

## Gábor Forrai: Reference, Truth and Conceptual Schemes. A Defense of Internal Realism

Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht – Boston – London 2001, 150 s.

Internal realism is a position that was introduced into philosophy by Hilary Putnam. Putnam himself didn't develop the position into sufficient detail and has now moved somewhere else, to a position he calls 'naive realism'. Gábor Forrai, professor at the Department of History of Philosophy at the University of Miskolc, nevertheless believes that internal realism is a viable philosophical position, worthy of a sustained defense; and such a systematic defense is indeed to be found in the present book. It is far from clear that Putnam himself would subscribe to the details of Forrai's account, but this should not lower its attractiveness.

Since Forrai draws on the notion of 'conceptual schemes' in his defence of internal realism, the book opens with interesting, if brief, historical introduction which explains how the idea of conceptual schemes gained its currency in modern and recent philosophy. As was to be expected, the story starts with Kant, who opened this direction of philosophical inquiry by means of his distinction between a structure of concepts and an empirical sensory material (which is permeated and organized by the structure). Forrai then proceeds to sketch the views of logical positivists and also of some more recent authors like W.V.O. Quine and T. S. Kuhn. One of the merits of Forrai's version is that it defines, in explicit terms, the central notion of a conceptual scheme – the notorious absence of clear specification of the content of the term being a weak spot of debates on this important topic. His definition is the following: "a conceptual scheme is a *set of closely related concepts, which serve similar purposes, occur in similar contexts, and fit one another*" (p. 16). In this sense, we can speak, for example, of a conceptual scheme of carpentry or of a Newtonian conceptual scheme. Such a conception is, therefore, not to be confounded with another common understanding of a conceptual scheme as something that delimits what a person can think or talk about – the total, or fundamental, conceptual repertoire of the given person.

Forrai's conceptual schemes are therefore quite humble and unpretentious, so to speak. But this should not exempt him from the obligation to step into serious philosophical problems. His conceptual schemes will usually deal each with its own delimited part of reality; in his own words, each will usually have its own 'domain'. But Forrai, at the same time, wants to distinguish between 'adequate' conceptual schemes and 'inadequate' ones, and this immediately brings in a couple of difficulties: for most people, an adequate scheme would be one which captures the real distinctions of nature. And Forrai seems to agree: classifications that do not respect natural similarities of things and their differences can be treated as inadequate, according to him. Such a conception can, however, be accepted only in a limited and special sense by Forrai; he cannot accept the metaphysical realist's idea that the distinctions are

already 'out there', waiting to be hit upon. So one of the key questions of the book is whether an internal realist can develop an acceptable account of adequate conceptual schemes. The ensuing question seems to be this: can two different conceptual schemes share a single domain and can both be adequate for it? To deny the possibility of such sharing of domains would fly in the face of some uncontroversial facts: for example, it seems that a carpenter and a Newtonian scientist may both be speaking about the same kinds of entities. But then can we really imagine a situation in which two conceptual schemes are adequate for the very same domain, but are, still, distinct from one another (that is, in technical jargon, are not "type-reducible" to one another)?

Forrai believes we can indeed. He is thus forced to give a quite elaborate account of how this is possible in the first place. For this purpose he draws heavily on the nowadays popular notion of supervenience. One of the crucial steps in his argument is to settle the matter at hand by the idea of supervenience of *facts* of one kind (that is, facts expressed by means of one conceptual scheme) on facts of different scheme, rather than in terms of supervenience of sets of particulars or properties. Obviously, I cannot go into details here. Let me just remark that contrary to a widespread tendency of philosophers of mind to take the notion of supervenience as one-directional<sup>1</sup>, Forrai advocates the possibility of mutual supervenience of two kinds of facts (see pp. 110ff.).

Forrai intends to speak of conceptual schemes in the sense of "theoretical taxonomies or classificatory frameworks" (p. 7). Such an expression might suggest that he is interested only in theoretical applications of conceptual schemes, such as we find in some branches of natural science which aim mainly to classify nature. This is, however, far from the truth. Forrai often considers practical uses of concepts and even lets this feature enter into the very heart of his arguments and definitions – his views often have a pragmatist ring. According to him, it is important to ask what we actually do, or try to achieve, with specific conceptual schemes. And it is this practical dimension of concept application that helps to solve the mentioned perplexities surrounding the idea of adequacy of conceptual schemes. Adequacy of schemes is fundamentally a matter of their successfulness, appropriately characterized. This idea is certainly worth exploring. In fact, it might be taken as a sort of innovation in the debates surrounding the notion of a conceptual scheme, which usually deal only with theoretical contexts. Fortunately, Forrai does not succumb to half-baked pragmatism of the sort 'Truth is what works'. His treatment is more sophisticated; he considers, for example the connection between truth of scientific theories and their instrumental success. I believe this points in the right direction. You simply cannot build a successful scientific apparatus if you start from false premises.

---

<sup>1</sup> For example, people hold that the mental supervenes on the physical, but not vice versa – there is no change in any mental property without a corresponding change in some physical property, but changes in physical properties do not hinge on any changes in mental properties; the class of supervening properties is smaller than the class of what it supervenes on: there are physical properties with no mental counterparts, but not vice versa.

Now, a couple of words must be said about the doctrine of internal realism itself. Internal realism is designed to combine two key features that competing epistemological doctrines stress in quite different ways: causal *independence* (the realistic ingredient) of the world on our cognitive capacities and, simultaneously, its *ontological* dependence (the 'internal' ingredient) on them. The main opponent throughout the book is a metaphysical realist, who stresses that the world is not only causally, but also ontologically independent of us: it has a structure of its own, which we may, or may not, discover. Internal realism favors the idea of a joint contribution of the world and of our conceptual apparatus as two elements of the cognitive enterprise. Putnam himself summarizes our part in this story thus: "We cut up the world into objects when we introduce one or another scheme of description" (from his *Reason, Truth and History* [Cambridge, 1981], p. 52). It is we who divides, by means of our conceptual apparatus, the world into classes of things and their attributes, but it is the world thus divided what impinges on us as something causally independent of our capacities. Without this or that 'scheme of description' (or conceptual scheme) we could not think or talk about any objects whatsoever.

The metaphor of 'slicing up' the world became familiar in more recent philosophy, to be sure. But we should not forget that this metaphor can be put to use only by someone who already cleaves to the doctrine of conceptual *pluralism*. I have in mind the following: if there is 'a way of slicing up the world', then there are, obviously, *many* ways to do it. There is no unique, or necessary, way of slicing up an apple pie, for example. Correspondingly, one of the chapters in the present book is entitled 'Conceptual Pluralism' – and it is a doctrine which, if I read him correctly, is embraced by Forrai.<sup>2</sup> But, of course, you can only slice up what is already there. So, what is it that is already there? In literature it has been given an awe-inspiring name: 'amorphous lump' (and Forrai himself speaks in this context about 'blob realism'). All right. But amorphous lump of what? We are led to imagine the world as a bare something that waits to be labelled. It has either no structure or infinitely many structures; from the perspective of human being this distinction does not matter.

I suspect that we are so deeply immersed into our way of structuring the world that we have tremendous difficulties even to begin to imagine something like an amorphous lump of X, out of which our ordinary world would be forthcoming; but this is to give only a psychological reason. What I think is really a weak spot of this approach is this: in case the world (or, rather, *a* world) would be really amorphous or blob in the strict sense, we would be utterly at loss in the matter of slicing it up into its basic kinds. The complete arbitrariness of such an enterprise would make it absolutely pointless. Even if we grant for a moment that we might be equipped with luxuriously comprehensive set of *a priori* concepts, which is the maximum we can make to be hospitable to the idea of an amorphous lump (i.e., we would know how to slice up a world from the very beginning), it would be of no avail. We would have no idea in which way these shiny concepts are to be used; we could apply it to anything

---

<sup>2</sup> As for the much more problematic notion of conceptual relativism, Forrai carefully dissociates it from his internal realism.

whatsoever. And a concept of *that* wide range of application is as good as no concept at all. Unless something has at least a hint of a shape for us, the application of a concept on it is out of question. And so this kind of consideration indeed speaks in favour of Forrai's attempt to speak of adequate conceptual schemes.

On the other hand, I am far less sure that internal realism of this particular kind is dissociated from metaphysical realism. To repeat: given that some schemes are adequate and others are not, why is this not closely related to metaphysical realist idea of 'ultimate structure of reality'? If every structure of nature is human structure, why some schemes work and others do not? Forrai thinks that internal realism is diametrically opposed to metaphysical realism (p. 9). This seems to be too hasty – though the belief is ubiquitous. I, for one, would not be surprised if it turned out that Putnam is in fact a neighbor of metaphysical realist,<sup>3</sup> and Forrai even his roommmate. It remains a challenge for advocates of internal realism to throw more light on this problem. To continue in the list of shortcomings of the book: some of the steps in some of the arguments are just too quick and it is then extremely hard to evaluate the validity of the arguments. For example, the claim, 'Concepts are conventional devices' (p. 35) is simply too controversial to support an acceptable argument. Such an idea might perhaps sound natural, but should be spelled out in much more detail. Next, the notorious bachelor example (on p. 47) is probably wrong. According to it, the word 'bachelor' is applied exclusively to unmarried males. But, to varyate on an example given by Gilbert Harman, it seems perfectly reasonable to call 'bachelor' a *married* person whose marriage is in ruins for decades and who lives a womanless life. And, given Forrai's strategy, this is no trifle, since he draws on the notion of verbally stated justification conditions for such reference-fixing sentences as 'X is bachelor'; the fact that we are likely to make frequent mistakes in the identification of the justification conditions of reference-fixing sentences puts this strategy in doubt. Also, I believe that Forrai should not so often pause to consider what a particular historical figure would say to his account; I, for one, am far from interested in question whether Peirce would approve of internal realism (and similar queries). Finally, I must mention the least important, but still annoying imperfection: the book contains alarming number of misprints. It is by no means an exception today and it is sad to encounter this phenomenon – which couple of decades back would be *horribile dictu* – even in the books of the very best publishing houses

To sum up my already too lengthy exposé, the account given in the present book is systematic and partly novel, even though sometimes lacks in depth. It deals with

---

<sup>3</sup> Putnam does not use the idea of adequacy of schemes, and is therefore not that close to metaphysical realism. His version of internal realism nevertheless suggests that we may go to and fro between different conceptual schemes by means of an algorithm: they are just 'notational variants' of each other (see his 'Replies', in *Philosophical Topics*, 20, 1992, 1, p. 356). And this approach points to the strongly realist idea that the world is already structured independently of us and limits severely our ways of conceiving it. Or would Putnam claim, in a Kantian manner, that the similarity of all different schemes of description stems only from our psychological make-up?

important problems of conceptual pluralism, linguistic reference, indeterminacy of translation, content externalism, truth and scepticism, to mention just the most salient ones. It gives a good overview of an important contemporary philosophical topic, a topic that is likely to provoke interesting controversies in the future – and the book itself is likely to promote some of them, too. What I lack at certain points of the story is the attempt to persuade the reader to participate at author's game; in other words, sometimes the account given is just too technical and the reader might not have a clue why a particular problem is worth pursuing at all – such perhaps is the case of the notion of 'relative reference', for example. But, having said this, I nevertheless believe that this is a book that every philosopher interested in the topic will want to read.

Tomáš Marvan

## W. V. O. Quine: Od stimulu k věde

Filosofia, Praha 2002, 151 s.

Po prvýkrát sa mohol slovenský a český čitateľ stretnúť s prekladom amerického mysliteľa radiaceho sa k prúdu súčasnej analytickej filozofie W. V. O. Quina v roku 1994. Vydavateľstvo *Hermann a synové* umožnilo záujemcom o súčasnú filozofiu zakúpiť si knižku s útlými rozmermi pôvodne nazvanú *Pursuit of Truth*, v češtine *Hľadání pravdy*. „*Od stimulu k věde*“ je názov ďalšej, rozmermi nie väčšej publikácie, pochádzajúcej z filozofickej dielne tohto amerického mysliteľa. Príbuznosť analyzovaných tém ju umožňuje chápať aj ako voľné pokračovanie *Hľadania pravdy* a keďže Quine už dva roky nepatrí k žijúcim filozofom, možno toto jeho posledné dielo vidieť aj ako bodku za problémami, ktorým sa počas svojho akademického života venoval.

Samotný názov výstižne naznačuje obsah práce, ktorá sa v preklade J. Peregrina dostáva k čitateľom v Čechách a na Slovensku po siedmich rokoch od svojho vydania v Amerike. Titul napovedá Quinovú snahu objasniť vzťah medzi kontaktom človeka s okolitým svetom vo forme podráždenia nervových zakončení na povrchu ľudského organizmu a rozsiahlymi teóriami, ktorými sa človek pokúša svet interpretovať. „... ako sme my, fyzickí obyvatelia fyzického sveta, dokázali svoju vedeckú teóriu celého tohto sveta vyprojektovať z našich skromných kontaktov s ním: z čírych dopadov lúčov a častíc na povrchy našich tiel ...“ (s. 38). Inými slovami, chce objasniť, ako sme sa od stimulov prepracovali k vede.

Napriek svojmu malému rozsahu pokrýva publikácia pomerne širokú škálu tém. Čitateľ narazí na problémy epistemológie, metodológie vied, logiky, sémantiky, teórie referencie a filozofie mysle, pričom v pozadí všetkých stojí Quinom už dávnejšie za-