Précis of *Pragmatist Quietism: A Meta-Ethical System*

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Pragmatist Quietism defends the view that there are objective ethical truths, and that these neither require nor admit of vindication from considerations that lack first-order ethical significance. The irrelevant considerations include the metaphysics of ethical properties, the semantics of ethical terms and concepts, and the rational commitments of agency and discourse. This sort of view is sometimes called "quietist" or "lightweight" realism.

My book is not the first defence of quietist realism. Its novelty lies elsewhere — specifically, in its *explanation* of this meta-ethical theory, in the world-picture within which it is ensconced — which, I claim, serves to dissolve the sense of mystery and uncanniness that might otherwise attach to it. The titular "pragmatism" is the dominant part of this world-picture.

With that said, the book begins not with invocations of high theory, but rather with a survey of the ordinary practice of ethical inquiry and debate. I believe that most other meta-ethicists misapprehend this practice, and, as a result, construct their theoretical edifices on shaky ground.

Most meta-ethicists either think that ethical judgments are something other than ordinary beliefs, or else think that ethical judgments are ordinary beliefs and so therefore must function in more or less the way that such beliefs do when they are formed and maintained as a result of substantive inquiry. By contrast, I am happy to say that ethical judgments are ordinary beliefs, but I claim that they function in the way that beliefs do when they result from inquiry that tends to get labelled "non-substantive" or "merely verbal". An example of such inquiry kicks off William James' *Pragmatism*: two hikers are arguing about whether a man who is chasing a squirrel around a tree is thereby also "going 'round the squirrel". I think that normative-ethical disputes are in crucial respects like that.

Let me unpack that a bit. I draw a distinction between "deep" and "superficial" inquiry/debate. Beliefs formed pursuant to deep inquiry exert an influence on the non-conceptual representational states that the thinker disposed to form, and an influence of a "map-like", "characteristically representational" sort on action. Beliefs formed pursuant to superficial inquiry do not (although they may exert other sorts of influence, including non-map-like or, as I call them, "direct" influences on action).

The deep/superficial distinction cross-cuts the distinction between ethical and non-ethical judgment. Ordinary disputes about whether the cat is on the mat are non-ethical and deep. James' "squirrel" dispute is non-ethical and superficial. There are also ethical, deep disputes; these are the ones to which Nicholas Sturgeon draws our attention in his classic "Moral Explanations" (1984) paper. And finally, there are ethical, superficial disputes. These, rather than the "Sturgeon cases", are the ones that tend to get called "normative ethics" by philosophers —

e.g. "Is utilitarianism true?"; "Should I push the man in front of the trolley?". When we ask whether non-ethical disputes admit of objectively right answers, we tend to have in mind *deep* non-ethical disputes. By contrast, when we ask the same of ethical disputes, we tend to have in mind the superficial ones. I claim that this is because of the distinctive influence that ethical judgments exert upon action and affect — an influence that is absent in non-ethical superficial disputes. This fools us into thinking of "normative ethical" disputes as akin to paradigmatically substantive disputes, when in fact, I argue, they are quite different.

Now, if "normative ethical" debates were akin to ordinary disputes about whether the cat is on the mat, it would be relatively straightforward to develop a plausible theoretical interpretation of them. But because they are in this weird category — like "squirrel" in some crucial respects, quite unlike it in their motivational and affective upshots, and really quite unlike "the cat is on the mat" — it is more difficult to develop a theoretical apparatus that is not obviously ill-fitting. So the bulk of *Pragmatist Quietism* is devoted to constructing such an apparatus.

The story goes basically like this: There are values that seem to be bound up with robust truth or accurate representation of the world — the value of predicting the course of experience, the value of guiding good action in the way a map does, and the value of, well, simply "mirroring nature". I call these "truthy" values. No truthy values are afforded in (superficial) normative ethical disputes, any more than they are afforded in debates like "squirrel". I claim that metaphysical, semantic, and other such considerations could be relevant to which, if any, ethical views to accept only by bearing on the truthy value of accepting this or that ethical belief. Since, in the relevant ethical disputes, no truthy value are up for grabs, it follows that these typical pillars of meta-ethics are irrelevant.

So if no truthy values are at stake in normative ethical disputes, why can't one "go either way" in these disputes, or settle them by conceptual fiat, as one seemingly can in disputes like "squirrel"? The explanation is that there are other sorts of value at stake in normative ethics, in virtue of the ways in which ethical judgments influence motivation and affect; I call these "specifically ethical values". I go on to construct a kind of truth that is specific to superficial, "normative ethical" inquiry out of these specifically ethical values. The idea is basically that a belief formed pursuant to such inquiry is true so long as an otherwise ideal advisor who held it would advise you to do all and only right actions.

At this point, one might worry that I've helped myself to the very sort of thing — value (or reasons, or normativity, or whatever) — that I'm supposed to be explaining. I respond to this worry by, as I put it in the book, "turning the dangling *explanandum* into the universal *explanans*" — offering a strategy for vindicating every claim or domain that is worthy of it by considerations that are fundamentally evaluative. This is the strategy that I call "pragmatism".

After spending most of the book defending the aforementioned value-theoretic claims and elaborating the pragmatist approach, I apply my pragmatist quietism to issues in moral epistemology including peer disagreement and debunking arguments, and respond to some criticisms that have been levied against quietist realism.