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Expressivism, Belief, and All *That*

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According to expressivism, normative judgements are non-representational motivational states. Traditionally, this was understood as the commitment that normative judgements are not beliefs. However, quasi-realist expressivists have recently argued, via minimalism about “belief,” that expressivism is compatible with normative judgements being beliefs. Quasi-realists have yet to explain, though, how they account for the *contents* of these beliefs. Specifically, they have not developed their preferred option, a “minimalist” or “deflationist” account of such contents. This paper remedies this gap.

The paper proceeds as follows: Section one presents expressivism, quasi-realism, and why quasi-realists need an account of the contents of normative beliefs. Section two explains why quasi-realists should resist William Dunaway’s minimalist treatment of such contents. Section three introduces a general framework for deflationism about the contents of beliefs. Section four explains how this view fits with expressivism and allows expressivists to hold that normative judgements are beliefs. Expressivists’ concession that normative judgements are beliefs forces us to revise our understanding of expressivism. The fourth section suggests how, and how it helps expressivists to account for the contents of normative beliefs. The section also sketches how to apply the account to other propositional attitudes.

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I. EXPRESSIVISM, QUASI-REALISM, BELIEF

Expressivism is characterized by two commitments. First, that the meaning of declarative sentences is to be explained in terms of the judgements assertoric uses of those sentences conventionally express. Second, that there is a distinctive difference between normative and descriptive judgements. *Descriptive judgements*, so expressivists hold, are *representational states*: they represent, in some theoretically robust sense, the world.¹ *Normative judgements*, on the other hand, are not representational states, but *conative attitudes*, which play a motivating role in the production of action.

One major worry about expressivism is that it undermines those crucial assumptions underlying ordinary practice associated with *realism* about normative thought and discourse. Meeting this worry is the aim of *quasi-realism*. This project proceeds by pointing out that in meta-ethics we cannot presuppose any particular philosophical understanding of the notions at play in the relevant assumptions, such as “truth” or “belief.” Quasi-realists then give an account of these notions on which the assumptions allegedly incompatible with expressivism are, in fact, not so.

In recent years, quasi-realists have made progress in this direction, by giving deflationary or minimalist accounts of notions that figure in the relevant assumptions. It is not always clear what the labels “deflationary” and “minimalist” signify, a topic to which I return. For now, we can say that “deflationary” and “minimalist” views are characterized by a commitment to deflate the theoretical commitments of phrases philosophers are tempted to read in a theoretically inflationary way.

One assumption among those expressivists are challenged to preserve, is that normative judgements are beliefs. How do quasi-realists accommodate this assumption? A first thing to note is that once expressivists accept that normative judgements are beliefs, they can no longer hold that the difference between descriptive and normative judgements is that the former are beliefs, while the latter are desires. This is not a problem, though: expressivists should draw the difference

¹ In what follows, ‘representation’ should always be read as “representation in some relevant theoretical robust sense,” though I will drop the qualification from now.

as I did above, and hold that what makes states “representational states” or “conative attitudes” as used in the characterization, is cashed out in terms of a robust theory of psychology, not in terms of our ordinary notions of “belief” or “desire.” Hence, as long as there is an account of our ordinary notion of “belief” on which not all beliefs are representational states and some beliefs conative attitudes, expressivism is compatible with normative judgements being beliefs. One prominent quasi-realist suggestion is that this can be done with “minimalism about belief.”²

Minimalism about belief has two parts. First, the claim that mental states are beliefs if and only if they can be conventionally expressed by assertoric use of truth-apt sentences. Second, “disciplined syntacticism,” a minimalist approach to truth-aptitude.³ According to *disciplined syntacticism* two features are necessary and sufficient for sentences to be truth-apt. First, having the right *syntactic form*, namely that possessed by declarative sentences. Second, being *disciplined*, which is being governed by sufficient norms regulating appropriate usage.

Minimalism about belief does not require beliefs to be representational in a robust sense. As long as truth-apt sentences can express non-representational states, non-representational states can be beliefs. What this requires quasi-realists to address is that the relevant characteristics of declarative sentences can be explained in terms of those sentences conventionally expressing non-representational states. This is the Frege-Geach Problem, a challenge expressivists need to address anyways. So, minimalism about belief allows expressivism to be *in principle* compatible with

² This is the most prominent suggestion made by (or on behalf of) quasi-realists. See, for example, Simon Blackburn, *Ruling Passions: A Theory of Practical Reasoning* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), James Dreier, “Meta-Ethics and the Problem of Creeping Minimalism,” *Philosophical Perspectives* XVIII 1: 23-44, Allan Gibbard, *Thinking How to Live* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), James Lenman, “Disciplined Syntacticism and Moral Expressivism,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* LXVI 1: 32-57, and Neil Sinclair, “The Moral Belief Problem,” *Ratio* XIX 2: 249-60. Note that not all authors who might be properly called “quasi-realists” draw on minimalism about belief (for example Michael Ridge (Michael Ridge, “Saving the Ethical Appearances,” *Mind* CXV 459: 633-49 and Michael Ridge, *Impassioned Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014)) and Terence Horgan and Mark Timmons (Terence Horgan and Mark Timmons, “Cognitivist Expressivism,” in Terence Horgan and Mark Timmons, eds., *Metaethics after Moore* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 255-98)). In what follows I will, for ease of exposition, treat minimalism about belief as the account of the quasi-realists’ choice. The account developed here should also work for these other accounts of belief, though.

³ The label “disciplined syntacticism” was introduced in Frank Jackson, Graham Oppy, and Michael Smith, “Minimalism and Truth Aptness,” *Mind* CIII 411: 287-302.

normative judgements being beliefs.

While this approach is promising, it is incomplete: quasi-realists have provided a plausible account of our ordinary notion of belief, only if the account accommodates all platitudes that characterize it. And, only if the account includes no commitments conflicting with expressivism have quasi-realists shown that *expressivism* is compatible with normative judgements being beliefs. But, it is central to our ordinary notion of belief that beliefs have propositional content. Minimalism about belief, however, does not tell us how to account for the contents of beliefs, and in particular, *normative* beliefs in a way that fits with expressivism. Hence, quasi-realists have yet to show that there *is* an interpretation of our ordinary notion of belief that suits their purposes.

How should quasi-realists account for the contents of beliefs? A first, and very important, thing to consider is what requires accounting. In theory-neutral terms, the claim that beliefs have propositional content should be unpacked as the claim that certain uses of *that*-clauses figure in belief-attributions. For example, when we attribute a belief, we use a *that*-clause to specify *what is believed*, which can also be hoped, desired, feared, and so on. If we say that someone believes that there are monsters hiding in the closet, we say that *what they believe* is *that there are monsters hiding in the closet*, which is also, for example, what someone hopes, when they hope *that there are monsters hiding in the closet*. So, what is needed, in the first instance, is an account of *that*-clauses in particular uses, *not* of propositional contents. Of course, my elaborations already reveal a crucial desideratum for any account of *that*-clauses in belief-attributions; namely, that it be applicable to propositional attitude ascriptions generally. I will turn to this in the last section.

One way to account for these uses of *that*-clauses is to have them denote real propositions. In recent work, both Mark Schroeder and Michael Ridge have argued that certain accounts of *that*-clauses along these lines are actually compatible with expressivism.⁴ Here I will not argue against such views, but rather explore the viability of another option. Prominent quasi-realists like Simon Blackburn and Allan Gibbard

4 Ridge, "Impassioned Belief," *op. cit.* and Mark Schroeder, "Two Roles for Propositions: Cause for Divorce?" *Noûs* XLVII 3: 409-30.

often suggest that they want to give a “deflationary” or “minimalist” account of the relevant uses of *that*-clauses.⁵ Quite surprisingly, however, quasi-realists have yet to give such an account. Consequently, this theoretical option is largely unexplored in meta-ethics leaving it open whether a “minimalist” or “deflationist” account is viable for expressivists. The exception here is a recent account by William Dunaway. However, if Dunaway’s account is the best “minimalist” option for quasi-realists, this route to *that*-clauses is in trouble. Let me explain.

II. MINIMALISM ABOUT *THAT*-CLAUSES

Dunaway reads the remarks of quasi-realists of wanting to use a “minimalist” or “deflationary” account of certain phrases as suggesting that expressivists can use what Dunaway calls “the minimalist strategy” to account for those phrases. According to Dunaway, the *minimalist strategy* works as follows: Take some target sentence “S₁” allegedly incompatible with expressivism. An example would be

TRUE: It is true that p.

where “p” denotes some normative sentence. We now identify some plausible other sentence “S₂”, an “equivalence sentence”, that is compatible with expressivism and for which the following schema plausibly holds:

EQUIVALENCE: “S₁” means whatever “S₂” means.

For example, for TRUE, this might be “p”, if the following is plausible:

MINIMAL TRUTH: “It is true that p” means whatever “p” means.

This approach is clearly inspired by suggestions made by quasi-realists regarding how they can use “minimalist” or “deflationist” accounts of “true” to earn the right to that notion. Hence, it seems natural to think that they would want to apply the suggestion to *that*-clauses too.

Dunaway now considers whether this suggestion could apply to

PROPOSITION: A stands in the belief relation to the proposition that p.

where “p” is a normative sentence. It seems clear that if expressivists could give a minimalist account of PROPOSITION, and in particular of the contribution which “the

⁵ See, for example, Simon Blackburn, *Essays in Quasi-Realism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) and Gibbard, “Thinking How to Live,” *op. cit.*

proposition that p” makes to PROPOSITION, they have an account of *that*-clauses in the relevant sense: they can then accept that *that*-clauses denote propositions and point to their treatment of “the proposition that p” to explain what those propositions are.

So, what is Dunaway’s suggestion how expressivists can account for PROPOSITION? He thinks they have two options, depending on how they understand “stands in the belief-relation”:⁶ The first is to hold that “stands in the belief-relation,” means whatever “is in” means. In this case, “the proposition that p” would mean whatever “the mental state expressed by ‘p,’” means. The second option is to hold that “stands in the belief-relation,” means whatever “is in the mental state expressed by” means. In this case, “the proposition that p” would mean whatever “p” means. In either case, so Dunaway claims, expressivists are committed to a view about propositions: propositions are either mental states or sentences.

How convincing is Dunaway’s suggestion? It is neither an attractive suggestion for expressivists, nor suitable as a “minimalist” or “deflationist” approach of talk about propositions. Dunaway’s suggestion is not attractive, because on either horn expressivists are saddled with controversial and problematic views about propositions. Most significantly, on *both* views about propositions expressivists are *committed* to a rejection of truth-conditional semantics, at least insofar that enterprise invokes propositions.⁷ For this reason alone *quasi-realists* should resist Dunaway’s suggestion.

However, Dunaway’s account also is not “minimalist.” As mentioned above, a core commitment of “minimalist” or “deflationist” approaches is to “deflate” the theoretical commitments of certain kinds of linguistic phrases. However, we can distinguish two ways in which a view can do this. The *first* is to give a

6 See Billy Dunaway, “Minimalist Semantics in Meta-Ethical Expressivism,” *Philosophical Studies* CLI 3: 351-71, at pp. 358-64.

7 While expressivism is often thought incompatible with truth-conditional semantics, it has recently been argued that expressivism should be understood as a *meta-semantic*, rather than a *semantic* view (see, for example, Ridge, “Impassioned Belief,” *op cit.*, Matthew Chrisman, *The Meaning of ‘Ought’* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), or Alex Silk, “Truth Conditions and the Meanings of Ethical Terms,” in Russ Shafer-Landau, ed., *Oxford Studies in Metaethics. Vol. 8* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 195-222). This makes expressivism relatively neutral on the question what the contents of sentences are and hence, in principle, compatible with truth-conditional semantics. Of course, whether this is so depends on whether expressivists can give an account of propositional contents that is compatible with truth-conditional semantics. Neither of Dunaway’s candidates does the job.

representationalist account of the phrase in question, on which that phrase functions to represent some entity. However, on such accounts, the theoretical requirements for the represented entity to be instantiated will be undemanding. Rather, the theory will assign those features to the entity that explain why the phrase has those features any plausible theory of that phrase must account for and go no further. So, while these accounts will not be ontologically conservative, their theoretical demands will be minimal. I will call such views “minimalist.”

The *second* option is to give a *non-representationalist* account of the phrase in question. According to such accounts we should not proceed in terms of invoking any entities the phrase represents. Instead, we give a two-part account. The first part is an account of the patterns of use that characterize the phrase on which those can be stated without mentioning any entity it represents. The second part is an account of why our vocabulary includes this phrase, which proceeds in terms of some *non-representational function*. According to accounts of this kind, we can completely explain the phrase’s function in our linguistic practice *without* invoking any entity it represents. This way the second part explains why and vindicates that the phrase in question is exhaustively characterized by the patterns of use surrounding that phrase. This leads such accounts to be ontologically conservative regarding the relevant phrase. I will call such views “deflationary.”

Dunaway clearly tries to proceed along the lines of the first option. However, his account does not satisfy the minimalist aim: Dunaway offers *reductionist* accounts of propositions that come with theoretical commitments well beyond what minimalism should offer. So, for quasi-realists with minimalist or deflationary sympathies Dunaway’s account is not an option. Of course, Dunaway’s failure of providing a minimalist account plausibly suggests that a truly *minimalist* account of *that*-clauses might be hard to come by. However, there is another option for the quasi-realist, namely *deflationism*. This is the kind of account I will now develop.

III. DEFLATIONISM ABOUT *THAT*-CLAUSES

Let’s start by getting clearer about the dialectic in which deflationism about the use of *that*-clauses in belief-attributions is situated. Such an account is an account of the role

of *that*-clauses in our *folk-theory of psychology*. Specifically, it is situated within the meta-theory of ordinary talk and thought about the contents of propositional attitudes. Of course, a *deflationary* account will be, primarily, an account of *attributions* of mental contents, not an account of what such content *is*. However, the notion “mental content” is already associated with certain kinds of phenomena regarding mental states. For example, “mental content” distinguishes different instances of propositional attitudes of the same kind and plays a crucial role in determining how propositional attitudes figure in the production of action. Let’s call these phenomena associated with mental content the “content-explananda” of the mental states in question.

One way to account for the content-explananda is by introducing entities to which *that*-clauses stand in some theoretically significant representation relation. Propositional attitudes are then relations to these entities and the crucial question is what the metaphysical nature of these relations and contents is such that they can fully account for the content-explananda. This approach would not be compatible with deflationism about *that*-clauses, though. Still, even on a deflationary account there should be something that accounts for the content-explananda, something fully describable in terms not mentioning contents. Let us call the properties that do this relevant explanatory work on such an account the “basic explanatory properties.”

So, suppose you think that the content-explananda can be fully accounted for without mentioning contents. However, you also think that *that*-clauses do legitimate work: you are not an error-theorist about *that*-clauses. What could you say about the work *that*-clauses do? Here is a suggestion: Suppose the basic explanatory properties are something we have a hard time keeping track of, make explicit judgements about, communicate our judgements to others, and so on, given our cognitive and epistemic limitations, time- and resource constraints, and so on. In this case, *that*-clauses could help us do *these* things. If they can do this in a non-representational fashion, we have a plausible role for *that*-clauses that hooks up with many things associated with mental content, while the basic explanatory work is done elsewhere. The only crucial question is how to cash this out. To do this, we can draw on Wilfrid Sellars’ work.⁸

8 In particular Wilfrid Sellars, “Meaning as Functional Classification,” *Synthese* XXVII 3: 417-37.

Sellars was primarily interested in a different use of *that*-clauses, namely that found in *meaning-attributions*. These are sentences of the form

(M) S (in language L, at time t) means *that* p.

However, Sellars was in a situation similar to our own: he wanted to preserve the legitimacy of *that*-clauses in these contexts without having to postulate “meaning entities”—the explanatory work in the theory of meaning was supposed to be done in terms not mentioning meaning. Sellars’ central idea was that this can be done, if the use of *that*-clauses is understood as follows: *that*-clauses serve as *illustrating* examples for certain properties of declarative sentences (Sellars had particular properties in mind, but let’s bracket this). More specifically, to transform a declarative sentence S into a *that*-clause is to transform it into a *meta-linguistic* predicate that picks out certain properties that S has in our language, where S serves as an *illustration* for the properties relevant in that context. So, on Sellars’ account, *that*-clauses are linguistic tools to pick out certain properties of sentences and provide information about and transfer knowledge of these properties. Call this the “Sellarsian account of *that*-clauses.”

Let’s make this clear with an example. Take:

(1) “Heinrich ist ein Imker” (in German) means *that* Heinrich is a beekeeper.

On the Sellarsian account, (1) classifies the German sentence “Heinrich ist ein Imker” as having certain properties, by using the English sentence “Heinrich is a beekeeper” as an example to *illustrate* those properties. Indicating that this is what the English sentence is used for is what transforming it into a *that*-clause does. More specifically, by transforming the English sentence “Heinrich is a beekeeper,” we introduce a predicate that serves to pick out the relevant properties, by using that sentence as an illustrative example. “Means” merely functions to attribute those properties to the German sentence.

It is important to note four things about this account: First, on this account, *that*-clauses *illustrate* the relevant properties by using a sentence in some presupposed language as an example for something with those properties. So, they pick out properties via *similarity relations* identified in a quasi-demonstrative way: *that*-clauses

pick out characteristics of sentences not via covert or explicit descriptions, but by example. Consequently, they function comparably to how we report the appearance of a person unknown to the audience by pointing to another person who looks sufficiently similar than it is to giving a description of her appearance.

Second, and based on this observation, *that*-clauses are not well understood, on this framework, as standing in that kind of relation to the relevant properties in which they would stand if they represented those properties (for example the relation in which “grass” stands to grass). Instead, *that*-clauses are a special instance of the general way of *taking something as an example of*. But, *taking something as an example of* is not well understood in terms of representing something. We can use examples to transfer all kinds of knowledge, some of which are more plausibly understood along the lines of practical competencies or knowing *how*. These ways of transferring information, however, are poorly understood along the lines of providing information about something that is represented. Suppose, for example, that competence with sentences is best understood in terms of knowing how to use them. In this case, one could use sentences in one language as examples to illustrate how sentences in different languages are used. However, it is implausible that this is best understood in terms of transferring only propositional knowledge.

Third, it is *still* legitimate for *that*-clauses to behave *syntactically* as they would on realist accounts of *that*-clauses. On the Sellarsian account, *that*-clauses pick out properties by using some sentence *as an example* for something with those (or relevantly similar) properties. Thus, *that*-clauses will behave structurally isomorphic to the relevant properties of the sentence following the “that.” This means, however, that they will behave linguistically exactly like terms that denote something that supervenes on, but does not reduce to, the relevant properties. Consequently, the account offers an explanation of why *that*-clauses function syntactically this way, even though the explanation of why *that*-clauses are in our vocabulary makes no reference to denoted entities.

Fourth, that *that*-clauses behave in these ways makes legitimate particular ways of referring to what *that*-clauses denote. In particular, we can use the label “propositional contents” to refer to what is attributed by *that*-clauses. For example,

rather than saying

(M) “S” (in a language L , at time t) means *that p*.

we can say

(C) “S” (in a language L , at time t) has the content *that p*.

Of course, on this framework, claims made by sentences of type (C) will not go beyond what is claimed by sentences of type (M). Still, in this way the account allows legitimate attributions of propositional contents.

Given these observations, it should be clear that the Sellarsian account offers a deflationary account of *that*-clauses. Yet, the crucial question is how it accounts for the use of *that*-clauses in belief-attributions. Here’s the answer: If declarative sentences and the basic explanatory properties of the relevant beliefs are connected, we can use Sellars’ idea to hold that at least one crucial role of *that*-clauses is to use declarative sentences to keep track of basic explanatory properties. Here is how this would work: Suppose there is some connection between “Heinrich is a beekeeper” and the basic explanatory properties of the mental state we would describe as the belief that Heinrich is a beekeeper. In this case, we can use “Heinrich is a beekeeper” *as an example* to *illustrate* the basic explanatory properties in question: we could say of some mental state that it has those basic explanatory properties relevantly related to “Heinrich is a beekeeper.” On the Sellarsian account, transforming that sentence into a *that*-clause plays exactly this role.

We now have the basics for a deflationary account of the use of *that*-clauses in belief-attributions. Furthermore, we have an account that, *prima facie*, does not conflict with expressivism’s commitments in a way that would disallow expressivists to say that normative judgements are beliefs with normative contents. The account, however, is incomplete: it requires a relevant relation between declarative sentences and the basic explanatory properties of beliefs, and I have not said anything about this relation.

However, here *expressivists* have an answer ready. According to expressivists, the meaning of declarative sentences is explained in terms of the judgements assertoric uses of these sentences express. It is these judgements, of course, which should constitute the beliefs expressed by those sentences. Suppose now that the

explanatory work for declarative sentences is done by the basic explanatory properties of the beliefs that the relevant judgements expressed by those sentences consist in. In *this* case, we have what we were looking for. Of course, to be able to properly assess this proposal, one needs to know how *exactly* expressivists' commitments in the philosophy of language are to be understood and, in particular, what is supposed to do the relevant explanatory work for the meaning of declarative sentences.

As already said, expressivists who *accept* that normative judgements are beliefs will not draw the distinction between normative and descriptive judgements in terms of the folk-psychological notions "belief" and "desire." Instead, this would be done in terms of a robust philosophical theory of psychology. But, if this is true, it should also be this characterization that *fundamentally* figures in expressivists' account of the meaning of sentences. Unfortunately, however, we have no clear idea what theory of psychology expressivists would use for this purpose. Without knowing this, though, we have no idea whether expressivists could use the Sellarsian account to account for the use of *that*-clauses in belief-attributions. Is there a theory that suits expressivists' purposes? In the next section I want to suggest a theory of psychology that leads to a form of expressivism that satisfies all of our requirements.

IV. CONCEPTUAL ROLE EXPRESSIVISM

I will argue that "conceptual role semantics", a school within functionalism about the mind, suits quasi-realists' purposes—at least one form of expressivism, "conceptual role expressivism", can deliver what is needed in our context. I will develop the framework in three steps. First, I will argue that conceptual role semantics combines with the Sellarsian account of *that*-clauses to give us an account of belief-attributions and of the role *that*-clauses play in such attributions. Second, I will show that this framework can allow the distinction between normative and descriptive judgements that lies at the heart of expressivism, while being compatible with both being beliefs. Third, I will show that this account can capture the role of *that*-clauses in propositional attitude ascriptions more generally.

IV.1. Conceptual Role, Belief, and all That. According to *functionalism about the mind*, mental states are dispositional states that are fundamentally characterized

by their “functional role.” The *functional role* of a mental state is its causal role within a mental economy. So, according to functionalism, mental states are fundamentally characterized by their *relational* properties, not by their intrinsic nature.

Even if we can characterize mental states in terms of their functional roles, however, that does not establish that they can be fully characterized without an irreducible notion of propositional content. But, there is a school within functionalism according to which, on the most fundamental level, propositional attitudes can be fully characterized *without* making reference to propositional content. This is the school I will call “conceptual role semantics” in what follows.⁹ *Conceptual role semantics* is primarily a view about the nature of the properties in virtue of which mental states have their contents. It situates those properties in the *functional role* of those mental states. Roughly, according to *conceptual role semantics* mental entities have their contents in virtue of particular *parts* of their functional roles, specifically in virtue of certain roles they play, for example, in the procession of sensory information, in reasoning, and in the production of behavioural outputs. Generally, the roles that could be relevant for a mental states’ content can be distinguished into three kinds. “Mind-entry” conditions specify the state’s role in the procession of sensory stimuli. “Mind-to-mind” conditions specify the state’s role in the processes of reasoning. And “mind-exit” conditions specify the state’s role in the production of actions. I will call that part a state’s functional role that concerns conceptual role semantics the “conceptual role” of that state.

9 In the literature “conceptual role semantics” labels the broad tradition according to which content is determined by a certain kind of role. The *locus classicus* for conceptual role semantics in this sense is Sellars’ work (see especially Wilfrid Sellars, “Inference and Meaning,” *Mind* LXII 247: 313-38 and Wilfrid Sellars, “Language as Thought and as Communication,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* XXIX 4: 506-27). Other authors in this tradition are, for example, Ned Block (Ned Block, “Advertisement for a Semantics for Psychology,” *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* X 1: 615-78), Robert Brandom (Robert Brandom, *Making it Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), Matthew Chrisman (Chrisman, “The Meaning of ‘Ought’,” *op. cit.*), Hartry Field (Hartry Field, “Mental Representation,” *Erkenntnis* XIII 1: 9-61), Gilbert Harman (Gilbert Harman, “(Nonsolipsistic) Conceptual Role Semantics,” in Gilbert Harman, ed., *Reasoning, Meaning, and Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 207-32), Paul Horwich (Paul Horwich, *Meaning* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), Christopher Peacocke (Christopher Peacocke, *A Study in Concepts* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1992), or Ralph Wedgwood (Ralph Wedgwood, *The Nature of Normativity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). The views I call “conceptual role semantics,” are embedded within this broad tradition, but take on commitments not all within the broader tradition share.

Of course, what is characteristic for the different types of propositional attitudes—what distinguishes them from each other and from other mental states—is how they operate on their content. Hence, what characterizes the different types of propositional attitudes on a framework of this kind should be cashed out in terms of their *conceptual roles*. More specifically, it should be cashed out in terms of the *types* of mind-entry, mind-to-mind, and mind-exit conditions characteristic for mental states of this kind.

This puts us in a position to say something about the meaning of the term “belief.” On this framework, the term “belief” will pick out mental states with a certain *type* of conceptual role. Given minimalism about belief, this should be that type of conceptual role suitable for conventional expression by assertoric use of disciplined declarative sentences. If one wants to explain the meaning of declarative sentences in terms of the mental states they express, this should be the kind of conceptual role possessed by all those states that can enter into those kinds of inferential relations necessary to solve the Frege-Geach Problem.

Not only the *type* of propositional attitude to which a mental state belongs is characterized in terms of content, however, but also what particular instance of that type it is. So, it determines not only whether a state is of the type “belief” or “desire”, but also whether it is of the type “belief that there are monsters hiding in the closet” or “belief that there are jackets hiding in the closet.” Hence, if one accepts conceptual role semantics, one thinks that on the most fundamental level of psychology those states we pick out with belief-attributions can be *fully* characterized in terms of their conceptual role. At this point, we need to go one step further though. As I said earlier, “mental content” itself is a notion associated with certain kinds of phenomena regarding mental states, which I have called the “content-explananda”. On a deflationary account we need to hold that the content-explananda can be fully accounted for in terms of the basic explanatory properties of the relevant mental states. Consequently, our purposes require endorsement of a version of conceptual role semantics according to which it is not only true that beliefs can be fully characterized in terms of their conceptual roles, but also that all of the content-explananda associated with beliefs can be fully accounted for in terms of conceptual

role. Given this, it is the property of having a particular conceptual role that has to account for all of the content-explananda of a belief.

This gives us a view about the basic explanatory properties of beliefs. Now that we have a view of these properties, we can tweak our understanding of expressivism's commitment in the philosophy of language accordingly. Given a *functionalist picture* about the mind generally, it seems plausible to think of expressivists' commitment in the philosophy of language as follows: languages are basically codified ways of providing information about the functional profile of one's mental states, and the meaning of declarative sentences is explained in terms of what functional state one commits oneself to be in by assertoric use of that sentence. Clearly, though, it will be the *conceptual role* which is most relevant for the sentence's meaning, as it will, for example, be a difference in the conceptual role of the states expressed which accounts for the difference in meaning between different kinds of declarative sentences. With this tweak, though, we can draw a relevant connection between declarative sentences and the basic explanatory properties of the beliefs they express that we can use with our account of *that*-clauses.

Applying the Sellarsian account of *that*-clauses, we can now use *that*-clauses to pick out the conceptual roles of certain kinds of mental states, namely, those states suitable for expression by declarative sentences. Given that those states are beliefs on the minimalist conception of belief, *that*-clauses now provide an easy way for us to keep track of the conceptual roles of beliefs via the sentences with which we are competent. And, this puts us in a position to explain how the Sellarsian view accounts for the role of *that*-clauses in belief-attributions. On this account, sentences of the form

(B) A believes *that* p.

attribute a state with a particular conceptual role to a person. In particular, they attribute a mental state which is of the conceptual role kind "belief" and which has the particular conceptual role picked out by "that p", namely, the conceptual role of the state conventionally expressed by assertoric use of the sentence "p".

With these remarks in place, Sellars' idea has been successfully applied to account for the use of *that*-clauses in belief-attributions. So, we now have a

deflationary account of *that*-clauses in such uses. Furthermore, on the face of it the account seems fully acceptable for expressivists who want to allow normative judgements to be beliefs. Note also, that the account given *should* be compatible with truth-conditional semantics. The treatment of *that*-clauses given by the account coheres well with the picture of semantics as a *theoretical modelling enterprise*. On the picture which emerges, while the fundamental explanatory work of explaining the meaning of sentences might *not* be done in semantic terms—because it is done in terms of the conceptual roles of the mental states associated with those sentences—, the theoretical enterprise of semantics still has a legitimate place for it might be the best thing we have to get a hold on whatever is doing the fundamental explanatory work.

Of course, two matters remain to be established: First, whether the framework is compatible with expressivism’s distinction between normative and descriptive judgements. Second, whether it can account for the use of *that*-clauses in propositional attitude ascriptions generally.

IV.2. Descriptive and Normative Belief. Expressivists think that *normative judgements* are not representational states, but consist in *conative attitudes*, while *descriptive judgements* are *representational states*. So, let’s begin by taking a look at how to distinguish the functional roles of “representational states” and “conative attitudes.”¹⁰

Representational states are characterized by their function to track features of our external environment. In this function, they also prominently serve to guide the agent around in that environment. While representational states are relevant for action in this way, however, they are motivationally inert. They will, consequently, have a functional profile in which the procession of and reaction to sensory inputs plays a major role. But, insofar as the production of action is relevant to this profile, it will reflect that these states only play a guiding, not a motivating, role in action.

10 The following draws from various places. See, for example, Ridge, “Saving the Ethical Appearances,” *op. cit.*, Sinclair, “The Moral Belief Problem,” *op. cit.*, Neil Sinhababu, “The Humean Theory of Motivation Reformulated and Defended,” *The Philosophical Review* CXVIII 4: 465-500, and Michael Smith, *The Moral Problem* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994). I presuppose a broadly Humean theory of motivation.

Furthermore, unless there is reason to think that they systematically misfire, representational states require either that we expand our ontology by including those features they function to track or that we show that they track something already part of our ontology.

Conative attitudes, on the other hand, do not function to track anything in the external environment. Instead, they motivate the agent to move around in, interact with, and manipulate her environment. These states motivate agents to do particular actions and are connected to other things in agents' mental lives that increase the likelihood of them being so moved. For example, conative attitudes will be directly tied to experiential states, the agent's attention being drawn to certain things, and so on. Conative attitudes, consequently, have a causal profile in which the procession of and reaction to sensory inputs plays only a minor role, while a major part of that profile concerns the motivation of action. Furthermore, conative attitudes do not require us to expand our ontology.

Of course, folk-psychology will not classify most of the mental states with the functional profile of conative attitudes as beliefs. Rather, that functional profile is paradigmatically possessed by non-cognitive states, most prominently desires. The crucial question here is, though: Could the set of mental states that have the conceptual role picked out by "belief" include some states that have the functional profile of representational states, while others have the functional profile of conative attitudes?

If there *are* such different kinds of beliefs, the difference in their functional roles lies in the kinds of *conceptual roles* characterizing them. So, within the conceptual role that characterizes all beliefs, we would have to distinguish two fundamentally different kinds of beliefs, depending on a difference in the type of conceptual role that characterizes them. This difference should, thereby, be mostly a difference in the kinds of mind-entry and mind-exit conditions characterizing them, although they might also differ, for example, in how they figure in reasoning.

It is clear that the assumption that there are beliefs with such different types of conceptual roles is ruled out neither by conceptual role semantics, nor by minimalism about belief. On a minimalist conception of belief, mental states are beliefs just in

case they have a conceptual role that would make them suitable for expression by a disciplined declarative sentence. This puts some restrictions on the kinds of conceptual roles that could characterize beliefs: only conceptual roles with a sufficiently rich set of mind-to-mind conditions to account for the inferential relations necessary to solve the Frege-Geach Problem could do so. When it comes to their other conditions, though, significantly different types of conceptual roles should be able to satisfy that requirement at least *in principle*. In our context, two such types can be highlighted.

First, it should be compatible with beliefs characterized by the following kind of conceptual role: when it comes to mind-entry conditions it is characterized by a significantly robust set of such conditions, which come with ontological commitments. When it comes to mind-exit conditions, on the other hand, these beliefs are characterized by conditions according to which they play a contributory role in the production of action in combination with other mental states, most prominently desires. Beliefs with a conceptual role of this type have the functional profile of representational states. And expressivists can hold that descriptive beliefs are beliefs of this kind.

Second, the minimalist restriction should *also* be compatible with beliefs with a very different type of conceptual role. If this conceptual role is characterized by mind-entry conditions at all, they will not expand our ontology. For example, maybe those mind-entry conditions only specify a restricted set of conditions that *rule out* the belief characterized by them. But, the conceptual role would be characterized by a robust set of mind-exit conditions that provides these beliefs with a motivating role in the production of action. Belief with a conceptual role of this type will plausibly have the functional profile of conative attitudes. And expressivists can hold that normative beliefs are exactly of this kind. Consequently, it seems that the offered framework allows expressivists to draw their distinctive distinction between normative and descriptive judgements, while maintaining that both are beliefs.

Of course, establishing that there are such states and fully cashing out their conceptual roles is part of a theoretical enterprise beyond the scope of this paper. However, these elaborations should suffice to show that there *is* a framework that

allows quasi-realists to account for the contents of normative beliefs. For the purposes of this paper, this should be enough.

This concludes my discussion of how the framework presented here would be compatible with a fundamental difference between normative and descriptive beliefs. One issue remains. This is how the account deals with *that*-clauses in propositional attitude ascriptions more generally.

IV.3. Desire and All That. My view accounts for the use of *that*-clauses in belief-attributions. One might worry, though, that it cannot explain the use of *that*-clauses in propositional attitude ascriptions more generally, because it has *that*-clauses always pick out the conceptual role of beliefs. There is at least one way to deal with this worry, though, if the conceptual role of any propositional attitude can be individuated through its relation to the conceptual role of belief. In this case, *that*-clauses could function to attribute conceptual roles to other kinds of propositional attitudes on my account, namely, that conceptual role which is relevantly related to the conceptual role of a belief. Is this response feasible? Here I cannot fully defend this response, but only work towards a license to optimism. I will do so by looking at one propositional attitude in particular: *desire*.

The first thing to note is that on the account on offer, there are actually two kinds of beliefs: normative and descriptive beliefs. Because of this bifurcation, we also need to consider two cases of desire, namely desires with descriptive contents (“descriptive desires” henceforth) and desires with normative contents (“normative desires” henceforth). I will deal with each type of desire in turn, starting with descriptive desires.

Here is how we can deal with such desires using my suggestion: Descriptive desires are most prominently motivating states, with their contents determining the kinds of actions an agent is disposed to undertake. The conceptual role of such desires will, consequently, be such that, in combination with beliefs about what makes the desired outcome more likely, it motivates the agent to act in certain ways. Recall now that descriptive beliefs will be characterized by conceptual roles with a robust set of mind-entry conditions, because they function to track particular features of the environment. This means that we can draw a distinctive relationship between the

conceptual role of descriptive beliefs and the conceptual role of certain descriptive desires: for any belief **B** with descriptive content, there will be some desire **D** the conceptual role of which is such that it tends to move the agent in a way that is conducive to bringing about those features of the external environment that it is the function of beliefs with the conceptual role of **B** to track. That desire, however, is surely the natural candidate for the desire with the same content as the belief in question. Consequently, the account offers a function from the conceptual roles of beliefs to the conceptual role of desires that tracks our intuitions about which beliefs and desires share their content. If this is true, we *can* characterize the conceptual roles of descriptive desires in relation to the conceptual roles of the corresponding beliefs. Hence, even though *that*-clauses would pick out the conceptual roles of beliefs, we can still account for their use in attributions of descriptive desires. In such attributions they serve to attribute a desire with a certain conceptual role, by illustrating the belief to which that desire is relevantly related. Of course, for an expressivist this explanation will not work for normative desires, so here we have to tell a different story.

One notable thing is that there *is* an intuitive difference in the conceptual roles of these two kinds of desires. While descriptive desires are motivating, it seems implausible that normative desires are. Take the desire that pleasure is good for its own sake. Would this desire motivate one to act in any particular way? Not really. Hence, it seems that normative desires differ significantly from descriptive desires: where the latter are motivating, the former are not.¹¹

So, what characterizes the conceptual role of normative desires? The most prominent features of such desires seem the following: First, someone who desires that *p*, where “that *p*” expresses a normative content, is disposed to take pleasure in

11 Of course, some desires with normative contents seem motivating: desiring that eating meat is morally permissible, for example, might motivate one to support research into lab-grown meat. However, the ascription of such desires is plausibly elliptical for the ascription of a mix of normative beliefs, descriptive beliefs, and desires with descriptive contents. The above desire for example, could be construed as a combination of the belief that causing unnecessary pain is wrong, the belief that eating meat causes unnecessary pain, and the desire that eating meat does not cause unnecessary pain. Desires with normative contents that cannot be so treated, however, seem motivationally inert.

entertaining the thought that p. Second, someone who desires that p, where “that p” expresses a normative content, is disposed to have her attention drawn to the thought that p and to entertain that thought in a fantasizing manner.

Both features mention a further mental state: “entertaining the thought that p.” Consequently, the first step in seeing whether my suggestion can handle normative desires should be to investigate whether it can account for *this* attitude. Here is my answer: to entertain a thought is to *simulate* the corresponding belief, where “simulation” is understood as running the belief “off-line.” If we understand “entertaining the thought that p” this way, however, then the *that*-clause can easily make the same contribution in attributing this attitude as it would in a belief-attribution. After all, to entertain the thought that p just *is* to be in that state that is a simulation of the belief with the conceptual role picked out by “that p.”

This allows characterizing the conceptual roles of normative desires in relation to the conceptual role of the corresponding beliefs as well. After all, these desires are characterized in terms of the attitude of entertaining the thought, which itself is characterized in relation to belief. Someone who desires that p will be in a state with the following two features. First, it will, in some relevant way, cause them to experience pleasure from simulating a belief with the conceptual role picked out by “that p”. Second, they will be disposed to simulate the belief with the conceptual role picked out by “that p”, and to have their attention drawn to that thought.

We now have a framework in which the account I gave can capture the use of *that*-clauses when attributing belief, desire, or the entertaining of a thought. Can it also deal with other propositional attitude ascriptions? Given what we’ve shown, I take the burden of proof to shift to those who want to deny this.