

One Cheer for Representationalism?[†]

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I Paradise postponed?

When Dewey declared in 1905 that pragmatism would ‘give the *coup de grace* to *representationalism*’,¹ he had (to say the least) underestimated the tenacity of the intended victim. Even as he wrote, Russell was at work on the waggons which were to carry so much of philosophy into new lands—regions where Frege’s referentialism was part of the bedrock (or so it seemed). A century later, despite renewed resistance by such giants as Wittgenstein and Richard Rorty himself, representationalism seems to many to be not only alive but unassailable—part of the constitution of the analytic republic, and almost too obvious to challenge.²

[†]For R. Auxier, ed., *The Philosophy of Richard Rorty* (Library of Living Philosophers, xxxii, 2008).

¹From a letter quoted by Menand 2001: 361.

²Anti-representationalism often meets with something close to incomprehension, as in these remarks from Frank Jackson, for example:

Although it is obvious that much of language is representational, it is occasionally denied. I have attended conference papers attacking the representational view of language given by speakers who 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. (Jackson, 1997: 270)

Similarly, referring directly to Rorty’s anti-representationalism, Simon Blackburn writes:

[L]anguage is not there to represent things – how ridiculous! . . . For, after all, a wiring diagram represents how things stand inside our electric bell, our fuel gauge represents the amount of petrol left in the tank, and our physics or history tells how things stand physically or historically. (2005a: 153)

(I return to Blackburn’s remarks below.) Moreover, as Brandom points out, it isn’t only in analytic philosophy that representationalism tends to be taken for granted:

[A] representational paradigm reigns not only in the whole spectrum of analytically pursued semantics, from model-theoretic, through possible worlds, directly counterfactual, and informational approaches to teleosemantic ones, but also in structuralism inheriting the broad outlines of Saussure’s semantics, and even in those later continental thinkers whose poststructuralism is still so far mired in the representational paradigm that it can see no other alternative to understanding meaning in terms of signifiers standing for signifieds than to understand it in terms of signifiers standing for other signifiers. (2000: 9–10)

Look a little more closely at the contemporary shape of this Fregean domain, however, and we pragmatists may find grounds for Deweyan optimism about its eventual fate—signs that the representationalist republic may be crumbling from within. One promising sign is the virulence of a virus of which Frege himself is one of the progenitors, viz., ‘semantic minimalism’: a quietist, deflationary attitude to some of the foundational conceptual machinery of representationalism. Doesn’t minimalism eat away at representationalism from the inside, depriving it of the theoretical vocabulary it needs to be telling us anything substantial about human thought and language? If so, then perhaps representationalism is dead after all, still flying the flag over the shell of an empire when the interesting conversation has moved elsewhere.

The second hopeful sign for Deweyan optimists, in my view, is the persistence, within the borders of representationalism, of a series of breakaway movements—each contending that the representationalist framework claims no proper dominion over some *local* region of its apparent territory, and offering an alternative, ‘expressivist’, account of the region in question. While most of these breakaway movements are (perhaps hopelessly) local in their ambitions, I think that the threat they pose collectively is substantial (and under-rated). I’ll call it the threat of *functional pluralism*: a challenge to the homogeneity of the representationalist empire. Interpreted in this optimistic light, these breakaway views do locally what Wittgenstein did globally.³ They challenge the assumption that language has a single core function, viz., to ‘represent how things are’.

Thus semantic minimalism and expressivist functional pluralism—two home-grown products of the analytic tradition—offer some prospect that Dewey may have been right about the eventual fate of representationalism. Moreover, it is easy to read both movements as products of pragmatist seeds, within the analytic mainstream. After all, semantic minimalism offers a self-consciously non-metaphysical approach to truth, while focussing on practical questions about what we can *do* with a truth predicate that it would be difficult or impossible to do without it. And expressivism focusses directly on the distinctive use of (say) moral or modal vocabulary—thereby, once again, sidestepping traditional metaphysical concerns about nature of moral or modal states of affairs. In both cases, then, we see some of the defining characteristics of pragmatism, such as an interest in the practical utility of words and forms of thought, and a rejection of metaphysics. So optimism on either ground about the fate of representationalism is ‘Dewey-eyed’ not merely in predicting a *coup de grace*, but in anticipating that the fatal blow will come from pragmatism.

Dewey was the first author to be honoured in the *Library of Living Philosophers* series, and hence it seems fitting to write for Richard Rorty’s volume on what is so strikingly a Deweyan as well as a Rortyan theme. In this essay I want to try to fill out the

³“We remain unconscious of the prodigious diversity of all the everyday language-games because the clothing of our language makes everything alike.” (Wittgenstein 1968, 224; see §§23–4 for similar remarks.)

above remarks, concerning what strikes me as a confirmation of a Dewey-Wittgenstein-Rorty anti-representationalism from sources within the analytic domain. In particular, I want to distinguish several grades of anti-representationalism, and to recommend what seems to me the most attractive grade. I'll draw these distinctions with reference to a pragmatist who can easily seem to be more of friend of representationalism than Dewey, Wittgenstein or Rorty, namely Bob Brandom. I suspect that Rorty may feel that the position I recommend concedes too much to representationalism; and Brandom, perhaps, that it concedes too little. If so, so be it: I am between Rorty and Brandom. By my lights, one could do a lot worse than that.

2 Dissent among the dissenters?

First, an objection to the idea that we might build a challenge to representationalism on the twin pillars of semantic minimalism and expressivist pluralism. It is often held that these two views are themselves in conflict (in which case an anti-representationalism based on both would be less Dewey-eyed than cross-eyed). The claimed conflict rests on the thought that semantic minimalism undermines expressivism, by lowering the bar: by making it easy for a declarative discourse to be truth-conditional, in the only sense that minimalism allows.

This has been a popular challenge to expressivism, propounded by John McDowell and Crispin Wright, amongst others.⁴ But it is a deeply puzzling objection, for the appeal to minimalism actually *supports* what is surely the core doctrine of expressivism, viz., that we should not theorise about vocabularies in a semantic key. Concerning evaluative or normative vocabulary, for example, the expressivist's core claim is that we should concern ourselves with the use, function and pragmatic significance of the vocabularies concerned, rather than with their semantic attributes. If we follow the expressivist in making this theoretical shift, how could it trouble us if semantic minimalists insist that the issue of semantic attributes is theoretically empty? As expressivists, we were already committed to the view that the interesting theoretical conversation takes place somewhere else. So isn't it good news—a kind of automatic confirmation of our instincts—if the semantic minimalist tells us that there is in any case no interesting theorising to be done in semantic terms?

I think that the availability of this response to the minimalist challenge to expressivism has been obscured by the fact that expressivism is usually a local position. Typically, expressivists want to abandon the semantic framework for a particular vocabulary—again, evaluative vocabulary, for example—while retaining it elsewhere. This does render them vulnerable to the minimalist challenge . . . but because of what they *retain* of

⁴See McDowell (1981), Boghossian (1990), Humberstone (1991), Wright (1992) and Jackson, Oppy and Smith (1994), for example.

the representationalist picture, not because of what they *adopt* of the expressivist picture! The minimalist challenge does indeed threaten the contrast that local expressivists usually want to draw between genuinely descriptive and expressive vocabularies—but because it threatens the former category, not because it threatens the latter.

This reading of the true relevance of minimalism to expressivism meshes nicely, I think, with the way Simon Blackburn interprets Wittgenstein, as someone who combines semantic minimalism and expressivism (arguably, in fact, *global* expressivism). Responding to Crispin Wright’s version of the usual minimalist challenge to expressivism, and to a general tendency to read Wittgenstein as the kind of minimalist who wants to “homogenise” language, Blackburn points out, in effect, that the fact that distinctions go missing in a semantic key—the fact that Ramsey’s or Wittgenstein’s semantic minimalism denies us the right to theorise about differences in one way—does not imply at all that we cannot theorise about differences in another way. The relevant differences are pragmatic, not semantic; and minimalism makes this easier to say, not harder!

The point is that Ramsey and Wittgenstein do not need to work with a sorted notion of *truth*—robust, upright, hard truth versus some soft and effeminate imitation. They need to work with a sorted notion of a *proposition*, or if we prefer it a sorted notion of *truth-aptitude*. There are propositions properly theorized about in one way, and ones properly theorized about in another. The focus of theory is the nature of the commitment voiced by one adhering to the proposition, and the different functional roles in peoples’ lives (or forms of life, or language games) that these different commitments occupy. Indeed, I should say that although a good title for the position might be “non-descriptive functionalism”, Wittgenstein could even afford to throw “description” into the minimalist pot. Even if we have to say that all commitments describe their coordinate slices of reality, we can still say that they are to be theorized about in a *distinctive* way. You come at them differently, offering a different theory of their truth-aptitude (again, this ought not to be uncongenial to Wright, since it is only extending the very kind of move he himself makes to rehabilitate versions of the realism debate, in the face of minimalism about truth). You may end up, that is, saying that these assertions describe how things are with values, probability, modality, and the rest. But the way you arrive at this bland result will be distinctive, and it will be the bit that matters.⁵

In my view, in fact, Blackburn understates the case: it is not that Wittgenstein could afford to throw ‘description’ into the minimalist pot, but rather that—as a semantic

⁵Blackburn (1998a, 166–167). Cf. Blackburn (1998b, 77–83), for a more detailed discussion of this “Wittgensteinian” option.

minimalist—he cannot afford *not* to throw it into the pot. In other words, the *only* satisfactory resolution of the apparent tension between minimalism and expressivism comes from seeing that minimalism implies that there can be no half measures. Given minimalism, expressivism is *necessarily* a global viewpoint, because minimalism deprives us of the theoretical vocabulary needed for any alternative viewpoint.

In failing to see that minimalism actually mandates expressivism in this way, Blackburn fails to see quite how completely wrong-headed is the usual charge that minimalism defeats expressivism. Nevertheless, I think Blackburn gets closer to the truth on this matter than most people—a fact which makes it all the more puzzling that, as I noted at the beginning, he is one of those who dismisses Rorty’s anti-representationalism as an ‘absurd’ position. In Blackburn’s case, the charge comes from someone whose major contribution has been to show us how subtle the question whether a vocabulary is really in the representing business can be; to argue that ways of talking which *look* for all the world as if they are genuinely representational—moral talk, or modal talk, for example—can actually be playing some different role.

We’ve just seen that in enlisting Wittgenstein as a patron of his own ‘quasi-realist’ program, Blackburn has even canvassed sympathetically the idea that there is no distinction between the descriptive and the non-descriptive. There are two ways to read the implications of this suggestion for representationalism: either it amounts to a global rejection of representationalism, a way of saying *globally* what expressivists and non-cognitivists usually say *locally*. Or it saves representationalism, but at the cost of stripping it of all theoretical content—of deflating the notion so much that it no longer plays any role in our theorising about the relationship of language and thought to the world. But it is hard to see how either reading differs significantly from Rorty’s rejection of representationalism; hard to see how someone who finds himself close to Wittgenstein on these matters could possibly be far from Rorty.

The real moral of the case is thus that semantic minimalism and expressivist pluralism are not only not in conflict, but actually reinforce one another. In white-anting representationalism, minimalism leaves the field clear for global expressivism (i.e., for a global assemblage of local expressivisms); while expressivism in its local varieties gives us an indication of what the theoretical conversation is going to be about, given that it is not to be conducted in a semantic key. All in all, then, a bright future for the Deweyan vision, albeit a century late.

3 Brandom as counter-revolutionary?

But a shadow falls over this Dewey-eyed vista from an unlikely quarter. My optimist—who sees representationalism as undermined by a resurgence of pragmatist themes within the analytic encampment, and sets off, *sans* mirrors, on the trail blazed by Dewey,

Wittgenstein and Rorty—finds his way blocked by a pragmatist of comparable stature, who may appear to be moving in the opposite direction. This counter-revolutionary figure is Bob Brandom, whose pragmatism sometimes seems intended not so much to deliver Dewey's *coup de grace* to representationalism, as an old-fashioned *coup d'etat*—to take over the representationalist empire intact, by rebuilding its walls on properly pragmatic foundations.

The matter is complex, partly because Brandom, too, is certainly opposed to many elements of traditional non-pragmatist representationalism, and partly because his view can be read in different ways. In the interests of sharpening matters up, I want to try to distinguish four possible positions, on a spectrum ranging from complete rejection of representationalism on the left, to full-blown three-cheers endorsement of representationalism, on the right. On the assumption that Wittgenstein and Rorty occupy the left-most (no cheers) position, I want to locate my counter-revolutionary reading of Brandom two steps further to the right, one cheer short of full-blown representationalism. And I want to recommend the position between Rorty and (this version of) Brandom: one cheer for representationalism.⁶

As I'll explain, however, the scale isn't linear. The difference between one and two cheers marks a sea change in one's implicit philosophical outlook, a kind of Dewey Line for pragmatism: stay to the left of it, and one's pragmatism is a genuinely progressive position, an alternative to metaphysics. Move to the right of it, and one is at best a metaphysician in pragmatist's clothing. So this is not gap anyone can comfortably straddle, and my message to Brandom is that he needs to take a stand, on one side or other.

4 Does language have a downtown?

Brandom emphasises that in contrast to Wittgenstein, his view requires that language 'has a downtown'—that *assertion* is a fundamental linguistic activity on which others depend. At the heart of Brandom's entire project is a pragmatic, *inferentialist* account of what is fundamental to this core activity.

By contrast to Wittgenstein, the inferential identification of the conceptual claims that language . . . has a *center*; it is not a motley. Inferential practices of producing and consuming *reasons* are *downtown* in the region of linguistic practice. Suburban linguistic practices utilize and depend on the

⁶Thus there are two apparent points of conflict between Brandom's position and what I'm treating as the Dewey-Wittgenstein-Rorty position, and broadly speaking I want to agree with Brandom on the first and disagree on the second—though, as I said, the disagreement turns on a particular interpretation of Brandom's views.

conceptual contents forged in the game of giving and asking for reasons, are parasitic on it. (2000: 14)

Doesn't this challenge Wittgensteinian pluralism, especially as appropriated by Blackburn? Where the expressivist wants to see a variety of superficially assertoric language games, differently related to various functions and psychological states, Brandom shows us a single practice of making commitments, offering entitlements, giving and asking for reasons. And for Brandom, surely, it isn't an option to 'throw assertion into the minimalist pot': on the contrary, assertion is *the* fundamental language game, and the core of Brandom's whole project is an investigation of the nature of this fundamental game.

In my view, however, there's actually no deep conflict here. After all, even Wittgenstein acknowledges the common 'clothing', which makes different language games superficially similar (and thereby misleads us into thinking that they are all doing the same job). It is open to us to say that the key similarity is precisely that various of the different language games all avail themselves of the same inferential machinery. This is thoroughly compatible with underlying pluralism, so long as we also maintain that the various different kinds of commitments answer to different needs and purposes—have different origins in our complex natures and relations to our physical and social environments. It is open to us to say this as long as we reject what is otherwise a competing account of the significance of assertions, viz., that they exhibit a common relation to pre-existing conceptual contents (which puts the basic pluralism at the level of differences of content, rather than differences of function).

Thus I think we can follow Brandom here—agree that language has a downtown—without sacrificing key pragmatist territory. What we need is the idea that although assertion is indeed a fundamental language game, it is a game with multiple functionally-distinct applications—a multi-function tool, in effect.⁷ So long as the right way to theorise about these applications is in the expressivist's use-based vocabulary, the position is compatible with the kind of functional pluralism of Blackburn's version of Wittgenstein.

Indeed, Brandom's project seems not only compatible with this kind of pragmatic functional pluralism, but committed to it. Brandom characterises his project as follows:

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

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

⁷Brandom warns us against misuse of the idea that language is a tool—that language has a *purpose*—but nothing I say here treads on controversial ground in this respect. (On the contrary, as I'm about to explain, the functional pluralism I have in mind here is of a kind that Brandom himself wants to highlight.)

Thus Brandom aims to show how conceptual content arises from pragmatic function, and this could only fail to involve some sort of pragmatic functional pluralism if Brandom were to offer us the *same* functional story for every sort of content. That is obviously not what he intends, however. On the contrary, what's exciting about Brandom's project is the way in which he links different kinds of vocabulary to different kinds of pragmatic tasks—the dazzle is in these details, as it were. And it couldn't be what he intends, surely, on pain of falling back into his opponent's camp. If Brandom were to say that we were *doing* the same thing, in the relevant sense, in making any assertion whatsoever, then he would merely have offered us a pragmatic account of assertoric *force*—by coarse-graining to this extreme, his account would simply fail to connect with what *varies* from assertion to assertion, and hence would have nothing to say about *content* (or the dimension of variability it represents).

So although Brandom's account may impose a degree of uniformity on language that Wittgenstein might wish to reject—offering us a uniform account of the way in which Wittgenstein's common linguistic 'clothing' is held together, so to speak—it not only *allows* but actually *requires* that this uniformity co-exist with an underlying pragmatic diversity. Different pieces of clothing do different things, even though there is an important sense in which they are all put together in the same way.

Note also that although Brandom cannot throw the term 'assertion' into 'Wittgenstein's minimalist pot', it doesn't follow that he cannot throw in terms such as 'description', 'truth', 'reference' and 'representation' itself. It is open to Brandom to maintain (and at least in the case of 'truth' and 'reference' he does explicitly maintain) that his substantial account of assertion—as the core, downtown, language game—doesn't depend on substantial 'word-world' relations, of the kind these terms are taken to denote in conventional representationalist views.

But does Brandom want to throw all these terms into the minimalist pot? This seems to me to be a matter on which Brandom could usefully be clearer. Certainly he sometimes speaks as if his project is not to deflate representational and referential notions, but rather to show how they can be constructed from pragmatic materials.

The major explanatory challenge for inferentialists is rather to explain the representational dimension of semantic content—to construe *referential* relations in terms of *inferential* ones. (1994, xvi)

The representationalist tradition has, beginning with Frege, developed rich accounts of *inference* in terms of *reference*. How is it possible conversely to make sense of reference in terms of inference? In the absence of such an account, the inferentialist's attempt to turn the explanatory tables on the representationalist tradition must be deemed desperate and unsuccessful. (1994, 136)

In the observance, however, what Brandom actually does is not to ‘construe referential relations’ (as having such-and-such a nature, for example), or to ‘make sense of reference’ (itself), but rather to offer us an account of the use of referential *vocabulary*: he tells us about the use of the *term* ‘refers’, not about the reference *relation*—about *ascriptions* of reference, not about reference itself.

Why does this distinction matter? In my view, it matters because it is crucial to avoiding a certain kind of philosophical *cul de sac*—roughly, metaphysics, or at least a distinctively misguided and self-inflicted kind of metaphysics, to which philosophy has long been subject. One of the lessons I think that Brandom might well learn from the analytic expressivist tradition concerns the importance and rewards of treading carefully on these matters. I want to summarise what I take to be some of the insights of that tradition, in order to explain where I take it that Brandom should place his feet (and to describe the gap that I think he currently straddles).

5 The lessons of Humean expressivism

The expressivist views I have in mind are responses to what are now called ‘location’ or ‘placement’ problems.⁸ Initially, these present as metaphysical or perhaps epistemological problems, within the context of some broad metaphysical or epistemological program: empiricism, say, or physicalism. By the lights of the program in question, some of the things we talk about seem hard to ‘place’, within the framework the program dictates for reality or our knowledge of reality. Where are moral facts to be located in the kind of world described by physics? Where is our knowledge of causal necessity to go, if *a posteriori* knowledge is to be grounded on the senses?

The expressivist solution is to move the problem cases outside the scope of the general program in question, by arguing that our tendency to place them within its scope reflects a mistaken understanding of the vocabulary associated with the matters in question. Thus the (apparent) location problem for moral or causal *facts* was said to rest on a mistaken understanding of the function of moral or causal *language*. Once we note that this language is not in the business of ‘describing reality’, says the expressivist, the location problem can be seen to rest on a category mistake.

Note that traditional expressivism thus involved both a negative and a positive thesis about the vocabularies in question. The negative thesis was that these vocabularies are not genuinely representational, and as I noted earlier, expressivists here took for granted that some parts of language are genuinely representational (and, implicitly, that this was a substantial matter of some sort). The positive thesis proposed some alternative account of the function of each vocabulary in question. My inversion of the common minimalist objection to expressivism rests on the observation that the positive thesis not

⁸See Jackson (1998), for example, for this usage.

only survives deflation of the negative thesis by semantic deflationism—it actually wins by default, in the sense that semantic deflationism *mandates* some non-representational account of the functions of the language in question.

But what's happening at this point on the metaphysical side—i.e., to those metaphysical issues that expressivism originally sought to evade? Note first that traditional expressivism tended to be an explicitly anti-realist position, at least in those versions embedded in some broader metaphysical program. In ethics, for example, non-cognitivism was seen as a way of making sense of the language of morals, while denying that there are really any such things as moral values or moral facts. But this was always a little problematic: if moral language was non-descriptive, how could it be used to make even a negative metaphysical claim? Better, perhaps, to say that the traditional metaphysical issue of realism versus anti-realism is simply ill-posed—an attitude to metaphysics that has long been in play, as Carnap makes clear:

Influenced by ideas of Ludwig Wittgenstein, the [Vienna] Circle rejected both the thesis of the reality of the external world and the thesis of its irreality as pseudo-statements; the same was the case for both the thesis of the reality of universals . . . and the nominalistic thesis that they are not real and that their alleged names are not names of anything but merely *flatus vocis*. (1950, 252)

Famously, Carnap recommends this kind of metaphysical quietism quite generally, and this is surely a desirable stance for an expressivist, especially when semantic minimalism deflates what I called the expressivist's negative thesis. An expressivist wants to allow that as *users* of moral language, we may talk of the existence of values and moral facts, in what Carnap would call an internal sense. What's important is to deny that there is any other sense in which these issues make sense. Here Carnap is a valuable ally, but a general Carnapian prohibition on 'external' ontological questions isn't sufficient at this point. My expressivist needs to show that like her more traditional colleagues, she escapes a certain kind of dog-leg, which—Carnapian prohibitions notwithstanding—threatens to take us from linguistic theory to metaphysics.

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

How can this happen? Easily, if our theories invoke representational notions. If we say as linguistic theorists that a term *X* *stands for* something, then the question ‘What is the *Y*, such that *X* stands for *Y*?’ becomes a question pressed on us by our linguistic theory itself—even if the *Y* at issue is something not normally regarded as part of the required ontology of linguistic theory, such as a moral property, or a prime number.

Employing substantial semantic relations thus makes linguistic theory ontologically profligate. Ascribing semantic relations to a vocabulary commits linguistic theorists to an ontology which mirrors—via the semantic relations in question—the internal ontological commitments of the vocabulary in question. Semantic relations thus provide a kind of bridge that cannot help but lead our theoretical gaze from words to things.

It is easy to see how this gives rise to location problems. As theorists studying human language as a natural phenomenon, we find ourselves saying in our theoretical voice that terms such as ‘goodness’, ‘seven’, ‘cause’, ‘knowledge’ and ‘truth’ do the job of *referring*—in other words, that they stand at one end of a relation of some significant kind. We then feel the need for an answer to the question, ‘What lies at the other end of this relation?’, which meets various theoretical desiderata—meshing with the other kinds of things we are inclined to say about speakers, their environments and their capacities, for example. Hence, given our starting point, a pressure towards naturalistic answers and towards location problems.

Traditional expressivism relieves this pressure by arguing that the semantic properties were wrongly ascribed, in the problem cases. My deflationary expressivism needs to sail closer to wind, and it isn’t immediately obvious that it can stay on the conservative side of the line. The crucial point is that the ontological profligacy of representational approaches is generated by their explicit employment of semantic relations, *for theoretical purposes*. So long as the semantic terms are simply *absent* from our theoretical vocabulary, no such ‘extra-linguistic’ ontological commitment arises. The trick is to find a way of ensuring that we stay on the side of virtue here, while allowing ourselves (and our subjects) the harmless deflationary use of the semantic vocabulary.

The solution lies in close attention to a use–mention distinction. The expressivist’s motto should be that vocabularies should be *mentioned* but not *used*—theorised about but not employed, at least in the armchair. As long as the expressivist keeps this in mind—ensures that that her initial theoretical perspective only *mentions* the target vocabulary—there’s no danger that her own casual deflationary use of the metalinguistic semantic vocabulary will lead her into the metaphysical trap; and no danger, either, that her subjects’ use of the corresponding vocabulary of the object language will draw her into their ontological web. With the use–mention distinction properly in mind, then, semantic deflationism does provide the required guarantee. It ensures that the expressivist is never going to find herself committed to a claim of the form “‘*X*’ *refers to* *Y*”, where ‘*X*’ is a term of the object language. (After all, the essence of a deflationary view of reference is that the notion has no such theoretical use.)

Summing up, what's at stake is the ability of pragmatism to escape certain sorts of metaphysical or ontological questions. One of the great virtues of expressivism is the way it replaces metaphysical questions with questions about human thought and language. In place of metaphysical questions about the nature of value, or modality, say, it offers us questions about the role and genealogy of evaluative and modal vocabularies—and these are questions about human behaviour, broadly construed, rather than questions about some seemingly puzzling part of the metaphysical realm. This shift is one of the things that makes Humean expressivism attractive to naturalists. It simply side-steps the problem of finding a place for value (or indeed causal necessity!) in the kind of world that physics gives us reason to believe in. (There are concomitant epistemological virtues, too, as was also clear to Hume.) So naturalists should embrace the pragmatist–expressivist shift from philosophising about objects to philosophising about vocabularies, in my view—embrace the lesson that a proper naturalism about subjects may undercut the motivation for a common form of naturalism about objects.

This is why it matters, and why virtue requires that we stay on what I want to identify as the Dewey-Wittgenstein-Rorty side of the fence: resolutely opposed to the kind of representationalism that gives metaphysics a free ride (on the back of the study of vocabularies). Expressivism isn't a way of doing metaphysics in a pragmatist key. It is a way of doing something like anthropology.

6 Where does Brandom stand?

Where does Brandom stand with respect to this distinction between metaphysics and anthropology? As I said earlier, my impression is that he straddles the divide. This is a large topic, deserving a more detailed treatment elsewhere, but I want to sketch some reasons in support of this assessment.

On the one hand, as I have already noted, Brandom often writes as if his project is metaphysical, in the present sense—as if he is concerned to give us an account of the nature and constitution of matters of philosophical interest, such as conceptual content and the referential aspect of language:

The primary treatment of the representational dimension of conceptual content is reserved for Chapter 8 . . . [where] the representational properties of semantic contents are explained as consequences of the essentially *social* character of inferential practice. (1994, xvii)

On the face of it, this is both 'metaphysical' about reference itself, and a path to more general metaphysical issues, in the way I've described. Moreover, some of Brandom's own (apparent) metaphysical aims are more general and more ambitious:

[T]he investigation of the nature and limits of the explicit expression in principles of what is implicit in discursive practices yields a powerful transcendental argument—a . . . transcendental expressive argument for the existence of objects . . . (1994, xxii–xxiii)

On the other hand, Brandom often makes it clear that what is really going on is about the forms of language and thought, not about extra-linguistic reality as such. The passage I have just quoted continues with the following gloss on the transcendental argument in question: it is an “argument that (and why) the *only* form the world *we can talk and think of* can take is that of a world of facts about particular objects and their properties and relations.” (1994, xxii–xxiii, second emphasis mine)

Similarly, at a less general level, Brandom often stresses that what he is offering is primarily an account of the *attribution of terms*—‘truth’, ‘reference’, ‘represents’, etc.—not of the properties or relations that other approaches take those terms to denote. Concerning his account of knowledge claims, for example, he says:

Its primary focus is not on knowledge itself but on *attributions* of knowledge, attitudes towards that status. The pragmatist must ask, What are we doing when we say that someone knows something? (1994, 297)

But a few sentences later, continuing the same exposition, we have this: “A pragmatist phenomenalist account *of knowledge* will accordingly investigate the social and normative significance of acts of attributing knowledge.” (1994, 297, my emphasis) Here, the two stances are once again run together: to make things clear, a pragmatist should deny that he is offering an account *of* knowledge at all. (That’s what it means to say that the project is anthropology, not metaphysics.)

It might seem that I am being uncharitable to Brandom here, taking too literally his claim to be giving an account *of* knowledge (and similar claims about other topics). By way of comparison, isn’t it harmless to say, at least loosely, that disquotationalism is an account of truth, even though it isn’t literally an account *of* truth, but rather of the functions of the truth predicate? But I think there are other reasons for taking Brandom to task on this point—more on this in a moment.

Another point in Brandom’s favour (from my Humean perspective) is that he often makes it clear that he rejects a realist construal of reference relations (and hence, as I’ve pointed out, of the theoretical bridge that is otherwise liable to lead from anthropology back to metaphysics). Thus concerning the consequences of his preferred anaphoric version of semantic deflationism, he writes as follows:

One who endorses the anaphoric account of what is expressed by ‘true’ and ‘refers’ must accordingly eschew the reifying move to a truth property and a reference relation. A line is implicitly drawn by this approach

between ordinary truth and reference talk and variously specifically philosophical extensions of it based on theoretical conclusions that have been drawn from a mistaken understanding of what such talk expresses. Ordinary remarks about what is true and what is false and about what some expression refers to are perfectly in order as they stand; and the anaphoric account explains how they should be understood. But truth and reference are philosophers' fictions, generated by grammatical misunderstandings. (1994, 323–324)

Various word-world relations play important explanatory roles in theoretical semantic projects, but to think of any one of these as what is referred to as “the reference relation” is to be bewitched by surface syntactic form. (1994, 325)

On the other hand, Brandom's strategy at this point suggests that in some ways he is still wedded to a traditional representational picture. Consider in particular his reliance on syntactic criteria in order to be able to deny, as he puts it,

that claims expressed using traditional semantic vocabulary make it possible for us to state specifically *semantic facts*, in the way that claims expressed using the vocabulary of physics, say, make it possible for us to state specifically *physical facts*. (1994, 326)

Here Brandom sounds like a traditional (*local*) expressivist, who is still in the grip of the picture that some parts of language are genuinely descriptive, in some robust sense. He hasn't seen the option and attractions of allowing one's semantic deflationism to deflate this picture, too; and remains vulnerable to the slide to metaphysics, wherever the syntactical loophole isn't available.

This reading is born out by the fact that at certain points he makes to confront these traditional metaphysical issues head-on. “None of these is a naturalistic account”, he says (2000: 27), referring to various aspects of his account of the referential, objective and normative aspects of discourse. And again:

Norms . . . are not objects in the causal order. . . . Nonetheless, according to the account presented here, there are norms, and their existence is neither supernatural nor mysterious. (1994, 626)

Once again, this passage continues with what is by my lights exactly the right explanation of what keeps Brandom's feet on the ground: “Normative statuses are domesticated by being understood in terms of normative attitudes, which *are* in the causal order.” (1994, 626) But my point is that he shouldn't have to retreat in this way in the first place. His account only looks non-naturalistic (to him) because he tries to conceive of

it as metaphysics. If he had stayed on the virtuous (anthropological) side of the fence to begin with, there would have been no appearance of anything non-naturalistic, and no need to retreat.

One final example, which seems to me to illustrate Brandom's continuing attraction to what I am thinking of as the more representationalist side of the fence—the side where we find the project of *reconstructing* representational relations using pragmatic raw materials. It is from Brandom's closing John Locke lecture (2006), and is a characterisation he offers of his own project, in response to the following self-posed challenge—"Doesn't the story I have been telling remain too resolutely on the 'word' side of the word/world divide?":

Engaging in discursive practices and exercising discursive abilities is using words to say and mean something, hence to talk about items in the world. Those practices, the exercise of those abilities, those uses, *establish* semantic relations between words and the world. This is one of the big ideas that traditional pragmatism brings to philosophical thought about semantics: don't look to begin with to the relation between representings and representeds, but to the nature of the doing, of the process, that institutes that relation. (2006, Lecture 6, Section 1)

I have been arguing that the right course—and the course that Brandom actually often follows, *in practice*—is precisely to remain "resolutely on the 'word' side of the word/world divide". This resolution doesn't prevent us from seeking to explain referential *vocabulary*—the ordinary *ascriptions* of semantic relations, whose pervasiveness in language no doubt does much to explain the attractiveness of the representational picture. Nor does it require, absurdly, that we say nothing about word–world relations. On the contrary, as Brandom himself points out in a remark I quoted above:

Various word–world relations play important explanatory roles in theoretical semantic projects, but to think of any one of these as what is referred to as "the reference relation" is to be bewitched by surface syntactic form. (1994, 325)

And the resolution has the payoff I've been trying to emphasise: by ensuring that our linguistic theory remains ontologically conservative, it keeps us safe from metaphysics.

In calling this kind of liberation from metaphysics an insight of Humean expressivism, I don't mean, of course, to belittle the respects in which pragmatism has moved on from Hume. Brandom notes that Wilfred Sellars characterised his own philosophical project as that of moving analytic philosophy from its Humean phase to a Kantian phase, and glosses the heart of this idea as the view that traditional empiricism missed the importance of the conceptual articulation of thought. Rorty, in turn, has described

Brandom's project as a contribution to the next step: a transition from a Kantian to an Hegelian phase, based on recognition of the social constitution of concepts, and of the linguistic norms on which they depend. For my part, I've urged merely that Brandom's version of this project is in need of clarity on what I think it is fair to describe as a Humean insight. Hume's expressivism may well be a large step behind Kant, in failing to appreciate the importance of the conceptual; and a further large step behind Hegel, in failing to see that the conceptual depends on the social. But it is still at the head of the field for its understanding of the way in which what we would now call pragmatism simply turns its back on metaphysics. (We Humeans expect this kind of blindness from mainstream representationalists, for we can see how their representationalism leads them astray. But we hope for better from our fellow pragmatists.)

7 Between Rorty and Brandom

I want to finish with an analogy, intended to give some sense of the progressive pragmatist program, as I see it; and of the key elements which may distinguish my sense of the way forward from that of Rorty, on one side, and Brandom, on the other.

Imagine a large structure such as a sporting stadium, built as a three-dimensional network of steel beams. Imagine it illuminated by the sun from overhead: each beam casts a shadow on the pitch beneath. Now imagine a photograph of the scene, in the hands of alien anthropologists (from a grey, cloud-bound planet, perhaps, where shadows are uncommon). The aliens realise that the stadium is an artifact of some kind, and wonder about the intentions of the creatures who designed it. Noticing the correspondence between beams and dark lines on the green surface underneath, they postulate that the function of a beam is to *represent* the corresponding line in pattern below. (Perhaps the more radical among them postulate that the representation is irreducibly perspectival: the stadium represents the pattern of dark lines on the grass, *as seen from the viewpoint of the sun.*)

The alien hypothesis gets things back to front, of course. The pattern on the grass is a projection of the structure of the stadium, rather than vice versa. Less obviously, but in my view even more importantly, the hypothesis is blind to the fact that beams have many different functions, within the structure as a whole. Some are vertical supports, transferring load to the ground; some are 'pushers', designed to keep other things apart; some are 'pullers', designed to hold other things together; some, such as supports for scoreboards, seats and cameras, may be related to the use of the stadium as a sporting venue; some may be merely decorative; and many, of course, may serve multiple functions, functions that only make sense within the context of the structure as a whole. So although all the beams have something in common—they are all *beams*, after all—they are also different in important respects. And to understand the structure, its relation to

the ground on which it sits, and its role in the lives of the creatures who built it, we need to understand these differences.

Language and thought are not human artefacts. No one designed them, and they have a purpose, at best, only in the *ersatz* evolutionary sense. Nevertheless, just as we can speak of the functions (in this sense) of organs and structures within the human body, at various levels of organisation, and their contribution to the overall interaction between ourselves (individually and collectively) and our environment, so we can ask similar questions about the functions and contributions of thought and language, and of their various components. Much of science and philosophy is dominated by a view of the functions of thought and language which is analogous to the alien hypothesis about the stadium, viz., that their primary function is to ‘represent’ external patterns. Anti-representationalists agree that this view is mistaken in important ways, but disagree about precisely which ways, and about what we should say instead.

For my part, I want to argue that the representationalist orthodoxy makes two basic mistakes. It misses important respects in which patterns in the conceptual realm⁹ depend on aspects of us, rather than aspects of our environment. And it misses a crucial dimension of functional diversity, within the conceptual realm—important respects in which different vocabularies do different jobs in our complex relationship to our physical environment. However, I think that this functional pluralism needs to come with an important rider. Just as we shouldn’t ignore what the steel beams in the stadium have in common—their common attributes, such as length, mass, and load-bearing capacity, which underpin their various different applications—so we shouldn’t overlook an important kind of homogeneity within language, comprising the ubiquity and centrality of assertion; of Brandom’s ‘downtown’.

I suspect that Rorty may be sceptical about the prospects for interesting theoretical work from this perspective. However, there is no doubt that it resonates with some Rortyan themes—especially with the view that language is for ‘coping not copying’, to mention one of Rorty’s favourite Deweyan slogans. I’ve urged that we should embroider this theme in two ways. First, we should anticipate that language makes various interestingly different kinds of contributions to coping, associated broadly with variation in us, as well as variation in our environment; and hence expect a theoretically interesting functional pluralism. This doesn’t commit us to the view that all differences are theoretically interesting, of course, or that all have the same kind of explanation or genealogy. On the contrary, as elsewhere in biology and anthropology, we should expect

⁹And hence, I want to add, patterns in the factual realm—for I take the factual realm, as we take it to be, to be a projection of our linguistic and conceptual activity. This needs to be said carefully, of course, to avoid various traps: implausible versions of mind-dependence, inattention to due Davidsonian cautions about the intelligibility of alternative conceptual structures, and compatibility with the basic naturalism (though not scientism) of the theoretical stance, for example. Most of what I’ve said about these matters is in various papers listed in the Bibliography: Price (1992), (1997), (1998), (2004a) and (2004b).

differences with respect to the depth and contingency of variations, as well as with respect to function. Some functions are likely to be basic and perhaps hard-wired; others, simply cultural fads. No matter: the basic point is that ‘coping’ brings a new dimension of variability to linguistic theory, a dimension that ‘copying’ necessarily suppresses. We should be amazed, indeed ashamed, if our ancestors have not managed to exploit this potential diversity, in theoretically interesting ways.

Second, we should recognise that superimposed on this functional diversity is an important kind of unity: a central kind of practice—viz., assertion—which is put to work in the service of many (though not all) of these diverse functions. Here, too, of course, there’s an issue about historical contingency and cultural difference. It is an interesting question how general this device is, and what sort of variation it displays, from culture to culture and era to era. If Brandom is right then the answer must be ‘very little’, because assertion is fundamental to anything that counts as a language at all. But even to bring this question into focus, we need to understand our home territory, how it works for us—and here, I think, Brandom’s account is the most illuminating we have.

In according this kind of centrality to assertion, I’m one step closer to the orthodoxy than the view—arguably Wittgenstein’s, and perhaps Rorty’s—that even this much representationalism is too much: hence my one cheer for representationalism. But I am one step further from the orthodoxy than the view that Brandom appears at least tempted to adopt, which aims to build a substantial notion of representational content from expressivist and pragmatist raw materials.¹⁰ And that view, in turn, is importantly distinct from full-blown primitive representationalism—from what Brandom calls platonism about semantic content. Rorty, Brandom and I are agreed on the need to follow Dewey’s lead, in draining that traditional tub. If we disagree, it is about whether to expect a baby, and if so of what shape and origins. Rorty, I think, expects nothing. Brandom, I think, sometimes hopes for a kind of hybrid—a sort of semantic Christ-child, its platonic properties reborn of human stock. And I expect something more modest and mortal, a complex little creature of flesh and blood—no analytic angel, certainly, but none the worse for that.¹¹

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¹⁰In a different way, Blackburn, too, seems tempted by this position, in the form of what he calls *success semantics*: ‘the view that a theory of success in action is a possible basis for a theory of *representation*, or a theory of *content* or *intentionality*’. (Blackburn, 2005b)

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