

hard cases for combining expressivism and deflationist truth: conditionals and epistemic modals

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In this paper I will be concerned with the question as to whether expressivist theories of meaning can coherently be combined with deflationist theories of truth. After outlining what I take expressivism to be and what I take deflationism about truth to be, I'll explain why I don't take the general version of this question to be very hard, and why the answer is 'yes'. Having settled that, I'll move on to what I take to be a more pressing and interesting version of the question, arising from a *prima facie* tension between deflationism about truth and the motivations underlying expressivism for what I take to be two of its most promising applications: to indicative conditionals and epistemic modals. Here I'll argue that the challenge is substantive, but that there is no conceptual obstacle to its being met, provided that one's expressivism takes the right form.

I expressivism, what

On my view, it is most fruitful to understand expressivist semantic theories as a kind of *assertability-conditional* semantics.¹ On the assertability-conditional interpretation of expressivist semantics, just as a syntactic theory classifies sentences as *syntactically permissible* or not, a morphological theory classifies sentences as *morphologically permissible* or not, and a phonological theory classifies sentences as *phonologically permissible* or not, the role of a semantic theory is to classify sentences as *semantically permissible* or not. But according to the expressivist, semantic permissibility conditions are *not* truth-conditions. If Sam was watching the 2010 World Cup final match between Spain and Holland until the 115th minute, he might reasonably believe that the winner was determined by penalty kicks. So if you ask him whether this is so, he will tell you that it is. Since in fact Spain scored in the 116th minute to win the game, what Sam says is false, so he has made

¹ See especially Schroeder [2008] for elaboration and discussion.

a mistake. But intuitively, Sam's mistake is not a linguistic mistake – it's a mistake about international sports competitions. So if a semantic theory aspires to offer *semantic* permissibility conditions, which are rules of *language*, then these should not be truth conditions.

On the contrary, since given that Sam really believes that the 2010 World Cup final was decided by penalty kicks, he makes no linguistic mistake to say so when asked, the *semantic* assertability condition for Sam of 'The 2010 World Cup final was decided by penalty kicks' must be the condition that Sam *believes* that the 2010 World Cup final was decided by penalty kicks. Consequently, at a first pass, the expressivist idea is to give a compositional semantics which generates, for each sentence, 'P', what it is to believe that P. This, in turn, tells us when it is semantically permissible to assert 'P' – for as Sam's example illustrates, intuitively it is always *semantically* permissible to assert 'P' just in case you believe that P.

In fact, this first pass characterization of expressivism is not exactly right; complications arise due to the meanings of words like racial slurs, of which a theorist should like to be able to give a semantic theory without *using* those slurs, even embedded in attitude ascriptions, and hence without being committed to claims of the form, 'to believe that Max is a kraut is to...'.² Fortunately, our characterization of expressivism in terms of assertability conditions, rather than directly in terms of what it is to think that P, allows us to accommodate this subtlety. An expressivist semantics assigns each sentence, 'P', to the mental state, M, which a speaker must be in, in order to permissibly assert 'P'. The constraint this operates under, is not that to believe that P is to be in M, but that this is how things could be characterized by anyone willing to use 'P'. From here forward, however, since for the most part I won't be discussing slurs, I'll ignore this subtlety, and we may gloss the expressivist's view as saying that we understand the meaning of 'P' in terms of what it is to believe that P.

Now, if for every sentence 'P', what it is to believe that P is just to have an *ordinary descriptive* belief to the effect that the world is a certain way, then the kind of semantic assertability conditions sought by the expressivist are nothing special, because they can be generated by an ordinary propositional or 'truth-conditional' semantic theory, simply by prefixing 'believes' before the proposition assigned to the sentence by that theory. So *interesting* or *essentially* expressivist views go further, and specify that for some sentences 'P', to believe that P is *not* simply to have an ordinary descriptive belief that the world is a certain way, but rather, to be in a fundamentally different sort of mental state altogether. Importantly, it is not that these

² Compare Schroeder [2009].

views hold that to think that P is not to have a ‘belief’ – rather, what they think, is that the belief that P is a very different sort of thing from the belief that grass is green, for example, in such a way that an adequate *theory* of these two sorts of belief needs to understand them as very different attitudes, rather than as simply the same attitude toward different propositions.

For example, traditional noncognitivist expressivism in metaethics holds that believing that stealing is wrong is a fundamentally different sort of mental state than believing that grass is green. Whereas believing that grass is green is a matter of having an attitude toward the state of affairs of grass’s being green that has *mind-to-world* ‘direction of fit’, believing that stealing is wrong is said to be a matter of having an attitude toward stealing that has *world-to-mind* ‘direction of fit’ – the kind of thing to motivate someone who has it not to steal, for example, or to blame people who do. Call the former attitude *ordinary descriptive belief* and the latter attitude *disapproval* of stealing. Moreover, according to metaethical expressivists, disapproving of stealing is not simply a matter of having an ordinary descriptive belief in anything. (Though it is, of course correct to call it ‘believing’ something – it is the belief that stealing is wrong.) Such a view is *essentially* expressivist, because it can’t be simply derivatively generated by any truth-conditional semantic theory. Though there is something it is for grass to be green, on this view, there is nothing it is for stealing to be wrong. So a semantic theory for ‘wrong’ can’t work by telling us what it is for stealing to be wrong; it must work by telling us what it is to *believe* that something is wrong, which is quite different from having an ordinary descriptive belief about how things are.

But metaethics is far from the only application – indeed, very arguably far from the best application – for expressivism. A much more promising application is to the case of *epistemic modals* like ‘might’, ‘must’, and ‘probably’.³ According to expressivism about epistemic modals, whereas thinking that grass is green requires having at least a relatively high credence that grass is green, thinking that Jack might be in Buellton doesn’t require having a high credence in anything – all it requires, is having *positive credence* that Jack *is* in Buellton. Expressivists note, for example, that all of the most plausible candidates for what you have to be confident in, in order to think that Jack might be in Buellton, appeal to concepts like *information*, *consistency*, and *belief* – but we seem to justifiably ascribe epistemic modal thoughts to animals and small children who lack these concepts. For example, Fido might wait by your chair because he thinks you might give him a treat – but whereas Fido doesn’t have beliefs about what is consistent with what he

³ Compare Price [1983], Schnieder [2009], Swanson [forthcoming], and Yalcin [2007], [forthcoming]; for critical discussion see Schroeder [unpublished a].

believes or knows, he does have beliefs about things like whether you will give him a treat. So the expressivist treatment appears to do better with attributing epistemic modal beliefs in such cases.⁴ Moreover, there are several other interesting motivations for expressivism about epistemic modals, some of which we'll touch on in section 4.

It should be clear, again, that this is an essentially expressivist view. For according to this theory, believing that Jack is in Buellton and believing that Jack *might* be in Buellton are fundamentally different kinds of mental state. The former involves having a *high* credence in something, whereas the latter doesn't require a high credence in anything. So expressivism about epistemic modals doesn't work by telling us what it is for it to be the case that Jack might be in Buellton; indeed, on this view there is nothing that it is for it to be the case that Jack might be in Buellton, so the only thing that we can do, to give an account of the meaning of 'might', is to say what it is to *believe* that Jack might be in Buellton.

Another application for expressivism closely related to epistemic modals is to *indicative conditionals*, sentences like 'if Max is at the party, then it will be noisy'. Indicative conditionals are semantically very closely related to epistemic modals; indeed, on many theories, indicative conditionals can be defined as restrictions on epistemic modals, or epistemic modals can be defined as indicative conditionals with vacuous antecedents.⁵ Here the expressivist idea is that believing that if Max is at the party, then it will be noisy is not a matter of having a high *outright* credence in anything, but rather a matter of having a high *conditional* credence that the party will be noisy, conditional on the assumption that Max will be there.⁶ Again, there are a variety of motivations for this view, some of which we'll get to in section 4. But again it should be clear that this view is essentially expressivist. On this view there is nothing that it is for it to be the case that if Max is at the party, then it will be noisy; so an account of the meaning of 'if Max is at the party, then it will be noisy' can't work by telling us what it is for this to be the case. It can only work by telling us what it is to *believe* that if Max is at the party, then it will be noisy.

⁴ Compare Yalcin [forthcoming].

⁵ See especially Kratzer [1986] for the former picture and Gillies [2004] for the latter.

⁶ See Edgington [1986] for a classic statement of this view, and compare Adams [1975]. But note that the view in Edgington [1995] is explicitly not an expressivist view.

2 deflationism about truth, what

So much for how I understand expressivism. For purposes of this paper, I'll understand deflationism about truth to have two basic components. The primary and central claim of deflationism about truth, as I will understand it, is that there is nothing that it *is* to be true – no nature of truth, or answer to the search for a general theory of in virtue of what all true things are true. It follows, of course, from this primary claim of deflationism that we don't need to be able to say what it is to be true, in order to give an account of the meaning of 'true'. However 'true' means what it does, it isn't by being about things being a certain way.⁷

So what *do* we need to do, in order to give an account of the meaning of 'true'? The answer to that question comes from the secondary claim of deflationism, as I will be understanding it. That claim is that all we need to know, in order to understand the meaning of 'true', is whatever is needed in order to explain why the meaning of 'true' guarantees that no instance of the following schema can consistently be denied:

schema If S is that P, then S is true just in case P.

In the schema, 'S' is to be replaced by referring expressions and 'P' is to be replaced by a sentence. For example, instances of this schema include 'If what Jennifer said is that grass is green, then what Jennifer said is true just in case grass is green', 'If what Harry believes is that God exists, then what Harry believes is true just in case God exists', and 'If what **schema** means is that if S is that P, then S is true just in case P, then **schema** is true just in case if S is that P, then S is true just in case P.' So the secondary commitment of deflationism about truth, as I will understand it, is that the meaning of 'true' guarantees that *no* instance of this schema can consistently be denied, and that all we need to know, in order to understand the meaning of 'true', is whatever we need in order to explain this fact.

Now, this characterization of deflationism is somewhat contentious, and its contentious features mostly surround my statement of deflationism's secondary commitment, which departs from typical

⁷ Soames [1999] offers a deflationist theory of truth which might be intuitively thought to give an answer as to what it is for a proposition to be true, and what it is for a proposition to not be true. This is because the theory says what it is to be in the *determinate extension* of 'true', and what it is to be in the *determinate anti-extension* of 'true'. It would be inaccurate, however, to characterize this view as telling us what it is to be true, because by the lights of Soames's own semantics, it makes sense to think that *p* is true even though *p* is not in the determinate extension of 'true', or untrue, even though it is not in the determinate extension of 'true'. On the other hand, Soames' semantics for 'true' *does* say just as much about what it is to be true, as he holds that it is possible to say about what it is to be F, where 'F' is any vague predicate whatsoever. Nothing in this paper, however, will turn on whether Soames's view counts as 'deflationist' or not, for Soames' view does not combine very well with expressivism.

characterizations of deflationism in more than one dimension.⁸ So I need to say something in its elaboration and defense. The first way in which my characterization of deflationism departs from standard characterizations, is with respect to my characterization of the deflationist's commitment with respect to **schema**. Paul Horwich [1990], for example, characterizes deflationism not as committed to the thesis that no instance of **schema** can consistently be denied, but rather as committed to *each instance* of **schema** – or at least, in an offhand recognition of complications raised by the liar paradox, to each ‘non-paradoxical instance’.⁹

Horwich's qualification about *non-paradoxical* instances, however, is crucial. Importantly, among the substitution-instances of **schema** are sentences like ‘If what Liar means is that what Liar means is not true, then what Liar means is true just in case what Liar means is not true.’

Liar What Liar means is not true.

But given the obvious empirical fact that the meaning of Liar *is* that what Liar means is not true (see above), endorsing this instance of **schema** commits us to endorsing a conclusion of the form, ‘P iff \sim P’, which is a few very short steps away from an outright contradiction. In order to avoid deflationism being committed to contradictions, Horwich therefore specifies that deflationism does not accept the so-called ‘problematic instances’ of **schema**.

However, there are three significant problems with this move by Horwich. First, there is no non-arbitrary way of specifying which instances of **schema** are problematic, for some liar-like paradoxes cannot be pinned on any single instance. For example, if the only thing that Liz says on Friday is ‘the only thing Phil will say tomorrow will be true’ and the only thing Phil says the next day is ‘nothing Liz said yesterday is true’, we get a liar paradox which cannot be pinned on any instance of **schema**. Second, as Matti Eklund [2002] has emphasized, a theory of the meaning of ‘true’ that treats different instances of **schema** differently fails to respect the fact that *every* instance of **schema** exerts ‘pull’ for competent speakers – that is, someone fails to see what is intuitively compelling about any instance of **schema** – even paradoxical ones

⁸ Compare particularly Horwich [1990].

⁹ Horwich [1990]. Note that Horwich also formulates his schema somewhat differently than I do mine, the main difference being that Horwich builds in explicit reference to propositions as such, whereas my schema is formulated without the word ‘proposition’. Intuitively, the referring expressions in my schema, because they refer to the objects of assertion and belief, refer to what we as philosophers would call ‘propositions’, but since ‘proposition’ as used in philosophy is a theoretical term, it seems best to formulate **schema** without it.

– is exhibiting a failure of understanding of the word ‘true’. And finally, as Hartry Field [2008, chapter 16] emphasizes, if **schema** simply has exceptions in so-called ‘paradoxical’ cases, we won’t get the usefulness that we require out of ‘true’. For example, we won’t be able to commit to each of the things that Graham Priest believes by saying, ‘everything Graham Priest believes is true’, because some of the instances of **schema** required to bear out that commitment simply won’t be part of the meaning of ‘true’. So for all of these reasons, simply restricting which instances of **schema** the deflationist is committed to, as Horwich does, is hopeless.

Some deflationists, of course, still accept Horwich’s characterization of deflationism as committed to each instance of **schema** (omitting Horwich’s attempt to make exceptions), but on pain of contradiction, this forces them to find a non-standard theory of the biconditional, ‘just in case’, which doesn’t entail the material biconditional, so that they can accept ‘the meaning of Liar is true just in case the meaning of Liar is not true’ without being committed to the outright contradiction, ‘the meaning of Liar is true and the meaning of Liar is not true’.¹⁰ Others still have embraced Horwich’s characterization of deflationism and dialethism as a consequence.¹¹ The second of these two paths does not look to me like a happy path; the former, I think, is unnecessary.

My characterization of the relationship of deflationism to **schema** avoids all of these commitments. Everyone can agree that no instance of **schema** can consistently be denied, without going on to actually endorse every such instance. For even though given some obvious empirical facts, some instances of **schema** cannot be consistently accepted, either, there is still the option of *rejecting* such instances of **schema** – neither accepting them nor denying them. Consequently I take mine to be a much more reasonable characterization of the commitments a deflationist should adopt.

My characterization also departs from standard characterizations in that I claimed that a deflationist theory holds that the only things we need to know, in order to understand the meaning of ‘true’, are whatever is needed to *explain* why no instance of **schema** can be consistently denied. But again, Paul Horwich [1990] has famously claimed that deflationists should *abhor* explanations, and take the instances of **schema** themselves as axioms. We’ve just rehearsed some of the problems, of course, with trying to take the instances of **schema** themselves as axioms. But in general, there is nothing *inconsistent* between my formulation and Horwich’s abhorrence of explanations – for it could be that since *nothing* is

¹⁰ See Field [2008].

¹¹ For example, compare Beall [2009].

needed to explain why no instance of **schema** can consistently be denied other than the instances of **schema** themselves, all it takes to know everything that is needed to explain why no instance of **schema** can consistently be denied, is to know each instance of **schema**. So even Horwich's own view fits my characterization, given his assumption that there is and can be no deeper explanation of the instances of **schema**.

On the other hand, my characterization is more general. This is because whereas Horwich abhors explanations of instances of **schema** full-stop, it is actually important to distinguish between two very different kinds of explanation of **schema**. Clearly, no attempt to explain why no instance of **schema** can consistently be denied that adverts to *what it is* for something to be true will be consistent with deflationism – for the primary claim of deflationism is that there is *nothing* that it is for something to be true. So, for example, attempts to explain why no instance of **schema** can consistently be denied in terms of reference, correspondence, or coherence are definitely out. Perhaps Horwich didn't see any other ways of trying to explain the instances of **schema**, which explains his abhorrence of explanations, full-stop.

But if we could explain the undeniability of any instance of **schema** without making any claims about what it is to be true – for example, simply by explaining what we *do* when we call something true, or what it is to *think* that something is true – then there would be nothing inconsistent between the kind of explanation that we would be offering and the deflationist's core commitment to the thesis that truth has no nature – that there is nothing that it is to be true. For example, consider the simple *redundancy* theory that if S is that P, then 'S is true' just means whatever 'P' means. On this view, to deny an instance of **schema** is to accept that S is that P, and hence be committed to the thesis that 'S is true' means whatever 'P' does, but hold that either S is true but \sim P, or P but S is not true. But it is very plausibly inconsistent to deny one thing that you are committed to thinking has the same meaning as something that you accept. Consequently, a simple redundancy theory like this one can offer an *explanation* of why no instance of **schema** can consistently be denied. But the redundancy theory is a *paradigm* of a deflationist theory – it makes no claims whatsoever about the nature of truth, and indeed is committed to the thesis that all claims about truth are really just claims about something else.¹²

Consequently, we must distinguish between the kinds of explanations that *all* deflationists must abhor, and the stronger, anti-explanationist, commitments of Horwich's minimalist theory, in particular.

¹² This is not to say that this simple redundancy theory has no problems – just to say that it illustrates the point that *explanations* of why the instances of **schema** are all undeniable are no inconsistent even with the most paradigmatic forms of deflationism.

The deflationist tent must be big enough to include explanatory theories, which actually tell us something substantive about the meaning of ‘true’ which can be used to actually make predictions. They simply can’t do this by telling us what it is for something to be true.

3 why deflationism about truth is obviously compatible with expressivism

A number of theorists have argued or worried that deflationism about truth is incompatible with expressivism. Without getting into the details of any such argument, however, it is easy to see that they must all fail, if not by making some actual mistake in reasoning, then at least by being forced to construe either ‘expressivism’ or ‘deflationism’ so narrowly as to make their conclusions uninteresting. This is because one way – one very obvious way, on reflection – of being a deflationist about truth, is to be an *expressivist* about truth.¹³

We saw in section 2 that the core ideas of deflationism about truth are that there is nothing it is to be true, and that all it takes to understand the meaning of ‘true’ is to understand what is needed to explain why no instance of **schema** can consistently be denied. And we saw in section I that an expressivist theory of meaning for some term tells us the meaning of sentences involving that term by telling us what it is to have the thoughts corresponding to those sentences. For example, the metaethical expressivist holds that since there is nothing that it is to be wrong, an account of the meaning of ‘wrong’ must work by telling us that to think that something is wrong is just to *disapprove* of it. And the expressivist about epistemic modals holds that since there is nothing that it is for it to be the case that Jack might be in Buellton, an account of the meaning of ‘Jack might be in Buellton’ must work by telling us that to think that Jack might be in Buellton is just to have a positive credence that Jack *is* in Buellton. And similarly for expressivism about other domains.

Consequently, since deflationism about truth is, at core, the thesis that there is nothing that it is for something to be true, one way – one *natural* way – of developing deflationism about truth, is to explain what ‘true’ means by saying what it is to think that something is true. In order to make good on deflationism, such an expressivist theory of truth must simply explain why this account of what it is to

¹³ See, in particular, Schroeder [forthcoming].

think that something is true is all that is needed in order to explain why no instance of **schema** can consistently be denied.¹⁴

One way to develop expressivism about truth appeals to the attitudes of *agreement* and *disagreement*.¹⁵ The point of the truth predicate, on this view, after all, is that it lets us express agreement or disagreement with what other people say or think, without having to elaborate everything that they say or think. So to believe that S is true is just to agree with S, and to believe that S is false is just to disagree with S. For example, to believe that what Jack said is true is just to agree with what Jack said, and to believe that what Jill believes is false is just to disagree with what Jill believes. This is an expressivist theory of ‘true’ and ‘false’, because it tells us what ‘true’ and ‘false’ mean, by telling us what it is to believe that something is true, and what it is to believe that it is false.

This expressivist theory can also easily explain why no instance of **schema** is consistently deniable. To deny an instance of **schema**, after all, there must be some values of ‘S’ and ‘P’ such that you believe that S is that P, but you deny that S is true just in case P. But in denying that S is true just in case P, you are committed to the claim that either S is true but \sim P, or P but S is not true. But according to the expressivist theory, to believe that S is true is just to agree with S. But if you agree with S, and you believe that S is that P, then you must agree that P. But clearly it is inconsistent to agree that P but believe that \sim P. So given that you believe that S is that P, it is inconsistent to believe that S is true but \sim P. So the only consistent possibility that leaves is to believe that P but S is not true.

The other horn is slightly harder, because expressivists have a general difficulty saying what it is to believe that \sim P as a function of what it is to believe that P, and so we can’t read off directly from this expressivist view about what it is to believe that S is true, an answer to what it is to believe that S is *not* true.¹⁶ But we can get leverage, by keeping track of one important constraint on any expressivist answer to that question. And that is that any expressivist answer to what it is to believe that S is *not* true must predict that it is inconsistent to believe that S is true and S is not true – this had *better* turn out to be right. So, getting back to our dilemma, could it be consistent to believe that P but S is not true? Well, no – for if you believe that P, then you must agree that P. But if you agree that P, and you think that S is that P, then you are committed to agreeing with S. But according to this theory, that is all it takes to think that S is

¹⁴ For a much more promising and detailed way of developing this view, see Schroeder [forthcoming], which elaborates on chapter II of Schroeder [2008].

¹⁵ Compare Gibbard [2003].

¹⁶ For discussion of these difficulties facing expressivism, see Schroeder [2008].

true, is to agree with S. So consequently, if you believe that P but S is not true, then you are committed to believe that S is true but S is not true – and that, as we observed, is inconsistent.

So that takes care of the other horn of our dilemma. Since given your belief that S is that P it is inconsistent to believe that S is true but $\sim P$, and given your belief that S is that P it is inconsistent to believe that P but S is not true, it follows that it is inconsistent to deny that S is true just in case P, given that you believe that S is that P. Consequently, it is inconsistent to deny that instance of **schema**, and the same reasoning goes for any other instance. So this very simple expressivist theory of truth has the right kind of structure to explain why no instance of **schema** can consistently be denied. But it makes no claims about the nature of truth – indeed, it denies that truth has a nature, and that there is anything that it is to be true. Consequently, it is a way of making good on the core ideas of deflationism – it *is* a version of deflationism.

But if a deflationist theory of truth could *just be* a form of expressivism, then expressivism is obviously consistent with deflationism, unless expressivism is itself inconsistent, which there is no reason to believe.¹⁷ So there can't be a general problem about reconciling expressivism with deflationism about truth. If there *are* any problems about reconciling *particular* expressivist theories with *particular* developments of deflationism about truth, therefore, these must be idiosyncratic problems with those particular ways of developing these theories, not problems of principle.¹⁸

4 motivating expressivism about conditionals and epistemic modals.

Though for reasons like those indicated above I find it hard to get puzzled about how expressivism in general can be reconciled with deflationism about truth, some of the possible – indeed, I think, some of the most promising – *applications* for expressivism seem to raise complications for deflationism about truth. In this section I'll outline a few of what I take to be among the most the interesting motivations for expressivism about each of these topics; then in section 5 I'll lay out why these might seem to raise special

¹⁷ Notice, in particular, that formulating the thesis of expressivism did not require us to say that the sentences which receive our expressivist interpretation are not really 'true', nor that they are not really things that we can 'believe' – nor did we use any other pre-theoretical characterization of what makes them different. Rather, what we said was that for some sentences 'P', believing that P is to be in a very different kind of state of mind than other kinds of belief – difference which it might take some theory, in order to describe. I'll return to this topic in the concluding section.

¹⁸ Compare Boghossian [1990, 164]: "But it is constitutive of non-factualism precisely that it denies, of some targeted significant, declarative sentence that it is truth-conditional. On a deflationary conception of what it is to possess truth conditions, there would be, simply, no space for such a possibility." If we are to use 'non-factualism' in the way that Boghossian prescribes, then expressivism clearly isn't committed to non-factualism.

problems for deflationism. I'll close in section 6 with how I think the expressivist can respond while preserving deflationist truth, even for these domains.

Let's take the case of epistemic modals, first. As we noted in section I, one of the reasons to endorse expressivism about epistemic modals is that, particularly as illustrated by the case of animals and small children, believing that Jack might be in Buellton doesn't require being confident in anything – it only requires having a *positive credence* that Jack is in Buellton. There is other, independent, evidence for this same conclusion. For example, epistemic modals are what Jake Ross and I [unpublished] have called *rationaly reversible*. Whereas ordinarily it is irrational to believe something now that you expect yourself to disbelieve in the future after only encountering new information (that is, most beliefs are governed by the principle of *Reflection*), it is perfectly rational to believe that Jack might be in Buellton and Jack might not be in Buellton, even while expecting that in the near future you will disbelieve this, after only encountering new information and updating your beliefs rationally – for example, because you plan to call Jack and ask where he is.

One possible explanation for this, of course, is that what you believe now and what you expect to disbelieve in the future are two different things, because 'might' is *context-dependent*. But a number of authors have recently argued that 'might' does not behave like we should expect a context-dependent term to behave.¹⁹ Expressivists can offer a simple alternative explanation: believing that Jack might be in Buellton and he might not be in Buellton isn't a matter of being confident in anything – it's just a matter of having an *intermediate credence* in the proposition that Jack is in Buellton. On this view, the reason why this case doesn't involve any violation of reflection is that though you know that in the future after encountering new information you will no longer have an intermediate credence in this proposition, you don't know whether that is because your confidence in it will go up or down.

On this explanation, if there *were* any proposition that you had to be confident in, in order to believe that Jack might be in Buellton and he might not be, then you would of course have to expect to have a low confidence in that very proposition in the future, in order to expect that in the future you will disbelieve that Jack might be in Buellton and he might not be. But then it *would* be a violation of Reflection, for you to believe this now while expecting to rationally disbelieve it in the future after only

¹⁹ See, in particular, Egan, *et al* [2005]. I don't mean to endorse these arguments here, only to point out that expressivism offers an alternative explanation.

encountering new information. Consequently, there *can't* be anything that you have to be confident in, in order to believe that Jack might be in Buellton and he might not be.

The same reasoning, from cases of reversibility, can be extended to conditionals. Conditionals, as well as epistemic modals, can be used to construct reversible – apparently Reflection-violating – sentences. For example, here is the case that Jake Ross and I used to illustrate reversibility for conditionals:

Holmes' Reversal: Professor Moriarty, Irene Adler, and Sebastian Moran are the three possible suspects in a murder that was committed with an air-rifle. Believing that only one of the three suspects was in possession of an air-rifle at the time of the crime, Watson says, 'Now all we need to find out is who had an air-rifle – if Moriarty had an air-rifle, then he's the murderer, if Adler had an air-rifle, then she's the murderer, and if Moran had an air-rifle, then he's the murderer.' Holmes, however, is better-informed than Watson, and has deduced that in fact *two* of the suspects had air-rifles at the time of the crime. So he denies all three conditionals that Watson affirmed: 'it's not the case that if Moriarty had an air-rifle, then he's the murderer, it's not the case that if Adler had an air-rifle pipe, then she's the murderer, and it's not the case that if Moran had an air-rifle, then he's the murderer.' But Holmes also knows that he will soon find out which of the three suspects had an air-rifle at the time of the crime but also had an alibi – and he knows that he will find this out *before* he finds out which of the other two had an air-rifle or committed the crime. But once Holmes knows who the innocent air-rifle owner is, he will know that whichever of the other suspects had the air-rifle is the murderer. Hence he will deny what he now affirms.²⁰

Since sentences involving conditionals can be reversible, the same dialectic ensues as for epistemic modals. This could be because conditional sentences are context-dependent, but again, a variety of authors have raised difficulties for this proposal – this time not only because conditionals don't behave in all of the ways that we expect context-dependent sentences to do, but because conditionals are still useful for conveying information even once across very different contexts and with very low information about context.²¹

Expressivists about indicative conditionals have a competing explanation – it is that thinking that it is *not* the case that if P, then Q is simply having an insufficiently high *conditional* credence in Q, conditional on P, rather than having a high credence in anything. It is perfectly rational, this expressivist explanation points out, for Holmes to have insufficiently high conditional credences that Moriarty is the murderer, conditional on Moriarty's having an air-rifle, that Adler is the murderer, conditional on Adler's having an air-rifle, and that Moran is the murderer, conditional on Moran's having an air-rifle, while expecting to soon have a sufficiently high conditional credence for two of these soon in the future after only gaining new information – provided that he doesn't know *which* of the three he will soon have higher conditional

²⁰ Ross and Schroeder [unpublished, 7].

²¹ For example, compare Gibbard's [1981] riverboat case.

credences in. As with epistemic modals, this explanation requires that there is *no* proposition in which Holmes is now confident and which he expects to disbelieve soon – otherwise this case *would* involve a violation of Reflection. So on the expressivist view, it is precisely because there *is no* proposition that Holmes is confident in, in this case, that he isn't violating Reflection.

A different, very important, motivation for expressivism about conditionals, derives from the hypothesis that the degree to which you are confident that if P, then Q should *match* the degree of your conditional credence in Q, conditional on P.²² Intuitively, someone who has a very high conditional credence in Q, conditional on P, is very confident that if P, then Q, no matter what her outright credences are, and someone who has a low conditional credence in Q, conditional on P, has a low confidence that if P, then Q. But as David Lewis [1976] showed (roughly), in general there *is no* proposition R, such that your outright credence in R matches your conditional credence in Q, conditional on P. So if your confidence that if P, then Q is always equal to your conditional credence in Q, conditional on P, then it *can't* be outright credence in any proposition – for there is no proposition for it to be credence in.

There are a variety of ways of generating proofs of variants of this result, differing in strength, intuitive accessibility, and appropriateness for countering potential loopholes, but the way that they all work, is essentially by showing that conditional credences don't really behave like outright credences in the ways that they would need to do, in order to be matched by outright credences.²³ We can use a feature of indicative conditionals that is also appealed to by our example of Holmes' Reversal to generate a fairly weak result in this family, in order to give the flavor for the general idea.

An important feature of the Holmes' Reversal case traded on the fact that it is possible to be more confident that it is not the case that if P, then Q, than you are that if P, then \sim Q. But one thing that we know about conditional credences is that your conditional credence in Q, conditional on P and your conditional credence in \sim Q, conditional on P must together add to I. So if your confidence that if P, then Q is equal to your conditional credence in Q, conditional on P, that means that your confidence in if P, then Q and your confidence that if P, then \sim Q must add to I. But since you may be more confident that it is not the case that if P, then Q than you are that if P, then \sim Q, it then follows that your confidence that if P, then Q and your confidence that it is not the case that if P, then Q may together add up to more than

²² Variants on this idea are often referred to as *Adams' Thesis*, after Adams [1975]. See particularly Edgington [1986] for this way of thinking about it.

²³ See especially Edgington [1995] for discussion and references.

I. It follows that your confidence in a conditional can't be represented by any credence, because your credence in anything and its negation cannot add to more than I.

This is a relatively weak result, because it relies (whereas others don't) on the special (though plausible) assumption that it makes sense to be more confident that it is not the case that if P, then Q than you are that if P, then \sim Q. But stronger results, which don't require extra assumptions like this, have the same flavor – they show that conditional credences behave sufficiently differently from outright credences that they can't all be matched by outright credences. So again, this motivation for expressivism rules out the possibility that there is any proposition in which you have a high credence, when you are confident in a conditional.

5 why you might think these motivations make special trouble for deflationist truth

There is a *prima facie* problem, however, for how the motivations for expressivism about conditionals and epistemic modals discussed in the last section can be reconciled with deflationism about truth – or at least, with deflationism about truth that extends truth to cover epistemic modal and conditional claims. Indeed, one of the most prominent proponents of views about conditionals that fall in the same family as expressivist theories, Dorothy Edgington, has explicitly claimed that the arguments for her view show not only that we can't understand the meaning of conditionals in terms of truth-conditions, but that truth cannot be properly ascribed to conditionals *at all* – even, it would seem, deflationist truth. For example, Edgington argues that her conclusions entail that we cannot understand the validity of arguments involving conditionals in terms of preservation of truth.²⁴

Intuitively, the problem is this: both the motivations for expressivism about epistemic modals and those for expressivism about conditionals appear to *require* that there is *no such thing* as the proposition that Jack might be in Buellton or the proposition that if Max is at the party, then it will be noisy. But if deflationist truth extends to epistemic modals and conditionals, then among the things that can be true or false are that Jack might be in Buellton and that if Max is at the party, then it will be noisy. But the objects of truth and falsity are supposed to be propositions. So extending deflationist truth to epistemic modals and conditionals seems to require that there *are* epistemic modal propositions and conditional propositions.

²⁴ See especially Edgington [1986], [1995]. Edgington's [1995] theory is a conditional-assertion theory, rather than an expressivist theory.

The problem isn't just that the objects of truth and falsity are in some pre-theoretical sense 'supposed to be' propositions. The formulation of deflationism about truth that I gave in section 2 appealed to a schema involving referring expressions whose substitution instances are expressions like 'what Jack said', 'what Jill believes', and 'what **Liar** means'. If these expressions refer, then they refer to whatever kinds of thing people say and believe – the objects of the attitudes – and that can be what sentences mean. So the schema allows for 'true' to be predicated of the very same things that are the objects of attitudes like belief and assertion and the meanings in context of sentences like **Liar**. And we have a name for the things that are the objects of attitudes like belief and assertion and the things of which truth and falsity are ascribed: they are what we call 'propositions'. 'Proposition' is supposed to just be a theoretical term for whatever plays these roles.

Because propositions are the objects of belief and assertion, we understandably expect them to also be the objects of credence. Credence, after all, would seem to be an attitude like any other. But if this is so, then we get propositions to ascribe truth and falsity to in claims like 'it is true that Jack might be in Buellton' and 'it's false that if Max is at the party, then it will be noisy' only at the cost of allowing for credences to be defined over these propositions. But that there is anything corresponding to these propositions for credences to be defined over, is precisely what the core motivations for expressivism about epistemic modals and about conditionals were concerned to deny.

If Edgington is right, and the motivations for expressivism about conditionals (and, by extension and analogy, about epistemic modals) really preclude truth being correctly ascribed to conditional or epistemic modal claims, then this would look like a striking limitation on expressivism about either of these domains. This is not only because, as Edgington acknowledges, there are valid arguments involving conditionals (and epistemic modals), and we ordinarily think of validity as preservation of truth. (Edgington's solution to this problem, following Adams [1975], is to give up on thinking about validity as preservation of truth.) It is because the word 'true' would lose its *general* usefulness – the very general usefulness which deflationists cite in favor of their account – if we weren't able to correctly apply it to conditional and epistemic modal sentences.

For example, if I tell you that nothing Jack says is true, and you find out that Jack says that if P, then Q, you should be able to infer that it's not the case that if P, then Q. If I tell you that everything Jill believes is true, and you find out that Jill believes that Max might be at the party, then you may safely infer that if I am right, then Max might be at the party. If the truth predicate doesn't let us do these things, then

its scope as a device of generalization is remarkably limited – after all, when I tell you that everything that Jill believes is true, I may not even know what, exactly, she believes. But reading Edgington’s arguments doesn’t look like the right kind of thing to convince me that I wasn’t really committed to the consequence that if Jill believes that Max will come if he wants to, then Max will come if he wants to.

Moreover, we can make the problem yet sharper by observing that the only way we *have* of negating epistemic modal or conditional sentences, is to use expressions like ‘it’s not the case that’. But ‘it’s the case that’ is really just a stylistic variant on ‘it’s true that’. So given that we do negate epistemic modal and conditional sentences, and given that the only way that we have of doing so requires a stylistic variant on ‘true’, the conclusion that epistemic modal and conditional sentences simply can’t be true or false looks like simply too much to swallow.

6 avoiding the problem

Though I think the *prima facie* worries raised in the last section constitute a genuine source of concern, I also think that the solution is straightforward. If propositions are the objects of natural-language attitude verbs like ‘believes’ and ‘said’, as well as of the predicates ‘true’ and ‘false’, and are the meanings of sentences in context, then the expressivist about conditionals and epistemic modals must deny that credences are defined over propositions. Credences, she should say, are defined over something *other* than propositions. In order to distinguish, we might call the proper objects of credence – whatever those are – *representational contents*.²⁵ Once we distinguish between propositions and representational contents, in this way, we must also say that the principle of Reflection, properly speaking, applies to representational contents, not to propositions. With these moves in hand, the expressivist can freely go on to extend deflationism about truth to epistemic modals and to conditionals.

Once we have a distinction between propositions and representational contents in hand, we can characterize the expressivist view as the theory that conditional and epistemic modal sentences don’t express representational contents. Worryingly, this *sounds* a bit like saying that they can’t be true or false, that they don’t really express *beliefs*, or that they don’t express *propositions*. And worryingly, expressivist views that are characterized in *these* ways are *ipso facto* barred from treating ‘true’, ‘believes’, and ‘proposition’ to apply to things like ‘that Jack might be in Buellton’ or ‘that if Max is at the party, then it will be noisy’.

²⁵ Compare Schroeder [unpublished b].

This, after all, is the sort of thing that motivates arguments to the effect that expressivists *can't* appeal to deflationism about truth. For according to these arguments, expressivists need *some* way of saying what is different about their especially expressivist sentences, and if it is not a matter of saying that they can't be true or false (as traditional noncognitivists in ethics and proponents of the 'no-truth-conditions' view about conditionals like Edgington maintain), then there must be *something else* that they are not. For example, the thought goes, it must be that they do not express *propositions*, that they do not state *facts*, that they do not *refer*, that they do not express *beliefs* – or *something*. There must, after all, be some way of saying what makes the sentences which receive the special expressivist treatment different from the other sentences, after all.²⁶

The proponent of this sort of argument then invariably jumps to the conclusion that whatever differentiates the sentences which receive the special expressivist interpretation from the other sentences of the language is going to have to be something for which there will be just as good of motivations to treat in a deflationist way, as there are motivations to treat 'true' in a deflationist way. For example, according to Paul Boghossian [1990, I66-I67], the same problems that apply to the characterization of expressivism as committed to the view that some sentences can't be true or false also extend to its alternative characterization as the view that some predicates don't express properties. And according to Dreier [1990], there is a worrying danger that the application of deflationist techniques to expressivism might 'creep' so far that it is no longer possible to say what makes expressivism distinctive.

But in fact, saying that 'Jack might be in Buellton' does not express a representational content is *very different* from saying that it cannot be true or false, that it is not something that you can believe, or that it does not express a proposition. And that is because, since the notions of truth, falsity, belief, and propositions are all either *pre-theoretical* notions or are (in the case of 'proposition') under direct pre-theoretical *constraints*,²⁷ there are pre-theoretical constraints which require us to treat them as applying even to sentences involving, for example, conditionals, epistemic modals, and the words 'true' and 'false'. But in contrast, the notion of a 'representational content' is a *theoretical* notion – motivated by the very considerations which motivate expressivism about epistemic modals and conditionals.

²⁶ See, in particular, the discussion in Dreier [2004], and the argument in Boghossian [1990].

²⁷ I.e., if you can believe or hope that P and it can be true or false that P, then there must be such a thing as the proposition that P – since propositions are just the things that can be objects of the attitudes or be true or false.

We don't have a natural-language predicate 'has a high credence that' which uncontroversially applies to epistemic modal and conditional complements; rather, we start by noticing that we can be more or less confident in various propositions, and then noticing that for *most propositions*, it is rational to have the confidence that you do in that proposition only if that confidence can be represented by a probability function. The probability function or set of probability functions that characterize your confidences, we then call your *credence function*. All of this is familiar from the great contributors to the Bayesian tradition of the last century: Ramsey, de Finetti, Savage, Jeffrey, and others.

From this perspective, what the arguments about epistemic modals and about conditionals show, is that *not all confidences behave in the same way as representing confidences by credences predicts*. In particular, high confidence that Jack might be in Buellton relates to high confidence that Jack *is* in Buellton not like high credences in distinct contents, but like positive credence in a given content relates to high credence in that same content. And similarly, as we saw above, high confidence that if Max comes to the party, then it will be noisy doesn't behave like high credence in any content, but rather simply like a high *conditional* credence. Consequently, since given the theoretical role of propositions we need to assume that there really are such things as the propositions that Jack might be in Buellton and that if Max comes to the party, then it will be noisy, from the expressivist's point of view we should interpret these arguments about conditionals and epistemic modals as showing that the theoretical notion of a *credence function* needs to be understood as defined over something more restrictive than propositions. So I've suggested that in order to distinguish, we should use 'representational contents' for whatever credence functions are properly understood as defined over.

So formulating expressivism about epistemic modals and conditionals doesn't require having any pre-theoretical term like 'true' or 'proposition' or 'fact', 'property' in order to say what distinguishes epistemic modal and conditional beliefs from other kinds of belief. It just requires having a motivation to think that there is *some important difference* between epistemic modal and conditional belief, and other kinds of belief. The motivations that we've considered in this paper for expressivism about each of these topics do precisely this. So we've found no obstacle to combining expressivism about conditionals and epistemic modals with the view that conditional and epistemic modal sentences express propositions, are the objects of belief, and can be true or false.

7 wrap-up

In this paper I don't mean to have been defending expressivism about any of conditionals, epistemic modals, or truth – just to have been showing that the cases of these applications for expressivism are useful for shedding some light on what commitments you need, in order to formulate an expressivist view, and hence on the compatibility between expressivism and deflationism about truth. I don't mean to have said that there are no serious obstacles facing expressivism, nor that there are no *technical* obstacles to combining expressivism about conditionals or epistemic modals with expressivism about truth.²⁸ The emphasis in this paper has been conceptual, rather than technical. On such grounds, I see no reason for the expressivist about epistemic modals or conditionals to eschew talk about propositions or about truth. Rather, she should instead focus on trying to say *what* propositions are, if they are not the kind of thing that our credences are defined over.^{29,30}

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²⁸ Existing expressivist treatments of epistemic modals and conditionals all have problems with attitude ascriptions (see Schroeder [unpublished a]). Moreover, there are special problems getting an expressivist account of truth to account for varying levels of confidence that something is true – a problem that Michael Smith [2002] noted for metaethical expressivism and has received a fair bit of discussion in metaethics. Moreover, since your confidence that it is true that probably P should match your confidence that P is probably true, it is a consequence of the latter problem that there are special technical problems about combining an expressivist semantics which deals well with epistemic modals like 'probably' with a satisfactory treatment of truth.

²⁹ See especially Schroeder [unpublished b] for more on this project and the possible directions it might take the expressivist.

³⁰ Special thanks to Johannes Schmitt for related discussions, and to Steven Gross for the invitation to contribute to this volume.

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