Abstract

After offering a characterization of what unites versions of 'expressivism', we highlight a number of dimensions along which expressivist views should be distinguished. We then separate four theses often associated with expressivism—a positive expressivist thesis, a positive constitutivist thesis, a negative ontological thesis, and a negative semantic thesis—and describe how traditional expressivists have attempted to incorporate them. We argue that expressivism in its traditional form may be fatally flawed, but that expressivists nonetheless have the resources for preserving what is essential to their view. These resources comprise a re-configuring of expressivism, the result of which is the view we call 'neo-expressivism'. After illustrating how the neo-expressivist model works in the case of avowals and ethical claims, we explain how it avoids the problems of traditional expressivism.

1. Expressivism Introduced

"Expressivism" designates a family of philosophical views. Very roughly, these views maintain that claims in the relevant area of discourse are 'in the business' of giving expression to sentiments, commitments, or other noncognitive (or nonrepresentational) mental states or attitudes, rather than describing or reporting a range of facts. This view is a natural, attractive option wherever one suspects that there may not be a domain of facts for the relevant discourse to describe or report. Familiarly, to avoid commitment to ethical facts, the ethical expressivist suggests that ethical claims (e.g., "Gratuitous torture is wrong," "John did the morally right thing") do not serve to describe ethical properties of objects, actions, persons, or states of affairs. Instead, ethical claims simply give voice to specific types of sentiment, or commitment, or more generically to certain types of 'pro-' or 'con-' attitude. Here is a classic statement of the idea by Ayer:

If I say to someone, 'You acted wrongly in stealing that money', I am not stating anything more than if I had simply said, 'You stole that money'. In adding that this action is wrong, I am not making any further statement about it. I am simply evincing my moral disapproval of it. It is as if I had said, 'You stole that money', in a peculiar tone of horror, or written it with the addition of some special exclamation marks.

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1 Expressivism has traditionally been characterized as a view about the meanings of claims in a given area of discourse (rather than, say, as a view about the basic function or point of those claims). The present characterization is designed to make room for views that capture the essentially expressive character of claims in some area of discourse without committing to the idea that the very meanings of the claims are somehow given by the non-cognitive mental states that they express. (We outline such a view in sections 3 and 4.)

2 Ayer 1952: 107. Often mentioned alongside Ayer in discussions of early forms of ethical expressivism are C. L. Stevenson (1937, 1944) and R. M. Hare (1952). Stevenson was apparently more open than Ayer to the idea that ethical claims are meaningful, allowing that ethical claims could have a unique sort of meaning that he called emotive meaning. Since the claim "This is good" is used to express approval, for instance, the claim itself must have something like the following meaning: 'I approve of this; do so as well'. Hare agrees with Ayer in denying that ethical utterances
Recent versions of ethical expressivism have been defended by, among others, Allan Gibbard and Simon Blackburn.³

Similar claims have been made about a number of different types of statements thought to be in some way philosophically problematic or puzzling. Austin, for instance, offered a seemingly expressivist treatment of knowledge claims⁴:

… saying 'I know' is taking a new plunge. But it is not saying 'I have performed a specially striking feat of cognition, superior, in the same scale as believing and being sure, even to being merely quite sure': for there is nothing in that scale superior to being quite sure. Just as promising is not something superior, in the same scale as hoping and intending, even to merely fully intending ... When I say 'I know', I give others my word: I give others my authority for saying that 'S is P'. (1970: 99).

And more recently, Gibbard (2003) has suggested that third-person knowledge claims, of the form ‘S knows that p’, should be treated as expressions. According to Gibbard’s proposal, to claim that S knows that p is, roughly, to express one’s willingness to rely upon S’s judgment that p – it’s to plan to rely on it.⁵

Relatedly, Strawson offered an expressivist treatment on which claims involving the truth-predicate have no descriptive but only expressive function:

The sentence 'What the policeman said is true' has no use except to confirm the policeman’s story; but . . . [it] . . . does not say anything further about the policeman’s story . . . . It is a device for confirming the story without telling it again. So, in general, in using such expressions, we are confirming, underwriting, agreeing with, what somebody has said; but . . . we are not making any assertion additional to theirs; and are never using 'is true' to talk about something which is what they said, or the sentences they used in saying it. (1949: 93).

More recently, Mark Schroeder has argued that expressivists ought to take the same approach to claims involving the truth-predicate as they do to other sorts of claims. In general, for the expressivists Schroeder has in mind, what ‘p’ means is to be understood in terms of whatever mental state counts as thinking that p. In the case of ‘p is true’, Schroeder thinks the expressivist ought to explain thinking that p is true in terms of being

³ Gibbard 2003 (see also Gibbard 1990); Blackburn 1998 (see also Blackburn 1984).
⁴ Austin’s treatment may be better described as ‘performative’.
⁵ Blackburn (1993: 35-51; 1998: 318-319) suggests that, since knowledge claims are irreducibly normative, like other normative judgments, they should understood in expressivist terms – in terms of a certain kind of endorsement of S’s justification. See also Ridge 2007 and Chrisman 2007. For a survey of epistemic expressivism, see Chrisman 2012.
committed to having certain attitudes toward other claims – specifically, claims of either ‘p’ or anything that means that p.6

Similar expressivist proposals have been made regarding aesthetic discourse, mentalistic attributions, probability claims, claims about what is funny, about causation, epistemic and other modals, conditionals, and even logical vocabulary.7

It’s clear enough that expressivist views have been offered regarding diverse areas of discourse. But even with respect to a given area of discourse, expressivists may disagree on the precise character of what claims in that area express. Thus, an ethical expressivist need not maintain that ethical claims serve to express emotions, sentiments, or attitudes. She may instead maintain that, in making an ethical claim, one is expressing one’s acceptance of, or commitment to, ethical norms – norms that tell us which actions are ethically required, permitted, or forbidden (see Gibbard 1990). An epistemic expressivist may similarly propose understanding knowledge claims as expressing acceptance of epistemic norms, which either entitle or don’t entitle particular beliefs (see Chrisman 2007). Aesthetic expressivists may think that aesthetic claims express emotions, or some kind of pro- or con-attitude (following Prinz 2004), or they may instead think that these claims express states of pleasure or displeasure (following Hopkins 2009). An expressivist treatment of epistemic modals could have it that they express some degree of either confidence or uncertainty (Egan and Weatherson 2011: 14-15; Schroeder 2010: 218), or habits or dispositions of various sorts (following Blackburn 1993: 55).

Another dimension of heterogeneity in expressivist proposals has to do with the theoretical purpose to be served. In some cases, the expressivist proposal seems motivated partly (if not primarily) by a desire to capture an apparent connection between sincere utterances of claims in that discourse and non-neutrality on

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6 Schroeder 2010b and forthcoming-a.
the part of the speaker in terms of attitude and motivation. Intuitively, someone who sincerely claims that
“That comedian is hilarious,” “What Joe did is admirable,” “The committee’s decision was unacceptable,” or
“That sonata is beautiful” is not being impartial about the subject-matter. Such claims seem directly to reveal
the subjective attitudes of those making them. Furthermore, these claims, when sincere, seem to license
certain expectations with regard to the speaker’s behavior – e.g., we can appropriately expect her to commend
what Joe did to others, to protest the committee’s decision, and so on. And if these expectations are unmet,
it seems, we are licensed to question whether the speaker really meant what she said. These features of the
relevant discourses suggest that there is an intimate link between, on the one hand, spontaneous
characterizations of things as attractive/repelling, amusing/boring, desirable/undesirable, etc., and, on the
other hand, the attitudes of those who offer the characterizations toward things so characterized. The
expressivist proposal purports to capture that link.

It is less obvious how readily expressivist treatments of labels such as “voluntary” or “must” can be
understood along similar lines. For example, while it’s quite reasonable to think (as suggested above) that
claiming, “What Jones did is reprehensible” directly expresses an attitude of disapproval toward what Jones
did, it seems rather less plausible that claiming, “What Jones said is true” similarly directly expresses an
attitude of any kind. And whereas paradigmatic instances of claiming, “This show is so funny!” clearly seem
directly to express amusement, it’s very unclear how claiming, “A bachelor must be unmarried” can be said
directly to express any sentiment, attitude, or commitment. In cases of this latter sort, expressivism seems
primarily motivated by the thought that construing the relevant terms as straightforwardly descriptive – as
simply responsive classifications of worldly items – incurs unwanted ontological commitments, or is
otherwise problematic. The expressivist construal is thus offered as a way of salvaging some distinctive
content or use for the relevant terms, once the face-value construal is rejected. The same may be said for
expressivist treatments of knowledge attributions, causal claims (e.g., “The window broke because the rock
hit it”), or conditionals (e.g., “If it rains, then the picnic will be canceled”). Here too the primary motivation

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8 See Blackburn 1993: 52-74. For a recent expressivist treatment of such uses of ‘must’, see Thomasson 2010. Thomasson has since come to prefer calling her view “modal normativism” (instead of the earlier “modal expressivism”), but as she explains, the view still makes the standard expressivist move of denying that the relevant discourse (in this case, modal discourse) functions to report or describe.
is the thought that a straightforward ‘factualist’ (or ‘representationalist’) construal of the relevant claims is not available, or is otherwise misguided.

Historically speaking, of course, expressivism in areas such as ethics and aesthetics was often also motivated by appeal to the inherent ‘queerness’ of the relevant facts.9 Here too expressivists proposed to reject the naïve assumption that the target claims even aim to describe or report facts, and are straightforwardly true or false, since it is this assumption that seems to cause trouble. For, on the assumption that statements that purport to describe facts are true provided that the relevant facts obtain (and false otherwise), if one admits that ethical or aesthetic claims are in the business of describing or reporting, then one must either insist that they are systematically false,10 or else welcome into one’s ontology whatever entities are implicated by ethical or aesthetic facts.

Finally, in recent years, another dimension along which expressivist views can be distinguished has emerged, namely, whether the mental state expressed by claims in the relevant domain is purely noncognitive or some sort of hybrid mental state with cognitive and noncognitive parts. Historically, it was always assumed that these possibilities were mutually exclusive. But some contemporary expressivists have rejected this assumption, allowing that at least some claims express both cognitive and noncognitive mental states. For instance, according to Ridge’s “ecumenical expressivism,”

for any declarative sentence \( \rho \) in which ‘required’ is used, an utterance of \( \rho \) expresses (a) an attitude of approval to all and only actions insofar as they would be approved by a certain sort of advisor, and (b) the belief that \( q \), where \( q \) is what you get when you take \( \rho \) and replace all occurrences of ‘required’ with ‘such that it would be insisted on by such an advisor’.

Pure expressivists maintain that claims in the relevant domain express only a noncognitive state; whereas hybrid expressivists maintain that the relevant claims express states that are both cognitive and noncognitive.12

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9 See, e.g., Mackie 1977: 38-42 for a well-known articulation of this motivation in the case of ethics. And see Brink 1984 for some discussion.
10 As Mackie and other ‘error theorists’ have done – see previous note.
11 Ridge 2007a: 63-64; italics added.
12 Hybrid expressivist views have received considerable attention in recent literature (see Boisvert 2008; Copp 2001, 2009; Finlay 2005; Ridge 2007a, forthcoming; and Schroeder 2009). Limitations of space do not allow us to discuss these views in any detail. If Schroeder (2009) is right, several of the hybrid views on offer are ultimately subject
So expressivist views vary according to

(a) the particular area of discourse to which they apply – e.g., ethics, aesthetics, knowledge, truth, and so on;

(b) the type of mental state that is supposed to be expressed by claims in the relevant area of discourse – e.g., emotions, sentiments, pro- or con-attitudes, pleasures or pains, confidence, uncertainty, commitment, etc.;

(c) the theoretical purpose(s) that they are meant to serve – e.g., accounting for the tight connection between sincere claims in the relevant area of discourse and a certain sort of attitudinal/motivational non-neutrality, avoiding unwanted ontological commitments, etc.; and

(d) whether they are pure or hybrid.13

In the next section, we separate several strands in expressivism, and explore some of the most significant problems it faces.

2. Expressivism Decomposed

We distinguish four different theses often associated with expressivist views, all recognizable from the discussion in section 1. With respect to claims in a given area of discourse D, expressivists have adopted:

1. A positive expressivist thesis (attitude expression): claims in D function to express a distinctive noncognitive type of mental state or attitude.14

2. A positive constitutivist thesis (internalism): to count as sincerely making a claim in D, a speaker must possess (a) the relevant mental state or attitude, (b) a disposition to have the relevant mental state or attitude, or at least (c) the belief that she has the relevant mental state or attitude.

3. A negative ontological thesis (anti-realism): there are no properties for the terms in D to denote, or facts for claims in D to report or describe.

4. A negative semantic thesis (noncognitivism): claims in D are not truth-apt.15
Traditionally, expressivists sought to capture (versions of) all four of these theses at once without subscribing to either an Ayer-style view that claims in D are meaningless or the error theorist’s view that claims in D are systematically false. And they assumed that the best way to do so was to suppose that the expression of noncognitive mental states or attitudes was somehow built into the semantics of the relevant discourse.

Roughly speaking, the idea is that whatever mental states or attitudes are expressed by claims in the given area of discourse is what gives them their meaning. Many take this ideationalist conception of meaning to be more-or-less definitional of expressivism. As Gibbard explains,

The term ‘expressivism’ I mean to cover any account of meanings that follows this indirect path: to explain the meaning of a term, explain what states of mind the term can be used to express. [...]

The label ‘expressivism’ alludes to a way of explaining the meanings of statements in a public language. Holmes tells Mrs. Hudson, “Packing is now the thing to do,” and we explain what he means by explaining the state of mind that he thereby expresses.16

(Hybrid expressivisms, too, take an ideationalist approach to meaning. For example, Ridge takes himself to be offering “a systematic and unified semantics for … normative predicates.”17) If the meanings of claims in D are somehow given by noncognitive attitudes, that explains both (a) how it is that they function to express such attitudes (attitude expression), and (b) why it is that speakers only count as making these claims sincerely if they have (or are disposed to have) the relevant attitudes (internalism). Moreover, such a view nicely accommodates both anti-realism and noncognitivism, for it allows the expressivist to deny that there are facts for claims in D to report or describe, truly or falsely, while still preserving meaningfulness for claims in D.

However, expressivism in its traditional form ran into serious problems. For one thing, as pointed out by Crispin Wright, at least on minimalist conceptions of truth and truth-aptitude, all that is needed for a claim to count as being truth-apt is for that claim to obey certain (minimal) constraints.18 And most (if not all) relevant areas of discourse include claims that satisfy these constraints. The sentences used when making

16 Gibbard 2003: 7, 75.
17 Ridge 2007a: 63, italics added. However, in (forthcoming) Ridge presents his hybrid expressivism as a view in meta-semantics, rather than semantics—i.e., as a view about that in virtue of which claims possess their semantic contents, rather than a view about the semantic contents themselves.
18 See Wright 1992: ch.1, and for a summary Wright 1996. According to what Wright calls ‘disciplined syntacticism’, the minimal constraints comprise “syntax-embeddability within negation, the conditional, contexts of propositional attitude, etc.-and of discipline: their use must be governed by agreed standards of warrant” (1996: 864).
ethical claims, for example, behave just like ordinary descriptive sentences syntactically as well as logico-semantically. They can be involved in logically valid inferences, they admit negation, embed in conditionals and in propositional attitude contexts, and so on.\textsuperscript{19} If these features entitle the minimalist about truth and truth-aptitude to say of a claim that it is truth-apt, then the expressivist would have to give up noncognitivism, and offer a characterization of her anti-realism that does not appeal to failure of truth-evaluability.

Rather than seeing this as a problem for their view, some expressivists actually embrace the marriage of expressivism with minimalism about truth-aptitude that Wright proposes. If the expressivist adopts minimalism about truth-aptitude, then she might similarly deflate notions like proposition and belief. A proposition, she could say, is just whatever is expressed by a truth-apt claim; and expressing the belief that $p$ is just a matter of sincerely making a claim that expresses the proposition that $p$. This is how some expressivists are supposed to be able to talk of such things as the truth or falsity of ethical claims, and it may give these expressivists resources for addressing issues of semantic continuity, which we describe below.\textsuperscript{20} But marrying expressivism and minimalism in this way may raise other problems. The more successful the expressivist is in earning the right to enjoy all the trappings of realist talk, the less clear it becomes just what is supposed to set claims in the relevant area of discourse apart semantically, i.e., as deserving of a semantic treatment different from that provided by the descriptivist for ordinary descriptive sentences. In fact, if we deflate notions like truth, truth-aptitude, proposition, and belief, one wonders how we’re supposed to then tell the difference between descriptivism and expressivism about a particular area of discourse.\textsuperscript{21}

A related, but better known, problem is the Frege-Geach problem. Peter Geach, unsurprisingly, sets up the problem nicely: “A thought may have just the same content whether you assent to its truth or not; a proposition may occur in discourse now asserted, now unasserted, and yet be recognizably the same

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Wright groups these under the “Geach point” (Wright 1998: sec. 3, especially p. 31, see also Geach 1960).
\item Simon Blackburn, for instance, has gone to great lengths to formulate a version of expressivism that he thinks earns the right to enjoy all the trappings of realist talk (see Blackburn 1993 and 1998).
\item An anonymous referee has suggested that the difference between descriptivism and expressivism can be revived by taking them to be meta-semantic views, as opposed to theories of meaning for given areas of discourse (see footnote 17). Note, however, that while this makes room for some distinction, viz. at the meta-semantic level, it does not allow us to preserve the traditional semantic claim that sentences in the designated area of discourse have a different kind of meaning.
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The problem is that expressivists about a discourse D deny that sentences used to make claims in D get their meanings by expressing propositions. If the expressivist maintains that these sentences nonetheless do have meanings, and that they get their meanings from the noncognitive mental states they express when asserted, then it is hard to see how sentences can carry consistent semantic contents across both asserted and unasserted contexts. If, for instance, the meaning of “Tormenting the cat is wrong” is exhausted by the disapproving attitude expressed when the sentence is asserted (or when it’s used to make a claim), then it is hard to see what the same sentence means when embedded in an unasserted context, such as in the antecedent of a conditional, or as part of a disjunction. After all, surely, e.g., “Either tormenting the cat is wrong or it is not” does not serve to express disapproval of tormenting the cat. So what could such a sentence mean on the expressivist view?

Expressivists differ over the solutions they offer for the Frege-Geach problem, but one prominent solution involves thinking of logically complex sentences like conditionals and disjunctions as also getting their meanings from the mental states they express, and then conceiving of logical connectives not as functions from propositions to propositions, but rather as functions from mental states to mental states. The meaning of “Tormenting the cat is wrong” is supposed to remain constant across both asserted and unasserted contexts, then, because the attitude it expresses when asserted is precisely the same as the attitude contributed by the sentence to whatever attitude is expressed by, e.g., the conditional into which the sentence is embedded.

A further, perhaps more basic, problem facing expressivists is that of accounting for the apparent semantic continuity between claims in the expressivist area of discourse and claims in other, non-expressivist areas of discourse. As we noted earlier, ethical sentences behave just like non-ethical sentences syntactically as well as logico-semantically. They can be involved in logically valid inferences, they admit negation, embed in conditionals, and so on. Given these similarities in linguistic behavior, and given that ethical terms and sentences embed seamlessly in ‘mixed’ contexts – i.e., contexts containing both ethical and non-ethical parts –

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22 Geach 1965: 449. Geach refers to this as “the Frege point,” noting that Frege was the first to make the point “clearly and emphatically.”
there is really no good linguistic reason to single ethical claims out for special semantic treatment. If there is good reason to construe the meanings of ethical sentences – or sentences used in any discourse – not in terms of propositions, but rather in terms of the motivational attitudes they express, then, by parity, the construal should be extended across the board. That is, the expressivist should trade in her local ideationalism – i.e., an idealist conception of meaning localized to a particular area of discourse – for a global ideationalism.\textsuperscript{24}

Indeed, this is roughly the direction that some expressivists have taken. But the move is problematic. Note that global ideationalism as a semantic theory is revisionary relative to the propositional-compositional semantics for declarative sentences that is familiar from the philosophy of language. Generally speaking, such wholesale semantic revisionism should not be undertaken lightly. Moreover, there are powerful logical and semantic reasons for invoking propositions as meanings of sentences that apply in areas where expressivism has seemed attractive – i.e., that a natural explanation of why two sentences are good translations of one another is that they express the same proposition; that propositions allow us to explain how semantic content can remain constant across a range of differences of force; and that propositions explain how it is that a single declarative sentence can be used to articulate the object of a wide variety of (propositional) attitudes. An expressivist who adopts a global ideationalist account of meaning incurs a theoretical debt: to offer a global semantic theory that rivals – and is fit to replace – the more traditional propositional-compositional framework. This is a tall order.

But perhaps the expressivist is not utterly without resources to provide a more satisfactory response. Go back to the Frege-Geach problem – arguably, a symptom of the deeper problem of semantic continuity. As we noted above, one prominent response by expressivists to the Frege-Geach problem was to insist that logically complex sentences like conditionals and disjunctions also get their meanings from the mental states they express, and then to conceive of logical connectives not as functions from propositions to propositions, but rather as functions from mental states to mental states. But we saw that, if this solution is supposed to

\textsuperscript{24} Compare this to what Schroeder calls the \textit{parity thesis}: “I will be arguing that pure [ethical] expressivism needs to be understood as committed to holding that normative sentences bear the same relation to noncognitive attitudes as ordinary descriptive sentences bear to ordinary propositional beliefs. I will call this the parity thesis” (2008b: 89).
work for “mixed” sentences as well (i.e., complex sentences only one part of which contains a claim in the expressivist’s area of discourse), then it represents but a first step toward sweeping semantic revisionism. (This is because, in order for the solution to work for these mixed sentences, the other parts of the sentences will presumably have to be given the same sort of semantic treatment that the expressivist gives to claims in her particular area of discourse).

However, Wright’s discussion of the Frege-Geach problem points to an altogether different way out for the expressivist, and one that we think prompts a reconfiguring of the traditional expressivist line. Consider a sentence that is normally used to make an assertion: “It is raining.” If one uses that same sentence as part of a conditional, or embeds it in any other ‘force-stripping’ context (negation, propositional attitude construction, etc.), it will no longer be used to make an assertion (though the sentence in which it is embedded may). This just means that from the possibility of embedding a declarative sentence in a force-stripping grammatical context we cannot infer anything about the illocutionary force that is standardly associated with it when it is uttered on its own. Given the familiar separability of force and surface grammar, this should come as no surprise. (‘I’d like to know what time it is,’’ for example, is a declarative sentence that is standardly used to ask a question, rather than to make an assertion about oneself.) Similarly, Wright explains, the fact that ethical sentences can be embedded in force-stripping grammatical contexts does not tell against the positive expressivist thesis according to which the standard function of claims in a given domain is to express noncognitive mental states or attitudes (attitude expression). So, if there were a way for the expressivist to allow that claims in an area of discourse possess whatever semantic features enable claims in other areas of discourse to behave (logically and grammatically) in the ways that they do, while still maintaining that certain claims function to express noncognitive mental states or attitudes, then the expressivist might be able to solve the Frege-Geach problem without involving herself in sweeping semantic revisionism. (And, we think, solutions to some of the other problems that expressivism has faced would be

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25 A related point worth considering, however, is this: The fact that claims of a given domain can be embedded so easily in force-stripping contexts may tell against the very notion of a given domain, and so may cause trouble for the expressivist in this indirect sort of way. For instance, “If he φ-ed, then he ought to be punished” seems like an ethical claim, but what about “If he ought to be punished, then he φ-ed”? And what about sentences like “It’s either morally wrong to φ or it isn’t”? (Thanks to Matthew Chrisman for this point.)
close at hand as well.) We think there is a way for the expressivist to do this, and it involves a rejection of the assumption noted at the beginning of this section—i.e., the assumption that, in order to best capture all four of the theses traditionally associated with expressivism, the expressivist must somehow locate the expression of noncognitive mental states or attitudes in the semantics of the relevant discourse—i.e., in the meanings of sentences used to make claims in that discourse.

3. Expressivism Reconfigured

Consider ordinary avowals (as they’re called), such as “I am in pain,” “I’m wondering if John will arrive on time,” and “I’m afraid of that snake.” On their surface, avowals resemble other sorts of claims in which some contingent state of affairs is reported or described. But avowals are unique in enjoying a kind of epistemic security not enjoyed by other claims. So, for instance, avowals contrast with third-person present-tense ascriptions of mental states (e.g., “She is in pain”), or past-tense mental self-reports (e.g., “I was in pain yesterday”). Avowals also contrast with non-observational bodily self-reports (e.g., “I’m sitting down”) and present-tense self-reports of psychological traits or standing dispositions (e.g., “I’m a patient person,” “I like going to restaurants”). Although, avowals seem to be made on no epistemic basis, it also seems out of place to challenge their truth, or to ask an avower to provide reasons or justification for her avowal. At the same time, avowals are rarely questioned, and are taken to represent privileged (self-) knowledge.

Accounting for this epistemic asymmetry between avowals and other claims (which asymmetry often comes under the label ‘first-person authority’) might be yet another theoretical purpose served by an appeal to expressivism. An expressivist treatment of avowals has it that avowals are importantly similar to natural expressions—like grimaces and groans—in that they function directly to express (rather than report or describe) the mental states of the persons making them. And this explains avowals’ epistemic security. After all, it seems equally out of place to ask someone grimacing in pain to give reasons or justification for the grimace or to question her being in pain. Here again, though, while perhaps nicely serving the purpose for which it was invoked, a simple expressivist treatment seems unable to accommodate the semantic continuity between avowals and other claims. If avowals do not involve genuine—let alone true—ascriptions of mental states to the avowing subjects, then they cannot have truth-conditional equivalents that do involve such
ascriptions and with which they can be legitimately interchanged in certain contexts, and they cannot serve as legitimate premises in logical inferences. (Moreover, avowals, understood simply as alternative ways of grimacing and groaning, would also not qualify as articles of genuine – let alone privileged – knowledge.)

One can, however, account for the epistemic asymmetry between avowals and other claims without compromising any of the notable semantic continuities between avowals and other ascriptions. Doing so requires drawing certain distinctions. The first distinction is between two senses of expression, and the second is between two ways of thinking about claims. Following Sellars (1969), we can distinguish between the following two senses of expression:

\textit{a-expression}: in the action sense, a person expresses a state of hers by intentionally doing something; Giving a hug, shouting “You’re here!” in a particular tone, and saying, “It’s so great to see you” are all actions by which a person can express joy at seeing you. Importantly, a-expression is a three-place relation between mental states, their possessors, and the vehicle of expression—i.e., the means by which the mental state gets expressed. To a-express is to engage in an action of some sort. This is to be contrasted with

\textit{s-expression}: in the semantic sense, a sentence (in speech, or a thought-token) expresses an abstract proposition by being a conventional representation of it.

The sentence “It is raining” expresses the proposition \textit{that it is raining}. So does the sentence “Es regnet,” as well as the that-clauses of “Sheila thinks that it’s raining” and “George hopes that it’s raining.” As we observed in section 2, this is commonly thought to be a natural way of explaining what good mutual translations, as well as different propositional attitudes, have in common. Unlike a-expression, s-expression is a relation between meaningful strings and their contents.

Alongside this distinction between two senses of expression, we distinguish between two importantly different ways of thinking about claims. Like such other English terms as ‘judgment’, ‘building’, and ‘painting’, the term ‘claim’ is ambiguous between a process of some sort—the act of making a claim—and the product of that process. To make the claim “It is raining” is to perform an action; and what is produced by

\footnote{26 Here as before, we prefer speaking of “claims” instead of “utterances” since it allows generalizing the expressivist treatment beyond discourse and speech, to reflection and thought. We also distinguish more carefully than before between \textit{claims} and the \textit{sentences} used in making them.}
that action is a sentence-token.27 It's true that in making the claim, a mental state gets expressed (presumably, the belief that it is raining). But in light of the distinction between a-expression and s-expression, we can see that it is the person, and not the sentence, that a-expresses the belief. Sentences are simply not in the business of a-expressing mental states (though one might be thought to express a mental state in virtue of using a sentence that s-expresses a proposition referring to that mental state). Instead, sentences s-express propositions.28

Returning to the case of avowals, it should be clear how these two distinctions can help the expressivist accomplish her aims while leaving the semantic features of avowals untouched. According to the view elsewhere called neo-expressivism,29 avowals considered as acts—like grimaces and groans—directly a-express the mental states avowed, and are consequently immune to epistemic criticism. This is the source of the epistemic asymmetry between avowals and other claims. However, considered as products, avowals are importantly different from natural expressions in that they are sentences, and so, are in the business of s-expressing propositions. And this accommodates the semantic continuity between avowals (understood as products) and other sentences.30

An expressivist armed with these distinctions, we think, is equipped to address the Frege-Geach problem. Recall that what the expressivist needs is a way of allowing that claims in her area of discourse possess whatever semantic features enable claims in other ('descriptive') areas of discourse to behave (logically and grammatically) in the ways that they do, while still maintaining that expressive claims function to express noncognitive mental states or attitudes. Our idea is this: regardless of the area of discourse, the expressivist is free to allow that claims in that area are embeddable in force-stripping contexts, and so forth, provided that we

27 Or thought-token, if the claim is made in thought rather than speech. In what follows, we will drop this qualification.

28 To the earlier list of dimensions along which expressivist views can be distinguished, then, we might add these two: (e) the sense of ‘express’ that is supposed to be operative in the positive expressivist thesis, and (f) the sense in which the relevant ‘claims’ are to be understood (as acts, products, or something else). The former of these two dimensions—i.e., the sense of ‘express’—has been getting some attention in recent years (see especially Schroeder 2008b).

29 The label, and the account summarized in what follows, come from Bar-On 2004. (A précis is provided in Bar-On 2010.)

30 For a full development of this account and an explanation of the strong presumption of truth governing avowals, see chs. 6-8 of Bar-On 2004.
are thinking of the claims as products that $x$-express abstract propositions. But this doesn’t stop the expressivists from maintaining the positive expressivist thesis (*attitude expression*), and insisting that these claims, *when understood as acts*, *x*-express noncognitive mental states.

The neo-expressivists similarly able to maintain the positive constitutivist thesis (*internalism*), according to which one cannot count as sincerely making a claim in the relevant area of discourse unless one either possesses the relevant (noncognitive) mental state or attitude, or is at least disposed to have the relevant mental state or attitude. Again, consider the act of making an avowal. Someone who *avows* feeling afraid is taken to engage in an act of direct expression of fear—rather than (or in addition to) expressing the *belief* that she is afraid. Though it is not conceptually impossible for someone to make a mental self-ascription and not be in the self-ascribed state, it is nonetheless a *propriety* condition on avowing a mental state (e.g., fear) that one is in the self-ascribed state. Similarly, it is open to the ethical expressivist, for instance, to insist that it is a propriety condition on making an ethical claim that one has (or be disposed to have in certain circumstances) whatever noncognitive mental state is supposed to be characteristic of such claims.31

Is neo-expressivism also compatible with the other two theses mentioned at the beginning of section 2 – i.e., the negative ontological thesis (*anti-realism*) and the negative semantic thesis (*noncognitivism*)? As we explained earlier, expressivism can be applied to a particular area of discourse to allow the expressivist to avoid particular ontological commitments. So for instance, ethical expressivists are sometimes motivated by a desire to avoid commitment to (what they see as) “spooky” irreducibly normative properties.32 Now, it’s worth noting that, despite its common association with the negative ontological thesis, even traditional expressivism does not entail anti-realism. It might be awkward, but it’s nonetheless open to one to adopt a traditional sort of expressivism about claims in discourse $D$ and yet also to be a realist about $D$-facts or $D$-properties. The basic neo-expressivist model that we describe in this section is similarly neutral with respect to the negative ontological thesis, and as such, it is every bit as accommodating of anti-realism as is

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31 For relevant discussion of propriety conditions, see Bar-On and Chrisman 2009, and Bar-On, Chrisman, and Sias, “(How) Is Ethical Neo-Expressivism a Hybrid View?” (in progress). (The former also addresses how the relevant distinctions can be applied to claims made in thought, and not just in speech.)

expressivism in its more traditional forms. Just like traditional expressivism, neo-expressivism does not entail anti-realism, but it can accommodate anti-realism in virtue of its ontological neutrality.\(^{33}\)

To be sure, the neo-expressivist does assert that claims in D (in the product sense) s-express propositions, and there are many who will want to couple the idea that propositions are truth-bearers with a metaphysically inflated conception of truth, thereby interpreting the neo-expressivist as committed to there being ways the world might be that would make these propositions true. But none of this is essential to the propositional-compositional semantics that the neo-expressivist prefers (and note that none of the reasons mentioned above for preferring the propositionalist framework to the expressivist’s global ideationalism trades on any conception of truth or truth-conditions). So we deny that the neo-expressivist is committed to any of it. Maintaining that a sentence expresses a proposition is quite different from maintaining that any of the terms in that sentence refer. In some cases, a neo-expressivist may want to hold that terms in the relevant area of discourse do refer—e.g., presumably, the neo-expressivist about avowals will want to say that mental-state terms refer.\(^{34}\) But in other domains, neo-expressivists may be anti-realists. Our point is that whether or not the propositions s-expressed by claims in D have ontologically problematic truth-makers is a matter to be settled by metaphysicians, not semanticists.

Finally, note that neo-expressivism is incompatible with the negative semantic thesis (noncognitivism). We hope it is clear that this should not worry the expressivist. For one thing, as we explained earlier, admitting that claims in D express truth-evaluable contents (propositions) seems to be the best way of accounting for the many semantic continuities between those claims and claims in other areas of discourse, and the fact that claims in D can occur in mixed contexts. For another thing, as we’ve just explained, one can

\(^{33}\) Of course, neo-expressivism may foreclose certain specifically semantic ways of accommodating anti-realism, since it rejects expressivism as a theory of meaning. If one is indeed concerned about this, it may be helpful to note that the two distinctions lying at the heart of neo-expressivism could in theory be combined with an expressivist theory of meaning—so, for instance, one could maintain that what gets s-expressed by ethical claims (in the product sense) is somehow to be cashed out in terms of non-cognitive mental states or attitudes. For reasons we describe in section 2, we think this option is not preferable. But it is an option nonetheless. (Thanks to an anonymous referee.)

\(^{34}\) Indeed, as explained in Bar-On (2012), it’s very unclear how one can couple avowal expressivism with psychological anti-realism, since, in explaining the special status of avowals, the expressivist invokes the very same things (i.e. states of mind) whose existence the anti-realist denies.
admit that claims in D express propositions that are truth-apt without thereby incurring any unwanted ontological commitments.

4. Expressivism Re-applied

In section 2, we raised three problems for traditional expressivism. We concluded that the expressivist might be able to avoid these problems, if she could maintain that claims in the relevant area of discourse function to express noncognitive mental states, while also allowing that they possess whatever semantic features enable claims in other areas of discourse to behave (logically and grammatically) in the ways that they do. And in section 3, we explained how the expressivist might do this. Armed with two important distinctions—i.e., the distinction between a-expression and s-expression, and the distinction between claims understood as acts and claims understood as products—the neo-expressivist can say that claims in D (as acts) a-express mental states of whatever kind, while claims in D (as products) s-express propositions, which allows them to behave in the same ways (logically and grammatically) as other claims behave. As we explain below, this neo-expressivist model promises solutions to the problems raised in section 2. But before showing how this works, we want to draw attention to the fact that the neo-expressivist model generalizes.

The two distinctions lying at the heart of neo-expressivism are applicable across all types of claims. In the opening section, we noted that expressivist treatments have been given to everything from aesthetic claims, to probability claims, to conditionals, and so on. Regardless of the particular domain with which one is concerned, it will be the case that the expression relation between people and their mental states (a-expression) is fundamentally different from the expression relation that holds between meaningful strings and their contents (s-expression). And of course, the act of making a claim – again, regardless of what the claim happens to be about – is something different from what is produced by the act, namely, a sentence- (or thought-) token. For a more concrete illustration, let us see how the neo-expressivist model applies in the case of ethical claims.
According to ethical neo-expressivism, expressivists have been correct to think that ethical claims are in some important sense different from non-ethical descriptive claims, in that ethical claims function to express certain distinctive mental states or attitudes. Where traditional expressivists have erred, however, is in thinking that this expressive function is somehow executed through the meanings of ethical claims. According to the neo-expressivist, so long as we are thinking of ethical claims as types of acts, it is clear that ethical claims are different from non-ethical descriptive claims. In making ethical claims, speakers characteristically express mental states that are different in kind from the states they a-express when making non-ethical claims. Presumably, when making ethical claims, speakers a-express a kind of mental state that often figures in motivation to act – e.g., desires, attitudes, emotions, etc. However, ethical claims understood as products – i.e., ethical sentences – are semantically continuous with non-ethical sentences in being truth-evaluable, embeddable in truth-functional and intensional contexts, involved in logically valid inferences, and so forth. And this is because, like their non-ethical counterparts, ethical sentences s-express propositions.

Now return to the three problems posed for expressivism in section 2. According to the first, it is hard to see how the expressivist can maintain anti-realism and noncognitivism in the face of minimalism about truth and truth-aptitude. This isn’t a problem for the neo-expressivist. Since the neo-expressivist allows that sentences are in the business of expressing truth-apt propositions, she is in no way committed to noncognitivism; moreover, in light of our discussion in the latter half of section 2, there are good reasons to reject noncognitivism. And since neo-expressivism is neutral on issues of ontology – leaving the matter to be settled by metaphysicians rather than semanticists – neo-expressivism is compatible with anti-realism (but also with realism). As we mentioned earlier, in some domains, there may be good reasons for preferring realism, which do not apply in other domains.

The second problem was the Frege-Geach problem. As we put it earlier, this is the problem of explaining how it is that sentences as construed by the expressivist can carry consistent semantic contents across both asserted and unasserted contexts. The neo-expressivist has no problem here either. Sentences carry consistent semantic contents across both asserted and unasserted contexts, because what a sentence s-

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35 See Bar-On and Chrisman 2009
expresses does not depend upon the type of act that it is being used to perform. The sentence “It is raining” s-expresses the proposition that it is raining whether it is being used to make an assertion (and, thereby, to a-express a belief) or not. In fact, one could argue that failure to attend to the two distinctions that lie at the heart of neo-expressivism is what has led expressivists and their critics to regard the Frege-Geach problem as a persisting problem for expressivism.

And finally, there was the problem of semantic continuity. Here, too, neo-expressivism offers an elegant solution. Rather than committing to sweeping semantic revisionism by adopting the sort of global ideationalist semantics that we describe above, the neo-expressivist opts for the more familiar propositional-compositional semantics, and then suggests that we capture semantic continuity simply in terms of s-expression. Claims in the domain of concern are semantically continuous with claims outside of the domain because they all s-express propositions. (It could be argued that the reason expressivists have rejected this is that they were implicitly accepting the representationalist conception of propositions embraced by realist opponents.) Furthermore, the neo-expressivist reminds us, capturing semantic continuity in this way does not bar us from recognizing the apparent psychological discontinuities between different types of claims, because we’ve not yet said anything about what sorts of mental states get a-expressed by speakers when they make claims in D.

5. Concluding Remarks

Historically, expressivists and their critics have assumed that expressivism is specifically a view about the semantics of claims in a particular area of discourse. As we explain above, this is presumably because they have assumed that the only way for the relevant claims to serve their expressive function while retaining their meaningfulness is for the expression of noncognitive mental states to somehow be built into the meanings of these claims. Now, those who share this latter assumption will probably want to deny that our neo-expressivist approach should be counted among the varieties of expressivism. After all, neo-expressivism

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36 A recent and highly-regarded monograph surveying expressivism (Schroeder 2008a), for instance, is subtitled “Evaluating the Semantic Program of Expressivism,” and opens by describing expressivism as first-and-foremost a “semantic hypothesis” (2008a: x).
divorces the expressive function of claims from their semantic contents. But as we saw in section 2, it is because they attempt to locate the expression of noncognitive states in the semantics of the relevant discourse that expressivists run into the sorts of problems that have plagued expressivism for many years. So, as long as expressivism is construed as a view about the function of claims in a particular area of discourse (what those claims are ‘in the business of’ doing), neo-expressivism is a live – and, we think, attractive – expressivist option.  

37 References


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