Conceptual Role Expressivism and Defective Concepts
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Abstract: This paper examines the general prospects for *conceptual role expressivism*, expressivist theories that embrace conceptual role semantics. It has two main aims. The first aim is to provide a general characterisation of the view. The second aim is to raise a challenge for the general view. The challenge is to explain why normative concepts are not a species of *defective* concepts, where defective concepts are those that cannot meaningfully embed and participate in genuine inference. After rejecting existing attempts to answer the challenge, I propose an alternative solution. However, the solution leaves conceptual role expressivism a far less distinctive and interesting position than its proponents claim. I conclude that we should be sceptical about how much expressivists gain by appealing to conceptual role semantics.

It has become increasingly popular to suggest that expressivists should embrace some kind of conceptual role semantics (Blackburn 2006; Horwich 2010; Gibbard 2012; Bâve 2013; Köhler 2017; Chrisman 2017; Sinclair 2018; Brown 2019). According to expressivism, normative concepts are fundamentally explained not in terms of what they refer to, but by their action-guiding role in practical deliberation. According to conceptual role semantics, concepts in general are fundamentally explained not in terms of what they refer to, but by their role in reasoning, deliberation, and belief formation. Insofar as conceptual role semantics provides an independently attractive framework for explaining meaning and content, it might therefore seem that expressivists would do well to embrace it, especially given the challenges that expressivists traditionally face providing a theory of meaning for normative concepts. This paper examines the general prospects for *conceptual role expressivism*, expressivist theories that embrace conceptual role semantics.

It has two main aims. The first aim is to provide a general characterisation of the view (section 1). Although a number of expressivists explicitly endorse conceptual role semantics for normative concepts, there is no agreement on what form this should take. The general characterisation provided here aims to abstract away from the details of these accounts to provide a unified view that deserves the general title of conceptual role expressivism. The second aim is to raise a challenge for the general view (section 2). The challenge is to explain why normative concepts are not a species of *defective* concepts, where defective

concepts are those that cannot meaningfully embed and participate in genuine inference. The challenge arises because normative concepts as conceived by expressivism bear a number of similarities to concepts that plausibly are defective. The remainder of the paper is then devoted to examining responses to the challenge. After rejecting existing attempts to answer the challenge (section 3), I propose an alternative solution (section 4). However, the solution leaves conceptual role expressivism a less distinctive and interesting position than its proponents claim. I therefore conclude that we should be sceptical about how much expressivists gain by appealing to conceptual role semantics.

1. The view

'Conceptual role semantics' means many things to many people. As I will be using the term, conceptual role semantics is a framework for theorising about *mental content*. It explains what it is for a mental state to have a particular content in terms of the particular role that mental state plays in cognition, where this may include its role in processes of reasoning, belief formation, and practical deliberation. The particular role that constitutively individuates a concept or a thought is its *conceptual role*.

For instance, a conceptual role account of the concept AND might characterise it as that concept $\&$ to possess which a subject is disposed or committed to making the following inferences: $p, q \rightarrow p\&q$; $p\&q \rightarrow p$; $p\&q \rightarrow q$ (e.g. Peacocke 1992). And a conceptual role account of the concept RED might characterise it as that concept R to possesses which a subject is disposed or committed to accepting thoughts of the form Ra in the presence of red things in normal conditions (e.g. Horwich 1998). Thus, a conceptual role account of some concept will individuate that concept in terms of its *possession conditions*, where these specify certain conditions under which a subject *accepts* contents involving that concept. These conditions might specify transitions to or from other states of acceptance (e.g. AND), transitions from *input-states* such as perceptual states or worldly states of affairs (e.g. RED), or transitions to *output-states* such as actions or conative states (e.g. OUGHT—more on which below).

The above characterisation of conceptual role semantics is only programmatic, and there are many different ways in which to develop such a theory.[1] For example, in developing a conceptual role theory for some concept,

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[1] Prominent examples include Harman (1973); Field (1977); Block (1986); Peacocke (1992); Horwich (1998). Following most expressivists, I will assume throughout the relative priority of thought over language, and so I will not examine conceptual role theories that primarily apply to (public) linguistic meaning, e.g. Sellars (1953); Brandom (1994).

there are a number of choice points that one must make with respect to cashing out the conceptual roles in question:[2]

- *Concept-first* vs *thought-first*. Do conceptual roles primarily apply to *concepts*, the constituents of thoughts, or to entire *thoughts*?
- *Subjectivist* vs *objectivist*. Are concepts and thoughts *concrete mental representations* or *abstract propositional contents*?[3]
- *Naturalism* vs *normativism*. Do conceptual roles specify transitions that subjects are *disposed* to make, or that subjects *ought* to make or are *rationally committed* to making?
- *Atomism* vs *holism*. Do concepts have *core* or *essential* conceptual roles, or are conceptual roles locally or globally *holistic*?
- *Solipsistic* vs *communitarian*. Are *individuals* the locus of conceptual roles, or *communities*?
- *Narrow* vs *wide*. Do conceptual roles specify transitions *only* between mental states, or also between mental states and worldly objects, properties, events, states of affairs, etc.
- *Doxastic* vs *non-doxastic*. Do narrow conceptual roles specify transitions only between doxastic states, or also between non-doxastic states?

Given the wide variety of views that might result depending on how one answers these questions, this shows that conceptual role semantics is best understood as a framework or general approach to theorising rather than a particular theory or thesis.

As with conceptual role semantics, 'expressivism' means many things to many people. As I will be using the term, expressivism is any approach to explaining normative thought and discourse that accepts the following two claims. First, that normative thought and discourse is *non-descriptive*, or *non-representational*, in the sense that normative judgments and assertions do not aim to describe or represent some distinctively normative part of reality (call this *non-descriptivism*). Second, that normative thought and discourse is in some sense *directive* or *practical*, where this is typically cashed out in terms of the role that normative judgments and assertions play in motivating actions and coordinating attitudes (call this *practicality*). An expressivist account of normative concepts will therefore explain normative concepts not in terms of

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[2] Compare Whiting (2006); Chrisman (2017); Sinclair (2018). While the following choice points are logically distinct, they will interact in a number of ways, making certain combinations more or less plausible.

[3] This distinction isn't exhaustive, but other views in the ontology of concepts are less obviously compatible with conceptual role semantics.

what they represent, but rather in terms of their directive or practical role in one's cognitive economy.[4] Given that conceptual role semantics explains concepts in general in terms of their role in a subject's cognitive economy, it is therefore worth asking if it is profitable to think of expressivism as a kind of conceptual role semantics for normative concepts. If we think that conceptual role semantics is an independently attractive framework for explaining mental content, then one might hope that adopting this framework will provide expressivists with the resources they need to adequately explain normative concepts.

More precisely, then, conceptual role expressivism can be defined as any conceptual role account of normative concepts that respects non-descriptivism and practicality. Although specific accounts will vary, both in terms of the choice points above as well the details of the conceptual roles for different normative concepts, I propose that conceptual role expressivism is characterised by the following three commitments:

(A) Conceptual roles for normative concepts do not specify any input conditions that mention or implicate normative properties, relations, or states of affairs.

(B) Conceptual roles for normative concepts specify some essential connection to conative or affective states.

(C) Conceptual roles for normative concepts do not determine robustly representational content for normative thoughts.

To clarify, the claim is not that (A), (B), and (C) are sufficient conditions on a concept's being normative. As we will see below, there are concepts that respect these commitments that are not normative concepts. Rather, the claim is that for any conceptual role account of normative concepts, these commitments are necessary and jointly sufficient for that account being expressivist. Below, I will show how existing versions of conceptual role expressivism go about meeting these constraints. However, first some general comments on each.

Commitment (A) is necessary to respect non-descriptivism. According to non-descriptivism, in deploying a normative concept, one is not responding to normative reality. While many contemporary expressivists embrace the existence of normative properties, relations, and states of affairs in a minimal or quasi-realist sense, all expressivists deny that such properties, relations, or states of affairs play any explanatory role in their account of normative concepts. As such, they will not play any explanatory role in an account of their possession

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[4] Prominent examples include Blackburn (1998); Gibbard (2003); Horgan and Timmons (2006); Schroeder (2008); Ridge (2014).

conditions. This is not to deny that subjects do in fact respond to features of reality when deploying normative concepts. But there is no distinctive domain of reality that all subjects must respond to in order to *possess* normative concepts, according to expressivists. Among other things, this is meant to explain how different subjects can systematically respond to different features of reality in applying a normative concept without thereby employing distinct concepts. Thus, for example, two subjects might have radically divergent conceptions of what constitutes the subject matter of moral wrongness, for example a Kantian who thinks it is wrong to violate the categorical imperative and a moral egoist who thinks it is wrong for anyone to not pursue their own self-interest. These two subjects will respond to distinct aspects of reality in applying the concept MORALLY WRONG, but they still seem to disagree about what is wrong. Consequently, expressivist conceptual roles for normative terms will be *narrow* in scope.

Commitment (B) is meant to capture whatever it is that expressivists want to claim is the distinctive function or purpose of normative concepts in our cognitive economy and interpersonal discourse. Traditionally, expressivists have endorsed some form of motivational internalism, which claims that there is some kind of necessary connection between normative judgments and being motivated to act in accordance with those judgments. On the present approach, this can be cashed out in terms of normative concepts involving constitutive conceptual connections between normative judgments and desires, intentions, or other action-guiding states. Expressivists might also claim that normative concepts are conceptually linked to affective states as well, such as certain reactive attitudes. Plausibly, different normative concepts will be linked to different kinds of attitude, and there may be many different candidates for the same normative concept. The general point is that normative concepts are distinctive in their connections to *non-doxastic* attitudes. This also suggests a more *atomistic* or at least *locally holistic* approach to characterising normative conceptual roles, though (B) remains compatible with a more global holism. However, I will assume for simplicity that normative thoughts and concepts have a core conceptual role.

Commitment (C) is essential because a meta-normative descriptivist might accept (A) and (B) while retaining a robustly representationalist conception of normative thought, i.e. one in which normative concepts purport to denote normative properties or relations and normative thoughts purport to describe normative states of affairs (e.g. Wedgwood 2007—more on which below). This is because conceptual role theorists typically hold that conceptual role in some sense determines content, and an orthodox reading of this claim is that the conceptual role of a mental state determines its *representational content*. Because expressivists deny that normative concepts are representational in this sense,

the conceptual role expressivist must respect commitment (C). Typically, this is secured by accepting some kind of *minimalist* or *deflationary* conception of content, though we will see below that there are other ways of respecting (C). However, one might accept (C) while rejecting expressivism, for instance if one accepted a global deflationism about content as well as some kind of meta-normative descriptivism. Hence, both (A) and (C) are necessary to respect non-descriptivism.[5]

Here ends the general characterisation of conceptual role expressivism. In the remainder of this section, I examine three different versions of expressivist theories that explicitly embrace conceptual role semantics and explain how each version adheres to commitments (A), (B), and (C). I choose these particular theories as I take them to be representative examples of expressivist views that explicitly embrace conceptual role semantics. For ease of exposition, I have regimented the terminology to that used above.

The first example comes from Horwich (2010), who holds that to believe a proposition p is to accept a sentence that expresses p, where acceptance involves relying on that sentence in theoretical and practical reasoning. Horwich argues that the meaning-constituting property of a word is its property of having some core conceptual role. This core conceptual role, together with other factors such as the environment and the meaning-constituting roles of other words, explain when sentences containing the word are accepted and rejected (hence for Horwich, conceptual roles are *concept-first*, *subjectivist*, *naturalist*, and *solipsistic*). Thus, on this view, the propositional content of a belief is determined by the meaning-constituting properties of the components of its sentential object, together with its syntactic structure. Because Horwich denies that the meaning-constituting properties of words are relations between those words and what they stand for, he denies that *any* meaning-constituting properties determine a robustly representational content. Hence, his view respects commitment (C) by being globally non-representationalist. As an initial approximation, he then proposes the following conceptual role for the 'ought' of practical rationality (2010: 188):

> S believes that they ought to do X ↔ S is strongly inclined to do X
> S denies that they ought to do X ↔ S is not inclined to do X

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[5] An important part of this account is that (C) is a substantive and independent commitment. Kalderon (2005) examines and rejects a number of arguments that try to derive something like (C) from something like (A) and (B). However, if (C) is an independent commitment motivated on independent grounds, then such argument do not speak against conceptual role expressivism.

(Throughout, I use arrow notation to specify the transitions between mental states constitutive of the conceptual role in question.) Hence, Horwich's view respects both (A) and (B), as the core conceptual role for the ought of practical rationality does not specify any input conditions and is constitutively connected to an action-guiding attitude.

The next example comes from Köhler (2017). Köhler aims to provide a deflationary account of propositional content by providing an account of the non-representational function of *content attributions* that does not invoke any entities as the referents of 'that'-clauses. In a nutshell, Köhler's idea is that the sentence mentioned in a 'that'-clause serves as an *illustrative example* of certain "basic explanatory properties" of the belief being attributed (2017: 198). Specifically, the sentence's semantic properties allow it to serve as an illustrative example of the belief's *conceptual role*, where Köhler understands this as the subset of its total causal-functional role that relates to perceptual, inferential, and action-producing processes (hence for Köhler, conceptual roles are *thought-first*, *naturalist*, and *solipsistic*). Declarative sentences are then understood as codifying information about the conceptual role of the belief state they express. By explaining the role of content attributions without appealing to contents, Köhler's account is committed to (C). He then proposes that representational states are those whose conceptual roles include sensory input conditions but no direct relation to action production, and that conative states are those whose conceptual roles include no sensory input conditions but directly relate to action production. Although Köhler offers no specific conceptual roles for normative mental states, he suggests that normative judgments are conative states in the above sense. Hence, the account respects commitments (A) and (B). However, these conative states are nonetheless belief states in virtue of their having sufficiently rich inferential transitions to and from other belief states.

The final example comes from Sinclair (2018), who proposes that expressivists adopt the following conceptual role for the concept X IS ALL-THINGS-CONSIDERED BETTER FOR ME TO DO AT T THAN Y (hereafter BETTER) as that concept *B* such that:

> *CR*BETTER   S accepts $B(x,y,me,t) \rightarrow$ S has conditional intention to do x rather than y at t.[6]

If *CR*BETTER is the conceptual role for the normative concept *B*, it should be clear that it respects commitments (A) and (B). Sinclair then argues that by endorsing a deflationary view of truth-conditional content, we avoid any kind of view

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[6] This conceptual role is taken from Wedgwood (2001).

according to which CR_{BETTER} determines a robust normative property or relation as the referent of B. Sinclair's view therefore also respects (C).

I will return to each of these theories in a little more detail below. The point here is that despite their differences, at the core of each view is the idea that normative concepts are individuated by their non-representational, practical, core conceptual roles. As such, each view respects the defining commitments of conceptual role expressivism. Although these three examples by no means exhaust all possible versions of conceptual role expressivism, they nonetheless provide recent examples of expressivist views that make explicit appeal to conceptual role semantics. Moreover, given the wide variety of differing choice points, they show how different versions of conceptual role expressivism can respect these commitments in theoretically diverse ways. In the next section I will raise a challenge to conceptual role expressivism. Because I take the challenge to be fully general, I will articulate the challenge in as general terms as possible.

2. The challenge

Let a candidate concept be *defective* just in case it cannot meaningfully embed in complex thoughts and participate in genuine inference. The challenge for conceptual role expressivism is to explain why normative concepts are not a species of defective concepts. The challenge arises because normative concepts as conceived by conceptual role expressivism bear a number of similarities to other concepts that plausibly are defective. I will argue that without any explanation of why normative concepts are not defective, expressivists must accept either (i) that normative concepts are also defective, or (ii) that plausibly defective concepts are in fact not defective. While perhaps early emotivists might happily accept (i) (Ayer sometimes describes moral concepts as 'proto-concepts'), both claims are problematic. So expressivists need to explain why normative concepts are not defective. Before providing some examples of defective concepts, however, let me say something more about what it is for a concept to be defective.

First, I am only here concerned with defectiveness in the narrow sense defined above. There are, of course, a number of other ways in which a concept might be described as "defective", but these will not be examined here. Second, it is important to distinguish between the *property* of being defective and the *explanation* for why a concept is or is not defective. In targeting the phenomenon, I do not wish to presuppose any particular explanation of what makes concepts defective. Third, depending on one's view of concepts, one might maintain that a "defective concept" is in fact no concept at all. That is, one might think that

the class of concepts is not divided into those which are defective and those which are not. Rather, on this view, the capacity to participate in inference and embedding is a necessary condition for something's being a concept in the first place—a "concept" that lacks this capacity is a *spurious concept*. If this is right, the challenge for conceptual role expressivism is to explain why normative conceptual roles successfully individuate any concept whatsoever. While the correct formulation of the challenge is a substantive issue, the arguments discussed below apply *mutatis mutandis* to either formulation.[7] For ease of exposition and to keep the challenge as general as possible, I will continue to talk about defective concepts without taking a stand on whether defective concepts are genuine concepts that have the property of being defective, or whether they are spurious concepts, descriptions of which are merely a *façon de parler* and not ontologically committing.

With these qualifications out the way, I will now provide two examples of defective concepts. The main focus of the challenge will be the second example, but it will be helpful to first examine a more familiar one. The classic example comes from Prior's (1960) 'tonk' connective. Transposing Prior's example from the linguistic to the conceptual mode, suppose we define TONK as that concept T to possess which a subject S is disposed or committed to making the following transitions involving arbitrary propositions p and q:

*CR*TONK   S accepts $p \rightarrow$ S accepts pTq
            S accepts $pTq \rightarrow$ S accepts q

We can think of TONK as a kind of logical connective. *CR*TONK provides introduction and elimination rules for TONK in a similar manner to other logical connectives. However, it apparently follows from *CR*TONK that anyone who possesses the concept TONK can derive any arbitrary proposition from any other arbitrary proposition. But this is absurd. Perhaps there is some loose sense of 'inference' such that one could 'derive' q from p via TONK in that one can recognise the rules that individuate TONK and consciously follow the rules that lead from p to q. But this weak sense of recognising and following the rules specified by *CR*TONK is not plausibly sufficient for one to genuinely infer anything using TONK. So despite having a well-defined conceptual role, TONK is a defective concept.[8]

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[7] This issue might turn on whether one accepts a subjectivist or objectivist ontology of concepts.
[8] Warren (2015) argues that 'tonk' is not defective; rather, it simply renders the language in which it is introduced trivial. However, because I understand conceptual role semantics as a view of mental content rather than language, Warren's arguments cannot be straightforwardly applied here. In any case, 'p' and 'q' in *CR*TONK quantify over arbitrary propositions, not sentences of a language. For this reason, TONK as defined here does not result in triviality.

The important lesson here is that not just any conceptual role can be genuinely meaning-constituting. Call such a view *unrestricted* conceptual role semantics. The standard response to Prior's example is to embrace some kind of *restricted* conceptual role semantics, where the basic idea is to introduce additional constraints on which conceptual roles are genuinely meaning-constituting (e.g. Belnap 1962). We'll return to this distinction below. However, I'll leave aside any further discussion of TONK for two reasons. First, insofar as TONK presents a problem for conceptual role expressivism, it is because it presents a problem for conceptual role semantics in general, which I'm not here calling into question. Second, as a candidate logical connective, TONK differs in important ways to normative concepts as conceived by conceptual role expressivism. Specifically, I will argue below that the distinctive commitments of conceptual role expressivism raise problems quite different to those raised by TONK. If correct, this means that standard responses to TONK will not answer the challenge for conceptual role expressivism of defective concepts. So with a firmer grasp of the notion of a defective concept, let us now proceed to our second example.

The second example is a variant of Dreier's (1996) 'hiyo' predicate. I will first introduce the example as Drier presents it and then go on to explain its relevance to conceptual role expressivism. Suppose we use the word 'hiyo' to perform the speech act of *accosting*. Thus, by uttering 'Hiyo, Bob!' in Bob's presence, I thereby accost Bob. We might say that the meaning of 'hiyo' is constituted by this use. But this use does not constitute a meaning for 'hiyo' that allows it to meaningfully embed or participate in inference. For starters, 'hiyo'-sentences are not declaratives, so 'hiyo' lacks the necessary syntactic properties. However, this does not get to the heart of the matter. To see why, suppose we introduce the predicate 'is hiyo' whose meaning is constituted by our using the predicate to accost whatever it is predicated of. Thus, by uttering 'Bob is hiyo' in Bob's presence, I thereby accost Bob in virtue of the meaning of the sentence uttered. 'Hiyo'-sentences are syntactically well-formed. However, it is implausible that they can thereby meaningfully embed and participate in genuine inference. Plausibly, we have no conception of what a sentence like 'If Bob is hiyo, then a Dingo is near' means. So even if 'hiyo'-sentences are syntactically well-formed, its meaning-constituting use is not such to allow 'hiyo' to meaningfully embed and participate in genuine inference. As with 'tonk', 'hiyo' seems to provide a counterexample to a certain kind of unrestricted use-theoretic meta-semantics.

It might initially seem that conceptual role expressivism is isolated from Dreier's example. Conceptual role expressivism explains normative concepts in terms of certain transitions between mental states involving those concepts. By contrast, 'hiyo' is explained in terms of its performative role. As such, there is no reason to think that 'hiyo' expresses any concept whatsoever.

Granting this, however, it is easy to construct an example that mirrors Dreier's but is formulated at the level of concepts rather than predicates. For instance, let HIYO be that concept H to possess which a subject S is disposed or committed to accepting the following transitions:

CRHIYO   S wants to accost x → S accepts Hx
                 S does not want to accost x → S rejects Hx

So just as one would utter the sentence 'Bob is hiyo' if one wanted to accost Bob, if one possesses the concept HIYO, then one is disposed or committed accepting the thought BOB IS HIYO when one has a desire to accost Bob. CRHIYO provides clearly defined acceptance and rejection rules for when to accept and reject HIYO-thoughts. However, just as we have no conception of what the sentence 'If Bob is hiyo, then a dingo is near' means, we surely have no grasp of the thought IF BOB IS HIYO THEN A DINGO IS NEAR. Nor is it plausible that we could genuinely infer that a dingo is near from Bob being hiyo. So despite having a well-defined conceptual role, HIYO is a defective concept.[9]

HIYO presents a challenge because the conceptual role for HIYO bears a strong resemblance to the conceptual roles of normative concepts as conceived by conceptual role expressivism. After all, CRHIYO does not obviously specify any input conditions that implicate hiyo properties, relations, or states of affairs. It specifies an essential connection to conative states. And it does not obviously determine any kind of robustly representational content for HIYO-thoughts. We'll see below that things are a little more complicated than this initial comparison suggests. But hopefully the similarity to normative concepts is clear enough. The important point is that if HIYO is defective, then given the similarity, conceptual role expressivists owe us an explanation of why normative concepts are not defective. Assuming, that is, expressivists wish to vindicate our normative practices rather than debunk them. Hence, the challenge of defective concepts.

3. Responses

In this section, I examine and reject some possible responses to the challenge.

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[9] It has been suggested to me that the conceptual analogue of Dreier's 'hiyo' predicate is better thought of as a kind of mental accosting that one performs in thought. However, I'm sceptical that any such act exists. We might utter the words 'Hiyo, Bob' in thought, so to speak, while thinking of Bob in some way or other, perhaps imagining Bob as the addressee of our thought. But I see no sense in which this is genuinely an act of accosting.

3.1 Everyone's problem?

Insofar as HIYO presents a challenge to conceptual role expressivism, one might wonder whether this is because it presents a challenge to conceptual role semantics in general. More generally, it seems, any version of conceptual role semantics should provide some account of the difference between conceptual roles that bestow genuine meaning and those that do not. So one might think that the conceptual role expressivist is no worse off than any other conceptual role theorist. And although this would certainly count against conceptual role expressivism at the end of the day, my aim here is to assess whether expressivists would do well to adopt some form of conceptual role semantics *insofar* as it is an independently attractive framework. I am therefore bracketing questions about the overall viability of conceptual role semantics.

The problem with this response is that descriptivist conceptual role theories *do* have a way of answering the challenge. In the present context, we can think of descriptivist theories as providing a particular kind of restricted conceptual role semantics. Specifically, that for a conceptual role to be meaning-constituting, it has to fix a unique determinate reference for the concept it characterises. In other words, only conceptual roles that determine robustly representational content are meaning-constituting. In the remainder of this section, I'll explain how a descriptivist approach developed by Peacocke (1992) and Wedgwood (2007) can answer the challenge. Although the approach is unavailable to expressivists, its general structure will pave the way for the alternative solution proposed in section 4, so it will be worth dwelling on in a little more detail.

According to Peacocke and Wedgwood, any theory of possession conditions for a concept must be supplemented with a *determination theory* that explains how the reference of a concept is determined by its conceptual role. Among other things, a determination theory is meant to *rationalise* the transitions specified by a conceptual role, in that it explains why it is in a certain sense *appropriate* or *correct* for a subject to make those transitions. On this approach, if no suitable determination theory for a concept can be given, then the transitions specified by the conceptual role cannot be appropriately rationalised, meaning that the concept is defective. Peacocke and Wedgwood develop this idea in slightly different ways, so I will take each in turn.

For Peacocke (1992), a determination theory for a concept fixes that concept's reference by making the belief-forming practices mentioned in its conceptual role result in *true* beliefs and by making the inferences mentioned *truth-preserving*. Thus, suppose AND is that concept *&* to possess which a subject S finds the following inferences primitively compelling (i.e. not answerable to nor derivable from anything else):

CR_{AND} S accepts p and S accepts $q \rightarrow$ S accepts $p\&q$

S accepts $p\&q \rightarrow$ S accepts p

S accepts $p\&q \rightarrow$ S accepts q

Given its conceptual role, the determination theory for AND assigns as the reference of AND whatever makes the transitions mentioned in CR_{AND} truth-preserving—here the classical truth function of conjunction (Peacocke 1992: 18). Thus, it is rational to follow CR_{AND} because one preserves truth in one's beliefs by doing so.

On this view, a concept is defective if there is no determination theory that makes the transitions specified by its conceptual role truth-preserving or a true-belief-forming practice. This is arguably true of TONK (Peacocke 1992: 21).[10] However, expressivists deny that conceptual roles for normative concepts involve forming reliably true beliefs or making valid inferences. Instead, they claim that the possession conditions for normative concepts are exhausted by their role in guiding action. So this explanation of defectiveness will be of no use to expressivists.

Although no expressivist, Wedgwood (2007) also maintains that the possession conditions for normative concepts are exhausted by their action-guiding role. He therefore requires a broader conception than Peacocke of the role of a determination theory. For the 'ought' of all-things-considered practical normativity, Wedgwood (2007: 97) proposes that OUGHT is that concept O to possess which a subject is rationally committed to the following:

CR_{OUGHT} S accepts the first-person proposition $O_{<me, t>}(p) \rightarrow$ S makes p part of S's ideal plan about what to do at t.

Here, one's *ideal plan* is what would be one's plan if it were not affected by ignorance and uncertainty about what to do in the situation one is in at t; to make p part of one's plan is to adopt a plan that entails p. Because plans are not truth-apt, the correctness of the transition cannot be explained in terms of truth-preservation from the belief to the plan.[11]

Instead of truth, Wedgwood (2007: 100) appeals to the "point" or "purpose" of the attitudes in question and to the corresponding rational norms that govern

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[10] If 'tonk' were trivial, this need not be true—see fn.8.

[11] Although some might argue that plans *are* truth-apt, a determination theory that assigns a semantic value to OUGHT based on the truth-preservation from the belief to the plan would assign quite a different semantic value to that of our actual concept, and so $A(O)$ would plausibly individuate a distinct concept if we took its correctness conditions to consist in truth-preservation.

them. Thus, while "getting things right" in believing is having a true belief, getting things right in planning consists in something else, such as having "*genuinely choiceworthy*" plans (ibid: 101). Wedgwood then argues that if being genuinely choiceworthy is what governs our plans, then the determination theory for *CR*ᴏᴜɢʜᴛ should assign to *O* the logically weakest property of a proposition in virtue of which it is correct to make that proposition a part of one's ideal plan. Thus whereas Peacocke's theory predicts that *O* is defective, Wedgwood's theory does not. At least, it does not insofar as there is some property in virtue of which it is correct to make a proposition a part of one's ideal plan.

Is there any semantic assignment for ʜɪʏᴏ that would rationalise *CR*ʜɪʏᴏ? I can see two possible ways of answering this question. The first simply maintains that there are no relevant norms governing our desires to accost people and our beliefs about who is hiyo that would determine a semantic assignment for ʜɪʏᴏ. If this is correct, then Wedgwood's theory predicts that ʜɪʏᴏ is defective—there is nothing it could refer to that would rationalise *CR*ʜɪʏᴏ. The second answer is that we can provide a determination theory for ʜɪʏᴏ, but one that shows ʜɪʏᴏ to be quite different to how we originally conceived it to be. To provide such a theory, we can first note that one "gets things right" in believing that x is hiyo when one desires to accost x. Given that this is a transition *to* a belief, we can ask what property would make this process a true belief-forming practice? Well, presumably the property of *my desiring to accost x*. Thus, on this account, ʜɪʏᴏ turns out to be an ordinary descriptive concept. If this is correct, then ʜɪʏᴏ is actually not a defective concept, but our explanation for why it is not defective is unproblematic. And, importantly for our purposes, it in no way helps the expressivist to explain why normative concepts aren't defective, because the same explanation is not available for normative concepts as conceived by expressivism.

My aim here has not been to claim that these explanations are correct or without problems of their own. Rather, it has been to show that there are existing strategies for dealing with defective concepts that make reference to the representational properties of concepts. Because expressivists deny that normative concepts are representational in this sense, they cannot pursue this strategy in any form. So the challenge to explain defective concepts is particularly pressing for expressivists. They must look elsewhere.

3.2 Deflationary responses

Each version of conceptual role expressivism examined above embraces some kind of minimalism or deflationism about content. One might therefore wonder

whether there is some kind of deflationary response to the challenge available. I examine each theory in turn.

Sinclair

Sinclair does not acknowledge the problem of defective concepts. But he does acknowledge the need for a determination theory in order to account for certain platitudes about how the content of a thought is determined by the contents of its component parts. In order to avoid descriptivism, Sinclair instead proposes a "deflationary determination theory". This begins with the observation that the truth conditions of a thought can be given by the deflationary scheme: the thought *Fx* is true iff x is F. Given this, he then argues (2018: 110):

> The semantic value of the predicative concept **F** is its contribution it makes to the truth-conditions of the thoughts in which it appears. Then, we can say, for a thought of the form {**x is** ...}, the contribution made by a predicative concept **F**, when substituted into the '...' position, is to generate a sentence which is true iff. x is F. So **F** makes the following contribution to truth-values: it generates a thought which is true when applied to things that are F and a thought that is false when applied to things that are not F (note the disquoting here). Since 'semantic value' is just contribution to truth-conditions, this is **F's** (deflationary) semantic value: the semantic value of **F** is the set of F-things.

Lest this account sound overly referential, Sinclair assures us that it is not because it does not necessitate that predicative concepts refer to robust worldly properties.

For the sake of argument, let's grant that Sinclair's proposal is suitably deflationary and captures all the relevant platitudes. The question is whether it can explain defectiveness. It seems to me that it cannot. First, deflationary semantic notions cannot play *any* explanatory role in a theory of meaning or content. Therefore, they cannot play a role in explaining defectiveness. To illustrate this point, recall that Sinclair endorses:

CR_{BETTER}   S accepts $B(x,y,me,t) \rightarrow$ S has conditional intention to do x rather than y at t.

If the semantic value of a predicative concept is its extension, then the semantic value of *B* is the set of tuples <*x,y,me,t*> that generate true thoughts when taken as the argument of *B*. However, on Sinclair's view, there is no robust worldly property or relation that explains why the members of this set generate true

thoughts when taken as the argument of *B*. Thus, given Sinclair's deflationism, there is *nothing* in virtue of which this set generates true thoughts. Consequently, there is nothing in virtue of which this semantic value rationalises *CR*BETTER.

Instead, the resulting view looks like a version of unrestricted conceptual role semantics. For there is nothing to rule out providing a deflationary determination theory for concepts like HIYO. Recall:

*CR*HIYO   S wants to accost x → S accepts *H*x
           S does not want to accost x → S rejects *H*x

If the reference of a predicative concept is its extension, then the extension of *H* will be the set of H-things, i.e. the set of individuals that determine a true thought when *H* is applied to them. There is no worldly property of *being hiyo* that explains why the members of this set generates true thoughts when taken as the argument of *H*. But neither is there a worldly relation of *being better than*. BETTER and HIYO are on all fours. So Sinclair's deflationary determination theory lacks the resources to explain why normative concepts are non-defective and why HIYO is defective.

Köhler

Because Köhler endorses a thought-first version of conceptual role theory according to which whole thoughts are primary rather than their constituents, the challenge will take a slightly different form. On this view, the challenge can be reformulated in terms of explaining what distinguishes defective mental states from non-defective mental states. Specifically, the class of mental states characterised by a concept F can be individuated as those mental states conventionally expressed by atomic 'F'-sentences. This is because on Köhler's view, sentences provide illustrative examples of the core functional roles of the mental states they conventionally express. The challenge of defective concepts is then to explain why the mental states expressed by sentences of the form 'S ought to do x' are not defective whereas those expressed by sentences of the form 'S is hiyo' are defective.

Like Sinclair, Köhler does not discuss the possibility of defective concepts or the challenge it might pose to conceptual role expressivism. However, it does not seem that his account has the resources to explain defective concepts. First, note how on Köhler's account, logical and semantic relations between declarative sentences earn their keep in codifying functional relations between mental states that are expressed by such sentences. Next, note that it is surely *possible* that there could be a functionally defined state such that a subject comes

to accept *Bob is hiyo* on the basis of the subject's desire to accost Bob, and which also causally interacts with other mental states that preserves the isomorphism of the 'logical' relations between 'hiyo'-sentences and other sentences. If this is a genuine possibility, then 'hiyo' can meaningfully embed and participate in genuine inference just as much as any normative predicate. So Köhler's account fails to explain why HIYO is defective or why normative concepts are not.

Horwich

Recall that for Horwich, to believe that I ought to do x is to accept the sentence 'I ought to do x'. The challenge for Horwich is then to explain why we can genuinely accept 'ought'-sentences but not 'hiyo'-sentences. Unlike the previous two examples, Horwich does acknowledge the challenge from defective concepts. His solution is to introduce an additional constraint on acceptance that explains why HIYO is defective and why normative concepts are not.

To identify the relevant constraint, Horwich begins with the observation that when one person genuinely accepts something and someone else accepts its negation, there is a *disagreement*: "there is conflict, a clash, a feeling that the other person is somehow in bad shape." (2010: 182) This seems to be something lacking in the hiyo-case. Suppose I want to accost Bob and come to accept that Bob is hiyo. Next, suppose you do not want to accost Bob and come to accept that Bob is not hiyo. Given CR_{HIYO}, we are both competent users of HIYO who have 'correctly' come to form our beliefs according to the meaning-constituting rules governing 'hiyo'. However, it seems implausible to suppose that there is any real sense in which we disagree about whether Bob is hiyo. Perhaps if we're walking together we might disagree over whether to accost to Bob. But the disagreement here seems to be in attitude or plan rather than in the belief itself. From this observation, Horwich then proposes that "the conflict associated with contradictory beliefs consists in their potential, through inference, to engender conflicting desires and decisions." (2010: 183) Call this the *disagreement constraint*.

Beliefs concerning taste aside, the disagreement constraint seems fairly plausible. The problem, however, is that constraint is best explained by the inferential properties of beliefs and not the other way around. This is because any belief whatsoever can engender practical conflict *given other suitable premises to reason from*. Imagine the following scenario: (i) Sophie wants to accost George and so comes to accept that George is hiyo; (ii) Sophie has the bizarre belief that people that are hiyo demand a certain kind of respect where this involves frustrating the desires of those who believe of someone who is hiyo that they are not hiyo; (iii) David does not want to accost George and so comes to accept

that George is not hiyo. In this scenario, contradictory beliefs about whether George is hiyo engender conflicting desires and decisions in virtue of their capacity to participate in inference. So Horwich's theory incorrectly predicts that we can genuinely accept 'hiyo'-sentences.

Of course, 'hiyo'-sentences don't actually engender practical conflict in this way. But that's because 'hiyo'-sentences cannot participate in genuine inference. Horwich's proposal claims that a sentence can participate in genuine inference in virtue of its capacity to engender practical conflict when it and its negation are accepted. But the above example shows that this gets things the wrong way around. Rather, accepting a sentence and its negation can engender practical conflict in virtue of their capacity to participate in genuine inference. So Horwich's account fails to explain why normative concepts are not defective and why HIYO is. All three deflationary accounts therefore fail to answer the challenge.

3.3 Biting the bullet?

I have assumed throughout that HIYO is a defective concept. All of the responses discussed above accept this assumption as a premise and try to explain the difference between HIYO and normative concepts. Could this assumption be challenged? In other words, could the conceptual role expressivist simply claim that HIYO, though weird, is not a defective concept? If this is right, then it's at least not obvious that the expressivist faces any challenge explaining defective concepts, as the particular challenge for expressivism was motivated by the similarities between normative concepts and HIYO.

We might develop this thought in the following way. First, suppose we adopt an inferentialist view of the logical connectives like the material conditional that says something like the following: to believe *if p then q* is to be committed to not accepting *p* while also rejecting *q* (compare Blackburn 1988). Given our account of what it is to accept and reject HIYO-thoughts, we arguably do have a conception of how HIYO can meaningfully embed and participate in genuine inference, at least for truth-functional connectives like the material conditional. Specifically, to accept an embedded HIYO-thought is to be committed to holding certain combinations of HIYO-thoughts and other attitudes.

Further, we might provide a debunking explanation of the intuition that HIYO is a defective concept as follows. Perhaps HIYO seems weird simply because *we* are not HIYO-people. We do not possess any such concept and would have no use for one. This contrasts with normative concepts, which expressivists claim earn their keep in motivating actions and coordinating attitudes. However, just because it is hard to imagine a use for HIYO it does not follow that there is no possible use. Perhaps we can imagine a community which for some reason

attaches the utmost significance to people's desires about who they accost. Surely such a community is possible, and it seems at least more plausible that they might have use for a HIYO-like concept. Arguably, therefore, HIYO is not defective.

I think that there are at least three things that can be said in response to this line of argument. First, one might worry that embracing HIYO will overgeneralise the quasi-realist ambitions of most contemporary expressivists. Typically, contemporary expressivists aim to vindicate our talk about normative truth, facts, properties, and so on by providing deflationary interpretations of these notions. However, if we accept that HIYO is on all fours with normative concepts, then we should expect to be able to provide similar interpretations of hiyo truth, facts, properties, and so on. Of course, *we* might not care to vindicate these notions, but it does not follow that such notions *could* not be vindicated by or on behalf of those (possible) subjects who possess the concept. However, that there are vindicatory explanations to be had of these notions seems much less plausible than for normative concepts. Perhaps one might reject expressivism's quasi-realist ambitions, but I think this is a significant cost to those sympathetic to expressivism.

Second, one might worry that the account of HIYO embedding provided above begs the question. The account relied on a certain view of logical connectives according to which to believe *if p then q* is to be committed to not accept *p* while rejecting *q*. The idea then was that we can straightforwardly explain hiyo-embedding by substituting a 'hiyo'-sentence in place of 'p' or 'q'. However, this account presupposes that we can genuinely accept and reject HIYO-thoughts. But this is the very claim that needs to be established. So it is not clear that this response is entitled to account of HIYO-embedding (compare Woods 2017: 231f). However, whether or not this does in fact beg the question might depend on thorny issues concerning where the burden of proof lies for showing whether HIYO is or is not defective.

Regardless, surely not just *any* candidate constitutive acceptance conditions will individuate a concept. Surely there must be *some* general constraints on what kind of acceptance conditions can individuate non-defective concepts. So even if we are entitled to assume that HIYO is non-defective, it still seems that we are owed some account of what makes it the case that certain conceptual roles individuate meaningful concepts whereas others do not. One might respond that all that matters is whether we could in fact use a concept according to its constitutive acceptance conditions. However, this would seem to reject any distinction between defective and non-defective concepts. In effect, this seems to debunk the claim that conceptual role determines content, which, as we saw, some see as platitudinous. The resulting view therefore seems closer to a kind of meaning or content scepticism. I won't try to argue against such a view here,

but it seems a high price to pay for embracing conceptual role expressivism.[12] At the very least, it would be interesting if conceptual role expressivists are forced to adopt this kind of view.[13]

4. An alternative solution

Having rejected a number of responses to the challenge of defective concepts, I will finish by briefly sketching a line of response that I think is more promising. Specifically, I will argue that expressivists can answer the challenge by providing a non-deflationary yet non-representational determination theory for normative concepts. The idea is to provide some substantive account of the kind of content determined by normative concepts compatible with expressivism that rationalises their conceptual roles. Defective concepts are those for which no such determination theory can be given. However, as we will see, this approach leaves conceptual role expressivism a less interesting and distinctive position than it might have initially seemed.

It is often assumed that expressivists must deny that normative attitudes have normative content in anything other than a deflationary sense. Implicit in this assumption is the thought that any substantive notion of content must be *representational* in the sense that it represents or constitutes some way reality might be. However, a much overlooked possibility is that expressivists adopt some theory of normative content that is *non-representational* (see Schroeder 2013; Brown 2019). If we have some substantive notion of normative content, then this can play an explanatory role in an expressivist theory of normative concepts. Specifically, it can help to explain why conceptual roles for normative concepts are genuinely meaning constituting whereas those of defective concepts are not.

Consider again Wedgwood's conceptual role for OUGHT:

CR_{OUGHT}   S accepts the first-person proposition $O_{<me, t>}(p) \rightarrow$ S makes p part of S's ideal plan about what to do at t.

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[12] On what is essentially the view under discussion, Jared Warren writes: "unrestricted inferentialism has been—as far as I am aware—rejected by every single philosopher post-Carnap." (2015: 5) See *op. cit.* for defence, though further argument would be needed for it to apply at the level of mental content, given our assumption of the relative priority of thought over language—see fn.8.

[13] Another possibility might be to bite the bullet and maintain that normative concepts are defective. For something along these lines, see Shiller (2018).

For Wedgwood, to accept a proposition is to accept a certain representation of reality as being the case. But what if there was some other way to understand normative propositions and what it is to accept them? For example, consider Gibbard's (2003) proposal that we model the contents of normative attitudes in terms of the sets of plans ruled out by those attitudes. Specifically, where a *hyperplan h* specifies a maximally coherent contingency plan for what to do in any possible situation, the content of the proposition $O_{<me, t>}(p)$ can be specified as the set of $<w, h>$ pairs in which p is prescribed by h in w at t.

We then need some story about what it is to *accept* such a proposition. This story should not *identify* accepting $O_{<me, t>}(p)$ with making p part of one's ideal plan. If it did, then CR_{OUGHT} would specify a transition from a mental state to itself and would fail to individuate a unique concept. But there are reasons for rejecting a straightforward identification anyway. For instance, we rely on normative propositions in theoretical reasoning as well as in practical reasoning, which is not true of our plans. And presumably it is possible to plan to do things against our better judgment. However this story goes, the important point is that the proposed semantic assignment seems to make sense of the conceptual role for OUGHT in a way that explains why it is non-defective. Roughly, the idea is that making p part of one's plans is rational in virtue of one's accepting $<w, h>$ contents that prescribe p. Further, given our understanding of hiyo-beliefs from CR_{OUGHT}, we have no conception of the proposition accepted in believing that someone is hiyo that we could appeal to in order to explain why it is correct or appropriate to believe that someone is hiyo when we desire to accost them (modulo the complications discussed in section 3.1). So this account predicts that HIYO is defective because its conceptual role does not determine any kind of content that could be used to explain its conceptual role.[14]

If we adopt this strategy for answering the challenge, however, we see that conceptual role expressivism becomes a less interesting position that it might have first appeared. For we have shifted much of the explanatory burden from the theory of possession conditions to the determination theory and the theory of normative judgment. In other words, it is no longer the conceptual role part of the theory that is doing the heavy lifting but our account of normative propositions and what it is to accept them. Where we were looking to conceptual role semantics to explain normative content, the bulk of the explanation has come from elsewhere. Nonetheless, I think this is exactly what

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[14] One might worry that the notion of rationality employed here is normative and thus one that expressivists are not entitled to use in their theory of normative concepts. While I cannot argue the claim here, I think that expressivists should simply reject that the relevant notion of rationality is normative—see Ridge (2014: chapter 8). Alternatively, however, one might instead attempt provide an expressivist meta-theory of conceptual role expressivism to reconcile the use of normative notions within the theory of normative concepts—see Gibbard (2012).

we should expect. This is because conceptual role expressivism is typically couched as a *meta-semantic* theory or a theory of content *determination*. This leaves open the semantic question of how we should understand the contents of normative concepts. This is easy to overlook because conceptual role expressivists tend to be deflationists about content, meaning that there is no explanatory role for contents. However, if we reject deflationism, then contents can play an explanatory role.

As well as being less interesting, conceptual role expressivism also becomes less distinctive. Although expressivists might not appeal to a conceptual role framework to explain normative concepts, I doubt few would deny that normative concepts should be explained in terms of their distinctive action-guiding role in practical deliberation. If we accept that expressivists need in addition some further theory of meaning or content to explain normative concepts, then this might seem to be compatible with a wide variety of expressivist theories of normative concepts. This isn't to say that expressivists should not embrace conceptual role semantics. If conceptual role semantics is an independently attractive view of content determination, or if conceptual role semantics provides useful resources to formulate expressivist claims about normative concepts, then expressivists have every reason to embrace it. However, in doing so, the expressivist does not discharge the usual explanatory burdens that come with developing an expressivist theory of normative thought and discourse.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, I have examined expressivist theories that appeal to conceptual role accounts of content to explain normative thought. Although many contemporary expressivists express sympathies with conceptual role semantics, there is no consensus about what combining these two approaches amounts to and what commitments their conjunction entails. My first aim was to provide a fully general characterisation of conceptual role expressivism that unites these otherwise disparate views. Additionally, this characterisation provides a general framework in which expressivists can develop their theory of normative thought, making explicit recourse to the various choice points discussed above. This shows that the conceptual role framework has room for many different versions of conceptual role expressivism in addition to those theories discussed above. While I have expressed scepticism that the conceptual role framework alone has the resources to explain normative concepts, I have not argued that this cannot be a fruitful framework for expressivists.

However, I have also argued that conceptual role expressivism cannot be the whole story of normative thought. Conceptual role expressivists owe us an

explanation of how normative conceptual roles can determine genuinely propositional content given commitments (A), (B), and (C). This was highlighted by the comparison with defective concepts like ʜɪʏᴏ, but the point is a more general one. Conceptual role semantics might provide a fruitful framework for expressivists to develop theories of normative thought. But the framework itself should not be seen as the solution to any problem or set of problems. All the puzzling features of normative thought as conceived by expressivists stand in no less need of explanation once we adopt a conceptual role view.[15]

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