

does expressivism have subjectivist consequences?

Metaethical expressivists claim that we can explain what moral words like ‘wrong’ mean without having to know what they are *about* – but rather by saying what it is to *think* that something is wrong – namely, to *disapprove* of it. Given the close connection between expressivists’ theory of the meaning of moral words and our attitudes of approval and disapproval, expressivists have had a hard time shaking the intuitive charge that theirs is an objectionably *subjectivist* or *mind-dependent* view of morality. Expressivism, critics have charged over and over again, is committed to the view that what is wrong somehow depends on or at least correlates with the attitudes that we have toward it. Arguments to this effect are sometimes subtle, and sometimes rely on fancy machinery, but they all share a common flaw. They all fail to respect the fundamental idea of expressivism: that ‘stealing is wrong’ bears exactly the same relationship to disapproval of stealing as ‘grass is green’ bears to the belief that grass is green.

In this paper I rehearse the motivations for the fundamental idea of expressivism and show how the arguments of Frank Jackson and Philip Pettit [1998], Russ Shafer-Landau [2003], Jussi Suikkanen [2009], and Christopher Peacocke [2004] all fail on this same rock. In part I I’ll rehearse the motivation for expressivism – a motivation which directly explains why it does not have subjectivist consequences. Then in each of parts 2-5 I’ll illustrate how each of Jackson and Pettit’s, Peacocke’s, Shafer-Landau’s, and Suikkanen’s arguments work, respectively, and why each of them fails to respect the fundamental parity at the heart of expressivism.

Though others have tried before me to explain why expressivism is not committed to any kind of subjectivism or mind-dependence – prominently including Blackburn [1973], [1998], Horgan and Timmons [2006], and, in response to Pettit and Jackson, Dreier [2004] and Smith and Stoljar [2003], the explanation offered in this article is distinguished by its scope and generality. The lack of scope and generality of previous explanations appears to be part of what leads this fallacious form of argument to crop up so regularly. Hopefully, having a clear common diagnosis of what makes *all* of these arguments go astray will help to clear this up.

I expressivism and the parity thesis

The best way to understand the commitments of metaethical expressivism, is to see it as responding to two obvious and central problems for *cognitivist* speaker-subjectivism – the view that ‘stealing is wrong’ has the same meaning or at least the same truth-conditions as some sentence like ‘I disapprove of stealing’, which reports a certain negative attitude of the speaker toward stealing. The first problem, the *disagreement* problem, is that speaker-subjectivism predicts that it should make perfect sense to say things like ‘When you just said, ‘stealing is wrong’ you spoke truly, but stealing is not wrong’. After all, according to the theory, someone who does not disapprove of stealing can truly say this of anyone else who does disapprove of stealing and says, ‘stealing is wrong’. The second problem, the *modal* problem, is that speaker-subjectivism predicts that the following sentence can be uttered truly by anyone: ‘If I didn’t disapprove of stealing, then stealing wouldn’t be wrong’. After all, according to the theory, this sentence has the same meaning as ‘If I didn’t disapprove of stealing, then I wouldn’t disapprove of stealing’. Both of these look like very objectionable consequences for a theory to have, and the second looks like a pernicious form of ‘subjectivism’.

The expressivist response to these problems is based on a diagnosis of what led to them. The expressivist begins by noting that a theory which held that ‘grass is green’ has the same meaning as ‘I believe that grass is green’ would give rise to exactly analogous problems. It has a disagreement problem, because it predicts that it may make perfect sense to say ‘When you just said ‘grass is green’, you spoke truly, but grass is not green’. After all, according to the theory, someone who does not believe that grass is green can truly say this about anyone who does believe that grass is green, and says so. Similarly, this view has a modal problem, because it predicts that anyone can truly say, ‘If I didn’t believe that grass was green, then it wouldn’t be green’. After all, according to the theory, this just means the same as ‘If I didn’t believe that grass is green, then I wouldn’t believe that grass is green’.

The expressivist’s hypothesis is that speaker-subjectivism and this strange theory about the meaning of ‘grass is green’ go wrong in the very same ways because they make exactly the same mistake, by *identifying* the meanings of these two sentences. Since we all know that however ‘grass is green’ and ‘I believe that grass is green’ are *really* related, it isn’t in a way that gives rise to disagreement and modal problems, the central idea of expressivism is therefore the hypothesis that ‘stealing is wrong’ and ‘I disapprove of stealing’ are related in exactly that same way. Since there are no disagreement or modal problems for ‘grass is green’, there therefore can’t be any problems like those for ‘stealing is wrong’, either. The expressivist calls the relationship between ‘grass is green’ and ‘I believe that grass is green’ the *expressing/reporting* distinction –

‘grass is green’ is said to *express* the very same state of mind that ‘I believe that grass is green’ *reports* – and hypothesizes that similarly, ‘stealing is wrong’ expresses the very same state of mind that ‘I disapprove of stealing’ reports. Hence, the expressivist holds that the meaning of ‘grass is green’ and of ‘stealing is wrong’ can both be explained by saying what mental state they express – the former expresses the ordinary, run-of-the-mill belief that grass is green, and the latter expresses a negative attitude toward stealing which I am here calling disapproval.

the parity thesis The relationship between ‘stealing is wrong’ and disapproval of stealing is exactly the same as the relationship between ‘grass is green’ and the belief that grass is green.

It is therefore a straightforward consequence of the most central idea of expressivism that the kind of dependence of wrongness on our attitudes that is articulated by sentences like ‘If I didn’t disapprove of stealing, then it wouldn’t be wrong’ no more follows from expressivism than the analogous statement, ‘If I didn’t believe that grass is green, then grass wouldn’t be green’ follows from common sense. The whole point of the view is that this is a fundamental error. It is crucially important to understand, moreover, that nothing about expressivism, its motivations, or its advantages turns on any particular theory about just what expression *is* – so long as ‘stealing is wrong’ bears exactly the same relationship to disapproval of stealing as ‘grass is green’ bears to the belief that grass is green, the view is guaranteed to get no untoward results about ‘stealing is wrong’ that it doesn’t get about ‘grass is green’.¹

All attempts to isolate ‘subjectivist’ or ‘mind-dependent’ consequences of expressivism trip themselves up, in one way or another, by failing to respect the parity that expressivists postulate between ‘stealing is wrong’ and ‘grass is green’, which they do by failing to follow out the consequences of their reasoning for ordinary, nonmoral sentences like ‘grass is green’ or ‘the earth is round’.

2 jackson and pettit’s ‘problem for expressivism’

Our first test case is Frank Jackson and Philip Pettit [1998], who argue that expressivists are committed to speaker-subjectivism by first arguing that in order for speakers to be able to use moral sentences, those sentences must have conditions of use which speakers can learn to recognize. Since the only conditions of use there could possibly be for ‘stealing is wrong’ are that the speaker disapproves of stealing, Jackson and Pettit conclude that these are the conditions of use for ‘stealing is wrong’. But, Jackson and Pettit claim, citing Locke, conditions of use are just truth-conditions. Hence expressivists are committed to holding

¹ See Schroeder [2008b] for discussion of this point.

that ‘stealing is wrong’ has the truth-conditions that the speaker disapproves of stealing – in other words, it is committed to full-fledged speaker-subjectivism, after all.

It has now been widely recognized that Jackson and Pettit’s argument doesn’t work, and that it trips itself up precisely by not carrying out its own implications for the expressivist’s insistence on the parity between the relationship between ‘stealing is wrong’ and disapproval of stealing, as compared to ‘grass is green’ and the belief that grass is green.² This parity thesis would suggest that on expressivist terms, if the conditions of use for ‘stealing is wrong’ are that the speaker disapproves of stealing, then the conditions of use for ‘grass is green’ should be that the speaker believes that grass is green. But then obviously the expressivist will simply disagree that conditions of use are truth-conditions, on pain of concluding that the truth-conditions of ‘grass is green’ are that the speaker believes that grass is green – i.e., on pain of accepting the very made-up theory whose obvious falsity was used in order to motivate expressivism in the first place. Any expressivist who insists on the straightforward analogy between the ‘stealing is wrong’-disapproval of stealing case as the ‘grass is green’-belief that grass is green case can therefore dispatch the Jackson-Pettit argument without breaking stride.³

3 shafer-landau

In his chapter on expressivism in *Moral Realism: A Defence*, Russ Shafer-Landau offers a more subtle critique of expressivism than that of Pettit and Jackson. Rather than arguing that the expressivist is committed to any modal implications, he argues simply that the expressivist is committed to accepting *material biconditionals* of the form, ‘stealing is wrong just in case I disapprove of stealing’. This argument is expressly intended to avoid difficulties for pinning stronger commitments on expressivism, but still to generate an intuitively problematic consequence.

So why should expressivists be committed to accepting these material biconditionals? Well, since ‘stealing is wrong’ expresses disapproval of stealing, I shouldn’t say it unless I disapprove of stealing. So if I say it but don’t disapprove of stealing, then something is going wrong. Consequently, there is something very peculiar or even incoherent about saying or thinking, ‘stealing is wrong but I don’t disapprove of it’. So denying the left-to-right material conditional appears to be incoherent.

Similarly, ‘stealing is not wrong’ must express some attitude that is rationally inconsistent with disapproving of stealing (for otherwise there would be nothing rationally inconsistent about thinking that stealing is wrong and also thinking that stealing is not wrong). So I shouldn’t say ‘stealing is not wrong’

² See especially Dreier [2004].

³ See Schroeder [2008b] and chapter 2 of Schroeder [2008a] for further discussion.

unless I have this attitude that is rationally inconsistent with disapproving of stealing. But then there is something peculiar or incoherent about saying or thinking, ‘I disapprove of stealing but it isn’t wrong’ – for that involves saying something that by my own lights I shouldn’t say unless I’m in a state that is rationally inconsistent with a state I believe myself to be in. So denying the right-to-left material conditional also appears to be incoherent.

Since denying either the left-to-right or the right-to-left material conditional is incoherent, denying the material biconditional is incoherent. And so this gives us most of what Shafer-Landau needs. For if it is incoherent to deny the material biconditional, then the only coherent view to take about it is to accept it. So it follows that the only coherent view that expressivists can take about material biconditionals of the form ‘stealing is wrong just in case I disapprove of stealing’ is to accept them. In that sense, they are a commitment of expressivists.

As with Jackson and Pettit’s argument, it is helpful to test Shafer-Landau’s argument against the expressivist’s commitment to the parity thesis. In contrast to their argument, however, where testing against the parity thesis demonstrated flaws in the argument, testing Shafer-Landau’s argument against the parity thesis shows no flaws in the argument. What it does show, however, is that his conclusion is not particularly problematic.

To test Shafer-Landau’s argument against the parity thesis, let’s see what it shows us about the non-moral case. By parity of reasoning, for the non-moral case Shafer-Landau’s style of argument shows that it is incoherent to accept sentences of the form, ‘the earth is round but I don’t believe that the earth is round’ or of the form, ‘the earth isn’t round, but I believe that the earth is round’. The incoherence of accepting sentences of the first form corresponds to the incoherence of denying the left-to-right material conditional, and the incoherence of accepting sentences of the second form corresponds to the incoherence of denying the right-to-left material conditional. But it is a *familiar* observation that it is incoherent to accept sentences of these forms. This fact is known as *Moore’s Paradox*. So all that Shafer-Landau’s argument shows is that Moore’s Paradox applies to moral sentences as well as non-moral ones.

You *might* think that Shafer-Landau’s argument shows more than this, because Moore-Paradoxical sentences have the form, ‘P but I don’t think that P’ or ‘ \sim P but I think that P’, whereas Shafer-Landau has shown that expressivists are committed to treating sentences of the form ‘stealing is wrong but I don’t disapprove of stealing’ and ‘stealing is not wrong but I disapprove of stealing’ in the same way. So this looks like a stronger commitment. But in fact this only follows because expressivists accept the equivalence, ‘I think that stealing is wrong just in case I disapprove of stealing’ – which we already knew, since it just articulates the basic tenet of the expressivist’s view. It’s no wonder that someone who accepts ‘I

think that stealing is wrong just in case I disapprove of stealing’ will need to take the same attitude toward ‘stealing is wrong but I don’t disapprove of it’ as she takes toward ‘stealing is wrong but I don’t think that stealing is wrong’.

So though Shafer-Landau’s argument makes no false assumptions about the expressivist’s commitments, by failing to consider the parity thesis, it is led to draw incorrect inferences about the significance of its conclusion.

4 suikkanen on normative subjectivism

In ‘The Subjectivist Consequences of Expressivism’, Jussi Suikkanen follows Shafer-Landau’s footsteps in weakening the ambitions of his argument that expressivism is committed to subjectivist consequences. Like Shafer-Landau, he does not attempt to show that expressivism is committed to any modal consequences. But in contrast to Shafer-Landau, he does attempt to show that expressivism is committed to *generalizations* of the form, ‘for all x , x is wrong just in case I disapprove of x ’. Suikkanen takes this commitment to characterize a kind of *normative*, as opposed to metaethical, subjectivism.

Just as Jackson and Pettit argued that ‘stealing is wrong’ must have a set of conditions of use, in order to be meaningful, and that there is nothing for the conditions of use for ‘stealing is wrong’ to be, other than that the speaker disapproves of stealing, Suikkanen’s argument proceeds by arguing that ‘stealing is wrong’ must have a set of *conditions of positive semantic evaluation*, and that there are only two possibilities for these conditions – that the speaker disapproves of stealing, and that the speaker believes herself to disapprove of stealing – either of which is supposed to lead to the subjectivist result, simply by different routes. Rather than putting things in just this way however, Suikkanen proceeds by arguing that every speaker must accept the following biconditional:

Premise ϕ ing is wrong if and only if I can now use the sentence ‘ ϕ ing is wrong’ to make a statement that receives a positive semantic evaluation.⁴

Assuming that the conditions under which ‘ ϕ ing is wrong’ receives a positive semantic evaluation are just those under which the speaker disapproves of ϕ ing, it follows that

Linking Thesis I can now use the sentence ‘ ϕ ing is wrong’ to make a statement that receives a positive semantic evaluation if and only if I now disapprove of ϕ -ing.⁵

⁴ Suikkanen [2009, 369]. This is Suikkanen’s thesis (iv).

And from these two commitments it follows that

Conclusion ϕ ing is wrong if and only if I now disapprove of ϕ -ing.

If we instead assume (which Suikkanen allows is also reasonable) that the conditions under which ‘ ϕ ing is wrong’ receives a positive semantic evaluation are just those under which the speaker believes herself to disapprove of ϕ ing, we get an exactly analogous argument for the biconditional which resembles Conclusion, but whose right-hand side is ‘I now believe that I disapprove of ϕ -ing. From here forward I’ll ignore this alternative line of argument, because the same problems arise for each.

Should expressivists agree that every speaker is committed to accepting Premise? The answer depends on the *nature* of the so-called ‘positive semantic evaluation’ which Premise calls for. So let’s distinguish between different *sorts* of positive semantic evaluation. Suppose, first, that we disambiguate ‘receives a positive semantic evaluation’ to mean ‘is true’. That reading makes Premise into a version of the T-schema – so it looks undeniable. But unfortunately, we know from the failure of the Jackson-Pettit argument that the Linking Thesis is false, according to expressivism, if ‘positive semantic evaluation’ just means ‘true’ – that after all, was where their argument went wrong. So we simply can’t take the following example as an analogy to Premise, and pretend that ‘receives a positive semantic evaluation’ just means ‘is true’ (a mistake which Suikkanen explicitly falls into):

Grass Premise Grass is green if and only if I can now use the sentence ‘grass is green’ to make a statement that receives a positive semantic evaluation.⁶

So interpreting ‘receives a positive semantic evaluation’ to mean ‘is true’ buys us Premise, but at the cost of the Linking Thesis.

On the other hand, we might interpret ‘receives a positive semantic evaluation’ to denote the relationship that expressivists *do* hold would make the Linking Thesis true – call it *assertability*. By parity, on an expressivist view, if ‘ ϕ -ing is wrong’ is *assertable* at a time just in case the speaker disapproves of ϕ -ing at that time, it follows that ‘grass is green’ is assertable at a time just in case the speaker believes that grass is

⁵ Suikkanen divides up what I’m here calling the Linking thesis into two different biconditionals which together have the Linking Thesis as a trivial consequence. The first of Suikkanen’s biconditionals links ‘I can now use the sentence ‘ ϕ -ing is wrong’ to make a statement that receives a positive semantic evaluation’ to ‘I can now sincerely assert ‘ ϕ -ing is wrong’ [2009, 371], and the second links ‘I can now sincerely assert ‘ ϕ -ing is wrong’ to ‘I now disapprove of ϕ -ing’ [374]. For our purposes we can just focus on what I’ve called the Linking Thesis itself.

⁶ Suikkanen [2009, 369]. This is Suikkanen’s thesis (i).

green at that time. So if we understand ‘receives a positive semantic evaluation’ to be something that expressivists really do hold happens for ‘ ϕ -ing is wrong’ at a time just in case the speaker disapproves of ϕ -ing at that time, respecting the parity at the heart of expressivism leads us to the conclusion that ‘grass is green’ receives exactly that same kind of positive semantic evaluation at a time just in case the speaker believes that grass is green at that time. So we *can* buy the truth of the Linking Thesis with the right interpretation of ‘positive semantic evaluation’, but it leads us to the conclusion that expressivists are also committed to its nonmoral analogue:

Grass Link I can now use the sentence ‘grass is green’ to make a statement that receives a positive semantic evaluation if and only if I now believe that grass is green.

This leaves us with the question of whether, on this interpretation, expressivists really are committed to holding that everyone must accept Premise, and analogously, whether everyone must accept Grass Premise. Well, to deny Premise, on this interpretation, is to be committed to the following:

Deny Premise Either ϕ -ing is wrong but I am not now in a position to assert ‘ ϕ -ing is wrong’, or I am now in a position to assert ‘ ϕ -ing is wrong’, but ϕ -ing is not wrong.

Deny Premise is incontrovertibly an incoherent thing to say. But the incoherence in Deny Premise is not logical inconsistency – as we saw in Shafer-Landau’s argument in section 4, it is a kind of pragmatic incoherence that we are all familiar with from Moore’s paradox. Here is its nonmoral analogue:

Deny Grass Either grass is green but I am not now in a position to assert ‘grass is green’, or I am now in a position to assert ‘grass is green’, but grass is not green.

Deny Grass is just as incoherent as Deny Premise. So the very same pressure exists to accept Grass Premise as to accept Premise – hence, the very same argument that supports Conclusion also supports:

Grass Concl. Grass is green if and only if I now believe that grass is green.

Indeed, once the Moorean nature of the incoherence of denying Premise is made clear, it should be clear that all of the rigamarole of talking about ‘positive semantic evaluations’ can be skipped entirely, and we can note directly that to deny Grass Concl. is to accept the classic Moorean paradox:

Grass Moore Either grass is green but I don't believe that grass is green, or I believe that grass is green, but grass is not green.

Similarly, we can note directly that to deny Conclusion is to accept the expressivist version of the Moorean paradox:

Express Moore Either ϕ -ing is wrong but I don't disapprove of ϕ -ing, or I disapprove of ϕ -ing, but ϕ -ing is not wrong.

If this doesn't look, at first, exactly like the classic Moore's paradox, then remind yourself (as in section 3) that the expressivist view is that disapproving of ϕ -ing is just *what it is* to think that ϕ -ing is wrong.

So are these uncomfortably subjectivist consequences of expressivism? Clearly not. As we noted in section 3, *everyone* can agree that it is Moore-paradoxical to deny Grass Concl., and Conclusion is just its expressivist analogue – just something else it is Moore-paradoxical – but not necessarily false – to deny. There is nothing new here, and nothing specific to expressivism. So what is the problem supposed to be?

Suikkanen attempts to get further than Shafer-Landau's argument by alleging not only that according to expressivism, everyone is committed to accepting Conclusion, but that according to expressivism, everyone is committed to accepting its universal generalization:

Normative Subjectivism For all x , x is wrong if and only if I now disapprove of x .

But it should now be obvious that something has gone wrong – for compare:

Green Subjectivism For all x , x is green if and only if I now believe that x is green.

Texas Subjectivism For all x , x is in Texas if and only if I now believe that x is in Texas.

Chemistry Subjectivism For all x , x is a truth of organic chemistry if and only if I now believe that x is a truth of organic chemistry.

All of these consequences are obviously unacceptable. But denying their instances is just as Moore-paradoxical as denying the instances of Subjectivism. We've already seen this for the green case, but here are the others:

Texas Moore Either George W. Bush is in Texas but I don't believe that George W. Bush is in Texas, or I believe that George W. Bush is in Texas, but George W. Bush is not in Texas.

Chem. Moore Either what you just said is a truth of organic chemistry but I don't believe that what you just said is a truth of organic chemistry, or I believe that what you just said is a truth of organic chemistry, but what you just said is not a truth of organic chemistry.

The reason why Texas Subjectivism and Chemistry Subjectivism do not follow from the Moore-paradoxicality of the denials of each of their instances, is that Moore-paradoxicality is not falsity. Moore-paradoxicality is just a *pragmatic* problem. But it is not a pragmatic problem that is inherited by their existential generalization – that is, by the denials of Texas Subjectivism or of Chemistry Subjectivism. To deny Texas Subjectivism is just to think that your beliefs are either fallible or incomplete. Thinking that one of your beliefs about what is in Texas is false is no more or less incoherent than any other paradox of the preface case, and thinking that you don't have beliefs about all of the things that are in Texas is not incoherent on anyone's conception – we all know that our beliefs are incomplete, about most topics.

So what we've seen in this section is that Suikkanen's argument faces a dilemma, depending on how we interpret 'receives a positive semantic evaluation'. On the first fork of the dilemma, the argument derives problematic consequences, but only by interpreting 'receives a positive semantic evaluation' in such a way that expressivists are obviously not committed to its premises. And on the second fork of the dilemma, the argument shows exactly what Shafer-Landau's argument shows – which, as we saw in section 3, is not at all problematic. But even in that case there is nothing problematic about the expressivist denying the universal generalizations to which Suikkanen aspires to commit her.

5 peacocke's *the realm of reason*

In *The Realm of Reason*, Christopher Peacocke marshals the tools of two-dimensional semantics in order to offer his own argument that expressivism is committed to the thesis that morality is mind-dependent. For Peacocke the argument takes the form of a dilemma:

For a theorist who holds that there is no such thing as a moral proposition the question of correctness would not even arise, and such a theorist might reasonably rebut the ascription to him of the view that the correctness of moral propositions is mind-dependent. But that is not Blackburn's position. [2004, 208]

So Peacocke's argument aims to show that an expressivist like Blackburn, who allows that talk about moral propositions and their 'correctness' or 'incorrectness' is legitimate, is committed to the thesis of mind-dependence, but not that expressivists who don't allow these things are so committed.

To understand Peacocke's argument, it is useful to construct a parallel argument against a *non-expressivist* form of *rigidified* speaker-subjectivism. According to the *rigidified* speaker-subjectivist, when a speaker who disapproves of stealing says 'stealing is wrong', she says something that is true at every possible world – not just those at which she disapproves of stealing. But if the same speaker were to fail to disapprove of stealing in some other possible world, then if she were to say 'stealing is wrong' in that world, what she would say would be *false* at every possible world. So-called 'two-dimensional' semantic frameworks represent this difference formally by using *double-indexing* for worlds – one world to keep track of what the speaker says, and one world to keep track of the worlds at which that thing is true or untrue. Rigidified forms of subjectivism assign 'stealing is wrong' to a value that is constant with respect to the second index, but variable with respect to the first.

Whereas vanilla forms of speaker-subjectivism are committed to the thesis that 'if I didn't disapprove of stealing, then stealing wouldn't be wrong', rigidified speaker-subjectivism doesn't face this problem – for the way that we evaluate counterfactuals, is by shifting the *second* world index, and according to the rigidified subjectivist, 'stealing is wrong' has a truth value that is *constant* across the second index. But in contrast, the rigidified speaker-subjectivist still predicts that 'if I didn't disapprove of stealing, then were I to say, 'stealing is not wrong', what I said would be true' expresses a truth. This is because according to the rigidified subjectivist, whether you utter a truth or a falsity when you say 'stealing is wrong' still depends on whether you disapprove of stealing. This is just the problem that in section I we called the 'disagreement problem' all over again.

Peacocke rightly takes this to be an objectionable feature of rigidified speaker subjectivism, and wrongly takes this feature to extend to expressivism. According to Peacocke, Blackburn's explanation of why he is not committed to the result that 'if I didn't disapprove of stealing, then it wouldn't be wrong', is *exactly* the explanation that is offered by the rigidified speaker subjectivist, and hence is objectionable for exactly the same reasons [2004, 213-214]. However, Peacocke's argument to this effect predictably generalizes to show that the expressivist is committed to the view that 'the earth is round' is mind-dependent, as well. Seeing that helps us understand why expressivism is in fact importantly different from rigidified subjectivism.

In order to make his points against the expressivist, Peacocke begins by alleging that on any theory "according to which psychological states are, in one way or another, the source of norms" [2004, 210], we

can characterize the commitments of that theory using double-indexing. In particular, Peacocke introduces the notation ‘ $P(w_1, w_2)$ ’ as an abbreviation for “Proposition P, when evaluated from the standpoint of psychological states in w_1 , holds with respect to w_2 ” [2004, 210-211].⁷ In justification of this notation, Peacocke writes,

It cannot be begging any questions against mind-dependent treatments to employ this doubly-indexed notion. The first parameter makes explicit the dependence that the mind-dependent theorist himself needs to use in articulating his own theory. The second parameter is just assigned whatever world is the one with respect to which the proposition P is being evaluated. [211]

Ignore for a moment the fact that it is question-begging to classify expressivism as a kind of mind-dependent theory antecedent to locating any sense in which this is so; what will be interesting for us, is whether there is any way in which expressivism can make sense of Peacocke’s doubly-indexed notation. As we’ll see shortly, there *is* a way of interpreting this notation on which it is useful for the expressivist, but it does not have the consequences that Peacocke alleges.

With his ‘ $P(w_1, w_2)$ ’ notation fully on board, Peacocke gets to work observing that the expressivist, like the rigidified speaker-subjectivist, must be committed to the thesis that the claim “for any world w , prima facie the infliction of avoidable pain is wrong (w, w)” is false [214]. This is because the point of the first index is to allow for variability between different agents with different attitudes, and in order to avoid holding that ‘if I didn’t disapprove of stealing, then it wouldn’t be wrong’ always expresses a truth, the expressivist must hold that there is no corresponding variation in the second index. On these grounds, Peacocke alleges that the expressivist is committed to an objectionable kind of mind-dependence.

But it is important to note that the significance of the thesis that the claim “for any world w , prima facie the infliction of avoidable pain is wrong (w, w)” is false depends entirely on what it means to say that the infliction of avoidable pain is wrong (w, w). According to the rigidified subjectivist, what this means, is that were I to say ‘the infliction of avoidable pain is wrong’ at world w , then I would speak truly. So consequently, for the rigidified subjectivist, the prediction that this claim is false amounts to the prediction that it is possible to say ‘the infliction of avoidable pain is wrong’ and speak falsely – a prediction which indeed sounds bad.

⁷ Since according to the expressivist it is an individual agent’s attitudes which are expressed, and different individuals can have different attitudes and the same individual can have different attitudes at different times, we should be careful to note that w_1 should really be understood to denote a world-individual-time triple, rather than just a world. This makes several of Peacocke’s other remarks somewhat hairy to interpret in a precise way, but since nothing will turn on it, I’ll follow his sloppier notation.

But although we *can* use the $P(w1, w2)$ notation to describe the expressivist view, it needs to be interpreted very differently. The simplest way to see why, is to go back to our parity thesis. For the expressivist, the relationship between ‘stealing is wrong’ and disapproval of stealing is exactly the same as the relationship between ‘the earth is round’ and the belief that the earth is round. So if there is some way of assigning truth values to ‘stealing is wrong($w1, w2$)’ that captures an expressivist theory only by varying across $w1$ for agents who disapprove of different things, then by the very same principles, the expressivist theory must assign truth values to ‘the earth is round($w1, w2$)’ in a way that varies across $w1$ for agents who have different beliefs. But that, of course leads by the very same argument to the conclusion that the expressivist has a mind-dependent view about whether the earth is round – which is, of course, false.

So respecting the parity thesis pushes us to focus more closely on what ‘ $P(w1, w2)$ ’ could possibly mean, in order for this sort of double-indexing to help us articulate an expressivist theory. And the obvious answer, is that what it means is that a person in the $w1$ situation *thinks* that were $w2$ to be the case, then P would be the case. After all, for the expressivist, the connection to mental states doesn’t tell us anything about what the agent says, or under what conditions it is true – it just tells us what it is to *think* that P . But on this interpretation, the significance of the fact that the claim “for any world w , prima facie the infliction of avoidable pain is wrong (w, w)” is false, is simply that it is *possible to think that* the infliction of avoidable pain is not prima facie wrong. But that’s not a kind of mind-dependence at all – it’s an obvious but unfortunate truth.

Like Jackson and Pettit and Suikkanen, Peacocke appears to have been confused by the fact that according to the expressivist, there is something going right when someone who disapproves of stealing says, ‘stealing is wrong’ that is not going right when someone who does not disapprove of stealing says ‘I disapprove of stealing’. As he alleges, there must be some sense of ‘correct’ in which it is ‘correct’ to say ‘stealing is wrong’ in the former case, but not in the latter.⁸ But comparison with the non-moral case shows that this sort of ‘correctness’ cannot be like truth – for ‘grass is green’ isn’t true just in case the speaker believes that grass is green. So it must instead be like sincere assertability. But no drastic consequences follow from the fact that different things are sincerely assertable by speakers who think different things.

So as with the argument of Pettit and Jackson, what we’ve seen is that Peacocke’s argument trips itself up by failing to respect the parity thesis. The parity thesis constrains how we can interpret Peacocke’s notation ‘ $P(w1, w2)$ ’ within an expressivist framework, and interpretations which respect that constraint – interpretations which are really compatible with the expressivist’s commitments – do not lead to any kind

⁸ See Peacocke [2004, 208].

of mind-dependent commitments. Using a two-dimensionalist framework is just another, fancier, way of equivocating on what it means to say that a sentence would be ‘correct’.

6 conclusion

In this paper I have rehearsed the underlying reasons why expressivism does not have subjectivist consequences, and illustrated how arguments to the effect that it does systematically go wrong by failing to do justice to the parity which expressivists postulate between the relationship that ‘stealing is wrong’ bears to disapproval of stealing, as compared to the relationship that ‘grass is green’ bears to the belief that grass is green. Everyone should accept that there is something incoherent about denying material biconditionals like ‘stealing is wrong just in case I think that stealing is wrong’ – and according to expressivists, to think that stealing is wrong is just to disapprove of stealing. Hence, it is no mystery that expressivists will think that there is something incoherent about denying the material biconditional, ‘stealing is wrong just in case I disapprove of stealing’ – it is just the good old, familiar Moore’s paradox, and there are no reasons to think that Moore’s paradox should come any closer to leading expressivists to accept sentences like ‘everything is wrong just in case I disapprove of it’ any more than it should lead any of the rest of us to accept sentences like ‘everything is wrong just in case I think that it is wrong’ – which, after all, say the same thing, according to expressivists.

As we’ve also seen, every argument which aspires to commit the expressivist to anything stronger than this platitude trades on attributing commitments to the expressivist which she obviously does not accept – commitments which we can *see* that the expressivist will reject, by testing them against the parity thesis that is at the heart of the fundamental idea of expressivism. Neither Lockean arguments about truth-conditions nor fancy two-dimensionalist machinery get around this problem, and the weaker conclusion that denying the corresponding material conditionals is incoherent is in no way a problematic consequence. The moral is: if you want to understand what expressivists are committed to, then make sure that you are respecting the parity thesis that is at the heart of their view.⁹

⁹ Special thanks to Jussi Suikkanen for provoking this response.

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