**Non-Descriptive Relativism:**

**Adding Options to the Expressivist Marketplace[[1]](#footnote-1)\***

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1. **Introduction**

Suppose you are in the market for a metaethical theory and two features are high on your wish list. First, you do not want to assign any descriptive or representational content to thin normative terms, arguably terms like ‘ought to’, ‘is wrong’, ‘is good’ and ‘is a reason to’, at least when these terms implicate authoritative force or weight.[[2]](#footnote-2) Second, you do want to explain the motivational and endorsement roles of normative thought and language, at least when these terms implicate authoritative force or weight. It will not take long to discover that one view has virtually cornered the market: expressivism.[[3]](#footnote-3) Though expressivism certainly delivers when it comes to non-descriptivity and action guidance, there are some contested issues. To name a few: It needs to explain why authoritative force or weight appears to be independent of us and our attitudes, it needs an account of normative disagreement, and it needs to accommodate the bundle of logical, semantic and epistemic roles highlighted by Frege-Geach concerns.

My aim here is add some competition into this marketplace by introducing a family of views I call *Non-Descriptive Relativism*. Taking for granted the evidence suggesting that normative terms do not purport to represent ways of the world, neither natural nor *sui generis*, and taking for granted evidence that normative thoughts have a motivational role, and normative assertions an endorsement role, that typical beliefs and assertions lack, I try forge an alternative to expressivism. I briefly address other issues along the way, such as the appearance of authoritative weight, normative disagreement, and Frege-Geach roles, for the hope is that some version of Non-Descriptive Relativism will be part of the best explanation of all the metaethical data. Of course, that is a larger project that only begins here.

1. **The Core Idea**

I can convey the core idea behind Non-Descriptive Relativism by contrasting it with two closely related views: speaker subjectivism and expressivism. Let me start with a crude version of speaker subjectivism, which says that normative thoughts *represent* the thinker’s conative attitudes, and normative assertions *report on* or *describe* the speaker’s conative attitudes. On this view, someone who asserts “Stepping on gouty toes is wrong” is describing her own psychology in much the same way as if she had said “I morally oppose stepping on gouty toes”, where moral opposition is a conative attitude. This is not the best version of speaker subjectivism for at least two reasons. First, it is too self-regarding. When one says that some act is wrong the claim seems to about worldly features that are independent of the claimant’s psychological makeup. Second, it entails some repugnant counterfactuals, like this: “If I didn’t morally oppose stepping on gouty toes, then stepping on gouty toes would not be wrong.” After all, a sentence that is meant to have a very similar meaning, “If I didn’t morally oppose stepping on gouty toes, then I wouldn’t morally oppose stepping on gouty toes”, is true.

Fortunately, there is a better, sophisticated, version of speaker subjectivism, one that gives the speaker’s attitudes some role in determining exactly which worldly features the speaker’s claims are about without locating her attitudes in the content of what is said or thought. One illustrative way to run the view is to say that *S’s* assertion that stepping on gouty toes is wrong has the content <that stepping on gouty toes has some property F>, where *S* morally opposes F in action. *My* assertions would be about those properties *I* morally oppose in action and *your* assertions would be about those properties *you* morally oppose in action.

These assertions would be *about* the objects of our attitudes, not the attitudes themselves. So sophisticated subjectivism avoids the kind of self-regard we find in crude subjectivism. There is also a way of formulating the view to avoid repugnant counterfactuals. We simply need to make normative predicates *rigidly* express those properties the speaker *actually* morally opposes. I prefer doing this by using Kaplan’s ‘dthat’ operator, where we say that a sentence of the form “X is wrong” expresses the proposition that x exhibits dthat(a property the speaker morally opposes in action). While this suggestion breaks with Kaplan’s use of ‘dthat’ in allowing complements that are not definite descriptions, a subjectivist can still capitalize on the operator to avoid repugnant counterfactuals. The antecedent of “If I didn’t morally oppose stepping on gouty toes, then stepping on gouty toes would not be wrong” takes me to worlds where I do not morally oppose stepping on gouty toes, but the consequent considers whether the action has features that I actually morally oppose.[[4]](#footnote-4) What my benighted counterfactual self opposes has nothing to do with it. Another nice feature of the operator is that is that is allows us to use the parenthetical to capture a *mode of presentation* of the content it helps to fix. That is, while sophisticated subjectivism says that speaker attitudes are not part of content, one’s attitudes could color the mode of presentation of the content they help to fix (more on this in section 7).

Sophisticated subjectivism has other things going for it. It explains plausible data concerning action guidance and it delivers on most Frege-Geach roles. Nevertheless, (pure) expressivists are unhappy with *any* descriptive content for thin normative terms.[[5]](#footnote-5) Typically focusing on the crude version, they suggest that we distinguish *describing* our attitudes from *expressing* those attitudes and they maintain that uses of normative language express but do not report on the speaker’s attitudes. Formulated as a bit of semantic theory the idea is all declarative sentences are in the business of expressing states of mind, and unlike sentences that express beliefs, basic normative sentences express conative attitudes (see, e.g., Gibbard 2003, Rosen 1998: 387, and Schroeder 2008a: 33).[[6]](#footnote-6) When metaethicists then try to craft compositional and truth functional semantic contents for the view they typically distinguish two kinds of content. Bits of language that express beliefs have traditional descriptive contents, such as sets of possible worlds or structured propositions or otherwise ways-things-might-be contents. Bits of language that express conative attitudes have nontraditional, non-descriptive contents, such as Gibbard’s hyperplans (2003), or Horgan’s and Timmons’ ought commitments (2006).

That is certainly one way to depart from speaker subjectivism’s descriptivity while explaining action guidance,[[7]](#footnote-7) but I think there is an alternative point of departure that might prove more fruitful. Instead of moving the field of play to a semantic theory built on expressing states of mind, and instead of positing a novel kind of non-descriptive content within that theory, we might instead consider different *relations* language might bear to standard contents, one relation being descriptive and another non-descriptive. That is, perhaps we should not be so quick to assume that if sentence D has way-the-world-might-be content C, then use of declarative sentence D is normally in the business of describing things in the C way.[[8]](#footnote-8) Indeed, perhaps it is possible for S to bear a *non-descriptive* relation to way-things-might-be C, so that declarative uses of S are not normally putting C at issue as an accurate description of how things are. This is the core idea of the alternative approach pursued here. We might still speak of non-descriptive contents on this alternative approach, but this would not refer to a novel kind of content that is not inherently descriptive (like a set of hyperplans as opposed to a set of worlds); instead, it would refer to the fact that the language with the content in question does not bear a descriptive relation to that content.

I grant that this is *prima facie* puzzling. How is it possible for a sentence to have a way-the-world-might-be content—content the sentence is *about*—but for declarative uses of that sentence to lack descriptive purport? To resolve this into a sensible metaethical view I am going to sketch a particular species of it. What follows as an *example* of how to make the core move – that of drawing a distinction between a descriptive and a non-descriptive relation some bit of language might bear to a given content. Though I am certainly open to other ways of making that move, I will try to show that the version of Non-Descriptive Relativism below has enough explanatory power to have a seat at the table for metaethical theories that aim for non-descriptivity, action guidance and other metaethical desiderata.

1. **Cognition and Description**

Let us step back for a moment and ask ourselves how language gets it content. The approach I will take says linguistic contents are fixed (at least in part) by some cognitive roles (/Kaplanian characters) associated with the conventional meanings of language. We can formulate these cognitive roles in terms of rules – rules encoding conventional meanings that help to fix semantic contents, and rules that we grasp and know how to follow when we grasp the conventional meanings of terms. These rules are analogues of classical conceptual analyses. So if the conceptual analysis for ‘water’ is “X is a sample of water iff x has the same explanatory nature as dthat(the clear, potable stuff that falls from the sky, fills our lakes and streams . . .)”, we might formulate the cognitive rule like this: “Predicate ‘is water’ of x iff x has the same explanatory nature as dthat(the clear, potable stuff that falls from the sky, fills our lakes and streams . . .)”.[[9]](#footnote-9) To clarify, these rules are not intended to require predication or forbid it whenever the conditions they identify obtain. They are intended to identify the conditions under which one *correctly* predicates, when one does predicate, where the correctness here has a semantic flavor.[[10]](#footnote-10)

What would a rule for ‘is wrong’ look like under sophisticated subjectivism? Here is one plausible candidate.

First Pass: Predicate ‘is wrong’ of an action iff it exhibits dthat(a property the speaker morally opposes in action).

This is fine as far as it goes. But I think it simply fails to capture an important aspect of speaker subjectivism, namely, that ‘x is wrong’ is in the business of *describing* x in some way. All First Pass delivers are conditions for correct predication, and that is not to identify conditions that are *described* or *represented* through predication. In other words, ‘iff’ does not encode that the term on the left-hand side is purporting to *represent* or otherwise *stand for* the conditions identified on the right-hand side. To do that, I suggest we formulate a use rule like this:

‘Wrong’ F-Rule: Predicate ‘is wrong’ of an action *for* (and only for) exhibiting dthat(a property the speaker morally opposes in action).

The point of switching from ‘if’ to ‘for’ is to encode in our cognitive rule the speaker subjectivist proposal that the left-hand side is to bear a representation relation to the right-hand side. ‘For’ signals that there is something about the cognitive role of the term that makes the predicate *stand for something*. It not only makes the predicate applicable on the basis of something, but it makes uses of the predicate describe that basis of application.

So understood, ‘Wrong’ F-Rule i) makes it so the sentence “X is wrong” has a character that is sensitive to speaker attitude, ii) takes us from contexts of use where the speaker morally opposes F1, F2, and F3 in action to the semantic content <x exhibits F1, F2, or F3>, and iii) makes it so the sentence “X is wrong” bears a descriptive relation to its content.

(iii) is important for our discussion. Formulated within the cognitive rule framework sophisticated subjectivism says that ‘wrong’ is governed by ‘Wrong’ F-Rule. But suppose we side with expressivism and reject descriptive content for thin normative terms. Our framework makes room to do so without moving the field of play to a semantics of attitude expression and adopting a novel kind of semantic content. Instead, we can swap out the ‘for’ locution found in ‘Wrong’ F-Rule with a different locution that encodes that the term on the left-hand side is *not* used to *describe* its content. I suggest that we posit a cognitive rule that says *when* to use a predicate along the following lines.[[11]](#footnote-11)

‘Wrong’ W-Rule: Predicate ‘is wrong’ of an action *when* (and only when)[[12]](#footnote-12) it exhibits dthat(a property the speaker morally opposes in action).

This is subtly but importantly different from the previous rule. Unlike ‘for’, ‘when’ encodes a *non-descriptive* role for the language. This key distinction between descriptive purport (‘for’) and lack of it (‘when’) is what ‘if’ fails to capture. Note that this approach retains the *content* suggested by ‘Wrong’ F-Rule—the sets of worlds picked out by the right-hand side are the same whether the rule employs ‘for’ or ‘when’—and it retains the conditions for correct predication. All it does is drop the descriptive relation to the language. Crucially, the difference is not between truth conditions and assertability conditions, as though f-rules introduce truth conditions and w-rules introduce assertability conditions. We simply have two ways in which semantic content can be fixed, either by w-rules (securing a non-descriptive relation to content) or by f-rules (securing a descriptive relation to content).

F-rules and w-rules would generate separate dimensions to semantics. F-rules would take us from contexts to *descriptive* contents. Descriptive content would be evaluated relative to a circumstance of evaluation (a possible world) to get an extension. I suggest *descriptive accuracy* and *descriptive inaccuracy* (and *descriptive indeterminacy*) as the possible extensions for contents generated by f-rules, pushing to one side for the time being the question of truth values (which I take up in section 6). Obviously, this retains familiar players from compositional semantics: character, context, content, circumstance of evaluation and extension. We simply interpret some of these values in a way that makes it transparent that we are modeling a descriptive dimension to meaning.

W-rules would have a structurally parallel dimension to meaning. They would take us from contexts of use to *non-descriptive* contents, and these contents would be evaluated relative to a circumstance of evaluation (again, this could be a possible world) to get a *non-descriptive* extension. For full generality we could say the extensions are *non-descriptive accuracy*, and *non-descriptive inaccuracy* (and *non-descriptive indeterminacy*), but since my examples concern contents fixed by evaluative conative attitudes it makes sense in the present context to consider *evaluative accuracy* and *evaluative inaccuracy* (and *evaluative indeterminacy*) as the possible extensions for w-rule fixed contents.[[13]](#footnote-13)

The upshot is that there is more than one way for a non-descriptivist to part company with speaker subjectivism. One way is to embrace expressivism (or one of its progenitors). But an alternative is to posit a distinction between kinds of relations a sentence can bear to its content, descriptive and non-descriptive. I have sketched this idea using f-rules and w-rules. Within this framework, the version of Non-Descriptive Relativism I want to consider is this: Thin normative terms are governed *only* by w-rules like the one in ‘Wrong’ W-Rule.[[14]](#footnote-14) If so, “X is wrong” would simply fail to rule out any way x might be and we could model this by saying that the descriptive content of the sentence is the set of *all* possible worlds, which is the same as the descriptive content of “X is not wrong”. Thin terms would be *maximally vague* with respect to descriptive distinctions.[[15]](#footnote-15) No matter what we are considering—taking candy from a baby, torturing children at random, donating blood, dedicating one’s life to helping the poor and powerless—one can call it wrong (or not wrong, or predicate any other thin term of it) without *misdescribing* it. As for action guidance, it is clear that this view captures action guidance as well as sophisticated (descriptive) subjectivism. It does so by positing a semantic connection between normative judgments and having certain conative attitudes (more on this in section 7).

By way of contrast, we can hypothesize that a purely descriptive sentence like “Stepping on gouty toes is uncommon” would *only* be governed by f-rules. It would be *empty* along the non-descriptive dimension in the sense that it rules out *no* possible non-descriptive contents. As a result, these sentences will be *vacuously evaluatively accurate*.

Within this framework it is quite possible to have a predicate that is meaningful on both dimensions. For it is possible that a term is governed both by f-rules and w-rules. This is a good option for thick normative terms and their sentences. Consider ‘is cruel’, for which we can posit an f-rule along the following lines:

‘Cruel’ F-Rule: Predicate ‘cruel’ of someone *for* exhibiting indifference to the pain or suffering others.

We might also posit a w-rule to capture its non-descriptive content:

‘Cruel’ W-Rule: Predicate ‘cruel’ of someone *when* she exhibits indifference to the pain or suffering in others, which the speaker actually morally opposes in character.

On this view “X is cruel”, when said by S, will be descriptively accurate just in case x is a person who is indifferent to the pain or suffering in others. The sentence said by S will be evaluatively accurate just in case x is a person who is indifferent to the pain or suffering in others and S actually morally opposes those qualities in character.

1. **Non-Descriptive Contents: Sets of World-Stance Pairs**

I have just offered a way of distinguishing descriptive content and non-descriptive content that does not make use of an expressivist semantic framework or novel kinds of contents. But we might wish to introduce contents that are not simply ways-things-might-be for other reasons. For example, we might wish to avoid *speaker variant* contents for a given thin normative predicate because they make it hard to accommodate certain cases of disagreement. It does not matter whether we consider ‘Wrong’ F-Rule or ‘Wrong’ W-Rule. If I oppose actions for exhibiting properties F1, F2, or F3, and you oppose actions for exhibiting properties G1, G2, or G3, my assertion “Stepping on gouty toes is wrong” would be accurate if the action exhibits some F property while your assertion “Stepping on gouty toes is not wrong” would be accurate if the action fails to exhibit any G properties. Whence the disagreement?

We can start to fix this problem by adjusting the w-rule for ‘is wrong’. Though the discussion of disagreement won’t come full circle until section 8, the first piece of the puzzle is to modify the w-rule for ‘is wrong’ to drop reference to what *the speaker* morally opposes. Consider the following.

Better ‘Wrong’ W-Rule: Predicate ‘is wrong’ of an action *when* it exhibits a property *that is morally opposed.*

Instead of referring to *the speaker’s* attitudes, this rule refers to moral opposition without saying whose opposition is in play (cf. Wiggins 1987: 187). We can articulate the content given by this w-rule as the *set of world-moral-opposition-stance* pairs *(<w, s>)* such that the object of the evaluation in *w* has some property that is an object of the stance of moral opposition.[[16]](#footnote-16) Instead of focusing on what the speaker morally opposes, we consider all possible stances of moral opposition, where, as before, moral opposition is a conative attitude. Some possible stances will morally oppose breaking promises, some causing pain, etc. For “Stepping on gouty toes is wrong” the non-descriptive content would be the set of *world-moral-opposition-stance* pairssuch that stepping on gouty toes in the world has some property that the stance morally opposes. For example, a world-stance pair would make it into the set if stepping on gouty toes in the world is a non-optimific action and the stance morally opposes non-optimific actions.

The content posited here ensures that each speaker considers the same non-descriptive content for a given normative sentence. And the content is similar to Gibbard’s world-hyperplan pairs (Gibbard 2003, ch. 3). As I understand his view, the content of the sentence “Stepping on gouty toes is wrong” would be the set of world-hyperplan pairs that includes all possible worlds and those maximally decided hyperplans that include the plan to not step on gouty toes. The most important difference between his approach and my own is that Gibbard works with one dimension to semantics and models all content in terms of sets of world-hyperplan pairs. Non-Descriptive Relativism, on the other hand, posits two dimensions to semantics, each dimension with its own content. Descriptive content is modeled with sets of worlds and non-descriptive content is modeled with sets of world-stance pairs. Further, the worlds featured in the non-descriptive content need not be the same as the worlds featured in the descriptive content. Predicating ‘is wrong’, for example, excludes no worlds whatsoever in the descriptive content, but its non-descriptive content excludes world-stance pairs where the item evaluated lacks any property picked out by the paired stance.

Second, Gibbard cashes out all normativity in terms of planning states. The current approach associates ‘is wrong’ with stances of moral opposition, understand as conative attitudes, and it is open to us to associate different normative terms with different conative attitudes. The stances associated with ‘is a reason to’ might be given by conative perspectives of *pro tanto* favoring, for example.

1. **Circumstances of Evaluation: Worlds and World-Stance Pairs**

We now need to evaluate these worlds for descriptive accuracy, and evaluate world-stance pairs for evaluative accuracy. We do not need to say anything unorthodox about the descriptive dimension. Let the circumstances of evaluation be the worlds of the contexts of use. As for the non-descriptive dimension, the view that will ultimately help us explain competent use of normative language and disagreement is this: The circumstances of evaluation are the worlds of the context of use *paired with evaluator stances*. The evaluator is not necessarily the speaker, but whoever is assessing the content (or whatever standard is being used to assess the content). In this way, evaluative accuracy will be sensitive to what MacFarlane calls the *context of assessment*, not just sensitive to the context of use, whereas we leave open the possibility that descriptive accuracy is only sensitive to the world of the context of use.

Within this setup, descriptive accuracy is familiar: If the world of the context of use is within the set of worlds that makeup descriptive content, the sentence is descriptively accurate; otherwise it is not. Evaluative accuracy is unfamiliar but predictable: If the world-stance pair of the circumstance of evaluation is within the set of world-stance pairs that make up non-descriptive content, the sentence is evaluatively accurate; otherwise it is not. In effect, each person evaluating the sentence or its content will be supplying their own stances of evaluation, at least as a default.[[17]](#footnote-17) When *I* evaluate “X is wrong” I supply *my own* stance of opposition and the content will be evaluatively accurate relative to my stance iff it exhibits some property I morally oppose in action. When *you* evaluate the same sentence in context, or its content, you supply *your* stance of opposition and the content will be evaluatively accurate relative to your stance just in case it exhibits some property you morally oppose in action. And so on and so forth.

As mentioned, this move is similar to semantic views that make extensions relative to a non-standard parameter in the circumstance of evaluation.[[18]](#footnote-18) Many truth relativists discuss taste predicates, like where the content of this predicate has an extension only relative to some standard of taste. Vegemite, for example, would be tasty relative to some standards of taste, and not tasty relative to other standards of taste. Non-Descriptive Relativism is similar, though the field of play is a non-descriptive dimension to meaning.

One significant problem for truth relativism is making sense of contents that are true or false only relative to a parameter other than the world and what it is like. On a straightforward reading, truth relativists are asking us to think of some *properties* as having relative extensions. Applied to normativity, there would be a property of *being wrong*, which would have an extension only relative to a standard. This has some strange consequences. Take actions like *feeding the hungry*, and *securing peace in the Middle East*. It looks like these actions will be within the extension of the property of *being wrong* relative to a certain assessor standard, and so something like “Feeding the hungry is wrong” will *accurately describe* the world relative to certain standards. Then again, “Feeding the hungry is not wrong” will also accurately describe the world relative to certain other standards. At least some of the ways things might be appears to be deeply perspectival.

I have a hard time understanding the metaphysics of such extension-relative properties and perspectival facts. Of course, it is possible for the formal semanticist to demur on questions of metaphysics. Perhaps the elements of the model are only posited for their formal properties without concern for issues of *aboutness*, in which case the contents of these predicates are not properties as the metaphysicist understands them. But if we want our semantic theory to model aboutness—which I do—and if we want it to have the structure to distinguish descriptive discourse from non-descriptive discourse—which I do—it is hard to see how to sensibly do this within one semantic dimension.

That said, it is debatable whether relativism is committed to deeply perspectival ways the world might be. But I think we avoid the difficulties entirely when we place the standard sensitivity of extensions within a non-descriptive dimension to meaning. Let us not say that some *properties* have extensions only relative to standards, and let us not say we are describing how things are in a perspectival way. Our non-descriptive contents for ‘is wrong’ are not properties in any robust metaphysical sense. They are, roughly, all the ways in which one might be morally opposed to some features in actions. Further, a sentence like “Stepping on gouty toes is wrong” is not evaluated directly in terms of truth relative to a perspective, but in terms of *descriptive accuracy* and *evaluative accuracy*. This division of labor is exactly what we need to make sense of extensions relative to standards, and to distinguish descriptive from non-descriptive discourse.

To be sure, Non-Descriptive Relativism maintains that a sentence’s evaluative accuracy is stance relative, and by default each evaluator supplies her stance. That is the key similarity with semantic relativism. So “Feeding the hungry is wrong” is going to be evaluatively accurate relative to certain stances. But once we drop the idea of properties with relative extensions this relativity is an asset rather than a liability. Like versions of semantic relativism, we capture the fact that semantically competent use of normative terms depends on one’s attitudes. If there is nothing about stepping on gouty toes that one morally opposes, and one knows this, it would be extremely odd for them to call it wrong. This is akin to the oddity of someone calling a food disgusting even though they themselves find nothing gustatorily or aesthetically unpleasant about it (cf. Lasersohn 2007: 655). In both cases the oddity is nicely captured by saying that there are conventional meanings for these terms that make *semantically competent* acceptance of such a claim sensitive to the thinker’s attitudes.

Further, when we allow the default stance to be that of the evaluator we solve the problem of repugnant counterfactuals without needing a rigid designator in the cognitive rule. The antecedent of “If I didn’t disapprove of stepping on gouty toes, then stepping on gouty toes would not be wrong” takes me to worlds where I do not disapprove of stepping on gouty toes, but when assessing the consequent the stance is supplied by me, the evaluator, not by my counterfactual, benighted self. Applying my stance of moral opposition to those counterfactual worlds, stepping on gouty toes still exhibits some property I morally oppose. So the view predicts that I competently reject the counterfactual. And that is the correct result.

1. **The Truth in Values**

It is time to recover truth. One option it to equate truth with descriptive accuracy. But the following cognitive rule for ‘is true’ captures an appealing alternative.

‘True’ W-Rule: Predicate ‘is true’ of content C (or sentence S with content C in some context) when (and only when) C is descriptively and evaluatively accurate.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Because purely descriptive sentences are vacuously evaluatively accurate, satisfying the rule for ‘is true’ hangs on descriptive accuracy for those sentences. What of other sentences, like “X is wrong”? We have some idea of the conditions under which the content of “X is wrong” is descriptively and evaluatively accurate. It is vacuously descriptively accurate and it is evaluatively accurate relative to stance s when x has some property that is the object of s. Turning to truth, and given ‘True’ W-Rule, it is semantically correct for me to say “It is true that x is wrong” just in case x has some property that I morally oppose in action. More generally, semantically competent ascriptions of truth are sensitive to the evaluator’s attitudes, at least when normativity is involved.

Just as the stance sensitivity of evaluative accuracy helped to account for semantically competent use of normative terms, this treatment of truth helps to capture semantically competent use of the truth predicate. We wouldn’t want the semantically competent assertion of “Stepping on gouty toes is wrong” to come apart from the semantically competent assertion “It is true that stepping on gouty toes is wrong”. And as with the basic sentence, there is something very odd about someone acknowledging that *it is true that* stepping on gouty toes is wrong when one thinks that there is nothing about it one morally opposes. If you have nothing against stepping on gouty toes it is semantically correct for you to say that it *is false* that stepping on gouty toes is wrong, just as it is semantically correct for you to say that it is *not wrong*. In making these claims about semantic propriety it is important that I am not thereby agreeing with them or accepting what they say or saying it is true. I am merely acknowledging a semantic fact.

1. **Psychology**

I have been speaking of the meanings of normative language. But what of normative thought? What is it to *think* that stepping on gouty toes is wrong? I am not at all confident about what to say here, though I am inclined to say something a bit surprising: *Non-Descriptive Relativism should say the same thing as sophisticated subjectivism*. That is, whether a content is fixed by f-rules or w-rules makes no difference when it comes to psychology. So, for S to think that stepping on gouty toes is wrong is, roughly, for S to believe that stepping on gouty toes has some property *she* (S) morally opposes in action. Granted, the non-descriptive content of the sentence “Stepping on gouty toes is wrong” consists in all those world-stance pairs such that stepping on gouty toes has some property that the stance morally opposes in action, which has nothing in particular to do with S’s or anyone else’s stance of opposition. However, to *accept* this content one must *affirm* it or *think it true*. On our semantic picture the content is true only relative to a world-stance pair. When S is making the judgment she is an assessor and her stances of opposition are plugged in. For S to think that stepping on gouty toes is wrong, then, is roughly for S to believe that stepping on gouty toes exhibits some property she morally opposes.[[20]](#footnote-20)

I say ‘roughly’ for three reasons. First, the content of the thought does not include anything about S’s psychology. That would be objectionably self-regarding. The content of the thought is <stepping on gouty toes has some property F>, where S morally opposes F. Second, the thought that stepping gouty toes is wrong does not have the same cognitive significance as the thought that stepping on gouty toes has some property F (where S morally opposes F), even though they might have the same content. To see this, suppose someone morally opposes actions insofar as they exhibit properties F1, F2, or F3. Her thought that stepping on gouty toes is wrong will be a belief with the that stepping on gouty toes exhibits F1, F2, or F3. But there can be more than one way of *conceiving* of properties F1, F2, or F3, and indeed we distinguish normative ways of thinking about them from non-normative ways of thinking about them. The key to the normative mode of conception is to note that the evaluator’s relevant conative attitudes—here, moral opposition—help to populate the content of the normative thought. In this manner the content is being thought of *under the guise of* one’s normative attitudes. The role of ‘wrong’ is to instruct the cognitive system to consult the thinker’s attitudes of moral opposition to determine the content of the thought. Whatever that content turns out to be, there are going to be other ways of thinking of the same content, ones that are not looking at them through the lens of one’s conative attitudes, and that is what makes the thoughts non-normative.[[21]](#footnote-21) Third, for normative ways of thinking one might worry that the view is still objectionably self-regarding insofar as one’s attitudes are involved in that way of thinking. But the attitudes are meant to be backgrounded in thought. S is in no way thinking *about* her attitudes even though her attitudes are doing some work in populating the content of her thoughts. Because her thoughts are focused on the various properties picked out by her attitudes, not the attitudes themselves, S’s normative thoughts are no more self-regarding than her visual appearances are lens-regarding when she is wearing glasses.[[22]](#footnote-22)

I think this view has the resources to explain the authoritative force that appears in normative thought and language, a force that can appear independent of us and our attitudes. The rough idea is that since normative concepts represent worldly features conceived under the guise of our most important conative attitudes, we get a mix of attitude-independence (whereby attitudes do not show up in content) that is colored by a conative-attitude-infused mode of presentation. If we have attitudes of opposition, or being against, or favoring or disfavoring that color our various modes of conception, this can be easily interpreted as presenting contents that include worldly opposition relations, or not-to-be-doneness relations, or relations whereby some considerations count in favor of some responses whereas other considerations count against. That is, it can appear as though the objects of our attitudes are themselves weighing against or counting in favor of various responses. Whether the mode of presentation is thereby erroneous is a difficult question. I am inclined to think not, but further discussion is for another time.

I have more straightforward comments about action guidance. Non-Descriptive Relativism predicts that normative judgments will have the same special motivational profile predicted by sophisticated (descriptive) subjectivism. The psychology on offer is the same. For a judgment of the form *x is wrong* we predict the motivational profile roughly akin to the judgment that x exhibits some property I (the speaker) morally oppose in action. This is not the place to unpack the prediction, or examine how well it fits the motivational data. But at least we can see that Non-Descriptive Relativism delivers a special connection to motivation that standard non-normative beliefs lack, albeit a motivational connection that is weaker than the sort of profile we expect for conative states. We can also see how the assertion ‘X is wrong’ would play an endorsement role that many assertions lack, for opposing one of x’s properties would be a condition on the semantic correctness of the sentence – a condition encoded in the cognitive role of ‘is wrong’ by anyone who fully grasps its conventional meaning.

Because the psychology is cognitivist, Non-Descriptive Relativism avoids some of the Frege-Geach problems that dog versions of expressivism.[[23]](#footnote-23) Consider a version of the negation problem that boils down to accounting for the logical inconsistency of the following two thoughts:

1. Bill’s thought that stepping on gouty toes is wrong.
2. Bill’s thought that stepping on gouty toes is not wrong.

If (a) is Bill’s *opposition* to stepping on gouty toes, while (b) is something like Bill’s *toleration* of stepping on gouty toes, it is hard to see how these thoughts are in the some kind of logical conflict. Attitudes of opposition and toleration toward one and the same thing are in some kind of conflict, but it does not appear to be the right kind of conflict (Schroeder 2008a, ch. 3).

Non-Descriptive Relativism simply avoids the problem by having a cognitivist psychology akin to descriptive speaker subjectivism. It says that (a) is Bill’s belief that stepping on gouty toes has some property he morally opposes in action, and (b) is Bill’s belief that stepping on gouty toes *does not* have some property he morally opposes in action. Those are clearly logically inconsistent thoughts.

1. **Disagreement**

Let me finally return to the issue of disagreement. Expressivists have struggled with the phenomenon of disagreement for some time. The general strategy has been to posit the possibility of disagreement in attitude, which is distinct from disagreement in fact or in belief. If that can be made to work, Non-descriptive
Relativism might be a beneficiary (cf. Jackson 2008). But here is a simpler alternative. Why don’t we say that *what it is* for two people to disagree is for one to accept some truth-apt content that the other rejects. This requires us to drop any presumption that what it is it is to accept some content that another rejects is to describe or represent the world in incompatible ways. That might happen in some cases that concern descriptive contents. However, according to the package of views on offer here people can disagree over normative matters by considering one and the same truth-apt non-descriptive content (a set of world-stance pairs) and each can evaluate it relative to her own stance to come to different conclusions. If Able accepts that stepping on gouty toes is wrong she is evaluating a certain set of world-stance pairs—those worlds where stepping on gouty toes exhibits some property that is the object of the paired stance of moral opposition—relative to her stance of moral opposition, and it could come out as evaluatively accurate, and it could be semantically correct for her to think that stepping on gouty toes is wrong and that it is true that it is wrong. For Bea to reject that *same truth-apt content* she evaluates that some set of world-stance pairs relative to her own evaluative stances and that content could come out as evaluatively inaccurate, and it could be semantically correct for her to think that stepping on gouty toes is *not* wrong and that it is false that it is wrong. Psychologically, Able thereby believes that the action exhibits some property (which she morally opposes in action), while Bea thereby believes that the action does not exhibit some property (which she morally opposes in action). These beliefs do not represent the world in incompatible ways. But the proposal is that so long as one is accepting truth-apt content that the other rejects they disagree. Importantly, the account does not overgeneralize. It is not the case that any difference in attitude is a disagreement. We need truth-apt content – content that is assessable in ways that show up in ‘True’ W-Rule.

I take it that the main controversy here is not the characterization of disagreement in terms of accepting and rejecting the same truth-apt content. The main controversy is the idea that there are w-rules governing normative terms that generate truth-apt contents. The only way to settle this is to see if the best semantic theory posits w-rules and makes competent use of the truth predicate sensitive to evaluative accuracy. If so, we have good reason to believe that the non-descriptive content generated by w-rules is truth apt.

Perhaps a deeper worry is whether my discussion of w-rules and the rest is enough to show that a predicate so governed is meaningful, and particularly meaningful in the ways in which normative terms seem to be meaningful (they are compositional and can feature in valid arguments, etc.). Dreier (1996) nicely illustrates how to fall short. He considers a semantic “theory” for ‘is hiyo’ that says only this: ‘Is hiyo’ is syntactically a predicate and it is used to accost, so “Bob is hiyo” is used to accost Bob. Dreier then complains, rightly, that though the “theory” says what the term is used to do, that is not enough to show that we have a meaningful predicate on our hands, particularly one that figures in truth-apt sentences that play certain Frege-Geach roles. We do not have any idea, for example, what the complex “Either Bob is hiyo or a dingo is near” means, or how to reason with such a premise.

Does a semantics with w-rules do any better? Well, if I were to cook up a predicate ‘is hiyo’ using a w-rule, it might be this: “Predicate ‘is hiyo’ of x when you accost x” or maybe “Predicate ‘is hiyo’ of x when you want to accost x”. These w-rules are unlike the “theory” that only discusses what the term is used to do. They actually give semantic correctness conditions, and we can add to the story by filling in whether the contents here are sensitive to certain parameters of the circumstances of evaluation, and so on. If we do all that, I think we would thereby introduce a sensible predicate. Having said that, it is hard to imagine what it would be like to use such a term, for our language doesn’t have such a term and it is hard to imagine *why* some language *would* developed such a term. There is no need for a non-descriptive predicate ‘is hiyo’. All our communicative needs in this neighborhood are adequately served by the descriptive predicates ‘is accosted by me’ or ‘is someone I want to accost’.[[24]](#footnote-24)

On the other hand, it is easy to imagine why language would develop predicates that allow us to reason about the objects of our most important conative attitudes, and so indirectly to reason about which attitudes to have toward which objects. It is nice to be able to use modus ponens, for example, to help decide whether to morally oppose one action in light of moral opposition to another (c.f. Gibbard 2003: 13). We also might like a way of communicating our attitudes to others, to reason together about what attitudes to have, and to contest the attitudes of others without contesting what they say for descriptive inaccuracy.

Whether descriptive content and descriptive accuracy alone can meet these needs (perhaps combined with other semantic and pragmatic machinery, like implicatures) is a good question. But language could do an *excellent* job meeting these needs if only it could avail itself of semantically non-descriptive terms that are connected to our attitudes but also sensibly play the predicate role, deliver truth aptitude for its sentences, enter into inferential reasoning, etc. But how? The suggestion here is that a semantic dimension with w-rules and a truth predicate sensitive to the non-descriptive content it generates would do the job nicely.

Granted, it is one thing to see how useful it would be for a language to develop w-rules concerning objects of our conations, and a truth predicate sensitive to the non-descriptive content they deliver. It is another matter entirely to show that our language is like this. Fulfilling this second project depends on whether the Non-Descriptive Relativist hypotheses offered here feature in the best explanations of all the metaethical data we would like to explain, just as we should believe that all declaratives express states of mind if that features in the best explanation of all the data we would like to explain. Sadly, this paper only engages with this bigger project in a piecemeal way.

1. **More Frege-Geach Roles**

In light of that, let me say a bit more about composition and validity, since the two types of content here might raise some questions about how this goes. Consider the following sentences.

1. Stepping on gouty toes is wrong
2. Apple’s stock will rise
3. Either stepping on gouty toes is wrong or Apple’s stock will rise.

We can say that the non-descriptive content of (A) is the set of world-stance pairs where stepping on gouty toes in the world has some property the paired stance morally opposes, and no descriptive content is ruled out. (B)’s descriptive content is the set of worlds where Apple’s stock will rise, and it rules out no non-descriptive world-stance pairs. But what about the complex sentence in (C)? We should say that ‘or’ operates on the descriptive and non-descriptive contents jointly. So (C) puts the following content in play:

1. Those (non-descriptive) world-stance pairs where stepping on gouty toes has some property morally opposed by the stance, plus all (descriptive) worlds,

∪

1. All (non-descriptive) world-stance pairs, plus those (descriptive) worlds where Apple’s stock rises.

 In effect, the descriptive and non-descriptive contents for each disjunct are conjoined and the ‘or’ operates on the conjoined contents. Each disjunct is assessable for descriptive and evaluative accuracy relative to a (descriptive) world of evaluation and a (non-descriptive) world-stance pair of evaluation, and truth is assessable for each disjunct. Finally, (C) is true if and only if either of the disjuncts is true.

 In this way we have standard compositionality of truth conditions, it’s just that truth conditions have been enriched to include non-descriptive contents in addition to descriptive contents, and there are two different circumstances of evaluation for each dimension of content corresponding to the extensions of descriptive accuracy and evaluative accuracy.

What is it to *accept* the disjunction in thought? We should say that to accept the disjunction is to assess it positively relative to the relevant circumstance of evaluation. Because there is normative content here, the relevant non-descriptive circumstance of evaluation will include the evaluator’s stances. For me to accept the disjunction boils down to my believing disjunctive content: Either Apple’s stock will continue to rise or stepping on gouty toes has some property F (where I morally oppose F in action).

For validity, consider the following argument.

1. If tormenting the cat is wrong, then tormenting the dog is wrong.
2. Tormenting the cat is wrong.
3. Tormenting the dog is wrong.

The classic statement of validity holds. If the premises are true the conclusion must be true. More carefully, for all contexts and circumstances of evaluation, if the premises are true relative to some context and circumstance, then the conclusion is true relative to that same context and circumstance. Beneath the surface of this truth-conditional approach we have descriptive and non-descriptive dimensions at play. But they have no effect on our characterization of validity.

 I hope it is clear that these points generalize to other arguments. Let me briefly consider one that is especially difficult for expressivism.

1. Either dogs do not feel pain, or kicking the dog is wrong.
2. Dogs feel pain.
3. Kicking the dog is wrong.

Expressivism has a hard time here because the conclusion is said to express a conative attitude toward kicking the dog and yet we do not have any premises that express a conative attitude in any straightforward sense. That makes it puzzling how the argument generates a conclusion that does express conative attitude. How do we get such attitude expression out of premises that do not express attitude?

Non-Descriptive Relativism avoids the puzzle. First, attitude expression does no theoretical work for us. Instead, when I accept the conclusion I form a belief – roughly, the belief that kicking the dog has some property (which I morally oppose in action). Second, this acceptance is foisted upon me if I accept both premises. By accepting (1r), I believe that either the dog does not feel pain, or kicking the dog is an action that has some property F (where I morally oppose F in action). By accepting (2r) I believe that dogs feel pain. So I must now believe that kicking the dog is an action that has some property F (where I morally oppose F in action), on pain of logical error of a familiar kind.

1. **Conclusion**

I have been assuming that non-descriptivism and action-guidance are worth defending, and that it would be desirable to have a metaethical alternative to expressivism. I have tried to show how a version of Non-Descriptive Relativism fills the bill. The version I have developed posits w-rules for some bits of language, rules the operate right alongside descriptive semantics. Whether we should believe it depends on whether it is part of the best explanation of all the metaethical data we would like to explain. Inevitably, I have only begun to do that explanatory work here and frankly I am much more confident that we should be exploring the non-descriptivist and action-guiding terrain, and generating alternatives to expressivism, than I am in the details of the view sketched here.

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2. I think this will amount to normative thought and language that is reason-implicating (Bedke 2010; Parfit 2011: 38). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. I will not address hybrid theories that sully expressivism with descriptive content. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Cf. Humberstone and Davies (1980). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. I think the main concern here is that speaker-variant descriptive content does not correctly categorize clear cases of disagreement. But see Jackson (2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Alternatively, relational expressivism says that normative assertions express relations between beliefs and conative attitudes (Ridge 2014, Schroeder 2013, Toppinen 2013). I should also note that expressivism need not be located in semantic theory. One alternative is to locate it in meta-semantic theory, where sentences get their semantic values (whatever they are) in virtue of expressing states of mind (See, e.g., Chrisman 2012: 323-30, and Ridge 2014: 102-11, 124-31). A second alternative is to develop expressivism as a radical pragmatic theory of meaning (see, e.g., the essays in Price et al. 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Of course, expressivism would predict a stronger motivational profile for normative judgments, as they would be constituted by conative attitudes, whereas subjectivism makes the presence of conative attitude a condition of semantic correctness. I think the weaker profile predicted by subjectivism is a better fit with the data, but that is another paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. On some ways of doing semantics there is no presumption that semantic content is that which language is *about*. Instead, contents (or semantic *values*) are simply theoretical posits whose only virtue is helping to model compositionality and truth functionality. However, I am interested in aboutness, and I want to leave room for what we might call non-descriptive (or non-representational) aboutness. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. This tradition needs the usual qualifications. First, just as there might be good reason to drop necessary conditions from classical conceptual analyses, there might be good reason to drop them from our cognitive rules. Second, different people might have different but interrelated cognitive rules that ensure they are trying to refer to the same thing. Third, any explicit formulation of a cognitive rule will be somewhat crude and unlikely to fully capture the cognitive roles associated with conventional meanings, but the formulations (and counterexamples and corrections) can be illuminating nonetheless. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. I do not think this sense of ‘correct’ is reason-implicating. But that is another story. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Cf. Smith and Stoljar (2003) and Jackson and Pettit (1998). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. If there are no necessary conditions for falling under a concept, we can drop these ‘only for/when’ clauses, as we would drop ‘only if’ in traditional conceptual analyses. I will not take a stand on this issue, but for ease of exposition I will henceforth omit the ‘only for/when’ clause. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. The approach here has some affinities with use conditional approaches to meaning (see Gutzmann and Gärtner 2013). It also has some affinities with Kaplan’s notion of information delimitation (unpublished). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. I leave open whether there are non-normative terms governed by w-rules. One good candidate might be ‘is whack’, as when Whitney Houston said “Crack is whack”. Modals might also be good candidates, though presumably their w-rules would not mention conative attitudes. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. The approach has some pedigree. See Joshua Gert (2007: 92-95; 2012: 51-6), Lenhart Åqvist (1964), and Stephen Schiffer (2002). Giulia Pravato (unpublished) has an approach to maximal vagueness in her dissertation, what she calls “irresolvable vagueness”.

Also, though I’d like to say thin normative terms have no descriptive content, I can acknowledge that there is a close cousin to descriptive content in the neighborhood. For somehow *category mistakes* are ruled out, for example, a lamp shade being wrong, or the number 7 being wrong, or really any non-action being wrong. I think this kind of domain restriction is prior to any restriction done by the content-fixing f- and w-rules, and for that reason I do not include in descriptive content the ruling out of category mistakes. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. C.f. Lasersohn (2005: 663). The content could be modeled as Lewisian *de se* content, or a set of centered worlds where the centers of worlds include agents with normative stances (Egan 2012), but I worry that Egan’s version is objectionably self-regarding. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. The default stance can be shifted with operators. If I say “According to act utilitarianism, agonizing torture is justifiable so long as it prevents sufficiently many mild itches” the stance of evaluation is not given by my conative attitudes, but act utilitarianism. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. See, e.g., Kölbel (2003, 2004), Kolodny & MacFarlane (2010), Lasersohn (2005), and MacFarlane (2007, 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. For full generality, we might say “descriptively and non-descriptively accurate”. Also, this ignores many complications concerning truth, but the main point here is to make it sensitive to something other than descriptive accuracy. And, again, the rule should be interpreted as supplying the conditions for semantically correct deployment of ‘true’ (see note 8 and surrounding text). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. This mixes non-descriptivity in language with representational belief in thought. The combination has been overlooked, largely because expressivism offers such a tight connection between a non-representational normative psychology and non-descriptive normative language. See Bedke (forthcoming). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. C.f. Dreier (1990: 19-20; 1999: 567-8). Egan (2012: 564-65) worries about the lack of common subject matter for value-laden thought. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. While the approach here is similar to Egan’s (2012) *de se* approach to value judgments, he thinks that accepting a value sentence is to self-ascribe a property. I worry that his view is objectionably self-regarding, and I think it is better to characterize the acceptance as a belief about worldly properties (albeit ones fixed by one’s conative attitudes). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. For the initial Frege-Geach problems, see Geach (1960, 1965) and Searle (1969: 136-141). For some nice discussions see Dreier (1996), van Roojen (1996) and Schroeder (2008b). See also Baker and Woods (2015), Blackburn (1984, ch. 6, 1998, ch. 3), Charlow (2014), Gibbard (2003, chs. 3-4), Horgan and Timmons (2006, 2009), Schroeder (2008a), and Schwartz & Hom (2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Notice that if there were a term ‘is hiyo’ governed by w-rules, the term would not bake in any performative character. Arguably, the language *does* need inherently performative terms like that, which is what the original ‘hiyo’ was meant to do. If I were to try to capture the cognitive role for the original ‘hiyo’, used for accosting, I might try this.

Say ‘hiyo’ to x *to* accost x.

This t-rule bakes in the term’s performative character. But unlike our f-rules and w-rules it does not deliver the kinds of contents that are assessable for truth. The thought is that language has no use for truth predicates that are sensitive t- rule “content”. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)