# Representationalism and semantic minimalism

Jonathan Knowles, Philosophy Department, Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Trondheim
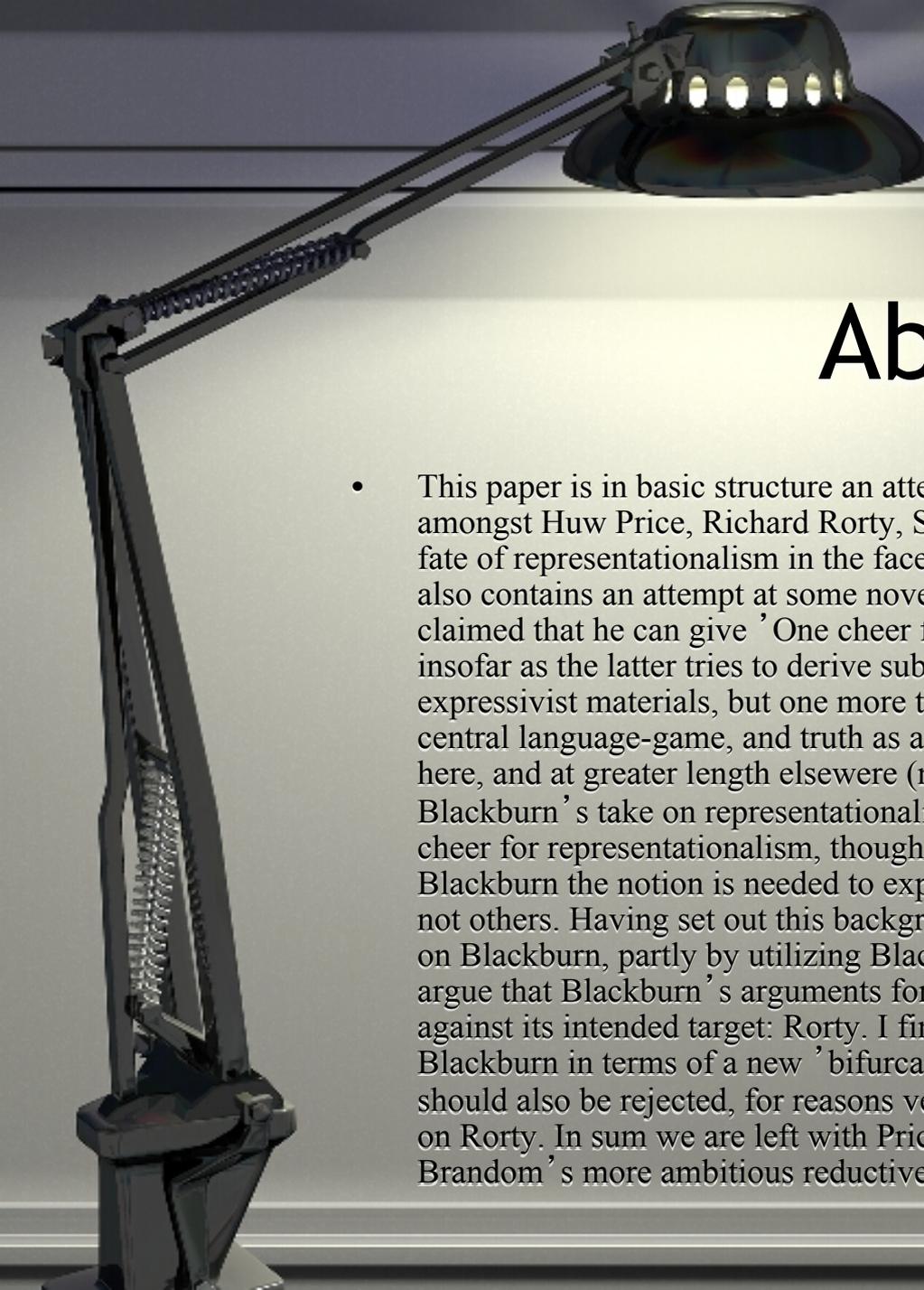
# Abstract

- This paper is in basic structure an attempt to tidy up some issues surrounding the debate amongst Huw Price, Richard Rorty, Simon Blackburn and Robert Brandom concerning the fate of representationalism in the face of a common acceptance of minimalism about truth; it also contains an attempt at some novel arguments against representationalism. Price has claimed that he can give 'One cheer for representationalism' – one less than Brandom, insofar as the latter tries to derive substantial semantic notions from pragmatist-cum-expressivist materials, but one more than Rorty, insofar as Price sees assertion as being *the* central language-game, and truth as a norm distinct from justification. Price also criticizes here, and at greater length elsewere (notably in a paper together with David Macarthur), Blackburn's take on representationalism, which, like Brandom's, involves more than one cheer for representationalism, though apparently for somewhat different reaons: for Blackburn the notion is needed to explain the functioning of certain truth-apt discourses and not others. Having set out this background, I will first criticize Price and Macarthur's attack on Blackburn, partly by utilizing Blackburn's own response to them. I will then go on to argue that Blackburn's arguments for his limited representationalism still lack conviction against its intended target: Rorty. I finally argue that Price's attempted rapprochement with Blackburn in terms of a new 'bifurcation' between e-representation and i-representation should also be rejected, for reasons very similar to those that undermine Blackburn's attack on Rorty. In sum we are left with Price's original one cheer for representationalism (though Brandom's more ambitious reductive project remains on the table too).

# Pragmatism and neo-pragmatism

- Dewey/Rorty: language is for 'coping not copying', a *tool* suited to certain purposes.

- Romanticism/Brandom: language is a lamp rather than a mirror. Emphasis on language-*use* as explanatory notion.
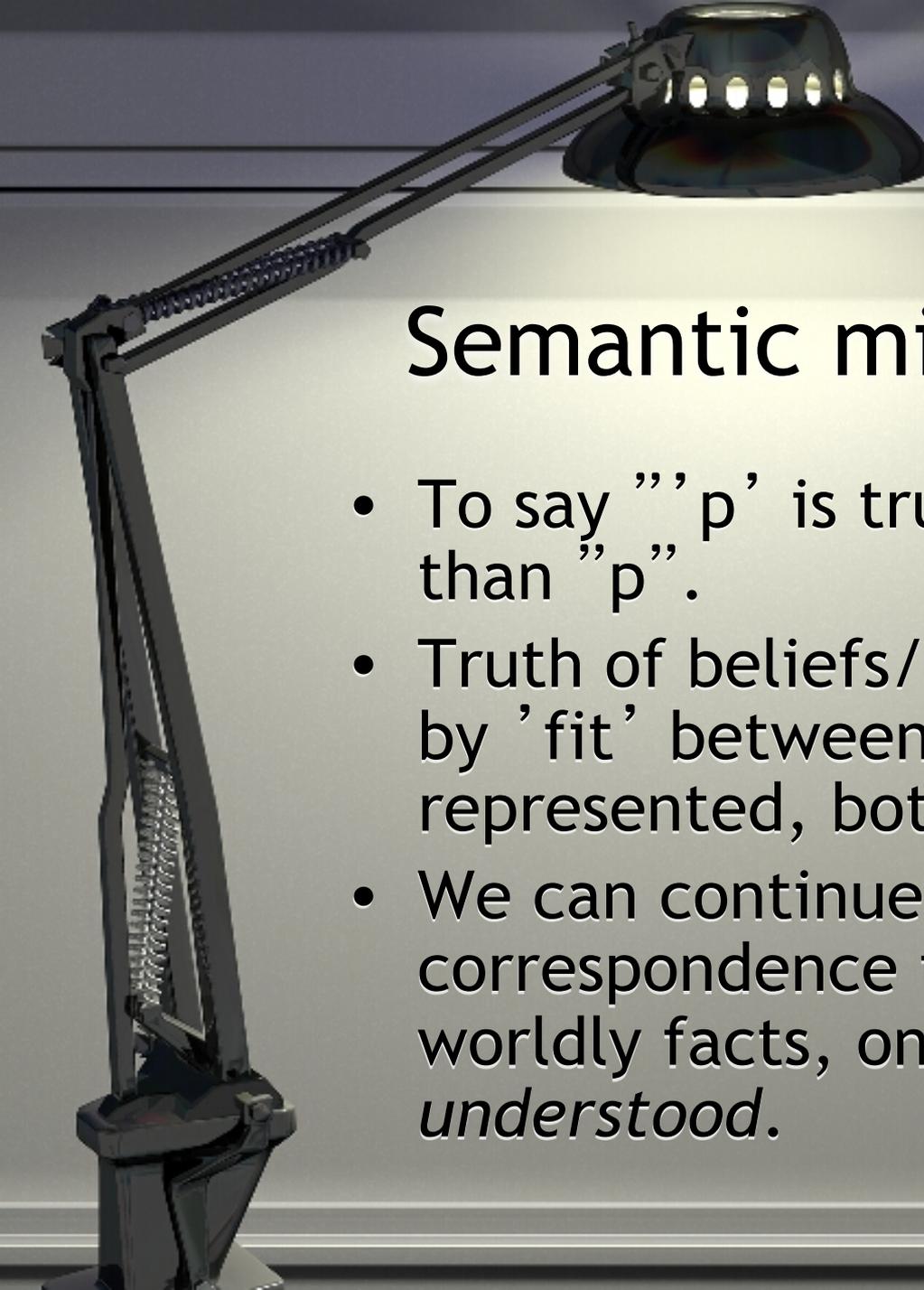
# Semantic minimalism as ally

- To say "'p' is true" is to say no more than "p".

- Truth of beliefs/assertions not *explained* by 'fit' between representation and represented, both terms fall out.

- We can continue to talk of correspondence to/representation of worldly facts, only not *substantively understood*.
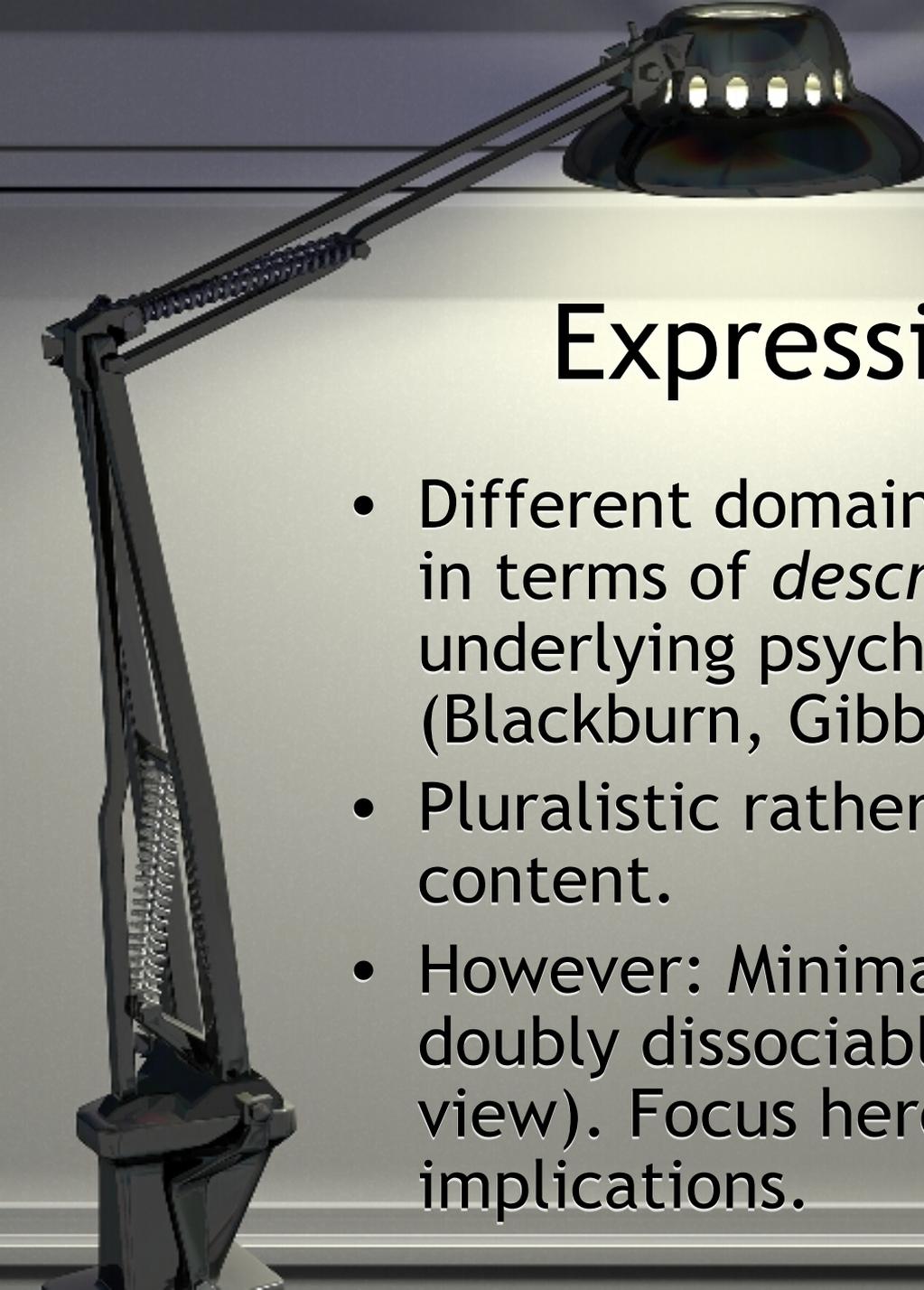
# Expressivism as ally

- Different domains not to be understood in terms of *describing* but *expressing* underlying psychological function (Blackburn, Gibbard, Price)

- Pluralistic rather than monolithic view of content.

- However: Minimalism and expressivism doubly dissociable commitments (in my view). Focus here on former and its implications.
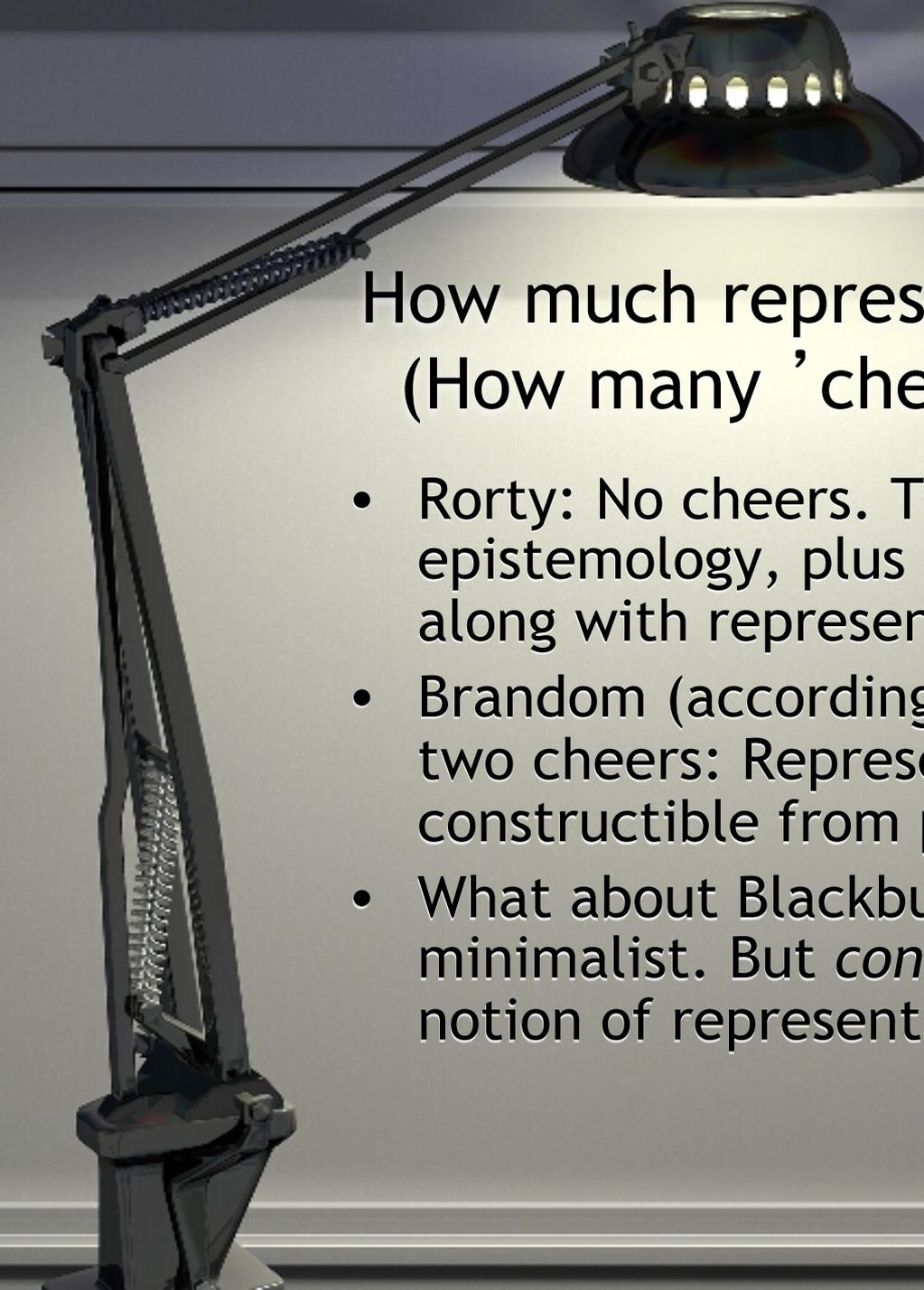
# How much representationalism remains? (How many 'cheers' does it deserve?)

- Rorty: No cheers. Traditional metaphysics and epistemology, plus truth as a separate norm, go along with representationalism.

- Brandom (according to Price's interpretation): two cheers: Representationalist notions constructible from pragmatist materials

- What about Blackburn? A fully-paid up semantic minimalist. But *contra* Rorty, we still need the notion of representation.
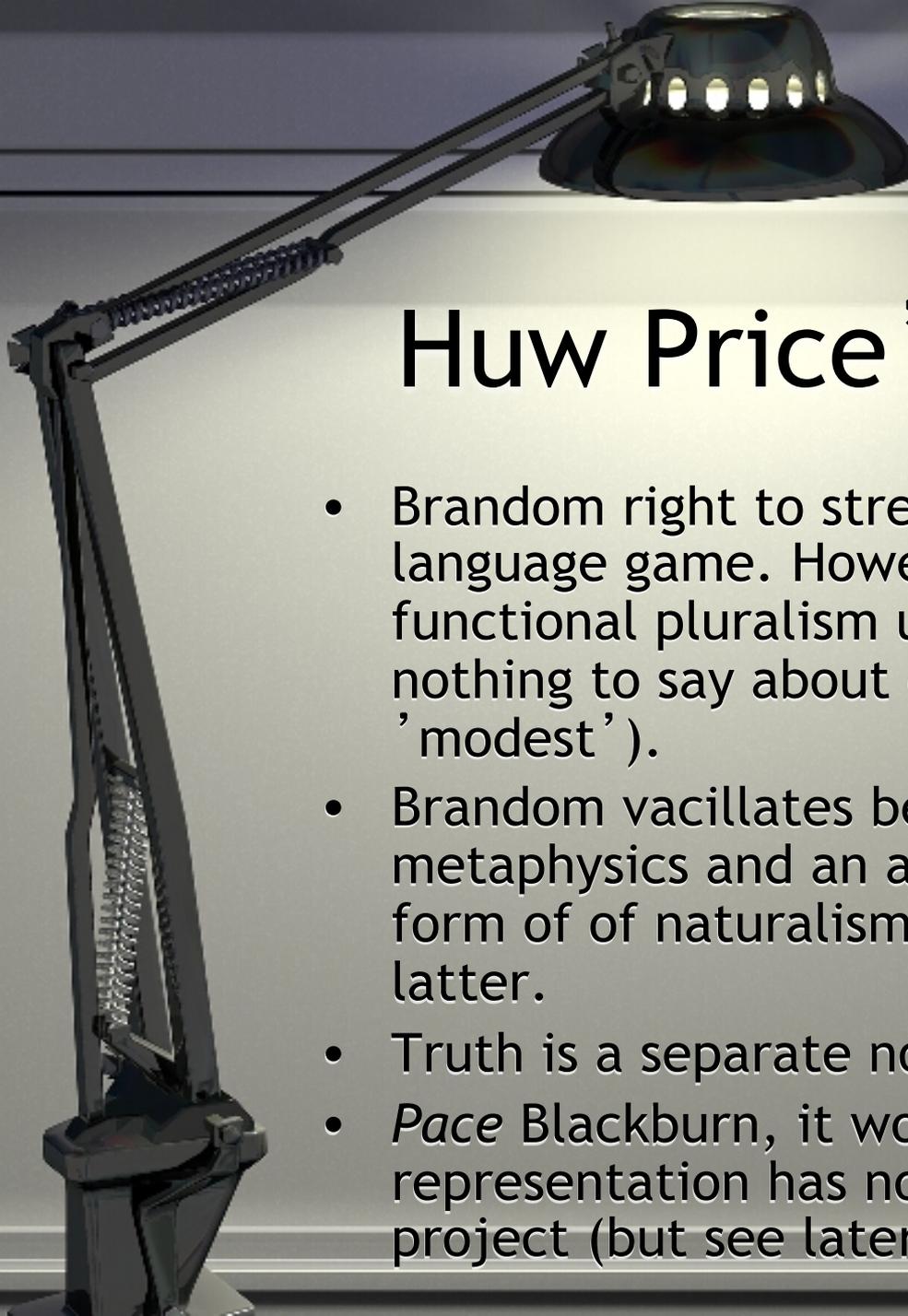
# Huw Price's 'one cheer'

- Brandom right to stress centrality of the assertion language game. However, this can't undermine functional pluralism unless Brandom's project has nothing to say about content but only force (i.e. is 'modest').

- Brandom vacillates between quasi-Hegelian metaphysics and an anti-metaphysical, expressivist form of of naturalism – he should embrace the latter.

- Truth is a separate norm from justification.

- *Pace* Blackburn, it would seem the concept of representation has no role to play otherwise in the project (but see later)

# Price/Price & Macarthur on Blackburn

- Price & Macarthur: semantic minimalism entails *global* expressivism/anti-representationalism. No 'bifurcation thesis'

- Argument 1: If you want some but not all discourses to be representational, you must think there are substantial semantic relations, which conflicts with minimalism

- Argument 2: Given minimalism + expressivism you don't *need* representationalism to explain how discourses get to be truth apt.
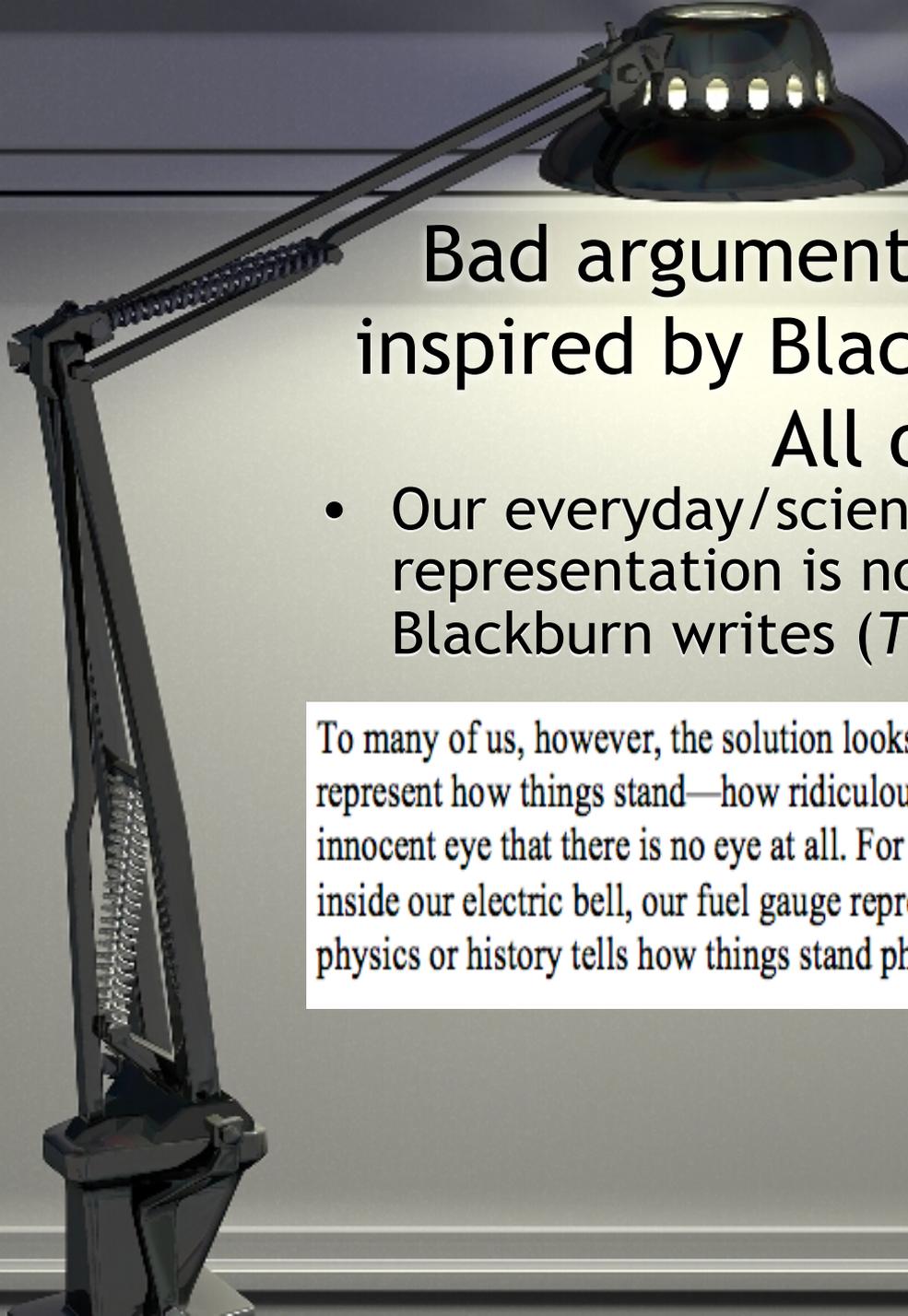
# Bad arguments! (following partly inspired by Blackburn, 'Pragmatism: All or some?'

- Our everyday/scientific concept of representation is not in thrall to philosophy. Blackburn writes (*Truth*, 153):

To many of us, however, the solution looks worse than the problem: language is not there to represent how things stand—how ridiculous! It is as if Rorty has inferred from there being no innocent eye that there is no eye at all. For after all, a wiring diagram represents how things stand inside our electric bell, our fuel gauge represents the amount of petrol left in the tank, and our physics or history tells how things stand physically or historically.
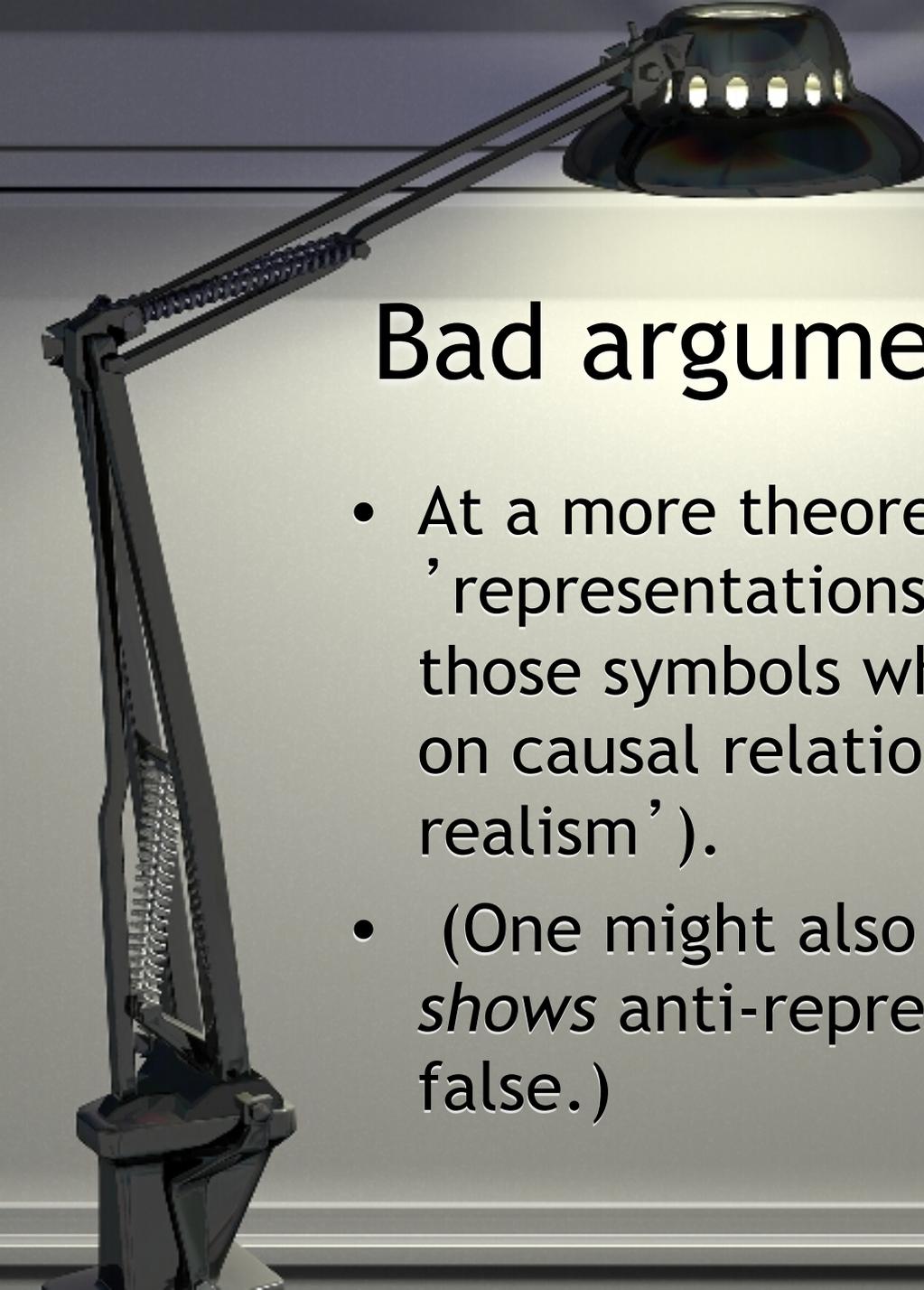
# Bad arguments (continued)

- At a more theoretical level 'representations' could be argued to be those symbols whose existence depends on causal relations to referents ('eleatic realism').

- (One might also think cognitive science *shows* anti-representationalism to be false.)
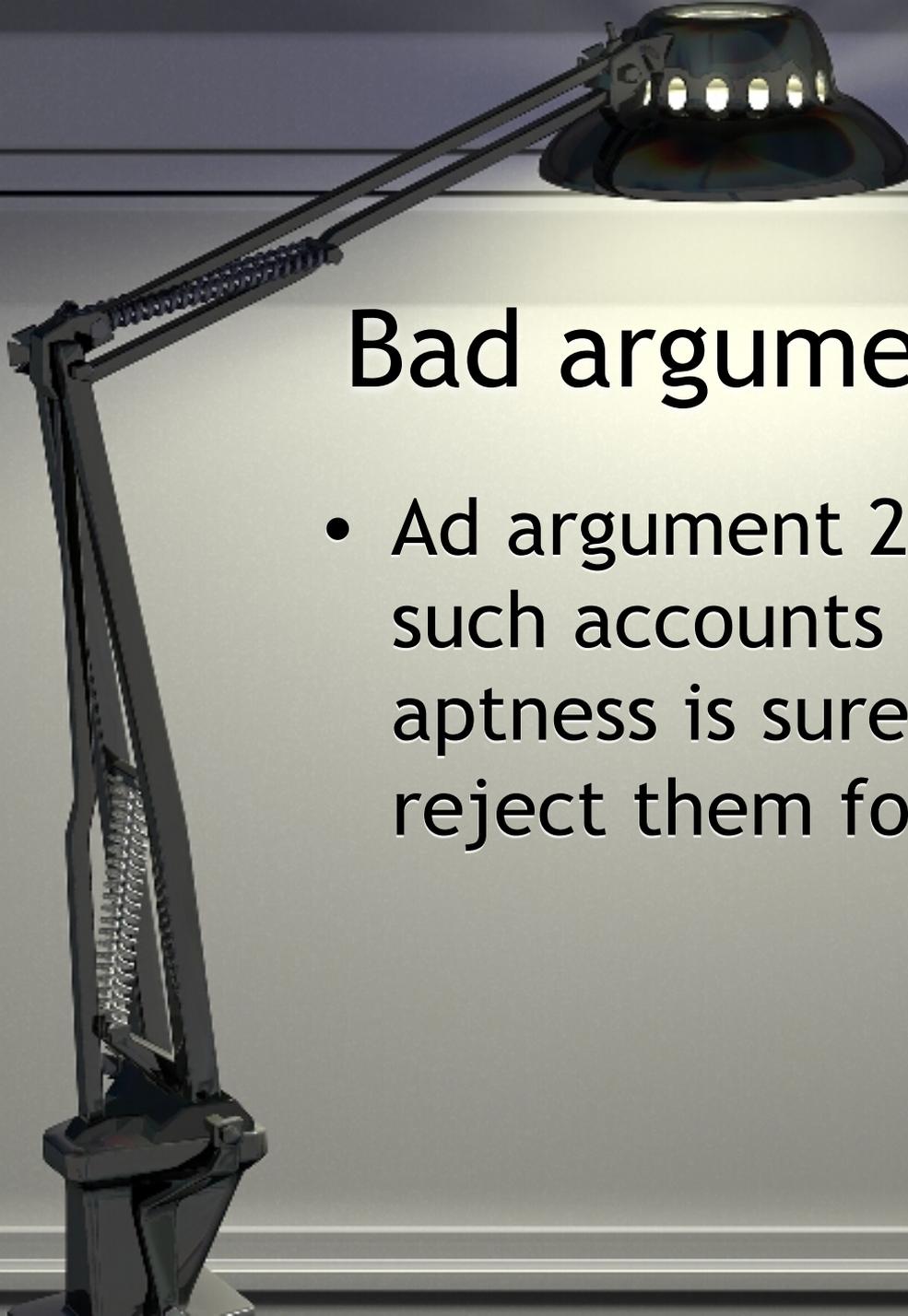
# Bad arguments (continued)

- Ad argument 2: That we don't *need* such accounts to explain truth-aptness is surely a bad reason to reject them for a pluralist!
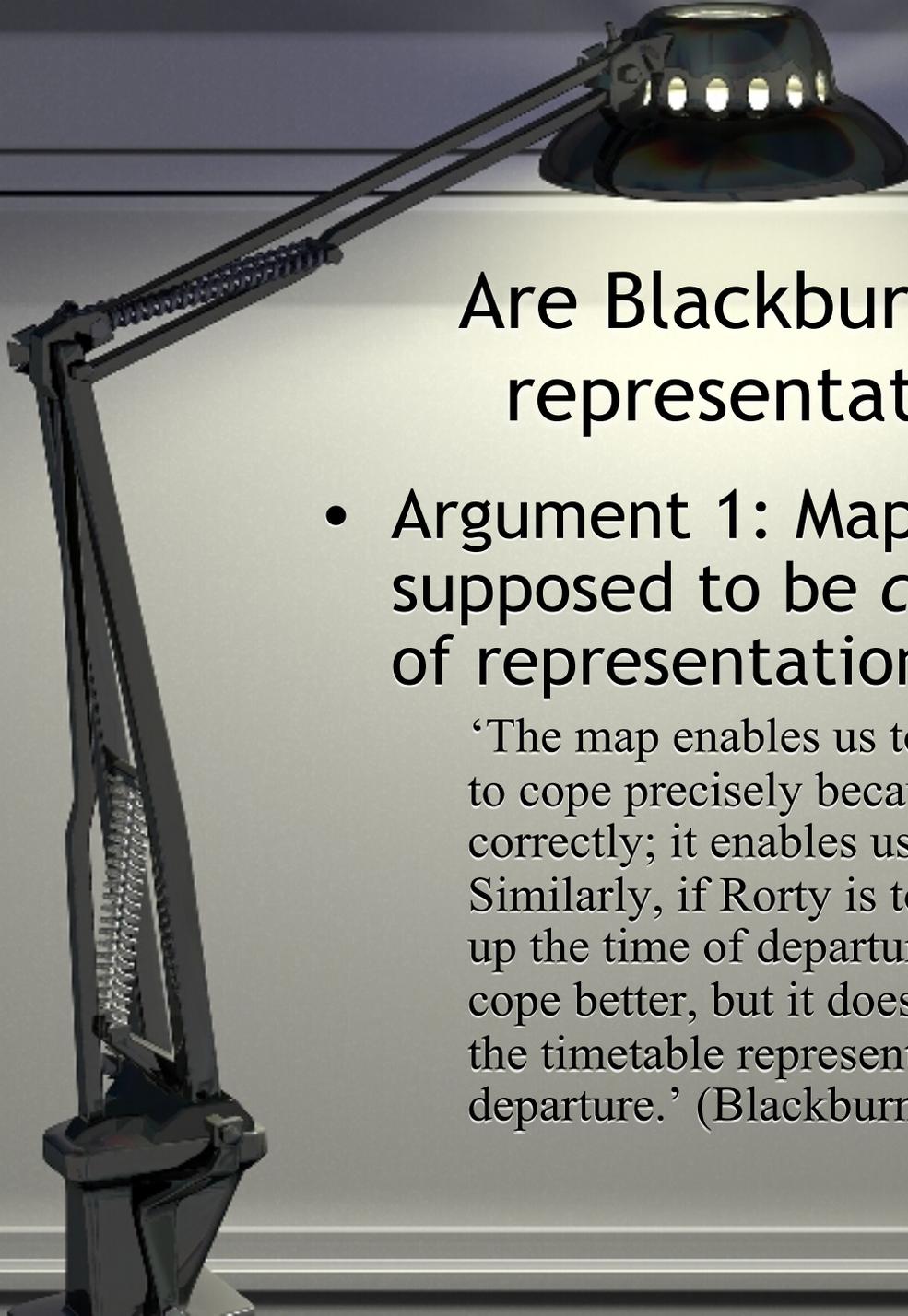
# Are Blackburn's arguments *for* representationalism cogent?

- Argument 1: Maps etc. These are supposed to be *common sense* examples of representation.

  'The map enables us to cope but we know why. It enables us to cope precisely because it represents the landscape correctly; it enables us to anticipate what we shall find. Similarly, if Rorty is to catch a plane, he will doubtless look up the time of departure in a timetable. The enables him to cope better, but it does so just because the times written in the timetable represent the intended times of departure.' (Blackburn 2006: 158)
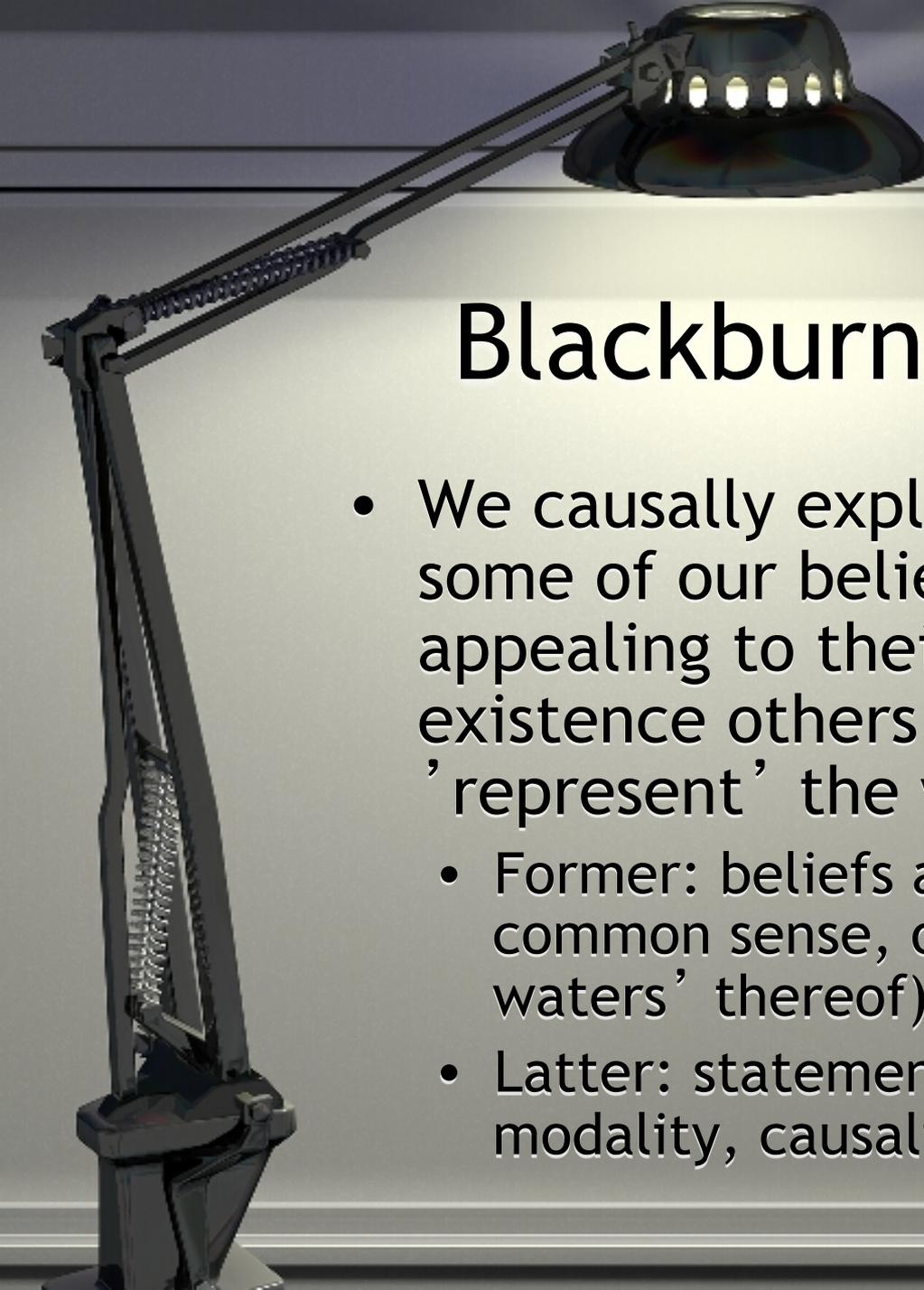
# Blackburn's argument 2

- We causally explain the existence of some of our beliefs/statements by appealing to their referents, not the existence others. Only the former 'represent' the world.
  - Former: beliefs about everyday objects of common sense, objects of science ('coastal waters' thereof)
  - Latter: statements about value, probability, modality, causality etc.
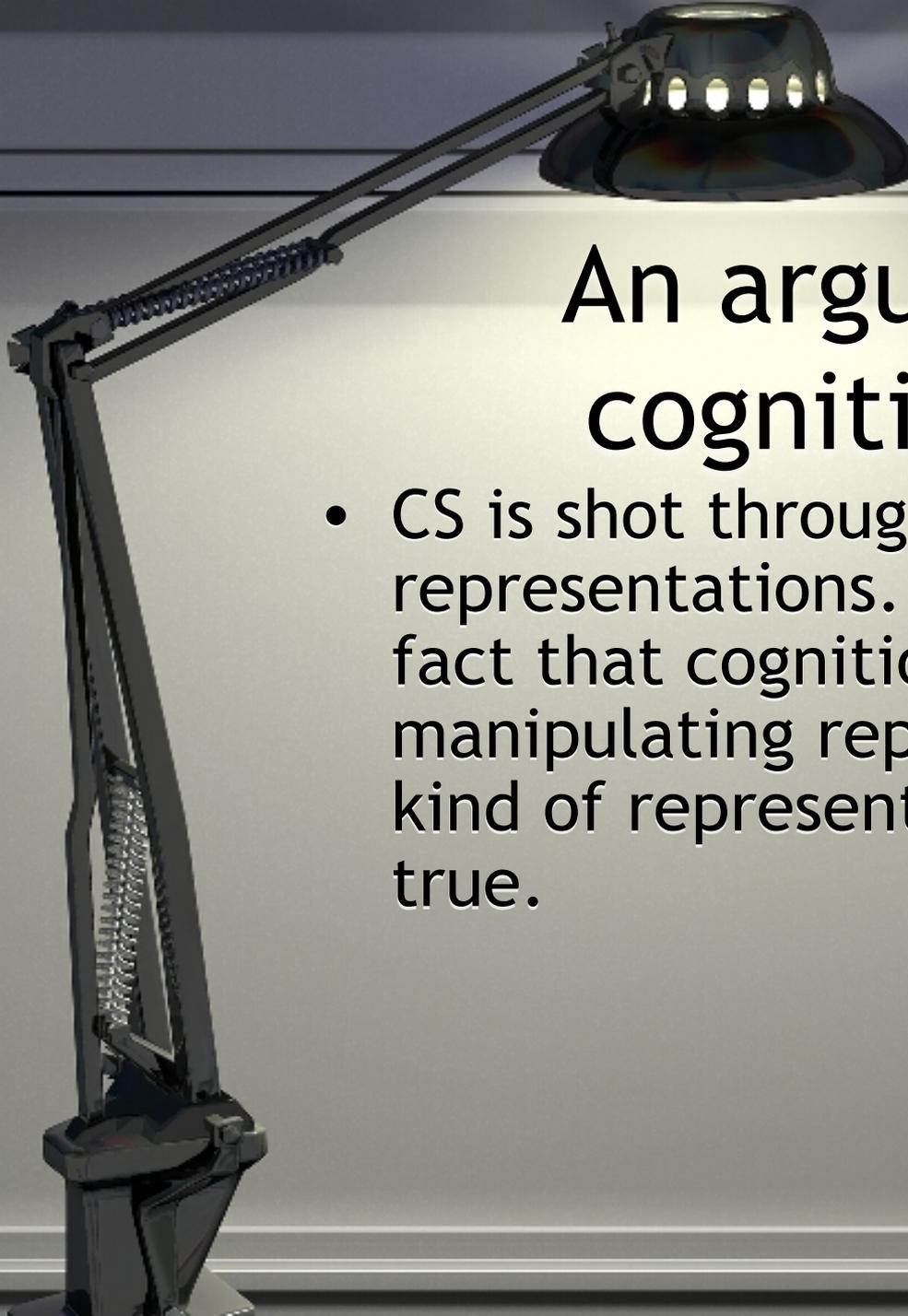
# An argument from cognitive science

- CS is shot through with talk of representations. Given it is an empirical fact that cognition occurs through manipulating representations, then some kind of representationalism must be true.
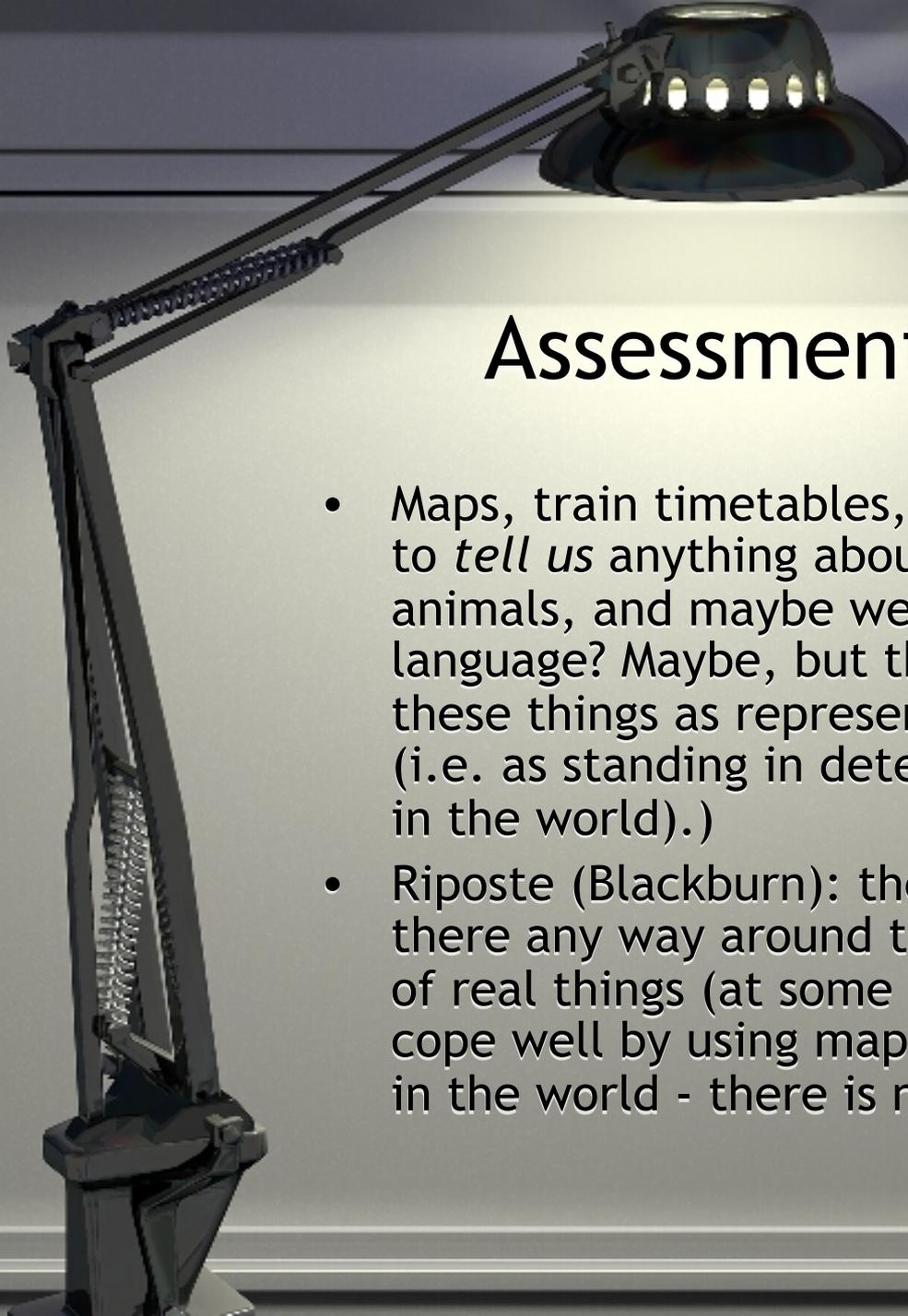
# Assessment of argument 1

- Maps, train timetables, pictures *etc.* must be interpreted to *tell us* anything about what they represent. (Can't animals, and maybe we ourselves, use symbols without language? Maybe, but there is no pressing need to see these things as representations in the proprietary sense (i.e. as standing in determinate relations to facts/things in the world).)

- Riposte (Blackburn): there is no 'given', but neither is there any way around thinking in terms of representation of real things (at some point, cf. next but one slide): we cope well by using maps etc because they copy something in the world - there is nothing else to say.
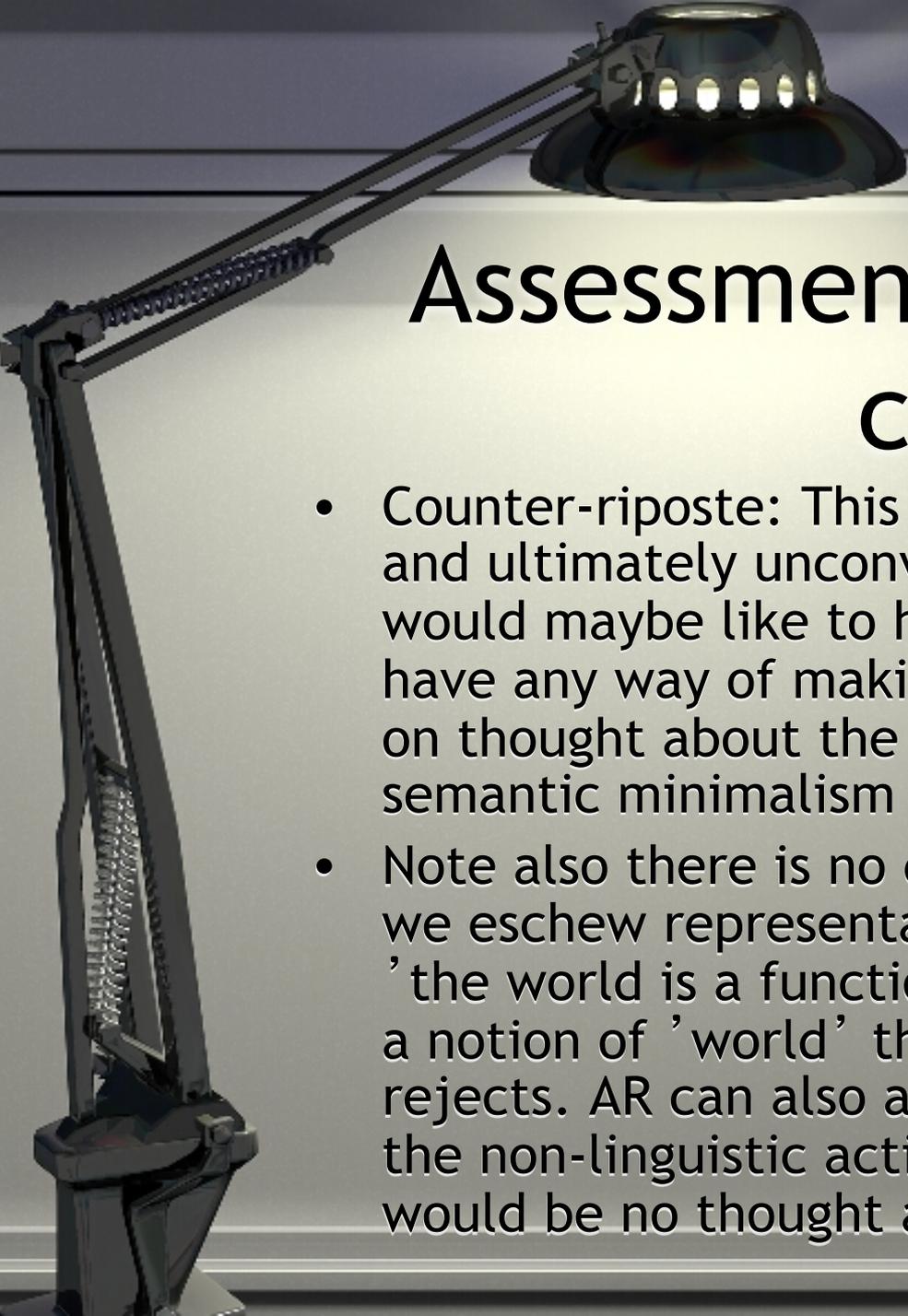
# Assessment argument 1 contd

- Counter-riposte: This is dialectically problematic and ultimately unconvincing. We (philosophers) would maybe like to have said this, but we don't have any way of making sense of how it casts light on thought about the world – unless we renege on semantic minimalism (here I agree with P&M).

- Note also there is no danger of linguistic idealism if we eschew representationalism, for the idea that 'the world is a function of our sayings' presupposes a notion of 'world' that antirepresentationalism rejects. AR can also acknowledge that without all the non-linguistic activities we engage in, there would be no thought and talk.
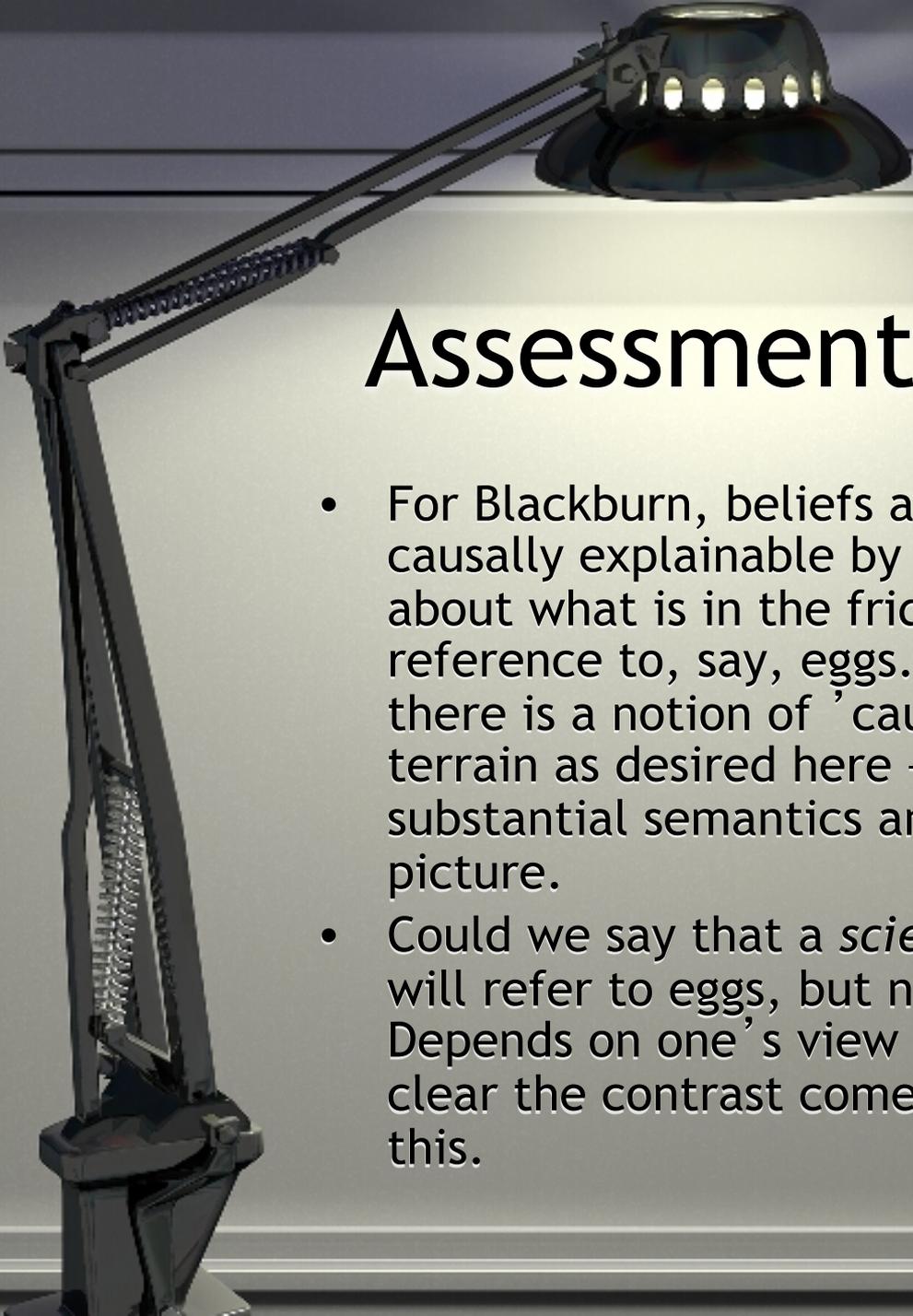
# Assessment of argument 2

- For Blackburn, beliefs about e.g. wrong and right are not causally explainable by reference to values, but beliefs about what is in the fridge are causally explainable by reference to, say, eggs. However, it is not clear that there is a notion of 'causally explain' which divides the terrain as desired here – without, again, bringing substantial semantics and metaphysics back into the picture.

- Could we say that a *scientific* explanation of egg beliefs will refer to eggs, but not moral belief to values? Depends on one's view of how the science works, but not clear the contrast comes through on any understanding of this.
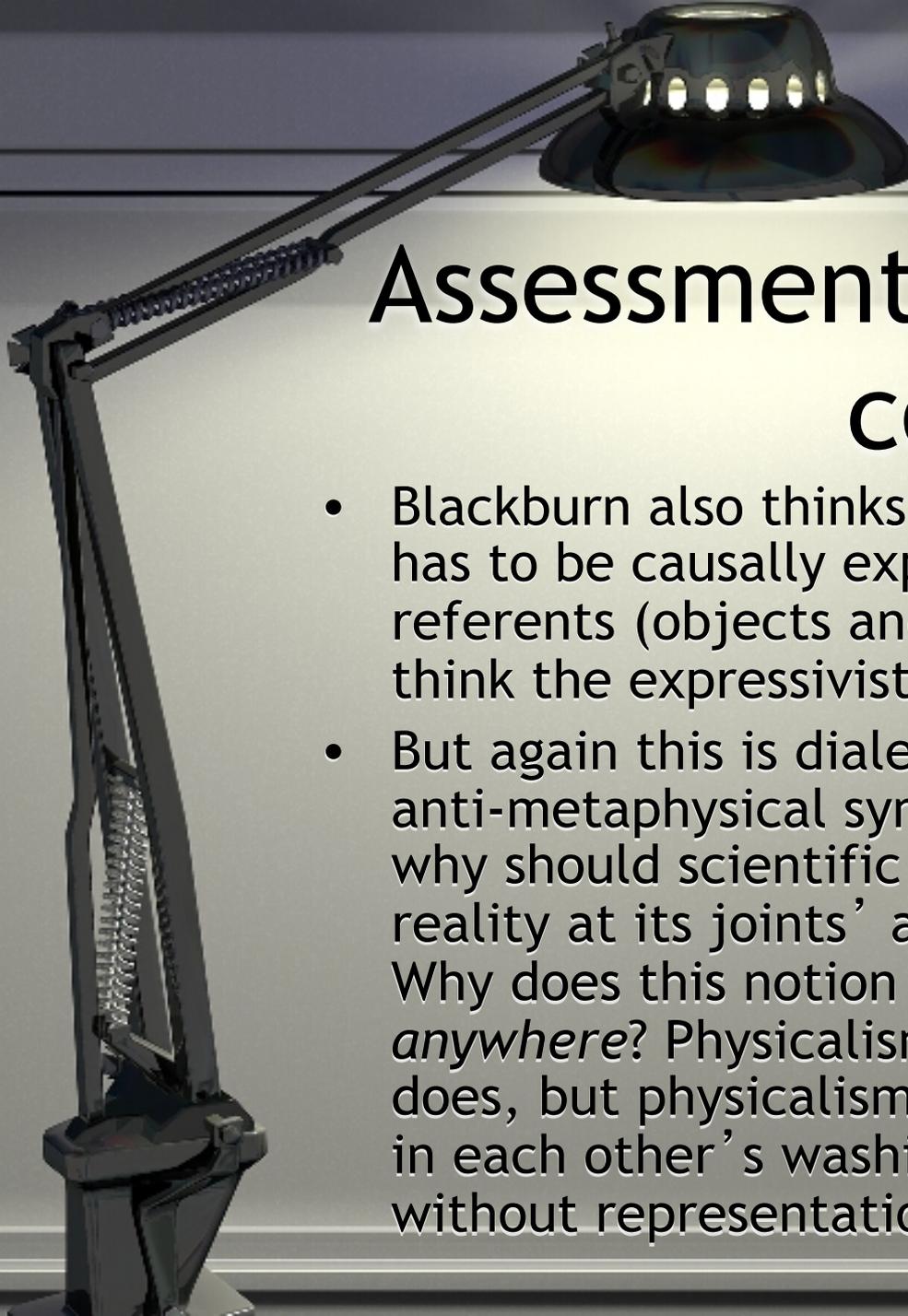
# Assessment of argument 2 contd.

- Blackburn also thinks *science*, i.e. its truth/success, has to be causally explained by the existence of its referents (objects and properties). (One might also think the expressivist buck must stop somewhere.)

- But again this is dialectically weak against one with anti-metaphysical sympathies (e.g. Rorty, Fine): why should scientific theories be seen as 'carving reality at its joints' any more than, say, morality? Why does this notion have to come into play *anywhere*? Physicalism might bolster the view that it does, but physicalism and metaphysical realism take in each other's washing (cf. Price 'Naturalism without representationalism').
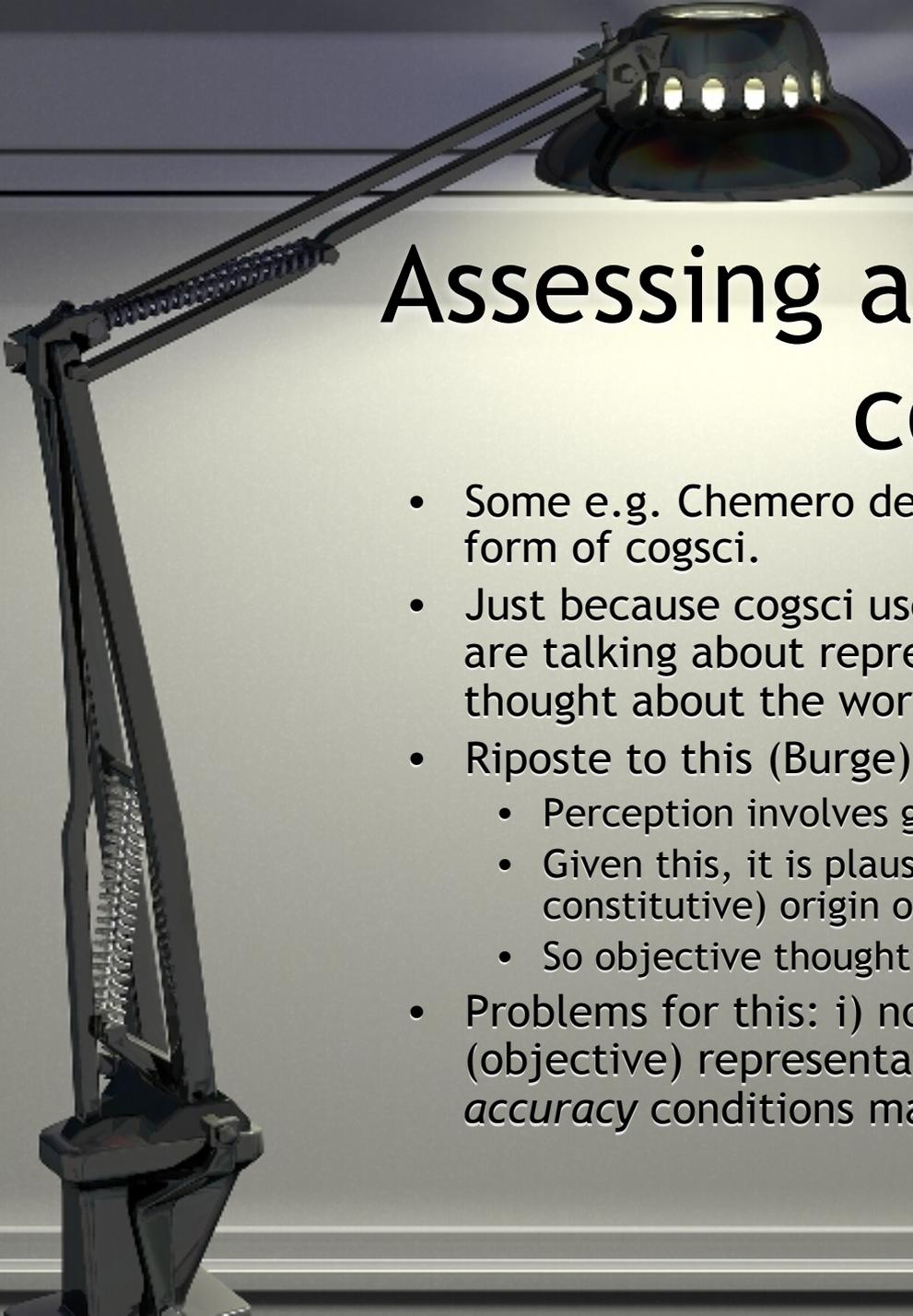
# Assessing argument from cogsci

- Some e.g. Chemero defend a strongly anti-representational form of cogsci.

- Just because cogsci uses 'representation' doesn't mean we are talking about representation in the sense relevant to thought about the world (cf. Chomsky).

- Riposte to this (Burge):

    - Perception involves genuine objective representation.

    - Given this, it is plausible that perception is the (causal + constitutive) origin of objective thought.

    - So objective thought is representational.

- Problems for this: i) not clear that perception does involve (objective) representation. ii) not clear that perceptual *accuracy* conditions map onto *truth* conditions.
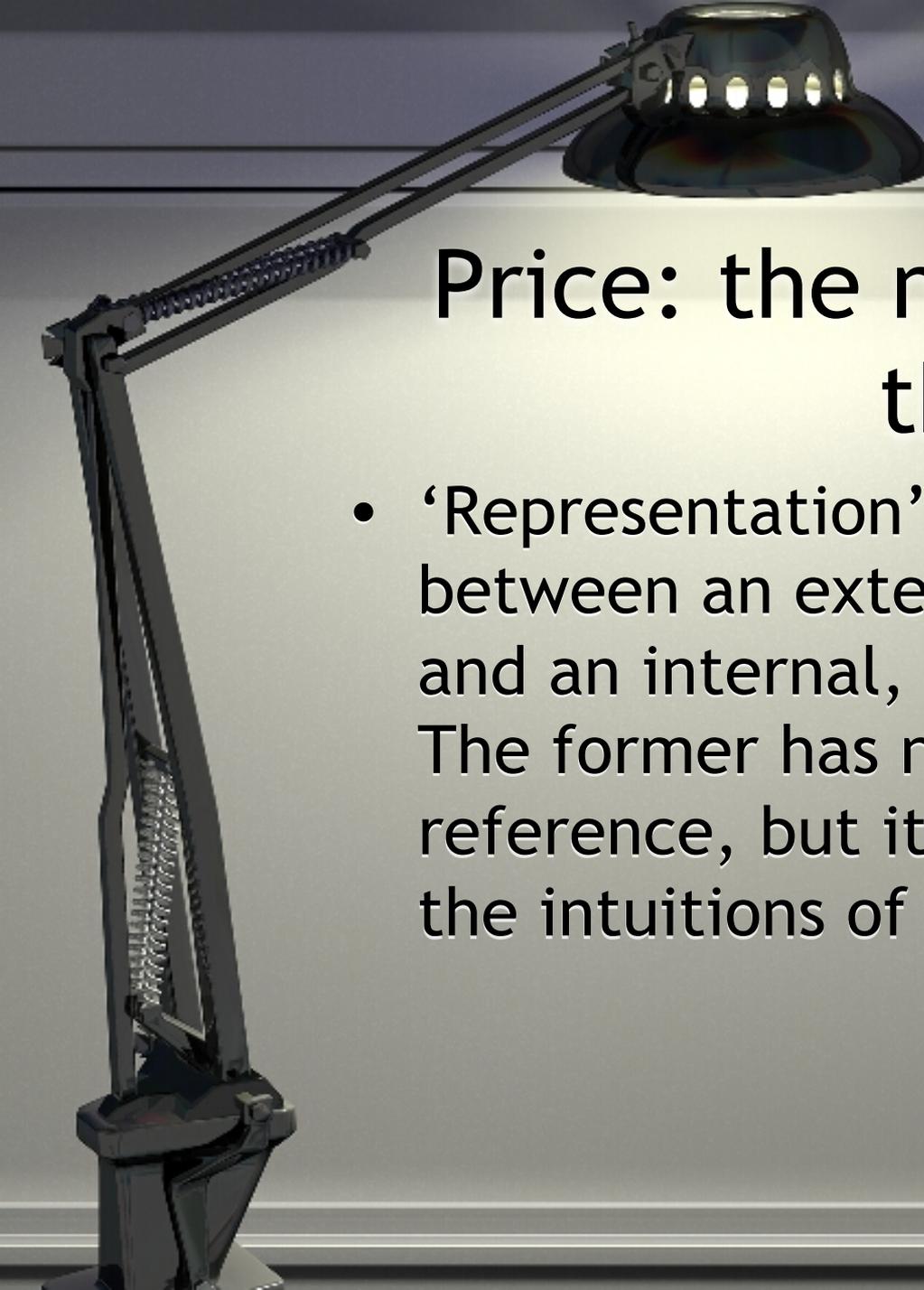
# Price: the new bifurcation thesis

- 'Representation' is actually ambiguous between an external, covariance notion and an internal, inferentialist notion. The former has nothing to with truth and reference, but it can perhaps vindicate the intuitions of Blackburn.
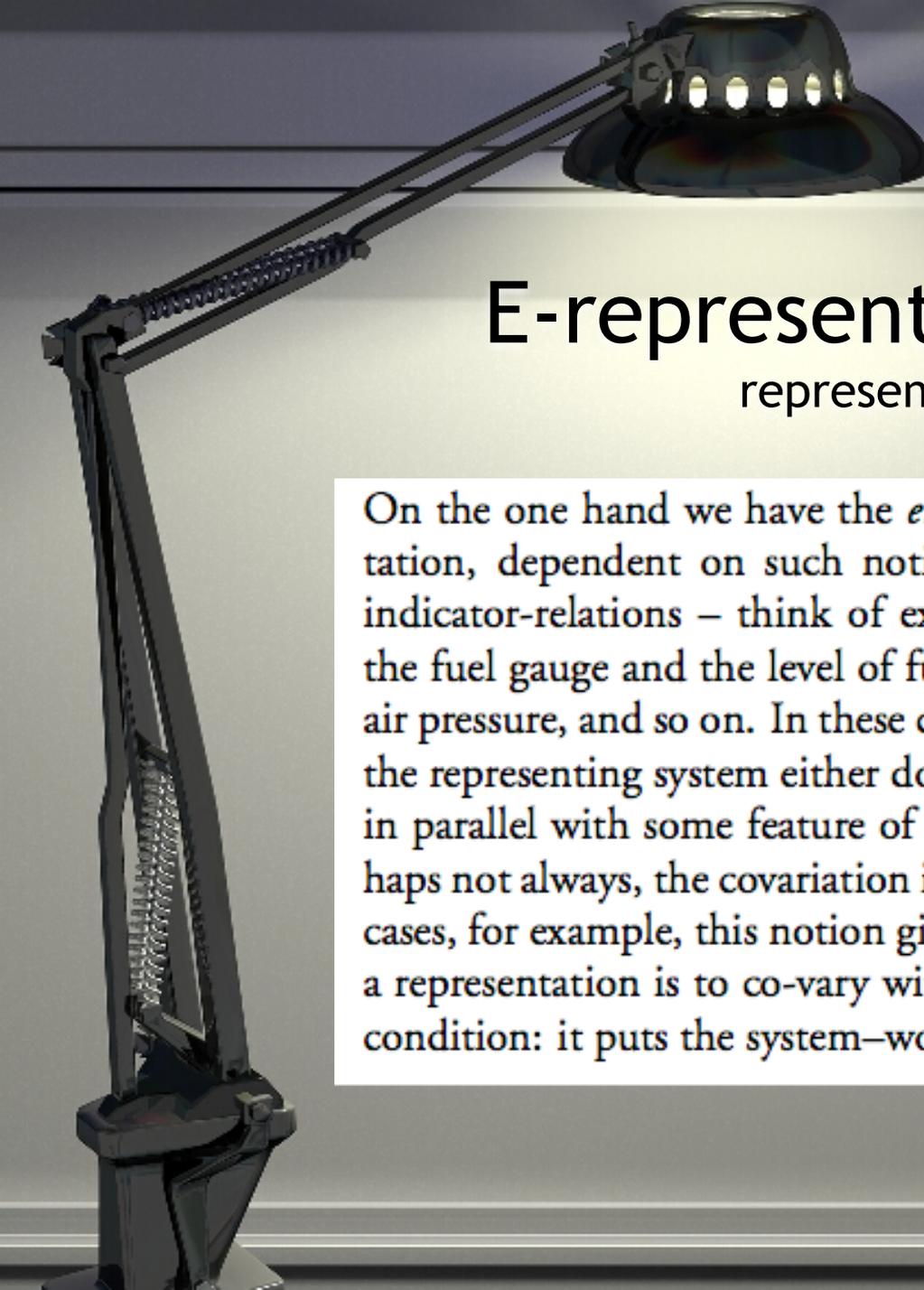
# E-representation ('Two readings of representationalism', 12)

On the one hand we have the *environment-tracking* paradigm of representation, dependent on such notions as covariation and (what Field calls) indicator-relations – think of examples like the position of the needle in the fuel gauge and the level of fuel in the tank, the barometer reading and air pressure, and so on. In these cases, the crucial idea is that some feature of the representing system either does, or is (in some sense) 'intended to', vary in parallel with some feature of the represented system. (Usually, but perhaps not always, the covariation in question has a causal basis.) In biological cases, for example, this notion gives priority to the idea that the function of a representation is to co-vary with some (typically) *external* environmental condition: it puts the system–world link on the front foot.[14]
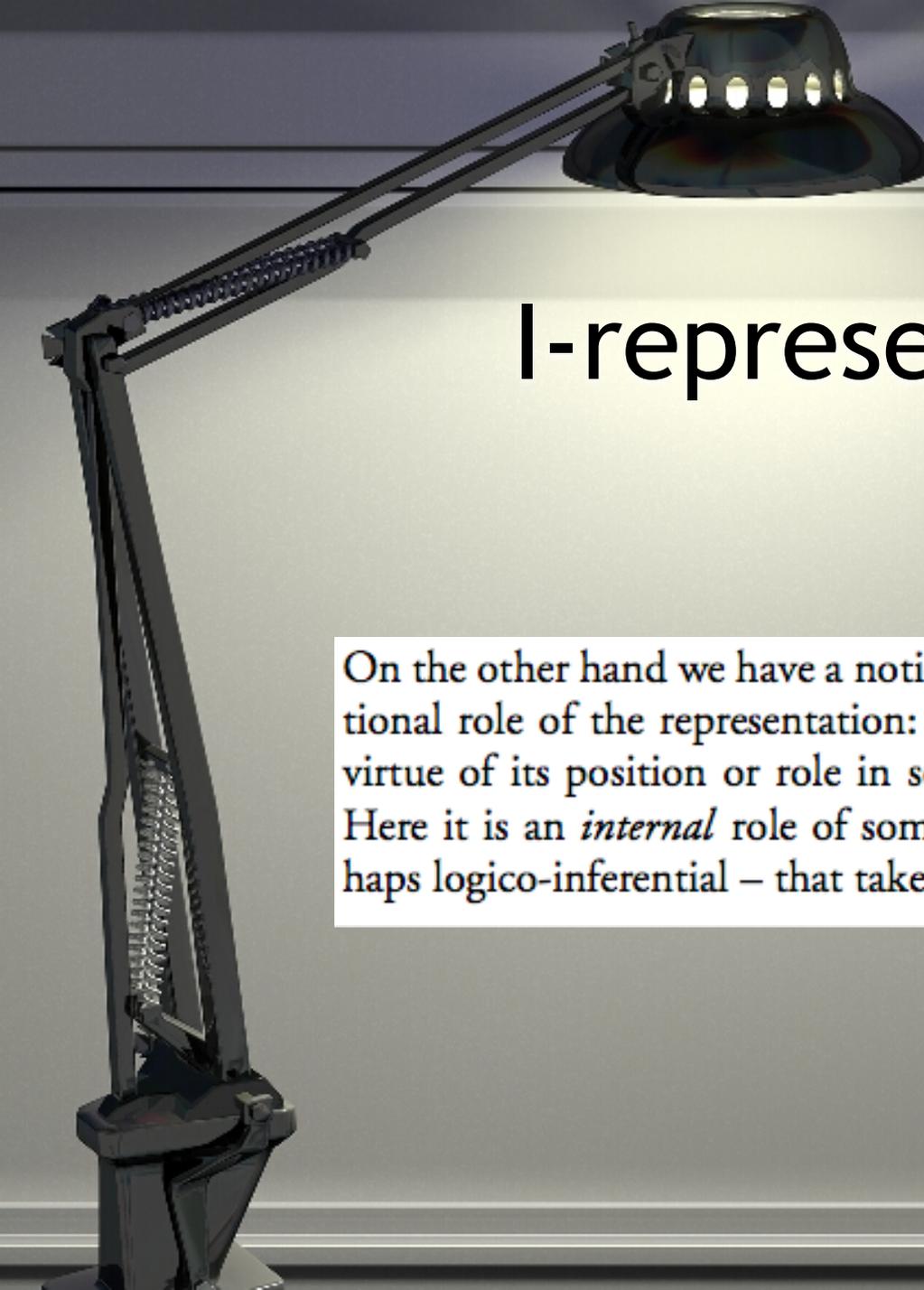
# I-representation (loc. cit.)

On the other hand we have a notion that gives priority to the *internal* functional role of the representation: something counts as a representation in virtue of its position or role in some cognitive or inferential architecture. Here it is an *internal* role of some kind – perhaps causal–functional, perhaps logico-inferential – that takes the lead.
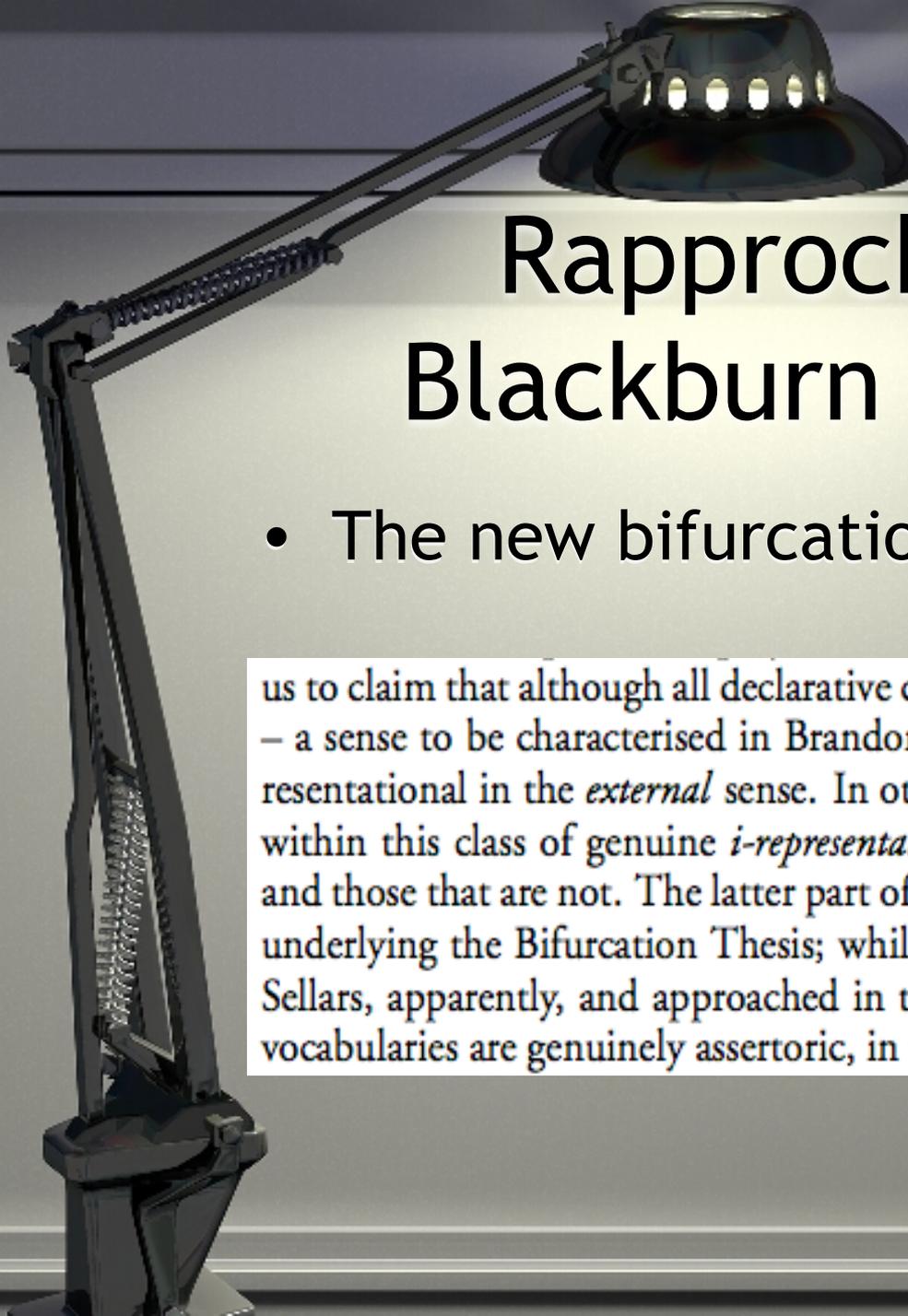
# Rapprochement with Blackburn ('Expressivism for two voices', 103-4)

- The new bifurcation thesis allows...

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.
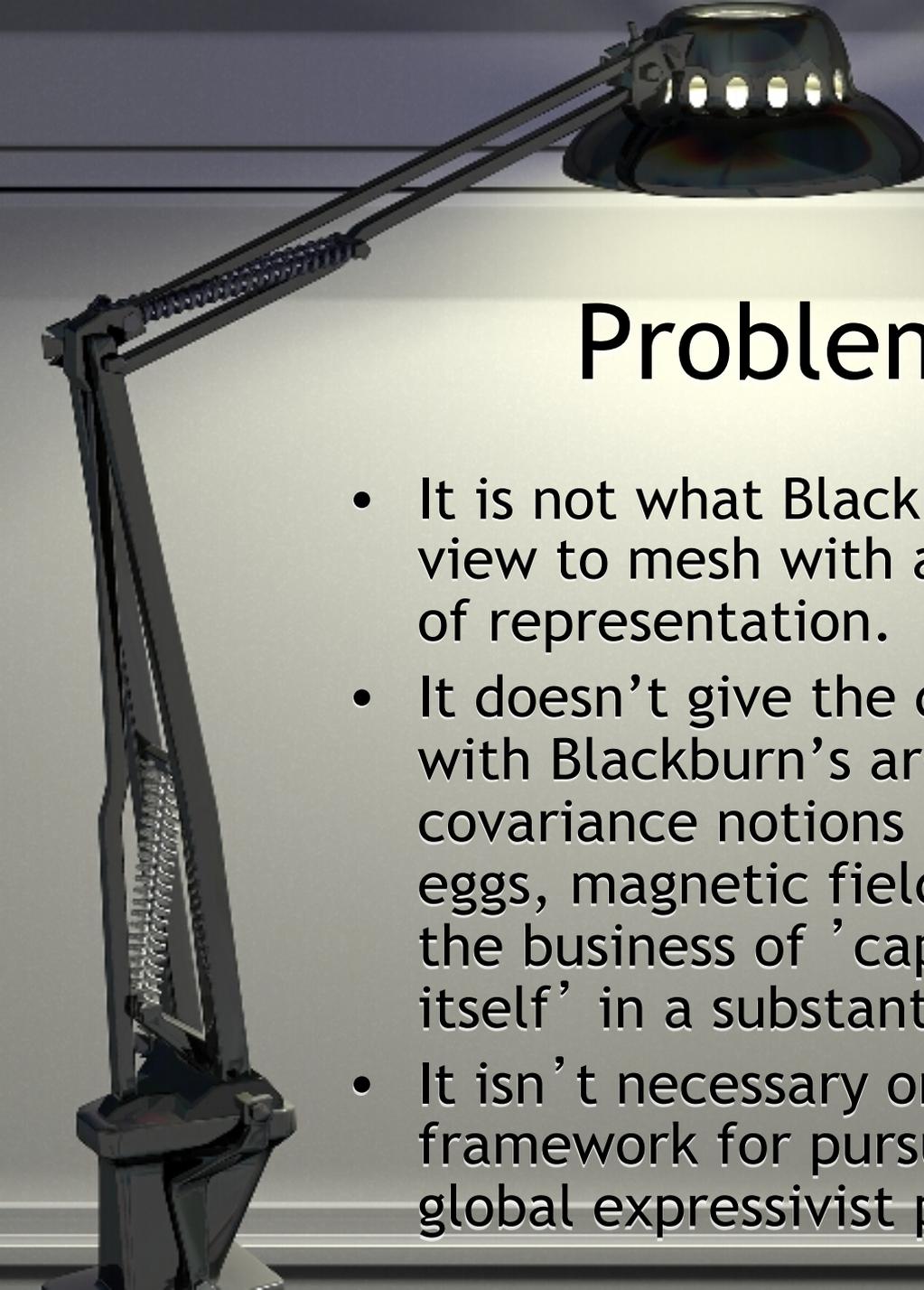
# Problems with this

- It is not what Blackburn wants - he wants his view to mesh with an everyday + *univocal* sense of representation.

- It doesn't give the desired results: cf. problems with Blackburn's argument 2: Why should covariance notions be restricted to talk about eggs, magnetic fields, etc. if we have eschewed the business of 'capturing the world as it in itself' in a substantive sense?

- It isn't necessary or even helpful as a framework for pursuing the subject naturalist/ global expressivist project.
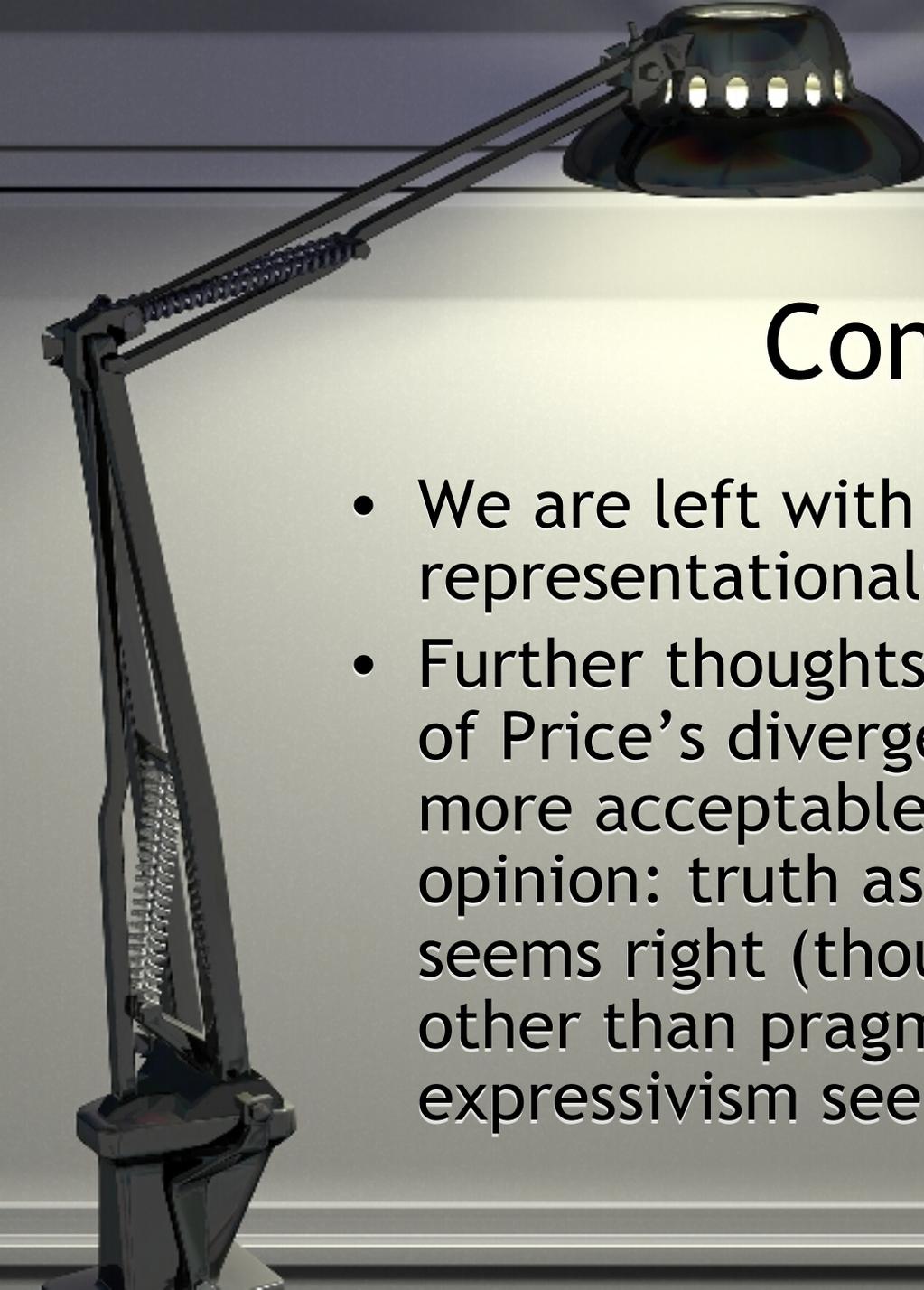
# Conclusion

- We are left with Price's 'one cheer' for representationalism.
- Further thoughts: there are some aspects of Price's divergence from Rorty that are more acceptable than others, in my opinion: truth as autonomous norm seems right (though reasons may be other than pragmatic), (global) expressivism seems dubiously coherent.