



Two Paths to Expressivism, and Beyond?



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Orientating Quote

“Now, once it is granted ... that empiricism in moral philosophy is compatible with the recognition that 'ought' has as distinguished a role in discourse as descriptive and logical terms...

“and once the tautology 'The world is described by descriptive concepts' is freed from the idea that the business of all non-logical concepts is to describe,

“the way is clear to an *ungrudging* recognition that many expressions which empiricists have relegated to second-class citizen-ship in discourse, are not *inferior*, just *different*.”

Sellars 1958: §79

Metaethical Expressivism, Typically

- Two core claims, vaguely stated:
 1. There is a philosophically important difference between what is expressed by claims which essentially deploy some target vocabulary
 - e.g. moral, normative, etc.and the claims we might more naturally think of as core parts of the practice of describing states of affairs in the world
 - e.g. empirical, matter-of-factual, etc.
 2. Someone who doesn't implicitly track this difference cannot count as fully understanding the meaning of the target vocabulary.
 - Hence, expressivism is usually seen as an *anti-descriptivist* account of the meaning of some target vocabulary or area of discourse.
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My Plan

- Make a brief note on the failings of proto-expressivism
 - Distinguish two paths to expressivist views about normative vocabularies
 - Explain why I think the second path is better, both as a thesis about normative discourse and as a model for modal expressivism
 - Use reflection on the case of logical vocabulary to take some initial steps on what I see as a path beyond expressivism in both the modal and normative cases
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Ayer

- Famously claimed that, unlike empirical vocabularies, moral vocabularies do not affect the propositional content of the sentences in which they occur but rather add emotive tone or coloring.
 - This means that, as far as his overall semantic view goes, the following claims have the the different, inconsistent semantic contents (propositions) you'd expect:
 - (1) Sally will help.
 - (2) It's not the case that Sally will help.
 - However, he's committed to thinking the following two claims have the same semantic contents:
 - (3) Sally ought to help.
 - (4) It's not the case that Sally ought to help.
 - viz. none at all.
 - Clearly unacceptable. A central goal of theoretical semantics is to develop a systematic way to assign contents to whole sentences based on the semantic values of the parts and the ways they are put together by the sentence.
 - We do this to explain apparent semantic phenomena, such as: incompatibility, entailment, synonymy.
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Hare

- Hare improves on Ayer with the claim that there are two fundamentally different kinds of contents: propositional (truth conditions), prescriptive (satisfaction conditions).
 - Thus, he'll say that (1) and (2) express incompatible propositions, while (3) and (4) express incompatible prescriptions.
 - However, it's not exactly clear how to make this work in a systematic way. For instance, the more natural conflicting prescription to
(3) Sally ought to help.
is:
(5) Sally ought *not* to help.
 - Moreover, Hare's bifurcated starting point wreaks havoc to systematicity when it comes to assigning semantic contents to mixed claims, e.g.
(6) If someone else isn't going to do it, then Sally ought to help.
(7) If someone else isn't going to do it, then Sally will help.
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First Path

- Combine two independently motivated ideas:
 - Following Hume, we must distinguish between belief-like and desire-like attitudes (with different “directions of fit”) in the psychological explanation of motivation to action.
 - Following Locke (and Grice) we should articulate the content of all say-ables in terms of some think-able.
 - Hence, as far as the project of theoretical semantics goes, *all* sentences should be assigned mental state types as their semantic contents.

(Avoids Ayerean/Harean bifurcation.)
 - But logically simple normative sentences will be assigned desire-like attitudes, whereas logically simple matter-of-factual sentences will be assigned belief-like attitudes.

(Underwrites the expressivist’s anti-descriptivist account of the meaning of normative claims.)
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Gibbard

“The label ‘expressivism’ alludes to a way of explaining the meanings of statements in a public language. Holmes tells Mrs. Hudson, ‘Packing is now the thing to do,’ and we explain what he means by explaining the state of mind that he thereby expresses.

“Expressing we explain by analogy with prosaically factual statements: Suppose Holmes instead says, ‘Moriarty will shortly arrive.’ He thereby expresses a prosaically factual belief, his belief that Moriarty will shortly arrive. Expressing a state of mind works the same in these two cases, but the states of mind expressed are different.” (2003: 75).

- The basic program:
 - Humeanism about the nature of the state of mind expressed by normative claims
 - Global ideationalism about how to articulate semantic contents
 - Founded on a primitive distinction between agreement/disagreement rather than truth/falsity.
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Schroeder

- Drawing on *inter alia* Geach, Hale, Unwinn, and Dreier, he develops sustained critique of the ability of expressivists to provide a plausibly systematic semantics indicative sentences.
 - Core conclusion:

“... [an expressivist] view according to which normative language and descriptive language work in the same way can solve a lot of the traditional problems of noncognitivism.

“But ... none of these advantages come by taking what we know about descriptive language and applying it to normative language – they all require drawing progressively more radical conclusions about how ordinary descriptive language works.

“That is one of my most important morals for this book. It is not, I think, an entirely new moral, but I’ve done my best to make it vivid, and I think that unlike previous treatments, my observations follow from a fully general understanding of what expressivism must be like.” (2008: 117)
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Second Path

- Combine two *different* independently motivated ideas:
 - Following Hume (but also Kant, Wittgenstein, Ramsey, Sellars, etc.), one endorses functional pluralism at the level of concepts and thoughts.
(One recognizes e.g. cognitive representations of reality, pressures on action, expectations, degrees of confidence, limits on conceivability, “pure” ideas reflecting our conceptual framework, etc.)
 - Following minimalists about truth, one rejects metaphysically inflationary interpretations of the core notions of theoretical semantics.
(Mainly: proposition, truth-condition, denotation, and predication)
 - Hence, all sentences can be assigned systematically decomposable propositions as their semantic contents.
(Avoids Ayerean/Harean bifurcation, as well as Schroeder’s critique)
 - But logically simple normative sentences will be said to allow us to *do* something different than describe reality: i.e. to express mental states with some functional role other than cognitive representation of reality.
(Underwrites the expressivist’s anti-descriptivist account of the meaning of normative claims)
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Blackburn

“To understand the role of a term in our language, we need some understanding of its compositional possibilities.” (1984: 16)

However, this is “...a relatively *internal* inquiry into the way meanings are generated in a particular language” which contrasts with “*external* surrounding questions, which success in compositional semantics would evidently leave untouched.” (*ibid.*: 11)

In the latter case, we are interested in “...questions about what it is about a group of people that makes it true that they are speaking and understanding a language which fits a particular semantic description, of what counts as change in language, sameness of language, understanding of language in a certain way.” (*ibid.*: 17)

- The basic program:
 - Pluralism about functional roles of mental states and concepts
 - Anti-inflationary stance towards core semantic notions (propositions, truth conditions)
 - Anthropological/genealogical approach to understanding the import of various functional roles to the meaning of various vocabularies
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Price

- A popular counterargument:
 1. According to minimalism, any sentence embeddable in the truth-predicate can be used to make an assertion (express a belief).
 2. The only thing that could distinguish assertions (beliefs) from other utterances (mental states) is their direction of fit with the world.
 3. So, although mental states expressed by normative claims may have other functional roles, minimalism forces one to grant that these claims are also descriptive, *pace* expressivism.
 - Price's response:
 - Embeddability in the truth-predicate is no mere syntactic criterion; we have to think that one making the claim is subject to certain norms. (2003)
 - Assertions (beliefs) can be distinguished from other utterances (mental states) in virtue of their central and special role in the practice Brandom calls giving and asking for reasons. (2011)
 - Residual worry: doesn't this erase the line expressivists originally wanted to draw between descriptive and non-descriptive vocabularies?
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Interlude

- Expressivism is usually seen as an anti-descriptivist account of the meaning of some target vocabulary or area of discourse.
 - Two places expressivism might engage the theory of meaning:
 - At the ~~narrowly semantic level~~ narrowly semantic level, where we seek a way to assign contents to sentences in a systematic way reflecting their logical form.
 - At the ~~broader metasemantic level~~ broader metasemantic level, where we seek to explain why particular kinds of sentences have the contents that they do.
 - First path: (a) Humean belief/desire bifurcation, (b) Ideationalist semantics as a competitor to the standard propositionalist approach.
 - Liabilities: Schroeder's critique of expressivist semantics. Plus perhaps (a) and/or (b) themselves are problematic.
 - Second path: (c) Pluralism about functional role of *beliefs*, (d) Anti-Inflationary metasemantic interpretation of standard propositional semantics.
 - Liabilities: Elides original distinction between expressive and descriptive. Plus perhaps (d) is itself a liability.
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Modal Expressivism

- Might we also want to draw a philosophically important distinction between what is expressed by claims which essentially deploy modal vocabulary (e.g. 'It is necessary that', 'It is probable that', 'must', 'should', etc.) and the claims we might more naturally think of as core parts of the practice of describing states of affairs in the world?
 - Perhaps, but, if so, we have to be much more careful, for
 - some modal vocabularies may be core parts of the practice of describing states of affairs in the world (e.g. physical necessity), even while others are not (e.g. epistemic possibility, deontic necessity).
 - moreover, some modal vocabularies may be core parts of the practice of describing the world only because they articulate features of the framework of all conceptual activity whatsoever, or the framework of empirical description.
 - Even so, can we reach forms of *modal* expressivism along either path sketched above?
 - Perhaps, but I think the second path looks like a better model.
 - However...
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A Different Approach

- What if the original distinction, for which we wanted to develop an anti-descriptivist view, was
 - not one between *moral claims* and descriptive claims (*a la* Ayer), but instead
 - one between *logical terms* and descriptive terms (*a la* early-Wittgenstein)?
 - We could, of course, fashion a “logical expressivism” which sought some philosophically interesting distinction in what is expressed by claims essentially deploying logical vocabulary and those deploying only descriptive vocabulary.
 - Note, however,
 - The sense of ‘express’ here is going to have to be radically different from the “externalization of what’s internal” (common to both Gibbard and Blackburn). (Instead: we’ll need something like “making explicit what’s implicit” (Brandom).)
 - The anthropological/genealogical explanation of *why* logical vocabulary is different from descriptive vocabulary will also have to be radically different. (Ryle, Sellars, Brandom on metalinguistic role.)
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A New Name?

- Although this approach bears similarities to “expressivism”, especially as reached by the second path, its differences tend to make this name misleading.
 - The core idea, vaguely stated: some words are not mainly for describing the properties of things we can encounter in reality but rather for providing/articulating the logical framework or conceptual scaffolding of various discursive practices including (but perhaps not limited to) the practice of describing states of affairs in the world.
 - Some suggestions:
 - Logicism
 - Pragmatism
 - “Logical” Pragmatism
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Two Cases

- I suspect a lot of philosophers are unreflective logical pragmatists about *traditional* logical vocabulary.
 - For instance, it's considerably strained to think that 'if and only if' describes a real relation holding between propositions like 'is sitting in front of' describes a relation holding between two people.

(which is not to say that both might not be reasonably said to *express* a relation in the mathematical sense that they can be represented with a binary function).
 - And it borders on absurdity to think that 'exists' describes a real property or 'is identical to' describes a real relation.
 - And semantic minimalists are (usually somewhat more self-consciously) logical pragmatists about traditional semantic vocabulary.
 - For instance: 'is true', 'denotes', and 'expresses the proposition that'.
 - These are not traditionally thought of as "logical" but in the minimalist's hands they play a framework-articulating role rather than a descriptive role.
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Beyond Expressivism in the Modal Case?

- I suspect that philosophers who go in for expressivism about various modal vocabularies are really attracted to something more like logical pragmatism with respect to their targets.
 - It distorts the issue to force the view into the mold of expressivism
 - first-path: where we say that modal claims must express mental states that are essentially desire-like in their motivational potentials
 - second-path: where we say that modal claims express some state with a functional role other than cognitive representation of reality
 - We should instead say that the target species of modal vocabulary is, in the relevant sense, “logical”. That is, it serves not to describe states of affairs in the world but to articulate the conceptual scaffolding within which discursive practices take place.
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Beyond Expressivism in the Normative Case?

- The view I'm attracted to about various normative vocabularies is something like logical pragmatism.
 - At least, I think that the words 'ought', 'must', and 'may' are first and foremost modal words. And, in their deontic uses, we should view them as articulating the logical framework or conceptual scaffolding of practical reasoning/discourse.
 - Again, it seems to me to distort the issue if we force the view into the mold of expressivism.
 - first-path: where we say that deontic claims must express mental states that are essentially desire-like in their motivational potentials
 - second-path: where we say that deontic claims express some state with a functional role other than cognitive representation of reality
 - But it is clearly not a return to a form of descriptivism; in this sense, perhaps, it is moving "beyond" expressivism.
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“We have learned the hard way that the core truth of 'emotivism' is not only compatible with, but absurd without, *ungrudging* recognition of the fact, so properly stressed (if mis-assimilated to the model of describing) by 'ethical rationalists,' that ethical discourse as *ethical discourse* is a mode of rational discourse.”

Sellars 1958: §82

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