Neo-pragmatist approaches have been making a comeback lately in certain local debates. Perhaps the best-known and best-developed pragmatist views positions are those in the expressivist tradition in ethics, defended and well developed by figures like Simon Blackburn and Alan Gibbard. More recently, forms of pragmatism about modal discourse have been on the rise—I've been working on developing such an approach for metaphysical modal discourse, Robert Brandom has a prior view about modal discourse across the board, and earlier figures like Sellars and Ryle worked similar angles for counterfactuals and laws of nature. Still others have been working on pragmatist approaches to logical notions like logical consequence (Restall et al.), truth (Horwich) or epistemic notions (Chrisman).

What is it to take a pragmatist approach locally, to a given area of discourse? As Michael Williams (2010, 318) puts it, following Huw Price, pragmatism is distinguished by two features. First, a *linguistic priority thesis* that says, when investigating classic philosophical problems about an area like the moral, don’t begin by asking metaphysical questions about what moral properties or facts are, or even if there are any. Instead, begin by asking about the discourse: what does moral discourse do for us? Why would we want to have moral terms in our vocabulary? What are we doing when we moralize? The second distinguishing feature of a pragmatist approach is what Williams and Price call *‘anti-representationalism’*. This involves the idea that we should drop the assumption that the meanings of the terms in question must be given in terms of the items they refer to (the idea that we explain meaning in terms of semantic world-word relations (Price 2011, 233 and Williams 2013, 128)). It’s easy to see the relation here—for if we keep a Representationalist thesis, that the meanings of moral terms (say) must be given via the moral properties or facts they refer to, then it seems we have no choice but to begin from asking the metaphysical questions about the things referred to, in order to determine whether our moral discourse is in good order. On the other hand, if we can account for the meanings of our moral terms in other ways, say, in terms of the rules they follow that enable them to fulfill the functions identified, then we have no such need for a metaphysics-first approach, and can follow the dictates of the linguistic priority thesis.

Why might anyone want to be a pragmatist about a given area of discourse? The central attractions of local forms of pragmatism are their promise to help us avoid long-standing ontological and epistemic problems. On the ontological side are what Price calls ‘placement problems’ about how such odd entities could find their place among the natural furniture of the world. As I have tried to make clear elsewhere, the expressivist needn’t (at the end of the day) deny that there are moral properties or modal facts, in the only sense these terms have. For instead she may tell a story about how our perfectly adequate modal talk, say, serves the function of
conveying constitutive semantic rules in particularly useful ways (rather than describing) but then licenses us to make hypostatizing moves that then entitle us to speak of modal facts and properties—to be not a reduced or quasi-realist about them, but rather simply a realist. Nonetheless the modal properties are not now ‘posited’ as ‘explanatory’ analogs of scientific properties, requiring some explanation of their relationship to the natural properties of the world, or appealed to in order to explain our modal talk. We also get new hope of avoiding the traditional epistemic problems about how we could come to know what the moral or modal truths are—for we are no longer stuck with the picture of ‘positing’ properties that we can’t empirically access to gain knowledge, and we can give a different account of our ability to know modal facts (perhaps, an account that goes via extrapolation from our conceptual competence).

For the remainder of this paper, I’ll leave aside questions about the development or plausibility of these local forms of pragmatism. For I’m interested instead in the prospects of a more global form of pragmatism. Some, prominently including Price himself, have suggested that the approach be taken more broadly—defending a form of global pragmatism. The questions I want to address today are, first, what could that even mean? What would a global form of pragmatism involve? More importantly, is it a view that could be made at all plausible? About this, even some prominent defenders of local forms of pragmatism, such as Simon Blackburn, have raised grave doubts. Finally, what would its consequences be for traditional ontological debates and for metametaphysics?

**What would a global pragmatism be?**

To those exposed only to local debates, say, about expressivism versus descriptivist approaches in ethics, the very idea of a global pragmatist approach might be hard to fathom. For local versions of the approach are often introduced by contrasting supposedly expressive (say, moral) discourse—that (say) serves to express the speaker’s attitudes rather than to describe the world, with the apparently descriptive discourse used in ordinary or scientific discourse—say, when we say how many cups are on the table, or electrons in a carbon atom.

So what would pragmatism, writ large, even mean? Simon Blackburn, one of the original and chief proponents of an expressivist approach to the moral, characterizes pragmatism as follows:

> You will be a pragmatist about an area of discourse if you pose a Carnapian external question: how does it come about that we go in for this kind of discourse and thought? What is the explanation of this bit of our language game? And then you offer an account of what we are up to in going in for this discourse, and the account eschews any use of the referring expressions of the discourse... or any semantic or ontological attempt to ‘interpret’ the discourse in a domain, to find referents for its terms, or truth-makers for its sentences (75)

For if we hope to get a different line of explanation that avoids some of the traditional metaphysician’s problems, the explanation of the relevant sort of talk must say why employing a language or conceptual scheme like this is useful for us in a way that doesn’t appeal to the supposed objects we are talking about.
The pragmatist approach has Carnapian roots. From an ontological point of view, I take the basic insight of a pragmatist approach to be Carnap’s: that we don’t require an ontological justification for introducing a new form of speech. Carnap describes the problem with external questions as follows:

Many philosophers regard a question of this kind [a philosophical question about the existence or reality of a system of entities] as an ontological question which must be raised and answered before the introduction of the new language forms. The latter introduction, they believe, is legitimate only if it can be justified by an ontological insight supplying an affirmative answer to the question of reality. In contrast to this view, we take the position that the introduction of the new ways of speaking does not need any theoretical justification because it does not imply any assertion of reality (214).

I’d actually like to revise the last part a little. The point I want to preserve is the idea that the introduction of a language form does not require ontological justification, or involve ontological presuppositions (pace Yablo, “Carnap’s Paradox”). So, for example, we do not need to first do a metaphysical check, to see if there really are numbers, in order to be justified in introducing nominative number talk. Instead (in this case), we may introduce the talk of numbers in a way that guarantees that our new noun terms for numbers refer, and so that we are entitled to say there are such things. (But notice this is emphatically not to say that numbers (rather than our talk of them and commitments to them) are created by or dependent on our language or thought, nor is it to deny that there may be empirical presuppositions behind introducing some sorts of terminology—more on this below).

If, for a given group of terms, the only explanation we could give of why we make use of them, and why these particular rules govern their use, is to say: We use terms for Xs because there are Xs, then it seems we must begin from metaphysics: assuring ourselves that there are Xs to justify our use of X-talk, and understanding the meaning of X-talk in terms of the Xs to which it refers. We would, in short, have to be representationalists about the language involved, and engage in a metaphysics-first approach that eschewed the linguistic priority thesis.

The pragmatist’s aim, by contrast, is to give a pragmatic explanation for the introduction (or retention) of the relevant discourse without having (or needing) to cite an ontological justification of the sort that would say: we go in for it because it represents the correct ontology, the objects or properties there really are. So, for example, a pragmatist might (with Horwich) explain why we go in for truth talk by appealing to the role the truth predicate plays in enabling us to express generalizations; or might (following Yablo’s analysis, though he himself is no pragmatist) explain the introduction of number talk as a way of enabling us to state laws in finite form (that would otherwise be infinite). The introduction of these useful forms of speech might then entitle us to talk about numbers or truth, and even to say that there are numbers or true propositions; but it doesn’t rely on a prior ‘insight supplying an affirmative answer to the question of reality’.

The idea of global pragmatism, then, is to take this approach across the board: denying that we ever need an ontology-first approach to saying what justifies introducing or retaining the relevant linguistic forms (of the form: “we go in for X-talk because there really are Xs”). (This is also a way of avoiding the
Representationalism Price rejects). As I understand it, Carnap’s was global in this way: the view was that we don’t ever, (not even for the thing language) require ontological justification for introducing a form of speech—though having once introduced it, we may go on to ask and answer (internal) questions about whether or not the relevant sorts of thing exist. (And usually answer them easily, and affirmatively.)

I think we have good reason for taking on globally the idea that we do not require ontological justification for employing certain forms of speech—and indeed that ontological existence questions can only be addressed once we have introduced the relevant forms of speech (below I will say why.) So, I (with Carnap and Price) think the pragmatist approach can and should be applied not just in long-suspect areas of discourse like the moral, modal or mathematical, but also for common sense discourse about ordinary objects. Doing so, moreover, gives us not just a generalized pragmatist approach, but a way of developing a view we may call “ontological pragmatism”. What I aim to do in the rest of this paper is to make clear how such a globalization can be defensible, and in so doing, I hope to sketch and make clear how a form of ontological pragmatism can work that is both more global and more plausible than its opponents have often assumed.

Doubts about Global Pragmatism

Simon Blackburn, one of the iconic proponents of forms of local expressivism, has recently raised worries about taking the pragmatist approach globally—worries that, I suspect, echo suspicions felt in the wider philosophical community. Perhaps the biggest source of resistance to adopting a global expressivist approach arises from considering our ordinary, common sense talk about ordinary objects like tables and chairs and the like. Indeed that sort of talk is often raised as an explicit contrast with talk about duties, possibilities, or numbers. That’s a sort of talk I’ve spent a while thinking about so I want to talk about that sort of talk, and whether we can give a reading on it that is both plausibly in line with pragmatism, and that also preserves the distinction Blackburn and others aptly note between our talk about ordinary objects and talk of matters moral, modal or mathematical. I think we can. In fact I think the key to seeing our way clear to embracing a global pragmatism is to clarify what it is to be an expressivist about everyday talk, and what the alternative would involve—for I think there is often misunderstanding of what extending it to ordinary discourse would involve.

There are, however, reasons to be wary about adopting a global form of pragmatism—reasons that Blackburn has clearly articulated. First is what (following Kraut) he calls the ‘no exit’ problem: that the pragmatist’s genealogical stories about how troublesome areas of discourse are introduced apparently rely on an unquestioned bedrock of common sense ordinary discourse—which then seems insusceptible to a similar treatment. In fact, it might seem then that the only explanation to be given of why we go in for ordinary object talk is because there are these ordinary objects surrounding us in the environment. Second, while there seem to be reasons from within the expressivist approach to embrace realism about everyday public objects, there are (as Blackburn points out) ‘huge asymmetries’ between our talk of common sense objects and talk of the moral, modal, or
mathematical, that should make us hesitate to generalize this realism to the troubled areas the local expressivist treats. And this, in turn, might give the expressivist reason to accept a bifurcation between common sense talk and talk in these other areas—leaving us again with merely localized forms of expressivism.

What I want to do here is to try to show a route to a palatable form of global pragmatism. I’ll begin by discussing Blackburn’s ‘no exit’ problem, and will suggest that a turn to recent work in evolutionary psychology can give us what we need in the way of understanding the priority of the everyday, without going in for heavy-duty metaphysics, or rejecting the basic pragmatist approach. I’ll next discuss how to respect the ‘huge asymmetries’ Blackburn identifies without giving up a form of global pragmatism, and while adopting a form of simple realism across the board, for the moral, mathematical, modal, and mundane.

1. Embracing the priority of the everyday

The first worry Blackburn raises about embracing a global pragmatism is what he calls the ‘no exit’ problem, that, “...even genealogical and anthropological stories have to start somewhere” (78). So, for example, genealogical stories about the origin of moral discourse might (with Hume) take off from talk of “natural propensities to pain and pleasure, love and hate, and an ability to take up a common point of view with others”; a Fregean story about mathematical discourse “would start by placing us in a world of kinds of objects with distinct identity conditions, such as tigers and eggs and warriors, and then a capacity to tally them” (78). So genealogical stories about suspect forms of discourse, like the moral or mathematical, begin by showing how such discourse may be introduced from an unquestioned ‘common-sense background’ of ordinary discourse.

But then the question we are left with is whether we have any hope of giving a similar genealogical story about that common-sense discourse itself. Blackburn doubts that can be done:

If we insisted... on positing the Carnapian external-sounding question, how come that we go in for descriptions of the world in terms of surrounding middle-sized dry goods?, then the answer is only going to be the flat-footed stutter or self-pat on the back: it is because we are indeed surrounded by middle-sized dry goods. (78-9)

But this involves apparently giving up the pragmatist line for common sense talk: in that case, we must appeal to the ontology itself (‘because we are surrounded by middle-sized dry goods’) to justify or explain why we employ the relevant linguistic forms (our terminology for ordinary objects)—apparently returning to a Representationalist reading of that area of discourse. Whereas in other cases, “there is every prospect of bracketing the existence [of the relevant entities] and coming to understand why we go in for the mode of thought in question in other terms. In other words, there is every prospect of giving an anthropology or genealogy which is itself free of the commitments in question” (83).

The key challenge Blackburn has presented here is to explain why we go in for descriptions in terms of middle-sized dry goods, without appealing to that very ontology. As has often been noted in the literature on contrastative explanation (Schaffer, Lipton, Haslanger), however, proper explanations must appeal to a
contrast case: e.g. we will get different explanations if we ask why Judy bought the car (rather than the truck) versus why she bought the car (rather than leasing it). In this case, I think we can identify three different questions, or demands for explanation, in the vicinity. When we ask ‘why do we go in for descriptions of the world in terms of surrounding middle-sized dry goods’, we could be asking this with at least three different contrasts in mind:

1. Why do we go in for descriptions of middle sized dry goods, as opposed to not employing descriptive modes of speech at all?
2. Why do we go in for descriptions in terms of, say, tables and trees, as opposed to descriptions, say, in terms of dragons and phlogiston?
3. Why do we go in for descriptions in terms of tables and trees, as opposed to in terms of particles arranged table-wise, in terms of its tabling here, or in terms of sequenced temporal parts rather than enduring objects—that is, why do we employ a thing-language instead of employing some ontologically alternative language?

Each of these questions would demand a different sort of explanation.

But once the question is clarified in this way, I think that whichever way we read the demand for explanation, the pragmatist has an available line of response—one that does not simply appeal to the ontology in question. Price, following Brandom, sketches a response to the first explanatory demand, ‘How come that we go in for descriptions at all?’ He suggests that for the pragmatist, there is still a story to be told here; the pragmatist’s answer to the general question he suggests, is no less relevant here than in other cases—and might be addressed by, for example, a Brandomian account of the function of assertive talk in general (159)—an account that doesn’t make use of Representationalist presuppositions.

While that seems apt as a response to the first explanatory demand, one might suspect that other explanatory demands remain: not of why we go in for assertions or descriptions at all, but of why we go in for a conceptual scheme that makes use of these particular terms or concepts (regardless of whether we use it in coordinating our commitments, expressing our attitudes, or whatever): why do we go in for using concepts and terms for medium-sized enduring objects like tables, chairs and trees. For the Representationalist metaphysical realist might still suggest that there must be a reason why we employ this particular conceptual scheme rather than various alternatives; perhaps because these are the things there really are, so that it becomes most important to coordinate our attitudes or practical activities about things of these sorts.

But here again there are at least two ways of understanding the (remaining) explanatory demand: (2) why do we make use of concepts for tables and tress rather than, say, concepts for witches or phlogiston or dragons? Or (3) why do we go in for concepts of tables and trees and other middle-sized dry goods, rather than empirically equivalent, but ontologically distinct, concepts of arrangements of simples, features, temporal parts, or the like?

What’s the difference between (2) and (3)? As I have characterized it, (2) involves asking why we make use of the particular terms we do—rather than some (failed) alternatives. It’s when we think of the demand in terms like (2) that we are most tempted to say: because these are the things there really are! But (2) pretty
clearly isn’t what Blackburn has in mind. Witches and dragons (if there were any) would also be medium sized dry(ish) goods, and the question seemed really to be why we go in for a language like this at all—rather than why we retain certain purported species and kind terms and jettison others. By contrast, (3) involves not contrasting our particular middle sized dry goods terms with others we’ve (mostly) rejected, but rather contrasting the ‘thing’ language at large with what we may call an ‘ontologically alternative’ language. Ontologically alternative languages have become quite prominent in post-Quinean ontological debates, providing crucial ways of showing that a revisionary view (such as eliminativism about ordinary objects) is “not absurd and ...not at variance with Universal Belief” (van Inwagen 1990, 106), and can still enable us to share information about the world. An ontologically alternative language involves us in what the neo-Quinean would think of as different ontological commitments, without involving us in any straightforward or direct changes in our empirical commitments. We can typically get to an ontologically alternative language by paraphrasing our old statements in a way that ensures that we can retain the idea that what ordinary people say in the course of normal conversation is true (though perhaps not ‘perspicuous’1), or at least ‘nearly as good as true’.2 Invoking an ontologically alternative language also enables revisionary metaphysicians to distinguish what they are saying from what only a madman (or bad scientist) would assert—so the revisionist cannot be said to be just crazy, or making an empirical mistake. Developing ontologically alternative languages has been crucial to the projects of revisionary metaphysicians like Peter van Inwagen, who uses his way of talking of particles arranged chairwise in order to show how his position is distinct from the ‘madman’s’ who simply believes there is ‘nothing in the chair-receptacle’, or that people who spoke of chairs were under some sort of illusion (1990, 105-7). Trenton Merricks similarly aims to distinguish his claim that there are no statues with an ordinary claim that there is no Bigfoot: the latter involves suspecting the believer of having made an empirical mistake—as a result of hallucinating, being the victim of a prank, or something like that. The former does not. The issue between the ontological chair-denier and chair-believer, unlike the issue between believers and disbelievers in phlogiston or Bigfoot, cannot be determined by straightforward empirical means. As Merricks puts it, “one’s visual evidence would be the same whether or not those atoms [arranged statue-wise] composed something”, making these debates not ‘straightforwardly empirical’ (2001, 9). And again this is crucial to the revisionist’s project, enabling them to reject arguments to the effect that: of course there are statues or chairs: I see them! So ontological debates, as we know them, have relied on the possibility of developing ontologically alternative languages (if these are unworkable, revisionary views can hardly get off the ground, and are subject to quick refutation). Yet the

very availability of ontologically alternative languages also enables us to make it clear why the pragmatist view, which would deflate these very debates, is plausible.\footnote{As I argue elsewhere, the availability of ontologically alternative languages also shows why Stephen Yablo’s quizzical view should be writ large—to show that there is nothing to settle debates about the existence of pants any more than there is about the existence of numbers or propositions: for it gives a way of isolating the ‘assertive content’ of sentences like ‘the pants are at the cleaners’ from the ontological presupposition that there is a unified, countable material object.}

With that much clarified, let’s go back to our questions (2) and (3):

2. Why do we go in for descriptions in terms of tables and trees, as opposed to descriptions in terms of dragons and phlogiston?

3. Why do we go in for descriptions in terms of tables and trees, as opposed to in terms of particles arranged table-wise, in terms of its tabling here, or in terms of sequenced temporal parts rather than enduring objects—that is, instead of employing some ontologically alternative (but perhaps empirically equivalent) language?

It is the former question, I suspect, that we have in mind when we are tempted to say simply: It is because there are tables and trees, and there aren’t dragons and phlogiston and dragons. But the pragmatist has a ready line of response if we interpret the question this way: the first set of concepts turns out to be successful in prediction, explanation, navigation; to not be based on imaginings, misperceptions, or other empirical mistakes; and otherwise non-problematic in ways the second doesn’t. The need for this kind of success enables us to respect Blackburn’s insistence that sufficient attention be paid to the need for a sense of accuracy in our practices that enable us to successfully measure, mark, or navigate (73). Indeed I would say that, arguably, there are empirical preconditions for the successful use of the relevant vocabulary that are met by concepts of the first but not the second group. Some may worry about a problem arising here: for any way of stating what these empirical preconditions are would seem again to commit us to a particular ontology. But one may hold that there are empirical preconditions without holding that these are stateable (we begin learning language without stating application conditions, simply responding to ostensions in various situations); and certainly without holding that there is a uniquely ontologically privileged statement of what these conditions are.\footnote{Suppose, for example, one attempts to introduce a term for a natural kind—a kind of animal, say. There may be empirical preconditions on this, for example, that I am not subject to some sort of visual illusion when I think I am perceiving something I can baptize. But one can accept that there are such empirical preconditions for successful employment of a term without thinking that there are also ontological preconditions: that there really be animals rather than mereological sums or…}

What I am rejecting is not that the world may play a role in determining whether our use of certain terms is successful, but rather that there is any uniquely privileged language in which we are to describe the role the world plays—a language that would give us a read on ‘the true ontology’.\footnote{So whether we describe the situation on Johnsonville Farm as one in which there are turkeys, or particles arranged turkeywise, or time-slices of 4-dimensional turkeys: the empirical preconditions for use of the term ‘turkey’ are fulfilled. If we describe it as one on which there is merely dirt (or particles arranged dirtwise, or…) they are not.}

But I think it is really the third sort of descriptive demand (not the second) that is at issue in preserving a global pragmatism: why do we go in for middle-sized
object concepts (like table or tree) rather than for any of various ontological alternatives? The prior pragmatist response won’t work here—for we could get equal success mapping a channel by employing concepts of particles arranged rockwise, or of rocks. And it is this third demand that is what is at issue in determining whether or not we require some specifically ontological—not scientific or empirical—justification for employing certain linguistic forms. It is also with respect to this question that the no-exit problem gains traction: the thought is that we can explain why we make use of and introduce concepts like those of right and wrong, of truth, or of number in terms that make no reference to such things—showing how these terms might be introduced on the basis of what Carnap would have called our ‘thing language’, to serve other purposes. But it is hard to see how to get a similar story going for the explaining why we use a ‘thing language’—or the corresponding concepts—at all. (Not just explaining why we use some everyday terms rather than others).

It may well be true that we cannot, in natural language, give a rule for introducing ordinary object talk (a thing language) in other terms (terms that don’t appeal to ordinary objects themselves), whereas by contrast we can do so for numbers, properties, and propositions. Of course one might locally introduce terms for particular kinds of things like blazers by rules that there is blazer, say, when a person creates an article of clothing with this precise structure, to be worn in the following contexts, by the following sorts of people... (and give a pragmatic story about why we would want such a term in our language). But that itself requires prior reference to persons and objects—the latter in the sense of middle-sized dry goods, and so that doesn’t undermine the idea that in general we need ontological justification for thinking there are middle-sized dry goods to justify introducing terms for middle-sized dry goods.

So the core challenge for the global expressivist really should be presented as explaining why it is that we go in for a thing-language at all, rather than for any of various ontologically alternative languages, and doing so in a way that doesn’t ‘make any use of the referring expressions of the discourse’—that doesn’t say: because the world really does contain tables and trees rather than particles arranged tablewise or tablings or time slices.

Nonetheless, I don’t think that these difficulties suggest that we require ‘ontological justification’ for introducing the relevant terms for medium-sized dry goods (so that we must reject pragmatism for those cases, and return to Representationalism). Instead, what they suggest is that at least some such terms are ‘semantically basic’ for us (that is, terms that cannot be learned or introduced

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6 What do I mean by ‘ontological alternatives’? Languages that would involve what a neo-Quinean would take to be different ontological commitments (say to artifacts versus mereological sums of simples) but which could be employed in stating empirically equivalent theories. (This is not to say that ontologically alternative languages must be equivalent in expressive power.) The idea that there are ontologically alternative languages has been key in neo-Quinean debates in ontology, as the paraphrasers, for example, typically hold that their languages involve distinct ontological commitments, but are equally able to capture our experience and don’t involve any empirical differences from their rivals. [Cite van Inwagen, Merricks.]

7 though one might be able to give such a rule in an ontologically alternative, non-natural language, that appealed (say) to particles arranged Xwise.
just by way of learning definitions stated in other terms) and perhaps further that some such concepts are basic for creatures like us. Indeed I think an interesting response to the ‘no exit’ problem is available by drawing on recent work in developmental psychology.

Good psychological evidence has been amassed for the idea that there are certain basic concepts that are the products of natural selection, and are tied to what Susan Carey (2009) calls ‘core cognition’ (Carey 2009, 71-72). Carey identifies these basic concepts as including concepts for middle-sized objects, agents, causation, and quantity (Carey 449). All of these concepts, Carey argues, are generated by innate input analyzers, which act on perceptual input in accord with rules built-in as a product of a long evolutionary process. The object concept, for example, involves rules in which tracking spatio-temporal continuity plays a key role in object individuation and identification, as do features like perceived rigidity and cohesiveness. For, as Carey writes: “All the work to date suggests that the core cognition of objects exhibited by young infants has a long evolutionary history” shared with cottontop tamarins (with whom our common ancestor reaches back more than 100 million years) and our closer relatives, the Rhesus macaques (2009, 96).

The idea that such concepts are conceptually basic for us gives us a way to embrace what Blackburn calls ‘the priority of the everyday’ (78) and to explain why it is that our other genealogical stories, about the origins of moral or modal or mathematical vocabulary, tend to bottom out here, and why, when asked why we go in for talk of this sort, we commonly can’t explain it in other terms—can’t do more than ‘stutter’.

It is also an interesting option because it shows a way of distancing Carnapian pragmatism from conventionalism: one needn’t hold that the conceptual scheme that underlies the most basic terms of our language (the ‘thing language’) is merely arbitrary or conventional to deny that use of those or other terms requires ontological justification. The response we give for these basic concepts is still pragmatist in spirit—we appeal to the use that possession of the relevant concepts (and ultimately terms to go with them) has for our evolutionary success in explaining why we have these concepts. But it is not conventionalist. And it is still naturalist in Price’s sense; we appeal to the results of empirical evolutionary psychology to figure out how and why we acquired certain concepts, and what use it served for us to have concepts governed by these rules.

But does it involve giving up on the pragmatist project? In a sense it suggests that we answer the question ‘Why do we have such concepts (for middle-sized dry goods, enduring medium sized material objects)?’ not exactly by way of anthropology but by evolutionary psychology. Some might suggest that that still preempts the possibility of a pragmatist approach to everyday talk—for the right evolutionary story must be that we have these concepts of medium-sized dry goods because that’s what there is in the environment, and that accuracy explains why the

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8 Thus we shouldn’t think of basic experience as merely involving perceptual primitives, and on that basis learning and constructing representations of objects, number, agency, or causality: indeed she says that there is no known proposal for how this learning could work (2009, 456).
concepts work for us and why possession of those concepts helps us and our evolutionary relatives to survive and reproduce.

But this is a totally unnecessary interpretation of the data. Natural selection doesn’t care a bit about correspondence to a Uniquely True Ontology of the World. (Indeed I suspect that it can’t do so, for reasons I’ll return to [do I?]). It cares about the success of the organism: success at surviving, success at breeding. All of this can be understood in perfectly pragmatic terms that simply appeal to the fact that having concepts governed by these rules (rather than ontological alternatives) is very useful to us.

Of course evolution does care about accuracy in a certain respect: for evolutionary success, it is (on the whole) useful to avoid making empirical mistakes, say, about where nutrition can be found, or the locations and movements of danger, or... But empirical mistakes could be avoided, and similarities and differences tracked, using a variety of ontologically distinct concepts. As revisionary ontologists since Quine have shown over and over again, there are a variety of different languages, tied to different ontologies, which one may use in conveying important empirical information. Indeed a large part of the output of neo-Quinean ontology has consisted in the development of a variety of different languages used in paraphrase strategies: that enable us to speak of a table, or particles arranged tablewise, or (in a feature-placing language) of its tabling around here, etc. As defenders of these languages have repeatedly argued, each is equally consistent with the empirical data, and usable to track relevant changes in the environment. One could have accurate tracking skills and find nutrition regardless of whether one thought or spoke of finding tomatoes or finding particles arranged tomato-wise, or finding where it’s tomatoing, etc.

Rather than appealing to its ontological accuracy, one could explain the preferableness of the objectual conceptual scheme (or thing language) by appeal to ways in which it is more cognitively efficient for creatures like us than simply tracking changing features, or individuating the world in terms of sequenced temporal parts, or tracking particles and ways they are arranged; or by showing ways in which it fits better with the constraints of our evolved perceptual system (since we can’t perceive particles), etc. In fact, since innatism is controversial, it is worth noting that this style of pragmatic explanation is fully available without commitment on whether or not these basic concepts are innate, as long as we don’t maintain that they are learned by way of detecting these specifically ontological differences in the world. In short, there are a variety of ways to address this third explanatory demand in pragmatist spirit, without a flatfooted stutter that just appeals to the existence of the very ontology articulated by that conceptual scheme.

The point here is that, if we accept that certain concepts are basic for creatures like us, and that certain terms that align with them are semantically basic, we can suitably acknowledge the priority of the everyday, without thinking that the only explanation that can be given of why we have terms for middle-sized dry goods (rather than employing some ontologically alternative conceptual scheme) is that there are middle-sized dry-goods, taken in the sense of asserting that that (and not the monist, trope-theorist, nihilist’s or organicist’s ontology) is the ‘true ontology’, giving us ‘ontological justification’ for introducing this range of concepts and terms.
rather than any ontological alternatives. Here as elsewhere, no such ontological justification is needed, and we can justifiably approach the relevant language in a pragmatist spirit.9

The possibility of ontologically alternative languages also gives a hope that, though we tend to stutter, we could if pressed come up with a way of stating a genealogical story about why we go in for talk of tables and chairs in a way that ‘eschews any use of the referring expressions of the discourse’ (in Blackburn’s terms; or, in Williams’ terminology, that is ‘ontologically conservative’). This might, e.g., be a story told first in feature-placing terms which explained why it is in situations like this that creatures like us tend to employ a material object concept, and think and say ‘there’s a table there’. (But this does not mean that we should take the feature-placing language itself to be more ‘ontologically revealing’.) If even the rules of use for our ordinary object concepts may be understood as ‘ontologically conservative’ in this way, that eliminates a reason for thinking there must be a bifurcation between ordinary object talk and moral and modal talk of a sort that might return us to metaphysics.

[One way of characterizing this issue, in line with work by Price and Williams, is in terms of whether or not talk of ordinary objects (or, more technically, EMUs for these terms) can be ontologically conservative: not involving the use of the term whose meaning is being analyzed (so that in that sense the rules for proper use of the term don’t appeal to things of that kind existing) (141). Williams suggests that one place to draw the sort of bifurcation the (merely) local expressivist was looking for is between those terms that have EMUs that are and are not ontologically conservative. The EMU for ‘Ought,’ he argues, is conservative, while the EMU for ‘red’ is not, as its E-clause appeals to a reliable discriminative responsive dispositions… to report ‘x is red’ only in the presence of a red thing. Price seems to agree with the importance of the distinction, suggesting that “What it takes to return us to metaphysics is…an ontologically non-conservative EMU” (2013, 185).

But part of what I have tried to show elsewhere is a way of understanding how rules of use for our ordinary object terms may be ‘ontologically conservative’ in (roughly) this way—indeed to deny that we need any that are not ontologically conservative. One way to see this is that the E-clause of an EMU for ‘table’ (or ‘red’) need not be stated in those very terms: one can instead introduce the term ostensively (apply it in conditions like this and this, not like this and this) or using ontologically alternative terminology (where particles are arranged in this way, apply ‘table’) —and the key point is that we don’t have to think that there is some unique privileged language in which the E conditions must be expressed. [One further way to tie this into Williams is to suggest that what ontologically alternative languages have in common is the E-clause (‘apply it in conditions like these’); they

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9 And of course, once we employ these concepts, we very often easily reach the conclusions that there are tables, trees and the like. And then it becomes not at all silly to say ‘we use the concepts of tree and table and not of witch and dragon because there are trees (and not dragons),’ but no ontological read is needed on this: it simply alludes to the success of the first, and the failure of the second.
may differ in the I-clause (tying ‘table’ inferentially to ‘furniture’, ‘sitting’, etc., and to norms of use), and may overlap in the function clause: both may have a kind of function of tracking certain sorts of changes in the world, but ‘table’ marry with this the function of doing so while being cognitively efficient and easy to use for creatures with our perceptual apparatus (which cannot make out particles); ‘particles arranged tablewise’ with the function of doing so while [attempting to] avoid commitment to a certain kind of ontology. (Part of my arguments have been to show that that is a misguided purpose.)

2. Respecting differences

I have argued so far that ordinary object talks doesn’t require ‘ontological vindication’ or Representationalist presuppositions after all, so that the pragmatist approach can be as applicable there as elsewhere. But are there huge asymmetries between common sense talk and the suspect forms of talk, which should nonetheless lead us to a bifurcated view, rather than a form of global pragmatism?

Blackburn argues that, by their own lights, pragmatists should see their view as ‘vindicating’ realism about chairs and tables and other ordinary objects. For the language that “embraces external, independent, public objects earns its living. It works, and nothing else of which we have the faintest conception does so. So we are to embrace it” (82). This might, though, lead us naturally to a merely local form of pragmatism: accepting realism about ordinary objects, say, while giving an expressivist account of discourse about the modal, moral or mathematical.

Couldn’t a pragmatist, however, say the same for the suspect discourse about the mathematical, moral or modal, however, and once again adopt a global view? That is, we might in each case say that, given that the form of discourse earns its keep, we should be realists about the relevant entities under discussion.

Blackburn cautions against generalizing this result to matters moral, modal, and the like, noting:

...there is a huge asymmetry between the case of common sense and what I called the coastal waters of science, on the one hand, and cases like possible worlds, numbers, and rights and duties or the passage of time on the other. For in embracing the common-sense scheme we embrace not only the tables and chairs it posits but a distinct view about our relation to them. (82)

What are these huge asymmetries, and can the pragmatist do them justice, while retaining a form of realism about the moral, modal, and mathematical?

Blackburn identifies several points of contrast that seem onto something:

- **Tracking and sensitivity:** We think of ourselves as causally influenced by tables and chairs, and sensitive to their ‘appearances and changes’: “if my chair collapses I will notice it, ...if the table dances around or bursts into flames I will register that, ... were it to grow in size it would have all kinds of other consequences that I could also register, and so on…” (82)

- **Automaticity:** Our (perceptual) registering of common-sense entities is “outside our control and outside the influence of other cognitive functions” (whereas this is not the case, e.g. for ethics)
• **Explanation:** Common sense entities are ‘directly witnessed’ and ‘Their whole life... consists in their role as systematizers and explainers of experience’ (83) As a result ‘There is therefore no option of embracing the scheme while holding back on its own explanations of why we do so’ in these cases, though doing so is quite plausible for possible worlds and the like (83).

These asymmetries, Blackburn seems to suggest, give us reason to hesitate about simply adopting a form of global pragmatism, for they might give us reason to reserve (a form of) realism for the ordinary objects of the common sense world that we hold back for the objects apparently referred to by the areas of discourse we are (locally) pragmatist about.

I agree that there are important differences here that ought to be respected. But I think they can be respected from within a kind of global pragmatist view that denies that we ever need ontological justification for introducing or retaining a certain form of discourse (though we may make inferences from truths of the discourse to simple realist claims about the objects) [Indeed that denies that we ever need a non-conservative EMU.]

The first asymmetry, marking the role terms for ordinary objects (but not for numbers or moral properties) play in tracking and world-sensitivity, is something Price has already tried to respect and preserve in drawing a distinction between E(xternal)-representations, which involve environmental tracking, covariation with environmental conditions, etc., and I(nternal)-representations, which give priority to internal connections, and are governed primarily by functional/inferential role (around 12 of ‘From quasi-realism to global expressivism’). This kind of insight can be preserved on the current suggestion as well: indeed we can see our semantically basic terms (and allied ordinary object concepts) as having primarily this sort of world-tracking function. By contrast, we introduce terms for moral facts, modal properties, or numbers with other functions—whether of expressing attitudes, conveying semantic rules, or enabling us to state in finite form what would otherwise require infinite expression [cite Yablo on this last, Blackburn and me on the others]. But we may acknowledge these differences in function without thinking that we require ontological justification for introducing the thing/language rather than an ontological alternative (that would also enable us to engage in accurate tracking etc.) Indeed in their functioning as E-representations, ordinary object terms need not differ from ontologically alternative languages in which we could track and retain sensitivity to similarly relevant elements of the environment. (We could with equal sensitivity report that the table was moved to the left or that the particles arranged tablewise were moved to the left [without affecting their relative arrangement]). So we can retain our pragmatism while respecting the difference between terms that are introduced to serve a tracking and world-sensitivity function from those that serve other functions.

The automaticity point comes naturally with the idea floated above, that our basic object concept is fundamental for us, perhaps even built-in as a product of a long evolutionary process—and so not conventional, or under our cognitive control, nor an optional, if useful ‘add on’ to our conceptual scheme, but its very starting place. Again, we can acknowledge and accept that difference between our ordinary
object concepts and terms and those for the moral, mathematical, or modal, without thinking that the difference lies in that the former (and not the latter) requires an ontological explanation.

The ‘explanation’ point can be preserved as well. Blackburn says that common sense entities ‘whole life... consists in their role as systematizers and explainers of experience’ (83). But we can acknowledge that by noting that the ‘entry rules’ for our ordinary object terms and concepts involve observational and perceptual conditions, and their appropriate use relies on certain empirical presuppositions in such a way that, if those fail, we are not entitled to say that there are the relevant objects, and the use of the terms in explanations being, in Yablo’s terms, ‘wrecked’. Indeed terms for ordinary objects might have certain empirical preconditions for their successful use—marking the difference between conditions under which we succeed or fail in our attempts to introduce a term for a new person, species, or artifact (we might fail in introducing such a term if we are suffering from some sort of perceptual illusion, for example).

Other, more derivative terms might serve a different purpose; terms for numbers, propositions, properties, etc. may serve a useful role in explanation (enabling us to state our explanations and laws more simply or briefly, for example). But the use of these terms seems to carry with it no empirical presuppositions that might fail. Introduction rules for these derivative terms may be insulated from such potential failings (we can move from ‘there are five cups’ to ‘there is a number, five’, regardless of whether we are suffering from perceptual illusion). In the words of Stephen Schiffer there is no ‘algorithm for their elimination’. Moreover, even if one thought that numbers or propositions could turn out to fail to exist (a thought I myself deny we can really make sense of), as Stephen Yablo has pointed out [cite], their failure to exist would make no difference to the success of the explanations they contribute to. (In this regard, they are quite unlike platypuses or electrons.) So we can still capture a difference in the roles terms of these kinds play in explanations, without being Representationalists about terms of the first sort while holding this back from terms of the second.

Blackburn says that, given that their whole point is to systematize experience, there is no prospect of embracing the common sense conceptual scheme without explaining our possession of it by saying roughly that we have that conceptual scheme because those are the things there are. But again I suspect that the feeling here comes from considering the second rather than the third explanatory demand. We can’t say why we have this conceptual scheme rather than an ontologically alternative but empirically equivalent one by saying that only the former can play a role in systematizing and explaining experience, for (given empirical equivalence) we could just as well systematize and explain experience in terms that appeal to particles arranged tablewise as to tables. The pragmatist may acknowledge the role of common sense terms in systematizing and explaining experience, while denying that ontological justification is needed or available for adopting one set of worldly concepts or terms over an ontologically distinct set (there, we might again look to pragmatic criteria that make our objectual scheme more efficient or user-friendly, more suited to creatures with our perceptual apparatus (which can’t make out particles)).
In sum, I think that it’s undeniably true that there are ’huge asymmetries’ between terms that play a tracking function (including but not limited to those that are tied to conceptually basic concepts) and those that serve other functions instead. We need to respect those differences in our theorizing. But once one sees key question as (3) why we go in for a thing-language rather than adopting one of a number of merely ontologically alternative conceptual schemes, the feeling that there is a difference in the sense that some form of ontological justification is needed for introducing thing talk but not number talk—begins to fade away. Our basic pragmatist approach, that insists that our use of a language form doesn’t require ontological justification, remains intact (though proper use of some language forms (and not others) may require that certain empirical preconditions be met).

If what I’ve said is correct, then even in the case of terms for ordinary objects we can begin by aiming to explain why we would want to have a certain form of discourse (answering that without prior commitment to the relevant ontology), and go on (with Michael Williams) to ask what rules the terms of that discourse follow that enable them to fulfill that function. Finally, using those rules, we may ask whether the terms of that discourse refer—whether there are the entities in question. But as I have argued elsewhere (forthcoming), once the question is asked in that way, it is typically easy to answer. In some cases, the way the terms (say for numbers or propositions) are introduced, guarantees that they refer. In other cases (say, terms for trees or platypuses), one must look to the world—but just engage in normal observation or empirical investigation to check if empirical preconditions are met, not heavy-duty ontology—to see if they refer.

So just as these differences in the origin and functions of our terms don’t make a difference with respect to whether one can retain a pragmatist approach, I also think they don’t lead to differences in whether one should say there really are the entities in question. I think we should adopt a form of simple realism about ordinary objects, numbers, duties, and modal facts alike; that there are such things in the only sense these terms have. We don’t need a bifurcated realism about the entities we accept.

And in each case, we can retain the core pragmatist idea that introduction of the relevant conceptual or linguistic form does not require ‘ontological justification’ (though in some cases and not others it has empirical presuppositions). Instead, we may introduce, for various purposes, all manner of ontologically alternative languages (provided their empirical presuppositions don’t fail) and build on these for other purposes. And in each case we can hope to get a pragmatic—anthropological, genealogical, or perhaps even evolutionary—story about the use and function of linguistic forms like these, where that needn’t be a matter of saying (in flatfooted Representationalist mode): we employ these linguistic forms because they correspond to the things there really are.

4. The Consequences of Global Pragmatism

So far I have aimed to show how a contemporary pragmatist can extend her view globally, to include talk about ordinary objects as much as about odd things like the moral or modal, while still respecting the priority of the everyday, and the huge asymmetries between these different forms of discourse. Seeing global
pragmatism in this way also makes the view show up importantly differently from how it is traditionally conceived. This is not your grandfather’s pragmatism. So let’s close by examining its consequences both for first-order ontology and for metaontology.

For first-order ontology: If we accept the pragmatist approach (globally), then, following the linguistic priority thesis, we begin not by asking in a vacuum: are there numbers, properties, moral facts, or tables? Instead, we look to the function of the discourse, and move from there to attempt to identify the rules governing the key terms: how are number terms introduced? What function do they serve for us? (Enabling us to state what would otherwise be infinitely long laws in finite form). We can then move from the function to give an account of meaning in terms of identifying the rules that govern these terms, enabling them to fulfill their function (Are we entitled to simply infer from ‘there are 3 cups on the table’ to ‘the number of cups is three’?). It is these rules (entry rules for which sometimes do and sometimes do not rely on empirical conditions) that then enable us to see whether the conditions for proper employment of the term are fulfilled—and so to make conclusions about whether there are numbers, properties, moral facts, or tables. Thus the global pragmatist position does not render existence questions unanswerable—instead it makes answering them a straightforward matter of seeing whether the relevant rules lead to the entailment, or the relevant conditions are fulfilled. (It may be somewhat less straightforward in cases where we have worries that there may be incoherencies in the rules—but I’ll leave those worries to the side here). As long as simple mistakes aren’t being made (empirically or by having incoherent rules), the results we get to our existence questions are generally going to be positive. So the global pragmatist view, in short, fits naturally with the easy approach to ontological questions (what Carnap treated as internal questions) that I have defended at length elsewhere (2015).

Now this is an important result. For pragmatist views are often shunned on suspicion of being unacceptably anti-realist. But the first-order ontological views that come out of this global pragmatist approach are typically nothing other than straightforward realism about the disputed entities. The pragmatist, so conceived, does not say that we should accept that there are tables or trees because it is useful for us to do so (rather than because ‘there really are such things’). Rather, she says that we adopt a conceptual scheme that includes objectual terms and the like (rather than an ontologically alternative scheme) because employing such a scheme is useful for creatures like us (with our perceptual apparatus, cognitive limitations, evolutionary niche…). But having adopted that scheme, it is then (given a small amount of ordinary experience) an easy matter to conclude that there (really) are such things as tables and trees—to be straightforward realists about them. (It of course does not rule out also concluding that there are particles arranged tablewise, table time slices, or the like—though we may lack motivation for utilizing these alternative conceptual schemes. So it tells us that there are tables and trees, but not that this is an exclusive True Ontology of the World). And the objects we end up accepting are generally (except in the obvious cases of social and cultural objects) mind and language independent. So it’s not anti-realist in denying that there are
mind-independent objects and kinds. The global pragmatist approach, then, gives us a straightforward realism about all the entities you ever wanted (and more!).

The more controversial consequences of the global pragmatist approach come out at the metaontological level. For if we accept this approach, we also end up with the view that it is misguided to ask of various ontologically alternative languages which is the right one, though we can ask which is best for various purposes. We also end up rejecting all traditional metaphysics-first style arguments, whether that involves the eliminativist denying that there are moral properties and so suggesting that we must take all our moral discourse to be in error; or the traditional realist saying we have good reason to posit moral properties and thus accept that our moral discourse is acceptable and can be true; or even the fictionalist who says that as there’s nothing to decide the ontological issue we’d better just take our moral discourse in a fictionalist light, as saying what is right or wrong according to some moral story. In fact, to the extent that it leads to an easy approach to answering ontological questions, it renders pointless a great many debates about whether entities of various sorts ‘really exist’. It also suggests a different, and potentially more fruitful, approach to various philosophical problems: one that begins not by trying to argue about whether the relevant objects ‘really exist’, but rather that begins by trying to analyze the function of the discourse and the rules that give the terms their meaning and (often) come to entitle us to speak of the objects.

As I mentioned at the outset, a standard motivation for adopting a local form of pragmatism is that it enables us to sidestep the traditional ontological ‘placement’ problems and epistemic problems plaguing areas of discourse like the moral and the modal. We can now see that global pragmatism has a similar capacity—not so much for dissolving these problems regarding ordinary objects like tables (where the problems might be thought not to arise)—but rather for dissolving these kinds of problems for ontology: how can we ‘place’ in the natural world those features that would make a merely ontological difference—making a difference, say, between situations in which particles arranged in certain ways did versus did not compose something? And how could we come to know what the uniquely true ontological view is?

As we have seen, what distinguishes the pragmatist view from that of the serious ontologist is not any standard first-order realist claim, but rather rejecting the ontology-first approach that says we must first settle ontological questions about what exists before we can determine whether or not we are justified in introducing (or retaining) pieces of terminology (though sometimes we must settle

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10 At the first-order level, the approach (as I have argued elsewhere) typically leads us to a kind of easy argument for simple (not explanatory) realism about the entities in question. Terms may be introduced to serve all kinds of functions, but if the rules of use that govern them are in good order and entitle us to introduce nominalized forms (in non-problematic ways), we are entitled to conclude that there are the relevant entities (properties, numbers, facts...). So first-order debates are generally easily resolved in the positive. [But making this kind of case requires a detour through examining what the rules of use are for the contested terms, and Ted will deny that there are analyticities that make this easy...]

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empirical questions to be so justified!). For that reason also, it denies that there is a unique answer to the question of which of various ontologically alternative languages is the uniquely correct one. They may differ in their expressive power or other pragmatic virtues, but on this view there is no prospect of beginning with ontology to figure out which of these languages correctly matches it—indeed they may (if no internal problems with the rules arise, nor failures of external empirical propositions) all be fine in the sense that we have reason to say that there are the things named by each.

Once we see global pragmatism in this light—as part of a rejection of the idea that some forms of language (and not others) properly mirror the ontological structure of reality, but not as rejecting the idea that there really are cats and not dragons, oxygen but not phlogiston—I think it becomes far more palatable and interesting than both its opponents, and even some of its proponents, had realized. And once we see this, perhaps more will be ready to go global.
So the global pragmatism I have argued for does not interfere with a first-order realism, but does undermine a kind of traditional neo-Quinean metaontology—and with it many traditional metaphysical arguments. Does it conflict with the idea that the world has structure?

Ted Sider criticizes the idea that “what distinguishes the class of electrons, as opposed to the class of the electrons-or-cows, is just that humans have a simple predicate for the former class, find it psychologically more natural to think in terms of ‘electron’, and so on”, saying “It is really, really hard to believe that the fact that electrons go together, in a way that electrons-or-cows do not, is merely a reflection of something about us”... If structure is just a reflection of our language (or whatever) then so are the facts about similarity, intrinsicality, laws of nature, the intrinsic structure of space and time... And this is incredible” (2011, 18). But a pragmatist of the sort discussed here also needn’t reject the idea of structure in view in this example: she needn’t deny that the world contains objective (empirical) similarities and differences, indeed similarities and differences many of our terms have the function of tracking, for different purposes. Nor need she deny that there are good reasons for thinking that electrons go together in a way that electron-or-cows don’t. Plausibly, for example, many of our scientific terms are designed to track empirical similarities, differences, and changes in ways that will figure effectively in lawful predictions. The concept of ‘electron’ has a purpose of serving in scientific explanations and predictions—a purpose that would be woefully underserved by the concept ‘electron or cow’. (Indeed it is hard to conceive of any purpose that would be served by that concept.) Denying that our use of certain terms has ontological presuppositions is not a matter of denying that the world has various kinds of empirically detectable structure, which it is often very much in our interests to track.

The pragmatist needn’t even deny the ‘knee jerk realist’ idea (Sider 2011, 18) that the point of much of our inquiry is, in a sense, to ‘conform itself to the world’: this indeed is captured for the pragmatist in the idea that many of our everyday and scientific terms are e-representations, designed to track and co-vary with certain environmental conditions.

Here I have only aimed to preserve a central thread of pragmatism—the anti-metaphysical/anti-Representationalist idea that employing a particular form of language does not (ever) require ontological justification; that we can give a

11 Other disjunctive concepts, however, such as ‘cow or duck or sheep or horse or goat or pig raised on a farm’ may have a conceivable legal or institutional purpose.
pragmatist story of why we would want to go in for this form of discourse without ever having to appeal to things of that very (ontological) kind in our explanation.

This sheds some new light on what it is to accept a form of pragmatism even for ordinary discourse. In fact in general (as I have argued at length elsewhere) the pragmatist approach that begins by identifying the function of the relevant discourse, and the rules the terms follow that enable them to fulfill that function, typically enables us to offer straightforward ‘easy’ arguments that there are entities of each of these different sorts—provided the rules are well-formed and entitle us to reach that conclusion, and that no empirical mistakes are being made. But establishing that takes a longer story than I have time for here.

What consequences does this have for metaontological debates? The pragmatist approach, writ large, suggests that traditional ontological debates go astray and are misconceived if they take the metaphysics-first approach, whether that involves the eliminativist denying that there are moral properties and so suggesting that we must take all our moral discourse to be in error; or the traditional realist saying we have good reason to posit moral properties and thus accept that our moral discourse is acceptable and can be true; or even the fictionalist who says that as there’s nothing to decide the ontological issue we’d better just take our moral discourse in a fictionalist light, as saying what is right or wrong according to some moral story.12

3. A reason to go global

But is he really subject to these problems that arise in not being super-realist about the modal?]

So far I have argued that Blackburn’s explanatory demand can be interpreted in three ways, each of which the global pragmatist has something to say about. I have also argued that the key explanation required is the third: to say why we go in for a ‘thing’ language at all, rather than some ontologically alternative scheme, without presupposing that it’s because it (rather than the others) accurately represents or corresponds to the real objectual structure of the world. Seeing the key explanatory demand as the third—explaining why we have this rather than some ontologically (but not empirically) alternative language does more, however, than help us retain the idea that we don’t need ontological justification to explain why we

12 At the first-order level, the approach (as I have argued elsewhere) typically leads us to a kind of easy argument for simple (not explanatory) realism about the entities in question. Terms may be introduced to serve all kinds of functions, but if the rules of use that govern them are in good order and entitle us to introduce nominalized forms (in non-problematic ways), we are entitled to conclude that there are the relevant entities (properties, numbers, facts…). So first-order debates are generally easily resolved in the positive. [But making this kind of case requires a detour through examining what the rules of use are for the contested terms, and Ted will deny that there are analyticities that make this easy…]
might make use of everyday discourse (with its terms for enduring medium-sized objects). It also gives us a new way of seeing why—if we adopt local expressivism about the modal—we couldn’t hope to get this sort of justification. And this then gives us reason to hold that those who are tempted by modal pragmatism should after all go global with their pragmatism.

Modal discourse is a prime target for expressivists, from Ryle and Sellars to Brandom, Blackburn, and me. Blackburn suggested that saying that something is necessary, should be taken as an expression of the fact that we find its denial inconceivable: we can make nothing of denials of it, or of what would count as a recalcitrant experience, we can’t see how we could have gone wrong in thinking it true (1987/1993, 70). Brandom treats modal vocabulary as enabling us to state explicitly the conceptual commitments that are implicit in what one is doing in using ordinary empirical vocabulary, reasoning with it, making, accepting, or rejecting inferences and so on. And I have been developing a related view that takes claims of metaphysical necessity to be object-language expressions of constitutive rules of use for the relevant terms.

Suppose for a moment that you accept some form of expressivism about the modal. Then you think the right place to look to explain why we can (truly) say that, for example, the lump but not the statue could survive the squishing, is not to appeal to some modal features of the world that explain what makes it true, but rather to appeal to our imaginative capacities, the constitutive rules associated with our use of ‘lump’ versus ‘statue’ terminology, or something like that. As modal expressivists, in short, we give up on the idea that we must appeal to some modal features that we are describing of the world to explain our modal discourse, its ability to be true and false, and so on. (Though this doesn’t mean that we give up on speaking truly of modal features of the world.) And we think that’s a good thing—since it avoids the well-known placement problem, Humean problems of figuring out how we could detect the modal properties, acquire knowledge of them, or how they could make a causal difference (the lump and statue seem to have all the same causal capacities and ‘non-sortalish’ properties).

But then suppose we only wanted to be local expressivists about modal language, but not about our ordinary common-sense language: we thought we needed ontological justification for introducing the common-sense ‘thing’ language—not empirical justification (that might, e.g. come from reassurance that we are not suffering some sort of perceptual illusion or empirical error), but rather (answering the third explanatory demand) justification for employing the (middle-sized) ‘thing’ language rather than an ontologically alternative language of particles arranged thing-wise, or a feature-placing language, or a language of series’ of temporal parts, or…

What sort of justification could we hope to get? It wouldn’t be a justification based in some perceptual or empirical difference, for (as purveyors of ontologically alternative languages are keen to point out) the languages each enable us to say things perfectly consistent with our experience, and that are empirically equivalent. To think of our thing language as ontologically justified thus requires more than thinking that certain empirical criteria are met, or empirical mistakes avoided: it requires thinking that the world gives us ontological justification for adopting this
set of concepts rather than the alternatives, e.g. for working with enduring object concepts rather than with ontologically alternative concepts that would also track environmental changes, but follow different rules for assigning unity, identity, and persistence.\textsuperscript{13} The differences in these concept sets are not empirical—they are modal and individuative: differences in the conditions under which the entities in question exist, would persist, would be identical or distinct, and so on.\textsuperscript{14} To think that there is some ontological justification required to justify speaking in a language of enduring things rather than of temporal parts, for example, would require thinking that there is some worldly justification for thinking that a certain ‘modal profile’ is instantiated, and that what I am perceiving has certain unity, identity, and persistence conditions rather than others.

But that, of course, is what the (local) modal expressivist denies, thinking of our modal claims not as reports justified by observing certain modal features of the world, but rather seeing, e.g. claims that a given statement is impossible as an expression of our inability to make anything of the idea that it is true (Blackburn 1993, 70), or of our claims that something is necessary as object-language expressions of constitutive rules governing our use of the relevant terms (me).

So, if we are local expressivists about the modal, then we \textit{can’t} think that ontological justification is required for adopting ordinary language talk rather than some ontological alternative. We may need \textit{empirical} justification for introducing a term to refer to a platypus or (equally) to particles arranged platypus-wise or to introduce an adverb that can be used to tell us ‘it’s platypusing around here’ (empirical justification that would have failed if platypus-relevant reports—in whatever language—had turned out to be a hoax). Or we might seek reassurance that our concept is in order, not containing hidden contradictions or related problems.\textsuperscript{15} But local expressivists about modality can’t hope to explain why we employ objectual terms rather than making do with arrangement terms or adverbial terms by saying \textit{because the former and not the latter correspond to the true ontology}—and so should abandon Representationalism with respect to this area of discourse as well.

This also connects with the evolutionary point: we also can’t hope to get a world-first causal-evolutionary explanation of why we evolved to possess the thing-language rather than an ontological alternative, for there are no causal differences

\textsuperscript{13} Indeed a recurring reason given for rejecting an ontology of ordinary objects comes from thoughts that there just aren’t (or can’t be) objects with the relevant ‘modal profile’: that could survive changes in their parts, that could have different persistence conditions from the lumps that constitute them, that could have vague identity or persistence conditions

\textsuperscript{14} Blackburn expresses skepticism of views that deny that our modal and descriptive discourse can be ‘disentangled’ (83); but the point here is that local expressivists about the modal are in no position to think any worldly/ontological justification could possibly be given for adopting our common-sense conceptual scheme over those that are mere ‘ontological alternatives’.

\textsuperscript{15} Many debates about ordinary objects can really be understood as worries about bringing in a linguistic/conceptual scheme like this: that it will involve us in conflicts (with other principles we accept, or internal contradictions) or not give us enough clarity (given vagueness) to answer questions or resolve problems. These are all debates and discussions we can have. But they are best understood as debates about the consistency or advisability of introducing this language—not as debates about whether there ‘really’ are such objects.
between the statue and the lump, or between the table and particles arranged tablewise that could make a difference to our experience or help explain (in a bottom-up, from the correct ontology of the world way) why we have one set of concepts rather than an ontological alternative. Instead, we must appeal to ways in which it might be cognitively preferable for creatures like us, and might make a causal difference to us to possess one set of concepts rather than another, to explain why it might be advantageous to use this language rather than an ontological competitor.