

Price's Subject Naturalism and Liberal Naturalism

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According to one generically pragmatist line of thought, metaphysical perplexities can be overcome by turning attention to our uses of words and concepts. Over the last three decades, Huw Price has motivated a version of this program by distinguishing two ways of adhering to naturalism in philosophy. Price argues that by pursuing naturalistic inquiry into ourselves as *subjects*, as speakers and thinkers, we can undermine naturalistic doctrines about the *objects* of our talk and thought, doctrines that give rise to metaphysical puzzles. In this sense, he opposes “object naturalism” from the standpoint of “subject naturalism.”¹

In this chapter, I'll first seek to identify how Price conceives of object naturalism and subject naturalism, as well as his reasons for holding that object naturalism can be undermined by subject-naturalistic inquiry. Then I'll address five questions about how his project bears on the prospects for a liberal naturalism.

- (1) Does Price's strategy depend on his requirement that the relevant inquiry into human discourse and thought be conducted in natural-scientific terms?
- (2) Is Price's strategy even compatible with that requirement?
- (3) Does the worldview Price arrives at amount to a liberal naturalism, i.e. a naturalism that could be obtained by relaxing a more restrictive version?
- (4) Is Price's strategy consistent with a liberal naturalism?
- (5) Should a proponent of Price's strategy accept a liberal naturalism?

I'll present considerations in favor of negative answers to (1), (2), and (3), and affirmative answers to (4) and (5). Crucially, the liberal naturalism I'll recommend to the subject naturalist will be a view about inquiry into discourse and thought, not a metaphysical view about the extent of the natural realm.

To clarify the resulting view of the terrain, I'll then contrast Price's distinction between two kinds of naturalism with that drawn by John McDowell, who distinguishes between a “restrictive naturalism” and his own “liberal naturalism” (2009c: 261–62). Both Price and McDowell seek to avoid philosophical anxieties by focusing on human subjects as natural beings. But there's an important difference. McDowell maintains an *ontological naturalism* about (e.g.) moral values by advocating a position that's *liberal in its naturalism*. By contrast, Price argues that

¹ While that terminology first appears in Price (2011d, published 2004), the distinction and its use are clearly anticipated in the introduction and the concluding section of Price (1988: 4–5, 215–16).

restrictively naturalistic inquiry into human subjects can vindicate a position that's *liberal (though not naturalistic) in its ontology*.² The version of subject naturalism I'll recommend represents a middle ground: it holds that liberally naturalistic inquiry into human subjects can vindicate a position that's liberal (though not naturalistic) in its ontology.

1. What is subject naturalism?

According to Price, "philosophical naturalism" or "naturalism per se" is just the view that "in some areas, philosophy properly defers to science" (2011d: 184, 199). This may be an overly broad formulation, since it allows believers in the supernatural to count as naturalists.

Nonetheless, it helpfully calls attention to two respects in which varieties of naturalism can differ from each other. They can differ in respect of the *domains* to which they apply, as well as in respect of the *kind of deference* to science they require.

Price points out that naturalism is usually regarded as applying to all reality, and as requiring deference to science with regard to both ontological commitment and epistemology. On this view, which he calls "object naturalism" (2011d: 185),

(ON) "all there *is* is the world studied by science, [and] all genuine knowledge is scientific knowledge."

Object naturalists holds that "the only facts there are are the kind of facts recognized by natural science" (2011c: 4-5; 2013: 24, 168). Such facts concern objects, properties, and happenings that are in principle describable in the vocabulary of the natural sciences, and they are knowable, if at all, by methods of natural-scientific inquiry.³

Price rejects (ON), concluding that philosophy's "debt ... to science" (2011d: 198) is sufficiently acknowledged by a view he calls *subject naturalism*. Subject naturalism "is the philosophical viewpoint that begins with the realization that we humans (our thought and talk included) are surely part of the natural world" (2011c: 5). This might appear to be a restriction of object naturalism to a particular domain: thought and talk done by human subjects. Thus construed, subject naturalism would countenance facts outside the reach of natural science, as long as these don't pertain to human subjects. But this misidentifies the sense in which subject naturalism is the more liberal view. After all, Price acknowledges *normative facts about human*

² For similar distinctions, see Macarthur (2014) and Christias (2019: 509–10). Unlike Macarthur, Christias sees himself as drawing a distinction *within* "liberal naturalism."

³ There are important questions about how "natural science" is delimited; here I can only note that Price construes it broadly enough to include at least some "human sciences," specifically the kind of "anthropological" inquiry with which is concerned (2011c: 29–30). Cf. Redding (2010: 373) and Macarthur (2014: 73).

beings.⁴ Yet he doesn't hold that such facts can be established by natural-scientific means.

In fact, subject naturalism can't be distinguished from object naturalism in terms of its *domain of application*. Rather, it's a view about the *nature of the proper deference* to science when philosophizing about any domain. Introducing the label, Price says that according to subject naturalism,

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. (2011d: 186)

This formulation subsumes two theses about the "relevance of science to philosophy" (2011d: 184, 186). The first imposes a constraint. Philosophical claims must be consistent with "the basic ('subject naturalist') premise that the creatures employing the language in question are simply natural creatures, in a natural environment" (2011c: 9; 2011d: 187, 194, 198). This rules out philosophical claims crediting us with supernatural faculties, faculties that can't be understood as acquired in the development of an organism that arose by biological evolution. (Alleged examples of supernatural faculties might be immediate awareness of universals, or rational intuition into truths.) However, this constraint doesn't yet underwrite the second thesis in Price's formulation, namely that what science reveals about ourselves can and should serve as a place for philosophy to begin.

Central to Price's subject naturalism is the view that some philosophical problems can only be resolved via inquiry into human language and thought. These problems concern, in the well-known words of Wilfrid Sellars (1963: 1), how "things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term." How can things as heterogeneous as physical objects, mathematical structures, colors, moral and aesthetic values or norms, possibility, probability, causation, and meaning be incorporated into a coherent worldview? Price addresses such "location problems" or "placement problems" as they are posed from the point of view of an object naturalist (2011c: 4–8; 2011d: 186–188; 2013: 26–29).⁵ Faced with a placement problem, we seem to have a choice of locating the relevant item within the "sparse

⁴ According to Macarthur (2014: 81), Price doesn't acknowledge moral truths on a "face-value understanding." That differs from Price's own assessment: he insists that his position allows moral talk "to be taken at face value, but without the metaphysical spooks" (2011b: 147). Macarthur appears to hold that taking moral truths at face value requires taking moral values to figure in "causal explanations of our talk of moral values."

⁵ The term "location problem" derives from Jackson (1998). As his source for "placement," Price (2011c: 6n1) cites an exchange between Simon Blackburn and John McDowell (see Blackburn 1993, 163, whose language is picked up by McDowell 1998a, 162–166). Though I have introduced placement problems as concerned with placing the *things we talk of*, Price agrees with Blackburn that they ultimately derive from a concern with placing our *talk of those things* (see note 8).

world apparently described by science,” or embracing some version of eliminativism, fictionalism, or projectivism according to which the items are illusory. Either way, we’d be doing what Price calls “metaphysics”: addressing philosophical perplexities about how things hang together by investigating the existence and nature of the things in question.⁶

Subject naturalism is advertised as a way of sidestepping this choice, and thus avoiding metaphysics (in this sense) altogether.

(SN1) Placement problems can be sidestepped via inquiry into how humans, as natural creatures, use language and thought.

Price describes such inquiry as “subject naturalistic” (e.g. 2011d: 196, 193-94). And he imposes a constraint on it:

(SN2) The inquiry mentioned in (SN1) should be conducted using methods drawn from the natural sciences, specifically from the “scientific perspective of a linguistic anthropologist” (2011c: 11).

I’ll be understanding Price’s subject naturalism as encapsulated by (SN1) and (SN2).⁷

2. The subject-naturalist rejection of object naturalism

According to Price, subject-naturalistic inquiry helps sidestep the problems resulting from object naturalism by undermining (ON) itself. That’s because (ON) carries presuppositions about language users that could be refuted by naturalistic inquiry.

If the presuppositions of object naturalism turn out to be suspect, from this self-reflective scientific standpoint, then subject naturalism gives us reason to reject object naturalism. (2011d: 186).

This yields a sense in which “[s]ubject naturalism ... comes first” in relation to object naturalism. Subject-naturalistic inquiry should enjoy a priority over object-naturalistic attempts

⁶ Price allows that there can also be legitimate inquiry directed at questions of this sort (2011f: 264; 2019: 137). I’ll have little to say about what distinguishes the philosophical perplexities he views as giving rise to metaphysics, other than that *metaphysically* reductionist or eliminativist answers are typically couched as views about what the items in question “really” are, or whether they “really” exist (Macarthur and Price 2007: 235–36). Metaphysics in Price’s sense thus presupposes an “absolute, theory-independent ontological viewpoint” (2011b: 134). Price’s conception of metaphysics is criticized as overly narrow by Legg and Giladi (2018).

⁷ Viewed this way, Price’s subject naturalism aligns closely with the approach Sellars himself announces in an early paper (1949: 290–92). Here, Sellars aims to show naturalists a way to avoid a “failure of nerve.” The problem they face is the apparent dilemma between maintaining that mathematical, normative, and modal concepts are “pseudo-concepts,” and claiming that they are “included within the scope of empirical science.” His “pragmatist” alternative involves insisting (here in the mathematical case) “that there is no aspect of *mathematical inquiry as a mode of human behavior* which requires a departure from the categories of naturalistic psychology for its interpretation.”

to resolve the placement problems, because those attempts should be placed on hold pending subject-naturalistic “validation” of object naturalism’s presuppositions.

In fact, Price expects that subject-naturalistic inquiry will call into question the credentials of object naturalism:

Invalidity Thesis: There are strong reasons for doubting whether object naturalism deserves to be “validated”—whether its presuppositions do survive subject naturalist scrutiny. (2011d: 187)

However, it isn’t always clear how Price aims to substantiate the Invalidity Thesis. I understand him as offering two very different lines of arguments. In the rest of the section, I’ll distinguish these, and contrast them with one he doesn’t offer.

2.1 Blocking a route to object naturalism: representationalism

One of Price’s lines of argument seeks to show that subject-naturalistic inquiry undermines *one possible strategy* for validating object naturalism. That strategy would rest on an assumption Price calls “representationalism.” This is the view that our employment of linguistic and mental items in contentful talk and thought must be explained in terms of their bearing a relation of “standing for” or “representation” to objects, properties, relations, and/or states of affairs.

Suppose we embrace representationalism as part of a naturalistic explanation of language and thought. In that case, the *representation relation* will itself have to be describable in natural-scientific terms. Hence also the *relata* on the worldly end of this relation, e.g. normative properties and states of affairs, must be so describable.

Given a naturalistic conception of speakers, the addition of a representationalist conception of speech makes [object naturalism] almost irresistible. Term by term, sentence by sentence, topic by topic, the representationalist’s semantic ladder leads us from language to the world, from words to their worldly objects. Somehow, the resulting multiplicity of kinds of entities—values, meanings, and the rest—needs to be accommodated within the natural realm. To what else, after all, could natural speakers be related by natural semantic relations? (2011d: 198–99; 2011c: 4)

In short, provided it supports representationalism, subject-naturalistic inquiry will validate object naturalism.

On the other hand, if subject-naturalistic inquiry calls representationalism into question, this semantic strategy for validating object naturalism will be unavailable. Price argues that this is indeed the case: subject-naturalistic inquiry into the function of *semantic vocabulary* supports a

deflationary view that debars ‘refers’, ‘true of’ and ‘true’ from playing the explanatory role representationalists take them to play. Consequently, “semantic deflationism ... blocks a particular route to location problems—a route that otherwise carries a lot of traffic” (2011f: 258–59, 262–64). Once we embark on that route, the route that starts with a naturalistic version of representationalism, the only way to maintain realism about the objects of our thought and talk is to “place” them in the “natural realm.” Hence, a subject-naturalistic vindication of deflationism about semantic vocabulary can block one route to object naturalism. Notice that this is a route on which placement problems are not just an *upshot* of object naturalism, but also *source* of object naturalism.

At times, Price appears to regard the strategy of validating object naturalism via representationalism as more than merely *one possible source* of object naturalism. “For someone who takes science seriously, the *only route* to object naturalism is ... to concede that the problem begins at the linguistic level, and to defend the representationalist view,” at least for discourse they don’t dismiss as non-factual (2011d: 196, my emphasis). This looks like an unnecessary commitment. For one thing, it excludes as unmotivated any object naturalism that *rejects* representationalism (Knowles 2018, 297–300), a position whose availability Price has since acknowledged (2011c: 5; 2013: 25n4). In addition, even a representationalist may take it that their representationalism only yields placement problems given a *pre-existing* commitment to object naturalism.⁸

2.2 Undermining a presupposition of object naturalism: functional uniformity

According to a second line of argument, subject-naturalistic inquiry does more than just undermine one strategy for validating object naturalism. It actually serves to *invalidate* object naturalism.

Here the role of subject-naturalistic inquiry is to reject what Price sees as the object naturalist’s presupposition that the vocabulary we use to talk about (say) values is “in the same line of work” as the language used in natural-scientific description and explanation. Semantic deflationism is important here too: it rules out the answer that the alleged common line of work is that of *representing the world* or *making true claims* (e.g. Price 2011f: 264).

⁸ Elsewhere in the same paper, Price describes his “linguistic conception” of the “origins of placement problems” differently: “Roughly, we note that humans ... employ the term ‘X’ in language, or the concept *X*, in thought. *In light of a commitment to object naturalism*, ... we come to wonder how what these speakers are thereby talking or thinking *about* could be the kind of thing studied by science” (2011d: 188, first emphasis mine).

According to Price, subject-naturalistic inquiry reveals that (e.g.) normative and semantic vocabularies serve very different functions in our linguistic economy from those served by the vocabularies employed in the natural sciences. He argues that the resulting “functional pluralism” (2011b: 136) about our thought and talk should have the effect of “blocking reductionist moves” (O’Leary-Hawthorne and Price 2011: 124, Price 2011b: 146).

[T]he functional standpoint threatens to undercut the motivation for reductionism: once we have an adequate explanation for the fact that the folk talk of Xs and Ys and Zs, an explanation which distinguishes these activities from what the folk are doing when they do physics, why should we try to reduce the Xs and Ys and Zs to what is talked about in physics? (2011e: 78)

In other words, functional pluralism undermines both reductionist proposals and the eliminativist alternative, according to which the conclusion that values or meanings are recalcitrant to object-naturalistic reduction implies that there are no values or meanings.

With regard to its opposition to reductionism and eliminativism, Price emphasizes, his functional pluralism resembles non-factualist/non-cognitivist versions of *expressivism*. But while traditional expressivism preserves a contrast between (e.g.) ethical discourse and genuinely descriptive discourse, Price argues that the anti-reductionist upshot of his functional pluralism *doesn’t depend on* the privileging of any kind of discourse (e.g. that of natural science) as genuinely descriptive.⁹ Instead, “the philosophically interesting work of non-cognitivism—the work of blocking reductionist moves, in particular—is done by the functional characterization” that reveals the heterogeneity of vocabularies (O’Leary-Hawthorne and Price 2011: 126; cf. 123).

2.3 Vindicating the correctness of assertions?

Robert Brandom offers a third interpretation of how Price’s subject naturalist counters the object-naturalist’s doctrine that (e.g.) normative talk remains suspect pending placement of its objects in the world described by the natural sciences.

[W]e describe how the use of the vocabulary is taught and learned. If there is nothing mysterious about that, and we can say in our favoured [natural-scientific] terms just what one needs to do *in order to use the vocabulary correctly*, Price argues, then the vocabulary should

⁹ Indeed, Price argues that subject-naturalistic inquiry calls into question the traditional expressivist “bifurcation” of assertoric discourse into domains that are, and aren’t, genuinely descriptive. His functional pluralism can thus be understood as a “global expressivism” (2011f; 2011c: 8-9; 2103; 2019; Macarthur and Price 2011).

count as naturalistically acceptable....” (Brandom 2013: 86, my italics; cf. 2008: 25; 2015: 93)

For now, I’ll ignore Brandom’s questionable assumption that Price aims to reveal (e.g.) moral vocabulary as “naturalistically” acceptable, rather than just as acceptable without reductionist or eliminativist analysis.

Thus construed, the subject-naturalist’s approach to placement problems would require vindicating the *correctness* of uses of the target vocabulary. As Brandom notes (2013: 88), this presupposes that it’s legitimate for subject-naturalistic inquiry to employ a notion of *correctness*. Here it’s crucial that “correct” not mean *true*. On the deflationary approach to truth Price shares with Brandom, a subject-naturalistic explanation of the functioning of the target vocabulary won’t specify truth conditions. The truth condition of ‘Eating meat is wrong’ can be specified, in English, by using that normative sentence itself. Instead of a truth condition, the kind of correctness Price makes use of in subject-naturalistic explanations is what he calls a “subjective assertibility condition.” Here is one such possible condition: “The utterance ‘X is good’ is *prima facie* appropriate when used by a speaker who approves of (or desires) X” (Price 2011g: 82-3; 2011e: 73).

But it’s unclear that placement problems for (say) moral properties or states of affairs can be undercut via an account of *subjective assertibility conditions* for sentences of moral discourse. Suppose a subject naturalist offers such an account, as well as an explanation of how moral discourse qualifies as making truth-evaluable claims. That would still leave them free to advocate, on object-naturalist grounds, an error theory on which ascriptions of moral properties achieve *only* subjective assertibility and never truth. Pending an explanation of how to leverage a naturalistically acceptable explanation of a vocabulary’s “correct use” into a way to escape placement problems, Brandom’s interpretation fails to capture Price’s subject-naturalist program.

3. Does Price’s rejection of object naturalism depend on subject naturalism?

We’ve seen two ways in which subject-naturalistic inquiry into human language and thought might undercut object naturalism: by blocking the representationalist route to object naturalism and by supporting functional pluralism. I now turn to questions (1) and (2), which can be reformulated as follows. Is there a reason why either of these strategies *must be* carried out via natural-scientific explanations of the functioning of linguistic or mental items? And is there reason to expect that either *could* be carried out that way?

Regarding question (1), the anti-representationalist strategy doesn't appear to require natural-scientific inquiry into our uses of semantic expressions such as 'true' and 'refers'. I see no reason why deflationary explanations of semantic talk must be presented from the "scientific perspective of a linguistic anthropologist" (2011c: 11). The same goes for the functional pluralist strategy. As Knowles (2011: 79) observes, "if ultimately there is no *necessity* about using scientific conceptions in the logic of expressivist explanation," then "it becomes very unclear what the naturalism really amounts to here" (also Shapiro 2014: 502).¹⁰ In short, Price's strategies for undermining object naturalism don't appear to require (SN2).

Regarding question (2), there are reasons to doubt that Price's critique of object naturalism *can* rest on explanations of language and thought that employ the conceptual and methodological tools Price regards as proper to the natural sciences.¹¹

First, both the deflationist strategy and the functional pluralist strategy involve semantic ascent: rather than theorize about the nature of moral goodness or the nature of reference, we examine the functioning of the words 'good' and 'refers'. But why should we care, in this connection, about the functioning of those particular English words? The obvious answer is that we're trying to explain the difference between what we're doing when we *speak of what's good, and of what refers to what*, and what we're doing when we engage in scientific description and explanation. We aim to

explain in naturalistic terms ... what role the different language games play in our lives—
what differences there are between the functions of talk of value and the functions of talk of
electrons, for example. (Price 2011d: 199).

Price's interest in how the English words 'good' and 'refers' function thus rests on the fact that these are words English-speakers use to *talk of* being good and of referring. They're words we use in order to *say that* something is good, or *say that* it refers to something else. And this means that the target of our subject-naturalistic inquiry must be linguistic expressions considered insofar as they enjoy a *semantic* characterization (by which I don't mean a characterization in

¹⁰ Brandom argues, against Price's "descriptivist subject naturalism," that subject-naturalistic vindications of a vocabulary's respectability should be allowed to avail themselves of *any metavocabulary for which that same task can be performed* (2015: 93-95; 91n57). On this more liberal view, what remains of *naturalism*? Brandom's own answer rests on his account of *how* a vocabulary's "respectability" is vindicated. That's achieved by showing how the vocabulary can be correctly deployed on the basis of abilities involved in using "empirical descriptive vocabulary, whether that of common sense, the special sciences, or fundamental physics." On this version of subject naturalism, *scientific* vocabulary enjoys no privileged role in the explanatory project.

¹¹ Brandom (2013: 88) expresses doubts about this, based on his view that the explanations may require using normative vocabulary. See also Redding (2010) and Macarthur (2014).

terms of reference or truth, but a characterization in terms of what they're *used to say*).¹² If that's right, the functional explanations Price uses to undercut object naturalism must employ semantic locutions tied to propositional-attitude ascriptions (Shapiro 2014: 504-5).¹³ But by Price's own lights (2011b: 133n3; 2011a: 205n2, 209, 219–20), we have no reason to expect that the facts stated using such locutions can be reconstructed from within the austere perspective of the natural sciences (cf. Macarthur 2014: 76–77).

There's a further reason for wondering whether natural-scientific inquiry is suited to revealing the distinctive role in our discursive economy of at least *some* of the vocabularies that give rise to placement problems. Inspired by Kant and Sellars, Brandom argues that in the case of both modal and normative vocabularies, the role that distinguishes them from “empirical descriptive vocabulary” is their “framework-explicating function”:

A central observation of Kant's is that what we might call the framework of empirical description—the commitments, practices, abilities and procedures that form the necessary practical background within the horizon of which alone it is possible to engage in the cognitive theoretical activity of describing how things empirically are—essentially involves elements expressible in words that ... do *not* perform the function of describing (in the *narrow* sense) how things are. (Brandom 2013: 105; cf. 2015: 35)

If this is right, the pragmatist approach to the target vocabularies should proceed via the identification of *necessary features of the framework of empirical description*. Identifying such features wouldn't seem to call for natural-scientific investigation from the viewpoint of Price's empirical “linguistic anthropologist.” Rather, it would be a task for what Sellars calls “transcendental linguistics,” which seeks an “analytic account of the resources a language must have to be the bearer of empirical meaning” (2002b: 281, 2002a: 268). The project could remain one of undermining object naturalism about normative properties and facts (and any modal ones excluded from natural-scientific discourse) by examining the distinctive framework-explicating functions of normative (and modal) expressions. But whether or not that examination should be viewed as *analytic*, it would no longer be natural-scientific inquiry.

¹² As Brandom says, “[w]hat the subject naturalist wants is a naturalistic account of the discursive practices of *using* the target vocabulary *as* meaningful in the way that it is meaningful” (2015: 91).

¹³ As we saw, Price's strategy *does* preclude explaining the functions of expressions by simply specifying what they are used to “describe” or “represent,” but this needn't rule out employing intentional vocabulary in other ways. I've argued elsewhere that Price's expressivist explanations invariably employ such vocabulary (Shapiro 2014: 500).

4. Subject naturalism and liberal naturalism

Can Price's subject naturalism be viewed as a species of "liberal naturalism"? On one understanding of this term, it applies to positions that agree with (ON) in insisting that the only facts are natural facts, but depart from (ON) in embracing "a broader, more expansive conception of nature that makes room for a class of nonscientific, but nonetheless nonsupernatural, entities" (De Caro and Macarthur 2010: 4).

When liberal naturalism is understood this way, the answer to our question is "no."¹⁴ But it's important to consider why. It might be thought that in rejecting (ON), Price advocates an *object non-naturalism* about the objects, properties and facts responsible for placement problems. Against this, he clarifies that while his subject naturalist "may agree that moral properties are not natural properties," this would be a misleading way of putting the upshot of subject-naturalist inquiry, which doesn't serve to establish any metaphysical thesis. The true upshot is "put more clearly by shifting explicitly to the meta-linguistic frame, and saying that moral terms and concepts are in a different 'line of work' to the terms and concepts of natural science" (2019: 139). Price's naturalism, as encapsulated by (SN1) and (SN2), isn't a metaphysical doctrine. When it comes to the *objects* of metaphysical perplexity, then, Price defends neither naturalism, whether restrictive or liberal, nor *non-naturalism* (2013: 169).

On the other hand, when it comes to the methodology of his *functional explanations* of our talk and thought, Price insists on a restrictive naturalism on which the only concepts invoked are those from the natural sciences. His claim is that privileging natural science in this explanatory project doesn't entail privileging it in matters of ontology (2011b: 142; 2011c: 30–31; 2013: 59–60).¹⁵ In short, then, no aspect of Price's position can be described as advocating a looser conception of the natural.

Still, no aspect of his position is *incompatible* with such a conception. All he rules out is a looser conception of *how the functioning of the target vocabularies is to be explained*. Earlier, I argued that Price's philosophical aims are compatible with, and may even require, such a looser conception. The functional explanations may need to use intentional descriptions, and they may be justified by transcendental arguments. To this, I can now add that such a conception should

¹⁴ Redding (2010: 271) suggests that Price is attempting to secure "a 'soft' or liberal naturalism in the culture generally" by "the strategy of adopting a strict or scientific naturalism *within* philosophy." I'll argue that Price is doing neither of these things. Macarthur (2014: 76) recognizes that Price's "subject naturalism is not a form of liberal naturalism."

¹⁵ Macarthur (2014) and Christias (2019) criticize Price by defending that entailment; Macarthur rejects the entailment's conclusion whereas Christias accepts it. I lack space to address their reasons (but see note 4).

still count as naturalistic. After all, instances of speech and thinking wouldn't be characterized in a way that requires any supernatural capacities. In summary, I've answered questions (3), (4) and (5) as follows.

- Price's subject naturalism doesn't *amount* to a liberal naturalism.
- Yet his commitment to a restrictive naturalism concerning the kind of inquiry that's supposed to undercut placement problems doesn't *itself rule out* a liberal naturalism.
- Moreover, there is good reason for a subject naturalist to reject that commitment. This would entail *embracing* a liberal naturalism about inquiry into the thought and talk of human subjects.

Pursuing the subject naturalist project using a more liberal conception of what counts as naturalistically respectable wouldn't, however, amount to a liberal naturalism that regards as natural the *objects* that give rise to placement problems. Subject naturalism gives us no reason to recognize, let alone answer, a substantial question concerning the extent of the "natural realm." While it may remain convenient to speak of "natural facts" as those recognized by the natural sciences, Price's subject naturalism doesn't furnish any way to understand this as a substantive metaphysical thesis rather than a definitional truth.

Though I've argued that Price adopts an excessively restrictive naturalism, my reasons differ from those of critics who take him to hold that we can only understand human beings, or engage in philosophy, using natural-scientific methods. Redding (2010: 272) objects to Price that "the idea that we can *only* learn about ourselves from science is, many will think, ludicrous." Yet it would be wrong to attribute that view to Price: as mentioned earlier, he thinks we can learn normative facts about ourselves by non-scientific means. Likewise, contrary to Macarthur (2014: 73), there's little reason to think Price would insist that "persons qua rational agents are fully understandable, or completely explicable, in scientific terms".¹⁶ And Price's assertion of science's privileged role in the *explanation of the functions of expressions and concepts* needn't amount to asserting that "the scientific framework *does* have a special kind of priority because it is from this framework that one practices philosophy" (Macarthur 2014: 80; cf. Redding 2010: 271–72). Nor does it reveal a "significant bias against acknowledging, *in one's theoretical voice*, the existence of abstract items that are not part of a causal structure studied by science" (Macarthur 2014: 83, my emphasis). There's no reason to attribute to Price the view that the

¹⁶ Admittedly, Price sometimes seems to restrict "explanatory projects" to using the vocabulary of natural science (2010: 179). But perhaps he could say that understanding humans as rational agents isn't an *explanatory* project in the relevant sense.

functional explanations by which metaphysical puzzles can be sidestepped are the sole kind of *philosophy* or *theorizing*. Surely he would agree that his own defenses of (SN1) and (SN2) are examples of philosophical theory.

5. Subject naturalism and McDowell's naturalism of second nature

To bring out what's distinctive in Price's subject naturalism, it helps to compare it with an outlook with which it has much in common, starting with its rejection of (ON) based on an embrace of (SN1). This is McDowell's "naturalism of second nature" (1994: 84–846, 1998b: 194).

Like Price, McDowell denies that the "dispassionate and dehumanized stance for investigation" rightly taken in natural science should be viewed as "conforming to metaphysical insight into the nature of reality taken as such" (1998b: 175). In particular, he agrees that (ON)'s rejection of irreducible facts about moral value can't be validated by a scientific understanding of the features of human nature on which the functioning of moral concepts are grounded. Science needn't show how our judgments of moral value track the facts, on pain of otherwise exposing them as merely "subjective responses to a world that contains nothing valuable" (1998a: 166).

Moreover, McDowell and Price explain this common commitment in similar ways. McDowell puts it in terms of

a relation ... between our concepts and the facts of nature that underlie them. The concepts would not be the same if the facts of (first) nature were different, and the facts help to make it intelligible that the concepts are as they are, but that does not mean that correctness and incorrectness in the application of the concepts can be captured by requirements spelled out at the level of the underlying facts." (1998b: 193)

Price too has long been at pains to distinguish the "external" or "explanatory perspective," from which natural-scientific facts about human beings are invoked in understanding a discursive practice, from the "internal" or "participant's perspective" on that practice from which the truth of its claims can be assessed (1988: 154, 157, 163).

Finally, just as McDowell (1998b: 186) advocates an "expansion of the notion of the world" to accommodate facts that have posed placement problems, Price argues that the "e-world," consisting of the facts "visible only from within science" and its *external* perspective, is

“properly contained in” a more expansive “i-world” consisting of facts visible from the *internal* perspectives of diverse forms of discourse not limited to science (2013: 52-56).¹⁷

Given so much agreement, are there important differences between Price’s subject naturalism and McDowell’s “liberal naturalism” (2009c: 262)? Two related contrasts seem the most significant. First, Price holds that natural-scientific investigations of discourse can *suffice to undermine* the mindset that gives rise to placement problems about moral reality. McDowell disagrees. To be sure, he admits that anthropological “reflections about the benefits of co-operation and social order go some distance towards ... making it intelligible that we inculcate ethical sensibilities in our young” (1998a: 166), and even that scientific investigation of ethical thought can help “alleviate [a] sense of mystery” (1998a: 165).¹⁸ Crucially, though, he doesn’t think it can yield a fully satisfying “diagnosis and exorcism” of the object-naturalist metaphysical picture that renders unreduced ethical facts problematic (1998a: 166). Rather, he insists that undermining (ON) requires conceiving of human subjects from a perspective *other than* that of the natural scientist.

To see why, we need to turn to a second contrast. McDowell accords the status of “natural” to some of the facts of Price’s i-world that fall outside the narrower e-world. “Natural phenomena” in McDowell’s liberal sense include not only phenomena recognized by object naturalists, but also “manifestations of a second nature acquired in acquiring command of a language” (2009b: 247) and a proper upbringing, manifestations such as rational agency and moral virtue. And McDowell makes clear that natural phenomena also include whatever phenomena are “open to view” to one who has acquired such a second nature: “there is nothing against bringing this richer reality under the rubric of nature too” (1998b: 192).

Does it matter whether we call some facts outside Price’s e-world “natural”? In other words, does anything rest on whether we follow McDowell to a *liberal naturalism*, or instead follow Price to an *ontological liberalism* that doesn’t insist on recognizing as natural any phenomena outside the purview of natural science? McDowell’s affirmative answer depends on transcendental considerations. His thinking about naturalism is driven by a desire to

¹⁷ Against the object-naturalist doctrine that “there can be no facts other than those that would figure in a scientific understanding of the world,” McDowell insists that “[w]e have no point of vantage on the question what can be the case, that is, what can be a fact, external to the modes of thought and speech we know our way around in” (1998a: 164). Price agrees: attempts to use any conception of a “totality of all the facts” to delimit factual discourse ignore that “*what facts we take there to be* depends on what kinds of assertoric claims our language equips us to make” (2013: 54).

¹⁸ Price (2015) criticizes McDowell for holding that puzzlement about (e.g.) ethics can’t be addressed by substantive philosophical theorizing. Perhaps the disagreement here concerns only what should count as “substantive philosophy.”

escape from “transcendental anxiety” about “the very possibility of thought’s being directed at the objective world” (2009b: 243). According to McDowell, objective thought requires that states of affairs be open to view to subjects with the appropriately formed second nature. In the case of moral thought, we can only understand its contentfulness if we see ourselves as having our minds opened by our upbringing to moral states of affairs. And this understanding of contentfulness can only be available from the perspective of one who engages in moral thinking. Contrary to Price, then, McDowell denies that we can understand ourselves as moral thinkers from an external perspective that doesn’t simultaneously allow us to lay claim to moral knowledge. Finally, as we saw, it’s the fact that moral states of affairs are open to view by human agents that qualifies them as natural for McDowell (cf. Macarthur 2014: 83-84). Understanding us as the natural beings we are requires invoking, as part of nature, the moral reality we naturally have access to.

I’ll conclude by proposing that there is room for a liberal naturalism that constitutes a middle ground between Price’s subject naturalism and McDowell’s version of liberal naturalism. Earlier, I argued that if the subject naturalist’s perspective doesn’t allow us to understand ourselves as even *deploying contents* in the target discourses, then subject naturalism won’t help with Price’s project of sidestepping placement problems. And Price’s restrictions on subject naturalism do, by his lights, put the contentfulness of our talk outside the perspective of subject-naturalistic inquiry. But is there reason to replace Price’s version of subject naturalism with McDowell’s alternative, on which acquisition of a second nature makes available direct access to “natural” moral facts?

I’m not convinced this is necessary, though addressing McDowell’s views about contentfulness would exceed this chapter’s scope. My suggestion here has been that Price’s project can, and should, be carried out *without* hewing to his austere strictures: subject naturalist explanations of vocabularies should be allowed to traffic in propositional-attitude locutions.¹⁹ Despite this liberalization, the explanations could still be given from a detached, external perspective. They needn’t exhibit statements using the target vocabulary as cases of *truly* stating, let alone knowing, the propositions they state. The result would be a liberal naturalism about human thought and language that seeks to undermine metaphysical puzzles about (e.g.)

¹⁹ Of course, the viability of this middle ground depends on the explanatory autonomy of a perspective on human beings that includes intentional characterizations but not moral ones.

moral facts, but one which declines to join McDowell in extending the realm of the natural to include these moral facts themselves.²⁰

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²⁰ For another discussion of Price’s subject naturalism with attention to liberal naturalism, see Beasley (forthcoming), which appeared after this chapter was submitted.

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