

Michael Williams: How Pragmatists can be Local Expressivists

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I am going to give a short presentation of Michael Williams' text "How Pragmatists can be Local expressivists", where I will try to describe the main points of the article. Williams is concerned about some of the possible consequences if we accept David Macarthur's and Huw Price's definition of pragmatism, where pragmatism can be seen as consisting of at least two commitments. 1) Linguistic Priority, meaning that we should start our philosophical investigations by asking what is distinctive or special about evaluative language, and 2) anti-representationalism, where the meaning of vocabulary items should be explained or understood functionally.

Williams maintains that the central belief of pragmatism is anti-representationalism. Historically, when considers pragmatists such as James and Dewey, one can identify a rejection of the correspondence theory of truth, in favor of a functional view of beliefs, where belief X is worth having if X helps us dealing with concrete problems. But most of today's pragmatists still like to maintain some deflationary view or approach to truth, that combines the non-epistemic view of truth, which is central to the correspondence theory, while still asserting that we have to discuss beliefs in terms of their usefulness.

Further, Williams discuss the essential elements of expressivism, where what is called assertoric sentences are seen as fundamentally non-descriptive, which basically means that we are dealing with judgments that are expressions of certain evaluative attitudes. They are, following Price's line of thought, ontologically conservative. We want to adopt that view if we want to avoid the metaphysical problems of representationalism. We do not have to engage in philosophical questions about the location of values in the natural world if we adopt this approach. Instead we can view normative properties and values as expressions of certain normative attitudes. So here, we can also see that pragmatic naturalists are anti-platonic and anti-metaphysical.

So according to Williams pragmatism entail an expressivist account of assertions. But, and here is the problem, according to Williams, standard expressivist views are local. But pragmatists, by contrast, are global anti-representationalists. They do not allow a representational conception of

language, which is connected to semantic deflationism. Pragmatists such as Price, however, do not believe that this is a problem. On the contrary Price thinks, given the placement problem (for example the problem of locating moral properties in the natural world), that we are justified in expanding expressivism into a global view. But Williams claims that this move is quite unnecessary. Pragmatism does not come into conflict with local expressivism. Far from it. Local expressivism actually supports it "by providing templates for anti-representationalist approaches to meaning that invite generalization". This entails metaphysical quietism, which supports functional pluralism. But this does not force us to adopt philosophical quietism. What Williams wants to show is that global anti-representationalism is compatible with the notion functional pluralism. Furthermore he wants to argue that this kind of functional pluralism actually supports what he calls expressivist intuitions.

Williams, however, knows that this is not an easy task given the tight connection between pragmatism and semantic deflationism. This philosophical anthropology must exclude all representationalistic notions, which makes it very difficult to explain functional differences between descriptive and normative discourses. In order to make this project successful Williams starts off by analyzing what is involved in giving an explanation of meaning in terms of use. What he calls an EMU. Here Williams has two explanatory goals in mind. First is to explain the nature of meaning or meaningfulness. The second goal is explain meanings of particular vocabulary items. The latter alternative, however, is not very popular among pragmatists and is often met with skepticism. This skepticism is expressed in many ways. Some deny that there is any factual matter as to what a person's word mean. Some say that we can decide the meaning of a word given the context of the word. While others argue that general explanations of meaning are not generally available but that they can be given in some special cases. He starts off by discussing the term "true", and the possibility of giving it a minimalist EMU.

He uses the minimal theory of Paul Horwich as an example of a deflationary account. Horwich asserts that the meaning of the truth predicate is captured by our commitment to all instances of the following equivalence schema: "The proposition P is true if and only if P". According to Horwich truth-talk is a useful generalizing device, where the acceptance of this enables us to endorse or repudiate claims. So it is really about what we do with the truth-predicate. This goes to show that a pragmatic approach to meaning should be viewed as "function first". And the EMU for true can therefore be conceptualized as minimalist in four

different ways. 1) It is compact, meaning that it is briefly stated. 2) It is theoretically modest, in the sense that everyone could accept it, compared to the very complex notion of truth associated with reference. 3) It is ontologically conservative. By that Williams mean that the notion of “true” is described or characterized without any reference to the property of truth. 4) It is functionally restrictive, where truth-talk, in our discursive practices, plays a limited role.

We must however not confuse the claim that truth is not useful in an explanatory sense, with the claim that truth predicates are not descriptive. According to Williams, vocabulary-items for which we can give a minimalist EMU, are the special cases where we can give general explanations of meaning. Although he doesn't think that all EMU's need to be minimalist. We can now, according to Williams, start to recognize the valuable insight of local expressivism. But he adds a warning to this. We must not think that this means that the vocabulary is not really descriptive, or that we must treat describing and expressing as competing alternatives. We must be careful of thinking that pragmatic significance is the only thing that counts. For example that use is only about pragmatic significance, while being blind to the fact that use-patterns fix conceptual content. Williams discusses another EMU, one extracted from Sellars, which is about the observation term "red" where a person has a disposition to report “X is red”, given motivation and certain conditions. In a reporting use tokens of "x is red" express, according to Williams, reliable discriminative reactions to an environmental circumstance. Williams thinks that we should see these as merely descriptive. And this goes to show that this is not minimalist with respect to "red". But, he adds that we should still acknowledge that the EMU for red is minimalist in spirit. It is theoretically modest, but it cannot be considered to be ontologically conservative since the EMU for red involves world-word relations. Williams believes that, in light of the non-ontologically conservative EMU for red, that we may be able to say that expressivist EMU's belong to the class of EMU's that don't involve world-word relations, as long as we are careful. He develops his conclusion by developing an EMU for "ought", an important part of a normative vocabulary. Ought, which is a normative term, has motivational force (to decide one ought to do) where a motivation leads to a certain action. Following Sellars, ought-statements are language exit transitions. Ought's are based on practical reasoning and they express endorsement. And this EMU seems to involve language-world relations, or world-word relations. But if we follow Sellar in believing that these are exit transitions, then we can view this EMU as ontologically conservative. This ought-EMU would therefore be minimalist in a way that the red-EMU is not.

Thus, we can actually draw the demarcation line, the line which is desired by traditional expressivists. And we can now start to view local expressivism as presenting minimalist EMU's, while still maintaining that far from all EMU's are minimalist. Furthermore, minimalism does not force us into the view that there is no property of truth. This also means that it is possible to have both anti representationalism and functional pluralism.