

Castañeda's Dystopia

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CASTAÑEDA'S DYSTOPIA *

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Among the more vexing problems for a theory of practical reasoning is that of distinguishing the proper terms of practical inferences and providing an account of the semantic values by means of which the validity of those inferences can be characterized. Though, normally, we do not think of an imperative like 'James, extinguish your cigar!' as possessing a truth-value, we can certainly come to accept and issue it on the basis of apparently sound reasons. If such reasoning is at all plausible, then what sort of designated value is preserved or conferred upon the conclusion?¹

Over the past three decades, Professor Castañeda has developed a powerful theory of practical thinking in which this problem is resolved in a novel and systematic fashion, a *mega*-theory which addresses a wide variety of issues in deontic logic and action theory as well.² But the sheer extent and internal unity of his program exposes it to critical scrutiny from many angles, surprisingly, to an objection from the arena of normative ethics. In what follows, I will show that Castañeda's semantics of practical language and inference has normative implications of which we have good reason to be suspicious.

I. PRACTITIONAL LEGITIMACY AND DEONTIC TRUTH

It is helpful, first of all, to outline the relevant features of Castañeda's theory. Central to his approach is a distinction between two types of thought-contents, or, as he labels them, *noemata*. There are, on one hand, *propositions*, truth-valued noemata that can be believed, asserted, and so forth. On the other, there are practical contents which, though neither truth-valued nor the objects of propositional attitudes like belief, can be accepted or *endorsed*. These *practitions*, as Castañeda calls them, are the contents of intendings, commandings, advisings and other practical attitudes. The sentence 'I shall run', for instance, expresses a *practition*, specifically, an intention, while its counterpart 'I am running' conveys a proposition. Logically, the contrast turns on a distinction

between two different modes of predication, a propositional and a practical, reflected in the canonical forms ' X does A ' and ' X to (do) A ' of a proposition and praction respectively, with neither reducible to the other.

Practitions, like propositions, enter into valid inferences, as premises as well as conclusions, and both types of noemata are governed by the same principles of logical implication. In particular, both are characterized by a two-valued logic, a claim which engenders the obvious question concerning the semantical values of practions. Having rejected the idea that practionitions are truth-valued, Castañeda speaks, instead, of the *legitimacy* and *non-legitimacy* of practionitions, the analogues of truth and falsity respectively.

In his explication of these values three factors are paramount: (i) the *de facto* ends of agents; (ii) what is required by the realization of these ends; and (iii) *harmonizations* of these ends, understood, ultimately, in terms of the hierarchic ordering of (i) and the consistency of (ii). Consider a set A of agents, ends E they pursue at time t , a partial description of the situation S at t of the agents in A , and a set α of practical actions whose performances by these agents would bring about E . Together, these determine a *context of legitimacy* C whose members are true propositions formulating the described portion of S , the facts of endorsement of, or subscription to, the ends E by members of A at t , and the laws of nature applicable at t . The closure under logical implication of the union of this set with the set of propositions formulating the realization of the ends E is a set C^+ called the *total description* of the context of legitimacy C . Let P be a primary practionition, i.e., a practionition all of whose contained predicates are predicated practically of their subjects, and let $c(P)$ be its corresponding performance proposition. We define P as *legitimate-in-context- C* just in case it satisfies one of the following conditions: (1) $c(P)$ is implied by the set C^+ ; (2) C^+ implies neither $c(P)$ nor $c(\sim P)$ but some agents in A endorse P and none endorses $\sim P$; or (3) C^+ implies neither $c(P)$ nor $c(\sim P)$ and condition (2) fails but $c(P)$ is true. P is *non-legitimate-in- C* iff $\sim P$ is legitimate-in- C , and P is *necessarily legitimate-in- C* if it is legitimate by virtue of condition (1).

A person endorses a practionition only if he takes it to be legitimate, just as one believes a proposition only if he takes it to be true.³ However, since legitimacy, as described, is relativized to some context or other, a moment's reflection reveals that more is needed to supply an adequate semantical underpinning to the (unqualified) endorsement and issuance of practionitions.

Stealing an apple from a neighbor might be legitimate relative to certain ends though not to others, and realizing this one might refrain from intending, commanding or advising that action. The latter presuppose tacit recognition of what is of *overriding* importance or legitimacy at a given time. There is, as Castañeda writes, an “absoluteness” to our issuance of practitions; it must be this way if we are to arrive at intentions and prescriptions that are, or are intended to be, action-guiding. But insofar as this is so, two other factors are taken into account by the agent; the ends of other agents he regards as *co-persons* — agents about who he in some sense *cares* — and the hierarchic ordering of both theirs and his own ends. A more refined description of contexts of legitimacy is needed.

Typically, an agent X subscribes to a hierarchy of ends C_X at any time t , a hierarchy which may conflict with that of another agent Y 's, i.e., the realization of C_X may be inconsistent with the realization of C_Y . But we can consider *ideal harmonizations* of C_X and C_Y where each is revised, in turn, to hierarchies H_X and H_Y which are harmonious with each other and differ from C_X and C_Y , respectively, as little as possible in the highest ranks of the latter. Where H_X^* is the part common to all such ideal harmonizations H_X , and similarly for H_Y^* , we call their junction $H_{X,Y}^*$ the *total ideal hierarchic complex of ends* subscribed to by X and Y at t . In general, H_α^* is the total ideal complex subscribed to by all members of a set α of agents.

Where α is the set of X 's co-persons at t , let $\alpha(X, t)$ be X 's *kingdom* of co-persons, i.e., an ordering upon α determined by how much X cares about its members. Then K_α is the part common to all the total ideal complexes to which members of α would subscribe were they to revise their own hierarchies of ends as little as possible at the highest ranks yet preserve the stratification of $\alpha(X, t)$; call it the *absolute context of X qua member of α at t* . Analogously, we identify the absolute context K_β of Y with respect to his set of co-persons β . Their junction $K^*(X, Y)$ is the total ideal hierarchic complex of ends subscribed to by X and Y qua members of α and β respectively. Generalizing, we locate the absolute context $K^*(A)$ for any set A of agents.

It is an easy matter to extend the concept of practitional legitimacy to these more elaborate contexts. Once we do, we come to a central principle of practitional semantics:

- (A) The value of a practition involved in its (unqualified) issuance and inference is legitimacy in an absolute context $K^*(A)$ where the agents of the practition and the issuer himself are members of A .⁴

An agent who endorses or infers a practition takes it to be legitimate in an absolute context $K^*(A)$, though it is important to realize that this does not mean that the agent *consciously* reviews all the ends of A 's members. The use of 'takes' indicates the agent's *implicit assumption* that a consideration of the relevant factors would uncover no reason against the performance of the actions intended, prescribed and so forth (see Note 3).

Practical reasoning is permeated by deontic concepts and normative propositions, and we can expect that Castañeda should have something to say about their role. A *normative* proposition, on his view, is the value of a deontic operator taking a practition as argument. The application of the operator $*it$ is obligatory that $*$ to the practition $*I$, to $sing^*$, for example, yields the normative $*it$ is obligatory that $I sing^*$ (where the ' $*$ '-quotes are used to form names of abstract concepts and noemata). Within Castañeda's theory, however, it is uninformative to speak of actions being obligatory, right or wrong *simpliciter*; deontic operators require an index identifying the context with respect to which something is, say, right, e.g., relative to the rules of a certain social club, to a country's legal system, or to a given moral code. This relativization is now coupled with a major stroke of systematic unification: an index i of a deontic operator reflects a context of legitimacy C_i , and the truth-value of a normative proposition is determined by the legitimacy value of its correlated practition. Since all deontic operators can be defined in terms of $*it$ is obligatory that $*$, we capture this idea in the following:

- (B) The normative $*it$ is obligatory $_i$ that X do A^* is true iff the practition $*X$, do A^* is necessarily legitimate in context C_i .

With this principle, the semantical values of normatives are fixed in precisely the way that those of practitions are in terms of factors (i)–(iii) mentioned above. In particular, the harmonization of hierarchically ordered ends is invoked to establish rankings upon norms, to determine deontic overridingness in given situations, otherwise conflicts among competing norms would be unresolvable. The normative $*Karl$, you ought, everything being considered, to repay your debt $*$ states not that Karl's repaying his debt is required by a particular legal or moral code, but that it is something he ought *unqualifiedly* to do – no other normative cancels or overrides it. How is the truth-value of an unqualified normative to be determined? Here is Castañeda:

Thus, as we view the general systematic structures of practical discourse, one of the fundamental links between $*X$ ought (*unqualifiedly*) to do A^* and $*X$, do A^* is that

the former expresses, or points to, the *Legitimacy* of the latter in the absolute or total context of ends, facts, conventions, and decisions; but it does not formulate what these are.⁵

So we arrive at the following semantical principle for unqualified normatives, perhaps a special case of (B):

- (C) The normative *it is obligatory, everything being considered, that X do A * is true iff the practition * X , do A * is necessarily legitimate in the absolute context.

Reference to *the* absolute context here is somewhat puzzling, especially when contrasted with the use of the indefinite article in (A). There are, after all, many absolute contexts, each indexed by a different set of agents; which one fixes the truth-value of an unqualified ought? The context determined by the set of all X 's co-persons is one interpretation, and a broader one would add to this set agents that would be affected by X 's doing A . A still broader, and perhaps most plausible, interpretation would include all agents whatsoever, a context that Castañeda refers to in speaking of the "ideal of morality."⁶ Whatever the correct view is, the issue seems imply a matter of further clarification and not a structural problem for the account.

II. HARMONY AND JUSTICE

Taking out our possible-world telescopes we begin by examining a world in which there is just one massive society of human beings living together on a single planet abundant in natural resources. The society is divided into two major groups, the Masters and the Slaves. For the Masters, pleased with their lot, the status quo is exactly as they want it to be – and so too for the Slaves, for they have been cleverly educated and conditioned to accept the prevailing state of things. Matters are, the slaves think, as they believe they ought to be *and* e.g. as they want them to be, for they feel that they themselves are slave-worthy only. They may even believe that being a member of the Master class is an undesirable burden to be avoided at all costs and, so, have no desire to become Masters. At the same time, the Slaves are denied much, e.g., a liberal arts education, freedom to travel, opportunity to own houses and land, choice of their own careers and work, participation in their own governance, the pleasures of philosophy, and so on. Still, not desiring these things they are not bitter about being excluded from them; they are deprived but unconcern-

ed with their deprivation. The Masters, we can suppose, believe and desire otherwise, humoring themselves over the delusions of the Slaves.

We have before us the picture of a *dystopia* – an isolated society embodying a maximal amount of contentment and harmony, but dramatically short on justice, perhaps even on overall pleasure and goodness. As to the *possibility* of this world, in a sufficiently strong sense of the modality, there is little doubt. Indeed, perhaps such conditions have already been approximated on this planet or, at least, the spectre of such is one reason why works like Orwell's *1984* and Huxley's *Brave New World* retain their disturbing profundity and relevance.

Suppose that at time t there are exactly n persons in this dystopia X_1, \dots, X_n . For simplicity's sake, let the set of co-persons for each $X_i, 1 \leq i \leq n$, be exactly the same, namely, the set α of all persons in the society. For each X_i there is an absolute context K_α^i , each of which is consistent with all others as regards ends concerning who should be a Master and who a Slave, who is to receive a liberal arts education and who not, who should govern and who not, the preservation of the general status quo and the ultimate desirability of the prevailing social structure. So, *the* absolute context $K^*(\alpha)$ contains these ends, that is, propositions asserting the endorsement of these ends by members of α , for removal of any would create "disturbances" in the higher ranks of some of the K_α^i and detract from their stratification – even though the K_α^i might embody different stratifications, viz, even a Slave cares more about his loved ones than he does for the families of the Masters and, for that reason, wants them to be Slaves.

Consider Harmonious, one of the more intellectually talented and charismatic persons in the dystopia, but a slave of his master Nochange. The latter possesses a superb library of philosophical, economic and utopian literature which Harmonious is required to dust each Wednesday. If one day Harmonious were to read some of these books he would be caused to adopt certain beliefs that would, in time, lead him to adopt the intention to radically change the society into an ultra-just and beneficial utopia. Because of his intelligence, charisma and capacity for hard work, he would very likely succeed in releasing those causal mechanisms which would eventuate in a realization of his ends. But Harmonious, as fate would have it, wants not to study such literature, because of his beliefs and aims. And Nochange wants Harmonious not to study such literature – in fact, everybody wants Harmonious not to study such literature or, at least, nobody desires the negation of this. So, on

Castañeda's theory, the practitioners *I (= Harmonious), not to read Nochange's books*, *You (= Harmonious), not to read Nochange's books*, and *Harmonious, do not read Nochange's books* are all legitimate – *necessarily* legitimate – not only in the absolute context indexed by Harmonious and Nochange, but in $K^*(\alpha)$ itself.

What determines deontic overridingness in this dystopia? By principle (C), the most plausible answer is necessary legitimacy in the absolute context $K^*(\alpha)$, bearing in mind that α contains all members of the society. Therefore, the normatives *it is obligatory, everything being considered, that Harmonious not read Nochange's books* and *it is wrong, everything being considered, that Harmonious read Nochange's books* are, or would be, *true*. It follows that an action which would open up to Harmonious a new world of conceptual enjoyment and bring to the planet a social system containing a greater measure of justice and pleasure or goodness is *wrong* – overridingly so.

This consequence, I believe, is objectionable from a moral point of view; actions that would correct a severe imbalance in the distribution of rights, benefits and burdens, and end a system of slavery, should, by any acceptable standards, be unqualifiedly *permitted* if not required. By generating the very opposite conclusion, Castañeda's semantics of practical language embodies a curious brand of conservatism, lacking provisions for an iron first perhaps, but heinous all the same.

Some might find it alarming that an account of practical reasoning has any normative implications whatever, aside from their specific character. Indeed, thesis (C), far from an innocent proposal within the supposedly value-free discipline of semantics, qualifies as a candidate for the fundamental axiom of normative ethics rivalling the Principle(s) of Utility and the Categorical Imperative(s). But my objection is that it is *inadequate* in this role and, hence, that the semantic component of Castañeda's theory, so central in the account of practical inference, must be modified⁷.

NOTES

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¹ Anthony Kenny has posed this problem with admirable clarity (1975), pp. 70–71). Defenses of imperatival inference can be found in Hare (1952, Chapter 2), and in Castañeda (1971, Chapter 4). A more familiar species of practical reasoning, no doubt, is

that of deliberation in which the conclusion is a first-person intention (see Castañeda, 1975, pp. 25–31 and Chapter 6).

² Castañeda (1975) contains the most comprehensive exposition of this theory.

³ See Castañeda (1975, pp. 57–58) where it is noted that to *take* something as true does not require ascribing the property of truth to it or even of having an exact idea of what truth is. The attitude has more the character of an implicit assumption rather than an explicitly articulate belief implying an ability to verbalize the content in question. Similar remarks pertain to taking a practition as legitimate.

⁴ See Castañeda (1975, p. 145). The occurrence of the indefinite article here reminds us that there are different absolute contexts insofar as there are different sets of agents. At the same time, it leaves open the possibility that there might be members of *A* other than the agents and issuer of the practition in question, e.g., *other* co-persons of the issuer.

⁵ Castañeda (1975), p. 242).

⁶ The notion of the ideal of morality is discussed by Castañeda in 1974). Though he seems to think that this is not the context involved in the issuance of a practition (1975, p. 145), this does not rule out such a context as being the one intended in (*C*). Bratman (1983, p. 155) takes Castañeda to mean the *relevant* absolute context determined by the agents mentioned in principle (*A*), a reading that is neither disputed nor explicitly endorsed in Castañeda (1983). However, nothing in the important pages 239–248 of Castañeda (1975) forces this reading.

⁷ Castañeda (1983) offers an amended definition of legitimacy in order to accommodate some points raised in Bratman (1983). In barest form this account is as follows. A context of legitimacy is a triple (*A*, *P*, *O*) where *A* is a class of agents, *P* a class of practitions supposedly (at least partially) adopted by all agents in *A*, and *O* a set of practically considered actions viewed as open by agents in *A*. A true proposition-extension of *P* is the union of *P* with a set of true propositions. A practition is legitimate in *C_i* iff (i) there is a true proposition-extension of *P_i* which implies the practition, or (ii) there is no true proposition-extension of *P_i* that implies the practition and none that implies its negation, but the corresponding performance proposition is true. Presumably, a practition is necessarily legitimate in virtue of clause (i). Castañeda writes that the simplicity of this revised account makes him “quiver” (1983, p. 408) – with good reason, for it is unable to escape the force of the Harmonious example as the objectionable practitions remain necessarily legitimate.

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