

Catholic Philosophy, Realism, and the Postmodern Dilemma

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I. THE POSTMODERN DILEMMA

By "modernism" let us signal a complex of doctrines that crystallized in the nineteenth century and whose late ramifications include egalitarian and libertarian liberalism. The tentacles of modernism, so defined, reach us at this moment. The majority of free democracies in the West embrace one or the other of the liberalisms just mentioned. We would not recognize the democracies without modernism. Similarly, as concerns theory of knowledge, the confidence with which modern philosophy began, whether in classical empiricism or rationalism, have, with only recent and still few exceptions, long since yielded to pragmatism and analysis and their offspring in Anglo-American circles and to existentialism and its affiliates on the Continent.

However oxymoronic the term "postmodernism" seems, yet postmodernism is a reality. The reason, known to all and openly celebrated by many, correlates with observations already made: the foundations of liberalism, egalitarian or libertarian, have collapsed under the weight of repeated attack. A progression of sallies have been made against these foundations, and, to simplify matters, we shall mention only two. It came to be realized that modernism depended upon an elaborate structure of contingent historical circumstances and processes. This is a fact to which J. S. Mill himself points when confronted with the question of what background is necessary for the utilitarian concept of humane rationality to work.

The answer: On condition of the liberalism that Mill tried to take in an

increasingly progressive, reformist direction.¹ But this condition traces modernism beyond its halting first steps in the Renaissance and Enlightenment, back to the Middle Ages when superstition reigned. Thus one sortie made against modernism would force admission that modernism is not modern enough. From this perspective, postmodernism includes the belief that just as modernism rid us of religion, so postmodernism will destroy its epigone, morality; and that just as modernism attacked hierarchicalized order, whether theoretical or practical, so postmodernism will develop both epistemology and ethics non-hierarchically.² In the latter day, however, came a second wave. It attacked modernism for being too modern. These attackers would extract the concession that meaning and truth in the practical or theoretical order arises only from highly particularized, traditional canons of rationality and humaneness. Despite their opposing points of departure, the attacking parties agree that liberalist modernism has exhausted its moral and intellectual capital.

But alas, the institutions of liberalism remain in place in the West, and no sane person would tear them all down; hence today arise liberal reformers on the model of J. S. Mill, such as Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen and Derek Phillips.³ The same goes for the church and us philosophers in her embrace, no less than for latter day modernists and postmodernists. Today and indeed for centuries, the Catholic moralist and the church he serves would directly interfere with the state only when there arises a question of sin. Otherwise, the church expects no treatment beyond what is given to the denominations and to non-Christian religions, although she reserves the orthodox belief that she is the mother church. Against the modernist backdrop, the church has grown and prospered; or at the very least, she has suffered little more than in ages past. So, only on likelihood of grave harm to religion itself or to the whole civil order will she interfere with the modern regime. Nor would it be prudent to forego modernism's palpable advantages, at least not if wholesale postmodernism is the only alternative.

¹ As in Chapter II of Mill's *Utilitarianism, Liberty, and Representative Government*, where Mill tries to overcome the objection that utilitarianism is a crass hedonism. In his answer, Mill acknowledges a debt to the whole of the Western tradition of civil order and rational discourse that enables him to reform it.

² We use "hierarchy" here only to stress order indexed from a privileged first principle. "Non-hierarchical" thus encompasses both (a) the holism inaugurated with Quine's net analogy for knowledge and (b) epistemological or moral anarchism.

³ Martha Nussbaum's thought more and more has followed this trajectory since her review of Allan Bloom's *Closing of the American Mind* in "Undemocratic Vistas," *The New York Review of Books* v. 34, n. 17 (November 5, 1987). See also Derek Phillips, *Looking Backward* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 175-96; Amartya Sen, *Inequality Reexamined* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), esp. Ch. 9, 129-52; Susan Moller Okin, *Justice, Gender, and the Family* (New York: Basic Books, 1989), 14.

Accordingly, the postmodern dilemma presents itself to the Catholic philosopher as follows. Either accept the collapse of modernism's foundations and commit oneself to an as yet uncertain and, in many ways unfriendly, postmodernism; or, in a postmodern setting, accept so much of a weakened modernism as does not compromise Catholic wisdom.

Accepting Horn A, i.e., the outright admission of modernism's bankruptcy and an unqualified embrace of postmodernism, should not worry us long. Under this alternative, it is hard to see what attitude the Catholic philosopher could assume to the faith besides the Modernism or the Traditionalism condemned by the First Vatican Council. Similarly, Horn B, i.e., an unqualified commitment to defective infrastructures for knowledge and values, hardly commends itself. The example and precept of Catholic tradition is to perfect existing structures, to heal what is sick; so it would be presumptuous to imply that, under the care and guidance of the vicar of Christ, the moral and intellectual foundations of civil order cannot be renewed, reformed, reconstructed. Nor is an attempt to go around the horns of this dilemma promising. This approximates a Catholic triumphalism out of step with the Second Vatican Council. The remaining alternative is to grasp both horns of the dilemma. And this all raises the question, in what manner and to what extent may we accept postmodernism, for the time being still superimposed upon modernism, without compromising the wisdom that as Catholic philosophers we ought to preserve? For convenience, let us call this the postmodern dilemma.

II. PHILOSOPHICAL REALISM STEPS INTO THE BREACH

Because it is a human dilemma and not a parochially Catholic one, the dilemma may be generalized. One example will suffice for now. The debate on physician assisted suicide rages about us in Europe and North America. The practice, or to be more precise, the belief that one has a moral right to its legalized practice, manifests the Hobbesian and Lockean strains of modern liberalism; whereas progressive liberals counsel protection of the vulnerable. Perhaps it is no surprise, then, that a perfectly liberal argument against legalizing physician assisted suicide can be generated from modernism's resources as well as an argument in favor of it. If one wishes to avoid the paradox altogether, one may take libertarian liberalism a bit further. One might protest that, over time, there should be fewer laws enacted on the basis of moral principles. But this answer will not hold still for long. Its reach extends to a political anarchy, a sinister element of postmodernism.

The dilemma thus generalized over a well known crisis of knowledge and values, the Catholic instinct is to repair to philosophical realism. Well and good,

but to which philosophical realism? No one can have failed to notice that because of the postmodern dilemma just described, today a few so called mainstream Anglo-American philosophers themselves have repaired to philosophical realism, one that defies so called classical or Aristotelian or Thomistic realism.

We refer to what is perhaps the most well known version of this new realism, the internal realism of Hilary Putnam. Passing momentarily its definition, let us notice the generic similarity between this new realism and the old one, as well as the profoundly humane and rational interests the new form represents. Declining to follow two paths that realism has taken—one, what we might call classical realism [and Putnam calls metaphysical realism], and two, positivism—Putnam still champions a first philosophy, a unity of knowledge and value. Thus

[W]e should recognize that *all* values, including the cognitive ones, derive their authority from our idea of human flourishing and our idea of reason. These two ideas are interconnected: our image of an ideal theoretical intelligence is simply a *part* of our ideal of total human flourishing, and makes no sense wrenched out of the total ideal, as Plato and Aristotle saw.⁴

Under this broad theme of the unity of knowledge and value, Putnam insists that his is a genuine realism. Indeed, he makes a foray into what I shall later call radical realism, when he criticizes Richard Rorty for being unable to deny that even he, Rorty, is a “metaphysical realist.” For Rorty does not recognize that (in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*) his picture is only a picture, but believes that in some deep pre-theoretic sense his picture is the way the world is.⁵ But Putnam, for his own part, truly is a realist: truth is a property independent of justification or probability.⁶ A review of the ethical and social and religious directions of his late work⁷ would show that Putnam embraces both horns of our postmodern dilemma. Fully aware of the weakness of modernism’s foundations but distrusting a Rorty-type irrationalism, Putnam defends philosophical realism. It is a realism within a postmodern setting. Given the postmodern dilemma, Putnam instinctively repairs to philosophical realism, too.

⁴ Hilary Putnam, “Beyond the Fact/Value Dichotomy,” in *Realism with a Human Face* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 141.

⁵ Hilary Putnam, “A Defense of Internal Realism,” 32.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ See, for example, Putnam’s *Renewing Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 180-200; *The Many Faces of Realism* (LaSalle, Illinois: Open Court, 1987), esp. Chs. II-IV; and *Meaning and the Moral Sciences* (London: Routledge, 1978), 83-94.

III. THE DOCTRINE OF INTERNAL REALISM

Yet as everyone knows, Putnam denies the validity of classical or Aristotelian or Thomistic realism, let us now call it simply classical realism. It is a realism that, *ceteris paribus*, Putnam thinks has been propounded in nearly every age. For Putnam, it is not this extravagant realism, but, instead, what he calls internal realism, that is valid. It will be helpful, first, to see what Putnam thinks internal realism is not, viz., metaphysical realism.

Responding to critics of his *Reason, Truth, and History* (1981), Putnam says that the metaphysical realist accepts all three of these principles: (1) the world consists of a fixed totality of mind-independent objects; (2) there is exactly one true and complete description of the way the world is; and (3) truth involves some sort of correspondence.⁸ Wary Thomists might protest the *ceteris paribus* clause uttered a moment ago. For "metaphysical realism 2" smacks of classic foundationalism, and especially the rationalist, Cartesian sort, whereas classical realism is nothing of the kind. True enough, Maritain, Gilson, and many other Thomists categorically disown Cartesian foundationalism. Their point, however, is ontological: the fact of human knowledge is a contingent fact. This ontological point in no way requires that knowledge, e.g., true philosophy or true science, in some meaningful sense is not a true and complete description of the way the world is. (Let us allow for a benign incompleteness entailed by the ongoing discovery process at any time.) "Metaphysical realism 3" might be disowned, because classical realism propounds an identity theory of knowledge, not a correspondence theory. This objection also pertains to the ontology of knowledge. Putnam's point, however, is more modest. Whatever the ontology of knowledge be, the notion that metaphysical realism, and so, in this context, classical realism, does not require correspondence would make classical realism vacuous. Indeed, what do we suppose that we mean, when we affirm "metaphysical realism 1," if not this: the sentence, the world consists of a fixed totality of mind-independent objects, corresponds to the way the world is? Thomas himself developed the nuance of classical realism that truth is something completed by the mind: truth, in the proper sense, occurs in the synthetic act of judgment. To be sure, the matter is more subtle and complex than this. But in terms of our analysis so far, it remains true that classical realism, *in its life as a theory*, must presuppose correspondence. If the way out of the impasse is to demonstrate that realism cannot mean, unqualifiedly, that truth is itself theoretical and linguistic, well and good. But the move is premature just now. The corresponding charge will have to be made to stick against Putnam, too.

⁸ Hilary Putnam, "A Defense of Internal Realism," 30.

Putnam's internal realism begins by saying that metaphysical realism makes sense only in a tradition of metaphysical discourse. Thus, if one accepts a definite set *I* of individuals of which the world consists, then the metaphysical realism corresponding to that *I* makes sense. Metaphysical realism, then, is always internal to a particular metaphysical discourse. By parity of reason, any realism worthy of the name is an internal realism. Putnam states internal realism as follows.

What I believe is that there is a notion of truth, or, more humbly, of being right, which we use constantly and which is not at all the metaphysical realist's notion of a description which corresponds to the noumenal facts. . . . From the point of view of the notion of being right that does actual work in our lives and intellectual practice, a mathematical theory which takes sets as primitive and a mathematical theory which is intertranslatable with the former, but which takes functions as primitive, may . . . both be right.⁹

Immediately following this, Putnam introduces his concept of truth.

In my picture, objects are theory-dependent in the sense that theories with incompatible ontologies can both be right. Saying that they are both right is not saying that there are fields out there as entities with extension and (in addition) fields in the sense of logical constructions. It is not saying that there are both absolute space-time points and points which are mere limits. It is saying that various representations, various languages, various theories, are good in certain contexts.¹⁰

The doctrine of internal realism thus accepts ontological relativity as concerns a theory. To recall the postmodern dilemma, however, Putnam insists that he is no relativist: neither moral nor general conceptual relativism attracts him in any way. Rather, reviving and revitalizing the realistic spirit is the important task for a philosopher at this time.¹¹

Having jettisoned metaphysical realism and correspondence and justification, and having embraced ontological relativity, Putnam would rescue truth. He would do so from the generically realist motive already sketched. But how? Here Putnam rings a change upon the theme of warranted assertability. Generally, defenders of this concept think of truth not through causal theories of knowledge (classic Empiricism); not through causal theories of reference (physicalist metaphysical realism); and again not through theories of justification worked out relativistically (on which account, Putnam says, even Rorty must be a metaphysical realist)—generally, exponents of warranted assertability think of truth as the quality of knowledge that entitles reliable proponents of a doctrine to affirm something. Putnam calls his specific version,

⁹ *Ibid.*, 40.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 41.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 42.

idealized warranted assertion. It means that what is supposed to be "true" be warrantable on the basis of experience and intelligence for creatures with "a rational and sensible nature."¹²

What sorts of truths does Putnam think meet this criterion? What indeed, if not many truths that anyone with a rational and sensible nature—so not only qualified experts—are warranted in affirming on the basis of experience and intelligence? "Talk of there being saber-toothed tigers here thirty thousand years ago, or beings who can verify mathematical and physical theories we cannot begin to understand (but who have brains and nervous systems), or talk of there being sentient beings outside my light cone, is not philosophically problematic for me. But talk of there being 'absolute space-time points,' or of sets 'really existing' or 'not really existing,' I reject."¹³

Thus Putnam would rescue truth. And thus he also would overcome a certain pathology that Edward Pols has called the dogma of the empirical impotence of philosophy.¹⁴ We trust that this, too, heartens realists among us. In Putnam's realism, so called truth-talk ranges widely. At one end are the findings of common sense, and at another, the most sophisticated, empirically grounded scientific theories. Somewhere in between is truth-talk that realism so desperately wants to recover from the postmodern dilemma. It is empirical talk of middle-sized objects and this from a philosophical, namely, non-reductive, point of view. We mean talk of morals and art and religion, even of philosophy itself. Let us go further and suggest that Putnam is generous enough that he would engage the fair minded among us who think we are entitled to the term, realism, too.

IV. THE DILEMMA OF INTERNAL REALISM

In this event, devotees of the dogged Detective Columbo might recall the line, Oh, just one more question . . . When we open up truth-talk to this wide range of middle-sized objects, and when we do so from a realist philosophical perspective, there is one more question we should ask, before going far. The question is, what of this truth-talk we enter and exercise and participate, as we widen the philosophical horizon?

In truth, that dogged detective always had several one more questions. Not being his match, we can only develop the question raised just now. Is the talk wherein we talk about and develop internal realism; is the talk whereby we criticize

¹² *Ibid.*, 41. ¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ In Edward Pols, *Radical Realism* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1992), 62-64. By this term, Pols imputes to his opponent the view, which he calls a dogma of the linguistic consensus, that philosophy has no empirical function; we accept it in this sense and note, too, that in his own way, Putnam would restore philosophy's empirical function.

other theories, including other realisms; is the talk wherein we would engage fellow realists; is the talk used to express dissatisfaction with postmodernism and to embrace, however reluctantly, corrupted foundations of modernism—is all this talk, internal to internal realism, true itself? If it is, then Putnam himself would insist that it must be talk warranted on the basis of experience and intelligence of a creature with a sensible and rational nature.

Nor do we lack evidence of the questions to which these qualities of warranted assertion extend. They extend to the issues of value and knowledge that realists wish to reconstruct in our day.

Thus we come to the internal realist dilemma. On one horn, we would internalize internal realism itself. To the question, is the discourse of internal realism true?, those who seize the one horn must answer: Yes, it is true, but internally to internal realism. A moment's reflection reveals the fallacy of this move. Internal realism now becomes internal, internal realism. Asking about its truth, we beget another internal realism; and so on, *ad infinitum*. On this first horn, the question whether internal realism is true is a non-starter, or it loses its sense.

True enough, Putnam acknowledges that his view, too, is only a picture; he also acknowledges a debt to pragmatism in his own reconstruction of realism.¹⁵ A soft version of the first horn thus comes into view. Accordingly, Putnam might plead that to internalize internal realism is unavoidable, yet far superior to the non-realist alternatives. But Putnam's criterion of truth pinches somewhere right about here. For if truth is what is warrantably assertible in his idealized sense, there surely are few people of experience and intelligence, having a sensible and rational nature, who would hasten to affirm that the very talk of internal realism itself is true only in an internal-to-theory sense, this being better than non-realism. It is hard to think of anything that people of experience and intelligence, having a rational and sensible nature, should shrink from affirming, if not this. At any rate, they should not affirm it of the very talk wherein they formulate the truth of internal realism!¹⁶

¹⁵ Hilary Putnam, "A Defense of Internal Realism," 40-41.

¹⁶ In another study in the same work, Putnam faces this charge pretty squarely. In his context, he asks whether his views commit him to realism, small "r," or to Realism. The common ground between this context and our charge is noted by Putnam himself: If saying what we say and doing what we do is being a "realist," then we had better be realists—realists with a small "r." This equates with our charge that in saying what we say about realism, we just are realists *simpliciter*. Then Putnam talks about object relativity for a page or so, and concludes: What I am saying is that elements of what we call "language" or "mind" *penetrate so deeply into what we call "reality" that the very project of representing ourselves as being "mappers" of something "language-independent" is fatally compromised from the very start* (italics in original), "Metaphysics" in *Realism with a Human Face*, 26, 28. But to repeat, if truth is what

If the first horn of the dilemma of internal realism leads to an infinite regress, the second approximates internal realism to classical or Aristotelian or Thomistic realism. Here, the word, approximate, is all-important. Yes, the internal realist might say, I really mean to affirm realism; if we do not get the truth, surely we approximate it. We either come close to it, or we accumulate truths. Either way, realism is distinctive because of this approximation idea. That is why I would rescue science from conceptual relativists and metaphysical realists and justificationalists like Rorty; it is what I mean by rescuing the objectivity of morals and art and religion; it is what I mean by rescuing even philosophy itself from mere justificationalist schemes and conceptual relativism and reductionist physicalism. Internal realism, accordingly, is like the old realism: if it does not attain the truth, it comes so close that we ought to breathe life back into the pursuit of truth and, above all, put philosophy back to work.

But the approximation horn of the dilemma remains incomplete. That we ought to put philosophy back to work, in a manner internal to internal realism, completes the thought. This horn, it seems to us, either makes Putnam's criterion of truth ambiguous between (a) internal, internal realism and (b) classical realism, or it makes the criterion vacuous.

Setting off philosophers again on the pursuit of truth, we surely can expect that, before going far, they check their compass. It registers the sensibleness and rationality of what they are doing. The compass is reason, reasoning about itself and its own activity. Thus if Putnam's criterion of truth works as to internal realism itself, then what he tells us about internal realism is true, approximately.

How should one judge the approximation? Putnam tells us that you do not judge it according to philosophical consensus. Idealized warranted assertability points not merely to what qualified members of the philosophic community say—and for science, not what its consensus says, and so on. It is this, but more; it is what is true. The “more” comes in the approximation to the truth,

is warrantably assertible in Putnam's idealized sense, then who would hasten to affirm that the sentence in our first quotation above implicates truth, but only internally to internal realism? Doing so, one encounters again the regress problem. If, on the other hand, one wishes to situate ontological relativity alongside realism, the second quotation above comes into view. In this scenario, often several viewpoints can be true. But if so, then by the gravity of the realism that Putnam commends, one must be coming very close to the truth that Realism seeks, or at least accumulating truths. In either event, one begets an approximation to truth thesis, despite Putnam's avowal to the contrary. In what immediately follows, we seize this approximation thesis. First, it approximates internal realism to the old or classical realism, at least insofar as saying what we say and doing what we do in developing internal realism is concerned. Second and in consequence, the basic claims about the truth of internal realism, so construed, cannot be true only internally.

and Putnam would overcome the consensualist problem that weakens other versions of warranted assertibility.¹⁷

Immediately, though, we turn to the doctrine of internal realism itself, and we uncover a damaging ambiguity. If the statement internal realism is approximately true, is true only internally to itself, then we lose the extra-consensual sense of approximate truth. Indeed, we encounter the regress problem again. If, however, we wish to retain a strong sense of approximate truth about the doctrine of internal realism, i.e., extra-consensual, approximate truth, we are on a slippery slope. At the bottom is classical realism. But if not this, then Putnam's criterion of truth seems vacuous. For if it were meaningful, then at least these points must be more than approximately true: that we know what we are doing when we exercise talk of realism, that it is really true that we know ourselves as rational agents, and so our talk of internal realism is the truth.

V. THE META-LANGUAGE COUNTER-OBJECTION

On the other hand, now we may be pressed to explain why our talk of internal realism is not simply meta-talk. Here, meta-talk of internal realism might fail to represent the linguistic domain of Putnam's concept of truth. Addressing the general issue of self-referential discourse, Putnam raises the objection against himself:

[We are brought] to a philosophically important possibility: the possibility of denying that our informal discourse constitutes a language. . . . According to this position, the informal discourse in which we say Every language has a meta-language, and the truth predicate for the language belongs to that meta-language, not the language itself is not itself part of any language, but a speech act which is *sui generis*.¹⁸

The *sui generis* clause troubles Putnam. We have been assuming that whatever differences might exist between (a) discourse of realism and (b) discourse about realism, they are not such that (a) is possible directly, whereas (b) is possible only in a strange meta-sense. So for Putnam, and then some. He rejects even the possibility that we can engage discourse about realism without using the concept of truth. His basic move is to collapse the distinction between saying and showing. Thus the things that we are shown when the meta-language objection is explained to us are shown by being said. "The idea that there are

¹⁷ Putnam vigorously denies that realism commits one to the belief that scientific or philosophic theories approximate, bring us ever closer, to The Truth (our term); on whether he is entitled to deny this, see immediately preceding note.

¹⁸ Hilary Putnam, "Metaphysics," 14.

discursive thoughts which cannot be 'said' is just the formalistic trick . . . I don't understand."¹⁹

So Putnam seems committed to truth-talk of realism and of internal realism as unavoidable, as though elements of it cannot be gainsaid. This is all we have been presuming all along. It might also be pointed out that the meta-language objection bears a family resemblance to the regress problem already discussed; to the extent they are similar, the regress problem afflicts the meta-language problem, too. Finally, the same strategy pursued so far was generalized by Jerrold Katz. He argues that any attempt to exclude so called folk semantics from scientific semantics must either collapse of its own weight or become dogmatic.²⁰ The meta-language counter-objection suffers the same fate, and Putnam is fully aware of the fact.

VI. THE PARADOX OF RADICAL REALISM

Passing over further intricacies of the second dilemma, we turn to a mere paradox. Once or twice in the immediately preceding discussion, we called the realism used to analyze Putnam's internal realism, classical realism. The term has been used on occasion until now, on the presumption that most readers would follow its trajectory. It is a vexing term. This is so not only because the term sometimes refers to thinkers of importantly different persuasions in anthologies and monographs and articles in epistemology. Nor has it seemed necessary till now to track closely the meaning Putnam attaches to it. For he thinks it refers to the antique forms of metaphysical realism, the classical realism of Aristotle or Aquinas. We have used it quite loosely so far, only to suggest a wide spectrum of issues that to many classical realists includes the doctrine of the intellect's knowledge of itself.²¹

The better term for this aspect of realism is radical realism. It is Edward Pols' term from his recent book of the same name.²² By "radical realism"

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 15.

²⁰ Jerrold J. Katz, *The Metaphysics of Meaning* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1990). For a brief discussion along these lines, see 29-34.

²¹ Here, the parasitic nature of knowledge of the thinking self in Aristotle and Aquinas raises only a false problem. If one thinks there is a critical reason for affirming the doctrine, that is fine. We have been stressing only that the thinking mind can know itself directly. "Parasitic" and "direct" are not contradictory opposites in the Aristotle-Aquinas axis. If they were, then "parasitic" would mean "indirect." But this would require that the self knew itself, actually through another intelligible, which is what the doctrine rather obviously denies.

²² See Pols, *Radical Realism*, ix-x, for the most primitive statement of his thesis. There, he recalls an incident in which he came to know something about knowing: What I enjoyed was

here, in general, we refer to meaningful, true discourse about reason, reasoning (though this involves only part of the term's range as Pöls uses it). Or to break the term down: "realism" signals empirical discourse about middle-sized objects that is unavoidable and undeniably true; within this range, we embrace Putnam's criterion of truth as that which persons of experience and intelligence and having a sensible and rational nature would affirm. "Radical," in the special context of much of our discussion so far, indicates a direct realism about reason itself. The part of classical realism that we take radical realism to be often has been overlooked. Perhaps the reason is that it leans a bit on subjectivism, an element we stress in order to draw attention to the directness of self-knowledge. And it seems to us that radical realism is indispensable in setting philosophy about its business again, more or less as Putnam would have things be.

What, then, of the paradox of radical realism? A while back, we raised the possibility that Putnam's criterion of truth is a vacuous element of his realism. This is true only in a qualified way—that is, if it is true at all. For it does seem possible that in time the approximation thesis will deliver Putnam to radical realism, deliver him from wholesale internal realism. In the meanwhile, however, internal realism and its truth criterion are not in any unqualified way vacuous. Nor should they be. The paradox of radical realism is connected with its radicalness. For however necessary radical realism might be to set classical realism aright, the former does not move very far in the grooves of the latter. Pöls himself virtually admits that radical realism needs to accommodate what we should call internal realism—what many now also call antirealism. His admission primarily concerns ongoing scientific investigations. Pöls thinks that we are entitled to treat—no, he thinks that we must treat—some, and perhaps many, of them as antirealisms, i.e., internal realisms.²³ This is a necessary condition of getting realism started in science, when we consider the abstractness and the immense detail of most physical or mathematical or biological theories; their sheer number, as well as the many and complex interrelations of *grand* and *petit* versions of many of them, must also be kept in mind. For scientific

a rational awareness (as I now call it) of ordinary things, but a rational awareness suddenly qualified and heightened by a surge in the intensity of the reflexive feature that is always native to it. And what that surge brought me was the assurance that we, the knowers, do not endow the thing known with the structure that comes through to us in our knowing it, ix-x. For his own adaptation of this radical realism, this direct knowing, to the sort of problem before us in this paper, see *Ibid.*, 143-44.

²³ Pöls discusses this issue in *Radical Realism*, 156-60. The accommodation to internal realism is transferred, not without remainder, to the important, related context of direct knowing in religion. See Pöls "Is There Religious Knowledge?" manuscript in progress, draft of April 16, 1993 cited with permission of author, 32-34.

investigation, radical realism assures the scientist of the rationality of what he does. As a science becomes more developed, it reaches a point from which it may discover enough of the truth that it is radically realist in some of its results. In the vast intermediate range where most science gets done, however, radical realism is overcome by an operational internal realism. This is the paradox of radical realism.

VII. CLASSICAL REALISM AND THE PARADOX OF RADICAL REALISM

Does this paradox bear consequences for the realism in philosophy that we gather to exercise and to appreciate and to develop? Let us turn briefly to one issue, though many issues would underscore the point urged in relation with it. The issue is a controversy that raged in neo-Thomist circles some years ago. Ralph McInerny reopened it not long ago, handling it with insight and elegance. It is the question of Christian ethics and some of the premises it seems to need. The reasons for choosing this issue are two. First, the controversy tacitly requires the concession before us at the moment; second, it will return us shortly to the postmodern dilemma and realism's place in it.

The negative thesis of McInerny's *The Question of Christian Ethics*²⁴ is that the Thomist revival inaugurated by Leo XIII has foundered, because of its inability to demonstrate the existence of a valid, purely philosophical ethics. The affirmative thesis distinguishes between ethical theories that (a) tell us the truth and (b) a false expectation of ethical theory, viz., that it enable us to love the good appropriately. McInerny shows how Aristotle and Thomas give us the former; then he argues that they never intended to give us the latter. Along the way, McInerny rejects the conclusions of Maritain and Gilson on this question. This all suggests a benign manner in which classical realism leans on internal realism. No truth integral to the theory itself was ever jeopardized.

The question of Christian ethics, however, implicates classical realism and internal realism in a more serious, more interesting manner. At one point in his argument, McInerny suggests that the doctrine of natural immortality is necessarily part of the picture of the philosophical ethics that he elaborates.²⁵ Given limitations of space, let us forget whether the concept of immortality itself is an ethical one. Rather, let us concede its importance, especially to a philosophical ethics wherein (a) the moral life in historic time and (b) personal relation with God in eternity are mutually implicated. Nor does space allow a

²⁴ Ralph McInerny, *The Question of Christian Ethics* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1993).

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 59.

rehearsal of all the reasons that the commitment to a purely philosophical demonstration of natural immortality is over-confident.²⁶ For the moment, the name of Cajetan recalls a classical realist, whose credentials otherwise are impeccable, who demurred on this point.

Happily, Professor McNerny's translation and commentary of Thomas's *De Unitate Intellectus contra Averroistas* also has appeared lately.²⁷ If we rightly read McNerny reading Aquinas, something like Cajetan's suspicion remains plausible.²⁸ If so, we find a deep and substantive controversy within philosophical (classical) realism: whether one doctrine, purely philosophical, depends upon another, true *ex suppositione fidei*. Here, internal realism or theory or antirealism is indispensable to classical realism. Either Cajetan's view is a realism internal to classical realism, or the standard approach to immortality is. We chose this issue, because of its profound interest and importance, but the results that pertain to it could be generalized over many other instances. In this and similar cases, what else besides internal realism annexed to classical realism can settle the matter? Indeed, what else raises the question?

VIII. RADICAL REALISM AND THE POSTMODERN DILEMMA

A question so profound as immortality and its connection with the moral life thrusts us back into the postmodern dilemma. Plainly enough, the question is consigned to metaphysics—and so to Hume's flame—by many or most modernist perspectives. Postmodernism, the setting of Putnam's realism, is far more generous. If Putnam would rescue realism; and if he also would rescue truth in philosophy and art and morals and religion, the question of immortality and many more compelling ones may be raised anew. To all this, radical realism settles the question of reason's birthright, as Pols sometimes calls it. Philosophy, art, religion, and morals all may go about their business, assured of the realism of reason itself. On certain questions, say as in McNerny's argument on behalf of a valid philosophical ethics, or perhaps Pols' own similar argument—both of which, at some level of generality, Putnam affirms—the birthright of reason

²⁶ For a treatment of one central problem, see our "A Weakness in the Standard Argument for Natural Immortality," forthcoming in a volume to be published by the American Maritain Association.

²⁷ Ralph McNerny, *Aquinas Against the Averroists: On There Being Only One Intellect* (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 1993).

²⁸ The most important claim in this context is that this human being understands, *ibid.*, 205-11. This true assertion does not entail individual, natural immortality of soul, unless the relations between (a) the soul's being the form of the body, (b) the soul's potentially knowing all things, and (c) its being a subsistent intellect is one of either natural or absolute necessity. But what line of implication, and what sort of necessity, runs between these items?

seems secured, even as concerns philosophy herself. Along the way, however, internal realism enters the discovery process. This is what, to Putnam, makes realism so especially vital: it is the very soul of investigation, whether scientific or philosophic or religious or artistic or moral.

This is all to urge that we seize both horns of the postmodern dilemma. It would be foolish to ask for a wholesale revision of the practices of modernism. More important, presently we anticipate a useful reconstruction of modernism. Postmodernism has drawn attention to the discourse of realism once again. The time is ripe to follow Leo XIII, Maritain, Gilson, Simon, McInerny, *et al.* Embracing the postmodern dilemma, we gain a keener view of (a) the narrow, though radical, realism of philosophy at the outset, and (b) realism's complex dependence upon theory or internal realism or antirealism at the end. This view becomes keener as we engage our opponent in a manner that, we trust, in some small way follows the example of the common doctor.