



Pragmatist Expectations and the Noncognitivist/ Minimalist Alternative

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Overview

- 1) Pragmatist expectations
- 2) Shift of pragmatist interests concerning morality
- 3) From non-cognitivism to expressivism
- 4) Why morality is subjective (epistemologically)
- 5) Price's problematic solution
- 6) Pragmatist afterthought

1) Pragmatist expectations

Pragmatism is a diffuse programme in philosophy and in need of clarification.

(P1) Human practice is a basic explanatory/justificatory source of norms for critical reflection on intellectual phenomena, especially knowledge

P1 opposes I1

(I1) Intellectual phenomena are self-explaining and (if at all) contributing to practice.

Question: what are the aims/conditions of „critical reflection“ in P1?

1) Pragmatist expectations

(P2) **Explanation:** Intellectual phenomena (knowledge, theories, etc.) can be explained from the point of view of their practical function.

(P3) **Elimination:** Intellectual phenomena can be eliminated if not of any possible practical relevance. („What does not make a difference in practice should not make a difference to philosophy“ (James, Rorty))

Question: Are P2 and P3 coherent?

Problem 1: Intellectual phenomena partly answer existing practical needs, partly create practical needs. Religion meets the need of a positive attitude towards the world as a whole (James).

Problem 2: „Human practice“ and „practical function“ not non-intellectual concepts. P2 and P3 may be circular.

1) Pragmatist expectations

What can reference to cognitive practical function explain/justify, if practical function is always inherently cognitive? Or, what to think of

(P1*) Explanation/justification of intellectual phenomena is not complete if it **excludes** human practice.

- (a) A has the belief that it is not raining; A has the desire to go out; As desire **explains** his having the belief that it is not raining.
- (b) A has a religious belief; A has the desire to see life positively; As desire **explains** As having a religious belief.

Obvious: Ambiguity of these explanations

1) Pragmatist expectations

(a1) As desire to go out **explains** his having the belief that it is not raining among other beliefs. (*selective reading*)

(a2) As desire to go out **explains** his having the belief that it is not raining, whatever the facts. (*constitutive reading*)

Strong epistemic pragmatism: Desires/actions **constitute** belief and knowledge.

Weak epistemic pragmatism: Desires/actions **select** belief and knowledge (among belief and knowledge).

1) Pragmatist expectations

Option 1: **Strong pragmatism** (P1)

Problem: **exclusive** distinction of knowledge and practice; problem of too ambitious explanation of knowledge through actions.

Option 2: **Weak pragmatism** (P1*)

Problem: epistemologically trivial, as practical aspects add nothing relevant to the cognitive aspects involved within actions. How to steer actions in everyday practice is not of principled but only of material interest.

1) Pragmatist expectations

Illustration: Price's Mo'an's fable („Truth as conventient friction“)

Mo'ans (merely opinionated assertions) only know the norms of sincerity and warranted assertability, but not the norm of truth.

Thesis: Acceptance of truth-norm forces Mo'ans to solve disagreements -- epistemic consensus is beneficial.

Caveats:

1. Prerevolutionary Mo'ans don't have disagreements, so nothing is to be solved. Norm cannot be beneficial in solving a (non-existing) conflict.
2. An evolutionary story is needed, but perhaps not available.
3. Can Mo'ans have preferences without truth? If they only express, do they know they express?

2) Pragmatist interests in face of morality

„If something makes no difference in practice, it should not make a difference to philosophy“

Reminder: hardly anything in morality would **not** make a difference in practice, so morality **in toto** is unproblematic for pragmatists?

Epistemic challenge to the pragmatist

Not least in face of the cognitivist/non-cognitivist distinction the pragmatist is asked how to sort morality as against empirical knowledge

Intuitive convergence of pragmatism with non-cognitivism

But should the pragmatist not have a look at the practical consequences? I.e. avoid error theory, crude emotivism etc.?

2) Pragmatist interests in face of morality

Normative challenge

Within the opposition between normative **neutrality** and normative **involvement**, the pragmatist should opt for the latter.

Pragmatist would be against a normatively neutral metaethics.

Why should the pragmatist engage with metaethics at all?

- Because it is (within ethics) nearest to his epistemic self-understanding.

But he has to bridge the gap between the semantic debate and his epistemic views.

3) From non-cognitivism to expressivism

Non-cognitivism

Non-cognitivists (1) deny moral sentences to be true or wrong (**semantic** thesis), and (2) think moral sentences to be psychologically based (**psychological** thesis)

Non-cognitivism classically is not normatively revisionary, but merely diagnostic. „Based“ is meant as „caused“. However, non-cognitivism opens the way to psychological justification.

What was the original **motive** behind non-cognitivism?

Anti-metaphysics: (2) is an ontologically lighter presumption than the existence of moral facts.

3) From non-cognitivism to expressivism

Two motives for non-cognitivism for retracting its semantic thesis

Manifest language

„it is true, that we should give food to hungry children“

„it is wrong, that we are allowed to kill unarmed terrorists“

Truth Minimalism

(TM) There is a metaphysically neutral explication of truth available: truth can be explained by disquotation within sentences.

Non-cognitivism now loses its anti-metaphysical motive for (1) and has manifest language against it.

3) From non-cognitivism to expressivism

Diagnosis of non-cognitivist situation after the availability of minimalism:

Why not simply give up (1/semantics) and keep (2/psychology)?

Because (2) makes a difference to sentences.

(a) The children set the cat on fire. (empirical)

(b) It is wrong that the children set the cat on fire. (moral)

How should expressivists make the psychological explanation of (b) cohere with the non-psychological status of (a)?

3) From non-cognitivism to expressivism

position	doctrine	problems
Expressivism	Declarative moral sentences & expression of moral attitudes	Coherence between semantic and psychological thesis
Half-split minimalism	Declarative moral sentences & expression of attitudes & minimal truth of moral sentences & maximal truth of empirical sentences	Maximal truth
Pragmatism (domain non-cognitivism)	Declarative sentences & minimal truth & domain specific attitudes/practical functions	Coherence between semantic and practical function

3) From non-cognitivism to expressivism

position	strategy	problems
Concessive expressivism	No reconstruction of declarative sentences (Frege-Geach Problem avoided)	Psychological thesis is not explanative for semantics
Revisionary expressivism (Blackburn)	Normative reconstruction of declarative sentences	Unclear, whether Frege-Geach problem solved

3) From non-cognitivism to expressivism

position	strategy	problems
Half-split minimalism (Stoljar)	Sentences linked with two kinds of truth conditions. Truth-semantic distinction between moral/non-moral sentences	No job for psychological thesis; How should the distinction between truth-conditions be made internally?

3) From non-cognitivism to expressivism

position	strategy	problems
Pragmatism (Price)	Keep minimalism for all sentences & distinguish different attitudes/ practical functions of sentences	Can pragmatism be globalized and not become circular? Problems of strong pragmatism P1!

4) Why morality is subjective

What has been neglected so far:

psychological thesis of non-cognitivism is **naturalistic**.

Naturalism

N is a naturalist conception of M, if:

- N gives a factual description of M
- N gives a (partial) explanation of M
- In order for N to be a partial explanation there must be a causal link between N and M; this link must at least be presupposed by the explanation.

4) Why morality is subjective

Subjectivist moral theory: moral knowledge is

- 1) **Internal knowledge:** knowledge from a „practical point of view“
- 2) **Subjective knowledge:** knowledge attitude dependent (in a wide sense of „attitude“ (expressivism, constructivism)).

Argument for (1): if there were outside moral knowledge we would not be in the position to know it (Davidson)

Argument for (2): naturalist conception of morality

4) Why morality is subjective

Naturalist argument for moral knowledge as subjective

- (1) Directions of fit: moral sentences are action-guiding in a way non-moral sentences are not.
- (2) Naturalist coherence: moral sentences would only be objective (attitude-independent) if they were caused by moral facts.
- (3) Given naturalism (!)**, moral sentences to be caused by attitudes rather than moral facts is more economical.
- (4) Morality is subjective (attitude dependent)

5) Price's solution: globalizing expressivism

Non-cognitivism^{Price}

Noncognitivists (1) do **not deny** moral sentences to be true or wrong, and (2) do **not think** them psychologically based, but instead (3) take moral sentences to fulfil **different linguistic functions** than other sentences, something (4) to be captured without claims to **substantial truth or psychology**.

Two obvious questions:

- a) Why are functionally different sentences nevertheless similar in truth-aptness? Does „true“ mean the same or something different along with different functions?
- b) How can functions be different without recourse to psychology?

5) Price's solution: globalizing expressivism

Non-cognitivist^{Price} truth

- True, it is raining today, whatever you think about it.
- (?)True, progressive taxation is just, whatever you think about it.

But

- True, progressive taxation is just, provided you accept (with me) a certain attitude towards taxation.
- *True, it is raining today, provided you accept (with me) the statement function of declarative sentences.

5) Price's solution: globalizing expressivism

Non-cognitivist^{Price} practical function

„... the general point is that the philosophically interesting work of non-cognitivism ... is done by the **functional characterization**. With this in place, a non-cognitivist has no need to insist on a distinction in terms of folk semantic and psychological notions“ (126)

Functional characterization: moral sentences have the function of obligating, restraining, controlling, etc.

Naturalist functional characterization: Moral sentences have practical functions Pf which fulfill needs Ni

The function of the heart is to pump blood, in order to provide the organism with oxygen.

6) Pragmatist afterthought

Avoidance of naturalist argument for moral knowledge as subjective

(3) **Given naturalism**, moral sentences to be caused by attitudes rather than moral facts is more economical.

Counter-argument:

a) It is possible, either that moral facts cause/explain or that they do not cause/explain.

b) Naturalist explanations available do not explain (meet) morality as it is.

6) Pragmatist afterthought

What to think of the constructivist position:

Moral sentences are true/false =

People (individually/collectively) believe moral sentences to be true/false under ideal conditions IC

IC: full information, coherence, reason-responsive attitude, moral sensibility etc.

Problem 1: rationalist presuppositions

Problem 2: moral pluralism

Problem 3: naturalism in danger

6) Pragmatist afterthought

Conclusion:

Either the metaphysical debate naturalism/non-naturalism goes on endlessly;

Or it is evaluated from the point of view of actual morality.

In the latter case we have a point for moral constructivism and against non-naturalism.

Pragmatists need not be afraid of mirrors

