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Dissertation Abstract

Metaethics for Neo-Pragmatists:
A Pragmatic Account of Linguistic Meaning for Moral Discourse

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In my dissertation, I aim to develop and defend a novel, pragmatist approach to foundational questions about meaning, especially the meaning of deontic moral vocabulary. Drawing from expressivists and inferentialists, I argue that meaning is best explained by the various kinds of norms that govern the use of a vocabulary. Along with inferential norms, I argue we must extend our account to discursive norms that govern normative statuses required to felicitously utter certain speech-acts—*norms of authority*—and the transitions in normative statuses affected by speech-acts—*pragmatic norms*. These *structural discursive norms* differentiate discursive practices and account for distinctive features such as objectivity and motivational import that some have and others lack. The structure exhibited by a practice is then explained in terms of its utility, making it possible to see how different discursive practices are answerable to the different needs and purposes of the discursive beings who use them. I call the resulting explanatory framework a *pragmatic analysis of linguistic meaning* (PALM).

Turning my attention to moral "ought," I argue that the structural discursive norms of moral discourse differentiate it from other objective discourses, like empirical discourse, on the one hand, and from other normative discourses, like prudential discourse, on the other. Drawing on work in evolutionary psychology and anthropology, I complete the PALM with an account of moral discourse as a meta-normative practice with a meta-coordinative function. Its utility for the discursive beings who use it lies in its enabling them to remedy certain tensions and instabilities that arise in their other coordinative, normative practices in a way that minimizes the risk of domination by alpha-type free-riders, the fracturing of social groups, and individual defection from cooperative endeavors.

In the final two chapters, I leverage the account to defend a pragmatist-friendly notion of objectivity in terms of a structure of distributed epistemic authority according to which no discursive perspective is ultimately authoritative or immune from challenge and to reconcile this sense of objectivity with the persistent pressure toward a kind of relativism that restricts the standing to make moral claims to members of the relevant communities. Moral communities, I argue, are constituted by trust in mutual recognition. When this trust is lacking, moral discourse balkanizes. The analysis of the pragmatics of moral discourse developed in these chapters adds much-needed detail to the pragmatist commitment to an ever-expanding discursive community embodied in Rorty's notion of solidarity and Dewey's understanding of democratic discourse that allows us to identify conditions under which they are possible and those under which they are likely to fail.