

Handout for Week 8

Passages from Huw Price's "Naturalism Without Representation" (2007)

I oppose both naturalism and non-naturalism as popularly understood, and favour a different kind of naturalism — a **naturalism without representationalism**. [NWR 3 (emphasis added)]

The popular kind of naturalism — the view often called simply “naturalism” — exists in both ontological and epistemological keys. As an ontological doctrine, it is the view that in some important sense, all there *is* is the world studied by science. As an epistemological doctrine, it is the view that all genuine knowledge is scientific knowledge. I'll call this view *object naturalism*. [NWR 3]

According to this second view, philosophy needs to begin with what science tells us *about ourselves*. Science tells us that we humans are natural creatures, and if the claims and ambitions of philosophy conflict with this view, then philosophy needs to give way. This is naturalism in the sense of Hume, then, and arguably Nietzsche. I'll call it *subject naturalism*. [NWR 4]

Priority Thesis: Subject naturalism is theoretically prior to object naturalism, because the latter depends on validation from a subject naturalist perspective. [NWR 4]

Invalidity Thesis: There are strong reasons for doubting whether object naturalism deserves to be “validated” — whether its presuppositions do survive subject naturalist scrutiny...

[M]y case for this claim will depend on the role of certain “semantic” or “representationalist” presuppositions in the foundations of object naturalism. [NWR 5]

The Placement Issue: If all reality is ultimately natural reality, how are we to “place” moral facts, mathematical facts, meaning facts, and so on? How are we to locate topics of these kinds within a naturalistic framework, thus conceived? In cases of this kind, we seemed to be faced with a choice between forcing the topic concerned into a category which for one reason or another seems ill-shaped to contain it, or regarding it as at best second-rate — not a genuine area of fact or knowledge. [NWR 5]

On the face of it, a typical placement problem [BB: object naturalism] seeks to understand how some object, property or fact can be a *natural* object, property or fact...

On the other possible view [BB: subject naturalism], the starting point lies in human linguistic practices, broadly construed. Roughly, we note that humans (ourselves or others) employ the term “X” in language, or the concept *X*, in thought...

Let us call these two views of the origin of the placement problem the *material conception* and the *linguistic conception*, respectively. [NWR 6]

If the linguistic conception is correct, then placement problems are initially problems about human linguistic behaviour (or perhaps about human thought). What turns such a concern into an issue about something else — about value, mathematical reality, causation, or whatever? The answer to this question was implicit above, when our attention shifted from the *term* to what it is *about*. The shift relies on what we may call the *representationalist* assumption. Roughly, this is the assumption that the *linguistic* items in question “stand for” or “represent” something *non-linguistic*... This assumption grounds our shift in focus from the *term* “X” or *concept* X, to its assumed *object*, X. [NWR 7-8]

[Representationalism:] Object naturalism thus rests on substantial theoretical assumptions about what we humans do with language —roughly, the assumption that substantial “word–world” semantic relations are a part of the best scientific account of our use of the relevant terms. [NWR 10]

[D]eflationism itself is clearly of a subject naturalist character. It offers a broadly scientific hypothesis about what linguistic creatures like us “do” with terms such as “true” and “refers” — what role these terms play in our linguistic lives. Of course, the use of these terms itself comprises the basis of one particularly interesting placement problem. So semantic deflationism *exemplifies* a subject naturalist approach to a particular placement problem — an approach that seeks to explain the *use* of the semantic terms in question... [NWR 10-11]

[I]t is very far from clear that a “scientific” account of semantic relations is going to provide what we need, in order to turn an interesting theoretical issue about *terms* (“causation”, “belief”, “good”, and so on) into an interesting issue about *objects*. [NWR 12]

The subject naturalist’s basic task is to account for the use of various terms — among them, the semantic terms themselves — in the lives of natural creatures in a natural environment...in completing this task, the subject naturalist might simply find no need for an **explanatory** category of semantic properties and relations. [NWR 14 (emphasis added)]

It is clear that the linguistic conception of the placement issue is already in play.

I noted earlier that to treat noncognitivism as an option in these debates is to commit oneself to a linguistic conception of the origin of the problem.

The threat to object naturalism takes off from this point, noting that the representationalist assumption is non-compulsory — that there are other possible theoretical approaches to language, in which semantic notions play no significant role.

We have thus been offered the prospect of a (subject) naturalistic account of the relevant aspects of human talk and thought, from the perspective of which the material question (“What are Xs?”) simply doesn’t arise.

At this stage, the only way for object naturalists to regain control of the ball is to *defend* the representationalist assumption. [NWR 16-17]

[T]he difficult opponent [for the object naturalist] is not someone who agrees to play the game in material mode but bats for non-naturalism, defending a primitive plurality of ontological realms. The difficult opponent is the naturalist who takes advantage of a non-representationalist theoretical perspective to avoid the material mode altogether. [NWR 20]

The object naturalist's instinct is always to appeal to the representational character of language to bring the issue back to the material level; but this, as we have seen, is a recipe for grave discomfort. [NWR 20]

Without a representationalist conception of the talk, however, the puzzle takes a very different form. It remains in the linguistic realm, a puzzle about a plurality of *ways of talking*, of forms of human linguistic behaviour. The challenge is now simply to explain in naturalistic terms how creatures like us come to talk in these various ways. This is a matter of explaining what role the different language games play in our lives — what differences there are between the functions of talk of value and the functions of talk of electrons, for example. This certainly requires plurality in the world, but of a familiar kind, in a familiar place. Nobody expects human behaviour to be anything other than highly complex. Without representationalism, the joints between topics remain joints between kinds of behaviour, and don't need to be mirrored in ontology of any other kind. [NWR 21]

Subject naturalism suggests that science might properly take a more modest view of its own importance. It imagines a scientific discovery that science is not all there is — that science is just one thing among many that we do with “representational” discourse. If so, then the semantic presuppositions of object naturalism are bad science, a legacy of an insufficiently naturalistic philosophy. The story then has the following satisfying moral. If we do science better in philosophy, we'll be less inclined to think that science is all there is to do. [NWR 22]

Passages from David Macarthur and Huw Price
“Pragmatism, Quasi-Realism, and the Global Challenge” (2007)

...semantic minimalism provides almost a knockdown argument *for* a strong or global kind of expressivism, not a knock-down argument against it.

This strong kind of expressivism is also a kind of pragmatism. [PQRGC 2]

Unlike more familiar forms of expressivism, our pragmatism is quietist...about the representational character of various vocabularies. [PQRGC 3]

“Placement problems” stem from a presupposition about the ontological scope of science—roughly, the naturalist assumption that all there is is the world as studied by science. The pragmatist we have in mind wants to dismiss or demote such metaphysical puzzles in favour of more practical questions, about the roles and functions of the matters in question in human life. [PQRGC 3]

Pragmatism thus begins with linguistic explananda rather than material explananda; with phenomena concerning the *use* of certain terms and concepts, rather than with things or properties of a non-linguistic nature. It begins with linguistic behaviour, and asks broadly anthropological questions: How are we to understand the roles and functions of the behaviour in question, in the lives of the creatures concerned? What is its practical significance? Whence its genealogy? [PQRGC 4]

It is easy to miss the possibility of beginning where pragmatism begins (viz., with an interest in understanding our *use* of terms such as ‘good’, ‘cause’ and ‘true’), without feeling the pull of the metaphysical questions—without wanting to ask what we are talking *about*. Unless the role of the representationalist assumption is made explicit, it is liable to remain part of the implicit geography of our thought about these matters, a pathway that cannot help but lead us from one place to the other. Once it is properly mapped, however, the presupposition can be challenged. We pragmatists can maintain that our predecessors’ mistake was precisely to follow that representationalist path, into the *cul de sac* of metaphysics. [PQRGC 7]

[O]ur pragmatists are metaphysical quietists. But note that they are not philosophical quietists *tout court*.... On the contrary, they take some relevant theoretical matters very seriously indeed: in particular, some broadly anthropological issues about the roles and genealogy of various aspects of human linguistic behaviour...

What distinguishes pragmatism is its commitment to addressing them without the resources of a representationalist model of language. [PQRGC 10-11]

Quasi-realism thus appears to have all the marks of our species of anthropological pragmatism. In reading quasi-realism in this way, however, we need to stress once more that it is a local pragmatism. It adopts the pragmatist attitude with respect to some areas of discourse, some topics of philosophical puzzlement, but not universally. Elsewhere, as it were, representationalism and metaphysics still reign.

5. The global challenge

In our view, however, quasi-realism is untenable in this local form. Like other local forms of expressivism, it faces irresistible pressures towards “globalisation”—pressures to concede the field to a view which, approached from this direction, is aptly characterised as *global* quasirealism, or *global* expressivism...

[T]his new view is the anthropological pragmatism with which we began, in its unrestricted form. [PQRGC 13]

If there is nothing more to truth than the equivalence schema, then any meaningful sentence ‘P’ whose syntax permits it to be embedded in the form ‘P is true’ immediately possesses truthconditions, in the only sense available: viz., ‘P’ is true if and only if P....

In general, then, the thought is that if truth is minimal, it is easy for sentences to be truth-evaluable—and hence implausible for a noncognitivist to maintain that a superficially truth-conditional statement is not genuinely truth-conditional. [PQRGC 14-15]

So what is the effect of deflationism on expressivism? It is to deflate the expressivist’s (usual) negative claim, *while leaving intact the positive claim*—the expressivist’s pragmatic account of the function of the terms in question. Contrary to the received view, then, semantic minimalism is a friend rather an enemy of expressivism. [PQRGC 16]

The most popular argument...for the defence of the “bifurcation thesis” (as it is called by Kraut (1990), following Rorty)—appeals to what we might call the Eleatic Criterion. The central thought goes something like this. We need to appeal to trees to explain our use of the term ‘tree’, but we don’t need to appeal to goodness to explain our use of the term ‘good’. So we should interpret talk of trees “really” realistically, but talk of goodness only quasi-realistically. [PQRGC 18]

[W]e want to emphasise there is an attractive alternative close at hand. It is global solution represented by our brand of pragmatism, or global expressivism. The near-invisibility of this alternative in contemporary philosophy seems due in large part to the enormous inertia of the representationalist orthodoxy. The point we’ve stressed is that to the extent that semantic minimalism is taken seriously...it actually sweeps away the foundations of this orthodoxy. But far from sweeping away, with it, the diversity of the things that expressivists want to claim that we do with assertoric language, the effect is to reveal the underlying diversity to the theoretician’s gaze, unencrusted with the dogma that it is all just DESCRIBING. [PQRGC 22]

Wittgenstein:

It is like looking into the cabin of a locomotive. We see handles all looking more or less alike. (Naturally, since they are all supposed to be handled.) But one is the handle of a crank which can be moved continuously (it regulates the opening of a valve); another is the handle of a switch, which has only two effective positions, it is either off or on; a third is the handle of a brake-lever, the harder one pulls on it, the harder it brakes; a fourth, the handle of a pump: it has an effect only so long as it is moved to and fro. (1968, §12)

So here’s the proposal, as our pragmatist sees it. Thinking of the function of assertions uniformly as representation misses important functional distinctions—distinctions we can’t

put back in just by appealing to differences in what is represented. To get the direction of explanation right, we need to begin with pragmatic differences, differences among the kinds of things that the assertions in question *do* (or more accurately, perhaps, differences among the kinds of things that their underlying psychological states *do*, for complex creatures in a complex environment). And to get the unity right, we need to note than in their different ways, all of these tasks are tasks whose verbal expressions appropriately invoke the kind of multi-purpose tool that assertion in general *is*. [PQRGC 25]

	Metaphysical quietism	Representational quietism	Use-explanatory quietism
A	No	No	No
B	No	Yes	No
C	Yes	No	No
D	Yes	Yes	No
E	Yes	Yes	Yes

TABLE 1: Options for quietism.

Option D is DM&HP’s pragmatism as global expressivism. [PQRGC 27]

For our part, we’ve urged, in particular, that minimalism about truth and reference leads to this kind of pragmatism. Whistled down the years by such distinguished lips as Wittgenstein, Ramsey and Quine, semantic minimalism has long been a melody that everybody in philosophy has in their head. What’s surprising, in our view, is that so few people have realised how it finishes:

with the **last quiet gasp of representationalism itself, as pragmatism prepares to sing.**
 [PQRGC 30 (emphasis added)]