

Pragmatism: All or Some or All and Some?

(1) My previous account:

In an earlier paper I wrote:

You will be a pragmatist about an area of discourse if you pose a Carnapian external question: how does it come about that we go in for this kind of discourse and thought? What is the explanation of this bit of our language game? And then you offer an account of what we are up to in going in for this discourse, and the account eschews any use of the referring expressions of the discourse; any appeal to anything that a Quinean would identify as the values of the bound variables if the discourse is regimented; or any semantic or ontological attempt to 'interpret' the discourse in a domain, to find referents for its terms, or truth makers for its sentences.¹ Instead the explanation proceeds by talking in different terms of what is *done* by so talking. It offers a revelatory genealogy or anthropology or even a just-so story about how this mode of talking and thinking and practicing might come about, given in terms of the functions it serves. Notice that it does not offer a classical reduction, finding truth-makers in other terms. It finds whatever plurality of functions it can lay its hands upon. (Blackburn, 'Pragmatism: All or Some' in *Expressivism, Pragmatism and Representationalism*, ed. Huw Price, p. 75)

The motivation for this was mainly to establish a specific geography for expressivist accounts of such things as modality, probability, causality, and normativity. On such accounts you do not identify the function of modal discourse, for instance, by talking of reference to possible worlds, or possible states of affairs even. Instead you talk of such naturally explicable or intelligible practices as endorsing and policing inferences, for example. The ban on mentioning possibilities (or similarly chances, laws, norms etc.) in the 'perspicuous representation' (an *übersichtliche Darstellung*) of what we do is what separates the approach from any kind of realism. It ensures that the perspicuous view is not one from outside (aspects of the world) to our minds, but one in which our activities are responsible for our talking in the ways we do. In what follows I shall just refer to this as the BAN.

Notice that this philosophical approach does NOT imply that the ban spreads. Once you have the perspicuous account you can be comfortable with the forms our speech and thought take. So you can relax into saying all kinds of realist-sounding things. There are values, duties, rights, possibilities, chances...and many statements concerning them are true. As I have often put it, it's not what you end up saying that defines your philosophy, but how you view the way we get there. An expressivist plus quasi-realist package gets you there without ontological contamination. Since the activities it highlights are entirely 'naturalistic' or free from apparent metaphysical contamination, the approach is, as Huw Price puts it, a defence of subject naturalism.

¹ Price & Macarthur, op. cit. p. 96.

But an implication of this way of approaching things seems to be that a more global pragmatism is not on the cards. For it seems impossible to stand back sufficiently from everyday middle-sized dry goods, the things making up our pre-theoretical environment, and offer an *übersichtliche Darstellung* or explanation of what we are *doing* in talking in these terms, that does not itself refer to the elements of the environment about which we talk. If we tried to do that we would either tie ourselves into metaphysically suspect alternatives (time-slices of furniture, or ‘particles arranged tablewise’, for example) or even tie ourselves up in such things as sense-data—the absolute antithesis of anything modern pragmatists (post-Sellars, post-Wittgenstein) would want.

(2) A Way Out

So if we want a perspicuous global oversight of our use of language, we should relax the BAN.

And it seems to me that this is what has happened. Contemporary pragmatists such as Brandom, Price, or Michael Williams have no wish to avoid talking about our environment in common-sense terms. They rightly see our *doings* as primarily concerned with actions in this environment. Rather the pragmatism is identified in terms of the avoidance of a semantic *metavocabulary* in favour of a pragmatic *metavocabulary*. In other words our *doings* with language are not to be described (as we give our *übersichtliche Darstellung*) in terms of representation, description, truth, and fact, for example, but in such terms as ‘the language game of giving and asking for reasons’. I shall call this the SBAN. We can conform to it while happily talking in terms of we ourselves, our social-deontic relations, and above all our causal relations with the surrounding environment on both the input and output side (in Price’s terms, we are happy enough with e-representation)

The motivation of the BAN was relatively straightforward. What is the motivation for the SBAN? Not, now, avoiding ontological commitment, at least to everyday things (this implies that an SBAN would not by itself serve a traditional expressivist’s purpose. For example, we expressivists frown when someone like Parfit talks happily of intuiting moral values, although ‘intuiting’ is an epistemological, not a semantic term). Brandom has helpfully interpreted Richard Rorty’s commitment to the SBAN in terms of (i) refusing to countenance self-interpreting presences, or in other words refusing to allow ‘representations’ without accounts of what is done in taking one thing as standing for another, (ii) suspicion of semantic *atomism*: we must remember that ‘meaning is holistic because understanding is’ (p. 97) (iii) suspicion of semantic *nominalism* (interpreting language in terms of a name/bearer relation; ignoring Frege’s insight into the priority of judgments and claims made by whole sentential episodes). As Brandom presents it, use of a semantic metavocabulary does not entail these errors, but it is ‘guilty by association’.

I said above that the BAN is specific to the project of giving the perspicuous representation that we want, but can be relaxed thereafter. Similarly we might expect that reference, representation, facts and truths could be purged of their misleading or obscuring features, and happily reintroduced once the theorizing is over. The SBAN would be an austerity which is introduced for a specific purpose, but would not imply any kind of general ban on the vocabulary in question. This could be nothing but a gain for pragmatism. It would free it

from being the target of jibes such as Frank Jackson's notorious complaint, that he has been at conferences in which people attacking representation nevertheless 'have in their pockets pieces of paper with writing on them that tell them where the conference dinner is and when the taxis leave for the airport'. We want to be able to say, with the folk, that the paper refers to the restaurant, and tells the reader where it is, or represents truly the timetable of the taxis.

The remaining question, then, is how to give a sufficiently perspicuous representation of our doings with language that both respects the SBAN and yet rehabilitates whatever good use of notions like representation, fact, and the rest, that emerge from the story. One traditional route would be to try to 'reduce' the semantic notions to something less suspicious. But another might be to show the emergence of these notions in a way parallel to that in which the expressivist shows the emergence of notions like goodness or obligations, which is not by reducing them to anything natural, but to identify their genealogy in social practices. In what follows, drawing on work by Jonathan Bennett and Donald Davidson, I present one possible route to achieving this. I do not want to compare its virtues with that of apparently different approaches, such as those of Huw Price and Bob Brandom. For my purpose the account can be regarded as illustrative, rather than definitive. I would be happier to contemplate a convergence of rather different, but individually illuminating stories, rather than trying to maintain a monopoly of the field. The one desideratum which, I think, the following sketch respects and other stories perhaps do not, is that it starts nearer the ground. We do not help ourselves to society, or to interpersonal norms, or to anything beyond the unfolding lives of progressively more interesting creatures.

Bennett's account in *Linguistic Behaviour* gives an empirically grounded ecological account whereby an organism's registrations of aspects of its environment, and the goals it sets about achieving, are identified together. In his view "the fundamental way of learning how an animal is epistemically related to its environment is by observing how environmental changes correlate with changes in the animal's pursuit of its goals". (*Linguistic Behaviour*, p. 49) As he puts it 'we can know that the frog sees the fly only because we know that it registers that there is a fly on the lily-pad, which in turn rests on our knowing that the frog registers that it is swimming/eating [i.e. in a state in which if it is going to eat, it has to swim]'. (p. 49) Thus, we observe a frog. Sometimes it sets off swimming. Sometimes it hops one way or another, sometimes it climbs a tree, and so on? Why? It has to eat, and lo and behold, on one occasion there was a fly across the pond, and on others flies in the direction in which it hopped, or up the tree it climbed. So we judge that it is sensitive to the presence or absence of flies, and that one of its goals is survival by eating them.

Bennett then goes up the evolutionary ladder to add complexity: organisms that are flexible in their pursuit of goals. There may be educable, able to be taught new strategies, and inquisitive, so that one of their goals is to improve at registering just those aspects of the environment that enable them to achieve other goals with greater efficiency. Eventually he argues we have a perfect right to interpret complex patterns of behavior in terms of episodes of the animal thinking such-and-such and intending such-and-such. We can also watch the animal balancing different goals, or inferring one thing from another. These are just more complex, but quite intelligible, developments of primitive registration on the one hand and goals on the other.

(3) The arrival of the social and the normative

A society of animals and a communication system between them arrive relatively late in Bennett's story. When vocalization or its equivalent comes it need not be signalling as a simple causal co-variant with a thing or things. It could more interestingly be the transmission of thoughts and intentions. It will then need complexities parallel to those of thoughts and intentions, or in other words the equivalent of sentences, as the expression of whole thoughts or intentions, and if it is to be both flexible and learnable, reliable correlations between sub-sentential features of signals and aspects of the thoughts and intentions communicated. In a pack or society there will no doubt also arise social-deontic norms concerning the evaluation of communications and sanctioning varieties of misuse of the system.

Bennett has offers us the sketch of a genealogical story of the emergence of recognizable language. So now I want to switch gear and look at the complexity the system will need. A way of doing this is via the position dramatized as that of the radical interpreter, as it appears in the well-know picture by Davidson. Here we have data of animal doings, including changes of doings in response to communications, and data of their sayings. Holistically we then theorize about the aspects of thought and intention correlated with aspects of sayings, until we are in a position to write a theory of the build-up of sentences from their parts. The first principle for constructing such a theory would be the principle of charity: to make the animals as 'rational' as possible: we proceed under the supposition that they are by-and-large efficient at living their lives in their world. If their lives involve being predators on flies, but prey to lizards, then we assume that one of their goals may be to get near a fly, and another would be to avoid a lizard. The next would be that the system has to be learnable and Davidson argued that the way to model that would be to provide an axiomatic system from which an interpretation of any of the sentences in the animal repertoire would be derivable.

Davidson famously put tight constraints on that, analogous to the way Tarski constrained the construction of a truth-theory for artificial languages, but that doesn't matter for what follows, apart from one aspect which may prove relevant.

So, consider Davidson's resolute ban on intensional contexts in the construction of such a theory: let's call it the IBAN. He had good reason for it: if the implication relations between the contents of sentences were to be transparent, first-order contexts provided a much better starting point than anything else. However, as the system builds up, there is reason to suppose the IBAN can be transcended. Thus:

"snow is white" is T_E iff snow is white

and

"snow is white" is T_E iff grass is green

are extensionally one as true as the other. But if the twin demands of system and charity mean that only one fits into the systematic system, then they come apart. If we call the interpretative axiomatic system S, then it can be a theorem of S that "snow is white" is T_E iff snow is white, but no theorem of S that "snow is white is T_E iff grass is green, nor even that

“snow is white” is T_E iff grass is green and $2 + 2 = 4$. The demands of systematicity prune and refine.

This suggests that philosophically the IBAN can be temporary, however important it is in the axiomatic construction. We have now a hygienic way of separating out “good” from “bad” entries into the interpretational theory, even when the good and the bad are extensionally equivalent. We have an extensionally pure way of constructing the fine grain of intensionality. And we also have an example that may be a model for the re-entry of semantic vocabulary into the way we describe language, even if we started under the austere regime of SBAN.

Indeed, this is how it panned out. Davidson’s Tarskian construction proceeds by assigning interpretations to constants and bound variables, extensions to predicates, and truth-conditions to sentences (with some ways of making entries into the r.h.s of the biconditionals privileged above others, as we have seen). I do not believe there is any way of respecting the learnability of infinitary, or at least indefinitely extensible languages from finite resources that does it any other way. In other words, “reference” and “represents” or “means that” have now been given a genealogy, and one that respects all three of Rorty’s demands. The method within which they are respectable theoretical terms was holistic, it respected the priority of the whole sentence, and it avoided any spooky mentalism with the associated idea of the self-extracting semantic power of “something” in the head or on the page. The method was also empiricist and naturalistic from the very beginning. So now, if we are engaged in doing anything except the kind of theorizing I have taken us through, we can be quite relaxed about semantic terms. ‘Refers’, ‘represents’, ‘truth’, ‘describes’ and the others become clean upright citizens in the republic of fact.

The Bennett and Davidson (B & D) story can be extended and augmented as we wish, provided that whatever theoretical terms we use can be seen to have the kind of naturalistic genealogy that it illustrates. Semantic, modal, or normative vocabulary comes in to make explicit such things as structure, inferential routes and inferential bars, and the norms that we impose on the use of the system (it is easy enough for us to regard linguistic norms as ones we impose; I do not want to imply that it is equally easy to see the norms of logic, or reasoning in general, or morals, quite so lightheartedly).

The original BAN was imposed for a definite purpose, but implied no general ban; the IBAN too served a purpose, but as the Davidsonian construction grew, could be transcended. What about the SBAN? Given what we have sketched, there should be no problem about emerging into equivalent daylight, describing his restaurant and taxi seekers in just the way he would wish. The story itself respects the SBAN. But just as the BAN only applies to the expressivist’s explanation of what we are doing, so the SBAN need only apply when we are retracing the B & D genealogy of what we are doing as we use language.

(4) Global what?

Could an account along these lines call itself global expressivism? Perhaps, but perhaps other labels would be better. Its foundation is in animals’ *doings*, so it can certainly appropriate the label pragmatism (if the words had not attracted other undesirable associations, I might be inclined to call it ‘vitalism’ or ‘activism’). It will be hospitable to a bifurcation thesis, in the

sense of Robert Kraut, and indeed hospitable to as diverse a plurality of functions for different elements in a linguistic system as we find it illuminating to distinguish. Wittgenstein's picture of the levers in the locomotive cab, all of which look much the same, but which do very different things, remains entirely appropriate. In particular the B & D story is built upon the bifurcation of registration and goal, of difference of direction of fit, so it can be no surprise if elements of a system are situated more squarely in one or the other. To echo Michael Williams 'we will get metaphysical quietism without philosophical quietism. And that is what we wanted.'