

AGAINST BEING FOR

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EXPRESSIVISM has always been a shifting target. Throughout its history, expressivists have denied such things as the truth-aptness of normative sentences, the existence of normative facts and properties, and the cognitive status of normative attitudes. But in each case, expressivists have come to embrace what was previously denied. To a large extent, this is a product of so-called creeping minimalism, where expressivists embrace deflationary interpretations of notions like *truth*, *fact*, and *property*.¹ But some expressivists aim to accommodate robust conceptions of these notions within their theory. For instance, it has been argued that expressivists can be correspondence theorists about truth, and that expressivists should identify normative properties with natural properties.²

This paper focuses on normative *belief*. Specifically, it examines whether expressivists can develop a robust theory of normative belief compatible with expressivism. Initially, expressivists denied that normative judgments are beliefs. But this view faces the awkward fact that normative belief-talk is ubiquitous in ordinary language. To accommodate this, many expressivists distinguish between robust and minimal senses of “belief,” embracing minimal normative beliefs while rejecting robust normative beliefs. However, it is not simply that we use the same language to *talk* about normative attitudes. Normative attitudes possess many of the distinctive features of belief *tout court*.³ So we are left with a view according to which there are two classes of mental states that *just so happen* to have all the same core properties despite having a completely different nature. And one might worry that this looks suspect.

Related worries have led some to question whether expressivists might instead maintain that normative claims express robust beliefs, but that such

1 See Dreier, “Meta-Ethics and the Problem of Creeping Minimalism.”

2 For the former claim, see Ridge, *Impassioned Belief*. For the latter claim, see Gibbard, “Normative Properties”; and Bex-Priestley, “Expressivists Should be Reductive Naturalists.”

3 See Horgan and Timmons, “Cognitivist Expressivism.”

beliefs are nondescriptive.⁴ This can be done by providing a nondeflationary, nondescriptive theory of belief *tout court* which can distinguish between nondescriptive normative beliefs and ordinary descriptive beliefs. For instance: Horgan and Timmons offer a commitment-based theory; Köhler offers a functionalist theory; I have offered an interpretationist theory; Gibbard can be read as providing a sententialist theory; one might construct such a theory within a cognitive act view of propositions; and Schroeder offers a theory of belief as being for.⁵

This paper contributes to the task of assessing this expressivist approach to normative belief by critically examining the last of these views: Schroeder's theory of belief as being for. After outlining the view (section I), I raise a challenge for it (section II), ultimately concluding that we should reject the view as it stands.

I

Schroeder's theory of belief as being for is offered as an instance of a more general nondescriptivist framework for explaining belief. It will therefore be helpful to begin by outlining the more general framework. Schroeder begins by differentiating two theoretical roles that propositions have traditionally been posited to play.⁶ The first role is that of being the objects of attitudes and the primary bearers of truth and falsity. The second role is that of carving up the world, where propositions correspond to distinctions in reality. He calls the entities that play the first role *propositions* and the entities that play the second role *representational contents*. If beliefs are essentially descriptive, then it is natural to assume that propositions just are representational contents. However, if beliefs are not essentially descriptive, then we can reject this assumption. Instead, Schroeder proposes that there are two distinct classes of entities corresponding to each role, and that propositions and representational contents are “two different sorts of thing.”⁷

Schroeder then proposes that while all beliefs involve an agent being related to a proposition, descriptive beliefs also involve the agent being related to a

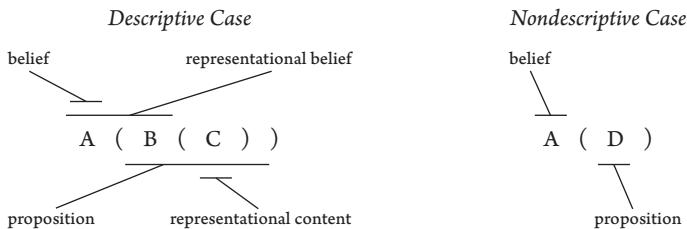
⁴ For an overview of these worries, see Schroeder, “Two Roles for Propositions.”

⁵ Respectively, see Horgan and Timmons, “Cognitivist Expressivism”; Köhler, “Expressivism, Belief, and All That”; Brown, “Interpretive Expressivism”; Gibbard, *Meaning and Normativity*; Brown, “Expressivism and Cognitive Propositions”; Schroeder, *Being For* and “Two Roles for Propositions.”

⁶ Schroeder, “Two Roles for Propositions,” 418.

⁷ Schroeder, “Two Roles for Propositions,” 421.

representational content. Diagrammatically, Schroeder suggests the following picture:



So in the nondescriptive case, a belief is simply a relation to a proposition. But in the descriptive case we can carve up belief in two ways. Specifically, belief can be carved up as the relation $A(_)$ to a proposition $B(C)$ or it can be carved up as a relation $A(B(_))$ to a representational content C .⁸

Lest the descriptive case seem implausibly complex, Schroeder offers the following comparison.⁹ Consider the state of *being about to go to Paris*. On one way of carving up this state, it consists in an agent standing in the relation of *being about to* and the act type of *going to Paris*. But on another way of carving up the state, it consists in an agent standing in the relation of *being about to go to* and the city Paris. So the single state of *being about to go to Paris* consists in two distinct relations to two distinct objects. This example exhibits the same structure of the descriptive case in the diagram above. Here, " $A(_)$ " denotes *being about to*, " $B(_)$ " denotes *going to*, " $A(B(_))$ " denotes *being about to go to*, and " C " denotes Paris. So there is nothing inherently problematic or unusual with a state having this structure.

Schroeder's theory of belief as being for is then offered as an implementation of the more general framework provided by the diagram. Although Schroeder expresses more confidence in the general framework, my focus here will be the theory of belief as being for.¹⁰ But it is worth highlighting that expressivists can embrace normative beliefs and propositions without adopting this framework. A simpler framework would maintain that all beliefs involve a single relation between an agent and a proposition, where some but not all propositions are representational contents.¹¹ On this view, descriptive beliefs are relations to propositions that are representational contents, and nondescriptive beliefs are

⁸ Schroeder, "Two Roles for Propositions," 422.

⁹ Schroeder, "Two Roles for Propositions," 421

¹⁰ Schroeder, "Two Roles for Propositions," 424.

¹¹ See, for instance, Brown, "Interpretative Expressivism."

relations to propositions that are not representational contents.¹² So it is not clear what advantages are gained by adopting Schroeder's general framework. However, this point will not matter for the discussion that follows, so I will not pursue it any further here.

Returning to Schroeder's view, he postulates the attitude of *being for* to play the *A*-role of belief within his framework. An agent has the attitude of being for when they are *for* something. As a first approximation, what one is for is a certain kind of property. So being for is a relation that holds between agents and properties. More specifically, when one is for something, then other things being equal, one *does* that thing.¹³ So being for relates agents to possible *act types*, broadly construed. We can then define the *being for* relation as the state "whose functional role is to lead one to acquire that property, other things being equal."¹⁴ If believing some proposition consists in being for some property, then we can say that propositions are the properties that one is for when one believes that proposition. If the relevant class of properties are act types, then identifying the proposition *p* will involve specifying what an agent is typically motivated to do when she believes *p*.¹⁵

This general account of belief is perfectly suited for an expressivist theory of normative belief. Expressivists think that normative thought is essentially directive, in the sense of being action guiding or attitude governing. If believing consists in being for, then it turns out that all beliefs are essentially directive. The directive nature of normative belief is then just a particular instance of the directive nature of belief in general. So if we suppose that normative expressions like "wrong" express noncognitive attitudes like *disapproval*, we can identify the belief that murder is wrong with *being for disapproving of murder*. If believing just is being for, then the proposition that murder is wrong just is the property of disapproving of murder. In terms of the diagram, *A* is being for, and *D* is the act type that one is for when one believes *D*.

With the nondescriptive case explained, we now need to explain the descriptive case. If believing is being for, and being for involves being motivated to do something, what kind of things are we motivated to do when we have a descriptive belief? To explain this, Schroeder introduces the notion of *proceeding as if*, which relates agents to representational contents. In terms of the diagram,

¹² As well as being simpler, this framework seems to preserve all the explanatory advantages Schroeder ascribes to his framework; see Schroeder, "Two Roles for Propositions," 422–23.

¹³ Schroeder, *Being For*, 84.

¹⁴ Schroeder, "Two Roles for Propositions," 424.

¹⁵ To explain negated descriptive beliefs, the theory actually requires propositions to be *pairs of entailing properties*; see Schroeder, *Being For*, 95–100. However, this detail will not be important in what follows, so I will stick to the simplified version for ease of exposition.

this is relation *B*. Descriptive belief therefore consists in *being for proceeding as if p*, where “*p*” denotes a representational content. Thus, for instance, believing that the cat is on the mat consists in *being for proceeding as if the cat is on the mat*, where “*the cat is on the mat*” denotes a representational content.

What is it to proceed as if *p* and to be for proceeding as if *p*? Schroeder provides the following answer:

On my best gloss, to proceed as if *p* is to take *p* as settled in deciding what to do. So being for proceeding as if *p* is being for taking *p* as settled in deciding what to do. Assuming that being for has the motivational property that someone who is for *a* will tend to do *a*, other things being equal, it follows that someone who believes that *p* will tend to proceed as if *p*, other things being equal. That is, it follows that she will tend to treat *p* as settled in deciding what to do.¹⁶

At a descriptive level, Schroeder’s suggestion seems plausible enough. When I believe that the cat is on the mat, other things being equal, I do proceed as if the cat is on the mat, in that I take this fact as settled in deciding to avoid walking on the mat, to look for the cat on the mat, and so on. So if believing is being for, then the proposition that the cat is on the mat is the property of *proceeding as if the cat is on the mat*.

Schroeder’s theory of belief as being for thus simultaneously provides a novel account of belief and belief contents suitable for expressivists. The account is fully general, applying to all beliefs, but it is designed to distinguish between descriptive beliefs that involve some kind of ontological commitment and normative beliefs that do not. Clearly, then, a central criterion of success will be whether the theory successfully does this. It is this aspect of the theory that I will now challenge in the next section.

II

The notion of *proceeding as if* plays a central role for Schroeder in distinguishing descriptive from nondescriptive belief. However, it is unclear whether it can play this role because the notion applies just as much in the nondescriptive case as in the descriptive. If I believe that the cat is on the mat, then a plausible description of my state is that I am for proceeding as if the cat is on the mat. However, it is no less plausible to describe my belief that murder is wrong in terms of my being for proceeding as if murder is wrong. After all, other things being equal, if I have this belief, then I will take the wrongness of murder as

¹⁶ Schroeder, *Being For*, 93–94; see also Schroeder, “Two Roles for Propositions,” 426.

settled in deciding what to do. So, intuitively, the notion of proceeding as if fails to distinguish between descriptive and nondescriptive beliefs.

One response to this objection would be to point out that “proceeding as if” is defined as a relation between (1) states of being for and (2) representational contents. If we reject the existence of normative representational contents, then there is nothing that can fill the place of 2, and so there are no normative instances of proceeding as if. That is, because “murder is wrong” expresses only a proposition and no representational content, and because by definition proceeding as if is a relation between states of being for and representational contents, and not between states of being for and propositions, there is no possible state of being for proceeding as if murder is wrong.

However, although it is possible to define “proceeding as if” in this way, the stipulation that it applies only to representational contents is not grounded in the functional characterization of the attitude. If we take “proceeding as if” as “a shorthand for the general relation of taking something as settled in one’s deliberative activity,” as Schroeder suggests, then the notion more plausibly applies to propositions, even nondescriptive propositions, because it is clear that I can take the proposition that murder is wrong as settled in my deliberative activity.¹⁷

Perhaps one could amend the functional characterization to range over representational contents explicitly, so that “proceeding as if” is shorthand for the relation of taking *representational contents* as settled in one’s deliberative activity. However, it is unclear that we have any grasp of this functional role over and above that of the original functional role. Moreover, explicitly ranging over representational contents in this way looks more like a criterion of adequacy that the functional role of proceeding as if must meet rather than an explanation of what this functional role is actually like, such that it only ranges over representational contents. So we have not yet been given any psychological distinction to go along with our distinction between <pai *p_{proposition}*> and <pai *p_{representational content}*>.

Indeed, insofar as proceeding as if has its home in deliberative activity, then even in the descriptive case it seems more plausible that proceeding as if is a relation to propositions and not representational contents. For deliberative activity constitutively involves propositional acts and attitudes, and so the most natural way of characterizing this activity will appeal to the propositional contents of those acts and attitudes, including in the descriptive case. Moreover, it would be strange if the same activity took a different object in the descriptive case even though the same kind of object (propositions) is also available.

¹⁷ Schroeder, “Two Roles for Propositions,” 426.

However, this might suggest another response to the objection. While Schroeder explains descriptive belief in terms of proceeding as if, he is aware that one can also describe normative beliefs in terms of proceeding as if.¹⁸ Schroeder suggests that we explain the difference in terms of what proceeding as if *consists in* in each case. Thus, an expressivist might claim that while it is correct to describe the belief that murder is wrong as being for proceeding as if murder is wrong, proceeding as if murder is wrong *just is* disapproving of murder. By comparison, while it is also correct to describe the belief that the cat is on the mat as being for proceeding as if the cat is on the mat, proceeding as if the cat is on the mat *just is* proceeding as if a certain representational content is true.

However, this response faces the same objection as before. For we do not have any account of what it is to proceed as if some representational content is true. Again, insofar as we understand what it is to proceed as if *p*, it more plausibly applies to propositions and not representational contents. Further, if the very same relation applied to propositions and representational contents, then this would over-generate beliefs. For every descriptive state picked out by the expression “being for proceeding as if *p*,” “*p*” would ambiguously denote a proposition or a representational content. Given Schroeder’s assumption that these are two distinct kinds of entity, it follows that there are two states of belief where intuitively it seems that there is only one. This is because beliefs are individuated by their contents, and so if descriptive beliefs consist in being for proceeding as if *p*, we can differentiate between two states of being for depending on how we disambiguate “*p*.¹⁹

Thus, if there is some relation that can distinguish descriptive from non-descriptive beliefs by playing the *B*-role in the diagram and taking representational contents and not propositions as relata, it is not the relation of proceeding as if. If there is any such relation, it will be something else. Calling this putative relation *pai**, perhaps one could say in the spirit of the last response that in the descriptive case, the property $\langle \text{pai } p_{\text{proposition}} \rangle$ just is the property $\langle \text{pai}^* p_{\text{representational content}} \rangle$. However, this cannot be right for the simple reason that by hypothesis, propositions and representational contents are distinct kinds of entity. Therefore it is not possible that $\langle p_{\text{proposition}} \rangle = \langle p_{\text{representational content}} \rangle$. So it is not possible that $\langle \text{pai } p_{\text{proposition}} \rangle$ just is $\langle \text{pai}^* p_{\text{representational content}} \rangle$.

¹⁸ Schroeder, *Being For*, 155.

¹⁹ An anonymous referee suggests that this does not over-generate beliefs because there are two different notions of proceeding as if in play. This might be correct, but the resulting view fails to provide a unified account of belief, which was the main aim of the theory. Indeed, this seems to be a problem for the response more generally.

In conclusion, Schroeder's theory fails to achieve the main task it sets for itself: to provide a theory of belief that distinguishes between descriptive and nondescriptive beliefs. While I have rejected a number of ways of conceiving the *proceeding as if* relation for this end, I have not shown that *any* way of conceiving the relation will fail. But the onus must be on the being for proponent to show that there is some conception available.²⁰

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