Minimal Expressivism

María José Frápolli and Neftalí Villanueva[†]

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is twofold: first we outline a version of non-descriptivism, 'minimal expressivism', leaving aside certain long-standing problems associated with conventional expressivist views. Second, we examine the way in which familiar expressivist results can be accommodated within this framework, through a particular interpretation that the expressive realm lends to a theory of meaning. Expressivist theories of meaning address only a portion of the classical problems attributed to this position when they seek to explain *why* the expressions they deal with have a given meaning. A position can nevertheless be termed 'expressivist' – in the minimal sense that we favor – based simply on the following key features of the meaning of these expressions: they can be used as functions of propositions, and they are not used to describe the way the world is.

1. Introduction: from expressivism to minimal expressivism

Expressivism is an approach to the meaning of certain kinds of expressions. A theory of meaning can be called 'expressivist' if it fulfills at least two of the following theses:

(1)   *Higher-order functions* (HOF). There are natural-language expressions with the following structural properties: they are non-extensional, non-truth-conditional functions of propositions. At least one of the items of the following list can be analyzed along these lines: belief, knowledge, necessity, possibility, good, bad, right, wrong.

(2)   *Non-descriptivism* (ND). These terms are not used to describe the way the world is.

(3)   *Truth-conditional status* (TCS). Expressions containing these terms lack truth conditions, even though they are syntactically correct – they are not "truth-apt".

(4)   *Attitude expressions* (AE). These terms are used to express some attitude *A* towards a particular piece of content.

The above four theses are logically independent, although the thesis HOF is present in the vast majority of semantic expressivisms. The aim of the first section is to discuss theses HOF to AE in some detail.

Certain predicables do not take simple objects within their scope, but rather complexes of properties and their bearers, i.e. propositions. These predicables are

[†]   Universidad de Granada, Granada, Spain; Email: frapolli@ugr.es and nef@ugr.es.

second-order predicables, or, as we prefer, functions of propositions. Not every second-order predicable is a function of propositions, since some are functions of functions. Examples of this latter type are standard quantifiers,[1] some uses of negation and conjunction, first-person operators (according to Anscombe-Williams, see for instance Anscombe 1975; Williams 1989, 170 and Recanati 2007, 239 et seq.), and others. The present paper focuses on a particular subset of second-order predicables: those that can be used to produce propositions out of other propositions. They are non-truth-functional in that the truth of the proposition that results from assigning specific propositions as its arguments is not a function of the truth-value of its constituents; and they are non-extensional – since embedded co-extensional expressions cannot be intersubstituted *salva veritate*.

The thesis HOF belongs to the logical-syntactic level – that is, it characterizes the kind of arguments that satisfy these functions in order to build well-formed sentences. Even though some of these expressions might eventually accept basic objects as their arguments, it is unquestionable that no first-order predicable can also take sentences as its arguments. Let us consider 'tall' and 'good' in the following examples:

John is tall.
The ball is good.
It is good that John is tall, since he wants to play college basketball.
*It is tall that the ball is red.

Only expressions such as 'believe', 'knows', 'necessarily', 'it is good that' can take whole sentences as their arguments. They may also be genuinely saturated by simple nominal expressions, such as 'you' in 'I believe you', but they can certainly be satisfied by that-clauses containing complete sentences, unlike predicates such as 'being tall' and 'being red'. We do not mean that ethical expressions lack *predicate-occurrences*, nor that those occurrences can be reduced or reinterpreted as *operator-occurrences*; rather, our only assertion here is that the expressions targeted by the expressivist *can* occur as typical functions of propositions.

Thesis ND is the point where expressivism diverges from any form of relationalism. An expressivist might claim that second-order predicables do not describe, they are not used to talk about how the world is, or about the relative position of one object with respect to others. A complete description of the world would not be altered by our talking about good or bad actions, ascriptions of truth, discourse about things that might have been different, people's beliefs,

---

[1] Natural language quantifiers are either monadic or binary predicable-formers that have n-adic (n > 0) predicables as arguments. Thus, quantifiers are not functions of propositions, but functions of non-saturated expressions. We have purposely avoided this issue in our characterization of expressivism.

etc.[2] Although such discourse is essential for rational endeavor, it is, nonetheless, irrelevant to answer questions such as 'what is the world like?' A simple relationalist, e.g., a follower of Russell's multiple-relation theory,[3] or an ontologically committed relationalist, somebody who is willing to sign metaphysical checks to afford the analysis of expressivist notions, could object to ND by claiming that expressions containing expressivist notions are nonetheless 'fit for making assertions'. Nevertheless, the expressivist who upholds ND does not need to deny the precept that complex expressions containing higher-order notions can be used to make assertions. Expressivism concerns only the kind of assertions that we make when we use these notions. Proposition-guise expressivism, as defended by Pendlebury (2010), for instance, claims that normative sentences are apt to make assertions despite that the propositions asserted are not factual. Expressivist notions may not be used to describe while still being part of assertions. This brand of expressivism includes Ridge's Ecumenical expressivism (Ridge 2006; 2009) and Copp's Realist expressivism (Copp 2001), among others. Our approach to TCS would clarify this point.

Even though ND seems to be hard to accept for those who treasure moral, semantic, epistemic concepts, etc. close to their hearts, the real source of concern for them should be thesis TCS. Non-descriptivism could perhaps even be interpreted so as to temper its counterintuitive effect, but these expressions lacking truth-conditional import would systematically alter what we consider ourselves to be doing when we think about what is right or wrong, what others believe, etc. Either we reject the idea that valid inferences are truth preserving, or we abandon

---

[2] Wittgenstein's non-descriptivism can be traced back to his analysis of negation, belief, and the rest of operations in the *Tractatus* (see, e.g,. T 5.542, T 5.2341, T 4.0621, T 5.44). There, non-descriptivism can be argued to be closely related to a modest ontology, as the one defended in T 6.41: "In the world everything is as it is and happens as it does happen. In it there is no value – and if there were, it would be of no value." Due to this historical fact, thesis ND can be considered a corollary of this ontological position. Nevertheless, our position is that ND is independent of these ontological assumptions.
Arguments can be provided to defend ND on strictly linguistic grounds, as Wittgenstein profusely does with respect to ascriptions of the non-descriptive nature of mental states. Both Hacker (1996, 4–5, 29) and Glock (1996, 188) agree that Wittgenstein's defense of these ascriptions is rooted in an analysis of what he considers a common mistake: conflating accusatives in sentences such as 'John loves apples' with those in sentences such as 'Peter wishes that Mary would come back', which Wittgenstein takes to belong to different grammatical categories. Wittgenstein provides a larger set of arguments to convey his point, (see Wittgenstein 2001, p. 92, PG 68, 90, Zettel 45, 58, 78, PI 290, 367–368, 444, 585, 588, etc.).
We do not wish to imply that Wittgenstein's 'ontology' changes from T to PI, and therefore non-descriptivism cannot be based exclusively on T's ontology. Rather, our point bears on the independence of the arguments for ND provided in Zettel, PG, PI, etc. from ontological issues. Non-descriptivism, as we interpret it, is neither equivalent nor presupposes any particular ontology.
[3] See, e.g., Moltmann 2003, for a contemporary defense of this position.

a widespread view on moral reasoning.[4] According to TCS, expressions containing second-order concepts lack truth conditions. The argument to reach TCS from ND appears to be quite straightforward: if second-order concepts do not describe, and we believe that the content of a complex expression is a function of the content of the parts (the classical Principle of Compositionality), then having a 'gap' introduced by a content-less second-order expression would be equivalent to saying that the entire expression lacks content. The effect would be similar to that of introducing random strings of letters in a sentence. 'John is xgsnebfj', in standard English, lacks truth conditions; its utterance says nothing about the world. In fact, it says nothing at all, as the interpretation is blocked by 'xgsnebfj'. Showing that this inference from ND to TCS is not valid will be one of the main propositions of this paper, as addressed in section 3.

Until now, our characterization of expressivism has been purely negative. Expressivists have nonetheless undertaken the task of providing a positive account of the meaning of second-order notions, instead of simply stating what these notions are not, from Stevenson (1937) to Gibbard (1990). Thesis AE is usually endorsed by expressivists who believe that if normative expressions do not describe, something should be said about their function, something concerning the subjects that we talk about when using those words. Gibbard, for example, maintained that, with utterances such as 'p is good', a speaker expresses the attitude that it is reasonable to feel bad for or to be angry at whoever failed to do p (Gibbard 1990). Some reactions against expressivism depend only on the specific positive account of the meaning of second-order concepts. Thus Gibbard's position has been assessed on psychological grounds: the particular attitudes that a speaker is said to be expressing when using ethical terms have been questioned (see, e.g., Ball 1995). Along more general lines, Jackson and Pettit have argued that the relation of 'expressing' was not the kind of connection that the expressivist needs in order to posit relations between a speaker and a certain attitude (see Jackson and Pettit 1998). Our own position is that, despite its name, an expressivist theory can stand without its positive side. Failing to see the appropriate consequences of an expressivist position leads the expressivist to take an unnecessary step further. 'Minimal expressivism' is our name for this new type of expressivism.

A minimal expressivist position, one that accepts HOF and ND, allows a reasonable account of the meaning of a relevant subset of the set of second-order predicables. TCS can be modified so as to retain some intuitions that have historically supported it, and at the same time, to answer the legitimate criticisms raised against it from non-expressivist lines. Minimal expressivism is a semantic position which is neutral regarding standard disputes that have traditionally surrounded the

---

[4] This is basically Geach's argument in (Geach 1960, 225) and, under the heading of the "Frege–Geach Argument", is currently one of the most serious criticisms against non-cognitivist and non-representationalist positions.

analysis of normative notions. One is entitled to add cognitive, epistemic or emotional aspects to the overall meaning of these notions, as AE states. Our claim is, nevertheless, that these aspects do not belong to the semantic core that accounts for the inferential behavior of expressivist concepts.

2. *One small obstacle out of the way*

It has been argued that there is no reason to assume that a principled difference exists between predicates which are the normal target of an expressivist theory and common predicates such as 'tall', 'blue', etc., and that there is no way to detect the difference between the group of expressions normally addressed by expressivists and the rest of the predicates simply by examining the surface structure (see Schroeder 2008; Thomas 2006, Chrisman 2008, 337–338).

> Once we characterize noncognitivist views in this way, moreover, it is easy to characterize the crux of the Frege-Geach Problem. It is that there is no linguistic evidence whatsoever that the meaning of moral terms works differently than that of ordinary descriptive terms. On the contrary, everything that you can do syntactically with a descriptive predicate like 'green', you can do with a moral predicate like 'wrong', and when you do those things, they have the same semantic effects. (Schroeder 2008, 704)

This statement cannot be meant to claim that these expressions do not differ in syntactic behavior, since it is clear that only these expressions *can* take complete sentences as their subject or direct object, instead of simple nominal phrases, as seen above. Schroeder might be right in stating that "everything that you can do syntactically with a descriptive predicate like 'green', you can do with a moral predicate like 'wrong' ", but we can argue against the converse being true. There are syntactic moves that can be performed with a second-order predicable that cannot be performed using a first-order predicable. Second-order concepts need arguments that are also concepts or concepts-plus-their-arguments. They occur in the syntactic surface as sentential functions, such as 'It is good that John comes' or 'It is true that snow is white', even though they also can occur as common predicables, 'That John comes is good' and 'That snow is white is true'.[5] Dyadic second-order concepts, such as '. . . believes that . . .', '. . . knows that . . .' are also different from first-order dyadic concepts such as '. . . is to the left of . . .' and '. . . is higher than . . .'. The former, but not the latter, need complete sentences as syntactic arguments (and consequently have complete propositions within their scope).

 Epistemic second-order concepts have raised some debate concerning their logico-semantic status partly because they need singular terms as their left-hand

---

[5] See Frápolli (2013, ch. 2) for an explanation of this feature of higher-order predicables, as applied to the case of truth.

arguments. Thus, it is tempting to interpret them as base-level relations. Nevertheless, following this temptation to the extent of requiring all their arguments to have the same syntactic status results in difficulties[6] that can be easily avoided. Epistemic concepts have previously been deemed half predicates (because of their left-hand arguments) and half connectives (because their right-hand arguments; Prior 1971, 135); the term 'connecticate' has been coined to cover them (Recanati 2000, 30).

The test of substitutivity *salva congruitate*[7] suffices to make the difference apparent between first- and second-order predicable syntactic categories[8]: two expressions belong to different grammatical categories if, and only if, switching them makes a grammatical expression ungrammatical, or vice versa. Consider the following examples:

> 'Snow is true', 'Grass is good', 'John is white', 'That John comes is true', 'That snow is white is good', 'That grass is green is white', 'That snow is white is green', 'It's white that grass is green', 'It's green that snow is white'

The last four are ungrammatical, and the first one has questionable meaning.

Typically, what is meant while appealing to the surface structure is rather a different claim. The words that the expressivist cares about take part in the subject-predicate structure in a way that makes them appear to be "fit for making assertions" (Thomas 2006). Their use is no different from other expressions that render "truth-apt" sentences, i.e. sentences that can be used to make a

---

[6] Even though the tradition that argues against the idea that beliefs are first-order relations can be traced back in the twentieth century to Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, this idea is also present in Wittgenstein's mature work, where he even provides reasons for this view, rather than restricting himself to a general diagnosis (see, e.g., Wittgenstein (1967), 46, 76; Wittgenstein (1974) 103. More non-descriptive material in Wittgenstein (1953) 290, 367–368, 585, 588). There is a whole tradition of analysis of the 'grammar' of belief that is not compatible with the claim that beliefs are first-order relations, from Urmson (1952), and Kiteley (1964) to Prior (1971), Recanati (2000; 2007), etc. In recent literature on the meaning of belief reports, arguments against relationalist views have been summarized in Boër (2007, 39–65) and Matthews (2007, 97–117). Perhaps more importantly, the development of epistemic logic stemming from Hintikka's seminal 1962 book cannot be understood without accepting the view that 'believe' and 'know' function as operators, rather than as first-order predicates.

[7] "We first explain the category of a (syntactically simple or complex) sign *S* in a language *L* as the class of all those signs *S'* of L such that *S'* may take the place of *S* in any proposition of *L* without the result being no longer a proposition of *L*: *salva congruitate*." (Geach [1962] 1980, 178)

[8] The Greek distinction between *categorematic* and *syncategorematic* terms and its Medieval use to demarcate the class of logical constants is a further argument against Schroeder's claim that "everything that you can do syntactically with a descriptive predicate like 'green', you can do with a moral predicate like 'wrong'." Besides quantifiers and connectives, normative notions such as 'necessarily' were counted as *syncategoremata*, which is a syntactic distinction. Standard philosophy of logic has found reasons to distinguish sets of notions for their syntactic properties: invariantist definitions of logical terms, grammatical definitions, etc. These identify sets of special notions that do not behave like the rest (see Klima 2005).

---

truth-evaluable statement (Lenman 2003). This claim has nothing to do with the distinction proposed in HOF, but more to do with ND and TCS, as explained in the following sections. Thus HOF is immune to criticisms that seek to question the syntactic specificity of the group of expressions singled out by expressivism.

3. The myth of the inheritable gap

Thesis TCS is contested not only on affective grounds – by 'objectivity minded' theorists, to use perhaps a more neutral, if not entirely fair, characterization (see Pendlebury 2010) – but also on logical grounds. Those who value their moral notions, for example, taking realism to be the only way to justify their intuitions, would feel disappointed by a view on the meaning of moral words that concludes that sentences such as 'committing adultery is bad', or 'aiding Somalia is good' cannot be used to say something true or false. Belief-ascriptions, knowledge-ascriptions, etc. would be equally doomed under the TCS dictate. Are we suddenly unable to know, believe, or be true to the facts?

From a logical standpoint, if complex expressions containing second-order predicables lack truth conditions, what happens when these complex expressions occur within the scope of truth-functional expressions, such as logical connectives? The mere fact that we can meaningfully make statements such as 'committing adultery is not bad', placing a complex containing a second-order expression within the scope of a truth-functional expression, shows that the original complex expression did not lack truth-conditions.

Several lines of argument can be developed to respond to these criticisms, but our concern here is simply to show that these worries are not damaging to all forms of expressivism. If TCS is derived from ND, together with a truth-functional account of logical-connectives, expressivism as a whole would be jeopardized, since HOF is too weak to be established as a theoretical alternative, and AE is not possible without one of the intuitions behind ND, the idea that these expressions are not used *only* in a descriptive manner.

Nevertheless, TCS does not derive from ND. Above, we claimed that theses HOF to AE are logically independent, and now we will explain in what sense this is true of ND and TCS. ND states that second-order expressions are not descriptive, i.e., they are not used to talk about how the world is. This does not imply that utterances of sentences containing second-order expressions lack truth-conditions, but only that second-order expressions are truth-conditionally irrelevant. As the difference between the occurrence of 'xgsnebfj' in 'John is xgsnebfj' and that of 'good' in 'aiding Somalia is good' exemplifies, second-order expressions are not holes in linguistic structures, they do not block the interpretation process. The content of an act of assertion of a sentence such as 'aiding Somalia is good' can be disclosed in truth-conditional terms, even though the concept 'good' does not aim

to describe. There is a major difference between being truth-conditionally irrelevant and blocking a truth-conditional interpretation. To be a proper consequence of ND, TCS should be rephrased as the following thesis:

> *Truth-conditional irrelevance* (TCI). Second-order predicables do not modify the truth-conditions of expressions within their scope.

The connection between lacking descriptive character and the absence of truth-conditions was presumed to be obvious – and unproblematic – by some of the first supporters of expressivism in the twentieth century. For example, in 1936 Ayer wrote:

> If now I generalise my previous statement and say, 'Stealing money is wrong,' I produce a sentence which has no factual meaning – that is, it expresses no proposition which can be either true or false. It is as if I had written 'Stealing money!!' – where the shape and thickness of the exclamation marks show, by a suitable convention, that a special sort of moral disapproval is the feeling being expressed. It is clear that there is nothing said here which can be true or false. (Ayer [1936] 1946, 107)

Ayer considers the inferential move from ND to TCS to be obvious, given his assumptions about meaning and truth-conditionality. A string of symbols having 'non-factual meaning' implies that the sentence does not express a verifiable content, and the essential characteristic of propositional content is that it can be declared true or false. But, for TCS to be derived from ND, even in Ayer's own terms, it is necessary to add a further premise to verificationism and the bipolar view on propositions. We call this premise the *myth of the inheritable gap*: if a sentence includes a truth-conditionally irrelevant expression, the sentence as a whole cannot be used to say anything true or false. This extreme version of the Principle of Compositionality, probably favored by Frege, is nevertheless justified only if the gap is produced by a word with the function of providing an essential component to the truth-evaluable content of the act at stake. Let us consider the following cases:

> He is tall.
> John is rs4q6uo9.

In the first case, unless appropriate contextual cues are provided, a pronoun functioning only to point to a contextually salient object of a certain kind lacks the appropriate content. In the second case, there is a meaningless string of symbols occupying the place of the predicate. In both cases, the failure is infectious, and affects the determination of the truth-value. However, not every statement containing truth-conditionally inert material behaves in the same way, given that some words and concepts do not serve either to point or to describe and, even for those, most contexts provide cues that facilitate an interpretation of the utterance that individuates some truth-evaluable content.

The content of our utterances and thoughts can be individuated from two different perspectives, exemplified by the following questions: 1) what would the world be like if what I'm saying/thinking were true? and 2) what comes of my assertion/thought and what does it come from? When the topic of truth-conditions is assessed, only question 1) is at stake. Second-order expressions make explicit some features of the inferential potential of the things we say/think, but they are irrelevant with respect to question 1). Let us consider modal operators, for example. Except for those who believe in primitive modalities, from Kripke (1963) on, most philosophers agree on a view concerning possibility according to which 'possibly p' is true if there is a possible world in which 'p' is true. In this situation, 'possibly' is regarded as second-order and non-descriptive, but there is also a consensus concerning the impact on the truth-conditions of the expressions within its scope. In this case, 'possibly' does not alter the truth-conditions of 'p', but rather qualifies the possible worlds in which 'p' has to be the case for us to say something true. To the question 'what would the world be like if 'possibly p' was true?', the answer is simply 'p has to be the case (in some possible world)'.[9] Modal expressions do not have an impact on the truth-conditions of 'p'. Similarly, the expressivist holds that such words as 'good', 'believe', 'true', etc. do not alter the truth-conditions of the expressions within their scope, but rather their contribution to the act in which they occur is some other. Similar examples of non-catastrophic occurrences of truth-conditionally irrelevant expressions can be found in the literature on procedural meaning (see, e.g., Ifantidou 2001; Blakemore 2002, chs 2 and 4), and in the analysis of deferential utterances (see Stojanovic et al. 2007). Illocutionary adverbials such as 'frankly', 'confidentially', 'honestly', 'seriously', etc., and attitudinal adverbials such as 'unfortunately', 'happily', 'sadly', 'luckily', etc., are usually mentioned as expressions with a non-truth-conditional status that have non-catastrophic occurrences (cf. Bach and Harnish 1979, Urmson 1963, Strawson 1973, Recanati 1987). *Syncategoremata*, as characterized by Greek and Medieval logic, which included logical terms but also interjections, adverbs, etc. can be interpreted as a traditional defense of the truth-conditional irrelevance of some meaningful expressions (see note 8).

There are two different ways to discuss truth-conditions, and therefore the truth-conditional relevance of an expression: 1) According to the first sense of the expression, truth-conditions are whatever follows structures of the form *'s' is true iff*, or alternatively *[[s]] = 1 iff*. 2) According to the second sense of the term,

---

[9] An apparent counterexample to this claim seems to be provided by the operator 'It is false that', but this alleged counterexample fails under scrutiny. The sentential operator 'It is false that' does not change the truth-conditions of its sentential argument. In 'It is false that p', 'p' has exactly the same truth-conditions as if it appeared in isolation. Nevertheless, this does not mean that the sentence containing the sentential operator and its argument has the same truth conditions as the argument on its own.

truth-conditions are explicitly represented content, whatever specifies the state of affairs that we have to compare with the circumstances of evaluation in order to determine the truth-value of what we are saying. The second sense of the expression corresponds to the content in a normal relativist framework, to the lekton in Recanati's moderate relativism (Recanati 2007), and to the basic idea that the content is a function from possible worlds to truth-values (see Yablo 2006). An expression can be truth-conditionally relevant in the first sense, while being truth-conditionally irrelevant in the second sense of the expression. Modal operators, temporal operators, etc. are analyzed in this way within a moderate relativist framework (see Recanati 2007, 65–72). Expressivist expressions are deemed to be truth-conditionally irrelevant only in the second weaker sense. It can be argued, as hinted above, that even expressions which are truth-conditionally irrelevant in the first, and stronger, sense can be part of truth-apt strings of symbols. TCI is thus in principle immune to the affective and logical criticisms described above, although they might still weaken a position that developed this minimal thesis into a fully explanatory theory.

In short, ND is no more than one side of the Humean view on ethical statements, namely its negative stance towards their status as judgments. Several attempts have been made to accommodate ND and reject TCS (see Popper 1945, 51, 204; Findlay 1944; but also Blackburn 1993, 16; Copp 2001, 2–3; Horgan and Timmons 2006, 230–231; Ridge 2006, 302; Pendlebury 2010, 190). Pace Ayer, we also hold that ND and TCS are logically independent, but we hold this belief as the result of examining different arguments. First, the step from ND to TCS involves an assumption that can be proven false on empirical grounds. Second, a slightly modified version of TCS can still be sustained, one that remains faithful to the original gist of the theory but is safe from the logical argument against expressivism.

4. Minimal expressivism at work

Minimal expressivism is the conjunction of HOF, ND and TCI. Let us have a reminder:

HOF: Certain predicables do not take simple objects within their scope, but complexes of objects and properties. These predicables are 'second-order' predicables, or functions of propositions. At least one of the items in the following list can be analyzed as an instance of a second-order predicable of the kind described at the beginning of the paper: belief, knowledge, *a priori*, necessity, possibility, good, bad.
ND: Second-order predicables do not describe the world.
TCI: Second-order predicables do not modify the truth-conditions of expressions within their scope.

Our claim is that such a position can satisfy our theoretical concerns about the meaning of second-order expressions. Minimal expressivism, we claim, preserves

the explanatory power of expressivism, as far as the meaning of the terms is concerned. A further task would be to determine the particular function performed by several sets of second-order notions, i.e., to provide the elements that distinguish between logical, epistemic, semantic and evaluative notions. Throughout this section, different kinds of minimal expressivism will be reviewed, so as to show that AE is no more than an explanatory hypothesis to generalize on the inferences that can be drawn – from and to – statements containing second-order expressions.

4.1. Modal, semantic and doxastic minimal expressivism

Modal expressions, such as 'possibly' and 'necessarily', are commonly assumed not to take simple objects as their arguments,[10] but rather are saturated by complete propositions. The usual semantics for modal expressions presupposes that these expressions do not modify the truth-conditions of the propositions within their scope, which fits TCI, one of the basic requirements of minimal expressivism. Again, the answer to the question 'what would the world be like if "possibly p" was true?' would simply be 'p would have to be true', at least in one possible world. Modal expressivism could be rejected only by someone who believed in primitive modalities, someone who thought that modal words are used to describe the world. This is the sort of alternative that, as noted above, signs metaphysical checks to pay linguistic bills. Modal semantics does not usually feel compelled to offer a 'positive' characterization of the meaning of modal terms. The meaning of 'possibly' is exhausted by the semantic characterization of 'possibly p'. No reflection on the 'attitude expressed' by the use of this word is needed.

A similar strategy could be adopted when dealing with semantic expressivism. Usually, we do not expect complex stories about the attitudes behind technical terms of semantics, such as 'synonymy', 'meaning', 'reference', etc. This does not mean that defining these terms is easy, nor that a general reflection on notions such as 'reference' is unimportant with respect to the first task. We contend that these two tasks should not be conflated. In what sense does something else need to be explained once we establish a theory on the meaning of these notions that successfully accounts for the inferences that they might engender? If a theory of meaning consistently renders the conditions under which 'x and y are synonymous iff x's meaning = y's meaning', 'in a directly referential theory, the meaning of proper names = their references', etc. are true, then it states everything necessary about the meaning of these terms. The opposite view,

---

[10] Simple objects are those that stand for un-analyzable expressions with respect to which questions regarding structure, compositionality, adicity and scope make no sense. Unlike propositions, questions concerning structure and compositionality cannot be meaningfully asked about them. Unlike predicables, it's of no use to ask about their adicity or scope.

realism concerning semantic statements, should start by answering why at all we need an account of the mind-independent properties for which semantic terms stand.

When we turn our attention to doxastic attitudes, minimal expressivism seems to lose its initial intuitive force. Often, it is assumed that a proper theory on the meaning of belief reports needs to start by clarifying what is meant by holding a belief, what it is to believe something, what kind of mental states constitute beliefs, and so on. Nevertheless, such reports on a relational theory of belief face serious challenges when trying to explain what types of objects the believer and the belief are, and the kind of relation that can be established between them when a belief is ascribed. Moreover, we are interested in explaining what somebody means when attributing beliefs to others in sentences such as 'A believes that p'. Other concerns are possible, of course, but the treatment of higher-order functions makes it advisable to outline the scope of any proposal as clearly as possible. For a minimal expressivist view on belief reports, it would suffice to provide an adequate account of the inferential potential of doxastic expressions. Still, a theorist might deem it worthwhile to face the obvious problems posed by the relational theory in order to account for the meaning of such notions. Our view is different. We argue that if we understand when it is justified to use a particular doxastic term and if we know which commitments are acquired through its use, then we know everything necessary to master the meaning of doxastic expressions.

4.2. Ethical minimal expressivism

Above, we mentioned that some of the reactions that expressivism elicits when ethical terms are at stake are emotional in nature. If these terms are not descriptive, the critic seems to feel, then a real foundation for our moral judgments cannot be established, and we no longer know what is good or bad. Our intent here is not to argue against this feeling (see Popper 1945, 54 et seq., for example, for someone who does), but rather to provide an argument that might cast ethical expressivism in a different light.

An ethical realist would have to show that there can actually be inferences from purely descriptive to evaluative propositions, and vice versa. The former set of inferences would clearly affect Moore's diagnosis on the naturalistic fallacy, and his anti-reductionist stance. Any such inference would prove that there is a way to reduce what is expressed by the use of a second-order concept to sets of first-order properties. Strikingly, most reactions against moral expressivism also include a rejection of reductionism. With regard to ethical expressions, minimal expressivism is a non-reductionist naturalistic view. It is compatible with a hypothesis on the conceptual realm that makes natural language essentially

non-extensional, and still deals with this feature without postulating 'creatures of darkness' or 'spooky entities'. It leaves the realm of the normative open for discussion, and thus does not include any revisionist attitude towards standard conceptual analysis.

5. *The theoretical niche for* minimal expressivism

Even though the main aim of this paper is to motivate a minimal version of expressivism, it is also important to show that our position is not present in an already overcrowded market of non-factual alternatives to classical theories of expressivism. Thus far in this paper, we have argued that it is possible to conceive of a theoretical approach to the meaning of a certain group of expressions, a subclass of functions of propositions, which preserves the explanatory power of expressivism while lacking some of the more controversial tenets. The purpose of this section is to describe in detail the theoretical niche for minimal expressivism. It should be noted that the goal is not to defend why minimal expressivism is *better* than other alternatives, but rather to show that it is a *singular* position, worth being defended in its own right.

Great emphasis has been placed on the previous sections to show the possibility of establishing a narrower version of expressivism, so narrow that we might ask whether it is still worth calling this position 'expressivism'. Does 'minimal expressivism' deserve to be considered as a form of expressivism after all? The main reason for a positive answer to this question is that minimal expressivism and traditional expressivism share a crucial feature that cannot be accommodated within other non-factual alternatives – that is, expressivism is not an *error theory*. *Reductionism* and *fictionalism* are bound to maintain that people's utterances containing ethical terms, doxastic expressions, etc. either lack truth conditions or are for the most part false. By rejecting the inference from ND to TCS, the expressivist agrees with the way we speakers use natural language in general, but does that from a position that could be non-revisionist with respect to speakers' intuitions about the truth of what they signify. Besides, unlike the reductionist, the expressivist does not seek, though analysis, to show that higher-order expressions are reducible to first-order expressions. The basis of the expressivist position is not a commitment with the idea that sentences containing moral words are not truth-apt, but to acknowledge the fundamental difference between first-order expressions and higher-order expressions, and to establish the role of the latter as not interfering with the truth-conditions determined by the former.

Nor is minimal expressivism a common variety of non-cognitivism. That is, non-cognitivism, the thesis that ethical statements (and possibly others) do not express beliefs but other psychological attitudes, is compatible with fictionalism to

start with (see Price 2011, 7), whereas minimal expressivism, as presented here, is not. Non-cognitivism, moreover, holds a specific commitment with respect to thesis AE and, as reflected throughout this paper, minimal expressivism is specifically crafted to avoid any such commitment. Minimal expressivism also differs from *hybrid* versions of non-cognitivism, such as Ridge's *ecumenical expressivism*, according to which ethical claims express beliefs, among other attitudes, except that these beliefs do not determine the truth-conditions of the claim. Within minimal expressivism, not only ethical/doxastic/epistemic/modal claims are truth-apt, but it is precisely the proposition within the scope of the function of propositions which determines the truth-conditions of the utterance. These features of minimal expressivism do not fit in any available description of non-cognitivism, whether hybrid or pure.

Blackburn's *quasi-realism* and Copp's *realist expressivism* preserve the truth-aptness of moral claims, but minimal expressivism crucially differs from both of them. Quasi-realism combines an expressivist view on moral claims with a deflationist theory of truth; minimal expressivism needs to hold no commitment with any particular theory of truth. The realist-expressivist, on the other hand, maintains that moral claims represent moral facts. Thesis ND as accepted by minimal expressivism, explicitly excludes this possibility.

Finally, a quick note on inferentialism. At the beginning of section 4, we argued that AE was no more than a hypothesis to make generalizations on inferences that are valid according to statements containing second-order expressions. To theorize about the nature of the specific attitude that we express when making these claims is useful, because it might provide us a comprehensive view on ways to use functions of propositions in conversation. This interpretation of the meaning of second-order expressions moves minimal expressivism close to inferentialism, the main tenet of which states that the content of an expression is individuated by the inferences that this expression can be part of. Price (2011, 11) describes a position which he considers to be similar, although not identical, to Brandom's inferentialism (Brandom 1994) – 'global expressivism'. Minimal expressivism, global expressivism, and inferentialism are anti-representationalist positions. The difference lies in the scope of the anti-representationalist claim. Brandom's inferentialism and Price's global expressivism are global approaches to the meaning of natural-language expressions, while minimal expressivism is a local position concerning the meaning of some higher-order concepts. In strict terms, minimal expressivism is compatible with any account of the meaning of first-order utterances and can be implemented on both truth-conditional and inferentialist foundations. As an illustration of the compatibility claim, let us consider the Tractarian account of higher-order concepts (logical constants, verbs of propositional attitude), implemented by a representationalist, figurative, treatment of atomic propositions, on the one hand, and by Brandom's expressivist explanation of logical and

semantic terms, on the other, being built on an inferentialist theory of meaning that covers all concepts in natural languages.

Minimal expressivism has a clearly delimited theoretical target – functions of propositions – and its basic claims both hold an *a posteriori* status. These claims are that 1) some predicables in natural languages admit propositions as arguments; and 2) all that speakers need to know in order to competently use these expressions is (a) when we are justified in using them, and (b) what commitments are involved in their use.

6. Conclusion

A theory of meaning can be called 'expressivist' if it upholds at least two of the theses stated at the beginning of the paper. Since expressivism is a thesis concerning the meaning of a particular kind of notion, it is possible to be expressivist regarding certain higher-order notions and descriptivist regarding some others. For instance, logical expressivism, the position held by Wittgenstein (Wittgenstein 1922) and Brandom (Brandom 1994) with respect to logical constants, forces no one to be an expressivist with respect to moral notions, and vice versa – a moral expressivist such as Stevenson (1937) is not necessarily committed to logical expressivism. We saw that most of the usual criticisms presented against expressivism were not aimed at theses HOF or ND, which detected in natural language the presence of a special group of expressions of a non-descriptivist nature, but rather they were aimed at theses TCS and AE. Thesis TCS posits that complex expressions containing natural-language counterparts of higher-order operators lack truth conditions, but only TCI is a consequence of ND – provided that their job is not to describe the world, second-order expressions do not modify the truth-conditions of the expressions falling within their scope. Some other objections concern thesis AE, the specific characterization of the positive work that second-order expressions undertake. We hold that AE is not necessary for a theory of the meaning of higher-order expressions, since the meaning of these expressions is exhausted once their inferential potential is indicated. This map of possible inferences would make apparent the relationships between some higher-order notions and others. This positive side of their meaning is worth considering – from the standpoint of what the speaker can do with the functions of propositions that we are interested in – only so long as they inspire hypotheses that might modify their inferential map.

Here, we have sketched a semantic view on a group of expressions particularly resistant to traditional analyses. However, this is only a preliminary step. Along similar lines, other sets of philosophically relevant notions admit an expressivist treatment. Logical connectives, classical and non-classical quantifiers, first-person and identity, and the set of factive notions (necessity, knowledge, and truth) will be

illuminated from the viewpoint of their inferential behavior once we eliminate the classical descriptive approaches that have driven most debates on higher-order notions to a disheartening dead-end.*

REFERENCES

ANSCOMBE, E. 1975, "First Person", in: S. Guttenplan, ed., *Mind and Language*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, pp. 45–65.

AYER, A.J. [1936] 1946, *Language, Truth and Logic*, London: Gollancz.

BACH, K. and HARNISH, R. 1979, *Linguistic Communication and Speech Acts*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

BALL, S.W. 1995, "Gibbard's Evolutionary Theory of Rationality and Its Ethical Implications", *Biology and Philosophy* **10**, pp. 129–180.

BLACKBURN, S. 1993, *Essays in Quasi-Realism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

BLAKEMORE, D. 2002, *Relevance and Linguistic Meaning: The Semantics and Pragmatics of Discourse Markers*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

BOËR, S. 2007, *Thought-Contents. On the Ontology of Belief and the Semantics of Belief Attribution*, Dordrecht: Springer.

BRANDOM, R. 1994, *Making it Explicit. Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

CHRISMAN, M. 2008, "Expressivism, Inferentialism, and Saving the Debate", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, **77**, 2, pp. 334–358.

COPP, D. 2001, "Realist-Expressivism: A Neglected Option for Moral Realism", *Social Philosophy and Policy* **18**, 2, pp. 1–43.

FINDLAY, J.N. 1944, "Morality by Convention", *Mind*, **53**, 210, pp. 142–169.

FRÁPOLLI, M.J. 2013, *The Nature of Truth. An Updated Approach to the Meaning of Truth-Ascriptions*, Dordrecht: Springer.

GEACH, P. 1960, "Ascriptivism", *The Philosophical Review* **LXIX**, pp. 221–225.

GEACH, P. 1962, 1980, *Reference and Generality. An Examination of Some Medieval and Modern Theories*, London: Cornell University Press.

GIBBARD, A. 1990, *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

GLOCK, H.J. 1996, *A Wittgenstein Dictionary*, Oxford: Blackwell.

HACKER, P.M.S. 1996, *Wittgenstein: Mind and Will*, Oxford: Blackwell.

HINTIKKA, J. 1962, *Knowledge and Belief: An Introduction to the Logic of the Two Notions*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

HORGAN, T. and TIMMONS, M. 2006, "Morality Without Facts", in: J. Drier, ed., *Contemporary Debates in Moral Theory*, Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 220–238.

IFANTIDOU, E. 2001, *Evidentials and Relevance*, Amsterdam; Philadelphia: J. Benjamins.

JACKSON, F. and PETTIT, P. 1998, "A Problem for Expressivism", *Analysis*, **58**, 4, pp. 239–251.

KITELEY, M. 1964, "The Grammars of 'Believe' ", *The Journal of Philosophy* **61**, 8, pp. 244–259.

KLIMA, G. 2005, "Syncategoremata", in: K. Brown, ed., *Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics*, 2nd edn, Oxford: Elsevier, 12, pp. 353–356.

KRIPKE, S. 1963, "Semantical Considerations in Modal Logic", *Acta Philosophica Fennica* **16**, pp. 83–94.

LENMAN, J. 2003, "Disciplined Syntacticism and Moral Expressivism", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, **LXVI**, 1, pp. 32–57.

MATTHEWS, R. 2007, *The Measure of Mind. Propositional Attitudes and Their Attribution*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

MOLTMANN, F. 2003, "Propositional Attitudes Without Propositions", *Synthese*, **135**, 1, pp. 77–118.

PENDLEBURY, M. 2010, "How to be a Normative Expressivist", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* **LXXX**, 1, pp. 182–207.

POPPER, K.R. [1945] 1947, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*. London: George Routledge & Sons.

PRICE, H. 2011, *Naturalism Without Mirrors*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

PRIOR, A. 1971, *Objects of Thought*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

RECANATI, F. 1987, *Meaning and Force*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

RECANATI. F. 2000, *Oratio Obliqua, Oratio Recta: An Essay on Metarepresentation*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

RECANATI, F. 2007, *Perspectival Thought*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

RIDGE, M. 2006, "Ecumenical Expressivism: Finessing Frege", *Ethics*, **116**, 2, 302–336.

RIDGE, M. 2009, "The Truth in Ecumenical Expressivism", in: D. Sobel and S. Wall, eds, *Reasons for Action*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 219–242.

SCHROEDER, M. 2008, *Being For: Evaluating the Semantic Program of Expressivism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

STEVENSON, C.L. 1937, "The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms", in: C.L. Stevenson, *Facts and Values*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, pp. 10–31.

STOJANOVIC, I., DE BRABANTER, P., NICOLAS, D. and VILLANUEVA, N. 2007, "Les usages déferentiels", in: A. Bouvier and B. Conein, eds, *Raisons Pratiques. Numéro spécial en épistémologie sociale*, Paris: Les Editions EHESS, pp. 139–162.

STRAWSON, P. 1973, "Austin and 'Locutionary Meaning' ", in: I. Berlin *et al*., eds, *Essays on J. L. Austin*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, pp. 46–68.

THOMAS, A. 2006, *Value and Context. The Nature of Moral and Political Knowledge*, Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press.

URMSON, J.O. 1952, "Parenthetical Verbs", *Mind* **61**, 244, pp. 480–496.

URMSON, J. 1963, "Parenthetical Verbs", in: C. Caton, ed., *Philosophy and Ordinary Language*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, pp. 220–240.

WILLIAMS, C.J.F. 1989, *What is Identity?* Oxford: Clarendon Press.

WITTGENSTEIN, L. 1922, *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, London and New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

WITTGENSTEIN, L. 1953, *Philosophical Investigations*, Oxford: Blackwell.

WITTGENSTEIN, L. 1967, *Zettel*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

WITTGENSTEIN, L. 1974, *Philosophical Grammar*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

WITTGENSTEIN, L. 2001, *Wittgenstein Lectures. Cambridge, 1932–1935*, edited by A. Ambrose. New York: Prometheus.

YABLO, S. 2006, "Non-Catastrophic Presupposition Failure", in: J. Thomson and A. Byrne, eds, *Content and Modality*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 164–190.