Focus
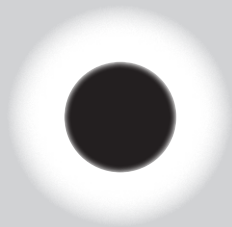# Article

CAN THERE EVER BE A THEORY OF UTTERANCE INTERPRETATION?

Louise Cummings

Abstract: In this paper, I tackle what appears to be a rather simple question: can there ever be a *theory* of utterance interpretation? It will be contended that a theory of utterance interpretation is not beyond the intellectual grasp of present-day pragmatists so much as it is a construct which lacks sense and is unintelligible. Although many of our most successful theories exhibit desiderata such as simplicity, completeness and explanatory power, it will be argued that these same desiderata are problematic when it is utterance interpretation that is the focus of theoretical efforts. The case in support of this claim sets out from a detailed analysis of the rational, intentional, holistic character of utterance interpretation and draws on the insights of the American philosopher Hilary Putnam. To the extent that a theory of utterance interpretation is not a difficult empirical possibility to realize so much as it is an endeavour which leads to an unintelligible outcome, we consider where this situation leaves pragmatists who have a substantial appetite for theory construction.
Keywords: communicative rationality; Putnam, H.; theoretical desiderata; unintelligibility; utterance interpretation.

1. INTRODUCTION

It is not an exaggeration to say that the attainment of a theory in a field or an inquiry is considered to be the zenith of human intellectual achievement. So strong is the desire to produce theories that scientists often devote their entire careers to their development and not an insignificant amount of time to challenging the theories of others. The attainment of a theory is in every sense a validation of the inquiry that produced it. Not only is the often large expenditure of technical and cognitive resources in scientific investigations justified if a theory results from an inquiry, but a theory secures the place of certain ideas within the body of human knowledge that is transmitted to subsequent

generations. So integral are theories to the scientific enterprise that they are heralded as the purpose or *raison d'être* of scientific investigation to every student of science. The development of theories is also widely lauded by the media and lay people, and acknowledged through international academic and scientific awards. This emphasis on theory is not without rational basis. It is through theories that we explain and predict events in the world including the behaviour of other people. Theories help us make sense of a rapidly changing environment that can prove to be hostile territory to the theoretically naïve and ignorant. To this end, some theories (e.g. quantum theory) are highly mathematical and formal in nature, while other theories (e.g. theory of mind) are informal constructs which are no less valuable in consequence (see Cummings 2013, 2014a, 2014b) for discussion of theory of mind). This paper will address theories in general, before examining one specific theory, and the impulse to theorize in scientific and other disciplines.

With such importance attached to the development of theories in science, it may seem strange to suggest that the impulse to theorize about utterance interpretation leads to unfortunate consequences. Yet, that is exactly what I intend to propose in this paper. It will be argued that the same theoretical impulse, which has resulted in so many notable successes in science, is deeply problematic when we turn to the question of the nature of utterance interpretation. To understand how this can be so, the argument of the present paper will unfold as follows. In section 2, we consider the features which theories aim to embody. These so-called desiderata include simplicity, completeness and explanatory power, to name just three. In section 3, the nature of utterance interpretation is considered. It will be argued that the interpretative process has a rational, intentional, holistic character. To the extent that pragmatists claim to develop theories of this process, these theories must succeed in capturing these attributes of interpretation. In section 4, it will be contended that a rather unpalatable dilemma confronts the theorist of utterance interpretation. Such a theorist can retain his theoretical aspirations but only at the expense of reducing himself to unintelligibility. Alternatively, he can make meaningful statements about utterance interpretation but must relinquish any claim to have a theory of this process. The assumptions, which give rise to this dilemma, are examined in section 4. Finally, in section 5, we address the question: if a *theory* of utterance interpretation is unintelligible, then what can we meaningfully say about interpretation?

2. THEORETICAL VIRTUES AND DESIDERATA

It is not infrequently the case that more than one theory accords with the data in a particular domain. How are scientists to pursue theory selection in the face of such underdetermination? Scientists are inclined to adopt as their chosen theory the one which exhibits certain theoretical virtues. These virtues or desiderata have been variously characterized and include simplicity, explanatory power, unity, elegance and completeness, to name but a few. Simplicity refers to the number and conciseness of a theory's basic principles (syntactic simplicity) or to the number and kinds of entities postulated by a theory (ontological simplicity or parsimony). This theoretical desideratum has been captured in a principle known as Occam's (Ockham's) razor which stipulates that we should not multiply entities beyond necessity. In *The Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy*, Isaac Newton (1729) casts simplicity as his first rule for reasoning in philosophy: «We are to admit no more causes of natural things, than such as are both true and sufficient to explain their appearances. To this purpose the philosophers say, that Nature does nothing in vain, and more is in vain, when less will serve; for Nature is pleased with simplicity, and affects not the pomp of superfluous causes». The explanatory power of a theory describes its capacity to explain observable phenomena. Unsurprisingly, scientists are inclined to accept theories which have high explanatory power and reject those with low explanatory power. In *The Origin of Species*, Charles Darwin makes direct appeal to explanatory power to reject the theory of creation and replace it with his theory of natural selection. Darwin (1858) states: «This grand fact of the grouping of all organic beings under what is called the Natural System, is utterly inexplicable on the theory of creation» (626: in Modern Library edition, 1998). He continues:

> Many other facts are, as it seems to me, explicable on this theory [of Natural Selection … O]n the view of each species constantly trying to increase in number, with natural selection always ready to adapt the slowly varying descendants of each to any unoccupied or ill-occupied place in nature, these facts cease to be strange, or might even have been anticipated (626-627: in Modern Library edition, 1998).

Explanatory power and simplicity are important in the present context because of the contribution they make to a further theoretical

virtue or desideratum. That desideratum is the empirical *completeness* of a theory. Scientists are inclined to accept complete theories over incomplete theories because the former provide the fullest possible explanation of the facts (explanatory power) using only a minimum of theoretical principles (parsimony or simplicity). Carrier (1994) captures the essence of completeness in the following remarks:

> What makes completeness desirable and worthwhile to pursue? The chief distinction of complete theories is their high explanatory power. In complete theories the corresponding empirical data can be processed without recourse to further, independent observation theories. It is the theory itself that is sufficient for analysing the operation of the relevant instruments and for correcting the raw-values they supply. The basic principles of complete theories thus do a lot more explanatory work than do the assumptions heading incomplete ones. There is more explanatory delivery for a given theoretical cost. Accordingly, a complete theory excels in theoretical parsimony. In such a theory the number of independent fundamental assumptions is kept at a minimum. This is what makes completeness an appealing feature (227-228).

Scientists do not pursue the completeness of theories at any cost. If, for example, the testability of a complete theory is reduced over an incomplete theory, then we are best to abandon completeness altogether. Nevertheless, as a guiding principle, and assuming all other things are equal, scientists may be expected to be influenced by completeness in their choice or selection of a theory in a particular domain.

However, it is the argument of this paper that not all things are equal. Specifically, it will be contended that in certain domains such as the natural and physical sciences, completeness represents a noble theoretical ideal which should be pursued whenever possible. But in a domain such as communicative rationality – that is, after all, what a theory of utterance interpretation may be taken to represent – a theoretical desideratum like completeness leads to particularly pernicious consequences. This is because theory generation in the natural and physical sciences *presupposes* rational concepts. It is through these concepts that scientific discourse, amongst which we include scientific theories, are meaningful and intelligible. The same cannot be said of theory generation in utterance interpretation. The completeness of a theory in this domain does not presuppose rational concepts and is not meaningful or intelligible in consequence. The issue is not one of emphasis but a difference in the type of question that can be intelligi-

bly addressed by a complete theory. When that question concerns the conditions under which human thinking and rationality are possible, including human communicative rationality, and is not simply about some phenomenon in the natural or physical world, it will be argued subsequently that we leave the domain of rational inquiry altogether in our pursuit of a complete theory. The same theoretical virtues, which lead to rational theory selection for the scientist, are positively destructive of the intelligibility of any theory of utterance interpretation that the pragmatist may produce. We will return to this point in sections 4 and 5. But in the meantime, we examine the phenomenon of utterance interpretation that the pragmatist is eager to attain a complete theory of.

3. THE NATURE OF UTTERANCE INTERPRETATION

Theoretical desiderata like simplicity reveal the type of criteria that a *theory* of utterance interpretation might be expected to fulfil. But aside from these criteria, such a theory must also faithfully represent the nature of utterance interpretation. In this section, that nature is examined in detail. It will be argued that utterance interpretation has a rational, intentional, holistic character. In demonstration of this claim, consider the following communicative exchange between Paul and Mike:

> Paul: Can we stay with you in Milan again this summer?
> Mike: Rose's mother will be with us this year.
> Paul: That's fine. It will do us no harm to stay somewhere else for a change.

This exchange is typical of thousands of similar verbal encounters that take place on a daily basis. Paul has made a request of Mike – he and his spouse (let's call her «Sally») would like to stay with Mike and his wife in Milan in the summer. Mike has implicated by way of his utterance that this will not be possible – Rose's mother will be staying in Milan and so Paul and Sally cannot be accommodated. Paul readily recovers this implicature of Mike's utterance. His acknowledgement of this implicature takes the form of a statement to the effect that it will do him and Sally no harm to stay somewhere else for a change. The apparent ease with which Paul and Mike negotiate this potentially difficult communicative exchange belies the complexity of the rational expectations, mental states and cognitive processes which make the

exchange possible. It is to these phenomena that we must turn for an explanation of the rational, intentional, holistic character of utterance interpretation. On standard pragmatic accounts, these phenomena are integral not just to the recovery of the implicature of an utterance, but also to the pragmatic enrichment of the logical form of an utterance. In the discussion to follow, we will see how the rational, intentional, holistic character of utterance interpretation seamlessly cuts across both aspects of the pragmatic understanding of utterances.

For communication to be possible, Paul and Mike must have certain *rational expectations* of each other in the above exchange. They must have an expectation that each is aiming to contribute only relevant, truthful utterances to the exchange. They must also have an expectation that each possesses linguistic knowledge as well as world knowledge and knowledge of the structure and function of conversation. These rational expectations can be seen to motivate Paul's linguistic choices in the first utterance in the above exchange. Paul must have an expectation that Mike has sufficient linguistic and world knowledge in order to identify the intended referent of the pronoun «we» in his utterance. If Paul did not entertain such an expectation of Mike, his use of «we» as opposed to «Sally and I» would be an irrational linguistic choice in this context. Paul must also operate with a number of other rational expectations. He must expect Mike to have as part of his background knowledge that Paul and Sally have previously stayed with Mike and Rose in Milan. Otherwise, Paul's use of the iterative expression «again», which presupposes that he and Sally stayed with Mike and Rose *before*, would be another irrational linguistic choice. Also, Paul's use of the deictic expression «*this* summer» as opposed to a form like «July 2014» only makes sense to the extent that Paul has a further rational expectation of Mike – that Mike will be able to establish the intended temporal referent of this expression. It emerges that every one of Paul's linguistic choices in the first utterance in the above exchange only makes sense on the assumption that Paul entertains certain rational expectations of Mike. These expectations all concern Mike's capacity to use aspects of context to arrive at the full propositional form of Paul's utterance.

However, Paul's expectations of Mike in the above exchange do not end here. It is Paul's rational expectation that Mike is acting as a cooperative communicator that leads him to search for the relevance of Mike's utterance to his (Paul's) request. That relevance can only be

established because Paul operates with an expectation to the effect that Mike is contributing truthful, relevant utterances to the exchange. It is this expectation which leads Paul to treat the apparent irrelevance of Mike's utterance as the first step in a process of reasoning which issues in the implicature that Mike is not agreeable to Paul and Sally staying with him and Rose in Milan in the summer. But even in the recovery of this implicature there is no end to the rational expectations which Paul may bring to his interpretation of Mike's utterance. For one of Paul's rational expectations of Mike must surely be that Mike is able to establish the particular speech act – a request – to which Mike's utterance is intended to be a response. A further rational expectation on Paul's part will be that Mike will want to maintain their pre-existing social relationship by declining Paul's request indirectly by means of an implicature rather than by means of a direct response such as «No». But even here Paul's rational expectations of Mike do not come to an end. Paul will have additional rational expectations to the effect that Mike will view him (Paul) as someone who can competently recover the implicature of an utterance whilst simultaneously recognizing Mike's motivation for the use of implicature in this particular context. It can be seen that Paul's rational expectations of Mike not only motivate the linguistic choices that Paul uses to frame his message, but they are also integral to Paul's interpretation of Mike's message in the above exchange.

For his part, Mike also has a series of rational expectations of Paul in this exchange. Mike's expectations motivate the linguistic choices that he uses to frame his message to Paul. For example, Mike can use the pronoun «us» because he has the rational expectation that Paul will be able to supply its intended referent, namely, Mike and Rose. Similarly, Mike can use the deictic expression «*this* summer» because he has a rational expectation that Paul will be able to supply the intended temporal referent. Mike's utterance in the above exchange also presupposes that Paul knows who Rose is and that Rose has a mother (i.e. her mother is not deceased). These presuppositions only make sense to the extent that Mike entertains certain rational expectations about Paul's world knowledge. Aside from motivating Mike's linguistic choices, Mike's rational expectations also explain his use of an implicature to decline Paul's request. Mike can decline Paul's request by way of an implicature because he has a rational expectation that Paul will be able to recover his intended implicature. Further rational

expectations on Mike's part could be delineated, but the point remains the same. As soon as we begin to unearth the expectations that Paul and Mike must use to make sense of the above exchange, we quickly find that there is no end to these expectations. Try as we might to place a boundary around these expectations, we can uncover other expectations that fall outside of the boundary. This situation is troublesome for the pragmatist who wishes to produce a theory of utterance interpretation, because the completeness of such a theory continually appears to evade his or her grasp. We will return to this point in section 4. In the meantime, we examine another feature of utterance interpretation, its intentional character.

Any post-Gricean pragmatist will tell you that a communicative exchange is an exchange of communicative intentions. Speakers and hearers not only recognize the intentions of others when they interpret utterances, but these same intentions also motivate their production of utterances. However, communicative intentions are only one part of the story of utterance interpretation. In fact, the recognition of communicative intentions is only possible to the extent that hearers are able to attribute a large range of other cognitive and affective mental states to the minds of speakers. To see this, let us return to the above exchange between Paul and Mike. Clearly, in order for Paul to understand Mike's utterance in this exchange, Paul must recognize the communicative intention that motivated this utterance, namely, that Mike is not willing for Paul and Sally to stay with him and Rose in Milan in the summer. But Paul can only recognise this intention after he has attributed a number of other mental states to Mike. These states include cognitive mental states like knowledge, belief and ignorance and affective mental states such as happiness, disgust and fear. On hearing Mike's utterance, Paul must be able to attribute certain *knowledge* states to Mike, including knowledge that Rose's mother is a retired physician, Mike and his wife own a villa in Milan, and that Paul and Sally have previously stayed with Mike in the villa. Alongside knowledge states, Paul must also attribute *belief* states to Mike. Among these attributed beliefs are the beliefs that Rose's mother will spend some time at the villa in the summer and that two further guests cannot be accommodated in consequence. Paul must also attribute certain states of *ignorance* to Mike, including ignorance of changes to the lease on the villa which prevent summer-only residence and ignorance of his wife's plans to leave him for another man before the trip takes place.

The range of mental states that Paul must attribute to Mike does not begin and end in knowledge, belief and ignorance. For Paul must also simultaneously attribute a number of affective states to Mike. When Paul observes Mike rolling his eyes as he explains that Rose's mother will be staying with them, Paul may reasonably attribute *sadness* or another negative affective state (anger, etc.) to Mike. Other non-verbal behaviours of Mike's may lead Paul to conclude that his request will be rejected. For example, Mike's facial expression may lead Paul to conclude that Mike is *dismayed* at the prospect of having him and Sally as summer guests in Milan. Before Paul even produces his first utterance in this exchange, he is attributing affective mental states to Mike. These states will effectively determine for Paul if he should go ahead with his request to Mike, or if it is best to delay the making of that request until a later time. For example, if Mike's non-verbal behaviours suggest that he is *anxious* or *fearful*, Paul may decide that his request will not be well received and that it is best to postpone it until he sees Mike again later in the week. What this scenario demonstrates is that the full panoply of cognitive and affective mental states must be attributed to speakers during utterance interpretation, and not just communicative intentions. The intentional character of utterance interpretation is not limited to the recognition of communicative intentions. In fact, once we begin to reveal the mental states that play a role in utterance interpretation, we find that there is no end to this process. Like rational expectations before them, mental states are not a bounded entity. *A fortiori*, mental states do not submit to the type of complete description that is required of a *theory* of utterance interpretation. In section 4, we will return to this point. But before doing so, we must examine the holistic character of utterance interpretation.

As any pragmatist will tell you, background knowledge is integral to the interpretation of utterances. This knowledge is variously characterized and includes knowledge of general and specific empirical facts (e.g. fish breathe through gills), knowledge of language (e.g. *freedom* and *liberty* are synonyms), and knowledge of the other participants in an exchange and of specific conversational practices (e.g. turn-taking). What pragmatists less often tell you is that this knowledge is holistic in nature. In fact, if anything, standard pragmatic accounts portray this knowledge as having an atomistic character, with «the knowledge» that we use to interpret an utterance represented as an isolable sub-part of our wider body of knowledge. It is not difficult to demonstrate that

this atomistic characterization is a fundamental misrepresentation of the knowledge that we use in utterance interpretation. The knowledge that Mike uses to interpret Paul's first utterance in the above exchange might reasonably be expected to include knowledge that Milan is an Italian city. But then this knowledge presupposes further knowledge to the effect that Italy is a country in southern Europe, that Europe is one of several continents, and that the continent of Europe includes countries that are part of the European Union (e.g. France) and countries outside of the EU (e.g. Switzerland). Apart from world knowledge, Mike will also use his linguistic knowledge to establish that the intended referent of «we» in Paul's utterance must be more than one individual. But then this linguistic knowledge presupposes knowledge of the concept of personhood, knowledge that «we» implies speaker inclusivity which is absent in the use of the pronoun «we», and knowledge that personal pronouns may be used to refer to inanimate entities (e.g. «The Queen Elizabeth 2 graced the seas for many years until *she* was decommissioned»).

The point that this example demonstrates is a simple enough one: there is no boundary on the knowledge that speakers and hearers may use to interpret utterances. Once we start to reveal this knowledge, we quickly find that there is no point at which this process can be terminated. Pragmatists have encouraged us to think and talk in terms of the knowledge that is *relevant* to utterance interpretation or that is *salient* for hearers during interpretation, as if this knowledge can be set apart from our wider body of knowledge. However, no such demarcation is possible or even intelligible, as we will always need knowledge that lies beyond any demarcation in order to make sense of the knowledge that is deemed relevant to utterance interpretation. There are no isolable sub-units within our knowledge as much in utterance interpretation as in any other domain. Certain standard ways of talking about utterance interpretation in pragmatics have led us to think otherwise. These ways presuppose a metaphysical standpoint from which it is assumed that we can survey human thinking and rationality in its entirety without use of the concepts that make that thinking intelligible to us. It is this same standpoint which makes it seem that a *theory* of utterance interpretation is possible and intelligible. As it will be argued below, the theoretical impulse with its aim of complete description is a misguided impulse when the object of description is communicative rationality. This impulse makes it seem that we can circumscribe the

rational expectations, mental states and background knowledge that are central to utterance interpretation. However, all that can ever be achieved through such circumscription is a distortion of the actual use of these concepts in interpretation. It is to a wider philosophical examination of this claim that we now turn.

4. THE IMPULSE TO THEORIZE IN UTTERANCE INTERPRETATION

Thus far, it has been argued that utterance interpretation has a rational, intentional, holistic character which no *theory* of interpretation can intelligibly represent. This claim is not without philosophical precedence. Indeed, the views of the American philosopher Hilary Putnam relate directly to it (see Cummings 2002a, 2002b, 2005a, 2005b, for discussion). Putnam's influence in philosophy has been immense in areas as wide-ranging as the philosophy of language and mind, epistemology and the philosophy of science. His views on metaphysical realism are particularly pertinent to the present discussion, and will be examined in this section. Metaphysical realism is, as described by Putnam, «a bundle of intimately associated philosophical ideas about truth» (1988, 107). Its assumptions are threefold. First, there is a unique correspondence relation between the propositions of language and features of the external world. Second, there is One True Theory of this external world or mind-independent reality. And third, there is a commitment to bivalence, such that each proposition of language must be either true or false. The metaphysical realist aims to explain the success of science in terms of the *reference* of the theories of science to subsets of the totality of all objects. His reductionism leads him to pursue an *explanation* of reference in terms of a causal relation. However, it is Putnam's claim that no *intelligible* explanation of the «facts of language» – for example, that we often assert «there is a castle in view» just when there is a castle in view and not when an igloo is in view – can proceed in the non-intentional manner typical of reductionist analysis.

To appreciate this, we must consider what is involved in such an explanation. An *intelligible* explanation of reference must appeal to a notion of *epistemic priority*, such that the explanans – in this case, a causal relation – exhibits a greater degree of supportive *warrant* than

the explanandum, here the notion of reference. Warrant presupposes the concept of *evidence*, evidence which is essential to the confirmation of the causal relation in this context. Moreover, the evidence in support of this causal relation presupposes the satisfaction of certain standards of *relevance* to that relation. Relevance is not an isolated notion, but one which is further dependent on the concept of *meaning* – to understand the relevance of the evidence of the present case is to understand the way in which the content of this evidence bears upon the content of the causal relation. In short, a pattern of interrelationships can be shown to exist for a range of such epistemic and normative notions, a pattern which constitutes a complex network of these different concepts. However, it is just these normative and epistemic notions which are unavailable to the causal theorist. He is pursuing a reductionist analysis – an account of the intentional from within the non-intentional – an essential feature of which is its rejection of all things normative. With this rejection of normativity and of the epistemic concepts described above comes the causal theorist's failure to provide an *intelligible explanation* of reference. We cannot even *make sense* of an explanation which, by its very nature, resists description in terms of relevance, epistemic priority, and so on.

In 1994, Putnam delivered the Dewey Lectures (Putnam 1994a). Prior to that time, he appeared content to express his rejection of causal theories in terms of what he believed to be their reductionist nature. For Putnam, causal theories are founded upon the mistaken assumption that the facts of various scientific disciplines, be they hard or soft in nature, have an informative light to shed on what has traditionally been described as the problem of intentionality. With the presentation of the Dewey Lectures, Putnam attempted to articulate further his dissatisfaction with the metaphysical realist's position. The focus of his attention at this time shifted from the scientific reductionism which motivates metaphysical realism and the causal theorist's response to the indeterminacy of reference, to the question of why it seems that a reductionist approach is the only serious contender when our inquiries turn to problems in the philosophy of mind. Of course, eliminativists like Stephen Stich and Richard Rorty would deny such a claim – for these philosophers, intentional notions like reference and reason can simply be eliminated. However, it is Putnam's claim that what motivates the case of reductionism – what Putnam, following John McDowell, has described as an *interface* conception of mind – similarly

motivates the case of eliminativism. Indeed, once one has accepted an interface conception of mind, then one must either proceed by reducing intentionality or explaining intentionality away.

To see this, consider how reference is accounted for within an interface conception of mind. In the Dewey Lectures, Putnam (1994a) argues:

> Early modern realism's philosophy of mind was an attempt to save some room for our everyday descriptions while fully accepting [the idea that our everyday descriptions cannot possibly apply to the things «as they are in themselves»]. According to this new philosophy of mind, our «experience» is entirely a matter taking place within the mind (or within the brain), within, that is to say, a realm conceived of as «inside», a realm where there are certainly no tables and chairs or cabbages or kings, a realm so disjoint from what came to be called the «external» world that (as Berkeley insisted) it makes no sense to speak of any experience as *resembling* what the experience is «of». Nevertheless, according to those philosophers who were not willing to follow Berkeley into idealism, «external» things are the *causes* of our «inner» experiences, and, while the person on the street is mistaken in thinking that he or she «directly perceives» those things, still we «indirectly perceive» them, in the sense of having experiences caused by them. Moreover, even color and warmth and the other «secondary qualities» (as they came to be called) can be granted a derivative sort of reality – they do not exist as «intrinsic properties» of the things «in themselves», but they exist as «relational properties», as dispositions to affect our minds (or brains) in certain ways (468-469; italics in original).

In the above passage Putnam describes a type of philosophical «solution» to the «problem» of explaining the relationship of perceptual experiences to the physical world. Although this solution is seventeenth century in origin, it effectively exhausts the type of explanation that is traded within present-day philosophical accounts of intentionality. For while it is generally held that we can explain our perceptual interaction with the world through the use of some suitably formulated causal mechanism, a similar mechanism is presumed to operate within our talk of thoughts referring to features of reality. Moreover, as part of these accounts it is argued that these causal relations (1) bridge the gulf brought about by the dualist's dichotomy of the mental and the physical (a gulf over which our conceptual powers cannot extend) and (2) secure a type of objectivity, in that both perceptual experience and the referential capacity of language are not the products of some fanciful creation on our part, but are ultimately «caused» by an exter-

nal world. Indeed, it is by virtue of these causal relations that we can assign content to our thoughts and perceptual experiences – outside of these relations, thoughts and experiences are taken to exhibit syntactic structure only. Putnam describes the varied nature of this interface of perception and conception as follows:

> In the tradition, these «interfaces» […] were originally thought of as mental […] It is not, however, essential to an interface conception of either perception or conception that the interface be mental – in materialist versions, the interface can be a brain process or brain state. In Quine's version of the interface conception of perception, it is nerve endings on the surface of my body that play the role of the interface. In the case of conception, the interface has recently been conceived of as consisting of «marks and noises» (Rorty); although the interface is not literally «inside» us on this Rortian conception, it turns out to generate the same problematic «gap» between thought and the world. (There is also a version – Fodor's – in which the interface is sentences, but not sentences in a public language – marks and noises – but in a language «inside» our brains, «mentalese». This is a kind of combination of the linguistic conception of the interface with the conception of the interface as «inside the head») (unpublished lecture notes).

Within an interface conception of mind our cognitive powers extend as far as an interface which is variously represented by sense data, qualia or, if your interests are Quinean in nature, by the stimulation of the body's surface neurons. In general, everything enclosed by this interface is of one kind, a strictly mental realm, and everything beyond the interface is of a quite different kind, physical relations devoid of all intentional character. According to one version of this picture, that advanced by Jerry Fodor, in order to explain how our thoughts can be about anything, one must first assume the existence of syntactically characterized structures, mental entities described in terms of their syntactic components. To this one must add semantics, physical relations which uniquely determine the truth-values of each of the previously specified syntactic structures. It is by means of a reduction to these physical relations that the causal theorist proposes to explain reference. The eliminativist, sceptical of the prospect of a successful outcome to this reductionist project, pursues an elimination of intentionality itself. Motivating both responses is the notion of an interface between an inner mental realm and an outer physical world, an interface which is bridged by a complete reduction of the mental to

the physical in the case of reductionism and which is explained away along with intentionality in the case of eliminativism.

This interface conception of our cognitive functioning has been, and continues to be, enormously influential, so much so that, as Putnam has argued, it can come to seem like «post-scientific common sense». Notwithstanding the appeal of this picture, the interface conception of mind is inherently unintelligible. Its unintelligibility stems from a certain metaphysical standpoint, one which assumes that we can compare thought and language with reality in itself. In the present context, this standpoint motivates the causal theorist's attempt to explain reference in terms of a causal relation. For the causal theorist, this relation does not presuppose rational discourse but is instead coextensive with this discourse. The difficulty with the standpoint presupposed by the causal theorist's view and by the interface conception of mind is that it leaves us with no means of *making sense* of the notion of an «explanatorily special» causal relation or of a reality in itself. For in both cases there is no residual notion of rationality with which to understand these notions. Moreover, it is not a solution to say that we *cannot* compare thought and language with reality in itself. For in employing the notion of a reality in itself, this negative thesis falls foul of the same unintelligibility from which it is intended to be an escape. Under the influence of the metaphysical spirit, we inevitably go forward by erecting standards about what must be the case in order for our thoughts to represent (refer to) reality. The typical manifestation of these standards is in the form of a philosophical theory, thus explaining Putnam's concern that «what he is offering should not be taken for a philosophical *theory* in the traditional sense» (1994b; xi).

Putnam's challenge to metaphysical realism – it is unintelligible rather than false – is equally devastating to a pragmatic theory of utterance interpretation. Like the interface conception of mind, which assumes that there is an inner, mental domain that is separable from an external reality in itself, such a theory assumes that we can throw a net around the rational, intentional phenomena that play a role in utterance interpretation. Within the net, we find the concepts that are the basis of utterance interpretation. Outside the net, we find a perspective which exists «in itself» apart from human thought and rationality. (In the absence of concepts that can make sense of this perspective, Putnam calls it a «we-know-not-what»). The theorist of utterance interpretation is in the same position as the metaphysical realist who aims

to capture reference in terms of a causal relation between thoughts and a mind-independent reality. Such a theorist aims to achieve a complete circumscription of the knowledge and mental states that play a role in interpretation. This circumscription must leave nothing behind – our entire communicative rationality must fall within its boundary. However, no matter how diligent we are in describing the rational expectations, mental states and knowledge that play a role in utterance interpretation, we can never attain a complete description of these mental phenomena, as a *theory* of utterance interpretation would have it (see Cummings 2012a, 2012b, for discussion). The impulse to theorize about utterance interpretation, like the impulse to theorize about reference, only appears intelligible on the assumption that we can occupy a metaphysical standpoint, a God's Eye point of view from which it seems that we can describe interpretation without using the same rational concepts that make interpretation possible. This point warrants further examination.

The pragmatist, I am claiming, is bewitched by the same view of our mental phenomena as that which has the metaphysical realist in its grasp. That view finds us trying to step outside of our conceptual skin by assuming a perspective or viewpoint that is devoid of rational concepts. It seems that this perspective offers the pragmatist not just the best, but the only, prospect of describing communicative rationality in its entirety. From this perspective, the pragmatist believes he can give the fullest possible description of the rational expectations, mental states and knowledge that play a role in utterance interpretation. This perspective is a type of reality in itself which exists apart from human concepts. As such, it seems to permit us to survey thought and rationality with the type of completeness that theorists aspire to without presupposing the very concepts that are to be part of the description. It appears that we can well and truly throw a net around every item of knowledge that is relevant to the interpretation of an utterance. But this beguiling view of the mental phenomena that play a role in utterance interpretation is also a highly fraudulent one. The pragmatist has left the realm of sense, which is constructed around his concepts, and has stepped into an unintelligible abyss. There can be no complete description from this perspective because there can be no description *at all* in the absence of rational concepts. Like the metaphysical realist before him, the pragmatist makes no sense at the very point at which he believes he has the totality of human concepts within his grasp. In

the same way that a causal relation cannot come to represent reference in the absence of prior rational concepts so, too, a complete theory cannot come to represent the mental phenomena that play a role in utterance interpretation. Both the causal relation and the complete theory are unintelligible constructs and for the same reason.

The theorist of utterance interpretation sets out with the noblest of intentions. His aim is to produce a complete theory of the rational processes that make human communication possible in much the same way that physicists strive for complete theories of physical forces in the natural world or biologists aim for complete theories of enzyme action in organisms. Like his scientific peers, the pragmatist sets about an exhaustive process of observation and description which is intended to capture every aspect of the phenomenon (utterance interpretation) that he is charged with explaining. With such theoretical aspirations uppermost in his mind, it can seem to the pragmatist that there is only one way of achieving the type of complete description of communi-cative rationality that he so desperately craves. That way is to step outside of his (own) rational thought and survey human thinking and rationality in its entirety. But this move marks an unintelligible turn for the pragmatist. For in his desire to achieve a complete description of communicative rationality, the pragmatist has left behind the very rational concepts that confer sense on that description. A concept of communicative rationality that has been fully circumscribed is truly a «we-know-not what». It is not the complete and intelligible theory of physical and natural phenomena that the scientist can produce, but an aberration of rationality that defies even meaningful description. The theoretical impulse that serves scientists so well in their inquiries is positively destructive when it is rational thought itself that is the focus of this impulse. Unbeknown to the pragmatist, his well-intentioned theoretical aspirations lead not to a complete theory of utterance inter-pretation but an unintelligible simulacrum of such a theory.

To recap, it has been argued that a *theory* of utterance inter-pretation suffers the same unintelligibility in the final analysis as the metaphysical realist's causal theory of reference. Putnam eloquently exposes the unintelligibility of the metaphysical realist's position. It is, he argues, an attempt to capture an intentional notion such as refer-ence without presupposing the rational concepts that are needed to *make sense* of this concept. I am claiming that the pragmatist commits himself to the very same unintelligibility when he attempts to develop

a theory of utterance interpretation. To achieve the completeness of such a theory, the pragmatist seeks recourse in a metaphysical standpoint, a type of God's Eye point of view from where he assumes he can describe human thought and rationality in its entirety, including human communicative rationality. Such a description appears to be truly exhaustive – no rational concept is omitted or sits outside of the description. But what the pragmatist has produced is not a *complete* description of communicative rationality but an *unintelligible* description. We cannot even recognize a description of human communicative rationality which purports to be complete. In the same way that Putnam claims the metaphysical realist has become utterly removed from the rational discourse which confers meaning on our statements about truth, reference and intentionality, the pragmatist, I am claiming, has divorced himself from the very rational discourse that we need to make sense of our statements about utterance interpretation. The impulse to theorize, which has been and continues to be so productive in the physical and natural sciences, has some very unfortunate consequences when we turn to questions about the nature of human thought and rationality, including communicative rationality.

5. IF NOT A *THEORY* OF UTTERANCE INTERPRETATION, THEN WHAT?

It has been argued that a *theory* of utterance interpretation leads the pragmatist into unintelligibility. Like the causal theorist, who attempts to account for the notion of reference without presupposing the very rational concepts that make this notion intelligible, the pragmatist commits himself to unintelligibility by trying to develop a theory of communicative rationality. So what is the pragmatist to make of this situation? If a *theory* of utterance interpretation is unintelligible, is there anything that the pragmatist can meaningfully say about interpretation? The answer to this question is that meaningful discourse about utterance interpretation is possible, even if such discourse cannot take the form of a theory. For a route through this unintelligibility, Putnam's views – and particularly his understanding of the writing of Wittgenstein – are once again revealing. As James Conant remarks in the introduction to Putnam's *Words and Life*:

The readings of (both early and later) Wittgenstein which Putnam (now) wishes to take issue with are all readings which understand Wittgenstein to be calling upon us to acknowledge the existence of certain *limits* (the limits imposed on thought by the logical structure of language, or the limits imposed on knowledge by the contingent nature of our forms of life). Wittgenstein (according to the readings Putnam opposes) shows us how to acquiesce in – rather than chafe against – these limits. Most of the readings of Wittgenstein which are presently in circulation (however much they may otherwise differ from one another) are of this variety, counselling us to resign ourselves to our inability to transcend the conditions of human knowledge. The readings of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* and *Philosophical Investigations* that Putnam himself (now) urges are ones which take Wittgenstein to be concerned to show that the limit against which, in our philosophizing, we (imagine ourselves to) chafe is an illusory limit. On this reading of Wittgenstein... «we cannot know the world as it is "in itself"... not because the "in itself" is an unreachable limit, but because the "in itself" doesn't make sense» (1994b, xl; italics in original).

Conant's use of the expression «our philosophizing» is significant in this context. Its significance stems from what Cora Diamond, Putnam and Wittgenstein all see as what becomes of our concepts under the pressure of *doing philosophy*. In an attempt to understand the effects of this pressure, Putnam has drawn upon the insights of American pragmatism, the principal appeal of which, in his opinion, has been an emphasis on the primacy of practice. The ways of talking and thinking which are fundamental to our practices give rise to pictures, pictures which can all too easily become the source of much metaphysics in philosophy. In demonstration of this, consider the case of our «using a picture» and the case of our «being in the grip of a picture». The former is the concern of Diamond's realistic spirit, a spirit which aims to recover the role that various concepts play in our lives. The latter is the work of the metaphysical spirit, the characteristic activity of which is a laying down of metaphysical requirements about what must be the case in order for something – reference, determinacy of sense, knowledge of other minds, and so on – to be possible. The satisfaction of these requirements results in an inevitable distortion of the very concepts that we are seeking to understand. This same distortion continues to haunt the endeavours of those who wish to escape from metaphysical realism. Such is Putnam's criticism of Rorty's attempt to abandon notions like representation.

It is part of Putnam's own attempt at recovery – what he has described as common-sense realism and a «deliberate» or «second naïveté» about conception – that he would have us take seriously the teachings of Wittgenstein. Sections 25 and 95 of *Philosophical Investigations* typify the picture that Putnam has in mind:

> Commanding, questioning, recounting, chatting, are as much a part of our natural history as walking, eating, drinking, playing (25)

> when we say, and *mean*, that such-and-such is the case, we – and our meaning – do not stop anywhere short of the fact; but we mean *this-is-so* (95)

The metaphysical spirit urges us to proceed in our philosophising by considering concepts apart from their applications in the different domains of our lives. When we do eventually set about examining their applications, we can only see these concepts through a lens of metaphysically imposed standards. As James Conant has remarked, «This is one way into metaphysics» (Putnam 1994b, liii). To overcome the domination that the metaphysical spirit has over us and, in so doing, find a way back out of metaphysics, we must first reverse the order of this examination, a task which is the concern of the realistic spirit. The realistic spirit encourages us to begin by looking and seeing just how concepts are applied within our various practices. This requires that we engage in a process of description, the aim of which is an accurate characterisation of the consequences that a particular picture, and the concepts inherent in it, has for its user. In his *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology & Religious Belief*, Wittgenstein describes the considerations that are subsumed within this type of description:

> «God's eye sees everything» – I want to say of this that it uses a picture.
> I don't want to belittle him [the person who says it.]…
> We associate a particular use with a picture…
> What conclusions are you going to draw?… Are eyebrows going to be talked of, in connection with the Eye of God?…
> If I say he used a picture, I don't want to say anything he himself wouldn't say. I want to say that he draws these conclusions.
> Isn't it as important as anything else, what picture he does use?…
> The whole *weight* may be in the picture… When I say he's using a picture I'm merely making a *grammatical* remark: [What I say] can only be verified by the consequences he does or does not draw…
> All I wished to characterize was the conventions he wished to draw. If I

wished to say anything more I was merely being philosophically arrogant (1966, 71-72; italics in original).

The most outstanding feature of this descriptive process is the restrictions placed on the extent of the description. Wittgenstein doesn't want to say anything he (the user of the picture) himself wouldn't say; indeed, to say more is 'being philosophically arrogant'. In fact, to say more is to proceed to philosophise in the manner urged by the metaphysical spirit, a manner in which we describe the application of a picture through an understanding of that same picture in isolation from its applications. Under the influence of the metaphysical spirit, we inevitably go forward by erecting standards about what must be the case in order for our thoughts to represent (refer to) reality. The typical embodiment of these standards is in the form of a philosophical theory. It is this very same theoretical impulse which, I contend, we must now also eschew in relation to utterance interpretation.

Applied to utterance interpretation, the type of descriptive process urged by Putnam has already been demonstrated. In section 3, we progressively revealed the rich array of rational expectations, mental states and knowledge that was used by Paul and Mike to make sense of each other's utterances in their brief verbal exchange. There was nothing forced about the description that was offered of this exchange. Rather, the description simply emerged as we carefully laid bare the significance of each utterance in this exchange for Paul and Mike. But from this description powerful observations were made about utterance interpretation and insights achieved. The essential interconnectedness of concepts was a particularly noteworthy observation. In this way, it was not possible to assign referents to terms such as «us» and «we» without acknowledging a range of mental states, including that the speaker must *believe* that the hearer has the background *knowledge* needed to make these reference assignments. Similarly, it made no sense to talk about the presupposition that was triggered by the iterative expression «again» in Paul's first utterance in this exchange – Paul and Sally had stayed with Mike and Rose *before* – in the absence of Paul's *beliefs* about Mike's mental states, and particularly Mike's *knowledge* of Paul's earlier stay in Milan. These conceptual interconnections are distorted by pragmatists who pursue theories of utterance interpretation. For it is in the very nature of the theoretical impulse to treat presupposition, reference assignment and a range of other pragmatic phenomena as isolable concepts which misrepresent the actual

use of these concepts by speakers and hearers. It is from the description of these conceptual interconnections that a proper understanding of utterance interpretation will emerge and where, I contend, the future focus of pragmatics must lie.

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