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LINGUISTIC FUNCTION AND CONTENT: REFLECTIONS ON PRICE'S PRAGMATISM

BY LIONEL SHAPIRO

Huw Price proposes a strategy for dissolving ontological puzzles through a pragmatist account of our conceptual activity. Here I consider the proper place for conceptual content in Price's pragmatism. Price himself rules out any explanatory role for content, just as he rules out any explanatory role for representational notions such as reference and truth. I argue that the cases are disanalogous and that he offers no good reasons for avoiding explanatory appeal to content. Furthermore, I argue that doing so is incompatible with his pragmatist project.

Keywords: anti-representationalism, conceptual content, global expressivism, pragmatism, Huw Price.

I. INTRODUCTION

The papers collected in Price's *Naturalism Without Mirrors* (Price 2011) defend an attractive strategy for dissolving ontological puzzles through a pragmatist account of our conceptual activity. Here, I raise a question concerning Price's strategy: what is the proper place in his pragmatism for the notion of conceptual content? After showing how Price rules out any explanatory role for content, I argue that he provides no good reason for this restriction. Furthermore, I argue that it is no accident that Price's actual pragmatist explanations violate the restriction. This is because doing without content is in fact incompatible with his project.

To explain Price's strategy, it helps to start with Sellars' well-known definition of philosophy:

The aim of philosophy, abstractly formulated, is to understand how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term. Under 'things in the broadest possible sense' I include such radically different items as not only 'cabbages and kings', but numbers and duties, possibilities and finger snaps, aesthetic experience and death. (Sellars 1963: 1)

Philosophers often approach difficulties in understanding how radically different items hang together by seeking explanations of their respective natures. By contrast, Price follows Sellars in urging us to pursue the same aim another way: by explaining how our uses of the respective vocabularies hang together with the various other linguistic and non-linguistic activities we engage in. In a passage published a decade earlier, Sellars writes:

In general, the task of the philosopher is to explore without prejudice the syntactical and pragmatic relationships which obtain between the various forms of discourse, descriptive, semantical, normative, modal, etc. (Sellars 1952: 94; here 'syntax' includes inferential role).

Similarly, Price advocates a pragmatism that 'replaces metaphysical questions with questions about human thought and language', such as 'the role and genealogy of evaluative and modal vocabularies' (Price 2010: 315; cf. Macarthur and Price 2007: 231–2).

Price's hope is that explanations of the diverse *functions* served by, e.g., moral, modal, and causal discourse can dissolve metaphysical puzzles about how the *objects* of such discourse hang together. Such an approach, he argues, 'simply sidesteps the problem of finding a place for value (or indeed causal necessity!) in the kind of world that physics gives us reason to believe in' (Price 2010: 315). This is because

the functional standpoint threatens [or, from Price's perspective, promises!] to undercut the *motivation* for reductionism: once we have an adequate explanation for the fact that the folk *talk of* Xs and Ys and Zs, an explanation which distinguishes these activities from what the folk are doing when they do physics, why should we try to reduce the Xs and Ys and Zs to what is talked about in physics? (Price 1993: 78, 68; O'Leary-Hawthorne and Price 1996: 123–6, 130–1; Price 2009a: 289)

Hence, Price concludes, 'the basic philosophical needs that [metaphysical] analysis seemed to serve can be met in another mode altogether: by explanation of the practices, rather than reduction of their objects' (Price 2003: 178). Thus 'the notion of linguistic function provides a . . . solution to metaphysical concerns' (Price and Jackson 1997: 135).

Price argues that his proposal places a restriction on how we should theorize about the functioning of the vocabularies in question. To have the desired effect, functional explanations ought not proceed by simply noting that the respective expressions and concepts serve to *refer to* different elements of reality (e.g., the 'duties' and 'possibilities' on Sellars's list). Indeed, we will see, he defends the stronger conclusion that 'representational' notions such as *referent* and *truth condition* should not play any substantial role in the desired explanations. Fortunately, he argues, this 'anti-representationalist' presupposition of his pragmatism is validated by an application of that very pragmatism. For among the vocabularies the pragmatist is concerned with is the vocabulary

of representation itself. And Price argues that an adequate explanation of this vocabulary's functioning vindicates the 'deflationary' conclusion that representational notions can play no 'substantial theoretical role' (Macarthur and Price 2007: 241; also Price 2011: 32; 2003: 181; 2004a: 209, 226; 2010: 314–5).

In short, Price both *motivates* avoiding theoretical use of representational notions and explains why he is *entitled* to avoid using them. The question I wish to ask is whether a Price-style pragmatist has similar motivation or entitlement to avoid using the notion of *propositional or (more broadly) conceptual content* when explaining the functioning of different discourses. Section II shows that Price appears to resist invoking content, despite the fact that his own sample explanations violate this restriction. Sections III and IV examine several motivations he would appear to have for the restriction, and argue that none is compelling. Finally, Section V argues that Price's brand of pragmatism turns out to require theoretical appeal to content.

II. PRAGMATISM WITHOUT CONTENT?

First, I need to explain how I am using the term of art 'content'. For present purposes, content-involving descriptions of language or thought can be identified via their connection with indirect discourse attributions. For example, I attribute a propositional content to a sentence, in a context, when I say that it can be used to express (in an assertion, or otherwise) the claim *that gooseberries are delicious*. Likewise, in attributing the conceptual content *delicious* to a predicate, I take it that the predicate can be used in expressing such claims as *that gooseberries are delicious*, *that some delicious foods are rare in the United States*, etc. This elucidation of content in terms of indirect discourse attributions is in line with Price's own discussion of 'content specifications' (Price 2004a: 214).

Why might it appear that no such notion of content is supposed to play any substantial role in the functional explanations Price recommends? The evidence comes from passages where he throws 'content' together with the 'representational' notions whose theoretical use his pragmatist eschews.

[W]hat I'm after is a pragmatic account of the linguistic practices that we'd *ordinarily describe* as application of particular concepts, or expression of particular thoughts. The distinction [i.e., the qualification I have italicized] is important because I am interested in the possibility that the semantic notions—content, truth, and the like—are not among the theoretical ontology of the view in question. (Price 2004a: 205n2; also 209, 220)

Instead, 'ascriptions of content may figure as part of the explanandum' for functional explanations (Price 2004a: 219). The impression that content-ascriptions should not also figure as part of the *explanans* is reinforced by the parallel Price draws between content and truth: 'just as explaining the use of the term "true" is different from saying what truth *is*, explaining the use of the term "content"

is different from explaining what content *is*' (Price 2004a: 219; see also Price 1997: 114–5). As we saw, he holds that truth plays no theoretical role in explanations of how expressions, including truth-ascriptions, are used. Similarly, it seems that content is supposed to play no theoretical role in explanations of how expressions, including content-ascriptions, are used. Officially, then, Price appears to disallow theoretical appeal to *having the content such-and-such* when explaining how elements of language and thought with particular contents function.

On the other hand, Price's actual examples of functional explanation almost invariably invoke content. I will look, in turn, at each of the two levels of his 'two-level picture of the functional architecture of truth-evaluable uses of language' (Price 2011: 19). The *lower level* contains explanations of the distinctive functions of specific vocabularies. A characteristic example is the claim that 'utterances of the form "It is probable that *P*" express the speaker's high degree of confidence that *P*' (Price 1993: 62; 1991: 90). Notice here the 'that'-clause attribution characteristic of content-talk. The same holds for his descriptions of the function of conditionals (expressing one's conditional credence that *p*, or one's disposition to infer that *p*) and the function of negation (expressing one's denial that *p*). The *higher level* contains an explanation of the function of assertoric discourse in general: a 'single, unified account of assertion, commitment, and judgment' (Price 2011: 19; see also Macarthur and Price 2007: 247). Here, Price notes a consilience between his view and Robert Brandom's account of assertoric discourse as a 'game of giving and asking for reasons' (Brandom 1994). And like Brandom's account, Price's discussion at this 'higher' level is couched in content-involving terms: in terms of the normative role of an assertion that *p*.¹ For example, Price explains that a speaker who denies the claim that *p* is prepared to treat as incorrect an assertion that *p* (e.g. Price 2003: 170).

Could Price deny that content-ascriptions play a 'substantial theoretical role' in his functional explanations? (A referee raised this objection.) The alternative would be that content-talk contributes at most some kind of expressive convenience. How might this be cashed out? Following Quine, deflationists argue that truth-talk is a device of 'semantic ascent' whose *raison d'être* lies in how it allows us, by generalizing about the truth of sentences or other truth-bearers, to accomplish something for which we would otherwise need propositional quantification or (as above) schematic letters (Quine 1970: 10–2). But there is no obvious parallel story about how content-talk might be of *logical* convenience. A second suggestion starts with Sellars's idea that an ascription of the form '*x* has the content that *p*' serves as a convenient means of classifying

¹ Admittedly, Brandom himself uses his content-involving analysis of assertion to motivate a distinct 'inferentialist' program for reductive analysis of content-possession (see Shapiro 2004 for discussion). Price rejects Brandomian inferentialism's reductionist ambitions (Price 2010: 315–9).

a linguistic or mental item as performing some function which one need not be able to specify directly. Instead, one need only *exhibit* an expression '*p*' in one's own language which performs a relevantly similar function (Sellars 1974). If this is right, we might suppose that Price's content-involving explanations could, in principle, be replaced by explanations that cite the functions in virtue of which the content-ascriptions obtain. But there is a problem with this suggestion. Unlike Sellars, Price does not hold that an item has the conceptual content it does in virtue of playing a particular functional role. Indeed, one attraction of his version of pragmatism is that it lets us avoid having to give any theory of what it consists in for an item to have the content it does (Price 2004a: 219–20), just as it lets us avoid having to give a theory of what it consists in for an action to be morally wrong. I conclude that it is hard to see how the role of content-talk in Price's functional explanations can be dismissed as a mere expressive convenience.

III. CONTENT AND EXPRESSIVISM/NATURALISM

Faced with Price's own appeals to content, should we discount his prohibition? That would be unwarranted, since he might seem to have at least three motivations for insisting that his functional explanations should do without content. The first derives from 'the expressivist's motto', the claim that each 'target vocabulary' for functional explanations 'should be *mentioned* but not *used*—theorised about but not employed' in such explanations (Price 2010: 314). As we have seen, he counts ascriptions of content among the target vocabularies.

Although this motivation is available to traditional expressivists, it cannot be available to Price. The reason traditional expressivists insist that words like 'good' or 'cause' should only be *mentioned* in their explanations is that they aim to avoid commitment to the reality of goodness and causes. Price disavows that aim. The expressivism he advocates is a 'global' variety: he refuses to contrast its target vocabularies with a stratum of discourse that is 'genuinely factual, or descriptive' (e.g. Price 2011: 9). So, the fact that content-talk figures as a target for functional explanations can give him no reason against *using* content-talk in explaining the functioning of 'good' or 'cause'.

A second possible motivation derives from naturalism. Though he rejects naturalism about (e.g.) moral properties, Price espouses 'subject naturalism' (Price 2011: 5; 2004b: 186). He 'adopts the scientific perspective of a linguistic anthropologist, studying human language as a phenomenon in the natural world' (Price 2011: 11, cf. 29). Yet, as we have seen, he does not think we should attempt to analyse facts about content in naturalistic terms: he wishes to 'avoid' the task of 'accommodating within the natural world the objects of . . .

normative talk, causal talk, *meaning talk*, and all the rest' (Price 2004a: 224 [my emphasis]). Instead of naturalizing content, he proposes giving a naturalistic explanation of the *distinctive function of content-talk*. Taken jointly, these two stances—subject naturalism and the denial that content can be naturalized—might seem to rule out invoking content in functional explanations.

My response is that a naturalistic restriction on the pragmatist's theoretical vocabulary is not required by the core project of deflecting metaphysics via functional explanations. Price's guiding thought is that the functional diversity of vocabularies should undermine any expectation of reductive connections between properties or facts expressed using functionally heterogeneous vocabularies. The 'key idea', he writes, is that attempts at reduction can be 'blocked by functional difference' (Price and Jackson 1997: 146). This is why 'the philosophically interesting work of [traditional] non-cognitivism—the work of blocking reductionist moves, in particular—is done by the functional characterization' (O'Leary-Hawthorne and Price 1996: 126). Nothing about this proposal requires that in explaining the functional differences between vocabularies we avoid using the notion of content. Nor is it clear why explanatory appeal to unanalysed properties of content-possession should be forbidden by the requirement that our explanations be 'compatible with the basic . . . premise that the creatures employing the language in question are simply natural creatures, in a natural environment' (Price 2011: 9). If 'subject naturalism' is intended to rule out invoking unanalysed properties of content-possession, Price owes us an argument for why the pragmatist should adhere to such a strong version of naturalism.

IV. CONTENT AND ANTI-REPRESENTATIONALISM

But there is a third possible motivation for doing without content. This derives from a pervasive theme in *Naturalism without Mirrors*: the claim that giving semantic notions a theoretical role *jeopardizes* the anti-reductionist payoff. Here, I will argue that we must draw a distinction within what Price calls the 'semantic notions—content, truth, and the like' (Price 2004a: 205n2). While, there are indeed pitfalls for the pragmatist in theorizing about language using *representational* notions, these pitfalls do not extend to theorizing in terms of *conceptual content*.

First, I need to address an objection to the very contrast just drawn. Is the notion of content not *itself a representational notion*? On one understanding, Price should answer 'yes'. If a sentence has the propositional content that p , then it is *true* just in case p , and if a predicate has the conceptual content F , then it *refers to* just the F things. Yet, according to Price's deflationism, it is precisely because those schemata account for the functioning of the notions of truth

and reference that these *fail* to be notions that could have any ‘substantial theoretical role’. Hence, Price’s objection to giving representational notions a substantial theoretical role will not *ipso facto* debar him from theorizing in terms of content. Nor, for that matter, does the role of content in deflationary understandings of ‘true’ and ‘refers’ show that content cannot also play a role in functional explanations of non-semantic vocabulary. Rather, we need to see whether the specific pitfalls Price finds in theorizing in terms of truth and reference carry over to the case of content.

One alleged pitfall of ‘[e]mploying substantial semantic relations’ is that it ‘makes linguistic theory ontologically profligate’ (Price 2010: 314). Price’s thought is that any theory of the functioning of (say) moral discourse that uses representational relations ‘picks up the *internal* ontological commitments’ of moral discourse (*ibid.*; also Price 2009b: 262; 2004a: 219). For example, suppose our theory of the functioning of words like ‘good’ and ‘wrong’ describes them as bearing a *representation relation* to properties. Then this theory is committed to there being properties suited to serve as the *relata* of this representation relation, as determined by whatever substantial characterization the theory may give that relation. If the representation relation invoked by the theory receives a naturalistic analysis, this would require that goodness and wrongness can be given a naturalistic analysis.

However, it is not clear why theoretical appeal to *content* should carry the same consequence. Suppose we make some claim about the distinctive motivational role of a word speakers use *to say of an action that it is wrong*. As long as its use of ‘wrong’ remains encapsulated within indirect discourse attributions, our functional theory will not place any constraints on what we might take to be the nature of wrongness, if we do take there to be such a property. Price makes essentially this point in another context (Price 2004a: 224–5). He considers an account of the ‘use conditions for the imperative “Make the grass green!”’ according to which ‘one should *judge* it to be obeyed when one *judges* grass to have been made green.’ Such an account ‘appeal[s] to speakers’ *judgments* about colors, not to colors themselves’, whence ‘there will be no embarrassing problem of unwelcome ontology.’

A second alleged pitfall of using semantic notions is that doing so threatens to erode the *functional pluralism* that is essential to Price’s aim of dissolving metaphysical puzzles (Macarthur and Price 2007: 249). Again, consider a theory that characterizes linguistic or mental items in terms of a *reference relation*. Evidently, a word that *refers to penguins* and one that *refers to probabilities* serve very different functions. Still, there is a temptation, in virtue of the sameness of the reference relation, to view such differences as simply a matter of each word’s bearing this relation to different *relata*. Price himself can resist this temptation; what allows him to do so is his deflationary explanation of the function of ‘refers’. But that explanation, he recognizes, is unavailable to one who wishes reference to play a substantial theoretical role.

Again, let us ask whether what holds for reference holds for content too. Is invoking content in theorizing about vocabularies a threat to functional pluralism? Take the difference between a sentence that *has the content that there are penguins in Sydney* and one that *has the content that the price of oil will probably rise*. There may indeed be a temptation to see this as just a matter of the difference between two possible states of affairs involving very different objects and properties. In that case, functional plurality would ‘simply bottom-out at the level of content’ (Price 2011: 26; cf. 2004a: 220-3; Macarthur and Price 2007: 246), leaving undisturbed the metaphysical puzzles about how the objects and properties in question hang together.

But this threat to functional plurality can be undercut by a pragmatist account of how *content-talk* functions. Here it helps to compare Brandom’s view, according to which the role of content-ascriptions lies in how they allow us to make explicit what is implicit in our practices of challenging or deferring to one another’s assertions (Brandom 1994: ch. 8). Once content-talk’s role is no longer construed as that of relating expressions to objects, properties, or states of affairs, it should no longer be tempting to conceive of functional plurality as bottoming-out at the level of content. And here the case of content differs from that of truth and reference. By limiting the expressive functions of ‘true’ and ‘refers’ to those that can be accounted for in terms of their use as devices for semantic ascent, deflationism undermines theoretical employment of truth and reference. By contrast, Brandom’s pragmatist explanation of content-talk’s function does not appear to undermine theoretical employment of content. It had better not do so, since the account of assertion on which it is based invokes propositionally contentful commitments.

V. WHY PRICE’S PRAGMATIST CANNOT DO WITHOUT CONTENT

So far, I have argued that Price provides no compelling motivation or entitlement for refraining from the use of content-talk in explaining linguistic functions. I will now argue that appeal to content is *required* for Price’s theoretical purposes.

The reason is that in order for functional explanations of vocabulary to dissolve metaphysical puzzles, the relevant vocabulary needs to be *identified* in content-involving terms. Price’s pragmatist project leads him from metaphysical questions about *causes*, e.g. whether they must precede their effects, to examination of the role of the word ‘cause’. The move from concern with causes to concern with ‘cause’-talk carries a *presupposition concerning content*, namely that our word ‘cause’ expresses the content *cause*, so that this word can be used in expressing the claim *that causes precede their effects*. This point does not

depend on any assumption that content possession can be explained in terms of word-world relations.

The presupposition concerning content is left implicit in how Price identifies the targets of functional explanation. He often describes such explanation as directed at *talk of things*. For example, the pragmatist is said to be concerned with ‘explaining . . . what differences there are between the functions of talk of value and the functions of talk of electrons’ (Price 2004b: 199). In one place, Price describes non-cognitivists as ‘arguing that talk of Xs—that is, standard use of the term ‘X’—does not have a referential or descriptive function’ (Price 2004b: 188). Given the intended application to metaphysical puzzles, however, ‘talk of causes’ must *mean more* than ‘standard use of the term “cause”’. Rather, talk of causes must amount to *expressing a certain conceptual content*.

Elsewhere, Price describes his proposal as concerned with *concepts*. Its subject-matter is ‘our use of the terms “snow” and “white”, or the concepts *snow* and *white*’ (Price 2011: 208), or in general how we ‘employ the term “X” in language, or the concept *X*, in thought’ (Price 2011: 188). Like Price, I will assume that ‘concepts’ are mental entities that are not individuated in terms of content. But what does he mean by ‘the concept *white*?’ If we think of this as the concept we use to express the content *white*, the subject-matter is already identified in content-involving terms. But if instead we think of the concept *white* as the concept we express using the word ‘white’, we are back to the question of why puzzles about *what it is to be white* should be addressed by examining the function of the mental entity we express using the word ‘white’. Once again, this would appear to presuppose that this word is the one we use to express the conceptual content *white*.

I have argued that a theorist who appeals to explanations of the diverse functions of vocabularies and concepts to dissolve metaphysical puzzles must *identify* the relevant linguistic or mental items in terms of their content. Someone might concede this while denying that content figures in the vocabulary used in *explaining* how the items thus identified function in their users’ linguistic or mental economies. The problem with this suggestion is that it requires that items identified by content can *also* be identified (for explanatory purposes) in terms that do not involve content. This would undermine Price’s denial that there needs to be any reductive account of content facts in terms of facts about linguistic functions.

I have raised two challenges for Price. First, is there reason to think that functional explanations on either level of his ‘two-level picture’ can eschew theoretical use of the notion of conceptual content? And secondly, in view of his distinctive approach to the Sellarsian aim of reflectively ‘know[ing] one’s way around’ such things as value, causation, and content itself (Sellars 1963: 1),

why should there be any problem with making theoretical use of the notion of content?²

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