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PART I

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CHAPTER I

*Naturalism without representationalism**Huw Price*

What is philosophical naturalism? Most fundamentally, presumably, it is the view that natural science properly constrains philosophy, in the following sense. The concerns of the two disciplines are not simply disjointed, and science takes the lead where the two overlap. At the very least, then, to be a philosophical naturalist is to believe that philosophy is not simply a different enterprise from science, and that philosophy should defer to science, where the concerns of the two disciplines coincide.

Naturalism as spare as this is by no means platitudinous. However, most opposition to naturalism in contemporary philosophy is not opposition to naturalism in this basic sense but to a more specific view of the relevance of science to philosophy. Similarly on the pro-naturalistic side. What most self-styled naturalists have in mind is the more specific view. As a result, I think, both sides of the contemporary debate pay insufficient attention to a different kind of philosophical naturalism – a different view of the impact of science on philosophy. This different view is certainly not new – it has been with us at least since Hume – but nor is it prominent in many contemporary debates.

In this lecture I try to do something to remedy this deficit. I begin by making good the claim that the position commonly called naturalism is not a necessary corollary of naturalism in the basic sense outlined above. There are two very different ways of taking science to be relevant to philosophy. And contrary, perhaps, to first appearances, the major implications of these two views for philosophy arise from a common starting point. There is a single kind of core problem to which the two kinds of naturalism recommend very different sorts of answer.

I'll argue that the less well known view is more fundamental than its rival, in a sense to be explained, and that in calling attention to the difference between the two we call attention to a deep structural difficulty for the latter. I'll thus be defending philosophical naturalism in what I take to

be its more fundamental form, while criticising its popular contemporary manifestation.

Both the difficulty for the popular view and the conceptual priority of its unpopular rival turn on the foundational role of certain ‘semantic’ or ‘representationalist’ presuppositions in naturalism of the popular sort. This role is not well understood, in my view, but of considerable interest in its own right. (I shall return to it in Lecture 2.) For present purposes, its importance lies in four facts. First, the presuppositions concerned are non-compulsory and represent a crucial choice point for naturalism; reject them and one thereby rejects naturalism of the popular variety. Second, the standpoint from which the choice is properly made is that of naturalism of the unpopular variety – this is the sense in which this kind of naturalism is conceptually prior to its more popular cousin. Third, the possibility of rejection of these suppositions is no mere idle threat; it is a corollary of some mainstream views in contemporary philosophy. And fourth, and potentially worst of all, the presuppositions concerned turn out to be doubtfully acceptable, by the standards of the kind of naturalism they themselves are supposed to underpin.

Concerning naturalism itself, then, my argument is something like this. To assess the prospects for philosophical naturalism, we need a clear sense of the task of philosophy, in the areas in which science might conceivably be relevant. Clarity about this matter reveals not only that the approach commonly called naturalism is not the only science-sensitive option for philosophy in these areas, but also that a different approach is the pre-eminent approach, in the various senses just outlined. As bad news for contemporary naturalists of the orthodox sort, this may sound like good news for contemporary non-naturalists. But I hope it will be clear that my intentions are much more even-handed. Many non-naturalists share the representationalist presuppositions of their naturalist opponents, and in questioning those presuppositions, we question both sides of the debate they underpin. So I oppose both naturalism and non-naturalism as popularly understood, and favour a different kind of naturalism – a naturalism without representationalism.

I OBJECTS AND SUBJECTS

The popular kind of naturalism – the view often called simply ‘naturalism’ – exists in both ontological and epistemological keys. As an ontological doctrine, it is the view that in some important sense, all there *is* is the world

studied by science. As an epistemological doctrine, it is the view that all genuine knowledge is scientific knowledge.¹

I'll call this view *object naturalism*. Though it is widely endorsed in contemporary philosophy, many of its supporters agree with some of its critics in thinking that it leads to some profound difficulties. The view implies that in so far as philosophy is concerned with the nature of objects and properties of various kinds, its concern is with something in the natural world, or with nothing at all. For there simply is nothing else. Perhaps there are very different ways of talking about the world-as-studied-by-science – different 'modes of presentation' of aspects of the same natural reality. But the object of each kind of talk is an aspect of the world-as-studied-by-science, or else nothing at all. The difficulties stem from the fact that in many interesting cases it is hard to see what natural facts we could be talking about. Different people will offer different lists of these 'hard problems' – common candidates include meaning, value, mathematical truth, causation and physical modality, and various aspects of mentality, for example – but it is almost an orthodoxy of contemporary philosophy, on both sides of the issue between naturalists and their opponents, that the list is non-empty.

More in a moment on these issues – *placement problems*, as I'll call them. Before we turn to such issues, I want to distinguish object naturalism from a second view of the relevance of science to philosophy. According to this second view, philosophy needs to begin with what science tells us *about ourselves*. Science tells us that we humans are natural creatures, and if the claims and ambitions of philosophy conflict with this view, then philosophy needs to give way. This is naturalism in the sense of Hume, then, and arguably Nietzsche.² I'll call it *subject naturalism*.

What is the relationship between object naturalism and subject naturalism? At first sight, the latter may seem no more than an obvious corollary of the former. Contemporary 'naturalists' – object naturalists, in my terms – would surely insist that they are also subject naturalists. After all, if all real entities are natural entities, we humans are surely natural entities. But in my view the relationship between the two approaches is much more interesting than this. Subject naturalism comes first, in a very important sense.

¹ It is a nice issue whether there is any deep difference between these two versions of the view, but an issue I'll ignore for present purposes.

² Both attributions call for some qualification. As a parent of empiricism, for one thing, Hume certainly bears some responsibility for the object naturalist's conception of the nature of knowledge.

I want to defend the following claim:

Priority Thesis Subject naturalism is theoretically prior to object naturalism, because the latter depends on validation from a subject naturalist perspective.

What do ‘priority’ and ‘validation’ mean in this context? As I noted earlier, subject naturalism directs our attention to the issue of the scientific ‘respectability’ of the claims and presuppositions of philosophy – in particular their compatibility with the recognition that we humans are natural creatures. If the presuppositions of object naturalism turn out to be suspect, from this self-reflective scientific standpoint, then subject naturalism gives us reason to reject object naturalism. Subject naturalism thus comes first and could conceivably ‘invalidate’ object naturalism.

In my view, this threat to object naturalism is very real. I’ll also defend this claim:

Invalidity Thesis There are strong reasons for doubting whether object naturalism deserves to be ‘validated’ – whether its presuppositions do survive subject naturalist scrutiny.

As advertised, my case for this claim will depend on the role of certain ‘semantic’ or ‘representationalist’ presuppositions in the foundations of object naturalism. The crucial role of such presuppositions is far from obvious, however. To make it visible, we need to examine the structure of the well-recognised hard cases for object naturalism, the cases I’ve termed placement problems.

2 THE PLACEMENT ISSUE

If all reality is ultimately natural reality, how are we to ‘place’ moral facts, mathematical facts, meaning facts, and so on? How are we to locate topics of these kinds within a naturalistic framework, thus conceived? In cases of this kind, we seem to be faced with a choice between forcing the topic concerned into a category which for one reason or another seems ill shaped to contain it, or regarding it as at best second-rate – not a genuine area of fact or knowledge.

One way to escape this dilemma is to reject the naturalism that produces it. If genuine knowledge need not be scientific knowledge, genuine facts not scientific facts, there is no need to try to squeeze the problem cases into naturalistic clothing. Thus, placement problems provide the motivation

for much contemporary opposition to naturalism in philosophy. However, there are two very different ways to reject the kind of naturalism that gives rise to these problems. One way is to be non-naturalistic in the same ontological or epistemic keys – to be an object non-naturalist, so to speak. The other way is to be naturalistic in a different key – to reject *object* naturalism, in favour of a subject-naturalist approach to the same theoretical problems.

At first sight, there seems to be no conceptual space for the latter view, at least in general, and at least if we want to avoid a universal subjectivism about all the hard cases. For subject naturalism rests on the fact that we humans are natural creatures, whereas the placement problems arise for topics which are at least not obviously human in nature. This is too quick, however. The possibility of a distinctive subject-naturalist approach to the placement issues turns on the fact that, at least arguably, these problems *originate* as problems about human linguistic usage.

In fact, it turns out that there are two possible conceptions of the origins of placement problems – two conceptions of the ‘raw data’ with which philosophy begins in such cases. On one conception, the problem begins with linguistic (or perhaps psychological) data; on the other, it begins with the objects themselves. These two conceptions are not often clearly distinguished, but the distinction turns out to be very important. As I’ll explain, the priority of subject naturalism, and hence the vulnerability of object naturalism, rests on the thesis that the linguistic conception is the right one.

2.1 *Where do placement problems begin?*

On the face of it, a typical placement problem seeks to understand how some object, property or fact can be a *natural* object, property or fact. Ignoring for present purposes the distinction between objects, properties and facts, the issue is thus how some thing, *X*, can be a *natural* thing – the sort of thing revealed by science (at least in principle).

How do such issues arise in philosophy? On one possible view, 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. On the other possible view, the starting point lies in human linguistic practices, broadly construed. Roughly, we note that humans (ourselves or others) employ the term ‘*X*’ in language, or the concept *X*, in thought. In the light of a commitment to object naturalism,

again, we come to wonder how what these speakers are thereby talking or thinking *about* could be the kind of thing studied by science.

Let us call these two views of the origin of the placement problem the *material conception* and the *linguistic conception*, respectively. In favour of the material conception, it might be argued that the placement problem for X is a problem about the *thing* X, not a problem about the *term* 'X'. In other words, it is the problem as to how to locate X itself in the natural world, not the problem about how to locate the term 'X'.

In favour of the linguistic conception, on the other hand, note that some familiar moves in the philosophical debates to which placement problems give rise simply don't make sense, if we assume a material construal of the problem. Consider non-cognitivism, which tries to avoid the placement problem by arguing that *talk* of Xs – i.e. standard *use* of the term 'X' – does not have a referential or descriptive function. Here the claim is that in the light of a correct understanding of the *language* concerned there is no *material* problem. Of course, non-cognitivism might be mistaken in any particular case, but if the material view of the placement problem is right, it is not so much wrong as completely wrong-headed – a view that simply starts in the wrong place. Perhaps non-cognitivism is wrong-headed in this way. But the fact that this is not a common view reveals widespread implicit acceptance of a linguistic conception of the placement issue.

This appeal to philosophical practice isn't meant to be conclusive, of course. Instead, I'm going to proceed as follows. For the moment, I'll simply assume that the linguistic conception is correct, and explore its consequences for object naturalism. (I'll remind readers at several points that my conclusions depend on this assumption.) At the end of the paper I'll come back to the question whether the assumption is compulsory – whether object naturalism can evade my critical conclusions by adopting the material conception. I'll argue, albeit somewhat tentatively, that this is not a live option, and hence that my earlier conclusions cannot be side-stepped in this way.

3 THE SEMANTIC LADDER

If the linguistic conception is correct, then placement problems are initially problems about human linguistic behaviour (or perhaps about human thought). What turns such a concern into an issue about something else – about value, mathematical reality, causation, or whatever? The answer to this question was implicit above, when our attention shifted

from the *term* to what it is *about*. The shift relies on what we may call the *representationalist* assumption. Roughly, this is the assumption that the *linguistic* items in question ‘stand for’ or ‘represent’ something *non-linguistic* (at least in general – let’s leave aside for present purposes the special case in which the subject matter is also linguistic). This assumption grounds our shift in focus from the *term* ‘X’ or *concept* X, to its assumed *object*, X.

At first sight, however, the required assumption may seem trivial. Isn’t it a truism that ‘X’ refers to X? Isn’t this merely the referential analogue of the fact that ‘Snow is white’ is true if and only if snow is white?

The familiarity of these principles masks a serious confusion, in my view. True, the move in question is in one sense a familiar semantic descent. A semantic relation – reference, if we are dealing with terms, or truth, if we are dealing with sentences – is providing the ‘ladder’ that leads us from an issue about language to an issue about non-linguistic reality. But it is vital to see that in the present case the move involves a real shift of theoretical focus, a real change of subject matter. So this is a *genuine* logical descent, then, and not a mere reversal of Quine’s deflationary ‘semantic ascent’. Quine’s semantic ascent never really leaves the ground. Quine himself (1970: 12) puts it like this: ‘By calling the sentence [“Snow is white”] true, we call snow white. The truth predicate is a device of disquotatation.’ So Quine’s deflationary semantic ladder never really takes us ‘up’, whereas the present semantic ladder does need to take us ‘down’.

If we begin with Quine’s deflationary semantic notions, in other words, then talking about the *referent* of the term ‘X’, or the *truth* of the sentence ‘X is F’, is just another way of talking about the *object*, X. So if our original question was really about language, and we rephrase the issue in these semantic terms, we’ve simply changed the subject. We haven’t traversed the semantic ladder but simply taken up a *different issue*, talking in what Carnap called the formal mode about objects, rather than talking about language. On this deflationary view, then, object naturalism commits a fallacy of equivocation – a kind of mention–use fallacy, in fact³ – on the way to its formulation of what it takes to be the central issue.

³ The fallacy turns on the fact that on the disquotational view, an expression of the form “‘Snow is white’ is true” contains a use masquerading as a mention. If it were a genuine mention, to call ‘Snow is white’ true would not be ‘to call snow white’, as Quine puts it. If we term this disquotational mention a *formal* mention, then formal mention is effective use, and the fallacy here involves a confusion between genuine and formal mention, or true mention and effective use.

This point is easy to overlook because we run up and down these semantic ladders so easily. But, if Quine is right, the reason the climbs are so effortless is that the ladders lead us nowhere. In the present case, we do need to get somewhere. If we begin with a linguistic conception of the origins of the placement issues – if we see these issues as initially questions about linguistic usage – then it takes a genuine shift of theoretical focus to get us to an issue about the nature of non-linguistic objects. If the shift is to be mediated by semantic properties or relations of some kind, they must be substantial properties, in the following sense. They must be such that in ascribing such properties to a term or sentence we are making some theoretical claim about the linguistic items concerned rather than simply using those items to make a claim about something else.

True, these properties must also be such as to allow us to make the transition to an issue about objects. Our theoretical focus must be led from the issue about the terms and sentences to an issue about their assumed semantic objects or values. For the object naturalist's conception of the resulting programme, moreover, it is vital that this transition track the disquotational schema. (How else could a concern with the use of the term 'X' lead us to an interest in X itself?) My point is that unless there is more to the semantic notions than simply disquotation, the starting point is not genuinely linguistic and so there is no transition at all. (One might argue that this is good news because placement issue begins at the material level in any case. But for the moment we are assuming the linguistic conception of the origin of the problem, and this response is therefore excluded.)

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.

However, these assumptions lie in the domain of subject naturalism. Moreover, as the conceptual possibility of deflationism already illustrates, they are non-compulsory; more on this in a moment. Hence my priority thesis: given a linguistic conception of the origin of placement problems, subject naturalism is theoretically prior to object naturalism and object naturalism depends on validation from a subject-naturalist perspective.