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EXPRESSING RULES

abstract

The notion of conceptual normativity is grounded on the idea that our conceptual contents are established by the norms of the discursive social practices we engage in. This idea involves two major problems. First, where do the norms of discursive practices come from and how can the contents that they establish be objective? Second, what is the role of the vocabulary that we use to express such norms as explicit rules? This article draws the outline of an account that could possibly answer both questions. First, it explores the viability of a naturalism about conceptual normativity. Second, it defines the characters of a rational expressivist analysis of the language of the rules.

keywords

rule-following, normative inferentialism, pragmatic metavocabulary, naturalism, space of reasons

1. Introduction A very well-trodden tradition in the analytic philosophy, originated from Wittgenstein's reflections on language games and rule-following in the 1930s, maintains that conceptual contents are characterized by normative significance and that our grasp of them is to be understood in terms of our ability to engage in norm-governed social practices. Some years later, Sellars (1956) beautifully distilled the gist of this approach to rationality into the notion of a conceptually articulated and socially maintained *space of reasons*, where linguistic performances provide and are in need of justifications. In effect, Wittgenstein's original focus on rules was part of an argumentative strategy aiming to undermine the venerable semantic view according to which an expression is contentful only in so far as it contributes to express representations of things in the world. Of course his criticism was directed primarily against the authors who had adopted such a view in the logical analysis of language, like Frege, Russell and the author of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* himself. The scope of his arguments, however, is crucially wider than linguistic analysis. On the one hand, by tackling the assumption that an explanation of conceptual contents *primarily* consists in the definition of homomorphic relations between linguistic expressions (or the mental episodes that they express) and states of affairs, he put into question the semantic grounds of the traditional accounts of empirical knowledge. On the other hand, by suggesting that linguistic practices are what confers contentful states to those who engage in them, he also undercut any meta-stance from which to judge the adequacy of conceptual contents. As Rorty (1979) pointed out, in this way he issued the challenge of rethinking the role not only of the epistemological, but also of any metaphysical and, in general, metalinguistic vocabulary that we use. In what follows, I argue that in order to really vindicate the objective notion of conceptual contents as they are articulated in a naturalistically construed space of reasons, metavocabularies must be reconsidered from an expressivist point of view.

2. Norms, rules and antirealism The target of Wittgenstein's criticism can be identified as the view that the semantic metavocabulary of representationalism should play a privileged role in the articulation of conceptual contents. His focus on the plurality of language games questions such a privilege on many levels. The idea of the normativity of meaning that permeates the *Philosophical Investigations* is not simply the idea that the ways in which we use the expressions of a language are governed by rules. Rather, it is the idea that the conditions of correctness that govern the application of the conceptual contents (which are variously expressed in language

uses) are established by the complex pragmatic engagement with our environment that we undertake in our discursive practices or *forms of life*.

Of course, under this reading, Wittgenstein's approach puts a huge theoretical load on the analysis of the metavocabularies that we use to talk about the norms of our discursive practices. This burden has been variously described in the vast literature on rule-following that has been thriving with varying vigour since 1953. It is still worth rehearsing here its main characters, because they offer a very effective way to single out the problems that we are going to deal with. Thus, following McDowell (1984), we can say that the *Philosophical Investigations* should be read as presenting us with a dilemma.

The one horn consists in the view that norms are some kind of Fregean content that we just somehow grasp when we understand the rules of a discursive practice. In this picture, grasping a rule is like opening a mental eye on a Platonic object that exhaustively determines the criteria for the normative assessment of any performance that is governed by the rule. Wittgenstein counters this mythology by suggesting to look at the process of language learning, where it is clear that no appeal to any mental awareness of any normative content can *non-circularly* bridge the gap between merely regular verbal behavior and rule-governed linguistic one. This means, of course, that one is not allowed to postulate semantic super-facts to be represented by such contents.¹ But the real reason why this metaphysical approach will not work, as Sellars (1954) noticed straight away, is that, if we accept the normative characterization of conceptual contents that Wittgenstein advocates, then the very awareness of the norms must be understood as positions in the space of reasons. In other words, the problem is that the language of the rules is not pragmatically and thus not even semantically autonomous from the discursive practices whose norms it talks about.

The other horn of Wittgenstein's dilemma is a metalinguistic account of the language of the rules. According to such an account, a distinction must always be drawn between the object language that is used in a practice and the metalanguage that expresses the norms for its use. So that, in order for one to be treated as able to contentfully deploy the former, one must already be able to contentfully deploy the latter. In this account, norms are conceived as linguistic objects: as such, however, they are in need for an interpretation that can only be provided in a metalanguage. Of course, the problem with this approach is that it engenders the vicious regress famously described in §201 of the *Philosophical Investigations*. The conclusion to be drawn is that semantic metalanguages are not suitable to express the pragmatic significances that are established by the rules of discursive practices.

As it is well known, Wittgenstein's solution to slip between the horns of the dilemma is to acknowledge that "there is a way of grasping a rule which is *not an interpretation*" (Wittgenstein, 1953, §201), not to try to look beneath the *bedrock* of linguistic justifications (§217), and accept *forms of life* as the primitive given in the analysis of rationality (§247; pt. II, p. 226). In other words, he proposes to acknowledge that there is no position outside discursive practices where to evaluate them from, since the very possibility to provide any normative assessment is grounded on the discursive practices themselves. Unfortunately, this proposal raised more problems than it was supposed to solve. On the one hand, there are those who have substantially embraced Wittgenstein's maxim and tried to develop holistic accounts in which conceptual contents are determined exclusively in relation the one with the other. These authors, like Rorty or Brandom, have been accused of severing the connection between conceptual contents and the objective reality and to deliver a picture of the space of reasons as a wheel spinning in the void. On the other hand, there are those who have rejected

1 To this extent, of course, Kripke (1982) was right.

a demarcational interpretation of the bedrock and have followed instead the idea that our discursive practices are supported by causally established patterns of regular behavior, arising as a consequence of the responsive abilities to cope with the environment which we are endowed with by nature or education. The problem with the latter idea is that no matter how much complex a story can be told about our responsiveness to the environment, any piece of regular behavior that it establishes will always agree with more than a rule, so it will not ever suffice by itself to fully support the normativity of conceptual contents. A paradigmatic example of this problem are the hurdles encountered by the various forms of causal, informational or teleological semantics.

3. Naturalism and the space of reasons

The reason why Wittgenstein's path appears to be so unsatisfactory is that it is hard to happily accept to stand on the bedrock of the space of reasons while candidly being in the dark on what really supports it. In fact it is reasonable to acknowledge, with Davidson (1986), that there are no justifications for our beliefs from outside the space of reasons and yet require an explanation of what grounds the objectivity of our conceptual contents.

In order to vindicate realism within the space of reasons, the image of the bedrock must be acknowledged as a way to picture a categorial distinction that already in nature separates rational from non-rational beings, in so far as our ability to play the game of giving and asking for reasons is just the way in which our interactions with our environment are articulated. That does not mean, however, that philosophers should be content with the acknowledgment of such an ability as a "second nature" of ours, like McDowell (1994) suggests. Authors like Rouse believe that the task of contemporary naturalism is precisely to accommodate the social and normative grasp that we have on the world within scientific understanding:

The primary phenomenon to understand naturalistically is not the content, justification, and truth of beliefs but instead the opening and sustaining of a "space of reasons" in which there could be conceptually articulated meaning and justification at all, including meaningful disagreement and conceptual difference (Rouse, 2015, p. 17).

There are, however, different ways to think of this task, because there are different ways to conceive our conceptual understanding. Rouse efficaciously distinguishes between considering it in terms of operative processes in cognition as opposed to normative statuses within discursive practices.

The first of these approaches has been certainly the more common one in cognitive sciences. It was championed, for instance, by Fodor (1998), who maintained that a scientific account of conceptual contents should explain how mental representations play certain causal roles in the mental life of an organism. In this approach, concept application is considered as a genus of the more general species of internal processes. Since non-conceptual processes pose less problems to scientific explanation, the task of naturalism is conceived as that of accounting for how conceptual processes arise beside or even from the other ones. So, this approach usually turns down the account of the normativity of conceptual contents. Things however do not really change in operative-process accounts that use biological evolution to support a normative analysis of an organism's responses to its environment. So, for instance, teleosemantics typically tries to explain the normative character of representational content in terms of the notions of indication and biological function: the intentional content that determines the correctness of the internal process of an organism as a representation should be what in the environment of the organism such a process has been naturally selected to causally covary with in a reliable way. However, the notion of biological function can account for error only by presupposing an independent determination of the trait types

that undergo natural selection (cf. Haugeland, 1998; Nanay, 2010). Consider for example the following analysis: an organism's syncopated heartbeat is a malfunction because the hearts of the organism's ancestors have contributed to their fitness by pumping blood regularly into their veins. The problem is whether it is possible to tell what a heart is, in the first place, without calling on teleological notions in turn. Likewise, a story can be told about how certain processes of an organism acquire the biological function to indicate distal targets. Yet, such a story presupposes that the proximal features of the environment, which the organism is evolutionarily attuned to, are already (not merely causally but) normatively related to distal substances.²

The normative-status approach, by contrast, focuses directly on the normative accountability of the behavior of an organism. As Rouse explains, in this approach “[c]onceptual understanding [...] need not be identified with any present component of the exercise of [practical-perceptual] skills as an operative process” (Rouse, 2015, p. 49). The idea behind this approach is to develop a naturalistic account that integrates both the social and the biological dimension of cognition. This is however a far less trodden path in cognitive sciences. Therefore, for the time being, it is wise for a philosopher to be content just with sketching what the outline of such a naturalist account of conceptual normativity should look like. In this brief space, I will only wave my hands in the direction of the work of Tomasello (2014). He has long maintained that human thinking is essentially cooperative. He has more recently argued that what philosophers of action call “shared intentionality”, i.e. the ability that we have to engage in social practices with joint goals, joint intentions and mutual knowledge, is fundamental to our specific way to produce mental representations, drawing inferences and evaluate our own behavior. He believes that the origins of shared intentionality can be explained as the result of both a social selective pressure on the collaborative skills required for the collaborative activities that individuals could not perform by themselves and the diachronic transmission of those skills to the future generations through teaching and social norm enforcement. Although this is inevitably promissory-notish, it is still enough to envisage the path for a non-reductionist naturalism about the normative statuses that we acquire in our discursive practices. First, such a naturalist account must explain how forms of shared intentionality emerged, in the light of natural and cultural evolution. Second, it must explain how shared intentionality can support the peculiar discursive articulation of our conceptual understanding. This sort of naturalism should suggest to the philosopher an answer to the question about the origins of the norms and support the idea that the burden of realism is not to be carried by the homomorphisms between our judgments and the world, but by the normative articulation of our conceptual abilities to cope with the world.

When Sellars (1954) discussed the problem of rule-following, he shared Wittgenstein's view that the dilemma between the idea that rules require meta-linguistic interpretation to be followed and the idea that there are only regularities is a false dichotomy. He pointed to the fact that there is a sense in which an agent can be said to act in reason of the rules even if he or she has no intention whatsoever with respect to the content of the rules. This is the sense in which the worker bees, for instance, perform their waggle dance in accord to a certain pattern so to represent the position of the food, or children use linguistic expressions in accord to the pattern that their caregivers teach them to conform to. These pattern-governed sorts of behavior are not merely accidentally in accord with a rule. Sellars' pragmatist insight is that both are the result

4. Expressivism and the language of rules

² Many of the arguments against teleosemantics, starting from Pietroski's (1992), can be read as underscoring this point.

of a selective pressure that makes them subject to normative assessment: in the first case the selective pressure is exerted by natural evolution, in the second by cultural learning. At the time, however, Sellars adopted a non-cognitivist framework for the analysis of learning processes that tends to obfuscate another important point of his. In fact, while the explanation of the development of the waggle dance only requires the analysis of the attunement of the bees' internal processes with their environment, the cultural learning of linguistic behavior can only be explained in the context of already up and running social discursive practices. Suppose that a naturalistic account like the one envisaged in the previous section is available to explain the origins of these practices. Still, the problem remains of understanding the gap that a child, who has been initiated to the space of reasons, has to fill in order to eventually be considered a full-blown discursive practitioner. According to Sellars the gap is an expressivist one: the child has to learn the language of the rules.

In order to grasp this idea, it is important to clarify what a language of the rules for a discursive practice is. Such a language must contain the expressive resources to make explicit the pragmatic significance of the expressions of the language that is used in the practice. In this sense it certainly is a metalanguage. Usually, the sort of metalanguages we are familiar with are semantic ones. So, for instance, in the Tarskian approach of model-theoretic semantics, metalanguages are deployed to refer to the expressions of the object languages and to associate them with their extensions in some structure of interpretation. The language of the rules, instead, must contain the normative vocabulary to say that certain linguistic moves are permitted or obligatory. As Brandom (2008) put it, such a language is a *pragmatic* metavocabulary: it allows to say what one *does* when one meaningfully deploys a certain vocabulary in a certain practice.

The sense in which the expressive resources of a pragmatic metavocabulary make a difference with respect to conceptual understanding depends on the very articulation of the space of reasons. By making moves in the game of giving and asking for reasons speakers endorse entitlements and commitments to further moves. What is a reason for what depends on which moves are treated as correct. So, for instance, if the move from p to q is treated as correct, then p can be given as a reason for q . Now, pragmatic metalanguages just allow to say that a move is treated as correct. By way of illustration consider logical vocabularies and in particular the case of conditionals. The conditional " $p \rightarrow q$ " allows to say something that could be otherwise only done by treating the inference from p to q as correct. The assertion of a conditional, in turn, is itself a move in the discursive practice, that can be given as a reason (for instance to argue by *modus ponens* from p to q) and for which reasons can be asked. In this sense, pragmatic metavocabularies bring into the game of giving and asking for reasons the very norms that regulate it. They provide discursive practices with the expressive resources that allow *in principle* to question any normative attitude: they illustrate why any privileged (either subjective or intersubjective) perspective in the game of giving and asking for reasons is structurally impossible.

The language of the rules for a discursive practice, then, is a pragmatic metavocabulary that allows to make explicit what ought to be the case and what ought to be done. Those who manage the language of rules are able to make assertions about the norms of the practice. Thus they are able to justify the others' and their own behavior in the light of those norms. Besides, they can also challenge those norms and develop the conceptual articulation of the contents that depend on them. This, in effect, is what makes of them full-blown discursive practitioners. By learning pragmatic metavocabularies, however, they do not gain access to any meta-stance: the authority of the assertions in the pragmatic metavocabularies is not grounded "from sideways on" (McDowell 1994), but on the normative interaction with the world that we engage in in the space of reasons.

In his *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein challenged the standard representational approach in semantics in two fundamental senses. First, he argued that the content of linguistic expressions is to be explained in terms of the norms of the discursive practices in which they are used. Second, he impugned the metavocabulary that is used for semantic analysis. Any account of conceptual normativity that follows such a pragmatist approach, then, must face the problem of vindicating the objectivity of conceptual contents and the possibility to talk about them. My modest purpose here was just to describe a strategy to do that in terms of a naturalistic account of conceptual normativity and a rational expressivist analysis of the language of rules. I can be satisfied if the shape of such a strategy has been enough clarified.

5. Conclusions

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