From Quasirealism to Global Expressivism – and Back Again?

1 Quasirealism to Global Expressivism

1.1 Quasirealism – the basic idea

Talking the realist talk without walking the metaphysical walk.

> QUASI-REALISM: a position holding that an expressivist or projectivist account of ethics can explain and make legitimate sense of the realist-sounding discourse within which we promote and debate moral views. This is in opposition to writers who think that if projectivism is correct then our ordinary ways of thinking in terms of a moral truth, or of knowledge, or the independence of ethical facts from our subjective sentiments, must all be in error, reflecting a mistaken realist metaphysics. The quasi-realist seeks to earn our right to talk in these terms on the slender, projective basis. (Blackburn, 1994, 315)

1.1.1 The role of the Bifurcation Thesis

> The bifurcationist often undertakes the task of determining which of our well-formed declarative sentences have truth conditions and which ones, though meaningful, are simply the manifestations of attitudes or the expressions of 'stances'. He wants to know which of our predicates get at real properties in the world, and which, in contrast, merely manifest aspects of our representational apparatus—'projections borrowed from our internal sentiments'. On different occasions he articulates his task in different ways; but they all point to some variant of the *bifurcation thesis* …, the thesis that some declarative sentences (call them the D sentences)
> —describe the world
> —ascribe real properties
> —are genuinely representational
> —are about 'what's really out there'
> —have determinate truth conditions
> —express matters of fact
> —limn the true structure of reality
> whereas other declarative sentences (call them the E sentences)
> —express commitments or attitudes
> —manifest a 'stance' (praise, condemnation, endorsement, etc.)
> —are expressive rather than descriptive
> —do not 'picture' the world
> —lack truth conditions, but possess 'acceptance conditions' or 'assertibility conditions'
> —merely enable us to 'cope' with reality
> —are true (or false) by convention
> —do not express 'facts of the matter'. (Kraut, *Mind,* 1990, 158–159)

Like other expressivists, traditional ("local") quasirealists are committed to such a distinction between *genuinely* and *quasi* descriptive claims.

1.1.2 Sellars as a precursor?

> [T]he core truth of 'emotivism' is not only compatible with, but absurd without, *ungrudging* recognition of the fact, so properly stressed (if **mis-assimilated to the model of describing**) by 'ethical rationalists,' that ethical discourse as *ethical discourse* is a mode of rational discourse. It is my purpose to argue that the core truth of Hume's philosophy of causation is not only compatible with, but absurd without, *ungrudging* recognition of those features of causal discourse as a mode of rational discourse on which the 'metaphysical rationalists' laid such stress but also **mis-assimilated to describing**. (Sellars, 1958, §82, emphasis in bold mine)

1.2   The kinds of pressure toward globalisation

1.2.1   Pulling from the outside – the argument from semantic minimalism

What the argument is   The observation that minimalism threatens to deflate the quasirealist's residual representationalism.

What the argument is not   The old argument (McDowell, Wright, Boghossian, etc.) that minimalism defeats non-cognitivism, by making it "easy" to be truth-conditional. We meet this by distinguishing the *positive* and *negative* theses in expressivism.

Negative thesis Moral claims (say) do not have truth conditions.

Positive thesis Moral claims have some *non-semantically-characterised* function, e.g., that of expressing affective attitudes.

Deflationism does undermine the negative thesis, but doesn't challenge the positive thesis – on the contrary, it suggests it has to be a model for everything, in the sense that it implies that for *no vocabulary at all* can it be informative to say that it has a semantically-characterised function – deflationism denies us such a theoretical role for semantic notions.

Why Blackburn is vulnerable to the argument   He is (usually – forgetting occasional lapses into "success semantics") a card-carrying deflationist.

1.2.2   Pushing from the inside – isn't quasirealism too successful for its own good?

An embarrassment of riches?   If quasirealism can show why we talk the talk with walking the walk in hard cases – e.g., ethics – why not in easy cases, too? For example, if the explanation of the quasirealist talk in the case of ethical language is that it encourages us to align our affective attitudes in a useful way, why not say the same about other mental states, such as the ones quasirealism thinks of a genuine beliefs. Why not think of their "talk" as explained in the same way?

Objection 1   In this case (e.g., in science) we have the prospect of "success semantics" – a *reductive* account of semantic notions – so we don't need the quasirealist's alternative explanation of the *use* of semantic vocabulary. **Reply:** Perhaps, but why should the quasirealist give up here on his usual methodology, which is to *explain* the talk, not offer an reductive analysis of it? Why not be consistent, if the territory allows it? And in any case, isn't the alternative in tension with the quasirealist's semantic minimalism? (The intuitions to which success semantics appeals can be put to work somewhere else, viz., in an explanation of why inter-personal alignment is *useful,* in this case.)

Objection 2   In the case of science, we don't need an alternative to metaphysics – we are already signed-up to its ontology, at least in its "coastal waters"? **Reply:** See below.

1.3   Global expressivism?

1.3.1   A two-storey pragmatism

1. The global level   A very *uniform* story about the nature and functions of assertoric speech acts (or judgements, if we want to put psychology before language in this respect), told in *non-representational* terms – e.g., a story about how assertions enable social creatures to express, revise and align behavioural commitments of various kinds. **Precursors?** Blackburn, suitably generalised, or Brandom's account of "the game of giving and asking for reasons".

2. The local level   A very *diverse* story about the various functions of the many kinds of commitments which are capable of participating in this uniform "assertion game" – e.g., that they are associated with affective and epistemic states of distinctive kinds, playing characteristic roles in our agentive lives. So long as none of these local, Level 2, functions are themselves characterised the old semantic terms, this level, too, is entirely "expressive".

1.3.2   A niggling bifurcationist voice

Aren't some of these sub-vocabularies are more in the business of "tracking the world" than others?

1.4   Two notions of representation

Proposal   Distinguish two (clusters of) notions in play in contemporary theory:

i-representation Emphasises position in an appropriate inferential or functional network.

e-representation Emphasises environment tracking, or causal co-variation.

With this distinction in play, we can be bifurcationists in *e-representational* terms, while being global pragmatists in *i-representational* terms (i.e., no semantic word–world relations in the picture, at that level). In other words, we can say not only (at Level 1) that all declarative utterances are *i-representations* (this itself being a pragmatic or expressive notion, at least if explicated following Brandom or a generalised quasirealist); but also (at Level 2) that some but not all declarative utterances are *e-representations*.

2   Back to Bifurcationism?

2.1   Blackburn's Carnapian criterion for pragmatism

> The [Carnapian] external question is posed, about a piece of language or discourse of some identified kind, when we ask how to explain the fact that we have come to think and talk like that: why do we go in for possible world talk, arithmetical talk, ethical or normative talk, and so on?

> You will be a pragmatist about an area of discourse if you pose a Carnapian external question: how does it come about that we go in for this kind of discourse and thought? What is the explanation of this bit of our language game? And then you offer an account of what we are up to in going in for this discourse, and the account eschews any use of the referring expressions of the discourse; any appeal to anything that a Quinean would identify as the values of the bound variables if the discourse is regimented; or any semantic or ontological attempt to 'interpret' the discourse in a domain, to find referents for its terms, or truth makers for its sentences. Instead the explanation proceeds by talking in different terms of what is done by so talking. It offers a revelatory genealogy or anthropology or even a just-so story about how this mode of talking and thinking and practising might come about, given in terms of the functions it serves. … It finds whatever plurality of functions it can lay its hands upon.

2.2   Blackburn's four-way picture

> Returning to the characterization of pragmatism given above, we should now see not a binary opposition, between pragmatism and some competitor called representationalism, but at least a fourfold division of alternatives. We could hold out for pragmatic stories *everywhere.* The opposition would be flat-footed representationalism *somewhere.* Or, we could hold our for pragmatic stories *somewhere,* and the opposition would be flat-footed representationalism *everywhere.* The last of these is, I suppose, the position manifested by those conservative philosophers with whom I started, who automatically react to any pragmatic story by reaching for notions of truth, truth-condition, truth-makers, and their kin, and proclaiming that these lie beyond the pragmatist's grasp. I stand shoulder to shoulder with Price and I hope many others here in finding that attitude reprehensible. Still, all that is needed to oppose it are *local* pragmatisms, for which, of course, I am more than happy to sign up.

2.3   Blackburn's concerns about global pragmatism

2.3.1   The No Exit "problem"

> On the other hand, I am much less certain about *global* pragmatism, the overall rout of the representationalists apparently promised by Rorty and perhaps by Robert Brandom. The reason is obvious enough. It is what Robert Kraut, investigating similar themes, calls the No Exit

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problem. It points out, blandly enough, that even genealogical and anthropological stories have to start somewhere. …

Such genealogical stories start with a common-sense background of us, and a world of physical objects, with distinct locations, changing only according to distinct regularities with a distinct speed limit. In the books in which he provides a genealogy of morals, Hume simply takes all that for granted, just as a Fregean account of arithmetic takes the tigers and eggs and warriors for granted.

Response Agreed, the scientific ontology is 'already in view,' when we ask the pragmatic external question about scientific vocabulary. But why does this matter? The external question is about the *talk,* not the *ontology.* In *other* cases – e.g., ethics – it matters that the ontology need not be in view when one asks these questions, because that's what enables pragmatism to provide an alternative to metaphysics (and placement problems). But this was never a problem in science, so we don't need the escape hatch. Hence it isn't a problem that it isn't available to us.

2.3.2 "Nothing to say except flat-footed representationalism"

If we ask the Carnapian external question about all *that* [i.e., about "the tigers and eggs and warriors"], then we face a choice point. It may be that we take an Aristotelian, or perhaps Wittgensteinian, line on the priority of the everyday. There is simply no place for 'first philosophy' to stand behind the *endoxa,* the given in our common-sense situation. This attitude would be that of *quietism,* or the rejection altogether of at least some external questions. If we insisted instead on posing the Carnapian external-sounding question: how come that we go in for descriptions of the world in terms of surrounding middle-sized dry goods?—then the answer is only going to be the flat-footed stutter or self-pat on the back: **it is because we are indeed surrounded by middle sized dry goods**. That answer, obviously, draws on the referential resources of the object language, and according to the account in front of us, **amounts to a victory for representationalism over pragmatism**. It is because it is no better than a stutter that I call it flat-footed representationalism. A similar fate awaits us, in many peoples' view, if we pose a Carnapian 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.

Response 1 It is simply not true that there is 'nothing to say', from the pragmatist's point of view, when we consider **Level 1**. All of the story told at that level – e.g., Brandom's inferentialist account of "the game of giving and asking for reasons" – applies as much here as anywhere. If Brandom is right, or if the generalised quasirealist's story about the functions of representationalist "talk" is right, this is still something substantial to say, *and it is all said in pragmatist terms.* To think otherwise is just to take one's eye off the ball, when it comes to explaining the *language* we use in talking about everyday things.

Response 2 Even at **Level 2**, if we have e-representation on the table, it is still not true that we are being flat-footed representationalists (on the contrary, we are linking bits of this kind of language to more primitive kinds of e-representations – nothing flat-footed about that).

So at neither level is it true that the pragmatist, characterised in Blackburn's Carnapian terms, has nothing to say. (Indeed, as Blackburn himself notes, we can can probably say a lot more, associated with such things as the universality of modal concepts and rule-following.)

2.4 Global pragmatism *and* bifurcation

Conclusion Pragmatists can do better, everywhere, than "flat-footed representationalism"; and in that sense claim a *global* view, in Blackburn's terms. But they can still make sense of tracking and the like – e-representation – as a *local* function of some parts of assertoric language.