# Expressivism and realist explanations

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**Abstract**

It is often claimed that there is an explanatory divide between expressivism and normative realism: more precisely, that the two views offer conflicting explanations of (i) the metaphysical structure of the normative realm, (ii) the connection between normative judgment and motivation, (iii) our normative beliefs and any convergence thereof, or (iv) the content of normative thoughts and claims. In this paper I argue that there need be no such explanatory conflict. Given a minimalist approach to the relevant metaphysical and semantic notions, expressivism is compatible with any explanation that would be acceptable as a general criterion for realism.

A specter is haunting metaethics—the specter of a convergence between an expressivist account of normative thought and language and a realist conception of normativity.[1] The "quasi-realist" project of appropriating commitments traditionally associated with realism—e.g., that there are objective normative facts, of which we are good judges—by interpreting them as first-order normative claims, amenable to an expressivist account, might have been *too* successful: it seems to have made expressivists unable to state in what sense their view is an anti-realist one, as originally advertised.

Metaethicists of all stripes, including expressivists, have tried to exorcise this specter. In particular, many have argued that we can still articulate an *explanatory* conflict between expressivism and realism. The two views might converge in their theses about truth, objectivity or knowledge, it is said, but they are divided in how they explain important facts about our normative beliefs and linguistic practice: realists rely on normative facts and properties in their explanations, while expressivists appeal instead to our affective and practical reactions to the natural world.

In this paper I argue that there need be no such explanatory divide between expressivism and realism. Expressivism is compatible with any explanation that could be reasonably attributed to realists in general—at least given a minimalist approach to the relevant metaphysical and semantic notions. It is only in conflict with a representationalist account of the *etiology* of normative thought and language, but such an account cannot be a criterion for realism: many self-professed realists, and in particular most non-naturalist realists, do not purport to offer a causal explanation of the emergence of normative concepts as representational devices.

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[1] I will focus here on *practical* normativity—the space of values and norms governing our actions and action-directed mental states (desires, emotions, plans, etc.)—not more narrowly on morality, nor on a general notion of normativity that includes theoretical or epistemic rationality. For brevity, from here on I will use *normative* and *normativity* to mean *practically normative* and *practical normativity*.

# 1 Expressivism, objectivity, and realism

First, let me recount how the idea of an explanatory conflict came to be seen as the best hope for drawing a divide between expressivism and realism.

Suppose a naturalistic investigation into why creatures like us developed a normative language delivered the following answers:

NEGATIVE FUNCTIONAL THESIS    Normative terms do not have the function of tracking normative facts, or any other kind of facts.[2]

POSITIVE FUNCTIONAL THESIS    Normative terms have the function of conveying and stabilizing our conative attitudes,[3] for the purposes of solving coordination problems in social contexts.

Let us also suppose that the function of normative terms is implemented through semantic connections between normative expressions and conative attitudes, at least at the sentential level:

SEMANTIC THESIS    Normative claims semantically express conative attitudes.[4]

I will call the conjunction of these three claims EXPRESSIVISM, as they are the core tenets of the expressivist theories developed by Simon Blackburn and Allan Gibbard in recent decades.[5]

Now take the following thesis:

OBJECTIVITY    There are objective normative facts and many of our beliefs about them are true.

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[2]*Function* is used here in an etiological, non-normative sense: $x$ is among the functions of a mental or linguistic item, in this etiological sense, if being or doing $x$ plays a role in the best causal explanation of the emergence and proliferation of items of that kind. *Tracking* is the kind of covariation between mental and linguistic items and features of the world that would causally explain the emergence and proliferation of said items as representational devices. Cf. Allan Gibbard's (1990, Ch. 6) notion of *natural representation*, and his thesis that normative discourse is not naturally representational, or the notion of *e-representation* articulated in Huw Price (2013), pp. 35-8. See O'Leary-Hawthorne and Price (1996) and Sinclair (2006) for arguments to the effect that this negative functional thesis is the best way to articulate the core negative insight of expressivism in a minimalist framework.

[3]By *conative attitudes* I mean affective and action-guiding mental states, e.g. mental states of norm-acceptance, planning, or attitudes of approval and disapproval.

[4]For instance, if asked what someone *said* by uttering "Genocide is wrong," we can correctly answer by saying that she expressed her disapproval of genocide, or some other conative attitude.

[5]I do not want to suggest that all self-described expressivists would accept these three theses. In this paper I am interested in Blackburn's and Gibbard's "quasi-realist" projects, and their relation to realism. Not only the SEMANTIC THESIS, but also the functional theses stated above—or at least close versions thereof—are central to these projects.

In recent years many versions of expressivism have been proposed that abandon the project of offering a psychologistic semantics for normative discourse. Some of these views articulate the expressive function of normative discourse in *pragmatic* terms, e.g. Bar-On and Chrisman (2009), Bar-On (2012), Bar-On and Sias (2013), and Yalcin (2012). Others restate expressivism as a *meta-semantic* view, i.e. as an account of *why* normative expressions have the meanings that they do, or of *what it is* for a normative expression to have a certain semantic value. See Suikkanen (2009a); Horwich (2010), Essay 9; Silk (2013); Charlow (2014); Pérez Carballo (2014); and Ridge (2014), among others. Moreover, some of these meta-semantic expressivist views allow that the meanings of normative claims are precisely those assigned to them by a standard truth-conditional semantics. It is not my goal here to explore the relation between expressivism in all these different guises and normative realism. Indeed, I doubt that any unified answer could be given to such a question. My focus, again, is on the idea that there is an explanatory conflict between quasi-realism, as developed by Blackburn and Gibbard, and realism. But I will discuss issues about meta-semantic explanation in section 6, where I examine the possibility of drawing a divide between EXPRESSIVISM and realism in terms of their explanations of semantic content.

And let us understand objectivity as *attitude-independence*: a normative fact is objective in this sense if it is counterfactually and constitutively independent of our attitudes. For instance, in claiming that it is an objective fact that genocide is wrong we are saying that: (i) it would be wrong no matter what we thought or felt about it; and (ii) it is not wrong in virtue of our attitudes towards it, but rather because of, e.g., the unnecessary suffering, loss of human life and violation of rights that it involves.[6]

Is OBJECTIVITY compatible with EXPRESSIVISM? If the SEMANTIC THESIS entailed that we do not have normative beliefs with factual or truth-apt contents—which is what old-school emotivists used to think[7]—the answer would clearly be no, since in that case we could not be committed to any normative facts at all, and *a fortiori* to any objective normative facts.

However, expressivists like Blackburn and Gibbard reject any such implications. By adopting minimalist notions of truth, facthood, and belief—notions that would apply to any superficially assertoric discourse in virtue of its syntactical structure and logical discipline—they have come to embrace such commitments as: it is *true* that genocide is wrong; the claim that genocide is wrong describes the *fact* that genocide is wrong; or more generally, there are normative facts and many of our *beliefs* about such facts are true. On a minimalist account, such claims are mere endorsements of first-order normative verdicts. Thus, they are not only compatible with the SEMANTIC THESIS, but are amenable to an expressivist account themselves, like any other normative claim. Moreover, Blackburn and Gibbard have given an expressivist account of objectivity claims. Our attitudes toward certain actions or states of affairs, they point out, remain the same even when we think of scenarios in which our attitudes are different: for instance, we disapprove of genocide even when we consider a possible world in which we ourselves do not disapprove of it. (Indeed, we also disapprove of the possible selves of ours who do not disapprove of genocide.) And it is such unconditional attitudes that we express when we say, for example, that genocide would be wrong no matter what anyone thought or felt about it, or that *it is an objective fact* that genocide is wrong.[8] Or so the minimalist-expressivist story goes.

Other philosophers have argued that, even if we accept the broad minimalism sketched above, EXPRESSIVISM is nevertheless incompatible with OBJECTIVITY. This would be because the SEMANTIC THESIS entails, in some way or another, the attitude-dependence

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[6]Note that, while certain versions of subjectivism or relativism about normativity (e.g., rigidified subjectivism and assessor relativism) might be able to accommodate the modal robustness of normative judgments by tying their correctness to our *actual* attitudes and beliefs, such views will be incompatible with normative objectivity understood in the constitutive sense. In this paper I am assuming that EXPRESSIVISM is compatible with this more robust kind of objectivity. I am also putting aside worries to the effect that EXPRESSIVISM is in tension with other ways in which the objectivity of normative truths, broadly understood, is manifested in our practice: for instance, that it cannot account for our ordinary reactions in cases of normative disagreement—see Enoch (2011), Ch. 2; Parfit (2011), Ch. 28; Scanlon (2014), Lecture 3—or for the possibility of fundamental normative error, as Egan (2007) argues.

[7]See Ayer (1936) or Stevenson (1944). Gibbard (1990) too argued that normative discourse is not factual or truth-apt, taking natural representationality to be a necessary condition for the factuality of a region of discourse. In what follows I will focus on the more recent version of Gibbard's expressivism, which abandons this narrow conception of factuality and truth-aptness in favor of a deflationary one.

[8]See Blackburn (1993), Essay 8; Blackburn (1998a), Ch. 9; or Gibbard (2003), Ch. 9. Blackburn similarly offers an internal reading of objectivity claims understood as concerning the *constitutive* attitude-independence of normative facts: "[W]hat makes cruelty abhorrent is not that it offends us, but all those hideous things that make it do so." (1993, p. 172)

of normative truths.[9] But let us put aside such worries here. Blackburn and Gibbard have argued on many occasions that their attitudinal semantics does not have such subjectivist consequences,[10] and the issue I want to discuss arises precisely once we assume these problems away.

Let us assume then that EXPRESSIVISM is compatible with OBJECTIVITY. If we were also to accept that OBJECTIVITY is the defining tenet of normative *realism*, this would mean that EXPRESSIVISM has converged with a conception of normativity that it was long thought to rival.

Some of us might be happy with this result. Insofar as we have some pretheoretical grip on what it is to be a realist about normativity, OBJECTIVITY arguably comes close to capturing it. And the dissolution of a long-standing philosophical divide is usually treated as a sign of progress. Moreover, realists might derive benefits from this convergence.[11] Putting aside all the flowcharts that will have gone to waste, it is hard to think of reasons why we should try to keep alive the conflict between expressivism and realism. Expressivists themselves have flirted with accepting the collapse of this divide. Blackburn, for instance, has often argued that on his view normative facts are as real and objective as they can be, and that there is no intelligible form of realism that delivers more robust metaphysical commitments.[12]

Alas, the general mood among philosophers engaging with this topic has been less ecumenical. It is widely believed that, despite the compatibility of EXPRESSIVISM and OBJECTIVITY, there must be some divide between EXPRESSIVISM and realism—in other words, that there is some set of commitments that go beyond OBJECTIVITY and make one a genuine realist, and which expressivists cannot accept. Moreover, Blackburn and Gibbard themselves routinely make such pronouncements; they call their view "quasi-realist," to mark its enduring anti-realist character, and hold that realism does not have a monopoly on truth and objectivity. But what are the further commitments that define genuine realism, and how exactly are they in conflict with EXPRESSIVISM?

In response to this question, it does not help to point out that most self-professed realists, as a matter of fact, reject EXPRESSIVISM. This only makes our question more pressing. What we are asking is whether realists *must* reject any of the theses of EX-PRESSIVISM, for reasons intrinsic to being a realist. If most realists happen to find EX-PRESSIVISM implausible, but for reasons that have nothing to do with their realism, that does not mean that the two views are incompatible—only that their supporters happen to disagree on whether EXPRESSIVISM is true.

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[9] See Jackson and Pettit (1998), Peacocke (2004), and Suikkanen (2009b), among others.

[10] See, for instance, Blackburn (1999) for a discussion focused on this issue. Schroeder (2014) discusses the arguments cited in fn. 9 and argues that they are all based on the same mistake: they conflate the *assertibility* conditions of normative claims—which are attitude-dependent, in the same sense in which assertibility conditions are *belief*-dependent for ordinary descriptive claims—and their *truth* conditions, which need not be attitude-dependent.

[11] Expressivists have long argued that their view avoids, or has good answers to, traditional problems faced by realism, e.g. epistemological challenges, or explaining the motivational force of normative judgment. If their "quasi-realism" is indistinguishable from at least some versions of realism, then realists could share in these benefits as well.

[12] See Blackburn (1998b), pp. 296, 319; or Blackburn (2005), pp. 117-21. Gibbard too sometimes suggests that non-naturalist realists might end up accepting expressivism (2003, p. 186; 2012, p. 229), and has even tried to accommodate some of the commitments of naturalist realism (2003, Ch. 5).

At this point, someone might suggest that we have an easy way of describing the divide between EXPRESSIVISM and realism, or at least between EXPRESSIVISM and *robust* realism: expressivists only accept OBJECTIVITY and other realist-sounding commitments in virtue of adopting a minimalist account of the notions of truth and facthood, while genuine realists understand these notions in a robust metaphysical sense. In other words, according to this proposal, while EXPRESSIVISM may be compatible with *minimal* or *non-metaphysical* realism,[13] it is in conflict with realism stated in terms of metaphysical notions such as robust correspondence truth.[14]

However, this does not give us a divide that both realists and expressivists must recognize. Self-professed robust realists may well think that their metaphysical commitments are not amenable to a minimalist treatment, and thus that their realism goes beyond the *ersatz* version available to expressivists. But a thoroughgoing minimalist will deny that claims about truths and facts could mean *more* than what his minimalism takes them to mean. Blackburn, for instance, does not allow for a difference between minimal and robust metaphysical commitments: his commitments to truth and objectivity, minimally understood, are as robust as they can intelligibly be.[15] Again, robust realists might resist such claims, but if we are to find a stable divide between EXPRESSIVISM and realism that minimalist expressivists can recognize, we need a test for realism that goes beyond metaphysical foot-stomping. That is, we must articulate a conflict between the two views that would persist *even if* we treated all talk of normative truths, facts and properties as internal to first-order normative discourse, in the way that minimalist expressivists do. This is the challenge that has become known, due to Jamie Dreier (2004), as *the problem of creeping minimalism*.

## 2   The promise of an explanatory divide

Blackburn and Gibbard often articulate the differences between their "quasi-realism" and genuine realism in explanatory terms: realists *start with* normative facts and explain our normative beliefs and linguistic practice by reference to those facts, they say. Expres-

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[13]That is, the kind of realism espoused by Nagel (1986), Dworkin (1996), or Scanlon (2010, 2014), who either reject ontological commitments to normative facts and properties, or claim that such commitments should be understood as first-order normative claims. Blackburn (1996) was among the first to claim that Dworkin-style realism is indistinguishable from his quasi-realism. Svavarsdottir (2001) also argues that a metaphysically deflated normative realism like Nagel's, which she characterizes as "a position reached within ethical inquiry" (p. 170), might be compatible with expressivism. Most recently, Dreier (2015) has suggested that Scanlon's realism need not be in tension with expressivism.

[14]Cuneo (2013): "[A] commitment to the deflationary package is an important respect in which expressivist and realist views seem to differ; expressivists accept the package, while realists do not" (p. 227).

[15]Blackburn (2006): "Minimalism denies that some true assertions 'literally' correspond with the world, while other true assertions only manage something less." (p. 160) This, he says, should bring "aid and comfort to the quasi-realist. It means that there are no thoughts about truth that lie beyond his grasp." (*ibid.*) In the same spirit, minimal realists often deny the intelligibility of adding any metaphysical weight onto the normative commitments that constitute their realism. For instance, Dworkin (1996) insists that seemingly metaphysical claims about moral facts being *out there*, or positing the existence of moral properties in the universe, can *only* be interpreted as benign normative claims, so that his realism "knows no bounds (...) [T]here is no more robust thesis for any realism to deploy or any anti-realism to refute, no more metaphysical a meta-ethics for the former to embrace or the latter to mock." (pp. 127-8) Similarly, Scanlon (2014) rejects the idea that his realism is "minimalist" in any way: on his view, he says, normative facts are as robust as they can be, and his account gives normative statements "exactly the content and 'thickness' that they require when taken literally" (p. 28).

sivists, in contrast, do *without* normative facts in their explanations of normative thought and language, appealing instead to our affective and practical reactions to non-normative phenomena; even though they accept claims about objective normative truths and facts, such claims come *at the end* of the expressivist project and are explanatorily idle.

Here is Blackburn (1993), describing this alleged explanatory conflict between expressivism and realism:

> "[T]he expressivist will say that there are ethical truths, and even that they are independent of us and our desires. But it is confusing to call the position realist, (...) because at no point does it regard our behavior in that area as explained by any kind of awareness of an area of reality, or a real feature or property of things. It is here that 'quasi' comes in: we *end up* saying things that sound superficially distinctive of realism, but *the explanation* of what we are doing in saying them and of how we get to say them is different."[16]

This divide is meant to be recognizable from a minimalist standpoint. That is, according to this proposal, even if realists accepted a minimalist treatment of the notions of truth, facthood, etc., they would still attach an explanatory role to normative facts and properties, e.g. to the wrongness of genocide, which expressivists cannot accept. Other philosophers have similarly tried to draw a contrast between EXPRESSIVISM and realism in explanatory terms, focusing on various *explananda* for this purpose: from truthmaking relations to facts about semantic content and normative disagreement.[17]

My goal in this paper is to show that, if we assume a minimalist approach to the relevant metaphysical and semantic notions, no explanatory commitment is both plausible as a criterion for realism and incompatible with EXPRESSIVISM. More precisely, I will argue that EXPRESSIVISM is compatible with any realist explanation that expressivists themselves would find intelligible, *except for* a representationalist account of the etiology of normative thought and language—which cannot be accepted, however, as a general test for realism.[18]

Perhaps the biggest challenge in any discussion about whether EXPRESSIVISM is compatible with realism is that we have no firm, widely shared grip on *what realism is*. The

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[16]Blackburn (1993), p. 98, his italics. The same Blackburn (1993): "[T]he existence of facts explains the way in which our knowledge expands and progresses: here an explanatory role seems to carry with it an ontological commitment which (...) is surely problematic to the quasi-realist" (p. 18). Anti-realism, he says, explains normative discourse and its role in our lives "while avoiding the view that it exists because it describes a genuine aspect of reality" (p. 7). This understanding of realism in explanatory terms was already present in Blackburn (1984), where realists were attributed the thesis that values and duties "are themselves part of the genesis of our beliefs. It would be because values, etc. are distributed in some way around the world, and because we are capable of reacting to them (...) that we moralize as we do." (pp. 181-2) Expressivists, in contrast, aim to "explain the practice of moralizing, using causal language, and so on, in terms only of our exposure to a thinner reality" (p. 169). See also Gibbard (2011): "[The realist] is asking about something he starts out thinking to be a fact (...) Its being a candidate fact is supposed to figure centrally in explaining how to judge it. (...) [Quasi-realists] can't (...) mimic the claim that understanding normative properties and relations as objective matters of fact is basic to explaining how judgments of wrongness work." (pp. 45-6)

[17]Fine (2001), Dreier (2004), Jenkins (2005), Asay (2013), and Dunaway (Forthcoming).

[18]To be clear, I am not assuming that, for there to be an explanatory divide between EXPRESSIVISM and realism, all realists should accept the same explanation of the relevant facts. It would be enough if, for instance, naturalist realists offered a causal explanation of our beliefs, while non-naturalists offered a non-causal one, as long as both explanations were incompatible with EXPRESSIVISM. My thesis is that, for any plausible *explanandum*, EXPRESSIVISM is at most incompatible with a narrow set of realist views.

notion of realism is notoriously problematic in philosophy, and nowhere is it more disputed than in metaethics.[19] Thus, I enter this debate with ambivalence. On one hand, I find it valuable to explore the compatibility between EXPRESSIVISM and the many faces of realism. On the other hand, I want to avoid the trap of treating realism as something the sharp contours of which we should all be able to recognize upon reflection.

Here is what I will do: I will examine various notions of realism, defined in terms of the explanatory role that they attach to normative facts and properties, or that they *deny* to our attitudes. I will not ask whether any of these notions precisely captures genuine realism. I *will* claim, however, that certain explanatory criteria are too narrow to be plausible as general tests for realism. The fact that the notion of realism is imprecise need not prevent us from making such judgments. We may not agree on an exact definition of normative realism, but I hope we can agree that any criterion for normative realism should cover *non-naturalist* realism. This is what I will rely on in making my case. The only explanatory project incompatible with EXPRESSIVISM is, I will argue, an account of normative thought and language according to which normative facts and properties causally explain the emergence of normative concepts as representational devices. But this explanatory commitment can only be attributed to certain *naturalist* realist views, and perhaps to one particular version of non-naturalist realism as well. It leaves out most non-naturalist realists. Thus, we can conclude that there is no explanatory divide between EXPRESSIVISM and anything recognizable as a general notion of realism.[20]

I should make it clear, however, that my arguments for this conclusion will be made from a perspective that many self-professed realists would reject. The question I'm interested in is whether Blackburn and Gibbard are right, *by their own lights*, to see a divide between EXPRESSIVISM and realism. Thus, I will engage with potential criteria for realism from a minimalist-expressivist standpoint: that is, I will treat any talk of normative truths, facts, and properties as internal to normative discourse and amenable to an expressivist account. For a thoroughgoing minimalist, there is no further *metanormative* level at which the realism debate could be carried out, at a remove from the subversive impact of minimalism. It is from this minimalist standpoint that Blackburn and Gibbard claim to have identified an explanatory divide between their view and realism. I will rely on the same standpoint in making the case that they were wrong to think so.

Some contributors to this debate might not be happy with the broad minimalist framework of my discussion. They will insist that the commitments they attribute to realism—e.g., theses about what it is for a normative fact to obtain, or about the nature of normative beliefs—rely on heavyweight metaphysical machinery, and cannot be reinterpreted as first-order normative claims. Indeed, they will argue, these metaphysical

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[19]As Wright (1992) put it: "[I]f there ever was a consensus of understanding about 'realism,' as a philosophical term of art, it has undoubtedly been fragmented by the pressures exerted by the various debates—so much so that a philosopher who asserts that she is a realist about (...) ethics, has probably, for most philosophical audiences, accomplished little more than to clear her throat." (p. 1)

[20]Rosen (1998), pp. 397-8, raises a similar worry about defining realism in explanatory terms: we could only state an explanatory conflict between quasi-realism and a realism according to which the relevant facts causally explain our beliefs about them, but normative realists need not make any such causal claims. Blackburn himself sometimes acknowledges this worry—see the Introduction and Essay 1 in Blackburn (1993). But no comprehensive treatment has been offered yet of potential explanatory criteria for normative realism and why they all fail to draw a divide with EXPRESSIVISM.

commitments succeed in drawing a divide between EXPRESSIVISM and realism precisely in virtue of being immune to a minimalist, internalizing treatment.[21] The divide between EXPRESSIVISM and realism only collapses if we assume a highly contentious reading of realist commitments, and moreover, the rejection of this way of interpreting metaphysical claims should itself be seen as part of genuine realism. Or so the objection would go.

I will do little to address these concerns in what follows. I agree that many self-professed realists reject minimalism about metaphysical talk and take their commitments to be irreducible to first-order normative theses, and there is not much I could say to convince such realists that their view is compatible with EXPRESSIVISM.[22] Indeed, as already mentioned in section 1, such realists would probably not see the need for this discussion in the first place. They will be content to assert the existence of "robust" normative truths and facts, and will reject the possibility of a minimalist appropriation of these notions. The problem of creeping minimalism, which an explanatory criterion for realism is supposed to solve, only arises if one assumes minimalism in the first place.

Thus, my paper is primarily addressed to minimalist expressivists, and to all those who find it plausible that the only way to make sense of metaphysical talk in the normative domain is to interpret it as an organic part of first-order normative theory. It is them that I want to convince that there need be no explanatory divide between an expressivist account of normative discourse and anything that we could recognize—from a minimalist, internalizing perspective—as a general realism about normativity.

## 3   Divide at a deep metaphysical level?

Let us begin with a notion of realism that is not defined in terms of *our* connections—be they psychological, epistemic, or semantic—with the normative realm, but concerns the nature of normative facts as such.[23] In doing so, I should note, we start with something that expressivists themselves would not find useful in this discussion: Blackburn and Gibbard insist that it is only in the explanation of our normative thought and practices that realists and expressivists diverge, not in anything they might say about the internal structure of the normative domain. However, other philosophers have found this route promising in trying to articulate realist commitments incompatible with EXPRESSIVISM. I will argue that, at least if we interpret metaphysical explanations involving normative facts as internal to normative theorizing, in the way that minimalist expressivists do, there is no conflict to be found here.

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[21]Most if not all of those mentioned in fn. 17 are likely to have this reaction.

[22]This is not to say that I will only argue for the compatibility between EXPRESSIVISM and "minimal" realism. From a minimalist perspective, the versions of realism that EXPRESSIVISM is compatible with are as metaphysically weighty as they can intelligibly be. In particular, I will argue that EXPRESSIVISM is compatible, by its own lights, with non-naturalist realism, although self-described "robust" non-naturalist realists might not recognize this convergence due to their rejection of minimalism.

[23]This is in the spirit of Fine's (2001) exhortation to *metaphysical innocence* in addressing the question of realism: "[T]he existence of an external reality may make it plausible that our linguistic and epistemic contact with that reality is of a certain sort, [but] this is not in what the externality of the reality consists. In thinking about these matters, we need to restore ourselves to a state of innocence in which the metaphysical claims are seen to be about the subject-matter in question (...) and not about our relationship to that subject-matter." (p. 7) I should note, however, that Fine ultimately offers a criterion for realism that involves explanations of mental and linguistic content, rather than purely the nature of the facts in the disputed domain. I discuss this type of proposal in section 6.

We have already assumed that EXPRESSIVISM is compatible with OBJECTIVITY understood in the sense that normative facts are counterfactually and constitutively independent of our attitudes. To use the same example again, we are supposing that expressivists can legitimately claim that genocide would be wrong even if our attitudes about it were different, and that it is not our attitudes that make genocide wrong, or that make "Genocide is wrong" true. For minimalist expressivists, explaining such facts is a task in normative theorizing, and our attitudes need not play any role here. The normative explanation of what makes "Genocide is wrong" true may itself express a set of conative attitudes, but this semantic fact has no import for what should go into the explanation. Importantly, expressivists need not refrain from talking about truthmakers, or about things having normative properties, in such explanations. But this metaphysical-sounding talk is given a minimalist account, which means the explanations can be more simply phrased in straightforwardly normative terms: e.g., genocide is wrong because of the unnecessary suffering it involves, and not because we disapprove of it.[24]

Some philosophers have proposed that, even if we assume this compatibility between EXPRESSIVISM and OBJECTIVITY, we can articulate realist commitments incompatible with expressivism at a deeper metaphysical level. Expressivists may well explain what makes genocide wrong, or why "genocide is wrong" is true, without invoking our attitudes, but they must evince their anti-realism, it is suggested, when explaining *what it is* for something to have a normative property, or *why* normative claims have the truthmakers that they do.[25]

Let us state then a notion of realism along these lines:

REALISM-MET    The metaphysical explanation of what it is for a normative fact to obtain, or of why any normative claim has the truthmakers that it does, does not involve our attitudes.

Note that REALISM-MET is not entailed by OBJECTIVITY. There is logical room for someone to hold that our attitudes do not make normative claims true, and normative truths would be the same no matter what our attitudes were, and yet that our attitudes help explain *why* this is so. For example, one might claim that it is because of the

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[24]To be sure, Blackburn and Gibbard are not very fond of metaphysical talk. In particular, they often resist expanding their minimalism to claims about normative properties. Gibbard (2003), Ch. 5, prefers to speak of natural properties that realize normative concepts, rather than accept the existence of normative properties as such. Blackburn's attitude to property talk has been more ambivalent. In Blackburn (1984) he claimed that the world does not contain moral properties, while in Blackburn (1993) he adopted a minimalist account of properties. Most recently, in Blackburn (2015), he has reverted to a reluctant attitude when it comes to property talk, preferring to think of himself as inhabiting "a world in which there are only natural properties, including ones to which we often have moral and evaluative attitudes" (p. 844). But, as Blackburn's own changes of mind show, EXPRESSIVISM does not mandate any position on the existence of normative properties.

[25]Jenkins (2005) defines realism in these terms, as a thesis about *what it is for normative facts to obtain*. Applied to our example, her proposal is that a realist holds that what it is for genocide to be wrong involves the *essence* of genocide and wrongness, while an expressivist claims that something's being wrong is a matter of our taking a negative attitude toward it. Similarly, Asay (2013) argues that, although realists and expressivists might agree on what the truthmakers for normative claims are, they nevertheless offer conflicting explanations of the truthmaking relations themselves. Realists talk about the *de re* properties of objects in accounting for why the relevant truthmaking relations hold, he says, while expressivists must appeal to our attitudes being projected onto the world when explaining the same facts. Sometimes, Asay switches to semantic facts as *explananda*: realists and expressivists give different accounts of disagreement, he says, and in particular of what makes it the case that our words are about certain things. As already mentioned, I discuss this option in section 6.

way our attitudes are projected onto the world that the following objectivist claim is true: genocide would be wrong no matter what anyone thought about it, and it is wrong because of the suffering it causes, not because we have certain attitudes towards it. In other words, on such a view, our attitudes do not explain the normative facts, but they are part of the explanation for why they do not explain normative facts.

To be sure, this is an odd position in logical space. But let us not assess the independent merits of combining OBJECTIVITY with the rejection of REALISM-MET in this way. What matters for our purposes is whether expressivists must reject REALISM-MET, and thus adopt the view sketched above. I see no reason why. Blackburn and Gibbard might not be particularly interested in such questions as why normative claims have the truthmakers that they do. But their objectivist track record suggests that, if they did consider these questions, they would treat such explanatory contexts as normative ones, and deny that our attitudes have any role to play here. Just as they hold that what makes genocide wrong has nothing to do with our attitudes, expressivists can very well claim that what it is for genocide to be wrong is not to be explicated in terms of how we feel about it, but rather by appealing to the attitude-independent properties of genocide and their normative import. In any case, EXPRESSIVISM does not entail any particular stance on these matters.[26]

Now, proponents of REALISM-MET might insist that the metaphysical explanations they have in mind are not to be reinterpreted as normative explanations in disguise, but rather should be taken for what they are: genuine metaphysical explanations, relying on heavyweight metaphysical tools. Insofar as expressivists refuse to acknowledge the legitimacy of metaphysical talk that evades an expressivist account, it might be argued, we can locate here the contrast between their lightweight objectivism and the robust REALISM-MET that unabashed metaphysicians can endorse.

However, this only brings us back to the familiar situation in which self-professed metaphysical realists reassure themselves that their view cannot be reconciled with EXPRESSIVISM, while from the minimalist side there is no intelligible contrast to be seen. Minimalist expressivists need not think of themselves as *rejecting* REALISM-MET understood as a metaphysical claim, but rather as giving such metaphysical talk the only intelligible reading it can be given.[27] Insofar as there is a dispute here, it is a *metameta-*

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[26]In her discussion, Jenkins assumes not only that expressivism is a form of anti-realism, but also that expressivists are anti-realists in the very sense captured by her proposal: expressivists must accept that what it is for something to be wrong is dependent on our attitudes, she argues, if they are not to contradict their anti-realism. This is a questionable move in the context of defending said proposal as an account of what separates expressivists from realists, especially given the existence of other options, such as Blackburn's and Gibbard's own explanatory criteria for realism. Asay also takes it for granted that expressivists will appeal to projection from our attitudes in explaining truthmaking relations in the normative domain. But, while Blackburn fueled this reading of expressivism by relying on the notion of projection in earlier writings (1984), he has since abandoned this misleading metaphor. In Blackburn (2010), p. 32, he explains that he did so precisely because this metaphor might have raised the suspicion that he ultimately accepts the attitude-dependence of normative facts.

[27]Blackburn (2010): "But what about the metaethicist, trying to understand the Place of Value in the World as a whole? (. . . ) There is (. . . ) a wrong way to proceed, which is to invoke an alleged distinction between an 'internal' (. . . ) dependency claim, and an 'external' or 'transcendental' one. (. . . ) Suppose we don metaethical clothing, and ask in what we hope to be an upper-case, metaethical tone of voice, 'Do Values as such depend on our Sentiments or our Wills as such?' We still have to answer by considering examples. So, for instance, does the value of the selfless act of benevolence depend on our sentiments, or does the awfulness of unmotivated cruelty depend on our willing to avoid it (. . . )? And now the claim is that we can hear these as other than requests for first-order (. . . ) dependency tests. But we cannot

*physical* one about how to interpret certain metaphysical explanations, rather than a metaphysical one about whether REALISM-MET is true or not.[28] In any case, in this paper I am interested in whether minimalist expressivists must see a conflict between their view and realism, given their internalizing approach to metaphysical issues. We will not find such a contrast if we focus on anything like REALISM-MET.

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Let us forget then about any notion of realism defined in terms of the metaphysical structure of the normative domain itself. EXPRESSIVISM and its explanatory ambitions have no import for what makes normative claims true and why.

We should also put aside the idea that the divide between EXPRESSIVISM and realism might be located in how they see the role of normative facts when it comes to explaining facts *outside* the normative domain: for instance, that realism might consist in ascribing a causal role to normative facts in explanations of historical events like revolutions and genocides,[29] or even a non-causal role in such explanations.[30] While some realists might embrace explanatory commitments of this kind, most do not. Non-naturalist realists, in particular, standardly reject the causal efficacy of normative facts.[31] Thus, any notion of realism that involves a causal-explanatory role for normative facts is a dead end in this discussion.[32] Even fewer realists, I suspect, would appeal to normative facts in *non-causal* explanations of phenomena unrelated to our normative beliefs and linguistic practices.

If we are to find a plausible notion of realism defined in explanatory terms and incompatible with EXPRESSIVISM, our only hope is to shift our attention to the psychology, epistemology and semantics of normative discourse. After all, EXPRESSIVISM does purport to explain a range of facts about normative thought and language, and it claims to do so by appealing to our affective and practical reactions to non-normative facts. It has seemed plausible to many, including Blackburn and Gibbard, that this is where we can find a contrast between EXPRESSIVISM and realism, because realists assign a central role to normative facts in accounting for the same mental and linguistic phenomena.

In the next sections I will examine three different kinds of facts with respect to which, according to Blackburn and Gibbard, there is an explanatory conflict between EXPRESSIVISM and realism: (i) the connection between normative judgment and motivation, (ii)

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(. . . ) There is no external question of dependency. (...) We might be tempted to think that there must be one, that people must be dragged willi-nilly into the halls of metaphysics. But this would only be so if we ignore expressivism." (pp. 30-2)

[28]Dunaway (2010) makes a similar point: the difference between expressivism and realism cannot simply consist in a disagreement about the *meaning* of metaphysical claims that they both accept, e.g. that there are normative truths. Rather, he says, the two views must disagree about some "deep or substantive claims" (p. 355).

[29]I have in mind the naturalist realism developed by Sturgeon (1985), and his examples of a revolution being caused by the unjustness of a political regime, or of Hitler's actions being caused by his depravity.

[30]See Wright's (1992) *wide cosmological role* conception of realism: a domain of facts is objective in this sense if it has a wide influence—not necessarily a causal one—on other domains of facts, excluding our beliefs or linguistic practices.

[31]See Shafer-Landau (2006) and Enoch (2011), among others.

[32]Moreover, Gibbard has actually been *more* willing to accept the legitimacy of causal explanations involving normative facts than many self-professed realists—see Gibbard (2003), Ch. 10. More on the compatibility between EXPRESSIVISM and such causal explanations, in section 5.

our normative beliefs and any convergence thereof, and (iii) facts about mental and linguistic content, e.g. what it is for someone to think that genocide is wrong, or for two people to disagree about whether genocide is wrong.[33] In each case I will look for a notion of realism characterized in terms of the explanatory role it ascribes to normative facts, and then will examine whether realism thus defined is incompatible with EXPRESSIVISM. In case (i), it is relatively easy to show that there is no such conflict, if only because it is hard to articulate a relevant notion of realism. Cases (ii) and (iii) are more complicated: we *can* isolate there an explanatory project incompatible with EXPRESSIVISM, namely a *tracking account* according to which normative facts causally explain the emergence and evolution of normative thought and language. However, I will argue, this cannot be accepted as a general criterion for normative realism.

# 4 Realism and motivation

Let's assume that *judgment internalism* or something close to it is true: making a normative judgment is associated, at least in normal circumstances, with being in a certain motivational state. (Most realists will accept at least this weak version of internalism, so I will ignore the possibility that the rejection of this claim might be built into the notion of realism.)

Expressivists usually take pride in their explanation of the motivational valence of normative judgments. On standard versions of expressivism, normative thoughts—the mental states expressed by sincere utterances of normative claims—are identical to, or constituted in part by, desire-like mental states. This explains the connection between normative judgment and motivation, without entailing that we will always act in accordance with our normative judgments: the motivational pull of the mental states that constitute such judgments can be overridden by other motivational states.

Expressivists also typically claim that realism does not provide resources to explain the connection between normative judgment and motivation. They may be right. However, this by itself cannot constitute a divide between EXPRESSIVISM and realism: the mere fact that realism leaves something unexplained, which expressivism accounts for, only means that realists would have something to *gain* from EXPRESSIVISM, if the views were otherwise compatible. If something in realism was incompatible with the expressivist explanation of judgment internalism, we would of course have a conflict here. But we have not found that something yet.

If we try to articulate a realist explanation of judgment internalism that would be in tension with EXPRESSIVISM, in particular an explanation involving normative facts and properties, we run into a simple problem. How could normative facts—which many realists take to be causally inefficacious—explain the fact of being motivated by one's normative judgments? Few realists would even accept that it is one of their tasks to

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[33]Here I am using *explanation* in a broad sense, such that one can explain *what it is* for something to be the case, even though no claim of the form "*p* because *q*" plays a central role in the explanation.

explain psychological phenomena of this kind, let alone that they should appeal to our contact with normative facts in such explanations.[34]

It might be suggested that, although realists do not usually try to offer causal explanations of such psychological facts, they do offer a different account of the connection between normative judgment and motivation, namely that this connection is normative. That is, realists will claim that one *ought* to be motivated by one's normative judgments, or that a *rational* agent will be properly motivated by her normative judgments.[35]

However, why should this be in conflict with EXPRESSIVISM? Expressivists can endorse such normative assessments of agents who are motivated by their normative judgments, especially given that these assessments are naturally read as concerning the rationality of *acting* in accordance with one's judgments—rather than the rationality of simply being in some motivational state, which may not lead one to action.[36] As already mentioned, expressivists do not deny the rather obvious fact that there is sometimes a mismatch between our normative judgments and our actions. Thus, EXPRESSIVISM poses no obstacle to judging that people whose actions are aligned in the right way with their normative judgments are rational, or acting as they ought to.

There would only be a conflict between EXPRESSIVISM and realism on this issue if we attributed the following position to realists: there is no constitutive connection between normative judgments and motivational states; normative beliefs only have representational content and a mind-to-world direction of fit, and always require the presence of appropriate desires in order to produce motivation and action. But this would amount, in effect, to building the rejection of Expressivism into the definition of realism, which would beg the question at stake here.[37] As I argued before, while it may be true that many or even most self-professed realists reject EXPRESSIVISM, this sociological fact cannot settle the issue of whether realists *must* reject EXPRESSIVISM, *in virtue of* their realism.[38] We haven't seen yet any reason to think that they must, and in particular no reason having to do with a realist explanation of the motivational valence of normative judgments.

## 5  Beliefs and convergence

Blackburn and Gibbard often attribute the following thesis to realists: our normative beliefs are explained by the normative facts. This realist commitment is supposed to be in conflict with an expressivist explanation of our tendencies in making normative judgments,

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[34]See Scanlon (2010), who holds that normative facts need not be "causally active in producing actions. It is an agent's *acceptance* of a judgment about the reasons he or she has that does this. Such acceptance, whether it amounts to belief or not, is a psychological state, and hence the kind of thing that figures in ordinary psychological explanations." (p. 12)

[35]See Scanlon (2014), Lecture 3.

[36]Indeed, Scanlon (2014) explicitly focuses on the connection between normative judgment and action (see p. 53).

[37]Note that, in a minimalist-expressivist framework, normative judgments are both desire-like attitudes and truth-apt beliefs. So the mere fact that, for realists, normative judgments are truth-apt beliefs with a mind-to-world direction of fit is not enough to draw a contrast with EXPRESSIVISM. The question is whether anything in realism as such entails that normative judgments do not also have a world-to-mind direction of fit, or why minimalist expressivists should think of realism as including such a commitment. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting that I address this issue.

[38]Moreover, see Nagel (1970) for an example of a realist who holds that normative judgments do not require the presence of external desires in order to produce motivation and action.

which does not involve cognitive responses to normative facts. As Blackburn (1999) puts it, in relation to moral judgments: "Our moral understandings are not explained by independent moral structures, to which we are lucky enough to be sensitive."[39] Similarly, Gibbard (2003) contrasts an expressivist explanation of normative belief, which does not help itself to normative facts, to a "standard realist's mode of explanation," which starts with a realm of facts to explain belief in them.[40]

This idea resembles Bernard Williams' (1985) contrast between science and ethics. Williams argues that science has a kind of objectivity that ethics lacks, namely an objectivity manifested in the different explanations of agreement and disagreement available in the two domains. There is a clear contrast, he says, between the best explanation of the substantial degree of convergence in the history of Western science, which involves the idea that we reflected a world that was already there, and the ethical case, where there is no hope for convergence on ethical truths to be explained by the fact that our beliefs reflect the ethical world.[41]

Let us state then a version of realism in these terms:

REALISM-BEL    The best explanation of normative beliefs, and of any large-scale convergence thereof, involves a central role for normative facts as what normative beliefs cognitively respond to.[42]

On the most natural reading, REALISM-BEL commits one to the availability of a certain kind of *causal* explanation of normative beliefs and their convergence: namely, an explanation according to which we tend to have the normative beliefs that we do, and to converge on true beliefs under suitable circumstances, because we are in causal contact with normative facts.

Thus read, REALISM-BEL entails that normative thought has the etiological function of tracking normative facts, which directly contradicts the NEGATIVE FUNCTIONAL THESIS of EXPRESSIVISM. For expressivists, the emergence and proliferation of normative concepts and beliefs is not explained by causal interactions between our cognitive system and the normative realm.

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[39]Blackburn (1999), p. 217. See also Blackburn (2013), where he draws a contrast between realism about tables and chairs, manifested in the commitment that we are causally influenced by and sensitive to the properties of tables and chairs, and the normative case, where we can forget about the existence of normative facts and offer an anthropological or genealogical account which does not involve our first-order commitments. This suggests that Blackburn understands normative realism as committed to a genealogical account of our normative beliefs, in which normative facts play a crucial explanatory role.

[40]Gibbard (2003), p. 183.

[41]Williams (1985), pp. 135-6. To be clear, the issue is not how much disagreement there is in ethics, nor whether the methods for settling ethical disagreements are as reliable as those available in science, but rather whether the best overall explanation of convergence in ethical beliefs, to the extent that such convergence happens, involves the idea that our beliefs represent normative facts.

[42]This proposal resembles Crispin Wright's (1992) Cognitive Command conception of realism. They both cash out the question of realism as a question of whether our beliefs in the given domain are best understood as cognitive responses to the facts. But there are some differences. Wright's Cognitive Command consists in the impossibility of cognitively faultless disagreement in the disputed domain, and is only meant to work as a test for realism in epistemically constrained regions of discourse. In contrast, REALISM-BEL allows for the existence of unknowable facts, and therefore leaves open the possibility of brute error about said facts—that is, error that cannot be explained by the malfunctioning of some cognitive mechanism. Another respect in which the notion of realism stated above follows Williams' understanding of objectivity rather than Wright's Cognitive Command proposal is its focus on an entire domain of facts and the best overall explanation of our tendencies in forming beliefs about those facts, rather than on explanations of individual beliefs.

However, this explanatory contrast cannot constitute a divide between realism and EXPRESSIVISM, as it would leave of out much of what goes for normative realism in contemporary philosophy. Most non-naturalist realists, in particular, claim that normative facts are not causally efficacious, and therefore cannot subscribe to REALISM-BEL as interpreted above.[43] That is, they cannot purport to offer a *tracking account* of normative thought—an anthropological story according to which normative facts causally explain why we developed normative concepts and why we tend to form the beliefs that we do in various circumstances.

To be sure, some realists do ascribe a causal-explanatory role to *non-natural* normative facts in the production of our beliefs.[44] However, this is a minority position among contemporary non-naturalists. It might even deserve its own label—say, *supernaturalist* realism. In any case, such an explanatory commitment is not a plausible criterion for normative realism in general.

Other realists might make claims about normative beliefs and their convergence on the truth that resemble REALISM-BEL: e.g., "We believe $p$ because it is true"—understanding such claims as ways of our reassuring ourselves that we are on the right track, but not as psychological explanations in which normative truths play a causal role. This is not to say that such explanations cannot have a causal dimension. For instance, any non-naturalist realist can hold that certain facts about our psychological processes, subjective make-up, and our interaction with the environment causally explain why we arrived at our normative beliefs, and then claim that the causal factors cited in the psychological explanation are also truth-conducive: we paid attention to the *relevant* non-normative facts, we reasoned *properly*, we showed the *right* degree of empathy, etc. But this does not involve ascribing causal powers to normative facts, and is compatible with a fully naturalistic story about the origins of our beliefs. The realist explanation only adds to the naturalistic story a normative assessment of our psychological features and belief-forming processes. Expressivists should have no issue with this.

Nonetheless, expressivists have shown discontent with the realists' epistemological picture, even when explicitly discussing varieties of realism that deny a causal-explanatory role for normative facts. Take the following passage from Gibbard (2012):

> "Non-naturalism starts its explanation with distinct realms into which we can inquire: the natural realm, the abstract realm of mathematics, the normative realm (...) For each realm, there are appropriate methods of inquiry. These methods are ways of coming to know the layouts of things in their respective realms." (p. 235)

For Gibbard, this realist story is in tension with an expressivist approach, on which we start with non-normative facts and our attitudes and build our way up from there.

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[43]Besides Shafer-Landau (2006) and Enoch (2011), see also Scanlon (2014), or Dworkin's (1996) remarks on "moral field theory"—a parody of the kind of realism that would attribute a causal role to moral facts in explanations of beliefs.

[44]FitzPatrick (2014, 2015) makes such claims in responding to evolutionary debunking arguments against moral realism. See also Oddie (2005): "Values can affect us, causally, and it is through their causal impact on us that we can have knowledge of value." (p. 2)

But what is the conflict supposed to consist in? Again, (most) non-naturalist realists cannot be offering an account of cognitive success that presupposes the causal efficacy of normative facts. Rather, they are talking about *how to inquire* into normative matters, or about *what goes well* when our beliefs converge on the truth, in a way that expressivists should find innocuous: there are normative facts and methods of inquiry appropriate for discovering them; when people use such methods correctly, they tend to form true beliefs, so their beliefs tend to converge.

Indeed, when expressivists put on their normative hat and engage in epistemological theorizing, we should expect them to start with normative facts and our responses to them, just as much as realists do. Moreover, they can even adopt the various epistemological terms found in realist literature. For instance, they can speak of intuition, rationality as responsiveness to reasons, or even normative perception; they have no reason to treat any of these notions as off-limits, as long as they make it clear that in using such terms they do not thereby commit to a tracking account of normative thought.[45]

We can already conclude that there is no general conflict between EXPRESSIVISM and realism when it comes to explaining normative beliefs, given that expressivists need not object to what most non-naturalist realists will say on this topic.

Let me end this section, however, by pointing out that the compatibility between EXPRESSIVISM and the many faces of realism goes even deeper. Not only can expressivists endorse the role that normative facts play in a non-causal realist epistemology, but they can even accept a *causal* role for normative facts in some explanations of normative beliefs. A first step would be to hold that normative properties are identical to the non-normative properties on which they supervene—a metaphysical thesis that is compatible with EXPRESSIVISM. (Indeed, Gibbard comes close to accepting such a thesis when he argues that normative concepts are realized by natural properties and that there is no need to posit irreducibly normative properties.)[46] If expressivists were to accept such property identity claims, they could ascribe the same explanatory roles to normative properties that their natural counterparts have. In particular, they could accept explanations in which normative properties themselves are understood to play a causal role in the production of our beliefs, e.g. "I believe that burning cats is wrong because it is wrong." It can hardly be disputed, after all, that the very natural features that make an act wrong also causally influence many of our beliefs about wrongness, or more generally that many of our normative beliefs are caused in part by the supervenience bases of normative properties.

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[45]This is not to say that expressivists should find all of these ways of speaking *appealing*. They might find some of them better suited than others for communicating confidence in our normative judgments and belief-forming processes. Blackburn, as a good Humean, is more sympathetic to perception talk and usually dismissive of rationalist approaches to the epistemology of the normative. He argues, for instance, that an agent whose moral judgments are off-track because his psychology is not that of normal socialized human beings should not be diagnosed as displaying dysfunctions of rationality: "We can exhort [him] (...) to share our sentiments. We can try to turn up the volume of his feelings for those whom he exploits. What we cannot do is argue the knave back into upright behavior." (Blackburn 1998a, p. 209) As for perception talk, this is legitimate, he argues, whenever we think of ourselves as properly indicating the truth. But we must be careful to understand such talk in a "low-grade" sense, making it clear that we are not committed to the availability of a naturalistic account of perceptual success in the normative domain (Blackburn 1993, p. 170).

[46]Gibbard (2003), Ch. 5.

What Expressivism must reject is a *robust* causal explanation that depicts our normative beliefs and evaluative tendencies as cognitive responses to normative facts. According to Expressivism, normative thought did not emerge as a faculty for tracking normative facts, but rather as a tool for social coordination. Thus, we could have engaged in normative thought and discourse even while being vastly off-track in our normative judgments, as long as our beliefs and linguistic practices displayed the affective and motivational profiles required for fulfilling this coordination function. So, even though expressivists may accept that some normative beliefs are caused in part by interactions with normative facts, they cannot accept that normative beliefs in general, and any convergence thereof, are the outputs of cognitive mechanisms whose function is to track normative facts.[47] Such a representationalist account of the etiology of normative thought *is* incompatible with Expressivism. But, as I argued above, it cannot be accepted as a general criterion for normative realism.

## 6  Erasing the semantic divide

Surely, it might be thought, realism and Expressivism offer different accounts of the content of normative thought and language, and thus of what it is in virtue of which we disagree on normative issues. Even if expressivists can accommodate, in a minimalist framework, much of what realists say about these matters—e.g., any claims about the truth conditions of normative claims, or the extension of normative predicates—they *must* hold that such realist talk is explanatorily idle, and that only the attitudinal semantics of expressivism provides genuine insights into the nature of normative content. Realists, in contrast, reject the Semantic Thesis and hold that the right account of normative content is a representationalist one, in which normative facts and properties play a substantive explanatory role.

Let us see how this contrast is supposed to work.[48] Take two sincere utterances of a normative sentence and its negation:

> Bill: "Genocide is wrong."
> Clara: "Genocide is not wrong."

What accounts for the fact that Bill and Clara are in disagreement? Before the advent of quasi-realism, the divide between realists and expressivists on these issues was easy to state. Realists would say that the two utterances express contradictory propositional

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[47]Someone might worry that expressivists cannot avoid accepting a tracking account of normative thought, once they allow for causal explanations involving normative properties: if normative properties play a causal role in the explanations of most true normative beliefs, doesn't that entail that normative thought has the etiological function of tracking such properties? The answer is no. A tracking account must be more robust than an explanation that merely points to the effects of normative properties on people who form *true* normative beliefs. It should account for the representational relations between normative thought and normative facts in any scenario in which there are normative concepts and beliefs. Only such an explanation would vindicate the idea of normative thought as a system of cognitive responses to normative facts. But according to Expressivism, the supervenience bases of normative properties will feature in causal explanations of normative beliefs only in a narrow range of evolutionary pathways: species similar to us in many respects could have developed normative concepts and converged in their beliefs even while responding to all the wrong natural properties.

[48]I focus on linguistic content here, but what I say can be extended to mental content, with minor adjustments.

contents involving the concept of wrongness, which stands for the property of wrongness. Expressivists, on the other hand, would reject this explanation and propose instead a story about the incompatible attitudes expressed by the two utterances: for instance, that Bill expresses disapproval of genocide, while Clara expresses, say, an attitude of indifference toward genocide.[49]

Minimalist expressivists like Blackburn and Gibbard, however, are comfortable with the vocabulary of representational semantics, e.g. with using the notions of truth-conditions, propositional content, reference, etc. Thus, they need not reject anything in the realist story cited above: they can agree, for instance that "Genocide is wrong" is true if and only if it is a fact that genocide is wrong, or that "wrong" stands for the property of wrongness, taking these to be tautologies that capture the grammar of the words "true," "fact," and "property". They can also agree, in the same minimalist framework, that "Genocide is wrong" represents the fact that genocide has the property of wrongness. What they deny is the *explanatory value* of such a thesis: it merely rehearses a commonsense normative commitment, they argue, and therefore cannot be an illuminating explication of the content of "Genocide is wrong". The expressivist story about disagreement in attitude, in contrast, is supposed to offer genuine explanations of normative content, and thus of what makes it the case that people are in normative disagreement.

It is important to note two things about this potential explanatory contrast between Expressivism and realism. First, it is significantly different from the options we have considered before. Blackburn and Gibbard do not *reject* the representationalist semantic picture. Rather, they identify a more subtle tension between Expressivism and realism defined in semantic terms: the functional theses and the attitudinal semantics of Expressivism provide genuine insight into the nature of normative content, in contrast to the explanatory idleness of semantic claims about truth conditions, extensions, etc. As Blackburn (1993) puts it:

"[T]he extra ingredients the realist adds (. . . ) are pulling no explanatory weight: they just sit on top of the story that tells how our sentiments relate to natural features of things."[50]

According to realism, as expressivists construe it, representationalist theses about normative facts and properties do illuminate the nature of normative discourse.

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[49]I am only using the approval/disapproval model as an example of an attitudinal semantics—I do not mean to suggest that it is an obvious choice for expressivists.

[50]Blackburn (1993), p. 155. See also Blackburn (2015): even though we cannot do without a notion of representation, he argues, "for it is a harmless part of everyday thought (...) representation is nevertheless not the key concept to deploy when the desire for philosophical explanation of our practice (...) is upon us. It is not the way to understand the kind of thought or the part of language in question, whereas a different focus on the function of terms in the lives of thinkers and talkers, is the better option." (pp. 851-2) Or Gibbard (2012): "[Both expressivism and non-naturalist realism aim] to explain the crucial features of normative thinking. Non-naturalists explain these features by parallels to the plainest cases of property attributions—like, for instance, (. . . ) whether the cat is on the mat. Expressivists recognize these parallels, but think they aren't basic. (...) What's crucial to normative thinking isn't how it bears on the non-natural layout of the world, but how it bears on action and the like." (pp. 218-9)

Secondly, this explanatory divide should be recognizable from a minimalist standpoint. It should not amount to a conflict between a minimalist approach to representationalist talk and a view according to which truth and referential relations play substantive explanatory roles in semantic theory. To be sure, many realists might subscribe to an inflationary conception of truth-conditional semantics, just as many realists think of their view as a substantive metaphysical thesis, irreducible to a position in first-order normative theory. But the divide between minimalist and inflationary understandings of metaphysical and semantic notions is not what we are looking for. Blackburn and Gibbard *assume* minimalism about truth, facthood, representation, etc. as the only way to make sense of such notions, and understand realism as a commitment to the explanatory value of representationalist theses *within* this framework: e.g., if we want to understand what "Genocide is wrong" is about and the nature of disagreement about such claims, we must talk about wrongness itself. This is what they take to be incompatible with EXPRESSIVISM.

Let us state then a version of realism in semantic terms:

REALISM-CON   Normative facts and properties play a substantive explanatory role in the best account of the semantic content of normative discourse.[51]

Blackburn and Gibbard reject REALISM-CON on the grounds that it is flat-footed and unilluminating to appeal to normative facts and properties when attempting to elucidate the content of normative claims: if someone claims that "Genocide is wrong" represents the fact that genocide has the property of wrongness, she is not making a mistake, but nor is she providing any insight into the nature of normative content.

However, I believe EXPRESSIVISM can be reconciled with REALISM-CON. It is precisely because expressivists treat representationalist claims as internal to normative discourse that they need not see such theses as less illuminating than EXPRESSIVISM from a general philosophical perspective.[52]   Expressivists, again, do not deny that in using normative language we are engaging with normative facts—for instance, that "Genocide is wrong" is true in virtue of the fact that genocide has indeed the property of wrongness, etc.—interpreting such commitments as organic parts of normative theorizing. But then why should they not recognize the value of such claims, from the same normative standpoint? Representationalist theses may not explain the origins of normative language, or the social and psychological workings of normative disagreement. However, from a normative point of view, we can say that the representational success of "Genocide is wrong" *is* a fundamental feature of this normative claim, or that the disagreement between Bill

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[51]Fine (2001), Dreier (2004), and Dunaway (Forthcoming) offer proposals along these lines. However, they would likely object to the minimalist framework in which I examine this notion of realism. Again, my focus here is on whether thoroughgoing minimalists must see an explanatory divide between EXPRESSIVISM and realism, so I am only considering construals of realism compatible with minimalism about metaphysical notions and representationalist semantics.

[52]To be sure, minimalist expressivists will not treat all representationalist semantic theses as first-order normative claims. On their account, many such theses hold simply in virtue of the grammar of terms like "truth", "fact", or "property": e.g., "Genocide is wrong" is true if and only if genocide is true, or the claim that the disagreement between Bill and Clara is about whether genocide has the property of wrongness. Such theses are neutral with respect to normative issues.

and Clara is about wrongness and is settled by the fact that genocide is wrong, not by anything about the mental states expressed by their claims. It is possible to accept EXPRESSIVISM and acknowledge at the same time the importance of representationalist talk when it comes to capturing the successes and failures of our normative commitments. It is not a tenet of EXPRESSIVISM as such that EXPRESSIVISM is more philosophically illuminating than normative discourse. Therefore, there need be no explanatory tension between EXPRESSIVISM and REALISM-CON if representationalist talk is treated as internal to normative theorizing.[53]

At this point, someone might suggest that the explanatory contrast between EXPRESSIVISM and realism is not to be found by looking at their semantic theses, but rather at a *meta-semantic* level: expressivists may well accept representationalist theses about the semantic contents of normative expressions, but won't they disagree with realists when it comes to explaining *why* normative expressions have these contents? Expressivists will talk about our conative attitudes and how utterances expressing such attitudes get to behave semantically as ordinary descriptive claims, it might be thought, while realists will appeal instead to normative facts and properties in their meta-semantic explanations.[54] For instance, a realist will hold that the existence of a property of wrongness explains why "Genocide is wrong" has the meaning assigned to it by a standard truth-conditional semantics, and this is something that expressivists cannot accept. Or so the argument would go.

The problem with this proposal is that it does not fit in a minimalist framework. Blackburn's and Gibbard's minimalism about representationalist talk entails that many semantic facts need no deeper explanation: for example, the fact that "Genocide is wrong" is true just in case genocide is wrong. On their view, such tautologies simply follow from the grammar of the word "true". Some realists might reject this deflationary picture and purport to offer substantive explanations of the same semantic facts, relying on the connections between our language and the normative realm, e.g. the referential relation between the predicate "wrong" and the property of wrongness. To be sure, this is an important philosophical disagreement. But it is only another instance of the more general divide between minimalism and inflationism about metaphysical and semantic notions. Realism thus defined, as a commitment to the explanatory value of representational relations in a theory of meaning, cannot be what Blackburn and Gibbard have in mind when

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[53]Rosen (1998) arrives at a similar conclusion in his discussion of Blackburn's quasi-realism: "[Quasi-realism] licenses the whole-hearted assertion of everything the realist has ever wanted to say about the objectivity and factuality of the domain at issue (. . . ) At the end of the day we have rather a pair of equally legitimate representations of our thought in the area, with no clear basis for saying that either is more revelatory of its nature than the other." (pp. 400-1)

[54]Dunaway (Forthcoming) offers a proposal along these lines. This idea is consonant with recent attempts to restate expressivism as a view in meta-semantics, which does not offer a psychologistic semantics for normative discourse, but rather explains why normative expressions have the semantic values that they do. See fn. 5 for examples of such proposals. Moreover, Chrisman (2012) has argued that Blackburn's own view is best interpreted as an account of why normative language fits a truth-conditional semantic model, rather than as a semantic project, and that the view thus understood is in conflict with a realist meta-semantic picture. Note, however, that the existence of a meta-semantic divide between expressivism and realism need not depend on whether expressivists abandon the SEMANTIC THESIS or not. Even expressivists who offer an attitudinal semantics for normative discourse may try to locate the conflict between their view and realism at the meta-semantic level. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for encouraging me to consider this meta-semantic option for drawing an explanatory divide between expressivism and realism.

they identify realism in logical space. From a minimalist standpoint, such a version of realism is not a robust metaphysical view that should be rejected, but rather the product of confusions about the nature of truth and representation.[55][56]

If we focus on metasemantic explanations, the only realist picture incompatible with Expressivism is, once more, a *tracking account* according to which normative facts and properties causally explain the emergence and proliferation of normative terms as representational devices: for instance, a causal theory of reference for normative terms, which would be in conflict with the Negative Functional Thesis of Expressivism.[57] However, as I argued before, accepting such an account cannot be seen as a requirement for being a realist, as this would leave out too many views that should be covered by any general criterion for normative realism.

# 7    Conclusion

I have argued that, if we assume a broad minimalist account of metaphysical notions and representationalist semantics, there need be no explanatory divide between Expressivism and anything recognizable as a general notion of realism. Therefore, assuming that "quasi-realism" is indistinguishable from realism in all other respects, it should be considered a form of genuine realism.

Many self-professed realists will not be impressed by this result, given the contentious minimalism on which it stands. It is a devious reinterpretation of realist commitments, they will argue, to treat such commitments as rehearsals of first-order normative claims, or as mere reflections of the syntax and discipline of normative language. This dispute between minimalist and inflationary approaches to metaphysical and semantic notions is one of the most intractable in contemporary philosophy, and one which I have not tried to resolve in this paper. But for those of us with a taste for minimalist landscapes, it is time to declare Expressivism compatible with realism pure and simple, and to explore the philosophical benefits of this reconciliation.[58]

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[55]This is not to say that other expressivists may not acknowledge the usefulness of a representationalist metasemantics in other domains of discourse and merely reject its application in the normative domain, drawing thus a divide between their views and realism defined in metasemantic terms. My argument here concerns thoroughgoing minimalist expressivists like Blackburn and Gibbard. Here is another way of stating why this metasemantic option for drawing a divide between Expressivism and realism does not work in a minimalist framework: Blackburn and Gibbard do reject an inflationary approach to representational metasemantics, according to which truth and referential relations play a substantive role in explanations of semantic content, but this is something they reject with respect to *any* domain of discourse. So this cannot be what they have in mind when they contrast their alleged anti-realism about normativity with their realism about, e.g., physical objects.

[56]An anonymous referee suggests that, even in a minimalist framework, there might be a difference between an expressivist and a realist account of semantic claims such as "'Genocide is wrong' is true just in case genocide is wrong": expressivists will talk about conative attitudes in explaining how we get to make these claims. Realists will offer different explanations, which do not involve conative attitudes. However, I believe we cannot find here a divide between Expressivism and realism. If expressivists explain how conative attitudes get to behave semantically like ordinary descriptive beliefs, why should this explanation be in tension with realism? Given that expressivists also endorse everything that realists want to say about truth and representation in a minimalist framework, there is no reason for realists to reject the additional story about conative attitudes—lest we build the rejection of Expressivism into the definition of realism, which again would be question-begging in this debate.

[57]Compare with the tracking account of normative belief discussed in section 5. These are in effect two dimensions—epistemological and semantic—of the same kind of naturalist realism.

[58]I am grateful to Martín Abreu Zavaleta, Brian Ballard, Cian Dorr, Hartry Field, Laura Franklin-Hall, Jed Lewinsohn, Colin Marshall, Tom Nagel, Sharon Street, David Velleman, and two anonymous

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