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How Pragmatists Can Be Local Expressivists

1. The pragmatists of my title are contemporary neo-pragmatists. Their pragmatism is the kind of pragmatism that we find in the writings of Richard Rorty, Robert Brandom, Huw Price and others. However, among pragmatists of this stripe, Huw Price is especially notable for his sympathetic attitude to expressivist accounts of vocabularies often thought to be metaphysically problematic: moral and modal vocabulary, for example. He argues that certain central metaphysical problems—“placement problems”—are inextricably tied to a representationalist approach to meaning. For example, if we think that moral or modal vocabularies mean what they do by virtue of standing for moral or modal properties, but at the same time think of the world as fundamentally a physical world, we will find ourselves wondering how to “place” such apparently non-physical properties. As Price, if we are committed to global representationalism, but at the same time sympathetic to philosophical naturalism, we are in danger of facing a shortfall of things to be referred to. Expressivist accounts of moral or modal discourse evade such problems by offering a non-representational, non-referential account of the meanings of the words in question: moral predicates don’t stand for moral properties, but are rather used to express distinctive attitudes of approval or disapproval. However, where most forms of expressivism are local, trading on a contrast between expressive and robustly representational discourse, Price endorses a “global” expressivism. He thinks that an across-the-board repudiation of representationalism, which he takes to be a central pragmatist theme, offers the best exit from metaphysical problems; and

going global in the way that Price recommends raises the question of what James Dreier has called “creeping minimalism.” I want to suggest an answer to this question. But first I need a more detailed statement of the problem.

Let me begin with a few words about the distinctive character of contemporary neo-pragmatism (which from now on I shall just call “pragmatism.”) According to David Macarthur and Huw Price, pragmatism is defined by two commitments.

Linguistic Priority. When dealing with metaphysical issues, don’t start by asking about (say) the nature of values: examine what is distinctive about evaluative language.

Anti-representationalism. Representationalists explain the (proper) use of vocabulary items in terms of their meanings, and explain meaning (at least of non-logical vocabulary) in terms of semantic (word-world) relations, such as reference. By contrast, anti-representationalists eschew the use of semantic notions as explanatory primitives. All vocabularies—semantic vocabulary included—are to be characterized (or explained) functionally, in terms of their use properties. Oversimplifying a bit, meaning does not explain use: use explains meaning.

Macarthur and Price thus offer the following equation:

$$PRAGMATISM = LINGUISTIC PRIORITY + ANTI-REPRESENTATIONALISM.$$

Although there is more to pragmatism than the equation takes account of, these are important pragmatist themes and I will be centrally concerned with some of their consequences.

The two components in pragmatism are not of equal weight. In practice, nearly all philosophers find themselves taking an interest in the distinctive characters of different vocabularies. The heart of pragmatism is anti-representationalism. Anti-representationalism links contemporary pragmatists with James and Dewey. James and Dewey think of belief in functionalist terms, as mediating (through inference) between perception and action. But in contrast to contemporary pragmatists, they equate their anti-representationalist outlook with a view about *truth*.

James and Dewey treat anti-representationalism as implying the rejection of the correspondence theory of truth in favour of some kind of epistemic theory. Beliefs are worth having—“true”—to the extent that they play their mediating role effectively, facilitating inference in ways that help us to cope with concrete problems (for example, by enabling us to anticipate experiences). On this instrumental view of truth, coping with problems replaces “corresponding to the facts” as the criterion of truth: hence James’s well-known claim that truth is whatever is “good in the way of belief.”

By contrast, contemporary pragmatists are much more inclined to favor a *deflationary* or *minimalist* approach to truth, holding that the use of the truth-predicate is fully captured by our commitment to the non-paradoxical instances of some appropriate equivalence-schema: for example,

(DQT) “p” is true if and only if p.

Deflationism allows them to concede to correspondence theorists that truth is a non-epistemic notion, without compromising a functional (use-based) approach to meaning. While retaining the anti-representationalist spirit of classical pragmatism, deflationism stays closer to our ordinary use of “true” than do accounts like James’s,

which threaten to elide the distinction between truth and justification. This is a real step forward.

So much for pragmatism. Now for expressivism or “non-cognitivism.” The basic expressivist thought is that although sentences involving certain vocabularies display the logical syntax of assertoric sentences—embedding in conditionals and so on—they remain *fundamentally non-descriptive*. Thus freestanding moral judgments *express evaluative attitudes*, and so are more intimately related to decision and action than to belief. Similarly, judgments of causal necessitation issue *inference-tickets*: i.e. express commitment to the goodness of certain kinds of material inference. We understand moral and modal judgments through appreciating what we *do* with them rather than what we *say*. Strictly speaking, we don’t *say* anything.

Price argues that the virtue of expressivist approaches to meaning—indeed, the virtue of use-theoretic approaches generally—is that they are *ontologically conservative*. Representationalist explanations of meaning tend to inherit the apparent ontological commitments of the vocabulary under review. A representationalist approach to moral predicates will tend to commit us *ab initio* to moral properties, and thus (if we have naturalistic inclinations) to metaphysical worries about their character. By contrast, the only antecedent ontological commitments of use-theoretic approaches to meaning are to speakers, their utterances, and so on: that is, to things that everyone is bound to recognize anyway. Expressivism’s ontological conservatism gives it obvious attractions for philosophers with a naturalistic turn of mind. Values—or normative properties--enter the world through our taking on normative attitudes. They are not already there, awaiting detection by some special faculty, distinct from our normal five senses. Further, the motivating aspect of value-judgments is built-in. If value-judgments express desires or preferences or decisions,

there are no worries about whether we can recognize the to-be-doneness of an action without being motivated to act accordingly.

It should be no surprise to find that pragmatists are susceptible to expressivism's charms. Pragmatism is a naturalistic philosophy in several ways. Not least, pragmatists are anti-Platonist. They want to treat norms as human phenomena that we are responsible *to* but also responsible *for*. Pragmatic naturalism is not reductive, say in the manner of physicalism: this is one way in which pragmatism is anti-metaphysical. But pragmatism has no time for the *supernatural*. This is another way in which pragmatism is anti-metaphysical. Pragmatists value anti-representationalism in part *because of* its anti-Platonist, anti-supernatural, potential. Anti-representationalists are excused from supposing that the meaningfulness of normative concepts depends on their referring to practice-independent normative properties, to which we must be presumed to stand in some kind of "detective" relationship. Put more positively, anti-Platonism embodies what Robert Brandom calls "pragmatism about norms": the view that normative *statutes* are instituted by our taking up normative *attitudes* (as is obviously the case with respect to the rules of games). Price shares this view, I think.

So far, so good. But now comes the problem. Standard expressivist views are *local*. The distinctive thrust of moral expressivism is to *contrast* the expressive character of moral vocabulary with the robustly representational character of scientific or other straightforwardly descriptive talk. Typically, expressivists take this contrast between expressive and representational uses of language to be essential to their position: expressivism entails *local* anti-representationalism. By contrast, pragmatists are anti-representationalists across the board. As semantic deflationists, they have no "robust" notion of truth. If sentences are used in ways that respect the

syntactic discipline of assertoric discourse, then they are used to make assertions and are as “truth-apt” as sentences get to be. The apparently vital contrast between descriptive and expressive uses of language is erased.¹ Once it is erased, how is what remains of expressivism to be distinguished from the most extreme realism?

Price denies that there is a problem here. Expressivists are right to trace metaphysical anxieties about (say) moral facts to representationalist prejudices. If we think that, to be significant, terms of moral appraisal must refer to moral properties, we will inevitably find ourselves trying to explain how such properties get a footing in the world around us. Expressivists are therefore also right to offer anti-representationalist accounts of moral talk. But they are *wrong* to suppose that, to make their point, they need to keep their anti-representationalism local. Pragmatists are *global anti-representationalists*, explaining *all* vocabularies along the anti-representationalist lines expressivists follow for particular cases. Far from *conflicting* with pragmatism, local expressivisms *support* it by providing templates for anti-representationalist approaches to meaning that invite generalization.

Traditional expressivists will not be impressed. Semantic deflationism, they will say, enforces a “seamless” view of language, eliding essential distinctions. Not so, Price responds. Anti-representationalism leads to *metaphysical* quietism, but not to *philosophical* quietism. Metaphysical quietism is compatible with functional pluralism. The relevant lines of demarcation can still be drawn, just *not in representationalist terms*. Charting the different functions that different forms of discourse fulfill is the (naturalistic) project of “philosophical anthropology.”

While this response proceeds on the right lines, it requires elaboration. There are lots of functionally different uses of words. Asserting is different from commanding or promising. What has to be shown is that within the domain of what

are to all intents and purposes assertional practices, pragmatists can draw demarcation lines more or less where expressivists want to draw them, for reasons bearing at least some relation to those that expressivists give, yet without invoking the semantic distinctions that traditional expressivists rely on. Expressivists will doubt that pragmatists can do any such thing. A radical quietist, such as Horwich, will agree. Of course, Horwich will deny that he has slipped into extreme, global realism. He will insist that he has set *all* metaphysical positions aside. This radical quietism is both metaphysical and philosophical. But my sympathies are with Price here. It would be more satisfying to show that global anti-representationalism is compatible with a form of functional pluralism that respects expressivist intuitions.

I think that this is a non-trivial undertaking. The constraints imposed on pragmatists by semantic deflationism are severe. A semantic deflationist has no notion of fact beyond that of true proposition, and no notion of truth that can bear any explanatory weight. Accordingly, it won't do to explain the functional difference between descriptive and normative discourse in terms of their expressing, respectively, beliefs and desires (or some other desire-like states) and then go on to explain the belief-desire distinction in terms of direction of fit (beliefs aiming to fit the world, desires aiming at getting the world to fit them). Such a strategy would bring in representationalist notions through the back door. It is all very well to talk about the "different roles in our lives" that different vocabularies play. But how are these roles to be characterized, if the language of philosophical anthropology must *exclude any explanatory use of representationalist idioms?*²

If we think that there are insights from local expressivisms that are worth retaining, we must show how we can draw lines in roughly the places that traditional local expressivists draw them and for reasons that bear some significant relation to

those that motivate locally expressivist views. And we must do this without compromising our global anti-representationalism. I think that this can be done. In what remains, I show how.

2. To see whether pragmatism can accommodate expressivist insights, we have to ask what is involved in giving an *explanation of meaning* in terms of *use* (an EMU).

In offering to explain “meaning” in terms of use, there are two explanatory goals we might have in mind. One is to explain *meaningfulness*: whatever distinguishes a linguistic item—a word or sentence—from a mere sound or scribble. Our goal, we might say, is to explain the *nature* of meaning. A second quite different goal is to explain the *meanings* of particular vocabulary items. This second task is not one that all philosophers associated with the pragmatist tradition take seriously. Some philosophers with pragmatist leanings (e.g, Quine and Davidson) are *skeptics about meanings*. However, skepticism about meanings comes in different grades.

(i) There is no fact of the matter as to what a person’s words mean.

Accordingly, there is *nothing to explain*.

(ii) One can determine what someone’s words mean, in the sense that there is a right thing to say in a particular interpretative- or speech-context. However, meaning is contextually sensitive and interest-relative. Accordingly, the conditions under which *w* means *M* cannot be specified in a *general, theoretically illuminating way*. Explanations of meaning are *incurably local*.

(iii) While compact and general explanations of the meanings of particular vocabulary-items are not generally available, they can be given *in certain special cases*.

These distinctions will be important in our consideration of vocabulary-specific EMUs that are minimalist or deflationary.

Since we have a particular interest in minimalism, we can start with a case for which all neo-pragmatists are committed to giving a minimalist EMU: “true” itself. I shall use this example to motivate a general meta-theoretical analysis of use-theoretic meaning-explanations: EMUs. I shall then exhibit the generality of the analysis by applying it to other cases: causal-modal vocabulary, observational vocabulary, and deontic vocabulary. I shall show how the analysis provides for accommodating the insights of local expressivisms within the framework of global anti-representationalism.

I begin, then, with “true.” As a concrete example of a deflationary account of truth, let us take Paul Horwich’s Minimal Theory. However, the meta-theoretical analysis of an EMU that I am going to present owes nothing to the details of Horwich’s theory of truth. Any deflationary theory would have done as well.

Horwich holds that our use of “true,” hence the meaning of the truth predicate, is fully captured by our commitment to all (non-paradoxical) instances of the equivalence-schema:

(MT) The proposition that P is true if and only if P.

Horwich is making three claims here. First, with respect to giving the meaning of “true”, the rule of use implicit in our acceptance of the instances of MT is *explanatorily* fundamental. Second, the instances themselves are *epistemologically* fundamental. That is, “We do not arrive at them, or seek to justify them, on the basis of anything more obvious or more immediately known.” Third, accepting the instances of MT is “the source of *everything else* we do with the truth predicate.”³ This “everything else” is the expressive function of the truth-predicate, which is to

endorse or repudiate claims that we do not or cannot specify. Truth-talk is a useful generalizing device.

Now although the EMU for “true” is deflationary—and so undoubtedly special in some ways—we can still treat it (following Horwich) as a paradigm for EMUs generally. Viewed this way, the template it offers breaks down into three components:

(I-T) A *material-inferential* (intra-linguistic) component. Excepting sentences that generate paradox, the inference from “Snow is white” to “It is true that snow is white”, and vice-versa, is always good; the inference from “Grass is green to “It is true that grass is green”, and vice-versa, is always good, and so on...

(E-T) An *epistemological* component. Such inferences are *primitively* acceptable (*a priori*). They are “free” moves in the discursive game.

(F-T) A *functional* component. The truth--predicate is important exclusively as a generalizing device. It enables us to do things that we could not otherwise do: endorse or repudiate claims that we cannot explicitly state because we do not know what they are (“You can trust John: anything he tells you will be true”) or because there are too many (“Every proposition of the form “p or not-p” is true”).

This meta-theoretical analysis makes it clear that “use-theoretic” explanations of meanings appeal to two distinct notion of use. The I and E clauses specify the inferential patterns that competent users of “true” display (or the proprieties they respect) in their use of “true.” This is use as *usage*: *how* a word is used. We can think of the “use-properties” (or, better, proprieties) specified by the I- and E-clauses clauses as *content-determining*. They are fundamental in that they neither receive nor

need any deeper *theoretical* explanation. They do, however, both invite and receive a *functional* explanation from the F-clause. After all, use-patterns are ten-a-penny: you can make them up *ad libitum*. So why do we have a concept that answers to the use-patterns given by I-T and E-T? F-T tells us why. The F-clause appeal to use as expressive function: *what* a word is used to do, what it is useful *for*.

This distinction is vitally important. There is a sense in which Horwich is quite right to say that the rule of use indicated by MT is “the source of *everything else* we do with the truth predicate.” The sense is this: the use-properties given by I-T and E-T *enable* truth-talk’s functional role. It is by virtue of its material-inferential and epistemic use-properties that “true” can play the functional role deflationists emphasize. But there is an equally good sense in which *what we do with the truth-predicate* is the source of (i.e. explains) our possessing a concept determined by those use properties. It points up the concept’s “survival value.” Equally good, or perhaps better. The functional clauses in an EMU *rationalize* its content-determining clauses. They explain why we possess/retain a concept governed by those content-determining proprieties. So although in the manner indicated explanatory relations between the two types of clauses in the EMU run both ways, a pragmatic approach to meaning can (and I think should) be viewed as “function first.”

I now turn to the EMU’s minimalist or deflationary character. The EMU for “true” is minimalist in four distinct ways.

(i) It is *compact*. The essential points about “true” are briefly stated without anything vital being omitted.

(ii) It is *theoretically modest*. The analysis is given in terms of platitudes that virtually everyone would accept. Compared with, say, the view that truth depends on reference, which must in turn be identified with a complex causal

relation, the minimalist account is *shallow*: more *phenomenological* than *theoretical*. It is controversial *only* in claiming that nothing more need be said.

(iii) It is *ontologically conservative*. The use of “true” is characterized without reference to the property of truth.

(iv) It is *functionally restrictive*. Truth-talk plays a more limited role in our discursive practices than proponents of “robust” theories imagine. In particular, truth is not a *theoretically significant concept*. It is in virtue of this last feature that the account can be thought of as *deflationary*.⁴

(i), (ii) and (iii) are aspects of theoretical minimalism. The fourth, functionally restrictive aspect of the account makes its theoretical minimalism plausible. With respect to the Minimal Theory’s deflationary character, then, the key claim is that “true” has no *explanatory* use. Indeed, it has no use beyond its generalizing role. In this sense, truth is not a “substantive” property.⁵

What about our problem: to retain something from local forms of expressivism, while cleaving to global anti-representationalism? The results so far already two possibilities for further exploration. First, vocabulary-items for which we can give minimalist or deflationary EMUs are the special cases that provide exceptions to Quinean scruples concerning compact meaning-analyses. Second, it is not obvious that all EMUs need be minimalist or deflationary, so there may be lines to be drawn. With these possibilities in mind, we can some further EMUs, beginning with Sellars’s account of the causal modalities.

Sellars treats causal statements (lawlike generalizations) as involving something like entailments. They embody, thus authorize, material inferences. Since Sellars thinks that natural-kind terms are richly dispositional, so that causal

commitments are built into our concepts of ordinary things and substances, he holds that claims like “Salt dissolves in water” hold as a matter of conceptual necessity. In the form given by my meta-theoretical analysis, a Sellarsian EMU for causal talk would go something like this:

(I-C) (i) Causal claims (lawlike statements) state physical necessities and involve material entailments (conceptual connections). (This is why causal claims ‘support’ counterfactual conditionals.) Causal claims constrain what is physically possible: thus, the inference from ‘ $N_c(p \supset q)$ ’ to ‘ $\sim P_c(p \ \& \ \sim q)$ ’ and vice-versa, is always good. (ii) Since there may be circumstances (that we cannot exhaustively specify) in which a given lawlike connection does not hold, entitlement to expect the effect, given the cause, is defeasible. The material inferences authorized by causal statements—or by the causal commitments embodied in natural-kind concepts—are non-monotonic.

(E-C) Causal claims (and/or lawlike statements) are open to repudiation, and may require justification, on *empirical* grounds. This distinguishes causal from e.g. mathematical necessity (even if they conform to the same modal logic). Causal claims may be built into natural-kind concepts, but there can be *empirical grounds for conceptual change*.

(F-C) In advancing causal/lawlike claims, we are issuing inference-tickets. We express commitment to inferring q from p , *ceteris paribus*.

In this case, the I-clause marks out lawlike connectedness as a kind of entailment (Sellars says “physical” entailment); the E-clause distinguishes physical necessity from other kinds (e.g. mathematical) in terms of how entitlement to the entailments that express it is acquired or lost (which is I suggested treating epistemic factors as partially content-determining); and the F-clause gives the functional significance of

concepts determined by such use-properties. As with the EMU for “true,” the expressive aspect of the EMU for causal modality resides in the F-clause. And as before, this clause is where the real explanation lies: the functional significance of causal talk explains our possessing a concept with the use-characteristics captured by the I- and E-clauses.

Sellars’s account of the causal modalities fundamentally expressivist. For Sellars, causal talk is a special kind of normative (in fact deontic) talk: it issues inference-tickets. At the same time, the EMU meets the criteria for being minimalist or deflationary: compactness, ontological conservatism, theoretical modesty, and functional restriction.

This brings me to my first thesis, which is that local-expressivist EMUs are *minimalist EMUs with a particular kind of F-clause* (one mentioning the expression of an evaluative or practical attitude). However, the meta-theoretical analysis of an EMU highlights a trap to avoid: the temptation to think of saying and doing (or expressing) as pointing to different *kinds* of meaning, rather than to distinguishable *aspects* of meaning. Recall the EMU for “true”. The F-clause says that truth-talk is a generalizing device: that’s all. But we must not confuse the claim that truth is not useful for *explanatory* purposes with the claim that truth-predications are not *descriptive*. The (I) and (E) clause determine core assertional and inferential proprieties governing the use of “true.” They are content-determining, according to a use-theoretic conception of how content is determined. This makes “true” descriptive, in the only sense that a semantic minimalist recognizes.

Let me re-iterate this vital point. In any EMU, the I- and E- clauses, on the one hand, and the (F) clause, on the other, are concerned with aspects of use that must not be confused and which must not be thought to compete. The inferential and

epistemological properties (or proprieties) captured by the (I) and (E) clauses concern *how* certain vocabulary-items are (to be) used assertively or inferentially. In thus capturing “use” as *usage*, they fix meaning in the (or perhaps one) sense of *conceptual content*. By contrast, the (F) clauses capture what an item conforming to such proprieties can be used (is useful) *for*. They capture “meaning” in the sense of *pragmatic (functional) significance*: expressive role and/or utility.⁶ If we fail to keep this distinction clearly in mind, or if we think that these different aspects of “use” are in competition, we will be tempted to suppose that, when deploying certain vocabulary items susceptible of minimalist analysis, but having a distinctive expressive function, we aren’t *really* saying anything but *only* doing something.

That the expressive function of a particular vocabulary explains its assertive and inferential use-proprieties, themselves specifiable in an ontologically conservative way, is the local expressivist’s deep insight. The tendency to take this insight to imply that the vocabulary to which his analysis applies is not “really” descriptive is his *ur-*mistake. The mistake occurs because the temptation to treat describing and expressing as alternatives that we must choose between is acute with respect to the standard candidates for expressivist treatment. This is so because these locutions have a *special* pragmatic significance beyond saying how things in some respects are. Focusing on this special pragmatic significance can encourage us to slip into thinking that use is at bottom *only* pragmatic significance, forgetting the use-patterns that fix conceptual content. In this way, we will come to suppose that in deploying “true” or “cause,” we aren’t really ascribing a property—truth to a statement or causal power to an object—we are *merely* endorsing a claim (or set of claims) or expressing an inferential commitment.⁷

A question is likely to come up here. I suggested that the (I) and (E) clauses of an EMU explain conceptual content--what we are saying--whereas the (F) clauses explain what we are able to do by saying that. But *what* are we saying in the cases under review? This is where pragmatist EMUs differ from classical meaning-analyses (to use Brandom's phrase). *Pace* proponents of such analyses, *there is no non-trivial answer to such questions*. By conforming to the use patterns/proprieties for "true" or "causes"—given by the material-inferential and epistemological clauses of the EMUs—we are able to say that p is true or that A causes B. End of story. Minimalist EMUs offer ontological conservatism without reduction or elimination.

5. The question is whether semantic minimalists can draw lines more or less where local expressivists want to draw them and for reasons that that local expressivists can sympathize with. My suggestion that expressivist analyses are a particular kind of minimalist (or deflationary) EMU will help answer this question only if we can capture an appropriate contrast between minimalist and non-minimalist EMUs. So the next question is: are there non-minimalist or non-deflationary EMUs and, if so, what makes them non-minimalist?

This brings me to a third EMU, extracted from Sellars's analysis of the observation-term "red." It too follows the tripartite template, though with a crucial complication.

(I-R) The inference from 'x is red' to 'x is not green', 'x is not yellow', etc. is always good. i.e., Necessarily, if x is monochromatically red, x is not monochromatically green (yellow, etc). Further inferential moves include those from "crimson" to "red", "red" to "colored", etc.

(E-R) (1) 1) The inferential moves specified by (aR1) are free. (2) To master “red” in its reporting use, the speaker must have a reliable discriminative reporting disposition (RDRD): a disposition, given appropriate motivation and conditions, to report ‘x is red’ only in the presence of a red thing in his field of vision. (3) For speaker fulfilling (2), a reporting move of ‘x is red’ is generally free but open to challenge, hence requiring justification, *in special circumstances*.

(F-R) In a reporting use, tokens of ‘x is red’ express reliable discriminative reactions to an environmental circumstance. In this way, they function as language-entry transitions, and thereby play a distinguished role in securing/undermining ‘theoretical’ entitlements. But in themselves, they have no special *expressive* function. They are purely assertoric and *in this sense* “merely descriptive.”

These clauses are of course illustrative rather than exhaustive. But they are enough to show that is *not* minimalist.

First, it is not mere laziness that deters me from attempting to state the EMU in a more complete form. Rather, I doubt that the inferential proprieties given in (I-R) *can* be exhaustively specified. I-R points towards the kind of inferences “red” is involved in but does not fully display them. The EMU is thus not genuinely compact, and so fails to be as uncompromisingly minimalist as that for “true.”

While not minimalist with respect to “red”, the EMU can be seen as offering a non-metaphysical account of *observationality*. The EMU for “red” stands to the EMU for a term’s being an observation term rather as the EMU for (say) “salt” stands to the EMU for the causally modal commitments that deployment of such a natural-kind term involves. On Sellars’s account, the observation/theory distinction is

methodological not *ontological*. That is, the EMU for observationality does not postulate a privileged range of sensible qualities, intrinsically suited to be the objects of non-inferential reporting, nor a special mode of awareness tailored to the “immediate” grasping of such qualities. (This is how it detaches the special epistemic weight attaching to observation-reports from the Myth of the Given in its Empiricist version.) The EMU is theoretically modest.

While not fully minimalist, then, the EMU for “red” is still minimalist in spirit, or so we might suppose. And in some respects it is. But not in all. While theoretically modest, the EMU is *not ontologically conservative*. By E-R, sub-clause (2), observation reports are bound up with reliable discriminative reporting dispositions: this is what allows them to function as *language entry transitions*, making possible their distinctive role in the regulation of theory. But because of its appeal to such dispositions, the EMU for “red”, or any word with a reporting use, involves world-word relations essentially.

The world-word relations on which entry transitions depend are *causal*, not *semantic*. “Red” does not refer to red things by virtue of this causal relation: the causal relation resides in the E-clause. The EMU attempts no reduction of reference to causal relatedness, thus implies no representationalist backsliding. In Price’s terms, we are still dealing with “I-representation,” not with E-representation. (Still less am I confusing the two.) But this does not affect the point that the EMU involves the *use*, and not merely the *mention*, of the term whose meaning it analyzes. The avoidance by EMUs of semantic relations as explanatory primitives does guarantee ontological conservatism.

This point suggests a refinement in our understanding of the relations between the three types of clause in our template for an EMU. So far, I have been contrasting

the I- and E- clauses with the F-clause, suggesting that the former determine conceptual (= assertional or descriptive) content. But we can see why Sellars is drawn to is a narrow conception of “conceptual content” in which such content is fixed by the (I) clauses alone. We can see why EMUs have three components.

Prior fixing of conceptual content by the I-clause is required if, following Sellars, we are to treat the observational/theoretical distinction as methodological rather than ontological. It is an essential feature of Sellars’s account of the observational use of a theoretical term can acquire an observational use—a new application--without change of meaning. The constant element in conceptual content is the aspect of content determined by the intra-linguistic, material-inferential relations captured by the I-clause. This aspect of content can be unaffected by a change in a term’s epistemic character.

In Sellars’s view, though specific conceptual content is determined fundamentally by the I-clause, a language could not be about the world in which it is used unless it contained some observation terms. The presence of such terms is a condition on meaningfulness for all terms, even though mere causal relatedness to environmental circumstances does not fix the conceptual content of any term. Still, meaning in the broadest sense involves all three components identified by my meta-theoretical analysis. Some terms build causal relations into their full EMUs and some don’t. Observation terms do so directly. Theoretical terms do so indirectly, in that they are also introduced in ways that involve essential relations to observable facts that they explain.

In light of the non-ontologically conservative EMU for “red”, can we say that, in addition to giving a fundamental explanatory role to a special expressive function,

“expressivist” EMUs belong to the class of EMUs that *don't* involve world-word relations essentially? Yes, *if we are careful*.

To explain what I have in mind, let me turn to normative vocabulary, in particular to “ought.” The EMU I want to consider combines ideas from Sellarsian analyses of causal modality and observationality. The EMU for “ought” is a kind of mirror-image of that for an observation-term. The EMU for “red” uses the idea of reliable discriminative responsiveness to capture the idea that, in acquiring information observationally, we react to our surroundings. In this way, observation reports function as “language entry transitions.” But “ought” has motivational force: to decide what one ought (all things considered) to do just is to decide what to do. As leading to action, ought-statements are connected with what Sellars calls language *exit* transitions. So here (following Brandom following Sellars) is a sketch of how an EMU for “ought” might go:

(I-O) “Ought” implies “It is not permissible not to...”, “can,” etc. (i.e. we are dealing with deontic *modality*.)

(E-O) “Oughts” are based on practical reasoning (of various kinds): reasoning to a conclusion (“I shall...”) where the reasoner has a reliable disposition to act on his conclusion. (The modality is distinctively *deontic*.)

(F-O) “Oughts” express endorsement (commitment to the soundness) of certain patterns of practical inferences.

While crude, this sketch is sufficient to make my point. This EMU, like that for “red,” involves language-world relations. However, since in this case the language-world transitions are *exit* transitions, the EMU remains ontologically conservative. We get an analogue of what representationalists think of as different “directions of fit,” but without representationalism’s theoretical baggage. The EMU for “red” invokes

responses to red things. In the EMU for “ought,” by contrast, deontic facts enter the characterization of use only *via* deontic attitudes. The latter alone belong to the causal order. This is so both locally and globally. The EMU for “ought” is minimalist in a way that the EMU for “red” is not. Neither EMU involves an idea of “fitting,” distinct from that of being true; and the concept of truth has already been dealt with in use-theoretically. Even so, we draw a line just where traditional expressivists and other fans of “different directions of fit” want one drawn.

6. Let me sum up.

I distinguished three grades of scepticism about meaning. The least severe allowed that, while not generally available, compact EMUs for particular vocabulary items can be given in certain special cases. Vocabulary items susceptible of minimalist analysis are the special cases for which particularized EMUs can be given. We can't do this for items that stand for “substantial” properties: paradigmatically natural-kind terms because such terms find multifarious (and changing) explanatory uses: in other words, for all the reasons central to Quine's repudiation of the analytic-synthetic distinction. But in such cases, we don't need an EMU because there is *nothing to explain* in a general, theoretical way. Sameness of meaning is a context-sensitive and interest relative notion. The distinction between change of meaning and change of belief gets no purchase outside particular pedagogical or expository contexts. There are no “meanings” to be captured. The same should probably be said of *thick* moral concepts. What we *can* deflate is their normative character.

Minimalist analyses of modal and deontic vocabulary accord with “pragmatism about norms,” the view that norms are instituted by--and enter into the causal order only by way of--normative attitudes. This non-reductively naturalist view

contrasts with such supernaturalist views as Divine command theories of morality, or what John McDowell calls “rampant Platonism” without being either “subjectivist” or “anti-realist.” The only sense in which norms do not belong to the “natural” world involves the sense of “nature” that contrasts nature with culture, not the sense that contrasts the natural with the super-natural or the non-natural. If there is a problem remaining to be solved, it concerns the emergence of norms. But pragmatists know where to look for a solution: the evolution of co-operative behaviour (as explained by evolutionary game theory, perhaps).⁸

At the same time, pragmatists can draw lines that approximate those drawn by local expressivists. Not only that, they can draw these lines for reasons that local expressivists can respect: for example, in terms of the different ways in which redness and to-be-done-ness enter into the causal order. The key is to see local expressivisms as presenting minimalist or deflationary EMUs with a distinctive F-clause, while recognizing that not all EMUs are minimalist.

Minimalist EMUs are conservative at the *theoretical-semantic* level, the level where lines are drawn. But minimalism imposes no obligation to say that there is no property of truth, or that there are “really no such things” as obligations or necessary connections. Quite the opposite: in a *plain* way we can and should talk about such things.

In sum, we get global anti-representationalism with functional pluralism, thus metaphysical quietism without philosophical quietism. And this is what we wanted.

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¹ Sellars does not face this problem, at least not immediately, since he is not a semantic deflationist. For deflationists, the conceptual content of “true” is fixed by our primitive acceptance of the (non-paradoxical instances) of some equivalence schema, in the case of Paul Horwich’s Minimal Theory:

(MT) The proposition that p is true if and only if p.

Sellars’s claim is that these equivalences are not to be regarded as primitive but rather as ‘following’ from the ‘definition’ (the scare quotes are Sellars’s own) of truth in that for a proposition to be true is for it to be...*correctly* assertible; assertible, that is, in accordance with the relevant semantical rules, and on the basis of such additional, though unspecified, information as these rules may require.¹ Truth is thus “semantic assertibility.” However, since Sellarsian ‘semantical rules’ are rules of criticism, embodying inferential and other epistemic proprieties, semantical assertibility is a kind of idealized justification. This epistemic theory of truth allows for “alethic pluralism.” Semantic assertibility defines the generic concept of truth: specific “varieties of truth correspond to the relevant varieties of semantical rule.” So for example, in mathematics truth is provability. But, notoriously, Sellars goes much farther. Basic factual discourse aims to *picture* the world. Picturing is a non-semantic form of representation involving a correspondence relation between “natural linguistic objects’ (utterances and inscriptions) and configurations of objects in the world. (Not *facts*: this is Sellars’s emendation of this Tractarian idea.) The question of whether or not to try to find *anything* in this aspect of Sellars’s philosophy is the main bone of contention between “left wing” Sellarsians (such as Rorty and Brandom) and “right wing”, orthodox Sellarsians (such as Joanna Seibt and, with qualifications, Jay Rosenberg). But if we go with the left wingers, we will be back to wondering what semantic minimalists should make of normative or modal expressivism. See Sellars,

Science and Metaphysics, Ch. IV; “Truth and Correspondence,” in *Science, Perception and Reality*.

² I think that the tendency on the part of Price and Macarthur to downplay the problem of accommodating expressivist insights reflects their somewhat stripped down view of pragmatism. The attractions of expressivism, for pragmatists, reflects pragmatism about norms, the flip side of pragmatic anti-Platonism. Pragmatism is “anti-metaphysical” in its hostility to postulating supernatural entities to guide human practices. But if we take Price at his word and take metaphysical quietism to entail having *no* views about the nature of norms, pragmatism (in its most typical articulations) pragmatists are not metaphysically quietists. But can they be expressivists? That is the question.

³ Horwich (2001), p. 559.

⁴ The different ways of being “minimalist” are only loosely related. In particular, it would be possible to claim a richer functional significance for truth-talk without compromising the EMU’s ontological conservatism. Price has a view of truth along these lines. Price thinks that truth-talk has a distinctive normative flavour. In terms of my analysis, we should think of Price as espousing a less restrictive F-clause: adding a normative-expressive function to the generalizing function stressed by Horwich and other strict deflationists. Whether we should follow Price in this is a question worthy of further discussion.

⁵ *Pace* Boghossian, the substantive/non-substantive distinction is itself explicated in terms of use and does not presuppose the idea of predicates that are robustly representational.

⁶ We could call attention to these two aspects of “functional significance” by splitting the F-clause. One clause would capture the expressive/performative role of uses of a

vocabulary item in unembedded assertions: the speech-act that such assertions are used to perform. The other clause would give the utility of the language-game involving speech-acts of that kind. This would give the EMU a pleasing symmetry: two clauses “above the line,” and two below. However, the distinction is not equally salient in all EMUs.

⁷ I think that Sellars was alive to this danger. This is why he says that the language of modality is a language of “transposed” norms. To stick with the case in hand, in making causal statements about things in the world, or even in deploying ordinary natural-kind terms, we express semantic (material-inferential) commitments, which are for Sellars a kind of normative commitment. As Sellars puts the point, we *convey* information (about our normative attitudes) that we do not *assert*. Indeed, since for Sellars the use-rules given by the I- and E- clauses of an EMU concern *proprieties* of use, and not mere regularities, these clauses themselves have a prescriptive character, and so an expressive function. This is why Sellars remarks, *a propos* of Carnap on rules for L-derivability, that the utterance “ ϕa is L-derivable from ϕa ” must be taken to *convey* what “ ϕa necessitates ϕa ” *conveys*. Causal statements express rules, which in turn express inferential commitments. (“Inference and Meaning,” p. 22.) I am not sure whether endorsing Sellars’s proposal sets me at odds with Robert Brandom’s claim that inferential commitments are *made explicit* by modal vocabulary.)

⁸ Sellars thought that the puzzle of how we got into the normative dimension was “the last refuge of special creation.” He also thought that an expressive account of the function of normative vocabulary, which went naturally with pragmatism about norms, told us to look to the evolution of co-operation for an answer. See PSIM.