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***The Limits of Realism*, By Tim Button. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013,  
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Tim Button's stimulating *The Limits of Realism* breathes new life into a variety of Putnam-inspired arguments concerning realism, meaning, and scepticism. The initial project of the book is a refined defence of Putnam's model-theoretic arguments against external realism. Its interim conclusion is that external realism—and more generally any view that countenances the possibility of radical sceptical scenarios—avoids an incoherent scepticism about meaning only if specific hypotheses about the determination of meaning are, in a certain sense, lacking in content. In the second part of the book Button articulates the failings of Putnam's own various nonrealist, natural realist, and justificationist attempts to sideline the radical sceptical possibilities which generate the dilemma of the first part of the book. These failings motivate the third part of the book, in which Button reasons his way to a positive, though qualified, assessment of an alternative general strategy for eliminating radical sceptical possibilities, along the lines of Putnam's 'proof' that we could not be brains in a vat. The final main part of the book aims to identify the plausible elements in Putnam's semantic externalism and conceptual relativism. The book closes with a pair of sure-footed and accessible technical appendices, ancillary to the presentation of Putnam's model-theoretic arguments and the critical discussion of justificationism respectively.

This book is unusual in a number of ways. First, the topic is rather unfashionable: analytic metaphysicians now tend to engage directly in theorizing about the ultimate nature of reality without pausing to worry about the conditions of the possibility of

linguistic and mental representation of reality. Regardless of the ultimate success of Button's arguments it is refreshing and salutary to be brought to reflect on these issues. The book is also unusual for its tirelessly high level of critical insight and dialectical subtlety. There is a great deal to learn from the details throughout. Finally the book is unconventional in its prose style. It is written in a fluent, chatty, and emphatic voice, with frequent rhetorical flourishes and picturesque turns of phrase.

It must be said that this style is sometimes frustrating. The reader is sometimes left reeling in the dust, wondering what exactly just happened. A cooler, more pedestrian, presentation would have made the argument more accessible to assessment at key points.

In what follows I shall attempt to work through one important point at which I found Button's argument elliptical and hard to trace. It is the point at which Button suggests that the dilemma of the first part of the book generalizes in such a way as to threaten the broadly externalist 'natural realism' to which Putnam has turned since the 1990s. The fate of Button's divergence from Putnam here is important because the narrowly empiricist view of indirect contact with the world against which Button first presses his dilemma is of limited appeal. If Button's argument soundly generalizes to threaten currently more fashionable versions of realism according to which we may cognitively engage with the external world directly, then it ought to receive wide attention.

What is the dilemma of the first part of the book? Its initial target is the 'external realist' position, which has among its major elements the following principle of 'Cartesianism': even an ideal theory might be radically false. The external realist will illustrate this possibility by means of nightmare sceptical scenarios: an ideal theory is at least a theory with true consequences concerning experiences; the nightmare sceptical possibility is that

a theory with true consequences concerning experiences—with true ‘empirical content’—could otherwise be radically false. Button presses upon this external realist an interesting and inventive version of a model-theoretic permutation argument plus ‘just more theory’ maneuver. First it is argued that the truth of the empirical content of a theory does not suffice to rule out very many unintended interpretations of the complementary non-experiential portion of the theory. This level of indeterminacy amounts to the meaninglessness of the non-experiential portion of the theory. Yet there is something incoherent about entertaining this outcome in one’s own case: in entertaining the hypothesis that one cannot think meaningfully about the non-experiential world one proves that hypothesis to be false.

The external realist is likely to respond here that even if the mere truth of the empirical content of her theory of the world fails to pin down the interpretation of the rest of her theory, there will surely be additional ‘external’ constraints on reference that do so. One can envisage here a range of specific hypotheses about the nature of such constraints: causal, naïve-perceptual, reference-magnetic, action-explanatory, and so on. Now Button observes that no adequate such hypothesis can be part of the empirical content of the theory, for it has already been shown that empirical content does not suffice to rule out the many unintended interpretations and resulting meaninglessness of non-experiential vocabulary. On the other hand if a hypothesis about meaning-determination is not part of empirical content, then it is, even if true, bound to remain utterly mysterious to us, transcending our experience—no more worthy of assent than a hypothesis about undetectable ‘magic’. The external realist, Button concludes, is saddled with an unprepossessing choice between incoherence and mystery: *‘Either external realism is incoherent, or something (one knows not what) fixes reference’* (p.62).

Although Putnam is Button's immediate inspiration the reader will recognize here an affinity with Hume's complaint about Locke's indirect realism. Hume and Locke agree that the 'slightest philosophy' suffices to establish that the objects of sensory awareness are ideas and not mind-independent external objects as we might naively have supposed. Locke nevertheless asserts that our ideas represent external objects, via connections of causation and resemblance. To this Hume objects: 'the mind has never anything present to it but the perceptions, and cannot possibly reach any experience of their connexion with objects. The supposition of such a connexion is, therefore, without any foundation in reasoning.' (*Enquiry* §XII) Hume is not here dogmatically denying that there could be connections. His point is that we cannot possibly attain the 'side-on' perspective from which these connections would become visible to us. Any specific hypothesis we might frame about these connections, such as Locke's, can be no more rationally endorsed than belief in undetectable magic.

There is an obvious response to the empiricists' predicament, which is to deny their shared presupposition that we only immediately cognitively engage with ideas and not external objects. Indeed something along these lines has been Putnam's own 'natural realist' response to worries about scepticism and meaning since the 1990s. If experience reaches all the way to the external objects, then in fixing the empirical content of a theory—its statements about experience—one *ipso facto* fixes the interpretation of external world vocabulary as well.

Button has two main criticisms of Putnam's natural realism. First he is rightly critical of Putnam's heavy emphasis on a naïve realist view of *sensory perception* in particular. One's view of sensory perception cannot so obviously help to resolve indeterminacy in vocabulary putatively concerning *unobservable* external objects.

It could be replied that the basic idea that possession of an ideal theory is already a world-involving state of mind need not focus on sensory perception to the exclusion of other forms of knowledge of the world. A natural realist view can be stated in a more neutral manner: an ideal theory is a *known* theory. Since knowledge is factive it follows from this view that an ideal theory could not be false. The view thus rejects the Cartesianism that is supposed to generate the incoherence–mystery dilemma for the external realist.

However Button offers a second, deeper, criticism of Putnam, which would seem to apply to natural realist views more generally. A recurrent theme of the second part of the book is Button's insistence that it is not Cartesianism *as such* that generates the dilemma. Rather any view that countenances radical sceptical possibilities is vulnerable to the dilemma, for any such view is *de facto* committed to a notion of empirical content, and it is this commitment that is the fundamental source of the dilemma.

As Button observes, a natural realist view says nothing in itself to rule out the possibility of radical sceptical cases. For any good case in which things are really as they seem to be, there could be a bad case of massive error, whose subject cannot subjectively discriminate her case from the good case. According to the natural realist the subject of such a bad case cannot be in the world-involving state of possessing an ideal theory; at best she merely seems to herself to be in such a state. Button rightly notes that even on an externalist view of this sort there will remain a sort of neutral 'common factor' between the good and bad cases (93). In both cases: one cannot subjectively discriminate one's case from a case in which one has two hands; one cannot subjectively discriminate one's case from a case in which grass is green; one cannot subjectively discriminate one's

case from a case in which electrons have negative charge; one cannot discriminate one's case from a case in which the universe is expanding; and so on. As I understand Button, this common factor, or 'level of abstraction at which we can hold things fixed' (93) is supposed to be the empirical content to which the natural realist is in effect committed, playing the same role as the empiricist's veil of ideas in generating the dilemma.

But having identified the natural realist's commitment to empirical content in this sense how is the dilemma of the first part of the book supposed to be reconstructed *mutatis mutandis*? The reader is given the impression that the reconstruction is too trivial or obvious to be worth spelling out in explicit detail. Actually it is very hard to see how it would go.

First it should be noticed that the given statements concerning subjective indiscriminability use the full range of external world vocabulary—'hands', 'green', 'electrons', etc. It is correspondingly unclear whether fixing the interpretation of the empirical content of the theory will leave any indeterminacy whatsoever.

But suppose for the sake of argument that there is some troubling residual indeterminacy in the theory remaining after the empirical content has been held fixed. The natural realist might propose that certain relations of meaning-determination—e.g. *perceptual constancy detection mechanisms plus communal practical interests*, or whatever—pin down reference more determinately. At this point Button will press his dilemma: is one's theory of meaning-determination part of the empirical content of one's overall theory, or not?

The natural realist must surely answer that it is not. No serious theory of meaning-determination is going to be comprised of statements about the subjective indiscriminability of one's situation from this or that situation. One's meaning-determination theory will not in that sense be part of the 'empirical content' to which the natural realist is committed in his countenancing of radical sceptical possibilities.

The more plausible alternative, then, is to hold that specific hypotheses about meaning-determination are not part of a sceptic-proof common core of statements about subjective indiscriminability. They are hypotheses about aspects of the world that are no more or less vulnerable to radical sceptical possibilities than any other. But what's wrong with saying that? Does that somehow make specific hypotheses mysterious, or unknowable—no more rationally acceptable than hypotheses about undetectable magic? No. Without the extreme sceptical principle that the mere possibility of a case of a subject radically deceived about  $p$  renders  $p$  unknowable in every case, specific principles of meaning-determination can be regarded as just as knowable as any other aspect of the world, despite the possibility of bad cases with respect to them. There are many ways in which epistemologists have opposed the extreme sceptical principle. To take one recent influential example, on an externalist 'safety'-driven conception of knowledge the mere possibility of bad cases does not undermine one's knowledge; only *nearby* bad cases undermine one's knowledge. And we have no reason to suppose that nightmarish bad cases are nearby.

At points Button suggests that there would be an 'absolutely disastrous' (p.54) incoherence in the realist taking the same relaxed attitude towards sceptical scenarios about semantics as he does towards sceptical scenarios about other aspects of the world. In one sense this is correct. The doubt that one's own words and thoughts actually have

no semantic content is not a doubt that should detain one for very long; in entertaining the possibility one proves it not to obtain. However in grasping the second horn of Button's dilemma the natural realist is not committing to the possibly absurd position that the hypothesis *that one's words and thoughts have content* is in principle vulnerable to sceptical doubt. The natural realist is committing to the position that specific hypotheses *about* meaning-determination—*that reference is fixed by perceptual-constancy detection mechanisms plus communal practical interests* or whatever—are in principle vulnerable to sceptical doubt. It is hard to see anything incoherent about that commitment.

There is one general background principle that would, if correct, underpin the accusation of incoherence against the natural realist. It is the principle that if one is committed to the sceptic-vulnerability of every specific explanation of how it came to be true that *p* then one is thereby committed to the sceptic-vulnerability of the hypothesis of *p* itself. Button nowhere asserts this principle, but if it were correct then the natural realist—in placing all specific hypotheses about content-determination outside the sceptic-proof core—would indeed be committed to the (possibly absurd) claim that the hypothesis that one's words and thoughts have content is itself sceptic-vulnerable. But the general background principle is not correct. Here is a closely parallel example: one can admit the sceptic-vulnerability of every specific empirical hypothesis about how one came to exist. It doesn't follow that one is thereby committed to the sceptic-vulnerability of the hypothesis that one exists. The latter hypothesis—like the hypothesis that one's words and thoughts have semantic content—is true whenever one entertains it.

As far as I can see then Button's refined model-theoretic permutation argument is ineffective against a natural realist view in the spirit of Putnam's post-1990 writings, indeed in the spirit of much recent realist metaphysics and epistemology. Button is right

to suggest that the natural realist does not evade commitment to a sceptic-proof common core of ‘empirical content’ across good and bad cases. What it is difficult to see is why this should be thought problematic. There is no evident problem with the view that specific hypotheses about meaning-determination are not part of that core. Almost nothing that we know about the world is part of that core.<sup>1</sup>

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