causal origin of our beliefs at the level of the physical conditions necessary for perception—so long as we take for granted that we do indeed have genuine perceptual beliefs. But only a conception of experience which can play a rational or cognitive role in belief acquisition can provide an answer to the Kantian or transcendental question of the *possibility* of perceptual belief. That there are empirical beliefs at all depends upon the fact that beliefs can be rationally constrained by our experience of the world.

Experience can play a reason-giving role only if it is conceptually structured, for only something having conceptual content can stand in rational relations to judgement (cf. McDowell 1994). Since it is part of our ordinary concept of experience that it *can* serve as a (defeasible) reason for an empirical judgement, non-conceptual entities that play a role in the physical enabling conditions of perception do not properly deserve the name of experience at all. About these claims, Putnam and McDowell are in agreement. McDowell goes further, however, in claiming that experience is through and through conceptual, that the very idea of non-conceptual experience in the person-level description of our perceptual contact with reality is incoherent. Putnam leaves this issue open.⁷ His characterizations of natural realism are, I take it, at least compatible with the view that experience is a hybrid of conceptual and non-conceptual (or pre-conceptual) elements, that is, so long as we do not think of the non- or pre-conceptual elements as playing any rational role in belief formation.

We have seen that Putnam's official position is that natural realism is to be understood simply in terms of the denial 'that there has to be an interface between our cognitive powers and the external world' (10). This denial seems to take the form of a rejection of inferentialism and the empiricist notion of 'raw data' in favour of the view that experience

is conceptually structured and so capable of bearing cognitively on our empirical beliefs. There are, however, two reasons for thinking that this cannot be the whole story. In the first place, many philosophers have *already* rejected sense-datum theories in favour of some form or other of what is commonly called 'direct realism',⁸ so if this is all that Putnam is up to then it might seem that he is either preaching to the converted or else only to those who retain some vestige of the sense-data theory (e.g. those who believe in the existence of qualia: allegedly non-intentional phenomenal aspects of experience). Given Putnam's view of the importance of a return to natural realism in overcoming the antinomy of realism, we might legitimately hope for a more widely relevant reading of what such a return consists in than this. Secondly, and apparently in spite of his official position, Putnam wishes to distinguish natural realism from the so-called causal theory of perception, which he claims is 'wholly incompatible' with it, even though this theory is *not* committed to the interface conception of perception (12). I should now like to consider this apparent tension in Putnam's presentation of natural realism and to attempt to uncover what lies behind it. In order to do so I shall consider what I shall call an *intentionalist* account of perception.

Intentionalism

We can provide an initial characterization of an intentionalist as one who holds that, in perception, we are aware of an intentional (or representational) content independently of the question whether we can also be described as being aware of an external object. Henceforth I shall only consider those versions of intentionalism for which intentional (or representational) content is conceptual content. I shall leave aside the question of whether or not there could be intentional non-conceptual content. As I am using the term, Searle defends an intentionalist position. He writes,

When I see a car . . . I have a visual experience of the car, and the visual experience is of the car . . . The content of the visual experience, like the content of the belief, is always equivalent to a whole proposition. Visual experience is never simply of an object but rather it must always be that such and such is the case. (Searle 1983, 37–40)

On Searle's view experience is typically of external objects. Nonetheless, whether or not we are deceived, at least we can say how perception apparently presents the world in a that-clause which expresses the propositional content of that experience. Furthermore, Searle adds that a veridical experience is one whose intentional content represents a state of affairs, which causes—in the right way—the very experience which embodies that content. The resulting theory is a version of what is commonly known as *the causal theory of perception*.⁹ We can represent the causal theory schematically as follows: *S* perceives *O* iff (i) *S* has a subjective experience, that is, an experience reportable using a locution that carries no worldly existential import such as 'It visually seems to *S* that . . .'; (ii) *O* causes this subjective experience in the right way; (iii) conditions (i) and (ii) are requirements imposed by our ordinary perceptual concepts (seeing, hearing, etc.).

Searle explains the possibility of phenomenally indistinguishable deceptive and non-deceptive experiences not by positing a common object of awareness but, rather, by

claiming that we are aware of the same intentional content.¹⁰ We must distinguish a common *object* of awareness from a common awareness of *content*. Consider seeing a car and a phenomenally indistinguishable case of hallucinating a car. The inferentialist posits a common object of awareness in the two cases, a car-ish sense-datum or quale. In contrast, the intentionalist simply says that in both cases we are aware of the same intentional content, that there appears to be a car in such-and-such a place, except that in the veridical case he can *also* say that he is aware of an actually existing car.

It is important to notice that the intentionalist, like the natural realist, accepts that there are no intermediaries in perception. When there is a car there, then *that* is what we are aware of and the intentional content is of, or about, that actual car. In the case of hallucination, the intentionalist says that we are not aware of any actual object, neither a car nor a car-ish sense-datum. Nonetheless, we are aware of the same content, that there is a car there, a content that is available independently of the presence of a car. To visually hallucinate a car, on the intentionalist view, is to literally see nothing.¹¹

The intentionalist, therefore, denies the existence of sense-data or qualia. There is nothing in the phenomenal character of experience that goes beyond the intentional. Consequently, there are no intermediaries in perception on the intentionalist account. Since the intentionalist does not think of experience in terms of the causal impact of unconceptualized data and a mental 'interpretation' of that data, he apparently concedes what is officially Putnam's key point, that there is no perceptual interface between our cognitive powers and the external world. He, too, rejects the myth of the Given in favour of the view that experience is conceptually structured.

One might conclude that since they agree on this much, natural realism and intentionalism are really the same thing. However, Putnam strongly disagrees. Not only does he say that natural realism is 'wholly incompatible' with the causal theory which, as we have seen, is a version of intentionalism, but he also makes the following criticism of Searle's position:

there is less to some versions of 'direct realism' than meets the eye. Sometimes the term is applied to any position that denies that the objects of 'veridical' perception are sense data . . . All one has to do to be a direct realist (in *this* sense) about visual experience, for example, is to say 'We don't *perceive* visual experiences, we *have* them.' A simple linguistic reform, and *voilà!* one is a direct realist. (10)

Yet this passage does not, on the face of it, present a fair assessment of the intentionalist who in fact joins the natural realist in rejecting the existence of any perceptual intermediaries.¹² The passage objects to a version of direct realism that retains the traditional Cartesian picture of perception, but makes the manoeuvre of *saying* that we observe external objects, where this is understood to mean no more than that our sense-data (or the like) are caused by external objects in the appropriate way.¹³ Yet this is hardly a fair description of intentionalism. There is more than a 'simple linguistic reform' between a 'veil-of-ideas' theory which accepts that there are non-conceptual intermediaries in perception and an intentionalism that rejects such intermediaries in favour of the view that perception bears a conceptually structured intentional content

purportedly about the external world. What is present to the mind, according to the intentionalist, when one sees an object, is not some mental proxy but the object itself.

Two Conceptions of a Perceptual 'Interface'

The unfairness of Putnam's apparent criticism of Searle's causal version of intentionalism seems to have two sources. Firstly, Putnam conflates the notion of sense-data (or qualia) with that of experience as an intentionalist understands it. But, as I have argued, these are quite separate notions that ought to be kept apart. Intentional contents are not perceptual intermediaries. Searle would say that it is in the nature of intentional contents that our experiences have them and in virtue of which we can perceive what we do. Secondly, Putnam argues that both the inferentialist and the intentionalist fall victim to the interface conception of perception. But this cannot be right since, as we have seen, the intentionalist sides with the natural realist in rejecting this very conception.

Yet surely it is implausible to interpret Putnam as simply falling victim to these rather obvious confusions. What is responsible for their appearance is, I suggest, a hidden complexity in Putnam's conception of a perceptual interface.

My claim is that Putnam is, perhaps unwittingly, operating with two distinct conceptions of a perceptual interface between mind and world. The first is what is often called the empirical Given, a boundary at which the causal realm of unconceptualized sense-data confronts the cognitive realm of the mind. It is this notion that Putnam tends to emphasize in his text and it is therefore natural to interpret the text in these terms. But there is a *second* conception of perceptual interface according to which the mind and its states are *self-standing* with regard to the existence of the external world, meaning that such states could, in principle, be just the same whether or not the external world exists. These two distinct conceptions of interface might be thought of as having different directions of orientation: the first represents a conception of the world's non-conceptual impingement on the mind; and the second, a conception of the autonomous mind's intentional (and conceptual) directness towards the world. Putnam tends to run both conceptions of a perceptual interface together perhaps because they *both* give rise to the general question of how items in the inner realm could possibly refer to determinate items in the external realm. Although these different conceptions of an interface can be combined, they do not logically imply one another and since only the latter is relevant to the intentionalist, they are best treated separately.

With this distinction before us, we can now see that Putnam means two quite distinct things by denying that there is a perceptual interface between the mind and the world. One is the Sellarsian idea that the Given is a myth, something Putnam acknowledges is an important theme of McDowell (1994), but it is one which is hardly news to the intentionalist. The second, more interesting and controversial, idea is that our sense experience is not self-standing with respect to the external world. Let us consider this second idea in more detail.

Since the publication of Putnam's Twin-Earth arguments for semantic externalism, it has been widely accepted that the contents of propositional attitudes of various sorts depend upon facts about the physical environment of the speaker and upon social facts

about the linguistic community of the speaker.¹⁴ Nonetheless, some philosophers convinced by these arguments *also* hold that semantic externalism does *not* apply to the contents of sense experience, or at least not to their phenomenal contents.¹⁵ If John and Twin-Earth John are in the same physical state and, in particular, are appeared to in the same way, then even if the contents of their propositional attitudes differ—given the difference in their environments and social histories—they still must, one might think, share the same phenomenal experiences.¹⁶ The thought is that since experiences (or qualia) supervene on one's internal physical state, one must at least share the same experiences (or qualia) as one's *doppelgänger*, however different one's beliefs etc.

Let us call the doctrine that sense experience (or its phenomenal aspect) is self-standing with regard to the existence of the external world, the *autonomy* of subjective experience—allowing for different understandings of what constitutes subjective experience.¹⁷ According to this view, it makes sense, at least in principle, to think that one could have all the same subjective experiences over the course of a lifetime even if the external world did not exist, perhaps by supposing that one is a brain in a vat. Indeed, Searle thinks that, in a sense, each of us *is* a brain in a vat:

The brain is all we have for the purpose of representing the world to ourselves and everything we can use must be inside the brain. Each of our beliefs must be possible for a being who is a brain in a vat because each of us is precisely a brain in a vat: the vat is a skull and the 'messages' coming in are coming in by way of impacts on the nervous system. (Searle 1983, 230)

Of course, the doctrine of semantic externalism undermines such brain-in-a-vat scepticism. The contents of one's propositional attitudes will be causally constrained by one's actual environment, whether it is the external world or the vat-world. Nonetheless, if one is also committed to the idea of an empirical Given, then semantic externalism can provide no remedy to *scepticism about reference*. As we have seen, the permutation strategy of the Model-Theoretic Argument depends precisely on the thought that the mind is only *causally*, not *cognitively*, related to the world. So, no matter what one's theory of content, a defender of the empirical Given seems forced to concede that most of our terms are referentially indeterminate.

But the point I now wish to emphasize is that the autonomy of subjective experience, as advocated by the intentionalist, provides an additional and independent reason for thinking that the reference of our terms presents an insoluble paradox. Putnam's rejection of (non-conceptual) sense-data or qualia is, then, only *part* of the remedy. Putnam *also* wants to criticize Cartesianism cum materialism for its commitment to the autonomy of intentional content, or what we might also call a methodological solipsist conception of experience. Let me briefly try to explain Putnam's thinking in this regard.

It is important to see that the object-independence of experiential content *by itself* makes it mysterious how any given experience has a determinate reference to a particular object. The intentionalist, for instance, thinks that one can have an experience with the intentional content that *p*, where *p* is some proposition, even when not-*p*; say, a case of hallucination. But that raises the problem that insofar as intentional content is object-independent, how can the intentionalist *explain* the particular kind of object-directedness

that we enjoy in perceptual experience? Consider the case of seeing an oak tree again. The intentionalist must think that one's visual experience of the oak tree is something that could have been exactly what it is even if there were no oak tree in one's surrounding environment. One could be in the very same experiential state whether or not there is an oak tree there. But that makes one wonder how a perceptual state, that would be just as it is if there had been no appropriate environment, could constitute the appropriate object-directedness when there is an appropriate environment.

Given the autonomy of subjective experience, the causal theorist faces a dilemma which is similar to that facing causal theories of reference: (i) either she thinks that the object of her experience is whatever satisfies a uniquely identifying description which gives the intentional content of that experience; or (ii) she thinks that the object of her experience can be singled out purely in terms of causal relations. On the one hand, the arguments of Kripke (1972), Donnellan (1966) and others that widely discredited descriptive accounts of reference can also be employed to undermine descriptive accounts of the perceptual relation. The main challenge facing descriptive theories is that there is always the possibility that objects other than the right one will satisfy the description; or that the description will not be uniquely satisfied. As Putnam might put it, a description, no matter how detailed and specific, is satisfied equally well by an object's *doppelgänger* on Twin Earth.

On the other hand, one cannot respond by saying that the object-directness of veridical perceptual states is secured by a causal relation of the right kind. For one thing, what we intuitively call 'the cause' does not stand out by itself from all of the other contributing or background causal conditions. If I am looking at a table, the photons hitting my retina or the electrical activity of my optical nerves are causes just as the table is.¹⁸ But even if we could individuate the relevant object simply in terms of causal relations, something that we have seen is very doubtful, there is the further problem that this is the wrong *kind* of relation. A chief point of Putnam's criticism is that a mere causal relation cannot do the duty of a cognitive relation. While the existence of an appropriate causal relation might *explain* why we have a perceptual belief with a certain intentional content, it cannot serve to explain the possibility of *justifying* that we do. The referential bearing of experience on the world depends upon the fact that our experience of an object serves a rational role, providing us with *prima facie* reasons to believe things about that object in the external world. Since normatively constrained rational relations cannot be reduced to law-governed causal relations, the intentionalist cannot explain the possibility of the distinctive object-directness of perceptual states in terms of causal relations alone.

Once we distinguish the two distinct conceptions of perceptual interface, we can see that Putnam's underlying criticism is not, as it might initially seem, that the intentionalist posits unconceptualized intermediaries between one's cognitive powers and the world. The real criticism is that since the intentionalist is committed to the existential independence of intentional contents, he is not entitled to characterize experience as a genuine cognitive relation at all. The natural realist, in contrast, denies the autonomy of subjective experience. Natural realism is committed to the view that, when we succeed in perceiving, our experiential content depends on the existence of the relevant external objects in the sense that were the object not to exist, the relevant content would not be available.¹⁹

In deceptive cases, therefore, one is subject to the illusion of having a perceptually demonstrative thought. However, when couched in the appropriate seems-locution such content as deceptive experience has is conceptually parasitic upon one's having enjoyed at least some actual cases of non-deceptive experience in the past. In this way the possibility of empirical content in general is conditional upon there having been some cases of actually perceiving the external world. Seeing an oak tree and having a hallucination of an oak tree are not, therefore, thought to involve a common awareness of the same autonomous intentional content. In the case of actually seeing the tree, one's experience is partially constituted by the very presence of the tree.

This is a version of the disjunctive view of experience alluded to earlier. However, the natural realist version ought to be distinguished from McDowell's relatively simple version according to which 'an appearance that such-and-such is the case can be *either* a mere appearance or the fact that such-and-such is the case making itself perceptually manifest to someone' (1982, 472). For Putnam it takes more than two disjuncts to characterize experience adequately, on the Austinian ground that there are *many* different kinds of appearances (e.g. there are a range of cases of partially misperceived objects) and *many* different kinds of mere appearances (e.g. some hallucinations are deceptive, some not) (Austin 1962, 48).

Three Kinds of Direct Realism

We are now in a position to understand better the rather confusing things that Putnam says about 'direct' realism—something he admits is an 'unhappy name' (10). Let us distinguish three forms of direct realism:

- (i) *Weak Direct Realism*: the view that although what we are aware of in sense experience is a mental intermediary we do not *call* it the object of perception. The only things that are candidates for this linguistic title are external objects.
- (ii) *Standard Direct Realism*: the denial that there is any inference or mental proxy involved in sense experience of an external object. Perceptual experience is immediate in being non-inferential and unmediated.
- (iii) *Strong Direct Realism*: a commitment to the standard view and, in addition, to the claim that non-deceptive experience allows for demonstrative thought that is object-dependent.²⁰

Weak Direct Realism is what Putnam calls a mere 'verbal modification in the way the traditional picture is presented' (19). Apart from an earlier version of Putnam himself, it is unclear who else qualifies as a direct realist in this trivial or purely verbal sense. The title is usually reserved for the substantial thesis that there are no mental intermediaries in perception. Such Standard Direct Realism includes Intentionalists such as Searle and Strawson. Putnam seems to blur the distinction between the Weak and Standard versions of the view, perhaps because he rejects them both in favour of Strong Direct Realism. As we have seen, on the Standard version it is possible that our experience, though unmediated, is never, in fact, *of* the external world because the latter fails to exist. In that case our experience might be, in principle, a mere matter of 'affectations of our subjectivity' (20), which shows, significantly, that Standard Direct Realism is open to traditional sceptical

challenge. In contrast, according to the Strong version, veridical experience would not be what it is without the existence of the relevant external objects.²¹ And our ability to perceptually single out external objects is essential to our being able to refer to such objects in thought and talk quite generally.²²

I shall conclude by considering one last puzzle in Putnam's account of natural realism. Consider these remarks:

[The natural realist account] is, in the end, not an 'alternative metaphysical account' . . . Winning through to natural realism is seeing the *needlessness* and the *unintelligibility* of a picture that imposes an interface between ourselves and the world . . . in my opinion, 'direct realism' is best thought of not as a theory of perception but as a denial of the necessity for and the explanatory value of positing 'internal representations' in thought and perception. (41, 101)

Putnam repeatedly claims that natural realism is not a 'metaphysical account', nor is it a 'theory of perception'. It is, we are told, 'commonsensical', 'of the common man', something 'familiar' to which we can 'return'. What this suggests is that natural realism is not so much a philosophical theory as a set of common-sense truisms that could be attested to by the man on the street. Yet, as we have already suggested, it is questionable whether the ordinary phenomenological facts cannot be accommodated equally well by all the theories of perception so far considered on the grounds of common sense. And it is quite implausible to suggest that a statement of the doctrine of content externalism as applied to sense experience is a Moorean common-sense proposition akin to, say, 'Here is a hand'. Indeed, one might explain the fact that post-Cartesian philosophy has been haunted by the question of scepticism on the basis that we now find it hard to deny that, as Strawson (1985, 5) puts it, 'subjective experience could, logically, be just the way it is without its being the case that physical or material things actually existed'. One might think that this is borne out by the way in which we seem, with minimal explicit exposure to philosophy, to accept the intelligibility of life-like and life-long dreams, and various brain-in-a-vat scenarios.²³

Q3

Realism is often articulated as the view that must make room for global error, a possibility that is internal to external world scepticism. And Putnam's own Model-Theoretic Argument against realism is a form of scepticism about reference, one that provokes a recoil into anti-realism. If, as Putnam suggests, both of these forms of scepticism ultimately make no sense—since they rely upon such dubious metaphysical notions as a 'God's eye view' and a magical conception of reference—that is not something that can be established by common sense alone.²⁴ I conclude that for natural realism to present a viable alternative to both realism and anti-realism it must provide a convincing philosophical diagnosis of scepticism, especially of its apparent naturalness, and the ways in which the antinomy of realism depends upon it.

NOTES

1. The Dewey Lectures, titled 'Sense, Nonsense and the Senses: An Inquiry into the Powers of the Human Mind', originally appeared in the *Journal of Philosophy* (Vol. 91, 1994). They are reprinted in Putnam (1999) and all references will be to this text unless otherwise indicated.

2. Note that Putnam (1982, 49) misleadingly speaks of truth as 'some sort of (idealized) rational acceptability'. What 'ideal' means is simply 'good enough'. See Putnam (1992, 403). Q4
3. Putnam (1992, 371) has written that 'natural realist accounts are distinguished by their rejection of the very idea of "sense data"'. Q5
4. This expression is borrowed from John McDowell (1982).
5. In making this reply, no attempt is made to offer an explanation of the fact that deceptive and non-deceptive perception can be phenomenally indistinguishable.
6. It is also fair to complain that one ought not to assume that the same notion of 'inference' is applicable both to our thinking and to a sub-personal account of the underlying mechanisms responsible for it.
7. See Putnam (2002) for reservations about McDowell's fully conceptualized conception of experience. Q6
8. In a discussion of the decline of sense-data theories in 20th-century philosophy, Tim Crane (1992, 5) remarks 'that in a set of essays devoted to perception published twenty years ago, *F. Sibley's Perception: A Symposium* (1971), there was hardly a mention of sense-data'. Q7
9. See, for example, Grice (1988) and Strawson (1974, 1988).
10. The fact that subjective experiences are effects of outer objects does not imply, though it may encourage, the view that these effects are the immediate objects of perceptual awareness. Strawson, a causal theorist, writes: 'mature sensible experience (in general) presents itself as, in the Kantian phrase, an *immediate* consciousness of the existence of the things outside us' (1988, 96).
11. Of course, in this case, we could say that the intentional object of the experience does not exist. For a defence of the insubstantial view of intentional objects that I am advocating, see Crane (2001).
12. The interchangeability of the terms 'sense-data' and 'experience' appears to confirm that all that is at issue is a 'veil-of-ideas' theory of perception plus a 'simple linguistic reform'.
13. This description certainly seems to characterize accurately those philosophers who believe that secondary qualities such as colour are to be understood in terms of the dispositions of objects to produce colour qualia in the mind.
14. Putnam (1975) originally formulated this externalist position only with respect to the meanings of natural kinds such as water, aluminium and elm trees; and, by implication, those mental states whose content involves reference to such terms. There is a question about how far this account can be extended to other mental states. See also Burge (1982).
15. Strawson (1985) follows Searle in advocating just such an internalist conception of the intentional content of experience. See also McGinn (1982, 38). However, defenders of irreducible qualia are the current orthodoxy. See, for example, Jackson (1982), Peacocke (1983) and Shoemaker (1996).
16. The intuitive pull of this idea may, but need not, depend upon the idea that the content of experience is non-conceptual.
17. For some subjective experience may only refer to qualia, for others who deny the existence of qualia, it may refer only to intentional content, and, of course, for others still it may include both kinds of content.
18. Cf. Haugeland (1998).
19. For a detailed defence of this conception of content, see McDowell (1986).

20. The importance of perceptually demonstrative thought is largely implicit in Putnam's writing but is more evident in McDowell (e.g. 1986). For an argument to the effect that direct realism can be understood solely in terms of demonstrative singling out, see Snowdon (1992).
21. It is this object-dependence of the content of non-deceptive sense experience that, I take it, Putnam is indicating by way of the italicized terms in the expressions: (i) '*sensing* of aspects of the reality "out there"' (10) and (ii) "'external" things, cabbages and kings, can be *experienced*' (20).
22. Putnam remarks: 'If one wants to describe the use of the sentence "There is a coffee table in front of me," one has to take for granted its internal relations to, among others, facts such as that one perceives coffee tables. . . . I mean the full achievement sense, the sense in which to see a coffee table is to see that it is a coffee table that is in front of one' (14).
23. There are important differences between long-term and recent envatment which bear on the question of the content of the brain's psychological attitudes and experiences. The intelligibility of recent envatment—a condition that ensures that the reference of one's terms and concepts systematically fails—is all that I need rely on in the present context. Also note that in brain-in-a-vat scenarios we must distinguish the material objects that are apparently experienced from the material objects that actually exist, for example, the vat of nutrients, the super-computer, the super-scientist.
24. Here it is worth recalling Wittgenstein (1972, 58): 'There is no common sense answer to a philosophical problem'.

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Q14



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