

Huw Price

Naturalism Without Mirrors.

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Ever since William James seemed to identify truth with what is useful philosophers of a somewhat more analytic persuasion have viewed pragmatism with great suspicion. More recently, such misgivings can be seen with various forms of scientific naturalism and their rejection of any anthropocentric remnants of pragmatism that might serve to distort the objective status of the natural world as revealed by modern science. What would then happen if a philosopher with significant pragmatist instincts and a further interest in showcasing its own naturalist credentials proceeded to develop such a view using the clear headed tools found in recent analytic treatments of language? This new collection of essays by Huw Price provides us with an answer. Here we find a detailed and insightful form of linguistic pragmatism (or neo-pragmatism as it sometimes called) that is at once anti-metaphysical and naturalistic. Demonstrating a sovereign command of the contemporary philosophical landscape, Price presents an original synthesis of positions not usually taken to be such friendly bedfellows.

The collection itself consists of thirteen previously published essays with a new lengthy introduction to help orient readers. The essays engage in piecemeal work that involves both pointed criticism as well as developments of his constructive, positive project. For examples of the former, Price critically distinguishes his own pragmatism from the 'response dependence' form seen in the work of Johnson and Wright (Chapter 4), as well as from the program of analytic metaphysics seen with Jackson (Chapters 6 and 12). Other philosophers figure as close allies but not without needing some further critical assessment. Throughout the book, Blackburn's local expressivism is chided for not being more global. Wittgenstein is read as sharing Price's functional pluralism of language use (Chapter 10). While Carnap's distinction between external and internal questions is reassessed and marshaled to positive effect, with the popular reading of Quine's defense of metaphysics chastised for its departure from what is presented as the actual anti-metaphysical stance of the master (Chapter 13).

As mentioned, Price's view is a linguistic form of pragmatism or what he also describes as a global expressivism that is combined with a pluralism concerning the functions and purposes of language use. With this positive view in place, Price further argues that it helps us to overcome the various 'placement' problems that abound within naturalist metaphysics (186). As his title indicates, his view is also naturalist but one that proceeds by rejecting the representationalist standpoint of much contemporary naturalism, which views language as a structural mirror of the reality it describes. His more anthropological naturalism favors a genealogical account of language, where Price is especially concerned with the various functions and purposes served by our use of language. The guiding questions in the philosophy of language are then for him concerned with understanding how, for example, we came to use modal talk, or how we

developed a need for having a rich moral vocabulary. It is with this emphasis on the function, point and purpose of language rather than with the ‘meaning’ of terms that, in my opinion, marks out its central claim to being a ‘pragmatist’ view.

Naturalisms *with* mirrors give supreme ontological and epistemological authority to the sciences and couple this with substantive semantic relations that further constrain our theoretical accounts of the world and its proper elements. Given this setup, many parts of our every-day talk fit rather uncomfortably within such a naturalist worldview. Talk of values, for example, if it is to remain respectable must represent truths about reality, but there will then need to be some set of objects or properties that are picked out by this talk, and which then makes such assertions true. We then slide down the ‘semantic’ ladder, by beginning with a concern over the point and function of some of the things we say, and ending with a metaphysical problem involving the structure of the reality we talk about (189-90). Price’s view seeks to block this slide and to keep us from engaging in what he views as the pointless metaphysical problems that inevitably follow. The key starting point is, of course, the rejection of representationalism, but with this comes a considerable amount of work in showing how these alleged problematic ways of talking, including moral, modal, mathematical and mental talk, fit with our everyday discussion of things. What is needed Price suggests, is not more metaphysics, but rather the development of a linguistic theory that looks to the expressive functions of language and attempts to account for their use, variation and diversity.

Price then endorses the basic expressivist insight that statements about values and meanings play specific non-descriptive functions in our language and that once we see this we will be able to resist metaphysical concerns about the objects of such talk. The local expressivism found in Blackburn’s quasi-realism is for Price the most sophisticated version of this insight (8). But he thinks that this view should take a more global form and he charts the various pressures placed on local expressivist accounts that push it in such a direction. One such pressure is given by those philosophers who think that semantic minimalism or deflationism is incompatible with expressivism. Very roughly, they claim that if a minimalist view of truth is correct then any statement that can be captured within an appropriate T-sentence will have truth conditions. But moral statements can be so captured and therefore have truth conditions. So they turn out to be cognitive claims after all (240).

Price’s response to this argument claims that expressivism involves two key points, a negative semantic point about how certain ways of talking lack, for example, referential or descriptive features, and a positive alternative view that appeals to linguistic functions as the expressions of speaker’s attitudes (240). Minimalist semantic accounts contest this first point by arguing that there is no important distinction to be drawn between the cognitive and non-cognitive. However, Price emphasizes that acceptance of this claim does not interfere with the basic attempt to explain language use in terms of the expression or projection of attitudes. He then recommends that the correct morale of the story is to give up any local form of expressivism, about say moral discourse, and accept that the cognitive-non-cognitive split is in serious trouble. Having done so we can,

however, stick with his positive proposal and accept a global approach to expressivism that highlights the functional pluralism present in actual linguistic usage.

This is an extremely rich position that can be approached both critically and sympathetically from a number of different entry points. My own preoccupations cause me to wonder how it might compare with aspects of Dewey's moral philosophy with a key test case involving Price's global expressivism and its consequences for understanding our use of moral vocabulary. Dewey rejected non-cognitivism about moral claims, arguing that value judgments are practical judgments about the usefulness of pursuing a certain course of action in order to fulfill a specific aim. As a result he further took such judgments to be empirically verifiable. At first glance it appears that Dewey would then reject Price's global expressivism because of its apparent commitment to the idea that moral claims express a subject's attitudes and are not then verifiable assertions about the subject's or other's conduct or character.

Seen from this perspective, Price's quest to halt needless appeals to ontology leaves us with a view of linguistic functions that prevents us from viewing moral claims as hypotheses to be verified and corrected in terms of their experimental consequences. Dewey would then reject this view as unable to address the key philosophical task of showing how a proper conception of moral inquiry provides us with tools to help alleviate social and moral problems. But it is precisely here that we may miss out on the potential richness of Price's account. A naturalistic and anthropological investigation into why human creatures appeal to moral talk might reveal that its key function is to express certain mental states, ones that are specified in terms of their motivational role in our psychology. However, Price further suggests that such functions might themselves be realized through central features of descriptive language, which is why moral claims have a descriptive form, make truth claims and prove verifiable (140-41). The result would be a naturalist account that explains the expressive function of moral talk while also indicating why it takes descriptive form. This, it seems to me, is in line with the general thrust of Dewey's own view of value statements as practical judgments with perhaps some further emphasis needed on how Price's view retains a place for the empirical confirmation of moral claims and hypotheses.

Price fashions himself as more guide than trailblazer as he brings together various existing positions to establish his own brand of linguistic pragmatism. Still, it takes some considerable creativity and innovation to perceive what others do not. Given its richness of detail, command of contemporary analytic philosophy, and connections to pragmatism both past and present, Price's vision is well worth future excursions.

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