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Confusion of Tongues
By Stephen Finlay
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I see you in the library, kicking the photocopier in frustration as it fails to work. I interject: "To make it scan, you have to log in first". Here, there is one thing my sentence strictly (semantically) means – that the copier scans only if the user is logged in – and another thing I use the sentence to (pragmatically) recommend – log in! In his book, Stephen Finlay pursues the hypothesis that normative language is just like this: it always has a purely descriptive meaning about how to bring certain things about, but also independent pragmatic recommendatory force. This "end-relational" theory of the meaning of normative language is fascinating and Finlay's defence of it is ambitious but serious. This is a book that anyone with an interest in metaethics ought to read, and I recommend it very highly.

Finlay's overall goal is to provide a simple explanation of the features of normative language. He first provides a unified semantic analysis of various normative words, and then tries to derive features of their use from their simple semantic meanings combined with a simple pragmatic principle, namely that people make assertions in order to advance their own conversational ends. Of course, the simplicity that he here pursues is simplicity at the most fundamental level, and simple fundamentals may explain surface phenomena in very complex ways. Nonetheless, Finlay does an excellent job of steering the reader through complex issues.

The book is split into nine chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the book, and chapter 9 concludes it. Chapters 2, 3, and 4 each pursue a theory of the semantic meaning of a normative term: "good", "ought", and "reason", respectively. These analyses run very roughly as follows. To say that something is good is to say that it increases the probability of some outcome, and to say that someone ought to do something is to make a claim about the probability of their having done it, given that some outcome occurs. (The outcomes in question here can be anything: Finlay refers to them as "ends", but this is potentially misleading given that they need not be goals that anyone actually has (32).) To say that R is a reason for someone to do something is to say that R is an explanation of why it is good that they do it. Since reasons are analysed in terms of goodness, and both goodness and oughts are analysed in terms of efficiency at generating outcomes, Finlay's account ultimately analyses all claims about normativity as claims about what will produce what. As such, his view amounts to a novel and bold kind of analytic naturalism.

A natural worry is that these analyses rob normative claims of their normativity. Finlay's response is that the recommendatory force of normative claims comes not from their semantic meaning, but from the pragmatic uses to which such sentences are put. So chapter 5 begins by providing a general account of how pragmatics work, and the chapter goes on to discuss the distinctive *practicality* of normative language. Finlay focuses on the claim that assertions of normative sentences such as "I ought to A" are evidence of that speaker's motivations. He claims that such practicality can be explained by his semantics combined

with attractive claims about pragmatics. Remember that on Finlay's analysis of "ought", a sentence like the one above must be elliptical for a claim about how to bring about some outcome. Finlay's thought is that when the relevant outcome is left unstated in sentences like this, the audience most naturally assumes that the outcome in question is something desired by the speaker. So it is true that such assertions provide evidence of the speaker's motivations.

Chapter 6 addresses a question about how the felicity of normative assertions is determined, given that speakers may have multiple competing goals. Skipping forward slightly, chapter 8 discusses how Finlay's view accommodates normative disagreement. These chapters are both interesting, and important for Finlay's purposes, but I shall say nothing further about them here.

Chapter 7 addresses a different worry for Finlay's view, namely that his proposed semantics is unable to account for what many see as the most interesting kinds of normative claims: claims about final values and categorical oughts. This seems like a serious worry for Finlay's view: final values are precisely those which are not good because they promote something else, and categorical oughts are precisely those which obtain independently of the instrumental merits of the relevant act. Finlay's semantics might look hopeless when applied to such claims.

With respect to final goods, Finlay points out that such goods are commonly said to be good for their own sake. Finlay takes such claims quite literally, as meaning that such goods are good for the purpose of promoting themselves (198). It follows that absolutely everything is good for its own sake. This is obviously an unexpected conclusion (to say the least), but Finlay defends it again by appeal to his pragmatic principle: since such claims are obviously trivial, they are appropriately asserted only for certain purposes – in particular, for pressuring others to change their goals. Similarly, with respect to categorical oughts, Finlay again argues that his pragmatic principle explains the relevant data. The idea is that when we insist that someone ought to do something regardless of their ends, we are again pressuring them to change their goals.

(An aside: One of the highlights of the book are the underexplored puzzles that Finlay attempts to resolve. For example, given the view above, a natural extension of Finlay's view treats things that are bad for their own sake as things that are bad for the purpose of promoting themselves. Obviously, nothing falls into that category. This might sound surprising, but Finlay points out that in ordinary English it really is true that people never use the phrase "it is bad for its own sake" (201). Whatever one makes of Finlay's positive view, Finlay's book is rewarding for highlighting puzzling data such as this.)

There are various objections that one might raise against Finlay's suggestions here. In many cases, Finlay does a good job of showing how his view can avoid those objections. But rather than fussing over the details of the view, I want to instead raise a broader worry. Throughout the book, Finlay's overall focus is on normative language: he claims that metaethical puzzles largely arise because of confusions about normative language (hence the book's title). One worry about this basic suggestion is that normative thought is just as distinctive and interesting as normative language, and we might well distort some issues by focusing on linguistic phenomena at the expense of psychological phenomena. Of course, a focus on normative language is not unorthodox in metaethics, since expressivists also often

focus primarily on normative language rather than on normative thought. Perhaps that is also problematic, but it is at least less obviously so since expressivists focus on semantics rather than pragmatics, and there is plausibly a closer connection between the meanings of words and thought contents than there is between pragmatic phenomena and thought contents.

In some cases, Finlay's focus may be unproblematic – for example, when discussing the open question argument, it seems perfectly sensible to focus on language since the argument is explicitly linguistic. But in other cases, the merits of focusing on linguistic phenomena are less clear. For example, when discussing the practicality of normative judgement in chapter 5, Finlay focuses on the claim that normative assertions provide evidence of our motivations. But standard formulations of so-called "judgement internalism" make no reference to assertion whatsoever, but instead make claims about the relationship between two psychological states: normative judgement and motivation. Finlay may well be right when he claims that some standard formulations of judgement internalism are implausible (125-135), but for all that we might think that there is some such psychological claim that is plausible and that Finlay's view will not be in a position to explain. If I do some hard thinking and change my mind about how I ought to live, we'd expect this to affect my later behaviour. This kind of truth is not obviously going to be explainable by facts about normative assertion. Or, for another example of how Finlay's focus on language may be distorting, when discussing categorical oughts Finlay focuses on unqualified assertions about what people ought to do. But again, it seems as though one interesting fact about categorical oughts is the *psychological* role they play in closing deliberation, and Finlay does not address this (he comes close, but not close enough, on p134).

Finlay foresees this objection (120-1, see also 192), and provides a brief twofold response. First, that there are counterparts to pragmatic phenomena in thought, as illustrated by the possibility of sarcastic thought. Second, that many of the issues facing his view – e.g. regarding disagreement – don't arise with respect to thought at all. Even if we accept these claims (and I am not sure that we should), they would not wholly vindicate Finlay's focus. Even if the second claim is true, it obviously doesn't speak to those issues that *do* arise with respect to thought. And even if the first claim is true and there are *some* counterparts to pragmatic phenomena in thought, it seems likely that other features of normative thought will have no linguistic counterpart.

But I don't want to give the wrong impression: the book is genuinely excellent and I recommend that others take a look and judge for themselves. And at any rate, to the extent that my main complaint about the book is that I want to hear more, I hope this successfully conveys a strong recommendation that you read it.

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