

Incommensurability and rational inquiry: context-sensitivity and realism reconciled in light of Putnam's pragmatist theory of knowledge

This study intends to settle a context-sensitive and realistic account of Kuhn's notion of incommensurability. Originally, Kuhn employed this notion to question positivist understandings of science as a cumulative enterprise guided by a universal method – that mobilizes the allegedly neutral ground of empirical observation – and teleologically geared toward the elucidation of reality's fundamental ontology. Kuhn opposed to this view a contextualized picture of science as irreducibly relying on socially, culturally and historically situated paradigms (providing notably taxonomies and standards for theory assessment). According to Kuhn, the evolution of science is punctuated by crisis and revolutions during which new paradigms override ancient ones. More recently, renewed attention has been granted to incommensurability with the growth of interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research attempts gathering many different systems of categories and methodologies. Nonetheless, the notion of incommensurability has been intensively debated and its epistemological and philosophical consequences remain problematic. Therefore, refined insights about topics such as realism, truth or meaning and reference are required to establish a context-sensitive and realistic account. In this respect, Putnam's philosophical work is mobilized. His intellectual trajectory from metaphysical realism to commonsense or pragmatic realism (through the intermediate internalist period) is carefully analyzed. Important continuities and ruptures are evidenced with, in particular, the crucial step constituted by the criticism of interfacial understandings of conception and perception as leading to a kind of antinomy of realism. A synthesis of Putnam's late positions about realism, truth and reference is then provided under the label 'Putnam's pragmatist theory of knowledge'. It includes two important features. First, mind-independent reality is reconsidered according to a second naiveté leading to recognize it is many different ways along differently situated points of view. Second, semantic processes involved in the establishment of knowledge claims, theories or conceptual schemes and mechanisms at stake in their rational acceptance are pictured as context-sensitive. On the ground of Putnam's pragmatist theory of knowledge, a global pragmatist approach of rational inquiry doing justice to indispensable and irreducible influence of contexts is developed. In this framework, contextual influences have two types of consequences. Differently contextualized rational inquiries can tune to different domains of investigation (that is to say, they can focus on different pools of real entities being particular ways along specific sets of points of view). In addition, differently contextualized rational inquiry can possess different systems of rational acceptability and establish differently featured conceptual schemes. According to this global picture of rational inquiries as context-sensitive processes of knowledge production, phenomena of incommensurability are reconstructed as standing between differently contextualized investigations that, under the guidance of incompatible systems of rational acceptability, settle differently featured (possibly incompatible and even taxonomically incommensurable) conceptual schemes hosting same terms. A context-sensitive and realistic account is then developed in which such phenomena are interpretable *either* in competing perspectives as cognitive imperfections (when standing between inquiries tuned to same or overlapping domains of investigation) *or* in non-competing perspectives as legitimate and significant (when standing between inquiries tuned to different domains of investigation). This account is eventually mobilized to reconcile incommensurability and scientific realism.