Habermas between Metaphysical and Natural Realism

by

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Habermas’s recent work in epistemology has been marked by a decisive rejection of his earlier epistemic conception of truth in which he understood truth as ‘what may be accepted as rational under ideal conditions.’ Arguing that no ‘idealization of justificatory conditions’ can do justice to both human fallibility and the unconditional nature of truth as a ‘property of propositions ‘that cannot be lost’,’ he has developed a realistic conception of truth that would sever any conceptual link between truth and justification which would imply that the meaning of truth can be explicated in terms of justifiability, while respecting the epistemic connection of justification as relevant for ascertaining the truth. But realizing this goal has remained elusive for Habermas who has attempted to capture the epistemic connection between truth and justification in two related, but as I shall argue, equally unsatisfactory ways. The problem, as I will try to show, lies with the way Habermas’s consideration of this issue does not adequately take into account a distinction drawn by Hilary Putnam between metaphysical and what he calls natural realism. Similar to Habermas, Putnam has recently been involved in a turn away from his own earlier epistemic conception of truth. But, unlike Habermas, Putnam has questioned the connection between truth and justification in a more cautious way that allows him to more successfully articulate a form of realism that, in taking its leave of an epistemic conception of truth, does not in turn create problems for our understanding of the epistemic connection of justification and truth. For this reason, I will argue that Habermas would be well advised to accept Putnam’s natural realism as a ‘friendly amendment’ to his own efforts. Though it requires re-thinking some of the ways in which Habermas has conceptualized the relation between truth and justification, Putnam’s natural realism is consistent with the aims of Habermas’s turn to
realism and, as I shall stress at the end of the paper, is a better fit with Habermas’s rejection of
metaphysical realism in the development of his ‘weak naturalism.’

Habermas’s Realism

Habermas’s turn to realism is motivated by a relatively simple insight: ‘Whereas well-
justified assertions can turn out to be false, we understand truth as a property of propositions
‘that cannot be lost’.’ The unconditional character of truth is opposed, in this way, to the
inherent fallibility of our argumentative attempts to justify our claims as true. And though
attempts to idealize justificatory conditions can secure the unconditional character of truth with
relative ease by linking it to justification under ideal epistemic conditions that could not be
trumped, such a move, as Habermas now argues, only succeeds at the cost of severing itself from
our sense of the inherent fallibility of all human knowledge and, in this way, ‘cut(s) off all
connection with the practices of justification familiar to us . . . .’ If our understanding of what it
means to justify a proposition essentially involves a sense of fallibility, then the idealization of
justificatory conditions, of our sense of what it is to justify a proposition, cannot secure the
unconditional character of truth. This strategy ‘cannot achieve its goal because it either distances
truth too far from justified assertibility or not far enough.’ (RRPT, pp. 40 & 45)

And yet, though truth is independent of justification in this way, justification must be
relevant for truth. Otherwise we would have no reason to suppose that seeking justification for
our beliefs helps us to pursue the truth. As he also puts it, more precisely, ‘there is an
unavoidable epistemological connection between truth and justification (but) this does not
amount to a conceptual connection between truth and rational assertibility under ideal
conditions.’ (RLT, 38) We need, therefore, an account of truth and justification which
recognizes that to call a proposition true is not to say that it is justifiable under ideal conditions while also explaining how seeking justifications for our beliefs is epistemologically relevant to seeking the truth. If truth is not an epistemic matter of justification, then why do we suppose that seeking and acquiring justification is a reliable way of coming to know the truth?

Habermas initially attempts to explicate the epistemological link between truth and justification with a pragmatic account of truth as a ‘Janus-faced notion . . . that mediates between behavioral certainty and discursively justified assertibility.’ On the one hand, truth faces the realm of behavioral certainty, the life-world in which our everyday action presupposes the truth of various beliefs. ‘We would step on no bridge, use no car, undergo no operation . . . if we did not hold the assumptions employed in the production and execution of our actions to be true.’ In the life-world we take the truth of certain things for granted. But, on occasion, a belief we take for granted in the life-world can lose its self-evidence for us. For instance, we see a footbridge we are about to step on sway more than we expected and question its safety. In such cases, truth turns to face the realm of discursively justified assertibility as we make the previously assumed belief explicit as a claim to truth in need of justification. And so we test the strength of the bridge. But when we become convinced that we have ‘exhausted the reservoir of potential possible objections’ to the truth of the belief in question, we no longer have a rational motivation for continuing to treat the belief as problematic, in need of justification. At this point, ‘the de-problematization of the disputed truth claim means that a license is issued for return to the attitude of actors who are involved in dealing with the world more naively.’ (RRPT, pp. 38, 43, & 47) And so, after testing the strength of the bridge to our satisfaction, we once again take its safety for granted and walk across it. The pragmatic role of the concept of truth, for
Habermas, is to mediate between what we need to assume in our everyday lives and what we treat as problematic in contexts of argumentation. But it could not perform this role if justification were not taken as epistemologically relevant to establishing the truth of disputed claims. Though we may be aware that truth is independent of justification, that we can always be wrong in what we believe ourselves justified to take as true, we allow our awareness of our own fallibility to prevent us from taking our pursuit of justification as relevant for establishing the truth at the cost of being unable to assure ourselves of the truth of our beliefs in a way that is sufficient for our practical lives.

Three years after this pragmatic construal of the relation between truth and justification, Habermas came to question its adequacy, noting that ‘this is a functional explanation that presupposes what needs to be explained, namely, the rational basis for switching from the perspective of discourse to action. But for a good justification of \( p \) to be sufficient for accepting \( p \) as true . . . the kinds of reasons that authorize such a transition must already make sense to the participants in discourse themselves.’ (RLT, p. 40) That is, the functional integrity of the relationship between action and discourse, behavioral certainty and discursively justified assertibility, cannot be appealed to in order to account for the epistemic link between justification and truth because it presupposes that very link. There would be no seamless transition from discourse to action if we did not recognize, from a perspective internal to our discursive consideration of validity claims, the relevance of justification for establishing the truth. Only in this way could we find in our discursive consideration of our beliefs, the rational motivation to make the transition from discourse to practice. What we want, and what Habermas now recognizes we need, is an account of our recognition of this relevance independent of the
practical transition it makes possible.

For this Habermas proposes to supplement his first account of the epistemic link between truth and justification with the idea that we recognize the epistemic relevance of justification to truth when the reasons we acquire for our beliefs ‘can prove a knowledge claim to be the result of a learning process, no matter how fallible that process may be. Reasons based on which S claims to know that \( p \) draw their special authority from the fact that they can be understood as reasons that have involved a learning subject ‘in the world itself.’(RLT, p. 41) It is the concept of learning that makes the connection between justification and truth comprehensible ‘to the participants in discourse themselves.’ If I can understand my reasoning as an instance of learning ‘in the world itself,’ I can see how my justification is relevant to establishing the truth. I can believe myself rationally entitled to resume taking the footbridge’s safety for granted because I see how the reasons I adduced for its safety involved learning about the footbridge itself. After all, I did not just meditate prayerfully on the safety of the bridge or consult holy scripture. I shook it as hard as I could. In this way I learned about the kind of forces the footbridge would bear.

At one point Habermas speaks of reasons which ‘create an evident genealogical connection between S’s knowledge and the rational acquisition of this knowledge.’ (RLT, p. 41) In order to establish an epistemic link between justification and truth, the reasons to which I appeal must make it evident that I have learned something about the world - as, for example, shaking the footbridge evidently enables me to learn about the footbridge’s strength. But how can any reasons make learning, in the sense in which we are interested, evident in a context where we cannot take for granted the epistemic relevance of justification to truth? When I shake
the footbridge, it is evident to me that I am learning about the footbridge because I am confident that my attempts to justify my beliefs, when they take such forms as these, are relevant to ascertaining the truth. If I were not confident, at least in principle, that my attempts to justify my beliefs are relevant to ascertaining the truth, I could not be confident that shaking the footbridge would enable me to learn about the footbridge’s strength as shaking the footbridge is something I do to seek justification for my belief in the footbridge’s safety. Though it is true that I cannot regard my attempts to justify my beliefs as relevant to ascertaining the truth unless I can regard them as forms of learning, it is also the case that I cannot regard my attempts to justify my beliefs as forms of learning unless I am already confident, at least in principle, in the epistemic relevance of justification to truth. Habermas is, therefore, not wrong to insist on learning as a key to our confidence in the epistemic link between justification and truth. But learning, even at its most evident, cannot be invoked as an explanation for that confidence as long as the epistemic connection between justification and truth is in question, as it must be for any epistemological position which insists that even the best justificatory conditions can come up short with regard to the truth. For if even the best justificatory conditions can fail us, then it is a genuine question as to how we can be confident that anything we seem to have learned about the world, in those best justificatory conditions, really is true of the world.

Habermas’s ‘Metatheoretical Assumption’

It is possible, however, that Habermas does not mean to appeal to learning as a complete account of our confidence in the epistemic link between justification and truth. There is also the ontological side of his concerns with realism: his weak naturalism which is concerned with a Kantian problematic not alien to the epistemological issues discussed so far. The problem is that
once we de-transcendentalize Kant’s conditions for the possibility of knowledge, as Habermas does, looking for socio-historical practices and procedures to take the place of Kant’s transcendental rules, we immediately undermine Kant’s ambition to secure a sense of universality and necessity for those conditions and, in consequence, a sense of objectivity for our knowledge of the world. The objectivity that Kant secured for empirical knowledge by grounding it in universal and necessary conditions for its possibility is lost as these conditions are now seen as inner-worldly contexts of social practices and procedures in the plural, each with a history all their own. Though Habermas stresses that ‘The pluralism of language games . . . does not necessarily lead to a manifold of incommensurable, mutually foreclosed linguistic universes,’ as it is always possible that we could ascertain ‘forms of symbolic expression and practice’ shared by all such language games, even this sense of universality would not be sufficient to ‘bestow necessity on a world that appears to be objective to all sociocultural forms of life. Only such necessity, however, could eradicate the suspicion of anthropocentrically generalizing from species-specific experiences.’ Once we understand our knowledge as the product of a unique perspective onto nature from within nature itself - the perspective of one natural species with its own unique capacities for coping with nature - the ‘skeptical doubt’ emerges that ‘the world as it is in itself partially eludes the horizon of ‘our’ possible experience.’ (RLT, p. 20)

This doubt is, of course, of a piece with the epistemological issues with which we have been dealing. It is the worry that our practices of justifying our beliefs and learning about the world may, for all we know, be nothing more than one among many sets of coping mechanisms which have evolved in nature to aid with the adaptation of different species to their differing
ecological niches. And, if so, they may, for all we know, have nothing or very little to do with ascertaining the truth about the world. As Nietzsche observed a century ago, ‘It is even a difficult thing for (us) to admit that the insect or the bird perceives an entirely different world from the one that man does, and that the question of which of these perceptions of the world is the more correct one is quite meaningless . . .’. So the question here is really much the same as the one we have been considering of our confidence in the epistemic relevance of justification to truth. In this context, Habermas stresses that the only way we can maintain our epistemic confidence is to make

a single metatheoretical assumption: that ‘our’ learning processes, that are possible within the framework of sociocultural forms of life, are in a sense simply the continuation of prior ‘evolutionary learning processes’ that in turn gave rise to our forms of life. For then the structures that form the transcendental conditions of possibility for our kinds of learning processes themselves turn out to be the result of less complex, natural learning processes - and thereby themselves acquire a cognitive content.’ (RLT, p. 27)

By assuming that our capacities to learn are themselves the ‘higher’ continuation of an evolutionary process that is seen as a form of ‘‘problem solving’ - by analogy to our own learning processes,’ we can accept the natural contingency of those processes without falling prey to skeptical doubts about their lack of objectivity. For if the workings of natural selection which have led to our capacities to learn can be understood as themselves forms of problem solving, ‘analogous to learning,’ then we can understand ‘the human mind as the intelligent solution to problems that itself developed under the constraints of reality. This perspective pulls the rug out from under the very idea that worldviews are species-relative.’ (RLT, pp. 28, 29, & 30)

It is not entirely clear how we should understand Habermas’s proposal. Toward the end
of the paper I will return to this issue and propose an interpretation that fits with the
epistemological proposals I will be making. But for now, at a minimum, Habermas clearly
intends it in a way that is relevant to the problem of the epistemic connection of justification and
truth which we have been considering. By assuming that the human mind is ‘the intelligent
solution to problems that itself developed under the constraint of reality,’ Habermas intends to
defuse a skeptical concern that threatens to undermine our confidence in the epistemic relevance
of our justificatory practices to truth. It could be suggested, then, that the epistemic connection
of justification and truth, in Habermas’s account, is only made intelligible in the light of this
‘metatheoretical assumption.’ Only by assuming that our modes of learning are products of
evolutionary processes which can themselves be seen as modes of problem solving ‘analogous to
learning,’ can it be evident that, in some cases, our forms of justification are products of learning
in the sense needed for our confidence in the epistemic connection of justification and truth. The
problems we observed in Habermas’s attempt to ground this connection in an account of
learning would, then, be seen as artefacts of a failure to integrate his appeal to learning in the
broader context of his ontological understanding of the ‘continuity between nature and culture.’
(RLT, p. 28)

As with the appeal to learning, it is not wrong to stress the importance of Habermas’s
‘metatheoretical assumption’ in an account of our confidence in the epistemic relevance of
justification to truth. We must be able to see our capacity to learn, in some sense, as something
more than a blind adaptation to nature, a set of good tricks with which evolution has equipped
us, if we are to avoid the sort of species relativism Habermas recounts. But Habermas’s
assumption is not sufficient to explain our confidence in the epistemic connection between
justification and truth as it can only plausibly be construed as a way of maintaining our confidence in the light of skeptical doubts which arise with a naturalistic understanding of our cognitive life. As we learn that our species and its capacities for learning are products of natural selection, our initial confidence in our capacity to learn about the world at all is shaken. Habermas’s assumption is, then, rationally motivated only in the light of that initial confidence, which it comes to repair. As such, it presupposes that initial confidence in our capacity to learn, in the epistemic relevance of justification to truth, and cannot itself explain it. What is the basis for our confidence in our capacity to learn such that we could be confident in what we had learned about evolution sufficient to rationally motivate Habermas’s assumption? Nothing Habermas has said with respect to learning as a product of evolutionary processes as modes of problem solving addresses this question.

Metaphysical and Natural Realism

The problems with Habermas’s attempt to account for the epistemic link between justification and truth stems, I believe, from his insistence that even the best justificatory conditions can fail us with regard to truth. If that is the case, the relevance of our justificatory practices to ascertaining the truth cannot help but become mysterious. At best, our most well justified beliefs seem true to us. But in each and every case, they may actually be false. A connection is made, in this way, between justification and the appearance of truth, but the truth itself lies beyond our capacity to recognize.4

In his own attempts to move beyond an epistemic conception of truth, Hilary Putnam has avoided this problem by moving more cautiously in severing the connection between justification and truth. Unlike Habermas, Putnam does not insist that even the best justificatory
conditions can fail us with regard to the truth, but only that, as he puts it, ‘truth is sometimes recognition-transcendent because what goes on in the world is sometimes beyond our power to recognize, even when it is not beyond our power to conceive.’ We can easily conceive how a statement like ‘There are no intelligent extraterrestrials’ can be true despite the fact that it is ‘not verifiable even ‘in principle’.’ But this does not imply that all statements are recognition-transcendent. Replying to Crispin Wright’s criticisms of his position, Putnam writes:

> It is indeed the case that our ability to verify them perceptually under favorable circumstances is part of what is comprised in our understanding of such atomic descriptive propositions as ‘Here is a chair’ (and thus I do not need to be persuaded by Wright that we should not ‘recoil’ so far in the direction of metaphysical realism as to think of truth as recognition transcendent in the most ordinary cases) . . .

Though we may not be able to specify them exhaustively or with precision, we need not reject the idea that there are conditions sufficient for the recognition of the truth of a proposition like ‘Here is a chair’ in order to accept a realist conception of truth.

As Putnam stresses, his ‘natural realism’ is a form of direct realism which rejects the idea of an interface between the mind and the world. The mind, as Putnam conceives it, is open to the world itself. And so, when I see a chair, if I am seeing correctly, I am seeing the chair itself, not a representation of the chair that I could have in view in the absence of the chair. In his criticism of Putnam’s position, Crispin Wright argues that such a view as this demands ‘that no genre of state of affairs is essentially beyond our powers of knowledge; under the right . . . circumstances, our powers will ‘reach out’ to the very facts in question, and opinions formed will be correct.’ If we follow Putnam, Wright is incorrect to take his point this far. After all, there are some statements whose truth we can conceive but not recognize, even in principle. But
the germ of an insight remains: if the mind is genuinely open to the world, then there must be
some justificatory conditions that are sufficient to put us in a position to know the truth about
the world. Though a statement like ‘There are no intelligent extraterrestrials’ may transcend our
ability to recognize its truth, it is not because the world or some part of it lies hidden from our
view behind a representational interface which is all we know directly; it is merely because of
the statement’s particular ‘logical structure’ which, in this case, limits us to an ability to
recognize only the probability of its truth.\(^\text{10}\) The idea that we can be in sufficiently good
epistemic conditions to recognize the truth of some statements, and certainly the most ordinary
ones, is never put in question by Putnam’s natural realism.

Putnam’s natural realism is more successful than Habermas’s in explaining both our
intuitions that truth is independent of justification and that justification is relevant to
ascertaining the truth. We can affirm, with Habermas, that there is no \textit{conceptual} connection
between truth and justification. Even in ordinary cases where we can be assured that there are
conditions sufficient for our recognition of a proposition’s truth we need not accept that the
proposition is true because of the epistemic fact that we would be capable of recognizing it
under such conditions.\(^\text{11}\) That the truth of \textit{some} propositions outstrip, in principle, our capacity to
recognize them is sufficient to make the point that the concept of truth cannot be reduced to an
epistemic concept. ‘Here is a chair’ is no more true, if it is true, \textit{because} I am capable of
recognizing it than ‘There are no intelligent extraterrestrials.’ Hence, if it is true, it is true
unconditionally. Its truth value is a property ‘that cannot be lost.’ But in maintaining that in
some, especially ordinary, cases epistemic conditions can be sufficiently good for the
recognition of truth, Putnam preserves the intelligibility of an epistemic connection between
justification and truth. For we never call into question the common sense idea that in some cases we can know what is true, not merely what appears true, but may just as well be false.

In calling that idea into question, Habermas’s realism flirts with what Wright and Putnam both assess as definitive of metaphysical realism - the idea of an interface between the mind and the world. To return to Putnam’s chair, seeing a chair (and so being justified in thinking that ‘Here is a chair’) can only be, for Habermas, at best a matter of seeming to see a chair. We remain limited to appearances that could always be false and, as such, are never sufficient for the recognition of their truth. We have no explicit appeal in any of this to mental representations of some sort as the direct object of our knowledge, rather than the world. And being bound to speak of appearances which can be deceiving is not, of itself, to be bound to a conception of appearances as an interface between the mind and the world. But in insisting that truth can always escape us, even in the best justificatory conditions, Habermas’s realism deprives us of the resources for seeing how our efforts to be rational with our beliefs can enable us to grasp the truth about the world. In this way, his position leaves us with the same sense of ‘cognitive alienation’ the notion of an interface between the mind and the world creates for us, in which the epistemic relevance of justification to truth is an ‘ultimately inscrutable matter.’

Though there is no explicit avowal of an interface here, Habermas’s position raises the very same problems. The relationship between our epistemic practices and truth remains just as mysterious. It is as if the appearance of truth, for Habermas, is condemned to be merely an appearance, never a direct grasp of the truth itself, a way of having the world itself in view.

Another way to make this point would be to say that Habermas has so sharply distinguished truth from justification that he has succumbed to what John McDowell
characterizes as the ‘interiorization of the space of reasons’ in which we partition the space of reasons, on the one hand, from the space of the world, on the other. That the world goes along with what we have good reason to believe, on this way of thinking, is external to our being justified in believing that. And so, as Habermas urges, the truth can escape us even in the best epistemic conditions as the world goes its own way independent of the space of reasons in which our justificatory efforts move. For his part, McDowell urges us to resist this partition and picture being justified in believing a proposition as a state that involves the world being a certain way - the way one believes it to be. ‘This points to a different conception of factive positions like seeing that things are a certain way. When someone enjoys such a position, that involves, if you like, a stroke of good fortune, a kindness from the world; even so, the position is, in its own right, a satisfactory standing in the space of reasons, not a composite in which such a standing is combined with a condition external to the space of reasons.’ A satisfactory standing in the space of reasons, for perceptual beliefs, is a matter of finding oneself in a position in which one’s seeing that things are a certain way is a matter of being present to the way the world is. As McDowell puts it with the example of seeing a candle, ‘for a subject in the best case, the appearance that there is a candle in front of her is the presence of the candle making itself apparent to her. This is not a mere seeming, which would be compatible with there being no candle there.’

It is this way of conceiving the space of reasons that Habermas denies himself in affirming the inability of even the best epistemic conditions to secure the truth. And in doing so he denies himself access to the common sense thought that there are some epistemic conditions in which seeing a candle is more than just seeming to see a candle in a way that would be
compatible with there being no candle there at all. Sometimes, under good epistemic conditions, seeing a candle is recognizing the presence of the candle in front of one. Of course, we can always, in principle at any rate, be mistaken as to whether or not we are making a judgement in genuinely good epistemic conditions. In this way, Habermas is correct to stress the fallibility of human cognition. But our fallibility need not be conceived as a limitation of every set of epistemic conditions with respect to truth, but merely in terms of our own limitations with respect to the epistemic conditions in which we find ourselves. McDowell makes this point in connection with his proposals about overcoming the interiorization of the space of reasons in this way: ‘Of course we are fallible in our judgements as to the shape of the space of reasons as we find it - what comes to the same thing - as to the shape of the world as we find it.’ I may not realize that I am wrong when I believe that there is a candle (or a chair) in front of me because I do not realize that I have been slipped a hallucinogenic drug rendering my perceptual capacities less than fully reliable. But this does not imply that there are no epistemic conditions sufficient to enable me to recognize the truth of my belief in a candle (or a chair) that I see in front of me. It is just that we can always make mistakes in judging that such conditions have obtained. But recognizing our fallibility about the shape of the space of reasons, our propensity to error in recognizing whether we are really justified in believing what we do, does not entail that there can be no justificatory context that would be sufficient for the recognition of truth, that would deliver more than just appearances to us, but the presence of the world itself.

By drawing a distinction between, on the one hand, our limitations with respect to epistemic conditions and, on the other, the limitations of epistemic conditions in relation to truth, and by stressing the former as opposed to the latter, we can recognize human fallibility
without putting into question the epistemic connection of justification and truth. In doing so, we do not so much account for the epistemic relevance of justification to truth as we call into question the necessity of the picture which calls it into question in the first place. For the demands of realism do not entail a picture of the relationship between justification and truth where even the best justificatory contexts would fail to secure the truth. Acknowledging that ‘truth is sometimes recognition-transcendent’ is sufficient to keep our distance from an epistemic conception of truth while also avoiding the ‘cognitive alienation’ that comes with metaphysical realism. Though, as stressed earlier, Habermas’s realism is not unequivocally metaphysical in character, there is no need for him to venture as close as he does to it. Tempering his realism, in the way modeled by Putnam’s natural realism, would serve him better.

Habermas’s ‘Metatheoretical Assumption,’ Again

It could be objected, though, that our confidence in the epistemic connection between justification and truth is shaken by more than just a mistaken conception of the demands of a realist conception of truth. There are also the problems raised by the de-transcendentalization of the conditions for the possibility of knowledge, the recognition of our knowledge of nature as a product of the natural world itself. As already noted, Habermas’s epistemological concerns are, in a significant way, rooted in this problematic. It is not sufficient, then, to settle Habermas’s concerns with the epistemic relevance of justification to truth by simply calling into question one aspect of his conception of truth which unnecessarily creates problems for us. And dealing with this other aspect of the problem, it might further be argued, demands a metaphysically realist interpretation of Habermas’s ‘metatheoretical assumption.’ Only if we read his assumption about the human mind as a product of an evolutionary process ‘analogous to
learning’ as a naturalistic explanation of the cognitive coordination of the mind and the world it purports to know, an assumption we make to explain to ourselves how our view of the world might adequately correspond to the world itself, can we successfully put to rest the skeptical worry that ‘worldviews are species relative.’ This objection is undoubtedly right to stress the way Habermas’s concerns with the epistemic connection of justification and truth are rooted in questions stemming from a naturalistic view of knowledge. As such, though it is important to see that the demands of realism do not entail a view of the relation between truth and justification that calls into question the epistemic relevance of justification to truth, it is not sufficient to adequately deal with Habermas’s concerns with this issue. Habermas’s weak naturalism is the ontological side of the epistemological coin we have principally been considering and no adequate treatment of Habermas’s realism can ignore this other side of the coin.

But pursuing a metaphysically realist interpretation of his metatheoretical assumption does not fit well with Habermas’s rejection of other metaphysical attempts to solve the epistemological problems raised by naturalism. In particular, his consideration of Marx stands out. According to Habermas, Marx saw natural evolution simultaneously producing ‘subjective nature,’ that is, the organic endowment of Homo Sapiens, and the conditions under which he has access to what is to him ‘objective nature.’ . . .’ It is ‘nature in itself’ which creates the conditions for the possibility of a subjective grasp of objective nature. However, as Habermas reflects, ‘if there is a rigid, that is, inescapable, correlation between objective nature and the possible forms of coping with nature that are determined by subjective nature, then the constitution of a ‘nature in itself’ can only be the result of a metaphysical glimpse behind the stage set by the human mind.’ (RLT, p. 22) It is this ‘metaphysical glimpse behind the stage’ that
Habermas seeks to avoid in his rejection of Marx’s strategy. But the metaphysically realist interpretation we sketched above requires just such a glimpse. We must be able to step outside our own distinctive cognitive grasp of the world and compare it with the world as it is in itself in order to assure ourselves that the human mind and the world are adequately correlated. Such a ‘sideways on’ perspective onto the relation between mind and world, as McDowell refers to it, or a ‘God’s Eye View,’ as Putnam prefers, is characteristic of the metaphysical realism they both reject. And, on this issue, Habermas is in agreement. As he also puts it, ‘no grasp of reality is possible that is not filtered through language.’ (RLT, p. 30) We cannot presume to step outside the set of socio-linguistic practices and natural abilities that enable our cognitive access to the world, the better to assess their adequacy by comparing them with the world we attempt to know in terms of them.

If, then, a metaphysically realist interpretation will not square with Habermas’s rejection of a ‘metaphysical glimpse behind the stage set by the human mind,’ how are we to take Habermas’s metatheoretical assumption? To begin we should carefully note the way his assumption privileges our human perspective onto the world. He writes, ‘If natural evolution is viewed in terms of increasing problem-solving capacities, emergent properties acquire a cognitive value that from ‘our’ point of view is represented as an accrual of knowledge.’ (RLT, p. 29 - emphasis mine.) It is only from a point of view that privileges the cognitive achievements of participants in distinctively human coping and argumentative practices, that evolutionary processes can be meaningfully represented as ‘an accrual of knowledge.’

Viewed for itself, as it would be understood by the natural sciences, natural selection can certainly be viewed as a form of problem solving. Through a process or trial and error, different
design possibilities are tried and either selected or weeded out by nature as more or less adaptive. There is, then, a sense in which evolution can be seen from this perspective as ‘an accrual of knowledge’ about more or less adaptive designs for particular environments. And the evolution of learning itself, of behavioral plasticity in the place of more or less rigid instinctive responses to the environment, can be seen as another instance of this ‘accrual of knowledge’ inasmuch as this particular design possibility can prove itself more adaptive in some environments for some organisms than others. But neither of these senses of evolution as a process ‘analogous to learning’ are sufficient for Habermas’s needs. In particular, neither of them pull ‘the rug out from under the very idea that worldviews are species-relative.’ For there is nothing uniquely necessary about any particular adaptive design evolution tries out and selects. Natural selection can only be said to learn relative lessons about a particular organism’s adaptive possibilities in relation to a particular environment; a point that goes for the evolution of learning itself as this is a strategy that is adaptive for some organisms in some environments, but not necessarily adaptive for all, by a long shot.

It is only when we privilege our own cognitive grasp of the world that evolution can be viewed as ‘an accrual of knowledge’ sufficient for Habermas’s needs. Privileging our own cognitive achievements, we can retrospectively see evolution as a form of problem solving in which the selection of various forms of adaptive strategies in nature have led increasingly to ‘higher’ capacities for learning in organisms, concluding with our own. But this sort of progressive understanding of evolution which sees natural selection operating on a track moving from lower to higher forms of adaptation is, from a scientific perspective, questionable at best and, at worst, an anthropocentric illusion abandoned long ago by Darwin himself.\textsuperscript{19} From a
perspective which privileges our own cognitive achievements, however, it is probably unobjectionable. Taking the objectivity of our own cognitive grasp of the world for granted, we understand evolution as a process ‘analogous to learning’ which, at least in part, has led by a process of trial and error to our capacity for a cognitive grasp of the world. In this way we see ‘the human mind as the intelligent solution to problems that itself developed under the constraints of reality.’

Understood in this light, however, Habermas’s metatheoretical assumption does not appear to underwrite our confidence in the epistemic relevance of justification to truth so much as it takes it for granted. This is, however, not that surprising. As discussed earlier, the most plausible way of understanding his assumption is as a thought we take for granted in maintaining our epistemic confidence in the light of naturalistically generated modes of skepticism. In this way, it must presuppose that initial confidence in our capacity to learn about the world. And this can now be seen as a reasonable assumption, indeed, an unavoidable thought, if we have rejected, with Habermas, the presumption of thinking from the perspective of a ‘metaphysical glimpse behind the stage set by the human mind.’ If we reject this metaphysical presumption, the only modes of critically evaluating our cognitive faculties left to us are undertaken from a perspective internal to our comprehension of the world through those faculties. We may, for instance, understand ourselves as vulnerable to particular sorts of mistakes in statistical reasoning and explain that vulnerability in terms of a plausible model of the evolution of our capacity for statistical reasoning. But such critical insights will not and cannot call our capacity to learn into question in a wholesale way as it must always take its bearings from other aspects of what we have learned about the world. Rejecting any ‘sideways on’ grasp of the coordination
of mind and world, critical reflection on our cognitive faculties must take for granted the overall objectivity of what we have learned through those faculties. A wholesale loss of confidence in the epistemic relevance of our justificatory practices to truth is a thought we can speculatively entertain. But it cannot be rationally motivated.

With this move we begin to see the connection between Putnam’s recent natural realism and one major thread of his older internal realism. ‘The ‘God’s Eye View’ - the view from which all languages are part of the totality being scrutinized - is forever inaccessible.’ Our confidence in the mind’s openness to the world, in our capacity to bring the world itself into view rather than mere representations which could be, for all we know, wholly false, stems not from a speculative leap of faith in the metaphysical coordination of mind and world, but from the way critical reflection on our grasp of the world can only proceed from a perspective internal to that grasp. From this internal perspective, the epistemic connection of justification and truth cannot emerge as a problem, at least not in a wholesale way.

That it does emerge as a problem, for Habermas, is symptomatic of the way in which he has yet to clarify the relation between his recent epistemological realism and his rejection of a ‘metaphysical glimpse behind the stage set by the human mind.’ Clarifying that relation will take us back through the need to be more cautious in drawing the line between truth and justification that we have already discussed. For it is the way Habermas draws this line that needlessly calls the epistemic connection between truth and justification into question and, in that way, begins to veer away from the insights of internalism toward a metaphysical realism that undermines Habermas’s best realist intentions. Committed resolutely to a critical perspective internal to our epistemic practices, we can accept that truth sometimes outruns justification and, for that reason,
recognize the conceptual independence of truth from justification. Our beliefs are not true, if they are true, because we are able to justify them under sufficiently good epistemic conditions. But there is nothing in any of this that should call into question the epistemic relevance of justification to truth. Our basic confidence in our capacity to learn about the world remains intact as unavoidably presupposed in every critical reflection on our cognitive grasp of the world.

Notes

Thanks to an anonymous reviewer from *IJPS* for critical comments on my original submission.

This revised version of my paper is indebted in several ways to those comments.


3. Though it is not directly relevant to my concerns in this paper, it is important to note that Habermas repudiates any reductionistic interpretation of his proposal: ‘A ‘strongly’ naturalistic explanatory strategy aims to replace the conceptual analysis of practices of the lifeworld with a scientific neurological or biogenetic explanation of the achievements of the human brain. In contrast, weak naturalism contents itself with the basic background assumption that the biological endowment and the cultural way of life of *Homo Sapiens* have a ‘natural’ origin and can be explained in terms of evolutionary theory.’ (RLT, pp. 28-29)

4. Just to be clear, in speaking of a connection between justification and an appearance of truth, I am not assuming that this appearance is deceptive. But if a connection is made only between justification and an appearance of truth, we have no way of knowing whether it is or is not deceptive.


7. This relaxed attitude toward specifying epistemic conditions has long been part of Putnam’s approach even when he still accepted an epistemic conception of truth. See, for example, Putnam, *Realism with a Human Face* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1990) viii, where he writes, ‘to drop the notion of ‘ideal’ altogether, since that is only a metaphor, I think there are better and worse epistemic situations with respect to particular statements.’ Also see, ‘When ‘Evidence Transcendence’ is not Malign,’ p. 599.


10. That is, with a sufficiently developed empirical theory about the material conditions needed for the development of life and the distribution of such conditions in the cosmos, we could verify that the statement was probably true to such and such a degree. See ‘When ‘Evidence Transcendence’ is not Malign,’ pp. 597-598. Also see Putnam, ‘Pragmatism,’ *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, XCV (3) (1995), pp. 296-297 where he stresses that negative existential generalizations create problems for the recognition of their truth and, more generally, ventures that ‘quantifiers and other logical constants extend our conceptual powers beyond the range of the verifiable.’ Wright, for his part, remains unconvinced that the recognition transcendence of ‘There are no intelligent extraterrestrials’ is benign in the way Putnam argues. But, as he himself admits, the question between them of how to explain the evidence transcendence of some statements without invoking the mechanism of an interface which both he and Putnam see as definitive of the sort of metaphysical realism they are both committed to avoiding, remains undecided as of yet. (See his ‘Postscript’ to ‘Truth as Sort of Epistemic’ in his *Saving the Differences: Essays on Themes from Truth and Objectivity* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 2003), pp. 326-331.)

11. Also see Putnam, ‘Pragmatism,’ p. 299 where he stresses that though truth coincides with idealized rational acceptability in ordinary cases it is not because truth *means* idealized rational acceptability.


16. In his consideration of Habermas’s realism, Maeve Cooke adopts a position opposed to the one I am defending, encouraging Habermas to adopt a form of metaphysical realism. But Cooke seems to connect metaphysical realism merely with idea that ‘reality has some essential independence of human descriptions and interpretations,’ a point that is not under contention between metaphysical realism and the sort of natural realism Putnam recommends. Cooke also brushes aside any problems connected with the idea of an interface between mind and world with the brief statement that ‘Putnam is wrong to reject the idea of a possible ‘interface’ . . . out of hand.’ As such, his paper does not really engage with the issues considered here. See Cooke, ‘Socio-Cultural Learning as a ‘Transcendental Fact’: Habermas’s Postmetaphysical Perspective,’ *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, 9 (1) (2001), pp. 63-83 and especially p. 78.


18. Compare this passage with his description of Putnam’s rejection of a ‘god’s eye view’ on p. 216 of *Truth and Justification*: ‘As we cannot grasp reality except in terms of our concepts, the idea that we could somehow step in between the linguistic realm of concepts and ‘naked’ reality, purified, as it were, of all subjective components makes no sense.’


22. Which is not to say that the epistemic connection of specific practices of justification and truth cannot emerge as a problem. There is nothing in either Putnam’s natural realism nor McDowell’s direct realism that, to my knowledge, provide us with a distinctive resource in dealing with the possibility of incommensurable socio-historical contexts of justification. But it is not, I think, the same sort of challenge we have been considering here. Being convinced that different contexts of justification are incommensurable can certainly motivate adopting a naturalistic understanding in which every epistemic practice is seen as just one among many different sorts of coping mechanisms. But, abstracted from such a naturalistic understanding, the
intrinsic challenge posed by incommensurable contexts of justification is basically that of the availability of an epistemic perspective that would either: 1) enable us to see how to coordinate the differing conclusions arrived at within those differing contexts (as, for instance, different conceptual frames of reference which enable us to bring different, though ultimately compatible, aspects of the world into view in different ways), or 2) enable us to critically evaluate the epistemic validity of each context of justification in relation to the other in a non-question begging way. In short, the challenge is to uncover ways in which the incommensurability in question is, in important respects, merely apparent. And showing this is going to be a matter of 1) establishing, as Habermas has done, the availability of a formal sense of rationality which can be accepted within every context of justification as a condition for the possibility of dialogue, and 2) a close examination of the distinctive features of each context of justification in an attempt to find overlooked opportunities for substantive dialogue. Noting the way the epistemic connection between justification and truth cannot be called wholly into question from a point of view internal to our attempts to understand the world is insufficient for this task. But it is also a futile task apart from having put to rest this more basic concern. If we are dogged by questions concerning the epistemic connection of justification, per. se. and truth, the task of negotiating apparently incommensurable contexts of justification in search of perspectives which would allow a critical coordination of their truth claims will also be questionable as the very idea of contexts of justification enabling us to reasonably make claims to truth will be itself in question. As such, some sort of resolution of the question examined in this paper would appear to be a necessary pre-condition for successfully tackling this other question.