

Reply to Bjørn Ramberg

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Bjørn Ramberg asks his readers to, ‘try to be guided, as you construe me, by what is my central concern. And please don’t impose on my words your semantic ready-mades, your fast-thoughts, your blocking responses’ (p. 141). An excellent piece of advice, and one which I had no trouble following, given that I could readily see his central concern, and completely agreed (no qualifications) with his interpretation of my book. Had the latter not been the case, the advice would have been harder to follow; but more valuable. For when reading something in philosophy with which you are instinctively inclined to disagree, especially when your own views are being targeted, there is little point responding unless you try to see where the other is coming from; their central concern, motivating them to look for gaps and weaknesses. There is little point, because if you just throw out your ‘blocking responses’, you will neither learn from the encounter, nor have much chance of persuading your interlocutor; or others with the same kind of central concern. We all have our philosophical instincts, but unless we make the effort to empathise with others, our own will become inflexible, making it harder to reassure ourselves they are rational. Philosophy of mind provides my favourite example, where some philosophers today think their opponents are mad – well, perhaps they do not really think that, but they do like to suggest that it is the only reasonable conclusion to draw. This is frustration, and hampers the prospects for constructive engagement. They are probably right that the ‘mad’ philosophers will not be persuaded; neither will they. But others less entrenched in the debate might have been, if they had looked for the kind of central concern which might lead someone to write mad-sounding things, thinking them sensible.

Ramberg’s central concern in his paper, I think, is to discover the central concern of my book. He sees all of these interlocking themes, concerning nihilism, transcendence, consciousness, and the autonomy of philosophy, and he wonders what is driving them. More specifically, he wonders if it is a central concern which he himself is on-board with; one concerning intellectual freedom. Basically, he

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wonders if we have the same kind of central concern. I think we do.

To give Ramberg's advice a twist, however, I will start trying to illuminate this matter by throwing out just one of my 'semantic ready-mades' – the only one that even tempted me when I read his paper. I do not equate science with objective thought. When I instinctively make sense of the room around me in terms of physical objects in spatial relationships to each other, I am employing objective thought; but there is nothing remotely scientific about it. It is a natural way of thinking. Science is a development of that natural way of thinking; the best we have or are ever liable to get. Quine liked to say that science is a development of common sense, and to this extent, he was right. But we have another way of thinking, which arises equally naturally, albeit only explicitly within a more limited set of circumstances, and which has been a principle focus of all the great philosophical traditions. This is subjective thought. When we cannot readily think of what we are aware of as something in the physical world, as when we feel a sudden rush of enthusiasm, or see a blind spot of shimmering mercury while suffering from a migraine, then we think of it as experience. Just as science is our most sophisticated extension of objective thought, philosophy is our most sophisticated extension of subjective thought; for it is only with the latter, in conjunction with the former, that we can try to make sense of distinctively human concerns such as freedom.

Now in *Meaningless*, I argued that subjective thought is parasitic upon objective thought. Many philosophers within what I think of as the broadly idealist tradition, past and present, have instead seen subjective thought as a kind of rival to objective thought, or else as something which shows an inadequacy in it; as if objective thinking needed to either catch up or fail. I share what I think is their central concern, these days at least, namely with the imperialistic ambitions of the scientific extension of objective thought, represented within academic philosophy under the heading 'physicalism' – or 'naturalism', when the emphasis is on epistemology rather than metaphysics. But I think an overly trusting attitude to subjective thought provides a weak basis for trying to do something positive about that concern. For as soon as you try to say something on its basis, the substance slips away, leaving you with only threadbare appeals to ineffability and a desire to say inarticulate things like, 'you know what I mean ... *that* particular feeling of pain, or the particular blueness, not of the sky, but of your experience.'

The substance returns when you realise that whenever you try to think about things both substantively and subjectively, you must lean on objective thought;

but that where objective thought really does leave you short is over the fact that there is anything to think about at all. For we each think from an experiential, subjective perspective; reality appears to us from such perspectives and we think about it, even if what we think casts doubt on the notion of ‘subjective perspective’, exactly because it leans on objective thought. In metaphysics, subjective thinking points you in the right direction, then leaves you cold. But once you arrive, there is plenty to think about; in the company of all those who have been there before and are there now. For it was from this kind of subjective perspective that people formed the idea that they were free; that action was required of them, and so it was their responsibility to decide and act. It was from this perspective that people wondered if their lives had meaning. And it is from this perspective that, when we try to make sense of matters like these, we exercise our intellectual freedom to think philosophically.

Thus the great significance of subjective thought, it seems to me, is that it brings us to the inside of human life, where philosophical questions arise. We have no choice but to think that way when circumstances make subjective thinking the only natural kind; but philosophers have chosen to develop it, realising that a distinctive set of the questions that we naturally ask depends on it. Physicalism, however, wants to close this kind of thinking off, with a metaphysical interpretation of the scientific extension of objective thinking. If we had only ever thought objectively, somehow oblivious to our subjective perspectives, then it is hard to see how we would have ever thought of the traditional problems of philosophy. If I thought of myself and others equally objectively, then why would I – how *could* I, even – come to think of these objects as free? Because they do unpredictable things, perhaps? (It would be hard to think this in your own case.) But then the weather would seem just as ‘free’ as people do. The problem would never have arisen.

And that is very much the point of physicalism, just as it was the point of its predecessors in the analytic philosophy movement, namely ideal language philosophy, ordinary language philosophy and logical positivism; in each case, it was the *appearance* of genuine philosophical problems that was to be removed through analysis. For if we look at the world entirely objectively, as physicalists suggest, then there are no philosophical problems; or, if you prefer, the intellectual relics we call ‘philosophical problems’ are revealed to be the products of natural illusion; relics such as thinking you are free, conscious, and currently at a certain stage of your life. You could call the problem of reconciling quantum mechanics

with relativity theory a philosophical problem, if you like, but it looks for all the world like a scientific problem, and so unless you are prepared to bring in illusionary intuitions based on our apparently subjective perspectives – ordinary conceptions of time, for instance – then your choice of label is going to look pretty dubious. The irony is that physicalism itself, as a metaphysical thesis about the fundamental nature of reality, only makes sense in light of subjective perspectives; for if the ‘fundamentality’ of the physical particles is not to be contrasted with the non-fundamental status of minds, as in the traditional opposition between realism and idealism, then it no longer means anything. But again this is very much the point of physicalism – not that I think many of its advocates realise – namely to take us beyond the urge to philosophically scrutinise the scientific picture, to a place where we just trust it. Physicalism aims to lose its own metaphysical status and hence itself; it is a bridging device.

Develop the natural objective and subjective ways we have of thinking about the world, then, and the former gets you science while the latter gets you philosophy; or at least, that is how it turned out in our world. Subjective thought does not negate objective thought, but rather contextualises it. But try to make a philosophy out of science, and philosophy is negated. For if we resolve to think only like a scientist at work, subjective thought must be intellectually disavowed; we must now think only of what the objective picture tells us, and refuse to contextualise it within our own individual perspectives. The contextualisation provided by subjective thought is vitally important, however; it is not something we want to lose, and so physicalism must be resisted with maximum effort. For it is within our individual perspectives that the fundamental reality – the only one there is – is there to be reflected upon by *everyone*; disavow those perspectives and it becomes an esoteric topic that only scientists can contemplate by means of their allegedly beautiful mathematical theories. But natural human questions about the meaning of life, or why there is something rather than nothing, are as real as they seem to be. Our lives themselves, as we live them from our insider perspectives, are as real as they seem to be; not just an illusionary take on something radically unfamiliar. Philosophy interprets and elucidates; it should not seek to obliterate. When it does, in the shape of physicalism, then its days are numbered; one way or the other.

The contextualisation subjective thought provided me with is that the scientific development of objective thought provides a model of how things appear within human consciousness, not the final story about how reality is, or

even a marker on the road to that final story. To think otherwise, is to try to make consciousness disappear, rather than to try to impose some human order upon it with objective thought. The recognition of the transcendence of reality is the most final story we can have, for when we recognise the limits of both subjective and objective thinking – for the former, bare pointing, and for the latter, endlessly detailed modelling of the kind of things which could cause what we point to, when what we point to is conceived along the original lines of the model – then we are able to rationally assure ourselves we should not try to go further. But it does not provide closure, only an invitation to think through our place within a reality which always outstrips our best descriptive efforts, as part of an ongoing historical conversation. Ramberg asks whether, ‘finitude and transcendence are a package deal, so that emphasizing one may be a way to illuminate the other’ (p. 140). Yes, exactly.

Now Ramberg pays special attention to my claim that nihilism’s consequences ‘outside of philosophy’ are all negative (p. 145). So did two other contributors to this symposium, Llanera and Malachowski, and it was the focus of one of the reviews of my book, by Hawkins, which I discuss in the Introduction. Only Ramberg, however, considers the possibility that the consequences *inside* philosophy might be both positive and practical; this is where his paper gets particularly interesting and perceptive, I think. If you think of philosophy as just an academic speciality, then the notion of it having practical consequences might make you think of its practitioners directly applying themselves to practical problems in the world today; this is the ideal of pragmatist philosophy. But my emphasis on the naturalness of philosophical questions, and the fact that I led with one of the most natural philosophical of all, that of the meaning of life, ought to have indicated that I do not.

Ramberg wonders if, ‘perhaps what we do in philosophy may permeate conscious life in such a way that more practical applications of intellect are also shaped by it, and not just in an entirely contingent manner’ (p. 146). That is how I think philosophy exerts a practical influence; the ‘practical applications of intellect’ are not made by professional philosophers, but by people with more practical intellects, who have absorbed the prevailing philosophical atmosphere. That atmosphere at the moment, at least in the rich, secular world which drives social change, is physicalist. We see the effect as people, now used to casually relating what their brains make them do, live with only occasional, absent-minded curiosity about how the next technological breakthrough will radically transform

their lives; hopefully in a manner which will not put them out of a job. The philosophy which drives this is invisible, just as it wants to be: it wants us to see only science. Natural philosophical questions are thereby discouraged. But if they were rather developed, through a change of atmosphere, then we might start to see very different practical applications of intellect.

As Ramberg very neatly puts it, nihilism tells us we cannot have teleological closure, and transcendence tells us we cannot have descriptive closure (p. 145). And yet religions offer us teleological closure and physicalist philosophy offers us descriptive closure; both hoping very much to close each other down through our acceptance of their respective offers. If we turn them both down, however, and reside somewhere in the middle, with nihilism and transcendence, then we may start thinking a little more. For teleological closure is not something we need to think through; only accept and live. And neither is descriptive closure; to get this, we just need to let the scientists do the thinking for us. Those offering closure have no ambition to invigorate public intellectual life by promoting intellectual freedom. But philosophy always should. Its traditional ambition is not closure, but openness.

Ramberg finds an anti-authoritarian strand to my thinking which he also finds in Rorty. That may well be what attracted me to Rorty in the first place, since I liked the fact that he focused on questions concerning the nature of philosophy: metaphilosophy. This is certainly an anti-authoritarian preoccupation, liable to hold special appeal only to those who are not satisfied to just get on with what everyone else is doing at the moment, because they want to question whether everyone else is doing the right kind of thing, and to do something different if they are not. Rorty certainly wanted to do something different; the figures he felt most enthusiasm for within the analytic philosophy happening around him, most notably Quine, Sellars and Davidson, were those he was able to read, however forcibly, as undermining analytic philosophy. What he really wanted to do, as Ramberg says, was to place philosophy in the service of democratic freedom. To this effect, he ‘noted the historical transformations of originally liberating notions like reason, truth, method, representation, and objectivity into scaffoldings for hierarchies and authority structures, and called them out’ (p. 148).

The problem with his efforts, according to the analysis I share with Ramberg, is that once he had divested from philosophy any source of distinctiveness, he had no leg to stand on. People listened alright, and they still do; because he became a famous intellectual off the back of philosophy. But given his overall message, his

support of democratic freedom would have had more intellectual credibility if he had not been a philosopher; Chomsky does better because he has scientific credentials. Ramberg memorably dubs this predicament, ‘the pragmatic collapse of philosophy’ (p. 149). It is an honest predicament if you are a philosophy professor who buys all that anti-philosophy stuff but who still wants to make a positive difference in the world; and Rorty was nothing if not honest. It is just a shame he did buy it. *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* had a formative influence on me. It seems to take us on a journey to a new and rosier future for philosophy, which is what I instinctively wanted. But this is not the destination, as you discover in the final chapter. He had a good title, ‘Philosophy without Mirrors’, but nothing to back it up; it turns out not to be philosophy at all, but rather ‘kibitzing’ between other academic disciplines, the legitimate ones, to keep them free of philosophy (Rorty 1979: 393). And to add insult to injury, Rorty tells us to embrace physicalism as a kind of Kantian moral choice in that chapter (ibid.: 382-389); as if to turn away from philosophy and towards science were to do the right thing.

Despite himself, Rorty did have very strong philosophical views: he held that there is no objective truth and that everything can be endlessly redescribed. These are the philosophical expressions of anti-authoritarianism which he weaved his messages about democratic freedom around. The problem is that they are radically implausible, and the main reason for this, within our current intellectual climate, is the authority science enjoys; which Rorty supported by endorsing physicalism. Of course, his own, idiosyncratic brand of physicalism was supposed to be a non-metaphysical one, compatible with the endless redescription thesis – but note well his instincts: if the scientific description has potential to serve authoritarian aims, then it must be *philosophy’s* fault. Not that he was altogether wrong, because metaphysical (normal) physicalism is indeed a philosophy. But it is only *one* kind of philosophy. And the big picture Rorty missed is that if philosophy fades from our horizons, as he wanted, then the scientific description will not be viewed as simply one description among others, but rather as the one which offers closure, thereby providing authority to those who yield it. You cannot redescribe scientific theories; when postmodernists try, telling us that $E=Mc^2$ is a ‘sexed equation’, to take one memorable example, the scientists just have a laugh (see Sokal and Bricmont 1999). But philosophy can credibly contextualise the scientific description as a whole, by placing it within the context of the experiential perspectives from which we live our lives; with our lives on its side, nothing could

be more credible. It cannot do this, however, while it is so wracked with self-doubt that it turns on its traditional resources in an effort to discredit the natural philosophical questions which people instinctively raise; questions those resources were built up to service.

Have I now revealed my central concern in *Meaningless*? The emphasis I have been placing on physicalism more squarely relates to what started to become my central concern immediately after I finished that book; my central concern now. At the time, I was more concerned to present the metaphysic which had resulted from the process of freeing myself from physicalism; and to show the positive light in which it places philosophy, against a deafening background of anti-philosophy. You might say that I was then more concerned with exercising my own intellectual freedom, and have since looked outwards, seeing the physicalism which once had an irrational hold over me, as the contemporary foundation of anti-philosophy; and anti-philosophy not as a challenge to my personal loyalties, but rather as a concrete problem for the world within our present circumstances. Still, the connection is plain enough, so when I look back over Ramberg's essay, especially in light of his final sentence, I wonder if he has been better able to see my central concern than I was at the time.

When we think of reality as meaningless and transcendent, thereby interrupting our more familiar interpretations of it, we are invited to think; if only to kick back against the initial thought. When critics of philosophy tell you it never makes progress, they reveal their desire for closure. Sure, we do close off some problems by solving them, or by realising they were confused. But the real progress occurs with the ones worth sticking with; both personally and inter-generationally. Think of philosophy on the model of science and it looks terrible. Think of science on the model of philosophy and it looks terrible too.

References

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