Representationalism – From Nihilism to Dualism

Huw Price

Helsinki · 12·09·11
1. Representationalism and its critics
2. Placement: problem and strategies
3. Quasi-realism: motivations and challenges
4. Two expressivist programs: linking Blackburn & Brandom
5. Representationalist dualism: a new Bifurcation Thesis
6. Adding a dimension
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6. Adding a dimension
The matching game
The matching game
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The matching game
The matching game
The semantic version

Statements

"P"
"Q"
"R"
"S"

The world

Fact that S
Fact that R
Fact that P
Fact that Q
Playing for real
Playing for real

Fun and learning activity
Sharks – feared and mystified at the same time. With this book, children will learn a lot about the different species while playing with the 4 sticker pages. Each sticker fits with a fact in one of the 8 pages and through searching and finding the corresponding fact, children will easily remember it.
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Hard problems

The matching game – easy version
Hard problems

The matching game – hard version
Hard problems

The semantic game – easy version

Statements

"P"
"Q"
"R"
"S"

The world

Fact that S
Fact that R
Fact that P
Fact that Q
The semantic game – hard version

Statements

"P"
"Q"
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The natural world

Fact that S

Fact that P

Fact that Q

Fact that R
Two implicit assumptions

(Big-R) Representationalism
The matching model is a good way of theorising about the relation of language to the world.

(Big-N) Naturalism (‘Object naturalism’)
For the purposes of such theory, the world is the world as described by science.
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For the purposes of such theory, the world is the world as described by science.
(Big-R) Representationalism is itself a (proto-)theory about human language.

So, by a naturalist’s own lights, it itself is subject to empirical confirmation or disconfirmation.

Hence ‘object naturalism’ properly defers to ‘subject naturalism’ – i.e., to a naturalistic view of ourselves and our linguistic practices.
Naturalism: an issue of priority

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Naturalism without Representationalism?

Three grounds for disconfirmation?

1. **Semantic minimalism.** Semantic notions are too thin to support the theoretical weight of Representationalism.

2. **Stich’s objection.** Basing metaphysics on reference makes it hostage to the inevitable indeterminacies of any naturalistic theory of reference. (Does ‘belief’ refer? The answer depends on our theory of reference, and we’re never going to agree about that!)

3. **Circularity.** Does the term ‘reference’ refer? The question seems to presuppose it’s own answer! (Cf. Boghossian.)
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Against Representationalism

My position

- Against (big-R) Representationalism, both as:
  - A view about how naturalists should theorise about language;
  - and (especially) as a methodology for metaphysics.

- A friend of anti-representationalists in the Pragmatist tradition, such as Dewey (‘Pragmatism will give the coup de grâce to representationalism’ – 1905), Wittgenstein, and Rorty.

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What’s the alternative?

The project

1. Sketch an alternative view of the relation of assertoric language to the natural world, built largely from familiar materials.

2. Show how to connect the work of two projects with anti-representationalist sympathies – viz., the different ‘expressivisms’ of Brandom, on one hand, and of Blackburn, Gibbard et al on the other – and to give the result a more explicitly anti-representationalist interpretation.

3. But suggest that in one sense, the way forward needs more representation, not less – hence dualism, not nihilism.
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6. Adding a dimension
The placement problem

Hard problems, again

- ‘More truths than truthmakers’ – more stickers than places to put them.
- An (apparent?) mismatch between the cardinality of two different sets.
- Hence three basic strategies …
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1. The two sets can actually be matched, just as they are.

2. We’ve under-counted on the right – there are more truth-makers available than we thought.

3. We’ve over-counted on the left – there are fewer statements in need of truthmakers than we thought.
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**Isomorphism after all**

### Reductionism

- Example: The Canberra plan.
- Option: Response-dependence.

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<tr>
<th>Statements</th>
<th>The natural world</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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**Reductionism**
- Example: The Canberra plan.
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Reductionism

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- Add natural facts (e.g., Chalmers on consciousness).
- Add non-natural facts (e.g., Moore on moral facts).
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Grow the pie on the right

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Get rid of some ‘true statements’

- ‘Not true’
  - Eliminativism
  - Fictionalism

Shrink the pie on the left

Statements

- "P"
- "Q"
- "R"
- "S"

The natural world

- Fact that Q
- Fact that P
- Fact that R
- Fact that S

Eliminativism

Fictionalism
Shrink the pie on the left

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Statements: “P”, “Q”, “R”, “S”

The natural world:
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6. Adding a dimension
Quasi-realism

- Begins with this question:
  ‘Why do some speech acts which are not genuine assertions nevertheless behave (pretty much) as if they were?’
- Ends up with ‘loose’ and ‘strict’ notions of assertion.
Motivations

Quasi-realism

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Three kinds of speech acts

The quasi-realist’s taxonomy

1. **Genuinely** descriptive statements.
2. Quasi-descriptive statements.
3. Non-declaratives.
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Huw Price
Two distinctions

The Bifurcation Thesis

1. **Genuinely descriptive statements.**

2. **Quasi-descriptive statements.**

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Two grades of assertion

Note the distinction between ‘strict’ assertions (those above the line) and ‘loose’ assertions (everything in blue).
The Bifurcation Thesis

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   \text{Bifurcation point}
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The minimalist challenge

Expressivism and semantic minimalism

- **Challenge.** Deflationism ‘makes it easy to have truth conditions.’

- **Reply.** True, but it also makes it impossible to *theorise* about language in semantic terms.

  So the expressivists’ positive thesis – that we should theorise in some other way – not only *survives intact*, but is actually *required* by semantic minimalism.

  If anything, the problem is just with local expressivism – but here the problem is with the residual representationalism, not with the expressivism itself. Which leads to …
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The global challenge

The threat of ‘globalisation’

- Quasi-realism involves ‘loose’ and ‘strict’ notions of assertion.
- **Challenge.** What if the loose notion is the only one we need?
- **Issue.** What does it take to be an assertion, in either sense – loose or strict?
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‘Not a motley’

Brandom on the ‘unity’ of assertion

- Assertion is a linguistic ‘downtown’ – a part of linguistic practice on which other parts necessarily depend:

“By contrast to Wittgenstein, the inferential identification of the conceptual claims that language ... has a center; it is not a motley. Inferential practices of producing and consuming reasons are downtown in the region of linguistic practice. Suburban linguistic practices utilize and depend on the conceptual contents forged in the game of giving and asking for reasons, are parasitic on it.” [Brandom 2000: 14]
Brand on the ‘unity’ of assertion

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The invention of ‘downtown’
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“We’ll start out by speaking in simple declarative sentences.”
A problem for expressivist pluralism?

- If to be an assertion just is to be a move in Brandom’s inferential game, what room is there for the pluralism of quasi-realism (and other varieties of the ‘Humean’ expressivism) – i.e., the claim that different vocabularies (moral, modal, etc) ‘do different jobs’?
- Doesn’t Brandom’s account of assertion ‘make everything the same’?
- No – the unity Brandom’s view imposes on the class of assertions is quite compatible with the view that assertions have a variety of expressive functions … and Brandom himself requires as much.
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“Starting with an account of what one is doing in making a claim, [my view] seeks to elaborate from it an account of what is said, the content or proposition—something that can be thought of in terms of truth conditions—to which one commits oneself by making a speech act.” [Brandom 2000, 12]

“Pragmatism about the conceptual seeks to understand what it is explicitly to say or think that something is the case in terms of what one must implicitly know how (be able) to do.” [2000, 18]

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- The pluralism here is in the variety of ‘doings’, or ‘practices’, on which particular assertoric vocabularies depend.
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**Brandom and quasi-realism**

If we characterise assertions as moves in a game of giving and asking for reasons, what happens to the quasi-realist’s idea that some *apparent* assertions – e.g., moral claims – are not *genuine* assertions?

**Two issues here:**

- Is the view that moral claims (say) are genuine assertions *in the inferentialist sense* in tension with what expressivists such as Blackburn had in mind, when they denied that such claims are assertions. *(Obviously not.)*

- Does Brandom’s view of assertion leave any room for a Bifurcation Thesis, of the kind (and in a place) that Blackburn’s quasi-realism requires? Or does it necessarily recommend a more *global* version of expressivism? *(Probably the latter, but defer the issue …)*
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Two notions of assertion

- We now have two notions of ‘genuine’ assertion in play:
  - **From Brandom:** assertions in the inferentialist sense.
  - **From quasi-realism & ‘local’ expressivism:** the (supposed) core of ‘genuinely descriptive’ declarative speech acts, after various cases (morals, modals, etc) are given an expressivist treatment.

- Clearly these notions are pulling in different directions – the former is ‘inclusive’, the latter ‘exclusive’.

- Why not resolve the tension by splitting the territory in two?
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1. Representationalism and its critics
2. Placement: problem and strategies
3. Quasi-realism: motivations and challenges
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Proposal. Distinguish two ‘nodes’ within philosophical uses of the notion of representation.

- **e-Representation**: defined in terms of ‘environment tracking’, covariation, ‘indicator relations’, and the like.

- **i-Representation**: defined in terms of systemic functional, inferential or perhaps computational role – e.g., a move in the game of giving and asking for reasons.

Both notions may be useful, but they’re not the same thing.
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These notions of representation are easily confused, if we confuse:

1. Normative answerability *within the conversational game* – an *external* constraint from the perspective of every player, though *internal* to the game itself.

2. Faithfulness of covariation – ‘answerability’ to the *external environment*.

Again, both notions may be useful, for various theoretical purposes – but we shouldn’t confuse them.
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**Important moral:** There’s a temptation to call both kinds of external constraint ‘truth’ – but again, we shouldn’t make the mistake of thinking that we’re dealing with two aspects or sub-species of a single notion of truth.

We need to distinguish between:

- ‘True’ as a word used within the conversational game – here our theoretical focus is on the use of the term (e.g., on what role it plays, what difference it makes, etc.)
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1. ‘True’ as a word used within the conversational game – here our theoretical focus is on the use of the term (e.g., on what role it plays, what difference it makes, etc.)

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Interpreting the 3D model

- Think of the base as the **natural world**.
- Think of the upright structures and clusters of figures as **vocabularies**: natural items themselves, standing in natural **practice-mediated** relations to each other and to other natural items (e.g., to speakers and elements of their environment).
- Think of the third dimension as modelling the **conceptual** structure, and the **inferential** relations between vocabularies, which are visible only to players of the game – to users of these vocabularies.
- **The crucial point:** This third-dimensional structure doesn’t need to be projected onto the natural base – and yet there’s nothing spooky and nonnatural about the whole picture (no placement problem).
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Conclusions

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- To be clear about where the street leads, we need to recognise that there are two different notions of representation in play, liable to be systematically confused.
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The right ‘ism’ for representationalism: not nihilism but dualism.
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