

Naturalism, Pragmatism and the Retreat from Metaphysics: Scientific versus Subject Naturalism

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Abstract: The paper presents a discussion of two different brands of anti-metaphysical naturalism in comparison with one another and with a more standard metaphysical naturalism. The first anti-metaphysical naturalism is the position I call *scientific naturalism*, which is the metaphilosophical thesis that science is our unique source of fundamental knowledge. The other is the position recently promulgated and defended by Huw Price, which he calls *subject naturalism* – a naturalism that begins with a (scientific) study of the acting, thinking and language using subject, rather than extra-human ‘reality’. Scientific naturalism concurs with the semantically deflationary and anti-metaphysical gambits of subject naturalism, but it does not, like subject naturalism, seek to explain the function of language in an expressivist or pragmatist way. I argue that these explanatory ambitions cannot be coherently realised any more than the representationalist programme of metaphysical naturalism can. I argue further that there is reason to doubt whether it is really obligatory for science to explain the function of language or thought at all. The upshot is that scientific naturalism emerges as a preferable position to both metaphysical and subject naturalism.

Introduction

In this paper I will be discussing and contrasting three kinds of naturalism, with special focus on two of them. These two latter positions represent different forms of what I call *anti-metaphysical* naturalism, insofar as they deliberately demur at the so-called big questions of what the ultimate constituents of reality are, what is true and how everything hangs together. Both these positions also involve a certain element of pragmatism, one more explicitly and positively than the other. They contrast with the third kind of naturalism I will be discussing, mainly critically: the (perhaps more standard) *metaphysical naturalism* of much recent analytical philosophy. On my (for present purposes simply stipulated) understanding of metaphysical naturalism, the position is an ontological one: it claims that what most fundamentally exists are the entities posited by basic physics, at least in some suitably idealised form. *Prima facie* non-physical phenomena such as intentional mental states or moral values are to ‘discerned’ within this physicalistic ontology, that is, in some sense, *reduced* to this ontology, at least to the extent that these phenomena can be countenanced as properly real at all. (Cf. Jackson, 1998, for what has become a canonical expression of this kind of naturalism.)

Turning to the anti-metaphysical forms of naturalism, the position that I myself recommend and have defended elsewhere is what I call *scientific naturalism*

(cf. Knowles, 2006; 2008; 2010). According to scientific naturalism, science – first and foremost natural science, in a sense I will be explaining – is our unique source of fundamental knowledge, where ‘fundamental’ is understood to mean something like ‘explanatorily most basic’. There is no assumption that science will ever reach any kind of fundament, but only that it is science that any given time will be what provides us with what is most fundamental. The view is meant to be close to what Quine, at least in certain central texts, understands by naturalism; in particular, it is tightly related to his rejection of any first philosophy prior to science. Scientific naturalism is usefully seen as a metaphilosophical position, not simply because it contrasts philosophy with science in the way just mentioned, but also insofar as it doesn’t see naturalism as providing answers to any peculiarly philosophical problems; in this way, it clearly contrasts with metaphysical naturalism (I will say more on this below). In this respect, it thus also has affiliations with Fine’s *natural ontological attitude* stance in the realism-anti-realism debate in philosophy of science (cf. Fine, 1988). In my view, scientific naturalism is at least close to being what any defensible position that justifiably calls itself naturalistic must ultimately hold, and hence that it is worthy of the simple epithet ‘naturalism’ (cf. Knowles, 2008). For purposes of placement in the territory defined by the current literature, however, the more specific label ‘scientific naturalism’ is not inapt.

The other anti-metaphysical or pragmatist form of naturalism I will discuss is Huw Price’s *subject naturalism*, as elaborated in several recent publications (see especially Price, 2004a; also Price, 2004b; 2007; 2010a). Spelling out subject naturalism instructively will require a more systematic treatment, to be offered below. Briefly, Price presents subject naturalism as an alternative to a position he calls *object naturalism*, which is very close to metaphysical naturalism. Subject naturalism starts not with the physical world but with the thinking and language-using subject – a starting point, Price argues, that has implications for certain presuppositions of the whole object naturalist project insofar as it may suggest a non-representationalist, *expressivist* conception of language and thought.

Elsewhere (Knowles, 2010) I have classified Price’s subject naturalism as a species of a generic view I call *non-scientific naturalism*, whose defenders are in different ways concerned to argue for a naturalism in which science is *not* our only source of fundamental knowledge. Prominent non-scientific naturalists include John McDowell, Susan Haack and Jennifer Hornsby (see *ibid.* and Knowles, 2006 for references and discussion; see also section 1 below). I have however since come to doubt whether Price’s naturalism should really be classed alongside these views.¹ For example, Price does not see subject naturalism as involving the delimiting of natural scientific understanding with respect

1 Mainly thanks to Price’s comments on *ibid.* (Price, 2010b).

to certain domains, such as the explanation of intentional action. Whether there are aspects of subject naturalism that distinguish it from anything scientific naturalism *positively* claims is also open to debate, as we shall see later. There is nevertheless at least one clear difference between them, which concerns the fact that scientific naturalism demurs at giving any substantive account of the content of thought and language, of how this functions – as subject naturalism does.

As I have mentioned, both scientific and subject naturalism are positions reasonably seen as pragmatist in their own different ways. When it comes to scientific naturalism the pragmatism is more a negative feature than a positive theoretical commitment: it consists, first, in the fact that there is no independent epistemological basis on which science rests – so that our commitment to science itself is reasonably characterised as pragmatically rather than, at least in a certain narrow sense, rationally based; and, second, in the fact that it doesn't see science as giving us a *metaphysical* picture – some fully intelligible account of everything and how it hangs together, including our place within this picture. These themes are also Quinean, and bear further discussion in relation to the idea of what a 'naturalised epistemology' might amount to, but I won't go into them in any detail here.² When it comes to subject naturalism, the pragmatist commitment is precisely more positive through its espousal of a generalised expressivism about language.

In my view, both of these non-metaphysical/pragmatist naturalistic positions – scientific naturalism (or *SN*) and subject naturalism (or *SuN*) – are preferable to metaphysical naturalism (or *MN*). In spite of its popularity, *MN* suffers in my view from insuperable problems, something that Price's critique of what he calls 'object naturalism' is also largely aimed to demonstrate. When it comes to comparing *SN* and *SuN*, the issues are somewhat more delicate. *SuN* has considerable appeal insofar as it offers an understanding of language and thought content within a naturalistically kosher and at least *prima facie* plausible framework. However, I will argue that this account of language and thought, like that of *MN*, ultimately runs into incoherence, and that we therefore must reject *SuN*. *SN* remains as a kind of minimal naturalism. *SN*'s potential drawback is that it can seem doubtful whether it is actually feasible, given a commitment to natural science's fundamentality, to demur at giving a substantive account of thought and language content; I will discuss the plausibility of such a stance towards the end of this piece.

I would like to note that even if my arguments are cogent and Price's *SuN* is doomed, given the pragmatist elements in *SN*, I would not want to see this as a general refutation of pragmatist naturalism *per se* (even assuming that Price's position gives the best and most plausible rendering of this overall philosophical

2 An important part of this pragmatism, in my view, is that naturalised epistemology, under one central understanding of what this is, simply doesn't exist – see Knowles (forthcoming).

position). It seems to me that naturalism and pragmatism are not so much diametrically opposed positions, but rather epithets characterising a (possibly multi-dimensional) spectrum of positions ranging from the more to the less pragmatic, the less to the more naturalistic. If this characterisation of the situation is correct, then my hope is merely to make a case for shift to the right along this spectrum, as it were – towards its naturalistic end.

The plan for the rest of the paper is as follows. In section 1, I consider naturalism as a general philosophical position, arguing that, contrary to some recent sentiment in the literature, there are certain constraints or criteria a position has to fulfil to qualify as naturalistic – beyond a bland renouncement of entities like elves and ghosts, together with respect for the achievements of natural science. I compare this with Price's general understanding of naturalism and present his conception of object and subject naturalism, indicating in particular how the former differs from scientific naturalism.

In section 2, I consider metaphysical naturalism: this turns out to be very close to Price's object naturalism, and both positions are open to devastating objections according to both me and Price, based on the criteria for naturalism adumbrated in section 2. In section 3, I turn to subject naturalism and the generalised or *global* expressivism it leads to in Price's hands, presenting first a moderately detailed summary, and then a critique that is also at least partly based on these same criteria for naturalism. I conclude with a brief overview and defence of scientific naturalism's quietist stand on the mind-world relation (i.e. on the content of thought/language).

1. Naturalism in contemporary philosophy

In the debate about naturalism today it seems for many the term 'naturalism' has become devoid of interesting content. No serious philosopher in the 21st century, it is often said, countenances strange supernatural entities like elves or demi-gods intervening in the day to day operations of the world, nor do they have any truck with the superficially less naïve but equally delusory ideas of psychic and spiritual forces of New Ageism. Moreover, most serious philosophers have nothing but a healthy respect for natural science within its proper domain. In that sense 'we are all naturalists now', as Roy Wood Sellars put it nearly a century ago (Sellars, 1922, p. *i*), and there is little of philosophical substance to *naturalism* per se. For modern sentiments somewhat along these lines, see Feldman (2001), Haack (1993), Keil (2008) and several of the essays collected in De Caro and Macarthur (2003).

A curious dimension to this line of thought is that it takes for granted the falsity of what we might ordinarily think of as having taken centuries of hard work in science to overcome, namely, a magical or quasi-magical world view.

This I think is in fact highly relevant to understanding the real nature of the naturalism debate as well as different varieties of non-scientific naturalism, as I argue elsewhere (Knowles, 2008; 2010). What I want to do here, however, is point out there are at least two further criteria which I think any genuine and interesting naturalistic position must fulfil, in addition to renouncing belief in ‘ghosties and ghoulies’, as it were, together with acknowledging science’s successes.

The first and most fundamental of these is the Quinean rejection of first philosophy – the rejection of the view that there are ideas and categories that are in some sense prior to science and its discoveries, but that nevertheless form a basis for science and which it must respect. Thus though both Kant and Carnap have nothing but the fullest and healthiest respect for natural science, and indeed see much of philosophy as concerned to vindicate science, they do not qualify as naturalists by this standard. For both of them science has to be understood in relation to ideas that are not merely more science. The debate between naturalists and non-naturalists on this issue is not one I intend to enter here; the point is that it marks a very significant and non-trivial point of departure for distinctively naturalist philosophy.

Following closely on the rejection of first philosophy is a second criterion of naturalism that also finds a famous expression in Quine: what he calls *reciprocal containment* (see e.g. Quine, 1969). For a naturalist, it is not only the case that epistemology is contained in science as the psychological study of knowledge; further, the activity of science itself is a suitable object for scientific enquiry, at least in principle – it being ultimately just another mode of human knowledge acquisition. What exactly reciprocal containment commits one to depends, as we shall see, on what one’s naturalism otherwise involves. With regard to naturalism *per se*, I see reciprocal containment as essentially a corollary of the rejection of first philosophy, but it bears emphasis as a substantive commitment.

I think many would want to add a third criterion of naturalism at this point, one that some might in turn see as tightly related to the idea of reciprocal containment. This criterion I will call *immanent realism*. I call it *immanent realism* because it does not aim to be a metaphysical doctrine about what *really* exists, nor does it say anything specific about how thought relates to reality in the way metaphysical realism does (see below); I would call it *common sense realism* were it not for the anti-scientific connotations that ‘common sense’ has in the literature. I myself have been tempted to see immanent realism as part of anything worthy of the naturalism epithet, but in fact have come to think that we should refrain from including it into the very definition of naturalism, for reasons I will now explain. Immanent realism can be stated roughly as the view that human thought and language are *parts and products of* an independent reality consisting of the universe and its origins, including at a smaller scale the evolu-

tion of life on earth – i.e. the reality that is detailed in the standard modern natural scientific story of how things came to be as they are today. Now there is certainly one implication of immanent realism I would endorse, namely the denial of idealism – the view that reality is in some way constituted by human thought and consciousness. It certainly seems hard to see how naturalism could accommodate idealism. However, recoiling to something even as non-committal as immanent realism aims to be would still be saying too much by way of a characterization of any naturalistic view whatsoever. Certainly it *may turn out* that human thought and language are in some recognizable sense ‘parts and products’ of a more fundamental set of processes. However it may also turn out that our theories of the former are to such an extent autonomous from theories of physical things (say) that we would not want to say this. As an analogy, consider those who see theories of life as detailing a phenomenon that may be more generic than purely physical phenomena, in spite of the latter’s quantitative predominance in the universe (cf. Rosen, 1991, a view discussed by Thompson, 2007, p. 238). On such a line, it would not be correct to see living systems as ‘parts and products’ of physical reality; something similar, I am suggesting, might hold for minds. In brief, if there is certain, rather strong kind of pluralism in science, then we may end up with a view in which theories of the inanimate simply *line up alongside* theories of the animate and minded, in such a way that realistic talk of the kind in question here simply lapses.

For this reason, I stick at the first two requirements – rejection of first philosophy and embracement of reciprocal containment – along with respect for science and rejection of the supernatural as the criteria for any position that wants to call itself naturalist in any genuine and interesting sense. Though certainly knowledge must be studiable scientifically for a naturalist, there is no requirement that this study sees knowledge as part of a reality that is somehow more fundamental than it.

My view in fact is that these criteria in effect yield scientific naturalism as the only defensible form of naturalism: that they have bite in relation to any other position that seeks to satisfy them, rendering that position equivalent to scientific naturalism to the extent it is meaningfully characterised as naturalistic, and is plausible as such. It is further noteworthy that the criteria have bite in spite of the fact that the characterization they offer gives little clue as to what exactly does or should lie within the ambit of ‘science’. Thus some will still see naturalism, even strengthened in the way outlined, as fairly innocuous because it has no resources for drawing a non-arbitrary line between – to take a notable example – natural and human science, where the latter is seen as an enquiry that seeks a different kind of insight from that natural scientific explanation can offer. I have argued that this is in fact not the case (cf. Knowles, 2008; 2010). In this paper, my aim is to show the criteria have bite in relation to other naturalis-

tic positions – in particular, metaphysical naturalism and Price's subject naturalism.

I turn now to Price's discussion of naturalism. For him philosophical naturalism is most fundamentally:

[...] the view that natural science constrains philosophy in the following sense. The concerns of the two disciplines are not simply disjoint, and science takes the lead where the two overlap. At the very least, then, to be a philosophical naturalist is to believe that philosophy is not simply a different enterprise from science, and that philosophy properly defers to science, where the concerns of the two disciplines coincide. (Price, 2004a, p. 71)

Without going into detailed interpretation of this passage I think it can safely be seen as consistent with my characterisation of naturalism in terms of the rejection of first philosophy. Whether it implies a commitment to reciprocal containment is less clear, but I hold that this is something a naturalist should abide by (in the general sense above), and it will be clear from what follows that Price holds this too (at least officially).

Price goes on in the paper cited above to note that though hardly uncontroversial, this general kind of naturalistic view is not what most contemporary naturalists and their opponents take themselves to be arguing over. The latter view he calls 'object naturalism', which claims that all there is is the world studied by science, or that all knowledge is scientific knowledge. This can sound a bit like my scientific naturalism, but for several reasons we should resist such an identification. Firstly, SN does not talk first and foremost in the material mode, that is, about what exists and what is true, but about what we know and how different bodies of knowledge relate to one another. Moreover, SN's commitment is only to the *fundamentality* of natural scientific knowledge – in something like the sense of what is explanatorily most basic (at any given time) – not to the idea that scientific knowledge exhausts knowledge *tout court*.

There is a further, I think related difference, discussion of which will also allow us to introduce Price's alternative to object naturalism: subject naturalism. Object naturalism (or *ON*) is deeply concerned with what Price and others call *placement problems*: problems of how to fit certain phenomena into the world as described by science; phenomena such as morality, modality, consciousness and so on. The general idea, familiar now from several decades of so-called 'naturalistic philosophy', is that certain phenomena appear to be both very important to us human beings – they are ones we routinely invoke in talking about and explaining the world – and yet also to map in a (to put it mildly) less than wholly perspicacious manner onto the fundamental entities and properties posited in physics. For many naturalists this set up is all we need to get on with serious metaphysical work.

Price, on the other hand, thinks we should think clearly about what these kind of placement problems really amount to – what they presuppose about language, thought and their relation to the world.³ Thus for Price ON cannot be taken for granted, but is in thrall to another enquiry into what exactly placement problems are and what they presuppose – an enquiry which for Price is itself naturalistic, that is, in a broad sense, scientific, insofar as it concerns a study of the human species and one of its central features, namely the use of language. These ideas articulate the perspective of Price's *subject naturalism* (SuN).

Though a full subject naturalistic enquiry is not something Price would pretend to have undertaken, he avers that there are at least certain strong indications that it will lead to a view of object naturalism as committed to a certain kind of picture of how thought and/or language relate to reality. Further, there are strong indications that this kind of picture is itself dubious. The upshot is that ON may well be ripe for fall, and that SuN is in fact all the naturalism we are likely to get. This upshot would lead further to a rather unexpected view – albeit not an unwelcome one, as Price sees things – about the relationship between language and reality: a kind of generalised or *global* expressivism (Price, 2010a; this volume). Though necessarily somewhat speculative, this view is one on which Price has also expended a deal of energy in articulating and defending, and is, I take it, also meant to be a broadly scientific one in the final analysis. (Sections 2 and 3 provide more details of Price's critique of ON and of SuN, respectively.)

Returning now (finally in this section) to the relationship between SN and ON, what I want to stress is that SN does not at all clearly trade in placement problems any more than SuN does. Or rather it would do so only if these were part of science; but there is no clear reason for thinking is the case. One important reason for this is that science is much less reductive in its explanatory ambitions than many philosophers have traditionally supposed it to be; 'placement' of explanatory fecund categories within another vocabulary is hence not an issue in general (cf. e.g. Dupré, 1993). Moreover, even where tensions do arise – within science, or between science and common sense – it seems implausible to think these call for metaphysical decisions. Take a well-known example of a placement problem discussed by Jackson (*op. cit.*, pp. 3-4), that concerning *solidity*. According to Jackson, metaphysics of the kind involved in ON should tell us whether, in spite of the fact that (according to modern science) tables and chairs are not really solid in the way we used to understand this notion, they nevertheless can be said to be solid – whether solid things still exist or not. From the perspective of SN there is simply no significant issue here, since it seems clear that science has no *use* for the question about whether ordinary objects, in spite of what we now know about their material structure, still can be said to be

3 The move is somewhat reminiscent of the starting point of Kant's critical philosophy, a view elaborated upon by Paul Redding (2010). Some further possible parallels between Price and Kant will be discussed below in section 3.

solid, or not. Our fundamental knowledge of the world will not trade in talk of solidity; whether we in our everyday life continue to do so is another matter entirely.⁴

With these differences clearly in mind, let us now turn to the view I call metaphysical naturalism.

2. Metaphysical naturalism (MN)

MN is still wide-spread in contemporary analytic philosophy, and what most traditional naturalists seem to cleave to – the default naturalism, if you like. It is not however anodyne by any means, but aims to offer precisely a metaphysically and epistemologically coherent conception of reality and our place within it that does justice to and to a large extent employs, at least in principle, the results of natural science. At the philosophical level, it effectively combines two different ideas: *physicalism* on the one hand, and *metaphysical realism* on the other. Physicalism says that what most fundamentally exist are the entities and properties of basic physics, on which all other real objects and properties supervene; perhaps they even reduce to this base in some sense of the word. Metaphysical realism (*MR* hereafter) – which I take to be closely related to the view Price calls *representationalism* (Price, 2004a) – sees true thought or assertion as adequately modelled, at least roughly speaking, by the metaphor of the mirror, i.e. in terms of the correct representation, in thought and/or language, of completely thought- or language-independent bits of reality. I will also take this definition to cover what is essential to Price's conception of representationalism.

The issues of metaphysical realism and physicalism are of course distinct. To start with, being a metaphysical realist doesn't seem to depend on being a physicalist (at least I'm not going to argue that here; note also that metaphysical realism doesn't seem to have any very direct connection with immanent realism, as discussed in the previous section). The question of physicalism also depends on many issues unrelated to metaphysical realism, such as whether there is any good reason to think the physical realm comprises a causally closed system – whether we need anything more than the fundamental physics forces to explain all phenomena, say. Nancy Cartwright is well-known for her view to the contrary (or at least the view that physicalism has not proven itself on this point); cf. Cartwright (1999). If she is right, I take it physicalism is in trouble. However,

4 A reasonable reaction to this would be to point out that the status and value of everyday, non-scientific discourse is thereby left unclear and at least unexplained. SuN, as we shall, has much to say about this matter, but insofar as SN rejects SuN, the former can seem to be left with an explanatory hole. The conclusion of this paper attempts to make some progress towards amelioration on this point.

even if she isn't, it isn't obvious that physicalism in the sense relevant to MN is in the clear.⁵

Partly through my own thinking on the matter and partly through Price's discussions I have become convinced that physicalism of the kind usually associated with MN is also in thrall to MR. To start with, one has to remember that physicalism is a metaphysical idea, not – plausibly – something that actual science itself gives us adequate reason to hold, let alone a part of science. Secondly – and it is here Price's contribution comes to the fore – it is a metaphysical project that seems to make most sense when launched from the perspective of a certain view of how language relates to the world – the perspective of MR. Using Price's metaphor, physicalistic metaphysics conceives of its project along the lines of a matching game in a child's book, seeking to link patterns on one page of a book – bits of language – together with patterns on the facing page – bits of the world (Price, 2010a). Achieving the correspondence is highly non-trivial but also highly significant insofar as we see our resources in terms of a sparse, physicalistic ontology on the right-hand page (so to speak): talk initially suggestive of something much richer and metaphysically extravagant turns out, under philosophical tutelage, to be talk of something in fact much less metaphysically problematic. However, if one drops the idea of representation or matching it becomes hard to see what the point or even meaning of physicalistic reduction can be.

Price considers this latter possibility in his discussion of object naturalism as having a material starting point, rather than a linguistic one (Price, 2004a – note then that ON *per se*, unlike MN, is not committed to representationalism or MR). Now causation has often been suggested as that which ultimately cuts nature at its joints, and this might suggest that there is a way of understanding physicalistic reduction that does not start with language. Instead of looking at things posited in language, can't we just look and *see* what does the work and adapt our conception of best theory to that? On this line physicalism (or ON) would be the view that since the only real causes turn out to be physical ones, the only real things are physical. But Price sees at least two problems with this way of understanding physicalism. Firstly, physicalism is a doctrine about what is real and what exists, but using causation as a criterion for what exists seems arbitrarily to assume that only causally efficacious properties and entities exist (Price, 2007). Secondly, and more fundamentally, the notion of 'doing work' – in effect, causation itself – is such an unclear concept that we need to treat it in the same way as other notions we want to want to identify as real or not – that is,

5 There would seem to be interesting connections between Cartwright's so-called *dappled* picture of the world and the possibility of the kind of pluralism discussed in relation to immanent realism in section 1 (to be resumed in the conclusion), but I won't pursue those here.

as something first identified through linguistic use, and then related to reality (Price 2004a). So we don't get around the linguistic starting point after all.

In this way, ON essentially merges with MN: though ON initially is formulated to be neutral on whether we start with the world or with language, it turns out that the idea of placement makes sense only on a linguistic starting point of the kind MN presupposes.

There is more to be said about all this – but not here and now. What I want to record instead is that I am further convinced, again with Price, that there is something inherently dubious, if not incoherent, about MN's representationalist commitments. Price deploys several different arguments here, but one central idea is that there is something suspect about the idea of a naturalistic theory of the representation relation of the kind that would be needed to vindicate MN, given the naturalistic perspective it itself recommends. Since any theory of how our words and thoughts represent will also apply to the concept of representation itself, it turns out that different and ostensibly conflicting theories will in fact not be conflicting at all; for each will correct by its own lights. But that just seems to show that there is no question of a correct such theory of representation. (Cf. Price, 2004a, pp. 81 f.)

This is one kind of reflexivity problem, generated by MN's commitment to something like Quine's reciprocal containment thesis: what we in previous eras might have taken to be a foundational, first-philosophical theory of reference must, to be consistently naturalistic, be viewed as just another empirical theory; but in accepting this, the whole project seems to disintegrate.

I think problems of reflexivity also infect the naturalist's metaphysical realism in a different way. Note first that the standard modern conception of the mind's relation to the world, such as we find the work of Descartes or Locke, is also metaphysically realistic, but in their case non-naturalistic: the mind or subject is placed *outside* of the natural order it represents. For a naturalist, by contrast, the mind is part the world it represents, in line with reciprocal containment. But if one combines this idea with metaphysical realism one seems condemned to incoherence: if the mind is in the world, but the world is known by means (at least *inter alia*) of representation in the mind, then it seems mind and world in some more or less literal sense must mutually contain each other. But one thing cannot contain another which itself contains the first thing; that is just incoherent.⁶

So much for metaphysical naturalism (and object naturalism). I turn now to Price's anti-metaphysical, pragmatist alternative: subject naturalism.

6 Knowles (forthcoming) provides a fuller presentation of this argument in a different dialectical context.

3. Subject naturalism (SuN) and global expressivism

The scrutiny of object naturalism and the critique of metaphysical naturalism offered above are for Price parts of a subject naturalistic enquiry. They are in a broad sense part of a (natural) scientific project aimed at understanding how thought and language relate to reality. But SuN doesn't for Price stop there, but rather leads to a whole new positive theory of how language relates to the world, which turns out to be characterizable as a kind of generalised or *global* expressivism (cf. Price, 2004b; 2010a; this volume). (I will henceforth understand 'subject naturalism – i.e. 'SuN' – to denote this global expressivism together with its natural scientific motivation and derivation.)

What exactly does this global expressivist view amount to? To start with, it offers a view of how the predicates of truth and reference function that makes no use of the representationalist paradigm – this being discredited and hence simply abandoned, at a theoretical, explanatory level. This is essentially a minimalist or deflationist theory, according to which talk about something in a way automatically guarantees an ontological niche for that thing insofar as we are prepared seriously to countenance the things we say. Thus, if we are prepared to assert that Israel's bombing of Gaza was a narrow-minded act of savagery, then we will also be prepared to assert that 'Israel's bombing of Gaza was a narrow-minded act of savagery' is true, and that 'narrow-mindedness' and 'savagery' refer to things in the world. There is nothing substantial about these relationships, but since there is nothing more substantial to be had, we can talk freely of truth and reference in these cases as much as in science (see below for more on expressivism as applied to science). This aspect of SuN thus marks a sharp divergence from metaphysical or object naturalism, which would not countenance things like savagery as basic in its ontology.

In an earlier critique of SuN (Knowles, 2010, § 2), I saw this feature of it as enunciating a divergence from SN, at least in principle; for from the perspective of SuN I took it there could be nothing inherently less fundamental about knowledge of, say, moral facts than about what we claim to know from science. However, as Price (2010b) explains in his reply, even for subject naturalism there may be a sense of 'fundamental' on which the property of savagery is less fundamental than that of spin in quarks, say. I think in fact there is more to say on this issue, as we shall see, but for present purposes it is important to remember that in the first instance what distinguishes SN from SuN is what the former *doesn't* say – namely, it doesn't offer a general account of how thought and language relate to the world in the way SuN does.

This leads us directly to the second, more positive component of SuN, that which makes it expressivist (the following draws on material in especially Price 2004b; 2010a; see further Price, this volume). Importantly for Price, giving such an account is also something which is integral to making the view as a whole

naturalistic, in that it considers our linguistic practices from a *side-ways on* perspective, as it were, and tries to explain them. The minimally representational role that deflationism ensures for language outlined above is thus to be supplemented by an *explanatory* account of why and how we use language as we do, including the ontologically committing role it has for us. Price's basic idea here is that what assertions fundamentally do is to give expression to certain psychological reactions we have to things in the world, rather than passively mirroring how bits of the world stand in and of themselves. These reactions are constitutive of the *concepts* we deploy to talk about the world, not of the world, so the position is not idealistic, but rather precisely a kind of expressivism – or *pragmatism* as Price also likes to call it – reminiscent of some interpretations of Hume and, most directly, the quasi-realism developed by Simon Blackburn in relation to ethics and modality (see Blackburn, 1983; 1998). The reactions in question are seen as varying with the discourse in question – causal, statistical, ethical and so on. Such a view inherits a burden of explaining why the various different reactions we have to the world nevertheless all find expression in the linguistic, assertional form we do in fact deploy, as well as how notions of truth become apt to for this practice. Price thinks something like Brandom's account of assertion, together with his own twist on the deflationary theory of truth, will work the trick here (cf. Brandom, 1994; Price, 2003). I won't go into these sides of Price's view explicitly here, but this connection brings out how the theory is also clearly pragmatist (or at least neo-pragmatist): our linguistic practices are to be explained not in terms of relations of representation or mirroring to something independently given, but rather by seeing them as *tools* for coping with the world, such that our conception of the latter comes to reflect our characteristically human natures and needs.

Price acknowledges his debt to predecessors on much of this, in particular Blackburn's quasi-realism, as noted. Where he crucially differs is in the global nature of his view. For many – Blackburn included – the quasi-realistic treatment of ethics is seen by way of a contrast with the more fully realistic treatment of other areas. For Price this kind of restriction is unmotivated. Thus the path to global expressivism opens up – a path on which even scientific discourse will be subject, in principle, to the kind of expressivist or pragmatist treatment that ethics receives.

It is here I think that Price's theory begins to get especially interesting. For Blackburn, much of science is seen as a kind of background theory on the basis of which quasi-realist proposals are to be formulated. Moral judgments have quasi-realistic truth conditions because they reflect, fundamentally, certain reactions we have to a world that, conceived in and of itself, is devoid of moral facts. But when it comes to the latter description – that concerning the world devoid of moral facts – it seems Blackburn would say the expressivist model does not apply. (I should note that the relevant contrast class for him is in fact certain *kinds*

of science, as well as many areas of common sense, but for the purposes of this essay, I will abstract away from this complication.)

Price wants to avoid this kind of compromise in his expressivism since it is precisely meant to be a globalised version of that position. Towards this end he notes first that the account of truth and assertion employed by quasi-realists is not parasitic on a representationalist or metaphysically realist account of these notions for other discourses. Though it has to some seemed natural to characterise moral quasi-realism in terms of a contrast between two kinds of truth conditions for the relevant bits of language – one representational, one not – one was always going to need a positive account of assertion and truth for the quasi-realistic tracts anyway. In the eyes of some commentators, embracing deflationism about truth and rejecting the representationalist paradigm – as Blackburn himself has done – undercuts the significance and content of expressivism or quasi-realism. For Price, the situation is rather the opposite: deflationism is tailor-made for a theory of language that makes no theoretical or explanatory use of the concept of representation, which is precisely what expressivism promises to do.

A further problem remains however concerning the status of science and the expressivist picture itself. (The latter is meant to be a scientific picture, remember, in line with its place as part of SuN.) If expressivism is perfectly general, then it seems science and indeed everything within it must also be understood expressivistically. Can Price coherently maintain this? To be a good naturalist, and embrace the ideals of reciprocal containment, he surely must. In the course of following I will nevertheless also consider in what ways some qualified retraction from the demands of naturalism might be plausible.

Price's own comments on this issue are intriguing if rather piecemeal. In the first instance he argues that many of the categories of science precisely are 'secondary qualities', as it were, and thus pass perfectly in with the generalised expressivist picture. One category Price himself has worked towards showing this for is that of *cause* (cf. Price & Menzies, 1993). It would take us too far afield to assess the plausibility of this and related views in themselves, so let us simply grant the tenability of the general line for the time being. Price's position is then that science is pretty much in the same boat as any other discourse when it comes to delineating 'the true and the real'. It is only when doing science we can talk of what structures, entities or causes there are and what is true of nature, just as it is only when doing morals that we can say what is good and is truly right. This is not an indictment of science, but rather a condition of its possibility.

One might object that science still aspires to a kind of *globality* in its explanatory ambit in a way that other discourses do not. Indeed in previous work (Knowles, 2010, § 2) I took this as an objection to SuN *qua* a kind of scientific naturalism. However, as Price essentially indicated in reply (Price, 2010b), this

objection is misplaced: SuN is in accord with a thoroughgoing scientific naturalism in the sense that it aims to explain everything – that is, every discourse – scientifically. Science itself shows us that it itself is just one discourse amongst many, albeit of a special character – and thereby also that its claims to *ontological* and *epistemological* fundamentality are misguided. But a kind of explanatory priority for science remains in place.

Well-taken though much of this, however, I think it still leaves something to be desired as a response to the initial worry – not least in the light of Price's writings subsequent to the exchange I have been referring to. To start to see why, reflect that on the basis of the above one might reasonably gain the impression that for Price we cannot speak meaningfully of reality *as it is in itself*, or see science as aiming to characterise this. For some this might be counter-intuitive, perhaps not so for others; whatever one's take on that question, however, the suggested implication is in fact resisted by Price. The fact that science is perspectival no more invalidates the idea of a 'view from nowhere', he suggests, than it renders the science inadequate. By understanding the perspective-dependent nature of a certain mode of understanding – say causal – one gains an insight into the world in itself, looking to us a certain way from a certain perspective:

The perspectivity of (some aspects of) current scientific practice turns out to be entirely appropriate given its role in the lives of creatures in our situation.[...] In appreciating this perspectivity however we get a new insight into the nature of the non-perspectival world. (*ibid.*, p. 33)

For Price then it seems the very idea of *things in themselves* – 'the non-perspectival world' – makes sense. *But how exactly?*, one feels impelled to ask. In particular does or can science *tell us* about things in themselves – does perhaps our current fundamental physics of time and space do just that, or at least could it in some suitably refined version? If so, it seems Price's expressivism cannot after all be *totally* global, for it would not then apply to this level of science: we would not be being told (merely) how 'certain things look from here', as it were, i.e. from our perspective, but how they are in themselves: we would be in touch with things which reveal themselves to us irrespective of our needs and natures.

Perhaps ultimately Price will want to take this line (his remarks on the rule-following considerations at p. 32 of Price, 2010a suggest otherwise, but I will not be considering those here). If he did take it, his position would not be without a deal of potential significance insofar as it suggests that an explanatory model initially developed for ethical talk should also have a much wider application, notably to discourses, such as causal ones, many think of as thoroughly 'objective' and non-perspectival. However, I do contend that the view would not then have the kind of significance Price takes SuN to have. In the cases for

which expressivism applied, we would be describing our relationship to the world *given*, ultimately, a prior, more basic conception of how this world is, our cognitive relation to which we simply take for granted, or else have to explain in some other way. Moreover, the knowledge we have through this prior conception would have to be seen as more fundamental than any we acquire through our ethical or causal discourses, since our explanation and understanding of the workings of the latter would be via this prior conception. Such a view may remain naturalistic, but it is not fundamentally a *subject* naturalism, in Price's sense. (Whether it would involve a lapse into a kind of metaphysical naturalism – as I suspect would be case – or might be made compatible with my scientific naturalism, i.e. SN, I leave open for the moment: see the concluding section.)

Price might retort here that I am setting up a false opposition between 'things in themselves' and 'how they seem from a given perspective'. Perhaps for some very special kinds of discourses he would say that how things seem to us through the use of those discourses *is* how they are in themselves. Thus it is not that we have to find some other way of thinking about thought and reality, rather, the 'unadorned' view is simply what you get when the contribution from our side approaches zero. But surely this end-point is just what global expressivism denies not merely the actuality but, in virtue its general explanatory structure, in some sense the very possibility of. Indeed, in the end, it can seem that there is an internal tension in the whole structure of global expressivism, insofar as it both requires, but seemingly cannot have, the idea of things in themselves – requires in order to make sense of its explanatory structure, but cannot have because this explanation also requires an unadorned conception of things. (I will consider below the possibility that expressivism, contrary to Price's suggestions, can manage without the idea of things in themselves.)

A tempting middle line here might be to see Price's expressivist position as akin to or leading to something like Kant's transcendental idealism, on which all understanding is seen in terms of operations of the mind imposing itself on an in-and-of-itself unknowable noumenal realm. If that is where subject naturalism leads us, however, then surely we have left behind naturalism, and are back with some kind of first philosophy (the very idea that there *is* a noumenal reality independent of thought and language cannot be or be based on a discovery of science). Moreover, transcendental idealism is surely very hard to sustain – what sense after all can be made of 'things in themselves' when they are thoroughly and necessarily beyond our ken? This is of course a large question of modern philosophy, but I take it the issues it brings with it are sufficiently complex and difficult to make it an unattractive avenue to want to go down – to be avoided if at all possible.

Can we instead see the idea of the noumenal as something like a *formal* concept – or perhaps a *regulative idea*, something that our thinking about the thought and the world simply has to conform to? This doesn't seem to be what

Price has in mind in putting forward his global expressivism. But I think that even if we accept it, it will be of little assistance to him, for the apparatus of expressivism will then end up being a mere instrument or model rather than a real explanation of anything.

We can see more clearly what the problem is here by considering a different line that Price I think might be more sympathetic to, but which ends up in essentially the same bind. On this line, we overlook Price's remarks about things in themselves; instead of rendering global expressivism in terms of these, we simply apply the model in relation to the 'realities' furnished by particular discourses. That is, we turn our backs on the idea of fully detached science, or reality as it in itself, and instead seek to understand whatever discourse we have to hand by relating it to another. Blackburn (2007) has called this view 'rolling pragmatism' and in the following I will do the same.

There are at least two problems with rolling pragmatism as I see things. The first is that its naturalistic status seems problematic. It may *turn out* that expressivist theories of the concepts we wish to understand do make use of fairly fundamental scientific conceptions of the world with which to frame their account of these concepts as reactions to 'the world'; nevertheless, if ultimately there is no *necessity* about using scientific conceptions in the logic of expressivist explanation – if the latter is not to be backed up by some *one* privileged account of what it is we are reacting to – then it seems an expressivist account might just as well give an explanation of certain concepts in terms of a reaction to some thoroughly *non-scientific* realm, such as that of moral values. Perhaps this kind of contingency is something Price is willing to live with, and will even see as part of a healthy non-foundationalism that should lie at the heart of any naturalistic position. However, it becomes very unclear what the naturalism really amounts to here, for science itself has no necessarily privileged role as the most global perspective, as it does officially for Price, and presumably must for a naturalist (at least putting aside 'non-scientific' varieties thereof – see the introduction).

The second and I think ultimately deeper problem concerns what sense we can give to rolling pragmatism as expressivist when 'unanchored' in this way. One way of bringing out the problem here is to ask how we can understand global expressivism *itself* expressivistically – as surely we must if there is no anchoring of this account in some prior conception of a reality as it in itself. There seems, in fact, no clear way of doing this: expressivism seems to involve and presuppose at least two metaphysical 'givens': the thinker or language user, on the one hand, and the world, on the other. To understand *this* set-up expressivistically, we will presumably have to posit a new thinker or language user and another world. (It cannot be the same ones, for then we will not have *understood* the original set-up expressivistically.) And so on and so forth. This sounds like a

very unappetizing regress. More fundamentally, I think, it is simply very hard to make any sense of (who are these thinkers, what are these worlds?).

If all this is right, the upshot seems to be that expressivism on this current interpretation of Price's position can only be understood as a kind of *philosophical model*. In effect, the ideas of 'reality' and 'mind' are formal or regulative ideas, as averred above, without ontological commitments themselves (even allowing that such commitment is to be understood in a deflationary way). This seems to fit badly with expressivism as a scientific theory of the kind Price was concerned to give. In any case expressivism becomes on this line simply a 'meta-discourse' we employ to 'understand' other discourses – some one in relation to some other. Expressivism would then be not a discourse that is mandated by anything about the first-order discourses themselves. Moral discourse concerns our moral lives, causal discourse the control of our environment – whilst the expressivist discourse would simply be a model for thinking about how these discourses relate to one another. If such a philosophy is useful in some relevant sense then maybe we can embrace it. But we would not then be giving 'expressivist accounts' of these other discourses in any ontologically committing sense (again, even deflationary), but merely relating some structure in one 'discourse' or 'theory' to that in another 'discourse' or 'theory' by way of a third 'discourse' or 'theory'.

As noted, this doesn't sound very much like what Price would want, even if it were considered somehow satisfactory. But I think in any case there are reasons to be dissatisfied with it. To start with, since expressivism on the above understanding is itself just a discourse, then all it can ultimately achieve is the interlocking of different discourses; but that kind of structural interlocking can surely be a central element of a more straightforward scientific naturalism – one doesn't need expressivism, or anything else. Secondly, even if one felt one needed an account of how this interlocking occurs, there is nothing on the present view which makes it clear why particularly *expressivism* is needed – why we should not also consider other philosophical models. One of these might thus be transcendental idealism, understood here not as a metaphysical but as a kind of instrumentally useful idea. Representationalist reductionism might be another, a model that again could divide into an analytic or an *a posteriori* version. Alleged problems with these models when seen as genuine theories would not be pressing on the present understanding of them, for their point would not be to be true, but rather to be useful in certain ways. What all this shows I think is that, absent an ontological understanding of these various theories (albeit perhaps only in a deflationary sense of 'ontological'), we have no clear grasp of in what sense they count as theories of content at all – a verdict which in particular applies to global expressivism.

Conclusion

There are, it seems, insuperable problems not just with MN but with an initially plausible rival to it, SuN. Though other kinds of naturalism substantially different from these two cannot be ruled out, this result in itself gives some succour to the idea that the naturalist should not extend her commitments beyond those of SN.

But the question of course now arises whether SN itself is a stable position. Can a position that defers to such an extent to science really demur at giving an account of how language and thought – both scientific and other – relate to reality, of ‘content’? Surely to retain the very idea of knowledge, we must also be committed to the idea that this is something we get by observing and reasoning about our surroundings, probing ever deeper into nature’s secrets, as it were. And if this process itself is to be understood naturalistically – as SN maintains in accord with reciprocal containment – then how can we draw a line here and say we shall not and cannot offer any account? Wouldn’t anything that attempted to offer such an account willy-nilly count as science? And wouldn’t then SN itself have to embrace such an account – along with its incoherence, if all such attempts, along with those considered here, indeed thus founder? In a word, can a naturalism of any kind avoid undoing itself?

One might argue in response to this that though we may not be able to give a full or general account of how thought relates to reality, it may be possible to do this for some discourses. Thus, if it turned out that Price & Menzies’ (*op. cit.*) expressivist account of causation could be accepted, then we would at least have given a naturalistic account of how causal thought arises and functions; and similarly, *mutatis mutandis*, for ethics and modality, if Blackburn is right. But however well-motivated these particular accounts are, I find this line problematic in principle – given what I have argued for in section 3. One thing is that local expressivism on the line being considered *cannot* be generalized, so that certain discourses must – but inexplicably – remain unexplained. Another and I think more serious worry in the present context is that any expressivism must assume a strong kind of realism as part of its background metatheory; that is, its very explanatory structure demands a thoroughly non-human world as a given to which we respond. That we can make sense of this without lapsing into metaphysical realism (or metaphysical naturalism) seems unlikely.

I do not then set much store by expressivism, even of a local variety, as an answer to our worry.⁷ Instead I offer the following two ideas by way of defence of SN. (Neither is even close to being full developed at the present time, but

7 This in spite of the fact that some of particular accounts offered by Price and Blackburn seem to carry a deal of naturalistic plausibility. This creates a dialectical problem for me that I will pass over here in the hope that this plausibility will eventually be capable of being seen through a different, non-expressivist lens.

they nevertheless indicate what I believe is the shape of the kinds of thing a supporter of SN needs to be looking at to make her view consistent.)

The first is that drawing a line at giving a general account of the relationship between thought and world, though it may appear arbitrary to us, may in fact not be. What I have in mind here is that there may be facts about our cognitive constitution that disenable us in understanding precisely this issue, or indeed even clearly what the issue is – even though we can have no way of understanding why this should be so. Chomsky and those he has inspired have of course long averred that we may be incapable of understanding all sorts of things that cognitive scientists wonder about, like language use, scientific reasoning and consciousness. It has always struck me that Chomsky *et al* evince too sharp a grasp on *what it is* they claim we are not able to understand for their views about these things to be at all credible. However, the idea that we are cognitively bounded is not for that reason undone. Indeed, *if we are* cognitively bounded – and thus, as I see things, can have no clear idea of in what way we are or why – then the fact that the line dividing what we can and cannot understand appears arbitrary, in the way I suggested above is the case for SN in relation to the thought-world relation, need be no reason to think it isn't real. We will never *know* that we can't understand it, but we might have reason to think that it's possible that we can't understand it (along with precisely what 'it' is).

A second and I think potentially more satisfying reason⁸ for drawing a line in the way SN does stems from the fact that the accounts offered in this piece that don't draw it all seem to insist on taking what John McDowell has called a 'sideways-on' view of the relation between thought and reality (cf. McDowell, 1994). On this view we start with a conception of ourselves as embedded in a world which is there anyway, and of which we and our thoughts are a part – an idea not wholly dissimilar from that involved in immanent realism, as discussed in section 1. Now McDowell's animadversions against the 'sideways on' perspective are often taken, *ipso facto*, as critique of scientific naturalism. But insofar as immanent realism is not built into naturalism, it is not clear why particular scientific theories need to accept a sideways-on starting point for understanding our place in nature, or why naturalism generally is committed to it. SN holds simply that science is our unique source of fundamental knowledge. As a consequence of this, both scientific and other knowledge will be studiable by recognizably scientific methods. There may also – in accord with the kinds of considerations of cognitive boundedness just adumbrated – be limits to the extent to which we can complete such an inquiry, given the kinds of beings we are. However, I see nothing in any of this that commits one to anything like a side-

8 I say 'more satisfying' both because, at the present time, I still find the ideas of the previous paragraph in need of some further development to be fully clear, and also because I fear the idea of 'cognitive boundedness' may have a metaphysically realist assumption baked inside it (though this is also an issue that needs much more thinking about).

ways-on view of the kind McDowell warns against – and which I would agree is what pushes many scientific naturalists towards giving the kinds of general account of the relationship between thought and language that lead to incoherency, in the ways discussed above.

I would like to close by pushing a little further this ambivalent relationship between naturalism and immanent realism, first raised in section 1. There I argued that the latter should not be viewed as *critical* for anything wanting to call itself naturalism. But if, moreover, our very *science* in fact turns out to be such that we simply have to place mind ‘alongside’, as it were, physics, then such a sideways-on picture could not be not merely demurred at, but also positively rejected – on empirical grounds. It would take us too far afield to go into details here, but it is worth registering that the idea that the mind, from a scientific perspective, defines a distinctive and autonomous realm in this way is one that is beginning to win greater currency in recent cognitive science (for a good overview, see Thompson 2007). This development is not merely one in which the idea of internal representation is being replaced by a more embodied and embedded conception of thought, but moreover involves the idea that an autonomous understanding of conscious experience as ‘being-in-the-world’ – in all its phenomenological richness – needs to be provided if we are to have a fully adequate account of mind. My closing idea, then, is that mind science may be concerned to *account for* the subject-object (or mind-world) structure of our ordinary thinking, rather than presupposing it; and in this way deracinate the sideways-on picture as the assumed starting point for understanding all knowledge and science.⁹

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