Natural Agents: A Transcendental Argument for Pragmatic Naturalism

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I distinguish between two phases of Rorty’s naturalism: “non-reductive physicalism” (NRP) and “pragmatic naturalism” (PN). NRP holds that the vocabulary of mental states is irreducible that of physical states, but this irreducibility does not distinguish the mental from other irreducible vocabularies. PN differs by explicitly accepting a naturalistic argument for the transcendental status of the vocabulary of agency. Though I present some reasons for preferring PN over NRP, PN depends on whether ‘normativity’ can be ‘naturalized’.

1. Introduction

A substantial portion of 20th and 21st century Anglophone philosophy concerns the problem of naturalism. By this I mean the philosophical motivations for adopting naturalism, the status and varieties of naturalism, and the debates between naturalists and their critics. The resulting philosophical situation has been described as “the real battle going on today, between reductive naturalism and normatively oriented accounts of rational practice” (Moyar 2008, 141). A resolution of this “battle” requires an inquiry into the prospects for a stable and attractive via media between these extremes. Let us say, then, that a candidate for a via media between reductive naturalism and norm-focused account of the social practices of rational agents is a candidate for “non-reductive naturalism.”

On the face of it, non-reductive naturalism promises us to eat our cake and have it afterwards. Since it is non-reductionist, it could avoid the problems that accompany reductive or eliminative naturalism. Yet as a version of naturalism, it avoids the dogmatic temptations of a first philosophy which stands apart from science, justifies science, and prescribes its cultural vocation. “Non-reductive naturalism” is used here as an umbrella term for a variety of positions that attempt to preserve metaphilosophical naturalism without giving in to reductionism or scientism. My aim here is to examine the strengths and weaknesses of a particular strategy for arriving at non-reductive naturalism – what might be called “the Davidson-Rorty strategy.”
Rorty, as is well appreciated, enthusiastically endorses historicism with respect to philosophical problems and theories. His historicist emphasis on the invention of increasingly more sophisticated forms of self-understanding is supposed to work in tandem with a naturalist emphasis on human beings as slightly more complicated animals. The question arises therefore as to how we are supposed to understand the relation between naturalism and historicism. In what follows I will reconstruct Rorty’s naturalism through his engagement with Donald Davidson. This engagement falls into two stages: “non-reductive physicalism” and “pragmatic naturalism.” Pragmatic naturalism differs by accepting the importance of transcendental argument for understanding our ascriptions of intentional states, or by what Ramberg (2004) calls “the vocabulary of agency.”

I begin with a reconstruction of “non-reductive physicalism” (section 2), with emphasis on how Rorty uses anomalous monism in order to deny (pace Davidson) that the vocabulary of intentional states has any privileged status over other descriptions of natural events, objects, and relations. I then turn to more recent work by Davidson and by Bjørn Ramberg to show how the distinctive status of the vocabulary of agency can be secured through transcendental argument, provided that the argument is understood as naturalistic and anti-foundational (section 3). I argue that Rorty should be willing to endorse transcendental arguments as formulated in this way because they do not function as descriptive vocabularies. Rather, they are normative; they reveal basic structures of our self-understanding as agents. I argue that PN, understood this way, has distinct advantages over NRP.

I conclude that Rortyian pragmatic naturalism is a type of naturalism insofar as it begins with the basically Wittgensteinian point that there is a plurality of discursive practices within the form of life of a certain kind of animal (section 4). Pragmatic naturalism, so understood, naturalizes the manifest image without reducing it to, or translating it into, the scientific image. We thus acknowledge the centrality to our self-understanding of ourselves as a certain kind of animal rather than as a system of particles (or whatever the ultimate constituents of reality turn out to be, if quantum mechanics is replaced by some other theory).

2. Non-reductive Physicalism

What Rorty calls “non-reductive physicalism” (or “antireductionist naturalism”) goes through slightly different formulations throughout the 1990s. This position is comprised of two distinct claims. The first claim is that there are no radical discontinuities between humans and the rest of nature. Rorty presents this claim in a number of different ways, but it emerges clearly through the following examples: