

Minimal expressivism

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1. What does it take to be a minimal expressivist

Expressivism is a way to approach the meaning of a certain kind of expressions.

A theory of meaning can be called 'expressivist' if it holds at least two of the following theses.

(1) Certain predicates do not take simple objects under their scope, but complexes of objects and properties. These predicates are 'second-order' predicates. At least one of the items of the following list can be explained as an instance of a second-order predicate: Belief, knowledge, a priori, first person thoughts, truth, good, bad.

(2) Second-order predicates do not *describe* the way the world is.

(3) Expressions containing second-order predicates lack truth conditions, even if they are syntactically correct.

(4) Second-order expressions are used to express some attitude A towards a particular piece of content.

These four theses are logically independent. In order to have an idea of what a minimally expressivistic position would look like, it is important to assess the logical space of possible positions that a single basic take on the meaning of a certain group of expressions can generate.

Second-order predicates and relationalism

Imagine, if possible, a world that contains only middle size objects. Think of a linguistic tool that could be used to spell out the details of such a world. Arguably, only (potentially) referential expressions and predicates would be necessary to specify how is every object located within such a world, and, all in all, how the whole thing looks like. Include now objects of any size, every object you can see around, or think of, and picture how that linguistic tool had to be altered in order to do its job. That such a tool is not a natural language is as easy to prove as to check that it is *extensional*, while natural languages host intensional contexts. According to thesis (1), natural language differs from the tool just described because the latter lacks *normative* words, like 'believes', 'thinks', 'good', 'bad', 'correct', whose main goal is not to allow us to talk about how an object is placed with respect to another. For a start, a language containing normative words is not *extensional*, expressions with the same meaning cannot be substituted *salva veritate* on every occasion. Normative expressions also have a peculiar logical status: they look like run-of-the-mill predicates –they are *insaturated*, in need of completion– but their arguments are not always the kind of objects one should expect to find under the scope of predicates like 'being red', 'being tall', etc. Thesis (1) simply states that natural language contains a peculiar group of expressions, that can be characterized by the nature of their arguments.

Thesis (1) does not amount to saying that second-order predicates are not *relations*, a relation being a particular kind of function taking simple objects as arguments. (1) certainly excludes Russell's *multiple relation* take on belief reports, for example, where 'believes that' connects an agent with a set of things, typically including a property and an object. (1) exclusively requires the argument/s of the second-order predicate not to be a single simple object. If propositions, complexes of objects and properties, were treated as objects themselves, then second-order notions could receive a *relational* analysis.

Relational predicates are characteristically used to talk about objects, and how they stand with respect to one another. One might assume that dyadic second order predicates simply connect especial kind of objects, they allow us to describe how a special kind of object, a subject, stands with respect to another special kind of object, a fact, a proposition, a complex entity of some other sort, etc. This view has been traditionally found problematic, since these out-of-the-ordinary objects, together with the special nature of the relation referred to by the use of the second-order predicate, are difficult to accommodate within the most basic naturalistic framework, one that follows Moore's reaction against *spooky entities*. According to a relational view on second-order predicates, we would not only need to provide a functionally appropriate definition of 'proposition', but also determine what kind of object a proposition is. Correspondingly, one should be able to determine what kind of property is referred to when predicates like 'believes', 'knows', 'is good', 'is true' are used. We have no opinion on whether this enterprise can be successfully accomplished, we simply think it is not necessary to undertake it.

A defender of (1) could accommodate a relational view on second order predicates by postulating isomorphism between second order predicates and second order, or derivative, properties. The world we introduced at the beginning of this section could be enriched so as to include not only objects and their properties, but also properties of those properties. According to Molnar:

"Df1 F is a derivative property of a iff a has the property F and a's having F ontologically depends on some properties of some parts of a, or a's having F ontologically depends on some other properties of a.

Df2 F is a basic property of a iff a has the property F and a's having F does not ontologically depend on any properties of any parts of a, and a's having F does not ontologically depend on any other properties of a." (Molnar 2003, 29)

Molnar's metaphysics could be made compatible with thesis (1) if isomorphism was added to the picture, if one were to suppose that our use of second-order predicates necessarily corresponds to an attempt to say how the world is, to talk about some special kind of properties: derivative properties.

Building up on Molnar's account on Basic vs. Derivative properties, one could modify (1) along the following lines in order to construct an even weaker thesis:

(1') Second-order predicates can only be applied iff another predicate is included in the same utterance or thought. At least one of the items of the following list can be explained as an instance of a second-order predicate: Belief, knowledge, a priori, first person thoughts, truth, good, bad.

(1') does not exclude Russell's multiple-reference theory, for example. Moreover, to our knowledge, there are no accounts on logical, doxastic, alethic, or epistemic expressions

that allow these expressions to be applied to unqualified objects. Irrespectively of anyone's position with respect to the grammaticality principle, it would be daring to provide a theory for the meaning of those expressions that took uses such as 'I believe the chair', 'It is possible that the chair' 'I know the chair', "The chair is true" as acceptable, or even desirable. It is striking for us to realize that the story has been dramatically different for predicates such as 'is good'. It is somewhat difficult to understand what someone is trying to say when she utters 'John is good' if she is not trying to say something like 'most of the things John does are good', or else 'John is a good something'. We will go back to this in section 2 of this paper.

It has been argued that there is no reason whatsoever to suppose that there is a principled difference between those predicates that are the normal target of an expressivist theory and run-of-the-mill predicates like 'tall', 'blue', etc., that there is no way to spot the difference between the group of expressions normally addressed by expressivists and the rest of predicates just by looking at the surface structure (cfr. Schroeder 2008, 704; Thomas 2006).

Once we characterize noncognitivist views in this way, moreover, it is easy to characterize the crux of the Frege-Geach Problem. It is that there is no linguistic evidence whatsoever that the meaning of moral terms works differently than that of ordinary descriptive terms. On the contrary, everything that you can do syntactically with a descriptive predicate like 'green', you can do with a moral predicate like 'wrong', and when you do those things, they have the same semantic effects (Schroeder 2008, 704).

This claim cannot be meant to establish that there is no difference in the syntactic behaviour of these expressions, since it is clear that only the expressions highlighted by the expressivist can take complete sentences as their subject or direct object, instead of simple nominal phrases. Take 'tall' and 'good' as examples:

John is tall

It is tall that the ball is red*

The ball is good.

It is good that John is tall, since he wants to play college basketball.

Only predicates like 'believe', 'knows' 'necessarily', 'a priori' can take whole sentences as their arguments. Maybe they can also be genuinely satisfied by simple nominal expressions, like in 'I believe you', but they can certainly be satisfied by that-clauses containing complete sentences as well, unlike predicates like 'being tall', and 'being red'.

What they mean while appealing to the surface structure is rather a different claim. Expressivist expressions take part in the subject-predicate structure in a way that makes them look like they are 'fit for making assertions' (Thomas 2006, ?). This claim has nothing to do with the distinction defended in (1), but more with (2), and (3), as we will see in the

following sections. Thus (1) –or its relational-friendly version (1')– is safe from the kind of criticisms that seek to question the syntactic specificity of the group of normative expressions singled out by expressivism.

Truth-conditions lacking expressions

Thesis (2) is the point where expressivism parts ways with any form of *relationalism*. Second-order predicates, an expressivist would claim, do not *describe*, they are not used to talk about how the world is, about the relative position of one object with respect to the others. A complete description of the way the world is would not be modified by our talking about good or bad actions, truths, things that might have been different, people's beliefs, etc. Of course, all this talking is important, it is indeed essential to our endeavour as humans beings. It is nonetheless irrelevant to answer to the question 'what's the world like?'. A simple relationalist, for instance a follower of Russell's multiple-relation theory (see Moltmann 2003 for a contemporary defense of this position), or an ontologically committed relationalist, somebody who is ready to sign metaphysical checks to afford the analysis of normative notions, could object to (2) by claiming that expressions containing normative notions are nonetheless 'fit for making assertions'. Nevertheless, the expressivist who holds (2) does not need to deny that complex expressions containing normative notions can be used to make assertions. It is all about the *kind of assertions* that we make when we use them. Normative notions may not be used to describe and still be part of assertions. Our take on (3) would clarify this point.

Even though (2) seems to be hard to swallow for those who treasure moral, semantic, epistemic concepts, etc. close to their hearts, the real source of concern for them has to be thesis (3). According to (3), expressions containing second-order concepts lack truth conditions. The argument to reach (3) from (2) seems to be quite straightforward: if second-order concepts do not describe, and we think that the content of a complex expression is a function of the content of the parts, and the way they are combined, then having a hole introduced by a content-less second order expression would amount to saying that the whole expression lacks content altogether. The effect would be similar to that of introducing random strings of letters in a sentence. 'John is xgsnebfj', as interpreted in standard English, lacks truth conditions; its utterance does not say anything about the world. As a matter of fact, it does not say anything at all, the interpretation process is blocked for good once we found 'xgsnebfj' in our way.

This conclusion is not only contested on *affective* grounds, there seem to be also logical reasons to reject it. Those who cherish their moral notions, for example, taking realism to be the only way to match their level of affection towards them, would feel rather disappointed by a view on the meaning of moral words that ends up saying that sentences like 'sleeping with your neighbour's wife *is bad*', or 'aiding Haiti *is good*' cannot be used to say something *true* or *false*. Truth-ascriptions, belief-ascriptions, knowledge-ascriptions, etc. would receive the same fate under (3). Are we suddenly unable to know, believe, or be true to the facts? What kind of soul-less theory is this? Besides, on the logical side, if complex expressions containing second-order predicates lack truth conditions, what happens when these complex expressions occur under the scope of truth-functional expressions, such as logical connectives? The mere fact that we can meaningfully say things like 'sleeping with your neighbour's wife *is not bad*', placing a complex containing a second-order expression under the scope of a truth-functional expression, shows that the original complex expression didn't lack truth-conditions.

Several lines of argument can be developed to respond to these criticisms, but our concern here is simply to show that these are not damaging to all forms of expressivism. If (3) followed from (2) together with compositionality, and a truth-functional account of logical-connectives, expressivism as a whole would be jeopardized, since (1) is a too weak to be established as a theoretical alternative and (4) is not possible without (2). Nevertheless, as it will be shown, (3) does not follow from (2). (2) states that second-order expressions are not descriptive, they are not used to talk about how the world is. This does not imply that utterances of sentences containing second-order expressions lack truth-conditions, but that second-order expressions are truth-conditionally irrelevant. As the difference between the occurrence of 'xgsnebfj' in 'John is xgsnebfj' and that of 'good' in 'aiding Haiti is good' exemplifies, second-order expressions are not holes in linguistic structures, they do not block the interpretation process. There is a big difference between being truth-conditionally irrelevant and blocking a truth-conditional interpretation. To be a proper consequence of (2), (3) should be rephrased as (3'):

(3') Second-order predicates do not modify the truth-conditions of expressions under their scope.

The content of our utterances and thoughts can be individuated from two different perspectives, exemplified by the following questions: i) what would be the world like if what I'm saying/thinking were true?, ii) what follows from it and what does it follows from? When the topic of truth-conditions is assessed, only question i) is at stake. Second-order operators affect the inferential potential of the things we say/think, but they are irrelevant with respect to question i). Take modal operators, for example. Except for those that believe in primitive modalities, most philosophers agree on a view on possibility according to which 'Possibly p' is true if there is a possible world in which p is true. 'Possibly' is taken to be second-order and non-descriptive, but there is also a consensus concerning the impact on the truth conditions of the expressions under its scope. In this case, 'possibly' does not alter the truth-conditions of 'p', it just qualifies the possible worlds in which 'p' has to be the case for we to say something true. To the question 'what would be the world like if 'possibly p' was true?', the answer is simply 'p has to be the case'. The modal expression does not have an impact on the truth-conditions of p. In the same vein, the expressivist thinks that words like 'good', 'believe', 'true' etc., do not modify the truth-conditions of the expressions under their scope.

(3') is in principle immune to the affective and the logical criticisms described above, even though they might still be harmful for a position that developed this minimal thesis into a full-blown theory.

Similar to our distinction between (3) and (3') is Horgan and Timmons' defense of the difference between non-cognitivism, the idea that moral judgements are not beliefs at all, and expressivism (Horgan and Timmons 2006, 230-231). An expressivist does not claim that our thoughts containing normative concepts are not beliefs, as our complex expressions containing normative expressions are yet fit to make assertions, they simply defend that normative notions do not alter the truth-conditional content of the beliefs they are inserted in.

Up until now, our characterization of expressivism has been purely *negative* (cfr. Jackson and Pettit 1998, 239, where they suggest that expressivism is a bipartite theory). Expressivists have undertaken nonetheless the task of providing a positive account of the

meaning of second-order notions, instead of simply saying what these notions are not, from (Stevenson 1937) to (Gibbard 1990). Thesis (4) is usually endorsed by expressivists who think that if normative expressions do not describe, something should be said about what they do, something concerning the kind of things that we *talk about* whenever we use those words. Gibbard, for example, maintained that whenever something like “p is good” was uttered, a speaker was expressing an attitude to the effect that it was reasonable to feel bad for whoever failed to do p, and it was reasonable to be mad at this person. Some of the reactions against expressivism hinge only on the specific positive account of the meaning of second-order concepts. Thus Gibbard’s account has been criticized on psychological grounds: the particular attitudes that a speaker is said to be expressing when she uses ethical terms have been questioned (see ???). On a more general line, Jackson and Pettit have argued that the relation of ‘expressing’ was not the kind of connection that the expressivist need to posit between a speaker and a certain attitude (see Jackson and Pettit 1998). Our own position is that, pace its name, an expressivist theory can perfectly walk without the limp of its positive side. It is only a failure to see the appropriate consequences of an expressivist position what moves expressivist to take an unnecessary step further. We call the conjunction of theses (1), (2), and (3’) *minimal expressivism*, and the aim of the rest of the paper is to present this position under a plausible light.

Taking stock

We have seen so far that a theory of meaning can be called ‘expressivist’ if it holds at least two of the theses stated at the beginning of the section. We saw that most of the usual criticism were not aimed at theses (1) and (2), that stated the presence in our natural language of a special group of expressions, and their non-descriptivist nature, but rather at theses (3) and (4). Thesis (3) posits that complex expressions containing counterparts of second-order normative operators lack truth conditions. We saw that only (3’) is a consequence of (2): provided that their job is not to describe how the world is, normative expressions do not modify the truth-conditions under their scope. Some other objections concerned thesis (4), the specific characterization of the positive work that normative expressions do. We think that (4) is not necessary for a theory of the meaning of normative expressions, and we hope that this point gets clarified along the following section.

2. What is *minimal expressivism* good for

Minimal expressivism is the joint conjunction of (1), (2), and (3’). Let us have a reminder:

(1) Certain predicates do not take simple objects under their scope, but complexes of objects and properties. These predicates are ‘second-order’ predicates. At least one of the items of the following list can be explained as an instance of a second-order predicate: Belief, knowledge, a priori, first person thoughts, truth, good, bad.

(2) Second-order predicates do not *describe* the way the world is.

(3’) Second-order predicates do not modify the truth-conditions of expressions under their scope.

Our claim is that such a position can satisfy our theoretical concerns about the meaning of normative expressions. The plan for this section is to review different kinds of minimal expressivism, hopefully rising the plausibility of the general take in the process.

Modal and doxastic minimal expressivism

The first kind of minimal expressivism that we want to look into is *modal expressivism*. Modal expressions, such as ‘possibly’ and ‘necessarily’, it is commonly assumed, do not take simple objects as their arguments, they are *saturated* by complete propositions. The usual semantics for modal expressions is not only compatible, but presupposes that these expressions do not modify the truth-conditions of the propositions under its scope. Again, the answer to the question ‘what would be the world like if ‘possibly p’ is true?’ would be simply ‘p would have to be the case’, at least in one possible world. *Modal expressivism* could be rejected by someone who believed in *primitive modalities*, someone who thought that modal words are used to describe how the world is. This is the kind of alternative that, as we said above, signs metaphysical checks to pay linguistic bills. Modal semantics does not usually feel compelled to offer a “positive” characterization on the meaning of modal words. The meaning of ‘possibly’ is exhausted by the semantic characterization ‘possibly p’. No reflection on the “attitude expressed” by the use of this word is needed at all.

A similar story could be told about *semantic expressivism*. We do not usually expect complicated stories about the attitudes behind semantics’ technical terms, such as ‘synonymity’, ‘meaning’, ‘reference’, etc. In what sense is there something else that needs to be explained once we have a theory on the meaning of these notions that successfully gives an account of the inferences that they might be involved in? If a theory of meaning explains why ‘x and y are synonymous iff x’s meaning = y’s meaning’, ‘in a directly referential theory, the meaning of proper names = their references’, etc. are true, then it says all that is to be said about the meaning of these normative expressions. The opposite view, semantic realism, should start by saying why an account of the attitudes expressed by the use of these words is needed at all.

When we move to *doxastic attitudes*, minimal expressivism seems to lose a bit of its initial credit. More often than not, it is assumed that a proper theory on the meaning of belief reports needs to start by clarifying what it is to have a belief, what it is to believe something, what kind of mental states are beliefs, and so on. Nevertheless, as we saw above, such a relational theory of belief reports faces a serious challenge when trying to explain what kind of objects are the believer and the belief, and the kind of relation that can be established between them when a belief is ascribed. Moreover, our concern is semantic (or logico-semantic/pragmatic), we are interested in explaining what somebody means when she attributes beliefs to others by the use of sentences of the kind A believes p. Other concerns are possible, of course, but the treatment of higher-order concepts advises to demarcate the scope of any proposal as clearly as possible. For a minimal expressivistic view on belief reports, it would be enough to provide an adequate account of the inferential potential of doxastic expressions. Still, somebody might think that facing the obvious problems that a relational theory seems to have is worth it in order to have an answer to questions as important as ‘what is a belief?’. For those sympathetic to this line of argument, we suggest the following empirical hypothesis:

Empirical hypothesis (EH). Every set of propositions that can be inferentially linked to propositions of the form βp , where β is a doxastic operator and p is a random proposition,

must contain at least one proposition of the form ∂q , where q is a random proposition and ∂ is a normative operator. βp and ∂q are non-extensional contexts.

(EH) posits that our talk about beliefs can only be inferentially linked with sets of propositions containing normative operators. Thus, we put forward that non-factive normative operators are non-detachable (I say “non-factive” because although “know” implies normative compounds, “truth” is detachable, and then “know” would be detachable in two steps, but we might stop in “truth” and thus gain generality, in the sense that (EH) is not restricted to non-factive operators, and then we should delete “It is true that p ” from the list of the appropriate βp propositions). There is no set of propositions that contains no normative operator from which a proposition containing a doxastic operator can be inferred. Belief is essentially connected to normative action and perception, and this shows up in its inferential behaviour. Consider in contrast what happens when normative expressions are absent: ‘if my table is green, then it is not blue’, ‘if the computer is on the table, then it is not below the table’, etc. (EH) is the claim that this kind of inferences are impossible from or to propositions containing normative operators.

Now if (EH) holds, what reason could there be to think that the meaning of doxastic expressions is not exhausted by an expressivistic characterization, one that does not care about explaining the “positive side” of these expressions, the kind of attitude that we ascribe to someone when we attribute a belief to her? What kind of work is this “positive side” going to do for our theory? Again this is not to say that a positive account of doxastic mental states is not useful or important, minimal expressivism only maintains all we have to say about the content of normative expressions is to spell their connections with other normative expressions. This view is neither radical nor new. Old-fashioned accounts of action, belief, and desire showed no relational commitments at all, they simply made explicit the connections between different normative concepts. (EH) makes minimal expressivism plausible because it implies that even if you found a coherent relational account for the meaning doxastic expressions, you would have gained very little if the goal is to understand the behaviour of these words in natural language.

Taking (EH) one step further

An empirical hypothesis such as (EH) would hold not only for doxastic expressions. We think that it could be generalized for every normative expression in the following way:

Generalized Empirical Hypothesis (GEH). Every set of propositions that can be inferentially linked to propositions of the form ∂p , where ∂ is a normative operator and p is a random proposition, must contain at least one proposition of the form ∂q , where q is a random proposition. ∂p and ∂q are non-extensional contexts.

This hypothesis, (GEH), lives and dies on empirical grounds, so in a sense it needs no more justification. But here is a possible story about the origin of this phenomenon. If intentionality could be essentially linked to the possibility of *being wrong* –both about the meanings of the words that we use and about the truth of our judgements–, then the *human sphere* would at least partially be characterized by its having correction conditions.

There is no discourse about our actions and thoughts that lacks normative operators, since they are natural language devices to talk about correction conditions. Normative operators are the distinctive mark of a discourse in which the possibility of being wrong is built-in, and thus any intent of moving from the normative side to the purely descriptive side would be blocked. We do not think this is any different from Moore's naturalistic fallacy.

Ethical minimal expressivism

We already mentioned some of the heated reactions that expressivist theories get when normative ethical terms are at stake. If these terms are not descriptive, they seem to think, then we cannot offer a real foundation for our moral judgements, and we do not know what is good and bad anymore. It is not our intent to argue against this feeling, only to provide an argument that might put ethical expressivism under a different light.

An ethical realist would have to show that (GEH) is false for the case of ethical terms, that is, that there can actually be inferences from purely descriptive to evaluative propositions, or vice versa. This would clearly affect Moore's diagnosis on the naturalistic fallacy, and his anti-reductionistic stance. Any such inference would prove that there is a way to reduce what is expressed by the use of a second-order concept to sets of first-order properties. Strikingly enough, most reactions against moral expressivism also include a rejection of reductionism.

Minimal expressivism is a non-reductionistic naturalistic view on ethical expressions. It can cope with a hypothesis about the conceptual realm that makes natural language essentially non-extensional, and still deals with this feature without postulating "creatures of darkness" or "spooky entities". It leaves perfectly open for discussion the realm of the normative, and so it does not include any revisionist attitude towards standard conceptual analysis.

3. Conclusion: Epistemic attitudes and the Pope

We have shown that some of the most common objections against expressivism do not affect Minimal expressivism, the view that normative expressions are used to express non-descriptive second-order notions, whose impact on the propositions under their scope is not truth-conditional. We have argued for the plausibility of such an analysis of normative notions by introducing (GEH), a general hypothesis concerning the inferential closure of the normative world. (GEH) faces an obvious counterexample in so-called 'factive' propositional attitudes. The verb 'to know' is usually claimed to be factive, because we cannot attribute knowledge that *p* to others or ourselves while avoiding a commitment with the truth of *p*. Thus, 'John knows that *p*, but not *p*' is contradictory, and one could make the following inference: 'If John knows that *p*, then *p*'. Factivity seems to imply that propositions lacking normative operators can be inferred from propositions containing normative operators, which seems to contradict (GEH).

This objection could be contested by appealing to an expressivism about truth (see Shroeder forthcoming, Frápolli Forthcoming), but we would like to offer a more general argument with the aid of the story that we introduced in the previous section as a possible background for (GEH). There we defended that the possibility of being wrong both with respect to the meaning of the words that we use and the judgements that we make was a mark of the mental, an abstraction from intentionality. Our judgements on the world are not

free from this mark, and so our access to the world is always mediated by propositional attitudes. Factivity is only a property that connects two sets of propositional attitudes, in this case epistemic attitudes and normative expressions such as 'is true', 'it is a fact', etc.

Our argument explores briefly what happens when a somebody is believed to be above error. Would anyone be willing to talk to a shaman? What about the Pope? Of course, people cue to be in the presence of those who are connected to the Divine, but do they do that because they want to have a chat with them? They want to receive some advice, some guidance for a better life, comfort or warning concerning their future, but surely they will not discuss the nuisances of last season's Champions League for their favourite team, the psychological details of a Dostoyevski's character, or the best way to reform the public education system in southern European countries. And the reason is: a shaman, or the Pope, *do not talk*. They certainly utter words that we all can understand, some might say that the sentences they produce are even meaningful, but we still would not engage in conversation with them, because nothing but the Truth can be expected from them. Both the justification of the things they say, and the special use of the words they exhibit, are not subjected to revision. When somebody acts as if their access to reality was unmediated by propositional attitudes, and therefore immune to error, we simply cannot interact with them as rational speakers.

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