

Huw Price

Huw Price did not plan to go into philosophy originally—as an undergraduate at ANU he hoped initially to become an astronomer. However his interests turned to pure mathematics then to philosophy, and he completed his BA with honours in both subjects. During his philosophy honours year he encountered both the philosophy of time, which was to become a long-term interest, and Hugh Mellor (then visiting ANU), who was to become his PhD supervisor at Cambridge. Moving to Cambridge after an MSc in Mathematics at Oxford, he wrote his PhD thesis on the question of factuality versus non-factuality in talk of probability, leading to a series of published articles (including Price 1983; Price 1984b; Price 1986). By this stage, he had held a Rothmans postdoctoral fellowship at ANU, and an ARC research fellowship at UNSW.

Price's work divides into two main areas. The first is a cosmological inquiry into the asymmetry of time and related issues. His key work here is his book, *Time's Arrow and Archimedes' Point* (1996). There he argues that our thinking about time (not only in armchair philosophy but even in theoretical physics) is crucially and inappropriately anthropocentric. We *experience* time as asymmetric because we act into the future, not the past, which leads us to project this asymmetry onto reality in ways which are not warranted by the facts. For instance, we like to think of time as 'flowing forwards', we fail to see that some of the arguments which support a Big Bang at the 'beginning' of the Universe would equally support a Big Crunch at the 'end', and we fail to consider the possibility of backwards causation where it might be helpful. As a remedy for such anthropomorphism, Price advocates a position which he calls the 'view from no-when'.

Somewhat controversially, he uses a commitment to backwards causation (earlier broached in Price 1984a) to frame an interpretation of quantum theory which he claims solves the problem of non-locality, whereby particles widely separated in space appear to be causally entangled. Many philosophers have praised this book for its provocative originality and rich and complex discussion. Some physicists, however, have claimed that it makes controversial empirical claims that are insufficiently worked out in actual physical equations to yet deserve credence. After publication of the book Price has further pursued its themes in many papers, including Price 1997b, 2002, and 2006.

Price has done much related work on causation, arguing that causal asymmetry also is merely an artifact of the agent-perspective with which humans view the world (Price 1991; Price 1992). In Price and Menzies 1993, he defends a general theory of causation defined in terms of agency—a version of the so-called 'manipulability' view of causation (albeit probabilistic rather than deterministic). This work on causation connects to the second major strand of Price's research, which developed from his early defence of a non-factualist account of single-case probability—the nature and tenability of the general distinction between factual and non-factual uses of language. In his first book, *Facts and the Function of Truth* (1988), he argued that the distinction is ungrounded, and began to propose in its place a kind of global expressivist pluralism about the uses of declarative language, reminiscent of the later Wittgenstein. These researches then sparked an interest in *pragmatism*. Price's pragmatism is derived much more from Ramsey, Blackburn and the later Wittgenstein than from James, Dewey or Peirce (though lately he does react against and discuss the American pragmatists Rorty and Brandom). It may be characterised by a strategy which he applies to a wide variety of philosophical problems. The strategy involves taking traditional questions of the form, 'What is X?', which he often characterizes as 'metaphysical' questions, and arguing that our focus should be shifted to 'non-metaphysical' questions of the form, 'What use is the concept of X to creatures like us?'. He

characterises this approach as producing *explanations* of the use of terms, rather than philosophical analyses.

He has applied this strategy most sustainedly to truth, initially in Price (1988). In answer to the question, ‘What use is the concept of truth to us?’, he suggests that the concept encourages speakers to resolve their disagreements. In later work (including Price 1998a, 2003), he distinguishes three ‘norms of assertion’ which he claims generate increasing levels of objectivity in discourse. The first norm, ‘subjective assertibility’, merely recommends sincere avowal of assertions, resulting in a community which expresses mere opinions of equal apparent value. The second norm, ‘objective assertibility’, recommends that assertions be justified by reasons, but if two people make assertions which disagree this is unproblematic if they both have reasons for them. Only the third norm, seeking the truth, requires that disagreements be *resolved* (although at this point providing a non-question-begging account of what might constitute ‘resolution’ of a disagreement will be crucial).

As already noted, Price has also applied his pragmatist strategy to *causation*, thus connecting his pragmatism to his interests in such issues as time-asymmetry. Thus in Price (2001), he writes that a philosophical account of causation “needs to begin by playing close attention to the role of the concept concerned in the practice of the creatures who use it.” These ideas are developed at greater length in Price (2007a). In Price (1998b), he makes use of pragmatism in discussions of *response-dependence*, arguing that the biconditionals used by response-dependence theorists to define concepts do not give *content-conditions* but *usage-conditions*. As an example he discusses the difference in ethics between self-descriptivism, the view that when we make moral claims we are talking about our own attitudes of, say, approval or disgust, and expressivism, the view that we can explain moral claims as expressions of, say, approval or disgust.

As a pragmatist he positions himself as something of a renegade against mainstream Australian analytic philosophy. He does retain a strong commitment to *naturalism*, though he is adamant that it is not a metaphysical claim. It does however lead him to problematise any normative claim which is not derivable from current scientific theory. Thus in Price (1997a), he singles out “morality, modality, meaning and the mental” as “threatened by the rise of modern science.” He attempts to rescue them by claiming that “these descriptive utterances are functionally distinct from scientific descriptions of the natural world...”. Rather than ceding these ‘M-worlds’ any ontological status, however, he invokes Carnap’s claim in “Empiricism, Semantics and Ontology” that judgments of ontological status cannot be made from an epistemic stance independent of choices to participate in a given theoretic framework (such as contemporary physics, ethics, and so on). This view is presented again and related to Quine’s naturalism in Price (2007b). As noted earlier, Price contrasts himself with his fellow-pragmatist Rorty. One key point of difference is that (as noted above) he wishes to retain the idea that truth is a normative constraint on assertion. At the same time, however, he contrasts himself with Brandom insofar as he does not wish to “build a substantial notion of representational content from expressivist and pragmatist raw materials” (Price 2008).

Price has worked at the University of Sydney since 1989, except for a brief period as Professor of Logic and Metaphysics at the University of Edinburgh. He is now an ARC Federation Fellow and Challis Professor of Philosophy, and heads the Centre for Time in the Department of Philosophy. This centre was established in 2002 in association with his Federation Fellowship, and awarded continued funding in 2007. He is a Fellow and Member of Council of the Australian Academy of the Humanities, and a Past President of the AAP. He was consulting

editor for the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* during 1995-2006, and is an associate editor of the *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* and a member of the editorial boards of *Contemporary Pragmatism, Logic and Philosophy of Science*, and the *Routledge International Library of Philosophy*. A collection of his essays on pragmatism and naturalism is forthcoming from OUP, and he is also co-editor (with Richard Corry) of *Causation, Physics and the Constitution of Reality: Russell's Republic Revisited* (2007).

References

Books:

- Price, Huw. 1988. *Facts and the Function of Truth*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell. (Second edition forthcoming from Oxford University Press.)
- Price, Huw. 1996. *Time's Arrow and Archimedes' Point: New Directions for the Physics of Time*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Articles:

- Price, Huw. 1983. "Does 'Probably' modify sense?" *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* **61**: 396—408.
- Price, Huw. 1984a. "The philosophy and physics of affecting the past". *Synthese* **16**: 299—323.
- Price, Huw. 1984b. "Mellor, chance and the single case". *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* **35**: 11—23.
- Price, Huw. 1986. "Conditional credence". *Mind* **95**: 18—36.
- Price, Huw. 1991. "Agency and probabilistic causality". *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* **42**: 157—176.
- Price, Huw. 1992. "Agency and causal asymmetry". *Mind* **101**: 501—520.
- Price, Huw; Menzies, Peter. 1993. "Causation as a secondary quality". *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* **44**: 187—203.
- Price, Huw. 1997a. "Naturalism and the fate of the M-worlds". *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supp.* **71**: 247—267.
- Price, Huw. 1997b. "Time symmetry in microphysics". *Philosophy of Science* **64**: 235-244.
- Price, Huw. 1998a. "Three norms of assertibility, or how the MOA became extinct". In Tomberlin, J., ed., *Philosophical Perspectives* **12**: 41—54.
- Price, Huw. 1998b. "Two paths to pragmatism II". Casati, R. and Tappolet, C., eds., *European Review of Philosophy* **3**: 109—147.
- Price, Huw. 2001. "Causation in the special sciences: the case for pragmatism". In Domenico Costantini, Maria Carla Galavotti and Patrick Suppes, eds., *Stochastic Causality*. Stanford: CSLI Publications.
- Price, Huw. 2002. "Boltzmann's time bomb". *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science*, **53**: 83—119.
- Price, Huw. 2003. "Truth as convenient friction". *Journal of Philosophy* **100**: 167—190.
- Price, Huw. 2006. "Recent work on the arrow of radiation". *Studies in History and Philosophy of Modern Physics*, **37**: 498—527.

- Price, Huw. 2007a. "Causal perspectivalism". In Huw Price and Richard Corry, eds., *Causation, Physics and the Constitution of Reality: Russell's Republic Revisited*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Price, Huw. 2007b. "Quining naturalism". *Journal of Philosophy* **104**: 375—405.
- Price, Huw. 2008. "One cheer for representationalism?" To appear in R. Auxier, ed., *The Philosophy of Richard Rorty*. Chicago: Open Court.