Hilary Putnam, Giant of Modern Philosophy, Dies at 89

By BRUCE WEBER    MARCH 17, 2016

Hilary Putnam, a Harvard philosopher whose influence ranged widely across many fields of thought, including mathematical logic, philosophy of mind and language, epistemology and metaphysics, died on March 13 at his home in Arlington, Mass. He was 89.

The cause was metastasized mesothelioma, his daughter-in-law Rebecca Steinitz said.

In the world of contemporary philosophers, Professor Putnam was known for the breadth of his thinking, the vividness of his provocative arguments, and his penchant for self-questioning and willingness to change his mind.

In a field of inquiry characterized by elusive concepts, dizzying “isms” and subtle taxonomies, philosophers are in continual battle to resist simplification. Infinite, or at least enormous, complexity is the nature of things, Professor Putnam argued, writing that “any philosophy that can be put in a nutshell belongs in one.”

He spent his career expanding on ideas, his own and those of others, as if exploring an intellectual universe as boundless as the physical one.

He made an early mark in mathematical logic. With Julia Robinson, Martin Davis and later Yuri Matiyasevich, Professor Putnam provided a crucial proof involving the possibility of an algorithm that would solve certain polynomial equations. Whether such an algorithm exists — it does not, it turned out — was a
question known as “Hilbert’s 10th problem,” one of a list of challenges to 20th-century mathematicians presented by the German David Hilbert at the International Congress of Mathematicians in Paris in 1900.

Early on, Professor Putnam studied with Hans Reichenbach, a leading proponent of logical positivism, the school of thought, now in disrepute, that maintains that the only basis of knowledge is that which can be scientifically verified.

But Professor Putnam argued against it, offering a course at Harvard in “nonscientific knowledge,” encompassing the wisdom that comes from aesthetics, ethics and religion.

In the theory of language, Professor Putnam is known for the assertion that meaning is not “in the head”; rather, he said, what we call the meaning of a word is informed by external factors — the context in which a concept is encountered.

He described what came to be called a linguistic division of labor, according to which experts in a given field define certain concepts while others may refer to the concepts and understand them but not, on their own, define them.

“He would say that our understanding of something depends on a community,” Warren Goldfarb, a friend of Professor Putnam’s and a former chairman of the Harvard philosophy department, said in an interview on Monday. “There are times it can be said you use and understand a term even when it has no distinction for you. I understand the word ‘larch’ or ‘elm’; I couldn’t tell the trees apart, but you couldn’t say I didn’t understand them.”

In a 1975 paper called “The Meaning of ‘Meaning,’” Professor Putnam further illustrated his argument with a famous thought experiment called Twin Earth. He imagined a planet alongside our own that was a facsimile in almost every way, including holding a replica of each person. The only difference on Twin Earth was its water. Though it looks like H2O, tastes like H2O, fills the lakes, rivers and oceans and performs the same functions as H2O, Twin Earth’s water had a different chemical makeup, abbreviated as XYZ.

Therefore, if an earthling named, say, Oscar, were to travel to Twin Earth and...
visit his doppelgänger, Twin Oscar, when they referred to water, they would actually be talking about two different things, even though they appeared to be the same. Because Oscar and Twin Oscar are identical in every way, including their thoughts at a given time, Professor Putnam argued, meaning cannot simply be a function of what is formulated in someone’s head.

Another notable thought experiment devised by Professor Putnam, known as “brain in a vat,” was in the field of epistemology. The experiment was intended to disprove a fundamental contention of metaphysical realism — that objects and relationships in the world exist independently of how we perceive them; in other words, that the world we see and hear is not the one that actually is, and that therefore, our brains are perception machines untethered to reality.

If that were the case, Professor Putnam argued, then a human brain would be no different from a brain in a vat placed there by a mad scientist. Human brains, however, employ words based on the things they refer to, which requires some kind of contact with those things. So the brain in a vat — call him Oscar — could not formulate the sentence “I am a brain in a vat,” because Oscar has no experience of a real brain or a real vat. Rather, he would actually be saying something like “I’m the image of a brain in the image of a vat.”

Professor Putnam’s death provoked striking encomiums among his colleagues. The philosopher Martha C. Nussbaum wrote in The Huffington Post that Professor Putnam was “one of the greatest philosophers this nation has ever produced” and compared him to Aristotle in the range of his “creative and foundational contributions.”

The linguist and philosopher Noam Chomsky, who had known Professor Putnam since they both attended Central High School in Philadelphia 75 years ago, wrote in an email that “he had enormous talents and creativity, one of the finest minds I’ve ever encountered.”

And Professor Goldfarb at Harvard said: “I don’t know anyone else who had his breadth or so quickly assimilated things in all different areas. He was essentially the quickest mind I’ve ever encountered.”
Hilary Whitehall Putnam was born in Chicago on July 31, 1926, and spent much of his early life in a village near Paris after the family moved to France. His father, Samuel Putnam, was a prominent translator of Romance languages — his translation of “Don Quixote” is published by Modern Library — and his mother, the former Riva Sampson, was a secretary. After the family returned to the United States in the mid-1930s and settled in Philadelphia, Samuel Putnam became a columnist for the Communist newspaper The Daily Worker.

Hilary Putnam graduated from the University of Pennsylvania, began graduate school at Harvard and finished his Ph.D. at the University of California, Los Angeles, where he studied with Mr. Reichenbach. Before landing on the Harvard faculty in the mid-1960s, he taught at Northwestern, Princeton and M.I.T.

Far to the left politically, Professor Putnam lived at a commune in Cambridge, organized anti-Vietnam War activities, affiliated himself with Students for a Democratic Society and joined the Progressive Labor Party, an offshoot of the Communist Party. He later cut his ties to the group and declared his membership a mistake.

Professor Putnam married Ruth Anna Hall, a philosopher who taught at Wellesley College, in 1962. She survives him, as do two sons, Samuel (who is married to Ms. Steinitz) and Joshua; two daughters, Erika Putnam Chin and Maxima Kahn; and four granddaughters.

Perhaps the best illustration of Professor Putnam’s restless intellect was his most notable reversal. It had its origin in a 1960 paper, “Minds and Machines,” in which he addressed the mind-body problem — the relationship between one’s thoughts and feelings and one’s physical states and processes. Professor Putnam put forth the argument that if humans can be said to have souls, then it is impossible to say that machines do not, and that the existence of a complicated model for how a human being operates — like a model or a program for how a machine operates — is possible.

His thinking was a component of what came to be called functionalism, a hugely influential idea for its adherents and detractors in cognitive science and philosophy of mind that defines a mental state (a thought, say, or a desire) by the role it plays in
the complicated machine, or cognitive system, in which it exists.

Pain, for instance, would be defined by a functionalist as a mental state that is generally caused by an injury to the body, yields a sense that something is wrong and provokes an urge to moan or cry out.

But Professor Putnam eventually rejected functionalism, arguing that our understanding of the human “machine” was insufficient to support functionalist theory.

“I may have been the first philosopher to advance the thesis that the computer is the right model for the mind,” he wrote in an introduction to his book “Representation and Reality” (1988). “I gave my form of this doctrine the name ‘functionalism,’ and under this name, it has become the dominant view — some say the orthodoxy — in contemporary philosophy of mind.

“In this book, I shall be arguing that the computer analogy, call it the ‘computational view of the mind’ or ‘functionalism’ or what you will, does not after all answer the question we philosophers (along with many cognitive scientists) want to answer, the question ‘What is the nature of mental states?’ I am, thus, as I have done before on more than one occasion, criticizing a view I myself earlier advanced.”

Professor Putnam was ridiculed by some for changing his mind, but he defended himself: “A philosopher’s job is not to produce a View X and then, if possible, to become known as Mr. View X or Ms. View X.”

If philosophic investigations, he added, “contribute to the thousands-of-years-old dialogue that is philosophy, if they deepened our understanding of the riddles we refer to as ‘philosophical problems,’ then the philosopher who conducts those investigations is doing the job right.”

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