

Brandom and Hume on the Genealogy of Modals*

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I The genealogy of modals

Brandom begins Lecture 4 with the suggestion that modality is problematic for empiricism but not for naturalism.

The status and respectability of alethic *modality* was always a point of contention and divergence between naturalism and empiricism. It poses no problems in principle for *naturalism*, since modal vocabulary is an integral part of all the candidate naturalistic base vocabularies. Fundamental physics is above all a language of *laws*; the special sciences distinguish between true and false *counterfactual* claims; and ordinary empirical talk is richly *dispositional*. By contrast, modality has been a stumbling-block for the *empiricist* tradition ever since Hume forcefully formulated his epistemological and ultimately semantic objections to the concepts of law and necessary connection. (2006, Lecture 4, §1)

Associating Hume's challenge to the status of modality with his empiricism rather than his naturalism, Brandom goes on to suggest the late twentieth-century's rejection of empiricism's semantic atomism then clears the way for the modal revolution.

It seems to me that this way of reading the history misses an important ingredient in Hume's treatment of modality, namely, Hume's interest in what might be called the *genealogy* of modality. This project has the following key features, in my view:

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1. While it may be *motivated* for Hume by empiricism, it doesn't depend on that motivation, and stands alone as a project for the philosophical understanding of modality – a project in one sense entirely within the scope of a well-motivated philosophical naturalism.
2. Despite its naturalistic credentials, it represents a profound challenge to the view of modality reflected in Brandom's (accurate) characterisation of the attitude of many contemporary naturalists.
3. It is a precursor of Brandom's own project, as described in this lecture; with the result that his project, too, represents a powerful challenge to this same form of contemporary naturalism (the kind that "takes modality for granted", as it were).

The genealogy of modality is the project of understanding how creatures in our situation come to go in for modal talk – how we get in the business of using modal vocabulary and thinking modal thoughts. In Hume, as in Brandom, this is supposed to be a thoroughly naturalistic enquiry, in the sense that it takes for granted that we ourselves are natural creatures, without supernatural powers. The interesting thing is that this naturalistic attitude to modal talk – to the use of modal vocabulary – can easily challenge a naturalistic view of the subject matter, if by this we mean the view that modality itself is part of the furniture of the natural world.¹

If this seems puzzling, think of the normative analogy. The project of a genealogy of normative and evaluative notions is to explain why natural creatures like us go in for using normative concepts and vocabulary. It is naturalistic in the sense that it regards us and our vocabularies as part of the natural order, but not (or at least not necessarily) in the sense that it regards norms and values as part of our natural environment. Many contemporary philosophers seem to find the point much easier to grasp in the normative than the modal case, a fact which no doubt reflects, in part, the role that modal notions have come to play in the foundations of contemporary philosophy. Hume's expressivist genealogy is a threat to the status of those foundations, in a way which may seem to have no parallel in the normative case.

Another factor is the one noted in Brandom's remarks above: physics seems modal through and through. In my view, however, any naturalist worth her salt ought to be cautious of this kind of appeal to physics. We can grant that physics as it stands is irreducibly modal, without simply throwing in the towel on the question as to whether this should be taken as reflecting the way the physical world is independently of us, or a deeply entrenched aspect of the way in which creatures in our situation need to conceptualise the

¹This is an example of how *subject naturalism* can challenge *object naturalism*, as I put it elsewhere (Price 2004).

world. Of course, these are deep and difficult questions – it isn't immediately clear that there's a standpoint available to us from which to address them. But this difficulty is no excuse for giving up the game – for simply *assuming*, in effect, that physics views the world through perfectly transparent lenses. (Where better than physics to remember our Copernican lessons?)

The point I want to stress is that a plausible naturalistic genealogy for modal discourse might count heavily on one side of these issues. In effect, it might tell us why creatures in our situation would be led to develop a modal physics, even if they inhabited a non-modal world (perhaps a Hume world, as contemporary metaphysicians sometimes say). As I've said, such a genealogy would be naturalistic in the Humean sense, which puts the emphasis on the idea that we humans (and our thought and talk) are part of the natural order. But many mainstream contemporary philosophers, keen to think of themselves as naturalists, would be discomforted by it. Why? Because would challenge the idea that the function of modal vocabulary is to keep track of distinctively modal features of the natural world, and challenge the project of resting realist metaphysics on modal foundations..

Thus I think that Brandom's presentation of his own genealogical project in this lecture obscures both some enemies and some allies. Its enemies, as I've already said, are the people in contemporary philosophy who assume a more robust, metaphysical approach to modality. There isn't an easy accommodation between Brandom's project, on the one side, and naturalism as widely commonly and metaphysically conceived, on the other. And the tension is one of the most important in contemporary philosophy, for the reasons Brandom himself puts his finger on: the role of modality in the revolution that swept through analytic philosophy in the last third of the twentieth century.

Brandom thus has a bigger fight on his hands than he realises, I think. But he's on the side of (Humean) virtue, in my view, and should be leading the charge – leading the pragmatists' campaign against modal metaphysics. The best reason for optimism about the outcome of the campaign is that we pragmatists hold the naturalistic high ground, and cannot be dislodged – at least, not without dislodging Darwin, too, for he's the rock on which we stand. The second-order, naturalistic reflection on the origin of our vocabularies always trumps, in principle, the unreflective first-order intuitions which merely exercise those vocabularies.

As for Brandom's allies, they are Hume and his expressivist descendants, fellow travellers in the quest for a pragmatist genealogy of modal idioms. Here are some leading lights, concerning a mixed bag of modal notions: Ramsey (1926) and other subjectivists about probability; Ramsey (1929) again, about causation and laws; Ryle (1950), whom Brandom mentions, about laws and conditionals; Wittgenstein (1981), about claims of necessity; various advocates of the project of understanding causation in terms of ma-

nipulation (e.g., Collingwood (1940), von Wright (1971), Gasking (1955), and Menzies & Price (1993)); and Simon Blackburn (1993), of course, who has done more than anyone else in recent years to defend a kind of modest Humean expressivism (stressing in particular the parallel between the moral and the modal cases). Common to all these writers, as to Brandom, is a concern to explain one or other of the modal notions in terms of what *we do with them*, what *practical role they play in our lives*, rather than in metaphysical terms.

This brings me to the more general issue I want to raise, viz., Brandom's somewhat ambiguous attitude to ontology and metaphysics. In general, pragmatists have not been shy about expressing some antipathy to metaphysics. Here again, Hume – an exemplary genealogical pragmatist, in the present sense – is a shining example, known for his remarks about committing volumes of school metaphysics to the flames. More recently, one thinks of Wittgenstein's dismissal of modal realism as 'the slightly hysterical style of university talk' (1981, §299); and of Ryle's remark that being a professor of metaphysics was like being a professor of tropical diseases – in both cases, Ryle said, the aim was to eradicate the subject matter, not to promote it.

We don't find this kind of anti-metaphysical attitude in Brandom. Rather, we find what looks to me to be a degree of ambiguity, or uncertainty, about the goals of his project, with respect to what are traditionally treated as metaphysical questions. I think that Brandom hasn't seen clearly the importance of a distinction which is marked relatively sharply in the Humean tradition, between two views of the philosopher's project. In the remainder of the paper I want to say something about this distinction, and offer some textual evidence that Brandom hasn't properly faced up to the need to take a stand on it, on one side or other.

2 The lessons of Humean expressivism

Expressivist views (in what I'm taking to be the Humean sense) are often responses to what are now called 'location' or 'placement' problems.² Initially, these present as ontological or perhaps epistemological problems, within the context of some broad metaphysical or epistemological program: empiricism, say, or physicalism. By the lights of the program in question, some of the things we talk about seem hard to 'place', within the framework the program dictates for reality or our knowledge of reality. Where are moral facts to be located in the kind of world described by physics? Where is our knowledge of causal necessity to go, if *a posteriori* knowledge is to be grounded on the senses?

The expressivist solution is to move the problem cases outside the scope of the general

²See Jackson (1998), for example, for this usage.

program in question, by arguing that our tendency to place them within its scope reflects a mistaken understanding of the vocabulary associated with the matters in question. Thus the (apparent) location problem for moral or causal *facts* was said to rest on a mistaken understanding of the function of moral or causal *language*. Once we note that this language is not in the business of ‘describing reality’, says the expressivist, the location problem can be seen to rest on a category mistake.

Note that traditional expressivism thus involves both a negative and a positive thesis about the vocabularies in question. The *negative* thesis was that these vocabularies are not genuinely representational, and traditional expressivists here took for granted that some parts of language are genuinely representational (and, implicitly, that this was a substantial theoretical matter of some sort). As many people have pointed out, this thesis is undermined by deflationism about the semantic notions on which it rests. Less commonly noted is the fact that deflationism leaves entirely intact the expressivists’ *positive* thesis, which proposes some alternative expressive account of the function of each vocabulary in question. As I’ve argued elsewhere (Macarthur & Price 2007), this kind of positive thesis not only *survives* deflation of the negative thesis by semantic minimalism; it actually wins by default, in the sense that semantic deflationism *requires* some non-representational account of the functions of the language in question – in other words, it ensures that the positive work of theorising about the role and functions of the vocabularies in question has to be conducted in non-semantic or non-referential terms.

What’s happening at this point on the metaphysical side – i.e., to those ontological issues that expressivism originally sought to evade? Note, first, that traditional expressivism tended to be an explicitly anti-realist position, at least in those versions embedded in some broader metaphysical program. In ethics, for example, non-cognitivism was seen as a way of making sense of the language of morals, while denying that there are really any such things as moral values or moral facts. But this was always a little problematic: if moral language was non-descriptive, how could it be used to make even a negative ontological claim? Better, perhaps, to say that the traditional metaphysical issue of realism versus anti-realism is simply ill-posed – an attitude to metaphysics that has long been in play, as Carnap makes clear:

Influenced by ideas of Ludwig Wittgenstein, the [Vienna] Circle rejected both the thesis of the reality of the external world and the thesis of its irreality as pseudo-statements; the same was the case for both the thesis of the reality of universals . . . and the nominalistic thesis that they are not real and that their alleged names are not names of anything but merely *flatus vocis*. (1950, 252)

Famously, Carnap recommends this kind of metaphysical quietism quite generally, and this is surely a desirable stance for an expressivist, especially when semantic minimal-

ism deflates what I called the expressivist's negative thesis. An expressivist wants to allow that as *users* of moral language, we may talk of the existence of values and moral facts, in what Carnap would call an internal sense. What's important is to deny that there is any other sense in which these issues make sense. Here Carnap is a valuable ally.

So construed, expressivism simply deflates the traditional ontological questions – it sets them aside, aiming to cure us of the urge to ask them, as Wittgenstein or Ryle might put it. In their place, it offers us questions about the role and genealogy of vocabularies. These are questions about human behaviour, broadly construed, rather than questions about some seemingly puzzling part of the metaphysical realm. So expressivism isn't a way of doing metaphysics in a pragmatist key. It is a way of doing something like *anthropology* (by which for present purposes I mean a small but interesting sub-speciality of biology). Hence my Humean slogan: *biology* not *ontology*.

3 Brandom and metaphysics

Where does Brandom stand with respect to this distinction between ontology and biology, metaphysics and anthropology? My impression is that he sometimes tries to straddle the divide, or at least doesn't sufficiently distinguish the two projects. This is a large topic, deserving a more detailed treatment elsewhere, but I want to sketch some reasons in support of this assessment.³

On the one hand, as I have already noted, Brandom often writes as if his project is metaphysical, in the present sense – as if he is concerned to give us an account of the nature and constitution of particular items of philosophical interest, such as conceptual content and the “representational properties” of language:

The primary treatment of the representational dimension of conceptual content is reserved for Chapter 8 . . . [where] the representational properties of semantic contents are explained as consequences of the essentially *social* character of inferential practice. (1994, xvii)

On the face of it, this is a metaphysical stance: it is concerned with representational *properties*, after all. And at a more general level, consider this:

[T]he investigation of the nature and limits of the explicit expression in principles of what is implicit in discursive practices yields a powerful transcendental argument – a . . . transcendental expressive argument for the existence of objects . . . (1994, xxii–xxiii)

³This section draws extensively on Price (2008a). I am grateful to the editor and publisher of that volume for permission to re-use this material here.

On the other hand, Brandom often makes it clear that what is really going on is about the forms of language and thought, not about extra-linguistic reality as such. The passage I have just quoted continues with the following gloss on the transcendental argument in question: it is an “argument that (and why) the *only* form the world *we can talk and think of* can take is that of a world of facts about particular objects and their properties and relations.” (1994, xxii–xxiii, latter emphasis mine)

Similarly, at a less general level, Brandom often stresses that what he is offering is primarily an account of the *attribution of terms* – ‘truth’, ‘reference’, ‘represents’, etc. – not of the properties or relations that other approaches take those terms to denote. Concerning his account of knowledge claims, for example, he says:

Its primary focus is not on knowledge itself but on *attributions* of knowledge, attitudes towards that status. The pragmatist must ask, What are we doing when we *say* that someone knows something? (1994, 297, latter emphasis mine)

But a few sentences later, continuing the same exposition, we have this: “A pragmatist phenomenalist account *of knowledge* will accordingly investigate the social and normative significance of acts of attributing knowledge.” (1994, 297, my emphasis) Here, the two stances are once again run together: to make things clear, a pragmatist should deny that he is offering an account *of* knowledge at all. (That’s what it means to say that the project is biology, not ontology.)⁴

Another point in Brandom’s favour (from my Humean perspective) is that he often makes it clear that he rejects a realist construal of reference relations. Thus, concerning the consequences of his preferred anaphoric version of semantic deflationism, he writes:

One who endorses the anaphoric account of what is expressed by ‘true’ and ‘refers’ must accordingly eschew the reifying move to a truth property and a reference relation. A line is implicitly drawn by this approach between ordinary truth and reference talk and variously specifically philosophical extensions of it based on theoretical conclusions that have been drawn from a mistaken understanding of what such talk expresses. Ordinary remarks about what is true and what is false and about what some expression refers to are perfectly in order as they stand; and the anaphoric account explains how they should be understood. But truth and reference are philosophers’ fictions, generated by grammatical misunderstandings. (1994, 323–324)

⁴It might seem that I am being uncharitable to Brandom here, taking too literally his claim to be giving an account *of* knowledge (and similar claims about other topics). By way of comparison, isn’t it harmless to say, at least loosely, that disquotationalism is an account of truth, even though it isn’t literally an account *of* truth, but rather of the functions of the truth predicate? But I think there are other reasons for taking Brandom to task on this point – more on this in a moment.

Various word-world relations play important explanatory roles in theoretical semantic projects, but to think of any one of these as what is referred to as “the reference relation” is to be bewitched by surface syntactic form. (1994, 325)

On the other hand, Brandom’s strategy at this point suggests that in some ways he is still wedded to a traditional representational picture. Consider, in particular, his reliance on syntactic criteria in order to be able to deny, as he puts it,

that claims expressed using traditional semantic vocabulary make it possible for us to state specifically *semantic facts*, in the way that claims expressed using the vocabulary of physics, say, make it possible for us to state specifically *physical facts*. (1994, 326)

Here Brandom sounds like a traditional expressivist, who is still in the grip of the picture that some parts of language are genuinely descriptive, in some robust sense. He hasn’t seen the option and attractions of allowing one’s semantic deflationism to deflate this picture, too; and remains vulnerable to the slide to metaphysics, wherever the syntactical loophole isn’t available.

This reading is born out by the fact that at certain points he makes to confront these traditional metaphysical issues head-on. “None of these is a naturalistic account”, he says (2000, 27), referring to various aspects of his account of the referential, objective and normative aspects of discourse. And again:

Norms ... are not objects in the causal order. ... Nonetheless, according to the account presented here, there are norms, and their existence is neither supernatural nor mysterious. (1994, 626)

Once again, this passage continues with what is by my lights exactly the right explanation of what keeps Brandom’s feet on the ground: “Normative statuses are domesticated by being understood in terms of normative attitudes, which *are* in the causal order.” (1994, 626) But my point is that he shouldn’t have to retreat in this way in the first place. His account only looks non-naturalistic because he tries to conceive of it as metaphysics. If he had stayed on the virtuous (anthropological) side of the fence, there would have been no appearance of anything non-naturalistic, and no need to retreat. (Rejecting the traditional naturalist/non-naturalist debate is of a piece with rejecting the realist/anti-realist debate.)

I have one final example, which seems to me to illustrate Brandom’s continuing attraction to what I am thinking of as the more representationalist side of the fence – the side where we find the project of *reconstructing* representational relations using pragmatic raw materials. It is from Brandom’s closing lecture in the present series, and

is a characterisation he offers of his own project, in response to the following self-posed challenge: “Doesn’t the story I have been telling remain too resolutely on the ‘word’ side of the word/world divide?” He replies:

Engaging in discursive practices and exercising discursive abilities is using words to say and mean something, hence to talk about items in the world. Those practices, the exercise of those abilities, those uses, *establish* semantic relations between words and the world. This is one of the big ideas that traditional pragmatism brings to philosophical thought about semantics: don’t look to begin with to the relation between representings and representeds, but to the nature of the doing, of the process, that institutes that relation. (2006, Lecture 6, §1)

I have been arguing that the right course – and the course that Brandom actually often follows, *in practice* – is precisely to remain “resolutely on the ‘word’ side of the word/world divide”. This resolution doesn’t prevent us from seeking to explain referential *vocabulary* – the ordinary *ascriptions* of semantic relations, whose pervasiveness in language no doubt does much to explain the attractiveness of the representational picture. Nor does it require, absurdly, that we say nothing about word–world relations. On the contrary, as Brandom himself points out in a remark I quoted above:

Various word–world relations play important explanatory roles in theoretical semantic projects, but to think of any one of these as what is referred to as “the reference relation” is to be bewitched by surface syntactic form. (1994, 325)

Biological anthropologists will have plenty to say about the role of the natural environment in the genealogy and functions of vocabularies. But the trap they need to avoid is that of speaking of “semantic relations between words and the world”, in anything other than a deflationary tone. For once semantic *relations* become part of the biologists’ substantial theoretical ontology, so too do their *relata*, at both ends of the relation. The enquiry becomes committed not merely to *words*, but to all the *things* to which it takes those words to stand in semantic relations – to norms, values, numbers, causes, conditional facts, and so on: in fact, to all the entities which gave rise to placement problems in the first place. At this point, expressivism’s hard-won gains have been thrown away, and the subject has become infected once more with metaphysics. That’s why it’s crucial that my (biological) anthropologists should remain semantic deflationists, in my view, and not try to recover substantial semantic relations, even on pragmatic foundations.

In calling the possibility of this kind of liberation from metaphysics an insight of Humean expressivism, I don’t mean, of course, to belittle the respects in which pragmatism has moved on from Hume. Brandom notes that Wilfred Sellars characterised his own philosophical project as that of moving analytic philosophy from its Humean

phase to a Kantian phase, and glosses the heart of this idea as the view that traditional empiricism missed the importance of the conceptual articulation of thought. Rorty, in turn, has described Brandom's project as a contribution to the next step: a transition from a Kantian to an Hegelian phase, based on recognition of the social constitution of concepts, and of the linguistic norms on which they depend. For my part, I've urged merely that Brandom's version of this project is in need of clarity on what I think it is fair to describe as a Humean insight. Hume's expressivism may well be a large step behind Kant, in failing to appreciate the importance of the conceptual; and a further large step behind Hegel, in failing to see that the conceptual depends on the social. But it is still at the head of the field for its understanding of the way in which what we would now call pragmatism simply turns its back on metaphysics.

4 There will be blood

By my lights, then, Brandom's attitude to metaphysics seems excessively irenic. I want to follow Hume, Ramsey, Ryle, Wittgenstein and Blackburn, in dismissing, or at best deflating, large parts of that discipline. Whereas Brandom – though engaged in fundamentally the same *positive* enquiry, the same pragmatic explanatory project – seems strangely reluctant to engage with the old enemy.

Nowhere is this difference more striking than in the case of modality. In my view, modality is the soft under-belly of contemporary metaphysics: the belly, because as Brandom himself notes in Lecture 4, so much of what now passes for metaphysics rests on it, or is nourished by it; and soft, because it is vulnerable to attack from precisely the direction to which the subject itself is most keen to be most receptive, that of naturalism. It seems to me that Brandom's treatment of modality provides precisely the tools required to press this advantage – precisely the sharp implements we need to make mincemeat of modern metaphysics. Hence my puzzlement, at his reluctance to put them to work.⁵

I had planned to end there, but the story is a little more complicated. Modern metaphysics turns out to have two under-bellies, both of them soft – a fact which underlines what a strange and vulnerable beast it is, in my view. The second belly is 'representationalism' – the fact that much of the subject is built on appeals to reference, and other robust semantic notions.⁶ Here, too, as I've said, I read Brandom as a somewhat ambiguous ally of the traditional pragmatist attack. On the one hand, he offers us profound new insights into how to do philosophy in another key; on the other hand, as the remark I

⁵Like Prague itself, this is no country for vegetarians.

⁶See Price (2008b) and Menzies and Price (2008) for an exploration of this aspect of contemporary metaphysics.

quoted from Lecture 6 indicates, he sometimes seems to want to get out of it some pragmatic substitute for platonic representation – some surgery which would reconstruct the referential belly of the beast, as it were, in a new and healthy form.⁷ Once again, I think that that's the wrong move. The two-bellied beast should simply be put out of its misery, and no one is better placed than Brandom to administer the *coup de grâce*.

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⁷See Price (2008a) for more on this theme.

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