

Expressivism and the Value of Truth:
A Reply to Lynch's 'Truth, Value and Epistemic Expressivism'

Neil Sinclair (neil.sinclair@nottingham.ac.uk)

(Posted online 18/09/11)

In a recent paper Lynch has argued against expressivism as an account of claims about the value of truth.¹ Since expressivism in its most theoretically virtuous forms aspires to be an account of all normative claims, expressivists need to address this argument.

Consider the plausible normative claim:

(TG) It is prima facie good that, relative to the propositions one might consider, one believe all and only those that are true. (Lynch, 'Truth, Value and Epistemic Expressivism', p.78. Unless otherwise stated, all subsequent references are to this paper)

Lynch's question is whether expressivism can provide a plausible account of this claim. He understands expressivism as the view that normative claims, such as (TG),

do not literally describe the world; they do not – in at least one sense – state facts. Rather they express our sentiments, or emotional attitudes, or convey our moral stances or commitments (p.76).

¹ Michael Lynch, 'Truth, Value and Epistemic Expressivism', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 79 (2009), pp. 76-97.

So why think that expressivism, so understood, cannot provide an account of the (TG)? Lynch's argument can be summarised as follows.

(1) In order for an expressivist account of any normative claim to make sense it must be possible to reach a standpoint disengaged from the making of that normative claim (p.85).

Hence, more particularly,

(2) In order for an expressivist account of the normative claim (TG) to make sense, it must be possible to make sense of a standpoint disengaged from the making of (TG), that is, an 'epistemically disengaged standpoint' (p.86).

But

(3) It is not possible to make sense of an epistemically disengaged standpoint ('the epistemically disengaged standpoint is an illusion' – p.86).

Hence

(4) An expressivist account of the normative claim (TG) doesn't make sense.

One worry with this argument is that the conclusion is understated. It is not just expressivism that requires a standpoint disengaged from a particular normative commitment in order to be understood. Any theory that seeks to stand outside a particular normative commitment and give an account of what is involved in holding that commitment, without asserting the commitment itself, seems to require such a standpoint. Indeed, this 'standing outside' of normative commitments and 'placing' them in a wider understanding of the beings who hold them is one of the most commonly accepted desiderata of meta-normative theories.² In so far as Lynch's argument suggests that, for the case of (TG), this desideratum cannot be satisfied, it counts against all meta-normative theories of (TG) that accept the desideratum of placement. This would include not merely expressive views, but realist views (according to which we can see normative commitments as representations of a genuine normative reality) and error-theoretical views (which agree with realists about the nature of the commitments, but disagree about the genuineness of normative reality). In other words, Lynch's argument, if successful, counts against all 'external' or 'Archimedean' views of normative commitments that is, views that provide 'commentary on normative thinking, concepts, and their truth-makers that [isn't] part of normative thinking itself' and therefore that 'purport to stand outside a whole body of belief, and to judge it as a whole from premises or attitudes that owe nothing to it'.³

² See Mark Timmons, *Morality Without Foundations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p.12 and Stephen Darwall, Allan Gibbard and Peter Railton, 'Toward *Fin de siècle* Ethics: Some Trends', *Philosophical Review* 101 (1992), pp.125-27.

³ The first quote is from Allan Gibbard, *Thinking How to Live* (London: Harvard University Press, 2003), p.186, the second from Ronald Dworkin 'Objectivity and Truth: You'd Better Believe It', *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 25 (1996), p.88. See also Simon Blackburn, *Ruling Passions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p.295.

Archimedean, including expressivists, need not worry unduly, however, since Lynch's argument is not successful. It fails because premise (3) is false.

To motivate this attack, first consider the intuitive implausibility of conclusion (4). This says that expressivism cannot give an account of the commitment expressed by a sincere assertion of (TG). But expressivism, as Lynch admits, is just the view that such assertions express attitudes, so the expressive account of (TG) is just that sincere utterance of (TG) expresses a pro-attitude to the state of affairs of believing (within a suitably defined range) all and only propositions that are true. This account may be implausible, but it is not *unintelligible*, as Lynch's conclusion claims. Something must have gone wrong. I suggest the problematic premise is (3).

What is the 'disengaged' standpoint that expressivism (or any Archimedean view) requires? Lynch does not give a general account, but does give two examples: of a morally disengaged standpoint and of an epistemically disengaged standpoint. First the *morally disengaged standpoint* is

the stance from which the expressivist wishes to 'give a story about how ethical thought functions' (p.85)

Further, such a standpoint is distinct from the stance we take when we 'employ evaluative language' (p.85). As an example, a naturalistic view of human beings, which sees them as 'frail complexes of perishable tissue' is commonly regarded as a disengaged standpoint from which we may hope to

understand our moral commitments.⁴ Insofar as a naturalistic view of human beings does not seem to involve making any moral judgements about them, it is a morally disengaged standpoint.

Since morality is just one example of a normative domain (epistemology another), we can generalise this account as follows. A standpoint is *normatively disengaged* insofar as (i) it attempts to explain what it is hold particular (type of) normative commitment and (ii) that explanation doesn't itself make any explicitly normative claims (of that type).

Given this general account of a normatively disengaged standpoint, what of the possibility of an epistemically disengaged standpoint, that is, a 'standpoint where we can explain our epistemic evaluations without engaging in them' (p.86)? Here the relevant epistemic evaluation is (TG). Lynch argues that an epistemically disengaged standpoint is not possible. But in fact there is a buried ambiguity in the notion of an epistemically disengaged standpoint that undermines Lynch's argument. We can distinguish:

(A1) The epistemically disengaged standpoint is a standpoint from which we can explain our commitment to epistemic evaluations (e.g. our commitment to (TG)) without thereby *being committed* to any such evaluations ourselves.

(A2) The epistemically disengaged standpoint is a standpoint from which we can explain our commitment to epistemic evaluations (e.g. our commitment to (TG)) without thereby *invoking any such evaluations* in that explanation.

⁴ See Simon Blackburn, *Ruling Passions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p.48.

(A1) is a stronger condition than (A2) and arguably cannot be met. The simple reason is given by Lynch. To attempt to explain our commitment to epistemic evaluations is a form of *inquiry*; to inquire is to figure out what to believe (p.89); and to believe is to accept the norm of truth for belief namely, that a belief is correct iff. it is true (p.79). Hence to inquire is to accept the norm of truth for belief. From here it is but a 'quick step' (p.83) to commitment to (TG). In short, to seek an account of the nature of our commitment to (TG) is to seek a *good* account, and that in turn is to accept that a *good* account is one that is true – which is to accept the claim (TG). Hence, if an epistemically disengaged standpoint is one that seeks to explain the nature of our commitment to (TG) and yet does not involve *making* that commitment then Lynch is right that such a standpoint is impossible.

Unfortunately for Lynch, this is not the sense of 'epistemically disengaged standpoint' that expressivism (or any Archimedean view) requires – that is given by (A2). All that expressivism requires is that it is possible to give an explanation of our normative commitments (including the commitment to (TG)) that does not itself invoke normative claims like (TG) *in that explanation*. It may well be that insofar as we are interested in expressivism we are interested in whether it is true, and thus we are considering it only because we are already committed to (TG). But this does not show that expressivism itself uses normative claims in its explanation of our normative commitments such as commitment to (TG). (Such an argument would in any case be too strong, for it would entail that all scientific theories are normative because their proponents accept the norm of truth.) All that is required for

expressivism to be a 'disengaged' view of normativity is that it explain our commitment to normative claims without employing normative claims *in that explanation* (clause (ii) above). More abstractly the point can be put by saying that there is a difference between the commitments to normative claims one acquires in considering whether to accept a theory (even a theory of normativity) and the normative claims of the theory itself. Commitment to (TG) may be of the former type, but (TG) itself is not of the latter type, and that is enough to make conceptual space for 'disengaged' accounts of our commitment to it.

Thus although there is a sense in which (3) is true – sense (A1) – it is not the sense that Lynch's argument requires. In the sense of 'epistemically disengaged standpoint' that expressivism requires – sense (A2) – premise (3) is false.

These reflections also allow us to say where Lynch's argument for (3) goes wrong. The argument is as follows:

(3a) 'if we are to make sense of an epistemically disengaged standpoint, we need to consider the possibility...that someone could engage in inquiry without being committed to (TG)' (p.86).

(3b) It is not possible that someone could engage in inquiry without being committed to (TG) (p.86).

This argument fails because (3a) is false. To make sense of an epistemically disengaged standpoint we need only make sense of an explanatory theory of our commitment to (TG) that doesn't involve the claim (TG) itself. This doesn't require imagining an agent or inquirer not committed to (TG), only imagining an explanation of that commitment that doesn't feature (TG) in the explanans. Thus Lynch's argument for premise (3b) – the example of King George (pp.86-90) – is beside the point.

What can we learn from this? First, the Archimedean project of giving an external grounding for normativity is consistent with the claim that there are some normative commitments that all inquirers have. Should it turn out, for example, that there are some normative commitments that are constitutive of all inquirers (or even all agents) that would not determine how to understand those commitments. Generally, that a normative commitment is constitutive of inquiry, agency, humanity or whatever doesn't determine how to understand that commitment.

Second, Lynch's argument is not completely undermined. In his conclusion Lynch claims:

Our reflections suggest that unlike our other values we cannot sufficient abstract from the value of truth in order to be sceptical about it ... What [this] tells us about value is that we cannot...take a skeptical attitude towards all of our values (p.95).

Nothing I have said here undermines this conclusion. That is, for all I have said it may be that it is impossible for us to cease to value truth and still count

as inquirers. That is, it may be that as inquirers we cannot cease to have the normative commitment expressed by (TG). Lynch goes on:

In particular, we cannot take an expressivist attitude towards the value of truth (p.95).

This does not follow from the previous conclusion and for the above reasons can be rejected. From the fact that a certain normative commitment is constitutive of inquirers nothing at all follows about how to understand that commitment. Further, Expressivism is *not* – as this passage suggests – a *skeptical* attitude towards the value of truth. It is an account of *what it is to value something* such as truth (or loyalty or friendship or counting blades of grass). To say that we cannot, while remaining inquirers, cease to value truth does not settle the question of *what it is* to value truth. It is the latter question to which expressivism is addressed and, for all Lynch argues, remains a coherent account.