

Expressivism for Two Voices

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Abstract

I discuss the relationship between the two forms of expressivism defended by Robert Brandom, on one hand, and philosophers in the Humean tradition, such as Simon Blackburn and Allan Gibbard, on the other. I identify three apparent points of difference between the two programs, but argue that all three are superficial. Both projects benefit from the insights of the other, and the combination is in a natural sense a *global* expressivism.

I Locating expressivism

Where in contemporary philosophy should one expect to encounter expressivists? It would be easy for a visitor to get the impression that the genus has a narrow range, confined to meta-ethics. For example, the usually authoritative *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*¹ defines “Expressivism” as a “[t]erm used for those theories of *ethical* discourse that contrast *ethical* sentences with expressions of belief.” (Blackburn, 1994, p. 127, emphasis added) Similarly, *Wikipedia* also focusses exclusively on the meta-ethical cases:²

Expressivism in meta-ethics is a theory about the meaning of moral language. According to expressivism, sentences that employ moral terms – for example, “It is wrong to torture an innocent human being” – are not descriptive or fact-stating; moral terms such as “wrong” “good,” or “just” do not refer to real, in-the-world properties. The primary function of moral sentences, according to expressivism, is not to assert any matter of fact, but rather to express an evaluative attitude toward an object of evaluation. (*Wikipedia*, accessed 22.4.2010)

This blinkered conception of expressivism is doubly misleading, in my view, for it manages to turn blind eyes simultaneously in two quite different directions. To one side, it ignores a range of views in the same tradition as meta-ethical expressivism, but about quite different topics. To the other side – more understandably, perhaps, but in

¹Whose author, as we shall see, actually knows better.

²Though, to be fair, it does leave the door ajar to the possibility that there might be expressivists elsewhere.

my view no less regrettably – it ignores the self-avowedly “expressivist” views of Robert Brandom, and other writers in the inferentialist school.

My aim in this paper is to do something to correct this narrowness of vision. I want to focus especially on the second blind spot, concerning the relationship between expressivism of the kind familiar meta-ethics and the expressivism of Brandom’s inferentialist program. The issue of the connection between these two species of expressivism has been unjustly neglected, in my view, and both sides stand to benefit from bringing it into focus. Along the way, I hope to do something also to remedy the first blind spot – to counter the sense that expressivism is simply or even primarily a viewpoint that belongs in meta-ethics – by outlining a conception of the scope and nature of expressivism that makes its broader applicability immediately apparent.

The paper goes like this. I begin with an outline of what I shall call *Humean* expressivism – i.e., the variety of expressivism familiar in meta-ethics, though I shall stress from the beginning some of its other applications – noting what I take to be some of its core theses, commitments and philosophical obligations. I then introduce what I shall call *Brandomian* expressivism, and note three ways in which it may seem to be in tension with Humean expressivism. The remainder of the paper then aims to show that all three apparent tensions can be resolved, with a little give and take on both sides. The two forms of expressivism turn out to be complementary, in an interesting way; and each benefits from the perspective on its own concerns provided by the other.

2 Humean expressivism

Humean expressivism (HEX, for short) is a view about the linguistic function of particular “vocabularies” – e.g., the language of morals and norms. The term “vocabulary” allows some vagueness, useful for present purposes, about whether the true subject-matter is *concepts, terms, claims*, or one of several other possibilities in the same vicinity. However this vagueness is resolved, the usual form of the view involves a combination of two theses about the vocabularies in question:

The Negative Thesis. This tells us what the vocabulary in question is *not* doing: e.g., that it is not *descriptive*, not *belief-expressing*, not *fact-stating*, not *truth-evaluable*, or not *cognitive*.

The Positive Thesis. This tells us what the vocabulary in question *is* doing: e.g., that it expresses an evaluative attitude.

As I noted above, it would be misleading to think of HEX as restricted to meta-ethics. There are analogous views in many other areas, including a particularly strong tradition, also traceable to Hume himself, concerning a wide range of *modal* vocabulary. Leading lights in this tradition might be held to include Ramsey (1926) and other subjectivists about probability; Ramsey (1929) again, about causation and laws; Ryle (1950), about laws and conditionals; Wittgenstein (1981), about logical and mathematical necessity; Sellars (1958) about causal modalities and counterfactual conditionals; Adams (1975), about indicative conditionals; various advocates of the project of understanding causation in terms of manipulation (e.g., Collingwood (1940), von Wright

(1971), Gasking (1955) and Menzies & Price (1993)); and Blackburn (1993), who has done more than anyone else in recent years to stress the *parallels* between the moral and the modal cases.

In some cases the characterisation of these authors as expressivists is uncontroversial. In other cases it calls for some judicious interpretation, or perhaps reinterpretation, in the light of perceived affinities between expressivism and other readings of the views in question. Nothing here hangs on a defense of such interpretations, and I shall not try to offer one, on a case by case basis. For present purposes, I shall simply assert that what unites these writers is a concern to explain one or other of the modal notions in terms of what *we do with them*, what *practical role they play in our lives*, rather than in metaphysical terms. Both aspects of this viewpoint – an *emphasis* on role in practice, and a *de-emphasis* on metaphysics – will play an important part in what follows. I shall be arguing, in effect, that they comprise a large part of the core of an expressivist view, in the most useful sense of the term. This will be my basis for claiming these authors as expressivists, in the controversial cases.

2.1 HEX on metaphysics

HEX is often a response to so-called placement problems. Initially, these problems present as ontological or perhaps epistemological issues, 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 for 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?

HEX’s solution is to move the problem cases outside the scope of the general program concerned, arguing that our tendency to place them within its scope reflects a mistaken understanding of the vocabulary associated with the matters in question. Expressivists thus maintain that the placement problem for moral or causal *facts* rests 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 placement problem can be seen to rest on a category mistake.

Traditional formulations of HEX tended to be explicitly anti-realist positions, 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 ontological claim? This point has often been stressed by Simon Blackburn, as in the following passage, in which he emphasises that his own preferred version of HEX – *quasi-realism*, as he calls it – is not a form of *anti-realism*:

Years ago I recognized that the ‘quasi’ in quasi-realism might mislead people, and I took some care to distance myself from an ‘as if’ philosophy, holding that we talk ‘as if’ there are (for instance) rights and duties, al-

though there are none really. In my 1987 paper 'Morals and Modals' I asked:

What then is the mistake of describing such a philosophy [quasi-realism] as holding that 'we talk as if there are necessities when really there are none'? It is the failure to notice that the quasi-realist need allow no sense to what follows the 'as if' *except* one in which it is true. And conversely he need allow no sense to the contrasting proposition in which it in turn is true. He no more need allow such sense than (say) one holding Locke's theory of colour need accept the view that we talk as if there are colours, when there are actually none. This is doubly incorrect, because nothing in the Lockean view forces us to allow any sense to 'there are colours' except one in which it is true; conversely neither need it permit a sense to 'there are actually none' in which *that* is true.

I went on to say that if the words retain an uncorrupted, English, sense then the Lockean and similarly the quasi-realist, holds not just that we talk and think as if there are ... but that there are. (Blackburn, 2005, p. 323)

Arguably, then, the best way to read HEX is as a view that rejects both kinds of metaphysics, realist *and* anti-realist. This is an attitude to metaphysics that has long been in play in the empiricist tradition, 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*. (Carnap, 1950, p. 252)

Famously, Carnap recommends this kind of metaphysical quietism quite generally, and this is surely a desirable stance for HEX, too; especially when semantic minimalism deflates what I called the Negative Thesis. HEX 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 is important, as Blackburn stresses in the passage above, is to deny that there is any other sense in which these issues make sense.

So construed, HEX simply deflates the traditional ontological questions. It sets them aside, aiming to cure us of the urge to ask them, as Wittgenstein might put it. In their place, it offers us questions about the role and genealogy of vocabularies. These are questions about human behaviour, broadly construed, rather than questions about some seemingly puzzling part of the metaphysical realm. So HEX isn't a variety of metaphysics. It is a way of doing something like *anthropology*.

2.2 Explaining the linguistic appearances

HEX thus *sidesteps* metaphysical issues, by rejecting a certain conception of linguistic role of the vocabularies with which it is concerned – the view that their role is to *represent* some aspect of external reality, as we might put it. Once this representationalist conception is in play, it is hard to resist questions of a metaphysical nature. (*What* aspect of reality, for example?) But the expressivist insists that the conception is not compulsory.

This move comes at an apparent cost, however. If the vocabularies in question are not in the business of representing aspects of reality, why do take they the grammatical form that they do? Why do they look like statements, if they're really doing some other job? This sort of question provides the motivation for Blackburn's quasi-realist program, mentioned above. Blackburn himself characterises quasi-realism as follows:³

[A] position holding that an expressivist or projectivist account of ethics can explain and make legitimate sense of the realist-sounding discourse within which we promote and debate moral views. This is in opposition to writers who think that if projectivism is correct then our ordinary ways of thinking in terms of a moral truth, or of knowledge, or the independence of ethical facts from our subjective sentiments, must all be in error, reflecting a mistaken realist metaphysics. The quasi-realist seeks to earn our right to talk in these terms on the slender, projective basis. (Blackburn, 1994, 315)

The quasi-realist normally takes for granted that some vocabularies *are* genuinely representational, descriptive, or whatever. Quasi-realism is thus intended as a “local” program, applicable to a selected range of vocabularies, and assumes some version of what Rorty termed the *Bifurcation Thesis* – the view that there is a well-grounded distinction between descriptive and non-descriptive declarative utterances. What quasi-realism adds to this thesis, in effect, is the claim that this distinction is not neatly mirrored in linguistic practice: much that might naively be thought to belong only to the descriptive realm – e.g., as Blackburn puts it, notions of “truth, or of knowledge” – actually lives on both sides of the line.

In this respect, Blackburn's view is strikingly similar to that of Sellars, for both the ethical and modal cases:

[T]he core truth of ‘emotivism’ is not only compatible with, but absurd without, *ungrudging* recognition of the fact, so properly stressed (if **mis-assimilated to the model of describing**) by ‘ethical rationalists,’ that ethical discourse as *ethical discourse* is a mode of rational discourse. It is my purpose to argue that the core truth of Hume's philosophy of causation is not only compatible with, but absurd without, *ungrudging* recognition of those features of causal discourse as a mode of rational discourse on which the ‘metaphysical rationalists’ laid such stress but also **mis-assimilated to describing**.⁴ (Sellars, 1958, §82, emphasis in bold mine)

³Again, the characterisation here refers only to meta-ethical expressivism, but Blackburn actually applies the program much more broadly.

⁴I claimed Sellars above as an example of a modal expressivist, in the Humean tradition. This passage

2.3 Deflating describing

In my view, a natural concern at this point is that such a view – Blackburn’s or Sellars’ – will have trouble giving us an adequate account of the descriptive/non-descriptive distinction. The better it does at the project of explaining those features of a discourse that mark it as “a mode of rational discourse”, *without* presupposing that it is descriptive, the less work there would seem to be for the claim that *any* discourse is genuinely descriptive, in some theoretically substantial sense. To put it in Blackburn’s terms, the better the quasi-realist does at explaining why moral claims (say) are *quasi*-descriptive, in the sense that they admit an interesting notion of “moral truth, or of knowledge”, the more puzzling it is going to be why we can’t use the same explanation of (say) scientific truth, or the descriptive character of scientific claims. What role is left for any “non-quasi” notion of description?⁵

This objection intersects with another. As many people have pointed out, the Bifurcation Thesis seems threatened by deflationism, or minimalism, about the semantic notions on which it rests. If the truth predicate is merely a device for disquotation, for example, how can there be any deep distinction of the kind required by the expressivists’ negative thesis, between those declarative utterances that are truth-evaluable and those that are not?

Less commonly noted is the fact that deflationism leaves entirely intact the expressivists’ Positive Thesis, which proposes some alternative expressive account of the function of each vocabulary in question. As I have argued elsewhere (Price 2004, Macarthur & Price 2007), the Positive Thesis not only *survives* deflation of the Negative Thesis by semantic minimalism; it actually wins by default, in the sense that semantic deflationism *requires* that any substantial account of the functions of the language in question be given in non-representational terms⁶ – in other words, it ensures that the positive work of theorising about the role and functions of the vocabularies in question has to be conducted in non-semantic or non-referential terms.⁷

Semantic minimalism is thus a threat to *local* versions of HEX, but not to its positive claims about any local case, or to a global version of the program, seeking to apply the same method everywhere (to all declarative vocabularies). This observation brings us nicely to the second form of contemporary expressivism, which is among other things a global program from the start.

3 Hegelian expressivism

Writers in the Humean tradition are not the only contemporary philosophers who call themselves expressivists. Robert Brandom also characterises his own view in these

shows that the attribution is well justified, and suggests, I think, that Sellars’ version of the view was considerably more subtle than better-known exemplars of that time, such as that of Ayer.

⁵See Macarthur & Price (2007), for a development of this objection.

⁶At least as “representation” is normally understood, by both sides in the disputes in question. In §6.2 below I note some other possibilities.

⁷A quietist might decline to conduct such theorising in any terms, perhaps; but again, the project is common ground between expressivists and their usual opponents.

terms, having in mind an idea he attributes to Hegel, rather than Hume. In a published interview with Italo Testa, for example, he describes his view like this:

I take from Hegel the idea of a rationalist expressivism. By ‘expressivism’ I mean the idea that discursive practice makes us special in enabling us to make *explicit*, in the form of something we can *say* or *think*, what otherwise remains *implicit* in what we **do**. Calling it ‘rationalist’ points to the crucial role of *inference*, of reasoning in the form of the relation between premise and conclusion, in determining what counts as explicit. At the base level, this means the theorist must explain what we have to be able to *do* (what sort of practical know-*how* we have to have) in order to be claiming . . . *that* something be so (a kind of knowing *that*). The inferentialist answer is: engaging in a social practice that has the structure of giving and asking for *reasons*. (This is how Hegel draws the line, difficult for representationalists, between the conceptual and the nonconceptual.) (Testa, 2003, p. 561, emphasis in bold added)

I have emphasised two occurrences of the verb “do” here, and will later return to this passage, to point out that they refer to significantly different kinds of “doings”. The notion of a practice plays more than one role in Brandom’s program, and an understanding of its relation to Humean expressivism will depend on this point.

In another context, Brandom offers the following characterisation of the notion of “expressing” at the core of his view, again relating it to the “social practice” involved in the second of the two *doings* in the passage above:

The general idea is that the paradigmatically rational process that Sellars invokes under the heading of ‘Socratic method’ depends on the possibility of making implicit commitments explicit in the form of claims. *Expressing* them in this sense is bringing them into the game of giving and asking for reasons as playing the special sort of role in virtue of which something has a conceptual content at all, namely, an inferential role, as premise and conclusion of inferences. (Brandom, 2000, p. 57)

I am interested in the relationship, if any, between Brandom’s Hegelian expressivism (BEX, as we might call it, since the ‘H’ is already taken), and Humean expressivism – particularly, in the latter case, the kind of development of HEX we find in writers such as Blackburn. I am going to argue that connections are close and interesting; and mutually illuminating, too, in the sense that each program has something significant to offer to the other.

At first sight, however, it may seem that HEX and BEX are in tension, in several ways. I want to outline three apparent points of disagreement; and then, in the remainder of the paper, go on to argue that all three conflicts may be resolved, to mutual benefit.

4 Apparent conflicts

4.1 Linguistic monism versus linguistic pluralism

The first apparent point of conflict contrasts a “monistic” theme in BEX with a pluralist theme in HEX. Brandom makes a big point of the centrality and unity of the speech act of *assertion*, within his inferentialist framework. He does not claim, of course, that making assertions is the only game we play with language, but he does claim that it is both central and indispensable. Contrasting his own position to Wittgenstein’s, he explains that his view requires that language “has a downtown” – that assertion is a fundamental linguistic activity, on which others depend:

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

It might seem that Brandom’s view thus challenges Blackburn, too. After all, Blackburn interprets Wittgenstein as a kind of proto quasi-realist.⁸ And in criticising an interpretation of Wittgenstein as someone whose quietism abolishes differences, “makes everything the same”, Blackburn, like Brandom, emphasises Wittgenstein’s pluralism: “I’ll teach you differences”, in the phrase that as Blackburn points out, Wittgenstein wanted to appropriate from Lear, as a motto for his own philosophy.

Blackburn sides with this pluralist Wittgenstein, of course. Hence the apparent conflict with Brandom. Where Blackburn’s expressivist sees a variety of superficially assertoric language games, differently related to various functions and psychological states, Brandom seems to require a single practice of making commitments, offering entitlements, giving and asking for reasons.

Again, Blackburn (1998a, p. 167) proposes approvingly that “Wittgenstein could even afford to throw [the term] ‘description’ into the minimalist pot” – a move that seems on the face of it to make the notion of assertion equally bland, as Blackburn’s own gloss suggests:

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. (1998a, p. 167, my emphasis)

For Brandom, in contrast, assertion is *the* fundamental language game, and the core of his expressivism is an investigation of the nature of this basic speech act.

⁸When once or twice Blackburn flirts with global quasi-realism, he offers Wittgenstein as an example of someone who might be seen as moving in that direction: see, e.g., Blackburn, 1998a, pp. 166–167, 1998b, pp. 77–83.

4.2 No place in BEX for the Bifurcation Thesis

On the face of it, then, Brandom wants to highlight, or inflate, a notion that Blackburn seems to deflate. The second apparent conflict between HEX and BEX is in a sense the converse: HEX needs contrasts, where Brandom's program might seem to provide only homogeneity.

As I noted earlier, HEX normally takes for granted the Bifurcation Thesis – i.e., the doctrine that there is a line to be drawn in language, between descriptive and non-descriptive uses.⁹ With this thesis in place, expressivism is taken to be needed when the answer is held to be “No” – when something that looks superficially like a factual claim is held to fall on the non-descriptive side of the line.

HEX is thus committed to the view that there is a distinction between what we might call *loose* and *strict* notions of an assertoric speech act. Moral claims, modal claims and genuinely descriptive claims are all assertions in the loose sense, but only genuinely descriptive claims are assertions in the strict sense. The question how best to draw this distinction is delicate, of course, if we wish also to deflate notions such as description and assertion. But in all its traditional forms, HEX is committed to the claim that there is some such distinction to be found.

It is easy to see how this doctrine seems to conflict with Brandom's inferentialist account of what an assertion *is*. If to be an assertion is nothing more or less than to be a certain kind of move in the game of giving and asking for reasons – and if we agree with Blackburn and Sellars that even non-descriptive claims can properly partake in the realm of reason – then it follows, contrary to HEX's intentions, that moral and modal assertion are strict, full-blooded, card-carrying assertions, in the only sense the inferentialist allows to matter. BEX thus seems in tension with one of the fundamental assumptions of HEX.

4.3 BEX's tolerance of metaphysics

We have seen that HEX tends to deflate traditional metaphysical claims and issues, replacing them with a standpoint better classified as anthropology. Its theoretical focus is on the genealogy of *linguistic practices*, not the nature and status of their supposed *objects*. In Brandom's work, by apparent contrast, it is easy to find passages that suggest a more robust engagement with contemporary naturalistic metaphysics, in its own terms. For example, referring to various aspects of his account of the referential, objective and normative aspects of discourse, he says that “[n]one of these is a naturalistic account.” On the contrary, as he puts it elsewhere, his view is this:

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, p. 626, emphasis added)

On the face of it, this sounds like a defence of a non-naturalistic realism about norms.

In the case of modality, similarly, Brandom seems considerably more tolerant of a metaphysical viewpoint than Humean expressivists tend to be. Indeed, in one of his

⁹That is, a line *within* the class of indicative or declarative uses. Non-indicatives are usually regarded as non-descriptive by default.

recent John Locke Lectures, Brandom begins with a passage which serves to mark a contrast, as he sees it, between his own “realist” view of modality and the irrealism of the Humean tradition:

The status and respectability of alethic *modality* was always a point of contention and divergence between naturalism and empiricism. It poses no problems in principle for *naturalism*, since modal vocabulary is an integral part of all the candidate naturalistic base vocabularies. Fundamental physics is, above all, a language of *laws*; the special sciences distinguish between true and false *counterfactual* claims; and ordinary empirical talk is richly *dispositional*. By contrast, modality has been a stumbling block for the *empiricist* tradition ever since Hume forcefully formulated his epistemological, and ultimately semantic, objections to the concepts of law and necessary connection. (Brandom, 2008, p. 93)

Associating Hume’s challenge to modality with empiricism rather than naturalism, Brandom goes on to suggest the late twentieth-century’s rejection of empiricism’s semantic atomism then clears the way for the modal revolution.

However, this reading seems blind to an important ingredient in Hume’s treatment of modality – and the key ingredient in HEX – viz., Hume’s interest in the *genealogy* of modality. While it may be *motivated* for Hume by empiricism, this genealogical does not depend on that motivation, and stands alone as a project for the philosophical understanding of modality – a project in one sense entirely within the scope of a well-motivated philosophical naturalism. Despite its naturalistic credentials, it seems¹⁰ to embody a profound challenge to the view of modality reflected in Brandom’s characterisation of the attitude of many contemporary naturalists.

Moreover, Humean expressivists will be unimpressed by Brandom’s observation that physics is modal through and through. We can grant that physics as it stands is irreducibly modal, the Humean will insist, without simply throwing in the towel on the genealogical question as to whether this feature of physics should be taken as reflecting the way the world is independently of us, or a deeply entrenched aspect of the way in which creatures in our situation need to conceptualise the world. (Where better than physics to remember our Copernican lessons?)

4.4 The irenic project: reconciling HEX and BEX

Thus we have three points of apparent disagreement between HEX and BEX. In the remainder of this paper, I want to try to show that none of these differences is irreconcilable, and that both forms of expressivism are better for making the effort to find a compromise. Concerning the first point, I shall argue that Brandom’s view about the centrality of assertion is entirely compatible with an underlying pluralism, of the sort that HEX requires; and that Brandom, too, is actually committed to such a pluralism. Concerning the second, I shall offer HEX two options, either of which preserves what is most distinctive about HEX (namely, its Positive Thesis); and one of which preserves a form of the Bifurcation Thesis, too. Concerning the third, I shall argue

¹⁰As expressivists such as Blackburn (1993) have often stressed.

that Brandom’s comparative tolerance of metaphysics is actually superficial, and that BEX benefits significantly from the clarification of its goals that flows from recognising that it, too, is engaged in the vocabulary-focussed explanatory project which HEX has embraced more explicitly.

5 BEX is pluralist too

Our first point of conflict between HEX and BEX rested on the apparent tension between these two commitments:

1. Brandom’s insistence, *contra* Wittgenstein, that assertion comprises a linguistic “downtown” – a single, core linguistic practice, on which other suburban practices depend.
2. Blackburn’s insistence, following Wittgenstein, on the plurality of the functions of various superficially similar assertoric language games.

As I noted, one way to highlight this tension is to observe that while Blackburn suggests that we might follow Wittgenstein in deflating notions such as description and assertion, such a move would be an anathema for Brandom, for whom assertion is *the* fundamental language game.

In my view, however, there is no deep conflict here – quite the contrary, in fact. 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 quite 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 we can follow Brandom, agreeing that language has a downtown, without abandoning the pluralist aspect of HEX. To preserve the pluralism, 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.¹¹ So long as the right way to theorise about these applications is in HEX’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 functional pluralism, but committed to it. Brandom characterises his project as follows:

¹¹Brandom 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.)

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, p. 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, p. 18)

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.¹² And it *could not be* what he intends, 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).

This point connects with my observation about two notions of “doing”, in the remarks from Brandom I quoted at the beginning of §3. The first use is this one:

By ‘expressivism’ I mean the idea that discursive practice makes us special in enabling us to make *explicit*, in the form of something we can *say* or *think*, what otherwise remains *implicit* in what we **do**.

At this point, I think, an Humean expressivist may say something like this:

“Precisely! One thing we **do** (for example) is to behave in ways which result from, and thereby reveal, our preferences and pro-attitudes. My view about evaluative language is that it gives us another way to reveal these attitudes to our fellows, by speaking in terms of evaluative *properties*. And another (quite different) thing we **do** is to behave in ways which result from, and thereby reveal, our epistemic attitudes, such as credences. My view about modal (e.g., probabilistic) language is that it gives us another way to reveal to our fellow speakers these epistemic attitudes, by speaking in terms of probability, possibility, and the like. The difference between these two cases illustrates my *pluralism*.”

My point is that Brandom, too, is committed to this kind of pluralism, in the sense that this first kind of “doing” comes in many varieties. However, this is entirely compatible with the view that there is an important unity to the second kind of doing in the passage in question, which Brandom characterises as follows:

[T]he theorist must explain what we have to be able to **do** (what sort of practical know-*how* we have to have) in order to be claiming . . . *that*

¹²On the contrary, what's interesting about Brandom's project is the way in which he links difference kinds of vocabulary to different kinds of pragmatic tasks.

something be so (a kind of knowing *that*). The inferentialist answer is: engaging in a social practice that has the structure of giving and asking for *reasons*. (This is how Hegel draws the line, difficult for representation-
alists, between the conceptual and the nonconceptual.)

This second kind of doing is the practical ability to play the game of giving and asking for reasons – a very different matter from, for example, the general practical ability to behave as our preferences and credences dictate.

Thus by keeping these two kinds of doing distinct, we see that while Brandom’s account may impose a degree of uniformity on language that some Wittgensteinian pluralists 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 functional diversity of the kind to which HEX calls our attention. It not only allows but requires that different assertoric vocabularies do different things, even though there is an important sense in which they are all put together in the same way, and all belong to the same assertoric game.

Note also that although Brandom cannot throw 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 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 he could usefully be clearer. He sometimes writes as if his project is not to deflate representational and referential notions, but to show how they can be constructed from pragmatic materials. Consider these passages from *Making it Explicit*, for example:

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, p. 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, p. 136)

However, as we shall see in §7 below, 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, because it is crucial to avoiding a certain kind of philosophical blind alley – roughly, metaphysics, or at least a distinctively self-inflicted kind of metaphysics puzzle, with which philosophy has long been

prone to burden itself. One of the lessons I think that Brandom might well learn from HEX concerns the importance and rewards of treading carefully on these matters. I shall return to this point in §7.

6 The fate of the Bifurcation Thesis

The second apparent conflict between HEX and BEX turned on the fact that the latter seems to provide no place for a Bifurcation Thesis – no place for the distinction between *loose* and *strict* notions of assertion, as I put it earlier; or between genuinely *descriptive* claims and other conceptually articulated statements (such as those of the moral and modal vocabularies, in both Sellars’ and Blackburn’s view). BEX lowers the bar for what it takes to be a genuine assertion; making the core notion of assertion one which is compatible, on the face of it, with HEX’s views about the functions of the various vocabularies to which it accords the expressivist treatment.

This seems to me to be a significant difficulty for any version of HEX which wishes to remain a local thesis, applicable to some vocabularies but not others. At the very least, it is a difficulty if we seek to combine HEX with BEX.¹³ I think that HEX has two options at this point.

6.1 Global victory

The first option is simply to abandon the Bifurcation Thesis. The expressivist who goes this way says something like this:

“I used to think of my Humean expressivism as a *local* position, applicable to some vocabularies but not others. What got me started, after all, was the recognition that there are interesting things to say about what is distinctive about such things as moral and modal talk, which have nothing to do with the idea that its function is to represent particular kinds of states of affairs.

However, I have now come to realise that for *no vocabulary at all* is it theoretically interesting to say that its function is to ‘represent’ particular kinds of states of affairs. (The problem isn’t that it is *false*, by the way, but that it is *trivial*.) This deflates my Negative Thesis, certainly, but not my Positive Thesis. It does nothing to undermine the interesting observations that got me started, about the distinctive – and *different* – functions of moral and modal vocabulary. On the contrary, it simply implies that they are exemplars of an approach to language we should be employing everywhere. In other words, what I took to be linguistic islands are simply the most visible extremities of an entire new continent – a universal program for theorising about language in *expressivist* rather than *representationalist* terms, to use Brandom’s (2000, pp. 7–10) own

¹³I think it is actually a difficulty independently of this project, since semantic minimalism seems to push HEX in the same direction, undermining its residual representationalism in a similar way. See Macarthur & Price (2007), for a development of this argument.

terminology. So the loss of the Bifurcation Thesis is a feature, not a fault. I am a beneficiary, not a victim, of my own success.”

This is a very good option for HEX, it seems to me. In effect, it is the position that Blackburn ascribes to Wittgenstein, and by which he himself occasionally seems tempted. However, it may not be the best option. I think that HEX may be able to do even better, in a way that preserves some of the intuitions which underlie the Bifurcation Thesis. The trick is to draw a distinction between two notions of representation, and to propose that the Bifurcation Thesis be maintained in terms of one, though abandoned in terms of the other.

6.2 Two readings of “representation”

If we consider the notion of a *representation* (type or token), as it is used in cognitive science and contemporary philosophy of language and mind, I think we can usefully distinguish two nodes, around which the various uses tend to cluster. One node gives priority to system–world relations. It stresses the idea that the job of a representation is to *covary* with something else – typically, some *external* factor, or environmental condition. The other node gives priority to the *internal* role of a representation, in a network of some kind. A token counts as a representation, in this sense, in virtue of its position, or role, in some sort of functional or inferential architecture – in virtue of its links, within a network, to other items of the same general kind.¹⁴

It is usually assumed that these two notions of representation go together; that the prime function of representations in the internal sense is to do the job of representing in the external sense. It takes some effort to see that the two notions might float free of one other, but it is an effort worth making, in my view. The vista that opens up is the possibility that representation in the internal sense is a much richer, more flexible and more multipurpose tool than the naive view always assumes.¹⁵

Once the distinction between these two notions of representation is on the table, it is open to us to regard them as having different roles and allegiances, for theoretical purposes. In particular, it is open to us to take the view that at least by the time we get to language, there is no useful external notion, *of a semantic kind* – in other words, no useful, general, notion of relations that words and sentences bear to the external world, that we might usefully identify with truth and reference. This is the conclusion that a semantic deflationist has already come to, from the other direction, as it were. On this view, the impression that there are such external relations will be regarded as a kind of trick of language – a misunderstanding of the nature of the disquotational platitudes. But we can think this without rejecting the internal notion: without thinking that there is no interesting sense in which mental and linguistic representation are to be characterised and identified in terms of their roles in networks of various kinds.

Networks of what kinds? We may want to distinguish several very different conceptions, at this point. According to one conception, the relevant kind of network is

¹⁴I develop this distinction at greater length in Price (2008b), calling the two notions *e-representation* and *i-representation*, respectively.

¹⁵Quasi-realism provides a useful stepping-stone. The quasi-realist is already committed to the idea that something can behave for all intents and purposes like a “genuine” belief, even though it has its origins at some “non-cognitive” level.

causal–functional in nature. According to another, it is normative and inferential. According to a third, at least arguably distinct from the other two, it is computational.¹⁶ But however it goes, the notion of representation involved can be divorced from any external notion of representation, thought of as a word–world relation of some kind.

How does help with the project of reconciling HEX and BEX? Greatly, for it enables us to claim that although all declarative claims are representational in an *internal* sense – a sense to be characterised in Brandom’s inferentialist terms – they are not all representational in the *external* sense. In other words, there is a distinction to be drawn, within this class of genuine *i-representations*, between those that are *e-representations* and those that are not. The latter part of this claim makes some sense of the intuitions underlying the Bifurcation Thesis; while the former preserves the insight (already in Sellars, apparently, and approached in the limit by quasi-realism) that all declarative vocabularies are genuinely assertoric, in the same sense.

This proposal is intended in an irenic spirit. It enables BEX to insist on an inferentialist conception of what it takes to be an assertion, or a factual claim; and HEX to make sense of the idea that not all of declarative language is in the world-tracking business; without any conflict between the two positions. However, as is often the case with a well-judged peace proposal proposal, both sides may be tempted to read it as a victory for their own view.

On one side, BEX may be inclined to argue that only *i-representations* – in fact, *i-representations* construed in the particular inferentialist way – really deserve the name *representations*. However, this seems to me to be largely a terminological issue. Once the two notions are distinguished, and it is recognised that both have been playing influential roles in discussions about these issues, the important work is done, and it doesn’t really matter who goes home with which piece of terminology.

On the other side, HEX may claim that it has been entirely vindicated; that *e-representation* (“world-tracking”) is *the* core notion of representation, and that BEX’s *i-representations* are just *quasi-e-representations* (*e-representations* of fictional realms of fact, perhaps). This, too, is partly a terminological issue, but I think it also involves a significant confusion about the relation of priority between the two notions of representation, which I want to try to do something to try correct. I’ll do this by means of a just-so story.

¹⁶Chomsky provides an excellent example of someone who not only thinks of representations in this way, but is explicit that it need not be accompanied by a referential conception:

[T]he argument for a reference-based semantics (apart from an internalist syntactic version) seems to me weak. It is possible that natural language has only syntax and pragmatics; it has a “semantics” only in the sense of “the study of how this instrument, whose formal structure and potentialities of expression are the subject of syntactic investigation, is actually put to use in a speech community”, to quote the earliest formulation in generative grammar 40 years ago, influenced by Wittgenstein, Austin and others [Chomsky, 1975, Preface; 1957, pp. 102–3]. In this view, natural language consists of internalist computations and performance systems that access them along with much other information and belief, carrying out their instructions in particular ways to enable us to talk and communicate, among other things. There will be no provision for what Scott Soames calls “the central semantic fact about language, . . . that it is used to represent the world”, because it is not assumed that language is used to represent the world, in the intended sense. (Chomsky, 1995, pp. 26–27)

6.3 Perfect match

Imagine a species of aquatic creatures – “bugs”, let’s call them – who have evolved in a pond in a dark cave. Not surprisingly, they have no eyes. It happens, however, that some of the biochemistry associated with their reproductive processes emits small amounts of light. This provides a potential fitness advantage to any bug who can detect the light emitted by potential mates, and thence to any bug who can *emit* such light, at appropriate moments, to signal his or her availability to detector-equipped conspecifics. So in no time at all, evolutionally speaking, our bugs have a full-blown electromagnetic dating system.

At this point, a small portion of the roof of the cave falls in, providing reflected light from other objects within the pond. Initially, this leads to all kinds of reproductively futile pairings. But as things settle down, and our bugs evolve the ability to distinguish signal from noise in the new environment, they also discover something else: they can now use their visual systems for all sorts of other tasks, in addition to finding the perfect match. Vision enables them to keep track of many other aspects of their external environment.

We now have two notions of matching, or accuracy, applicable to the bugs’ visual systems: first, the original, highly specific, good-mate-securing notion of accuracy; and second, a more generic notion of accuracy, applicable to any visual detection task. If we imagine that the bugs have now developed not only language but also philosophy, we should not be surprised to find that this functional duality might be a source of confusion; especially if the terminology associated with vision does not mark the distinction.

In one camp will be the Freudians of the bug world, who think that true visual matching is really reproductive matching. Anything else must either be reducible to the reproductive case (perhaps by some complicated analysis of which the ordinary bug in the pond might be quite unconscious), or be eliminable, or at best be some kind of fictional or “quasi” reproductive matching.

In the other camp will be the Wittgensteinians, who maintain that reproductive matching is only one game that bugs play with their visual system, and that there are countless others. They complain that the Freudians try to force everything into the reproductive mold (“All you Freudians ever think about is sex”), whereas the “gaze” is a great deal more variegated than that. “It is like looking into the control room of a submarine”, they might say. “We see handles all looking more or less alike. (Naturally, since they are all supposed to be handled.)”

Between these camps there is another position. It pulls back from the rampant pluralism of the Wittgensteinians, in the sense that it maintains that there is an important notion of *accuracy*, that unifies all or many of the visual games. But it doesn’t try to link equate this unifying notion to successful *reproductive* matching. On the contrary, this new univocal notion is just the bug’s version of our ordinary human notion of (visual) perceptual accuracy.

Bugs in this middle camp thus say things like this:

“We bugs have two distinct notions of visual accuracy, one associated with our use of our visual systems – the original use, as it happens, in

our species – for finding reproductive partners; the other associated with the generic task of keeping track of our external environments. These notions coincide, in a sense, in special circumstances – i.e., where the piece of the external environment we are interested in is a potential mate. But it is important to keep them theoretically distinct, because they have quite different theoretical allegiances. After all, mate-selection is only contingently visual, as our own history illustrates. So even if it is true that the former notion of visual accuracy is now, for us, a special case of the latter, it is an entirely contingent fact, that we do better not to entrench in our theoretical vocabulary.”

This middle position is the one that I want to recommend for our own notions of representational correctness, except that everything is shifted up a level. The narrow, perhaps genealogically more basic, notion is associated with the e-representational task of keeping track of the external environment. It thinks of a representational state as “accurate”, or “correct”, in so far as it succeeds in doing this. It is a notion applicable to some assertoric language games, in so far as they serve this function; and to many things (e.g., visual states) that are not assertoric language games, that also serve this function.

The broader i-representational notion is applicable *only* within assertoric language games, by the players themselves; but applicable in all of them. It is the normative notion of correctness that drives the game of “giving and asking for reasons” – a game that we use for many purposes besides that of keeping track of our physical environments.

Once again, it is helpful to emphasise the differences, and not to be misled by the fact that there may be a sense in which these notions coincide, in special cases (or by the fact that one may in some sense be an ancestor of the other). For the differences *matter*. In the present context, they enable us to see how HEX and BEX can fit together. HEX’s *bifurcation* gets drawn in terms of the narrower, more biological notion. BEX’s *unification* gets cast in terms of the broader, conceptual notion.

7 Is Brandom really a metaphysician?

Finally, then, to the third apparent conflict between HEX and BEX: the fact that whereas HEX is an explicitly anti-metaphysical position – more like anthropology than metaphysics, as I put it earlier – Brandom often writes as if he wishes to preserve traditional metaphysical projects, simply transposing them into a new key.

In this case, my proposal for reconciling HEX and BEX turns on the claim that Brandom actually misrepresents his own project, to the extent that he presents it as a form of metaphysics. I think that Brandom doesn’t sufficiently distinguish philosophical anthropology, as I have called it, from the kind of investigations properly thought of as metaphysical; and hence that HEX here has something to offer BEX, in providing clarity about these matters. This is a large topic, which I have discussed in more detail elsewhere, but I want to close by offering some reasons in support of this assessment.¹⁷

¹⁷This section draws extensively on Price (2008a). I am grateful to the editor of that journal for permission to re-use this material here.

As I have noted, Brandom often writes as if his project is metaphysical – as if he is concerned to give us an account of the origins, nature and constitution of particular *entities, properties or relations* of philosophical interest. At one point, indeed, he tells us that he is offering a transcendental argument for the existence of objects themselves, in the most general sense:

[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, pp. xxii–xxiii)

In such passages, however, 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, pp. xxii–xxiii, emphasis in bold 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, p. 297, emphasis in bold mine)

Another point in Brandom’s favour (from HEX’s perspective) is that he rejects a realist construal of reference relations. Thus, concerning the consequences of his preferred anaphoric version of semantic deflationism, he writes:

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, pp. 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, p. 325)

Why is this important? Because it blocks a route that otherwise leads from the *anthropological* enquiry, about the functions of (say) evaluative vocabulary, to the *metaphysical* enquiry, about the nature of values – or at any rate, which does so unless one is prepared to deny, as Brandom is not, that evaluative language is referential, in the same sense that other declarative language is referential. Without such a denial, a more substantial notion of reference inevitably leads our theoretical gaze from the anthropological question – “What are ordinary speakers doing, when they use a term such as ‘good?’” – to the metaphysical question, “What does ‘goodness’ refer to; i.e., what *is* goodness?” So long as our notions of reference and truth remain deflated, however, invoking the semantic vocabulary leads us nowhere new. (The question “What does ‘goodness’ refer to?” gets only a trivial answer: “Why, to ‘goodness’, of course!”)

This kind of point has long been emphasised by Blackburn, who stresses both the inability of deflationary semantic notions to rescue metaphysics from the bench to which Humean metaphysics consigns it, and the fact that the expressivists’ theoretical focus is always at the linguistic level – on the ascriptions of moral and modal properties, say, rather than on the nature of those properties themselves.

In my view, Brandom respects this distinction in the observance, without being as clear as HEX enables us to be about its importance. For example, the passage about norms I quoted above –

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, emphasis added)

– continues with what is by HEX’s 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, p. 626)

It seems to me that what Brandom should say here is that his account is simply *silent*, in itself, on the question as to whether there are norms. For it is not metaphysics, and as such, neither affirms nor denies that there are norms. On the contrary, it simply explains our use of normativity vocabulary. To this, Brandom could add that of course in his street voice he affirms that there are norms (or at least would be prepared to do so if someone could demonstrate that such an assertion had any point, in the language games played on the street). Putting the matter in these terms simply by-passes concerns about naturalism (unless, as is clearly not the case for Brandom, the account offered of normative ascription was somehow in tension with the thought that we ourselves are natural creatures). Brandom’s account only *looks* non-naturalistic because he tries to conceive of it as metaphysics. If he stays on the virtuous (anthropological) side of the fence – being clear about what is being said in his philosophical voice – there is no appearance of anything non-naturalistic, and no need to retreat. (Rejecting the traditional naturalist/non-naturalist debate is of a piece with rejecting the realist/anti-realist debate.)

One final example, to illustrate Brandom’s continuing attraction to what I am thinking of as the metaphysical 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, 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?” He replies:

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 look to the nature of the doing, of the process, that institutes that relation. (2008, pp. 177–78)

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, p. 325)

Anthropologists will have plenty to say about the role of the natural environment in the genealogy and functions of vocabularies. The trap they need to avoid is that of speaking of “semantic relations between words and the world”, in anything other than a deflationary tone. This is the point I made above: once semantic *relations* become part of the anthropologists’ substantial theoretical ontology, so too do their *relata*, at both ends of the relation. The enquiry becomes committed not merely to *words*, but to all the *things* to which it takes those words to stand in semantic relations – to norms, values, numbers, causes, conditional facts, and so on: in fact, to all the entities which gave rise to placement problems in the first place. At this point, HEX’s hard-won gains have been thrown away, and the subject has lapsed once more into metaphysics.

In calling this kind of liberation from metaphysics an insight of HEX, I don’t mean to belittle the respects in which philosophy has moved on from Hume. Brandom notes that Sellars characterised his own 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.

I have suggested 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 be a step behind Kant, in failing to appreciate the importance of the conceptual; and a further step behind Hegel, in failing to see that the conceptual depends on the social. But

I think it remains at the head of the field for its understanding of the way in which expressivism turns its back on metaphysics.

Indeed, as we saw above (§2.2), Sellars himself continued to endorse “the core truth of ‘emotivism’ . . . [and] of Hume’s philosophy of causation.” For Sellars, in other words, adopting Kant’s conceptualism did not mean rejecting the genealogical insights of Hume’s expressivism; nor, presumably, the contrast to a metaphysical treatment of the same topics that those insights embody. It is true that for Sellars this point is still linked to an acceptance of some sort of Bifurcation Thesis; a distinction between genuine descriptive uses of language, on the one hand, and vocabularies “mis-assimilated to describing”, on the other. And Sellars himself struggled with the issue as to how describing should best be characterised.¹⁸ But it is hard to see how his difficulties on this point, or the move to deflate describing we proposed above, could offer any solace to the Humean expressivist’s metaphysically-inclined opponents, by Sellars’ lights. For Sellars, then, the liberation of morality and modality from the hands of the metaphysicians seems a done deal, and an enduring legacy of Hume. I have recommended that Brandom, too, should see his own expressivism in these terms.

8 Total expressivism

I conclude that HEX and BEX actually fit together remarkably well, and that the totality is considerably more illuminating than either viewpoint separately. The unified view – *total* expressivism (“TEX”), as we might call it – combines expressivist contributions at two levels. At the higher level, it takes from BEX an inferentialist account of the assertion and judgement in general. This is expressivist in the sense that Brandom makes clear: it eschews representationalist presuppositions, and instead offers an account of what it is to make an assertion in terms of a distinctive practice within which such speech acts have a place (in fact, a very central place).

At the lower level, TEX takes from both HEX and BEX the insight that particular groups of concepts – particular assertoric sub-vocabularies – are distinctively associated with various *practical* aspects of the lives of typical language users. What does this rather vague claim mean? Well, look to many actual examples within the HEX tradition. Any one of those examples might be mistaken, or incomplete, of course; and they may all involve a conception of what is at stake which needs to be modified in the light of the global expressivism embodied in TEX. Nevertheless, the pragmatic functional pluralism so well exemplified by HEX – especially in the hands of its more ambitious exponents, such as Blackburn himself – illustrates the general character of the lower-level expressivism of the combined view.¹⁹

¹⁸See, e.g., Sellars (1963, p. 451) and Chisholm & Sellars (1958). In the latter piece (which is a correspondence with Chisholm), Sellars comments on his own proposal in (1963) in the following terms:

I . . . agree that the term “descriptive” is of little help. Once the “journeyman” task (to use Ayer’s expression) is well under way, it may be possible to give a precise meaning to this technical term. (Presumably this technical use would show some measure of continuity with our ordinary use of “describe.”) I made an attempt along this line in my Carnap paper [1963], though I am not very proud of it. (Chisholm & Sellars, 1958, p. 532)

(I am grateful to Lionel Shapiro here.)

¹⁹I argued above that Brandom is committed to such a pluralism, too. This measure of agreement does

At the same time, the higher level program promises what Blackburn's quasi-realist was most committed to seeking: viz., an understanding of the logical form and structure of assertoric language, applicable to cases in which it cannot rest on representationalist foundations. True, it provides such an understanding in a package which seems to local versions of HEX an embarrassment of riches. For it offers such non-representationalist foundations *globally*, sweeping aside HEX's Bifurcation Thesis, at least as traditionally understood. But I have suggested, first, that such an outcome was always on the cards, by the quasi-realist's own lights (in view of an inherent instability in local versions of the program); and second, that some consolation is at hand, provided that we are prepared to distinguish two notions of representation, and regard the Bifurcation Thesis as a distinction drawn entirely at the lower, functional level.²⁰

Finally, I have argued that TEX retains the deflationary, quietist attitude to metaphysics so characteristic of many versions of HEX (from Hume himself onwards). Like HEX, but simply on a grander scale,²¹ TEX regards the interesting philosophical project as lying somewhere other than metaphysics – a descriptive, explanatory, and genealogical project, better thought of as a kind of philosophical anthropology.²²

Above all, I have claimed that the combination of Humean expressivism and Brandom's inferentialist expressivism is both entirely harmonious, and genuinely a piece for two voices, in the sense that there is distinctive expressivist work to be done at both levels. Above all, then, TEX is an arrangement of the philosophical score which makes it true that HEX and BEX are singing from the same songsheet. The piece deserves a hearing, not least by the two groups of singers it seeks to place on the same stage.²³

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not exclude the possibility of disagreement about the right functional story, in any particular case. But such a disagreement would reflect a more fundamental alignment, on the nature of the general project.

²⁰And not incompatible, therefore, with the claim that that HEX's target vocabularies do involve genuine factual assertions, in the sense relevant at the higher level.

²¹Grander, for example, in encompassing the project of understanding assertoric language as a whole in expressivist terms.

²²It would be absurd to claim that TEX thereby excludes everything ever thought of as metaphysics, of course. It may well sit quite comfortably with Strawson's "descriptive metaphysics", for example. I think it is fair to say that it excludes the subject as conceived by most contemporary "metaphysicians", but this claim certainly requires some argument. See Price (1997, 2009), for some steps in this direction.

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