

## **'Pragmatism and Scientific Naturalism: Some Forks in the Road' (draft)**

[Jim.OShea@ucd.ie](mailto:Jim.OShea@ucd.ie) talk on Huw Price's *Naturalism Without Mirrors* (Zurich 8May11)

Huw Price presents his pragmatism as a globalized quasi-realist expressivism combined with a deflationary semantics and metaphysical quietism. The semantics is modeled on Robert Brandom's expressivist inferentialism. Price's global version of expressivism highlights the multifarious purposes of linguistic activity without the traditional non-cognitivist *contrast* between non-representational and allegedly genuinely representational uses of language. What results is pragmatism as a naturalistic functional pluralism about the varieties of ways in which language enables human animals to cope with their multifarious natural environments.

Price says about Brandom's inferentialist account of assertion that the "crucial thing, from my point of view, is that Brandom explicitly rejects a [big 'R'] Representationalist starting point, offering, as he puts it, an 'expressivist alternative' to the 'representational paradigm' (Brandom 2000: 10)" (20). To embrace Brandom's Sellarsian inferentialist semantics in this way is to leave behind many more familiar semantic paths as roads not taken, but here I want to follow Price down this first road - and this includes, at the appropriate level, Price's across the board minimalism about truth and facts. Here I want to briefly consider two main issues on which Price, Brandom, and Sellars diverge in interesting ways after heading down their common normative pragmatic, inferentialist road: the first fork concerns naturalism, and the second concerns what Price (following Robert Kraut) calls the 'Bifurcation' thesis.

Sellars, like Price, combined his across the board 'non-world-relational' inferentialist semantics with a kind of epistemic deflationary minimalism about the meaning or inferential role of the truth predicate, roughly as providing an epistemic license to disquote. (Sellars calls it truth as 'correct semantic assertibility'.) And about facts, Sellars writes in a deflationary spirit

in *Science and Metaphysics* (1968) that “the term ‘fact’ is properly used as a synonym for ‘truth’, even in its most generic sense, so that we can speak of mathematical and even ethical facts....” – but Sellars immediately adds that the term “ ‘factual’ ... [in a] more specific sense . . . should be thought of as short for ‘matter-of-factual’...” and as roughly equivalent to Leibniz’s technical distinction between truths of fact and truths of reason (*SM* V.2).

So the second fork, which I’ll return to briefly in closing, concerns Sellars’ attempt to embed *within* the sort of global pragmatism embraced by Brandom and Price an underlying ‘bifurcationist’ account of the nature of ‘matter-of-factual’ empirical truths. That is, in contrast to the various ‘M-world’ truths about matters of morality, modality, mentality, and meaning, for Sellars groundlevel matter-of-factual empirical truths involve a substantive *but non-semantic* ‘word–world’ causal-representational correspondence, naturalistically conceived.

So at the higher level, as it were, Sellars took his normative pragmatic account of truth as correct semantic assertibility to hold univocally across the full plurality of truth-apt propositional domains. But whereas in the case of mathematics truth consists<sup>1</sup> (roughly) in provability, and in morality truth consists (again, roughly) in consilience with certain intersubjectively instituted and impartial norms of action, the truth or correct assertibility of matter-of-factual empirical claims, Sellars argued, consists in their naturalistically corresponding to or tracking how matters stand with respect to the objects in the perceiver’s or the scientific theorist’s environment (broadly construed). The *making* of such matter-of-factual judgments is entirely an *internal* pragmatic business of correctness as on the inferentialist ‘use’ account of meaning story, for Sellars. But the ongoing *result* of such world-responsive inferential practices, he argues, is a complex and dynamic neuro-cognitive mapping of objects and uniformities in the environment. My suggestion in relation to this second fork is that it is not clear that Price and Brandom’s global pragmatism must entail the rejection of an underlying ‘small-r’ representationalist bifurcation having *this* general shape, and that

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<sup>1</sup> [M. Lynch and C. Wright debates about how exactly to characterize this relationship....]

embracing it would provide a resource for responding to some of the traditional hostility to pragmatism. (It also enables a coherent tie-in to a parallel account of non-linguistic animal representational states or ‘mappings’ based on natural selection.)

So that was the second fork, and I’ll return to it again briefly in closing. A more immediate choice point confronts the initial embrace of Brandom’s normative inferentialist pragmatism, however, and this concerns the question of naturalism in general.

In the Locke Lectures, *Between Saying and Doing*, Brandom’s key methodological innovation concerns what he calls *pragmatically mediated* semantic relations between vocabularies, enabling him to present his ‘analytic pragmatist’ as a successor to the classical logicist, empiricist, and naturalist “core programs” of 20<sup>th</sup> century analytic philosophy. An example Brandom gives of what he calls (strict) “*pragmatic expressive bootstrapping*” within this account is the case of providing “an extensional metalanguage for intensional languages, as in the case of possible worlds semantics for modality” (Brandom *BSAD*: 11). (It is ‘bootstrapping’, for example, in the sense that the metalanguage is expressively weaker than the target language it explicates.) And then Brandom adds the following interesting example concerning Price’s naturalism:

“One example of a claim of this shape in the case of pragmatically mediated semantic relations . . . is Huw Price’s pragmatic normative naturalism. He argues, in effect, that although normative vocabulary is not *reducible to* naturalistic vocabulary, it might still be possible to say in wholly naturalistic vocabulary what one must do in order to be using normative vocabulary. If such a claim about the existence of an expressively bootstrapping naturalistic pragmatic metavocabulary for normative vocabulary could be made out, it would evidently be an important chapter in the development of the naturalist core program of the classical project of philosophical analysis. It would be a paradigm of the sort of payoff we could expect from extending that analytic

project by including pragmatically mediated semantic relations.”  
(Brandom *BSAD*: 10-11)

But what exactly is Brandom’s attitude toward what he here praises as Price’s “would be” naturalistic analysis of the use of normative vocabulary, as part of what generally features in the book as the superseded ‘core program’ of classical analytic naturalism? Not only here but also in various places in commenting on Ruth Millikan’s very different biological naturalism, Brandom offers praise and does not outright reject but certainly does not endorse the envisioned naturalistic explanations of our normative-linguistic behavior.

Brandom’s earlier *Making It Explicit* presents norms as at once irreducible to the causal order and yet also as non-mysterious from a naturalistic point of view: on the one hand it is “norms all the way down” (*MIE* 44), and Brandom asserts that “Norms...are not objects in the causal order” (*MIE* 626); but on the other hand “Normative statuses are domesticated by being understood in terms of normative attitudes, which *are* in the causal order” (*MIE* 626). Price himself quotes these passages to illustrate that Brandom seems to vacillate between directly taking on traditional metaphysical tasks such as attempting to determine what norms *really* are (which on Price’s view he shouldn’t do), and properly naturalistic domesticating accounts in terms of the function of various cognitive attitudes of subjects. What I’m considering is the slightly different question of Brandom’s attitude, not toward metaphysics in general, but toward Price’s proposed naturalistic account of normative vocabulary itself as he describes it above.

Another way of putting this is to ask what Brandom’s attitude is toward the idea of a thoroughlygoingly *naturalistic account of the human subject itself*, that is, of the rational being that *has* the attitudes that serve to functionally or expressively domesticate the irreducible normative statuses in Brandom’s normative pragmatics. On my view what Brandom’s father figure Sellars had earlier sought was (like Brandom) a non-reductive

pragmatic account of the normative ‘M-worlds’ (in Price’s sense), one which is indeed much like Brandom’s own inferentialist account, but one which nonetheless, as Sellars put it, “can be reconciled with the idea that man is what science says he is” (PSIM 38). How to achieve this naturalistic reconciliation was the central problem of Sellars’ philosophy, and I think the question of whether to embrace a thoroughgoing naturalism *with respect to the constitutively and irreducibly normative capacities of human subjects themselves*, from top to bottom, constitutes a first crucial fork in the global inferentialist pragmatist road.

At this fork Sellars, on my reading, in effect took Price’s path in seeking to maintain the view – consistently with the pragmatic irreducibility of the M-worlds in terms of which we conceive ourselves as rational social beings – that human beings are nonetheless what science says they are, where this latter claim is understood in a way that I don’t think Brandom wants to embrace. Perhaps Price’s view also involves resisting such statements, since Sellars takes *this* claim to be a straightforward ontological claim; but in Sellars’ hands the naturalistic ontology is authorized solely by the explanatory successes of science and is not based foundationally on a Big-R representationalist metaphysics. And in my view a crucial part of Sellars’ own complex way of attempting to reconcile the ‘irreducibly normative’ with the ‘scientifically natural’ was what we just saw Brandom admire in Price but from a distance: namely, the idea that “it might still be possible to *say* in wholly naturalistic vocabulary what one must *do* in order to be *using* normative vocabulary”, where on Brandom’s understanding this would be an achievement of classical analytic naturalism, pragmatically elaborated.<sup>2</sup>

But when we consider Price’s and Sellars’ respective conceptions of naturalism itself, differences emerge further down the shared road of their normativity accommodating naturalism about the human subject. Price argues for an important distinction between *subject naturalism* and *object naturalism*, where object naturalism as an “ontological doctrine...is the view that...all there *is* is the world studied by science. As an epistemological

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<sup>2</sup> [See also the end of L. Shapiro’s 2011 EJP article.]

doctrine, it is the view that all genuine knowledge is scientific knowledge” (NWM 185). I take it that Sellars is not an epistemological object naturalist in this sense, since he argues, for instance, in favor of the objective knowledge of moral truths and facts as construed above. So it is the ontological question that concerns us here.

Price takes object naturalism to be dominant in contemporary philosophy as an outlook founded on a (Big-R) Representationalist semantics involving foundational ‘word–world’ semantic relations. As such object naturalism leads inevitably to the serious Placement Problems concerning the M-worlds, which seem to force a choice for naturalists between Canberra Plan reductionism and traditionally ‘bifurcationist’ non-cognitivism.

Price argues against object naturalism in favor of his proposed *subject naturalism*, according to which “philosophy needs to begin with what science tells us *about ourselves*. Science tells us that we humans are natural creatures, and if the claims and ambitions of philosophy conflict with this view, then philosophy needs to give way.” (186). In “Naturalism Without Representationalism” Price defends the following two theses:

*Priority Thesis:* Subject naturalism is theoretically prior to object naturalism, because the latter depends on validation from a subject naturalist perspective.

*Invalidity Thesis:* There are strong reasons for doubting whether object naturalism deserves to be ‘validated’ – whether its presuppositions do survive subject naturalist scrutiny.

Price argues that the familiar placement problems arise for object naturalism due to its dependence on a foundationally representationalist semantics that is itself deeply problematic. I want to agree with Price’s *Invalidity Thesis* as directed at Big-R Representationalist object metaphysics. And in the end I also want to agree with the key move in Price’s argument for that thesis,

concerning the priority of our views about language and cognition as crucial for the correct pragmatic solutions to the placement problems.

But I wonder whether we might be able to embrace these arguments from Price while retaining a unified underlying naturalistic ontology and resisting some of Price's own radically pluralist conclusions, which in the same article he describes as follows:

“Without a representationalist concept of the talk, ... the [placement problem] puzzle takes a very different form. It remains in the linguistic realm, a puzzle about a plurality of *ways of talking*, of forms of human linguistic behavior. The challenge is now simply to explain in naturalistic terms how creatures like us come to talk in these various ways. [...] 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. [...] Subject naturalism ... imagines a scientific discovery that science is not all there is – that science is just one thing among many that we do with ‘representational’ discourse.” (NWM 199)

(Again, just as a footnote, I have already noted that science is *not all there is* for Sellars either, with respect to all the irreducibly normative pragmatic dimensions that matter to us in the ‘life world’, so to speak.) Price argues in “Naturalism and the Fate of teh M-Worlds” that in contrast to this pluralistic subject naturalism, naturalism standardly conceived as object naturalism “requires ontological monism”, “a single World to be described” (147). But if we hold up naturalism in a somewhat different light, a slightly different take on the *priorities* involved is possible while arguably preserving much else that Price wants to preserve. Here I think the comparison with Sellars is again fruitful.

Suppose we ask why it is that we should take a scientific naturalist perspective on the nature and capacities of the human subject in the first place, as opposed to say a Platonic, or a religious, or a magical perspective?

Or why is it that the Aristotelian ‘migration’ of (or sharing of) immaterial forms account of human cognition was basically no longer a live option for a Hume or a Kant? One answer is that it is impossible to coherently imagine Hume or Kant’s view on the subjects without first the epistemic authority of Galileo and Newton on the objects. It is the independent credentials of the emerging naturalistic ontology that forces the early moderns to then re-examine the nature and possibility of human cognition from the ground up.

This is consistent with Price’s remark that “if the claims and ambitions of philosophy conflict” with what science tells us, “then philosophy needs to give way” (186, quoted above). But the raising of the ontological placement problems associated with this definitive modern philosophical clash does not *require* the philosophical assumption of a Big-R Representationalism. The ostensible clashes do not first arise from bad philosophy but rather from striking and independently authoritative advancements in scientific ontology that bad philosophy prevents us from accommodating. It can then coherently turn out philosophically, in light of this ontology, that the pragmatic inferentialist rejection of Big-R Representationalism is the most promising first step toward a successful reconciliation of the hardwon naturalist ontology and the irreducibly normative M-worlds within which we conceive ourselves as *rational animals*. That was roughly Sellars’ view, and if some view having that shape could be made to fly then from that perspective the resulting ontological monism would be seen as a virtue rather than a vice.

That’s a big task and here I just want to close with a couple of remarks on the ‘small-r’ representationalist bifurcation concerning empirical matters-of-fact which, as noted earlier, systematically underlies *one* region of Sellars’ global pragmatism at the normative inferentialist level. In chapter one of the book Price distinguishes between an internal, inferentialist conception of representation and the sort of external, causal covariance or tracking conceptions of representation that are familiar from the cognitive sciences (and presumably also from various teleosemantic biology-based theories). On page 23 of Huw’s book things don’t look good for the external conception: “The upshot is a model in which there is a substantial *internal* notion of



representation. . .but no substantial *external* notion of representation” . But like Brandom’s praise from a certain distance for Price’s subject naturalism, Price elsewhere (and increasingly, I am told) shows more openness to the kind of pragmatically subordinated naturalistic tracking representations that I have asserted also lie at the heart of Sellars’ view of matter-of-factual empirical truth. In a 2007 talk entitled ‘Expressivism, Pluralism and Representationalism – A New Bifurcation Thesis’, some of which made it into the book but not this bit, Price asks the following question:

*“Is there room in this picture for the idea that some subset of the representations in the internal, systemic, inferential sense, are also representations in the covariance, environment tracking sense?”*

**Answer:** Yes, up to a point.” (Price 2007, p. 18)

Price notes that this concession “does nothing to re-inflate the metaphysics-grounding uses of the notion of representation” (ibid.), and the same is the case with Sellars’ conception of the subordinate matter-of-factual representational level. And when Price adds, “On the contrary, if we want to regard a particular class of systemic representations as also counting as world-tracking, covariant relations, it will be because we think we already know what lies at the ‘world’ end of the covariance relation” (ibid.). This is importantly true on Sellars’ non-traditional bifurcationist view, too: both the grounds for and the intentional contents of all of our matter-of-factual empirical assertions are entirely determined by our critically evolving inferentialist language games in response to the impacts of the world in perception. This naturalistic theory of cognitive mapping is designed from the start to be consistent with that pragmatist insight. Price – and Rorty, Brandom, and McDowell, for that matter – are certainly right that it is a common confusion, and one with enormous consequences, to unwittingly confuse aspects of the two distinct ‘internal-inferential’ and ‘external-causal’ notions of representation with one another. But that doesn’t mean that having carefully distinguished them and with our wits about us we cannot

theorize as to how they might be systematically interrelated with one another in empirical cognition, and that was Sellars' hypothesis at this second fork in the pragmatic naturalist road.

That Sellars put forth any such view at all is a fact that has been almost entirely occluded by the otherwise beneficial and deservedly influential developments of the higher-level normative aspects of Sellars' views by the three Hegelian Sellarsians just mentioned: Rorty, Brandom, and McDowell. But just as I think Price rightly presents his own outlook as a third alternative to traditional non-cognitivism or to the metaphysical reductionism currently on offer to contemporary naturalists, so I think something like the combination of Sellars' two turns at the two forks discussed here represents a fourth alternative that should be more visible as a possible path for globally pragmatic naturalists who are looking to find a non-reductive location in nature for the normative M-Worlds. If such a view could be made out it would have the virtues of Price's functional pluralism at the normative pragmatic level, while also managing to preserve both a monistic naturalism and a non-semantic bifurcationist account of empirical cognition.

In closing: As noted earlier at our first fork in the pragmatist road, Brandom's praise for Price's (and I've suggested Sellars') attempt "to *say* in wholly naturalistic vocabulary what one must *do* in order to be *using* normative vocabulary", was somewhat lukewarm praise made from a certain distance - but the possibility itself looks interesting and Brandom does not rule it out. At the second fork, Price's concessions to the possibility of an underlying naturalistic world-tracking theory of representation that might be consistent with a global inferentialist pragmatism - a view that I have also suggested was held by Sellars - again has the feel of only a lukewarm gesture made from a distance. But again the possibility looks interesting and is certainly not rejected by Price. Both Price and Brandom are acutely aware of the bad philosophy to which those two moves have almost inevitably given rise. But I'll take whatever encouragement I can get, even if only from sideways on and from a distance.