

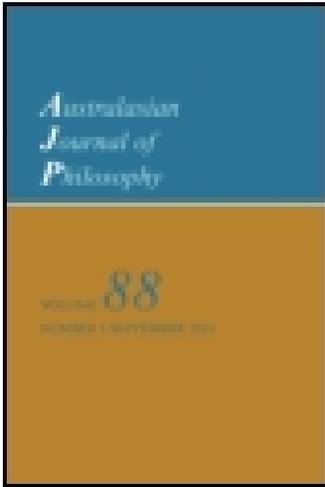
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### Expressivism, Pragmatism, and Representationalism, by Huw Price

Howard Nye<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> University of Alberta

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## BOOK REVIEW

Price, Huw, *Expressivism, Pragmatism, and Representationalism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013, pp. x–xii + 204, US\$29.99 (paperback).

This volume consists of three parts. The first is comprised of Huw Price's 2008 Descartes Lectures, in which he offers a highly accessible and engaging presentation of his global expressivism. This view holds that the truth-aptness and meaning of all statements should be explained in terms of the roles they play in our thought and talk, rather than their bearing causal-explanatory relations to what they represent. The second part is comprised of commentaries on Price's view by Simon Blackburn, Robert Brandom, Paul Horwich, and Michael Williams. In the third part Price responds to the commentaries and clarifies his view in the light of them.

As Price explains, his view can be seen as a generalization of the expressivist quasi-realism proposed by Blackburn [1993] and Allan Gibbard [2003] for ethical (and certain other) statements. Ethical expressivists hold that the function of ethical language is not to track facts in a causal-explanatory sense, but rather to express something like emotions, plans, or endorsements of principles. Early ethical expressivists claimed that this meant that ethical sentences could be neither true nor false, and that there were no such things as ethical facts. But, as Blackburn and Gibbard observe, talk of ethical truths, falsehoods, and even facts seems to be part of the basic business of agreeing, disagreeing, and reasoning about substantive ethical ideas. Consequently, they argue that we should combine ethical expressivism with minimalist, deflationary theories of semantic notions like truth, according to which (for example) all that there is to say about the meaning of '*P* is true' is that it voices agreement with *P*. On the resulting view, we can happily make realist-sounding claims about ethical truths and facts (hence the 'realism'), as these simply express our substantive endorsements of practical attitudes, and do not commit us to thinking that they bear causal-explanatory relations to a realm of ethical reality (hence the 'quasi').

Because the project of voicing our practical attitudes with claims about ethical truths and facts is quite distinct from that of explaining the natural world, expressivist quasi-realism gives us a way of rejecting what Price calls the *object naturalist* thesis that all truths and facts are those studied by the natural sciences. But, as he observes, it respects the *subject naturalist* thesis that we are natural beings whose thought and talk are natural phenomena, by giving a thoroughly naturalistic account of what we are up to in talking and thinking about facts other than those studied by natural science. In his first Descartes lecture, Price defends the *priority thesis* that the more fundamental naturalistic commitment is to a subject naturalistic account of what is going on with our thought and talk about all domains of facts. If object naturalism is to be vindicated, it must be through the (capital-R) *Representationalist* assumption that our thought and talk always seeks to bear something like a causal-explanatory tracking relation to the facts it represents. But by drawing attention to internal problems for Representationalism, and to the attractions of expressivist quasi-realist approaches to various domains (including not just ethical but logical, probabilistic, modal, and causal domains), Price supports the *invalidity thesis* that it is doubtful

that the more fundamental subject naturalist commitment will in fact support object naturalism.

In his second and third Descartes lectures, Price presents his globalization of expressivist quasi-realism. He argues against the *bifurcation thesis* that ‘there is a line to be drawn in language, between descriptive and non-descriptive uses’ [30], to which he takes ‘local’ expressivists to subscribe (although he thinks that it plays no role in their positive proposals). Price contends that expressivist quasi-realists must provide an explanation of what makes a piece of language or thought a truth-apt statement or judgment—one that *does not* invoke its bearing anything like a causal-explanatory matching or tracking relation to the state of affairs it represents. He suggests that the requisite non-Representationalist account of assertion or judgment can be found in Brandom’s view that such items are apt to play the role of premises and conclusions in inferences, which have the functional utility of ‘a coordination device for social creatures, whose welfare depends on collaborative action’ [49]. Price contends that, once we have such a non-Representationalist account of ‘*how there come to be* statements with particular contents’ [41], we can use it across the board, to explain the meaning of claims that have traditionally been regarded as descriptive as well as those that have been regarded as non-descriptive.

Indeed, Price argues that *all* statements and judgments should be regarded as descriptions or ‘representations’ in the familiar sense of items capable of playing certain internal, inferential roles. He refers to these as *i-representations*, and he argues that there is a sense in which all *i-representations* describe or represent the world, conceived of as the totality of truths, facts, or states of affairs. Price does allow for a distinction somewhat like that maintained by the bifurcation thesis. He concedes that, in addition to the concept of an *i-representation*, we have one of something that plays the role of tracking certain environmental conditions. Price refers to these as *e-representations*, and allows that only *e-representations* represent the world conceived of as the natural environment. But Price wants to downplay the relevance of *e-representation* to the explanation of statements’ meaning. In addition to stressing the above point that (if expressivist quasi-realism is right) *i-representation* is needed to give a general account of the content of assertoric statements, he offers reasons to think that distinctive inferential, *i-representational* roles are needed to explain the particular contents of all statements—including those of natural science.

Price refers to his explanations of statements’ meaning in terms of their use as a form of ‘pragmatism’, and in his commentary Blackburn takes such pragmatism about a discourse to ‘offer an account of what we are up to in going in for this discourse ... [that] eschews any use of the referring expressions of the discourse’ [75]. But, as Blackburn observes, it is very difficult to see how one could be a genuinely global pragmatist of the kind Price purports to be. At some point, pragmatic accounts will presumably have to use the expressions of a naturalistic story about ourselves and our environments, which cannot be explained without ‘drafts covertly drawn on the very kind of thing about which we are talking’ [81]. Brandom similarly argues in his commentary that the inferentialist account of meaning in terms of use that he and Price favour does not rule out the possibility that representational notions like tracking must play ‘fundamental roles’ in accounts of the meaning of certain statements, such as ‘empirical descriptive’ ones [107–8]. Horwich’s commentary voices a different but important concern, namely that Price’s argument against object naturalism illicitly makes apparently non-linguistic issues hinge on linguistic questions.

Williams’s commentary offers a way of understanding Price’s explanations of meaning in terms of use (‘EMUs’), on which the meaning of certain statements is

partially explained in e-representational terms. According to Williams, all EMUs involve clauses specifying (I) how they should be used in linguistic inferences, (E) how they should be inferred from the non-linguistic environment, or what effects they should have on it, and (F) the functional utility of thought or talk that plays roles (I) and (E). Williams argues that EMUs for some statements (like the empirical ‘*X* is red’) will contain (E) and (F) clauses that speak of their e-representing facts described with those very statements (like tracking red things), while the EMUs for others (like the normative ‘*A* ought to  $\varphi$ ’) will not make reference to their e-representing their contents.

In his responses, Price largely endorses Williams’s clarification of his view, and argues that Blackburn’s and Brandom’s concerns about the inability of his EMUs to avoid using certain vocabularies to explain themselves or eschew all talk of e-representation are misplaced. While I agree that Williams’s clarification constitutes the most plausible way of understanding Price’s view, I think that it introduces something so much like the bifurcation thesis that it becomes difficult to understand what Price found so troubling about it. On Williams’s clarification, e-representation of content plays *some* role in explaining the meaning of some statements, but it plays *no* role in explaining that of others. I fail to see what substantive point is at issue between Price and those who choose to call the former ‘descriptive’ and the latter ‘non-descriptive’.

I believe that there is a substantive issue in the vicinity of the bifurcation thesis, but that Price does little to address it. In places, he suggests that expressivist quasi-realists who retain the bifurcation thesis hold that ‘first class’ truths and facts are e-represented by descriptive language, while the ‘truths’ and ‘facts’ i-represented by non-descriptive language are only ‘second class’ [30–1]. Similarly, I take one of the main worries about expressivist quasi-realism to be that it offers a naturalistic story that, if successful, actually *debunks* our truth- and fact-ascribing practices in domains like ethics by showing them to be ungrounded in reality, but then advises us to carry on with them in a kind of sham. Those with such worries will tend to view a Pricean response that there is an ‘in-game’ sense of ‘reality’ and ‘grounded’ in which we can say that ‘ethical truths are grounded in reality’ as simply articulating a more elaborate sham. There is, I think, a powerful intuition that genuine, non-sham truths are more robustly constrained by reality than the results of simply playing certain games with each other, which, so far as I could see, Price does little to dispel. This may be related to Horwich’s concern that Price’s argument against object naturalism rests too much weight on theses about how we use language. I think that Price’s response shows Horwich to have misconstrued this argument. But a broader issue remains about whether accounts of statements according to which they do not e-represent their content vindicates or debunks our view of them as truth-apt and fact-stating.

Despite these concerns, I think that Price’s view, as presented and clarified in this volume, has many merits and much to teach those interested in expressivist quasi-realism, representation, and truth. Among many other things, I believe that Price’s distinction between i-representation and e-representation contributes greatly to solving what Jamie Dreier [2004] calls ‘the problem of creeping minimalism’ for distinguishing the positions of expressivist quasi-realists from those of robust realists. I suspect, moreover, that the resulting solution will put a great deal of pressure on non-reductive realists who think that they can reject expressivist quasi-realism without incurring any substantial metaphysical commitments (e.g. Parfit [2011]).

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Howard Nye  
*University of Alberta*  
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