

Expressivism and Varieties of Normativity

Daniel Wodak

The expressivist advances a view about how we explain the meaning of a fragment of language, such as claims about what we morally ought to do. Critics evaluate expressivism on those terms. This is a serious mistake. We don't just use that fragment of language in isolation. We make claims about what we morally, legally, rationally, and prudentially ought to do. To account for this linguistic phenomenon, the expressivist owes us an account not just of each fragment of language, but of how they weave together into a broader tapestry.

The linguistic phenomenon in question is the relativity of normative terms to standards. In the same circumstances, one act can count as what we "ought to do" relative to one standard (e.g. morality) and what we "ought not do" relative to another (e.g. legality). We see the same phenomenon with descriptive terms: in the same circumstances, one entity can count as "tall" relative to one standard and "not tall" relative to another. Such claims are consistent, and have different contents. However this does not show that "ought" (or "tall") is lexically ambiguous. Rather, "ought," like "tall," has a single *standing meaning*, or *character*, which systematically determines those different contents.

Historically, the expressivist neglected this phenomenon. She offered an explanation of the contents of terms like "ought" in one fragment of language. She provided no explanation of the character of normative terms like "ought."

In §11.2, I explain why the expressivist must explain the character of "ought" across all varieties of normativity—i.e. across all standards to which "ought" is relativized. Such an explanation is required for two reasons. First, if "ought" had different contents but no single character, it would have a different meaning in moral, legal, rational, and prudential claims. There is no evidence for this prediction of widespread lexical ambiguity, and much evidence against it. So the expressivist needs an account of the character of "ought" if it is to be consistent with the linguistic data. Second, without

such an explanation, expressivism will lack the parsimony and explanatory power of its “descriptivist” competitors.

There are two ways that the expressivist could explain the character of “ought”: at the semantic level, or at the meta-semantic level. I consider the first in §11.3. The best option here builds on work by Allan Gibbard. However, it gets the wrong results about inconsistency: it makes claims about what we morally ought to do inconsistent with claims about what we legally, prudentially, or rationally ought to do. This problem with inconsistency, I argue, afflicts plausible alternatives to this expressivist semantics.

In §11.4, I consider whether meta-semantic expressivists can explain the character of “ought.” The best option here was developed by Michael Ridge. But it leaves expressivists with an implausibly disunified meta-semantics: there are two different explanations for why “ought” has one meaning. There is no good way for meta-semantic expressivists to avoid this problematic disunity.

If this is right, the expressivist faces a challenge. She must provide an explanation of the character of “ought,” but has no good way to do so. My hypothesis is that to explain the univocality of “ought,” the expressivist must posit that “ought” expresses the same type of conative attitude when it is relativized to varieties of normativity; but once she posits that, no matter how we fill in the details of her view we encounter a general problem in explaining inconsistency because attitudinal inconsistency is too coarse-grained. I use this hypothesis to frame the present challenge to expressivism as a dilemma in §11.5. In §11.6 I note that by construing her view as a pragmatic thesis the expressivist can evade both horns of the dilemma; but this is a Pyrrhic victory, since it does not vindicate anti-realist commitments about normativity.

As Seth Yalcin (2012) noted, expressivism has been “so unmoored from linguistic phenomena [that] it is unsurprising that there is little agreement concerning what the expressivist’s linguistic programme is, or should be.” This can make expressivism an elusive target. My aim here is to draw our attention to a linguistic phenomenon that the expressivist has neglected in order to throw down a gauntlet; my aim is not to offer an impossibility proof. Perhaps some form of expressivism avoids both horns of the dilemma while vindicating anti-realism. If so, progress will still have been made: we will at least have reached some agreement about what the expressivist’s linguistic program should be.

11.1 SETTING THE STAGE

We should not proceed unmoored. So what is this linguistic phenomenon? And what are “content” and “character,” “descriptivism” and “expressivism”?

11.1.1 The Linguistic Phenomenon

Consider Sophocles' *Antigone*. After her brother Polynices was killed in battle, Creon—the king of Thebes—forbids Antigone to bury him, on pain of death by stoning. Say that Antigone and Creon discuss what she ought to do:

1. Morally, I ought to bury Polynices, but legally I ought not do so.
2. No, morally and legally, you ought not bury Polynices.

In saying (1), Antigone takes morality and legality to be *divergent standards*: the same act in the same circumstances (“burying Polynices”) is what she “ought to do” relative to one standard (morality) and what she “ought not do” relative to another (legality). In saying (2), Creon takes morality and legality to be *convergent standards*: according to both, Antigone ought not bury Polynices.

This exchange will be our main focus. But it is synecdochic: we are using this example to represent the wider linguistic phenomenon of standard-relativity. We could also substitute legality for another standard, like prudence:

3. Morally, I ought to bury Polynices, but prudentially I ought not do so.
4. No, morally and prudentially, you ought not bury Polynices.

And we could *embed* such relativized claims, as Creon does in the following sentences (after the prophet Tiresias convinces him of the error of his ways):

5. Morally you ought not bury Polynices; but if you bury Polynices, rationally I ought not blame you.
6. Legally, I ought to punish you. But morally, I should not have made it the case that legally I ought to punish you.

It is worth noting a few intuitive and important features of such exchanges. Antigone and Creon disagree about what she morally ought to do, but agree about what she legally and prudentially ought to do. Moreover, they do not disagree with themselves: it is consistent for Antigone to say that “burying Polynices” is what she “ought to do” relative to morality, *and* what she “ought not do” relative to legality and prudence. Ditto for Creon’s claims (5) and (6).

11.1.2 Content and Character

Now let’s distinguish between *content* and what Kaplan (1989) called *character*. These technical terms track an intuitive distinction between

context-variant and -invariant meaning.¹ To illustrate it, consider the following uses of “tall”:

7. Creon is tall for a Theban, but he’s not tall for a Greek.
8. No, he’s tall for a Theban *and* for a Greek.

Here the same entity (“Creon”) is taken to be “tall” or “not tall” relative to different standards (“for a Theban”; “for a Greek”). There is an intuitive sense in which “tall” has a different meaning in the two uses in (7): one might mean “of a height greater than 4’5”,” the other might mean “of a height greater than 5’5”.” These are different *contents* of “tall.” There is also an intuitive sense in which “tall” means the same thing in (7) and (8): roughly, “of a degree of height greater than the average *x*.” This is the *character* of “tall”: i.e. its *standard-invariant meaning*.²

The standard-relativity of the descriptive term “tall” in (7)–(8) is analogous to the standard-relativity of the normative term “ought” in (1)–(2). So by analogy, our concern is with the distinction between the contents (standard-variant meanings) and character (standard-invariant meaning) of “ought.”

The challenge for expressivists will be to explain the standard-invariant meaning of “ought” (or “*A* ought to φ ”),³ and how it systematically interacts with standards like “morally” and “legally” to determine contents.

11.1.3 Descriptivism

Before we get there, consider the orthodox account of the character of “tall” from representationalist, truth-conditional semantic theories. On this account, “tall” means a function from contexts to contents, where contents are propositions.

“Descriptivists” offer the same representational explanation for the meaning of descriptive and normative terms. Following Angelika Kratzer in particular, they take the character of “ought” to be a function from contexts to propositions. To illustrate this approach, here is one candidate function:

¹ There are different ways to cash this out: compare Kaplan (1989) and Heck (2001).

² This is not a definition of character. It is simply the only form of invariant meaning that concerns us.

³ For the sake of expository convenience, I will drop such parentheticals and speak of the meaning of “ought.” Some expressivists frame their views in terms of the meaning of sentences (“*A* ought to φ ”). Such expressivists can translate my claims appropriately. (They had better be able to in order to explain compositionality: see Ridge (2014), p. 137.) They should also heed Schroeder’s (2008) point that it is easier to assign Kaplanian characters to terms than sentences (pp. 179–80).

$\text{Ought}_{f,g} \varphi = 1$ iff $\forall w((w \in [[F]] \cap [[G]]) \supset w \in [[\varphi]])$.

The modal base f provides a set of propositions, F , which represents the relevant circumstances. The ordering source g provides a set of propositions, G , which represents the demands of the relevant standard. “ A ought to φ ” is true iff “ A φ s” is true at every world in the intersection of F and G . This illustrates the essential innovation from Kratzer (2012): that two conversational backgrounds are relevant to modals; f determines which worlds are accessible, while g ranks those worlds.

This account of the character of “ought” has many virtues, two of which are dialectically important. First, it explains how the character of “ought” systematically interacts with standards to determine contents. Second, it provides fine-grained inconsistency conditions. (1) and (2) are inconsistent: “Antigone buries Polynices” cannot be true and false at the intersection of the F and G where G represents the same legal demands and F represents the same circumstances. But the conjuncts of (1) are consistent: it can be true that “Antigone buries Polynices” at the intersection of the F and G where G represents the moral demands, and true that “Antigone does not bury Polynices” at the intersection of the F and G where G represents the legal demands.⁴ This explains why Antigone and Creon disagree, but Antigone does not disagree with herself.

Of course, there are problems with and puzzles for the function above, and truth-conditional accounts of the character of “ought” generally. Still, such accounts are promising. And perhaps more importantly, even those who reject them should still accept that descriptivists face no special challenge in explaining the *character* of “ought.” After all, there will be some account of the character of standard-relative descriptive terms, like “tall.” If the descriptivist is right, whatever machinery works for “tall” can also be wheeled out for “ought.”

11.1.4 Expressivism

The expressivist rejects descriptivism. She claims that there is a deep difference between how we should explain the meaning of descriptive terms (like “tall”) and normative terms (like “ought”). Three motivations are offered for this.

⁴ This explanation only appeals to the fact that these standards have different demands (represented by different sets of propositions). It does not directly appeal to the fact that one of these standards is moral while the other is legal. This may pose problems for this specific descriptivist explanation.

The first concerns representation. If (7) and (8) are representational, they commit us to objects instantiating properties like *being tall*. If (1) to (6) are representational, they commit us to objects instantiating properties like *being what one ought to do*. Unlike *being tall*, such properties do not seem to be part of the familiar physical world, so many worry that they would be strange or mysterious.

The second concerns disagreement. If speakers systematically differ in their criteria for applying descriptive terms like “tall,” they don’t disagree when they assert (7) and (8): they merely talk past each other. Not so if Antigone and Creon systematically differ in their criteria for applying the words “morally ought.” If Antigone is a divine command theorist and Creon is a virtue ethicist, they still disagree about what she morally ought to do.⁵

The third concerns “internalism.” Roughly, this is the view that there is an internal connection between our sincere uses of “ought”—in thought and talk—and our conative attitudes.⁶ If a completely dispassionate and indifferent person said “Creon is tall,” we would have no grounds to doubt her sincerity, but not so if she said “Antigone ought to bury Polynices.” Absent some indication of her conative attitudes—that she is *for* Antigone burying Polynices—she would seem to be parroting others’ normative claims. This suggests that conative attitudes play importantly different roles in normative and descriptive claims.

Enter the expressivist. She proposes that we “explain the meaning of a term” by “what states of mind the term can be used to express” in sincere speech acts.⁷ Further, she takes descriptive terms like “tall” to express cognitive states, and normative terms like “ought” to express conative states (like plans).

The expressivist aims to vindicate anti-realism. She is “primarily motivated” by the thought that by explaining the meaning of normative but not descriptive terms via conative states we can avoid “unwanted ontological commitments.”⁸ Desires and beliefs, after all, don’t carry the same ontological commitments.⁹

⁵ See especially Horgan and Timmons (1991).

⁶ What “internal” connection? This is a vexed question. See Smith (1994) and Ridge (2014). It is arguable whether it is normative *judgments* or *utterances* that bear an internal connection to motivation, hence the phrase “thought and talk.” I focus on utterances for simplicity.

⁷ Gibbard (2003), p. 7; see also Ridge (2014), p. 5. As Bar-On and Sias (2013) note, many take this pattern of explanation “to be more-or-less definitional of expressivism” (p. 702).

⁸ Bar-On and Sias (2013), p. 701. See Gibbard (2012), pp. 236–40; Ridge (2014), p. 101. Expressivists about certain non-normative terms and claims typically share this motivation.

⁹ Beyond this intuitive gloss, I will not attempt to solve the difficult problem of how we should distinguish realism from anti- (and quasi-)realism. For discussion, see Dreier (2004).

The expressivist also aims to explain disagreement in terms of inconsistent conative attitudes. Antigone and Creon disagree because they express rationally discordant attitudes. The details of the explanation differ, but the form is like the following. Antigone expresses a plan to bury Polynices and Creon expresses a plan for Antigone not to bury Polynices. Since these plans are rationally discordant—a speaker who possessed both would be practically irrational—they are inconsistent, and so are the sentences that express them.¹⁰ Attitudinal inconsistency can persist in the face of systematic differences in speakers' criteria for applying words like “morally ought.” So expressivists claim to explain why virtue ethicists and divine command theorists disagree.

Finally, the expressivist aims to explain internalism. The internal connection between sincere uses of normative terms and conative attitudes is explained by taking those terms to *express* speakers' conative attitudes.

For each of these motivations, the descriptivist has (at least) one response.¹¹ With one exception (see §11.6), I put these to one side. The aim of this chapter is not to defend descriptivism, but to explore a novel challenge to expressivism.

11.1.5 Varieties of Normativity

Expressivism is typically advanced as a theory about the meaning of normative language: the expressivist offers an explanation of the meaning of claims about what we “ought to do,” or what we “morally ought to do.” But this ignores the varieties of normativity. Antigone's and Creon's claims about what they “ought to do” are relativized to moral, legal, prudential, and rational standards.

In (1) to (6) “ought” is explicitly relativized to these standards. Speakers also implicitly relativize “ought,” and other deontic modals, to standards that are made salient by the conversational context: “You must reply in the third person to an invitation issued in the third person” and “You can't double dribble!” implicitly relativize deontic modals to standards set by etiquette and basketball. These cases also illustrate the large, even “opened,”¹² scale of the varieties of normativity.

This phenomenon has been noted before. It is familiar to linguists, who call varieties of normativity “flavors” to which deontic modals are relativized.

¹⁰ See Schroeder (2008) and Woods and Baker (2015) for excellent discussion of this issue.

¹¹ Considering just the first motivation, descriptivists can be error theorists, naturalists, non-naturalists, or quietists about the ontological commitments of normative language.

¹² See von Fintel and Heim (2011), p. 36.

And it is familiar to philosophers. Michael Zimmerman (1996) wrote that “ought” is often used to “express moral obligation,” as well as “to express what is required not by morality but by prudence, or law, or aesthetics, or the rules of chess, or whatever.” Likewise, Stephen Finlay (2014) says “the orthodox view” is that “the moral sense of ‘ought’ is only one of many, including prudential and instrumental senses, and those of institutions like legal systems, etiquette, and games.”

Historically, this phenomenon has been largely ignored by the expressivist. She focused on one (or at most, a narrow subset) of the “senses” of “ought,”¹³ and offered a theory that explains its *content*. She offered no account of the character of “ought.” This assessment is not unorthodox. While Jamie Dreier (2009) writes that expressivists “decline to say what” normative terms or claims mean by speaking of their “content, or character,” we “can think of” expressivism as taking (sets of) conative states to be “normative *contents*”; i.e. we can think of (sets of) attitudes as the semantic “contents of sentences.”¹⁴ Dreier even contrasts expressivism with relativism, which assigns normative claims “a Kaplanian character,” or “a function from contexts to contents.” Similarly, Mark Schroeder’s (2008) book-length evaluation of expressivism noted that the view is yet to introduce “context-sensitive elements” to yield “a picture of the role of context . . . in which individual terms have Kaplanian characters.”¹⁵

11.2 EXPRESSIVISM *SANS* CHARACTER

So far, we’ve seen that there is a linguistic phenomenon of standard-relativity, which occurs with descriptive and normative terms alike. One way to explain the meaning of a standard-relative term is to provide an account of its character, which determines its contents. The descriptivist can use the same machinery in explaining the characters of descriptive and normative terms. The expressivist, by contrast, has not provided an account of the characters of “ought” et al.

These observations do not amount to a challenge to the expressivist. We have not yet seen why she needs to provide an account of the character of “ought.” To do so, let’s continue pressing the analogy between “ought”

¹³ Sticking to our central case, the two most prominent expressivists—Blackburn (1984, 1993, 1999) and Gibbard (1990, 2003)—defend expressivism primarily about the moral or practical “ought,” and ignore the legal “ought.” Kevin Toh (2005) does the opposite.

¹⁴ Dreier (2009), pp. 83, 85 (emphasis his). Why the “sets of” qualification? See §11.3.

¹⁵ Schroeder (2008), pp. 179–80.

and “tall.” Does a first-order semantic theory need an account of the character of “tall”?

Say the meaning of any use of “tall” is its semantic content. The contents of uses of “tall” vary depending on the standards to which “tall” is relativized: “tall” (for a Theban) has a different content to “tall” (for a Greek). So different uses of “tall” will differ in meaning: “tall” will be lexically ambiguous.

A semantic theory with this structure would encounter two serious, interrelated problems. First, it would lack the theoretical virtues of parsimony and explanatory power. It would posit a vast number of distinct meanings of “tall.” And it would owe us an explanation of what these different contents have in common, if they are not systematically determined by any character.

Second, it would fail to explain the linguistic data. Predictions of lexical ambiguity are testable, and this one fails the relevant tests. Consider the Conjunction Reduction Test, wherein two sentences that contain a purportedly ambiguous term are conjoined, using the term once in contexts where both meanings are encouraged. To illustrate: “Pale colors are light”; “Feathers are light”; “Pale colors and feathers are light.” The third sentence fails the test because “light” seems *zeugmatic*: it has been used with two parts of the sentence (“colors,” “feathers”) and must be understood differently in relation to each. This is evidence for thinking that “light” is lexically ambiguous.¹⁶ By contrast, consider (8): “Creon is tall for a Theban *and* for a Greek.” If “tall” were lexically ambiguous, this should seem *zeugmatic*. But it doesn’t. Such linguistic data are not explained by a theory that takes “tall” to be ambiguous.

Would a first-order semantic theory that provides no account of the character of “ought” face these same problems? Absolutely.¹⁷ Say the meaning of any use of “ought” is its semantic content. The contents of different uses of “ought” vary depending on the standards to which “ought” is relativized. So different uses of “ought” will also differ in meaning: “ought” will be lexically ambiguous.

¹⁶ Sennet (2011). Linguistic evidence from this test—as well as the “and so” and “binding” tests used below in the example of Zoe—is rarely decisive. It can be hard to distinguish between ambiguity and nearby phenomena, like semantic indeterminacy. Further issues are posed when speakers produce *zeugma* for poetic effect: in “She took her hat, and her leave,” “took” is used literally in relation to “her hat” and figuratively in relation to “her leave.”

¹⁷ Importantly, this poses problems for expressivists and certain descriptivists who cavalierly posit multiple senses of “ought” without providing any account of the character of “ought.”

If the expressivist does not provide an account of the character of “ought,” her theory faces two serious, interrelated problems. First, it would lack the virtues of parsimony and explanatory power. It would posit widespread lexical ambiguity, perhaps even attributing to “ought” an open-ended set of meanings (to correspond to the open-ended set of varieties of normativity). This violates the maxim that we should not multiply meanings beyond necessity. Moreover, with no account of the character that determines these varying contents, it would not explain what these different contents have in common.¹⁸

Second, the expressivist will not explain the linguistic data. When we have *convergent standards*, we can take sentences in which “ought” is relativized to different standards (“Morally, Antigone ought not bury Polynices” and “Legally, Antigone ought not bury Polynices”) and conjoin them using “ought” once (as in (2)). If “ought” were lexically ambiguous, such sentences would seem zeugmatic, as “light” does in “Pale blue and feathers are light.” That “ought” does not seem zeugmatic in cases like (2) and (4) strongly suggests that it is not ambiguous. This is a straightforward application of the Conjunction Reduction Test.

We get the same results if we apply other standard tests for lexical ambiguity to “ought,” and other deontic modals that are relativized to different standards. Consider the following case. Zoe has three kids: Joe, Kim, and Leo. Joe is in the Evil Villains Club, where it is a rule that members are silent when someone is presenting a scheme, as is happening now. Kim is in a legally designated noise-reduction zone. Leo is near a dangerous predator; if he makes a peep, it’ll kill him and some kids. Now we can consider sentences like “Joe must be quiet, and so too for Kim and Leo,” or “All of Zoe’s kids must be quiet.” In these sentences, “must” is implicitly relativized to different standards. But it does not strike us as zeugmatic, which strongly suggests that it is not ambiguous.¹⁹

Perhaps these arguments are not decisive. But they at least show that the onus is on the expressivist to show that her explanation of the meaning(s) (contents) of “ought” is plausible in the absence of an account of its character. It is difficult to see how the expressivist could discharge this explanatory debt; a disunified semantics is certainly not *favoured* by the data.

¹⁸ For more on what explanatory power is needed, see Swanson (2007), p. 1195 and Finlay (2014), pp. 55 ff. The expressivist has offered no attempt to discharge this explanatory debt. It is also worth noting that known attempts to do so—such as Ludlow’s (2008)—would undercut the disagreement-based motivation for expressivism. See Plunkett and Sundell (2013).

¹⁹ See Zwicky and Sadock (1975) and Stanley (2005) for discussion.

Now we have a challenge for expressivists. To meet this challenge, an expressivist must give us an account of (a) the character of “ought,” and (b) what modifiers (“morally,” “legally”) add to the meaning of sentences like “Antigone ought to bury Polynices.” Expressivists’ answers are subject to three constraints: they must be generalizable to the open-ended set of varieties of normativity; they must explain the univocality of “ought”; and they must explain inconsistency. As we shall see, it is difficult to satisfy all of these constraints at the same time.

11.3 SEMANTIC EXPRESSIVISM

All forms of expressivism face this challenge. There are two main ways for the expressivists to meet it: at the semantic level, or at the meta-semantic level. Let’s start with semantic expressivists, who answer the first-order question “What does ‘ought’ mean?” They take “ought” to mean the attitude it expresses when uttered sincerely.²⁰ This is a rival to the descriptivist view of character from §11.1.3.

So how can the semantic expressivist explain the character of “ought”? I’ll first argue for a minimal condition that any such explanation must satisfy:

Unified Expressivism “Ought” always expresses conative attitude *X*.

Why is this a minimum condition? First, consider what an expressivist view would look like without it. Say “ought” expresses a plan in “Morally, Antigone ought not bury Polynices” and a belief in “Legally, Antigone ought not bury Polynices.” If “ought” expresses two different types of mental states and its meaning is identical to the state expressed, it is ambiguous. This is the result that the expressivist must avoid. So when it is relativized to different standards, “ought” must express the same attitude type.

Second, consider how this minimum condition can do explanatory work. The character of “ought” can be played by this attitude *type*, and the contents of “ought” can be played by *tokens* of this type. Take a simple example of conjunction reduction: “Antigone ought not bury Polynices, or deceive Creon.” We can take “ought” to express one type of attitude—such as *being for*—which systematically determines the contents of the conjuncts: being for Antigone not burying Polynices and being for Antigone not deceiving Creon. And we can offer this same in cases involving standard-relativity, like (2): “Morally and legally, Antigone ought not bury Polynices.” If “ought”

²⁰ This is roughly Rosen’s (1998) characterization of expressivism: it offers “a mapping from statements . . . to the mental states they ‘express’ when uttered sincerely,” p. 387.

expresses and means one type of mental state (character), this type can systematically determine the different attitude tokens (contents) expressed by the conjoined claims “Morally, Antigone ought not bury Polynices” and “Legally, Antigone ought not bury Polynices.” This is a plausible explanation for why “ought” is not zeugmatic in (2).

But it is not a full explanation of the character of “ought,” because it does not explain varieties of normativity. How does this type of mental state interact with the standards to which “ought” is relativized to produce token mental states? What do “morally” and “legally” add to the meaning of (2)?

There are two promising places to look for an answer. The semantic expressivist could claim that varieties of normativity modify the objects of this type of attitude, or modify other features of the attitude itself. Let’s take these in turn.

11.3.1 Objects of Hyperplans

The most promising version of the first strategy builds on work by Allan Gibbard. Gibbard (2003) appeals to the notion of a *hyperplan*, a plan which

covers any occasion for choice one might conceivably be in, and for each alternative open on such an occasion, to adopt the plan involves either rejecting the alternative or rejecting it. In other words, the plan either forbids an alternative or permits it.²¹

The meaning of normative terms is explained via the expression of hyperplans.²²

There are three reasons why Gibbardian expressivism is a particularly promising place to look to develop an expressivist explanation of the character of “ought.” First, hyperplans have structural features that are similar to the possible worlds employed in the truth-conditional semantics we considered in §11.1.3. As Yalcin writes, hyperplans can be “formally analogous” to functions.²³

Second, Yalcin has argued that this framework can explain a related linguistic phenomenon—the relativization of “ought” to bodies of information—without requiring an additional “distinct lexical entry for ‘ought’.”²⁴

²¹ Gibbard (2003), p. 56. A different Gibbardian strategy that I don’t consider (since I don’t know how to develop it) would appeal to *simulating* conative states. See Gibbard (2015).

²² More accurately, since “real people are undecided about what to do in most possible situations (just as we are undecided about most details of what is the case, which world is ours), our planning states can be represented by sets of hyperplans,” Dreier (2009), p. 84.

²³ Yalcin (2012), p. 148.

²⁴ Yalcin (2012), p. 154. The relativization of words like “ought” to standards and to bodies of information are often classed together under the umbrella “context-sensitivity.”

Yalcin does not consider how the framework can explain standard-relativity. But Gibbard discusses how “ought” claims that are relative to *moral* and *rational* standards could express and mean the same type of mental state. This is the final reason why Gibbardian expressivism is a particularly promising place to start.

Gibbard (1990) proposed that rational and moral “ought” claims express the same type of mental state with different *objects*.²⁵ “Rationally, *A* ought to φ ” expresses the speaker’s hyperplan for *A* to φ .²⁶ (Put technically: the object of the attitude is the prejacent.) “Morally, *A* ought to φ ” expresses the speaker’s hyperplan to blame *A* if *A* does not φ . This only addresses two members of the open-ended set of varieties of normativity, but the strategy could be generalized by identifying other act-types which form the objects of conditional hyperplans. For example, “Legally, *A* ought to φ ” might express the speaker’s hyperplan for *A* to be punished if *A* does not φ .²⁷ Similar moves could be made when “ought” is relativized to prudence, etiquette, the rules of games, and so on.

While it is initially promising, this strategy generates the wrong results about inconsistency. It makes claims about what we morally ought to do inconsistent with claims about what we legally, prudentially, or rationally ought to do.

Consider how this view explains the inconsistency of (1) and (2): “Morally, Antigone ought not bury Polynices” and “Morally, Antigone ought to bury Polynices” express hyperplans for Antigone to be blamed if she does bury Polynices and for Antigone to be blamed if she does not bury Polynices. These plans are discordant, so the sentences are inconsistent: Creon and Antigone disagree.

But what about (1) itself? “Morally, Antigone ought to bury Polynices, but legally she ought not do so” expresses hyperplans for Antigone to be blamed if she does bury Polynices and for Antigone to be punished if she does not bury Polynices. On many respectable views, being punished

²⁵ Like Wedgwood (2010) (p. 121), I take it that these objects can be actions or attitudes. I take it that similar objections arise either way, but I focus on actions in the discussion below. I also ignore the aforementioned qualification about sets of hyperplans; nothing hangs on this.

²⁶ For the sake of explanatory convenience, I am eliding over several exegetical issues. First, as already mentioned, speakers express sets of hyperplans. Second, *hyperplans* are not employed until Gibbard (2003). Third, unlike Gibbard (1990), Gibbard’s (2003) view is about the technical term “the thing to do,” rather the rational “ought”: i.e. “ φ -ing is the thing to do” expresses the speaker’s hyperplan to φ . None of this affects the objections that follow.

²⁷ A broadly similar view about “A is legally obligated to φ ” was suggested by Hart (1982).

constitutively involves being blamed.²⁸ If this is so, these hyperplans are discordant,²⁹ the conjuncts are inconsistent, and Antigone disagrees with herself. She is irrational.

This is an implausible result. How can the expressivist respond?

She could bite the bullet. Perhaps “Legally Antigone ought to bury Polynices” entails that “Morally, Antigone ought to bury Polynices,” so the conjuncts of (1) are inconsistent. This response tethers expressivism to a controversial form of legal anti-positivism.³⁰ Moreover, (1) and (2) are just one example of a general phenomenon. We can substitute legality for other standards, like etiquette; the same issue arises, and this anti-positivist response becomes increasingly implausible.³¹

She could claim that it is consistent and rationally compatible for Antigone to express hyperplans to be blamed for burying and for not burying Polynices. There’s nothing irrational about planning to be blamed, whatever one does. Perhaps this is plausible. But if so, the expressivist loses her explanation for why (1) and (2) are inconsistent, and why Antigone and Creon disagree. Moreover, we can construct variants of the case where this move is unavailable.³²

The expressivist could appeal to more specific objects of our attitudes that are constitutively independent. For this to generalize, the expressivist must identify a highly specific distinct object of our hyperplans for each variety of

²⁸ Feinberg (1970).

²⁹ That may be too quick. Perhaps “legally ought” expresses (passive) plans for someone *to be* punished (and blamed), which are not discordant with (active) plans *to* blame someone that are expressed by “morally ought.” (See Harman (1973) on passive “ought to be” and active “ought to” claims.) But this should not detain us. I take it that “legally ought” would express plans to be blamed by the state, and so by the relevant legal officials. So any appeal to a passive–active distinction would not help in analogous cases where the speaker is Creon.

³⁰ Of the kind defended by Greenberg (2014). Dworkin (1986) accepts no such entailment.

³¹ To illustrate, consider “According to etiquette, *A* ought to φ .” The expressivist could take it to express the speaker’s conditional plan to socially distance herself from *A* if *A* does not φ . But on Scanlon’s (2008) view, blame constitutively involves social distancing. This will suffice to generate inconsistencies between “ought” claims that are relative to morality and etiquette. Biting the bullet by accepting anti-positivism about etiquette is deeply counterintuitive.

³² Depending on one’s stance on moral dilemmas, “I morally ought to φ and to not φ ” may be consistent. But this should not detain us. We can make the same objection with “I am *not* morally obligated to φ , but I am morally obligated to φ ,” and “I am *not* morally obligated to φ , but I am legally obligated to φ .” The former sentence is definitely inconsistent, so for Gibbardian expressivists it must express a practically irrational pair of attitudes towards my being blamed if I don’t φ . But if punishment constitutively involves blame, then the latter sentence also expresses a practically irrational pair of attitudes towards that same object.

normativity. That is a daunting task. Especially since we must have, share, and conventionally express attitudes with these highly specific objects. It is already doubtful that the pacifists at my yoga studio regularly plan to blame and punish when they make sincere claims about what we morally and legally ought to do. Appealing to attitudes with highly specific objects amplifies this concern considerably.

Moreover, no matter which distinct objects of our attitudes the expressivist appeals to, she is guaranteed to get the wrong results about inconsistency. To see why, recall (5): Creon's claim that "Morally, Antigone ought not bury Polynices; but if she buries Polynices, I rationally ought not blame her." This is obviously consistent. Does the Gibbardian view get this result? The first conjunct expresses Creon's hyperplan to blame Antigone if Antigone buries Polynices. The second conjunct expresses Creon's hyperplan not to blame Antigone if she buries Polynices. (Recall: the object of the hyperplans expressed by rational "ought" claims is the prejacents.) So Creon expresses rationally incompatible attitudes.

Can the expressivist tinker with the details of her view to avoid this result? I have no proof that she can't, but I'm skeptical. The Gibbardian strategy is to explain the character of "ought" in terms of the expression of the same type of attitude, and explain the varieties of normativity as altering the objects of that attitude. But the above paragraph illustrates how the object of the expressed attitude will depend on the variety of normativity *and* the prejacents: in other words, what token attitude " A ought to φ " expresses depends on the modifier (e.g. "rationally") and the values of A and φ . These can vary independently. So in the infinite possible combinations of varieties of normativity *and* prejacents, what rules out the possibility of cases where " A ought to φ " and " B ought to ψ " are relativized to different standards yet express rationally discordant attitudes?

11.3.2 Flavors of Approval

What if the expressivist gives up on this appeal to hyperplans and their objects, claiming that "ought" expresses a different type of conative attitude? She may appeal to *approval* instead. Unlike hyperplans, approval cannot play a similar role to possible worlds in truth-conditional semantics. But there are at least two reasons why the expressivist might make this move.

First, it might seem that the Gibbardian's woes can be traced back to her claim that "ought" expresses an "all-in" attitude: hyperplans. Approval, by contrast, is a "pro tanto" attitude. If I plan to drink and not drink my coffee, I'm irrational. If I express those plans, what I express is inconsistent. But I can approve of both drinking and not drinking my coffee without being

irrational, and express that approval without inconsistency. This might help the expressivist avoid over-generating inconsistency. Say that by asserting (1)—“Morally, I ought to bury Polynices, but legally, I ought not do so”—Antigone expresses her approval of both burying and not burying Polynices. Those attitudes, and the sentences that express them, are consistent.

Before we issue a hurrah for approval, we should notice that this form of expressivism *under-generates* inconsistency. Consider the disagreement between Antigone and Creon. When he says (2)—“No, morally and legally, you ought to bury Polynices”—he expresses his approval of not burying Polynices. That attitude is consistent with what Antigone expresses. Now the expressivist has lost one of the central motivations for her view: that it explains moral disagreement.

Second, and more compellingly, it might seem that approval is a type of mental state that comes in different “flavors” that match and can explain the varieties of normativity. Perhaps there is moral approval and legal approval and rational approval and so on. This is a different strategy for the semantic expressivist. Since it takes “ought” to express the same type of attitude, it is also *unified* in the sense specified above. And since she takes varieties of normativity to modify the “flavor” of that attitude, the expressivist provides a different explanation of the character of “ought” and how it is relativized to standards.

The trick is to explain what this talk of “flavors” of approval amounts to. Björnsson and McPherson (2014) provide an illuminating way to cash this out. To distinguish the “non-cognitive attitudes corresponding to judgments of moral wrongness, for example, from attitudes involved in aesthetic disapproval,” they appeal to the distinct *grounds* of states of approval.³³ This is fairly intuitive. If I witnessed Peter Singer gracefully scoop a drowning child out of a pond, I would morally and aesthetically approve of his act: I would express the same type of attitude (approval), with the same object (Singer’s action). The token attitudes are still distinct, however, as they are based on different features of the object: I would *morally* approve because Singer’s act averted harm, and I would *aesthetically* approve because of the elegant arc of the motion itself. So the same type of attitude, approval, may

³³ Björnsson and McPherson (2014), p. 1. Actually, “grounds” are only one of the five features of moral claims that Björnsson and McPherson appeal to (pp. 14–16), but the other four offer no additional resources here. As they acknowledge, three of these features—aversion, personal-level acceptance, and engagement—“are shared with instances of many other types” of claims. That is also true of the remaining feature: social hostility. When Creon claims that “Antigone ought not ϕ ,” he may well be disposed to be socially hostile to Antigone if she ϕ s regardless of whether “ought” is relativized to morality or legality. (Indeed, he must be in cases where these standards converge.)

come in different “flavors,” and tokens of this type with the same objects may be distinguished by their grounds.

This forms the basis for a second promising expressivist strategy. “*A* ought to φ ” always expresses approval towards *A* φ ing; when “ought” is relativized to standards (“morally,” “legally,” . . .), that expresses the distinct “flavors” (read: grounds) of the token state of approval. To pursue this strategy, the expressivist needs to identify these distinct grounds. On Björnsson and McPherson’s view, “Morally, *A* ought to φ ” expresses the speaker’s approval of *A* φ ing, where her approval is (paradigmatically) based on the perception that for *A* not to φ would involve *A* “intentionally harming or risking harm to others” and/or *A* failing “to respect certain boundaries that play a central role in sustaining social cooperation.”³⁴ All we need, it seems, is the distinct (paradigmatic) grounds for other varieties of normativity: legality, prudence, rationality, and so forth.

One quick and promising way to develop and generalize this strategy would be to borrow a formal feature from the descriptivist’s account of the character of “ought” (from §11.1.3). The descriptivist appeals to an ordering source, *g*, that represents the demands of the relevant standard. The expressivist can take that same set of propositions to be the grounds for the relevant states of approval. So *g* allows for standard-relativity on a descriptivist or expressivist view.³⁵

However, no matter how this strategy is developed, it encounters the same problems with inconsistency that afflicted its predecessor. To see why, let’s ask: Does having two tokens of the same type of attitude with inconsistent contents cease to be rationally discordant when those attitudes have different grounds?

Let’s say that it does. This is the best case for the expressivist. Initially, she now seems able to deliver the right results about inconsistency. Consider (1) and (2). Antigone says “Morally, I ought to bury Polynices,” expressing approval of burying Polynices, and Creon claims “Morally, Antigone ought not bury Polynices,” expressing approval of her not burying Polynices. Let’s say that these attitudes have the same ground (e.g. harm), and so are inconsistent. We have an explanation of interpersonal disagreement. Now consider the other conjunct of (1): “Legally, I ought not bury Polynices.” This expresses Antigone’s approval of not burying Polynices. But since it has a different ground (e.g. respect for the law of the land), this does not generate intrapersonal disagreement.

³⁴ Björnsson and McPherson (2014), p. 15.

³⁵ I’m grateful to Alex Kaiserman and Hrafn Asgeirsson for suggesting this idea.

So far, so good. But this view encounters several problems. For one, it is consistent with Björnsson and McPherson's view that Antigone could express moral approval of burying Polynices based on one ground (harm) and Creon could express moral approval of her not burying Polynices based on a different ground (social cooperation). But this would under-generate inconsistency.

For another, it is consistent with Björnsson and McPherson's view that Antigone could express moral approval of burying Polynices based on one ground (social cooperation) and legal disapproval of not burying Polynices based on *that same ground*. If it is plausible that claims about what we morally and legally ought to do both express approval, it is also plausible that they both sometimes express approval grounded in the perception that acts involve "a failure to respect certain boundaries that play a central role in sustaining social cooperation." But then the two conjuncts of (1) express moral approval of burying Polynices and legal approval of not burying Polynices based on the same ground. If the grounds of moral and legal approval can overlap, this will over-generate inconsistency. This problem is amplified if the expressivist develops this strategy by taking *g* to individuate standards, as it is quite obvious that different modal flavors (morality, legality) can share many of the same demands.

The expressivist could attempt to solve both of these problems by positing that there is a unique, non-disjunctive ground for all tokens of moral approval (e.g. harm), and making a similar move for every other variety of normativity. But that would be a counterintuitive commitment. It is already doubtful that Antigone (our divine command theorist) and Creon (our virtue ethicist) express moral approval grounded in the perception that acts are harmful or fail to respect boundaries that play a role in social cooperation. Making the distinct ground of moral approval even more specific will be far too discriminatory.³⁶

Moreover, even this fix would not help when we consider cases involving embedding. Take (6), Creon's claim that "Legally, I ought to punish Antigone. But morally, I should not have made it the case that legally I ought to punish her." *Ex hypothesi*, this speech act expresses Creon's disapproval of his own approval of punishing Antigone.³⁷ Given their

³⁶ The expressivist, like Björnsson and McPherson (2014), might take distinct grounds to only be features of *paradigmatic* moral claims. But this is no help. Now we need to know how to discriminate between non-paradigmatic moral claims and paradigmatic non-moral claims. An anonymous referee suggests that the expressivist may be able to ameliorate these concerns by appealing to the phenomenon of semantic blindness. (See Hawthorne (2004).) I don't think that this response succeeds, but cannot show why here.

³⁷ Or rather, disapproval of *having made it the case* that he approves of punishing. I'm not sure if this injects enough space between the higher- and lower-order attitudes to

commitments elsewhere, expressivists are hard-pressed to deny that these first-order and higher-order attitudes are rationally discordant, regardless of any difference in their grounds.

What if having two tokens of the same type of attitude with inconsistent contents does not *cease* to be rationally discordant when those attitudes are based on different grounds? This seems more plausible. If I plan to drink my coffee because it is delicious and plan not to drink my coffee because I am over-caffeinated, these plans are inconsistent and render me irrational. But if the expressivist accepts this, the second strategy is a non-starter. Identifying distinct grounds for our attitudes will not generate the more fine-grained inconsistency conditions that the expressivist needs: she will still lack any explanation for why moral “ought” claims can be inconsistent with each other, but not with legal “ought” claims; so she will still lack an explanation for why Antigone and Creon disagree, but Antigone does not disagree with herself.

11.4 META-SEMANTIC EXPRESSIVISM

So far we’ve seen that the expressivist owes us an explanation of the character of “ought” across all varieties of normativity, and that an expressivist semantics struggles to deliver that while also explaining why inconsistency is standard-relative. Once the expressivist must posit that “ought” always expresses the same type of mental state (to explain its character), any way of explaining the relativization of “ought” to standards allows for inconsistency between moral, rational, legal, and prudential “ought” claims. Equally implausibly, it requires us to posit that speakers like Antigone and Creon are practically irrational.

This gives us due cause to be skeptical that the expressivist should pursue a semantic program that rivals well-developed truth-conditional accounts of the character of “ought.” Instead, she could pursue a meta-semantic program.

Meta-semantic theories answer the second-order question: “In virtue of what does the phonetic and orthographic sequence ‘ought’ mean what it does?” Michael Ridge (2014) offers the most well-developed form of meta-semantic expressivism, and his view seems particularly promising in this context. Ridge explicitly accepts that “the key terms with which normative claims are made (‘ought’, ‘must’, ‘reason’, ‘good’, ‘bad’, and cognates) are

avoid discordance. We could remove that space if we switched from “*A* ought to φ ” to “It ought to be that p ” (as in: “Morally, it ought not be the case that I legally ought to φ ”). But this would introduce other complications regarding how we should treat “ought to be” constructions.

context-sensitive,” just like “tall”; but they are “not brutally ambiguous.” Rather, they “have a unified meaning,” insofar as they have a single Kaplanian character.³⁸

Ridge adopts a truth-conditional account of the character of “ought” (like Kratzer’s from §11.1.3): the character of “ought” is a function from contexts to contents,³⁹ which we can call “*Z*.” Ridge argues that meta-semantic expressivism is consistent with this first-order semantic theory. Let’s grant this, and focus on answering the meta-semantic question: “in virtue of what does the orthographic and phonetic sequence ‘ought’ mean *Z*”? The expressivist answer is that “ought” means *Z* in virtue of expressing some conative state.

11.4.1 A Disunified Meta-semantics

Perhaps surprisingly, Ridge thinks that this answer is only true in some cases. He explicitly adopts a disunified meta-semantics: “Expressivism provides the right meta-semantic theory for *only certain uses*” of terms like “ought.”⁴⁰ Some uses of “ought” (e.g. “the ‘ought’ of morality”) mean *Z* in virtue of expressing a non-representational conative attitude; other uses of “ought” (e.g. “the ‘ought’ of etiquette”) mean *Z* in virtue of expressing a “robustly representational belief,” a belief which carries ontological commitments.⁴¹

Two problems emerge here. First, Ridge must concede that there is a viable non-expressivist explanation of why “ought” means *Z* in a wide variety of uses. This explanation is non-expressivist insofar as it appeals to robustly representational beliefs. And it is viable in that it explains: why “ought” means *Z*; how context selects the relevant ordering source; how competent speakers use “ought” to communicate, coordinate, and collect information; and how speakers disagree even in the face of systematic differences in their criteria for applying words (like “legally ought”).⁴² Once that viable non-expressivist explanation is on the table for some uses, why not offer it across the board? A unified meta-semantics is preferable, if only for the sake of parsimony.

Second, consider how this non-expressivist explanation interacts with its expressivist counterpart. Here Ridge is committed to an unexplained

³⁸ Ridge (2014), p. 9.

³⁹ This is not to say that there are no important differences in the precise details of their semantics for modals. For example, Ridge argues that his view better addresses concerns about inconsistent sets of requirements. These details are simply orthogonal to our concerns.

⁴⁰ Ridge (2014), p. 9 (emphasis added). ⁴¹ Ridge (2014), pp. 40, 93.

⁴² Dworkin (1986) famously called this “theoretical disagreement” about the law.

coincidence. There is one *explanandum*: that the word “ought” means *Z*. There are two radically different *explanantia*;⁴³ the expressivist, after all, is emphatic about the differences between representational beliefs and non-representational conative states. If the *explanantia* are radically different, why is the *explanandum* exactly the same? Why don’t the radical differences between the states that we are expressing translate to differences in meaning? And relatedly, why would we employ one word to express such radically different mental states?

This combination of a unified semantics and disunified meta-semantics seems quite implausible. Importantly, there are no companions in guilt to whom Ridge can appeal. We take “tall” to have a single meaning, even though it can be relativized to different standards. Once we agree upon that, surely we should hope for a unified meta-semantics for “tall,” rather than different meta-semantic explanations for why different uses of “tall” have the same meaning? It may be reasonable to offer different meta-semantic explanations for different fragments of language, such as proper names and logical connectives, but it is unprecedented to offer different meta-semantic explanations for a fragment of language for which we have a unified semantics: deontic modals.

11.4.2 A Unified Meta-semantics

Meta-semantic expressivists might wish to part company from Ridge and offer a unified explanation for why “ought” means *Z*. All uses of “ought” mean *Z* because they express non-representational conative attitudes. More is required for this to be a unified explanation. (Would we have a unified explanation if some uses of “ought” mean *Z* because they express approval and others mean *Z* because they express hyperplans?) We need “ought” to mean what it does in claims like (1)–(4) because it expresses the same *type* of non-cognitive state.

⁴³ In personal communication, Ridge notes that the quoted passage from p. 9 “must be handled with great care,” as he had “in mind the meta-semantic story one tells about the semantic *contents* (not *characters*) of sentence *tokens* (not *types*).” Ridge contends that his meta-semantic explanation of why “ought” means *Z* is unified: “Linguistic conventions . . . dictate that a speaker who asserts ‘*A* ought to φ in context *C*’ in a context of utterance *U* has made the judgment” that is fixed in a certain way, where “the judgment” is simply a variable. “In *some* contexts, the relevant judgment will simply be an ordinary garden-variety representational belief,” while “in *other* contexts, the relevant judgment will be” non-cognitive. I take it that this explanation is only superficially unified: when we replace “the judgment” with a disjunction of radically dissimilar disjuncts (“cognitive or non-cognitive attitudes”), it is a disunified meta-semantic explanation of why “ought” means function *Z*.

This is the same constraint that we reached when we considered whether the semantic expressivist could provide an explanation of the character of “ought.” Once that constraint was in place, we saw that the expressivist encountered serious problems with getting the right results about inconsistency. She either failed to generate inconsistency between claims about what we morally ought to do, or over-generated inconsistencies between claims about what we morally, legally, prudentially, and rationally ought to do. Now the meta-semantic expressivist will face the same problems. She will either predict that speakers like Antigone and Creon fail to disagree with each other, or predict that they disagree with themselves. Neither option is palatable.

11.5 THE EXPRESSIVIST’S DILEMMA

So far the challenge to expressivism has been framed in terms of relatively highfalutin distinctions (content and character, semantics and meta-semantics). We can now abstract away from such details and reframe the challenge.

First, let’s make two simple and plausible observations about “ought” et al.:

Inconsistency “*A* ought to φ ” and “*A* ought not φ ” are always and only inconsistent when “ought” is relative to the same standard.⁴⁴

Univocality Deontic modals are not lexically ambiguous when relativized.

INCONSISTENCY is a plausible general truth about standard-relative modals. It explains why the conjuncts of (1)—“Morally, I ought to bury Polynices, but legally I ought not to do so”—are consistent. It also explains why Antigone disagrees with Creon when she says (1) and he says (2): “No, morally and legally, you ought not bury Polynices.” UNIVOCALITY is supported by linguistic data and considerations of parsimony and explanatory power (§11.2). My conjecture is that no form of expressivism plausibly explains both observations.

Why? The answer does not depend on how the expressivist (a) identifies the conative state that deontic modals express (plans, approval, etc.), or (b) specifies what it is to understand the meaning of those modals in terms of

⁴⁴ This is a simple, imprecise formulation of the observation. It should be broader: “*A* ought to φ ” and “*A* ought not ψ ” are consistent when “ought” is relative to different standards. (See §11.3.1.) And there may be exceptions where “*A* ought to φ ” and “*A* ought not φ ” are inconsistent even though they are relative to different standards, due to some interesting relation between those standards.

those states. It concerns whether she accepts UNIFIED EXPRESSIVISM: that “ought” always expresses the same type of conative state.

Now we can state the dilemma. UNIFIED EXPRESSIVISM is either true or false. If it is true, the expressivist fails to explain INCONSISTENCY. If it is false, the expressivist fails to explain UNIVOCALITY. So the expressivist fails to explain either INCONSISTENCY or UNIVOCALITY.

Consider the first horn. In (1)–(4), Antigone and Creon disagree about what she morally ought to do, but agree about what she legally and prudentially ought to do. If unified expressivism is true, “Antigone morally ought not bury Polynices,” “Antigone morally ought to bury Polynices,” and “Antigone legally ought not bury Polynices” all express the same type of attitude. If the first two express inconsistent attitudes, why do the latter two express consistent attitudes? The expressivist needs a general, systematic explanation of this. None of the candidates we considered succeeded.

All that matters for this argument is that “ought” expresses the same type of mental state, *X*, regardless of the relevant standard. The same issue arises if we substitute *X* for hyperplans or approval or “being for” or whatnot. That’s why the identification of the relevant conative state is downstream from the choice between unified and disunified expressivism.

Now consider the second horn. The expressivist proposes that we explain the meaning of “ought” in terms of the mental state(s) that “ought” expresses. If so, we can offer the same explanation of the meaning of “ought” *only if* “ought” expresses the same type of mental state. If different uses of “ought” express plans and preferences, or approval and beliefs, or what have you, then the expressivist is committed to offering different explanations of the meaning of “ought.” I take it that this is true on any specification of what it is to explain the meaning of “ought,” which is why the semantic–meta-semantic distinction is also downstream. However, it is worth noting that disunified meta-semantic views are on better footing than disunified semantic views. Both lack similar theoretical virtues (especially parsimony), but the latter is also in tension with linguistic data.

This way of framing the challenge reveals why some available responses offer partial solutions at best. First, note that there are *two* distinct, related issues with inconsistency: if UNIFIED EXPRESSIVISM is true and (1) and (2) express rationally discordant attitudes then (1) does too, which is sufficient to make the conjuncts of (1) inconsistent. So it won’t help to move to a (semantic or meta-semantic) *hybrid* expressivism on which normative terms express conative and cognitive states.⁴⁵ If the expression of rationally

⁴⁵ Ridge (2014) is a hybrid expressivist; I ignored this complication in §11.4 to simplify things.

discordant conative states is *sufficient* to make the conjuncts of (1) inconsistent, it is no help to add that (1) also expresses beliefs. And even if it isn't—which is a big concession—it is still a problem to predict that by asserting (1) Antigone expresses rationally discordant attitudes.

It's not clear whether the unified expressivist can avoid such predictions. She may lean on her account of sincerity, conceding that by asserting (1) Antigone conventionally expresses rationally discordant attitudes, but arguing that Antigone need not *have* those attitudes; she is only *committed* to having those attitudes, such that she either has those attitudes or is *insincere*. But these predictions are no better. Antigone does not seem practically irrational, insincere, or committed to practical irrationality (whatever that means).

Second, note that to explain univocality it is not enough to get the result that “ought” means the same thing in (2). It must also mean the same thing in both uses in (1). So it won't help to move to a view on which some legal claims (like Creon's) express conative states while others (like Antigone's) express cognitive states. That move could seem well motivated. Hart (1994) famously distinguished “internal” and “external” legal claims: the former are used to guide, recommend, and criticize, while the latter are not. This might tempt some to offer an expressivist treatment of Creon's internal legal claim and a descriptivist treatment of Antigone's external legal claim. But that temptation should be resisted, as this view suggests that Antigone's and Creon's claims about what she “legally ought” to do differ in meaning, making it hard to explain why Antigone and Creon agree.

Third, note that expressivists face the same challenge with all varieties of normativity. The same issues arise when we swap “legally” for “prudentially” in (3) and (4). So even if the expressivist can legitimately offer a disunified approach to “morally ought” and (external uses of) “legally ought,” she still faces the burden of explaining why there is no inconsistency in claims like (3): “Morally I ought to bury Polynices, but prudentially I ought not do so.”

11.6 PRAGMATIC EXPRESSIVISM

This dilemma is not an impossibility proof. It is a challenge: the onus is on the expressivist to deliver a view that avoids being impaled on both horns. Interestingly, there is a view that can achieve that quite easily, but it offers expressivists a Pyrrhic victory, as it fails to vindicate any anti-realist ambitions.

The view in question appeals to pragmatics. “Smith is punctual” literally means that Smith is punctual, but if it is the main content of a letter of

recommendation it communicates—in particular, it *conversationally implicates*—that Smith is a mediocre candidate. This illustrates how speakers use more than semantic meaning to communicate about their mental states and circumstances.

Speakers may use normative terms to communicate information about their conative states: “I ought to bury Polynices” might *conversationally implicate*, but not *mean*, Antigone’s approval of burying Polynices. This pragmatic thesis could be considered a form of expressivism; it could offer a different specification of what it is to understand meaning in terms of the expression of attitudes.

This pragmatic thesis is consistent with UNIVOCALITY and INCONSISTENCY. It does not require positing lexical ambiguity or offering disunified meta-semantic explanations, for the simple reason that pragmatics is distinct from semantics and meta-semantics. Nor does it lead to implausible predictions of inconsistency between sentences or discordance in speakers’ attitudes. Conversational implicatures are flexible and cancelable,⁴⁶ and preserve as far as possible the presumption that speakers are rational. When Antigone says “Morally I ought to bury Polynices,” this may implicate that she is for burying Polynices; but when she says “Morally I ought to bury Polynices but legally I ought not do so,” this need not implicate that she is irrationally for and against burying Polynices.

This pragmatic thesis can play a role in explaining the meanings (contents) of uses of “ought.” Standard-relative terms can be used to form sentences that are syntactically complete but semantically incomplete. Consider “Creon is tall.” *Being tall* is a relational property, and this sentence fails to specify one *relatum*. It may be that conversational implicatures about speakers’ intentions help determine the relevant comparison class—the standard to which “tall” is relativized—to generate a logically complete proposition. This is what King and Stanley (2005) call a “weak” pragmatic effect: pragmatics plays a role in assigning contents to uses of standard-relative terms. The same may hold for “Antigone ought to bury Polynices”: it might be syntactically complete but semantically incomplete, as the standard is unspecified.⁴⁷ Conversational implicatures about speakers’ attitudes can help determine the relevant standards in assigning contents to normative terms.

⁴⁶ For evidence that the so-called “internal connection” between sincere uses of normative terms and speakers’ conative attitudes is in fact cancelable, see Woods (2014).

⁴⁷ See Finlay (2014) for related discussion (in terms of unspecified ends). Notably, there are multiple plausible ways of cashing out the idea that pragmatic implicatures about speakers’ attitudes can have weak pragmatic effects; another was suggested by an anonymous referee.

I take it that there's much to be said for this pragmatic thesis. But many worry that "pragmatic expressivism" is a form of expressivism in name only. Ridge, for instance, claims that "expressivism is most clearly *not* well understood as a theory in pragmatics," because that would not vindicate anti-realism:

If that were all that expressivism had to add to the theory of meaning then it would be compatible with a fully representational theory of literal meaning. The whole point of going expressivist was to avoid the problems inherent in a representationalist approach.⁴⁸

I will not try to adjudicate whether anti-representationalism is "the whole point" of going expressivist, or whether expressivism should be a broader church that admits merely pragmatic parishioners. Instead, I will make three points. First, given its role in weak pragmatic effects, this plausible pragmatic thesis can easily be misconstrued as a distinct version of meta-semantic expressivism. Second, such pragmatic theses are consistent with a descriptivist semantics and meta-semantics. And third, descriptivists can and do exploit such pragmatic theses to explain phenomena that were thought to favor expressivism. This includes cases of disagreement where speakers (like virtue ethicists and divine command theorists) systematically differ in their criteria for applying words (like "morally ought").⁴⁹ And it includes the so-called "internal" connection between conative states and sincere uses of normative terms like "ought."⁵⁰ So such pragmatic theses may neutralize two of the three motivations for expressivism. This makes it more difficult for expressivists to lean on disagreement or internalism in fending off the present challenge.

If this is right, I must amend my earlier hypothesis. If the expressivist is to explain the univocity of "ought" in terms of the expression of conative attitudes, she must posit that "ought" expresses the same type of conative attitude when it is relativized to varieties of normativity; but once she posits that, no matter how we fill in the details we encounter a general problem in explaining inconsistency because attitudinal inconsistency is too coarse-grained. The expressivist can avoid both horns of the dilemma by adopting a pragmatic view that accepts, but does not *explain*, the univocity of "ought": but by doing so, she fails to deliver on a central motivation for expressivism (anti-realism).

⁴⁸ Ridge (2014), p. 103, emphasis added.

⁴⁹ See Copp (2001), Strandberg (2011), and Plunkett and Sundell (2013).

⁵⁰ This "quasi-expressivist" strategy is extensively developed by Finlay (2014).

11.7 CONCLUSION

Expressivism, as Yalcin noted, has been unmoored from linguistic phenomena. So the best way to determine whether there is a plausible expressivist program, and if so what that program should be, is to focus on neglected linguistic phenomena, like the relativization of “ought” to different standards.

This phenomenon poses a novel challenge to expressivism. Does “ought” express the same type of conative state when relativized to different standards? If so, expressivists struggle to explain inconsistency. If not, expressivists struggle to deliver a plausible explanation of the univocal meaning of “ought.”

It’s too early to tell whether some form of expressivism survives this challenge without abandoning all anti-realist ambitions. My main aim has been to throw down a gauntlet. The expressivist still owes us an account of the semantic character (rather than content) of “ought.” We are yet to see how she can either rival or adopt the truth-conditional first-order semantic theories that take the character of “ought” to mean some function from contexts to contents. We’re used to hearing the mantra that everything descriptivists do, expressivists can do cheaper. For the expressivist to deliver on that front, she must show how she can explain the univocality of “ought” in terms of the expression of a type of conative attitude that has sufficiently fine-grained inconsistency conditions.

Aside from this challenge to expressivism, I hope to have shed light on the methodological point with which we began. It is fine to ask questions about the meaning of fragments of natural language considered in isolation. But since we do not use those fragments in isolation, we must not lose sight of the bigger picture. We must ask how those fragments fit together. Like everyone else, the expressivist owes us an explanation not just of moral language, but of how the open-ended set of varieties of normativity fit together. In other words, everyone—including expressivists of all stripes—must explain the deep continuities between uses of deontic modals that are relativized to different varieties of normativity.⁵¹

⁵¹ I am deeply grateful to the many people who offered extensive feedback and assistance with this chapter: Matthew Chrisman, Jonathan Dancy, Jan Dowell, Max Etchemendy, Daniel Fogal, Sukaina Hirji, Eric Hubble, Jeffrey Kaplan, Sebastian Koehler, Adam Lerner, Sarah McGrath, Tristram McPherson, Philip Pettit, Sam Preston, Michael Ridge, Gideon Rosen, Michael Smith, Lindsay Whittaker, Jack Woods, two anonymous referees, and audiences at ANU, Edinburgh, NYU, Princeton, and UNC Chapel Hill.

References

- D. Bar-On and James Sias. Varieties of expressivism. *Philosophy Compass*, 8(8): 699–713, 2013.
- Gunnar Björnsson and Tristram McPherson. Moral attitudes for non-cognitivists: Solving the specification problem. *Mind*, 123(489): 1–38, 2014.
- Simon Blackburn. *Spreading the Word*. Clarendon, 1984.
- Simon Blackburn. *Essays in Quasi-Realism*. Oxford University Press, 1993.
- Simon Blackburn. *Ruling Passions*. Oxford University Press, 1999.
- David Copp. Realist-expressivism: A neglected option for moral realism. *Social Philosophy and Policy*, 18: 1–43, 2001.
- James Dreier. Meta-ethics and the problem of creeping minimalism. *Philosophical Perspectives*, 18: 23–44, 2004.
- James Dreier. Relativism (and expressivism) and the problem of disagreement. *Philosophical Perspectives*, 23(1): 79–110, 2009.
- Ronald Dworkin. *Law's Empire*. Belknap Press, 1986.
- Joel Feinberg. *Doing and Deserving: The Expressive Function of Punishment*. Princeton University Press, 1970.
- Stephen Finlay. *Confusion of Tongues: A Theory of Normative Language*. Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Allan Gibbard. *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings*. Harvard University Press, 1990.
- Allan Gibbard. *Thinking How to Live*. Harvard University Press, 2003.
- Allan Gibbard. *Meaning and Normativity*. Oxford University Press, 2012.
- Allan Gibbard. Improving sensibilities. In Robert N. Johnson and Michael Smith (eds.), *Passions and Projections: Themes from the Philosophy of Simon Blackburn*. Oxford University Press, 2015.
- Mark Greenberg. The moral impact theory of law. *Yale Law Journal*, 123(5): 1118–625, 2014.
- Gil Harman. Review of *The Significance of Sense: Meaning, Modality, and Morality*. *The Philosophical Review*, 82(2): 235–9, 1973.
- H.L.A. Hart. *Essays on Bentham: Jurisprudence and Political Theory*. Oxford University Press, 1982.
- H.L.A. Hart. *The Concept of Law*. Clarendon Press, 2nd edition, 1994.
- John Hawthorne. *Knowledge and Lotteries*. Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Richard Heck. Do demonstratives have senses? *Philosophers' Imprint*, 2(2): 1–33, 2001.
- T. Horgan and M. Timmons. New Wave Moral Realism Meets Moral Twin Earth. *Journal of Philosophical Research*, 16: 447–65, 1991.
- David Kaplan. Demonstratives. In Joseph Almog, John Perry, and Howard Wettstein (eds.), *Themes from Kaplan*. Oxford University Press, 1989.
- Jeffrey C. King and Jason Stanley. Semantics, pragmatics, and the role of semantic content. In Zoltan Gendler Szabo (ed.), *Semantics versus Pragmatics*. Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Angelika Kratzer. *Modals and Conditionals: New and Revised Perspectives*. Oxford University Press, 2012.
- Peter Ludlow. Cheap contextualism. *Philosophical Issues*, 18: 104–29, 2008.

- David Plunkett and Timothy Sundell. Disagreement and the semantics of normative and evaluative terms. *Philosophers' Imprint*, 13: 1–37, 2013.
- Michael Ridge. *Impassioned Belief*. Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Gideon Rosen. Blackburn's essays in quasi-realism. *Noûs*, 32(3): 386–405, 1998.
- Timothy Scanlon. *Moral Dimensions: Permissibility, Meaning, Blame*. Harvard University Press, 2008.
- Mark Schroeder. *Being For: Evaluating the Semantic Program of Expressivism*. Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Adam Sennet. Ambiguity. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ambiguity/>>, 2011.
- Michael Smith. *The Moral Problem*. Blackwell, 1994.
- Jason Stanley. Semantics in context. In Gerhard Preyer and Georg Peter (eds.), *Contextualism in Philosophy: Knowledge, Meaning, and Truth*. Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Caj Strandberg. The pragmatics of moral motivation. *The Journal of Ethics*, 15(4): 341–69, 2011.
- Eric Swanson. Modality in language. *Philosophy Compass*, 3(6): 1193–207, 2007.
- Kevin Toh. Hart's expressivism and his Benthamite project. *Legal Theory*, 11: 75–123, 2005.
- Kai von Fintel and Irene Heim. Intensional semantics. Unpublished manuscript, 2011.
- Ralph Wedgwood. Schroeder on expressivism: For—or against? *Analysis*, 70(1): 117–29, 2010.
- Jack Woods. Expressivism and Moore's paradox. *Philosophers' Imprint*, 14(5): 1–12, 2014.
- Jack Woods and Derek Baker. How expressivists can and should explain inconsistency. *Ethics*, 125(2): 391–424, 2015.
- Seth Yalcin. Bayesian expressivism. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 112(2): 123–60, 2012.
- Michael Zimmerman. *The Concept of Moral Obligation*. Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- A. Zwicky and J. Sadock. *Syntax and Semantics: Ambiguity tests and how to fail them*. Academic Press, 1975.