

Passages from Huw Price: “One Cheer for Representationalism”

When Dewey declared in 1905 that pragmatism would ‘give the *coup de grace* to *representationalism*’, he had (to say the least) underestimated the tenacity of the intended victim. [OCR 1]

‘semantic minimalism’: a quietist, deflationary attitude to some of the foundational conceptual machinery of representationalism. Doesn’t minimalism eat away at representationalism from the inside, depriving it of the theoretical vocabulary it needs to be telling us anything substantial about human thought and language? [OCR 2]

The second hopeful sign for Deweyan optimists, in my view, is the persistence, within the borders of representationalism, of a series of breakaway movements—each contending that the representationalist framework claims no proper dominion over some *local* region of its apparent territory, and offering an alternative, ‘expressivist’, account of the region in question. While most of these breakaway movements are (perhaps hopelessly) local in their ambitions, I think that the threat they pose collectively is substantial (and underrated). I’ll call it the threat of *functional pluralism*: a challenge to the homogeneity of the representationalist empire. Interpreted in this optimistic light, these breakaway views do locally what Wittgenstein did globally. They challenge the assumption that language has a single core function, viz., to ‘represent how things are’. [OCR 2]

Semantic minimalism offers a selfconsciously nonmetaphysical approach to truth, while focussing on practical questions about what we can *do* with a truth predicate that it would be difficult or impossible to do without it. And expressivism focusses directly on the distinctive use of (say) moral or modal vocabulary—thereby, once again, sidestepping traditional metaphysical concerns about nature of moral or modal states of affairs. [OCR 2]

I suspect that Rorty may feel that the position I recommend concedes too much to representationalism; and Brandom, perhaps, that it concedes too little. If so, so be it: I am between Rorty and Brandom. By my lights, one could do a lot worse than that. [OCR 3]

The claimed conflict rests on the thought that semantic minimalism undermines expressivism, by lowering the bar: by making it easy for a declarative discourse to be truth conditional, in the only sense that minimalism allows. [OCR 3]

Concerning evaluative or normative vocabulary, for example, the expressivist’s core claim is that we should

concern ourselves with the use, function and pragmatic significance of the vocabularies concerned, rather than with their semantic attributes. [OCR 3]

The minimalist challenge does indeed threaten the contrast that local expressivists usually want to draw between genuinely descriptive and expressive vocabularies—but because it threatens the former category, not because it threatens the latter. [OCR 4]

Simon Blackburn interprets Wittgenstein, as someone who combines semantic minimalism and expressivism (arguably, in fact, *global* expressivism). [OCR 4]

[Blackburn:] The focus of theory is the nature of the commitment voiced by one adhering to the proposition, and the different functional roles in peoples' lives (or forms of life, or language games) that these different commitments occupy. [OCR 4]

[T]he *only* satisfactory resolution of the apparent tension between minimalism and expressivism comes from seeing that minimalism implies that there can be no half measures. Given minimalism, expressivism is *necessarily* a global viewpoint, because minimalism deprives us of the theoretical vocabulary needed for any alternative viewpoint. [OCR 5]

Blackburn has even canvassed sympathetically the idea that there is no distinction between the descriptive and the nondescriptive. There are two ways to read the implications of this suggestion for representationalism: either it amounts to a global rejection of representationalism, a way of saying *globally* what expressivists and noncognitivists usually say *locally*. Or it saves representationalism, but at the cost of stripping it of all theoretical content—of deflating the notion so much that it no longer plays any role in our theorising about the relationship of language and thought to the world. But it is hard to see how either reading differs significantly from Rorty's rejection of representationalism. [OCR 5]

The expressivist views I have in mind are responses to what are now called 'location' or 'placement' problems... [OCR 9]

[T]raditional expressivism thus involved both a negative and a positive thesis about the vocabularies in question.

The negative thesis was that these vocabularies are not genuinely representational, and as I noted earlier, expressivists here took for granted that some parts of language are genuinely representational (and, implicitly, that this was a substantial matter of some sort).

The positive thesis proposed some alternative account of the function of each vocabulary in question.

My inversion of the common minimalist objection to expressivism rests on the observation that the positive thesis not only survives deflation of the negative thesis by semantic deflationism—it actually wins by default, in the sense that semantic deflationism *mandates* some nonrepresentational account of the functions of the language in question. [OCR 9-10]

I need a distinction between ontologically *conservative* and ontologically *profligate* ways of theorising about language. Any way of theorising about language has some ontological commitments, of course—at the very least, presumably, commitments to speakers, to speech acts of some kind, and to various environmental factors (e.g., to explain why such speakers produce such speech acts on certain occasions but not others). An ontologically conservative theory commits us to no more than this. Whereas—again putting the matter in Carnapian terms—an ontologically profligate theory also picks up the *internal* ontological commitments of the linguistic frameworks *theorised about*. [OCR 10]

So naturalists should embrace **the pragmatist–expressivist shift from philosophising about objects to philosophising about vocabularies**, in my view—embrace the lesson that a proper naturalism about subjects may undercut the motivation for a common form of naturalism about objects. This is why it matters, and why virtue requires that we stay on what I want to identify as the Dewey-Wittgenstein-Rorty side of the fence: resolutely opposed to the kind of representationalism that gives metaphysics a free ride (on the back of the study of vocabularies). **Expressivism isn't a way of doing metaphysics in a pragmatist key. It is a way of doing something like anthropology.** [OCR 12]

[T]his passage continues with what is by my lights exactly the right explanation of what keeps Brandom's feet on the ground: “Normative statuses are domesticated by being understood in terms of normative attitudes, which *are* in the causal order.” (1994, 626) But my point is that he shouldn't have to retreat in this way in the first place. His account only looks nonnaturalistic (to him) because he tries to conceive of it as metaphysics. If he had stayed on the virtuous (anthropological) side of the fence to begin with, there would have been no appearance of anything nonnaturalistic, and no need to retreat. [OCR 14-15]

Hume's expressivism may well be a large step behind Kant, in failing to appreciate the importance of the conceptual; and a further large step behind Hegel, in failing to see that the conceptual depends on the social. But it is still at the head of the field for its understanding of the way in which what we would now call pragmatism simply turns its back on metaphysics. (We Humeans expect this kind of blindness from mainstream representationalists, for we can see how their representationalism leads them astray. But we hope for better from our fellow pragmatists.) [OCR 16]

that it resonates with some Rortyan themes—especially with the view that language is for ‘**coping not copying**’, to mention one of Rorty’s favourite Deweyan slogans.... the basic point is that ‘coping’ brings a new dimension of variability to linguistic theory, a dimension that ‘copying’ necessarily suppresses. [OCR 17-18]

In according this kind of centrality to assertion, I’m one step closer to the orthodoxy than the view—arguably Wittgenstein’s, and perhaps Rorty’s—that even this much representationalism is too much: hence my one cheer for representationalism. But I am one step further from the orthodoxy than the view that Brandom appears at least tempted to adopt, which aims to build a substantial notion of representational content from expressivist and pragmatist raw materials. [OCR 18]

Passages from Huw Price “Expressivism for Two Voices”:

Humean Expressivism (HEX):

The Negative Thesis. This tells us what the vocabulary in question is *not* doing: e.g., that it is *not descriptive*, *not belief expressing*, *not fact stating*, *not truth evaluable*, or *not cognitive*.

The Positive Thesis. This tells us what the vocabulary in question *is* doing: e.g., that it expresses an evaluative attitude. [ETV 2]

[W]hat unites these writers is a concern to explain one or other of the modal notions in terms of what *we do with them*, what *practical role they play in our lives*, rather than in metaphysical terms. Both aspects of this viewpoint – an *emphasis* on role in practice, and a *de-emphasis* on metaphysics – will play an important part in what follows. [ETV 3]

Once we note that this language is not in the business of “describing reality”, says the expressivist, the placement problem can be seen to rest on a category mistake. [ETV 3]

HEX wants to allow that as *users* of moral language, we may talk of the existence of values and moral facts, in what Carnap would call an internal sense. What is important, as Blackburn stresses in the passage above, is to deny that there is any other sense in which these issues make sense. [ETV 4]

HEX thus *sidesteps* metaphysical issues, by rejecting a certain conception of linguistic role of the vocabularies with which it is concerned – the view that their role is to *represent* some aspect of external reality, as we might put it. [ETV 5]

Quasirealism is thus intended as a “local” program, applicable to a selected range of vocabularies, and assumes some version of what Rorty termed **the Bifurcation Thesis – the**

view that there is a well-grounded distinction between descriptive and nondescriptive declarative utterances. [ETV 5]

Where Blackburn's expressivist sees a variety of superficially assertoric language games, differently related to various functions and psychological states, Brandom seems to require a single practice of making commitments, offering entitlements, giving and asking for reasons. [ETV 8]

It is easy to see how this doctrine seems to conflict with Brandom's inferentialist account of what an assertion *is*. If to be an assertion is nothing more or less than to be a certain kind of move in the game of giving and asking for reasons – and if we agree with Blackburn and Sellars that even nondescriptive claims can properly partake in the realm of reason – then it follows, contrary to HEX's intentions, that moral and modal assertion are strict, fullblooded, cardcarrying assertions, in the only sense the inferentialist allows to matter. BEX thus seems in tension with one of the fundamental assumptions of HEX. [ETV 9]

Thus we have three points of apparent disagreement between HEX and BEX. In the remainder of this paper, I want to try to show that none of these differences is irreconcilable, and that both forms of expressivism are better for making the effort to find a compromise. Concerning the first point, I shall argue that Brandom's view about the centrality of assertion is entirely compatible with an underlying pluralism, of the sort that HEX requires; and that Brandom, too, is actually committed to such a pluralism. Concerning the second, I shall offer HEX two options, either of which preserves what is most distinctive about HEX (namely, its Positive Thesis); and one of which preserves a form of the Bifurcation Thesis, too. Concerning the third, I shall argue that Brandom's comparative tolerance of metaphysics is actually superficial, and that BEX benefits significantly from the clarification of its goals that flows from recognizing that it, too, is engaged in the vocabulary focussed explanatory project which HEX has embraced more explicitly. [ETV 10-11]

[Quoting Brandom:]

Starting with an account of what one is *doing* in making a claim, it seeks to elaborate from it an account of what is said, the content or proposition— something that can be thought of in terms of truth conditions—to which one commits oneself by making a speech act. (2000, p. 12)

Pragmatism about the conceptual seeks to understand what it is explicitly to *say* or *think that* something is the case in terms of what one must implicitly know *how* (be able) to *do*. (2000, p. 18) [ETV 12]

[W]hat Brandom actually *does* is not to “construe referential relations” (as having such and such a nature, for example), or to “make sense of reference” (itself), but rather to offer us an account

of the use of referential *vocabulary*: he tells us about the use of the *term* “refers”, not about the reference *relation* – about *ascriptions* of reference, not about reference itself. [ETV 13]

The second apparent conflict between HEX and BEX turned on the fact that the latter seems to provide no place for a Bifurcation Thesis – no place for the distinction between *loose* and *strict* notions of assertion, as I put it earlier; or between genuinely *descriptive* claims and other conceptually articulated statements (such as those of the moral and modal vocabularies, in both Sellars’ and Blackburn’s view). BEX lowers the bar for what it takes to be a genuine assertion; making the core notion of assertion one which is compatible, on the face of it, with HEX’s views about the functions of the various vocabularies to which it accords the expressivist treatment. [ETV 13]

If we consider the notion of a *representation* (type or token), as it is used in cognitive science and contemporary philosophy of language and mind, I think we can usefully distinguish two nodes, around which the various uses tend to cluster. One node gives priority to system–world relations. It stresses the idea that the job of a representation is to *covary* with something else – typically, some *external* factor, or environmental condition. The other node gives priority to the *internal* role of a representation, in a network of some kind. A token counts as a representation, in this sense, in virtue of its position, or role, in some sort of functional or inferential architecture – in virtue of its links, within a network, to other items of the same general kind. I develop this distinction at greater length in Price (2008b), calling the two notions *e-representation* and *i-representation*, respectively. [ETV 15]

[A]lthough all declarative claims are representational in an *internal* sense – a sense to be characterised in Brandom’s inferentialist terms – they are not all representational in the *external* sense. In other words, there is a distinction to be drawn, within this class of genuine *i-representations*, between those that are *e-representations* and those that are not. The latter part of this claim makes some sense of the intuitions underlying the Bifurcation Thesis... [ETV 16]

Finally, then, to the third apparent conflict between HEX and BEX: the fact that whereas HEX is **an explicitly antimetaphysical position – more like anthropology than metaphysics**, as I put it earlier – Brandom often writes as if he wishes to preserve traditional metaphysical projects, simply transposing them into a new key. [ETV 18]

I conclude that HEX and BEX actually fit together remarkably well, and that the totality is considerably more illuminating than either viewpoint separately. The unified view – *total* expressivism (“TEX”), as we might call it – combines expressivist contributions at two levels. At the higher level, it takes from BEX an inferentialist account of the assertion and judgement in general. This is expressivist in the sense that Brandom makes clear: it eschews representationalist presuppositions, and instead offers an account of what it is to make an assertion in terms of a

distinctive practice within which such speech acts have a place (in fact, a very central place). At the lower level, TEX takes from both HEX and BEX the insight that particular groups of concepts – particular assertoric subvocabularies – are distinctively associated with various *practical* aspects of the lives of typical language users. [ETV 22]

[TEX] offers such nonrepresentationalist foundations *globally*, sweeping aside HEX's Bifurcation Thesis, at least as traditionally understood. But I have suggested, first, that such an outcome was always on the cards, by the quasirealist's own lights (in view of an inherent instability in local versions of the program); and second, that some consolation is at hand, provided that we are prepared to distinguish two notions of representation, and regard the Bifurcation Thesis as a distinction drawn entirely at the lower, functional level. Finally, I have argued that TEX retains the deflationary, quietist attitude to metaphysics so characteristic of many versions of HEX (from Hume himself onwards). Like HEX, but simply on a grander scale, TEX regards the interesting philosophical project as lying somewhere other than metaphysics – a descriptive, explanatory, and genealogical project, better thought of as a kind of philosophical anthropology. [ETV 23]

Passages from Huw Price “Two expressivist programmes, two bifurcations”:

I shall argue that there are two very different notions, or clusters of notions, both commonly associated with ‘representation’ and various cognate terms, and that there is much to be gained by pulling them apart and recognising that they are distinct. [TEPTB 22-23]

This proto-theory accords a key role to the idea that **the function of statements is to ‘represent’ worldly states of affairs and that true statements succeed in doing so**. I'll call this first assumption (big R) *Representationalism*. [TEPTB 24]

...the version of expressivism called *quasirealism*, championed over many years by Simon Blackburn. The quasirealist's project is to begin where expressivism begins, with the thought that the primary function of certain of our (apparent) statements is not that of describing how things are and yet to show how, nevertheless, such expressions might earn a right to all or most of the trappings of descriptive ‘statementhood’ – in particular the right to be treated as capable of being true and false. [TEPTB 29]

Typically, of course, expressivists do all of this *locally*...

In other words, they take for granted what Robert Kraut (1990), following Rorty, **calls the bifurcation thesis – the doctrine that there is a line to be drawn in language, between descriptive and non-descriptive uses**. [TEPTB 30]

[T]he bifurcation thesis, and in particular the belief that some claims are genuinely descriptive, play *no role at all* in the positive story, in the case of the commitments the expressivist regards as not genuinely descriptive...

So there's no evident barrier to abandoning the matching model altogether and endorsing *global* expressivism. This is the view that I want to recommend. [TEPTB 30]

A quasi-realist of a more conventional stripe, who does want to hold onto the bifurcation thesis, is committed to a kind of two-tier view of the landscape, with respect to a whole range of notions that we associate with the business of making claims and assertions. In effect, he must think that **there are both *loose and strict answers to questions such as: what is it to be a belief, an assertion, a statement, a judgement, a proposition (even a fact)***? The loose answer is supposed to tell us what descriptive and quasi-descriptive uses of language have in common, the strict answer what separates the real cases from the merely quasi-cases. [TEPTB 30]

I'm attempting to recruit Brandom's inferentialist account of assertion, to answer a question I think Blackburn's quasi-realist should have been asking a little more loudly: what is it that all declarative claims have in common (*quasi* and *really* descriptive claims alike, if such a bifurcation there be)? [TEPTB 32]

Thus I think we can follow Brandom here – agree that language has a downtown – without abandoning the pluralist aspect of Blackburn's expressivism. [TEPTB 33]

So while Brandom's account may impose a degree of uniformity on language that some Wittgensteinian pluralists might wish to reject – offering us a uniform account of the way in which Wittgenstein's common linguistic 'clothing' is held together, so to speak – it not only allows but actually *requires* that this uniformity coexist with an underlying functional diversity of the kind that expressivists such as Blackburn and Gibbard require. [TEPTB 34]

1. **e-Representation:** On the one hand, we have the *environment-tracking* paradigm of representation, dependent on such notions as covariation and 'indication relations' (Field 1994) – think of examples such as the position of the needle in the fuel gauge and the level of fuel in the tank, the barometer reading and air pressure and so on. In these cases, the crucial idea is that some feature of the representing system either does, or is (in some sense) 'intended to', vary in parallel with some feature of the represented system. (Usually, but perhaps not always, the covariation in question has a causal basis.) In biological cases, for example, this notion gives priority to the idea that the function of a representation is to covary with some (typically) *external* environmental condition: it puts the system–world link on the front foot.

2. **i-Representation:** On the other hand, we have a notion that gives priority to the *internal* functional role of the representation: something counts as a representation in virtue of its position

or role in some cognitive or inferential architecture. Here it is an *internal* role of some kind – perhaps causal–functional, perhaps logico-inferential, perhaps computational – that takes the lead. [TEPTB 36]

The two notions have their origins in two distinct notions of representation. The former belongs in a particular (normative, inferentialist) version of the systemic-functional notion, which characterises representations in terms of their roles in networks of various kinds. The latter belongs with notions of representation as environmental covariance. **My new bifurcation thesis claims that these are not two competing accounts of a single species of representation but two quite different beasts; and that it is this fact, not the old bifurcation thesis, that is the key distinction that expressivists need to make their project run smoothly.** [TEPTB 38]

So long as we restrict ourselves to the vocabulary associated with the i-representational level, in other words, we should not expect to be able to formulate any remnant of the old bifurcation thesis. [TEPTB 39]

The second question is whether there is room in this picture for the idea that some *subset* of representations in the i-representational sense are also representations in the e-representational, ‘environment-tracking’ sense...I think it is open to a quasi-realist to say this, and this is the core of my irenic proposal. [TEPTB 39]

The view I’m challenging can be thought of as a loosely articulated combination of two fundamental assumptions about language and thought. The first assumption (call it the *content assumption*) is that language is a medium for encoding and passing around sentence-sized packets of factual information – the *contents* of beliefs and assertions. The second assumption (the *correspondence assumption*) is that these packets of information are all ‘about’ some aspect of the external world, in much the same way. [TEPTB 40]

My proposal rests on pulling the two assumptions apart, on regarding them as having quite different theoretical allegiances, the content assumption with *i-representation* and the correspondence assumption with *e-representation*. [TEPTB 40]

Until recently I had thought of myself as a straight up and down antirepresentationalist, in the tradition of Dewey, Wittgenstein and Rorty. But now – even if I’m still opposed to big-R Representationalism – I find that far from being an eliminativist about representation, I’m heading in the other direction: I’m a *dualist*, not a *nihilist*! [TEPTB 44]