

HILARY PUTNAM ON THE END(S) OF ARGUMENT

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1. Introduction

Hilary Putnam sees himself as a philosopher who stands on a divide (1990). On one side lies scientism. On the other, a “linguistic idealism” (1995:75). On the one side, an assortment of positivists, deflationists and scientific realists, trying to maintain a belief in an objective world, fall into the error of reductionism. On the other, “disenchanted positivists” like Paul Feyerabend and Richard Rorty and an assortment of French post-modernists insist on the indeterminateness of representation and fall into the error of relativism and a consequent subjectivism.

Putnam has tried to articulate a position that eludes both of these extremes. In “Why is a Philosopher?” he criticises the programs of those on both sides of the proposed divide, attributing to them a similar oversimplification (1990:105-119). The alternative position he develops in his own work is a many-sided pragmatism which is sensitive to the limits of expert knowledge, sceptical of ideological commitments to formalism, and committed to the epistemological and philosophical significance of questions of practicality, utility, and convention.

Putnam’s work has not focussed on informal logic, but we believe that his epistemology provides an illuminating perspective which can be applied to key questions it has entertained. We illustrate this point by elaborating relevant features of Putnam’s views and informal logic and, more specifically, by applying his perspective to outstanding issues about the “end” of argument, understood (i) as the goal (the *telos*) at which argument must aim, and (ii) more simply, as the point when argument ceases, and is carried on no more. Our analysis attempts to show that Putnam’s pragmatism can resolve some conundrums that could potentially

become major stumbling blocks in the development of informal logic.

2. Putnam's Pragmatism

In a recent collection of papers on her husband's work, Ruth Anna Putnam quotes John Dewey as a representative of what is best in the pragmatist tradition. Dewey, she notes, proposed pragmatism as a cure for the malaise of academic philosophy in his day. Declaring that "Philosophy will recover itself when it ceases to deal with the problems of philosophers and addresses the problems of men" (2002:7), Dewey saw academic philosophy as an endeavour which had become too theoretical, too speculative, too other-worldly. As an alternative, he recommended the rapprochement of theoretical inquiry and political and practical endeavour.

In her own paper, Ruth Anna Putnam endorses a similar point of view, lamenting a contemporary preoccupation with the issues of Cartesian scepticism. She proposes pragmatism as a philosophy which rejects the overly speculative turn of academic philosophy and, in the manner of Charles Sanders Peirce, rejects

Cartesian doubts as paper doubts that could not possibly stimulate anyone to real inquiry (2002:8).

So conceived, pragmatism repudiates any all-embracing scepticism and embraces the world we live in, maintaining that inquiry must begin in a social world where action is not only possible but the only living option. When the pragmatist does philosophy of mind, for example, she begins

by taking our commonsense beliefs for granted; taking for granted... that we sometimes think of the same building, and that we can sometimes communicate this fact to one another, and so we sometimes succeed to meet at an appointed time in a certain place. (2002:9)

Hilary Putnam responds to Ruth Anna Putnam's remarks with whole-hearted agreement, attributing his own interest in pragmatism to the influence of his wife (2002a:12-13). He himself considers the issues that give rise to the pragmatic point of view in *Pragmatism: An Open*

Question, where he recognizes and explores a view of philosophy which presents philosophy as an extension of ordinary life. Like earlier pragmatists, he rejects epistemological and metaphysical quibbling. In a section entitled “The Primacy of Practical Reason,” he ties such views to the Kantian idea that Enlightenment science

does not come from theoretical reason, but from pure practical reason (1995:42).

According to Putnam’s view, the very standards that govern good scientific inquiry (indeed, inquiry of any sort) must be derived from our practical entanglement with the world – from our interaction with it and other people rather than from purely theoretical considerations.

Putnam’s discussion underscores the relevance of these ideas to philosophy today. As he puts it,

I think that this idea of the primacy of practical reasoning (though not of ‘pure’ practical reasoning) is a terribly important one *now*” (1995:43, his italics).

This is an idea which is terribly important *now* because it is an effective antidote to the excesses of contemporary philosophy, which is sometimes marred by overly-intellectual metaphysics.

Questions which even the Middle Ages did not take seriously, such as, for example, Do Numbers Really Exist, are the subject of books and papers today. At least two books on these questions by good philosophers of mathematics have come out in the last five years.... Grown men and women arguing about whether the number three ‘really exists’ is a ludicrous spectacle. It was in a similar context that John Dewey suggested that the primary task of philosophy should not be this kind of metaphysics, that is, the attempt to construct a ‘theory of everything,’ but should rather be a criticism of culture. Kant’s philosophy, in spite of its metaphysical excesses, was intended as a criticism of culture, as a sketch or a plan for an enlightened society making progress towards a state in which social justice would reign. (1995:44)

The general view of philosophy this implies is evident in Putnam’s

account of moral epistemology, which takes Kant as a paradigm but criticizes common interpretations of Kant's work.

We cannot, Kant thinks, construct a moral image of the world by seeking to prove a priori that there are true value judgements. The famous Kantian strategy is the other way around (although today philosophers like Bernard Williams forget this . . .). The strategy is to say: As a being who makes value judgements every day, I am *of course* committed to the idea that these are true value judgements; *what must be the case if there are to be true moral judgements?* In what kind of world can there be true value judgements? (1995, 43, his italics)

On this account, the proper end of moral philosophy is not the construction of a proof that morality exists and should be so regarded. With the possible exception of a few of us who are seriously ill, we all know that morality exists, because we all experience and participate in moral aspirations. Morality is a part of everyday life and it is wrongheaded to think it is the job of philosophy to prove that it exists. As Putnam writes in another context:

What people need is justification addressed to those who stand within the ethical life, not 'proofs' intended to convince those who stand outside it. (2002b:39)

Like Charles Taylor (1985), Putnam's view of morality suggests that we must accept the existence and the relevance of morality because we cannot excise it and be left with any reasonable facsimile of the social and practical world which we inhabit. In general,

Pragmatism tells us that we have to take seriously the beliefs that we find indispensable in our lives. (Putnam 2002b:38)

When approached from this perspective, moral and political philosophy becomes a discipline which is less about abstract theorizing and more about practical moral problems. The goal here is a democracy that reflects this shift in emphasis. As Putnam writes:

Dewey's position, the position I defend, is that it is possible to have what we might call a deliberate democracy, a democracy in which people deliberate together not about abstract philosophical questions (e.g. about whether Kantianism or Utilitarianism or Platonism is right – pragmatists reject the whole attempt to base ethics on any of these traditional metaphysical alternatives), but about the most intelligent way to resolve situated political, economic, and social problems. Such deliberation, we believe, can lead to warranted assertions – not, notice, timeless a priori truths. (2002b:39)

3. Putnam, Formalism and Informal Logic

One prominent consequence of Putnam's pragmatism is an avowedly anti-formalist stance which recognizes that the complexities of life – which are inevitably vague and elusive – cannot be captured if we commit (and restrict) ourselves to a formalist account of knowledge. As he writes at one point,

Any conception of rationality broad enough to embrace philosophy – not to mention linguistics, mentalistic psychology, history, clinical psychology, and so on – must embrace much that is vague, ill-defined, no more capable of being 'scientized' than was our knowledge of our ancestors. The horror of what cannot be 'methodized' is nothing but method fetishism. It is time we got over it. Getting over it would reduce our intellectual hubris. (2002c:24, his italics)

Elsewhere, Putnam borrows a phrase from Morton White when he explains the "revolt against formalism" which has been historically associated with American pragmatism. As he explains,

This revolt against formalism is not a denial of the utility of formal models in certain contexts, but it manifests itself in a sustained critique of the idea that formal models, in particular systems of formal logic, rule books of inductive logic, formalisations of scientific theories, etc. – describe a condition to which rational thought either can or should aspire" (1995, 63).

In his discussion of the nature of inquiry, Putnam is adamant:

The model of an *algorithm*, like a computer program, is [to be] rejected (1995:71).

Putnam's commitment to practical utility and his anti-formalism are both relevant to informal logic, which has emerged as a subdiscipline of philosophy which is attempting to develop a logic applicable to ordinary argument (see Groarke 2002). According to Johnson and Blair (1980, 1994), the roots of this endeavour can be found in the call for more relevant higher education that accompanied the social and political movements of the 1960s. Philosophers, unhappy with the then standard course in symbolic logic, argued that it was relevant only to philosophy and began to develop courses in "informal" logic as an alternative. In the process they adopted as their goal a logic which could more fully engage the business of day-to-day life and recognized a profitable engagement in it as the proper end of argument.

Govier elaborates the view of most informal logicians when she takes Barber to task for his suggestion that philosophers indulge in arguments which are too refined and abstract to be relevant to real problems of politics.

In a democracy, Barber says, citizens are a necessity, whereas philosophers are a luxury. I think a good democracy needs both philosophers and citizens. In fact, a closer examination of the practices and possibilities of argument by political and other philosophers could contribute to citizenship by enhancing our capacity to respond carefully and positively to disagreements." (1999:3).

Informal logic is a subdiscipline of philosophy which attempts to prove this point.

As in the case of Putnam, the commitment to utility and practical life which characterizes informal logic has promoted a commitment to a less formal and less mathematical approach to argument. Formal models of argument may be useful in particular contexts (and the development of non-classical formal logics may increase this possibility), but informal logic in many ways rejects the allegiance to formal theorizing that characterized earlier logic texts. The motivation behind this rejection is evident in the work of early contributors to the field, who set out to replace artificial examples of good and bad argument that are amenable to formal treatment (as in Copi 1957) with real instances of reasoning,

arguments and debates which were taken from newspapers, the mass media, advertisements and political campaigns (as in Kahane 1971). It was the attempt to comment usefully on these examples that precipitated the move away from formal logic, for formal systems did not provide the resources this required.

As Govier explains,

Real arguments in natural language are not amenable to fully precise treatment. They deal with topics of controversy, disputed facts, plausible hypotheses, approximately correct analysis. To evaluate them, we must sort out ambiguities, see how diverse factors fit together, weigh pros and cons, consider the credibility of those on whom we may depend for credibility and expertise. Formal logic is, by its very nature, incompetent to address such matters. At best, it will apply to some arguments in natural language, after virtually all interesting questions about the interpretation, content and substantive truth they contain have already been resolved. (1987:16; compare Johnson 2000:60)

In view of such conclusions, informal logic is committed to two of the key components that characterize Putnam's pragmatism. The first is his commitment to the belief that the goal (the "end") of argument should be insights and conclusions that positively contribute to our lives beyond philosophy. The second is a consequent conviction that the study of rationality and argument should not be constrained by formal models which are too narrow to capture the complexities, the richness and vagaries of life. Insofar as Putnam emphasizes these two views, his philosophy provides a broad perspective which is very much in keeping with the aims and goals of those philosophers who are developing informal logic. To illustrate how this perspective can be applied to specific issues in the field, we turn next to the theory of informal logic, and to questions about the ends of argument which have arisen in this context.

4. Regress in the Theory of Informal Logic

Inevitably, the work of informal logicians has given rise to theoretical debates about the nature of informal argument and the view of it implicit

in different approaches to informal logic. In the present paper, we highlight one theoretical problem – what we shall call “the regress problem” – which is discussed by two important authors (Govier and Johnson). We shall argue that Putnam’s pragmatism can provide an answer to the problem, and that his philosophy can in this way provide a better foundation for informal logic. All the more so given that variants of the regress problem arise, as we shall demonstrate, for all theories of informal logic.

Govier presents a variant of the regress problem when she criticizes the influential account of argument that Johnson has developed in *Manifest Rationality* (Johnson 2000). She fastens on his claim that every proper argument has a “dialectical tier” which engages objections that are likely to be made by those with competing and contrasting points of view. An argument without a dialectical tier (which does not recognize the dialectical context in which arguments occur) is not, according to Johnson, a proper argument. While Govier grants that this view highlights an important and frequently neglected aspect of argument which should play a role in argument assessment, she argues that it leads to a problematic regress.

The regress problem seems to arise for Johnson’s account because of his claim that every argument is incomplete without a dialectical tier. . . . This means that every arguer has a dialectical obligation to buttress his or her main argument with supplementary arguments responding to alternative positions and objections. Supplementary arguments, being also arguments, would appear to require supplementary arguments addressing alternatives and objections. Those supplementary-to-the-supplementary arguments, being again arguments, would appear to require the same. And this line of reasoning can clearly be continued. Thus Johnson’s view seems to imply an infinite regress. (1999:232-33)

Despite her own concerted attempt to end or elude the regress problem, Govier is forced to conclude that there is no way around it. She reluctantly concludes that Johnson’s promising attempt to make dialectical considerations an integral part of informal logic and argumentation theory ultimately fails:

this problem... seems to me to be a fatal one. Thus, even though I have made assumptions about alternatives and objections which are generous and lenient towards the conception of the Dialectical Tier, and even though I have glossed over many potential difficulties, I have not been able to arrive at a satisfactory interpretation of dialectical adequacy. Curiously, what seemed *prima facie* to be a sensible and promising stipulation about argumentation has led to considerable philosophical difficulties and eventually to an unacceptable regress. (1999:237)

One finds a second instance of the regress problem in Johnson's own criticisms of a controversial theory of informal logic which is known as "deductivism." Deductivists maintain that everyday arguments are best understood as instances of deductive reasoning. Not in the sense that they can be formalized in a way that is captured by traditional formal logic (a claim which deductivists typically deny), but in the sense that they can always be construed as arguments with implicit premises which have an implicitly deductive structure. On the deductivist account, even the inductive argument "Every swan I've seen is white, hence all swans are white" is to be treated as deductive, for anyone who propounds this argument assumes that other swans have the same features as the swans they've seen, and so propounds an argument with the implicit structure:

Premise: Every swan I've seen is white.

Implicit Premise: All other swans are like the swans I've seen.

Conclusion: All swans are white.

In the present context, our interest is not deductivism, but Johnson's claim that it leads to an untenable infinite regress. As he points out, deductivism is ultimately founded on our ability to transform an argument which is not *prima facie* deductive into a valid example of deductive reasoning by adding an implicit premise which claims that the premises of the argument imply its conclusion. The argument: P1, P2, THEREFORE C can, for example, always be understood as the deductive argument: P1, P2, IP, THEREFORE C, where IP is the implicit premise: IF P1 AND P2, THEN C.

As Johnson explains:

The so-called inference from the premises to the conclusion can itself always be embodied in the argument as a missing premise. Thus the argument

(A1) $P_1, P_2 - \text{INF}_A - C$

can be represented as

(A2) $P_1, P_2, \text{MP}, - \text{INF}_B - C$

where the MP is a premise version of the inference (inf_a) in (A1) – or what we have now come to call the associated conditional [i.e. the proposition “If P_1, P_2 then C ”]. And it would seem that (A1) is a good argument if and only if (A2) is a good argument.... (Johnson 2000:73)

Deductivist attempts to reconstruct natural language arguments tend to favour implicit premises that are more complex than the associated conditionals Johnson highlights, but he does successfully capture the basic strategy that makes deductivism possible. The problem, he argues, is that this strategy invites a version of the regress problem.

Consider the deductivist proposal that we reconstruct the argument:

(A1) $P_1, P_2 - \text{INF}_A - C$

as:

(A2) $P_1, P_2, \text{MP}, - \text{INF}_B - C$

where MP is the associated conditional “If P_1 and P_2 , then C .” Once one accepts this kind of reconstruction, it can just as easily be applied to (A2), rendering it as the new argument:

(A3) $P_1, P_2, \text{MP}, \text{MP1} - \text{INF}_C - C$

where MP1 is the associated conditional that affirms the inference in (A2) – i.e. the conditional “If P_1, P_2 , and MP, then C .” But (A3) can itself be reconstructed as the new argument:

(A4) $P_1, P_2, \text{MP}, \text{MP1}, \text{MP2} - \text{INF}_D - C$

where MP2 is the associated conditional for the argument (A3) - i.e. the conditional, “If P_1, P_2, MP , and MP1 , then C .”

The problem is that this process of reconstruction can be carried on indefinitely, producing an infinite chain of arguments: (A1), (A2), (A3), (A4)..., where any (An) contains the premises of the argument (An-1) plus its associated conditional. Johnson concludes that deductivism is inherently problematic, for its strategy of reconstruction and the implicit premises it contemplates imply an unending series of reconstructions which can never be completed.

Johnson intends his version of the regress problem as an exposé of deductivism. But it has a much broader application. Indeed, it is a mistake to think that the regress problem arises for deductivism, because the arguments it countenances are deductively valid. On the contrary, it is not the deductive nature of the relationship between the premises and conclusion of these arguments that causes the regress, but the more basic assumption that their premises in some way imply their conclusion. And this assumption seems to characterize all arguments, whether they are deductive or not (for any attempt to base a conclusion on some premises must implicitly assume that the premises *in some sense* warrant the conclusion).

It seems to follow that the regress problem arises, not only for deductivism (and the dialectical view of argument that Govier criticizes), but for any account of informal arguments. Thus any such account must accept that every argument assumes that the premises warrant the conclusion and in this way depends upon the further argument that the premises and this assumption warrant the conclusion. But this new argument seems to depend on the argument that its premises and the assumption that they warrant the conclusion lead to the conclusion. In this way, any argument seems to depend on an infinite series of arguments which follow once we recognize that any argument depends on the assumption that its premises warrant its conclusion.

In the course of his discussion, Johnson suggests that we can elude the regress problem by rejecting the “premise plus inference” (the “P + I”) conception of argument it depends on and treat arguments more simply, as reasons given for a conclusion (2000:178). If we accept this redefinition of an argument,

the question ... becomes whether these reasons are good reasons to accept the conclusion. This question is not to be treated as a two part request: (a) Are the premises true? And (b) is the inference from the

premises to the conclusion warranted? There is just one question: Are the reasons given good reasons? (Ibid.:74)

But the regress cannot be so easily eluded. For one can construct a regress as long as one accepts that the reasons in a good argument are good reasons in the sense that they provide support for the conclusion. Johnson himself accepts this when he proposes that an argument occurs when an arguer

seeks to persuade the Other(s) of the truth of a thesis by producing the reasons *that support it* (2000:168).

Such a view suggests that every argument depends on the implicit claim that its premises support its conclusion. And this implied relationship of support is naturally expressed as the argument's associated conditional, even if one does not call it an "inference." It seems to follow that all arguments assume associated conditionals, and this is all one needs to construct a variant of the regress problem.

5. Regress Elsewhere

Our own account suggests that *all* theories of informal argument must face the regress problem. While this makes the problem a much more pervasive one than Govier or Johnson have suggested, this should come as no surprise, for the regress problem in the theory of informal logic is a specific instance of a much broader regress problem which has frequently been discussed in the history of philosophy.

Johnson's own regress is an instance of a regress Lewis Carroll presents in his famous account of the tortoise and the hare (Carroll 1967). Putting aside the fable Carroll uses to express his argument, the strategy which gives rise to the regress can be easily expressed. Let the letter C represent the conditional: IF A AND B, THEN Z. In order to accept Z on the basis of this conditional, we must first accept that A is true, that B is true, and that "If A and B, then Z" is true. But this implies that we must accept the new conditional D: IF A AND B AND C, THEN Z. And in order to accept Z on this basis, we must accept a new conditional E: IF A, B, C, D, THEN Z. But this will not lead us to Z unless we accept the

conditional F: IF A AND B AND C AND D, AND E THEN Z. And so on, ad infinitum.

Johnson's regress is a version of this argument, the infinite series of associated conditionals he identifies corresponding to Carroll's ever expanding list. The relationship between Govier's regress and Carroll's argument is less direct, but all these regresses can be seen as instances of the "mode of infinite regress" the ancient sceptics use to cast all opinions into doubt. Sextus Empiricus famously expounds this strategy when he argues that whatever criterion establishes the truth of a claim must be justified by an appeal to another criterion of truth (for the first criterion may be objected to); which must be justified by an appeal to a third criterion; which must be justified by an appeal to a fourth, and so on ad infinitum. As Sextus puts it in his discussion in the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* (1933:2.20),

the discovery of the criterion becomes impracticable, since we do not allow them [those who propose the criterion] to adopt a criterion by assumption [for the existence of the criterion is in question], while if they offer to judge the criterion by a criterion we force them to a regress *ad infinitum*.

As Sextus' writings show, the ancient Pyrrhoneans recognized that this strategy can be used to raise doubts about any belief or principle of reason, turning any argument into an attempt at justification which is never allowed to end. On the basis of the same kind of reasoning Blaise Pascal (1864, II, 8) concludes that perfect proof is unattainable. Looked at from the history of epistemology, it cannot be judged surprising that similar kinds of problems arise in the theory of informal logic.

6. Putnam on the Ends of Argument and Philosophy

Once one recognizes that the regress problem is not unique to the theory of informal logic, it is natural to try and answer it by appealing to the views of philosophers who have addressed the broader problems it reflects. While Putnam has not (insofar as we know) directly addressed the regress problem as it applies to the theory of informal logic, we believe that there are aspects of his philosophy and his pragmatism which

can be usefully exploited in this context. It might in this regard be said that the regress problem is a problem which raises never ending questions by noting that anyone who provides reasons for a conclusion may be asked why we should accept that these reasons can establish the proposed conclusion.

Putnam advances a different example of interminable questions in his discussion of internal realism, where he illustrates the point that a seemingly innocent question may lead to intractable philosophical debate. He writes:

Suppose I take someone into a room with a chair, a table on which there are a lamp and a notebook and a ballpoint pen, and nothing else, and I ask, 'How many objects are there in this room?' My companion answers, let us suppose, 'Five.' 'What are they?' I ask. 'A chair, a table, a lamp, a notebook, and a ball point pen.' 'How about you and me? Aren't we in the room?' My companion might chuckle. 'I didn't think you meant I was to count people as objects. Alright, then, seven.' 'How about the pages of this notebook?' (1988:110-11)

As Putnam points out, this is only the beginning of the problem. For how can one prevent endless questions about the definition of the term "object." Are people objects? Do the individual pages of the book count as objects? How about the individual screws in the lamp stand? The piece of chewing gum stuck to the underside of the lamp? Or the lamp shade that I can remove? Is my hand an object? Wouldn't a doctor who specialized in hands distinguish each knuckle and each fingernail? And wouldn't a scientist distinguish between the elementary particles that make up the objects in the room? Is each individual particle a separate object? Which groups of particles should count as separate objects? Can we count as "objects" the mental objects in our heads? And so on and so forth.

The apparently simple question: "How many objects exist in this room?" is, it turns out, fraught with philosophical difficulty. It can (if we are to aim at true precision) prompt an endless series of questions if we are determined to decide how many objects there are in the room. Even if we limit ourselves to philosophical disputes between philosophical opponents – materialists, idealists, Aristotelians, Leibnizians,

functionalists, realists, verificationists, etc. – it is not clear how further analysis of the room and its components parts can answer what seemed to be a very simple question. As it turns out, arguments about how many objects exist in the room seem potentially endless. Because we can ask endless questions about and pose endless objections to any account of the objects in the room, opponents can argue interminably about the number of the objects in the room.

Putnam locates the source of these problems – and the solution to them – in language. On the one hand, the problem is that

The same situation can be described in many different ways, depending on how we use words. (1988:114)

It follows that we have to decide on the precise meanings of the words we use. This is a problem because

The situation does not itself legislate how words like ‘object,’ ‘entity,’ and ‘exist’ must be used. (1988:114).

In order to resolve the controversy we must not continue to argue about the number of objects in the room, but decide on a convention that will establish how these words should be used. In deciding on a convention we can appeal to considerations of utility. Conventions clearly are not arbitrary, but are forced upon us by the practical exigencies of life. And because practical utility may vary in different contexts we may adopt different conventions in different circumstances. If we are discussing the physiology of the hand, it will be appropriate to distinguish different objects that make up the hand (a callous there, veins there, finger nails, knuckles, etc.), for this is a convention which can contribute to our ability to medically deal with hands.

Such views do not imply that conventions are arbitrary or that they can never change. What is true by convention is not

absolutely conventional – a truth by stipulation, free of every element of fact. (1988:113)

Conventions are not immune to criticism. Inasmuch as they are an expression or an extension of a certain way of life or goal-oriented endeavour, improvement or progress is possible. For this same reason,

different conventions may be appropriate in different contexts. Conventions in physics need not mirror, in any simplistic or explicit way, conventions in ethics. What is important in the present context is that conventions have their roots in the practical sphere in which we operate. This prevents the regress which would arise if a particular convention derived its authority from another convention which would have to derive its authority from another convention, and so on ad infinitum.

According to Putnam, a statement about the number of objects in the room would be true

just in case it would be correct to use the words of which the statement consists of in that way in describing the situation" (Putnam 1988:115, his italics).

It is the consensus that surrounds the use of the words which determines the convention. So it is considerations of utility which must bring disagreement and argument to an end.

In championing a philosophy that is constrained and determined – through convention – by ordinary, everyday concerns, Putnam provides a reason why philosophical argument and inquiry should ultimately end. As Wittgenstein famously wrote,

If I have exhausted the justifications I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned (*On Certainty*, §217).

Like Peirce, Dewey and other pragmatists, Putnam locates bedrock in practical, non-academic considerations. On this account, it is not loyalty to theory but a careful attention to everyday endeavours and preoccupations which establishes when we reach the end of theory. This is an end which is in turn established by the “end” of theory, which must be the amelioration of the very practical problems of life. As Thoreau puts it, “there is a solid bottom everywhere” (Putnam 1995:41). It is only philosophers who over-intellectualize who fail to recognize that this is so.

7. Conclusion: The Regress Problem Reconsidered

Putnam’s relevance to informal logic can be seen if we apply his

approach to his example of an endless argument to the regress problem as it occurs in the theory of informal logic. For it suggests that it is a mistake to think that there is a way to answer the regress problem on its own terms. This would require a resolution of sceptical issues which philosophers have struggled with for thousands of years. Instead of expecting this kind of answer, we will do better to dismiss the problem by appealing to convention and utility. In the context of the give and take of ordinary argument, the conventions of argumentation do not require that "arguments," "good arguments," "complete arguments," etc. be forwarded with an answer to the regress problem. In the social practice which constitutes argument in informal contexts, it would, on the contrary, be peculiar to imagine that a defense of a position answer an endless series of questions which might be asked about it. Someone who thinks otherwise has not understood the world of argument.

More deeply, the conventions that govern informal argument are founded on sound considerations of practical utility. Arguments are tools which further the ends of individuals and groups. They would quickly fail to do so if every argument could be pushed in the direction of endless regress. What is required will differ in different argumentative contexts. Conventions may be established by the social goals of law, or political commentary, or interpersonal exchange. It is reasonable to suppose (indeed it is to be hoped) that the theory of informal logic might itself contribute to new conventions that could usefully inform informal argument. But it is difficult to conceive of any practical circumstances – now or in the future -- in which infinite regress serves a useful purpose. Indeed, the kinds of regresses that Johnson and Govier propose seem a paradigm example of an argumentative practice which is inimical to the social benefits of argument. Rather than promote and improve the utility of argument, they seem to undermine it.

When Govier finds no answer to the infinite regress problem in Johnson, she concludes that Johnson's views are wanting. Putnam's approach suggests another possible response. Considerations of pragmatist utility, not a theoretically pure and complete account of argument, may bring interminable disputes to an end. Govier herself moves towards some such realization, ending her arguments about Johnson's dialectical tier with the recommendation that we might "adopt a pragmatic minimalist version of Johnson's account to good pedagogical and personal effect." On her account,

...this recommendation is selective and highly pragmatic. It is not based on a rigorous analysis. And it contains nothing to solve the theoretical problems raised here – especially that of the regress. Even so, such a recommendation in the spirit of Johnson’s dialectical tier would initiate some modest progress in the practice of argument. (1999:238)

We think that the “highly pragmatic” nature of Johnson’s dialectical tier is enough to secure its value. A “rigorous analysis” of the sort Govier supposes is not what the situation calls for. It is enough that practical limitations limit the extent to which one can develop a dialectical tier. And practical limitations will limit the extent to which one can answer the kinds of regress that arise in the theory of informal logic. This is enough of a limit, and no more is needed. As Putnam’s philosophical work suggests, we need to determine limits by situating arguments within the context of the real, practical world we inhabit. When we cannot rely on theoretical concerns, on conclusive philosophical argument, then everyday practice, sophisticated common sense belief, become a (fallible but not arbitrary) criterion that determines when arguments should end. The practical orientation of informal logic lends itself to this pragmatist approach. In discussing the theoretical concerns that arise from the study of informal arguments, it is important that informal logicians not lose sight of the discipline’s roots in a public world of shared communal endeavour. A Putnam-like pragmatism can help us remember that this is so.

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