

Years ago, I was working on the history of *natural kind* as a philosophical category. Realizing that some of the key actors in the story were still around, I cold-mailed Hilary Putnam. He graciously replied.

I quote a sentence from him in my paper ‘No grist for Mill on natural kinds’, *Journal for the History of Analytical Philosophy*, 2014. Putnam passed away in 2016, which makes it no longer possible to ask for permission to quote specific parts of our correspondence— so I take the liberty of sharing the exchange in its entirety.

What’s striking to me, as much as the philosophical content, was Putnam’s great kindness and generosity.

—P.D. Magnus 29aug2019

*some e-mails which might pretentiously be titled*  
**the Magnus-Putnam correspondence**

P.D.M. on Mon Oct 24 2011 16:50

Dear Professor Putnam:

I am presently working on the history of the natural kind concept. One difficulty is that ‘natural kind’ has sometimes served as a fixed phrase of philosophical jargon and sometimes merely as a apposite combination of words. Of course, the former use has predominated in the last several decades. This is in large part due to your work, starting with ‘Is Semantics Possible?’

This just leads to the question of whether your use of the phrase was the first or second kind. The text itself does not settle the matter. So I am just writing to ask whether you had anybody else’s technical sense of ‘natural kind’ in mind back then, or whether you meant it to just mean whatever real categories there were in the world.

I appreciate that this is a somewhat fuzzy question to begin with, and that recollections after this much time are hardly decisive evidence. Since it is still possible to ask you, however, I thought that I might as well do so. Any response would be much appreciated.

best, P.D. Magnus

H.P. on Mon 24 Oct 2011 17:22

Dear Prof. Magnus,

In his great System of Logic; Ratiocinative and Deductive, Part II, chapter IV, Mill wrote, “By a Kind, it will be remembered, we mean one of those classes which are distinguished from all others not by one or a few definite properties, but by an unknown multitude of them: the combination of properties on which the class is grounded, being a mere index to an indefinite number of other distinctive attributes. The class horse is a Kind, because the things which agree in possessing the characters by which we recognise a horse, agree in a great number of other properties,

as we know, and, it cannot be doubted, in many more than we know. Animal, again, is a Kind, because no definition that could be given of the name animal could either exhaust the properties common to all animals, supply premises from which the remainder of those properties could be inferred. But a combination of properties which does not give evidence of the existence of any other independent peculiarities, does not constitute a Kind.”

In Chapter VII, he also writes, “[Kinds are natural groups] The reader is by this time familiar with the general truth (which I restate so often on account of the great confusion in which it is commonly involved), that there are in nature distinctions of Kind; distinctions not consisting in a given number of definite properties, plus the effects which follow from those properties, but running through the whole nature, through the attributes generally, of the things so distinguished. Our knowledge of the properties of a Kind is never complete. We are always discovering, and expecting to discover, new ones.”

And in the same Chapter, “Though in a Natural group of objects a definition can no longer be of any use as a regulative principle, classes are not therefore left quite loose, without any certain standard or guide. The class is steadily fixed, though not precisely limited; it is given, though not circumscribed; it is determined, not by a boundary line without, but by a central point within; not by what it strictly excludes, but by what it eminently includes; by an example, not by a precept; in short, instead of a Definition we have a Type for our director.”

I read Mill’s Logic in the 1950s, I believe, and I was very likely influenced by such passages. Rereading it now, I find the whole chapter is marvelous!

Sincerely yours, Hilary Putnam

P.D.M. on Wed Oct 26 2011 01:41

Prof. Putnam,

Thanks very much for your prompt reply.

The odd thing about Mill is that he gives an account of Kinds with a capital-K but never uses the phrase ‘natural kind’. It is not entirely clear when his Kinds came to be called natural kinds, although there are several criticisms of Mill in the 1870s and 1880s attacking his account natural kinds so-called. The label then fell out of use for a while. In the 1901 Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology, the entry on ‘kind’ discussed Mill’s view without calling them natural kinds.

The paper I’m presently writing traces through some of this. I argue that the tradition of natural kinds since the 1970s breaks with the earlier tradition in important respects. Your suggestion that you were influenced directly by Mill is thus food for thought.

If you’d be interested, I’d be glad to send you a draft.

best, P.D. Magnus

H.P. Wed, 26 Oct 2011 10:52

Dear Prof. Magnus,

I wrote that I “was very likely” influenced by Mill’s discussion, because I had forgotten it when was I giving the lectures on philosophy of language at Harvard in 1967 which were the first presentation of what became semantic externalism. [I have attached a lecture I am giving next week in Sweden that tells the history.] But a few years later I recalled it, and it is likely that it was there in my subconscious. To add to the story, Mill knew Kant’s first Critique very well, and may well have been influenced by Kant’s remarks. Kant even used water as his example!

Don’t send me a draft at this time. After my return from Sweden on November 4th, the rest of November and December will be spent closing on a house, and then moving all our furniture from our present house, where we have been living for 33 years, and then (on December 21st) flying to Tel Aviv for the winter, and where I will teach a seminar on Wittgenstein’s \*Investigations\* I know that reading and writing will have to go on hold till we get to Israel, and that January will be fully occupied with my seminar. But if you want to send me a file in February, that would interest me.

Best wishes, Hilary Putnam

P.D.M. on Wed, 26 Oct 2011 14:50

Dear Prof. Putnam,

Thanks for another prompt reply. Would you mind if I refer to either this correspondence or your Schock lecture? I would provide citations (to ‘personal communication’ or ‘The Development of Externalist Semantics’) but would not quote them directly.

I wish you the best in your whirlwind of travel and moving.

sincerely, P.D.

H.P. on Wed Oct 26 15:11 2011

Dear P.D.

I would not mind, and I give you permission to quote, provide I see the quotes first.

Thanks for the wishes, Best, H

P.D.M. on Thu Feb 16 15:37 2012

Dear Prof. Putnam,

Back in October, we corresponded briefly about the history ‘natural kind’ as philosophical jargon. I offered to send a draft of my paper on the subject, and you requested that I wait until February to do so. Here it is, attached as a PDF.

If you have less time now than you anticipated having, I understand and sympathize. If you do get a chance to look at the paper, any thoughts would be welcome.

best, P.D. Magnus

H.P. on Fri Mar 16 12:00 2012

Dear P.D. Magnus,

I have now read what you sent, and it is clear that we \*totally\*disagree (I am talking about my email of 10/24/11) on the importance of Mill's contribution and on its similarity/dissimilarity to my ideas. Specifically:

(1) I think what Mill calls "natural groups" are exactly what I meant by "natural kinds".

(2) Mill was opposed to \*Aristotelian\* essentialism, and so am I.

(3) I think the question "What is the nature of Gs?", where Gs are a natural group, makes perfectly good sense, provided we realize the answer is context-sensitive and interest relative, and I think Mill would have agreed. Using the word "essence" for "nature" did mislead some readers. (See my "Aristotle After Wittgenstein", you can find it via Google)

(4) I am not sure whether Kripke's famous "metaphysical necessity" really outruns physical necessity. I don't have room for such a notion, if it does. The use of that notion makes the idea that science discovers the essences of, say, substances like water, sound more metaphysical than it should.

(5) THE KEY ISSUE FOR ME HAS ALWAYS BEEN EXTERNALISM. IT IS CLEAR THAT MILL WAS AWARE THAT THE EXTENSION OF A WORD LIKE "COW" IS NOT DETERMINED JUST BY WHAT IS IN OUR HEADS, JUST AS IT IS CLEAR THAT KANT WAS AWARE THAT THE EXTENSION OF WORD LIKE "WATER" IS NOT DETERMINED JUST BE WHAT IS IN OUR HEADS. THEY BOTH DESERVE CREDIT FOR ANTICIPATING EXTERNALISM, EVEN IF THEY DID NOT APPRECIATE ITS ENORMOUS SIGNIFICANCE.

In brief, I think you are unjust to Mill!

Hope this clarifies matters,

Sincerely, Hilary Putnam

P.D.M. on Fri, 16 Mar 2012 12:37

Dear Prof Putnam,

Thank you for taking the time to read my paper and reply.

I agree with your suggestion that what you mean by "natural kinds" is what Mill meant by "natural groups". This is importantly different than the standard account of the history, which aligns your "natural kinds" with Mill's "Kinds". Mill's critics, as far as I can tell, mostly responded to his account of Kinds rather than to his broader account of classification.

Breaking the connection between Mill's "Kinds" and contemporary "natural kinds" was my primary aim in the paper. In doing so, I overstate the discontinuity between his concerns and yours.

sincerely, P.D. Magnus

H.P. on Fri Mar 16 2012 19:39

Good!

Best wishes,

Hilary Putnam

P.D.M. on Mon Mar 19 2012 00:57

Would you mind if I were to quote your statement that “I think what Mill calls “natural groups” are exactly what I meant by “natural kinds” ”?

H.P. on Mon Mar 19 2012 17:24

Dear P.D.,

I wouldn't mind at all!

H