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Ramberg's Naturalized Rationalism

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Over the course of his career, Rorty supervised a number of PhD candidates who went on to distinguished academic careers, among them Barry Allen, Robert Brandom, Pablo Quintanilla, and Michael Williams, to name a few. Although Bjørn Ramberg did not complete his doctorate under Rorty's supervision, he nonetheless belongs on this list, and in his contribution to the *Springer Handbook on Rorty*, Ramberg offers an affectionate tribute to his mentor (Ramberg, 2023). I like to think of myself as standing in a similar relation. Although Bjørn was not my PhD supervisor—I was his postdoctoral fellow in Oslo—he has been my mentor in the fullest sense. From him I have learned what academic integrity means and what philosophical acumen and curiosity look like at their best. All this while remaining one of the kindest and most generous human beings I know, always more interested in what others have to say than in asserting his own position. Precisely because he has often refrained from pressing his views, this piece sets out to highlight a distinguished line of Ramberg's thought that, I believe, we should draw on in the future.

Each of those who passed through Rorty's intellectual orbit carried away something different from the encounter. For Ramberg, this took the form of a wholehearted embrace of contingency, coupled with a deep commitment to the dignity of our human projects. However, Rorty was not Bjørn's only main reference point; he shares this central role with Donald Davidson. In fact, Ramberg's first monograph is an introduction into Davidson's philosophy of language (Ramberg, 1989)—a reading that

also underlines a Rortyan line in Davidson.¹ His second ‘monograph’ is a long article from 2004 titled “Naturalizing Idealizations: Pragmatism and the Interpretivist Strategy” (Ramberg, 2004). In this piece, Ramberg sets out to fully synthesize Davidsonian rationalism with Rortyan naturalism. He carves out space for a strong (and, in fact, *ideal*) form of rationality, while showing that such rationalism is fully in the service of a naturalist vision, one that places us, as creatures embedded in our environment, at the very center of philosophical inquiry.

This chapter is a comment on this second work. In what follows, I will underline and elaborate on three main threads in Ramberg’s piece: the consequences of Ramberg’s view for ontology (1), his distinctive conception of rationality (2), and how these first two points account for his definition of philosophy as practice that seeks to investigate not merely the meaning of words, but the meaning of life (3).

All three aspects hang together and can be entered via Ramberg’s distinctive appropriation and elaboration of Davidson’s anomalous monism and Rorty’s eliminative materialism. As Ramberg shows, both anomalous monism and eliminative materialism appear contentious when viewed through the traditional lens of a dualism between language and world, yet become coherent once Rorty’s “vocabulary–vocabulary”² is fully embraced. Once this move has been taken, ontology dissolves into Davidson’s “bland monism” (Ramberg, 2004, 13) and rationality is fully at the service of our creature-needs, where ‘our’ refers to concrete, finite creatures in concrete and determined environments, who come with this anomaly to be able to hold an infinity of potential projects and to change habits. I will say more on each of these notions and topics in what follows.

1. Post-ontological philosophy of language

Ramberg follows Brandom’s characterization of Rorty’s view of language in his essay in *Rorty and His Critics* (Brandom, 2000, Ramberg, 2004, 14). According to Brandom, where Kant and Carnap drew a line between meaning as a priori and belief as a posteriori, Quine’s “Two Dogmas” dissolves this divide, replacing it with a “continuous dimension” (Brandom, 2000, 156), “For we simply do not see sharp differences between

¹ Bjørn once told me that some of the critics back in the days did not appreciate this line of the book. We are speaking of the height of the Davidson ‘hype’ in analytic philosophy. While the book contains many rigorously analytical sections, it is certainly Bjørn’s ability to draw out existential questions within Davidson’s work that truly sets his book apart.

² To use Brandom’s felicitous coinage (Brandom, 2000).

changes of meaning and changes of belief of the sort that model predicts" (Brandom, 2000, 156). Rorty writes that "Quine's suggestion that the difference between a priori and empirical truth is merely that between the relatively difficult to give up and the relatively easy brings in its train the notion that there is no clear distinction to be drawn between questions of meaning and questions of fact" (Rorty, 1982, 5). Famously, Rorty endorses this dismissal of the language-theory-distinction in its most radical form.

However, how are we to speak of language and theory once the distinction between them has been abandoned? As Brandom explains, Rorty's metaphor of "vocabulary" functions as a "suggestion for a successor notion" (Brandom 2000, 157): a notion that subsumes both meaning and belief, language and theory, such that any change in meaning is always also a change in belief, and vice versa (Brandom, 2000, 157). Brandom further helpfully proposes—and Rorty explicitly adopts this suggestion (Rorty, 2000a)—a distinction between what he terms the "vocabulary–vocabulary" and particular vocabularies. The former serves as the successor notion for the highest-order language-theory package, insofar as it "replaces meaning–belief talk" (Brandom, 2000, 177). Particular vocabularies, by contrast, are the specific packages of meanings and beliefs through which we make sense of our lives and of particular practices.

For Brandom, Quine and Rorty go too far in this respect, effectively "overdoing" it (Brandom, 2000, 156), since Brandom continues to regard the distinction between belief and meaning as worth retaining. Ramberg, by contrast, pushes the argument further and insists that the distinction needs to be abandoned altogether, adding Davidson's insistence to let go of the scheme–content distinction to the list. For Ramberg,

Brandom is absolutely right to suggest that for Rorty, a principle virtue of the 'vocabulary–vocabulary' [...] is that it provides a way of designating discursive bodies that completely incorporates Quine's dissolution of any principled distinction between semantical and empirical commitments, as well as Davidson's devastation of the thought that the idea of a conceptual scheme is a philosophically interesting or fruitful one.

Ramberg, 2004, 14

However, where Brandom sees a 'too much,' Ramberg sees a 'yes, please more'. According to Ramberg, what "motivates Rorty's use of the vocabulary is that it stills the ontological urge, the urge that leads us to engage in projects of ontological legitimation," in a way that "precludes any attempt

to restore an ontologically potent form of distinction between what we talk about and how we talk about it" (Ramberg, 2004, 14). As noted above, this distinction is dear to Brandom: he insists that our speech is *about* something and maintains that this aboutness of language must be reflected in our theoretical accounts of what language is and how it functions. Notoriously, Brandom has developed sophisticated strategies for weakening the referential import that comes with the very distinction between 'what we talk about' and 'how we talk about it.' (i.e. Brandom, 1994)

For Ramberg, instead, it is precisely the willingness to let go of the very possibility of a distinction between the "what" and the "how"—the full endorsement of the dismissal of the three dogmas—that makes Rorty philosophically compelling. However, what do our words 'mean', if language can't be sharply distinguished from the world it is 'about'? In my analysis, once one has abandoned the named distinctions—once one has shifted, that is, from dualism to triangulation³—, the focus shifts from a list of inventory to the coordination of action: calling a tree a "tree", then, functions as a shorthand for coordinating our behaviors within a space that materially contains objects we currently address as "trees," but there is nothing about *treeness* in itself that renders the label "tree" more adequate than any alternative. As Rorty puts it, the "antiessentialist has no doubt about trees and stars. But the fact of antecedent existence is of no use in giving sense to the question: 'What are trees and stars apart from their relations to other things—apart from our statements about them?'" (Rorty, 1999, 58)

In Ramberg, this Rortyan intuition is articulated as follows: "the point of any vocabulary can be explicated only relative to the specific goals, needs and interests of its users or potential users" (Ramberg, 2004, 14). I take this to mean something like the following: we developed tree-talk because we have certain needs (e.g. avoiding sunburn, staying warm in winter, securing food) and are engaged in practices (lighting fires, relaxing in the shadow, eating apples, building benches and houses) that are more smoothly coordinated if we possess a linguistic shorthand for addressing trees. Crucially, however, the emergence of the label "tree" cannot be disentangled from these needs, aims, purposes, and desires.⁴

³ See on this my (Huetter-Almerigi, 2020).

⁴ Matthieu Queloz, I suppose, would add "concerns" here (Queloz, 2025). The crucial point is that the Jamesian 'trail of the human serpent' runs through all of our words and concepts.

For Ramberg, “Once the question is allowed whether a vocabulary is *adequate* to the items it invokes” (Ramberg, 2004, 17), we are already headed down the wrong road. Of course, the matter we now call a ‘tree’ existed prior to our talking about it—but did it exist *as* a tree? Certainly not. The subatomic and atomic formations, its appearance as ‘middle sized dry good’, the trunk, the leaves, etc. were all there before we had labels for them. Yet none of this was there *as an entity of a specific kind* until it became apparent that it fulfilled some of our various and changing needs and was entangled with our projects in a way that made it necessary or convenient to introduce a label for it. As our needs and projects change, we will introduce other labels that better smooth our engagement with the world at that time, potentially then *not* addressing the very same number and conformation of atoms.

In my analysis, Ramberg makes an analogous move in his interpretation of Rorty’s and Davidson’s contributions to the mind–body-problem. For Ramberg, the “pragmatist takes the mind-body-problem to be real, but transient.” (2004, 5) This parallels Brandom’s claim that, for Rorty “The cartesian mind is real, but it is a contingent, optional product of our mutable social practices.” (Brandom, 2011, 110) Both Ramberg and Brandom are here invoking Rorty’s early eliminative materialism, which, according to Brandom, was “the first genuinely new answer to the mind–body-problem” (2000, 157) in a long time.

In his papers on the topic (Rorty, 2014c; 2014a), Rorty sets out to defend that the intuitive implausibility of eliminating sensation-talk (i.e., the mental vocabulary) “rests *solely* upon the fact that elimination of the referring use of ‘sensation’ from our language would be in the highest degree impractical” (Rorty, 2014c, 112-3).⁵ As he notes in these early papers, at our current historical moment sensation-talk and the mental vocabulary are so deeply embedded in our practices that eliminating them would require a radical transformation of everyday life. However, nothing about this impracticability depends on the ontological givenness of the mental. This is precisely the point Ramberg takes up and develops.

The specificity of Ramberg’s interpretation is most easily grasped when Brandom is used as a foil. As Brandom notes, in the papers under discussion Rorty embarks on an extended investigation of the relation between vocabularies and ontology—“a relation that the example of eliminative materialism had shown is far too complex to be captured by talk of a ‘the-

⁵ On Rorty’s eliminative materialism see (Ramsey, 2020; Gascoigne, 2021; 2023; Huetter-Almerigi forthcoming).

oretical direction of fit,' according to which how things anyway objectively are has authority over what we should say about it." (Brandom, 2011, 110) Brandom then goes on to present his own reconstruction of Rorty, suggesting that Rorty was "looking at ontology through normative lenses" (Brandom, 2011, 110).

On Brandom's reading, Rorty's articles⁶ on eliminative materialism provide the resources to distinguish between three kinds of entities: subjective, Cartesian kinds over which individuals hold incorrigible authority; social kinds over which communities exercise authority; and objective kinds, which exercise authority over our sayings insofar as speakers are responsible for describing them correctly. As Brandom puts it "The pragmatist takes it that the normative statuses that distinguish the three ontological categories—the structures of authority and responsibility characteristic of each—are themselves things that fall under the category of the social." (Brandom, 2011, 111) The crucial question, then, is what "social" means here. Given how Brandom sets the stage, it is certainly distinguished from 'physical/empirical' and from 'individual'. I will come back to this. For now, it is important to insist that, framed in this way, Brandom's three-sorted ontology and corresponding spheres of inquiry preserve precisely the distinctions that Rorty urges us to abandon.⁷

On Ramberg's reading, by contrast, once we have fully embraced the "vocabulary–vocabulary" approach, that is, once we have dismissed all distinctions stemming from the three dogmas, there is no longer any basis for distinguishing ontological spheres. Vocabularies are entitled by, and persist in virtue of, the purposes they serve, not by or qua the ontological types of objects they contain or the diverse authority-structures we attribute to them. In this respect, Ramberg, along with Rorty, endorses Quine's behaviorism, according to which "Language is a social art. In acquiring it we have to depend entirely on intersubjectively available cues as to what to say and when. Hence there is no justification for collocating lin-

⁶ Brandom includes here Rorty's "Incorrigibility as a Mark of the Mental" (Rorty, 2014b) next to (Rorty, 2014c; 2014a). As I will explain shortly, this inclusion is indicative of the divergence between Brandom's and Ramberg's respective appropriations of the topic.

⁷ To my ear, Brandom's reconstruction bears a closer affinity to Huw Price's subject naturalism than to Rorty's own position. That said, Rorty himself situates his view in the vicinity of Price (Rorty, 2007). I take this to be characteristic of one of Rorty's familiar rhetorical strategies, namely, the forging of philosophical alliances. Admittedly, Rorty's position is closer to Brandom's and Price's than to that of other pragmatists (or non-pragmatists). However, my concern here is with the fine-grained differences among these views. On my reading, Ramberg and Rorty diverge from Price and Brandom precisely in their attempt to articulate a mode of philosophizing wholly purged of the three dogmas.

guistic meanings, unless in terms of men's disposition to respond overtly to *socially* observable stimulations" (Quine, 2013, xix, my emphasis).

Note that the role played by the term "socially" here differs markedly from Brandom's use of "social" discussed above. In Brandom's case, the social sphere deliberates about where normative authority ought to be attributed. In Quine's case—or at least as Ramberg takes up this Quinean/Davidsonian strand—the appeal to "socially observable stimulations" signals indeterminacy. The issue is not where, or to whom, authority should be granted; rather, it concerns the uncertainty of meaning as such, across all possible contexts or domains of inquiry. We can *never* ultimately know what others mean by their words, and the only clues available to us are social cues, which take place in a material environment. If our interactions proceed smoothly after we have guessed what "gavagai" means, then, apparently, the native speaker and we meant something sufficiently similar to act upon or engage with gavagai together. And this, arguably, is all that can reasonably be expected of the category of meaning.

The point advanced by Quine and Ramberg concerns the permanent necessity, and indeed the inescapability, of interpretation with respect to meaning. Brandom's point, by contrast, concerns the attribution of normative authority and the inescapability of the deliberative practices constitutive of the game of giving and asking for reasons. This is a subtle but consequential difference. In the former case, the very category of meaning is at stake; the claim is fundamentally semantic. In the latter, what is at issue is whether our social practices succeed in rendering meaning explicit; the claim is ultimately epistemic. Accordingly, in the first case meaning is indeterminate, whereas in the second it appears to be merely underdetermined—underdetermined in virtue of our fallible human capacities or some other contingent rather than constitutive limitation that impedes the achievement of full determination.

The inescapability of interpretation—the constitutive infinitude of always-possible alternative translations (Quine, 2013, 23)—is what renders meaning indeterminate for Quine and Davidson, a credo that Ramberg ultimately persuaded Rorty to accept, despite Rorty's long-standing reluctance. He did so by showing that the indeterminacy of meaning (and, relatedly, the distinctive status of mental vocabulary) does not rest on the metaphysical difference between the mental and the physical (Ramberg, 2000; Rorty, 2000b). On Ramberg's view, meaning (and, by extension, the mind) is not ontologically special; rather, it is normatively inescapable (Ramberg, 2000, 362). On this account, whenever we encounter meaning,

we must presuppose that someone has attempted to make sense of something and to communicate that sense, whether to themselves or to others. That sense, however, is not something that can be grasped in the manner of a Fregean sense; instead, it is constituted in interaction and shaped by particular needs and interests within specific environments. Accordingly, Ramberg's picture of language is thoroughly contextualist and explicitly Nietzschean, insofar as "it denies that contextually determined meaning and belief refer back to any sort of coherently specifiable totality of ascription at all." (Ramberg, 2004, 31)

For Ramberg, much in line with the classical pragmatists, the notion of meaning is invoked when the coordination of action is at stake—whether with ourselves or with others—namely, when we are deciding what to do, or how to respond to and elaborate upon something that generates friction. As he puts it, "noises are speech only when situated in a general context of agency" (Ramberg, 2004, 9). This view does not exclude that we believe in actual, material, causal interactions with a wide range of objects and phenomena; rather, it removes the need to inquire further into their ontological structure in the sense of their ultimate reality, when this means their Being independently of us. Certainly, contexts of agency involve objects or events with which to deal, but the way we linguistically deal with these objects or events cannot be disentangled from our local purposes and desires, nor can the individuation of objects at large be disentangled from the descriptions we give.

Going back to the interpretation of the mind–body–distinction, the salient point for Ramberg is the following:

The pragmatist is not claiming to solve the mind–body problem, nor to dissolve it. Nor is the problem being diagnosed an illusory one [...]. It is a problem we will come to see as idle once we have developed better ways of conceiving ourselves and our relations to our surroundings, once we have developed, that is, better vocabularies. Ramberg, 2004, 5

This dovetails smoothly with Rorty's position. As Rorty argues in his papers on eliminative materialism, his view rules out any mapping of language-independent objects onto linguistic labels, since he endorses the Sellarsian claim that "there is no criterion for the adequacy of a bit of language to a bit of nonlinguistic awareness" (Rorty, 2014a, 205). This point applies *tout court* to all forms of awareness, including our purported inner

states.⁸ Framed in the terms relevant here, it is the purposes served by a given way of talking that explain its adoption, rather than the ontological deep structure underlying the categories invoked by its central claims.

As Rorty illustrates through his Antipodean thought experiment in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, we can imagine persons who do not employ mentalistic vocabulary at all, and the question of whether “they in fact have minds” or not (Rorty, 1979, 74) is of interest only from within a dualist framework. On such a framework, language is taken to denote entities that exist as fixed items independently of language. Translation is then conceived as the activity of mapping different ways of talking about ‘the same objects,’ holding the ‘objects’ constant while only the words vary across languages. Once this manner of framing the issue is abandoned—because, following Quine and Davidson, we cannot sharply distinguish which aspects of our discourse are linguistic and which are material—Rorty invites us to recognize that sensation-talk, like any other mode of discourse, rests “solely” on its deep entrenchment in our current practices (Rorty, 2014c, 112). Sensations are “real” insofar as they constitute a category we employ to navigate our present forms of life; yet this way of talking is potentially “transient,” since there is nothing about the mind *in itself* in an ontological sense that would make the continued use of the mentalistic vocabulary necessary once we are no longer engaged in practices in which the category of ‘mind’ has any stake.

When Ramberg persuaded Rorty of the distinctive status of mental vocabulary, he did so by appealing precisely to this line of reasoning. He argued that Davidson’s aim in advancing anomalous monism was not to defend the ontological specialness of the mind or of meaning. Rather, Davidson’s point was that the mental vocabulary serves different purposes from the physical vocabulary, and that insofar as we continue to pursue the purposes articulated through mental discourse, we must insist

⁸ Incorrigeability as a ‘mark of the mental’ (what Brandom characterizes as the first ontological realm) is not at issue in the case of meaning because, on my reading, Rorty does not frame the question of meaning in terms of who or what is granted epistemic authority. Rather, he treats it as a question about the conditions under which communication succeeds. On this view, communication is always public, much like Wittgenstein’s beetle example, in which speech remains public even if the respective ‘beetles’ are private, and it is in principle impossible to determine whether the various beetles to which speakers refer when using the term ‘beetle’ are tokens of the same type. For Rorty, establishing identity conditions among referential objects is not required for successful communication; consequently, posing the question in those terms is misguided or even pointless. “It is pointless not just because nobody has any idea how to resolve the issue, but because nothing turns on it.” (Rorty, 1979, 120) See on this also footnote 6 and my (Huetter-Almerigi forthcoming).

on its distinctiveness. Mental discourse is special not because it refers to a separate ontological realm or stands in a unique authority relation, but because it enables us to do things that physical discourse does not—namely, to express law-like relations rather than the strict law relations characteristic of physical explanation (Ramberg, 2000; Davidson 2001). This, in turn, serves “to preserve our sense of ourselves as creatures with purposes that are not exhausted by prediction and control” (Ramberg, 2000, 368). Once the rejection of the three dogmas is embraced, Ramberg argues, “we need not worry about the ontological priority of kinds of description, but only about their relative utility for specific purposes” (Ramberg, 2004, 13). This, in turn, allows us to “retreat all together from ontology, advocating a view of language that simply leaves no room for it.” (Ramberg, 2004, 13).

Therefore, Davidson’s monism is not of the kind that reduces ontological categories to one another. As Ramberg emphasizes, Davidson himself characterizes his position as a “*bland* monism” (Davidson, 2001, 214, my emphasis). According to Ramberg, this should be read as follows: “It is monistic, because it denies the dualist’s thought that there are two ontological kinds; mental and physical. It is bland in a somewhat peculiar sense; it also denies the reductivist or eliminativist thought that there is *one* ontological kind of a sort to which our various ways of talking may stand in questionable relationship.” (Ramberg, 2004, 13)

This, in a nutshell, is what ontology becomes after the dismissal of the three dogmas. The pragmatic naturalist of Ramberg’s stripe is not an eliminativist in the strong sense of reducing categories to one another. Ontological discourse may still be employed, but it functions merely as a way of singling out objects from the “flux of experience” (Quine, 1951, 41), in which we happen, for one reason or another, to take an interest. Naming objects enables us to engage with our environment and with one another, without thereby committing us to any robust metaphysical or scientific claims. In this respect, Ramberg’s naturalism aligns with early Quinean intuitions about abandoning foundational distinctions, yet it is decidedly not of the late-Quinean, scientific variety that holds philosophy should ultimately cede authority to science. On the contrary, it brings into relief the difficulty of reconciling these two strands of Quine’s thought.

2. Idealized Rationality

Given the pragmatic and naturalist framework outlined above, which emphasizes aims, purposes, and our creaturely needs, it may seem surprising

that Ramberg insists on ideal rationality. How can his claim that interpretivism necessarily operates according to what he calls the Rationality Maxim, or "RM" (Ramberg, 2004, 9–10), be reconciled with his commitment to naturalism?

In short, the answer again lies in anomalous monism. If we wish to preserve ways of talking that do not reduce us to mere objects of "prediction and control" (Ramberg, 2000, 368)—and for Ramberg there are compelling reasons to do so—then we require a vocabulary capable of fulfilling that function. To function properly, this vocabulary cannot be contaminated by the physical realm, even though it operates within a fully determined environment, one in which mental events are physical events and in which ideal rationality does not conflict with natural law. Ramberg finds this framework in Davidson.

When articulating his anomalous monism in "Mental Events", Davidson begins with this presupposition: "I start from the assumption that both the causal dependence, and the anomalousness, of mental events are undeniable facts"; the remainder of his paper is devoted to investigating "how this can be" (Davidson, 2001, 207). Davidson situates himself within the Kantian tradition and explicitly aims to make sense of Kant's intuition that "Philosophy [...] cannot give up the idea of nature any more than that of freedom" and "must therefore assume that no true contradiction will be found between freedom and natural necessity" (Kant cited in Davidson, 2001, 207).

Davidson's solution is his well-known anomalous supervenience relation, according to which "mental events are identical with physical events" (Davidson, 2001, 209); however, the predicates we employ in what Ramberg fruitfully terms physical and mental *vocabularies* are not coextensive (Davidson, 2001, 216). Crucially, this distinction between the identity of events and the distinctiveness of the vocabularies we use to describe them should not be understood as relying on a dualism between scheme and content. When Davidson asserts that the description of every event and the laws governing them "are linguistic" (Davidson, 2001, 215), this must be understood in the sense developed above: we cannot sharply separate a purely linguistic, analytic, or scheme component from the objects it purports to pick out.

The mental is not ontologically identical with the physical and we merely employ different vocabularies to describe the same object of phenomenon. Rather, because objects and phenomena cannot be separated from the words we use to describe them, employing different vocabular-

ies picks out different ‘objects’ while still situating them—here the *bland* monism—within the same world, that is, presupposing a single environment governed by strict laws. In this sense, anomalous monism is thoroughly post-ontological—post-ontological without ‘losing the world,’ so to speak.⁹ “Anomalous monism resembles materialism in its claim that all events are physical, but rejects the thesis, usually considered essential to materialism, that mental phenomena can be given purely physical explanations. Anomalous monism shows an ontological bias only in that it allows the possibility that not all events are mental, while insisting that all events are physical.” (Davidson, 2001, 214).

Importantly, this does not render mental events derivative of physical events: mental events are no less real than physical events. What differs—this is what Rorty learned from Ramberg’s interpretation—are the purposes the respective vocabularies serve. Let us dwell for a moment on this notion of reality. ‘Real’ here does not mean the *really real* of the dualist, where reality hinges on a word–object fit and objects come with ontological hardness (meaning that there is a clear ultimate list of objects our universe contains, though, given our cognitive restriction we do not know exactly which they are). Rather, “real” means that the word–object package in question is sufficiently entrenched in our practices to make the category significant for navigating our current way of life. It is “real” in the sense that it is among the categories that currently populate our inner and outer world and which are difficult to substitute precisely because they are deeply entrenched with our current ways of making sense of our world and our lives in it.¹⁰ By contrast with the dualist understanding of reality, according to which reality is how the world is independently of us, the post-three dogmas way of putting things takes our purposes—the questions and projects we are currently pursuing—to be an integral part of what constitutes reality. Post-ontological reality is always reality *for us*. The evaluative criterion for successful theories and terms is whether they enable us to accomplish the purposes we had in mind when we first formulated those words and theories.

What, then, are the purposes served by mental and physical vocabularies? For Davidson, “when events are related as cause and effect, they

⁹ Or, to put the point in Rorty’s terms, the ‘world’ in its dualist sense was ‘well lost’ to us long ago, and there is no reason to continue mourning its disappearance (Rorty, 1982).

¹⁰ In Rorty’s terms, “the world” and all the other objects which currently make up our reality are “those planks in Neurath’s boat which at the moment are not moved around” (Rorty, 1982, 15).

have descriptions that instantiate a law" (Davidson, 2001, 215). The physical vocabulary answers our desire for prediction and control; accordingly, what we seek in it are generalizations and laws, more precisely, *strict* laws of natural necessity, under which individual actions and our particular ways of seeing and approaching things make no difference. The mental vocabulary, by contrast, is defined as the realm of freedom, the domain in which our choices *do* make a difference. For this reason, the instantiation of strict laws cannot be its aim; the mental vocabulary aspires to *law-likeness* (Davidson, 2001, 216–7, 224).

Therefore, to individuate strict laws in the mental realm would be a category mistake, since the realm is defined precisely by the possibility of agency—that is why Ramberg characterizes it as the *vocabulary of agency*. Accordingly, the mental vocabulary is "nomologically irreducible" (Davidson, 2001, 216) to the physical vocabulary and shifting from one to the other amounts to "changing the subject" (Davidson, 2001, 216). It is a change of subject because, even when reference is made to the same event¹¹, the explanations sought are incompatible as the purposes served by the respective vocabularies are not compatible with one another. This is why in Ramberg's version of interpretivism, rationality must be *ideal* rationality, why it cannot be *pure*, and why his version of rationality, as Ramberg puts it, is "*staunchly anti-reductivist*" (Ramberg, 2004, 35, my emphasis). Let's take these points in turn.

Ramberg develops his line of thought with respect to rationality in contrast to Føllesdal's humanism. Føllesdal criticizes interpretivism for relying on an idealized notion of rationality. On Føllesdal's account, interpretivism fails descriptively because it neglects the many cognitive and moral mistakes to which humans are prone every day. Since human beings are not ideal, Føllesdal maintains, any theory of what we are doing when using language must take such imperfections into account. Ramberg, by contrast, argues that interpretivism cannot operate with anything less than the "Rationality Maxime (RM)" of the Ideal Interpreter (IDA) (Ramberg, 2004, 9–10). The reason is that, if interpretivism were to follow Føllesdal's intuition and theoretically accommodate empirical imperfection, it would attempt to bring under natural law—that is, *strict* law in Davidson's sense—something that should remain only *law-like*, thereby committing the category mistake discussed above.

¹¹ Here, "same," as noted above, does not denote a reductive ontological identity relation; rather, it functions within a pragmatist, post-ontological framework.

For Ramberg, what is distinctive of persons or free agents should not be captured by “predicates of empirical law” (Ramberg, 2004, 16). In this sense, the mental vocabulary is prescriptive rather than descriptive. Focusing on “rationality-considerations *is* to deprive those concepts of the particular kind of stability which empirical theorizing requires of its predicates” (Ramberg, 2004, 16, my emphasis). The reason is “its constitutive relation to agency” (Ramberg, 2004, 16), i.e. the possibility of *choosing* how to act and to act differently, which arises precisely from not being governed by strict laws but only by law-likeness. “I suggest that this is a constitutive feature of the vocabulary of agency—i.e., a part of what it is to consider some item an agent. [...] To endorse it is to preclude the possibility that any vocabulary of empirical theory could ever do the job for which we rely on the ascription of intentional states.” (Ramberg, 2004, 43) The central aim of Ramberg’s vocabulary of agency, following Davidson, is to “cut across bodies of empirical, nomological generalizations” (Ramberg, 2004, 16). Once one switches from the physical to the mental vocabulary, one is “not making an empirical claim at all” (Ramberg, 2004, 32). In this sense, “RM,” the Ideal Rationality Maxime, is *constitutive* of his approach (Ramberg, 2004, 10).

However, although ideal rationality in this sense is distinct from empirical law, it is not “pure” insofar as it is not independent of aims and desires:

We might press the point by saying that how rational it is rational for us to be depends on the contingencies of our creature needs and interests and on the features of the environment within which we pursue their satisfaction. Looking for a more felicitous, less paradoxical way to put it, we should say that the idea of pure rationality, conceived as explicable in terms of formal principles, is an idea that for the purposes of rationalizing interpretation of behavior is without categorical force.

Ramberg, 2004, 35

It lacks categorical force because, if it were devoid of interests and purposes, it would likewise be devoid of content. More precisely, what holds for any term holds for “rationality” as well: it cannot be divided into scheme and content. Rationality is therefore always *particular* rationality, shaped by specific aims and directed toward particular objects. Accordingly, rationality in Ramberg’s sense—that is, the vocabulary of

agency as a whole¹²—is always in the service of some concrete agent engaged in a determinate project. “Hence, ideal interpretation settles content only relative to contexts specified in terms of some subset of the various purposes, aims and interests we may have in approaching a subject [...].” (Ramberg, 2004, 26) Ramberg’s IDA (ideal interpretation) is never operating at a *general* level but always “for one purpose or another” (Ramberg, 2004, 27).

Accordingly, defining rationality as such, or in abstraction, is impossible; this is why Ramberg’s position is “staunchly anti-reductivist.” For “there is no fixable, explicable notion of rationality against which we can measure [...] findings [of possible empirically investigated human cognitive capacities and strategies] and draw conclusions about the degree and distribution of rationality” (Ramberg, 2004, 35). Since rationality is always in the service of our projects and arises from our “creature need and interest with the environment in which we function” (Ramberg, 2004, 36), there is no basis for a reductive account of rationality: “nothing can serve as final arbiter in our effort to choose among competing cognitive strategies” (Ramberg, 2004, 37). Importantly, further inquiry into rationality “will not tell us how to acquire fewer false beliefs, or desire better things, or act more wisely” (Ramberg, 2004, 39). Rather, rationality, understood as a constitutive feature of the vocabulary of agency, can be seen as a byproduct of evolved practices developed to cope with problems as they arise.¹³

This stands in marked contrast to the Kantian notion of rationality as reconstructed by Rorty:

inquiry, to be rational, had to be conducted within a permanent framework knowable a priori, a scheme which both restricted possible empirical content and explained what it was rational to do with any empirical content which came along. Once schemes became temporary, the scheme-content-distinction itself was in danger, and with it the Kantian notion of philosophy as made possible by our a priori knowledge of our

¹² For Rorty, this is the reason why Davidson uses “rationality, normativity, intentionality, and agency as if they were roughly co-extensive predicates” (Rorty, 2000b, 371).

¹³ I owe this, along with the concluding thought of this paragraph, to Rob Sinclair, to whom I am immensely grateful—for his insightful engagement with my work and for the entire adventure of putting this volume together. I am also deeply grateful to Federico Penelas, who generously provided comments on an earlier version of this article, and to Henrik Rydenfelt for coordinating the last steps of the publication.

own contribution to inquiry (the schematic, formal element—
e.g. 'language'). Rorty, 1979, 272–3

The citation is drawn from Rorty's discussion of the futility of insisting on meaning-invariance. On his view, conceiving of meaning as fixed was intelligible only within a framework in which the three dogmas remained operative. Once those dogmas are abandoned, not only does our understanding of meaning shift, but, as Ramberg further argues, our conceptions of rationality, and, consequently, of philosophy itself, are transformed as well.

Since, for Ramberg, rationality is inseparable from the vocabulary of agency, which is, by definition, open-ended, it cannot be conceived as a finite object of study. Rationality becomes a topic for philosophy precisely insofar as philosophy is not engaged in the descriptivist business of discovery but in the prescriptivist task of enlarging the scope of our possible projects and expanding what we can take ourselves to be doing, all while remaining a built-in feature grounded in empirically evolved capacities.

3. Naturalized Philosophy

For Ramberg, conceiving of philosophy in this way amounts to naturalizing it. However, naturalism after dualism does not consist in the "naturalization of some domain [...] to bring it under the scope of natural science" (Ramberg, 2004, 39). Rather, for the pragmatic naturalist, "the argument runs in the other direction" (Ramberg, 2004, 41).

The pragmatic naturalist [...] treats the gap itself, that which transforms reduction into a philosophical project, as a symptom of dysfunction in our philosophical vocabulary. Pragmatic naturalism does not aim at conceptual reduction, but at a transformation of those conceptual structures we rely on to sustain our sense of a metaphysical gap between those items we catch in our vocabulary of thought and agency, and those items we describe in our vocabularies of causal regularities.

Ramberg, 2004, 43

Philosophy, then, becomes the activity of investigating meaning, understood as imbued with an existential dimension. "[W]hat we folk (psychologists) care about, typically, is not how people move various parts

of their bodies, but what it is that we do by so moving them" (Ramberg, 2004, 42). Philosophy, in this sense, investigates how our activities are to be described and what gives them 'sense.' As noted in §1, 'sense' is not something that can be grasped once and for all; rather, it is enacted in interaction with others within a shared environment. It is inseparable from our interests, and the articulation and reshaping of the interests that animate our projects constitute both a part of the philosophical process and one of its central aims.

Therefore, Ramberg's project is decidedly hermeneutic (Ramberg, 2004, 15). "We may, I suppose, still think of philosophical reflection as an attempt to illuminate what there is" (Ramberg, 2004, 13), but "where agents are concerned, there is, to paraphrase Heidegger, always more being than theory" (Ramberg, 2004, 43). 'Meaning' is never a purely semantic category, at least when 'semantic' excludes the existential register. Our aims and interests, grounded in our creaturely needs, both constitute what meaning is and motivate what we do in the ideally rational enterprise of philosophy.

Because we illuminate our vocabularies by giving explicit expression to the interest we take them to serve, philosophy itself, even at its most abstract, becomes wedded to the vocabulary of action. Any attempt to reflect upon the nature of things of some kind brings us to the question why we (should) *care about that kind of thing*, and this question will immediately throw us back into the vocabulary of agency. Ramberg, 2004, 44

Philosophy, then, is not primarily in the business of explaining what we do, but of elucidating why we do the things we do. Within the context of post-ontological ontology, philosophical reflection becomes "a matter of providing characterizations of the interests we have in referring to items of this or that sort" (Ramberg, 2004, 13). Description, therefore, cannot be divorced from ethics, nor from reflection on what we aim to do with our lives. As Ramberg put it:

[w]hat pragmatic naturalists with one hand take away from philosophy—the idea of ontology (whether as metaphysics or natural science) as a substantive inquiry into the legitimacy of vocabularies—they return with the other; we are left with a conception of philosophy as aiding our practical and ethical

deliberations, our experimentations, by imaginatively providing alternatives to what begins to look like conceptual hang-ups and fixed ideas ('intuitions'), and depicting altered self-conceptions for us to try out. On this view, the job of a philosopher is to make vivid how our practices might change if we were to describe things—particularly human beings—in altered vocabularies, or if we extend particular vocabularies into new domains.

Ramberg, 2004, 47

In the best Rortyan manner, redescription is the task of philosophy for Ramberg, with Davidsonian ideal rationality serving as its guiding force: "I have proposed a view of philosophy that emphasizes the distinctiveness of the vocabulary of intentional states, of agency, and which ties philosophy as an enterprise to that distinctiveness" (Ramberg, 2004, 45). Philosophy, in this sense, is not concerned with uncovering metaphysical truths or fixed ontologies, but with expanding the imaginative and practical horizons of human thought and action.

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