
Pragmatic Verificationism in Hillary Putnam in the Context of the Critique of Metaphysical Realism

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Research Article

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Abstract: This article attempts to explore Hilary Putnam's understanding of pragmatic verificationism, which plays a significant role in his philosophy, within the context of his critiques of metaphysical realism. Although Putnam, who presents a new perspective on the concept of truth, does not explicitly state that he has constructed it within the framework of pragmatic principles, we argue in this study. Upon examining his thoughts, it can be seen that his later ideas, in particular, are consistent with a pragmatic philosophical understanding. Putnam's critique of metaphysical realism, along with logical positivism's critiques of verificationism and Popper's critiques of induction, shape his approach to truth and verificationism. Based on this, after presenting these critiques, we attempt to present the Putnamian version of pragmatic verificationism. In short, our study argues that Putnam is a pragmatic verificationist when it is recognized that he has introduced a new dimension to the concept of truth within the framework of his critiques of metaphysical realism.

Keywords: Verificationism, pragmatism, metaphysical realism, philosophy of science, Hillary Putnam.

Introduction

One of the most important problems in science is method. Setting aside general debates, the scientific method can be defined, in its broadest sense, as the process of identifying a scientific problem, formulating an explanatory claim related to that problem, testing that claim using various tools, and generating generalized theories from the data obtained as a result of these tests. Philosophy of science, on the other hand, advocates for the scientific method and how knowledge of nature can be obtained through this method. The fact that a claim is referred to as "scientific" may mean that it is justified by the methods employed by science and therefore reliable.¹ However, there's no such thing as a single method or methods used in science. When we examine the history of philosophy of science, the diversity of philosophers' methods supports our previous statement. Our study here is essentially aimed at this purpose.

Even if the concept of truth is primarily linked to epistemology, it also has connections to fields such as ethics, politics, and science. The meaning of any concept varies depending on its discipline and the perspective from which it is studied. Therefore, the relationship between the concept of truth, which is the fundamental starting point of our study, and other fields depends on its perspective. In other words, what is meant by truth depends on the context of the issue. Verificationism, which stems from the concept of truth, constitutes the main problem of our study, will be examined from a pragmatic perspective in the philosophy of science, specifically with Hillary Putnam. Therefore, when we talk about verificationism in our study, it exhibits a different character from that of positivist philosophy.

Putnam's² views on the philosophy of science are influenced by

¹ Umut Morkoç, *Herkes İçin Bilim Feslefeesi: Bilimsel Yöntemin Kısa Tarihi* (Ankara: Fol Kitap, 2023), 2-3.

² Even so Hilary Putnam, an American philosopher, was initially trained within the analytic philosophical tradition, he constructed his ideas by revising them from nearly every period of his life. He contributed to fields such as philosophy of science, logic, philosophy of language, and philosophy of mathematics. Furthermore, Putnam was politically active and philosophized on ethics. The unifying core of his philosophy lies in his defense of realism's claims as true or false. Like many realists, Putnam maintained that knowledge is possible, establishing the necessary distinctions

the principles of the pragmatic tradition. However, Putnam also incorporates influences from the analytic tradition. It can be argued that Putnam developed the pragmatic version of the question of truth in the philosophy of science after Charles Sanders Pierce.³ However, Putnam has a different perspective than Pierce in his understanding of 'truth'.⁴ Following this statement, Putnam's understanding of verificationism in the philosophy of science is one of the points that make him unique. Because he develops a pragmatic understanding of truth in a unique way, in contrast to both the coherence and correspondence theories.⁵ In this respect, Putnam's pragmatic verificationism differs from the kind developed by logical positivists. Logical positivists acknowledge that language has functions beyond providing true or false sentences. However, they argue that science is concerned with truth and, therefore, should be confined to the domain of clear principles of meaningfulness. Where traditional empiricists or empiricists treated ideas as units of thought and conceived of them as causal consequences of sense experience, logical positivists rejected them as vague entities, viewing instead linguistic entities such as sentences and words as fundamental vehicles of meaning. They proposed criteria of verifiability to explain the correspondence of these linguistic entities to experience. According to these criteria, the meaning of a sentence is the set of conditions that demonstrate that the sentence is true.⁶ Nevertheless, Putnam opposes the verificationism of logical positivism because of the a priori criterion here.

Critique of Metaphysical Realism

To reveal Putnam's critique of metaphysical realism, it is first necessary to define the meaning of metaphysical realism. More importantly, to understand Putnam's critique of metaphysical realism,

between knowledge and mere belief, tradition, dogma, and superstition. On this point, Putnam periodically revisited and revised his previous views. Yemime Ben-Mehamen, *Hilary Putnam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 1-15.

³ John R. Shook, *Pragmatizm*, çev. Celal Türer (Ankara: Fol Yayıncılık, 2021), 26-52.

⁴ Hilary Putnam, *Words and Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 152.

⁵ Ben-Mehamen, *Hilary Putnam*, 90-115.

⁶ Morkoç, *Herkes İçin Bilim Feslevesi*, 15.

also known as metaphysical realism, it is necessary to reveal the trajectory of his thought. Putnam is one of the important thinkers who continued the debate about scientific realism or reality in the 20th century. His stance on scientific realism can be examined in three periods. The first period is the scientific realism/realism period, which dates back to the 1960s and early 1970s. At this stage, Putnam opposed metaphysical realism. The fundamental characteristic of Putnam's scientific realism is its opposition to the physical reductionism of the positivist tradition. However, this opposition does not lead to metaphysical realism.⁷ His second period is internalist verificationism. During this period, Putnam was forced to revise his aforementioned understanding. For example, he accepted concepts such as "common sense" and "natural realism" despite their contradiction with internalist verificationism. In this regard, pragmatic pluralism prevails.⁸ Consequently, his later understanding emerged as natural realism, commonsense realism, or pragmatic realism. He defines this pragmatic realism in his work, *Representation and Reality*, by offering a general framework for what the perspective is, without engaging in polemics.⁹

In its most general sense, metaphysical realism is the acceptance of the world as it is, independent of whether humans or other researchers/questioners perceive or notice it. For example, the properties of the entities within the world, along with their relationships to other objects, constitute the fabric of the world. These entities exist independently of humans' ability to discover them. Based on this principle, metaphysical realism allows beliefs about the world to be objective; otherwise, no objectivity is possible.¹⁰

According to Putnam, metaphysical realism consists of three stages. The first stage is reference. According to metaphysical realism,

⁷ Hilary Putnam, *Philosophical Papers 3: Realism and Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), i- viii.

⁸ Hilary Putnam, *Pragmatism: An Open Question* (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishing, 1995), 15-25.

⁹ Hilary Putnam, *Representation and Reality* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1991), 108.

¹⁰ J. T. M. Miller, *Metaphysical Realism and Anti-Realism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 4-25.

this reference is determinate and observable. However, a point overlooked by metaphysical realism is that theoretical terms can also refer to unobservable entities. The subject matter of this science refers to the unobservable world as well as the observable one. In this context, according to Putnam, observable quality emerges as a result of the separation of two properties that are themselves unobservable.¹¹ The first feature, in the Putnamian critique, is that the references are observable but also do not include unobservability.

The second stage in metaphysical realism is truth, which is the main focus of our study. When tested, theories are approximately true rather than completely true. However, what is referred to as truth as correspondence indicates a particular understanding of truth. At this point, when truth is attributed to a theory, it is a genuine attribution, intended to indicate that the theory is true of the world.¹² In this context, it rests on the logical acceptance that a theory that is accepted and well-validated can be false simply because the world may not conform to it. For Putnam, such a theory involves a lack of truth and must be criticized on this point.

The final characteristic of metaphysical realism is continuity. A theory need not exist continuously, but rather must be continuous in its change. Continuity carries metaphysical realism beyond reference and truth. For example, there is no difference in the truth of the statement "there are electrons along the wire" and the statement "there is a cat in the house."¹³ At this point, the issue lies in the ability to be expressed through language. However, whether this criterion is sufficient for metaphysical realism is debatable.

Putnam examines metaphysical realism by placing the idea of pragmatic justification as its criterion or center. Metaphysical realism posits a conception of truth that is independent of the subject. By describing subjects as brains in a vat, this conception suggests that real-

¹¹ Hilary Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 87.

¹² Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History*, 176-177.

¹³ Putnam, *Words and Life*, 492-496.

ity cannot be completely encompassed. Conversely, he criticizes metaphysical realism from the perspective of pragmatic justification. Metaphysical realism argues that truth is the same and valid for everyone.¹⁴ Putnam, however, rejects this. For a monist perspective requires possessing God's ability to see, which is not possible for humans. Metaphysical realism posits a subject-independent understanding of truth. However, such a subject-independent understanding of truth is only possible when viewed through the eyes of God.¹⁵ The fact that subjects do not have the power and scope to provide this, and the absence of such a criterion, demonstrates one of the important shortcomings of metaphysical realism.

One philosopher of science that Putnam opposes and criticizes is Karl Popper. Popper stands out in the philosophy of science for the falsifiability of scientific theories and for his opposition to induction. More precisely, Popper argued that none of the scientific generalizations and theories can be definitively verified; instead, they can be definitively falsified. The conclusion to be drawn from this is that it is impossible to know whether scientific theories are definitively true; instead, they should be viewed as truths that can only be true.¹⁶ At this point, induction is not valid for Popper because it always involves the possibility of falsification. Putnam opposes Popper for his rejection of induction. Based on these statements, it can be said that Putnam affirms induction.¹⁷

However, Putnam's definition of induction as meta and pessimistic shows that he does not have an inductive idea developed by logical positivists.¹⁸ Although Putnam affirms the existence of induction, he differs intellectually from Popper and from logical positivists by defining it as a commodity.

¹⁴ Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History*, 2-10.

¹⁵ Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History*, 45-54.

¹⁶ Hüseyin Batuhan, *Bilimsel Düşünüşe Giriş: Uğur Felsefe Öğreniyor* (Ankara: Fol Kitap, 2019), 186-187.

¹⁷ Hilary Putnam, *Philosophical Papers 2: Language and Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 271-285.

¹⁸ Hilary Putnam, *Philosophy in an Age of Science: Physics, Mathematics, and Skepticism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 106.

Putnamian Pragmatic Verificationism

Pragmatism is also a theory of truth, as it investigates reality and searches for meaning.¹⁹ According to this philosophical tradition, truth is pluralistic, open-ended, and uncertain. For example, the proposition "the dog is on the carpet" has countless possibilities of verification. Therefore, dogs can be reinterpreted in numerous ways, as both the concept of carpet and carpets can be reinterpreted in countless ways, referring to dogs within the possible world.²⁰ Such examples can be multiplied in many ways, and existing examples can likewise be interpreted in different contexts and possibilities.

For 20th-century empiricists, known as logical positivists or logical empiricists, the answer to the question of the method of science is the principle of verification. This concept was primarily developed by the German-speaking Viennese circle. According to them, a statement can only be considered meaningful if it can be verified through observation. If a claim can be verified and confirmed through observation, there is no problem in believing it, that is, accepting it as true. If a claim cannot be verified, it is meaningless and requires no further effort. In this respect, the principle of verification provides a tool for distinguishing scientific knowledge from non-scientific knowledge.²¹

The Putnamian concept of truth has several characteristics that distinguish it from those of logical positivists and metaphysical realists. First, truth must possess a justifiable criterion. The justification characteristic here can also be expressed as justification. Justification/vindication, as the primary characteristic of truth, reduces it to an epistemic concept. Putnam, who does not clearly distinguish between truth and justificationism, closes the door to an "anything goes" approach with justification or justification criteria. The second characteristic of truth or justificationism is that it is neither theological nor too secular. In other words, justificationism must be protected from

¹⁹ William James, *Pragmatizm*, çev. Tahir Karakaş (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2019), 149-155.

²⁰ Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History*, 30-35.

²¹ Naomi Oreskes, *Bilime Neden Güvenmeliyiz?*, haz. Zülfü Dicleli (Ankara: Optimist Kitap, 2023), 35-36.

overdetermination and influence within certain epistemic constraints. The epistemic criteria to be established should be neither too broad nor too narrow but should be under the most ideal conditions. At this stage, language exists as a helpful tool, even an instrument that structures the world.²² In other words, truth exists thanks to the use of language.²³ This characteristic will ensure open-ended accuracy and, by influencing theories, can lead to endless debate. As a result, it is possible to provide many scientific descriptions rather than a single one.²⁴ Therefore, instead of a single window, a viewpoint with multiple perspectives is possible.

Pragmatic verificationism is Putnam's concept contrasted with fictionalism and skepticism. Putnam rejects the brains-in-a-vat concept of skepticism and metaphysical realism.²⁵ Let's begin by asking a question like this: How do we know we're not a brain in a vat? We can formulate the brain-in-a-vat problem as follows. For example, suppose we are a brain in a vat. Let's assume that this brain in a vat functions like a belief-generating mechanism, just like the human brain, with its specific characteristics of electrons and technologically-enabled software. In addition to this characteristic, let's also assume that the brain in a vat can create simulations. A problem arises when, starting from such a situation, we assume that we are in any given class and understand that what's happening around us is merely a simulation. The objection here comes from metaphysical realists. Their objection can be expressed as follows: If, based on the brain-in-a-vat argument, we are simply a simulation, and the world we inhabit is not ontologically real, then the problem arises.²⁶

²² Putnam, *Realism and Reason*, 20-25.

²³ Hilary Putnam, *Philosophical Papers 1: Mathematics, Method, and Matter* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 201.

²⁴ Hilary Putnam, *Ethics without Ontology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 20-21.

²⁵ Hilary Putnam, *Meaning and the Moral Sciences* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), 125-127.

²⁶ Taner Beyter, "Kavanozdaki Beyinler (BIV) Argümanı: Hepimiz Kavanozdaki Beyinler Olabilir miyiz?" *Evrin Ağacı*, https://evrimagaci.org/kavanozdaki-beyinler-biv-argumani-hepimiz-kavanozdaki-beyinler-olabilir-miyiz-8014?srltid=AfmBOors-FYeYNk1P6yrH6xk1vDltU7ACT5aA_OAD8GSrf4mb1-sf23K.

Referring to the above statements, skeptics and metaphysical realists describe the act of knowing itself as processes inherent in the mind. In the skeptical version, the question of how we know we are brains in vats remains unanswered. Verificationism against skepticism is described as the worst of all arguments. Therefore, both skepticism and fictionalism can be criticized for their lack of utility. However, the most appropriate orientation would be to focus on what makes us scientifically successful and functional. Putnam formulated this understanding as follows: "Such predicates, 'theoretical predicates,' should be considered empirically meaningful only to the extent that the system as a whole provides our experiences more successfully than we could without them."²⁷

Putnam's argument seems to be a kind of endless dialogue. He argues that it would be insufficient for anyone to say anything about what dictates the choice of a referential scheme. Because if anyone says something, it would be understood as "adding more theory," which could be reinterpreted in countless ways and would thus itself be referentially ambiguous. Is there truly an endless dialogue here, or is it a matter of ensuring truth by conformity? In response, Putnam, to avoid falling into the same critique he leveled against metaphysical realists, proposes to ensure that any reference *x* is properly true and works. In other words, his goal is not to specify the criteria by which it is true, as metaphysical realists do, but rather the criteria by which it works.²⁸ Putnam's approach can be presented as his formulation of pragmatic verificationism. However, there is a problem here: the criteria in question are not epistemically guaranteed.

Conclusion

In this study, we have attempted to present the issue as concisely as possible, relying on primary sources. We have attempted to frame the topic within appropriate frameworks to facilitate a clearer understanding of the context. While the philosopher's primary works con-

²⁷ Hilary Putnam, *The Collapse of the Fact Value: Dichotomy and the other Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 29.

²⁸ Putnam, *Philosophy in an Age of Science*, 103.

stitute the primary focus of our study, we have also consulted supporting sources. In addition, we have attempted to present justifications and evidence within appropriate frameworks. When verificationism is mentioned in the philosophy of science, the first thing that comes to mind is the logical positivists. However, this concept is not limited to logical positivists. In fact, thinkers who philosophize within the framework of pragmatism have also employed the concepts of truth, and, consequently, verificationism. Hilary Putnam's pragmatic verificationism is essentially constructed in conjunction with many concepts. For example, the use of language related to truth as a tool within appropriate frameworks supports our claim.

Putnam's early engagement with analytic philosophy and his later transition to pragmatism forced him to revise his worldview and thought. However, instead of evaluating issues in a completely predetermined context, he consistently advocated for open-endedness by asserting the criterion of "however." His revision of his early ideas, and his later shift to metaphysical realism, reflecting his intellectual positioning, reflect his later shift to pragmatic realism or common-sense realism. According to Putnam, the world independent of us cannot be considered independent of us because it is perceived and given meaning by our minds. Putnam's understanding of truth is based on diversity, depending on the world and the mind that perceives and gives meaning to it. Therefore, truth is not a single entity but rather a description based on the use of language. In this context, Putnam's understanding of truth is based on pluralism. His advocacy of pluralism essentially expresses his opposition to the physical reductionism of positivist thought. Putnam's revision of such opinions and thoughts is based on his rethinking and reformulation of issues.

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