

NATURALISM AND QUIETISM

Philosophy is an almost invisible part of contemporary intellectual life. Most people outside of philosophy departments have no clear idea of what philosophy professors are supposed to contribute to culture. Few think it worth the trouble to inquire.

The lack of attention that our discipline receives is sometimes attributed to the technicality of the issues currently being discussed. But that is not a good explanation. Debates between today's philosophers of language and mind are no more tiresomely technical than were those between interpreters and critics of Kant in the 1790's.

The problem is not the style in which philosophy is currently being done in the English-speaking world. It is rather that many of the issues discussed by Descartes, Hume and Kant had cultural resonance only as long as a significant portion of the educated classes still resisted the secularization of moral and political life. The claim that human beings are alone in the universe, and that they should not look for help from supernatural agencies, went hand-in-hand with the admission that Democritus and Epicurus had been largely right about how the universe works. The canonically great modern philosophers performed a useful service by suggesting ways of dealing with the triumph of mechanistic materialism.

As what Lecky called “the warfare between science and theology” gradually tapered off, there was less and less useful work for philosophers to do. Just as medieval scholasticism became tedious once Christian doctrine had been synthesized with Greek philosophy, so a great deal of modern philosophy began to seem pointless after most intellectuals had either lost their religious faith or found ways of rendering it compatible with modern natural science. Although rabble-rousers can still raise doubts about Darwin among the masses, the intellectuals—the only people on whom philosophy books have any impact—have no such doubts. They do not require either a

sophisticated metaphysics or a fancy theory of reference to convince them that there are no spooks.¹

After the intellectuals had become convinced that empirical science, rather than metaphysics, told us how things work, philosophy had a choice between two alternatives. One was to follow Hegel's lead and to transform itself a combination of intellectual history and cultural criticism—the sort of thing offered by Heidegger and Dewey, as well as by such lesser figures as Adorno, Strauss, Arendt, Blumenberg, and Habermas. This tradition now flourishes mostly in the non-Anglophone philosophical world, but it is also exemplified in the work of such American philosophers as Robert Pippin.

The other alternative was to stay faithful to Kant by developing armchair research programs, thereby ensuring philosophy's survival as a thoroughly professionalized academic discipline. These were programs to which observation, experiment and historical knowledge are equally irrelevant. The neo-Kantian program was an investigation of the nature of something called "Experience" or "Consciousness", rather than of "Reality".

An alternative program was launched by Frege and Peirce, this one purporting to investigate the nature of something called "Language" or "the Sign". Both programs assumed that, just as matter can be broken down into atoms, so can experience and language. The first sort of atoms included Lockean simple ideas, Kantian unsynthesized intuitions, sense-data, and the objects of Husserlian

¹ The most important change produced by secularism was a shift from thinking of morality as a matter of unconditional prohibitions to seeing it as an attempt to work out compromises between competing human needs. This change is well described in a famous article by Elizabeth Anscombe called "Modern moral philosophy". She contrasts hard, unconditional, prohibitions of such things as adultery, sodomy and suicide with the soft, squishy consequentialism advocated by, as she says, "every English academic moral philosopher after [Sidgwick]". That consequentialism is, Anscombe says, "quite incompatible with the Hebrew-Christian ethic" (Anscombe, *Ethics, religion and politics* (Minnesota UP, 1981), p. 34.)

In the United States we are currently experiencing a return to the latter ethic--a revolt of the masses against the consequentialism of the intellectuals. The current red-state vs. blue-state clash is a flareup of the old struggle about the secularization of culture. But almost nobody now looks to philosophy for help with this struggle. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, they did. Writers like Spinoza and Hume did a great deal to advance the secularist cause. In the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, however, the baton was passed to art and literature. Novels whose characters discussed moral dilemmas without reference to God or Scripture took the place of moral philosophy.

Wesenschau. The second set included Fregean senses, Peircean signs, and Tractarian linguistic pictures.

By insisting that questions concerning the relation of such immaterial atoms to physical particles were at the core of their discipline, philosophers in Anglophone countries shoved social philosophy, intellectual history, and culture criticism out to the periphery, taking Hegel with them. This strategy has been quite successful.

Yet there have always been holists—philosophers who were dubious about the existence of atoms of consciousness or atoms of significance. The holists became skeptical about the existence of shadowy surrogates for Reality such as “Experience”, “Consciousness” and “Language”. Wittgenstein, the most famous of these skeptics, came pretty close to suggesting that the so-called “core” areas of philosophy serve no function save to keep an academic discipline in business.

Skepticism of this sort has recently come to be labeled “quietism”. Brian Leiter, in his introduction to a recently-published collection titled *The Future for Philosophy*, divides the Anglophone philosophical world into “naturalists” and “Wittgensteinian quietists”. The latter, he says, think of philosophy as “a kind of *therapy*, dissolving philosophical problems rather than solving them”.² They are, Leiter happily reports, a small minority, dominant in only four major graduate departments—Harvard, Berkeley, Chicago and Pittsburgh. Those in the naturalist majority, he says, “agree with the Wittgensteinians that philosophers have no distinctive methods that suffice for solving problems, but (unlike the Wittgensteinians) the naturalists believe that the problems that have worried philosophers (about the nature of the mind, knowledge, action, reality, morality, and so on) are indeed real”.³

I think Leiter’s account of the stand-off between these two camps is largely accurate. He has put his finger on the deepest disagreement within contemporary Anglophone philosophy. But most people who think of themselves in the quietist camp, as I do, would not say that the problems studied by our activist colleagues are *unreal*. We do not divide

² Brian Leiter, ed., *The future for philosophy* (Oxford UP, 2004), p. 2.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 2-3.

philosophical problems into the real and the illusory, but rather into those that retain some relevance to cultural politics and those that do not. Quietists of my persuasion think that such relevance needs to be shown before a problem is taken seriously. This view is a corollary of the maxim that what does not make a difference to practice should not make a difference to philosophers.

From this point of view, questions about the place of values in a world of fact are no more unreal than questions about how the Eucharistic blood and wine can embody the divine substance, or about how many sacraments Christ instituted. Neither of the latter problems are problems for *everybody*, but their parochial character does not render them illusory. For what one finds problematic is a function of what one thinks important, and one's sense of importance is dependent, in large part, on the vocabulary one employs. So cultural politics is largely a matter of struggles between those who urge that a familiar vocabulary be eschewed and those who defend the old ways of speaking.

As an example of such a defense, consider Leiter's assertion that "Neuroscientists tell us about the brain, and philosophers try to figure out how to square our best neuroscience with the ability of our minds to represent what the world is like".⁴ The quietist response is that we should start by asking whether we really want to hold on to the notion of "representing what the world is like". Perhaps it is time to give up the notion of "the world", and of shadowy entities called "the mind" or "language" that contain representations of the world. Study of the history of culture helps us understand why the latter notions gained currency, just as it shows us why certain theological notions became as important as they did. But quietists think that such study also gives reason to believe that many of the central ideas of modern philosophy, like many of the central issues that divide Christian theologians, should have become more trouble than they are worth.

Philip Pettit, in his contribution to *The Future for Philosophy*, gives an account of the naturalists' metaphilosophical outlook that is somewhat fuller than Leiter's. Philosophy, he says, is an attempt to reconcile "the manifest image of how things are", and the "ideas that come to us with our spontaneous everyday practices" with "fidelity to

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

the intellectual image of how things are".⁵ In our culture, Pettit says, the intellectual image is the one provided by physical science. He sums up by saying that "a naturalistic, more or less mechanical image of the universe is imposed on us by cumulative developments in physics, biology and neuroscience, and this challenges us to look for where in that world there can be room for phenomena that remain as vivid as ever in the manifest image: consciousness, freedom, responsibility, goodness, virtue and the like."⁶

Despite my veneration for Wilfrid Sellars, who originated this talk of a conflict between the manifest and the scientific images, I hope that philosophers will eventually abandon the visual metaphors that Pettit deploys. We should not be held captive by the world-picture picture. We do not need a synoptic view of something called "the world". At most, we need is a synoptic narrative of how we came to talk as we do. We should stop trying to for a unified picture, or for a master vocabulary. We should confine ourselves to making sure that we are not burdened with obsolete ways of speaking, and then insuring that those vocabularies that are still useful stay out of each other's way.

Narratives that explain how these various vocabularies came into existence helps us see that terminologies we employ for some purposes do not link up in any clear way with those we employ for other purposes. Such narratives can help persuade us that we can simply let two linguistic practices co-exist side by side. This is, for example, what Hume suggested we do with the vocabulary of prediction and that of assignment of moral responsibility. The lesson the pragmatists drew from Hume was that philosophers should not scratch where it does not itch. When there is no longer an audience outside the discipline that displays interest in a philosophical problem, that problem should be viewed with suspicion.

Naturalists like Pettit and Leiter may respond that they are interested in philosophical truth rather than in catering to the taste of the day. This is the same rhetorical strategy that was used by seventeenth-century Aristotelians trying to fend off Hobbes and Descartes. Hobbes responded that those who still sweating away in

⁵ Pettit, "Existentialism, quietism and philosophy" in Leiter, op. cit., p. 306.

⁶ Ibid., p. 306. Pettit adds that "philosophy today is probably more challenging, and more difficult, than it has ever been".

what he called “the hothouses of vain philosophy” were in the grip of a obsolete terminology, one that made the problems they discussed seem urgent. Contemporary quietists think the same about their activist opponents. They believe that the vocabulary of representationalism is as shopworn and as dubious as that of hylomorphism.

This anti-representationalist view can be found in several contributions to a recent collection of titled *Naturalism in Question*, edited by Mario de Caro and David Macarthur. One of these is Huw Price’s remarkable essay, “Naturalism without representationalism”. Price makes a very helpful distinction between object naturalism and subject naturalism. Object naturalism is “the view that in some important sense, all there is is the world studied by science”.⁷ Subject naturalism, on the other hand, simply says that “we humans are natural creatures, and if the claims and ambitions of philosophy conflict with this view, then philosophy needs to give way.”

Whereas object naturalists worry about the place of non-particles in a world of particles. Price says, subject naturalists view these “placement problems” as “problems about human linguistic behavior”.⁸ Object naturalists worry about how non-particles are related to particles because, in Price’s words, they take for granted that “substantial ‘word-world’ semantic relations are a part of the best scientific account of our use of the relevant terms”.⁹ Subject naturalists are semantic deflationists: they see no need for such relations—and, in particular, for that of “being made true by”. They think once we have explained the uses of the relevant terms, there is no further problem about the relation of those uses to the world.

Bjorn Ramberg, in an article called “Naturalizing Idealizations”, uses “pragmatic naturalism” to designate the same approach to philosophical problems that Price labels “subject naturalism”. Ramberg writes as follows:

Reduction, says the pragmatist, is a meta-tool of science; a way of systematically extending the domain of some set of tools for handling the explanatory tasks that scientists confront.

⁷ *Naturalism in Question*, ed. de Caro and Macarthur (Harvard UP, 2004), p. 73.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

Naturalization, by contrast, is a goal of philosophy: it is the elimination of metaphysical gaps between the characteristic features by which we deal with agents and thinkers, on the one hand, and the characteristic features by reference to which we empirically generalize over the causal relations between objects and events, on the other. It is only in the context of a certain metaphysics that the scientific tool becomes a philosophical one, an instrument of legislative ontology.¹⁰

Pragmatic naturalism, Ramberg continues, “treats the gap itself, that which transforms reduction into a philosophical project, as a symptom of dysfunction in our philosophical vocabulary”. The cure for this dysfunction, in Ramberg’s words, is imaginatively to provide “alternatives to what begins to look like conceptual hang-ups and fixed ideas...[and to explain] how our practice might change if we we were to describe things...in altered vocabularies”.¹¹

Frank Jackson’s book *From Metaphysics to Ethics* is a paradigm of what Price calls object naturalism. Jackson says that “serious metaphysics... continually faces the location problem.” The nature of this problem is explained in the following passage:

Because the ingredients are limited, some putative features of the world are not going to appear *explicitly* in some more basic account....There are inevitably a host of putative features of our world which we must either eliminate or locate.¹²

Subject naturalists, by contrast, have no use for the notion of “merely putative feature of the world”, unless this is taken to mean something like “topic not worth talking about”. Their question is not “What features does the world really have?” but “What is worth discussing?” Subject naturalists may think that the culture as a whole would be better off if a certain language-game were no longer played, but they do not argue that some of the referring expressions deployed in that practice signify unreal entities. Nor do they think that they need to

¹⁰ Ramberg, “Naturalizing idealizations; pragmatism and the interpretive strategy”, *Contemporary Pragmatism*, vol. 1, no. 2 (December, 2004), p. 43.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 47

¹² Frank Jackson, *From metaphysics to ethics: a defence of conceptual analysis* (Oxford UP, 1998), p. 5.

be understood as really about something different from what they are putatively about.

For Jackson, the method of what he calls “serious metaphysics” is conceptual analysis, for the following reasons:

Serious metaphysics requires us address when matters described in one vocabulary are made true by matters described in another vocabulary. But how could we possibly address this question in the absence of a consideration of when it is right to describe matters in the terms of the various vocabularies?...And to do that is to conceptual analysis.¹³

But conceptual analysis does not tell the serious metaphysician which matters make which statements about other matters true. He already knows that. As Jackson goes on to say, “Conceptual analysis is not being given a role in determining the fundamental nature of the world; it is, rather, being given a central role in determining what to say in less fundamental terms given an account of the world stated in more fundamental terms”.¹⁴

As I have already emphasized, subject naturalists have no use for Jackson’s key notion—that of “being made true by”. They are content, Price says, with “a use-explanatory account of semantic terms, while saying nothing of theoretical weight about whether these terms ‘refer’ or ‘have truth-conditions’.”¹⁵ The subject naturalist’s basic task, he continues, is “to account for the uses of various terms—among them, the semantic terms themselves—in the lives of natural creatures in a natural environment.”

If you think that there is such a relation as “being made true by” then you can still hope, as Jackson does, to correct the linguistic practices of your day on theoretical grounds, rather than merely cultural-political ones. For your *apriori* knowledge of what makes sentences true, permits you to evaluate the relation between the culture of your day and the intrinsic nature of reality itself. But subject naturalists like Price can criticize culture only by explicitly practicing

¹³ Ibid., pp. 41-42; emphasis added.

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 42-43.

¹⁵ Price, op. cit., p. 79.

cultural politics—by arguing that a proposed alternative culture would better serve our purposes.

Price confronts Jackson with the following question: “[if we can explain] why natural creatures in a natural environment come to *talk* in these plural ways—of ‘truth’, ‘value’, ‘meaning’, ‘causation’, all the rest—what puzzle remains? What debt does philosophy now owe to science?”¹⁶ That question can be expanded along the following lines: If you know not only how words are used, but what purposes are and are not served by so using them, what more could philosophy hope to tell you?

If you want to know about the relation between language and reality, the quietist continues, consider how the early hominids might have started using marks and noises to coordinate their actions. Then consult the anthropologists and the intellectual historians. These are the people who can tell you plausible stories about how our species progressed from organizing searches for food to coordinating efforts to find out how things work. Given narratives such as these, what purpose is served by tacking on an account of the relation of these achievements to the behavior of physical particles?

Both Jackson and Price pride themselves on being naturalists, but different things come to their minds when they speak of “nature”. When Jackson uses that word he thinks of particles. A subject naturalist like Price thinks instead of organisms coping with, and improving, their environment. The object naturalist expresses his fear of spooks by insisting that everything be tied in, somehow, with the movements of the atoms through the void. The subject naturalist expresses his spooks by insisting that our stories about how evolution led from the protozoa to the Renaissance should contain no sudden discontinuities—that it be a story of gradually increasing complexity of physiological structure gradually making possible increasingly complex behavior.

For the subject naturalist, the import of Price’s dictum that “we are natural creatures in a natural environment” is that we should be wary of drawing lines between kinds of organisms in non-behavioral and non-physiological terms. This means that we should not use terms

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 87

such as “intentionality”, or “consciousness” or “representation” unless we can specify, at least roughly, what sort of behavior suffices to show the presence of the referents of these terms.

For example, if we want to say that squids have intentionality but paramecia do not, or that there is something it is like to be a bat but nothing it is like to be an earthworm, or that insects represent their environment whereas plants merely respond to it, we should be prepared to explain how we can tell—to specify what behavioral or physiological facts are relevant to this claim. If we cannot do that, we are kicking up dust and then complaining that we cannot see. We are inventing spooks in order to make work for ghost-busters.

The subject naturalist’s emphasis of behavioral criteria is reminiscent of the positivists’ verificationism. But it differs in that it is not the product of a general theory about the nature of meaning, one that enables us to distinguish sense from nonsense. The subject naturalist can cheerfully admit that any expression will have a sense if you give it one. It is rather that such talk complicates narratives of biological evolution and of cultural progress to no good purpose. In the same spirit, liberal theologians argue that questions about the number of the sacraments, though perfectly intelligible, are distractions from the attempt to convey the Christian message.

Fundamentalist Catholics, of course, insist that such questions are still very important. Object naturalists are equally insistent that it is important, for example, to ask how collocations of elementary physical particles manage to exhibit moral responsibility. Quietist Christians think that the questions insisted on by these Catholics are relics of a relatively primitive period in the reception of Christ’s message. Quietist philosophers think that the questions still being posed by their activist colleagues were, in the seventeenth century, reasonable enough. They were a predictable product of the shock produced in the seventeenth century by the New Science, but by now they have become irrelevant to intellectual life. Christian faith without sacramentalism and what Price calls “naturalism without representationalism” are both cultural-political initiatives.

So far I have been painting the object naturalist vs. subject naturalist opposition with a fairly broad brush. In the time that remains I shall try to show the relevance of this opposition to a couple of current philosophical controversies.

The first of these is a disagreement between Timothy Williamson and John McDowell. The anthology edited by Brian Leiter to which I have already referred includes a lively polemical essay by Williamson titled “Past the linguistic turn?”, Williamson starts off by attacking a view that John McDowell takes over from Hegel, Wittgenstein and Sellars: viz., “Since the world is everything that is the case....there is no gap between thought, as such, and the world”. Williamson paraphrases this as the claim that “the conceptual has no outer boundary beyond which lies unconceptualized reality” and again as the thesis that “any object can be thought of”.¹⁷

Williamson says that “...for all that McDowell has shown, there may be necessary limitations on all possible thinkers. We do not know whether there are elusive objects. It is unclear what would motivate the claim that there are none, if not some form of idealism. We should adopt no conception of philosophy that on methodological grounds excludes elusive objects”.¹⁸

I think that McDowell, a self-professed quietist, should respond that we should indeed adopt a conception of philosophy that excludes elusive objects. We should do so not for methodological reasons, but for reasons of cultural politics. We should say that cultures that worry about unanswerable questions like “Are there necessary limitations on all possible thinkers?”, “Might the world have been created five minutes ago?”, “Are there zombies among us?” or “Is my color spectrum the inverse of yours?” are inferior to cultures that respect Peirce’s pragmatic maxim. Superior cultures have no use for what Peirce called “make-believe doubt”.

Williamson is wrong to suggest that only idealism could motivate McDowell’s thesis. The difference between idealism and pragmatism is that between metaphysical or epistemological arguments for the claim

¹⁷ Williamson in Leiter, op. cit., p. 109.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 110.

that any object can be thought of and cultural-political arguments for it. Quietists think that the idea of necessary limitations on all possible thinkers is as weird as Augustine's thesis about the inevitability of sin—*non posse non peccare*. Neither can be refuted, but healthy-mindedness requires that both be dismissed out of hand.¹⁹

The clash of opinion between McDowell and Williamson epitomizes the opposition between two recent lines of thought within recent analytic philosophy. One runs from Wittgenstein through Sellars and Davidson to McDowell and Brandom. The other is associated with what Williamson calls “the revival of metaphysical theorizing, realist in spirit...associated with Saul Kripke, David Lewis, Kit Fine, Peter van Inwagen, David Armstrong and many others.”²⁰ The goal of this revival is, as Williamson puts it, “to discover what fundamental kind of things there are, and what properties and relations they have, not how we represent them”.²¹ The contrast between these two lines of thought will become vivid to anyone who flips back and forth between the two collections of articles from which I have been quoting—Leiter's *The future for philosophy* and De Caro's and MacArthur's *Naturalism in question*.

Quietists think that no kind of thing is more fundamental than any other kind of thing. The fact that, as Jackson puts it, you cannot change anything without changing the motions or positions of elementary physical particles, does nothing to show that there is a philosophical problem of how these particles leave room for non-particles. It is no more philosophically pregnant than the fact that you cannot mess with the particles without simultaneously messing with a great many other things. Such expressions as “the nature of reality” or “the world as it really is”, have in the past, quietists admit, played a role in producing desirable cultural change. But so have many other ladders which we are now in a position to throw away.

¹⁹ Pragmatism takes its stand against all doctrines that hold, in the words of Leo Strauss, that “Even by proving that a certain view is indispensable to living well, one merely proves that the view in question is a salutary myth: one does not prove it be true.” (*Natural right and history* (Chicago UP, 1968), p. 6) Strauss goes on to say that “Utility and truth are two entirely different things”.

Pragmatists do not think they are the same thing, but they do think that you cannot have the latter without the former.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 110-111.

Quietists who have no use for the notion of ‘the world as it is apart from our ways of representing it’ will balk at Williamson’s thesis that “What there is determines what there is for us to mean”. But they will also balk at the idealists’ claim that what we mean determines what there is. They want to get beyond realism and idealism by ceasing to contrast a represented world with our ways of representing it. This means giving up on the notion of linguistic representations of the world representation except insofar as it can be reconstructed within an inferentialist semantics. Such a semantics abjures what Price calls “substantial word-world relations” in favor of descriptions of the interaction of language-using organisms with other such organisms and with their environment.

The controversy about inferentialist semantics is the second of the two I want briefly to discuss. He crucial objection to Brandom’s inferentialism, it seems to me, is Fodor’s. For the clash between Fodor and Brandom epitomizes not only the difference between representationalist and inferentialist semantics but the larger atomist-holist conflict to which I referred earlier.

Brandom takes Davidsonian holism to the limit. As Davidson did in “A nice derangement of epitaphs”, he repudiates the idea that there is something called “a language”—something that splits up into bits called “meanings” or “linguistic representations” which can then be correlated with bits of the physical world. He tries to carry through on the Quine-Davidson hope for, as Kenneth Taylor has put it, “a theory of meaning in which meanings play no role”.²² So he abandons the notion of a sentence having a “cognitive content” that remains constant in all the assertions it is used to make. Brandom cheerfully coasts down what Fodor derisively describes as “a well-greased and well-traveled slippery slope” at the bottom of which lies the view that “no two people ever mean the same thing by what they say”.²³

²² Kenneth Taylor, *Truth and meaning: an introduction to the philosophy of language* (Blackwell, 1998). Taylor thinks of Davidson’s distaste for meanings as a result of his preference for extensional languages. This may have played a role in Davidson’s (early) thinking, but it plays none in Brandom’s. Once one gets rid of the “making true” relation, there is no reason to find anything fishy about non-extensional languages.

²³ Jerry Fodor, “Why meaning (probably) isn’t conceptual role” in *Mental representations*, edited Stephen Stich and Ted Warfield (Oxford UP, 1994), p. 143.

Brandom does this because he wants to set aside the idea that I get what is in my head—a cognitive content, a candidate for accurate representation of reality—into your head by making noises that effectuate this transmission. He hopes to replace it with an account of what he calls “doxastic scorekeeping”. I keep score in order to use the noise that emerge from your lips as indications of what motions those lips, and other portions of you body, are likely to make in various circumstances. Keeping track of these indications enables me to predict your responses to motions that I myself may wish to make. This pattern of behavior is, of course, one we share with many other mammals.

We humans count as rational because we can go one step further. We can take advantage of social norms. We gang up on people who, having made noises such as “I promise to pay you back”, make no move to produce the goods. The same goes for people who, having uttered “p” and “if p then q”, obstinately refuse to utter “q”, even when it would be in point to do so. We, unlike the brutes, can play what Brandom calls the “game of giving and asking for reasons”.

Brandom does not call himself a “naturalist”, probably because he thinks the term might as well be surrendered to the bad guys. But the whole point of his attempt to replace representationalist with inferentialist semantics is to tell a story about cultural evolution—the evolution of linguistic practices—that focuses on how these practices gave our ancestors an evolutionary edge. Unless one is convinced that physical particles somehow enjoy an ontological status superior to that of organisms, this will strike one as as naturalistic as a story can get.

Brandom claims that we can account for all our linguistic behavior in terms of doxastic scorekeeping. He cheerfully admit that, as he puts it, “a word—‘dog’, ‘stupid’, ‘Republican’—has a different significance in my mouth that it does in yours, because and insofar as what follows from its being applicable...differ from me, in virtue of my different collateral beliefs”.²⁴ But this difference is not a problem for anybody except philosophers who take the Fregean notion of “cognitive content” seriously.

²⁴ Robert Brandom, *Making it explicit* (Harvard UP, 1994), p. 587.

I think that Brandom is right when he suggests that we shall remain metaphysicians as long as we allow ourselves to ask Fregean questions about little atoms of linguistic significance that are transmitted from speaker to hearer. Consider questions like “Does the assertion that the morning star is the evening star have the same cognitive content as the assertion that the thing we call the morning star is the same thing as the one we call the evening star?” If “same cognitive content” just means “will do as well for most purposes”, then the answer is yes, But Fregeans, wielding Church’s Translation Test, brush aside the fact that either sentence can be used to do the same job. The real question, they say, is not about uses but about senses, meanings, intensions. Sense, these philosophers say, determines reference in the same way that the marks on the map determine which slice of reality the map maps. Meanings cannot be the same thing as uses, for there is a difference between semantics and pragmatics. It is semantics that determines sameness and difference of cognitive content.

But we shall have a use for the notion of “same cognitive content” only if we try to hold belief and meaning apart, as Frege assumed we should and Quine told us we should not. We shall not be tempted to employ it once we cease to think of communication as a matter of transmitting the same atom of significance from brain to brain. We can instead explain communication as Brandom does when he says that we are “able to move back and forth between the significance tokenings have as governed by the commitments they themselves acknowledged, on the one hand, and by the commitments they take the speaker to acknowledge, on the other.” This ability lets us make de re ascriptions, for what is expressed by such ascriptions is, as Brandom says, “just the understanding of what is represented by a speaker’s claims or beliefs—what they are about.”²⁵

Brandom’s answer to the question “why are there de re ascriptions?” is the same as his answer to the question “why are there singular terms?” The answer is not that there are things out there that we need to represent accurately, but that we need the notion of “same thing” and of “getting the thing right” to help us figure out what doxastic and other commitments our fellow organisms are making. We need them not to relate words and world, but to coordinate our

²⁵ Ibid., p. 503.

behavior, to relate speech acts to other speech acts and to bodily movements. As Brandom puts it, “The permanent possibility of a distinction between how things are and how they are taken to be by some interlocutor is built into the social-inferential articulation of concepts”.²⁶

On this conception, as Brandom says, “particular linguistic phenomena can no longer be distinguished as ‘pragmatic’ or ‘semantic’”.²⁷ Only if you persist in thinking that there is a what Price calls a “substantive” word-world relation called “making true” will you invoke Fregean senses, or some surrogate for them, to account for referential opacity. Only then will you be perplexed as to how the assertion that *a* is identical with *b* can be non-trivial, given that the whole point of senses is to determine reference and that “*a*” and “*b*” name the same thing.

Fregean semantics brings metaphysics in its train. For it makes it possible to suggest that some languages fit the world better than others, because they can be more neatly paired off with divisions that already exist in the world. But if one eschews notions like “the world” one will cease to deploy expressions like “fitting better” or “representing more adequately” at the wholesale level—the level at which great big things like mind and world, or language and world, are envisaged as confronting one another. One may only use them only make practical recommendations at the retail level—for example, “‘Mammal’ fits these creatures better than ‘fish’” and “‘Terrorist’ fits these people better than ‘freedom-fighter’”.

I hope that my quick summary of the controversies between McDowell and Williamson and between Brandom and Fodor has helped make clear the significance of Price’s distinction between two forms of naturalism. Subject naturalists like Price, Ramberg and myself urge our activist colleagues to stop talking about great big things like Experience or Language, the shadow entities that Locke and Frege invented to replace Reality once that became the province of empirical science. For

²⁶ Ibid., p. 597.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 592.

we shall not be able to evacuate the so-called “core areas” of philosophy until we do this.

Object naturalists like Jackson, Leiter, Petit, and Fodor fear that philosophy would lose its soul if philosophers turned their back on Locke, Kant and Frege—if they no longer constructed theories about the Nature of Experience or the Structure of Language, and stopped asking which *really* real entities made sentences about *putatively* real entities true. We quietists think that we would only lose our insular hyper-professionalism. We might find better things to talk about, and then people might once again take an interest in what we are saying.

Richard Rorty
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