Pragmatism, Expressivism and the Global Challenge

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October 14, 2005
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4 The eleatic defence

5 Brandom on Rorty
Introduction

From Simon Blackburn:

William James said that sometimes detailed philosophical argument is irrelevant. Once a current of thought is really under way, trying to oppose it with argument is like planting a stick in a river to try to alter its course: “round your obstacle flows the water and ‘gets there just the same’”. . . . [James] thought pragmatism was such a river.
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“There is a contemporary river that sometimes calls itself pragmatism, although other titles are probably better. At any rate it is the denial of differences, the celebration of the seamless web of language, the soothing away of distinctions, whether of primary versus secondary, fact versus value, description versus expression, or of any other significant kind.”
“What is left is a smooth, undifferentiated view of language, sometimes a nuanced kind of anthropomorphism or “internal” realism, sometimes the view that no view is possible: minimalism, deflationism, quietism. Wittgenstein is often admired as a high priest of the movement.”
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- To challenge this ‘undifferentiated’ view of language (especially, here, in a form elaborated by Wright).
- To recommend instead quasi-realism – his own version of expressivism – as the most attractive treatment of a range of philosophical topics: e.g., moral, aesthetic, conditional, causal, and probabilistic judgements.
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   - support for his case against the undifferentiated view;
   - but an argument that quasi-realism remains too differentiated – there is a better, more ‘global’, form of expressivism.

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   - The manifest world
   - The scientific world
   - The expressivist solution
   - Explaining the appearances
   - The quasi-realist’s world

3 Two kinds of global challenge

4 The eleatic defence

5 Brandom on Rorty
The origins of expressivism

Expressivism is often a response to the challenge posed by the contrast between:

- The rich world of the ‘manifest image’, populated by values, abstracts objects, mental facts, . . .
- The sparse world described by science.

The “placement problem”: the task of reconciling the manifest image with the scientific image – finding a ‘place’ for values, abstract objects, etc., in the world revealed by science.
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The manifest world . . .
The manifest world ...
... minus norms ...
... and abstract objects ...
...yields the scientific world:

- Physical/causal
- Abstract/mathematical
- Evaluative/normative
The expressivist solution

- Focus on the problematic *vocabularies*, not on the *objects* or *properties*.

- Maintain that the function of the vocabularies is not to *describe* or *represent* or *refer to* bits of the world – instead it is to *express* or *project* certain of our psychological states (e.g., our evaluative attitudes).
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This leads to a picture with a contrast between vocabularies:

- Scientific vocabulary does genuinely \textit{represent}, or \textit{refer to}, the external world.
- Other vocabularies don’t have a \textit{representational} or \textit{referential} function.

Important point: this contrast is drawn in \textit{semantic} terms – i.e., in terms of truth, reference, etc.
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Explaining the ‘descriptive’ appearances

- **Puzzle**: why do the non-representational vocabularies ‘look like’ descriptive vocabularies – why do we talk of moral truths, etc.?
- **Quasi-realism** takes this issue seriously, and tries to show, starting from expressivist starting point, how we naturally come to speak in a ‘quasi-descriptive’ way.
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Quasi-realists as metaphysical quietists

One thing quasi-realism buys us, according to Blackburn, is a defence of ordinary practice – a reason for claiming that there is no error in saying, with the folk, “there are moral values.”

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Two challenges for quasi-realism

Like most other expressivist views, quasi-realism is a *local* view: it treats some vocabularies as *quasi*-descriptive, others as *genuinely* descriptive. The quasi-realist’s entitlement to this distinction comes under attack from two directions:

- an internal challenge, from within the quasi-realist’s own framework;
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The internal challenge:

“Suppose you succeed in explaining, on expressivist foundations, why non-descriptive claims ‘behave like’ descriptive claims. If these explanations work in the hard cases, such as moral and aesthetic judgements, then surely they’ll work in the easy cases, too – i.e., for scientific judgements – in which the claim that the easy cases are *genuinely* descriptive seems:

- an idle cog, not needed to explain the use of the statements in question; and
- a methodological inconsistency, given that quasi-realism offers an expressivist account of the use of semantic vocabulary in association with the hard cases.”
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Upshot – *global* quasi-realism:
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The minimalist challenge:

According to minimalism (or deflationism) about truth:

- There is no substantial theoretical property of truth.
- The truth predicate is just a grammatical device of “disquotation” (by adding it to a quoted sentence, we can say what we can say with the unquoted sentence).
- Its essence, in so far as it has one, is captured by the equivalence schema:

  "P" is true iff P.
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If the minimalist is right, and truth is “thin”, then it seems easy for moral claims (say) to be truth-evaluable: it is sufficient that

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Apparent consequence:

If minimalists are right about truth, expressivists must be wrong about moral claims (etc.) – for minimalism makes it easy to be truth-evaluable, in the only sense available.

Thus, apparently, minimalism is bad news for expressivism.

This is the minimalist pressure to “make everything the same” that Blackburn was alluding to, in the passage at the beginning.
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- The *internal* challenge pushes in the direction of global quasi-realism, global expressivism.
- The *external* challenge seems to push towards global representationalism, global cognitivism – a global *defeat* for expressivism.

*But this impression is mistaken…*
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Let’s return to the quasi-realist’s world:
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Minimalism doesn’t fatten up the “thin” reference relations:
Minimalism doesn’t fatten up the “thin” reference relations:
On the contrary, it thins-down the “fat” ones!
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Conclusion: global victory . . .

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Upshot:

So both challenges push in the same direction, towards global quasi-realism:

- Good news for Blackburn, *qua* expressivist.
- But bad news, *qua* local quasi-realist.
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2 The genealogy of quasi-realism

3 Two kinds of global challenge

4 The eleatic defence
   - Blackburn’s options
   - The eleatic strategy
   - A crucial distinction
   - Two kinds of diversity

5 Brandom on Rorty
Possible replies?

1. The external challenge relied on minimalism about truth (and other semantic notions), and can be blocked, in principle, if minimalism is rejected.

2. The internal challenge makes this an unattractive option, from a quasi-realist’s own point of view, but it is a possibility.
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The eleatic strategy

- Some writers, including Blackburn, have been tempted by the idea that what makes the difference between real-realist vocabularies and quasi-realist vocabularies is that the former stand in causal relations to their objects.

- Thus trees stand in causal relations to talk of trees – use of the word “tree” – but values don’t stand in causal relations to talk of value.

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- Physical/causal
- Abstract/mathematical
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A crucial distinction

- Some writers want to use the eleatic criterion as the basis of a *non-semantic* argument or criterion for realism – e.g., perhaps, an epistemological criterion. (Set those views aside.)

- Others want to link the eleatic criterion to semantic issues, suggesting, e.g., that causal relations are the basis of “real” or “substantial” reference relations.
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The former (e.g., epistemological) use of the eleatic criterion might be compatible with semantic minimalism, but the latter (semantic) use isn’t: you can’t both deflate your semantic cake, and bake it from substantial causal ingredients.

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Two kinds of diversity

There are two kinds of diversity at issue:

- The distinctions between the non-representational functions of various vocabularies, by expressivist lights.
- The distinction between real- and quasi-representation, needed to keep quasi-realism a local view.

Semantic minimalism doesn’t threaten the former diversity, but it does threaten the latter . . . and the eleatic criterion doesn’t help, in this case, except by defeating minimalism.
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2. The genealogy of quasi-realism

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   - The role of the eleatic picture
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Huw Price & David Macarthur
Pragmatism, Expressivism & the Global Challenge
Rorty as a global expressivist

Rorty is certainly not opposed to theorising about vocabularies, as aspects of human behaviour, aspects of the natural world.

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Brandom on Rorty:

*I have been urging . . . that the scruples that lead Rorty properly to insist that semantic and epistemic, as opposed to causal, relations are intelligible only when thought of as obtaining between relata that all have conceptual shape can be satisfied without our having to deny that our claims answer normatively to the facts – both for their truth and for their justification – as well as being causally conditioned by them.* (Brandom 2000, 166–167, our emphasis)
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Do facts have a dual role?

Brandom wants facts to have a dual role, providing both causes and normative constraints.

We suggest that this betrays a residual attachment to the eleatic picture.
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Brandom wants facts to have a dual role, providing both *causes* and *normative constraints*.

We suggest that this betrays a residual attachment to the eleatic picture.
For Rorty, facts are something like ‘projections’ of endorsed vocabularies: the world isn’t fact-like – though it is causal (at least in one sense of ‘world’) – from any stance outside our vocabularies.

But as long as the factual and the causal ‘line up’ – as they do in the eleatic picture – it is possible to maintain (with Brandom) that facts do both causal and logical work.
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- the richness of the *factual* world, projected from all the vocabularies currently in play; and
- the sparseness of the *causal* world.
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The facts, as we see them:
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- Physical/causal
- Abstract/mathematical
- Evaluative/normative
The causal world, by best current science:
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Our point:

Only by thinking that some of the facts in the former picture are second-rate, “quasi” facts, can you force the two pictures into alignment.

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An amendment:

We suggest that there is a proper role for the idea that the judgements associated with some vocabularies – especially perceptual vocabularies – have a direct and distinctive causal connection to the objects in view in the causal picture.
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Which is where we began, with the expressivist’s response to the charge that minimalism makes everything the same.

Our conclusion: On the contrary, expressivism provides the proper theoretical framework for drawing the needed distinctions – for explaining the underlying differences in the rich, plural, world of the manifest image.

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