

Natural Agents: A Transcendental Argument for Pragmatic Naturalism

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I distinguish between two phases of Rorty's naturalism: "non-reductive physicalism" (NRP) and "pragmatic naturalism" (PN). NRP holds that the vocabulary of mental states is irreducible that of physical states, but this irreducibility does not distinguish the mental from other irreducible vocabularies. PN differs by explicitly accepting a naturalistic argument for the transcendental status of the vocabulary of agency. Though I present some reasons for preferring PN over NRP, PN depends on whether 'normativity' can be 'naturalized'.

1. Introduction

A substantial portion of 20th and 21st century Anglophone philosophy concerns the problem of naturalism. By this I mean the philosophical motivations for adopting naturalism, the status and varieties of naturalism, and the debates between naturalists and their critics. The resulting philosophical situation has been described as "the real battle going on today, between reductive naturalism and normatively oriented accounts of rational practice" (Moyar 2008, 141). A resolution of this "battle" requires an inquiry into the prospects for a stable and attractive *via media* between these extremes. Let us say, then, that a candidate for a *via media* between reductive naturalism and norm-focused account of the social practices of rational agents is a candidate for "non-reductive naturalism."

On the face of it, non-reductive naturalism promises us to eat our cake and have it afterwards. Since it is non-reductionist, it could avoid the problems that accompany reductive or eliminative naturalism.¹ Yet as a version of naturalism, it avoids the dogmatic temptations of a first philosophy which stands apart from science, justifies science, and prescribes its cultural vocation.² "Non-reductive naturalism" is used here as an umbrella term for a variety of positions that attempt to preserve metaphilosophical naturalism without giving in to reductionism or scientism. My aim here is to examine the strengths and weaknesses of a *particular* strategy for arriving at non-reductive naturalism – what might be called "the Davidson-Rorty strategy."

Rorty, as is well appreciated, enthusiastically endorses historicism with respect to philosophical problems and theories. His historicist emphasis on the invention of increasingly more sophisticated forms of self-understanding is supposed to work in tandem with a naturalist emphasis on human beings as slightly more complicated animals. The question arises therefore as to how we are supposed to understand the relation between naturalism and historicism. In what follows I will reconstruct Rorty's naturalism through his engagement with Donald Davidson.³ This engagement falls into two stages: "non-reductive physicalism" and "pragmatic naturalism."⁴ Pragmatic naturalism differs by accepting the importance of transcendental argument for understanding our ascriptions of intentional states, or by what Ramberg (2004) calls "the vocabulary of agency."

I begin with a reconstruction of "non-reductive physicalism" (section 2), with emphasis on how Rorty uses anomalous monism in order to deny (*pace* Davidson) that the vocabulary of intentional states has any privileged status over other descriptions of natural events, objects, and relations. I then turn to more recent work by Davidson and by Bjørn Ramberg to show how the distinctive status of the vocabulary of agency can be secured through transcendental argument, provided that the argument is understood as naturalistic and anti-foundational (section 3). I argue that Rorty should be willing to endorse transcendental arguments as formulated in this way because they do not function as descriptive vocabularies. Rather, they are normative; they reveal basic structures of our self-understanding as agents. I argue that PN, understood this way, has distinct advantages over NRP.

I conclude that Rortyan pragmatic naturalism is a type of naturalism insofar as it begins with the basically Wittgensteinian point that there is a plurality of discursive practices within the form of life of a certain kind of animal (section 4). Pragmatic naturalism, so understood, naturalizes the manifest image without reducing it to, or translating it into, the scientific image. We thus acknowledge the centrality to our self-understanding of ourselves as a certain kind of animal rather than as a system of particles (or whatever the ultimate constituents of reality turn out to be, if quantum mechanics is replaced by some other theory).

2. Non-reductive Physicalism

What Rorty calls "non-reductive physicalism" (or "antireductionist naturalism") goes through slightly different formulations throughout the 1990s. This position is comprised of two distinct claims. The first claim is that there are no radical discontinuities between humans and the rest of nature. Rorty presents this claim in a number of different ways, but it emerges clearly through the following examples:

1. “To be a naturalist, in this sense, is to be the kind of antiessentialist who, like Dewey, sees no breaks in the hierarchy of increasingly complex adjustments to novel stimulation – the hierarchy which has amoebae adjusting themselves to changed water temperature at the bottom, bees dancing and chess players check-mating in the middle, and people fomenting scientific, artistic, and political revolutions at the top.” (Rorty 1991a, 109)
2. “every event can be described in micro-structural terms, a description which mentions only elementary particles, and can be explained by reference to other events so described. This applies, e.g. to the events which are Mozart composing a melody or Euclid seeing how to prove a theorem.” (Rorty 1991b, 114)⁵
3. “I define naturalism as the claim that (a) there is no occupant of space-time that is not linked in a single web of causal relations to all other occupants and (b) that any explanation of the behavior of any such spatiotemporal object must consist in placing that object within that single web.” (Rorty 1998b, 94)
4. “I shall define ‘naturalism’ as the view that *anything* might have been otherwise, that there can be no conditionless conditions. Naturalists believe that all explanation is causal explanation of the actual, and that there is no such thing as a noncausal condition of possibility.” (Rorty 1991d, 55)

Or, as Rorty puts it in an especially pithy statement, “as good Darwinians, we want to introduce as few discontinuities as possible into the story of how we got from the apes to the Enlightenment” (Rorty 1998a, 40). Let us call this the *continuity thesis*, as comprised of the following claims:

- a) for any entity, it stands in relation to other entities in terms that can be described using notions of spatio-temporal location and causal interaction.
- b) all differences between spatio-temporal, causally related (i.e. “natural”) entities are differences of degree rather than of kind and, as a corollary.
- c) all differences between human beings and other natural entities are differences of degree rather than of kind.
- d) Thus human beings are properly seen as slightly more complicated than other animals, but nonetheless not something other than animal; we are not something animal plus something else that is non-animal or non-natural.

The justification for the continuity thesis lies in Rorty’s debt to Quine, for whom there is no *a priori* vocation for philosophy; philosophy takes place within the

natural world as the sciences present it. In its Quinean version, the continuity thesis is first and foremost a methodological assumption: philosophy is continuous with science, and only concerned with the objects of scientific inquiry. Consequently there are no entities that are exempt from the causal order. Rorty shares Quine's rejection of any first philosophy that attempts to justify the sciences themselves. The continuity thesis is also, for Rorty, expression of sensitivity to the Darwinian and Deweyan understanding that human existence is continuous with the forms of life of other animals. The picture of humans as animals is underwritten by the results of the natural sciences.

The second claim is presented as "anti-reductionism" or "non-reductive," where reduction (and so irreducibility) is a semantic notion. Thus, in recasting Davidson, Rorty writes:

to say that Davidson is an *anti-reductionist* physicalist is to say that he combines this claim [i.e. (2) above] with the doctrine that 'reduction' is relation merely between linguistic items, not among ontological categories. To reduce the language of X's to the language of Y's one must show either (a) that if you can talk about Ys you do not need to talk about X's, or (b) that any given description in terms of X's applies to all and only the things to which a given description in terms of Y's applies. (Rorty 1991b, 114–115)

Alternatively, following directly on (3) above, "I define reductionism as the insistence that there is not only a single web but a single privileged description of all entities caught in that web" (Rorty 1998b, 94). Let us call this *the irreducibility thesis*: there is no single privileged descriptive vocabulary to which all others can either be reduced (or eliminated if they cannot be reduced). Since Rorty stipulates that reduction is a semantic relation, the irreducibility thesis can be defined as the impossibility (or perhaps, more precisely, the *uselessness*) of that semantic relation among different "vocabularies."⁶

If reduction is a semantic notion, then so too is irreducibility. Rorty thus argues that non-reductive physicalism rests on a *conceptual* or *semantic* irreducibility.⁷ Irreducibility is simply to say that talk of X's – e.g. beliefs, desires, and reasons – cannot be replaced with talks of Y's – e.g. patterns of neuronal activity or of fundamental particles – without altering the distribution of truth-values across sentences (or theories). To say that I believe that democracy is the worst form of government except for all the others is irreplaceable, *salva veritate*, by saying anything about the behavior of large groups of neurons in my brain. Thus construed as a semantic relation, irreducibility is ontologically inert.⁸ It asserts only that talking about beliefs cannot be replaced by talking about brain-states; more generally, there is no single descriptive vocabulary into which all others can be translated *salva veritate*.

Irreducibility therefore neither licenses an inference to metaphysical supernaturalism nor blocks a commitment to metaphysical naturalism; irreducibility is “no impediment to a materialist outlook” (Rorty 1991b, 114). Nevertheless, it is not entirely clear how the dual commitment to continuity and irreducibility is supposed to work, or whether Rorty is even entitled to hold both theses.

Since Davidson’s anomalous monism is also a type of non-reductive naturalism, and Davidson’s dialogue with Rorty has been important for both of them, it is helpful here to take a closer look at Davidson. Sinclair (2002) argues that Davidson ought to be interpreted as a naturalist because Davidson, like Rorty, accepts Quine’s emphasis on the continuity between philosophy and science. Yet Davidson is a non-reductive naturalist because he rejects the view that there must be a single level of description which satisfies all of our explanatory interests.⁹ Instead, Davidson holds that there can be both “heteronomic” and “homonomic” generalizations in the construction of theories (Davidson 1980). For some empirical theory, generalization to some additional body of evidence is homonomic if it further refines and extends those constitutive concepts already at work in the theory prior to taking the new body of evidence into account. A generalization is heteronomic if it departs from the prior set of concepts. On these grounds, Davidson claims that generalizations about psychophysical relations must be heteronomic because of the distinctive character of the concepts used in describing psychological states:

when we use the concepts of belief, desire, and the rest, we must stand prepared, as the evidence accumulates, to adjust our theory in the light of considerations of overall cogency: the constitutive ideal of rationality partly controls each phase in the evolution of what must be an evolving theory.... We must conclude, I think, that nomological slack between the mental and the physical is essential as long as we conceive of man as a rational animal. (Davidson 1980, 223)

The “evolving theory” here is the theory of the behavior of the creature construed as an intentional being, i.e. an agent. The norm of rationality makes it possible to take behavior *as* actions expressive of beliefs and desires, and this norm is heteronomic with respect to the concepts employed in physical theory. This does not preclude us from saying that every particular mental event is identical with some physical event. We can have both “causal dependence and nomological independence” of the mental and the physical (Davidson 1980, 224).

Anomalous monism thus allows two different types of explanation – the psychological and the physical – to be regarded as conceptually (i.e. semantically) irreducible without warranting any claims about the distinct ontological status of the mental. By adopting this strategy from Davidson for his own purposes, Rorty accepts the conceptual difference between the mental and

the physical but renders it ontologically innocuous. As he puts it, “the difference between mind and body – between reasons and causes – is thus no more mysterious than, e.g. the relation between a macro-structural and micro-structural description of a table” (Rorty 1991b, 114).

Rorty’s creative appropriation of Davidson should not blind us to a subtle but critically important distinction between their versions of non-reductive naturalism. Consider their respective attitudes towards Brentano’s thesis that the intentional is irreducible to the non-intentional. Davidson situates himself with respect to Quine’s attitude towards Brentano:

After accepting Brentano’s claim that intentional idioms (those we use to report propositional attitudes) are not reducible to non-intentional concepts, Quine remarks, “One may accept the Brentano thesis either as showing the indispensability of intentional idioms and the importance of an autonomous science of intention, or as showing the baselessness of intentional idioms and the emptiness of a science of intention. My attitude, unlike Brentano’s, is the second.” (Davidson 2004a, 153)¹⁰

Though Davidson does not take Brentano’s thesis without reservation, he does argue that the vocabulary in which we employ intentional idioms has a special status with respect to the vocabularies of the natural sciences. By contrast, Rorty insists that the irreducibility of the intentional to the non-intentional is no different from any other kind of irreducibility. This irreducibility no different from, nor or any more significant, than the irreducibility of the biological or the geological. Deepening the contrast between Davidson and Rorty here is crucial for appreciating the superiority of Rorty’s later position.

Rorty further develops this line of thought in a critical response to McDowell (1996). Rorty expresses skepticism about whether we could show “that there is a bigger gap between rationality and elementary particles and avian monogamy and those particles” (1998d, 393). Rorty happily accepts the Davidsonian thesis that the norms of rationality we employ in attributing psychological states to certain organisms on the basis of their behavior is heteronomic with respect to, and so irreducible to, the concepts of physics. Yet, he argues, it is conceptually irreducible only in the same way that *any* two forms of explanation may be irreducible to each other. That provides no reason, Rorty argues, for thinking that we need a new conception of the natural in order to accommodate the exercise of conceptual capacities, i.e. “naturalized platonism” (McDowell 1996, 95). The irreducibility of the mental to the physical does not indicate anything special about the mental; *all* vocabularies may be irreducible to one another.

Though this flies in the face of Davidsonian doctrine, Rorty’s point ought to be well taken for two reasons. Firstly, Davidson’s original argument for the irreducibility of the mental suggests that all non-intentional vocabularies are in principle reducible to that of physics. But the irreducibility at stake here is a

conceptual one. The question therefore is whether the concepts that are constitutive of the vocabulary of geology or ecology are in principle semantically reducible to those of physics in a way that agency is not. Anyone who is inclined to think that conceptual irreducibility is a legitimate strategy to begin with should feel nervous about asserting that talking about beliefs is in principle irreducible to talking about particles, but talking about anticlines is not.¹¹ Insisting on a difference between the sorts of irreducibility (psychophysical and geophysical) can easily become, if one is not exceedingly careful, a refuge for exiled and homeless intuitions about the ontological divide between humanity and nature. Rorty rightly questions Davidson's contention that all non-intentional vocabularies can be in principle semantically reduced to that of physics.¹²

Secondly, Rorty argues for conceptual irreducibility, as Davidson does, in light of the diversity of human needs and interests. Sinclair clearly brings out this aspect of Davidson's argument for non-reductive naturalism; we need different vocabularies, such as the vocabulary of the mental and the physical, because different vocabularies are governed by different explanatory interests we have as the sort of creatures we are (Sinclair 2002, 178ff). Some of our explanatory interests require intentional attributions, and thus presuppose norms of rationality. But then we ought to notice that we have explanatory interests not only in attributing psychological states; we have geological interests, ecological interests, paleontological interests, and so forth.

Thus the considerations that Davidson brings to bear for refusing to reduce the psychological to the microphysical ought to hold for refusing to endorse the reduction of any interest-satisfying vocabulary to that of another. There is no reason, Rorty concludes, to think that the vocabulary of psychological states is *sui generis* with respect to all other vocabularies. Rorty concludes against McDowell that there is no need to fight off "bald naturalism" with "naturalized Platonism," because bald naturalism is compatible with pluralism of vocabularies and so utterly innocuous.

Recently, however, Rorty (2000) has conceded to Ramberg (2000) that Davidson had a deeper point that Rorty previously acknowledged. To use Ramberg's terminology, the vocabulary of agency has priority over all vocabularies of empirical generalization. The next step is to determine what it is in Davidson's account that Rorty has come to accept, and how accepting this points to a stronger version of non-reductive naturalism.

3. The Transcendental Priority of Agency

To understand the significance of Rorty's acceptance of Ramberg's criticisms, we need to see how Ramberg is not only building on Davidson's argument for the conceptual irreducibility of the mental, but also how Davidson's argument is best seen as a transcendental argument of a peculiar sort. The transcendental character of Davidson's arguments has been acknowledged elsewhere (Maker

1991; Carpenter 2002; Bridges 2006). Here I want to appropriate Bridge's term "transcendental externalism" in order to develop further Carpenter's claim that "Davidson's externalism, and especially its central model of triangulation, represents the heart of his transcendental argumentation" (220). More specifically, I want to describe three features of Davidson's account of agency: that the irreducibility of the mental depends on the interrelation between physical and social externalism; that it is developed and defended through transcendental argument; and that it is a *naturalized* and *anti-foundational* transcendental argument, which Davidson calls "triangulation."

The triangulation argument can be difficult to specify precisely, in part because of the peculiarities of Davidson's style of philosophizing. However, the importance of triangulation is clearly brought out in Davidson's "Three Varieties of Knowledge" (2001d). Here, Davidson takes it as a basic fact that there are three domains of empirical knowledge: the subjective, the objective, and the intersubjective. Davidson regards modern epistemology as a series of various attempts to reduce one or two forms of knowledge to some third, and claims that all such attempts have failed. Hence he takes it as a starting point that "none of the three forms of knowledge is reducible to one or both of the others" (206). No ultimate priority can be assigned to knowledge of one's own mental states, knowledge of the mental states of others, or knowledge of physical objects and events. At the same time, we need to understand how all three are both interconnected with and irreducible to one another.

In "Three Varieties" Davidson argues that the indispensability of triangulation shows why all three types of empirical knowledge are inseparable. One cannot make sense of subjectivity without objectivity, because one cannot be a holder of beliefs at all without also understanding that one's beliefs could be wrong. In that way beliefs require the concept of error, which in turn presupposes a grasp of objectivity.¹³ Yet objectivity depends upon the intersubjective community of creatures with whom one communicates: "it is only when an observer consciously correlates the responses of another creature with objects and events of the observer's world that there is any basis for saying the creature is responding to these or to those objects and events" (212). Intersubjective communication consists of the on-going coordination of one's responses to changes in the environment with the responses of others. To be a subject, then, is to regard oneself implicitly as standing at one corner of a triangle; at one of the other corners is another subject, and at the third corner is the world of objects.¹⁴ Consequently, "knowledge of other minds and knowledge of the world are mutually dependent; neither is possible without the other" and "knowledge of our own minds and knowledge of the minds of others are thus mutually dependent" (213). The "triangulation" of the subjective, intersubjective, and objective demonstrates why none can be grounded in the other; "[t]he three sorts of knowledge form a tripod: if any leg were lost, no part would stand" (220).

Davidson's version of semantic externalism is a "novel hybrid of perceptual and social externalism" (Carpenter 2002, 221), since we cannot have social and perceptual externalism depend on each other. Without social relations, one cannot determine the content-determining cause of propositional attitudes. But without causal relations with objects, one cannot ascribe propositional attitudes to those with whom one coordinates one's behavior. And without both, one cannot even understand oneself as having beliefs and desires. As Carpenter helpfully puts it,

the meaning of our thoughts and our utterances are fixed neither by the micro-structure of our physical environment nor by the practices of our linguistic communities. Rather, Davidson's triangulation theory of externalism asserts that content is fixed (at least in part) by systematic patterns of causal interactions between ourselves, other people with whom we interact linguistically, and objects and events we perceive in the world. (228)

In other words, the dynamic and evolving pattern of interaction between language users (social externalism) and the world (perceptual externalism) determines both "the objectivity of thought and the empirical content of thoughts about the external world" (Davidson 2001b, 129). In this sense the triangulation argument should be regarded as a transcendental argument, since it specifies a necessary condition of there being any rational cognition, and thus agency, at all.

In "The Emergence of Thought" (Davidson 2001b) Davidson presents triangulation as a necessary condition for the *emergence* of thought itself. The emergence of thought is difficult to conceive precisely because the vocabulary of intentional ascriptions is irreducible to that of physical systems.¹⁵ Since it is irreducible (i.e. no homonomic psychophysical generalizations), we face a difficulty, to which I turn to quote Davidson at length:

In both the evolution of thought in the history of mankind, and the evolution of thought in an individual, there is a stage at which there is no thought followed by a subsequent stage at which there is thought. To describe the emergence of thought would be to describe the process which leads from the first to the second of these stages. What we lack is a satisfactory vocabulary for describing the intermediate steps.... It is not that we have a clear idea what sort of language we would use to describe half-formed mind; there may be a very deep conceptual difficulty or impossibility involved. That means that there is a perhaps insuperable problem in giving a full description of the emergence of thought.... [but] There is a prelinguistic, precognitive situation which seems to me to constitute a necessary condition for thought and language, a condition that can exist independent of thought, and can therefore precede it.... The

basic situation is one that involves two or more creatures simultaneously in interaction with each other and with the world they share; it is what I call *triangulation*. (Davidson 2001b, 127–128)

Anomalous monism holds that there is no serviceable vocabulary for bridging descriptions of objects and events in terms of physical (or chemical, biological, etc.) laws to vocabularies which ascribe beliefs, desires, and intentions to rational agents. Yet the vocabulary of intentional ascriptions is indispensable, for reasons familiar to us from Strawson and Austin as well as Davidson. Davidson's triangulation argument shows us how to specify exactly which complex patterns of animal behavior are necessary conditions for the application of the vocabulary of agency. It thus allows us to regard ourselves both as parts of the natural world *and* as agents. Yet it is only as agents that we can see ourselves as distinguishing between those theories which are governed by norms of rationality (the mental) and those theories which are not so governed (the physical). In that respect the vocabulary of agency has a transcendental status with respect to empirical theories of both mental and physical phenomena.

On this interpretation, the vocabulary of agency is both transcendental and naturalistic. The task now is to see how it can fulfill both conditions. This problem is resolved by noticing that the triangulation argument is explicitly and emphatically non-foundational. Though non-foundational, it counts as a transcendental argument because triangulation specifies a necessary condition for there being any rational thought at all. Pihlström (2004) proposes that an argument is transcendental if it satisfies two conditions: (i) it demonstrates "concern for the *necessary conditions* for the possibility of something (such as experience or meaning)"; (ii) "an examination of the conditions for the possibility of some given actuality must proceed 'from within' the sphere (of experience, of meaning) constrained and limited by those conditions" (293).¹⁶ The first condition is by now familiar from the work of Strawson and Stroud. The second condition prevents empirical discovery of actual conditions (e.g. of cognition or language) from counting as transcendental. In these terms, Davidson demonstrates that anything that *we* must describe by using the vocabulary of agency, including empirical content governed by shared norms (objective, intersubjective, and subjective), has as a necessary condition the triangulation between at least two creatures and a shared world.

Yet it is only from within the sphere of agency, having been initiated into it through triangulation, that we are in an epistemic position to appreciate the force of the demonstration. Triangulation is a necessary condition for us to be the sorts of beings that we can recognize as agents at all. Like arguments in the transcendental tradition from Kant to Heidegger and Wittgenstein, Davidson's triangulation argument culminates in a moment of insight into the necessary conditions of those basic features of ourselves without which we would find ourselves utterly unintelligible, unrecognizable.

That the triangulation argument is non-foundational, and thus compatible with naturalism in a way that foundational transcendental arguments are not, has not been appreciated. For example, in his important comparison of Kant and Davidson, Maker distinguishes between “confrontational arguments” and “transcendental arguments” (Maker 1991). Confrontational arguments posit an antecedently given subject and an antecedently given object and ask how subjectivity and objectivity, thus construed, could confront each other. By contrast, transcendental arguments demonstrate that no confrontation is necessary; subjectivity and objectivity are only intelligible insofar as they are mutually dependent. The mutual dependence is established by showing it to be a necessary condition for the possibility of any knowledge-claim at all. What a transcendental thinker such as Kant or Davidson “wants to show is that objectivity is other than subjectivity without being something radically other as to be thoroughly beyond and completely inaccessible to it” (Maker 1991, 351).

While I concur with Maker to that extent, he does not sufficiently appreciate that triangulation is not a *foundational* transcendental argument. Though triangulation is a necessary condition for the possibility of empirical content, it does not provide a foundation for all knowledge and experience as a whole. Rather, it illustrates the interdependence of irreducibly different kinds of rational cognition. More importantly, by bringing into consideration the role of *inter*-subjectivity through the existence of *another* sentient creature who occupies a distinct spatio-temporal location and who has her own pattern of responses to stimuli, Davidson shows that objectivity cannot be given a foundation in subjectivity. In order for triangulation to work, the other must be truly irreducible to any sameness of self and other – for only then can the otherness of the other’s perspective count as a frame of reference according to which my own beliefs can be seen as true or false. I can only triangulate if the otherness of the other subject is irreducible to my own subjectivity. If it is not irreducible, then genuine *inter*-subjectivity is lost, and both objectivity and subjectivity along with it.

Taken this way, triangulation should be regarded as a transcendental argument *against* “the constitutive power of transcendental subjectivity,” contra Pihlström (2004).¹⁷ Triangulation is a transcendental argument which shows, *pace* Kant and Husserl, that subjectivity *cannot* be foundational for knowledge.

Triangulation allows Davidson to show how the irreducibility of psychological language to bio-chemical language is *different in kind* from the irreducibility of the latter to descriptions couched in terms of the behavior of elementary particles. The process of communication embedded in the relation of triangulation is, as Davidson puts it, “a community of minds is the basis of knowledge; it provides the measure of all things. It makes no sense to question the adequacy of this measure, or to seek a more ultimate standard” (Davidson 2001d, 218).

Further developing this line of thought, Ramberg (2000) suggests that “the distinctiveness of agency lies ... in the fact that the predicates thus applied

take their point from a normativity we invoke when we try to explain to ourselves what it is that makes communication possible” (Ramberg 2000, 360). Viewed in these terms, the basis of knowledge invoked by Davidson is construed as “a plurality of creatures engaged in the project of describing their world and interpreting each other’s descriptions of it” (ibid., 362). There is no question of our even being able to derive the vocabulary of agency from the vocabulary of empirical generalization; the former is a condition of possibility for the latter, with the crucial proviso that the former is conceptualized as having a *naturalized* transcendental condition: the triangulation between a plurality of animals and their world. It has often seemed that there is a conflict between transcendental interpretations of Davidson and naturalistic interpretations of Davidson. Yet only if the triangulation argument is both transcendental and naturalistic will we be able to appreciate the change in Rorty’s later position.

4. Pragmatic Naturalism

Rorty’s shift from “non-reductive physicalism” to “pragmatic naturalism” can be seen in a number of articles from the first few years of the current century. In “Naturalism and quietism” (2007), Rorty clearly distinguishes between his own views and naturalistically-oriented analytic metaphysics and epistemology. Rorty identifies this difference through what Price (2004) calls “subject naturalism” and “object naturalism.” Object naturalism consists of an ontological doctrine – “the view that in some important sense, all there *is* is the world studied by science” – and an epistemological doctrine – “the view that all genuine knowledge is scientific knowledge” (73). But object naturalism is not the only kind of naturalism there is:

I want to distinguish object naturalism from a second view of the relevance to 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. I’ll call it *subject naturalism*. (73)

While object naturalists “worry about the place of non-particles in a world of particles,” (Rorty 2007, 151) subject naturalists view such “placement problems” (i.e. the place of values, mental states, numbers, secondary qualities, etc.) as no more than “problems about human linguistic behavior (or perhaps about human thought)” (Price 2004, 76). Thus, whereas object naturalists want to show how values, consciousness, secondary qualities, and logical and mathematical principles are consistent with our best contemporary physics, subject naturalists begin with a picture of human beings as a peculiar sort of animal – an animal that engages in an odd behavior called language.

Subject naturalism is consistent with the continuity thesis because it holds that humans are slightly more complicated animals. Yet it also embraces the irreducibility thesis because human beings are regarded as animals that engage in a variety of discursive practices, none of which satisfies all needs and interests. Thus there is no single privileged descriptive vocabulary to which all others can be reduced. Price further argues that subject naturalism undermines object (i.e. reductive) naturalism because it abstains from commitment to any substantive word-world relations. If one thinks that the terms employed by linguistic animals are representations of entities and properties, then there could be a privileged descriptive vocabulary. But the move from subject naturalism to object naturalism depends on having a substantive view of word-world relations from which subject naturalism can simply abstain. Subject naturalists “think that once we have explained the uses of the relevant terms, there is no further problem about the relation of those uses to the world” (Rorty 2007, 151).

More interestingly, however, Rorty explicitly identifies Price’s subject naturalism with Ramberg’s (2004) own version of “pragmatic naturalism.” Ramberg’s account of pragmatic naturalism requires a distinction between reduction and naturalization; the importance of this distinction makes it worthwhile to cite Ramberg at length:

Reduction ... is a meta-tool of science; a way of systematically extending the domain of a set of tools for handling the explanatory tasks that scientists confront. Naturalization, by contrast, is a goal of philosophy: the elimination of metaphysical gaps between the characteristic features by which we deal with agents and thinkers, on the one side, and the characteristic features by reference to which we empirically generalize over the causal relations between objects and events, on the other. It is only in the context of a certain metaphysics that the scientific tool becomes a philosophical one, an instrument of legislative ontology. This is the metaphysics of scientism.... The pragmatic naturalist, by contrast, treats the gap itself, that which transforms reduction into a philosophical project, as a symptom of dysfunction in our philosophical vocabulary. Pragmatic naturalism does not aim at conceptual reduction, but at a transformation of those conceptual structures we rely on to sustain our sense of a metaphysical gap between those items we catch in our vocabulary of thought and agency, and those items we describe in our vocabularies of causal regularities. (Ramberg 2004, 43)

Pragmatic naturalism, in Ramberg’s sense, holds that while reduction can be a legitimate strategy for organizing vocabularies of causal regularities, reduction is not necessary to alleviate metaphysical gaps, which is the goal of naturalization.¹⁸ Ramberg regards the distinction between “our vocabulary of agency” and “our vocabularies of causal regularities” as the Davidsonian distinction between the theories we form about ourselves as self- and other-interpreting

agents (theories that are governed by norms of rationality) and the theories we form about the objective world (which are not so governed). That distinction, in turn, is secured through anti-foundational, naturalistic transcendental argument: without that distinction, we would be unable to regard ourselves as agents at all, but triangulation allows us to see agency as natural.

The priority of the vocabulary of agency permits a powerful criticism of Rorty's (1998c) argument against McDowell (and Davidson). Against Rorty, Ramberg argues that the inescapability of agency shows that not every vocabulary can be regarded as on a par with the kinds of empirical generalization used in scientific explanation: "we should see an interesting difference between the sort of conceptual features that may distinguish the biological or the geological from each other or from the chemical or the physical, and the sorts of conceptual freedom that make the psychological distinct from all of these" (Ramberg 2004, 46). Triangulation guarantees that the vocabulary of agency is irreducible to the vocabulary of empirical generalizations, for it makes all such generalizations possible in the first place. It follows that the irreducibility of the mental to the physical cannot be held on a par with the irreducibility of the vital to the physical.

Not only does Rorty concede the point, but Rorty's (2000) response to Ramberg (2000) is remarkable for the extent of the concession.¹⁹ Rorty now accepts that the vocabulary of agency is privileged, in a distinctive way: "there is a vocabulary which is privileged, not by irreducibility, but by inescapability. It is not, however, the descriptive vocabulary of intentionality but the prescriptive vocabulary of normativity.... The two are not the same" (Rorty 2000, 373). By distinguishing between the descriptive and the prescriptive, Rorty endorses the transcendental presupposition of agency without rejecting the claim that there is no single privileged *descriptive* vocabulary. This point is central for a post-ontological philosophy, if the point of ontology – whether classical, "fundamental," or scientific – is to assign ultimate privilege to some descriptive vocabulary.²⁰ But the inescapability of normativity, as construed by Davidson, Ramberg, and now Rorty, does not threaten to smuggle ontology in through the back door after having been kicked out the front.

To summarize, Rortyan pragmatic naturalism holds that: (a) the vocabulary of agency is distinctive from the vocabularies of empirical generalizations; (b) its distinctiveness lies in the role that normativity plays in this vocabulary; (c) the distinctiveness of the vocabulary of agency can be brought out through naturalistic transcendental argument. As a naturalistic transcendental argument, however, pragmatic naturalism is still a *conceptual* position, and so not grounded in any strong *ontological* claims for or against physicalism, reductionism, etc.²¹

An immediate advantage of PN over NRP can be seen in how it distinguishes between different positions that Rorty had previously conflated. Recall that NRP held that the irreducibility of the mental to the physical is no different from the irreducibility of the biological to the physical. It is clear that

part of this thought can be accommodated in terms of the “disunity of science” thesis advanced by Dupré (2004). If we consider how scientists actually work, we will see both a plurality of methods of inquiry and a plurality of scientific theories. Taking such diversity into account, there may be very good reasons for rejecting the reduction of the biological to the physical.²² Consequently we can reject what Dupré calls “the myth of the unity of science.” It is just this myth which Rorty also criticizes – remember that Rorty is skeptical of the viability of the reduction of the biological (“avian monogamy”) to the physical (“particles”). But NRP holds that once the myth of the unity of science is rejected, we will have done all that needs to be done to satisfy Davidson’s and McDowell’s desire to safeguard the distinctiveness of the mental.

By contrast, PN allows us to correctly emphasize the difference between Dupré’s thesis and Ramberg’s. Dupré argues against a single privileged descriptive vocabulary among empirical generalizations; Ramberg argues for a distinctive status of the prescriptive vocabulary of agency as distinct from descriptive vocabularies of empirical generalization. Though pragmatic naturalism can happily accept both of these points, the difference was obscured in Rorty’s earlier position, and it is a virtue of PN that it makes the difference clear. Still, it might be asked: if we accept both the transcendental priority of the vocabulary of agency and the disunity of sciences – is there still anything left worth calling *naturalism* at all?

The answer I propose is a tentative “yes,” because both *within* science (the Rorty-Dupré thesis) *and* among discursive practices generally (the Ramberg-Price thesis) we discover a basic plurality in the form of life of a certain kind of animal. Pragmatic naturalism understood in this way takes its cue from Wittgenstein’s remark: “Commanding, questioning, storytelling, chatting, are as much a part of our natural history as walking, eating, drinking, playing” (Wittgenstein 2001, §25). Though pragmatic naturalism is fully consistent with insights from the natural sciences (e.g. paleontology, neuroscience, comparative psychology, molecular genetics, particle physics, etc.), its content and validity are independent of them. (One might say that pragmatic naturalism allows us to naturalize the manifest image without reducing it to the scientific image or combining them within a synoptic view.²³)

The “yes” is tentative because obstacles to a full-blooded embrace of PN must not be ignored. The most serious problem is this: in order to accommodate the vocabulary of agency within naturalism, we must be able to see how normativity can be natural. Hence the pragmatic naturalist must surmount a dual burden: the tradition of how the normative has traditionally been conceived, and the tradition of how the natural has traditionally been conceived.²⁴ On the one hand, among twentieth-century philosophers, normativity has paradigmatically been attached to linguistic performances expressive of conceptual mastery. On the other hand, within the modern tradition, nature has been construed as ‘disenchanted’, i.e. nomologically governed and so not describable in terms of norms.

At this point we face a potentially serious problem with the Davidson-Rorty strategy for constructing pragmatic naturalism. The problem is that both Davidson and Rorty appear to accept the very “disenchanted” concept of nature which renders it difficult, if not impossible, to see how normativity could be naturalized. For example, Davidson has been criticized for his rejection of our conception of animal life, which ought be to central to a successful pragmatic naturalism. In his criticism of the triangulation argument, Bridges (2006) contends that Davidson’s worries about “the ambiguity of the concept of cause” (Davidson 2001b, 129) in our explanations of animal behavior, and our inability to attribute propositional attitudes to them, arise because Davidson refuses to help himself to what Bridges calls “our ordinary conception of animal life” (Bridges 2006, 310).

On the one hand, I concur with Bridges that our ordinary conception of animal life, grounded as it is in the form of life that we as animals share with the others, allows us to avoid having “to choose between Davidson’s bare vision of an animal driven to and fro by undifferentiated causal sequences passing through its body, and the sentimental pet owner’s view of an animal as a full-fledged thinker and agent who just happens to be unusually taciturn” (311). Put slightly differently, Davidson’s conception of nature, including animal life, is that of a disenchanted concept of nature. On the other hand, the theorists who offer alternatives to this dilemma – Bridges considers McDowell and Hurley – still must take up the burden of explaining how the normative emerged from the non-normative without reducing the normative to the non-normative, which is exactly the problem to which triangulation is a response.²⁵

The disenchanted concept of nature is clearly present in NRP, where the commitment to naturalism is expressed through the claim that the ultimate constituents of nature are microphysical states. While PN does indicate a turn away from an emphasis on microphysics towards a picture of human beings as animals, where animal life is understood in terms that Rorty inherits from Dewey and Darwin, it is not yet clear to me that PN goes far enough in distancing itself from the disenchanted concept of nature that dominates both Davidson’s remarks on animals and NRP. The resolution of this problem requires that Rortyan pragmatic naturalism be further developed by taking much more seriously the thought that human beings are a more properly regarded as a certain kind of animal than as a system of particles.²⁶ (This is also the crux of the difference between Price’s subject naturalism and object naturalism.)

PN, as I have presented here, ought to be responsive to these worries due to its conception of (1) the vocabulary of agency as having patterns of complex animal behavior for its necessary conditions of application and (2) pluralism with respect to science which allows for a conception of animal life irreducible to the movements of particles. Yet without denying that much more work is required, PN offers a promising *via media* between “reductive naturalism” and “normatively oriented accounts of social practice” (Moyar 2008, p 141). It can

do so because the incorporation of the vocabulary of agency into naturalism makes possible a much richer and more sophisticated picture of ourselves as “natural agents”: animals who are inescapably committed to the process of triangulating between the subjective, objective, and intersubjective aspects of knowledge and experience, and in that process engendering, as Rorty has done more than most to emphasize, ever more interesting and exciting forms of science, philosophy, and poetry.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank Steven Levine, Cheryl Misak, and Sami Pihlström for their comments on previous drafts of this paper, and Maureen Eckert for helpful remarks that led to note 8. The initial version of this paper was written as part of a NEH 2007 Summer Seminar organized at the University of New Mexico by Russell Goodman; the author thanks the NEH for its support, as well as the generous collegiality of the seminar participants and organizers.

NOTES

1. I have in mind here what Price (2004) calls “placement problems”: if the natural is all there is, then what should be said about values or about secondary qualities? For a now-classical presentation of placement problems for naturalism, see Stroud, “The Charm of Naturalism,” Pacific APA Presidential Address, 1996, reprinted in De Caro and Macarthur (2004).

2. In doing so, non-reductive naturalism also avoids flying in the face of the dominant metaphilosophical attitude of our times. Nor should it be ignored that a metaphilosophical commitment to naturalism is very likely regarded, among professional philosophers, as part of a broader commitment to secularism in the public sphere generally.

3. Since this paper emphasizes Rorty’s appropriation of Davidson, I shall ignore the early stage of Rorty’s naturalism, the “epistemological behaviorism” of Rorty (1979), where Davidson plays a less central role than in Rorty’s subsequent work.

4. The term “pragmatic naturalism” has a long genealogy independent of Rorty and his interlocutors; it was originally applied to Dewey’s position. Though Rorty has sometimes laid claim to the mantle of Dewey’s heir, much to the consternation of Dewey scholars, it is outside the purview of this paper to consider whether Rorty’s pragmatic naturalism is that of Dewey.

5. The careful reader will note that Rorty presents this as a definition of *physicalism*, not of *naturalism*. However, the notion that does the heavy lifting for Rorty here and throughout his corpus is that of a *non-reductive* physicalism. The idea of a “non-reductive physicalism” is also mentioned in a footnote to the citation in note 3 above.

6. For an extended discussion of the status of a “vocabulary” in Rorty’s philosophy, see Brandom (2000).

7. Only on the view of concepts that Davidson and Rorty accept – in which to grasp a concept is to know how to use a word in a sentence – is the identification of

conceptual claims with semantic ones permissible. Since it is the views of Davidson and Rorty that are at issue here, I will use “semantic” and “conceptual” interchangeably.

8. Consequently, arguments against *non-reductive* naturalism – that is, arguments in favor of physicalism (“or something near enough”) – must turn on refutations of the semantic and epistemic views at work in Davidson and in Rorty, as can be seen in the criticisms of Davidson advanced by Kim and by Fodor. The disagreement in how to approach problems in philosophy of mind is driven by a much deeper set of striking contrasts.

9. Sinclair argues that Fodor’s reductive naturalism is driven by an *a priori* metaphysical commitment to “essentialism,” which he takes to mean “the ontological doctrine that posits a world consisting of a fixed totality of mind-independent entities admitting of only one true and complete description” (Sinclair 2002, 166). Only with this commitment in place does the continuity thesis shared by Davidson, Rorty, and Fodor generate the demand that (a) only phenomena that are reducible to physical phenomena count as real and (b) philosophical theories about necessary and possible conditions must be rejected if they conflict with empirical results about actual conditions.

10. This version of “Could There Be a Science of Rationality?” contains an “Afterword” not included in the original 1995 version of this essay, as reprinted in *Problems of Rationality* (2004).

11. In fact, Davidson does assert just this – that the vocabulary of geology is not *in principle* irreducible to that of physics, even if not in fact, whereas the vocabulary of psychology is irreducible in principle (Davidson 2004b, 112).

12. And, for that matter, *which* physics? I suspect that the privileged status of physics in Davidson – as in Quine and Sellars – derives its cachet from transferring to some imagined future physics – whatever physics might someday, somehow succeed in unifying (or overturning) general relativity and quantum field theory – the privileged status which Newtonian physics had for the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It is to Rorty’s credit that he is more sensitive to this point than are most contemporary naturalists, whether reductive or non-reductive. (A little historicism can go a long way.)

13. For elaboration of this claim within Davidson’s project, see “The Myth of the Subjective” (Davidson 2001a). However, it is important to notice that this constraint only pertains to conceptions of subjectivity as characterizable in terms of propositional attitudes. In the absence of mastery of a language, Davidson argues, the conditions for individuating propositional attitudes cannot be satisfied. However, Davidson does not deny that triangulation is possible in the absence of language. Davidson addresses the need for an account of non-linguistic triangulation, or “primitive triangulation” (Davidson 2005). For why Davidson requires a more fully developed account of primitive or non-linguistic triangulation, see Nulty (2006).

14. I take these to be “the familiar objects whose antics make our sentences and opinions true or false” (Davidson 2001c).

15. Sinclair (2005) does an excellent job of showing how the account of triangulation is motivated by the metaphilosophical commitment to non-reductive naturalism, and that seeing it in the proper context allows the Davidsonian naturalist to side-step certain objections. Where I disagree with Sinclair (2002; 2005) is in his reluctance to regard Davidson’s argument as a transcendental one. Davidson can hold transcendental claims of a weaker, naturalistic sort, to be specified.

16. Pihlström does not regard these conditions as necessary and sufficient conditions for transcendental argument: “Am I now claiming that any piece of philosophy if and only if it investigates the necessary conditions for the possibility of some given X

from within the sphere constrained by those conditions? Yes, but both X and the kinds of investigation that satisfy this criterion can be so variable that this ‘single criterion’ – while being a verbal formula that indeed captures all transcendental philosophies – itself has a family-resemblance character” (293).

17. It would take a different sort of paper to consider the similarities and differences between the transcendental argument of Davidson and that of Wittgenstein. For a nuanced explication of the sort of transcendental interpretation of Wittgenstein which could profitably be brought into conversation with the interpretation of Davidson defended here, see Lear (1998).

18. Notice, however, that by identifying reduction as concerned with “the explanatory tasks that scientists confront,” Ramberg regards reduction as an *epistemic* notion, and so not, as Rorty initially did, as a *semantic* one.

19. “In the case of Bjørn Ramberg’s paper, I find myself not only agreeing with what he says, but very much enlightened by it. So I shall be trying to restate Ramberg’s arguments rather than to rebut them – trying to strengthen rather than weaken them” (Rorty 2000, 370).

20. Whether it is possible or desirable to construct an ontology that is *not* an attempt to provide an ultimate or final descriptive vocabulary is not an issue that Rorty or Ramberg take seriously.

21. Ramberg (2000) argues our most basic reason for accepting the transcendental priority of agency, and thereby rejecting “scientism,” are not ontological but *political*. Rorty highlights the importance of this move by stressing the terminological shift from “intentionality” (a descriptive term) to “normativity” (a prescriptive term). We can thereby rescue the basically Kantian motivations of Davidson’s interest in anomalous monism by drawing out the point through Hegel rather than through Brentano. The next step would be to show how one can uphold the demand to resist and eliminate various form of dehumanization *without* ascribing a non-natural ontological status to human beings.

22. For recent attempts to explicate the nature of biological phenomena without reducing them to physico-chemical ones, yet but without thereby re-introducing vitalism or supernaturalism see Kauffman (1995; 2000) and Thompson (2007).

23. The hallmark of the “naturalized manifest image” is that it does not require any ontological commitments over and above those of the natural sciences. It thereby ought to be distinguished from the tradition of “perennial philosophy” which articulated the manifest image through an explicit anti-naturalism or supernaturalism in a tradition that runs from Plato through Paul and Augustine down to Descartes and Kant.

24. Aiken (2006) remarks, following Margolis, that if normativity is conceived of along Fregean lines, as it is by “Fregean Pragmatists” (322) such as Sellars, Brandom and McDowell – as well as Davidson and Rorty – there is a deep conflict with the commitment to continuity so important to the Deweyan strain within pragmatic naturalism. As long as normativity is construed along those lines, we will be tempted to give far too quick a response when asked why cooperative hunting among chimpanzees or dolphins should *not* count as normative. Rorty is aware, so far as I can tell, of the tension between the Fregean and Darwinian strands in his thought; he simply thinks that the urge to overcome that tension is the same as the demand to combine the manifest and scientific images within a synoptic view, and that urge therefore ought to be resisted, not satisfied.

25. In a similar vein, Finkelstein (2007) argues that Davidson is unable to avail himself our ordinary conception of animal life because of his commitment to what a properly philosophical theory is.

26. Further development of this line of thought will require a conversation between pragmatic naturalists and critics of the disenchantment of nature (e.g. Theodor Adorno, Hans Jonas, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, John McDowell) and their contemporary exponents.

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