

Book Reviews

Huw Price. *Expressivism, Pragmatism and Representationalism*.
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Near the end of *Expressivism, Pragmatism and Representationalism*, Huw Price quotes an e-mail from Richard Rorty. In the e-mail, from May 2006, Rorty writes:

[A]s you might expect, my doubts are all about whether you are radical enough. I am not sure that it is worthwhile retaining lower-case representationalism by means of your notion of ‘internal representations’, just as I am unsure whether it was good strategy for Brandom to try to revivify representationalist notions within the bosom of his inferentialism. (193)

Despite Rorty’s doubts, the position Price defends is pretty darn radical. Like Rorty, he rejects representationalism across the board – even in those areas where it seems to make the most sense. Like Rorty, he blurs the distinctions between different types of discourse. And, like Rorty, he proposes a pragmatic account of meaning in terms of use.

Expressivism, Pragmatism and Representationalism is an important book that, along with the essays collected in Price’s 2011 *Naturalism Without Mirrors*, offers a compelling defense of hardcore linguistic pragmatism. Price’s position is certainly radical. That’s the easy part. But in addition I think it is largely right – though whether Price has shown this (or even can show this) is another question.

The book consists of three parts. The first section is Price’s 2008 Descartes Lectures delivered at the Tilburg Center for Logic and Philosophy of Science. The second section includes lengthy critiques by Simon Blackburn, Robert Brandom, Paul Horwich, and Michael Williams. The third section contains Price’s response.

Price’s primary target is representationalism: “the idea that the function of statements is to ‘represent’ worldly states of affairs and that true statements succeed in doing so” (24). This, by itself, is not such a surprising claim: many would agree with Price that there are some areas where representationalism just doesn’t work very well. It’s hard to give a representational account of moral discourse, for example, and there are similar problems for modal and

mathematical areas of discourse. In these areas it can be hard to specify exactly what a particular statement represents, especially if one wants to avoid sketchy notions such as moral facts.

As a result, one option is to be a *local* representationalist with regard to some areas while taking a different approach with regard to other areas. For example, one could be a representationalist when it comes to scientific discourse but be an expressivist with regard to moral discourse. One could, that is, claim that scientific claims describe or represent the world while moral claims serve an expressive function.

But this is not Price's approach. The problem with going local is that a line still has to be drawn *somewhere* and it isn't clear how to draw it. What is the criterion for treating some areas of discourse as truly descriptive while treating other areas as expressive, say? In the absence of such a criterion, Price argues instead for a *global* expressivism that rejects representationalism across the board.

Well, almost. Price does reject representationalism across the board – he rejects the idea that the *primary* function of any area of discourse is to represent worldly states of affairs – but he distinguishes between two senses of representation, one of which is relatively benign. The less benign sense of representation he calls “e-representation.” This is representation in its usual sense where “representation” is a matter of tracking the environment: hence, “the function of a representation is to co-vary with some (typically) *external* environmental condition” (36). The more benign sense of representation he calls “i-representation.” This sense “gives priority to the *internal* functional role of 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” (36). Price's notion of i-representation is meant to have the same explanatory power as representation, traditionally understood, but without the heavy metaphysical baggage. For example, representation was supposed to explain the external constraint on our language use: representationalism tells us that, because statements represent worldly states of affairs, true statements are those that co-vary with the external environment. In the case of i-representation, the external constraint is a bit different. For Price, it's a “kind of ‘in-game externality’ provided by the norms of the game of giving and asking for reasons – the fact that, *within the game* players bind themselves, in principle, to standards beyond themselves” (37). (Of course one might well wonder if “in-game externality” is *really* external in any meaningful sense. I'll return to this point later.)

More generally, Price is proposing a global expressivism that gives a “single, unitary account of the assertoric form” (49) yet nonetheless allows for great diversity in the functions that assertions play. Representation plays no role at the general level (“the assertoric language game is simply a coordination device for social creatures, whose welfare depends on collaborative action”

[49]). Thus, oversimplifying only slightly, meaning is use, not representation. But things are different at the local level. Here, at least in some cases, the use of assertoric discourse might best be understood in terms of something like representation. Price refers to this as a “two-level” theory: at the higher, general, level it is resolutely anti-representationalist; at the lower, local, level it recognizes i- and e-representational uses of language. Thus, unlike some who view expressivism as on a par with representationalism – expressivism is correct when talking about morals, representationalism is correct when talking about medium-sized object – Price proposes expressivism as a global account of discourse, which may take on a representationalist function only in some particular areas.

Price’s account is subtle and rich. He offers several arguments against representationalism, drawing numerous distinctions that open up new ways of viewing the relationship between our internal cognitive architecture and the external environment. He is especially clear when it comes to identifying assumptions built into representationalism – and then showing how these assumptions might be avoided.

However, while Price makes a strong case against representationalism, it isn’t always clear what the alternative, “global expressivism,” looks like. Price goes to some effort to link his proposal to Blackburn’s expressivist moral theory and Brandom’s inferentialist semantics, hoping that doing so will put his theory on more familiar and inviting terrain. But both Blackburn and Brandom turn down the invitation. In his response Blackburn demurs by pointing out that “that the term ‘representation’ and its cousins have perfectly good *everyday* uses” (68) and that pragmatists, of all people, should not dismiss everyday uses. Brandom takes a different route to the same conclusion: calling his own position a “soft global semantic representationalism” (106) he concludes that:

Representational vocabulary can be understood as performing an important, indeed essential, expressive role in making explicit a discursive representational dimension of semantic content that necessarily helps articulate every autonomous discursive practice. (109)

If Blackburn and Brandom are right, then representationalism is not only a perfectly natural way of approaching ordinary discourse, it is also an essential dimension of any well-functioning area of discourse. Granted, these are compelling points. If meaning is closely connected to use (as most pragmatists believe), and if the use of much discourse is to represent, then linguistic pragmatism would seem actually to *support* representationalism, not undermine it.

Part of the problem, no doubt, is that Price has not given a fully complete account of i-representation. Brandom challenges him on just this point, writing:

What I am doing, I think, is just filling in Price's notion of i-representation... I also want to emphasise how serious the need for such a filling-in is. For, as things stand at the end of his Descartes lectures, I think the notion of i-representation is a mere placeholder – the mark of an aspiration rather than the specification of a serviceable concept. (105)

Michael Williams makes a similar point, though he is more sympathetic to Price's project. He writes:

I think that Price is exactly right. However, his response requires elaboration ... to show that global anti-representationalism is compatible with a form of functional pluralism that respects expressivist intuitions. However, perhaps unlike Price, I think that this is a non-trivial undertaking. (132)

Williams then proceeds to offer an account of how to unpack the various ways in which meaning is tied to use. According to Williams, an explanation of meaning in terms of use (what he calls an "EMU") has three components. First, there is an inferential part: we want to know what can be inferred from sentences containing a particular concept (for example, from "it is true that 'snow is white'" we can infer "snow is white"). Second, there is an epistemological part: on what basis do we accept sentences containing a particular concept? Is the basis *a priori*? Or empirical? And, finally, there is a functional part: what do sentences containing a particular concept *do* or express? In the case of "truth" one might say that its main function is to serve as a way to generalize across statements (135). Significantly, each of these components picks out a different sense in which we might talk about the "use" of a concept and hence picks out a different sense in which the meaning of a concept is tied to its use.

Williams' larger point is this: if we go through the effort of constructing EMUs for particular concepts we will discover that some can be stated quickly and completely while others will resist tidy, compact, formulations. The EMUs for some concepts will be "ontologically conservative" (141) while others will not. But that's fine. The EMUs that are ontologically conservative will typically be EMUs for concepts that can most easily be understood expressively ("truth" and "ought" are two of Williams' examples), while the EMUs that are less compact will typically be EMUs for concepts that seem more clearly representational ("red" for example). Because EMUs break their explanations into three components, it is possible to make sense of how different concepts might seem naturally more or less expressive, or more or less representational, while still holding that meaning is primarily a function of use. As Williams puts it, this shows us how to get "global anti-representationalism with functional pluralism" (144).

I've dwelled on Williams' response because Price seems to agree wholeheartedly. As he puts it:

The distinction Williams draws here aligns very nicely with (and very helpfully elucidates) my own distinction between the top level, *i-representational*, aspect of my two-level pragmatism, and the lower level (and in some but not all cases *e-representational*) aspect. (173)

With the addition of William's EMUs, we're in a better position to take stock of Price's overall project. In his responses to Blackburn and Brandom he clarifies once again that the kind of pragmatism he is defending is a "two-level" version (147). At the higher, global level, Price offers a "*uniform* story about the defining common characteristics of declarative speech acts ... [where] the entire story is told in non-representational terms" (154). At the lower, local level are "accounts of the various kinds of things we 'do' with this general resource" (155). Williams' EMUs provide both a general explanatory structure (at the global level) as well as a breakdown of the differences in how various concepts are used (at the local level).

In response, then, to Blackburn and Brandom, Price argues, first, that a pragmatist *can* take an anti-representational stance even with regard to everyday uses of language. The pragmatist will view such everyday uses *as if* they were e-representations (even though they are really only constrained by the sorts of "in-game externalities" mentioned earlier). Second, Price argues that Brandom hasn't fully appreciated the significance of the distinction between i-representation and e-representation. The temptation, he claims, is to think of these as two sides of the same coin or as two roughly equal ways of manifesting a single, underlying relation. If that's how one thinks of i- and e-representation then it is indeed hard, as Brandom points out, to avoid the conclusion that representation (as what underlies these two concepts) is important and essential. Price replies:

Brandom seems to me to be missing the opportunities provided by the recognition that *representation* is not a usefully univocal notion. Much better, in my view, to insist that these new examples are just *different*. (190)

More than that, Price is recommending that we reassess what is most basic and fundamental to our understanding of what "representation" means. This is a classic pragmatist move: to argue that apparently paradigmatic examples of "representation" are not the rule but rather the exception. In Price's language, i-representation is fundamental; e-representation is at best a derivative outlier. In other words, Price is recommending a sort of paradigm shift revealing that "representation" (in its normal sense) is much less fundamental than Brandom realizes.

I think it's fair to say that Price and his four commenters come from the left side of the philosophical spectrum. But while Blackburn and Brandom are a bit more centrist than Price, and Williams is largely in agreement, a good case can be made that Paul Horwich is even farther on the radical side.

Horwich's primary criticism is that Price makes a purely linguistic case in support of metaphysical claims. Among these claims is the thesis that naturalism (or the common variety that Price calls "object naturalism") is unsupportable and probably false. According to Price, naturalism is unsupportable because, once we take an anti-representationalist stance, one cannot appeal to evidence for naturalism that can only be expressed in representational idioms (e.g., one cannot defend naturalism by appealing to natural science). Moreover, to the extent that naturalism (or "object" naturalism) is essentially committed to representationalism, then anti-representationalism is tantamount to a form of anti-naturalism as well.

Horwich agrees with Price in his rejection of naturalism but he comes to this conclusion by a different path. For Horwich, some metaphysical questions "are on a par with non-philosophical issues in that they call for reasoning from and to beliefs about the outside world and cannot be settled merely by an examination of language" (124). For Horwich, part of the argument against naturalism is simply the fact that we *do* recognize non-natural facts (e.g., facts about numbers) and this cannot be explained away easily:

It's *prima facie* extremely plausible that amongst the facts we recognise, some are *non-natural* – for example that there are numbers, that it's good to care about the welfare of others... For it's as plain as day (to anyone not 'in the grip of a theory') that they aren't spatio-temporally located, aren't engendered by facts of physics and don't enter into causal/explanatory relations with other facts. (125)

If Horwich is correct we don't need a sophisticated philosophical theory to show that naturalism and representationalism are false. All we need is to pay attention to the beliefs we actually have about the world – and resist the temptation to over-theorize.

I put Horwich to the left of Price simply because, on his account, it seems quite possible that philosophy is now out of a job ("down-sized" might be a better metaphor). If Horwich is correct and we need to resist theories that attempt to clarify metaphysical issues by reducing them to linguistic questions, then the alternative seems to be more scientific than philosophical. As Horwich himself suggests, a scientific approach to the question of naturalism would have to start with the observation that we do, in fact, believe in non-natural facts. Neither scientists nor philosophers can afford to ignore such observations. And pragmatists in particular can't afford to, which is one reason pragmatists from Peirce onward have been accused of neglecting philosophy for science. So perhaps Horwich isn't so much to the left of Price as closer to the spirit of classical pragmatism.

In his response, Price replies that his position isn't merely linguistic but also anthropological. Quoting an earlier essay, he writes: "the kind of global expressivism I want to defend 'isn't a way of doing metaphysics in a pragmatist

key' – 'it is a way of doing something like anthropology'... As such, it has its eyes on questions about human thought and linguistic usage" (181). Thus:

The shift I recommend is not a matter of *recasting* metaphysical issues as issues about language but of *abandoning* the metaphysical questions altogether, in favour of the anthropological questions. (181)

Price's point seems to be this: in those cases where an area of discourse seems incurably representational we can offer a quasi-anthropological account of how this came to be. Understanding how people come to talk in representational ways does not mean that a particular area of discourse is *really* representational or that the concepts used in this area *really* represent.

However it isn't clear that Price can make this appeal to anthropology. After all, anthropology is itself an area of discourse that, if Price is right, is best understood expressively. That means that the constraints on it reflect the sort of "in-game externality" mentioned earlier: namely, that "*within the game* players bind themselves, in principle, to standards beyond themselves" (37). But it is difficult (or, rather, impossible) to see how these constraints are external in any meaningful sense. If the constraints are *just* the rules of a game then it is hard to see what principled basis there would be for preferring these constraints, or this game, over another. Instead, we seem to have a range of different games, none intrinsically preferable to any other.

It is at this point that Price's affinity with Rorty is clear. Like Price, Rorty was well-known for blurring the distinction between science and other areas of discourse. And, like Price, Rorty was well-known for viewing science as governed only by internal standards of correctness. In Rorty's case, his views led to howls of protest: that he was insufficiently pragmatic, that his position was a shabby form of relativism, and so on. While these protests sometimes overlooked the strength of his case against deeply-held articles of philosophical faith, they did have a point: Rorty's case against scientific objectivity, for example, often seemed a bit too casual and a bit too dismissive of actual scientific practice.

A similar objection can be raised against Price. Price's claim that the only constraints on discourses are *internal* constraints threatens to undercut his own position. Appealing to anthropology likewise does no good, since anthropology, too, would be undercut by Price's anti-representationalism. In the end, somewhat ironically, Price's anti-representationalism invites skepticism about the credibility of his *own* philosophical discourse.

In some ways Price's situation is not that different from other areas of cutting-edge research. For example, over the last few decades string theory has often been touted as the next big thing in physics. Unfortunately, experimental confirmation has been largely absent, forcing defenders of string theory to appeal to considerations of simplicity and elegance instead – considerations that some physicists find distinctly second-rate. Similarly, Price has developed a

theory that compels us to reassess traditional conceptions of meaning and representation. By questioning these conceptions his approach has distinct – and rather exciting – charms. But at the same time it is not clear what sort of evidence can support it, besides the evident elegance of his approach. Most disconcerting is the possibility that, in rejecting representationalism across the board, Price has deprived his approach of any kind of evidential support at all.

Notwithstanding these reservations, Price's proposal is an important extension and deepening of linguistic pragmatism. Given the problems facing representationalism, at both the global and local level, Price's alternative certainly deserves close attention. It may even, as I mentioned at the beginning, have the advantage of being right (and I find Price's responses to Blackburn and Brandom largely convincing). But it is another question whether Price can *show* that it is right.

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Michael Bacon, *Pragmatism: An Introduction*. Oxford: Polity Press, 2012. 224pp. Paper ISBN: 978-0-745-64665-7.

The questions of level, scope and approach confront any "Introduction" to a complex tradition of thought. With such a broad target in view, difficult decisions about what to focus on, how to organize it and what depth is required immediately arise. Further, academic marketability now demands a multi-purpose introduction. There is a persistent trend within introductory guides to broad literatures to posit themselves as useful and intended for both ushering undergraduates into the area and contributing to current debates on the state of the discipline.

Such concerns only multiply for a tradition like pragmatism, a persistent minority in the philosophical world both in the country of its origin and (to an extreme degree) in the wider philosophical world. Pragmatism, for many years, has been in the contradictory situation of being divided between self-enclosed dialogues and wider campaigns of self-justification. Pragmatism tends towards ghettoization (internally and externally imposed), and it also lives under the very real and constant obligation to justify itself in those wider philosophical circles. As such, introductory texts, for it, bear a unique significance (and responsibility). They can be among the few that students and researchers outside of the tradition ever actually encounter. Seldom do they actually live up to this obligation. However, Michael Bacon's recent *Pragmatism: An Introduction* successfully