Replies to Greco and Turner

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Abstract Dan Greco and Jason Turner wrote two fantastic critiques of my book, *The Construction of Logical Space*. Greco’s critique suggests that the book can be given a Kuhnian interpretation, with a Carnapian twist. Here I embrace that interpretation. Turner criticizes one of the views I develop in the book. Here I identify an avenue of resistance.

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Greco and Turner wrote two fantastic critiques of my book. I learned a great deal from their comments, and suffered a great deal trying to come up with answers to their objections. I cannot thank them enough.

1 Greco

My basic reply to Greco can be stated in two words: “I agree”.

A little more specifically: I think he is right to suggest that my book should be given a Kuhnian interpretation with a Carnapian twist.

1. The Kuhnian Interpretation

I embrace the Kuhnian idea that there is no fully neutral perspective from which to assess the rationality of endorsing a theoretical claim. This is because I think
it only makes sense to talk about rational or irrational theory-change against the background of a particular choice of “just is”-statements, and I think there is no neutral perspective from which to decide which “just is”-statements to accept.

2. The Carnapian Twist

I also embrace the Carnapian idea that one should appeal to pragmatic considerations in deciding which “just is”-statements to accept. In particular, I think one should accept whichever “just is”-statements one sees as delivering the most fruitful theorizing—where fruitfulness is a pragmatic notion, which depends on one’s goals.

If there is a disagreement with Carnap, it is not primarily epistemological. It is primarily to do with linguistic issues. My own view is that it is not usually possible to specify a sentence’s truth-conditions by identifying a “semantic rule” for that sentence—a rule speakers have access to merely in virtue of their linguist competence—and taking the sentence’s truth-conditions to be the result of applying that rule to the environment in which the relevant linguistic community operates. Because of this, I do not think one can identify a subject’s conception of logical space by specifying which semantic rules (or “meaning postulates”) she associates with the sentences of her language. To the extent that Carnap is interpreted as making claims to the contrary, there will be a disagreement between us.

Greco considers the hypothesis that even if there is no neutral perspective from which to assess the rationality of endorsing a theoretical claim, there may be a neutral perspective from which to decide which set of “just is”-statements would best satisfy one’s practical goals. He notes, for example, that even “if the classicist cannot find the intuitionist’s claim intelligible, there’s no barrier to her being able to understand the hypothesis that intuitionists live better lives, and to her taking empirical evidence to bear on the plausibility of that hypothesis.” (p. xx) I think that’s true, but I think it’s also true that the classicist may not be moved to change her views by the mere observation that intuitionists lead better lives: she may feel the need to understand why intuitionists lead better lives. And that is something she may only be in a position to do from an intuitionistic (and therefore non-neutral) perspective.

Greco suggests that my view is more radical that certain passages of the book suggest. I think he is right. He also notes that my view has non-trivial epistemological consequences, by entailing that we cannot hope to do epistemology from a fully neutral perspective. Again, I think he is right: my view is inextricably linked to a substantive epistemological picture. But I believe it is a picture we have independent reasons to accept.1

2 Turner

One of the claims I make in the book is that the same fact can be structured in different ways.

1 See, for instance, Greco (typescript).
It is useful to consider an example. Suppose you think that for Socrates’s death to take place just is for Socrates to die. Then you take the sentences “Socrates’s death took place” and “Socrates died” to be accurate descriptions of the same fact. Because this fact is accurately described by the first of these sentences, it can be structured in a way that yields the referents of “Socrates’s death” and “…took place” as constituents. Because the fact is accurately described by the second of these sentences, it can also be structured in a way that yields the referents of “Socrates” and “…died” as constituents. So the fact can be structured in more than one way.

Turner argues that this view is open to two different interpretations:

1. Deflationism
   “in and of themselves facts simply have no structure. Since they are structureless, we are free to ‘carve’ them in whatever way we please. This ‘carving’ is done by our linguistic practices. […] they impart structure to the facts; but in the order of explanation, our linguistic practices come first.” (p. xx)

2. Inflationism
   “facts do have structure in and of themselves, which sentences need to match—it’s just that they have a lot of it. […] Facts are multiply structured. For instance, quite independent of any linguistic behavior on our part, there is a fact that has both the structure Fa and the structure Rab.” (p. xx)

If these are my choices, I choose Inflationism. But I would rather choose neither. As I read Turner, both Deflationism and Inflationism are burdened by a certain presupposition: the idea that there is a distinction to be made between the (semantically relevant) structure that is had by a fact “in and of itself” and the structure that is “imparted” by our linguistic behavior. It seems to me, however, that there is no such distinction, and that the presupposition ought to be rejected. I believe, for example, that one ought to accept the following “just is”-statement:

For the fact that Socrates died to be structured in a way that yields the referents of “Socrates” and “…died” as constituents just is for it to be possible to set up a suitable system of linguistic representation whereby the relevant fact gets described by the sentence “Socrates died”.

Turner considers a variant of this idea, but I don’t think the variant goes far enough. Here is Turner:

[D]eflationists can say not only that facts have structure, but that they had structure before we came along, and that they would have had structure even if we hadn’t been around. But they can’t mean it. That’s because the deflationist can think that the way we carve the facts projects modally and temporally, infecting the modal and temporal claims we make. But this projection shouldn’t be taken too seriously; it’s a feature of how we talk, and ignores the important explanatory relation between facts’ structure and our practices. (p. xx)
On the view I advocate, it is true that “the way we carve the facts projects modally and temporally, infecting the modal and temporal claims we make”. What is not true is that there is a separate notion of structure that should be our real concern—a notion that bears an “important explanatory relation” to our linguistic practice. When the deflationist talks about a fact’s having structure, she is already talking about the notion of structure that should be our real concern. There may or may not be other notions of structure. But if there are such notions, they are not relevant to semantics.

What I’ve done so far is suggest that Deflationism and Inflationism are both burdened by a certain presupposition: the idea that there is a distinction to be made between the semantically relevant structure that is had by a fact “in and of itself” and the structure that is “imparted” by our linguistic behavior. I would now like to suggest that when the presupposition is removed, neither view seems particularly appealing.

Deflationism becomes inconsistent. For a fact to have (semantically relevant) structure just is for it to be possible to set up a linguistic practice that imparts structure on it. So it would be inconsistent to claim both that facts are structureless and that our linguistic practice imparts structure on them.

Inflationism becomes trivial. For a fact to have (semantically relevant) structure just is for it to be possible to set up a linguistic practice that imparts structure on it. So although it is true that facts have structures which sentences “need to match”, the matching is automatic: part of what it is for a fact to be structured is for the relevant matching to be possible.

I have reported my view that the presupposition is false, but that is not the same as arguing that it must be false. Turner has done a wonderful job of showing just why the presupposition is so natural, why it has important consequences, and why I cannot avoid arguing against it. I wish he had written his critique before I published my book.

Reference

Greco, D. (typescript). Cognitive mobile homes.