

The Burman Lectures in Philosophy 2012

Umeå Universitet, humanisthuset, 27-29 februari

Metaethics as a Confusion of Tongues

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Series abstract

Can fundamental normative notions expressed by words like ‘good’, ‘ought’, and ‘reason’ be analyzed and explained? Naïve attempts to explain the normative by investigating the conceptual meaning of normative words have been widely scorned and abandoned for several decades. But successful semantic analyses may now be possible due to developments in our understanding of language and how it is used. Study of normative words supports the End-Relational theory that things are good, reasons, or ought to be done only in relation to some end. Many central problems of metaethics arise out of the ways normative language is used in practical contexts in pursuit of our ends, and can be resolved through a better appreciation of these conversational pragmatics. This includes problems about the relationship between normative judgement and motivation, and the “categorical” character of moral claims. Special attention is paid to problems concerning the nature and extent of normative disagreement. A pragmatic solution to these metaethical problems has the virtues of expressivist views without their vices.

Lecture 1, Metaethics: Why and How?

27 februari kl. 13.15 -15, Hörsal E

Ethics or “practical philosophy” seeks to resolve disagreement about how we ought to act. Questions in Metaethics concerning the metaphysics and semantics of the normative have important implications for the possibility of a method for Ethics. But what method should we employ for Metaethics? Traditionally, philosophers offered analyses of the meaning of normative language. Today this *analytic* method stands in disrepute as a hopeless failure. This lecture responds to four challenges: Primitivist, Expressivist, Externalist, and Revisionist. While they may reveal the analytic method to be naïve, they do not show that it is not the right method for Metaethics. A presumptive case can be made in its favour.

Lecture 2, The Semantics of "Ought"

28 februari kl. 13.15 -15, Hörsal F

'Ought' is often claimed by moral philosophers to express an irreducibly normative concept. The correct semantic theory of the word suggests otherwise, however. The word 'ought' is used in a variety of different ways, but a relative of the standard semantics for modals due to Angelika Kratzer can provide a unifying analysis. This analysis points toward an End-Relational theory of the normative 'ought' in terms of comparative probability of certain ends. Special attention is paid to the meaning of the normative 'ought' in instrumental conditionals, which have puzzled many philosophers. A compositional analysis identifying the instrumental 'ought' with the 'ought' of prediction generates a plausible reduction.

Lecture 3, The Pragmatics of Normative Disagreement

29 februari kl. 13.15 -15, Hörsal E

Many central problems of metaethics arise from uses of normative language—especially in moral discourse—that appear incompatible with the kind of simple semantics advanced for 'ought' in Lecture 2. The Problem of Disagreement is a conspicuous case in point. But might these features be explicable by supplementing a simple semantic theory with the right account of conversational pragmatics? Exploring this idea for disagreement can be motivated by observing that similar problems confront any plausible semantic theory for 'ought'. It is argued that when combined with a basic and intuitive Instrumental Principle of pragmatics, the End-Relational theory of 'ought' systematically generates correct predictions about when normative claims disagree with each other. This solution is "quasi-expressivist" in recognizing that normative disagreement does not always consist in a conflict in belief, but it enjoys significant advantages over expressivism proper.

Arrangör:

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The Burman lectures were started in 1996 – on the initiative of the then Mayor of Umeå Inge-Bert Täljedal – to honour the memory of "Umeå's first professor of philosophy" Eric Olov Burman (1845-1929). Burman was born in Yttertavle outside of Umeå, went to high school in Umeå, and became professor of Practical Philosophy 1896-1910 at Uppsala University. Nowadays Burman is best known as the teacher of another Uppsala philosopher, Axel Hägerström (well-known for his realist anti-metaphysical stand and his expressivist theory of moral judgments). Some of Hägerström's criticism of idealistic views were foreshadowed in the teachings of Burman. It should perhaps be pointed out that our Burman is not the only Burman in the annals of philosophy. In addition to Eric Olov Burman from Yttertavle, there was the Dutch Cartesian philosopher Frans Burman (1628-78).