

Adding Content to Price's Pragmatism

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1. Introduction

Question: Where does conceptual content fit in Price's picture?

Aim of “replac[ing] metaphysical questions with questions about human thought and language”:

- “[T]he basic philosophical needs that [metaphysical] analysis seemed to serve can be met in another mode altogether: by explanation of the practices, rather than reduction of their objects.”

Anti-representationalism: motivation and justification

- Price: above project presupposes that notions of representation (reference, truth conditions) play no “substantial theoretical role.”
- Fortunately, “deflationary” functional explanations of the use of representational vocabulary validate this presupposition.

The question, reformulated:

Is there also motivation and justification for avoiding use of the notion of content in functional explanations?

2. Pragmatism without content?

Evidence that Price's functional explanations avoid invoking conceptual content:

[W]hat I'm after is a pragmatic account of the linguistic practices that we'd ordinarily describe as application of particular concepts, or expression of particular thoughts. The distinction is important because I am interested in the possibility that the semantic notions—content, truth, and the like—are not among the theoretical ontology of the view in question.

Another hint:

There's an important difference between an approach which *analyses* content, or meaning, in terms of use ... and an account which simply tells us how expressions are used, without thereby claiming to offer an account of content. For an account of the latter kind, ascriptions of content may figure as part of the explanandum.

Apparently, content-ascriptions won't also figure in the *explanans*.

- That's why the pragmatist owes no account of "what content *is*."
- Explicit parallel to truth-ascriptions, which also do not figure in explanations of truth ascriptions.

3. Doing without content: general pragmatist motivations

First candidate: traditional “expressivist’s motto”

“[the target] vocabularies should be *mentioned* but not *used*—*theorized* about but not employed”

But this motivation is unavailable to Price’s global expressivist:

- the fact that something is a “target vocabulary” for functional explanations can’t rule out its use in functional explanations.

Second candidate: “subject naturalism”

“[pragmatist] adopts the scientific perspective of a linguistic anthropologist, studying human language as a phenomenon in the natural world”

Replies:

- No restriction on vocabulary is dictated by very project of deflecting metaphysics by offering functional explanations.
- And why should appeal to unanalyzed properties of content-possession not be “compatible with the basic premise” that language-users are “natural creatures”?

4. Doing without content: avoiding specific pitfalls

A theme: pragmatism's anti-metaphysical payoff is jeopardized by “employing semantic properties in its theoretical ontology”

- Reply: we must draw distinction within “semantic notions—content, truth and the like.” Pitfalls of appealing to representational notions don't extend to notion of content.

First pitfall: “dog-leg ... from linguistic theory to metaphysics”

- By invoking representational notions, explanations of moral discourse inherit “ontological commitments” of that discourse.
- These explanations are committed to there being certain properties (goodness, wrongness), and to these being suited to serve as *relata* of representation relation.

Reply: suppose our pragmatist describes the motivational role of a word that is used to *say of something that it is wrong*.

- Must she share speaker's commitment to property *wrongness*?
- And does such a description place any constraints on what kind of property *wrongness* might be?

Second pitfall: eroding functional pluralism

Reference

- By invoking reference, one runs risk of viewing functional difference between ‘kangaroo’ and ‘probability’ as simply a matter of bearing the same relation to different *relata*.
- Explanations of reference-talk’s function can remove this risk.

Content

- Similarly, by invoking content, one runs risk of viewing functional difference as “simply bottom[ing]-out at the level of content.”
- Explanations of content-talk’s function can remove this risk.
- But this time, such explanations don’t appear to undermine theoretical appeal to content-talk in functional explanations.
(Example: Brandom)

5. Can Price's pragmatist do without content?

Stronger conclusion: appeal to content, unlike appeal to representation, is required for Price's theoretical purposes.

First reason: Price's linguistic approach to metaphysics

His focus is on how a semantic "bridge" generates metaphysical problems from a linguistic starting point.

But Price himself needs a semantic "bridge" to dissolve metaphysical problems.

- His pragmatist turns from puzzles about causes to examining the function of some linguistic or mental item.
- This carries a substantive semantic presupposition, namely that the item in question expresses the content *cause*.

The locutions by which he identifies the targets of functional explanation implicitly invoke content:

- 'talk of Xs' (this must mean more than 'use of the term "X"')
- 'the concept X' (this must mean more than 'the concept we expressing using the term "X"')

Second reason: content's role at both levels of "two-level picture"

Lower level: explanations of distinctive functions of specific vocabularies.

- Prominent example: "utterances of the form 'It is probable that *P*' express the speaker's high degree of confidence that *P*"
- Functional explanations of conditionals, negation also make use of content-talk.

Higher level: explanations of the function of assertoric discourse

- Price notes consilience between his own view of the significance of agreement/disagreement and Brandom's conception of "game of giving and asking for reasons."
- In both cases, the account of assertion is explained in content-involving terms, in terms of the normative role of an assertion that *P*.

6. Conclusion

Two questions for Price:

1. Is there reason to think that functional explanations on either level can eschew theoretical use of the notion of content?
2. Would there be any problem with conceding that such use is unavoidable?