

THE PRICE OF LIVING A PHILOSOPHICAL LIFE WITHOUT OBJECT NATURALISM

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RESUMEN

En nuestro artículo nos centramos en las principales críticas al representacionalismo desarrolladas por Huw Price en su trabajo “Naturalism without Representationalism”, unas críticas que sientan las bases de su primer argumento contra el naturalismo del objeto. Con posterioridad examinamos su segundo argumento, el que se sigue de sus consideraciones sobre la posibilidad de comenzar con una concepción material de los problemas de la localización.

Palabras clave: Huw Price, naturalismo del objeto, naturalismo del sujeto, representacionalismo.

ABSTRACT

In our paper we first focus on Price’s central objections to representationalism in his “Naturalism without Rpresentationalism”, which pave the way for his first argument against object naturalism –in his terms, they throw doubts on the possibility of ‘validating’ object naturalism. Then, we will examine his second argument, stemming from his considerations on the possibility of starting off with a material conception of the placement problems

KEY WORDS: Huw Price, object naturalism, subject naturalism, representationalism.

1. INTRODUCTION: PLACEMENT PROBLEMS AND THE TWO HORNS OF A DILEMMA

The chapter we will comment on, “Naturalism without Representationalism”, is focused on philosophical naturalism, that is, the general doctrine that philosophy is not an enterprise different from science. Price starts out by setting forth two different versions of naturalism available

to Contemporary philosophers: the widespread *object naturalism*, according to which the world studied by science is all there is and all knowledge is thus scientific knowledge, and what he takes to be a more fundamental form, *subject naturalism*, namely, the perspective that ‘philosophy has to begin with what science tells us *about ourselves*’ (p. 186). His main claim is that *subject naturalism is theoretically prior to object naturalism and provides us with a perspective from which object naturalism can be rejected, given that it rests on a set of semantic presuppositions that are completely untenable, more specifically, on the substantial conception of reference and truth that is characteristic of representationalism*. His objections to it, central to the chapter, can be taken to contribute to the well-known set of criticisms to representationalism put forward by Rorty and other pragmatists (paradigmatically, Rorty 1979, Brandom 1994). In the second part of the chapter, he considers the possibility of adopting a different starting point, which ends up involving the object naturalist with the very same substantial semantic notions that have been found deeply problematic. The conclusion is that the only available option for those philosophers with naturalistic leanings seems to be embracing the subject, non-representationalist version. From this perspective, accounting in naturalistic terms for the difference between, for instance, moral values and mathematical truths comes down to accounting for the difference between two different kinds of linguistic practices. To put it in Wittgensteinian terms, there are linguistic practices all the way down.¹

Let’s us reconstruct Price’s argumentative line with some more detail. According to him, the robust semantic presuppositions characteristic of representationalism play a crucial role in the statement of the so-called ‘placement problems’, namely, the problems of locating *phenomena* such as morality, mathematics, causality, intentionality, etc. within a naturalistic

¹Notice the strong Wittgensteinian tone of the following fragment: “The challenge is now 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 instance. 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.” (Price, 2010, p. 199, our emphasis) From now on, unless something different is explicitly pointed out, all the quotes included in this article belong to the text that we are commenting on.

framework or general view of reality. He distinguishes two different ways of conceiving of those problems: *the material* and *the linguistic* conceptions. The difference can be simply put in the following terms: a placement problem for X is, according to the material conception, a problem about *the thing X*, whereas, for the linguistic conception, it is rather a problem about *the term X*. Each conception takes placement problems to concern something different: *objects or facts* and *linguistic practices*, respectively. This opens the possibility of two horns for an object naturalist's dilemma: she may start out with either a material or a linguistic conception of placement problems. To take the latter first, on the assumption that placement problems are linguistic ones, the object naturalist will then focus on *the referents* of the relevant terms. For example, if she were concerned with morality, she would shift the focus from 'morally correct' to moral correctness itself. Now, the transition from terms to their referents rests on the assumption of *a substantial, non-deflationary conception of semantic relations*, namely, relations between natural language words, on the one hand, and objects and properties in the world, on the other. As we have mentioned, Price takes any commitment to the existence of such relations to be deeply problematic. With regard to the material horn, he considers it to be a dead end as well, for two main reasons. First, it closes up the possibility for a naturalist philosopher to draw conclusions on the basis of our characteristic use of language. Secondly, he points out that semantic notions have become a significant part of the conceptual tools of Contemporary metaphysics. And he seems to think that this is as it should be: there is no other option for a metaphysician than going semantic. As a consequence, by adopting the material conception, the object naturalist ends up being committed to the very same deeply problematic semantic notions of reference and truth that were central to the linguistic conception.

In what follows we are going to first focus on Price's central objections to representationalism, which paved the way for his first argument against object naturalism –in his terms, they throw doubts on the possibility of 'validating' object naturalism. Then, we will examine his second argument, stemming from his considerations on the possibility of starting off with a material conception of the placement problems.

2. ON THE LINGUISTIC HORN

We will start out our analysis of Price's exploration of the first, linguistic horn by quoting a long but significant fragment of the text:

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. (p. 190)

So, representationalism is the position to get rid of. He makes three main points against it. First, he claims that there is a very attractive alternative to holding a substantial truth-conditional semantics: going deflationist about reference and truth while appealing to a use account of semantic notions; to put it in a nutshell, defending a substantial truth-conditional semantics is not compulsory. Second, he briefly mentions a problem of indeterminacy that may affect the theory of reference, inspired by Stich's discussion on the concept of belief (Stich, 1996). Third, he puts forward what we take to be his main objection, composed in turn of different claims: (i) it is not possible to have an empirical attitude with respect to the substantial semantic relations themselves, in particular, *it is not possible to acknowledge their contingent character, which clearly contradicts the object naturalist's principles*; (ii) *the possibility of considering that there is no need for substantial semantic relations gets open for* (who should be no longer regarded as an object but) *a subject naturalist*. He then suggests that the object naturalist risks being incoherent –he does not want to rest his case on the incoherence charge, though, but on the weaker claim that there is no need for a naturalist to encompass substantial semantic relations as a constitutive part of the furniture of the world. Moreover, he waves at Putnam's model theoretic argument: "The problem is not that there is no right answer, but that there are too many right answers." (p. 195) We will say little about the first point, nothing about the second, but pay special attention to the third and more developed one.

Let's us begin by focusing on the third objection: in Price's own words

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 to be

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 terms 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.* (p. 19, our emphasis)

It is not at all clear to us why the object naturalist could not take reference and truth to be contingent semantic relations, namely, why she could not think that there might have been *other* semantic relations or *no* semantic relations at all. The alleged fact that in the actual world the adequate semantic relations are substantial reference and truth is perfectly compatible with thinking that there are other worlds where there are other semantic relations in play and even some worlds, where there are no human beings and no natural language is thus spoken or written, where there aren't any kind of semantic relations whatsoever.

The only reason that Price seems to offer in favour of his claim is his support of Boghossian's transcendental argument against semantic irrealism or anti-realism (Boghossian, 1990). According to it, semantic anti-realism is incoherent since semantic notions are presupposed in the very statement of the thesis, as much as in the whole debate between realists and anti-realists. Boghossian's conclusion is that a realistic, though non-naturalistic, stance towards semantic content is *necessary* –namely, it should be non-contingently adopted.² Price's suggestion is, instead, taking up the subject naturalist alternative. Notice the following fragment:

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. (p. 193)

² In other words, anti-realism about substantial semantic relations cannot be considered to be an empirical possibility.

Now, there are some aspects of this suggestion we would like to comment on. First, there is no reason to accept Boghossian's argument, which we find flawed. From the premise that the semantic anti-realist has to use language to state her thesis and express her disagreement with the realist, it does not follow that she has to subscribe to the realist's terms: what she is presupposing is that there is an *alternative* explanation of what she is doing, which does not appeal to substantial reference and truth –it may be even a purely physical *phenomenon*, fully accountable in neurological terms, or a completely pragmatic one. So, there is no reason to think that the thesis that there is a level of semantic content that has to be accounted for in terms of reference and truth is itself a *necessary* truth, and coming back to Price's argument, Boghossian's argument provides him with no reason to think that the semantic presuppositions held by the object naturalist are necessary – which, on the assumption that any naturalistic thesis must be contingent, would have plunged her into incoherence.

Second, it is not at all clear why Price thinks that accepting Boghossian's argument, as he seems to agree to, might serve to pave the way for adopting his favourite position, subject naturalism: if one accepted the argument, one wouldn't be able to help being committed to substantial reference and truth.

Third, although he says that he does not want to press on the incoherence charge, he ends up illustrating what he has in mind by entertaining two alternative possibilities as to what reference might be:

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. (p. 194)

The fact that the term ‘reference’ *might* stand in those different relations to different things, namely, that it *might* be interpreted or understood in those different ways does not imply that there is no possibility of finding empirical evidence in favour of one of them so as to prefer it to the other. Likewise, the fact that the term ‘light’ *might* be interpreted or understood in two or more different ways (as it happens, some have thought that it refers to a particle whereas others took it to refer to a wave), does not imply that there is no possibility of finding empirical evidence in favour of one of those conceptions so as to prefer it to the other. For the object naturalist, ‘reference’ is in no way different from ‘light’ and the rest of theoretical terms: there might be different empirical conceptions about the intended *phenomena*, and finding strong evidence for a certain theory is the only way to choose among them. So, in as far as she may say that according to our best physical theory, ‘light’ refers to *the so and so*, she may also say that according to our best semantic theory, ‘reference’ refers to *the such and such* –in both cases, the reference of the terms involved might have been different from what it in fact is, which means that both theses are contingent ones. Therefore, there does not seem to be possible to run an incoherence argument against her on this basis.

However, the previous considerations notwithstanding, we think that Price has put together two notions that should be kept apart: contingency and *aposterioricity* or empirical character. As forcefully argued by Kripke (1980), one may think that scientific theoretical identifications are *a posteriori* but necessary: their *aposterioricity* is grounded on the fact that they are known by virtue of experience, hence not *a priori*, whereas their necessity is grounded on the fact that simple general terms for natural kinds (such as ‘light’, ‘heat’, ‘gold’, ‘tiger’, ‘water’, etc.) are akin to rigid designators, namely, they express the same property in all possible worlds –alternatively, one may think that they express an essential property of an individual or a sample, namely, a property that the individual or the sample has in all the worlds.³ To take one of Kripke’s examples, a statement such as

³ See the different conceptions of rigidity put forward for general terms as a consequence of Kripke’s thesis. Paradigmatic examples of the identity of designation conception are Linsky (1984), LaPorte (2000) and Salmon (2005), whereas Devitt & Sterelny (1999) and Devitt (2005) typically exemplify the essentialist conception.

(1) Water is H₂O

is both *a posteriori*, that is, known on the basis of experience, and necessary, namely, true in all possible worlds, given that ‘water’ and ‘H₂O’ express the same natural substance in all of them: hence if true in the actual world, (1) will be true in all the other possible ones. From this perspective, there is no incompatibility between being empirical or *a posteriori* and being necessary. Now, on the object naturalist’s assumption that reference is a natural kind and ‘reference’, a simple general term for a natural kind, hence rigid, a statement such as

(2) Reference is relation R*

would turn out to be both *a posteriori* and necessary: for ‘reference’, as well as for ‘water’ and ‘light’, being empirical would then be perfectly compatible with having a fixed referent across all the possible worlds, which would make the statement establishing its identity necessary. So, even if semantic statements like (2) were taken to be necessary, this would be no obstacle to making sense of the ‘empirical attitude with respect to the semantic terms themselves’ that is expected to be present in an object naturalist.

Is there an incompatibility between what has been said in the two previous paragraphs? We do not think so, on the following grounds. On the one hand, *one might have come to find out* that reference is something different from what it in fact is –in other words, the word ‘reference’ might have been used to refer to something different from what it is in fact used to refer to. On the other hand, reference might not have been different from what it in fact is –if one takes the actual use of ‘reference’ as fixed, there is no possible world in which it refers to something different, since it is a rigid general term. So, for instance, if it refers to R* in the actual world, it will refer to that very same relation in all other worlds. (Likewise, if ‘water’ refers to H₂O in the actual world, it will refer to that very substance in all the possible ones.) In more Kripkean terms, in a counterfactual world where ‘reference’ were used in a different way, it might have turned out that reference was not R* (on the

assumption that this is what the term refers to as a matter of fact): that is an *epistemic* possibility, namely, one might be in a position to find out that the term is being used in a different way; however, once the term is used as it is, it refers to R^* in all the worlds, since it is not *metaphysically* possible for reference not to be what it in fact is –which makes a statement such as (2) necessary if true.⁴

Moreover, Price concludes that 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’ (p. 194). He thus seems to suggest an interesting distinction between an *entitlement question* and a *need question* regarding the existence of substantial semantic relations.⁵ According to it, there are two different questions for an object naturalist to pose: on the one hand, she may wonder whether she is entitled to posit substantial semantic relations, namely, whether that kind of relations fit in her general naturalistic ontological commitment; on the other hand, she may wonder whether positing them satisfies any theoretical need. As far as the former question is concerned, the object naturalist takes it to be an open empirical question, which must be answered on the basis of an empirical search. Price points out that there is no automatic entitlement; but why should the entitlement be *automatic*? Far from that, we think that for an object naturalist the entitlement question can only be settled by reflecting on whether there is a well-developed conception of substantial semantic relations that becomes acceptable by naturalistic standards. As for the question of whether substantial semantic relations are needed, the object naturalist has given a positive answer to it: *they are needed to explain meaning*.

Finally, in connection with the last point and also with the above-mentioned first objection, we would like to suggest, on behalf of the object naturalist, that pointing to the fact that deflationism represents a theoretical alternative does not amount to offering an argument against substantial truth-conditional semantics. As acknowledged by Price, deflationism about reference and truth should be complemented by a use account of semantic terms. The

⁴ For the difference between *epistemic* and *metaphysical* possibility, see Kripke (1980, 2nd. Conference).

⁵ For that distinction see also Devitt (1991, pp. 83-107).

point is that one may have reasons not to hold a general use account and prefer, instead, any kind of truth-conditional semantics –given the stronger explanatory scope of such theories, especially on their intensional versions. Price claims:

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. (p. 192)

To us, the main point is not whether deflationism can offer an answer to Boghossian’s transcendental argument –as stated above, we think that the challenge can be met without problem: there is no incoherence in presupposing that a different account of language use is at work. The real challenge is, though, *making that account explicit*, namely, offering an adequate theory of our linguistic practices that does not appeal to substantial reference and truth; to put it in Price’s recently quoted words, the deflationist has to manage to be very specific about how she ‘couches her theoretical claims about the terms concerned in other terms entirely’. If exploiting a use account were the only hope for a deflationist, she may not end up representing a viable theoretical alternative after all: as it is known, use accounts do not afford acceptable semantic explanations for all kinds of natural language expressions –take, for instance, proper names, natural kind general terms and indexicals. In the light of that, the object naturalism could still claim that substantial reference and truth are needed to explain meaning: it is then the answer to the above-mentioned need question that would provide her with a clear motivation to posit those substantial semantic concepts.

3. ON THE MATERIAL HORN

The reasons put forward by Price against the adoption of a material conception of placement problems presuppose that the notion of linguistic practice can, and must, be assigned a central role in the study of matters as diverse as, for example, values, causality and modality.

What is wrong with it [the material conception], 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. (p. 196)

However, the object naturalist may think that ‘the things that we humans do with language’ are not directly relevant to answering questions concerning, for instance, the nature of values, causes or modal facts. As explicitly acknowledged by the author, *prima facie* those are questions concerning *things* rather than terms, namely, ontological questions. So, *prima facie*, without further argument, there is no reason to think that ontological issues can be settled by reflecting upon our own linguistic practices. If an object naturalist did not take the nature of values, for instance, to depend on our use of evaluative expressions or our making evaluative judgments under certain conditions, she would have no inclination to start off with either a semantic analysis of evaluative expressions or a pragmatic analysis of evaluative force. Something similar holds for causality and modality: if an object naturalist thought that there were *de re* causes and modalities, namely, that causal relations and modal properties were neither psychological features nor properties of natural language sentences, she would find no reason to establish conclusions regarding causality or modality on the basis of examining our causal or modal talk or our linguistic practices involving causal or modal expressions respectively.⁶ Therefore, unless such an argument is provided (namely, an argument concerning the propriety, to go on with the previous examples, of reducing morality to speech acts of moral evaluation, causality to psychological association and modality to a set of sentence properties), Price’s first consideration against taking the material mode option is not, from our perspective, adequately justified. The Wittgensteinian picture that Price is so happy about may be a point of arrival, after some forceful arguments for it are provided, but cannot be a point of departure in arguing against the object naturalist –unless one does not mind begging the question.

⁶ Needless to say, in the case of meaning, the relevance of taking linguistic practices as a *starting point* cannot be questioned.

Moreover, Price notices that semantic notions (either substantial or deflationary) have become typical conceptual tools of Contemporary metaphysics. He seems to infer from that observation that there is no possible way of doing metaphysics without resorting to semantic notions. But this is a *non-sequitur*: from the fact that certain philosophers have established ontological conclusions on the basis of semantic premises, it does not follow that ontological theses *must always be based* on semantic considerations. A historical statement cannot serve to ground a conceptual claim about what metaphysics is about. Granted, many philosophers have adopted a semantic starting point in doing metaphysics –a paradigmatic example is Dummett, who grounded metaphysical anti-realism on a verificationistic semantics (Dummett, 1975 y 1976) as much as most philosophers taking part in the Contemporary debate on realism and anti-realism (such as Davidson, 1977; Goodman, 1978; Putnam, 1981). However, we think that the adoption of a semantic starting point in doing metaphysics is a theoretical decision that cries out for justification: an alternative strategy would be starting out with a general thesis about the world as a whole to then pass on to establish particular theses about particular aspects of that whole –among which, there is the human being and her peculiar linguistic capacity. That has a certain *rationale*, since why should our more general views –namely, our conception of what there is in general, what categories of things there are, etc.- be determined by our view about a particular aspect –namely, our conception of human language and the way it relates to other human actions-, and not the other way around? It seems to make more sense to start out with a general picture to then see whether particular conceptions of different *phenomena* fit in than modelling the general picture on the basis of the conclusions drawn from reflecting on just one particular aspect, namely, the linguistic practices characteristic of human beings. This raises a methodological point that should be considered and discarded before claiming, as Price does, that semantic notions are essential to metaphysics –or, in other terms, that metaphysics is necessarily concerned with semantic notions.⁷

⁷ The methodological point at stake has been strongly emphasized by Michael Devitt; from his perspective, metaphysics comes first. Notice what he says about the relation between realism, a metaphysical doctrine, and correspondence truth, a semantic conception: “Realism is about the nature of reality in general, about what there is and what it is like; it is about the largely

Moreover, on the assumption that the semantic notions at stake were thought to be substantial ones, metaphysics would turn out to be impossible, a dead end: if metaphysics could not help deploying fatally flawed substantial semantic notions, then it should be given up.⁸ Price seems thus to provide us with a *reductio ad absurdum* of Contemporary metaphysics, which could be summarized by means of the following argument:

- (1) Substantial reference and truth are essential conceptual tools of Contemporary metaphysics.
 - (2) But substantial reference and truth are untenable (almost incoherent).
- So,
- (3) Contemporary metaphysics is not a viable theoretical activity.⁹

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

This piece of writing has begun by identifying Price's main claim: subject naturalism is theoretically prior to object naturalism, and provides us with a perspective from which it can be invalidated, given its dependence on the substantial conception of reference and truth that is the core of representationalism. So, the rejection of object naturalism involves, basically, the rejection of representationalism.

Price's argumentative path consists in elucidating how the robust semantic presuppositions characteristic of representationalism play a relevant

inanimate impersonal world. If correspondence truth has a place, it is in our theory of only a small part of that reality: in our theory of people and their language." (Devitt, 1991, p. 43).

⁸ On the other hand, on a deflationary conception of the semantic notions in play, the objection presented in the text turns out to be obscure: "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." (Price, 2011, p. 198) The reasons for this claim are utterly mysterious to us.

⁹ Be that as it may, there seem to be many debates in Contemporary metaphysics that are utterly devoid of semantic notions, either substantial or deflationary ones –to mention just a characteristic one, the debate on properties, which features, among others, realists, nominalists and trope theorists.

role in the statement of the so-called ‘placement problems’, i.e., the problems of locating *phenomena* such as morality, causality and modality in a naturalistic picture of reality. Object naturalism, the alternative Price wants to rule out, has two ways of conceiving of those problems: the material conception and the linguistic one. They can be taken to function as two horns of a dilemma for the object naturalist: she may start out with either a material or a linguistic conception of placement problems. On both alternatives, according to Price, she ends up being committed to the deeply problematic semantic notions of reference and truth.

So far so good, but it does not go *that* far. From our critical assessment of Price’s position, it follows that the object naturalist can still take reference and truth to be both substantial and empirical relations. Moreover, we consider that the Wittgensteinian picture pressed by Price can be a point of arrival but cannot be, as he seems to intend, a point of departure in arguing against the object naturalist –at the risk of begging the question. Finally, we believe that it is not true that metaphysics cannot help resorting to semantic notions. The availability of metaphysical thought totally devoid of such notions shows that there is still some room for significant philosophical maneuver.

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