

Representationalism Revisited

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I am very grateful to Diego Lawler and Eleonora Orlando, to María Frápolli, and to David Macarthur, for their thoughtful responses to ‘Naturalism without representationalism’ on the occasion of its publication in Spanish. There is much to discuss in all three papers, but the most challenging response by far is that of Lawler and Orlando. Accordingly, given constraints of space and time, I shall concentrate on replying to their piece (drawing on Frápolli’s paper at one point, in support of my response to one of their challenges).

I think I disagree with Lawler and Orlando on four main points. The first three of these concern my claim that object naturalism runs into problems with the placement problem for semantic vocabulary. I argue that the object naturalist’s general methodology turns out to be inapplicable to the special case of the semantic vocabulary, in virtue of the way in which that methodology *presupposes* semantic notions such as reference and truth; and Lawler and Orlando disagree with this argument in several ways.

As Lawler and Orlando note, I make the claim in question in a conditional form, initially, under the assumption that placement problems originate at the linguistic level, as issues about the role of particular *terms*, *concepts* or ‘vocabularies’ – moral terms, say, or causal terms, or semantic terms. Under this assumption, the object naturalist thinks of the placement problem as something like the question “To what natural entities or properties, if any, do these terms *refer*?” I note (2004a, Section 5) that if the question is genuinely posed at the linguistic level (rather than being a mere invocation of Quine’s deflationary ‘semantic ascent’), then the notion of reference in question here must be a substantial one – a substantial word–world relation. My objections to object naturalism turn on the consequences of this fact, when the placement spotlight turns on the semantic vocabulary itself.

Lawler and Orlando recognise the role of the assumption of a linguistic conception of the placement problem, and follow me in taking that assumption to be in place, in formulating their initial objection to my argument. I shall continue to assume it, for the moment, in replying to their objections. (I shall turn to the material conception in Section 4 below.)

1. Object naturalism and the empirical contingency of semantic relations

Lawler and Orlando’s first objection concerns my claim that object naturalism cannot adopt its own preferred attitude of ‘empirical contingency’ towards the semantic notions on which it depends. As I put it the challenge:

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. (Price 2004a, p. 81)

Lawler and Orlando respond:

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.

However, I think that this response turns on a misunderstanding of the kind of contingency I had in mind. It is an *epistemic* contingency, an open-mindedness about what the progress of empirical science will reveal to be the case *about the actual world*. My point – adapted, as I say, from Boghossian – is that to the extent that the object naturalist's methodology *presupposes* substantial semantic relations, it cannot adopt this attitude of empirical open-mindedness towards the semantic vocabulary itself. So semantic vocabulary is bound to be an outlier – a placement problem not amenable to the kind of treatment the object naturalist requires as a global model.

Once again, I stress that the assumption of a linguistic conception of the placement problem is playing a crucial role here. I am not denying that such questions about semantic relations can be posed in material mode. In that mode, we would be asking not *whether the semantic vocabulary refers to anything*, but simply *whether there are semantic relations*. It is the former formulation that creates the difficulty.

Later in their paper, Lawler and Orlando themselves describe the 'material' version of this empirical attitude, distinguishing two questions an object naturalist may ask in this mode:

[T]here 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*.

I will return to these remarks later (see Section 5), and especially to the last point, which, as Lawler and Orlando appreciate, offers a challenge to the deflationism on which my Wittgensteinian pluralism depends.

For the moment, though – following the structure of my original paper, and of Lawler and Orlando's own faithfulness to that structure, in their response – I am assuming a linguistic conception of the origin of placement problems. In this linguistic mode, the fundamental empirical question is not whether there are semantic relations, but whether the semantic vocabulary *refers* to anything. And it is this circularity that is the source of the difficulty.

The ‘open empirical question’ cannot be genuinely open, in this case, because it is itself couched in substantial semantic vocabulary – it is the question ‘According to empirical science, does this vocabulary actually *refer*?’

2. Boghossian’s argument

As I noted above, I took myself to be following Boghossian at this point in my argument. I think that Lawler and Orlando miss the crux of Boghossian’s objection to (a certain kind of) semantic anti-realism. They say:

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 realists term’s: 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.

However, the problem that Boghossian identifies for the semantic anti-realist is not an objection to the possibility of some such alternative ‘non-semantic’ account of language; it is an objection to the anti-realist’s specific (negative) thesis about the semantic vocabulary, namely, that it fails to *refer* to anything. Boghossian’s point is that in saying this, the anti-realist has to use the very language about which she claims to be an anti-realist.

As I note (Price 2004a, pp. 79–80), I part company from Boghossian in pointing that not all opponents of “big R” semantic Realism fall victim to his objection. A semantic deflationist can escape it, simply by abandoning the negative claim – abandoning the semantic vocabulary altogether, for theoretical purposes. (This leaves any alternative ‘non-semantic’ account of language untouched, of course.) But this escape route is no help to the object naturalist hoping to hold open anti-realism about semantic properties and relations (i.e., as she puts it, the view that semantic terms *fail to refer*) as a live empirical possibility – something that future science might reveal to us to be true. This is why I think that Boghossian’s argument “pave[s] the way for adopting ... subject naturalism”, as Lawler and Orlando put it, while denying that “if one accepted [Boghossian’s] argument, one wouldn’t be able to help being committed to substantial reference and truth.” Like Boghossian himself, Lawler and Orlando overlook the possibility and consequences of semantic deflationism.

3. *R** and *R***

I think that Lawler and Orlando also miss the crux of an argument (Price 2014a, p. 83) which I intended to show how the object naturalist project of finding the referents of terms must go wrong for the semantic terms themselves. In reply to this argument, Lawler and Orlando say the following:

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*.

Lawler and Orlando note “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)”. But the point is that the claims “The term ‘light’ refers to a particle” and “The term ‘light’ refers to a wave” are incompatible. Whereas “The term ‘refer’ refers to relation R*” and “The term ‘refer’ refers to relation R**” need not be at all incompatible, by the lights of proponents of these claims – for the apparent disagreement provides explicit evidence of ambiguity. The proponent of the first claim takes herself to be saying that the term ‘refer’ stands in relation R* to relation R*, while the proponent of the second claim takes herself to be saying that the term ‘refer’ stands in relation R** to relation R**. And these two claims need not be incompatible.

What if speaker 1 interprets speaker 2 in her own (i.e., speaker 1’s) terms, and *vice versa*? Then, indeed, each thinks that there is a genuine dispute. But each has a different view about *what* dispute it is. One thinks that the disagreement is about whether ‘refer’ stands in relation R* to R* or to R**; the other thinks that it is about whether ‘refer’ stands in relation R** to R* or to R**. Once again, then, they talk at cross-purposes.

Moreover, it is no help for the object naturalist to appeal to semantic externalism at this point, e.g., by way of the notion that the natural relation that both parties can agree on having in mind is the one that *actually* acts as a reference-magnet for the term ‘refer’. “Quite so”, they will both say, and still find themselves talking past one another. One thinks that R* is an R*-magnet for the term ‘refer’, the other that R** is an R**-magnet for the term ‘refer’ – they are still not disagreeing.

So, by the lights of an object naturalist who construes the placement project in linguistic terms – and for whom, accordingly, substantial semantic relations such as reference play an essential role in the formulation of the questions at the core of the placement issue – the stance with respect to these relations themselves *cannot* be the open-minded empirical stance that such a naturalist adopts with respect to everything else. Once again, this is simply a consequence of the way in which, on this linguistic construal, these notions are *presupposed* by the investigative stance.

4. The material option

In Section 3 of their paper, Lawler and Orlando turn to the second horn of the dilemma I try to present for object naturalism, namely, the option of saying that placement problems begin at the material level. On this view, as I put it,

the starting point is the object itself. We are simply acquainted with X, and hence – in the light of a commitment to object naturalism – come to wonder how this thing-with-which-we-are-acquainted could be the kind of thing studied by science. (Price 2004a, p. 75)

At the end of my paper I turn to the question whether object naturalism can evade my objections by adopting the material conception.” I argue – “albeit somewhat tentatively,” as I put it – “that this is not a live option.” (Price 2004a, p. 76)

I offer two arguments for this conclusion. The first argument is that the cat is out of the bag, as I put it: linguistic ways of deflating placement problems are already on the table, and it

takes substantial semantic commitments to set them aside, and defend a space for the metaphysical projects they seek to undermine. The second argument points out how semantic notions have become part of the toolkit of contemporary metaphysics – including, notably, the programme widely seen as a preferred model for contemporary naturalist metaphysics, the so-called Canberra Plan. To the extent that this is so, a linguistic conception of the starting point is built in from the start.

My argument for the latter point turns on the claim that if the Canberra Plan wants to avail itself of a generalisation of Lewis famous argument for physicalism, it needs to allow that *semantic* roles do the work that *causal* roles do for Lewis – and this shift once again puts semantics at the core of the metaphysical enterprise, defeating any attempt to remain on the material plane. It is clear that I failed to explain this point clearly in my paper – Lawler and Orlando say that they find it “utterly mysterious”! Rather than attempt to do better here, I simply refer curious readers to my best attempt to make the point, in a joint paper with Peter Menzies (Menzies and Price, 2009); see also Price (2009).

What about the cat and the bag? On this point, I note that the linguistic conception of the placement issue is already in play in contemporary discussions of the placement problem, citing noncognitivism as a clear example:

The threat to object naturalism takes off from this point, noting that the representationalist assumption is non-compulsory – that there are other possible theoretical approaches to language, in which semantic notions play no significant role. We have thus been offered the prospect of a (subject) naturalistic account of the relevant aspects of human talk and thought, from the perspective of which the material question (‘What are Xs?’) simply doesn’t arise. At this stage, the only way for object naturalists to regain control of the ball is to *defend* the representationalist assumption (a project fraught with difficulty, for the reasons noted above). (Price 2004a, p. 84)

The point doesn’t depend on noncognitivism in its traditional form, however – it works equally well for the kind of deflationary Wittgensteinian pluralism that I favour. As I put it:

The difficult opponent [for the object naturalist] is the naturalist who takes advantage of a non-representationalist theoretical perspective to avoid the material mode altogether. If such an opponent can explain why natural creatures in a natural environment come to *talk* in these plural ways — of “truth”, “value”, “meaning”, “causation”, and all the rest — what puzzle remains? What debt does philosophy now owe to science? (Price 2004a, p. 87)

In a more recent piece, I explain the point this way:

The ... job of the cat, as personified by the early noncognitivists, was to make us sensitive to the issue as to what we are doing with language – to encourage us to question the ‘transparency’ of language, in Russell’s metaphor. Once this issue has been raised, once we have learnt to make the sideways, anthropological glance at our own ways of speaking, then the option of handling placement problems entirely at the linguistic level is on the table. At this point, there’s no going back: the cat is out of the bag. What it takes to return us to metaphysics is a particular kind of answer to what is first and foremost an anthropological question. (Price *et al* 2013, p. 185)

The question I have in mind, of course, is a question about language – roughly, the question “what is going on” when we speak of “truth”, “value”, “meaning”, “causation”, or whatever it is. And the answer needed to return us to the material mode is the Representationalist one: the view that these terms stand in (or purport to stand in) substantial semantic relations to items in the world. In this way, the cat forces the object naturalist’s hand – forces her to defend Representationalism. And this, as I put it, “is a recipe for grave discomfort”. (Price 2004a, p. 87)

I think that Lawler and Orlando misunderstand this challenge to object naturalist, interpreting it as the claim that answers to material questions might turn out to require language-involving answers:

[T]he 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. ... [P]*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. ... Therefore, unless such an argument is provided (namely, an argument concerning the propriety ... of reducing morality to speech acts of moral evaluation ...), Price’s first consideration [i.e., ‘the cat is out of the bag’] 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.

Here Lawler and Orlando fail to see that my “Wittgensteinian picture” is not an answer couched in linguistic terms to the metaphysical question (i.e., in this case, the question “What is the nature of value?”). It is an answer to a entirely different question, a question about language: “What is the function and genealogy of *talk* of ‘value’?” (As I put it, this is an *anthropological* question, not a *metaphysical* question.)

This Wittgensteinian picture is not in itself a point of departure, of course. But it puts in play the linguistic point of departure – the suggestion that placement problems be resolved at the linguistic level. To defend her metaphysical stance, in the light of this possibility, the object naturalist needs to defend Representationalism. In other words, she needs substantial semantic properties and relations, and then faces the difficulties discussed above in virtue of the special role that these notions play in her general programme. That’s why the escape to the material mode doesn’t work.

5. A challenge to deflationism

Finally, I want to turn to the challenge that I deferred earlier – a challenge Lawler and Orlando raise to my semantic deflationism.

The real challenge is ... offering an adequate theory of our linguistic practices that does not appeal to substantial reference and truth; to put it in Price’s ... 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.

I agree with Lawler and Orlando that there is an important theoretical issue here, namely, the issue as to whether an adequate theory of language needs substantial word–world relations. We semantic deflationists need to say ‘no’. The objection is that we thereby lose our entitlement to the insights of important parts of linguistic theory – precisely those parts whose success is claimed to provide “a clear motivation to posit ... substantial semantic concepts”, as Lawler and Orlando put it.¹

This is a large issue, that deserves a more thorough treatment than I can give it here, but I want to indicate the direction that I think the deflationist must take. Essentially, it is to call attention to a possibility that Lawler and Orlando overlook, namely, that the work done by these notions in semantic theory is entirely compatible with deflationism, and therefore doesn’t require *substantial* semantic properties and relations. Elsewhere (Price 2004b) I have made this point in terms of a distinction drawn by Michael Dummett between two conceptions of the goal of a theory of meaning. A *modest* theory of meaning helps itself freely to the conceptual resources of the object language in question; a *full-blooded* theory of meaning avoids doing so. A familiar point in discussions of that period was that the modest project goes hand in hand with a deflationary attitude to the semantic vocabulary employed in semantic theory. All deflationists are then committed to the view that to the extent that semantic vocabulary plays an important role linguistic theory, the theories in question actually fall on the modest side of the line. Conversely, an opponent who wants to argue, with Lawler and Orlando, that there is essential theoretical work for substantial semantic notions, needs to produce an example which is indubitably immodest.

I think it is helpful to distinguish two views of the place of semantic notions in linguistic theory along a different dimension. One possibility is that they are ‘upstream of language’, needed to characterise the functions that language evolves to serve – think of Millikan’s famous work on representation (e.g., Millikan 2005) for a view of this kind. The other possibility is that they are ‘downstream of language’, being notions ‘internal to the language game’, notions that we use to speak about language ‘from within’. A deflationist sees reference and truth in the latter light, of course. But as the project of a modest theory of meaning illustrates, this stance is compatible, at least *prima facie*, with thinking that there is interesting theoretical work that can be done with notions. (One of the traps here is to think that we must limit ourselves to a single notion of meaning, so that these two theoretical perspectives are mutually exclusive. On the contrary, in my view, there are interesting things to be said from both of them; again, see Price 2004b.)

¹ John MacFarlane (2014) raises a similar challenge in his recent review of my *Expressivism, Pragmatism and Representationalism*.

One of the great advantages of thinking of reference and truth as ‘downstream’ in this way – rather than as substantial word–world relations needed to characterise language ‘from the outside’ – is that it offers an easy solution to a difficulty that Frápolli discusses in her insightful paper. Frápolli cites Benacerraf, calling attention to “the concern for having a homogeneous semantical theory in which semantics for the propositions of mathematics parallel the semantics for the rest of the language”, and the difficulty of reconciling this with “a reasonable epistemology” for mathematics. As Frápolli points out, the difficulty is not unique to mathematics: it “remains unaltered if the focus is extended to non-empirical contents of any kind”. But so long as our semantical theory is ‘downstream’, in my sense, the problem has an easy solution: in this case the uniformity of the various domains, empirical and non-empirical, is simply the uniformity of the assertoric form of language, whose commonalities we may exploit (from the inside, as it were) for various theoretical purposes, such as those of a modest theory of meaning, in Dummett’s sense. The inhomogeneities between domains lies elsewhere – in the different “practices” on which different domains depend, as Frápolli puts it. (Frápolli’s invocation of Strawson in support of this view of the place of semantical notions such as truth and fact – the view that they are ‘downstream’, in my terminology – seems to me precisely right.)

The view that I share with Frápolli plays a key role in my version of pragmatism, and of naturalism without Representationalism. Indeed, in the introduction to *Naturalism Without Mirrors* I characterise it as the “single key point”, to the extent that there is one, and put it like this:

In so far as our claims are representational, it seems plausible to assume that they are uniformly representational, whatever the subject-matter – in other words, that representation is a univocal notion, in this sense. But if representation is viewed as relation to our natural environment, univocity leads to the placement problem in an acute form. The problem is solved by abandoning the external notion of representation in favour of an internal notion; by recognising that the grip of the alternative picture rests in large part on the disquotational platitudes; and by insisting that we theorise about our relations to our natural environment in a different, non-semantic vocabulary. So long as we practice our naturalism in another key – in the pragmatic, functional dimension that opens up when we abandon Representationalism – we retain univocity where it matters, while avoiding the placement problems altogether. (Price 2011, pp. 32–33)

But I stress two things. First, this viewpoint is entirely compatible with thinking that there is a legitimate external, covariational notion of representation, applicable to some vocabularies – the mistake is simply to confuse this external notion with the ordinary semantic notions, in my view. Second, much of formal philosophy of language can be done in the internal key. As I put it:

[M]uch of the formal machinery of philosophy of language seems entirely compatible with the present viewpoint, so long as it is thought of in this internal way, as formalising and describing the structures and relations characteristic of language at the higher, homogeneous, level – the level which is blind to the underlying functional distinctions associated with the origins and roles of particular groups of concepts. (Price 2011, p. 24)

To back up this instinct, or alternatively to show it mistaken, we need to examine in more

detail the various contexts in linguistic theory in which semantic terms seem to play a crucial role. We deflationists put our money on the claim that all such contexts go one of two ways: either the use of semantic terms is compatible with a deflationary reading, or the piece of theory in question is bad theory – one that we would be better off without. Our Representationalist opponents need a case which can be plausibly argued to go in neither direction – in other words, a case which depends on substantial semantic notions, and achieves some theoretical insight or end that even a deflationist will agree we should not discard. Lawler and Orlando are quite right, in my view, to call attention to this issue; but I have yet to see a reason for thinking that deflationists should be nervous.

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