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Maria Baghramian

**THREE PRAGMATISMS:
PUTNAM, RORTY AND BRANDOM**

ABSTRACT. Over the last several decades an increasing number of philosophers have announced their sympathies for or have become affiliated with what has become known as neo-pragmatism. The connection between the various strands of pragmatism, new and old, however, remains quite unclear. This paper attempts to shed some light on this issue by focusing on a debate between Hilary Putnam and Robert Brandom on classical and contemporary pragmatisms. Using the Brandom-Putnam debate as my starting point, I examine the relationship between the pragmatisms of Putnam and Rorty, two of the most influential neo-pragmatists, and argue that differing conceptions of the normative are at the heart of their disagreement. I further argue that this disagreement has similarities to, and can be illuminated by, two differing conceptions of norms in Wittgenstein's work. I conclude that Brandom does not delineate the differences between various strands of pragmatism convincingly.

The term 'neo-pragmatism' has been used rather indiscriminately to characterise the philosophical affiliations of a large number of twentieth century American philosophers - the best known among whom are Quine, Sellars, Putnam, Davidson, Goodman, Stich, and Brandom. It is unclear in what sense, if any, this new pragmatism may be seen as a unified doctrine; furthermore, the connections between neo-pragmatism and the classical American pragmatism of the turn of the twentieth century are also unclear. These difficult questions have been thrown into sharp relief through a recent exchange between Hilary Putnam and Robert Brandom (in Conant and Żegleń 2002).

In this paper, I try to disentangle some of the prominent strands of contemporary pragmatism by looking at the Brandom-Putnam debate. Ironically, the debate, and hence this paper, turns out to be not so much about Brandom's views as about Rorty's brand of neo-pragmatism,

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because, as Putnam maintains with good evidence, despite claims to the contrary, Brandom's real target is Richard Rorty.¹ I begin the paper by looking at how each member of this discordant triumvirate defines the supposedly common starting point of the debate: pragmatism.

1. The Many Faces of Pragmatism

According to Robert Brandom the term 'pragmatism' is "a generic expression that picks out a family of views asserting various senses in which practice and the practical may be taken to deserve explanatory pride of place" (Brandom 2002, p. 41). He distinguishes between narrow and broad versions of pragmatism. Pragmatism in the narrow sense is "a philosophical school of thought centered on evaluating beliefs by their tendency to promote success at the satisfaction of wants, whose paradigmatic practitioners were the classical American triumvirate of Charles Peirce, William James and John Dewey" (Brandom 2002, p. 40). The basic idea behind the classical pragmatism, Brandom argues, is "that one can understand normative assessments of the truth of beliefs as assessments of the extent to which the holding of that belief would contribute to the satisfaction of desires. Beliefs are true insofar as they are good tools or instruments for getting what one wants" (Brandom 2002, p. 51). Brandom calls this "instrumental pragmatism." Pragmatism, defined broadly, on the other hand, is a "movement centered on the primacy of the practical, initiated already by Kant, whose twentieth-century avatars include not only Peirce, James and Dewey, but also the early Heidegger, the *later Wittgenstein* and such figures as Quine, Sellars, Davidson, and Rorty" (Brandom 2002, p. 40, emphasis added).²

Hilary Putnam has vehemently objected to Brandom's characterisation of classical pragmatism. He expresses dismay that despite the efforts of serious students of pragmatism to rebut this type of interpretation for almost a century, the view still receives an airing from such an eminent philosopher. According to Putnam, the position attributed to the classical pragmatists by Brandom is one that should rightly be ascribed to Richard Rorty.³ He maintains that Brandom shows a deep misunderstanding of the

¹ Putnam's suspicions are backed by a rather careless footnote in Brandom's paper. See footnote 3 below.

² Presumably Brandom should also be included in this list.

³ As Putnam notes, the very last footnote of Brandom's paper more or less gives away the game. Brandom concludes: "For this reason, I think one ought to reject the global form of instrumental pragmatism, as well as the local one" (p. 58), and then in the footnote he

work of Peirce, James and Dewey (Putnam 2002, pp. 59-65). More specifically, Putnam denies Brandom's claims that the classical Pragmatists:

Either (1) identified what is true with what promotes success in the satisfaction of wants; *or* (2) thought that we should forget about truth and just concentrate on finding what promotes success in the satisfaction of wants; *or* (3) thought that what promotes success in the satisfactions of wants is more important than what is true. (Putnam 2003, p. 60)

It is useful to point out, in support of Putnam, that James's own account of the genesis of pragmatism emphasized the significance of the practical and in doing so it readily fits in with Brandom's definition of broad pragmatism. To remind ourselves, James, in his classic statement of the doctrine, credits Peirce with having coined the term 'pragmatism' and recounts:

Mr. Peirce, after pointing out that our beliefs are really rules for action, said that, to develop a thought's meaning, we need only determine what conduct it is fitted to produce: that conduct is for us its sole significance. And the tangible fact at the root of all our thought distinctions, however subtle, is that there is no one of them so fine as to consist in anything but a possible difference of practice. To attain perfect clearness in our thought of an object, then, we need only consider what conceivable effects of a practical kind the object may involve – what sensations we are to expect from it, and what reactions we must prepare. Our conceptions of these effects, whether immediate or remote, is then for us the whole of our conceptions of the object, so far as that conception has positive significance at all. (James 1907, p. 86)

As James's account shows, the core of classical pragmatism is the emphasis on the lived experiences and practices we engage in our encounters with the world.

Putnam's characterisation of his brand of pragmatism is scattered in his writings of the past twenty years and amounts to a nuanced and complex picture. One way to understand Putnam's pragmatism is to see it as the negation of a philosophical position he rejects – the position he calls "metaphysical realism." He defines metaphysical realism as the philosophical perspective according to which:

Komentarz [P1]: a or b?

Komentarz [P2]: There is no such entry in Reference Section. If it should be 2002 here, please precise which one: a or b?

adds: "Accordingly, I find a major tension in Rorty's thought, between his robust appreciation of the transformative potential of new vocabularies and his continued appeal to instrumental models for thinking and talking about them" (p. 215).

- (a) The world consists of some fixed totality of mind-independent objects, (a view defended, among others, by Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus*), and it has a fixed totality of properties.
- (b) There is exactly one true and complete description of “the way the world is.”
- (c) There is a sharp distinction between properties we “discover,” i.e., the world, and the properties we “project” onto the world. Similarly, there is a sharp distinction between factual judgements and value-judgements.
- (d) Truth involves a relation of correspondence between words, thought-signs, or propositions and external things and sets of things.
- (e) It is possible to take an externalist, or God’s eye point of view, on reality. The empirical sciences describe such a concept-independent and perspective-independent reality. A “finished science” will provide us with a full account of what there is. (Based on Putnam 1981, pp. 49-56; 1987, p. 4; and 1990.)

Putnam finds these assumptions of metaphysical realism, incoherent, rather than merely false. Contra the metaphysical realists, he argues that we cannot have a view of the world that does not reflect our interests and values – and in this he echoes sentiments expressed by James. But contrary to the relativistic interpretations of pragmatism, implicit in Brandom’s definition of instrumental classical pragmatism, he maintains that we are “committed to regarding some views of the world – and, for that matter, some interests and values – as better than others” (Putnam 1990, p. 210). Putnam believes that Brandom’s conception of classical pragmatism, or pragmatism in the narrow sense, comes close to the relativism he wishes to reject but is an accurate description of Rorty’s views on the subject.

Pragmatism as a positive doctrine, for Putnam, comes down to subscribing to the following theses:

- (I) The rejections of various unhelpful and pernicious dualisms, including, most importantly, the subjective-objective dualism and its close relation, the fact-value dichotomy (e.g., Putnam 1985 and 2002). Like the classical pragmatists, Putnam believes that all knowledge of fact presupposes value judgements (Putnam 2003, p. 60). In this he echoes the view of Dewey who denied the existence of a dividing line between moral and scientific knowledge or facts and values and who argued, “to frame a theory of knowledge which makes it necessary to deny the validity of

Komentarz [P3]: The same problem as above.

moral ideas, or else to refer them to some other and separate kind of universe from that of common sense and science, is both provincial and arbitrary” (Dewey 1908, p. 53).

- (II) Fallibilism: All beliefs are open to revision and all interpretations and methods of enquiry have a provisional authority only (Putnam 1994, p. 152). This is a philosophical position also common to the classical pragmatists, Dewey, James and Peirce (Putnam 2003, p. 60).
- (III) Antiscepticism: “pragmatists hold that doubt requires justification just as much as belief does” (Putnam 1994, p. 152).
- (IV) The thesis that practice, including practical reason, is primary in philosophy (Putnam 1994, p. 152; and 1995). This thesis may be seen as the core of pragmatism, both new and old.
- (V) Jamesian pluralism: the position that our views of the world reflect our interests and values and that our interpretations of the world are correct given the interests relevant to the context of those interpretations, and hence there could be more than one correct conception or interpretation of a given situation.⁴

Komentarz [P4]: I deleted „a” after „1994” (in both cases).

However, Putnam has also explicitly stated that he is not a pragmatist (Putnam, R.A. 2002, p. 7) because he rejects the pragmatist theory of truth which may be susceptible to the charge of relativism.⁵ Over the last decade, Putnam has come to embrace, once again, a robust non-instrumental and non-epistemic conception of truth, this more recent reaffirmation of the role of truth places him in the realist rather than pragmatist camp, even though he sees his new realism as continuous with the dictates of the common sense rather than with metaphysical realism that he has rejected since the early 1970s.

Rorty shares Putnam’s distaste for dichotomised thinking⁶ and rejects the divisions between descriptions and evaluations. Unlike Putnam, however, Rorty embraces a “sociological view of truth” whereby truth, rationality, and objectivity are to be defined in terms of the practices of a community. According to this view, the terms ‘knowledge’ and ‘truth’ are compliments paid to beliefs that we think to be well-justified, for the moment, so that no further justification is needed (Rorty 1998). In other words, ‘true’ for Rorty is a term of commendation for exactly those beliefs that we consider well-supported at a given time. Pragmatism in

Komentarz [P5]: a, b, or c?

⁴ For this point see my (2004, Ch. 7) and Russell Goodman in this volume (pp. ??-??).

⁵ This was not true of an earlier Putnam who supported the Deweyan truth-like notion of warrant or warranted assertibility (see Putnam 1987, for instance).

⁶ Or what, in Baghramian (2004), I call philosophical Manichaeism.

Rorty's hand comes down to the view that "there is nothing to be said about either truth or rationality apart from descriptions of the familiar procedures of justification which a given society – ours – uses in one or another area of enquiry" (1991, 1985, p. 6). Rorty rejects the accusation that his view is tantamount to the "self-refuting" variety of relativism he condemns, because, according to his brand of pragmatism, there is a distinction between better and worse beliefs, beliefs that are justified and those that are not. However, he claims that pragmatism entails ethnocentrism (Rorty 1991, 1985, p. 6) the view that "we must, in practice, privilege our own group, even though there can be no non-circular justification for doing so" (Rorty 1998, p. 29). He argues: "there is no truth in relativism, but this much truth in ethnocentrism: we cannot justify our beliefs (in physics, ethics, or any other area) to everybody, but only to those whose beliefs overlap ours to some appropriate extent" (Rorty 1991, p. 30, n.13). He defends the inevitability of ethnocentrism by arguing that terms such as 'warranted' and 'rationally acceptable' always invite the question "to whom?". Just as the terms 'better' and 'worse' invited the question "by what standard?". The answer, he claims, is always "us, at our best," where the relevant group, the us, consists of the educated, sophisticated, tolerant, wet liberals, the people who are always willing to engage in debate and keep an open mind (Rorty 1998, p. 52).

Komentarz [P6]: There is no such entry in the Reference Section.

Komentarz [P7]: a, b, or c?

Komentarz [P8]: I deleted „a” after „1991.”

Komentarz [P9]: a, b, or c?

Despite Rorty's protestations, his ethnocentrism sails perilously close to relativism because of the strong links it forges between truth and the cognitive and social practices of a community of enquirers. If we accept that there are diverse communities whose cognitive practices vary substantially and at times are in conflict with each other, then the sociological account of truth ends up giving us differing and incompatible conceptions of truth, rationality and objectivity where each of these conceptions is legitimately backed by distinct social and cognitive practices. Rorty's ethnocentrism ultimately is a relativistic doctrine for all relativists are condemned to be ethnocentric.⁷ The relativist, through her claim that truth and knowledge, standards of justification and criteria of right and wrong are relative to their socio-cultural background embraces a type of determinism that makes ethnocentrism inevitable. If truth is decided by the local norms of our culture, then we are condemned to believe what our culture tells us to be true. The relativist of course accepts that members of other cultures are similarly entrapped by their own cognitive and ethical norms, but that

⁷ But obviously not all ethnocentrists are relativists.

acknowledgement does not free the relativist from the bind of ethnocentrism, or thinking that his ethnos has the best hold on truth and justification. Rorty tries to distance himself from relativism because he wishes to disassociate from the pernicious conclusion that every point of view is as good as every other. But it's not really clear that his ethnocentrism would achieve this goal.

A similar point can be made regarding the suggestion that truth is a matter of intersubjective agreement. By tying the idea of truth to that of justification, and by making justification audience and context dependent, Rorty embraces relativism. Rorty readily admits, "justification is relative to an audience" (Rorty 1998, p. 22), and that he cannot give "any content to the idea of non-local correctness of assertion" (Rorty 1998, p. 60), non the less he continues denying that his views amount to relativism. But to explicate truth in terms of local correctness is to concede to one of the crucial posits of relativism: that truth is dependent on local and changing norms and conceptions.⁸ Rorty also argues that we can make sense of the notion of objectivity only in terms of intersubjective agreement – "there is nothing to objectivity except intersubjectivity" (Rorty 1998, p. 72). However, given that, given that we can cite many instances when different communities of enquirers have agreed on beliefs different to and incompatible with ours, then to rely on the authority of intersubjective agreement is to accept that there are as many legitimate epistemic authorities as there are internally united communities of enquirers. To make truth a matter of intersubjective agreement is, in effect, to deny the distinction between truth and falsity for history is resplendent with examples of false beliefs which were accorded intersubjective agreement – where a false belief was seen as "true" and "justified," by a community of enquirers.

Rorty also claims that to be a pragmatist is to accept that truth simply is the best idea we currently have about how to explain what is going on. One problem is to decide who the relevant and significant "we" is. Given a conflict between differing scientific explanations or ethical viewpoints how are we going to decide which "we" has the best idea? Unless we assume either that, there always is a consensus on what the best idea for an explanation is, or that there is a method of grading various explanations, we are left with divergent and conflicting "truths" and relativism looms large. The point is how to arbitrate between conflicting explanations or vocabularies, if what decides whether a statement is warranted, or good to believe, depends only on local knowledge, historic

Komentarz [P10]: a, b, or c (in both cases)?

Komentarz [P11]: a, b, or c?

⁸ For a discussion of different types of relativism see Baghramian (2004, Introduction).

and cultural conditions, and the presuppositions that inform the epistemic judgments of a group of thinkers. Once we start using the term ‘warranted (to us)’ rather than ‘true’ the specter of relativism begins to haunt us. It may be objected that the rupture between truth and warrant comes about only in cases where we mistakenly had assumed that we had a warrant for a belief and not in those instances where we actually have genuine warrant. The problem with this reply is that the distinction between thinking that one is warranted and actually being warranted is the distinction between true (warrant) and false (warrant) and hence the distinction between truth and falsity.⁹

Rorty comes close to conceding that a substantive notion of truth is eliminable by arguing that only the only use of truth which could not be eliminated from our linguistic practices with relative ease is the cautionary use. That is the use we make of the word when we contrast justification and truth, and say that a belief may be justified but not true. According to him, this cautionary use is used to contrast less-informed with better informed audiences, past audiences with future audiences. (Rorty 2000, p. 4). This is the use of ‘true’ in statements such as “although your statement satisfies all our contemporary norms and standards, and I can think of nothing to say against your claim but still, what you say might not be true.” Rorty thinks that this cautionary use is a gesture toward future generations or the “better us” as he calls them (Rorty 1998, pp. 60-61). So even this cautionary use is interpreted in sociological terms, and relies on an ethnocentric approach to what may count as true.

Komentarz [P12]: a, b, or c?

There is much in common to Putnam and Rorty’s conceptions of pragmatism. Both authors reject metaphysical realism, the correspondence theory of truth and an ontology of facts; they deny the intelligibility of there being “a view from no-where” and argue against absolutist conceptions of truth and knowledge; they emphasize the role of lived experiences; they also tend to trace their philosophical genealogy to classical American pragmatism in general and Dewey (and to varying degrees James) in particular, and acknowledge the formative role of later Wittgenstein on their thought. And yet, Rorty and Putnam are distanced by a considerable philosophical gulf. It is to their differences that we now turn.

⁹ For a discussion relativism about truth in general and a more detailed treatment of some of the above points see Baghramian (2004, Ch. 4).

2. Norms and Their Standing

A central issue at the heart of the varying conceptions of pragmatism I have discussed is the status and role of norms and values. Cognitive or epistemic norms, truth, rationality, justification, coherence and such like, provide us with rules or at least guideline as to how we ought to reason, infer or conceptually engage with the world. Similarly, ethical norms in the moral domain provide us with guidelines for our interactions with other people and the world. The status and the source of the authority of cognitive or epistemic norms are central to the disagreement between Rorty and Putnam's differing conceptions of neo-pragmatism and are also crucial to Brandom's discussion of the topic.

According to Brandom, as we saw, the classical pragmatists "endorse a normative pragmatics" (Brandom 2002, p. 58), but they emphasise the *instrumental* role that norms play in our conceptual and epistemic economy. Cognitive performances can be seen as better or worse, correct or incorrect, insofar as they contribute to the agent's success in securing some end or achieving some goal. Brandom's own view of norms is non-instrumental. Norms are implicit in discursive practices. They are commitments that can be understood as social *statuses*, instituted by practical attitudes of participants in an essentially social linguistic practice (Brandom 2002, p. 54).

Both Putnam and Rorty wish to emphasize the central role of norms and epistemic values in our cognitive economy. For Putnam, normative discourse is indispensable not only to what scientists do, or to scientific inquiry, but also to our social and personal life, for we "cannot escape making value judgements of all kinds in connection with activities of every kind. Nor do we treat these judgements as matters of mere taste, we argue about them seriously, we try to *get them right* . . ." (Putnam 1994, p. 154). Rorty agrees with Putnam that the terms 'knowledge' and 'truth' have a normative role in our conceptual economy, but unlike Putnam, deems their authority to be merely local – to be confined to the linguistic and social practices of a given community.

Putnam and Rorty, then, part company in their constructions of the nature and sources of norms, the vexed question of whether their authority is based on intersubjective agreement only or whether they have some form of objective authority. A strong feature of Putnam's philosophical outlook – throughout the many changes it has undergone – is a belief in the possibility of a robust conception of right and wrong, truth and falsehood. The difficulty facing him now, as in the past twenty years, is how to reconcile this quest for objectivity with his insistence

that all such judgements are also context-dependent. Putnam's initial solution was to appeal to the epistemic notion of idealised rational acceptability, a view that he came to reject in the 1990s. For a period, in *Realism with a Human Face* for instance, he appealed to the Deweyan notion of warrant (short for the Deweyan technical notion of "warranted assertibility") and argued that:

In ordinary circumstances, there is usually a fact of the matter as to whether the statements people make are warranted or not [. . .]. Whether a statement is warranted or not is independent of whether the majority of one's cultural peers would *say* it is warranted or unwarranted. (Putnam 1990, p. 21)

In his most recent book, Putnam has appealed to the core but nebulous Kantian idea of the authority of reason. According to his current thinking objectivity is a matter of "judgments of the reasonable and the unreasonable" (Putnam 2004, p. 71). Logical statements, methodological value judgments in science and most ethical judgments are objectively true or false in this sense of objectivity. Reasonableness is not the outcome of the activities of a transcendent metaphysical faculty, rather what is and what is not reasonable is decided in the context of the concerns of the specific enquiry at hand.

For Rorty, on the other hand, objectivity, in so far as it can be made sense of, is a question of socially sanctioned warrant, there is no more to objectivity than the achievement of intersubjective agreement by members of an ever-expanding community of enquirers. For pragmatists, he argues:

The desire for objectivity is not the desire to escape the limitations of one's community, but simply the desire for as much intersubjective agreement as possible, the desire to extend the reference of "us" as far as we can. Insofar as pragmatists make a distinction between knowledge and opinion, it is simply the distinction between topics on which such agreement is relatively easy to get and topics on which agreement is relatively hard to get. (Rorty 1985, p. 5)

Komentarz [P13]: There is no such entry in Reference Section.

Rorty's version of objectivity, as we saw, leads to relativism – a philosophical cul-de-sac that Rorty himself wishes to avoid. Rorty also emphasises what he sees as his Darwinian or naturalist conception of normative concepts such as truth. Language is a tool for coping with our environment, rather than representing it, he argues, and the normative elements of language are rules for enabling us to use this tool more effectively. Rorty does not see any tension between his sociological account of warrant and the naturalist, Darwinian approach, but the two

strands of his thought are not fully compatible. For instance, it is unclear how Rorty will explain the prevalence of irrational (and in that sense non-adaptive) ways of thinking and dealing with the world.¹⁰

Putnam's view on the status of norms, on the other hand, leaves us with the perennially problematic questions: whose reason? and which standard of reasonableness? As Putnam himself accepts, reason is historically embedded and informed by the context in which embodied human beings find themselves. Even in logic, and not just in ethics, there are disagreements on what counts as reasonable. Consider, for instance, the disagreements between classical logicians and relevant and paraconsistent logicians on the status of the law of excluded middle and even the principle of non-contradiction. Whose norms of reasonableness are we going to accept? Moreover, there is ample empirical evidence to show that human beings deviate quite substantially from accepted norms of reason in their thinking. For instance, as various studies have shown, experimental subjects tend to reason very badly in standard tests which supports the common sense belief that human beings do not reason according to a single standard norm of rationality (see Stich 1990, p. 4). Therefore, Putnam cannot rely on empirical arguments to establish the universality of reason. Without a more secure footing for his appeal to the authority of reason and reasonableness, is he condemned to Rortyan relativism? Do all good pragmatists – new and old – end up either as relativists or as ethnocentrists?

3. Pragmatism, Relativism, and Wittgenstein

The issues facing Putnam and Rorty's pragmatism has parallels in competing interpretations of the views of later Wittgenstein – a philosopher who has been a source of inspiration for both Putnam and Rorty. To appreciate Wittgenstein's relevance to the present discussion we need to go back to Brandom's position paper. Brandom directs his critical remarks towards what he calls the "narrow conception of pragmatism" but believes the broader version to be both important and interesting. Wittgenstein as well as Rorty, according to Brandom, belong to this broader tradition. Putnam, on the other hand, believes

¹⁰ Steven Jay Gould and Richard Lewontin have, with good reason characterised the attempts to use natural selection as an explanation for every human trait as "Panglossian" for they resemble Dr. Pangloss's argument, in Voltaire's *Candide*, that humans have noses so that their glasses can be kept in place.

Wittgenstein to be fundamentally non-Rortyan (see for instance Putnam 1992, 1995, and 2002).¹¹ Which of these interpretations is correct?

Wittgenstein may be seen as a pragmatist insofar as he emphasises the role of socially regulated practices and public use in creating meaning. No rules, including rules of logic, Wittgenstein argues, exist independently of the occasions of using them. In language, as in reasoning, “in the beginning was the deed” (Wittgenstein 1980, p. 31). Instead of looking for abstract relations between language and the world, we are asked to pay attention to the lived contexts in which language is used. Linguistic communication is a rule-governed social activity which takes place within the framework of a whole host of other social activities (or what he calls “language-games”). All human life, including our conceptual life, takes place within a cultural, social and biological context, or a “form of life.” Language, thought and action cannot be understood in isolation from the activities, the goals and the needs of the players of specific language-games within the background of their form of life. And at all times we should remember that “What has to be accepted, the given, is – so one could say – *forms of life*” (Wittgenstein 1958, p. 226e).

Rorty and Putnam’s differing conceptions of norms have strong parallels with two seemingly distinct strains in Wittgenstein’s attempts to give an account of the rule-governed nature of our conceptual dealings with the world. According to Rorty, the later Wittgenstein, like James and Dewey, belongs to the group of philosophers who have “kept alive the suggestion that, even when we have justified true belief about everything we want to know, we may have no more than *conformity to the norms of the day*” (Rorty 1980, p. 367, emphasis added). For Rorty’s Wittgenstein, as Putnam also notes, what is true or false in different language-games is determined by criteria internal to those games, according to this conception, “there is no such thing as one language game being *better* than another except in the sense of ‘better relative to certain interests’” (Putnam 1995, p. 33). This is the Wittgenstein who explains “the normativity of rule – following in terms of conformity to the standards of a community” (Putnam 1996, p. 243). This reading turns the later Wittgenstein into a relativist, admittedly a sophisticated and subtle one, but a relativist non-the-less.¹²

Komentarz [P14]: No such entry.

Komentarz [P.Z.15]: Footnote below: no such entry.

¹¹ Wittgenstein’s own relationship with Pragmatism has been the subject of much debate (see, for instance, Russell Goodman 1998). Wittgenstein did read James and seemed to have had a high opinion of him. However, I am going to put aside these historical connections for the purposes of this paper.

¹² See Blackburn (2004) and O’Grady (2004) – two treatments of the question of

Several lines of thought in Wittgenstein's work are conducive to this relativist reading. The emphasis he places on the role of the communal and shared nature of the form of life that informs all conceptual activities finds a sympathetic ear among the cultural relativists. Wittgenstein seems to be arguing that all judgments can meaningfully arise only from within the context of a form of life, and there is no possibility of standing outside all forms of life in the hope of making objective, external comparisons or offering criticisms of the comparative merits of various belief systems. Furthermore, in several places Wittgenstein seems to be envisaging alternative language-games or *forms* of life which embody concepts and conceptions very different from the ones we find familiar. For instance, he describes communities with different approaches to measuring length or quantity (e.g., using rubber rulers), or ones with alternative ways of counting (e.g., counting the same object twice). In the same way, he suggests, there could be forms of life that use rules of logic and processes of reasoning substantially different from the ones we take for granted. Alternative forms of life can have alternative conceptions of reason and reasonableness, or alternative cognitive norms. Even the rules of logic and standards of reasonableness, he seems to say, are relative to the form of life from which they emanate and in which they are embedded. In *Zettel* he tells us: "I want to say: an education quite different from ours might also be the foundation for quite different concepts. For here life would run on differently" (Wittgenstein 1972, p. 387). The Rortyan Wittgenstein emphasises the contingency of all human activities. He wants to show that the role of thinking and inferring in our life is both defined and circumscribed by our social and cultural activities, for as a good pragmatist he has to accept that in the beginning was the deed and the deed was bounded only by the dictates of societal conventions. The Rortyan Wittgenstein, in *Philosophical Investigations* §199, announces: "To obey a rule, to make a report, to give an order, to play a game of chess are customs (uses, institutions)" (1958). Since customs, frequently, are entirely culture-specific, one natural reading of this passage is that Wittgenstein delineates and interprets the act of a rule-following, the quintessential manifestation of normativity, in purely culturally contextualised terms. This is Wittgenstein engaged in Rortyan pragmatism, but it is not at all clear if this is the pragmatism that Brandom wishes to defend.

Almost simultaneously, Wittgenstein appears to be distancing himself from relativism. In *On Certainty*, for instance, he claims that a man cannot make a mistake unless he already judges in conformity with

Wittgenstein's relativism. I have discussed Wittgenstein's relativism in my (2004, Ch. 3).

mankind (Wittgenstein 1968, §156), a comment that seems to emphasize the universal features of human judgment. This is the Wittgenstein Putnam champions. Putnam agrees that for Wittgenstein, a form of life is a background to all speech and thought. A form of life is constituted by our physical nature and particular socio-linguistic conventions, but not merely by them for the normative elements governing reason and thought go beyond the merely natural and conventional. In a telling passage in *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics* he argues:

Then according to you everybody could continue the series as he likes, and so infer anyhow! In that case we shan't call it "continuing the series" and also presumably not "inference." And thinking and inferring (like counting) is of course bounded for us, not by an arbitrary definition, but by natural limits corresponding to the body of what can be called the role of thinking and inferring in our life. (Wittgenstein 1978, p. 20)

This is the Putnamian Wittgenstein. This Wittgenstein is denying that rules can exist outside those practices which invoke them, or that they can be understood independently of their applications. He accepts that rules cannot exist independently of the social occasions of using them, but, the emphasis on the social character of thought should not be taken as an indication of Wittgenstein's relativism. According to Putnam, "the Wittgensteinian strategy [. . .] is to argue that while there is such a thing as correctness in ethics, in interpretation, in mathematics, the way to understand that is not by trying to model it on the ways in which we get things right in physics, but by trying to understand the life we lead with our concepts in each of these distinct areas" (Putnam 1996, p. 263). The question for Putnam's Wittgenstein, and indeed Putnam himself, is how to cash out the idea of correctness so that while retaining the pragmatist ideal of the primacy of practice we do not succumb to the temptations of Rortyan relativism. This very question, I believe, is at the heart of Wittgenstein's self-questioning. He asks:

So you are saying that human agreement decides what is true and what is false?

And responds:

– it is what human beings *say* that is true and false; and they agree in the *language* they use. That is not agreement in opinions but in form of life. (Wittgenstein 1958, §241)

It is difficult to know how exactly to interpret this passage. What does Wittgenstein mean by "agreement in form of life"? One possible, but unsatisfactory, reading is that what is true and false, in some sense, is

decided by the (agreed) conventions of a shared form of life, and in that sense it is relative to it.

A second possible reading is to see “agreement” as a limit concept which places specific constraints on all (human) forms of life. The constraints may operate in two distinct but complimentary ways. The agreement on form of life, firstly, may arise out of the natural and biological dimensions of human existence. Putnam acknowledges the importance of this type of constraint on the limits of a form of life and in doing so highlights an interesting connection between Dewey and Wittgenstein. According to Putnam:

Like John Dewey, [...], Wittgenstein has a naturalistic (but not a reductionist) view of man. We are not mere animals, but our capacities for understanding and for reasoning are capacities which grow out of more primitive capacities which we share with animals (Dewey spoke of “biosocial continuity” in this connection). (Putnam 1992, p. 175)

Rorty, who advocates a Darwinian naturalism but sees its role as one of the main points of his disagreement with Putnam, would agree with much of this. However, while according to Rorty we are mere animals, for Putnam there are further constraints at play – constraints that belong more firmly to *the space of reason*. The further constraint operating on form of life, the constraint that imposes agreement within a given form of life, has to do with the connection between foundational activities – such as thinking and inferring – within a language game and the norms that govern these games.¹³ The role of thinking and inferring in our life sets limits to what can be seen as intelligible instances of these cognitive activities just as the role of the activity of measuring in a form of life, to take a favourite Wittgensteinian example, limits what may be seen as an accurate and useful systems of measurement. The role or function of taking measurements provides us with norms that are *constitutive* of and foundational to the very activity of measurement and simultaneously define what would count as a usable system of measurement.

Such constitutive norms are non-contingent in the limited sense that the activity under consideration is defined by them and achieves its coherence and applicability from them. They are also foundational in the Wittgensteinian sense that “one might say these foundation walls are carried by whole house” (Wittgenstein 1968, §248; also in Putnam 2004, p. 63). Such norms are also universal to the effect that they are binding

¹³ I am not sure if Putnam would endorse this position, but I think the various things he has said on Wittgenstein over the last decade are not out sympathy with the position canvassed above.

on all those who engage in activities of *that particular kind*. A similar point can be made regarding the norms governing the activity of counting, on the one hand, and the role of counting in a form of life. In *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, for instance, he says:

For what we call “counting” is an important part of our life’s activities. Counting and calculating are not – e.g. simply a pastime. Counting (and that means: counting like this) is a technique that is employed daily in the most various operations of our lives. And that is why we learn to count as we do: with endless practice, with merciless exactitude; that is why it is inexorably insisted that we shall all say ‘two’ after ‘one’, ‘three’ after ‘two’ and so on. ■ But is this counting only a use, then: isn’t there also some truth corresponding to this sequence?” The truth is that counting has proved to pay. ■ Then do you want to say that ‘being true’ means: being usable (or useful)? No, not that; but that it can’t be said of the series of natural numbers any more than of our language that it is true, but: that it is usable, and, above all, it is used. (Wittgenstein ???, Section I, pp. 4-5)

Komentarz [P16]: Are these signs correct?

The pragmatist overtones of the passage, both in Brandom’s narrow and broad senses, are quite striking. But what is also noticeable is the emphatic sounding claim that we call “counting” is an important part of our life activities. To be able to count is to be able to follow a set of rules and to follow them the same way that others do. Wittgenstein is denying that norms can exist outside the actual practices which involve their application, this is part of his anti-platonism, norms have no reality independently of their actual applications. He also allows that there can be many possible interpretations for any given rule. This is a part of his purported relativism. But he also emphasises that the possibility of a plurality of interpretations does not imply that we will be correct in following rules according to our individual interpretation, because such rules possess a social character and their correct application is determined in a communal, rather than solipsistic setting. Acknowledging this social character is a crucial aspect of the social pragmatism of Wittgenstein. This, I think, is non-controversial. But to allow that the correct application of norms is a communal affair should not lead to the conclusion that their authority is only social as well. To know how to count, to know that “we shall all say ‘two’ after ‘one’, ‘three’ after ‘two’ and so on” is to follow the norms and rules that define, and are constitutive, of the act of counting within our form of life. To paraphrase Wittgenstein, “Counting is of course bounded for us, not by an arbitrary definition, but by natural limits corresponding to the body of what can be

called the role of counting in our life” (based on Wittgenstein 1978, p. 20, cited above).

What goes for counting also goes for other, foundational, language games. Cognitive norms often have both constitutive and foundational roles. The very act of thinking presupposes logic, to debate or even to have a coherent discussion with someone is to respect the law of non-contradiction, to do science is to engage with the world within the sphere of cognitive norms that in part define science. This seems even true of moral norms, to be a human being (rather than a psychological aberration) is to have ethical concerns for; our ability to have moral engagements with others and the world is part of what makes us human. Thus to be able to participate in a (human) form of life and to engage with others within it is to be governed by a set of norms. The binding force of these norms, as well as the constraints imposed by nature, brings about agreement in form of life and mitigates against mere conventionalism.

Both Rorty’s and Putnam’s Wittgenstein are real enough. Rorty is right in emphasising the contingency of all norms. Since human being and thinking inevitably have a social dimension Rorty’s emphasis on the social character of norms and values is well judged. However, there is a sense of the “normative,” emphasised by Putnam’s Wittgenstein, which by virtue of being constitutive and not merely regulative of certain types of activity goes beyond the socially defined contingent rules and norms that Rorty emphasises. Such norms transcend the merely local and yet are not independent of all human activities and interactions. On the face of it, there is a real tension between the two Wittgensteins, just as much as there is a tension between the Pragmatisms of Putnam and Rorty. The tension, however, is a result of the inherent complexity of the role of norms in our thought and action. The tension might somewhat dissipate once we realize that at least some key cognitive norms have both social and constitutive roles. Norms become concrete, and in that sense actual, only through their application in concrete and specific social conditions. They have no reality outside of such applications. Yet, some epistemic norms also have a constitutive role which is prior to their usage in specific social conditions. In this limited sense, one could say, norms transcend the activities that make them manifest.

This conception of the normative assessments of the truth and reasonableness of beliefs is far removed from the one Brandom attributes to pragmatism narrowly defined. The issue of the contribution that beliefs make to the satisfaction of desires, from this perspective, although not wholly irrelevant, is subsumed under the wider consideration of the pre-

conditions of the intelligibility of foundational cognitive practices such as thinking, reasoning, inferring, etc. If the above is correct then the lines delineating different strands of neo-pragmatism are to be drawn quite differently from those suggested by Brandom. Putnam and Rorty, separated by their distinct conceptions of the normative, fall into distinct groupings which may be called objective versus social pragmatism. Wittgenstein whom Brandom groups with Rorty hovers between the two pragmatisms, but it would certainly be wrong to group him with Rortyan sociologism and to ignore his Putnamian objectivism. Wittgenstein's work shows the signs of the real tension between the objectivist and the social interpretation of norms but it also contains the first signs of a solution to this real tension.

What of the classical neo-pragmatists? Is Brandom correct to see them as advocating a view that ultimately emphasises the contingent and situational features of norms, most significantly, the role they play in the satisfaction of desires? The question is too large to be addressed here. Suffice it to say that, as in the case of Wittgenstein, we can find both the objective and sociological features of the normative in the work of both James and Dewey. However, this should not be seen as a sign of philosophical sloppiness on their part, objective and social pragmatisms are not necessarily philosophical rivals; they are the two sides of the coin minted by the human condition.

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Komentarz [P17]: my supplement

Komentarz [P18]: I added 'a'.

Komentarz [P19]: I added 'b'.