Rethinking Representationalism (I)*

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1 The relevance of science to philosophy

What is philosophical naturalism? Most fundamentally, presumably, it is the view that natural science constrains philosophy, in the following sense. The concerns of the two disciplines are not simply disjoint, and science takes the lead where the two overlap. At the very least, then, to be a philosophical naturalist is to believe that philosophy is not simply a different enterprise from science, and that philosophy properly defers to science, where the concerns of the two disciplines coincide.

Naturalism as spare as this is by no means platitudinous. However, most opposition to naturalism in contemporary philosophy is not opposition to naturalism in this basic sense, but to a more specific view of the relevance of science to philosophy. Similarly on the pro-naturalistic side. What most self-styled naturalists have in mind is the more specific view. As a result, I think, both sides of the contemporary debate pay insufficient attention to a different kind of philosophical naturalism – a different view of the impact of science on philosophy. This different view is certainly not new – it has been with us at least since Hume – but nor is it prominent in many contemporary debates.

In this paper I try to do something to remedy this deficit. I begin by making good the claim that the position commonly called naturalism is not a necessary corollary of naturalism in the basic sense outlined above. There are two very different ways of taking science to be relevant to philosophy. And contrary, perhaps, to first appearances, the major implications of these two views for philosophy arise from a common starting point. There is a single kind of core problem, to which the two kinds of naturalism recommend very different sorts of answer.

I'll argue that the less well-known view is more fundamental than its rival, in a sense to be explained; and that in calling attention to the difference between the two, we call attention to a deep structural difficulty for the latter. I'll thus be defending philosophical naturalism in what I take to be its more fundamental form, while criticising its popular contemporary manifestation.

*This lecture is a lightly revised version of my 'Naturalism Without Representationalism', from David Macarthur and Mario de Caro (eds), *Naturalism in Question* (Harvard University Press, 2004), 71–88.

Both the difficulty for the popular view and the conceptual priority of its unpopular rival turn on the foundational role of certain "semantic" or "representationalist" presuppositions in naturalism of the popular sort. This role is not well understood, in my view, but of considerable interest in its own right. (It deserves a more detailed examination than I can give it in this paper.) For present purposes, its importance lies in four facts. First, the presuppositions concerned are non-compulsory, and represent a crucial choice point for naturalism – reject them, and one thereby rejects naturalism of the popular variety. Second, the standpoint from which the choice is properly made is that of naturalism of the unpopular variety – this is the sense in which this kind of naturalism is conceptually prior to its more popular cousin. Third, the possibility of rejection of these suppositions is no mere idle threat; it is a corollary of some mainstream views in contemporary philosophy. And fourth, and potentially worst of all, the presuppositions concerned turn out to be doubtfully acceptable, by the standards of the kind of naturalism they themselves are supposed to underpin.

Concerning naturalism itself, then, my argument is something like this. To assess the prospects for philosophical naturalism, we need a clear sense of the task of philosophy, in the areas in which science might conceivably be relevant. Clarity about this matter reveals not only that the approach commonly called naturalism is not the only science-sensitive option for philosophy in these areas, but also that a different approach is the pre-eminent approach, in the various senses just outlined. As bad news for contemporary naturalists of the orthodox sort, this may sound like good news for contemporary non-naturalists. But I hope it will be clear that my intentions are much more even-handed. Many non-naturalists share the representationalist presuppositions of their naturalist opponents, and in questioning those presuppositions, we question both sides of the debate they underpin. So I oppose both naturalism and non-naturalism as popularly understood, and favour a different kind of naturalism – a naturalism without representationalism.

2 Two kinds of naturalism

The popular kind of naturalism – the view often called simply "naturalism" – exists in both ontological and epistemological keys. As an ontological doctrine, it is the view that in some important sense, all there *is* is the world studied by science. As an epistemological doctrine, it is the view that all genuine knowledge is scientific knowledge.[1]

I'll call this view *object naturalism*. Though it is widely endorsed in contemporary philosophy, many of its supporters agree with some of its critics, in thinking that it leads to some profound difficulties. The view implies that in so far as philosophy is concerned with the nature of objects and properties of various kinds, its concern is with something in the natural world, or with nothing at all. For there simply is nothing else. Perhaps there are very different ways of talking about the world-as-studied-by-science – different "modes of presentation" of aspects the same natural reality. But the object

[1] It is a nice issue whether there is any deep difference between these two versions of the view, but an issue I'll ignore for present purposes.

of each kind of talk is an aspect of the world-as-studied-by-science, or else nothing at all. The difficulties stem from the fact that in many interesting cases it is hard to see what natural facts we could be talking about. Different people will offer different lists of these "hard problems" – common candidates include meaning, value, mathematical truth, causation and physical modality, and various aspects of mentality, for example – but it is almost an orthodoxy of contemporary philosophy, on both sides of the issue between naturalists and their opponents, that the list is non-empty.

More in a moment on these issues – *placement problems,* as I'll call them. Before we turn to such issues, I want to distinguish object naturalism from a second view of the relevance of science to philosophy. According to this second view, 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. This is naturalism in the sense of Hume, then, and arguably Nietzsche.[2] I'll call it *subject naturalism.*

What is the relationship between object naturalism and subject naturalism? At first sight, the latter may seem no more than an obvious corollary of the former. Contemporary "naturalists" – object naturalists, in my terms – would surely insist that they are also subject naturalists. After all, if all real entities are natural entities, we humans are surely natural entities. But in my view, the relationship between the two approaches is much more interesting than this. Subject naturalism comes first, in a very important sense.

I want to defend the following claim:

Priority Thesis

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

What do "priority" and "validation" mean in this context? As I noted earlier, subject naturalism directs our attention to the issue of the scientific "respectability" of the claims and presuppositions of philosophy – in particular, their compatibility with the recognition that we humans are natural creatures. If the presuppositions of object naturalism turn out to be suspect, from this self-reflective scientific standpoint, then subject naturalism gives us reason to reject object naturalism. Subject naturalism thus comes first, and could conceivably "invalidate" object naturalism.

In my view, this threat to object naturalism is very real. I'll also defend this claim:

Invalidity Thesis

> There are strong reasons for doubting whether object naturalism deserves to be "validated" – whether its presuppositions do survive subject naturalist scrutiny.

As advertised, my case for this claim will depend on the role of certain "semantic" or "representationalist" presuppositions in the foundations of object naturalism. The

[2] Both attributions call for some qualification. As a parent of empiricism, for one thing, Hume certainly bears some responsibility for the object naturalist's conception of the nature of knowledge.

crucial role of such presuppositions is far from obvious, however. To make it visible, we need to examine the structure of the well-recognised hard cases for object naturalism, the cases I've termed placement problems.

3 The placement issue

If all reality is ultimately natural reality, how are we to "place" moral facts, mathematical facts, meaning facts, and so on? How are we to locate topics of these kinds within a naturalistic framework, thus conceived? In cases of this kind, we seemed to be faced with a choice between forcing the topic concerned into a category which for one reason or another seems ill-shaped to contain it, or regarding it as at best second-rate – not a genuine area of fact or knowledge.

One way to escape this dilemma is to reject the naturalism that produces it. If genuine knowledge need not be scientific knowledge, genuine facts not scientific facts, there is no need to try squeeze the problem cases into naturalistic clothing. Thus placement problems provide the motivation for much contemporary opposition to naturalism in philosophy. However, there are two very different ways to reject the kind of naturalism that gives rise to these problems. One way is to be non-naturalistic in the same ontological or epistemic keys – to be an object non-naturalist, so to speak. The other way is to be naturalistic in a different key – to reject *object* naturalism, in favour of a subject naturalist approach to the same theoretical problems.

At first sight, there seems to be no conceptual space for the latter view, at least in general, and at least if we want to avoid a universal subjectivism about all the hard cases. For subject naturalism rests on the fact that we humans are natural creatures, whereas the placement problems arise for topics which are at least not obviously human in nature. This is too quick, however. The possibility of a distinctive subject naturalist approach to the placement issues turns on the fact that, at least arguably, these problems *originate* as problems about human linguistic usage.

In fact, it turns out that there are two possible conceptions of the origins of placement problems – two conceptions of the "raw data" with which philosophy begins in such cases. On one conception, the problem begins with linguistic (or perhaps psychological) data; on the other, it begins with the objects themselves. These two conceptions are not often clearly distinguished, but the distinction turns out to be very important. As I'll explain, the priority of subject naturalism, and hence the vulnerability of object naturalism, rest on the thesis that the linguistic conception is the right one.

4 Where do placement problems begin?

On the face of it, a typical placement problem seeks to understand how some object, property or fact can be a *natural* object, property or fact. Ignoring for present purposes the distinction between objects, properties and facts, the issue is thus how some thing, X, can be a *natural* thing – the sort of thing revealed by science (at least in principle).

How do such issues arise in philosophy? On one possible view, the starting point

is the object itself. We are simply acquainted with X, and hence – in the light of a commitment to object naturalism – come to wonder how this thing-with-which-we-are-acquainted could be the kind of thing studied by science. On the other possible view, the starting point lies in human linguistic practices, broadly construed. Roughly, we note that humans (ourselves or others) employ the term "X" in language, or the concept *X,* in thought. In the light of a commitment to object naturalism, again, we come to wonder how what these speakers are thereby talking or thinking *about* could be the kind of thing studied by science.

Let us call these two views of the origin of the placement problem the *material conception* and the *linguistic conception,* respectively. In favour of the material conception, it might be argued that the placement problem for X is a problem about the *thing* X, not a problem about the *term* "X". In other words, it is the problem as to how to locate X itself in the natural world, not the problem about how to locate the term "X".

In favour of the linguistic conception, on the other hand, note that some familiar moves in the philosophical debates to which placement problems give rise simply don't make sense, if we assume a material construal of the problem. Consider noncognitivism, which tries to avoid the placement problem by arguing that *talk* of Xs – i.e., standard *use* of the term "X" – does not have a referential or descriptive function. Here, the claim is that in the light of a correct understanding of the *language* concerned, there is no *material* problem. Of course, noncognitivism might be mistaken in any particular case, but if the material view of the placement problem is right, it is not so much wrong as completely wrong-headed – a view which simply starts in the wrong place. Perhaps noncognitivism is wrong-headed in this way. But the fact that this is not a common view reveals widespread implicit acceptance of a linguistic conception of the placement issue.

This appeal to philosophical practice isn't meant to be conclusive, of course. Instead, I'm going to proceed as follows. For the moment, I'll simply assume that the linguistic conception is correct, and explore its consequences for object naturalism. (I'll remind readers at several points that my conclusions depend on this assumption.) At the end of the paper I'll come back to the question whether the assumption is compulsory – whether object naturalism can evade my critical conclusions by adopting the material conception. I'll argue, albeit somewhat tentatively, that this is not a live option, and hence that my earlier conclusions cannot be side-stepped in this way.

5 The semantic ladder

If the linguistic conception is correct, then placement problems are initially problems about human linguistic behaviour (or perhaps about human thought). What turns such a concern into an issue about something else – about value, mathematical reality, causation, or whatever? The answer to this question was implicit above, when our attention shifted from the *term* to what it is *about*. The shift relies on what we may call the *representationalist* assumption. Roughly, this is the assumption that the *linguistic* items in question "stand for" or "represent" something *non-linguistic* (at least in general

– let's leave aside for present purposes the special case in which the subject matter is also linguistic). This assumption grounds our shift in focus from the *term* "X" or *concept X,* to its assumed *object,* X.

At first sight, however, the required assumption may seem trivial. Isn't it a truism that "X" refers to X? Isn't this merely the referential analogue of the fact that "Snow is white" is true if and only if snow is white?

The familiarity of these principles masks a serious confusion, in my view. True, the move in question is in one sense a familiar semantic descent. A semantic relation – reference, if we are dealing with terms, or truth, if we are dealing with sentences – is providing the "ladder" that leads us from an issue about language to an issue about non-linguistic reality. But it is vital to see that in the present case, the move involves a real shift of theoretical focus, a real change of subject-matter. So this is a *genuine* logical descent, then, and not a mere reversal of Quine's deflationary "semantic ascent". Quine's semantic ascent never really leaves the ground. Quine himself puts it like this: "By calling the sentence ["Snow is white"] true, we call snow white. The truth predicate is a device of disquotation."(*Philosophy of Logic* (Prentice-Hall, 1970), p. 12) So Quine's deflationary semantic ladder never really takes us "up", whereas the present semantic ladder does need to take us "down".

If we begin with Quine's deflationary semantic notions, in other words, then talking about the *referent* of the term "X", or the *truth* of the sentence "X is F", is just another way of talking about the *object,* X. So if our original question was really about language, and we rephrase the issue in these semantic terms, we've simply changed the subject. We haven't traversed the semantic ladder, but simply taken up *a different issue,* talking in what Carnap called the formal mode about objects, rather than talking about language. On this deflationary view, then, object naturalism commits a fallacy of equivocation – a kind of mention–use fallacy, in fact[3] – on the way to its formulation of what it takes to be the central issue.

This point is easy to overlook, because we run up and down these semantic ladders so easily. But if Quine is right, the reason the climbs are so effortless is that the ladders lead us nowhere. In the present case, we do need to get somewhere. If we begin with a linguistic conception of the origins of the placement issues – if we see these issues as initially questions about linguistic usage – then it takes a genuine shift of theoretical focus to get us to an issue about the nature of non-linguistic objects. If the shift is to be mediated by semantic properties or relations of some kind, they must be substantial properties, in the following sense. They must be such that in ascribing such properties to a term or sentence we are making some theoretical claim about the linguistic items concerned, rather than simply using those items to make a claim about something else.

True, these properties must also be such as to allow us to make the transition to an issue about objects. Our theoretical focus must be led from the issue about the

[3] The fallacy turns on the fact that on the disquotational view, an expression of the form "'Snow is white" is true' contains a use masquerading as a mention. If it were a genuine mention, to call "Snow is white" true would not be "to call snow white", as Quine puts it. If we term this disquotational mention a *formal* mention, then formal mention is effective use, and the fallacy here involves a confusion between genuine and formal mention, or true mention and effective use.

terms and sentences to an issue about their assumed semantic objects or values. For the object naturalist's conception of the resulting program, moreover, it is vital that this transition track the disquotational schema. (How else could a concern with the use of the term "X" lead us to an interest in X itself?) My point is that unless there is more to the semantic notions than simply disquotation, the starting point is not genuinely linguistic, and so there is no transition at all. (One might argue that this is good news, because placement issue begins at the material level in any case. But for the moment we are assuming the linguistic conception of the origin of the problem, and this response is therefore excluded.)

Given a linguistic view of the placement issue, then, substantial, non-deflationary semantic notions turn out to play a critical theoretical role in the foundations of object naturalism. Without such notions, there can be no subsequent issue about the natural "place" of entities such as meanings, causes, values, and the like. Object naturalism thus rests on substantial theoretical assumptions about what we humans do with language – roughly, the assumption that substantial "word–world" semantic relations are a part of the best scientific account of our use of the relevant terms.

However, these assumptions lie in the domain of subject naturalism. Moreover, as the conceptual possibility of deflationism already illustrates, they are non-compulsory; more on this in a moment. Hence my Priority Thesis: given a linguistic conception of the origin of placement problems, subject naturalism is theoretically prior to object naturalism, and object naturalism depends on validation from a subject naturalist perspective.

6 Should object naturalism be validated?

It is one thing to establish a need, another to show that there are serious grounds for doubting whether that need can be met. However, it seems to me that there are actually strong grounds for doubting whether object naturalism can be satisfactorily validated, in the above sense. These grounds are of three kinds.

6.1 The threat of semantic deflationism

I have already noted that deflationism about truth and reference blocks an object naturalist's access to the kind of semantic ladder needed to transform a theoretical question about terms into a question about their assumed objects. Given the attractions of deflationism, this is clearly grounds for concern, from an object naturalist's point of view.

It is worth emphasizing two further points. First, deflationism itself is clearly of a subject naturalist character. It offers a broadly scientific hypothesis about what linguistic creatures like us "do" with terms such as "true" and "refers" – what role these terms play in our linguistic lives. Of course, the use of these terms itself comprises the basis of one particularly interesting placement problem. So semantic deflationism *exemplifies* a subject naturalist approach to a particular placement problem – an approach that seeks

to explain the *use* of the semantic terms in question – as well as providing a general obstacle to an object naturalist construal of placement problems at large.

Second, it is worth noting in passing how the distinctions in play at this point enable semantic deflationism to avoid Paul Boghossian's charge that any such view is inconsistent.[4] Boghossian argues that irrealism about semantic notions is incoherent, because irrealism involves, precisely, a *denial* that the term or sentence in question has semantic properties (a referent, or truth-conditions). If this characterisation of irrealism is indeed mandatory, then Boghossian seems right. Irrealism *presupposes* semantic notions, and hence the denial in question is incoherent in the case of the semantic terms themselves.

However, the point turns on the fact that so construed, irrealism relies on the kind of theoretical framework provided by the representational view of language. So long as a semantic deflationist simply *rejects* this theoretical framework, her position is not incoherent. Of course, one might insist that the resulting position no longer deserves to be called irrealism, but this is merely a terminological issue. The important point is that it is indisputably deflationary. A deflationist can consistently offer a use-explanatory account of semantic terms, while saying nothing of theoretical weight about whether these terms "refer", or "have truth-conditions".

The answer to Boghossian's challenge to deflationism thus depends on a distinction between *denying in one's theoretical voice* that these terms refer or have truth-conditions (which Boghossian is right to point out that a deflationist cannot do); and *being silent in one's theoretical voice* about whether these terms refer or have truth-conditions. A deflationist can, indeed must, do the latter, having couched her theoretical claims about the terms concerned in other terms entirely – and having insisted, *qua* deflationist, that the semantic notions do no interesting causal-explanatory work.

I'll return to Boghossian's argument in a moment, for in my view it does comprise a problem for my object naturalist opponents. For the moment, what matters is that it does not provide an obstacle to a well-formulated deflationism.

6.2 Stich's problem

We have seen that in the light of a linguistic conception of the origins of the placement problem, semantic deflationism is incompatible with object naturalism. In so far as deflationism is an attractive view, in other words, the "validation" of object naturalism must remain in doubt.

But rejecting deflationism does not necessarily solve the object naturalist's problems. One way to appreciate this is to adapt the considerations discussed by Stephen Stich in Chapter 1 of *Deconstructing the Mind* (New York: OUP, 1996). In effect, Stich argues that even a non-deflationary scientific account of reference is unlikely to be determinate enough to do the work that object naturalism requires. Stich's own immediate concern is with eliminativism, and thus (in linguistic mode) with issues as to whether terms such as "belief" refer at all. He argues that so long as we retain a

[4] Paul Boghossian, "The Status of Content", *Philosophical Review,* 99(1990) 157–184; "The Rule-Following Considerations", *Mind* 98(1989) 507–549.

linguistic conception of our starting point in metaphysics, these questions inevitably become hostage to indeterminacies in our theory of reference. Evidently, if Stich is right then the problem is not confined to eliminativism. It affects the issue "What is belief?", for example, as much as it affects the issue "Are there any beliefs?" So realist as well as antirealist responses to the placement problem are equally afflicted.

Stich himself responds by disavowing the linguistic conception of the *explanandum.* We'll return below to the question as to whether this is really an option. For the moment, I simply help myself to Stich's useful discussion of these issues, in support of the following tentative conclusion. Even setting aside the threat of deflationism, it is very far from clear that a "scientific" account of semantic relations is going to provide what we need, in order to turn an interesting theoretical issue about *terms* ("causation", "belief", "good", and so on) into an interesting issue about *objects.*

6.3 Is object naturalism coherent?

We have seen that if placement problems originate at the linguistic level, substantial semantic notions are needed to transform a question about linguistic usage into a question about non-linguistic objects. Object naturalism thus presupposes substantial semantic properties or relations of some kind. The two previous reasons for doubting whether object naturalism is entitled to this presupposition turned first, on the possibility of deflationism, which denies that semantic properties are load-bearing in the appropriate sense; and second, on the possibility that even a non-deflationary scientific account of reference might be too loosely constrained to be useful as the required semantic ladder.

Now to an even more serious difficulty. In view of the fact that object naturalism presupposes the semantic notions in this way, it is doubtful whether these notions themselves can consistently be investigated in an object naturalist spirit. Naturalism of this kind seems committed to the empirical contingency of semantic relations. For any given term or sentence, it must be to some extent an empirical matter whether, and if so to what, that term refers; whether, and if so where, it has a truthmaker. However, it seems impossible to make sense of this empirical attitude with respect to the semantic terms themselves.

Part of the difficulty turns on Boghossian's objection to semantic irrealism. In that context, the problem was that if semantic notions are presupposed in the issue between realists and irrealists – for example, if the realist/irrealist issue is taken to *be* that as to whether the terms and sentences of some domain refer, or have truth-conditions – then irrealism about these notions themselves is incoherent. Here, the problem is as follows. The object naturalist's project requires in general that irrealism be treated as live empirical possibility; but Boghossian's point shows that the object naturalist cannot adopt this attitude to the semantic terms themselves.

Boghossian takes the point to amount to a transcendental argument for a non-naturalist realism about semantic content. In my view, however, it is better seen as a pro-naturalist – pro-*subject* naturalist – point, in that it exposes what is inevitably a non-naturalistic presupposition in the leading contemporary conception of what is

involved in taking science seriously in philosophy. Of course, the possibility of this interpretation depends on the fact that there is a consistent alternative naturalism, which walks away from the usual semantically-grounded conception of issue. (In a different way, it also depends on a linguistic conception of the starting point, a conception we are assuming at this point, and a conception to which Boghossian himself is obviously committed.)

It might seem implausible that there could be a problem here which is specific to object naturalism. After all, I have suggested that it is an empirical possibility that the subject naturalist standpoint might not yield the kind of substantial semantic relations required for object naturalism. Isn't this same possibility all that object naturalism needs to make sense of the possibility of irrealism about semantics, in its sense?

No. The empirical possibility we have discussed is not that subject naturalism will discover that there are no semantic properties of the right sort, but simply that it will find no reason to say that there are. This is the distinction I appealed to above, in explaining how deflationism escapes Boghossian's trap. The subject naturalist's basic task is to account for the use of various terms – among them, the semantic terms themselves – in the lives of natural creatures in a natural environment. The distinction just mentioned turns on the possibility that in completing this task, the subject naturalist might simply find no need for an explanatory category of semantic properties and relations. (At no point would she need to say that the term "refer" does or does not refer to anything, for example, except in the deflationary, non-theoretical sense.) Of course, from the object naturalist's perspective this looks like an investigation as to whether there are semantic properties, but the subject naturalist has no reason to construe it that way. Indeed, she has a very good reason *not* to construe it that way, if, as Boghossian has argued, that construal is simply incoherent.

The issue of the coherence of the object naturalist approach to the semantic terms is subtle and difficult, and I don't pretend to have made a case that the difficulty is conclusive. What I hope to have established is something weaker. A naturalist has neither need nor automatic entitlement to a substantial account of semantic relations between words or thoughts and the rest of the natural world – no automatic entitlement, because by naturalism's own lights, it is at best an empirical matter; and no need, because there are ways of being naturalist which don't depend on any such assumption. Nevertheless, the stronger thesis, the incoherency thesis, seems to me both fascinating and plausible, and I want briefly to mention another way of fleshing out the difficulty.

If there is a coherent object naturalist account of the semantic relations, then as we noted earlier, the object naturalist will want to say that the right account is not *a priori* – there is more than one coherent possibility, and the issue is in part an empirical matter. Let's consider just two of the coherent possibilities – two rival accounts of what reference is, for example. Account one says that reference is the natural relation R*, account two that it is the natural relation R**. Thus, apparently, we have two incompatible views as to what reference actually is.

But do we? Let's think a little more closely about what each of these views claims. The first account claims that the ordinary term "Reference" picks out, or refers to, the

relation R* – in other words, by its own lights, that

"Reference" stands in the relation R* to the relation R*.

The second account claims that the ordinary term "Reference" picks out, or refers to, the relation R** – in other words, by its own lights, that

"Reference" stands in the relation R** to the relation R**.

Are these claims incompatible? Not at all. The term "Reference" might very well stand in these two different relations to two different things, even if we allow (as proponents of both views will want to insist), that in the case of each relation singly, no term could stand in that relation to both.

Again, the problem stems from the fact that the object naturalist is trying to ask a question which renders its own presuppositions fluid. There is no fixed question, with a range of answers, but, so to speak, a different question for each answer. I leave as an exercise (see Figure 1) another puzzle of this kind. It is multiple choice, Here the

The option selected below is:

A. Option A	[ ]
B. Option B	[ ]
C. Option C	[ ]
D. None of the above	[ ]

Figure 1: A multiple choice examination

problem is not that there is no right answer, but that there are too many right answers.[5] Again, the upshot seems to be that 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.

7 Rejecting the linguistic conception of the *explanandum?*

As I have emphasised, the above discussion has assumed a linguistic conception of the origins of the placement problem. Is this an optional assumption? Can a material conception get object naturalism off the hook? I close with two reasons for skepticism on this point.

[5] In a more detailed examination of these issues, it would be interesting to consider the connection between this kind of consideration (and indeed Boghossian's argument) and Putnam's "just more theory" concerns about the metaphysical use of a theory of reference (Hilary Putnam, *Meaning and the Moral Sciences,* Boston, 1978; *Reason, Truth and History,* New York, Cambridge University Press, 1981).

7.1 The cat is out of the bag

It is clear that the linguistic conception of the placement issue is already in play. I noted earlier that to treat noncognitivism as an option in these debates is to commit oneself to a linguistic conception of the origin of the problem. The threat to object naturalism takes off from this point, noting that the representationalist assumption is non-compulsory – that there are other possible theoretical approaches to language, in which semantic notions play no significant role. We have thus been offered the prospect of a (subject) naturalistic account of the relevant aspects of human talk and thought, from the perspective of which the material question ("What are Xs?") simply doesn't arise.[6] At this stage, the only way for object naturalists to regain control of the ball is to *defend* the representationalist assumption (a project fraught with difficulty, for the reasons noted above).

Couldn't an object naturalism challenge the current conception of the starting point? What is wrong with Stich's proposal, that we simply begin at the material level, and do metaphysics without semantic crutches? What is wrong with it, I think, is that it amounts to the proposal that we should simply *ignore* the possibility that philosophy might have something to learn from naturalistic – *subject* naturalistic – reflection on the things that we humans do with language. (If this seems controversial, note that it would be to ignore the possibility of noncognitivism.) So it is a radically anti-naturalistic move. For someone who takes science seriously, the only route to object naturalism is the hard one: to concede that the problem begins at the linguistic level, and to defend the representationalist view.

7.2 Semantic notions are part of the toolkit of modern metaphysics

The second consideration deserves a much more detailed discussion than I can give it here. Briefly, however, it seems that semantic notions such as reference and truth have become instruments in the investigative program of contemporary metaphysics. It has become common practice to identify one's objects of interest in semantic ways – as truth-makers or referents, say, or more generally as "realisers" of semantic roles.

However, the relevance of this observation about philosophical practice is far from straightforward. One of the difficulties is to decide which of the many uses of such semantic notions are "substantial" theoretical uses, and which can be regarded in a merely Quinean fashion – convenient but theoretically uncommitted uses of deflationary semantic terms. For the reasons discussed earlier, the use of deflationary semantic notions in metaphysics is not incompatible with a material conception of the origins of the placement issue. But if more substantial notions are in play, then the linguistic domain seems to play a correspondingly more significant role. Claims about language come to play a role analogous to that of observational data in science, with the semantic

[6] That is to say, it doesn't arise as a question driven by naturalism. Such questions in many other contexts, of course – "What is justice?", "What is irony?", "What is choux pastry?", for example. If more or less commonplace questions of these kinds do give rise to puzzles of an object naturalist sort, the subject naturalist recommends a dose of linguistic therapy: Think carefully about what you are assuming about language, before you allow yourself to be convinced that there's a genuine ontological puzzle.

relations supporting inferences to an unobserved reality. The enterprise thus becomes committed to a linguistic conception of its starting point.

There are many strands in this linguistic retooling of contemporary metaphysics – the Linguistic Return, as we might call it. One significant strand runs as follows, I think. In David Lewis's influential conception of theoretical identification in science,[7] objects of interest are identified as occupiers of causal roles. If the theoretical term "X" is defined in this way, we know what to do to answer the question "What is X?" We experiment in the laboratory of the world, adjusting this, twiddling that, until we discover just what it is that does the causal job our theory assigns to X.

In the view of many, however, Lewis's program is fit not just for science but metaphysics as well.[8] Indeed, some who think this would reject the suggestion, implicit in my formulation, that metaphysics is something different from science. But there is one difference at least. In metaphysics, there is no guarantee that our objects of interest will be the kinds of things which have *causal* roles. We might be interested in numbers, or values, or indeed in causation itself, and for all of these things it is at least controversial whether they can be identified as the cause of this, the effect of that.[9]

So in the global program, the place of causation must be taken by something else. What else could it be? It seems to me that there are two possibilities. One is that causal roles get replaced by semantic roles. In this case, the procedure for answering a question of the form "What is X?" is analogous to the one described above, except that the aim of our fiddling and twiddling – conceptual, now, rather than experimental – is to discover, say, to what the term "X" *refers,* or what *makes true* the claim that X is F.

That's the first possibility – that semantic relations play the same substantial role in the general program as causal relations played in the original program. If so, then the upshot is as we have seen. Language has become the starting point for metaphysics, and the resulting position is vulnerable in the ways described above.

The second possibility is that *nothing* specific replaces causation. It simply depends on the particular case, on what the Ramsey-Lewis method turns out to tell us about the X in question. Semantic terms may figure in the description of the task, but on this view they are no more than deflationary. We say, "X is the thing that makes this Ramsey-sentence true", but this is just a convenient way of doing what we could do by saying "X is the thing such that …" and then *using* the Ramsey-sentence in question.

I think that this second version does avoid essential use of nondeflationary semantic notions, and is hence compatible with a material conception of our starting point in

[7] David Lewis, "Psychophysical and Theoretical Identifications", *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 50(1972), 249–58; "How to Define Theoretical Terms", *Journal of Philosophy* 67(1970), 427–46.

[8] See especially Frank Jackson, *From Metaphysics to Ethics,* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998.

[9] The claim that metaphysics extends beyond the causal realm is perhaps more controversial than I here allow. Someone who rejects it will be inclined to say that where causation stops, non-metaphysical modes of philosophy begin: formalism, perhaps, in the case of mathematics, noncognitivism in the case of value, and so on. For present purposes, it is enough to point out that such a view is thereby committed to a linguistic conception of the placement issue, for the latter views are linguistic in nature. However, it is worth noting that in a causally-grounded metaphysics of this kind, the notion of causation is likely to be problematic, in a way analogous to the semantic notions in a linguistically-grounded object naturalism. It will be a primitive notion, inaccessible to the program's own professed methods.

metaphysics. The problem is that it thereby cuts itself off from any general argument for (object) naturalism, of a kind which would parallel Lewis's argument for physicalism about the mental.[10] Lewis's argument relies on a premise to the effect that all causation is physical causation – the assumption of "the explanatory adequacy of physics", as Lewis puts it. Without such a premise, clearly, there is nothing to take us from the conclusion that a mental state M has a particular causal role to the conclusion that M is a physical state. The problem for the second of the two versions of the generalised Lewisean program is that without any single thing to play the role that causation plays in the restricted program, there can be no analogue of this crucial premise in support of a generalised argument for physicalism.

Thus it seems to me that object naturalists face a dilemma. If they appeal to substantial semantic relations, they have some prospect of an argument for naturalism, couched in terms of those relations – for example, an argument that all truths have natural truthmakers. In this case, however, they are implicitly committed to a linguistic conception of the "raw data" for these investigations, and face the problems identified earlier. If they don't appeal to substantial semantic relations, they avoid these difficulties, but lose the theoretical resources with which to formulate a general argument for naturalism, conceived on the object naturalist model.

Without the protection of such an argument, the difficult opponent is not someone who agrees to play the game in material mode but bats for non-naturalism, defending a primitive plurality of ontological realms. The difficult opponent is the naturalist who takes advantage of a non-representationalist 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 to science?

Summing up, it is doubtful whether an object naturalist can avoid a linguistic conception of the placement issue, and thereby escape the difficulties identified earlier. Some versions of object naturalism help themselves to the linguistic conception in any case, in order to put semantic relations to work in the service of metaphysics. In other cases, the inescapability of the linguistic conception turns on the fact that it is always available to the object naturalist's subject naturalist opponent, as the basis of an alternative view of the task of philosophy in these cases. The object naturalist's instinct is always to appeal to the representational character of language to bring the issue back to the material level; but this, as we have seen, is a recipe for grave discomfort.

8 Natural plurality

Linguistically construed, the placement problem stems from a striking multiplicity in ordinary language, a puzzling plurality of topics of talk. Given a naturalistic conception of speakers, the addition of a representationalist conception of speech makes the object naturalist's ontological interpretation of the placement problem almost irresistible.

[10] David Lewis, "An Argument for the Identity Theory", *Journal of Philosophy* 63(1966), 17–25.

Term by term, sentence by sentence, topic by topic, the representationalist's semantic ladder leads us from language to the world, from words to their worldly objects. Somehow, the resulting multiplicity of kinds of entities – values, modalities, meanings, and the rest – needs to be accommodated within the natural realm. To what else, after all, could natural speakers be related by natural semantic relations?

Without a representationalist conception of the talk, however, the 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 behaviour. The challenge is now simply to explain in naturalistic terms how creatures like us come to talk in these various ways. This is a matter of explaining what role the different language games play in our lives – what differences there are between the functions of talk of value and the functions of talk of electrons, for example.[11] This certainly requires plurality in the world, but of a familiar kind, in a familiar place. Nobody expects human behaviour to be anything other than highly complex. Without representationalism, the joints between topics remain joints between kinds of behaviour, and don't need to be mirrored in ontology of any other kind.

In the remaining lectures I want to try give a sense of what this alternative program looks like, especially by locating it with respect to familiar landmarks in the contemporary philosophical landscape. To conclude this lecture, I want to stress two things: first, that this is a recognisably naturalistic project; and second, that it is a very different project from that of most contemporary philosophical naturalists. I have argued that the popular view (object naturalism) is in trouble by its own lights, in virtue of its semantic presuppositions. The availability of the subject naturalist alternative makes clear that the problems of object naturalism are not problems for naturalism *per se* – not a challenge to the view that in some areas, philosophy properly defers to science.

We began with the relevance of science to philosophy. Let's finish with the relevance of science to science itself. Object naturalism gives science not just centre-stage but the whole stage, taking scientific knowledge to be the only knowledge there is (at least in some sense). Subject naturalism suggests that science might properly take a more modest view of its own importance. It imagines a scientific discovery that science is not all there is – that science is just one thing among many[12] that we do with "representational" discourse. If so, then the semantic presuppositions of object naturalism are bad science, a legacy of an insufficiently naturalistic philosophy. The story then has the following satisfying moral. If we do science better in philosophy, we'll be less inclined to think that science is all there is to do.

[11] This kind of linguistic pluralism is very Wittgensteinian in spirit, of course. One of Wittgenstein's main themes in the early sections of the *Investigations* is that philosophy misses important distinctions about the uses of language, distinctions which are hidden from us by 'the uniform appearances of words.' (§11) The view proposed here may be too naturalistic for some contemporary Wittgensteinians, but would Wittgenstein himself have objected to it? (He might have thought that it is science, not philosophy, but that's a different matter.)

[12] Or more likely, I think, "several things among many", in the sense that scientific language itself is not monofunctional. I think that causal and modal talk has distinct functions in this sense, and, while essential to any interesting science, is not the whole of it. If so, this is enough to show that there is functional plurality within scientific language, as well as outside it. More on this in later lectures.