Scientism Without Representationalism: Neo-pragmatist Semantics and Neo-positivist Metaphysics

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It has become something of an orthodoxy that neo-pragmatism is committed to anti-representationalism in semantics and epistemology; the mind is not a ‘mirror of nature’. Though Rorty and Brandom develop this view in somewhat different ways, recently Huw Price (2011; 2013) has developed a powerful version of this anti-representationalism that he uses to criticize metaphysical naturalism, or what he calls ‘object naturalism’. On Price’s diagnosis, we should avoid grounding any metaphysics in a conception of language as essentially or fundamentally representational. Instead we should recognize an ineliminable ‘discursive pluralism’, or that language plays many different functions. This would seem to undermine any route to metaphysics, naturalistic or otherwise. What remains is what he calls ‘subject naturalism’. In other words, we should overcome metaphysics in favor of linguistic anthropology.

However, I shall argue that there is a remarkable convergence between Price’s critique of analytic metaphysics and the scientific metaphysics developed by Ladyman and Ross (2007; 2013). This convergence has both a negative and a positive aspect. On the *negative* side, Ladyman and Ross’s criticism of what they call “neo-scholasticism” in analytic metaphysics neatly aligns with Price’s criticism of semantically-grounded metaphysics, or “object naturalism.” Ladyman and Ross agree with Price that there is no way to ground metaphysics on semantics alone. This does not mean, *contra* Price, that we should abjure metaphysics; it means, rather, that we need to ground metaphysics in the epistemology of scientific *practice*. On the *positive* side, Price’s recent partial rehabilitation of traditional representationalism, with the distinction between ‘i-representations’ and ‘e-representations’, corresponds precisely with Ladyman and Ross’s emphasis on ‘extra-representational real patterns’ as both ontologically basic and as what is reliably tracked by representations.

In order to synthesize Ladyman and Ross with Price, I will first show why it must be e-representations, not i-representations, which reliably track real patterns. I will then situate the resulting account within the history of pragmatism by drawing upon Sellars’s distinction between “S-assertability” and “picturing.” Price has remarked that e-representations inherit the role played by picturing items; I now suggest that real patterns play the role of pictured items. If, as Sellars argues, picturing is the right way of thinking about the nonsemantic sense of truth, of truth as correspondence, then we should say that truth-as-correspondence consists of the e-representations of real patterns. However, I shall conclude with considerations from dynamical systems theory (Thompson 2007) as to why Ladyman and Ross are overly optimistic about the prospects for unification of the sciences; on this basis I conclude that, while scientific metaphysics is compatible with neo-pragmatist semantics and epistemology, it is nevertheless the case that “metaphysics has no positive content beyond the abstract characterization of all that exists as real patterns” (Ladyman and Ross 2013: 122).