Non-reductive naturalism and the vocabulary of agency

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ABSTRACT

Carl Sachs has recently provided a helpful discussion of Richard Rorty's thinking concerning the question of naturalism, distinguishing between two positions he terms 'non-reductive physicalism' and 'pragmatic naturalism' (Sachs 2009). The central difference between them is that the latter but not the former sees what Sachs, following Bjørn Ramberg, calls *the vocabulary of agency* as having a transcendental role in relation to other vocabularies. In this paper, I will be concerned to raise some doubts about pragmatic naturalism and the reasons Sachs gives for preferring it to non-reductive physicalism, and about whether Rorty or more generally a pragmatist naturalist should subscribe to the latter rather than the former.

Introduction

In a recent paper Carl Sachs provides a helpful discussion of Richard Rorty's thinking concerning the question of naturalism (Sachs 2009). He distinguishes between two positions that he terms 'non-reductive physicalism' and 'pragmatic naturalism', claiming that Rorty has moved, under pressure from critical remarks by Bjørn Ramberg (2000), from an endorsement of the first to an endorsement of the second. Moreover, the latter is the more cogent position, according to Sachs. The central difference between non-reductive physicalism and pragmatic naturalism is that the latter but not the former sees what Sachs, following Ramberg, calls *the vocabulary of agency* as having a privileged, transcendental role in relation to other vocabularies, in particular, all descriptive vocabularies, including those of the sciences. In this paper, I will be concerned to raise some doubts about pragmatic naturalism and the reasons Sachs gives for preferring it to non-reductive physicalism; and, further, about whether Rorty or more generally a pragmatist who also wants to be a naturalist really should or needs to subscribe to pragmatic naturalism rather than non-reductive physicalism.

Both non-reductive physicalism (NRP henceforth) and pragmatic naturalism (PN henceforth) reject a reductive naturalist position, according to which a certain scientific vocabulary – often taken to be that of completed physics – provides us with a full, basic account of what is true, or what the 'facts' are. All other vocabularies have to be 'made sense' of in terms of this basis, i.e. they have reduce to it (at least in principle), or else be seen as in some way or other making less than literally true claims. This is something that Rorty has steadfastly opposed through different avenues of thought. One central one (developed in 'Non-reductive naturalism' in Rorty 1991) has been the Davidsonean line that while there may be just one reality 'out there' consisting of

physical particles in motion (or whatever the physicists tell us) there is an indefinite number of mutually incommensurable ways of describing that reality, none of which can non-question-beggingly lay claim to providing *the one true* description of it. The position is (semantically) non-reductive but also, apparently, naturalistic in that it allows all events *can* be described in microphysical terms. We might call it 'ontological physicalism'. Rorty's naturalism goes however further than this ontological thesis in that he also claims there are no radical discontinuities between non-human and human cognitive activity, and that Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection has provided us with a framework for understanding our place in nature alongside that of other organisms (see 'Inquiry as recontextualization: An anti-dualist account of interpretation' in Rorty 1991). Sachs calls this the *continuity thesis*. Both NRP and PN seek to uphold both these features of Rorty's naturalism.

NRP can be said to stop there, but PN adds a further twist. Whilst both NPN and PN are steadfastly anti-reductive about different vocabularies, they diverge on the further question of whether there is anything *especially* special about that mode of understanding and explaining of ours which we apply to *each others'* activities, involving the attribution of beliefs, desires and verbal meanings to explain action: *the vocabulary of agency* (Ramberg 2000). The vocabulary of agency can be equated with a certain conception of what others have called *folk* or *common sense psychology*. For Davidson, common sense psychological explanations answer to constitutive ideals that are quite different from those of natural science, rendering any hope of reduction of the former to the latter forlorn: this is the thesis of the *anomalism of the mental* (see Davidson's 'Mental events', and other essays collected in his 1980). Initially this thesis operated with a notion of scientific explanation that involved strict laws, but in later work Davidson stressed that psychological explanations are distinctive compared to those of any natural science, 'exact' or otherwise, implying that there is a more significant fault-line between the vocabulary of agency and all scientific vocabularies, on the one hand, than between any two vocabularies within the latter class, on the other (Davidson 1987). This last claim is one that Rorty took exception to in his days of NRP (see Rorty 1972; 1979, 207–209; 1998). For the earlier Rorty, Davidson's anomalism rests just on the idea that mental ascriptions are, to put it in Quinean terms, *indeterminate* – that is, underdetermined relative to physical descriptions of the same 'portions of reality'. However, this is the case for all non-physical descriptions, so there ends up being no principled difference between the vocabularies of agency, on the one hand, and those of say biology, geology or paleontology, on the other, relative to that of physics. Davidson has responded to this objection (2001, 217 and following pages), and Ramberg's paper is aimed at taking Rorty to task for not fully appreciating Davidson's position. Rorty subsequently recanted, accepting the main lines of Ramberg's critique (Rorty 2000). Hence Rorty, along with Davidson and Ramberg, came to accept PN, which holds that the vocabulary of agency does have a privileged, transcendental status relative to all other vocabularies. We shall be concerned with some of the arguments in these exchanges in the sequel; suffice it to say for the moment that Sachs sees Davidson's and Ramberg's arguments as cogent and as decisively establishing the superiority of PN over NRP.

As noted, I will be concerned to raise some doubts about PN and the reasons Sachs gives for preferring it to NRP, and about whether Rorty himself should adopt this line. In raising these doubts my aim is, further, to adduce some positive reasons for maintaining a different form of non-reductive naturalism, one that is not exactly NRP, but still something closer to it than to PN.[1] In section 1 I outline the Davidson-Ramberg argument (or arguments) for the transcendental priority of the vocabulary of agency (VA henceforth). I also indicate how, according to Sachs, this yields the position of PN, and how PN is, in spite of its transcendental elements, supposed to be compatible with naturalism. In section 2, I argue that Sachs' arguments for the compatibility of PN with naturalism are unconvincing, on both epistemological and 'metaphysical' (that is – perhaps more appropriately for a pragmatist – *substantive*) grounds. In section 3 I raise doubts about the argument for the alleged transcendental priority of VA itself, as based on Davidson's notion of 'triangulation'; the section also reveals inadequacies in the letter though not the spirit of Rorty's basic naturalistic position, in relation to the continuity thesis and the place of language. Finally in section 4 I suggest a different way a pragmatist at least close to Rorty might seek to accommodate the centrality of VA to our explanatory practices, and, more generally, how a pragmatist, non-reductive naturalist position would shape up on the line developed throughout the paper.

1.

Is the vocabulary of folk psychology – of agency – importantly different from all other explanatory vocabularies? If so, how and why? These questions have been a concern of Davidson and of commentary on his work since 'Mental events', published in 1971. One central idea in this paper and developed in later work (e.g. Davidson 1987) is that explanations of behaviour in terms of beliefs and desires are of a different nature from explanations of things like electrons accelerating, stones falling or even hearts beating. Thus a main theme of Davidson' earlier work was that there are no laws of common sense, intentional psychology, at least of a suitably strict and informative kind. However, this suggestion met with the criticism that there is a similar dearth of such laws in many other explanatory fields – not least many special sciences, such as biology and geology – and that this thereby rules out reduction in these fields too. This leaves us very much where Rorty in Sachs' narrative stands in his earlier views, namely, wondering how there can be something *especially* special about the vocabulary of VA. (See Knowles 2002 for a fuller presentation and discussion of this dialectic.)

Sachs, following Ramberg, sees the answer to Rorty's question as emerging out of Davidson's theory of triangulation (for relevant papers see his 2001, parts II and III). According to this, there is a necessary interdependence of knowledge of the external world, knowledge of one's own mind and knowledge of the minds of others: none makes any sense without the other two. The line of thought is something like the following. The very possibility of knowing one's own mind – knowing that one is thinking or saying *that flower is blue,* say – depends on one grasping the possibility of objective error, for it is only in so doing that one understands what beliefs, and hence what one is apprehending, are at all. But objective error is only possible in turn if there are others with which to compare oneself, for without others there is no saying what the

objective causes of one's beliefs are, and hence what one might be wrong about – whether one is thinking about flowers or retinal stimulations, say. Thus to be a thinker one must interpret and be interpretable (know the minds of others). But thereby also is one ensured an objective reference for most of one's beliefs (knowledge of the external world), for the content of a belief is given by what causes it. Further, and to complete the circle, a presumption of correctness about one's own belief contents is also ensured (knowledge of one's one mind), for without this presumption the idea of intersubjective interpretation would make no sense.

How does this connect to the distinctiveness of VA? VA is simply the vocabulary of intersubjectivity, of understanding each other in terms of attributions of beliefs, desires, intentions and so on. But by triangulation, it follows that understanding anything – putting forward truth evaluable claims – requires us to be in contact with and understand other people in the way outlined above. Hence VA as the vocabulary of triangulation is a transcendental precondition of all other vocabularies. VA is not, however, a descriptive vocabulary, a view which would, allegedly, throw us back into some kind of metaphysical foundationalism akin to physicalism, but rather a special kind of normative vocabulary: it does not describe how we generally tend to do things, but how we rationally *should* (see Ramberg 2000, 361–362). Yet it also does this in a very special and fundamental way: though not descriptive of what we do, neither can we choose to distance ourselves from its requirements as we can other, less fundamental norms, such as those of etiquette, or (perhaps) ethics (*ibid.*, 362).

According to Sachs this provides us with a transcendental argument for the priority of VA. But importantly, it is also one that is compatible with naturalism. The reasons he gives for saying this are as follows:

> [T]riangulation is not a *foundational* transcendental argument. Though triangulation is a necessary condition for the possibility of empirical content, it does not provide a foundation for knowledge and experience. Rather it illustrates the interdependence of different kinds of cognition. More importantly, by bringing into consideration the role of inter-subjectivity through the existence of another sentient creature who occupies a distinct spatio-temporal location and who has her own responses to stimuli, Davidson shows that objectivity cannot be given a foundation in subjectivity. […] Taken this way, triangulation should be regarded as a transcendental argument […] which shows, *pace* Kant and Husserl, that subjectivity cannot be foundational for knowledge. (Sachs 2009, 25, my emphasis).

Thus VA has a privileged status over other vocabularies, but not in a non-naturalistic way, and hence the move from NRP to PN is vindicated.

2.
What should we make of this defence of PN and its allegedly naturalistic credentials? There are in my view a number of problems with it. I begin in this section with the claims about its naturalistic credentials.

On the basis of the above quote, it seems that Sachs is equating a non-naturalist view with one that lays emphasis on subjectivity as (somehow or

other) providing a foundation for objective knowledge; and, moreover, is assuming any view that avoids such a commitment is, at least insofar, in the clear from a naturalistic point of view. But can things be so simple? To start with, even if triangulation is not a foundation for knowledge, it is meant to be a transcendental condition that any knower or set of knowers and their cognitive activity must satisfy. In other words, it would seem to be an *a priori* and necessary structural constraint on all our knowing. Talk of 'necessary structural constraints' is reminiscent of the *a priori* forms and categories of Kant rather than the *a priori* contents of Descartes (*viz.* 'I am thinking' etc.). In fact neither Davidson nor (more pertinently) Sachs gives us much guidance as to exactly how one should understand the idea of an *a priori* structural constraint, of the kind triangulation is presumably meant to be. Nevertheless, even if is not exactly Kant's conception that is intended (as would seem safe to assume) the idea would appear, at least *prima facie*, to be just as hard to reconcile with what I take to be the standard naturalistic epistemological picture made popular by Quine – in which *nothing* is given *a priori*, or as first philosophy. Sachs refers approvingly to Quine's naturalism in his discussion, though interprets this in an ontological way as concerning the thoroughgoingly interconnected nature of reality, i.e. the idea that nothing stands outside the causal order (Sachs 2009, 18). However, Sach's rejection of subjectivism as non-naturalistic seems clearly to be an epistemological point; and in any case the rejection of first philosophy is surely central, if anything is, to Quine's naturalism. Moreover, Quine's critique of first philosophy is something that Rorty sees as central to his own pragmatic reorientation of the subject. So we are, in the present context, surely owed an explanation as to how Davidson's *a priori* structural constraint on knowing fits in with or relates to this epistemological aspect of naturalism. My point is not that the idea of triangulation as a transcendental, *a priori* precondition might not be naturalistically acceptable in some way or other; perhaps Quine's picture of naturalism needs to be finessed. The point is rather that we need to say more – a lot more – about how this kind of constraint is meant to exist compatibly with upholding anything worth calling naturalism. To assert that it is on the grounds that it is not conceived subjectively like more traditional *a priori* constraints is simply not convincing.

This point can be usefully compared to a well-known objection against transcendental arguments against scepticism: that they are only successful if backed up by some or other kind of verificationism or idealism (Stroud 1984). Thus when some objective condition is claimed to be a necessary consequence of facts about our experience, the sceptic can reply that this only reflects the limits of our imagination or conceptual schemes. To make the argument watertight, the anti-sceptic has to argue that these limits set the limits of what is genuinely possible. But doing that, regardless of how plausible it is in itself, seems to require the 'dogmatic' embracement some kind of first philosophy – a kind of verificationism, for example – which explains what these limits are. The sceptic can then ask why we should accept this first philosophy. My Quinean, epistemological naturalist asks in a somewhat similar manner how the transcendental constraint of triangulation is to be understood compatibly with denying the possibility of first philosophy.

A further problematic feature of the line Sachs pushes from the perspective of naturalism is that the transcendental status of the vocabulary of

agency, which involves seeing it as a specially *normative* vocabulary in the way sketched above, seems to entail a radical lack of continuity in our understanding of us and other, 'brute' animals. Such continuity is an important aspect of nearly all forms of naturalism, and it is at least central to Rorty's (*viz. the continuity thesis* from the introduction – henceforth 'CT'). If we are importantly like brutes insofar as they also perceive and act in their environments on the basis of a complex nervous system – something all recent work in empirical psychology and neuroscience takes for granted – then it would seem that CT, and hence naturalism, demands an account of our perceptual and agential powers which reflects this, rather than one that separates us from them. However, VA – at least as understood by people like Davidson and Ramberg, as well as, to take a further, influential example of this general line, John McDowell (see his 1994) – seems to do precisely the latter. For these thinkers, animals are not subject to rational constraints, at least *strictu dictu*, in the way they perceive and behave in their environments. We humans are, and moreover this is something essential to our nature – *viz.* the transcendental priority of VA over other vocabularies. Hence a charge of discontinuity and (insofar) non-naturalism seems highly germane against PN.

Sachs in fact considers this objection, and suggests that PN needs to 'be further developed by taking much more seriously the thought that human beings are more properly regarded as a certain kind of animal than as a system of particles' (Sachs 2009, 30). Sachs nevertheless sees promise in PN insofar as it involves a conception of 'the vocabulary of agency as having patterns of complex animal behaviour for its necessary conditions of application' (*ibid*.). Here he alludes to the fact that a form of triangulation is also something Davidson thinks obtains in the animal world and as a step in the ontogenetic development of fully intentional cognition: it is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for human, rational thought and behaviour – the latter requiring language in addition (see Davidson 2001, essay 9). However, what this theory omits to say anything about is how these two seemingly quite disparate elements – mere 'animal' triangulation, as it were, and language – are meant to *combine* to yield the phenomenon appropriately covered by VA. What we are told is just that language somehow lifts the bare elements of triangulation to a new level, but a level whose nature is nevertheless essentially different from anything that has gone before it. From the perspective of CT, one would want to object that very much of our nature as perceiving and behaving organisms is something we *simply share* with animals; or least, we share ours with some species at least as much as they share theirs with others. By stressing VA as not merely *a* but *the* central mode of understanding human behaviour, we are stuck with an unmotivated breach of the continuity thesis, and hence a compromise with naturalism. (I say 'unmotivated' because the naturalism I endorse will also breach with it, but in ways that I think are defensible – see below.)

Before moving on, I should emphasize that the above point is not that there is something specifically naturalistically problematic about the *normativity* of VA. As noted above, Sachs, following Ramberg, sees this as favourable insofar as a transcendental *descriptive* vocabulary would throw one back into some kind of metaphysical foundationalism. In fact this point hardly seems to address the putative worry about how normativity, particularly of the constitutive kind involved in VA, can exist in a natural world. But in any case, I think the worry is

not really genuine for a naturalist who is also a pragmatist. Sachs refers approvingly to Rorty's approval of Huw Price's Wittgenstein inspired *subject naturalism*, which asks not how the referents of our various vocabularies fit into a physical world, but how a species like ours came to talk in the manifold ways it does (see Price 2004, referred to by Sachs 2009, 26–27). Though there is in my view a lot more to say about subject naturalism (see Knowles 2011), the basic idea that a good naturalism should prescind from asking what makes the claims in our various vocabularies true should neutralise worries about the place of the normative in a natural world. The problem with VA from a naturalistic perspective, as understood by Davidson *et al.*, is thus not that it is constitutively normative, but that it – perhaps in virtue at least in part of this – enunciates a radical and unmotivated discontinuity with our understanding of the rest of living nature.

3.

In this section I want to raise some doubts about the argument for triangulation *per se*. This is important for me because I think that if the argument were successful, the idea would have to have some impact on our other commitments *willy nilly*, naturalism included. If it isn't, our doubts about its compatibility with naturalism can be resolved in favour of the former, and we stand much freer to reconstruct the significance of VA in other terms. (Note then my aim is thus not to show that VA or folk psychology is not an important and/or significant vocabulary for us, nor that it is not normative,[2] but rather to cast doubt on its status as something fundamental or transcendentally presupposed by all other vocabularies.) The discussion will also bring into clear focus the status of CT and introduce my own conception of a pragmatist form of naturalism.

Davidson's argument for triangulation is complex insofar it emerges from a whole host of considerations arising from his philosophical project as a whole. I will not be giving it a full and systematic treatment (for this see Bridges 2006),[3] but pointing out what seems to be a fault in its basic dialectical structure. Before starting I should also make clear that one thing I do not mean to be questioning, in accord with my sympathies for a broadly pragmatist take on the mind/world relation, is Davidson's argument against 'truth-making' and representationalism: the idea that truth is to be explained by identifiable worldly packets, 'facts', to which individual sentences correspond, and which our beliefs might correctly or incorrectly represent. I also accept with Davidson that we cannot make sense of properly truth-evaluable thought without seeing this as linked to language and linguistic competence. My concerns are rather with the allegedly intersubjective consequences this is all meant to have. (Of course, whether one can pick and choose from the Davidsonean package in this way is very much the question at issue; what I say below will I hope go some way to establishing this is possible.)

Why then should objective, truth-evaluable thought presuppose intersubjectivity? Though much of Davidson's work over the years can seem to bear on this question, his clearest and most direct answer to it is spelt out in his essay 'The second person' (essay 8 in his 2001).[4] Here the claim is that without a 'second person' with whom we can interact, we can make no sense of the causes of our beliefs, as expressed in linguistic reactions, being some particular thing or event, rather than something else. And without this idea, we can make no sense of our thoughts having determinate contents at all, such that we might be said to

be thinking correctly or incorrectly about the world, without which in turn we cannot make sense of thought at all. We need, as Davidson puts it, two 'lines of thought', two projections from distinct responses, in order to be able to find a single intersecting point at which these cross.

I think a very natural reaction to this argument is that it seems to confuse levels: the level of physical or extensional causation with that of thought. Though Davidson talks of 'lines of *thought*' it seems that the explanatory value of this can only be physical or extensional. What connects me to you in terms of where intersecting lines cross, extending outwards from our sensory and motor apparata, can surely only be understood in terms of some portion of the spatio-temporal manifold and the physical events that this comprises at a given time. But such a point of intersection leaves it completely open how I would *describe* this spatio-temporal 'blob' in attributing a thought to you – perhaps merely as such a blob, but perhaps instead as a cat, say, or a source of annoying noise, or something inviting a kick, or the last thing your uncle saw before he got run over – or whatever. Yet it is only in terms of descriptions that we get to the level of truth-evaluable contents. So, one might conclude, triangulation in itself does not give us determinate content, or a common, objective world to think about.

An equally natural counter-reaction to this would be to say that Davidson's claim is only that triangulation is a necessary, not that it is a sufficient condition for objective thought. For this, says Davidson, we also need language, as we have seen. However, one can respond in turn that if language is indeed meant to provide this extra ingredient, it is in fact unclear why the ingredient it provides shouldn't be sufficient for thought *in and of itself*. Davidson admits that insofar as we remain within the realm of non-linguistic communication, there is really nothing that determines that we are thinking about some particular thing rather than another. When language enters the scene, there suddenly is. Davidson also maintains that it is most likely impossible to explain what intentional thought amounts to in a non-circular way. But now it seems we really are left with no good answer to the question as to why – whatever it is that language provides – this should be something that *in addition* requires the structure of a triangulated interaction to operate upon to yield genuine thought. Given that we will in any case need this simply assumed power inherent in language to determine what we are thinking about, what reason have we been given for thinking triangulation really is necessary for the capacity for thought at all? As far as I can see nothing Davidson says should incline us to this point of view. At most I think that what he says, in e.g. 'The Emergence of thought' (in Davidson 2001), might convince us that triangulation is in some way causally necessary for the development or evolution of thought: that in the course of evolution or development, this is a stage through which organisms who develop the capacity for thought in the full sense have to pass. But the modality in Davidson's intended conclusion is much stronger than this, concerning what is constitutive of objective thought. And it is just not made clear why triangulation is an essential component in human thought in this way – why, having passed through this stage, we cannot kick away the ladder and simply 'think for ourselves', so to speak. If this is right, then Davidson's argument for the essentially intersubjective nature of thought collapses.[5],[6]

This point is in fact very close to the reverse of that I used above against Sach's construal of PN as satisfying the continuity thesis. There the problem

consisted in understanding how combining animal-level triangulation with language, yielding VA, allows us to think of the latter as continuous with any vocabulary for understanding at the animal level. What I now urge is that we have been given no reason for seeing an animal level of triangulation as constitutively relevant to the level of human, truth-evaluable thought (however exactly we conceive of the latter).

A possible objection to this line is that without triangulation, and the assumption that this plays a constitutive role in understanding thought, one has no way of honouring CT, – the continuity thesis – and hence naturalism. Given one wants to uphold CT, as I in particular do, then surely some kind of constraint on thinking from the animal world must be acknowledged; and in the broadly Davidsonean, anti-representationalist setting we are assuming here, triangulation would seem the, or at least an, obvious choice. Hence a good pragmatist naturalist should accept triangulation as a constraint on thought – it might seem. Now I have of course already argued that Davidson's understanding of VA entails a breach of CT and hence is naturalistically suspect. Nevertheless, if my view seems apt to commit such a breach too then I am clearly in trouble by my own standards.

By way of response, I should first stress that when it comes to understanding ourselves as *behaving/acting and perceiving beings*, what I have said is perfectly compatible with CT and allows a theory of the former that is continuous with that of brutes – precisely in contrast to Davidson *et al.*'s understanding of VA, which removes us in our entire perceiving and acting nature from the level of animals. On the other hand, Rorty's whole-hearted endorsement of CT seems to neglect what would seem to be an obvious but non-arbitrary limitation to it, namely, the fact that we are *language-using creatures*, and insofar cognitively endowed in a very special sense. In respect of language, nature itself is – surely – simply not continuous, and our theories should reflect this. However, this discontinuity does not, implausibly, consist in our basic patterns of acting in and perceiving our environments being fundamentally different from those of animals, as supporters of Davidson *et al.*'s construal of VA would maintain. It consists instead – or at least I would contend – in the fact that linguistic competence does not, at least essentially, involve acting and reacting to our environment at all, but rather – in and of itself – the formulating of thoughts or beliefs about the world, or, equivalently, what is true. This is a view that I also see as borne out by the best science of language we have today, namely the generative approach championed by Chomsky and his followers. On this line, not only is VA naturalistically suspect in entailing an all-encompassing discontinuity in our understanding of the animal kingdom; it is also unsuited to understanding the special, human capacity that language represents, insofar as VA sees linguistically expressed thoughts as, essentially, responses to the environment, and as reasons for behaviour.[7]

It seems then that though naturalism requires a certain level of continuity with the rest of living world, it shouldn't demand continuity with respect to the theory of language, which is unique to humans; hence the objection that rejecting the necessity of triangulation breaches with CT can be turned aside. At the same time, my individualistic, Chomskyan view concerning the nature of language and its relation to thought provides an alternative, positive proposal to bolster our

conclusion that Davidson's argument for the necessary intersubjectivity of thought fails.

4.

In this final section I want to sketch an alternative conception of VA that I think a pragmatist like Rorty could be happy with, and that is also more commensurate with the kind of naturalism that I have been advocating. I will also in conclusion say a little bit more about the role of thought and language in my picture from this particular pragmatist-naturalist perspective.

To recap: I have been arguing against the position Sachs identifies as pragmatic naturalism (PN) in favour of something at least closer to non-reductive physicalism (NRP). I have argued that the idea of VA as a transcendental precondition for other vocabularies is dubious from a naturalistic perspective, both epistemologically (*viz.* 'no first philosophy') and substantively (*viz.* CT). I have further argued that the argument for this transcendental status from Davidson doesn't work. In other words, there is no absolute requirement that we need to see ourselves as interpreting others' actions and utterances to understand how any of us can be minded. Moreover, the consequences of rejecting triangulation do not seem to be deleterious from the perspective of upholding naturalism, *viz.* (again) CT, properly interpreted.

The first point I now want to make is that it needn't follow from this that we must reject the view that VA is a very central and important aspect of ordinary human interaction and explanation. There is a way of understanding VA, or folk psychology, that does not require us to see it as fundamental or fundamentally different from other vocabularies in the way Sachs *et al.* claim, but nevertheless allows us to respect the central role it has in our lives – and perhaps also in the kind of project Rorty has in mind for philosophy. My thought here is that instead of stressing its transcendental status, we can see VA as having acquired a central place for our understanding of others merely through a process of biological and/or cultural evolution.[8] I don't need here to take a stand on exactly what kind of process this might have been, nor on what folk psychology, *qua* such an evolved capacity is – whether it is to be seen as an internalised set of tacitly cognized principles, builds on simulation of our own dispositions to act and reason, or perhaps is more perceptual in nature. All I maintain is that it *is* an identifiable capacity, roughly along the lines philosophers have been talking about in discussing 'folk psychology' over the past few decades, and that it is somehow 'hard-wired' (or perhaps in a deep way 'soft-wired') into us as the result of an evolutionary process. Given this, VA will inevitably play a central role for us, and insofar as it, in a natural way for us, characterizes and provides insight into our own reasoning and acting processes, including the description of other phenomena, it will also appear to have a kind of relevance to ourselves and our activities that many other vocabularies lack. Nor would I want to claim that this is any kind of delusion – to deny that what we say when operating within VA is anything other than at least largely or approximately true. In line with my general pragmatism I seek to draw no invidious distinctions of this kind 'in reality'. All I would question, in accord with my arguments for respecting CT, is that VA gives us our *most fundamental and systematic* understanding of our behaving and perceiving natures. As I see things,

this role will most likely instead be played rather by a theory that evinces more continuity with the animal world – except, as noted, when it comes to language.

In this way, I think we can explain how VA is 'inescapable', as Rorty (2000, 373) puts it, in every descriptive project we engage in, without seeing it as having a transcendental status. But how does this conception of VA fit in with Rorty's philosophical project more generally? Rorty, as noted, takes on board Ramberg's criticisms of his own criticisms of Davidson's distinction between VA and other vocabularies, accepting the former as a normative vocabulary distinct from and presupposed by any descriptive vocabulary for characterising intentionally endowed creatures. Rorty's line of thought in this paper can be summarised as follows: You have to be able to see yourself as capable of going wrong if you are going to get anything right, and since the notion of getting things right is unavoidable, you have to see yourself as subject to interpersonal norms of evaluation. I have not commented on the premises of this argument in this piece,[9] but rather the inference, which as I see it is what grounds the idea of VA as a special, explanatory vocabulary for understanding one another. One thing Rorty does not comment upon, however, is the final section of Ramberg's paper. Here Ramberg avers the following:

> It may be that Rorty's issue is not with claims about the nature of the vocabulary of agency of the sort I have been making, but with the idea that these claims confer on the vocabulary special philosophical status. (Ramberg 2000, 364)

He goes on to argue that Rorty should be interested in these special features of VA, and see them as conferring upon it this special philosophical status, precisely because it serves a kind of purpose that he is concerned with, namely: fending off scientism. Scientism is the tendency which would see all vocabularies, regardless of reductive ambitions, as aiming for prediction and control. Emphasizing VA allows us instead to stake out a humanistic mode of understanding that is suitable to political concerns.

I should first say, somewhat incidentally to the main theme of this paper, that I think Ramberg, following along with Rorty and several other neo-pragmatists, gives a somewhat distorted view of science here. Science is not just, or perhaps even fundamentally concerned with prediction and control, but rather, or at least as much with, explanation and insight. Nevertheless, I do think that Ramberg's advice to Rorty may for all that be sound. VA may precisely be something you should see as having something *like* a transcendental status if you are interested in replacing questions of scientific explanation with questions about how we should work together for a better world. However, I think insofar as it is advice, it is also contingent on your sharing this as an aim. If your aim is the betterment of humanity and solidarity, then something like a prioritizing of VA may be an important thing to go in for. If this is not your aim, however, then it seems – even by Ramberg's own lights – that VA may be less central to our philosophical projects. I do not, for the record, mean to be denying an interest on my own part in this project of betterment. I simply want to underline its essentially contingent status. Moreover, I think this is something Rorty could or at least should agree with.

Finally I turn to the understanding of my own version of non-reductive, pragmatist naturalism. On my view, naturalism and pragmatism – or anti-

representationalism, as it might also be termed – are or should be natural bedfellows. A defensible naturalism starts from the simple idea that there is a certain priority to scientific theorizing when it comes to furnishing our most systematic and fundamental knowledge. By stressing the centrality of science, certain metaphysical and/or reductive projects can be discarded, a verdict that is reinforced by more general, but as I see them no less scientific considerations sceptical to the idea of representation (see Price 2004). More generally, we need to respect what we get to know through science in seeking to give an understanding of the nature of mindedness – of consciousness, cognition, the very relation between thought, language and world. What I understand from this science informs my (qualified) allegiance to CT – though I have of course said little in detail about exactly what form or forms a science of living, thinking things would take. Here is not the place to do that (see Knowles forthcoming-a for an attempt at a general account). I can though – indeed, should, given the themes of the present paper and particularly the issues raised in the previous section – try to address one overarching issue, that of the place of linguistic, conceptual thought in my naturalistic-cum-pragmatist picture.

One virtue of PN, which stresses the transcendental priority of VA as a normative vocabulary, is that in providing a conception of language and conceptual activity that fits with anti-representationalism it fulfils its pragmatist aspirations. I have argued, however, that PN comes with too high a non-naturalistic price to be acceptable. For a more committed naturalist, our account of language should not be transcendental; rather, given scientific theorizing provides us with our most fundamental knowledge, but also that conceptual, linguistic thought has a fundamental role to play in understanding mindedness (see previous section), it seems we must in some way theorize language in scientific terms. The question however now arises: Can we do justice to these demands, consistent with upholding pragmatism, i.e. anti-representationalism?

Though probably the majority opinion here would be negative, I think a cautious optimism is in order; here (by way of conclusion) I will sketch what I see as the line to pursue.[10] Firstly, insofar as a correct naturalism is non-reductionist, there is no obvious need for a scientific account that 'tells us what meaning is'. *A fortiori*, there is no need to see meaning as a substantial, semantic phenomenon – that is, in the way representationalists view it. Secondly, and more positively, I nevertheless see in Chomsky's programme of generative grammar some hope for giving a scientific understanding of the human linguistic capacity (together perhaps with our capacity for mathematical thinking). This understanding sees language as something arising from a small number of very abstract, innate principles which, through exposure to an appropriate human environment, develop into constraints on computations that determine the possible structures that linguistic forms of a mature language can take. Such a view does not explain what linguistic meaning is, but it does potentially serve to give an explanatory grounding to the kind of phenomenon meaningful, linguistic activity amounts to – at least, on Chomsky's internalist view of this activity as essentially a vehicle for framing thoughts. This Chomskyan conception has also been suggested as a possible naturalist-cum-pragmatist grounding of language by Price, whose position is close to mine in seeking to be both thoroughgoingly naturalistic and pragmatist. As Price points out, for Chomsky a scientific account of language

[...] will [make] no provision for what Scott Soames calls "the central semantic fact about language, ... that it is used to represent the world", because it is not assumed that language is used to represent the world, in the intended sense. (Chomsky 1995, 27, cited by Price 2011, 103, footnote)

Moreover, for Chomsky

[i]t is possible that natural language has only syntax and pragmatics; it has a "semantics" only in the sense of "the study of how this instrument, whose formal structure and potentialities of expression are the subject of syntactic investigation, is actually put to use in a speech community", to quote the earliest formulation in generative grammar 40 years ago, influenced by Wittgenstein, Austin and others. (Chomsky 1995, 26–27, Chomsky quoting from his 1957 classic *Syntactic Structures*)

A further noteworthy aspect of Chomsky's overall view of the mind in the present context is its emphasis on modular structure: alongside language, we have a capacity for scientific theorizing plus various everyday 'common sense' capacities, such as folk psychology, folk physics and the like, with which the linguistic capacity interacts (not necessarily to be viewed as 'central' modules like language) (see Chomsky 1995). None of the internal states of these capacities involves belief or knowledge in the everyday sense of the term and hence they do not presuppose a notion of intentional thought. Further, nothing of what we articulate through these capacities is seen as 'carving reality at its joints', a notion Chomsky rejects as meaningless – in good pragmatist style. Finally, though language is what we use to articulate the insights of these modules, this is just a consequence of the nature and structure of our minds, not a question of any kind of 'transcendental necessity'.

A lot more needs to be said, of course. However, I cannot see in this picture any obvious incoherence in relation to the goal of offering a thoroughly non-reductive and anti-representationalist pragmatism which also fully respects the demands of naturalism.

NOTES
1. In this paper my focus will be on how we should interpret the continuity thesis and on epistemological aspects of naturalism. I actually have qualms about ontological physicalism, which strikes me as far stronger than anything warranted by naturalistic (i.e. empirical or scientific) criteria, and thus harbours (for a pragmatist at least) dubious metaphysical assumptions. Expressing what I take to be somewhat similar concerns, an anonymous reviewer of this paper queried in what sense Rorty could be considered a naturalist at all, given that he rejects the idea that any vocabulary is closer

to reality than any other, and that there is no criterion deeper than convenience to which we can appeal when assessing vocabularies. I think this is a very good question, albeit one that one can give answers to without reneging on anti-representationalism (for some discussion see Knowles forthcoming-a and Knowles forthcoming-b). However, for present purposes my starting point is (like Sachs') Rorty's own insistence that he intends to be a naturalist (like all the great thinkers in the pragmatist tradition before him), given which – and assuming this is a coherent package – I then focus on the question of whether his naturalism, and naturalism for a pragmatist more generally, is or should be anything more substantial than the kind of pluralism about vocabularies involved in NRP.

2. Insofar my position is no longer that defended in Knowles (2002).

3. Bridges (2006) is an article-length critique of Davidson's triangulation argument. Some of what Bridges has to say overlaps with my critique (see below), but his main concern is with the premises of the argument, which is Davidson's view that non-linguistic creatures cannot be said to relate in perception or cognition to determinate distal features of their environment. Though this issue deserves attention in its own right, I think that ultimately Davidson's view can survive this critique. In any case, for present purposes, I want to simply grant Davidson his premises (but see note 4 below).

4. There is of course, in addition to Davidson's own writings, a whole recent history in philosophy, stemming from Wittgenstein's private language argument, which attempts to cast aspersions on the idea of 'private language' and 'private rule following'. I cannot go into this here; suffice it to say that the consensus seems to be that most of these arguments cannot succeed without avowing some kind of verificationism or anti-realism (which indeed was one of the motivations behind Davidson's attempts to give a new kind of argument).

5. Bridges might be seen as making a related point when he complains as follows: 'Davidson's transition into thought is effected by a creature's cottoning-on to the fact that it and another creature are jointly triangulating on particular events in the world. There is a real question how such a *cottoning-on* could in any sense be part of the explanation of the capacity for thought' (2006, 17). However, this argument does not establish that triangulation might not be necessary for thought. So my point is rather that, given that such 'cottoning-on' is required, it is just unclear why triangulation should be necessary. Bridges misses an explanation; I see Davidson's explanation in terms of language as providing it but also obviating the need for triangulation.

6. A possible rejoinder to this that I will not discuss here is that we need to consider not just the conditions for thought but for knowledge – Davidson after all often presents the triangulation argument in term of different kinds of knowledge. Thus, if it is true that language alone gives us sufficient conditions for thought, we might seem to face a sceptical problem about why this thought should correspond to reality; in denying the constitutive relevance of triangulation, we foreclose on the possibility of an avenue of response to this problem. I am not quite sure how this argument should go in detail and am rather doubtful that it can work in any case, but the problem of scepticism in connection with the triangulation argument is an intriguing one I would like to pursue in future work.

7. The contents of the last few sentences obviously constitute a large and somewhat controversial commitment that I cannot defend in detail here. I note first that for many of the main, negative-orientated purposes of the present paper, doing so is not required. However, I would also like to make a few remarks by way of explanation of the commitment so as to indicate the shape of the 'larger picture' I would defend. Firstly, the view is an idealisation: language does of course impact on our behavioural and (at least I can accept) perceptual capacities. The point is that it does this in ways that do not radically reconfigure the nature of these capacities: we still see the world and act upon it in relation to our basic biological needs. Language *per se*, on the other hand, allows us to transcend such practical projects, considering issues that have no resonance in what we

see or what we might do. I see this view, further, and as already suggested, as tightly related to Chomsky's view of language as an autonomous module of the mind, at the service of perception and action, but not dedicated to them. This conception is, importantly, meant to be part of a *scientific* approach to the mind-brain which eschews the everyday understanding of belief, desire and action that underlies VA. Finally, the view embraces Davidson's idea that 'nothing can count as a reason for holding a belief except another belief' (Davidson 2001, essay 10, 141). In other words, there is no basic epistemological connection between perception and belief. When it comes to action, Davidson's interpersonal view on the preconditions of thought means that rational action is automatically built in as a constitutive factor in understanding thought, but that is precisely what I am seeking to bring into question here. Of course if one thinks one must deny Davidson's dictum, one might also feel the need to deny much of the rest of Davidson's programme, but I am, as noted, seeking to explore the possibilities of abiding by central parts of this programme whilst doing away with what I see as its less defensible elements. (See also the final section of the paper for more on these issues.)

8. I say 'merely' because supporters of the transcendental status of VA need not deny that it has *de facto* arisen in us through some kind of evolutionary process.

9. Rorty also uses some time on these in his reply to Ramberg, explaining how he has erred here too, but I see these as concerning his overly dismissive attitude to truth, which is a distinct issue.

10. I confess at the outset that the following remarks are, as an anonymous referee complained, unsatisfactorily brief and programmatic. In my defence I can only say that a fuller presentation would go beyond what I can attempt in a single paper, as well as pointing out again (see note 7) that the main argumentative aims of this paper are negative. Interpreted charitably, what I have to say can be seen as indicating the shape of, and thereby hinting at the possibility of, a kind of pragmatism that is more consistently naturalistic than versions offered hitherto.

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