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Smile when you're winning: how to become a Cambridge pragmatist¹

Hallvard Lillehammer

1. *Late Cambridge pragmatism*

The aim of this paper is to trace the development of a particular current of thought known under the label 'pragmatism' in the last part of the Twentieth century and the beginning of the Twenty-first, latterly associated with Cambridge University, and the two holders of the Bertrand Russell Professorship in that university, Simon Blackburn and Huw Price. I refer to this current of thought as 'late Cambridge Pragmatism'.² I address three questions about this current of thought. First, what is its actual historical development? Second, does it constitute a single, coherent, philosophical outlook? Third, in what form, if any, does it constitute an attractive philosophical outlook? In response to the first question, it might be thought the answer is simple and obvious, and that it has been clearly enough formulated in the recent work of Huw Price (Price: 2011; 2013). Late Cambridge pragmatism emerges from taking the insights of expressivist accounts of normative and other philosophically contested vocabularies and giving them global scope, in conjunction with a general deflationism about philosophically contested notions such as 'truth', 'reference', 'representation', and 'reality'.

¹ I am grateful to audiences at the British Academy and the University of Kent for comments on some of the material included in this paper, and to Simon Blackburn, Huw Price and participants in the Cambridge meta-ethics seminar from 2001 to 2013 for their contributions to the non-dogmatic exploration of questions in meta-ethics. Thanks also to Neil Sinclair and Christine Tiefensee for informative discussions in the context of their own work on expressivism and representation.

² There are other currents of thought that could equally be thought of as meriting this label, such as the current of thought that links F. P. Ramsey at the beginning of the Twentieth Century with D. H. Mellor at the end (see e.g. Lillehammer & Mellor (2005)). I do not address this current of thought here.

My aim in this paper is not to contest that narrative, but to add to it. For, as is well known, the development of this current of thought also embodies another aspect on which its proponents have yet to attain complete perspicuity, namely the nature and status of its philosophical naturalism.³ In response to the second question, I will identify a potential tension between the two main proponents of late Cambridge pragmatism, namely the attitude they take to what I refer to as the ‘naturalist master narrative’. In response to the third question, I make one very tentative suggestion; namely that the attractiveness of the naturalist master narrative embodied in late Cambridge pragmatism is partly a question about what we value, and to that extent sensitive to how those values are best pursued, given the particularities of our historical circumstances.

2. Analogies and metaphors

My account of late Cambridge pragmatism begins much earlier, at the heyday of Cambridge analytic philosophy, with Ludwig Wittgenstein presiding over a selected group of followers in his rooms in Trinity College, later to be successively occupied by the two Bertrand Russell Professors. Blackburn and Price have both been profoundly influenced by Wittgenstein’s work, as illustrated by their repeated citations of the following remark:

We remain unconscious of the prodigious diversity of all the every-day language games, because the clothing of our language makes everything alike. (Wittgenstein (2009 [1953]: 224). Quoted in Blackburn (1998: 80; 2005: 130; 2010: 202); Price (2011: 36; 273, 305))

³ Throughout this paper I intend my use of the term ‘naturalism’ to be consistent with, but not to entail, the position defended by Price under the label ‘subject naturalism’ in Price (2013).

This ‘clothing’ is the ‘propositional’ surface appearance of much of our linguistically embodied communication; and its articulation in the form of declarative sentences, with subject and predicate phrases we may be tempted to think must stand for, or ‘refer’ to, objects and properties in the world. Wittgenstein famously warns us against falling for these surface appearances, and repeatedly stresses the plurality of functional differences beneath. In his characteristic engineering style, Wittgenstein explains the philosophical challenge this raises by means of an analogy, which has been quoted approvingly by Price:

It is like looking into the cabin of a locomotive. We see handles all looking more or less alike. (Naturally, since they are all supposed to be handled.) But one is the handle of a crank which can be moved continuously (it regulates the opening of a valve); another is the handle of a switch, which has only two effective positions, it is either off or on; a third is the handle of a brake-lever, the harder one pulls on it, the harder it breaks; a fourth, the handle of a pump: it has an effect only so long as it is moved to and fro’.
(Wittgenstein (2009 [1953]: 7). Quoted in Price (2011: 200, 248))

Wittgenstein compares these different kinds of handle to a wider range of implements, known collectively as ‘tools’:

Think of the tools in a tool-box: there is a hammer, pliers, a saw, a screw driver, a rule, a glue-pot, glue, nails and screws. - The functions of words are as diverse as the functions of these objects. (Wittgenstein (2009 [1953]: 11). Quoted in Price (2011: 200))

Price appropriates Wittgenstein’s analogy to illustrate his own version of late Cambridge pragmatism:

Assertion...[is]... a multipurpose tool, in much the same way as the handle turns out to be, in the cabin on Wittgenstein's locomotive. In one sense, Wittgenstein stresses, the various handles have very different functions. Yet they are all 'designed to be handled', as Wittgenstein puts it, and *in that sense* members of an important single category (in contrast... to the assorted tools – 'a screw-driver, a rule, a glue-pot, glue..' – mentioned in Wittgenstein's tool-box example.) Handles as a class are importantly different from pedals as a class, for example (though many jobs could be performed by either). (Price (2011: 222))

There are at least two contrasts here. First, we need to distinguish between different kinds of tools of the same kind (e.g. assertions). Second, we must distinguish between different tools of different kinds (e.g. assertions and commands) The substance of the view that Price takes from Wittgenstein is that various forms of judgement with different functions (e.g. physical predictions, moral evaluations, religious dogma) can still be classified as genuine assertions in virtue of their expression playing a distinctive conversational role (e.g. 'aligning commitments across a speech community' (Price (2011: 222))). To carry on in the same metaphorical vein, one competitor view in this context would be one that classified an unfamiliar handle along with the spades or the toothbrushes. This, of course, is basically the accusation Price (2011) levels against so-called 'non-global expressivists', including those who defend the view that has come to be associated with Blackburn under the label 'quasi-realism'.

I will return to the comparative attractions of global and non-global expressivism later. For now, I note that Blackburn, claiming to be at least as much of a 'Wittgensteinian' as his successor in the Bertrand Russell Chair, has never been entirely comfortable with the appropriation of Wittgenstein for this strand of the pragmatist project. He writes:

[M]y exploration is more thoroughly Wittgensteinian than this kind of relaxed pluralism. Wittgenstein himself cannot be seen frolicking on the streets of Paris. He is no minimalist. In all the areas that he considered in the later philosophy he relies upon a contrast between descriptive and non-descriptive uses of language. His main technique is to press a non-descriptive function for paradigmatic assertions... (Blackburn (1993: 6))

The textual issues here are delicate. On the one hand, we have the distinction between assertions and non-assertions (where, for all Blackburn says in this passage, he is with Price). On the other hand, we have the distinction between descriptive versus non-descriptive language (where, at least in this passage, he may not be). The issue is further complicated by the famously scattered nature of Wittgenstein's writings and its various developments over time. So perhaps it is better to let dead Wittgensteins lie.⁴

3. *How to become a late Cambridge pragmatist: quick and easy*

⁴ For what it's worth, there are passages in Wittgenstein's writing where Blackburn seems to hold the higher exegetical ground. In *LE*, for example, Wittgenstein writes: 'No state of affairs has the coercive power of an absolute judge.. [A]s soon as we try to drop the simile and simply state the facts which stand behind it, we find that there are no such facts... [What ethics says] does not add to our knowledge in any sense. But it is a document of a tendency in the human mind which I personally cannot help respecting deeply' (Wittgenstein (1965: 5-12). Quoted in Blackburn (2005:131). See also Blackburn (2010: 204-6)). On the same topic, Rush Rhees cites Wittgenstein as saying: 'Someone might ask whether the treatment of such a question in Christian ethics is right or not. I want to say that this question does not make sense (Rhees (1965: 23)). Quoted in Blackburn (2005: 131)). That these would not be the words of a pragmatist of the 'global expressivist' variety is at least partly suggested by the fact that not enough of the crucial terms (e.g. fact, knowledge) are suitably deflated. Yet even this might conceivably be queried. So I move on.

There are at least two ways of coming to adopt the position of a late Cambridge pragmatist. There is the quick and easy way, and the slow and tortuous way. The quick and easy way (and also the way that is comparatively easier to understand) is Price's way, as articulated in the following passage from his 2007 paper 'Pragmatism, Quasi-realism, and the Global Challenge':

Pragmatism begins with questions about the functions and genealogy of certain linguistic items... with phenomena concerning the use of certain terms and concepts, rather than with things or properties of a non-linguistic nature. It begins with linguistic behaviour, and asks broadly anthropological questions: How are we to understand the roles and functions of the behaviour in question, in the lives of the creatures concerned? What is its practical significance? Whence its genealogy? (Price (2011: 230-1))

And continuing (this is from his 2004 paper, 'Immodesty without Mirrors'):

The challenge is now simply to explain in naturalistic terms how creatures like us come to talk in these various ways. This is a matter of explaining what role the different language games play in our lives... This certainly requires plurality in the world, but of a familiar kind, in a familiar place. This... leaves space for functional pluralism, and does so... in virtue of its non-representationalism... Assertion thus becomes a multipurpose tool, in much the same way as the handle turns out to be, in the cabin of Wittgenstein's locomotive... (Price (2011: 222); (2013: 20))

Most of the distinctive elements of late Cambridge pragmatism, including its Wittgensteinian inspiration, are present here: functional pluralism; non-representationalism; avoidance of standard 'metaphysical' debates; naturalistic anthropology; a general optimism about our

understanding of shared human purposes, and so on.⁵ During the first decade of the new century, Blackburn's work displays increasing sympathy for this line of thought, from which it might be tempting to conclude that having discovered the deflationary potential of the new minimalism, he eventually concluded that he ought to have been a pragmatist of the 'global expressivist' variety all along. As he writes in the opening pages of Blackburn (2010):

Insofar as this collection has an equivalent centre of gravity, it is probably best thought of as pragmatism. At the time of the previous collection [Blackburn (1993)] I suspect I had not fully absorbed the deflationary theory of truth, nor had I obtained my current view of the relation between the expressive theory of ethics defended in that volume, and those modern approaches to the theory of meaning that fly under the banner of pragmatism. (Blackburn (2010: v))

Yet as anyone who has engaged seriously with his work over the last three decades can testify, with Blackburn things are not that simple. To see how, it is necessary to do some historical spadework.

4. How to become a Cambridge Pragmatist: not so easy, not so cheap

In Blackburn's early period (in which I include most of his work up to Blackburn (1993)), there is little sympathy for pragmatism, in this phase mainly represented by William James

⁵ Blackburn picks up on this definition of pragmatism in (Blackburn 2010: 169-70). Interestingly, he now adds: '... notice that the word "description" can go into the deflationist pot along with "representation"'. (Blackburn (2010: 172)). In more recent work, Blackburn seems to distance himself from this understanding of pragmatism in favour of a more holistic approach on which the referring expressions of a discourse may eventually appear in the pragmatist explanation so long as their occurrence is consistent with a suitably naturalistic ontology. (See Blackburn (MS)). I return to this issue below.

and Charles Peirce of its classical period, and Richard Rorty among Blackburn's contemporaries. The following passage from one of the endnotes in Blackburn (1984) is instructive:

It may seem strange that I present pragmatism here as a version of a coherence theory, whose distinctive stress is on utility as the virtue of a system. It is more common to find it presented as though a pragmatic theory of truth is a quite different animal altogether. But I do not accept that it can be. (At present the title seems to be conferred on almost anything from a vague sympathy with empiricism, to a redundancy theory or disbelief in the prospects for any serious theory of truth at all. (Blackburn (1984: 259))

In Blackburn (1993), we then find the following reaction to a pragmatist view of a broadly Pricean variety:

Wittgenstein did appear to hold a minimalist theory of truth... But relying on this fact ignores that minimalism about truth is entirely compatible with holding a very un-minimal theory of assertion... The point is that a thin theory of truth can consort with a thick theory of judgement, ascribing a variety of functional roles to the commitments that on the surface all get expressed by equally well-behaved indicative sentences. (Blackburn (1993: 6-7))⁶

A similar degree of resistance to pragmatist currents of thought is in evidence during what I classify as Blackburn's 'middle period', in which I include his main work in the years up to, and immediately following, the publication of Blackburn (1998a). The following remark

⁶ Notice again the potential conflict with the earlier quotation from the same page of Blackburn 1993 on the nature of assertion (See page 4-5 above). The 1990s were full of sophisticated attempts to identify logical spaces of these and similar kinds between different kinds of 'representational' items and their corresponding forms of 'aptness'. (See e.g.. Jackson *et. al.* (1994)). If some of that literature seems quaint for students of the subject now, it was no less confusing for students of the subject then.

from a 1998 special issue of *Mind* (not reprinted in Blackburn (2010)), and later (disapprovingly) quoted by Price, is illustrative:

There is a contemporary river that sometimes calls itself pragmatism, although other titles are probably better. At any rate it is the denial of differences, the celebration of the seamless web of language, the soothing away of distinctions... What is left is a smooth, undifferentiated view of language, sometimes a nuanced kind of anthropomorphism or ‘internal’ realism, sometimes the view that no view is possible: minimalism, deflationism, quietism. Wittgenstein is often admired as a high priest of this movement. Planting a stick in this water is probably futile, but having done it before I shall do it again, and – who knows? – enough sticks may make a dam, and the waters of error may subside. (Blackburn (1998b: 157). Quoted in Price (2011: 228))

I am probably not the only reader who has been puzzled about what exactly was going on at that point. Part of the puzzlement is undoubtedly down to the proliferation of labels. Here is Blackburn again, this time in his (1998a):

What should a theory of this kind be called? I have called it ‘projectivism’, but that can sound misleading... Gibbard calls the view ‘expressivism’, and I now think that is better. A full-dress title might be ‘non-descriptive functionalism’, or ‘practical functionalism’. At any rate... the moral proposition [is] a ‘propositional reflection’ of states that are first understood in other terms than that they represent anything... It is the isomorphism between propositional structures and necessary practical states that is the heart of things. (Blackburn (1998a: 77))⁷

⁷ By this point, the first explicit references to Price’s work (some of them approving) have begun to register in Blackburn’s work; at first briefly in his (1993), and then again in his (1998a). Blackburn writes: ‘Of course we *voice* our own reactions as we talk of these things [e.g. ethics], but we *voice* our own beliefs as we say anything whatsoever, yet not all our

By the time we reach Blackburn's late period (in which I include most of his work since the turn of the Century), and Blackburn is contemplating his move from Trinity College to the New College of the Humanities, something seems to have changed (at least with respect to the labels). Thus, in Blackburn (2010), he writes:

In the beginning was the deed [another Wittgenstein favourite]⁸, and it is these deeds that give us the substance of all our evaluative and normative repertoires. We can call the overall package pragmatism, or expressivism, or non-descriptive functionalism, or just Wittgensteinianism if we like. (Blackburn (2010: 46). See also Blackburn (1998: 51); (2005, 130), and Wittgenstein (2009 [1953], 546)).

Yet we still do not quite seem to have arrived at late Cambridge pragmatism of the Price variety. One remaining source of tension (and I don't claim it is the only one) is visible in the following passage, in which Blackburn gives a sympathetic rendering of another of his Cambridge predecessors, namely Bernard Williams, and Williams's attempt in his (1985) to 'place' the vocabulary of (thick) ethical valuation in the world as described by the natural sciences:

Out-and-out pragmatists such as Rorty and Price think that what is true of these historically mutable [thick ethical] terms is true of everything. Representation is always the enemy and our practice in making judgements is always the right focus to substitute for it. Williams, evidently, thought that in the case of common sense and ... science, this was otherwise... One reason for thinking that Williams was right is that genealogy

sayings are about our own beliefs' (Blackburn (1993: 10). See also Blackburn (1998a: 50). The reference here is to Price's 1991 paper 'Two Paths to Pragmatism' (Price (2011: 80-111)). Yet the idea that expressivism should be accepted as a global thesis, or that his own view can itself be thought of as a (local) form of pragmatism, is not explicitly present in Blackburn's published work as we enter the new century.

⁸ And apparently a favourite of William James before him. Thanks to Cheryl Misak for the pointer.

and anthropology...can only go on against the background of a shared world. We need to suppose things about the environment within which adaptation took place and practice was moulded in order to give a historical narrative. (Blackburn (2010: 260))

Blackburn is here expressing commitment to an ‘explanatory asymmetry’ thesis. According to this thesis, we arguably have some hope of explaining evaluative and other philosophically contested concepts in the conceptual framework of natural science, and thereby ‘placing’ values and the like within a naturalistic world view, with which all our philosophical commitments ought to explanatorily cohere. To attempt the same project in reverse is not so much rejected as incoherent or unfeasible, as not considered.⁹ Nor is the idea that the direction of explanation or dependence might have to go both ways.

An explanatory asymmetry thesis might relate either i) pairwise to two somehow independently specifiable vocabularies (e.g. the teachings of the Bible and the terms of evolutionary biology); ii) group-wise to clusters of somehow independently specifiable vocabularies (e.g. so-called ‘theological’ vocabularies and ‘natural scientific’ vocabularies; or iii) unrestrictedly, to some maximal collection of vocabularies, (e.g. by way of identifying some ‘master vocabulary’ that is thought to have explanatory priority with respect to all other vocabularies). As I read Blackburn, he is endorsing an explanatory asymmetry thesis along the lines of ii) above; although his wider commitment to philosophical naturalism points firmly in the direction of iii). An explanatory asymmetry thesis might also be held either as a

⁹ Blackburn writes: ‘The natural world is the world revealed by the senses, and described by the natural sciences: physics, chemistry, and notably biology, including evolutionary theory... To be a naturalist is to see human beings as frail complexes of perishing tissue, and so part of the natural order. It is thus to refuse unexplained appeals to mind or spirit, and unexplained appeals to a Platonic order of Forms or Norms; it is above all to refuse any appeal to a supernatural order... So the problem is one of finding room for ethics, of placing ethics within the disenchanting, non-ethical order which we inhabit, and of which we are a part... ‘Finding room’ means understanding how we think ethically, and why it offends against nothing in the rest of our world-view for us to do so (Blackburn (1998a: 49)). For a more recent take on these issues, see Blackburn (MS).

claim about a) *conceptual priority*, or b) *ontological priority* (or both). Thus, it might be held that our attitude towards some vocabulary V2 should depend on whether some vocabulary V1 is asymmetrically presupposed in an explanation of our use of V2 (and whether V1 is in that sense *conceptually prior* to V2). Alternatively, it might be held that our attitude towards some vocabulary V2 should depend on whether the items apparently referred to by some vocabulary V1 is asymmetrically presupposed in a (causal or other) explanation of our use of V2 (and whether V1 is in this sense *ontologically prior* to V2). As I read Blackburn, he is endorsing an explanatory asymmetry thesis along the lines of b) for a wide range of naturalistically unproblematic/problematic pairs of vocabularies, as in ‘the natural sciences’ versus ‘mind’ and ‘ethics’. This delivers a clear commitment to the ontological priority of the naturalist master narrative. With respect to explanatory asymmetry along the lines of a), the issue is not so straightforward, and arguably subject to changing sympathies on Blackburn’s part over time (see Blackburn (MS)). The issue here is that some of the naturalistically more problematic vocabularies (logical, semantic, epistemic, or evaluative) could themselves be presupposed by the naturalistic master narrative. (This line of thought has been pursued in a broadly ‘pragmatist’ spirit by Hilary Putnam with respect to the role of logical, mathematical, and even ethical, vocabulary in scientific and other kinds of explanation (See e.g. Putnam (2004).)

Whatever his settled views on this matter, Blackburn clearly thinks we may sometimes have to take a rejectionist stand with respect to a contested vocabulary, even if it forms part of conceptually sophisticated and thriving life forms. The possibility that the naturalist may need to take up such rejectionist attitude runs right through Blackburn’s work, from his very early period onwards. The issue is most vividly illustrated by the example of religious discourse, as in the following passage from his 1993 collection:

To suppose that the world exists because God made it is the privilege of the theological realist. If this kind of belief is intrinsic to first-order theorizing (as in the theological case), then the kind of diagnosis of the commitments offered by the projectivist will indeed find error in the everyday practice, as well as in various philosophical interpretations of it; this is why a ‘Wittgensteinian’ projection of religious belief is a kind of cheat. (Blackburn 1993: 58)¹⁰

In this case, our ability to ‘mention’ or describe what we are doing when using a given vocabulary without also ‘using’ that vocabulary to make naturalistically problematic commitments is a condition of being serious about our philosophical naturalism, or, as Blackburn also puts it, of ‘saving our philosophical souls’.¹¹ To save our philosophical souls is to combine our functionalist pluralism about different vocabularies with commitment to a naturalistic ‘master vocabulary’ that has other philosophically contested vocabularies (at least ontologically) within its asymmetrical explanatory grasp. Even if some of the contested vocabularies (e.g. semantic, or even ethical, vocabulary) may end up being used at some point in our explanation of our practices of using those vocabularies, the naturalistic vocabulary itself, suitably understood, is not ‘just one vocabulary among others’ (see Blackburn (MS)). On the contrary, at least according to this version of late Cambridge pragmatism, our naturalist voice is the voice of our metaphysical conscience; a condition of

¹⁰ There is extensive discussion of alternative interpretations of religious belief in Blackburn (2005:13ff; and 2010: 308ff.).

¹¹ Blackburn writes: ‘I confess to a residual sense that we have saved our own philosophical souls if our fullest or best explanation of why it is good to be gripped by the story avoids disquotation. Perhaps it is not clear why saving our philosophical souls should be a priority... But I maintain a more conservative position. If we can find bare, pragmatic, non-committal explanations of the good our stories do, we may be on the way to seeing how things hang together better than if we cannot do so (Blackburn (2010: 322). But see Blackburn (MS)). For more on how to understand this, see the *Coda* below.’

sincerity imposed on any philosophically adequate account of the world and our place within it.

5. Price on the naturalist master narrative

This commitment to the naturalist master narrative marks a potential dividing line between late Cambridge pragmatism, Blackburn style and late Cambridge pragmatism, Price style. In a number of places, Price has also addressed the naturalist appeal to explanatory asymmetry (or what he calls ‘the Eleatic Criterion’), and its connection with what he calls the non-global expressivist’s (and hence, by implication, Blackburn’s) ‘bifurcation thesis’ between genuine and ‘quasi’ representation. Thus, in his 2007 paper ‘Pragmatism, Quasi-realism, and the Global Challenge’, Price writes:

The most popular argument for... the defence of the ‘bifurcation thesis’... appeals to what we might call the Eleatic Criterion... We need to appeal to trees to explain our use of the term ‘tree’, but we don’t need to appeal to goodness to explain our use of the term ‘good’. So we should interpret talk of trees ‘really’ realistically, but talk of goodness only quasi-realistically. This is an appealing idea, and the Eleatic Criterion may well mark some distinction of interest... [Yet] there are some interesting reasons for doubting whether ... [the bifurcation thesis] draws the line where its proponents would like to draw a line – say, around scientific claims. (Price (2011: 242-3))

And then, in a footnote:

[O]ne large issue concerns the status of causal discourse, which is arguably both properly treated in expressivist terms, and essential in science. An even deeper issue... turns on the status of logical and conceptual generality. Plausibly, the relevant

explanations of our use of general terms depends only on the particular instances we and our ancestors happen to have encountered in the past – generality itself seems to play no explanatory role. This point... suggests that no interesting part of language really meets the explanatory test. (Price (2011: 243))¹²

In light of this suggestion, Price briefly considers a potentially more charitable interpretation, on which the bifurcation thesis does not apply to the question of what representation consists in, but to what is being variously represented. He writes:

It might be suggested that the proper role of the.. [bifurcation thesis].. is not to underpin a semantic distinction between genuinely descriptive and quasi-descriptive discourse, but a metaphysical distinction, between ontology that deserves our allegiance as realists and ontology that does not...

And yet:

[T]his move is out of bounds to a quasi-realist such as a Blackburn..., for at least two reasons. The first is that it would challenge his metaphysical quietism... The second is that it would mean that quasi-realism was simply tilling the wrong patch of ground, in taking emulation of realism to be a matter of entitlement to the semantic trimmings...

Quasi-realism would require quasi-causation, not quasi-truth. (Price (2011: 243))

Taking this route is consistent, Price thinks, with the kind of naturalistic philosophical outlook he and Blackburn arguably share. (Price's 2011 collection is called, after all,

¹² The diagnosis Price ends up with is that '...much of the appeal of the eleatic intuition rests on a kind of perspectival fallacy: of course the ontology invoked in the explanations in question looks privileged, in those contexts; but so it should, for the explanatory perspective is itself scientific!' (Price (2011: 243)). As Price has pointed out in conversation, the appeal to generality in the above quoted passage forges a direct link with some of the central concerns of earlier Cambridge pragmatists, such as F. P. Ramsey.

Naturalism without Mirrors). Yet, as Price maintains, there is no need for pragmatism, when properly understood, to actually enter into debate about the truth-values of claims embodied within all the philosophically contested vocabularies that Blackburn worries about, nor to explicitly reject the naturalistically problematic commitments they apparently contain. Instead, Price argues, we can (at least in favourable cases) cultivate a disposition of dignified silence:

Compare the difference between an anti-theist who denies the existence of God, and an anti-theist who simply rejects the issue altogether, refusing to take sides – or even to label herself as an agnostic – on an issue she regards as in some way ill-founded. (Price (2011: 236))¹³

I will return to the attractions of this approach shortly. Before I do so, I pause for a second time; this time to suggest that Price has here isolated a theoretically significant position which at least one version of the later Blackburn might actually want to defend. For, contrary to what Price here suggests, there is not a lot to be lost for Blackburn in rejecting ‘metaphysical quietism’. Indeed, on at least one reasonable way of reading him (and as I have just read him above), Blackburn is not a metaphysical quietist. He is a metaphysical naturalist. And as a metaphysical naturalist, even if he is not entitled to apply a simple ‘bifurcation’ thesis for the reasons given by Price in the quotation above, he might still (for all I have shown) hold out hope for the coherence of some suitably ‘graded’ asymmetry thesis; all of this in the domain of ontology broadly construed (as long as it transcends the boundaries of the narrowly

¹³ And a bit later in the same work: ‘So rejecting the view that God created the species does not require accepting the following claim: God did not create the species. The alternative – the right alternative, obviously, in this case – is a kind of passive rejection: simply avoiding theological vocabulary, in scientific contexts’ (Price (2011: 240-1)).

‘semantic’).¹⁴ What Price is arguably right about is that so interpreted, ‘quasi-realism’ (at least as that view is most frequently discussed) may have been tilling the wrong patch of ground; in which case the above-quoted remarks by Blackburn on Williams could be read as a revisionary step away from the perspective of late Cambridge pragmatism, Price-style.¹⁵ On this reading we can also retain any original sympathy we might have felt towards Price’s criticisms of the ‘bifurcation’ thesis when purely targeted at any ‘local expressivist’ project that requires a (more or less sharply defined) representation (truth)/non-representation (logic of attitudes) distinction; a distinction to which the later Blackburn, on the present reading, need not be committed (even if he actually is).

6. *Saving our philosophical souls*

The suggestion, so far, is that our two late Cambridge pragmatists divide on a broadly speaking metaphysical question, namely the issue of whether to assign the naturalistic

¹⁴ Blackburn writes: ‘We should beware of framing the issues to generally, as issues about Language and the World. Even if that abstract issue ceases to enchant us, the loss of a global question is not the global loss of a question’ (Blackburn (2005: 136). See also Blackburn (2010: 212)). Two concrete instances where Blackburn (by approvingly quoting Wittgenstein) seems to allow for a more ‘graded’ conception, either at the level of semantics or at the level of metaphysics: 1) ‘There is no doubt at all that *in certain language games* mathematical propositions play the part of rules of description, as opposed to descriptive propositions... But that is not to say that this contrast cannot shade off in all directions. And *that* in turn is not to say that the contrast is not of the greatest importance’ (Wittgenstein (1978: 163). Quoted in Blackburn (2005: 133); (2010: 206)); 2) ‘Here one must, I believe, remember that the concept ‘proposition’ itself is not a sharp one’ (Wittgenstein (1969: 320). Quoted in Blackburn 2010: 210).

¹⁵ Perhaps, by 2010 and his discussion of Williams, Putnam, and the absolute conception, this is where Blackburn ends up (c.f. Blackburn (MS)). Whether interpreting the ‘bifurcation’ thesis as a metaphysical rather than a semantic thesis makes that thesis either more or less ‘interesting’ is a question I do not address here.

‘master narrative’ asymmetric privilege in settling the question of what the world is ‘really’ like, or what our overall world view genuinely commits us to with respect to ‘what there is’. Blackburn’s pragmatism, as I have read it, does assign the naturalistic narrative such privilege; which is why he is (at least sometimes) tempted to say about some philosophically contested vocabulary that it is embroiled in some kind of error, and that any philosophical attempt to construe it otherwise is a ‘cheat’. Price, in at least some paradigm cases, prefers to stop short of this error-theoretic claim, suggesting that we let (at least some) philosophically contested vocabularies lie by avoiding any first order engagement with them, so long as our purposes (scientific, explanatory, or whatnot) do not require us to. Yet both Blackburn and Price explicitly self-ascribe a commitment to naturalism. And what actually does require explanation; in what terms; and in terms of what, is a historically variable and politically contested issue. The question of how we should understand the asymmetric privilege of the naturalistic master narrative is therefore one that has potential implications outside the narrow confines of academic philosophy.¹⁶

Blackburn’s famously forthright way with at least some contested vocabularies has genuine potential to place him in the direct line of fire on this point. In at least one place, Price appears to notice the difficulty, and briefly seems tempted to step into a river he normally prefers to avoid. Thus, in a footnote in his 2003 paper ‘Truth as Convenient Friction, he writes:

Even if not dangerous on its own, the third norm [of assertion, i.e. that if not-P, there are prima facie grounds for censure of an assertion that P] might become so in combination with some particularly deadly source of intractable disagreements, such as religion [sic.] commitment. More generally, the thought that argument is sometimes

¹⁶ The contemporary debate about whether or not to teach Creationism in schools or to include ‘the metaphysics of God’ as a compulsory element of the Philosophy A Level syllabus, and *if so why*, are just two contemporary examples of the genre.

dangerous suggests a link between the concerns of this paper and the motivations of Pyrrhonian sceptics. (Price (2011: 176)

This remark is telling. Of course, a stance of selective Pyrrhonian scepticism (whereby one refrains from either assenting to P or not-P) is clearly possible to adopt for some people, about some issues, in some historical circumstances. In other circumstances, however, it is far from clear that the cultivation of such a stance is a realistic possibility, at least for everyone. Thus, entering a ‘quietist’ plea was not an oddly neglected strategy that would have saved thousands of the accused from the terrors of Stalin or the Inquisition, if only they had thought of it. (Just because you refuse to say anything does not mean you are not really an enemy of the revolution, a covert atheist, or whatnot.) Furthermore, and as Blackburn helpfully points out, one of the standard conceptual devices historically employed to resolve uncertainty or disagreement is to stack the burden of proof squarely on one side (Blackburn (1984: 207-8); (2005)). So both the availability and the advisability of a ‘quietist’ strategy will be sensitive to context; in particular to the question whether our favourite vocabularies are ‘winning’ or ‘losing’ at the time. If ‘we’ are on the winning side (e.g. naturalistically minded atheists of a tolerant persuasion), then the quietist strategy might be practically stable, and thus advisable. If ‘they’ are on the winning side (e.g. the Party, or the Inquisition) it may not be; and we may be forced by our social circumstances to ‘enter a plea’, even if we are taken to have done so by remaining silent.¹⁷ Yet whatever we decide to do, our decision is likely to be in some way framed not only by our evaluation of the threats and incentives we face in that particular situation, but also by what we ‘believe’ (in a perfectly everyday and familiar sense of that

¹⁷ There is a close connection between the argument of this paragraph and James’s discussion of religious belief in ‘The Will to Believe’ (James (1982 [1896])), although exploring the details would require more space than I can give it here. Thanks to Cheryl Misak for the pointer,

word) about the issue in question. This is one sense in which a late Cambridge pragmatist can smile when (and possibly only when) she is winning.

There is also another sense in which smiling could be the most appropriate response for a late Cambridge pragmatist. If we follow the deflationist project through from its semantic beginnings to one or other of its metaphysical termini, we may eventually end up with nothing to say about what the world is really like, except relative to the vocabulary of some contestable conceptual framework or other. If so, the ‘truth’, ‘correctness’, or philosophical ‘adequacy’ of the naturalist master narrative can begin to look like one of those fundamental truths that some philosophers argue cannot be coherently articulated. Of course, the true Wittgensteinian home of fundamental philosophical insights we cannot coherently articulate is his (early) *TLP*, with its notorious suggestion that there are some things that cannot be *said*, but only *shown* (Wittgenstein (1961 [1922])).¹⁸ The Wittgenstein of *TLP* is hardly an obvious companion for a late Cambridge pragmatist, either of the Blackburn or the Price variety. Yet given the difficulty of coherently articulating the asymmetrical privilege of the naturalist master narrative, this is one place where a late Cambridge pragmatist could eventually end up. For one way of showing what you are thinking, is by smiling. At least, that is, when you are winning.

6. Coda

¹⁸ The later Wittgenstein has some apparently rather dismissive things to say about this kind of possibility, as when he says, in the context of his discussion of first-person privacy in the *Investigations*, that ‘a nothing would serve just as well as a something about which nothing could be said’ (Wittgenstein (2009 [1953]: 102)).

I can think of at least one alternative and minimally plausible way to make sense of the late Cambridge pragmatist's naturalist master narrative.¹⁹ On this proposal, the commitment to naturalism is understood as a practical and fundamentally value-driven recommendation to assign the vocabulary of the natural sciences an asymmetrically privileged place in human thought and action. To endorse and recommend the naturalistic master narrative as the background against which the nature and function of linguistic and other human practices are to be interpreted, for example, is to endorse and recommend that narrative as expressive of, or conducive to the promotion of, our values. To consider the naturalistic narrative a better master narrative than some other potential master narrative (such as a supernatural cosmology according to which everything happens for a good reason) is to think it makes more coherent sense as a way of thinking about the world and our place in it, in light of what we care about. Or, to put in slightly more provocatively, to decide on what vocabulary to use in trying to make sense of the world and our place in it is to decide in light of *the good* (c.f. Putnam (2004)). On this proposal, we can begin to make sense of why a secular pragmatist would prefer not to make use of religious discourse, as opposed to using it and thereby being pressured into making a series of negative existential claims (c.f. Price (2011: 236, 240-1)). On this proposal, the strategy of avoiding religious vocabulary can be interpreted not as duplicitous way of evading the issue of our true ontological commitments, but rather as expressive of an attitude of liberal tolerance (or even indifference) with respect to ways of thinking and speaking that on the whole are thought (rightly or wrongly – the issue depends at least in part on complex considerations about what we are willing to count as social

¹⁹ Among less promising ways of making sense of it I include the unrestrictedly relativist view that all systems of representation are on a par, the choice of a naturalist master narrative being rationally arbitrary; and the unrestrictedly trivialising view that the privilege of any set of representations obtains relative to the system of representations of which it forms a part. I take it that Price's remarks in Price (2011: 243), quoted above, do not commit him to either of these views.

progress, and the like) to be less conducive to the pursuit of what we think is really important in life.

Having said that, following this proposal has the potential to create more trouble down the line. First, in order for this proposal to count as a plausible interpretation of the commitment to naturalism embodied in late Cambridge pragmatism it would ideally need to do justice to most of the things that either or both of our late Cambridge pragmatists actually say. I'm not sure that it does. Second, it might be worried that on this reading there will be too much scope for the existence of different master narratives, each of them internally coherent and consistent with our basic values, but only some of them being naturalistically respectable in the desired way. (For example, if we assume that some of nature's benign purposes are essentially hidden from us, then the absence of evidence for the claim that everything happens for a good reason need not be regarded as evidence of absence on pain of incoherence.) For some committed naturalists, this kind of 'relaxed' pluralism will be too much to handle (c.f. Blackburn (1993: 7)). Third, for at least some committed naturalists the very idea of vindicating naturalism on substantially evaluative terms is based on a profound misunderstanding of the relationship of asymmetric dependence in which any plausible claim about value, or the good, necessarily stands to plausible claims about fact, or what the world is like. (Thus, they may argue, it is simply not true that everything happens for a good reason, however 'lovely' it would be to think and act in a way that allows us to think and speak otherwise.) For these reasons (and probably others as well), naturalistically inclined pragmatists may want to look elsewhere.

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