*draft date 27 May 2013*

**Attitudinal Expressivism and Logical Pragmatism in Metaethics[[1]](#footnote-1)\***

Matthew Chrisman

University of Edinburgh

**1. Introduction**

Expressivists in metaethics hold that there is a philosophically important difference between the kinds of mental states expressed by our use of normative vocabulary and the mental states expressed by our use of other vocabularies paradigmatically caught up in the practice of referring to and describing pieces of reality. Typically expressivists think that someone who does not implicitly track this difference does not completely understand the meaning of the target vocabulary. Hence, expressivism is usually seen as an *anti-descriptivist* theory of the meaning of words like ‘good’, ‘wrong’, or ‘ought’.

In support of this view, expressivists typically argue that, by claiming that normative sentences express non-representational mental states, such as preferences and plans, they avoid any metaphysical requirement to posit normative properties in reality that are picked out by normative vocabulary or to explain how we might cognitively track such properties in regulating our normative thought and discourse or acquiring normative knowledge. Moreover, expressivists typically claim to make better sense than competing descriptivist views of the distinctive role that the thoughts expressed by normative sentences play in motivating action. However, expressivists are often criticized for committing to an overall semantics that does not live up to the constraints of compositionality operative in all serious attempts to explain the relation between the meaning of whole sentences and their parts. Moreover, many philosophers harbor further worries about whether expressivism can really make sense of normative reasoning, especially its pretentions to sometimes reaching objectively correct answers to normative questions.

We might, of course, debate whether the advantages expressivists claim are indeed advantages, and whether their view has them. But I shall begin here by taking them for granted in order to scrutinize the idea that the expressivist’s anti-descriptivism undermines a plausible compositional semantics. This is an old criticism. I see it as the core challenge in the well-known Frege-Geach Problem. However, it has been recently renewed and expanded by Schroeder’s influential book *Being For[[2]](#footnote-2)*. In response to this, I shall here suggest that contemporary discussions of expressivism in metaethics tend to run together two quite different views, and that only one of them is subject to the objection about compositional semantics which Schroeder articulates. Having distinguished the two versions of expressivism and conceded the first to Schroeder’s objection, I want to go on to suggest that those sympathetic to the second sort of expressivism might improve their account of normative vocabulary and the way it figures in reasoning by making what may seem like a somewhat surprising comparison between normative vocabulary and logical vocabulary. I shall argue, that is, that this comparison brings into view the initial steps towards a third anti-descriptivist view in metaethics, which we may see as a pragmatist improvement on the second version of expressivism.

**2. The Semantic Problem with Proto-Expressivism**

Almost all expressivists and their emotivist, prescriptivist, projectivist, noncognitivist forbearers[[3]](#footnote-3) will agree that there is some canonical semantic account of the contents of matter-of-factual sentences in terms of something like the propositions they express, which determine their truth-conditions. For example,

 (1) Sally seems to help the needy.

 (2) It is not the case that Sally seems to help the needy.

will be said to express propositions, determining the conditions under which they are true. The controversy starts when expressivists turn to normative sentences like

 (3) Sally ought to help the needy.

 (4) It’s not the case that Sally ought to help the needy.

For although, on the surface, these sentences look to be very similar to (1) and (2), proto-expressivists traditionally denied that the same kind of semantic explanation applies to them. Some proto-expressivists suggested that these sentences don’t have semantic contents at all but only emotive significance, others suggested that these sentences are like imperatives in having satisfaction conditions rather than truth conditions, still others simply denied that these sentences are truth-apt.

Whatever the particulars, any such bifurcated approach seems like it is going to have no hope at all of systematically explaining how we compose the semantic value of sentences that logically mix normative and matter-of-factual elements, e.g.

(5) Either Sally seems to help the needy or it’s not the case that she ought to help the needy.

This is a clunky sentence of English, but it surely has some meaning which is a systematic function of the meanings of (1) and (4). Moreover, part of the whole point of semantics is to systematically assign semantic values to sentences and their parts in a way that lays the foundations for explaining various phenomena, such as the equivalence, inconsistency, and entailment relations between sentences; sentential ambiguities; grammatically well-formed but meaningless sentences; and the way finite language users acquire competence with (apparently) infinitely productive languages like English as quickly as they do. From the point of view of this project, we’d need very strong reason to think that the style of semantic explanation appropriate for (3) and (4) is radically different from the style of semantic explanation appropriate for (1) and (2). After all, they all look to be linguistically very similar.

In traditional theories of meaning as well as many contemporary semantic theories, the notion of a *proposition* provides the framework in which to pursue explanations of such semantic phenomena. The core idea is that *all* meaningful declarative sentences should be said to express a proposition that we could potentially represent with logical or at least syntactic operations on the contents of the simple singular terms and predicates. It’s controversial how to articulate these propositions, or whether the notion of a proposition is best suited to play this theoretical role, but for the sake of simplicity here, I’ll abstract away from this controversy and assume that the semantic values of whole declarative sentences are functions from worlds to truth values. Hence, the semantic value of (1) might be modeled as a function, which gives the value T iff Sally seems to help the needy in the world in which it is being evaluated. In the familiar way, then, the semantic value of (2) would then be represented as a function, which gives the value T iff it is not the case that Sally seems to help the needy in the relevant world. However, if we model the semantic values of (1) and (2) this way, it seems that we’d better model the semantic values of (3) and (4) in a parallel fashion. Otherwise it become utterly mysterious how to model the semantic value of (5); and we’d also have to develop brand new explanations of all of the semantic phenomena that seem to be shared by normative and matter-of-factual sentences.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Some will object, however, that although (1)-(2) and (3)-(4) seem similar on the surface, the whole point of the proto-expressivist’s denying that the latter sentences express propositions is to reject these appearances on metaethical grounds. But how then shall we model the semantic value of a mixed sentence like (5), and how plausible are the alternative explanations of all of the apparently general semantic phenomena that a semantics which assigns propositional objects to all declarative sentences explains so well? I think one strand in recent metaethical debate conceives of expressivism as an answer to this challenge.

**3. Type-1 Expressivism and Schroder’s Criticism**

Although we might want to introduce various bells and whistles, distilled to its essence the first way to be an expressivist involves endorsing two controversial but independently motivated ideas. First, one embraces a distinction inspired by Hume’s moral psychology between two basic kinds of mental states: belief-like and desire-like states. These are assumed to play fundamentally different functional roles in motivation to action. They have what is sometimes called a “difference in direction of fit” with the world – one purports to represent the way the world is, the other doesn’t represent the way the world is but sets a goal capable of engaging our wills. Second, one argues that the mistake in proto-expressivist views was precisely their commitment to a truth-conditionalist semantics for matter-of-factual sentences but something fundamentally different for normative sentences. Instead, we should endorse a global “ideationalist” alternative to the standard truth-conditionalist approach to semantics. That is to say that, rather than seeking a systematic way to assign anything like abstract propositions, which determine truth-conditions, to each meaningful declarative sentence of the language, the expressivist seeks a systematic way to assign a *mental state type* or “idea” or “thought” to each sentence of the language.

Such an ideationalist approach to semantics isn’t by itself inconsistent with a truth-conditionalist approach. If, for each declarative sentence S, the mental state type linked to it is the *belief* (or “thought”) that S, then ideationalism could be seen as an adjunct to the truth-conditionalist approach; the assertion of a sentence S would then be said to express the belief that p, which explains why the truth-conditions determined by p represent the content of S. If we understand the ideationalist thought in this way, ideationalism provides the means by which we link sentences to their truth-conditions – not an alternative to this link.

However, as I understand things anyway, one hope some expressivists have had in combining Humeanism about the psychology of motivation with a global ideationalist semantics is that we might draw a philosophically interesting distinction in meaning between normative and matter-of-factual sentences, while nevertheless pursuing a unified, albeit non-traditional, approach to assigning semantic values to normative and matter-of-factual sentences. To achieve this, one must reject the conception of ideationalism as an adjunct to the truth-conditionalist approach – one must see it as an alternative which, for some sentences S, treats their assertion as expressing some non-belief state such as a motivational attitude. Perhaps these can still be though of as “thoughts”, but the first kind of expressivist will insist that they are not thoughts whose propositional contents match the propositional contents of the sentences semantically linked to them.

I don’t know if it’s fair to attribute the first way to be an expressivist to any philosopher actually claiming the mantel of “expressivism” in print – at least not in the bald form I’ve presented above – but I do think this captures a dominant way that expressivism has been conceived in contemporary metaethics. Moreover, it’s clearly what Schroeder has in mind in his recently influential criticism of expressivism.[[5]](#footnote-5) In *Being For*, he makes several subtle and ingenious proposals on behalf of what I’ll call *type-1 expressivists*; these are meant to improve their claim to be able assign mental state types as semantic contents in at least as systematic as truth-conditionalist semantics assign propositional contents. Ultimately, however, Schroeder argues that any view of this kind faces a fundamental problem.[[6]](#footnote-6)

To begin to see why he thinks this, reconsider our examples of normative sentences:

(3) Sally ought to help the needy.

(4) It’s not the case that Sally ought to help the needy.

but now add to this a third sentence generated by putting the negation in a different place in the logical form of the original sentence:

(6) Sally ought not to help the needy.

If the basic idea behind expressivism is that a normative sentence like (3) get its semantic content from the fact that it conventionally expresses not a belief-like representation of the way the world is but rather something some desire-like attitude towards Sally’s helping the needy, then Schroeder suggests that we ask a question like this: How do we assign contents to (4) and (6)? Assume, for the moment for the sake of concreteness, that we think of (3) as getting its content from the fact that it conventionally expresses approval of Sally’s helping the needy. Then, it’s clear that an expressivist will want to say that (6) gets its content from the fact that it conventionally expresses something like approval of Sally’s *not* helping the needy. So far, so good – but what now about (4)? We might be tempted to say that (4) expresses approval of Sally’s not helping the needy. But it’s not plausible that (4) expresses approval of Sally’s not helping the needy, since one can deny that something ought to be done without approving of not doing it. In light of this, we might be tempted to say that (4) expresses something like *toleration* of Sally’s not helping the needy. But, although this is more plausible than the previous suggestion and it may explain why people who accept (4) tend to behave differently from people who accept (3), Schroeder insists that it doesn’t explain why (4) is *logically* inconsistent with (3). His idea is that approval and toleration may stand in some sort of normative or practical tension, but it’s not logically inconsistent to disapprove of and tolerate the same thing. Yet, as we saw in §2, a core part of what semantic theories are supposed to help us explain is why sentences which differ like (3) and (4) do stand in certain semantic relations, such as being logically inconsistent.

The reason Schroeder thinks this is a significant theoretical cost for expressivists is that their competitors don’t have this problem. A descriptivist can agree that, at the level of language, normative and nonnormative sentences act alike in their expressive potentials, but they’ll insist that, at the level of mind, the kind of mental states expressed are also alike. That is, they’ll say that all three sentences express a single general kind of attitude – belief – towards three logically distinct propositions. Sentence (3) expresses the belief that one ought to help the needy, sentence (4) expresses the belief that it is not the case that one ought to help the needy, and sentence (9) expresses the belief that one ought not to help the needy. And sentences (3) and (4) are logically inconsistent just in case the beliefs they express are logically inconsistent, which they are since their propositional contents are logically inconsistent. So, it looks like the standard truth-conditionalist semantics will have an easy time with these sentences, whereas things look much more difficult for expressivists. Schroeder calls this the “Negation Problem” and he argues that many of the more sophisticated things expressivists have wanted to say about the states of mind expressed by sentences like these run into versions of the same problem and, moreover, even some of the sophisticated things that expressivists could say to get around the problem (with the help of his suggested improvements) land them very quickly in new problems for assigning semantic values in a compositionally systematic way.

The details of this argument are nuanced and complex, and Schroeder does a better job explaining them than I could. So, I won’t reconstruct his argument any further here but rather quote his final conclusion:

Recall that much of the initial appeal of expressivism was that since moral language and descriptive language work in the same way, there are no real puzzles for expressivism in the philosophy of language – only an explanatory project in the philosophy of mind…What we’ve seen, is that this idea is right – sort of. It is right that a view according to which normative language and descriptive language work in the same way can solve a lot of the traditional problems of noncognitivism. But the idea is also sort of wrong. None of these advantages come by taking what we know about descriptive language and applying it to normative language – they all require drawing progressively more radical conclusions about how ordinary descriptive language works. That is one of my most important morals for this book. It is not, I think, an entirely new moral, but I’ve done my best to make it vivid, and I think that unlike previous treatments, my observations follow from *a fully general understanding of what expressivism must be like*.[[7]](#footnote-7)

In spite of being sympathetic with much of the argument preceding it, I think this conclusion is only partially right.

What I think is right is that, insofar as expressivists are trying to develop an ideationalist alternative to the standard truth-conditionalist semantics, which treats a fundamental psychological distinction between belief-like and desire-like states of mind as relevant to the semantic assignment of compositionally articulable semantic values, they are going to have to embrace a number of ideas about how language works, which look radical and undermotivated from the point of view of standard semantic theory.[[8]](#footnote-8) Because of this, I think Schroeder’s argument represents a serious challenge to any expressivist who follows the type-1 template for expressivism.

However, I think Schroeder is wrong to think his conclusion follows from a fully general understanding of what expressivism must be like. For one thing, as he acknowledges, his argument doesn’t apply to “ecumenical” versions of the expressivist project, which attempt to give an ideationalist semantics for normative and nonnormative claims but treat the former as interestingly different in that they express a hybrid belief-desire state.[[9]](#footnote-9) I suspect (but will not argue here) that more nuanced but essentially similar challenges face an ideationalist version of the ecumenicalist project.[[10]](#footnote-10) But, more importantly for my purposes to follow, I don’t think Schroeder has shown why expressivists *must* endorse an ideationalist approach to semantics as an alternative the default truth-conditionalist approach semantics. There remains, I shall now argue, an alternative non-ideationalist way to be an expressivist in metaethics.

**4. Type-2 Expressivism**

Recall that, as I’m conceiving of things, type-1 expressivism involves endorsing two controversial but independently motivated ideas: the Humean distinction between belief-like and desire-like states of mind and the non-traditional ideationalist approach to compositional semantics in contrast to a more standard truth-conditionalist approach. In contrast, what I am thinking of as *type-2 expressivism* involves endorsing two *different* controversial but independently motivated ideas. First, one embraces functional pluralism at the level of concepts and thoughts – that is, a view about the mind which recognizes not only cognitive representations of reality and pressures on practical motivation but also several other functional kinds of mental states, such as degrees of belief (for probability judgments), openness to a possibility (for epistemic possibility judgments), limitations on conceivability (for alethic modal judgments), expectations (for causal judgments), etc.[[11]](#footnote-11) Here the inspiration is as much Hume (or Kant, Frege, Ramsey, Wittgenstein, Sellars) on various kinds of *modality*, as on morality. Then, second, one argues that the standard truth-conditionalist approach to compositional semantics is perfectly available to any expressivist who is willing to abandon a metaphysically inflationary interpretation of the core theoretical terms of semantic theory (mainly: “proposition”, “truth condition”, “deontation”, “predication”).[[12]](#footnote-12) That is, one endorses a form of minimalism about the metaphysical purport of semantic vocabulary.

I think this allows for an easy answer to the problem of systematically modeling the semantic values of (the parts of) normative and matter-of-factual sentences, which is at the heart of both the original semantic problem for expressivism’s forbearers and Schroeder’s critique of expressivism. At least, it’s easy in the sense that a type-2 expressivist should be allowed to deploy all of the resources of any of the standard propositional approaches to semantics *as long as these are not inflationarily interpreted*. For example, if we’re conceiving of the semantic values of whole sentences as functions from worlds to truth values, we’ll have to give a non-inflationary interpretation of the notion of a sentence being true at a world. Perhaps worlds should not be conceived of as maximally detailed abstract ways reality could be or as concrete sets of facts, but rather as sets of true sentences, where we think that all it is to think a declarative sentence S is true is to endorse S. Within this framework, there will be room for disagreement about what abstract semantic values to assign to particular sentences, but if the only kind of abstract semantic values we are using are interpreted in a non-inflationary way, then, type-2 expressivists could be understood to be making claims completely consistent with standard truth-conditionalist approaches to modeling the compositional structure of the meaning of sentences our language.

To be sure, adopting semantic minimalism does open a difficult question in the theory of meaning about why various kinds of sentences have the semantic values that they do, if it’s not always because they describe the world as being a particular way. It is here, with what I think of as an essentially *meta*semantic question, that the second kind of expressivist seeks to draw a contrast between normative vocabularies and others including (but perhaps not limited to) those we might want to think of as essentially caught up in the description of reality. The initial thought is that although the sentences deploying normative and/or matter-of-factual vocabularies have truth conditions, the typical sorts of constitutive and anthropological explanations we pursue of why the various vocabularies contribute what they do to the truth conditions of the sentences in which they figure may differ in philosophically interesting ways.

How does that cohere with a view that agrees we should model the compositional meaning of sentences with abstract functions determining truth conditions? It comes down to how we think of the role of the notion of truth in truth-conditional semantics. However, as Blackburn argued early on in the metaethical debate, the nature of truth is a question external to the project of compositional semantics, which he describes as

…a relatively *internal* inquiry into the way meanings are generated in a particular language [by contrast to] *external* surrounding questions, which success in compositional semantics would evidently leave untouched.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Similarly, he writes:

To understand the role of a term in our language, we need some understanding of its compositional possibilities. A description of its role which leaves some occurrences unintelligible, by failing to show how a word with *that* role can feature in *that* context to generate *that* meaning, is semantically inadequate. But there remain questions about what it is about a group of people that makes it true that they are speaking and understanding a language which fits a particular semantic description, of what counts as change in language, sameness of language, understanding of language in a certain way.[[14]](#footnote-14)

As I understand these passages, Blackburn is suggesting that the project of assigning abstract functions (e.g. from worlds to truth values) as the semantic values of declarative sentences in an attempt to systematically model the compositional structure of our language is completely consistent with a number of different *meta*semantic views – that is, views not about *what* semantic values to assign to particular sentences and their parts but about *why* those patterns of assignments are correct. This is why he accepts that normative sentences express propositions. To the consternation of those who would define expressivism as the denial that normative sentences semantically express propositions, he writes:

This strategy – that of expressivism – leaves normative … propositions alone with their own specific identities. They are the counters in our transactions with our values, just as a piece of money is a counter in financial transactions. To understand the value of a piece of money … [i]t is necessary to understand the process of human economic behaviour. Similarly, to understand the normative proposition, it is no good looking for a ‘concept’ or a ‘truth-condition’. We need the same eye for whole processes of human action and interaction.[[15]](#footnote-15)

“But wait,” you might think, “the abstract semantic values of declarative sentences as we conceive of them in compositional semantics (e.g. as functions from worlds to truth values) are supposed to determine truth-conditions, and isn’t expressivism premised on rejecting the application of truth-conditionalist programs in the philosophy of language to normative discourse?”

I think the cogency of this worry depends on what is meant by “truth-conditionalist programs in the philosophy of language.” To be sure, most standard semantic models seek to represent the semantic contribution of any semantic unit in terms of (at least) the contribution it makes to the truth-conditions of the declarative sentences in which it figures. However, one would think that is inconsistent with expressivism only if one assumes that truth-in-a-semantic-model just is a matter of the relations between sentences and some preferred conception of what entities are part of our final ontology, which is, of course, an assumption that any type-2 expressivist will have to reject. But these expressivists could insist that rejecting this assumption is not only consistent with endorsing standard approaches to assigning of semantic values to expressions of natural languages, and reaping their benefits in terms of explaining the compositional structure of our language in a uniform and systematic way – it’s actually born out by the practice of many theoretical semanticists developing semantic models for various languages. Linguistic semanticists seeking to model the compositional structure of a language are not generally concerned with which of its sentences should be thought to represent reality or whether its predicates or operators should be conceived as standing in some sort of asymmetric dependency or picturing relation with the entities we conceive as really out there in the hard, (mostly) mind-independent world. Rather they’re concerned to show how associating particular expressions with particular abstract entities like functions and sets postulated as part of the ontology of a model can be used to explain things like the productivity and learnability of the language as well as things like entailment and inconsistency relations or the systematic semantic effect of various kinds of embedding.

If this is right, it means that standard truth-conditionalist approaches to semantics are completely consistent with metaethical views which would seek to distinguish the functional role of normative concepts and thoughts from the concepts and thoughts essentially caught up in the practice of describing reality. For example, a type-2 expressivist might allow that sentences (1)-(5) should all be assigned contents in some truth-conditionalist way; the compositional semantic value of each of these sentences might modeled with a function from worlds to truth values. However, the metasemantic explanation of why the descriptive sentences (1) and (2) are correctly assigned the function that they are assigned could still be importantly different from the metasemantic explanation of why the normative sentences (3) and (4) are correctly assigned the function that they are assigned (and the metasemantic explanation for (5) will be a complicated mixture). For example, the former sentences might be said to express the propositions they express because, when asserted, the resulting claims convey essentially descriptive beliefs, caught up in the way we keep track of our environment, whereas the latter pair of sentences might be said to express the propositions they express because, when asserted, the resulting claims convey essentially practical beliefs, caught up in the regulation of our behavior.

What does this mean for the Frege-Geach problem? Here’s how Blackburn characterizes the problem in his “Attitudes and Contents”, which is often taken to be a prime example of developing an ideationalist alternative to the standard propositionalist semantics:

The problem is that of the embedding of sentences that primarily express attitude, in contexts that might appear to admit only sentences that, in some contrasting way, express propositions. When I say that these sentences primarily express attitude, I have never intended to deny that they can be regarded as expressing beliefs or propositions. This opposition would be going beyond anything I embrace.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Instead, as I interpret him, Blackburn’s idea is that the expressivist can grant Geach’s appeal to what he calls “Frege’s point”, *viz.* that a proposition – *even a normative proposition* – may occur in discourse now asserted, now unasserted, and yet be recognizably the same proposition. On this interpretation, a type-2 expressivist will agree that a standard truth-conditionalist semantics is capable of providing the resources for an initial assignment of semantic interpretations to any arbitrary declarative sentences of our language. That is, it provides the structural resources to begin to think systematically about the skills language learners must develop in order to interpret novel sentences, why various sets of sentences manifest semantic properties such as equivalence, inconsistency, and entailment, why certain grammatically well-formed sentences are meaningless and other sentences are ambiguous, etc. However, he will insist that this leaves important deeper (or at least different) questions about the source or nature of these propositional assignments unsettled. We might, for instance, still “want to know what makes it true that a particular word is a predicate with a particular assigned meaning, and what kind of truth it is that sentences in the mouth of the [competent speakers of the language] have the overall meaning that the theory calculates for them.”[[17]](#footnote-17) And it’s precisely here that rejecting the metaphysically inflationary conception of truth conditions creates the theoretical space needed to develop an alternative account of normative thought and discourse, as well as (importantly) several other domains.

It is here at what we might think of as the “metasemantic” level that type-2 expressivism engages with the theory of the meaning of normative sentences. Rather than assigning “ideational contents” to these rather than abstract functions, he will say that the explanation of why they express the propositions that that they do is importantly different from the reason why matter-of-factual sentences express the propositional that they do. Roughly speaking, the story is this: normative sentences are caught up in the regulation of our practices, whereas matter-of-factual sentences are used to keep track of things in our environment. Moreover, such reflections about anthropological function and constitutive purpose should, at least in principle, admit of ecological and genealogical support. That is, thinking of expressivism this way puts us in a position to speculate – hopefully plausibly – about why it was useful for our ancestors in the types of biological and social environments they found themselves in to develop one language with a unified compositional structure to do these two different jobs.

This completes my case for distinguishing two rather different strands of expressivism in contemporary metaethics. There is the strand I’ve been referring to as type-1 expressivism, which is the target of Schroder’s semantic criticisms, but there is also the strand I’ve been referring to as type-2 expressivism, which cannot be the target of semantic criticisms since it doesn’t advance a semantic thesis but only a metasemantic thesis. In what follows, I want to conclude, somewhat more tentatively, by considering a different kind of anti-descriptivist view and arguing that, at least on the face of things, it carries the advantages of expressivism while avoiding potential problems.

**5. Type-2 Expressivism and Logical Pragmatism**

If the potential problems for type-2 expressivism aren’t semantic, then what are they? At the beginning of this paper I mentioned the fact that, in addition to semantic challenges, many philosophers harbor worries about expressivism’s ability to make sense of normative reasoning. This is remains a vaguer worry than the semantic challenge to type-1 expressivism. Some think the Frege-Geach problem is really about why inferences involving normative thoughts are good, if we conceive of the thoughts involved as motivational attitudes rather than representations of reality.[[18]](#footnote-18) Others argue that even if there’s a way around the Frege-Geach problem, there remain other sorts of inferences from normative thoughts to descriptive thoughts whose invalidity cannot be explained if we think of the normative thoughts as having a desire-like direction of fit with the world.[[19]](#footnote-19) Still others suggest that, if we conceive of our normative thoughts as non-representational attitudes, then we won’t be able to make sense of reasoning to objectively correct normative conclusions, that is conclusions that are not merely correct in virtue of cohering with our other attitudes but rather in virtue of getting the answers to normative questions right.[[20]](#footnote-20)

Obviously these worries are each different from the next, and some of the intuitions from which they stem are controversial. Expressivists have sought to address each individually, and a full discussion would require considering those attempts and whether there is some plausibly unified, overall account of normative vocabulary as expressive of motivational attitudes that can handle all of these challenges. However, I want to do something different here. I want to suggest that the choice between conceiving of normative vocabulary as picking out features of reality (e.g. normative properties) or figuring centrally in the expression of motivational attitudes (i.e. with a desire-like rather than belief-like direction of fit) is a false choice; I suspect there is a completely viable anti-descriptivist view that is an improvement on type-2 expressivism.

To bring this possibility into view, I shall temporarily switch gears and ask about logicalvocabulary. The theoretical terrain here looks remarkably different. Most philosophers – even those not at all sympathetic to anti-descriptivist views in metaethics – would agree that there is a philosophically important difference between the role of traditional logical vocabulary (e.g. what we might formalize with truth-functional connectives, the quantifiers, and the identity symbol, maybe also the copula) and that of other vocabularies (e.g. empirical or matter-of-factual). The difference is not that logical vocabularies serve centrally in the expression of some importantly different kind of mental state, with a different direction of fit or different functional role from whatever mental states are expressed by the vocabularies paradigmatically caught up in the practice of describing states of affairs in the world. Rather the difference is that logical vocabulary provides the conceptual framework within which singular terms and predicates are combined to form semantically and logically complex claims. As such, as it is often said, logic vocabulary has no subject matter of its own but rather provides the scaffolding that we use to articulate the conceptual or inferential relations between sentences with *any* subject matter whatsoever.

Because of this, one might suggest that although logical vocabulary is caught up essentially in the practice of describing reality, that’s not because there are specifically logicalproperties and states of affairs in the world which logical terms refer to and describe, but rather because the role of logical terms is to make articulation of the conceptual and inferential relations between various descriptions possible in the first place. The role of logical vocabulary is, of course, more general than that: It also makes possible the articulation of conceptual and inferential relations between various commands, intentions, recommendations, requests, etc. In any case, because of its fundamentality and generality philosophers as diverse as Kant, Frege, Wittgenstein, Carnap, Quine, Sellars, Burge, and Brandom have all suggested in one way or another that logical vocabulary plays an importantly different expressive role from the vocabulary we normally think of as carrying descriptive content. In this case, by contrast to what’s typical in metaethics, we draw distinctions between different kinds of vocabularies not because they generate different types of sentences but rather because they function differently in all sentences in which they figure.

Of course, not everyone will agree that a term’s playing a logical role means that it doesn’t carry descriptive content. Those philosophers who are more metaphysically inclined will be happy to say, for instance, that there is a real relation of identity holding between anything and itself, and this is picked out by ‘is identical to’. Or there is a real property of existence that only the extant things have, and this is picked out by the term ‘exists’. Or there is a real property of not-ness that is picked out by ‘not’. I’m not sure if there is much that those of us who dislike the heavy-duty metaphysics involved in the idea that terms like ‘is identical to’, ‘exists’, and ‘not’ as *referring* to and *describing* parts of reality can say to such logical descriptivists that doesn’t involve the pejorative use of “Platonist” and a bit of table thumping about the difference between philosophical explanations and ontological posits. But if we’re not descriptivists about logical vocabulary, then what are we?

Brandom uses the term “logical expressivism” for the alternative to logical descriptivism which he favors.[[21]](#footnote-21) This use of the label “expressivism” can be misleading, especially in the present context, because it is different from either type-1 or type-2 expressivism. Superficially, it’s different because its target vocabulary is logical vocabulary rather than normative vocabulary. But it’s also different in a deeper structural way from expressivist views in metaethics. The sense in which Brandom thinks the role of logical vocabulary is distinctive does not have anything particularly to do with the types of mental states it can be used to externalize but rather with the way it allows us to discursively acknowledge commitments that are otherwise only implicit in our practices. He writes, “we might think of the process of expression in the more complex and interesting cases as a matter not of transforming what is inner into what is outer but of making explicit what is implicit.”[[22]](#footnote-22) Moreover, in his view, having propositional content is understood in terms of standing in inferential relations that can be made explicit with logical vocabulary, and this applies to all sorts of declarative sentences. Brandom writes: “In this respect, inferentialism and expressivism dovetail neatly. For the paradigm of expression is saying something. And what can play the role of premise and conclusion of inference is a saying in the sense of a claiming. Expressivism, like inferentialism, directs our attention in the first place to propositional conceptual contents.”[[23]](#footnote-23) What I want to note here is that there is no suggestion that expressivists (about logical vocabulary) should reject the idea that sentences with logical vocabulary express propositions. Quite the contrary, logical vocabulary has its distinctive role, in Brandom’s view, because of the way it can be used to make explicit the inferential relations between the propositional contents of various things we can say.

Insofar as we’re considering only type-1 expressivism – these quotes from Brandom can make it seem like he is talking about something completely unrelated to expressivism in metaethics. For one thing, as we’ve already seen, anti-descriptivists about logical vocabulary do not think these terms serve in the expression of desire-like rather than belief-like states of mind. So it is clear that these philosophers don’t mean to endorse a type-1 version of expressivism about logical vocabulary. However, anti-descriptivists about logical vocabulary also don’t think of logical concepts as occupying a box that is merely one among many in the plurality of functional roles which would be the straightforward application of the pluralist-*cum*-minimalist program characteristic of type-2 expressivism. As we have already seen, one can think that logical vocabulary carries no descriptive content even if one thinks that many descriptions of reality contain logical terms. For it’s the framework constituting/articulating role of these terms that is thought to distinguish them from terms that refer to and describe reality. So, although Brandom’s logical expressivism seems to me to be consistent with a type-2 version of expressivism about the relevant vocabulary, I think it goes beyond this in its idea that logical vocabulary is non-descriptive not because of what kind of mental state (or kind of concept) it functions to express but because of how it allows us to make and talk about logically complex sentences.

In any case, I’m going try to avoid the confusion Brandom invites and use the label *logical pragmatism* for the basic idea of distinguishing logical vocabulary from that of descriptive vocabulary based on the former’s framework articulating expressive role. Once the basic idea is in view and clearly distinguished from both versions of metaethical expressivism discussed above, it becomes tempting to wonder whether we might apply it to other vocabularies besides those traditionally called “logical”. Two that Brandom himself suggests are alethic modal vocabulary and deontic vocabulary.[[24]](#footnote-24)

In the alethic modal case, the basic idea is to expand the traditional conception of “logical” to include modal terms, such as ‘necessary’ and ‘possible’, as part of the (quasi-)logical scaffolding of discursive practice rather than part of its descriptive content. Although more controversial than a logical pragmatism restricted only to classically logical vocabulary, this isn’t a crazy idea. After all, although modal terms exhibit important differences with traditionally logical terms, we tend to formalize them with various sorts of logical operators rather than predicate letters, and there is a rich study of modal logics. Moreover, the idea that modal terms like ‘necessary’ and ‘possible’ refer to something in reality, such that modal sentences should be said to describe modal features of reality is an idea that I think one endorses mainly for lack of seeing any viable alternative. And, for what it’s worth, something like the logical pragmatist view of modal vocabulary seems to be prefigured in Ramsey’s view about probabilistic modalities, Wittgenstein’s view about logical and metaphysical modalities, and Sellars’ view about nomological modalities.[[25]](#footnote-25)

Here, I don’t plan to articulate logical pragmatism about alethic modalities in any more detail, let alone defend it. I mention it because I think it helps to make better sense of Brandom’s suggestion that deontic vocabulary also deserves anti-descriptivist treatment along logical pragmatist lines. To begin to see how this might work, focus on normative uses of words like ‘ought’, ‘must’, and ‘may’, as well as phrases like ‘it’s obligatory/permissible/forbidden to’. Just like traditional logical terms seem to play a distinctive role in our reasoning quite generally, these terms seem to play a distinctive role in our practical reasoning. Moreover, like there is a rich study of the logic of alethic modalities, there is also a rich study of the logic of such deontic modalities. And in this study, we tend to formalize these terms with various logical operators rather than predicate letters. A proponent of type-2 expressivism might take this as evidence that this vocabulary serves essentially in the expression of beliefs with an essentially practical and non-descriptive functional role. A proponent of logical pragmatism about deontic vocabulary would go further.

Like type-2 expressivists, I think he would adopt an anti-inflationary stance about semantic vocabulary in order to remove any obstacle to assigning propositional contents to declarative sentences as part of to the narrowly semantic project of articulating the compositional structure of semantic contents. If so, then like type-2 expressivists he would locate the descriptive/non-descriptive contrast at a deeper level in the theory of meaning (as part of what I’ve called “metasemantics”), where we are concerned not to assign semantic contents but to explain why it is that various vocabularies contribute what they do to the contents of the sentences in which they figure. However, the justification for thinking that deontic vocabulary plays a non-descriptive role would not appeal to their distinctive role in expressing motivational attitudes (or distinctively practical beliefs) but rather to their distinctively logical role in practical reasoning. That is, a logical pragmatist about deontic terms would treat this vocabulary, too, as (quasi-)logical: he’d treat it as part of what constitutes and articulates the conceptual framework or logical scaffolding within which we articulate the inferential relations between other claims and (in this case, sometimes) actions, rather than something contributing descriptive content to it.

I believe this view carries the original benefits claimed for expressivist views in metaethics. If logical pragmatism about deontic vocabulary is right, we don’t have to posit anything in our ontology to be picked out or described by words like ‘ought’ and ‘is permissible’; and this avoids any puzzling questions about how we might cognitively track such things in our normative reasoning and knowledge. Moreover, it carries the benefit of type-2 expressivism over the type-1 expressivism discussed above: we don’t have to commit to any controversial claims about how to assign semantic contents to normative and matter-of-factual sentences in a systematic and compositional way.

However, the logical pragmatist’s motivation for thinking that the target vocabulary plays a different role from descriptive vocabulary is importantly different. It is not (mainly) because terms like ‘ought’ or ‘is permissible’ express concepts that fall among the plurality of concepts that don’t figure in “cognitive representations of reality”. Rather it is because these terms are – in a suitably extended sense – *logical*. They figure as part of the logical scaffolding or conceptual framework within which we engage in normative and practical thought and discourse. That’s why we semantically represent them as operators rather than as predicates. For this reason, although it has some affinities with type-2 expresssivism, I think we shouldn’t think of the view as a form of metaethical expressivism but as part of a program of applying logical pragmatism in the metaethical domain. The core claim isn’t that deontic vocabulary serves in the expression of motivational attitudes but rather that it plays a framework constituting/articulating role similar to more traditional logical vocabulary, and this should manifest itself in the way we present the truth conditions of the sentences in which they figure.

Because of this, I think the vague worry about expressivism’s ability to make sense of reasoning with normative thoughts mentioned at the beginning of this section have much less traction against metaethical logical pragmatism. There is a question of how it’s correct to reason with deontic vocabulary; however, that’s a question that philosophers and logicians have long sought to tackle in the discipline of deontic logic. Moreover, there is a question of how to make sense of the objective purport of such reasoning, but this is a completely general challenge for anyone who doesn’t believe that our use of logical vocabulary is made correct by referring to features of reality. I don’t mean to make light of these questions, but I think assimilating (a central species of) normative vocabulary to logical vocabulary puts us in a much better position to address them than thinking of normative vocabulary as expressive of motivational attitudes.

I said above that this assimilation is *part* of a program for applying logical pragmatism in the metaethical domain, and at the outset I said that I wanted to use the comparison to logical vocabulary to bring the *initial steps* towards a third anti-descriptivist theory in metaethics into view, because deontic vocabulary is not the only vocabulary that has traditionally been of concern to metaethicists. It’s standard to see metaethical expressivism as a view as much about words like ‘good’ and ‘right’ as about deontic words like ‘ought’, ‘must’, and ‘may’. So, we might worry that logical pragmatism works for the deontic modalities but not for all “vocabulary reasonably called “normative”.

As I see things, the logical pragmatist who wants to extend his view into metaethics has at least two options in response to this worry. First, he could simply limit the scope of his distinction. Perhaps words like ‘good’ and ‘right’ should not be viewed as part of the logical scaffolding of practical thought but “thicker” content-bearing contributions. There would still be a number of views one could take about what constitutes their semantic contribution, including one of the kinds of expressivism discussed above as well as some form of descriptivism. Second, he could suggest that some uses of these terms are normative precisely because they involve one of the deontic modalities in their meaning (they’re “fraught with ought” as it is sometimes put), but in other uses they are descriptive (which often seems to be the case with merely attributive uses of ‘good’ as in “good murder weapon” and merely instrumental uses of ‘right’ as in “right way to run a presidential campaign”). This distinction could even be put to use in diagnosing the attractions of descriptivism and expressivism about these terms in traditional metaethics.

I won’t attempt to develop logical pragmatism about normative vocabulary any further here. My goal in this final section has merely been to show how, once we mover from type-1 expressivism to type-2 expressivism, there is room to move further to the application of a kind of logical pragmatism to normative terms. This is an anti-descriptivist view in metaethics, but it’s one that understands the distinction in expressive role between normative and matter-of-factual discourse as based not on the distinction between representational and motivational attitudes but rather on the distinction between descriptive content providing and framework constituting/articulating roles. If we take this distinction as foundational, perhaps we open the way to a new anti-descriptivist view in metaethics, one which carries the putative benefits of expressivism but also has more traction against its putative problems.

1. \* For helpful feedback on earlier versions of this material, I'd like to thank Tama Coutts, Graham Hubbs, Huw Price, Michael Ridge, Kirun Sankaran, and Alex Silk. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. It’s not clear how best to use all of these labels. Some would refer to emotivism, prescriptivism, and noncognitivism as species of expressivism; however, I’m going to reserve the latter term for a more contemporary class of views in metaethics. A central project of this paper is to articulate two different views that nonetheless fall together under this label. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. I see this as the core of the Frege-Geach problem. See, P. T. Geach, "Assertion," *The Philosophical Review* 74(4) (1965): pp. 449-465. There may be other aspects to the problem having to do with what’s going on in certain forms of reasoning with normative and non-normative concepts, but I’ll start here with this semantic challenge. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See especially *Being For*, chs. 1-2, "Expression for Expressivists," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 76 (2008), pp. 86-116, "How Expressivists Can and Should Solve Their Problem with Negation," *Noûs* 42, (2008), pp. 573-99. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. This was originally a problem pointed out by Unwin and Dreier. See Nicholas Unwin, “Quasi-Realism, Negation and the Frege-Geach Problem,” *Philosophical Quarterly* (1999) 50 (196), pp. 337-352; “Norms and Negation: A Problem for Gibbard's Logic,” *Philosophical Quarterly* (2001) 51 (202), pp. 60-75; James Dreier, “Disagreeing (About) What to Do: Negation and Completeness in Gibbard's Norm-Expressivism,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* (2001) 72 (3), pp. 714-721. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *ibid*., p. 177, emphasis added. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. For what it’s worth, I’m not convinced that they have to embrace all of the ideas Schroeder claims that they will. More specifically, Schroeder argues that they will need to find some single mental state type (his candidate is dubbed “being for”) which is both desire-like rather than belief-like and “inconsistency transmitting” in the same way that belief is, viz. that holding it towards inconsistent contents is itself inconsistent. In this regard, it’s worth noting with Gibbard *Meaning and Normativity*, appendix 2, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) that the standard propositionalist semantics helps itself to the primitive notion of *inconsistent propositions*. So, if ideationalist expressivists are allowed to help themselves to a competing primitive notion (Gibbard’s suggestion is *disagreeing judgments*), there may be a way to construct an ideationalist expressivist semantics that doesn’t go in for Schroeder’s states of “being for”. Granted, this semantics will still be highly controversial from the point of view of the standard propositionalist semantics – in effect, reversing the order of explanation between negation and rejection – but it will be controversial for reasons different from those that Schroeder develops. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Pioneered by Michael Ridge, “Ecumenical Expressivism: Finessing Frege,” *Ethics* (2006) 116 (2), pp. 302-336. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. In work in progress, Ridge has come to take a more nuanced view of how an expressivist ought to do semantics. His recent work, then, contains a view that could be interpreted more along the lines of type-2 expressivism that I will go on to consider. However, I will not consider further in this paper the prospects for ecumenical versions of type-1 or type-2 expressivism. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. These are only examples, and there is significant room for debate both about what the other functional roles are and whether the glosses I’ve indicated here are the most apt. The relevant point here is not the details but the difference with the first template for expressivism. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Compare Price, "Semantic Minimalism" and Daniel Stoljar, "Emotivism and Truth Conditions," *Philosophical Studies* 70 (1993), pp. 81-101. This is related to but not exactly the same as the issue of whether expressivism is compatible with the minimalist theories of truth inspired by Ramsey and Quine, and developed in more detail Field and Horwich. In my view, a lot of this debate depends on what I think is a still somewhat vexed issue – viz. what exactly minimalists hope to “deflate”. In this arena, it is often assumed that minimalism is incompatible with any use of notions like ‘proposition’ and ‘truth-condition’ in the theory of meaning. However, as far as expressivism goes all we need is the refusal to interpret these notions in a metaphysically committing way when engaging in the project of compositional semantics – i.e. in a way such that if one thinks that a sentence expresses a proposition or has truth conditions then one is committed to thinking that there is something in reality that each of its terms refer to or a “truth-maker” that the sentence describes. To be sure, many who endorse a truth-conditionalist account of meaning think of their account as so committed; and many minimalists about truth think that semantics should eschew all appeal to truth-conditions for interesting explanatory work. However, there doesn’t seem to me to be anything in the mere assignment of functionally composed propositions or truth-conditions that commits one to metaphysical inflationism about propositions or truth-conditions. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Blackburn, *Spreading the Word*, p. 11 emphasis in the original. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. *ibid.*, p. 16-17. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Blackburn, *Ruling Passions: A Theory of Practical Reasoning* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 50. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Blackburn, "Attitudes and Contents," p. 504. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Blackburn, *Spreading the Word*, p. 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. E.g. Mark van Roojen “Expressivism and Irrationality,” *The Philosophical Review* 105(3) (1996): pp. 322-335. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. E.g. Cian Dorr, “Non-cognitivism and Wishful Thinking,” *Noûs* 36 (2002): pp. 97-103. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. E.g. Andy Egan, “Quasi-Realism and Fundamental Moral Error,” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 85(2) (2007): pp. 205-219.

 [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Robert Brandom, *Articulating Reasons: An Introduction to Inferentialism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), ch.1. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Brandom, *Between Saying and Doing* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Brandom, *Articulating Reasons*, p. 13-14. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. See especially Brandom, *Between Saying and Doing*, ch. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Frank Ramsey, "Truth and Probability," in *The Foundations of Mathematics and Other Logical Essays*, ed. R. B. Braithwaite (Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1926), pp. 156-98, Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Zettel* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1967), Wilfrid Sellars, "Counterfactuals, Dispositions, and the Causal Modalities," in *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science, Volume II*, ed. Herbert Feigl, Michael Scriven, and Grover Maxwell (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1958), §81. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)