

# Rethinking Representationalism (III)

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## I Introduction

In the previous lecture I distinguished two nodes, or ‘attractors’, for the notion of representation, as it figures in contemporary philosophy. One node (‘i-representation’) emphasises position in an inferential or functional network, the other (‘e-representation’) stresses correlation with an aspect of an external environment. I recommended that rather than trying to encompass both nodes in a single account of representation, or to privilege one at the expense of the other, we should simply recognise that they are distinct. There’s a legitimate theoretical role for both notions, in other words, but not as the two ends of the same philosophical stage-horse. Better, I urged, to let each notion stand on its own two feet, and to allow them to live their separate lives.

I talked loosely about the idea that i-representations ‘do many jobs’, and I claimed that there is thus a new degree of freedom in a proper theory of language and thought – an extra dimension of variability – which is necessarily invisible in traditional representationalism, when i-representations and e-representations are not distinguished. In this lecture I want to begin by saying something more about this potential plurality of i-representations – about what it consists in, *how* the different cases differ from one another. I’ll do this by appealing once again to the genetic affinities between the program I’m recommending and the traditional ‘Humean’ expressivism of writers such as Blackburn. From that point, the rest of the lecture goes like this:

- I’ll stress the way in which the picture I’m recommending reverses the order of explanation between *use* and *factual content*. (I’ll note an affinity at this point with the way in which Brandom characterises the project of pragmatism, as he sees it.)
- I’ll then discuss the implications of this picture for the notion of the *World*, as it figures in contemporary philosophy. Here, I think we need to recognise a deep conflation between two distinct notions, each respectable in its own terms, but deeply misleading when confused. Not surprisingly, perhaps, I want to suggest that this conflation is a kind of metaphysical image, or complement, of the conflation I’ve identified between two notions of representation. As with representation, then, my strategy is to make the notion of the World tractable by splitting it in two. One notion, linked to the traditional conception of the world

as the totality of the facts, cleaves to the notion of i-representation. The other notion, that of the world as the natural environment, cleaves to e-representation and to the standpoint of subject naturalism.<sup>1</sup>

- Next, returning to some issues I mentioned at the end of the previous lecture, I'll discuss the objection that this view amounts to a concession that the scientific perspective is 'primary' – that the facts of science are the real facts, and the rest, at best, some sort of quasi-fact. If successful, this objection would lead us back in the direction of the old bifurcation thesis, and the view that while science is description, all else is mere projection. But I'll argue that it isn't successful.
  1. I'll argue that it mistakes a kind of merely perspectival primacy for the view the science alone is *really* 'in the referring business'. It misses the point that every assertoric vocabulary is equally in this business *by its own lights*, and that the apparent primacy of science, within the subject naturalism here proposed, reflects the fact that the lights of the enquiry *are* those of science. (To mistake this for an absolute primacy is to mistake science for metaphysics.)
  2. I'll back this up with reasons for thinking that we find the relevant kind of functional pluralism *within science* – so that it can't be true, as this line of argument wants to claim, that *description* itself is one of the relevant functions, uniquely associated with scientific language. Once we know what to look for, on the 'expressive' side, we find it within science, too.<sup>2</sup>
- Finally, I'll return to pluralism, and distinguish the functional plurality of i-representations from the more familiar pluralism often discussed with respect to particular 'levels' in the conversational game: in science, morality, and elsewhere. These are horizontal pluralisms, mine a vertical pluralism.

## 2 The diverse unity of i-representations

I've referred to a new dimension of variability within the class of i-representations – a dimension I've claimed is systematically obscured by the orthodox picture, which runs together the two notions of representation. But what does this variability consist in, and what is the plurality to which it is supposed to give rise? My first-pass answer, as I suggested in the previous lecture, is that the variability is just what traditional expressivists in the Humean tradition were getting at, when they suggested that evaluative

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<sup>1</sup>Which way, if either, goes the notion of the world as everything that *exists*? Initially a faithful Quinean, I want to answer that question in terms of the scope of existential quantification; but to rebel against the master, in claiming that it needn't be just in science that existential quantification finds a role. The world of existents thus goes the same way as the world as the totality of the facts, under my interpretation. See my 'Quining naturalism' for more on this.

<sup>2</sup>Here the argument will appeal in particular to the *modal* aspects of science, where the case for an interesting functional explanation seems to me to be very strong. This means that science could only be 'genuinely descriptive', in these terms, if the modal is in principle eliminable from science.

or modal claims (say) had a distinctive linguistic role – that of ‘expressing’ a particular sort of practical stance, or a psychological state with particular practical consequences.

For traditional expressivists, of course, these distinctive functional roles were supposed to contrast with the ‘descriptive’ function of ‘genuine’ factual claims. Thus there was thought to be a *prescriptive–descriptive* distinction, on the evaluative side; and what we might term a *predictive–descriptive* distinction, on the modal side. The picture I have recommended wants to reject, or at least severely qualify, these traditional dichotomies. But this needn’t involve any major revision to the *positive* account of the functions of what these expressivists took to lie on the non-descriptive side.

Some examples. The evaluative and normative cases are familiar, so I’ll concentrate instead on examples of ‘predictive’ expressivism. Best-known, perhaps, is the view known as probabilistic *subjectivism*, although this view needs to be interpreted with some care, to fit the present mould. Subjectivism about probability is often characterised as the view that probabilities *are* degrees of belief, so that statements about probabilities are statements *about* degrees of belief. This needs to be distinguished from the view that ascriptions of probability should be understood as *expressions of* degrees of belief, and it is the latter view I have in mind here.<sup>3</sup> Crudely put, the view is that creatures who are decision-makers under uncertainty find it useful to tie their credences to a topic suitable for debate and consensus, and that’s what the notion of probability provides. *By* discussing propositions about probability – by coordinating beliefs about *that* – speakers can coordinate their credences. That’s what talk of probability is ‘good for’, on this view. The distinctive ‘objects’ of such talk – the probabilities themselves – inherit their properties from the functional task; from the credences, or dispositions to betting behaviour, to which *talk* of probability gives voice. (More in a moment on the order of explanation here exemplified.)

There’s an analogous view of causation, which takes it to differ from probability mainly in that it reflects the distinctive perspective of a creature who takes herself to have the ability to *intervene* in her environment – in other words, an agent. In other work I’ve argued that the causal viewpoint can be treated as a kind of special case of the probabilistic viewpoint, where the probabilities concerned are probabilities of outcomes conditional on *actions*, assessed from the distinctive epistemic standpoint of the agent herself. (Creatures who were gamblers, but not agents within the realm on which they gambled, would not be in a position to occupy the latter standpoint, and hence would have no use for causal talk.)

As a final example, consider the tradition associated with writers such as Ryle and Ramsey, which treats conditionals and law-like generalisations as something like rules, or inference-tickets: conditional commitments, to make one move in the language game, *in the event that one makes another* – to believe that *q* if one should come to believe that *p*, or to treat something as a B, if one should come to treat it as an A.

These examples all illustrate the basic idea. Particular, contingent, features of a creature’s practical circumstances – e.g., that she is a *decision-maker under uncertainty*, or an *agent*, or a bearer of *epistemic dispositions* – provide the source of the variability

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<sup>3</sup>This distinction illustrates something very general about the viewpoint – more on this in a moment.

in this ‘missing dimension’. Each of these features constitutes what we might call a *practical stance* – a practical situation or characteristic that a creature must instantiate, if the language game in question is to play its defining role in her life.<sup>4</sup> The variation in these practical stances is the source of the functional variation of i-representations, which I want to treat as entirely of a piece with the variability highlighted in traditional expressivist views of these same matters.

As for traditional expressivist, this variability lies at the level of use conditions, rather than truth conditions. The stance is something like a practical precondition of the language games in question; and, at a more detailed level – the level of possession of a particular credence, say – it provides an appropriateness condition for a particular utterance within the game. In particular, it isn’t a truth condition. For traditional expressivists, the way to say this was to say that the utterances in question *don’t have* truth conditions. For me it is a little more complicated. The utterances do have truth conditions, from the point of view of their users – the speakers playing the game. Indeed, ‘It is probable that P’ is true iff it is probable that P. But as I stressed above, these truth conditions are not to be identified with the use conditions, or stance.<sup>5</sup>

What’s most distinctive about my proposal, compared to those traditional expressivist accounts, is that in place of their *bifurcation* between expressivist language – where this kind of functional story was taken to be appropriate – and what they thought of as genuinely *descriptive* discourse, I want to offer an over-arching unification. I want to propose a single, *unitary* account of the assertoric form, an account compatible with the idea that it can be put to work in these various distinct ways.

On my view, then, all these functionally distinct moves in the language game *are* genuine assertions, in the only sense now available. But what is this sense? How can we *characterise* the notion of assertion, so that despite their functional differences, utterances of these various kinds can all count as genuine assertions?

In the previous lecture I gave you the low-carbon answer to this question: we should just coast in Brandom’s wake at this point, helping ourselves to his account of assertion. (One of the main points of the previous lecture was that Brandom’s notion is thoroughly compatible with the pluralism of my Humean expressivism.) I now want to add to this energy-saving answer a more labour-intensive proposal for reaching what I think turns out to be the same point (with a better view of the surrounding landscape, along the way).

At its simplest, my proposal is that the assertoric language game is simply a coordination device for social creatures, whose welfare depends on collaborative action. It helps to reduce differences among the behavioural dispositions, or other variable as-

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<sup>4</sup>This needs qualification in the following respect. Just as blind people can learn to apply ‘visual’ concepts, so, in all or most of these cases, speakers who do not occupy the relevant stance could presumably pick up the vocabulary in question, by exploiting at second hand the abilities of those speakers who do.

<sup>5</sup>I disagree with someone (e.g., the probabilistic subjectivist, or Pettit & Jackson) who claims that the use conditions are actually truth conditions not so much in thinking that they make the *wrong* choice of truth conditions, but in thinking that they are wrong to assume that there is a theoretical issue to be settled at all, in these terms. As a deflationist, I simply deny that. Within the vocabulary in question, of course, claims have their disquotational truth conditions; but I recognise no semantic notion that would give us a fact of the matter from any other standpoint.

pects of speakers' situations, on which such action depends. Of course, it is hardly news that assertion can be thought of in this way. But whereas tradition would have said that *what gets coordinated* are beliefs about the world, my view says that while this isn't exactly *wrong*, it puts the explanatory emphasis in the wrong place.

The first step to getting things right is to recognise that the coordination task has another dimension – a dimension corresponding to the functional variability. *What gets coordinated* thus varies from case to case, depending on the practice or functional task – i.e., the *stance* – that underlies the class of utterances in question. For probabilistic claims it is credences or dispositions to betting behaviour, for conditionals it is inference-tickets, and so on. Each case brings with it a new *practical* respect in which the members of a speech community may differ, and hence a new sense in which it may make a difference to their collective lives whether they take steps to coordinate. For better or worse, that's the crucial difference that flows from bringing the case within the scope of the assertoric game.<sup>6</sup>

This is a story that needs a lot more telling, of course. I've told it a little more detail elsewhere, but much remains to be done. For the present, however, I'll simply offer two reasons for optimism about this aspect of the program. The first is that it doesn't seem controversial that assertion functions as a coordination mechanism, in something like this way. That looks just *obvious*, from the traditional standpoint. My move is simply to take that obvious truth, and give a new twist to our understanding of what gets coordinated – to reverse the order of explanation between practice and semantic content, in a way I'll explain in a moment. But since that reversal takes place beneath the surface, as it were, it doesn't affect the plausibility of our 'obvious' observation. (It gives the subject matter of the observation a new and more important role, but the tradition can hardly deny that the material is there to be put to use.)

The second ground for optimism is that this project seems to align so well with what, as I've said, I take to be the leading current proposal for saying something substantial about the assertion game, that of Brandom. Certainly, more needs to be said about how Brandom's wheels fit on my axles – how the resulting vehicle can be steered in the direction I want to take it – but that's a much less daunting task than inventing the wheels from scratch.

### 3 The pragmatic construction of content

There is another respect in which my proposal aligns well with Brandom's. In the previous lecture, I characterised my view in terms of two assumptions about language and thought: the *Content Assumption*, that language is a medium for encoding sentence-sized packets of factual information; and the *Correspondence Assumption*, that these contents are all 'about' some aspect of the external world, in much the same way. As I said, my proposal rests on pulling the two assumptions apart, retaining the Content

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<sup>6</sup>One of the advantages of this proposal, I think, is that it helps to explain our varying inclinations to play the assertion game, with respect to different topics – in *Facts and the Function of Truth* I explored this idea in terms of the variability in the possibilities for no-fault disagreements, from case to case.

Assumption but sidelining the Correspondence Assumption, replacing it with a more pluralistic understanding of the role of content in our complex interaction with our environment.

The project is thus to explain *how there come to be* statements with particular contents, by thinking about the practical role of the particular instantiation of the assertion game that produces tokens with such contents. This amounts to a reversal of the orthodox view of the relative priority of content and usage, or semantics and pragmatics. Here's Brandom's description of what I take to be a closely related contrast between these two orders of explanation:

An account of the conceptual might explain the use of concepts in terms of a priori understanding of conceptual *content*. Or it might pursue a complementary explanatory strategy, beginning with a story about the practice or activity of applying concepts, and elaborating on that basis an understanding of conceptual content. The first can be called a *platonist* strategy, and the second a *pragmatist* (in this usage, a species of functionalist) strategy. One variety of semantic or conceptual platonism in this sense would identify the content typically expressed by declarative sentences and possessed by beliefs with sets of possible worlds, or with truth conditions otherwise specified. At some point it must then explain how associating such a content with sentences and beliefs contributes to our understanding of how it is proper to use sentences in making claims, and to deploy beliefs in reasoning and guiding action. The pragmatist direction of explanation, by contrast, seeks to explain how the use of linguistic expressions, or the functional role of intentional states, confers conceptual content on them. (2000: 4)

Brandom goes on to say that his own view is 'a kind of conceptual pragmatism':

It offers an account of knowing (or believing, or saying) *that* such and such is the case in terms of knowing *how* (being able) to do something. ... The sort of pragmatism adopted here seeks to explain what is asserted by appeal to features of *assertings*, what is claimed in terms of *claimings*, what is judged by *judgings*, and what is believed by the role of *believings* ... – in general, the content by the act, rather than the other way around. (2000: 4)

Later, Brandom distinguishes between views which understand the conceptual 'in representational terms' (2000: 7), and his own view, which seeks 'to develop an expressivist alternative' to this 'representational paradigm.' (2000: 10)

In these respects, then, my project seems well-aligned with Brandom's. In other recent work I've explored some possible divergences at later stages – these depend on some issues of interpretation of Brandom's project – but it seems clear that he and I begin in very much the same place.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>A possible difference concerns the notion of practice. There is room for a range of views on the

### 3.1 The mirror and the key

My project turns on a contrast between the view of informational content as a passive, ‘reflective’ sampling of something ‘external’, and that of it as an active product of an inferential and conversational game – a game whose distinct applications are distinguished by variation at two ends: in the *users*, as well as in the *world*. I’m thus proposing that we abandon the passive conception of representational content in favour of a more active, relational metaphor: that of the *key*, which is adapted at one end to the shape of the user, at the other end to the shape of some part of the environment.

The important question then becomes something like this: in virtue of what features of the environment, and what features of the circumstances of the language users, does the particular variation of the assertion game that generates *these* contents prove itself to be useful? It is the second part of the question that corresponds to the new dimension of variability which is obscured by traditional representationalism (and uncovered but misunderstood by traditional expressivism).

The difference between my position and traditional expressivism requires that I say something very different about the the issue of word–world relations. Traditional expressivists held onto the old representationalist story for discourses they regarded as genuinely descriptive, and told a different, functional story elsewhere. My story is in one sense more complicated, and in another sense much simpler. It depends on a bifurcation in the notion of the *world*, but not in that of *assertion*.

## 4 The duality of worlds

“[W]here there are no sentences, there is no truth ... the world is out there, but *descriptions of the world* are not.” (Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, 4–5, my emphasis)

At the end of the previous lecture I offered my bifurcation in the notion of representation as an alternative – in some ways, a very sympathetic alternative – to Rorty’s rejection of big-R Representationalism. To make the transition a happy one, however, we need to face up to a corresponding bifurcation in the notion of the *World*. This notion, too, I want to suggest, has two nodes, or conceptual attractors, that need to be clearly distinguished – and once distinguished, kept apart, rather than uncomfortably bundled into the same skin. I began this section with the above quotation from Rorty – a much-quoted fragment from the introduction to *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* – to illustrate that he, of all people, here seems unconscious of the need for the distinction. After all, what is Rorty, of all people, doing in combining the idea that the

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question as to what extent the relevant practices are constrained by our natures and physical circumstances. At one extreme would be the view that we are universal practitioners, capable of turning our hands to any practice at all, given the right instructions. At the other extreme would be the view that, as Louis Armstrong puts it with respect to jazz, “If you got to ask, you ain’t never gonna get to know.” – i.e., you have the relevant practices innately (or otherwise naturally), or not at all. Both extremes are implausible, but there are a lot of possibilities in between. Brandom may be closer to the former extreme than me.

world is ‘out there’ with that of *descriptions of the world*. Isn’t this plain old representationalism? (As we’ll see, there are ways to read Rorty to avoid that consequence, but they need the distinction I’m about to draw.)

#### 4.1 Worlds of states of affairs

It is often noted that notions such as *belief*, *statement*, *state of affairs* and *fact* seem to go hand-in-hand with those of *assertion*, and *truth* itself.<sup>8</sup> And in arguing that we should think of the use of *i*-representations as genuinely assertoric, in what turns out to be the most interesting theoretical sense available, I’ve recommended, in effect, that we should respect this intuition: *i*-representations should be regarded as genuinely *factual*, too, in the best sense of the term we now have.

But a venerable tradition in metaphysics thinks of the *world* as the totality of facts, or states of affairs. Thus the world is held to *be* ‘a world of states of affairs’, in David Armstrong’s phrase; or simply ‘everything that is the case’, in the opening words of the *Tractatus*. How is this conception of the world to be reconciled, if at all, with the relaxed, multifunctional notion of fact and state of affairs I’ve just recommended? On the one hand, the idea that the world is everything that is the case seems so uncontroversial that they could hardly fail to get along; on the other, the result seems likely to collide head-on with any *metaphysical* use of this notion.

Why do they collide? Because all sides will agree, presumably, that what facts *we take there* to be depends on what kinds of assertoric claims our language equips us to make (as well as on what particular claims, of each kind, we take to be true). But functional pluralism about kinds of assertion seems to stand squarely in the path of any sort of metaphysical closure, or totality. If there is in principle no totality of possible kinds – no set of all possible functionally-distinct assertoric language games – then nor can there be any totality of all the facts, apparently.

There seems to be a totality from where we stand, as it were – as players of a particular assemblage of assertoric language games – but we might have stood somewhere else (it depends on a host of contingencies about our circumstances and natures). This doesn’t commit us to saying, implausibly, that if we had gone in for different language games, the facts would have been different; only that if we’d gone in for different language games, we would have made factual claims different from (i.e., not translatable as) any that we actually make. Here, proper attention to use–mention distinctions saves us from implausible idealism.<sup>9</sup>

Thus we get something like, not a plurality of *worlds*, but a plurality of *ways of*

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<sup>8</sup>This sort of remark is especially common in the context of approving discussions of deflationary theories of truth, but its plausibility doesn’t seem to depend on deflationism.

<sup>9</sup>I think it also saves us from conflict with Davidson. A standpoint that merely *mentions* the language games of foreigners does not incur the obligation to interpret them in the home language, and hence to render the ‘alien’ conceptual scheme in terms of our own. This doesn’t mean, *contra* Davidson, that we recognise an irreducibly *different* conceptual scheme. So long as we merely mention the foreigners’ utterances, we do not attribute them a conceptual scheme at all – that’s not the enterprise in which we’re engaged. Davidson will say that we therefore don’t treat them as language users, but I think this is terminological – if Davidson wants to keep the term ‘language’, we can use another.



*world-making*. Or rather, what we get is one way of world-making, the only way – viz., the adoption of a practice of making factual claims – but now recognised to have a plurality of potential applications, associated with the plurality of possible assertoric language games.

Before we turn to the second notion of the world, it is important to see that there's nothing spooky going on with respect to the first. In particular, there's no sense in which our adoption of a new language game "gives concrete being" to a world or realm of facts which didn't exist before we started to play the game. The story is much more banal than that. Adoption of a new language game gives concrete being to ... a new language game! That is, it puts us in a position to endorse to a new collection of factual claims. But there's no perspective, external or internal, from which it is appropriate to say that the adoption of the game has 'brought the facts into being', or anything of that kind. We can't speak about the facts in question until we play the relevant game, and within the game, very special cases aside, it certainly won't be appropriate to say that we *created* the facts. (There's no soapbox here for the village idealist.)

#### 4.2 The world as the natural environment

The first notion of world (call it the *i-World*) went with that of *i*-representations. The world in the first sense is simply what our *i*-representations are *about*, in the proper deflationary sense of 'about' – among other things, as I've stressed, it is a world only visible from *within* (i.e., to *users of*) the vocabularies in question.

The second notion of world goes with that of *e*-representation. In this sense, the world is simply the natural environment – what we have in view in the scientific project. This project includes, as a small fragment, the kind of enquiry that might have a use for the notion of an *e*-representation, when the focus of the investigation is a particular aspect of human behaviour (our own *linguistic* behaviour) and its context. Here, the notion of an *e*-representation provides one among many conceivable relations between the relevant aspects of us, on the one hand, and our environment – the *e-World* – on the other. (The relations that figure in the expressivist's functional explanations provide other examples.)

I want to be neutral, for present issues, on some controversial issues about the constitution of the *e-World*, in this sense – neutral, in particular, on issues of reductionism and pluralism within science. (I'll say something briefly about the latter at the end of this lecture, but only to contrast scientific pluralism with the kind of pluralism associated with *i*-representations.) However, I want to stress that there's nothing meta-physical about the notion. It doesn't presuppose an Archimedean viewpoint, outside thought and language altogether, but simply an ordinary, first-order scientific viewpoint. Roughly, the *e-World* is visible only from within science in precisely the same sense as the *i-World* is visible only from within the viewpoint of users of assertoric vocabularies in general. Indeed, the *e-World* simply *is* the *i-World* of the scientific vocabulary. (Our own scientific vocabulary, too, not some transcendental scientific vocabulary.)<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Note that the fact that the *e-World* can be properly contained in the *i-World*, despite the fact that

Once again, the view I'm recommending is that the i-World and the e-World are both useful notions to have in our philosophical vocabulary, so long as we don't make the mistake of confusing them. Traditional positions, naturalist and non-naturalist, might be seen as arguing that one or other is primary – one or other is *the* world. I want to say that that argument, like the analogous argument about representation on which it feeds, rests on an equivocation.

In the next section I want to turn to an argument that tries to resuscitate one side in this debate, claiming that the kind of account I have offered itself reveals the primacy of the e-World. Before I turn to that, let's return to my quotation from Rorty, to illustrate the way in which the distinction between two notions of world makes things go smoothly.

“[W]here there are no sentences, there is no truth ... the world is out there, but descriptions of the world are not.” (Rorty, *op. cit.*)

If it is the e-World which is 'out there', then the contrast is misleading (by my lights, and surely by Rorty's), because not all descriptive sentences are descriptions *of the e-World*. But the remark stands if we read both occurrences of 'world' as 'i-World'. For in this case it amounts to an affirmation – *from the inside*, as it were – that the existence of the i-World doesn't depend on our linguistic practices.

Similar points apply to this famous remark from P. F. Strawson, the earlier part of which I quoted approvingly in the previous lecture:

If you prise the statements off the world you prise the facts off it too; but the world would be none the poorer. (You don't also prise off the world *what the statements are about* – for this you would need a different kind of lever.) (Strawson, *op. cit.*, my emphasis)

Once again, I want to say that this is fine if we read it 'from inside our language games', with our i-Worlds in view. From this vantage point, the italicised phrase can be given a deflationary reading, and the remark as a whole can be read as emphasising that although our language games are 'mind-dependent' (or better, 'situation-dependent'), the objects they commit us to are not. We cannot speak of those objects except within the game concerned; but from that standpoint, the right thing to say – neglecting the obvious reflexive cases – is that the objects *don't* depend on our practices. (As I put it before, no standpoint for simple-minded idealism.)

If we try to read Strawson's remark in terms of the e-World, however – as a remark from the anthropological perspective, in which we stand outside the language games in question – then again the italicised phrase is problematic, by my lights. In fact, it is problematic in two (albeit closely related) ways: first, in assuming that there is a notion of 'aboutness' in play, from this standpoint, and second in assuming that what statements are about must lie in the e-World.

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our own vocabularies are all proper objects of scientific study, and thus items themselves in the e-World, depends on the fact that not all investigations of a vocabulary need be committed to the ontology to which the vocabulary itself is committed. The crucial points here are the use-mention distinction, and rejection of substantial semantic properties.

## 5 Isn't science 'purely descriptive'?

At this point, some of my opponents – especially traditional expressivists – are likely to ask how my view really differs from theirs. Why shouldn't we say that the e-World – the natural environment – just *is* the *real* world, as these expressivists do; and regard my view as a victory for the view that combines realism about the natural world with irrealism about other matters; or *real* realism about science with *quasi*-realism about other vocabularies?

As the latter way of putting the question makes clear, this is related to a broader issue, which I raised but deferred in the previous lecture. Does my view leave any room for Blackburn's distinction between (as I put it), loose and strict notions of assertion? Or does it necessarily recommend a kind of global version of quasi-realism – a budget-travel version of global expressivism, which allows the economy class passengers to take over the whole plane?

You won't be surprised to hear that my money is on this economical alternative. It seems to me that there are three ways in which the quasi-realist might try to make a case for the opposing view – three ways the claimed 'genuine assertions' might be distinguished from the broader field:

1. LOGICAL FORM: It might be argued that there are logical or grammatical marks of 'genuine' as opposed to 'quasi' statementhood.
2. ONTOLOGY: It might be held that my view gives an ontological primacy to science (or perhaps some subset of science).
3. THE FATE OF THE EXPRESSIVE COMPONENT: It might be argued that for some vocabularies – again, perhaps, those of science – the expressive component of the account simply falls away, leaving us nothing else to say, except that the claims in question are 'purely descriptive'.

Concerning the first of these proposals, it seems to me that it is simply inconsistent with the idea that we should look to Brandom's inferentialism for our account of assertion. For if inferentialism supplies our account of the distinctive grammar and logic of assertion – and if I am right in claiming that what it captures is the loose rather than the strict notion – then it follows that the grammar and logic go with the loose version, not with anything else.

### 5.1 Ontology and the perspectival fallacy

The second option – roughly, realist about the-world-as-described-by-science, but at best quasi-realist about other topics – is a version of what is sometimes called *Eleatic* realism (or Eleatic naturalism). One appealing version of the Eleatic criterion for realism holds that we should be realists about a class of entities (about Xs, say) when Xs figure in causal explanations of our talk and beliefs 'about' Xs (i.e., of talk which has the superficial form of talk about Xs). Blackburn canvasses such a criterion as the basis of a distinction between quasi-realism and genuine realism, for example:

A quasi-realist [e.g., about value] can mimic our formal practice with the concept of truth or fact. But surely he cannot give the facts any role in explaining our practice. To do so is to embrace their real distinct existence, or so it might seem.<sup>11</sup>

Of course, the task of seeking the causes of our beliefs and utterances – ‘explaining our practice’, as Blackburn puts it – is a just small part of the scientific enterprise as a whole. The Eleatic criterion is likely to appeal to the general case, saying that the mark of the real is to be needed in causal explanations in general, not merely in causal explanations of our own practices. But the restricted project will serve to illustrate my general point: as we engage in this explanatory project, there is an inevitable but potentially misleading difference between the scientific vocabulary and others. We are engaged in a scientific practice, seeking explanations for various other practices (or, indeed, for scientific practice itself). In other words, we are *employing* scientific vocabulary, to *theorise about* the function and genealogy of vocabularies in general.

In general, presumably, the explanations we offer from this scientific perspective will appeal to extra-linguistic states of affairs of various kinds – to the various features of ourselves and our environments that explain our linguistic practices (scientific and otherwise). Thus, roughly, it is characteristic of the project that it appeals to non-linguistic ontology, in the service of explanations of various kinds of linguistic behaviour. In the case in which the latter behaviour involves quantification over a distinct ontology of its own – an ontology of moral values, in the moral case, for example – the explanatory project embodies the starkest possible asymmetry between this ontology and that of science. It *invokes* scientific ontology, while *ignoring* moral ontology. And how could it be otherwise? We *use* scientific vocabulary, but *mention* the various object vocabularies with which we are concerned. (Our explanandum is *the use of moral language*, not *moral states of affairs*.)

No wonder, then, that the natural facts that play a role in explaining our practices *look* privileged from this perspective. They are privileged, *from this perspective*, for it simply *is* the scientific explanatory perspective. One mark of this privilege – perhaps the most misleading – is that the perspective entitles us to formulate the disquotational platitudes for terms and sentences in the scientific vocabulary, but not for others. To say something of the form:

‘P’ is true iff P

we have to *use* the sentence we substitute for P. The same goes for something of the form:

‘x’ refers to x.

Since our imagined explanatory perspective merely *mentions* the target vocabulary, expressions of these form are admissible only in the case in which the target vocabulary and the explanatory vocabulary are one and the same – in other words, only in the case

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<sup>11</sup>‘Truth, Realism, and the Regulation of Theory’, in *Essays in Quasi-Realism*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1993, 15–34, at p. 31. (Cf. *Spreading the Word*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984, p. 257.) Blackburn goes on to call attention to some difficulties for this suggestion, however—here, as elsewhere, he is by no means an unqualified Eleatic naturalist.

in which the meta-vocabulary provides the use of the term in question. Hence it can easily seem that the meta-vocabulary is *uniquely* representational, or referential.

In both a semantic and an ontological sense, then, scientific discourse can easily seem to be privileged. The error, I've urged, is to mistake a genuine but merely perspectival privilege for something stronger – for an *absolute* ontological criterion, or for the conclusion that only scientific discourse is genuinely truth-conditional. The best defence against this error lies within the explanatory project itself. If reflection on the genealogy and functions of quantification, and semantic vocabulary, leads to the kind of conclusion I've recommended – in other words, to a view which is essentially unitary about these aspects of language, across vocabularies with different functional origins – then we have what we need to meet this challenge: an explanation of the *appearance* that scientific discourse is privileged in these ways, without the need for any substantial, non-perspectival distinction to account for this appearance.<sup>12</sup>

Thus functional pluralism offers a natural way to deflate the Eleatic intuition – to explain it as a product of a kind of perspectival fallacy. We functional pluralists should certainly embrace the project of explaining our linguistic practices – for that way, if all goes well, lies a scientific foundation for the suggestion that different parts of language serve different functional ends, in some sense overlooked by object naturalists. As I suggested at the end of the first lecture, the upshot would be that science might properly take a more modest view of its own importance. Object naturalism would be defeated from within, as it were, by a scientific discovery that science is just one thing among many that we do with the linguistic tools of assertion and ontological commitment. And this project itself does not accord any special status to scientific ontology, in anything other than the perspectival sense. (No basis here, in other words, for metaphysical privilege.)

## 5.2 Expressivism all the way down?

The last suggestion is that the material for a distinction between genuine and quasi description might lie within expressivism itself – that the expressivist project will simply run out of steam at some point, and find nothing to say, other than that the remaining statements are genuine statements, devoid of any expressive component. I want to offer two reasons for thinking that this outcome is unlikely, the first pitched at the idea that the purely descriptive residue would equate with the language of science, and the second more general.

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<sup>12</sup>If this seems doubtful, note that we can consider our linguistic practices from other perspectives. We can evaluate them, in various senses, for example. (Arguably, in fact, they cannot count as full-blown linguistic practices—as 'sayings', or 'assertings', say—unless they are taken to be subject to normative assessments of various kinds. But the present point doesn't depend on this claim.) If we invoke evaluative or normative properties in this context, the resulting ontological commitment is once again a product of the perspective – a product of the framework in play, as a Carnapian might put it.

### 5.2.1 Science and the status of modality

A popular philosophical conception of science combines two thoughts. On the one hand, science is supposed to aim for the perspective-free standpoint, the view from nowhere. On the other, its fundamental concern, at least *inter alia*, is supposed to be with the modal character of the world: with laws of nature, causal powers and objective probabilities and dispositions. My kind of expressivism raises the possibility that science itself might provide us with good reason to challenge this philosophical conception of science – with good reason to think that these two characteristics, combined in the popular conception of science, are actually incompatible.

How could this happen? Well, suppose, as I suggested earlier, that we came to accept an expressivist genealogy for causation and other modal notions. In essence, this would be a scientific account of a particular aspect of human linguistic and cognitive practice, explaining its origins in terms of certain characteristics of ourselves, as epistemically-limited creatures, embedded in time in a particular way. A corollary would be that uses of these very concepts in science—including, indeed, in this very explanation—would themselves be held to reflect the same embedded perspective. Thus some aspects of current scientific practice would be revealed *by science* to be practices that only ‘make sense’ from this embedded perspective—so that if, *per impossibile*, we could step outside this perspective, these aspects of science would cease to be relevant to us.

Would this be a *reductio* of the expressivist account of causation? Or a fundamental challenge to science? Neither, in my view. On the contrary, it would be continuous with a venerable scientific tradition, a tradition in which science deflates the metaphysical pretensions of its practitioners, by revealing new ways in which they are unlike gods. Science has not only survived, but thrived, on this diet of self-deprecation. Why should the present case be any different, if some of science’s own core categories and activities turn out to be perspectival in a newly-recognised way; a way that depends on the peculiar standpoint that science’s own practitioners occupy in time?<sup>13 14</sup>

In general, the status of modal discourse provides a particularly fascinating focus and potential application for the kind of pragmatism I want to recommend. For the moment, the crucial point is that it provides a major potential challenge to the view that science is uniquely ‘in the describing business’, a challenge from within science itself (i.e., from within the scientific investigation of human modal vocabulary). But in philosophy more generally, the cement of the universe has become the concrete from

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<sup>13</sup>There’s a connection here with the issue between van Fraassen and modal realists. My view offers a middle path in that debate, claiming against both van Fraassen and his realist opponents that we may hold that modality is ineliminable from science – science is not merely in the business of describing the actual – without having to regard modality as simply ‘found structure’, or pre-existing furniture. As Blackburn, in particular, has long insisted, we can account for our modalising in other terms.

<sup>14</sup>Would the relevant aspects of current science then stand revealed as bad science? No, I think, the perspectivity of (some aspects of) current scientific practice turns out to be entirely appropriate, given its role in the lives of creatures in our situation. In that sense, it is not ‘bad science’, and doesn’t need to be reformed or eliminated.<sup>15</sup> In appreciating this perspectivity, however, we get a new insight into the nature of the non-perspectival world, which ‘looks like this’, from our particular point of view. So there’s some good news, too, for ‘detached’ science.

which many metaphysical edifices are constructed. With representationalism, modality is one of the twin foundations of much of contemporary metaphysics; so much rests on these issues.

### 5.2.2 The modality and generality of language in general

The suggestion we're considering is that we might find genuinely descriptive language where the expressivist program simply runs out of steam: where there is nothing to say about the role, function or genealogy of a concept, other than that it serves to represent some feature of the speaker's environment. In a recent paper, Blackburn himself characterises this suggestion rather nicely (without wholly endorsing it):

A similar fate awaits us, in many peoples' view, if we pose [an expressivists'] external-sounding question about at least the coastal waters of science. How come we go in for descriptions of the world in terms of energies and currents? Because we have learned to become sensitive to, measure, predict and control, and describe and refer to, energies and currents. That is science's own view of how we have got where we are, and there is none better. (Blackburn, 2007, pp. 7–8)

But as I've noted elsewhere, there's a powerful objection to this kind of suggestion in the lessons of Wittgenstein's rule-following considerations, especially as elaborated by Kripke. One of the lessons of these considerations is that our use of general terms inevitably depends on shared but contingent dispositions to generalise in the same way from a small number of exemplars. Actually, the point applies equally well to names and other singular terms, for these, too, depend on shared dispositions concerning reapplication. Language use is a dynamic, diachronic activity, and even singular terms need to be reapplied when reused. The lesson of the rule-following considerations is that all of these cases depend on contingencies in us – contingent, shared dispositions to 'go on in the same way' in the *same way*.

The point I want to emphasise is that these contingent dispositions are themselves *stances*, in the sense I've been using that term. In other words, they are contingent features of speakers, on which the use of particular vocabularies depends – and which can't in general be construed as aspects of the *content* of claims made in these vocabularies. (They are background pre-conditions of language, in other words.) As long as these stances are on a par with all the others, they reveal a respect in which all of language has the kind of dependence on contingent characteristics that was the mark of the expressive.<sup>16</sup> In this positive sense, then, the expressivist project casts its distinctive illumination over everything, though to different degrees in different places. The old bifurcation thesis thus gets replaced by a kind of gradation, with no extreme case at the right-hand end.

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<sup>16</sup>Also, similar possibilities for no-fault disagreements etc.

## 6 Two kinds of pluralism

Finally, to the topic of pluralism. In an early paper, I distinguished two kinds of philosophical pluralism. One kind – I called it **Horizontal Pluralism** – I took to be exemplified by Quine’s ontological relativity, and other forms of scientific relativism. Here the plurality consists in the possible existence of a range of alternative scientific world-views, each empirically adequate to more or less the same degree, and none, even in principle, having privileged claim to provide a “truer” description of the world. I pointed out that horizontal pluralism is not confined to science. In ethics, for example, it is the familiar thesis that there is a range of equally coherent moral viewpoints, none objectively superior to any other. Why is this a case of horizontal pluralism? Again, because different moral systems are all nevertheless moral systems. They have something in common in virtue of which they may be counted to be different ways of performing the same linguistic task. It is a nice question how this “something in common” is to be characterised, but it there must be an answer, if relativism is not to degenerate into the trivial point that the same words may mean different things for different people.

I contrasted this kind of pluralism with **Vertical Pluralism**: the view that philosophy should recognise an irreducible plurality of *kinds* of discourse – ethical as well as scientific, for example – and mentioned Wittgenstein, as well as Goodman and Rorty, as examples of pluralists of this vertical sort.

I’ve mentioned this distinction now because scientific pluralism has enjoyed a resurgence in recent years, e.g., in the work of Nancy Cartwright and John Dupré. Hence it seems important to distinguish the kind of pluralism I’ve been defending from such forms of scientific pluralism. It is an interesting issue whether the distinction is a sharp one. On the one hand, after all, I’ve noted that it might be a consequence of my view that we find functional plurality within science, e.g., in the distinction between modal and non-modal vocabulary (or between different kinds of modal vocabulary). While on the other hand, we might well want to distinguish Cartwright’s and Dupré’s version of scientific pluralism from anything that Quine signed up for; and to explain the difference, perhaps, by appeal to a vertical dimension. I suspect, actually, that there’s a further distinction we’ll need, between two kinds of verticality: one corresponding to something like differences in levels of description in a world in which we find patterns at many levels, the other corresponding to my functional pluralism.

These distinctions need a lot more work. I’d hoped to do some of that work in this lecture, but other things intervened. For the moment, I leave you with a distinction between two sources of pluralism. One explains it in terms of a pre-existing plurality of structure in the natural world (external to us), the other in terms of plurality in our natures and circumstances, and hence in the uses we find for assertoric language games. The distinction may not always be sharp, but it is deep and important, in my view – and naturalism leads us astray, unless we keep it in mind.