

David Lewis to JJC smart

Berkeley,
22 August 1991

Dear Jack,

Thank you for your notes about Barry Taylor's paper. I didn't get to them in Melbourne — I was mostly working on philosophy of religion, of all things! — but now, stopping off in California on my way home, I've reread Barry's paper and a letter I wrote to him when I saw it in draft.

You'd like a win; so would I, but I don't think there's any hope of that. (I think there almost never is in philosophy — it's too easy to force a draw.) That doesn't bother me very much at all. Given a draw I'm free to go on as before thinking

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that a permutation that turns 'cat' into the word for cherries is an incorrect interpretation of English; that not just any interpretation that makes epistemically ideal theory come true is a correct interpretation; and indeed that there's a genuine risk that no correct interpretation makes ideal theory come true.

Putnam claimed more than a draw: he said our position was 'incoherent'. If we have a draw, that's wrong. Now can we strike back and show that his position is incoherent? I take Barry's paper to show that we cannot. Ah well — we can be content to say that Putnam's position is incredible, but coherent.

Here's how I'd describe the
draw in Barry's terms. We
have an epistemically ideal theory
 \mathcal{T}^+ in language \mathcal{L}^+ . \mathcal{T}^+ includes
an incontrovertible semantic chapter
 \mathcal{S} (Barry's $C^\#$ plus recursive
truth conditions) which yields
Tarski biconditionals for all
the nonsemantic sentences of \mathcal{L}^+ .

Call an interpretation of \mathcal{L}^+
immodest iff it satisfies \mathcal{S} .

\mathcal{S} , interpreted according to an
immodest \mathcal{M} , says that \mathcal{M} is
a correct ('intended') interpreta-
tion of \mathcal{L}^+ .

If \mathcal{M} were not immodest,
it couldn't be correct. For
if it were, \mathcal{S} interpreted according
to \mathcal{M} would tell us truly
(truly, because \mathcal{S} is incontrovertible and
 \mathcal{M} is its correct interpretation, ex
hypothesis) that \mathcal{M} is incorrect.
Contradiction. Barry's point is

that all interpretations that
make \mathcal{T}^+ true are indeed
immodest. We have no hope
of demonstrating to Putnam
that any or all of them
are incorrect, because they
are not immodest. I accept
that point.

At the same time, if
an interpretation is incorrect,
then even if it is immodest,
that doesn't mean that it
satisfies the constraints on
reference that are set
forth in \mathcal{S} . It satisfies
them as misinterpreted (ex
hypothesis) but not as
correctly interpreted. Nor
is it ineffable why this
incorrect interpretation is
incorrect: \mathcal{S} , as correctly
interpreted, says why.

And there's the stalemate. Putnam hasn't proved to us that every immodest interpretation that satisfies \mathcal{I}^+ is a correct interpretation. We can't tell him why any such interpretation is not correct — or rather, we can tell him, but we can't force him to understand because we can't say anything that will force him to interpret what we tell him correctly.

The crucial paragraph is the end of §VII (p 161). The realist is trying to tell Putnam why not all interpretations that make \mathcal{I}^+ true are correct and he's trying to do this in such a way that his own words addressed to Putnam 'have a meaning

which is invariant under the vicissitudes which beset \mathcal{L}' (and correspondingly beset \mathcal{L}^+). Barry thinks this can't be done, and I think he's right. (What follows ^{that point in Barry's paper} concerns misguided ways of trying to do it, and Barry's defence against the suspicion that he himself has likewise tried to do the impossible.) But why do I need a super-language that escapes the vicissitudes of \mathcal{L}^+ ? In \mathcal{L}^+ itself, as correctly interpreted, I have told Putnam how \mathcal{L}^+ is to be correctly interpreted. I can do no more, and I think I've done enough.

Barry says (162) that a realist 'has no real answer... to the rebuttal of Lewis' but here I think he

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means the rebuttal of a hypothetical Lewis who rises to the bait and tries to tell Putnam, in terms that just cannot be misinterpreted why not all interpretations of \mathcal{J}^+ are correct.

And when Barry says at the end that no noncircular argument can be mounted against the Putnamian, I agree; provided that by 'the Putnamian' he means someone who says, but doesn't claim to prove, that all interpretations that satisfy \mathcal{J}^+ are correct. And the Putnamian, in turn, has no noncircular argument against us. And there we may let matters rest.

So you see that I have no dispute with the letter,

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as opposed maybe to the spirit, of Barry's analysis. And I must say that I think it's very helpful indeed.

You mention essential indexicality, but I don't think this changes anything. Imagine the ideal theory to be proclaimed by a specific speaker at a specific time, in a language equipped with indexicals 'I' and 'now' (and derivatively 'here', 'there', 'that', etc.) Thus it's his theory not only of how the world around him is, but also of who and when in the world he is. OK; the issues of immodest vs. modest,

correct vs. incorrect interpretations go just as before; and of course we still want to say that this new sort of ideal theory might be (partly) false.

Yours,

Dave

c: Barry

PS It may be helpful (or it may by now be redundant, but if so no harm done) for me to respond to another passage on that eventful p. 161. Barry considers an argument to 'bridge the gap' from immodest interpretation to correct interpretation.

We have constructed... an interpretation M for L which models J , and hypothesised... that this is an intended [= correct] model. Until a reductio is... forthcoming, we ^[= putnam] are enabled to assume that L 's vocabulary really has the interpretation that M imputes. Since Meta- L includes L as a part, this warrants the assumption that Meta- L too uses this vocabulary with the same interpretation.

Barry calls the argument 'specious', but what he has in mind is that the realist opposing the argument might reject the final step. Once the further work is done to support the final step, Barry says that the realist 'has no real answer' so 'it seems the Just More Theory Manoeuvre does succeed in the end' (p162).

OK; but I don't want to reject the final step, and I agree with Barry that L , L^+ , and Meta- L are in the same boat.

And I'm willing to grant that Putnam is entitled to assume, until a reductio is forthcoming, that M is a correct interpretation of L . Well, is a reductio forthcoming? Yes and no. We have a reductio ad Putnam's paradox itself — the conclusion that epistemically ideal theory can't be wrong — but we have no other reductio. You know and I know that reductio ad Putnam's paradox is reductio ad absurdum, but Putnam does not agree. So it's enough of a reductio that you and I can feel well justified in

rejecting the assumption that just any interpretation which models M is correct. But it's useless in breaking the stalemate with Putnam.

As I said, it's easy to force a draw: when hit with a reductio, just accept the absurd conclusion. (This lesson I owe, above all, to Graham Priest) That's why I've come to think that draws in philosophical debate don't mean much. They don't ^{always} mean that there's no truth of the matter; or that nobody knows what's true; or that we ought to suspend judgement; or that both the opposed views are rational.