

Philosophical Naturalism—Week 12

1. “At most, we need a synoptic narrative of how we came to talk as we do. We should stop trying 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.” [Rorty 5]
2. “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.” [Rorty 12]
3. “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 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.” [Rorty 17]
4. “Object naturalism...rests on substantial theoretical assumptions about what we humans do with language—roughly, the assumption that substantial “word-world” semantic relations are part of the best scientific account of our use of the relevant terms.” [Price 78]
5. It can be true both that:
‘Reference’ stands in the relation R^* to the relation R^* , and
‘Reference’ stands in the relation R^{**} to the relation R^{**} .
“In the light of the role of semantic notions in the object naturalist’s conception of the task of philosophy, that task does not make sense with respect to the semantic terms themselves.” [Price 83]
6. “The difficult opponent [for the object naturalist] is not someone who agrees to play the game in the material mode but bats for nonnaturalism, defending a primitive plurality of ontological realms. The difficult opponent is the naturalist who takes advantage of a nonrepresentationalist theoretical perspective to avoid the material mode altogether. If such an opponent can explain why natural creatures in a natural environment come to *talk* in these plural ways—of ‘truth’, ‘value’, ‘meaning’, ‘causation’, and all the rest—what puzzle remains? What debt does philosophy now owe science?” [Price 87]
7. “Without representationalism, the joints between topics remain joints between kinds of behavior, and don’t need to be mirrored in ontology of any other kind.” [Price 88]
8. “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. 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.” [Ramberg 43]

9. The pragmatic naturalist...treats the gap itself, that which transforms reduction into a philosophical project, as a symptom of dysfunction in our philosophical vocabulary. Pragmatic naturalism does not aim at conceptual reduction, but at a transformation of those conceptual structures we rely on to sustain our sense of a metaphysical gap between those items we catch in our vocabulary of thought and agency, and those items we describe in our vocabularies of causal regularities. It is in the context of this metaphilosophical project that the interpretive strategy as wielded by Dennett and endorsed by Rorty emerges as a naturalizing one. It is not merely non-reductive, it is anti-reductionist; it seeks to free us from those philosophical perceptions that transform reductive enterprises into tests for ontological legitimacy. [Ramberg 31]

10. A distinctive feature of the interpretivist strategy as it has been developed after Quine (1960), is that it aims for naturalization without taking the route through nomological or conceptual reduction. Where some see only three alternatives — some form of reduction, outright elimination, or a retreat to dualism — the post-Quinean interpretivist claims to mark out a fourth possibility. [Ramberg 2]

11. The pragmatist is not claiming to solve the mind-body problem, nor to dissolve it. Nor is the problem being diagnosed as illusory, as a product of some form of conceptual confusion, linguistic mistake or general lack of semantic alertness. The pragmatist takes the mind-body problem to be real, but transient. It is a problem we will come to see as idle once we have developed better ways of conceiving ourselves and our relations to our surroundings, once we have developed, that is, better vocabularies. These vocabularies will be better in the specific sense that they will enable us to treat certain items as agents *without* sticking us with dichotomous schemes of fundamental ontological kinds, the kind of kinds whose relation one to the other cannot but become immediately problematic. The interpretivist strategy is attractive because it holds out the promise of just this kind of improvement in our conception of the capacities that make us persons. [Ramberg 4]

12. What motivates Rorty's use of the concept of a vocabulary, is his thought that it may bring us closer to a philosophical vocabulary within which we may still the ontological urge, the urge that leads us to engage in projects of ontological legitimization. The concept serves this purpose precisely in so far as it allows us to pick out discursive structures in a manner that precludes any attempt to restore an ontologically potent form of the distinction between *what we talk about* and *how we talk about it*. [Ramberg 10]

13. When we claim to be characterizing a vocabulary, we thereby claim to be giving a *basic* account of some set of concepts. That is to say, we claim to be offering reasons for thinking that the interests we invoke, the concepts we analyze, and the manner of the analysis, all are linked in such a way that to use a different kind of concept would, *eo ipso*, be to serve different kinds of interests. Claiming to offer a basic account, in this sense, is not to rule out the possibility of there being — or coming to be — systematic conceptual relations between the vocabulary one thus specifies and other vocabularies. Rather, it is to insist that such conceptual relations will not provide a way for us to keep the interests as is and drop the concepts, in favour of those of some other vocabulary...

Vocabularies are as enduring as interests are, which means that some will be highly transient, and others may be impossible for us to get by without. Like interests, they may be nested, contested, and individuated at cross-purposes....What may appear to one historian as the emergence of a better characterization of a vocabulary will to another appear as the abandoning of a set of goals in favour of another set. Such messiness tends to increase as historical distance decreases, approaching the chaotic at the limit constituted by the present.

Specifying interests, moreover, is itself an interest-governed enterprise—when we invoke vocabularies in our descriptions of social or intellectual evolution, no perspective is possible that is not laden with normative commitments. Similarly, any philosophical characterization of a vocabulary, staking a claim for the basic nature of some set of concepts, will involve a stipulative element. It will embody a proposal for conceiving of our interests in a certain way, a plea for seeing them that way and for assigning them a certain weight. The notion I am characterizing is essentially a hermeneutic one — vocabularies are never neutrally described, and they are never fully given. [Ramberg 11]

14. It is easy, perhaps, in thus objecting to interpretivism in the guise of Dennett's intentional stance, to lose sight of the fact that the fate of the vocabulary of intentional states is not, on the pragmatist's view,

confined to the question of which predictive strategy is most reliable, or detailed, or elegant or precise or accurate. As much at issue is the question of *what it is* that is to be predicted. What we folk (psychologists) care about, typically, is not how people move various parts of their bodies, but what it is that we do by so moving them. And, again typically, whatever predicates we settle on in our descriptions of bodily movements, these are predicates agents can satisfy by moving their bodies in slightly, perhaps very, different ways. Such differences we generally want the predicates of our folk-psychological vocabulary to be insensitive to. What makes different movements instances of the same type of action, are the interests that give applicability to the predicates explicated by ideal interpretation. [Ramberg 30]

15. [T]he identification of actions is not only interest-dependent in a general way; the nature of these interests is such as to make the identity of intentional states (and thus actions) dependent on actual contexts of interaction. There is no fixing the elements of the subjective perspective of an agent on the world as such. To see an item as an agent, then, is not only to see the item as autonomous with respect to the categories of empirical law. It is also to see that item as possessing a nature beyond what any determinate attribution of thought will make explicit; where agents are concerned there is, to paraphrase Heidegger, always more being than theory. I suggest that this is a constitutive feature of the vocabulary of agency — i.e., a part of what it is to consider some item as an agent. [Ramberg 30]

16. Rorty strives to naturalize our conception of philosophical reflection by thinking of it as an adaptive activity of natural creatures. We should, he urges, learn to think of ourselves in terms such that there no longer appears to be anything *conceptually* or *philosophically* mysterious about our being embodied thinkers, or agents in a world of causes. The interpretivist strategy naturalizes precisely in so far as it frees us from worries about the “ontological status” of the kinds that constitute the *denotata* of our various ways of describing things. While Rorty’s naturalism is in important ways Quinian, it is not Quine’s naturalism, nor that of Quine’s more scientific descendants. By resisting the scientific urge that informs both realism and eliminativism, the pragmatic naturalist insists that questions of what sort of predictive vocabulary to apply when, and to what — or whom, are questions that by their nature will not be contained within the scope of theoretical criteria of theory-choice. As questions of vocabulary choice, such questions resist methodological resolution. Neither mounting scientific knowledge nor the increasingly sophisticated theoretical superstructure of methodology raised upon it by philosophy of science will, all by itself, tell us under what aspects we should care about things. [Ramberg 33]

17. But what pragmatic naturalists with one hand take away from philosophy — the idea of ontology (whether as metaphysics or natural science) as a substantive enquiry into the legitimacy of vocabularies — they return with the other; we are left with a conception of philosophy as aiding our practical and ethical deliberations, our experimentations, by imaginatively providing alternatives to what begins to look like conceptual hang-ups and fixed ideas (‘intuitions’), and depicting altered self-conceptions for us to try out. On this view, the job of a philosopher is to make vivid how our practices might change if we were to describe things — particularly human beings — in altered vocabularies, or if we extend particular vocabularies into new domains. This intellectual practice is not so much a pursuit of truth as it is a pursuit of alternative perspectives on the relevance to each other of various ways of making truth-claims. It is exemplified by the pragmatic naturalist’s promotion of the interpretive strategy. [Ramberg 34]

Quotations from:

Richard Rorty “Naturalism and Quietism

Huw Price “Naturalism Without Representationalism” (in De Caro & Macarthur *Naturalism in Question*).

Bjørn Ramberg “Naturalizing Idealizations” (in *Contemporary Pragmatism* vol 1 no 2, December 2004).