Pragmatist Semantics, by José Zalabardo. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023. Pp. xvi + 233.

Consider simple probabilistic or evaluative claims, such as 'It is probable that P', and 'It is good that Q'. In these and many similar cases, we can imagine a two-question quiz, asking philosophers for their views about the nature of such statements.

1) *The representation question.* Is the function of these statements, in their basic use, to represent how things are in the world?
2) *The meaning question.* Is the meaning of these statements to be understood in terms of word–world relations, such as truth and reference?

Zalabardo begins *Pragmatist Semantics* with the observation that philosophers tend to give the same answer to both questions. Indeed, they tend to assume that this is compulsory – that, as Zalabardo puts it, 'a sentence can represent the world only if its meaning can receive a particular kind of explanation—one that makes reference to semantic relations between the sentence and the bits of the world that the sentence represents' (ix).

Calling an explanation of meaning of this kind *representationalist,* Zalabardo formulates the assumption like this:

RR   A sentence that performs the function of representing things as being a certain way must have a representationalist meaning ground. (8)

His own terminology serves to emphasise how natural RR can seem. If what's at stake in (2) is whether meaning is representationalist, don't the two questions amount to the same thing?

Zalabardo thinks not. In a range of cases, he wants to say 'Yes' to the first question but 'No' to the second. He wants to combine 'the function of representing things as being a certain way' with a use-based, or *pragmatist,* approach to meaning.

In the matrix below, then, most philosophers position themselves on the NW–SE diagonal. They may make different choices for different discourses, but the available options seem to be top left or bottom right. Zalabardo is challenging this orthodoxy. In an interesting range of cases, he wants to be in the SW corner.

	Representational function	Non-representational function
Representationalist meaning grounds	Popular	Unavailable?
Pragmatist meaning grounds	Unavailable?	Popular

So Zalabardo thinks that there's an option most of us have been missing. I use the first person deliberately. If Zalabardo is right, it will be easy to cite myself as someone who seems to make this mistake. I will seem to do so, for example, in my response to Jamie Dreier's famous 'problem of creeping minimalism' (Dreier 2004). This is the question how we distinguish expressivism from realism in metaethics, if we allow minimalism to strip any heavyweight theoretical content from notions such as *truth, proposition,* and *fact.* I have argued that this is primarily a problem for realists. Minimalism about the semantic notions renders the top line inaccessible, leaving us, by default in the lower right – a global victory for expressivism, or so I claim (Macarthur and Price 2007; Price 2009, 2022). If Zalabardo is right, haven't I missed the possibility of a realism that positions itself in the lower left?

Creeping minimalism is usually presented as an issue within metaethics, but as Zalabardo appreciates, the issue is much broader. We face the same questions in any declarative discourse. Zalabardo discusses four cases. Moral discourse is one, but it isn't his main focus. As he says:

> [M]y focus in the present book will be on … four [cases]—moral discourse plus … three semantic discourses …—ascriptions of truth, belief, and meaning. In fact, my real focus will be on the last three. I will also consider moral discourse for its historical importance in the development of some of the central ideas in this area, and to highlight the fact that the difficulties under discussion do not arise from the semantic nature of the target discourses, but I won't consider in much detail the specific features of this case. (x)

Note that three of these discourses are, as Zalabardo says, *semantic* themselves. Zalabardo is well aware of the self-referential nature of the project: in broad terms, he's investigating the semantics of semantic claims themselves.

What does Zalabardo mean by the questions we started with, and by the key terms in RR? For question (1), and the phrase 'the function of representing things as being a certain way', I'm going to postpone this issue, until I can explain what I take to hang on the matter. Question (2) is more straightforward. The key notion is that of *meaning grounds.* This is Zalabardo's gloss:

> I propose to understand the task of explaining the meaning of a sentence as aiming at specifying its *meaning ground*—the fact by virtue of which the sentence has the meaning it has. (xi)

Some readers may feel that Zalabardo helps himself too quickly to the assumption that there is a single such thing as *the* meaning of a sentence. For one thing, might his own self-referential investigation not lead to the conclusion that there is more than one kind of thing that we do with 'meaning talk'? But set such concerns aside, at this point. Zalabardo's

first main task is to argue that for the four discourses he has in centre-field, their meaning grounds cannot be construed in representationalist terms.

1. Against representationalist meaning grounds

Why not stay with the crowd, in the NW corner? For many, as I noted, the motivation for moving is minimalism about the required semantic relations (truth, reference, and the like), and the view that they don't have sufficient theoretical weight to serve in an account of meaning grounds. This seems to make the first row in the table untenable, and hence, in the light of something like RR, to leave us in the SE corner.

Minimalism is not Zalabardo's concern. His objection to representationalist meaning grounds rests on the open question argument. He argues that whatever the representationalist picks out as the item in the world, the link to which is supposed to provide the meaning grounds of the claims in question, we can make sense of a speaker who means the same as us by such claims, but takes it to be an open question whether they refer to those items.

Zalabardo devotes two chapters to making this case, the first for moral claims and the second for his three semantic discourses. His arguments in these chapters are clear, detailed, insightful, and to my mind compelling. Friends as well as foes of representational treatments of the meaning of these discourses will find much of interest here. For my part, I'm on Zalabardo's side at this point, so I'll move on to chapters in which there's some friction.

2. A pragmatist alternative

The standard alternative to representationalist meaning grounds is to explain meaning in terms of use. But what feature of use? Zalabardo discusses a number of alternatives, before settling on the following proposal: 'When a sentence has a pragmatist meaning ground, … it will have the meaning it has as a result of the way in which its acceptance and rejection are regulated' (92–93).

> Acceptance of a sentence, as I'll use the term, is a conscious, involuntary re-identifiable attitude towards the sentence consisting in the conviction that things are as the sentence represents them as being. I'm going to use *rejection* for the negative correlate consisting in the conviction that things are not as the sentence represents them as being. (92, emphasis original)

To apply this proposal to his four target discourses, Zalabardo needs, as he puts it,

> to start by identifying features of the procedures that regulate the acceptance of their sentences and/or the ascription of their predicates that can be regarded as essential for these expressions to have the meanings they have. (93)

He suggests that 'in broad outline, this job has already been done for us' (93).

> If we look at the non-cognitivist and verificationist accounts of these discourses, we find that they treat aspects of the procedures by which the acceptance of their sentences or the ascription of their predicates is regulated as essential to the meanings of these expressions. (93)

This is how it goes in the ethical case, for example.

> Consider, first, the expressivist account of ethical discourse .... One of the functions that the account assigned to sentences ascribing the predicate 'is morally right' was to express the speaker's feeling of moral approval towards the object of predication. But clearly the sentences won't play this role unless speakers regulate their ascription of the predicate by whether they feel moral approval towards the object of predication. What I'm proposing is that we drop the expressivist's claim about the function of these sentences but keep her implicit claim about how the ascription of the predicate has to be regulated in order for it to have the meaning it has: 'is morally right' has the meaning it has by virtue of the fact that its ascription is regulated by the presence in the speaker of the feeling of moral approval. (93–94)

3. Why isn't this expressivism?

Thus Zalabardo's proposal has some overlap with expressivism. What distinguishes the two positions? Zalabardo returns to this question at several points in the book, and I want to examine his answers in some detail. Some forms of contemporary expressivism are closer to Zalabardo's view than he realises, I think. This is not a criticism of the view, by my lights – quite the contrary! – but we can clarify the landscape of possible positions by sorting this out.

When he first discusses expressivist or non-cognitivist views, Zalabardo puts his objection like this.

> For our purposes, their most salient feature is the fact that they construe the target sentences as *not having the function of representing the world.* I regard this as a major disadvantage of these views. It seems to me that on our intuitive conception of these discourses, they aim at representing the world, and they succeed in doing so, no less than the discourses for which representationalist meaning grounds can be provided. In my view, other things being equal, we should aim to vindicate this intuitive conception. (77, emphasis added)

Later, after he has explained how his own view makes use of some of the same materials, he describes the difference as follows.

> It is … important to appreciate the difference between the pragmatist approach and the non-cognitivist proposals ... The pragmatist co-opts some central features of the non-representational functions that non-cognitivists assign to the problematic discourses. However, these ideas are put to a new use—to specify the acceptance procedures from which sentences obtain their meaning grounds—while explicitly

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refraining from following the non-cognitivist in *assigning to these sentences a non-representational function.* On the pragmatist approach, the meaning grounds of the target sentences are completely silent on the function they perform. (97, emphasis added)

Two comments. First, the notion of *function* is carrying a lot of weight. In one reasonable sense of function, after all, Zalabardo's own proposal is that to specify how a sentence has to function (or 'work'), in order to have the meaning that it has, we have to specify its acceptance and rejection conditions. In this 'how do these words function' sense, Zalabardo's proposal isn't and couldn't be silent. On the contrary, as he says, it agrees with expressivism about 'how the ascription of the predicate has to be regulated in order for it to have the meaning it has'. So the charge must be that the accounts differ in some other sense of function, for which Zalabardo's pragmatism is silent, while 'the non-cognitivist [is] assigning to these sentences a non-representational function'.

4. Two ways to be non-representational

This brings me to my second concern. There's a potential scope confusion, worth noting and avoiding, concerning the negation in the term 'non-representational'. Let's agree (for the moment) that expressivists avoid assigning a representational function (to moral discourse, say). At least, they avoid it in their robust theoretical voice. As we have noted, and Zalabardo himself notes, many expressivists have argued that minimalism about the semantic notions allows them moral truths, facts and representation in a thin, non-theoretical sense – that's the source of creeping minimalism. Note that this implies that if we construe the columns in our matrix in terms of these lightweight representational notions, these expressivists are already positioning themselves in the SW corner. (I'll come back to this point below.)

But *avoiding* assigning a representational function is different from assigning a function that the expressivists themselves characterise – in their robust theoretical voice – as *non-representational.* It has to be different, if they think that the ordinary representationalist vocabulary is too thin to carry any theoretical weight.

As I have put the point previously (Macarthur & Price 2007, Price 2009), traditional expressivists made two claims, one negative and one positive. The negative claim was that the discourse in question lacks some semantic feature – being truth-apt, say. The positive claim was, say, that the claims in question express mental states of a certain sort. Minimalism about semantics deflates the negative claim, emptying it of any theoretical content. But it doesn't touch the positive claim, which doesn't rely on the deflated semantic notions. So it leaves the interesting part of expressivism intact. That's why creeping minimalism is good news for expressivists, in my view.

The positive claim is 'non-representational' in the sense it *says nothing* about representation, one way or the other. But that's a different matter from using representational vocabulary to

deny that the discourse is representational. That would be the negative claim, which this sort of expressivist has abandoned. I proposed the following analogy.

> Unlike Creationists, Darwinians don't think that the species were created by God. Does this mean that Darwinians must use the term 'God' in their theoretical voice, as it were, in order to *deny* that the species were created by God? Not at all. Darwinians simply offer an account of the origin of the species in which the term 'God' does not appear. So *rejecting* the view that God created the species does not require *accepting* the following claim: God did not create the species. The alternative … is passive rejection: simply avoiding theological vocabulary in scientific contexts. (Price 2009, p. 258)

So *rejecting* the view that moral predicates are referential, or representational—rejecting it as a theoretical view—does not require that expressivists *endorse a negative claim,* that moral predicates are *not* referential. Passive rejection provides an alternative.

If we don't notice this scope ambiguity, it is easy to read expressivists as implacable opponents of Zalabardo's project. After all, their story is 'non-representational'. But if all that means is that they see the interesting work as being done somewhere else, it is far from clear that there's any deep conflict. Zalabardo, too, is working with pragmatic ingredients. As we'll see, his notion of what it takes to count as representing the world doesn't depend on semantic raw materials. So perhaps it is in tension neither with the expressivists' positive claim (which doesn't mention representation, one way or the other), nor with what they disavowed, in their negative thesis, before the semantic notions got deflated?

Late in the book Zalabardo returns to the point.

> [Earlier] I presented a line of reasoning according to which the deflationist account of truth ascriptions enables us to treat any discourse to whose sentences the truth predicate can be meaningfully ascribed as performing the function of representing the world. I then argued that the claim to representational status that a discourse would acquire in this way would be undermined by the inclusion in its meaning grounds of a non-representational function. The pragmatist accounts of the meaning grounds of the problematic discourses that I am defending don't suffer from this problem. Their meaning grounds, on this approach, are given by the procedures employed for regulating the acceptance of their sentences. *They don't include ascribing to them a non-representational function.* This obstacle to a genuine representational role doesn't afflict every non-representationalist account of meaning grounds, but only those which, unlike my proposal, ascribe to the target sentences a non-representational function. (163, emphasis added)

But if we read 'ascribing … a non-representational function' in the passive sense – i.e., simply as 'not assigning a representational function' – then there is no difference here at all.

Expressivists simply agree with Zalabardo, in assigning meaning grounds which, in themselves, *stay silent* on the question of representational function.

5. The response to quasi-realism

In addition to discussing expressivism in general, Zalabardo pays particular attention to quasi-realism – the version of expressivism most concerned to show that an expressive discourse can reasonably present with a representationalist face. Late in the book he summarises his objection to quasi-realism.

> I argued that the quasi-realist approach doesn't sustain a successful vindication of the representational character of the target discourses. The reason is that, by maintaining that the meaning grounds of the target sentences include a non-representational function, quasi-realism preserves a two-tier picture, of genuinely representational discourses with no function other than representing the world and discourses that we speak of as representational, although a non-representational function is essential to their meaning. I have argued that the pragmatist approach I'm defending doesn't exhibit this shortcoming. Pragmatist meaning grounds, like representationalist meaning grounds, include no function other than representing the world—there's no non-representational function that a sentence with a pragmatist meaning ground has to perform in order to have the meaning it has. Consequently, I've argued, there's no sense in which the representational credentials of a sentence would be undermined by having a pragmatist meaning ground. (205)

What remains of this criticism of quasi-realism, if we take on board the two points I have made above: first, that the sense in which expressivist meanings ground 'include a non-representational function' need only be the passive sense, with which Zalabardo's view agrees; and second, that in the 'how do these terms function' sense, he has a function at this point, too (contrary to the claim that his view 'include[s] no function other than representing the world')?

What seems to remain is the charge that quasi-realism 'preserves a two-tier picture', distinguishing between genuinely and merely 'quasi' representational discourses. I am very sympathetic with this charge, having long argued that Blackburn's quasi-realism is unstable, in virtue of this two-tier character (Macarthur and Price, 2007; Price 2015). But does Zalabardo's view escape it? It may seem not. After all, Zalabardo draws a distinction between discourses that have pragmatist meaning grounds and those that have representationalist meaning grounds.

> I'm not going to argue that all declarative sentences have pragmatist meaning grounds. This is certainly not the case. As we will see in due course, there are prominent regions of discourse for which the model is unsuitable. (93)

So Zalabardo certainly has a two-tier picture *with respect to meaning grounds.* We might think that this commits him to a two-tier picture with respect to representational function, too, but I think that would be a mistake, by his lights. It would be another manifestation of what he presents as our *ur*-mistake, that of confusing questions (1) and (2). Provided we keep the issues apart, we can have two categories with respect to meaning grounds, but not with respect to what it takes to represent the world. Despite different kinds of meaning grounds, two categories of sentences might represent the world in just the same way.

6. What is it to represent the world?

What does representing the world amount to, by Zalabardo's lights? He begins with the observation that we treat some of our declarative claims as subject to 'an absolute standard of correctness' (155), in the following way.

> The feature that I want to focus on is the existence of a standard of correctness for sentence acceptance and rejection that's *absolute* in the following sense: if I accept a sentence now, then I regard as *correct* its acceptance at any time by any speaker who at that time means by the sentence what I mean by it now, and I regard as *incorrect* its rejection at any time by any speaker who at that time means by the sentence what I mean by it now. And if I reject a sentence now, then I regard as *correct* its rejection at any time by any speaker who at that time means by the sentence what I mean by it now, and I regard as *incorrect* its acceptance at any time by any speaker who at that time means by the sentence what I mean by it now. Our verdicts on a sentence with respect to this absolute standard of correctness are what we express by ascribing the predicates 'is true' and 'is false'. (153, emphasis added)

To treat a domain of discourse in this way is thus to treat agreement and disagreement with another speaker as automatically praise or blameworthy – as a sign that the other speaker is *right* or *wrong,* in the special sense of correctness here involved. (Either way, they may also be praise or blameworthy for other independent reasons, e.g., for speaking out of turn.) In particular, it is to eschew the possibility of *no fault* (Price 1988) or *faultless* (Kölbel 2004) disagreement.

Zalabardo then proposes 'construing the notion of representational discourse *in terms of* speakers treating sentences as subject to an absolute standard of correctness' (155, emphasis added). As he says, this is another application of his general pragmatist approach, this time to the predicate 'is representational' itself.

> I propose … a pragmatist specification of the meaning ground of 'is representational'. On this approach, the predicate has the meaning it has by virtue of the fact that its ascription is regulated by whether you take the target sentence to be subject to an absolute standard of correctness. Regulating ascription of the predicate in this way is necessary and sufficient for meaning by the predicate what we mean by it. (155)

Some critics may feel that for something that claims to be an account of what it is to represent the world, the world itself is surprisingly absent from this proposal. But this is Zalabardo's pragmatism at work, at two levels. First, it is an account of what it is to *take* a sentence to be in the representational business, as it were. And second – more importantly for the present concern – in so far as it offers a notion of 'the world' at all, it is radically internalist.

Zalabardo doesn't discuss this explicitly, but his view seems to lead to the conclusion that the world is simply everything that may be correctly said to be the case, by sentences subject to this absolute standard of correctness. Zalabardo responds to the charge that this is insufficiently objective by arguing that this is all we get in science, where realist opponents might hope for their alternative to be grounded. He concludes that 'no linguistic representation of the world is more objective than what can be achieved with predicates with pragmatist meaning grounds' (206).

So, to return to where we started, has Zalabardo identified a tenable new position, in the SW corner of our matrix? Traditional inhabitants of the NW corner are likely to feel that he has done so by redrawing the map. In effect, he has thrown out the old realist understanding of what it is to be representational, a picture cashed out in terms of relations between the words and the world, the latter considered as independently in view. He has replaced this with a pragmatic criterion for what it is to make claims 'in objective mode' – claims we take to be answerable to an external standard.

If this is what it takes to be a representationalist about a discourse, then the SW corner is certainly a tenable position. You can be both a pragmatist about meaning and a representationalist, or realist, in this relaxed SW spirit. The point is similar to one we mentioned earlier: the SW opens up to expressivists, if we deflate the terms at the head of the columns. (Again, that's creeping minimalism.)

Zalabardo's position is more interesting than that, because he isn't simply deflating terms such as 'representation'. He's giving a pragmatic account of how they work. But the upshot seems to be similar. In effect, Zalabardo's version of question (1) isn't the one that old-fashioned realists and expressivists both thought that they were answering, when they said 'Yes' and 'No' to it, respectively. That old question has been written out of geography, as it were – and good riddance to it, in my view. But we don't understand the new map until we understand that it is not the same as the old one.

I said that if Zalabardo was right, I was one of those who seemed to be at fault, in ignoring the SW option. So do I feel the need to shift my ground? No, as it turns out. I have long regarded factuality, or what Zalabardo calls representation, as constructed from within, in something like his sense; and not at all incompatible with what I now call global expressivism.

The one substantial difference is that unlike Zalabardo, I think this kind of representation always comes by degrees. The so-called absolute standard is never entirely absolute. I have

argued that all assertoric discourses have the potential to force us to admit no fault disagreements, under certain sorts of pressure (Price 1988, 2023). Among the factors that enforce globalisation, in my view, are the rule-following considerations. We can never exclude the possibility that two speakers will find themselves 'going on in the same way' in *different* ways, in what will come to seem merely a terminological disagreement, with no 'factual' content.

I don't think this is in fundamental tension with Zalabardo's proposal, which can be seen as a kind of limiting case, that different discourses approach to different degrees. The effect would be to replace the West–East division on our map with a kind of gradation. Some discourses are further West than others, with no pure cases.

As representation lies to the West in our matrix, so pragmatism lies to the South. These remarks have come from a standpoint still quite lightly populated in contemporary analytic philosophy, one that lies even further South than Zalabardo himself. So I want to finish by recommending the book to inhabitants of more popular regions, further to the North (and especially the NW). For you, this rich and tightly-argued book will be more challenging than it is for me – but all the more reason to read it.

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