

Recent Work in Expressivism

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Abstract

This paper is a concise survey of recent expressivist theories of discourse, focusing on the ethical case. For each topic discussed recent trends are summarised and suggestions for further reading provided. Issues covered include: the nature of the moral attitude; ‘hybrid’ views according to which moral judgements express both beliefs and attitudes; the quasi-realist programmes of Simon Blackburn and Allan Gibbard; the problem of creeping minimalism; the nature of the ‘expression’ relation; the Frege-Geach problem; the problem of wishful thinking; the role of moral intuitions; expressivism in aesthetics.

1. Introduction

According to descriptivists the distinctive linguistic function of a given discourse is to describe the world as being thus-and-so. The judgements of the discourse are therefore apt for truth in the following sense: they are true if the world really is the way the judgement represents it as being, false otherwise. Realists are descriptivists who hold that there exists an independent reality which the judgements can successfully describe. Expressivism is one among a family of views contrasted with descriptivism. Its siblings include fictionalism, which holds that the target judgements pretend to describe (Joyce 2001, Kalderon 2005) and prescriptivism, which holds that they prescribe (Hare 1952). A position is expressivist to the extent that the linguistic function of the target discourse is to express mental states.

This basic taxonomy is complicated by the claim that judgements describe in virtue of expressing beliefs – mental states that represent the world as being thus-and-so (Gibbard 1990, 2003). To remain distinctive, expressivists must therefore hold that the target judgements express non-belief-like mental states or ‘attitudes’. Thus the debate moves from a contrast in pure semantics between describing and expressing to a contrast in semantics-cum-psychology between expressing beliefs and expressing attitudes. On either conception of the debate it is incumbent on an expressivist to do two things: first, articulate the non-belief-like states of mind that are expressed by the target judgements; second, provide an account of why such states would come to be expressed in the discourse exhibiting the distinctive features of the target discourse, or, if this is not possible, to explain *away* these features as explicable errors on the part of the users of the discourse.

Since the twentieth century expressivism has received its fullest development as an account of moral discourse. According to metaethical expressivists the distinctive function of moral judgements is the expression of affective attitudes for the purposes of mutual co-ordination of action (Gibbard 1990, Blackburn 1998a). My discussion will focus primarily on this case, although where possible I will frame the discussion in terms that have wider application. I will divide recent work into three sections: refinements and variations; challenges and non-moral expressivisms.

2. Refinements and Variations

a. The moral attitude problem

The first refinement is specific to metaethical expressivism and concerns the nature of the attitude expressed by moral judgements. Modern expressivists eschew the idea that this state has a distinctive phenomenological hue. Instead the attitude is typically identified as a practical stance or policy of action. A standard example is approval of x : the disposition to act in ways that (one believes) promote x . Such a stance can be as calm and considered as any belief. This general approach has been developed in at least two ways.

The first builds on the idea, championed by Stevenson, that when making moral judgements we are not merely voicing own attitudes, we are seeking to influence the attitudes of others. Blackburn (1998a, 2006a) attempts to capture this feature by claiming that the attitude expressed is emotionally ascended, that is, directed not merely at the perceived features of things, but also at attitudes towards those features. Roughly, on this view, to think that x is wrong to disapprove of x and to disapprove of those who fail to share this disapproval. The effect of expressing this state is not merely to voice one's disapproval, it is to insist that others share it. Though Blackburn's view has attracted criticism (see Miller 2003: 88-94 and Ridge 2003a), an increasing number of expressivists adopt structurally similar views. Gibbard (1990), for instance, holds that the direct focus of moral judgement is not actions, but feelings of guilt and resentment. Likewise Schroeder (2008b) suggests that judgements of wrongness may express a positive attitude in favour of blaming for the action in question.

A second account of the moral attitude comes from Gibbard. In earlier work, Gibbard argued that moral judgements are that species of normative judgements concerning when one ought to feel self-directed guilt and other-directed resentment (Gibbard 1990). Gibbard (2003) proposes that judgements concerning 'the thing to do' express planning states, that is, policies of what to do in various possible circumstances. His bold hypothesis is that thinking what I ought to do is thinking what to do and hence that judgements of what I ought to do – normative judgements – express planning states. The combined view is therefore that moral judgements express planning states concerning feelings of guilt and resentment. Gibbard ultimately shies away from the bold hypothesis in favour of the more qualified view that normative judgements mix plans and prosaic factual beliefs (2003: chs. 7-8). But he also argues at length that an expressive discourse based on planning has a legitimate place for notions such as truth and consistency (2003: chs. 3-5, 9-11). Doubts have been raised about Gibbard's system, in particular as to whether he is entitled to a notion of 'disagreement in plan' that can ground the notion of inconsistency between planning states (Dreier 2006, Schroeder forthcoming). Nevertheless, by focusing on an idealised discourse expressive of planning states Gibbard's work provides a tantalising glimpse of the potential of expressivist discourses to make room for these notions.

b. A role for belief

Consider the following semantic view. Judgements of the form ' x is F' express two mental states: a belief that x is G *and* an attitude directed at G-things. Is this a version of expressivism about F-judgements? That depends on what makes the

judgement distinctive. If the judgement only counts as an F-judgement in so far as it expresses the attitude, the account is expressivist. If the judgement counts as an F-judgement purely in virtue of expressing the belief, then it is descriptivist. This means that one old way of marking the difference between expressivism and descriptivism is redundant. According to this view descriptivists hold that the target judgements express beliefs rather than attitudes, whereas for expressivists they express attitudes rather than beliefs (see, for example, Brink 1989: 5, 9). This taxonomy must now be replaced: both descriptivists and expressivists can accept that the target judgements express beliefs and attitudes; their disagreement concerns what makes those judgements distinctive.

Both sides have rushed to occupy the logical space this point opens up. On the descriptivist side, representatives include Boisvert (2008), Copp (2001) and Finlay (2004, 2005). According to Copp's 'realist-expressivism' the belief involved in judging an action wrong represents that action as forbidden by the set of standards the adoption of which as a social code of conduct by a society would best meet that societies' needs. The judgement may also express an agents' subscription to those standards and thus acquire a connection to motivation. Realists-expressivists need not accept Copp's account of the particular content of moral beliefs, but in so far as they hold that this content is accompanied by related attitudinal content they are better placed than their descriptivist compatriots to explain the supposed action-guiding nature of moral judgement.

On the expressivist side, the newly opened territory has been occupied by Alm (2000), Barker (2000, although see Finlay 2004 for doubts about this classification) and Ridge (2006a, 2007a, forthcoming). Ridge defines 'ecumenical expressivism' as the view that moral judgements express both beliefs and desires, but do not express beliefs that provide their truth-conditions. As Ridge points out, previous versions of expressivism were in any case 'conservatively ecumenical' insofar as they allowed some moral judgements to express beliefs (notably judgements involving so-called 'thick' moral terms such as 'courageous'). But Ridge prefers a version of expressivism that is 'liberally ecumenical'. On this view *all* moral judgements express beliefs. A basic variant holds that a judgement that *x* is good expresses the belief that *x* is F and a generalised pro-attitude towards objects in so far as they possess this property. The precise content of the belief expressed is fixed by the object of the attitude and may vary from speaker to speaker. For example, suppose that I approve objects in so far as they are conducive to aggregate pleasure. On the basic ecumenical expressivist view my judgement that *x* is good would express the belief that *x* is conducive to aggregate pleasure together with this generalised approval. (Ridge's actual view is more complex, but the details are not essential here.)

Just as realist-expressivists claim they can steal the clothes of expressivists when it comes to the motivating force of moral judgements, ecumenical expressivists claim they can steal the clothes of descriptivists when it comes to the logical properties of those judgements (Alm 2000, Ridge 2006a). Consider, for example, the following moral modus ponens:

(A) If terrorism is wrong, then so is supporting terrorists.

(B) Terrorism is wrong.

Therefore

(C) Supporting terrorists is wrong

According to the basic version of ecumenical expressivism these sentences express the following states:

(A') Belief that: if terrorism is F then supporting terrorists is F *and* disapproval of F-things.

(B') Belief that: terrorism is F *and* disapproval of F-things.

(C') Belief that: supporting terrorists is F *and* disapproval of F-things.

The argument is therefore valid in the sense that 'any possible believer who accepts all of the premises but...denies the conclusion would thereby be guaranteed to have inconsistent beliefs' (Ridge 2006a: 326). The advantages of this type of solution to the expressivists problem with logic are clear: by piggy-backing on the descriptivist treatment of embedded contexts, the ecumenical expressivist avoids the charge that he artificially bifurcates our understanding of logical relations by postulating a 'logic of the attitudes' alongside yet distinct from a 'logic of belief'. More generally, the ecumenical expressivist may hope that when it comes to accounting for the distinctive features of the target discourse, the inclusion of a belief-like element means his explanations share substantive elements with those of descriptivist.

c. Quasi-realism and creeping minimalism

If expressivism is the view that the distinctive function of the target judgements is to express attitudes, what else are expressivists committed to?

Quite a lot, it may seem. In the early days of expressivism, it seemed to many that unless a set of judgements were understood wholly descriptively, they could not be truth-apt, knowledge-apt, embedded in non-assertive contexts, subject to logical relations or the proper focus for disagreement. Starting with the work of Stevenson on disagreement, expressivists gradually began to overturn this prejudice. Blackburn later christened this project 'quasi-realism' (Blackburn 1980: 353). Gibbard's work on planning discourse is the most recent manifestation. Quasi-realism is the task of showing how those features of a discourse previously thought the sole preserve of descriptivists – features such as its possession of a truth-predicate and the intelligible embedding of its judgements in non-assertive contexts – can come to be seen as legitimate features of a discourse whose underlying semantics is expressive. (Note that quasi-realism is not the view that we can think and talk *as if* murder is wrong or *as if* moral judgements are truth-apt, when in fact nothing is really wrong and moral judgements are not really truth-apt. The first confuses quasi-realism with fictionalism (see Blackburn 1998a: 318-9; 2005 and Jenkins 2006), the second underestimates the extent to which quasi-realists seek to 'domesticate' the apparently descriptivist notions employed by ordinary moralisers (Blackburn 1993: 3).)

Details of the project aside, quasi-realism raises tricky questions concerning how expressivism is kept distinct from descriptivism (Dreier 2004, Harcourt 2005). Although these problems are not new (see Wright 1985), recent developments of the quasi-realist project, notably its adoption of minimalist accounts of key notions, bring them into sharp relief. A minimalist account of truth, for example, holds that there is nothing more to understanding truth than understanding the schema: '*p*' is true iff *p*. By this schema expressivists who give an account of the meaning of '*p*' can help themselves to an account of the meaning of '*p* is true' without raising the theoretical states. Minimalist accounts of 'property', 'fact' and even 'belief' may follow. But this last minimalism threatens to undermine the debate, which rests on a distinction between beliefs and non-belief-like states. To address this 'problem of creeping minimalism' (Dreier 2004) expressivists need to meet what Lenman (2003a) calls the contrast challenge: to find some defensible contrast between uncontroversially descriptive discourses and putatively expressive ones.

There are at least three distinct ways in which metaethical expressivists have responded to this problem.

According to the first the fundamental contrast remains a psychological or psycho-functional one between beliefs and attitudes. This approach is consistent with minimalism about belief so long as the expressivist can distinguish a minimal sense of belief in which moral judgements express moral beliefs from a robust sense in which they do not. This is the approach preferred by Blackburn (1998a, 1998b), Ridge (2006b, forthcoming,) and myself (Sinclair 2006, 2007). Related views are given by Horgan and Timmons (2006) and Lenman (2003a).

According to the second response, preferred by Gibbard (2003, 2006) and Dreier (2004), the relevant contrast concerns explanation. One way of developing this thought is that a view is descriptivist just in case the explanation of the target judgements involves seeing them as tracking (or attempting to track) some sort of worldly property. This account may mesh with the first: for example if a robust belief is one with a 'tracking' function. Note, however, that Gibbard himself is agnostic concerning whether normative judgements, on his account, are genuine beliefs (2003: 182). For Gibbard it is the nature of the explanation involved, rather than taxonomy of the mental states, that is important.

A final response is tentatively suggested by Chrisman (2008). On this view, the relevant contrast concerns two types of inferential meaning. Roughly, we can contrast statements that play a *theoretical* inferential role with those that play a *practical* inferential role, where a theoretical inference is one whose premises provide evidential support for a conclusion that can constitute theoretical knowledge about the world and a practical inference is one whose premises provide practical support for a conclusion that can constitute practical knowledge about how to live. On Chrisman's proposal the distinction between moral and descriptive discourse is that the former involves statements that play a practical inferential role and the later involves statements that play a theoretical inferential role. One advantage of this approach, noted by Chrisman, is that it relies on a distinction already recognised by ordinary users of moral discourse, namely the distinction between practical and theoretical reason.

If Chrisman's inferentialism or Gibbard's agnosticism is the correct response to minimalist creep it marks a point at which the psychologized labels of 'expressivism' and 'descriptivism' are no longer appropriate for the debate. On these views the debate is not merely saved, it is relocated. What all three views recognise, however, is that it is only once the proper extent of minimalism is appreciated that the essence of expressivism becomes clear.

d. 'Expression' for Expressivists

In what sense, according to expressivism, do the target judgements *express* attitudes? The same sense in which descriptive judgements express (robust) beliefs, perhaps, and a sense that requires the establishment of social conventions, understood by both speakers and hearers, regarding the state signified (Blackburn 1995: 49). But what sense is that, precisely? Jackson and Pettit (1998) make problems for expressivism here, arguing that a plausible account of expression forces metaethical expressivists to admit that moral judgements express beliefs about one's own attitudes, thereby reducing expressivism to subjectivism. Many have replied that beliefs about attitudes may be part of the sincerity or assertability conditions of the judgements without thereby providing their truth-conditions (see Barker 2000, Schnall

2004, Ridge 2006c). Schroeder (2008a) presses the problem with expression in a different way, arguing that some of the ways of understanding ‘expression’ do not transfer from the case of beliefs to the case of attitudes, while those that do are more controversial than expressivists typically suppose. Schroeder’s argument works uncertainly by exhaustion, focusing primarily on the account of expression given by Gibbard (2003: ch.4). But other options are available. One view is that to express a mental state is to take up a public argumentative position with respect that state: to be prepared to defend that state and to advertise this preparedness (see Alston 2000, Barker 2006 and Blackburn 2001, 2006a). On this view the particular territory defended is determined inferentially, by what counts as evidence in favour of one’s stance and what counts as agreement or disagreement. This account emphasises that although the territory defended is a mental state, the state itself is not the focus of attention. Since the state is a representation of or policy of response to the world, the real discussion concerns how to represent the world or how to respond to it.

One further aspect of the ‘expression’ debate concerns whether the notion of ‘express’ employed requires a sincere agent to possess the state their utterance expresses (Joyce 2002, Ridge 2006c). If not, then expressivists may be better placed than is usually supposed to explain why the connection between sincere moral utterance and appropriate motivation can wax and wane (see Blackburn 1998a, Lenman 1999).

3. Challenges

The most serious challenge facing any expressivist position is explaining how the distinctive features of the target discourse can be generated by an underlying expressivist semantics. This is the project of quasi-realism. Most recent work in expressivism concerns the viability of this project.

a. Frege-Geach Problems

Since the 1960’s discussion of the Frege-Geach problem has dominated expressivist literature. The task is to provide an understanding of moral sentences as they appear in non-asserted contexts and an account of the validity of inferences involving those contexts. Besides the solutions offered by Ridge (2006a) and Gibbard (2003) the most developed response in recent literature is so-called commitment-semantics (Blackburn 1988, 1998a, 2002, Hale 2002, Bjornsson 2001). On this view, we understand contexts such as conditionals in terms of the complex combinations of commitments their expression commits us to, where ‘commitment’ covers both beliefs and attitudes. In saying ‘If p then q ’ one commits oneself to adopting the commitment expressed by unembedded uses of ‘ q ’ should one come to adopt the commitment expressed by unembedded uses of ‘ p ’. Failing to adopt the q -commitment on adopting the p -commitment amounts to failing to do what one is committed to doing.

Some have objected that commitment-semantics cannot account for all intuitively valid inferences (see Sonderholm 2005 and Elstein 2007 for reply), others that it cannot successfully account for negation (see Unwin 1999, but note that emotional ascent may help here: see Schroeder forthcoming). A deeper worry is similar to one that dogged earlier responses to the Frege-Geach problem: that the account fails to capture the specifically *logical* inconsistency of an agent who denies an intuitively valid inference. Blackburn responds by suggesting that logic is no more

than ‘our way of codifying and keeping track of intelligible combinations of commitments’ (1998a: 72); an agent who accepts the premises but denies the conclusion of a moral modus ponens is making a logical error insofar as she renders herself unintelligible. It may be objected that this view of logic is not the ‘ordinary’ prephilosophical understanding. But that would be to read too much into ordinary prephilosophical commitments. Ordinary moralisers certainly see something amiss with those who deny the force of modus ponens. It is only if one assumes that ordinary moralisers presuppose something more than this that Blackburn’s account of logic appears revisionary. But that ordinary discourse carries with it such philosophically weighty presuppositions is far from obvious. In any case, it is a measure of the importance recent work in expressivism that it forces philosophers to question not only their understanding of moral and other discourses, but their understanding of logic itself.

b. Other Features

It is, of course, incumbent on expressivists to explain (or explain away) all of the features of the target discourse, not just those concerning embedding and inference. Fortunately, some recent work does see beyond the Frege-Geach problem. For example, some expressivists who have general concerns about minimalism have offered alternative expressivist-friendly accounts of truth (Ridge forthcoming, Barker 2006). Metaethical expressivists have also continued to defend their view against the charge that it leads to relativism (Blackburn 1998a, 2000) and have provided accounts of moral knowledge (Gibbard 2003: ch.11), explanation in moral terms (Blackburn 1991, Gibbard 2003: ch.10) and the mind-independence of moral values (Sinclair 2008).

Despite this, it would be premature to consider the expressivist theory complete. As our understanding of moral or any other discourse grows, the number of features that require explaining on an expressivist (or descriptivist) basis grows too, and loose ends are inevitable. Many recent examples concern the epistemology of moral judgement. Dorr (2002), for instance, argues that any expressivist solution to the Frege-Geach problem will license wishful thinking – the changing of one’s cognitions in response to one’s attitudes – thus violating the epistemological principle that only a change in cognitive states can make a difference to what it is rational to believe (see Lenman 2003b for a response). Smith (2002) questions whether the expressivist account has enough complexity to distinguish between the certainty with which one holds a moral attitude and the strength of that attitude (see Lenman 2003c, Ridge 2003b and Olson and Bykvyst, forthcoming, for discussion). Egan (2007) argues that ordinary moral discourse does, whereas expressivists cannot, admit a notion of *fundamental* moral error, that is, error that persists even once one’s moral sensibility has undergone every possible internal improvement. Finally, in a reversal of the standard dialectic, Lenman (2007) argues that expressivists are better placed than descriptivists to provide an account of moral inquiry’s reliance on considered moral judgements. For expressivists, Lenman argues, these ‘intuitions’ are not mysterious intimations of moral reality but practical stances to be considered and negotiated when discussing how to live together. In this argument, as in many others, the key to the expressivist explanation is not the fact of expression per se, but the purpose of that expression in co-ordinating our often conflicting lives.

4. Non-moral Expressivisms

Outside the ethical sphere, recent work has seen expressivist theories offered for the self-ascription of mental states (Bar-On and Long 2001), indicative conditionals (Blackburn 2006b), probability (Logue 1995, Barker 2006), mathematics (Lindström 2000), epistemology (Gibbard 2003 ch.11, Ridge 2007b, Chrisman forthcoming) and aesthetics (Todd 2004). In epistemology, for example, Chrisman suggests that ‘S knows that *p*’ expresses acceptance of a set of norms governing the regulation of belief and the belief that those norms entitle S to her belief (this is a version of ecumenical expressivism). For Gibbard, the judgement expresses a plan to take S’s word as to whether or not *p*.

In the aesthetic case, to say an object is beautiful may be to express the aesthetic pleasure we have in response to it. Todd (2004) argues that the need to find agreement concerning such attitudes is weaker than that concerning moral attitudes and hence that expressivism about the aesthetic best captures the thought that there can be many equally valid responses to a given artwork. Todd’s argument neatly highlights the point that quasi-realism is not the view that *any* discourse expressive of non-belief-like states can come to possess all the features distinctive of moral discourse. Much of the quasi-realist construction in the moral case is driven by the postulation of a coordinating function for the discourse. Where that function is absent we should not necessarily expect all of the construction to be possible.

5. Conclusion

In their 1992 synopsis of metaethical trends, Darwall, Gibbard and Railton pondered whether expressivism is ‘obsolete’. I hope this survey has gone some way to support a negative answer to this question. Not only has recent work shown the expressivist theory itself to be varied and multi-faceted, but criticism and development of the theory, in particular about moral discourse, has led to a deeper understanding of the possible contrasts between moral and other discourses, of the contours of moral discourse and of the possible ways of explaining the notions (such as truth and consistency) that it employs. These insights will endure even if expressivism does not.

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