

References

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Huw Price: *Expressivism, Pragmatism and Representationalism*
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Naturalism is usually understood as a matter of letting natural science decide the question of what there is. What natural science tells us there is, there is; and what it tells us there is not, is not. Of course, an entity *prima facie* not recognized by natural science may, after investigation, turn out to be a naturalistically respectable entity after all, but just viewed from an unusual angle, or a conglomerate of naturalistically respectable entities, or perhaps a correlate of our odd way of speaking about naturalistically respectable entities – therefore we need something as “philosophical analysis” to tell us which entities are only *prima facie* incompatible with naturalism, and which are really at odds with it (and hence do not qualify as entities at all). If something does not survive such a scrutiny, the naturalist is at liberty to dismiss it as just a phantasm of a confused human mind.

Quine (1969, 26) takes pains to stress a different aspect of naturalism: “knowledge, mind, and meaning”, he claims, “are part of the same world that they have to do with, and ... they are to be studied in the same empirical spirit that animates natural science.” This might seem to be just a special case of the general tenet: if everything that there is is to be sanctioned by natural science, then surely “knowledge, mind, and meaning” are. Huw Price, in the book under review, argues that the Quinean urge marks a *specific variety* of naturalism – which Price calls *subject naturalism*. And he goes on to argue that this variety of naturalism must *precede* the seemingly more general *object naturalism* that grants science the right to arbitrate ontology.

According to Price, the reason for distinguishing between subject naturalism and object naturalism is connected to the fact that our theories of the world, especially scientific theories, are inevitably couched in language. Hence, to let science sanction the existence of an X , we must assume that the word we

use to talk about *X* does really refer to *X*. Thus, object naturalism presupposes a certain substantial theory of reference and hence a theory of how our language works. But to have such a theory, we must study the ways we, human subjects, use language and the ways our usage of language bestows meanings upon our words; and this is an investigation that falls into the province of *subject* naturalism.

When we consider how our language works, we may well come to the conclusion that many forms of our discourse seemingly describing the world and referring to its objects are not really doing this. We may conclude that many such seeming descriptions are actually doing something else – typically expressing, or giving vent to, what our own attitudes are. (Thus, for example, we may conclude that moral claims do not describe moral facts, but rather express our affirmative or negative attitudes to what people do.) This immediately compromises object naturalism. (For to apply object naturalism straightforwardly, we would have to distinguish between those theories which do refer to objects of the world and those which do not, which necessitates prior subject-naturalistic studies.) But moreover, Price argues, this state of affairs puts a question mark over seeing *any* kind of discourse or theory as literally descriptive – and he suggests we should go for *global expressivism*, accepting that any kind of discourse primarily expresses the attitudes of the speakers.

This approach would reduce the load we usually put on semantic concepts, concepts like *reference*, *truth*, or *representation*. (The point is that if we accept global expressivism, these concepts are no longer needed to constitute the link between language and reality). Therefore, we could settle for some kind of minimalist or deflationist account of these concepts: the concept of reference, for example, might be thought of as exhaustively characterized by the schema “*X* refers to *Y*”, where *X* is the name of a nominal phrase, and *Y* is the nominal phrase itself.

Price recommends distinguishing between two notions of representation: we should, he claims, differentiate between “e-representation”, which has to do with “environment-tracking” and with co-variances of linguistic items and objects of the extralinguistic world, and “i-representation”, which is a matter of “internal functional roles” or representations. Price urges that these two notions should be kept strictly apart, because they belong to very different projects. And if our project is semantics, then the notion of “e-representation” is completely useless and the only notion that we may usefully take into account is that of “i-representation”.

These proposals are thought-provoking and in the book under review they are carefully scrutinized by highly competent opponents: Simon Blackburn, who was one of the pioneers of expressivism, Paul Horwich, one of the found-

ing fathers of modern deflationism, Bob Brandom, whose inferentialism has affinities with Price's subject naturalism and global expressivism, and Michael Williams, whose anti-foundationalist approach to epistemology is also in some respects close to Price's standpoint.

Let me classify the various different possible strands of objection to Price's standpoint which I see in the following way:

i) The objection to subject naturalism

One such strand concerns his detaching of subject naturalism from object naturalism. A principal attraction of naturalism is that it dispenses with the Cartesian picture of the human subject standing in contraposition to the objective world (see the quotation from Quine at the beginning of this review). Yet it would seem that Price's step is now flirting with a return to the vicinity of Cartesianism. The point is that we can read the doctrine of subject naturalism in two ways. One reading would indeed make it a reincarnation of the *prima philosophia* of Descartes or the *pursuit of meaning* of the logical empiricists – something that must be carried out *before* we can even think about exploring the world, or about the *pursuit of truth*. But precisely the abandonment of this was what Quine was convinced naturalism amounts to. Also, I am sure this is *not* what Price is intending.

The other reading of subject naturalism would construe the human subject as an inextricable part of nature – hence subject naturalism is simply a part of object naturalism. But if this is the case, then any scruples which we may have with respect to object naturalism carry over to subject naturalism. Thus, if the problem is that object naturalism presupposes a substantial theory of reference, then so does subject naturalism (albeit perhaps restricted to a narrowed domain).

ii) The objection to global expressivism

Another strand of objection pertains to the issue of global expressivism, which would seem to intertwine two ideas that should rather be kept apart. First, there is the idea that describing is nothing like a simple matching of linguistic items with extralinguistic objects. This is a motif Price strongly urges and one to which I myself also wholeheartedly subscribe. Describing is a matter of a complicated language game, and to clarify what we are really doing when we describe is extremely nontrivial. (It is the basic error of many theories of the language-world relationship to think that this relation is as transparent as putting a label on an exhibit and hence is suited to be used as an unexplained explainer.) But then there is a second motif, namely that there is no substantial gap between describing and doing other things with language – no gap which would substantiate our contrasting describing with expressing. About this motif, I have doubts. To me it seems that, once we accept the non-transparency

of the linguistic activity we call describing (and accept that we cannot dispose of it by assimilating it to labeling), it is very natural to take it as a baseline against which to plot other language games.

Hence I am not sure that our realization that describing, far from being transparent picturing, mirroring, or mapping, is a complicating linguistic practice, should lead us to the conclusion that expressivism can only be global (because our speech acts cannot be classified as picturing vs. non-picturing), and not rather to the conclusion that now we can work with the distinction between describing and expressing without fear of falling in with a naive semantics or cumbersome metaphysics. As Rorty (1991, 109), puts it, “holism takes the curse off naturalism” – once we free ourselves from the conviction that naturalism goes hand in hand with an atomistic picture theory of language, we need no longer fear to be naturalists, and nor need we fear to recognize describing as a baseline activity.

iii) The objection to global anti-representationalism

Then there is the fact that Price’s global expressivism is also a global anti-representationalism. Again, I wholeheartedly agree that the concept of *representation* cannot be used to underpin semantics in the sense that it is acceptable to use it as an unexplained explainer, but not everything Price says about representations seems to me should be accepted without hesitation. In particular, his contrast between e-representations and i-representations seems to invite a basic confusion. Modeling the distinction between semantically useless and semantically useful notions of representation on the distinction between the external and the internal would seem to lead us astray; for once we conclude that the only representational dimension of language is internal, our language games take on the glint of self-contained enterprises unconstrained by the extralinguistic world. (And McDowellian worries about “frictionless spinning in the void” are forthcoming ...) I think that a more useful distinction would be not between being constrained vs. being unconstrained by the extralinguistic world, but rather between being constrained in an atomistic vs. holistic way. The notion of representation which we want to avoid is the notion of it acting directly as a semantic relation, linking items of language to items of the external world; whereas an unproblematic notion would be one which sees the external world wielding its “friction” on the level of the whole language games, so that the relations of representation as applied to items of language are at most artifacts of our effort to repack the friction so that it is distributed to the individual atoms.

Blackburn’s objection to Price’s program can be seen as a combination of the objection to subject naturalism and the objection to global expressivism. He writes (pp. 78-79):

[E]ven genealogical and anthropological stories have to start somewhere. There are things that even pragmatists need to rely upon, as they produce what they regard as their better understandings of the functions of pieces of discourse. ... Such genealogical stories start with a common-sense background of us, and a world of physical objects, with distinct locations, changing only according to distinct regularities with a distinct speed limit. ... It may be that we take an Aristotelian, or perhaps Wittgensteinian, line on the priority of the everyday. There is simply no place for 'first philosophy' to stand behind the *endoxa*, the given in our common-sense situation. This attitude would be that of *quietism*, or the rejection altogether of at least some external questions. If we insisted instead on posing the Carnapian external-sounding question: how come that we go in for descriptions of the world in terms of surrounding middle-sized dry goods?—then the answer is only going to be the flat-footed stutter or self-pat on the back: it is because we are indeed surrounded by middle sized dry goods. That answer, obviously, draws on the referential resources of the object language, and according to the account in front of us, amounts to a victory for representationalism over pragmatism. It is because it is no better than a stutter that I call it flat-footed representationalism.

Blackburn's point thus is that pragmatist explanations are, in effect, stories about subjects acting in an external environment and trying to cope with it in accordance with their needs, and that to formulate these stories, one needs a language, and notably a language with words referring to all the things that come up in the story. Thus, a pragmatic explanation of language presupposes a representational language.

Blackburn disagrees with Price's global expressivism and global pragmatism, but he would accept what he calls "rolling pragmatism". According to him, we can give pragmatist and expressivist treatment to any part of language, any form of discourse, but we cannot do it with the whole language at once. To give a part of language the pragmatist treatment, we need another part to lean on and hence to take non-pragmatically, at face value (though subsequently we might accept a pragmatist treatment of the latter part, while leaning on some further part).

Brandom is mostly sympathetic with Price's approach; this is not surprising as Price's global expressivism has much in common with Brandom's own inferentialism. However, he is slightly uneasy about Price's sweeping anti-representationalism. Brandom's claim is that, though the notion of representa-

tion has no *explanatory* role to play (in particular it cannot underlie a theory of language as an unexplained explainer), it plays a vital *expressive* role.

Paul Horwich disagrees with Price; what he criticizes most vigorously is Price's kind of the linguistic turn that goes hand in hand with his subject naturalism and global expressivism. Like the pioneers of the turn, Price, in Horwich's words, insists that metaphysical questions "can be answered only, and merely, by attention to our linguistic and conceptual practices" (p. 113), and this is something Horwich disputes. Here, for example, is Horwich's argument against the idea that metaphysical facts and our knowledge of them can be explained away as products of our implicit definitions (pp. 118-119):

How could the fact that sentence 'p' is a definition *ever* entail the fact that 'p'? Consider 'The bachelors are unmarried men', and let's suppose for the sake of argument that it provides the definition of 'bachelor'. What this supposition amounts to is that we treat that sentence in a special way: we regard it as certainly true, we aren't prepared to count anything as evidence against it, and we take it to hold in all *possible* scenarios. But there's no valid route from the fact that we do all these things with the sentence to the conclusion that it *is* true – and, thereby, via the disquotational truth schema, to the former conclusion that bachelors are men. Granted, we cannot do those things without being sure that bachelors are unmarried men. But such a conviction, no matter how strongly and rigidly it is maintained, could nonetheless be false – our being absolutely certain *that p* does not entail *that p*.

I must say I am left taking side with Price over this, for I do not find Horwich's arguments fully intelligible. It seems to me that if we suppose that 'Bachelors are unmarried men' is the definition of 'bachelor', then we have two possibilities: either we deny that definitions are truth-apt (and deny that it makes sense to see them as expressing facts); or we admit this, but then, it would seem to me, we must accept that it is true, for to be a definition is to be *made* true.

Take an Austinian performative: "Hereby I open the conference." Either I may deny that this sentence has a truth value (for unlike assertion, it is not the kind of speech act that would be truth-evaluable), or I may say that by making the speech act, I make – *inter alia* – the sentence true. In either case it does not make sense to say that the sentence may be false – it makes no sense to say that though I may believe that the sentence is true, it is not. And definitions, as far as I can see, can be seen as something like "collective performatives" – we may deny them the truth value true in favor of denying their truth-

evaluability, but we may not deny them the truth value in favor of the assumption that they are false. Hence it makes no sense to me to say that though we are sure that it is true, it may, in fact, be false.

Like Brandom, Williams is largely sympathetic with Price's undertaking. But his sympathy is flavored by a version of the objection to global expressivism – he is convinced that once we cease to construe the descriptive/non-descriptive dichotomy as the representational/non-representational one, there is no reason to deny the local expressivists the significance of this boundary. He insists that “pragmatists can draw lines more or less where expressivists want to draw them, for reasons bearing at least some relation to those that expressivists give” and that “global anti-representativism is compatible with a form of functional pluralism that respects expressivist intuitions” (p. 132).

Williams tries to throw some of his own light on Price's standpoint, through an analysis of his version of the use theory of meaning, or “explanation of meaning in terms of use (EMU)”, as he calls it. He provides a very useful analysis of such theories. He claims that an EMU generally consists of three components. The first is “a *material-inferential* (intra-linguistic) component”. (In the case of the term *true*, for example, this component fixes the inference akin to that from *Snow is white* to *It is true that snow is white* etc.; in the case of the term *red* it fixes inferences akin to those from *This is red* to *This is not green* or *This is colored* etc.) The second is “an *epistemological* component”. (In the case of *true* this component merely states that the inferences of the previous components are “*primitively acceptable (a priori)*”, that they “are ‘free’ moves in the discursive game”; in the case of *red* it states that in addition to the “free” moves of the first component, red has also a “reporting” use based on the “reliable discriminative reporting disposition” of the user.) The third is “a *functional* component”. (In the case of *true* this component states that truth “is important exclusively as a generalizing device”, while in the case of *red* it states that “tokens of ‘x is red’ ... function as language entry transitions and thereby play a distinguished role in securing/undermining ‘theoretical’ entitlements”. The point of these differentiations is that while the first two components characterize “*how* a word is used”, the third one articulates “*what* a word is used to do, what it is good for” (p. 135).

Williams then goes on to argue that we can draw the same line local expressivists want to draw by means of distinguishing between “minimalist” EMUs and those EMUs that are not “minimalist”. The “minimalist” EMUs, roughly, are those that do not involve the language-world relation essentially, where the involvement is “essential” if it is a matter of language entry transitions (like in the case of red), but not necessarily if it is a matter of language exit transitions.

Although I find Williams's approach illuminating, personally I would disagree with some of the details of his Sellarsian approach. Williams states that it is the first component alone that determines the content of a term; and that the second component already builds on the content. Thus, in the case of red, the content of the term would be completely "internal" to language, whereas the matter that it is correct to state 'x is red' in certain circumstances while incorrect in others would be a matter of the application of the content to the extralinguistic world. (Hence, this dividing line has affinities with the line between Price's i-representation and e-representation.) But I do not believe that this is viable; I think that the content of an empirical word like *red* must be constituted both by the intralinguistic inferences (akin to inferences from *This is red* to *This is not green*) and the rules that it is correct to assert *This is red* in certain (and not other) circumstances. I am convinced that if this interlinkedness with the world is not built into the content from the very beginning, we are never able to get it: in particular, no way of applying the 'narrow' content of *red* to the extralinguistic world is able to yield us the appropriate correctnesses of the usage of *This is red*.

But my objection here is orthogonal to what is crucial for the issue of Price's global expressivism, so perhaps it is better to leave it for now. What I find important is how Williams makes explicit the possibility of a non-representationalist construal of the *description/expression* gap.

Overall, I think that Price's book, and Price's approach in general, is a very interesting attempt to rethink and extend some basic tenets of pragmatism and expressivism. My impression is that at some point the extensions breach the boundary of the viable; however, even if this is true, the discussion about the limits that it fosters is useful. Pragmatism, in recent decades, has been a very influential current (and, I think, wholly deservedly) and expressivism has been developing into an increasingly attractive philosophical option – therefore to scrutinize the limits of these enterprises is something extremely desirable. From this viewpoint, Price's discussion with his opponents (and sympathizers) is pertinent for everybody interested in these philosophical currents.

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