

Reichenbach: Probability & the A Priori

Has the Baby Been Thrown out with the Bathwater?

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Preface

Three years before his decease in 2016 Hilary Putnam commented in an interview by Phillip McReynolds on the philosophical views of his *Doktorvater*¹ Hans Reichenbach. Putnam wanted to illustrate a recurrent phenomenon in the history of philosophy with the development of Reichenbach's philosophy. The phenomenon that Putnam wanted to illustrate is a philosophical version of 'throwing the baby out with the bathwater'.

What Putnam meant is the following. Often in the historical development of philosophy, when philosophical views succeed each other, older and out-of-fashion views are cast aside in their entirety. Valuable elements in outmoded views thus risk being thrown out together with the out-of-date views of which they are part. A result of this, according to Putnam, is that sometimes philosophical errors are repeated.

Putnam's illustration of such an error is the insight² of Kant that (in Putnam's words) "Not all physical statements follow on a par: some of them constitute the very lenses through which you see physical phenomena."³ Putnam argues that the constitutive character of a certain category of physical statements might be one of the elements mentioned above; valuable elements within an outmoded philosophical view. The outmoded view in this case being kantianism. When the kantian bathwater was judged to have become stale, the idea that certain physical statements have a constitutive character was rejected together with the philosophical view of which it was part.

In his early work, which was published before the tide had turned against kantianism, Reichenbach's views stayed close to kantian (or neokantian) philos-

¹'Doktorvater' is the German term for PhD Supervisor.

²There is not, nor has there ever been, consensus in the community of philosophers on whether the insight of Kant that is described by Putnam is one of the great triumphs of reason or that it is an unwanted vestige of rationalism.

³Putnam continues by saying "...and that's a kantian idea. Kant put it in the structure of the mind. After the linguistic turn we say certain things are the very structure of the language at a given time; they are like lenses through which you see the phenomena—they're partly constitutive of the phenomena [...] Reichenbach (in his 1920 book) asked 'was Kant on to something?' rather than saying that Kant is obsolete."

ophy. Reichenbach's early work constitutes a search for the elements of kantian philosophy that should be retained in the face of then-recent developments in theoretical physics (viz Einstein's relativity theories). Putnam argues that the result of this search—the insight that certain physical statements have a constitutive character—allows the early Reichenbach to answer a question that was again (and more famously) posed in a later generation by Thomas Kuhn: Reichenbach's early view shows how scientific progress is possible without introducing any element of irrationality.

In Reichenbach's later work, according to Putnam, the kantian element is no longer present. In his later work Reichenbach has become a logical positivist and his views no longer show traces of kantianism. These considerations lead Putnam to the conclusion that the development of Reichenbach's philosophy from a neokantian beginning to a logical positivist stance is a case of 'throwing the baby out with the bathwater'.

The careful reader will already have noticed that I have adopted Putnam's phrase in the title of this dissertation with a slight modification: I have added a question-mark at its end. It is my aim in this dissertation to show that the baby—which Putnam believes has been thrown out—is still there. I will show that it is at least tenable that the elements of kantian thought that graced Reichenbach's early work return in his later work in a logical positivist guise. We shall see that Reichenbach's ideas about probabilistic posits and his sophisticated realist stance may be argued to be traces of transcendentality.