Free Thinking for Expressivists

Neil Sinclair (neil.sinclair@nottingham.ac.uk)

NB. This is an unrevised draft of the paper that appeared in *Philosophical Papers* 37 (2) (2008), pp. 263-287.

Abstract. This paper elaborates and defends an expressivist account of the claims of mind-independence embedded in ordinary moral thought. In response to objections from Zangwill and Jenkins it is argued that the expressivists 'internal reading' of such claims is compatible with their conceptual status and that the only 'external reading' available doesn't commit expressivisists to any sort of subjectivism. In the process a 'commitment-theoretic' account of the semantics of conditionals and negations is defended.

1. Introduction

Ordinary moral thought presupposes that moral values are mind-independent: the abhorrence of rape in no way depends on us thinking it abhorrent; torture would be wrong even if we didn't think it so. Generalising, it is not the case that thinking that some action possess a moral value makes it do so, nor is it the case that if our moral judgements were to change then the moral values would follow suit.[1] Moral values roam free of our thoughts about them.

This presupposition promises dialectical leverage in the meta-ethical debate between realists and expressivists. The former hold that moral judgements cognize a realm of moral properties, the later that they function to express attitudes for the purposes of mutual co-ordination.[2] For the realist, the mind-independence of moral truths is a simple consequence of the fact that moral reality is itself largely mind-independent. Expressivists, on the other hand, give no role to moral reality in their account of moral judgement, so on their view it is difficult to see on what the moral

values of things could depend, if not us. Such a conclusion would make expressivism intolerably revisionary of ordinary moral thought.

What follows addresses this apparent threat to expressivism. In the next section I explain that, despite what was just said, expressivism does not entail any implausible claim of moral mind-dependence. In §3 I explain how expressivists can accommodate the claims of moral mind-independence that swim on the surface of moral discourse. In §4 I respond to Zangwill's objection that this accommodation cannot capture the conceptual truth in moral mind-independence. I argue (through the example of Freddy and Faye) that the conceptual status of some forms of moral mind-independence is compatible with expressivism once the fundamental co-ordinating role of morality is recognised. In the penultimate section I dismiss a more recent objection to expressivist accounts of moral mind-independence given by Jenkins.

2. Expressivism and Mind-dependence

Were expressivism to entail the claim that the moral values of things depend on our judgements concerning their value then this could rightly be considered a *reductio* of the position. Fortunately for expressivists, there is no such entailment. The expressivist, just as much as the realist, can accommodate the thought that what makes it the case that something is wrong, right, or unjust is not that we think it so, but rather those perfectly ordinary features that make it so. For the expressivist, this is because to judge something wrong is to express one's moral attitude. Such attitudes are responses to ordinary features of the things judged, such as the pain caused or the potential threat to life. As expressivists from Stevenson onwards have noted, these

features can be adduced as reasons in support of the attitude.[3] Hence it is these features that 'make it the case' that a particular moral epithet applies. For example, suppose that my moral disapproval of torture is a response to the unnecessary pain that it causes. It will be this pain-causing property that, in my view at least, makes it the case that torture is wrong.[4]

It is helpful at this juncture to distinguish one benign claim, similar to mind-dependence, that *is* entailed by expressivism. This is the claim that the moral judgements we make are dependent on the attitudes we have. According to expressivism, sincere moral judgements express moral attitudes. If follows that, if those attitudes change, we would make different moral judgements. But it doesn't follow from this that those judgements would be as appropriate as the judgements we make now. If I were to suddenly become enthused and approving of torture, and disposed to insist that others feel likewise, I might express these attitudes by declaring that torture is right. But my judgement would still be misguided, and what makes it misguided is those unchanged features of torture (the pain caused) on which its moral value (now) depends.

3. The Standard View

Although the foregoing is enough to show that expressivism doesn't entail any implausible claims of moral mind-*dependence*, we have not yet seen whether the expressivist can make sense of the claims of mind-*independence* embedded in ordinary moral thought. The process of doing so is one part of what Blackburn has labelled the project of 'quasi-realism'. Quite generally, the quasi-realist project is that of showing how those features of ordinary moral thought and discourse that were

once thought only explicable on a realist meta-ethic – such as the ability of moral sentences to intelligibly embed in conditionals and the assumptions that moral judgements can be true, known and rationally disputed – are in fact compatible with expressivism. The completion of this project will result in a view of moral practice that both fits the basic expressivist understanding and legitimately possesses these features. Assuming that the assumption of mind-independence is one such feature there is a question whether it can be brought into the quasi-realist fold. As Zangwill notes: '[That] result would be extremely important. For it would bring [expressivism] back into line with ordinary moral thought. That is why quasi-realism is news'.[5] So how might the quasi-realist project proceed for the case of moral mind-independence?

What I shall call 'the standard view' can be broken down into three stages.[6] The first involves ascertaining the content of claims of mind-independence. It is tempting to understand the commitment to mind-independence embedded in ordinary moral thought in an ontological way that assumes realism. For example, it is tempting to understand 'The abhorrence of rape in no way depends on us thinking it abhorrent' as claiming that the possession by instances of rape of the property of abhorrence in no way depends on our judgements concerning such a property. But expressivists can plausibly deny that our everyday engagement in moral discourse comes with such philosophically high-minded assumptions built in. Instead, claims of moral mind-independence can be understood in a way that assumes neither expressivism nor realism. For example, the above claim about the abhorrence of rape can be understood as maintaining simply that the correct application of the predicate 'abhorrence' to the action of rape in no way depends on our propensity to so apply it. It is then a further question how this predicate and the conditions governing its application are to be understood, with realism and expressivism providing distinct alternatives.

Generalising, expressivists can urge that we understand the embedded claims of moral mind-independence as asserting not that the distribution of moral properties is independent of us but that the correct application of moral predicates is independent of us. Whether those predicates are property-ascribing (as realists hold) or attitude expressing (as expressivists hold) is then a further issue.[7]

Having taken the realist sting out of the ordinary assumption of moral mind-independence the expressivist is in a better position to accommodate such claims. This is the second stage of the standard view. The generalised (ontologically unassuming) claim of mind-independence embedded in ordinary moral discourse can be captured by the following two negated conditionals (where *x* is an object of evaluation and M a moral predicate such as 'wrong'):

(1a) It is not the case that if we think that *x* is M then *x* is M.

(1b) It is not the case that if we don't think that *x* is M then *x* is not M.

Conversely, the thought that the correct application of moral predicates does depend on our very application of them – the claim of moral mind-*dependence* – can be captured by the following conditionals:

(2a) If we think that *x* is M then *x* is M.

(2b) If we do not think that *x* is M then *x* is not M.[8]

The second stage of the standard view, therefore, is for expressivists to provide an understanding of (1a) and (1b).

One way for expressivists to understand conditionals such as (2a) is in *commitment-theoretic* terms.[9] On such views we understand conditionals by understanding what their expression commits us to in terms of permissible and mandatory combinations of more basic commitments. So, by expressing a conditional sentence one expresses commitment to (i) endorsing the commitment expressed by

assertoric use of the consequent should one come to endorse the commitment expressed by assertoric use of the antecedent and (ii) rejecting the commitment expressed by assertoric use of the antecedent should one come to reject the commitment expressed by assertoric use of the consequent. One advantage of this account is that the notion of 'commitment' is broad enough to encompass both beliefs and the sorts of attitudes which, according to expressivists, moral judgements express. Thus we do not treat conditionals with moral clauses in any way differently from conditionals with non-moral clauses. For example, to assert 'If it rains, it pours' is to express commitment to believing that it is pouring should one come to believe it is raining and to rejecting the belief that it is raining should one reject the belief that it is pouring. Blackburn labels the complex commitments thus expressed, states of 'tying oneself to a tree' of commitments.[10] The functional structure of these complex commitments is isomorphic with the propositional structure of the sentences used to express them.

Since the claims (1a) and (1b) are *negated* contexts, we are also owed an account of negation. Here again the expressivist can employ commitment-theoretic semantics. To accept the negation of a sentence is (trivially, uncontroversially) to deny that sentence. Psychologically, this involves *rejecting* the commitment that the unnegated use of the sentence expresses. Here again the notion of 'commitment' is capricious, generating an univocal account of negation. For example, to accept the negation of 'It's raining' is to reject the belief that it is raining hereabouts, that is, to reject the description of the world its content offers. The judgement 'It is not the case that it is raining' expresses this rejection. Likewise, if Brian rejects the judgement that 'Torture is wrong', he is, on the expressivist understanding of morality, rejecting the attitude which is expressed by the judgement 'Torture is wrong'. This rejection is

what is expressed in his judgement 'It is not the case that torture is wrong'. Note that to *reject* a commitment – as it appears in the account both of conditionals and of negations – is not merely to lack that commitment. There is a difference between an agent who rejects belief in God and an agnostic, just as much as there is a difference between an agent who rejects moral disapproval of torture and an agent who has yet to form an opinion on the issue.[11] In each case, to reject a commitment is to be set against those who profess it in ways which those who merely lack the commitment are not. For example, to reject belief in God is to stand ready to oppose those who assert that He exists and the description of the state of the world such assertions offer. Likewise, on an expressivist understanding of morality, to reject the moral disapproval of torture is to stand ready to oppose those insist upon others sharing their disapproval of torture: by engaging them in moral discussion, for example.[12] Such a disposition will be lacking in someone who simply hasn't formed an attitude on the matter (or thinks that no attitude can be justifiably formed). Again, someone who accepts a negated sentence has ruled himself out adopting the commitment expressed by unnegated use of that sentence, in a way in which someone who simply lacks the commitment has not.[13]

This commitment-theoretic semantics can now be applied to moral mind-(in)dependence. Call the attitude which, according to expressivists, is expressed by use of the moral term M and directed at object *x* the M_x-attitude. On the commitment-theoretic account, the mind-*dependence* conditionals (2a) and (2b) express commitment to (i) endorsing the M_x-attitude should we come to believe that we have the M_x-attitude and (ii) rejecting the M_x-attitude should we come believe that we do not have the M_x-attitude.[14] Since we can assume that we are committed to believing that we have the M_x-attitude just in case we have the M_x-attitude, to accept (2a) and

(2b) is to be committed to endorsing the M_x-attitude just when we have it. Since, for expressivists, the predicate M is used to express this attitude, this is equivalent to the original (ontologically neutral) claim of mind-dependence, namely that the correct application of M depends merely on our applying it (and hence ultimately on nothing at all).

Consonant with the account of negation, the sincere utterer of the mind-*in*dependence conditionals can be understood to be expressing (i) a rejection of the commitment to endorse the M_x-attitude upon believing that we have it and (ii) a rejection of the commitment to reject the M_x-attitude upon believing that we do not have it. In other words, this is to reject the commitment to endorse the M_x-attitude just when we have it. Again, given the expressivist semantics for predicate M this is equivalent to rejecting the thought that M is correctly applied just when it is. In this way, expressivists can provide an account of the claims of moral mind-independence that are embedded in ordinary moral thought.

Why might agents tie themselves to the particular trees of commitment that they do by asserting the mind-(in)dependence conditionals? That is, why might agents commit themselves to endorsing the M_x-attitude just in case they have it, or commit themselves to rejecting this commitment? One answer lies in the notion of *moral dispositions*. A moral disposition can be defined as a tendency to form and regulate moral attitudes in response to certain inputs of belief and perception.[15] One such disposition would be the disposition to form an attitude of moral disapproval towards acts which (one believes) cause unnecessary pain. The set of such dispositions possessed by a particular agent is commonly labelled a *moral sensibility.* An important part of the co-ordinating role of moral practice is served by evaluating moral sensibilities, in so far as people's moral sensibilities affect their behaviours.

Thus it becomes sensible for agents to form moral attitudes towards moral sensibilities: attitudes to ways of forming and regulating moral attitudes, or 'second-order attitudes'. For example, people commonly endorse attitudes that are formed as the result of empathetic engagement with othersand reject attitudes formed on the basis of fear, prejudice or fickle habits. These second-order attitudes are themselves moral attitudes, and ones that (as I argue below) are explicable given the co-ordinating function of moral practice and justifiable on those grounds.

It is such second-order attitudes that agents express by tying themselves to the particular trees of commitment involved in the moral mind-(in)dependence conditionals. Thus, only someone who rejects a moral sensibility on which moral attitudes to *x* hinge on our beliefs about those very attitudes will be tied to the tree of commitments involved in (1a) and (1b). Conversely, only someone who endorses a moral sensibility on which moral attitudes to *x* hinge on beliefs about those same attitudes will be tied to a tree of commitments involved in (2a) and (2b). To generalize: someone who asserts the mind-*independence* of moral values can be understood to approve of moral sensibilities on which moral attitudes hinge on beliefs about other things than our own moral attitudes. Conversely, some who asserts the mind-*dependence* of moral values can be understood to approve of sensibilities on which moral attitudes hinge on beliefs about those very attitudes.[16]

Ultimately then, for expressivists any disagreement among agents concerning the mind-independence of values can be traced back to a moral disagreement concerning which moral sensibilities to approve of and which to disapprove of: those who accept mind-independence hold that our moral attitudes *should* depend on things other than our beliefs about those very attitudes; those who deny mind-independence hold that moral attitudes *should* depend on nothing more than beliefs about those very

attitudes. This is why this second part of the standard view is sometimes labelled the 'internal reading': for it treats what may first appear to be a meta-ethical dispute as a substantial ethical one.

The third and final part of the standard view holds that this is a moral dispute for which the defenders of mind-independence hold the higher ground. According to Blackburn, the moral view of the defenders of mind-dependence is 'absurd' (1981 p.179), 'immodest' (1993 p.4), not 'admirable' (1998 p.296) and involves endorsing moral sensibilities that 'nice people' would not endorse (1984 p.218). Commitment to moral mind-dependence is, in short, indicative of a repugnant moral view.

In summary, the standard view first strips the ontological pretensions from claims of mind-independence (first stage) and then regards them as speaking to a moral issue (second stage) on which the expressivist can stand with the righteous (third stage).

4. The Conceptual Truth in Moral Mind-independence

Zangwill has objected to the second stage of the standard view. He argues that the claims of mind-independence embedded in ordinary moral discourse have a conceptual status that is inconsistent with the internal reading. By *conceptual status* Zangwill means that it is constitutive of competence with moral concepts that one recognises mind-independence. The argument for this is as follows (1994 pp.214-5). Anyone who grasps moral concepts must grasp that they can be successfully and unsuccessfully applied (this is a precondition of all moral argument). But moral concepts couldn't be unsuccessfully applied if their correct application depended

merely on so applying them. So anyone who grasps moral concepts must grasp that their correct application doesn't depend on so applying them. That is, anyone who is competent with the deployment of moral concepts must, quite generally, accept mind-independence. Furthermore, Zangwill argues, the internal reading cannot account for this conceptual status (1994 pp.213-4). If *p* is a conceptual truth about a range of concepts then one cannot abandon *p* without ceasing to trade in those concepts altogether. Yet the internal reading takes claims of mind-independence to be founded on a substantive moral position and thus represent claims which, presumably, can be denied without abandoning morality altogether. So the internal reading is inconsistent with the conceptual status of claims of mind-independence. Such is Zangwill's argument.

Zangwill is right to argue that mind-independence has a conceptual status, but wrong to suggest this is inconsistent with the internal reading. The internal reading takes statements of mind-independence, like all moral statements, to be expressions of attitudes, the point of such expression being mutual co-ordination. Here mutual co-ordination means 'living together' in the broadest sense. According to expressivists the goal of moral practice is to foster patterns of action and attitude that, at the very least, avoid ruinous conflict and, at the very most, allow for maximal flourishing of those things which people value. As Stevenson puts it, moral judgements are "instruments used in the complicated interplay and re-adjustment of human interests".[17] As I argue below, it is impossible for a set of concepts that express attitudes to also aid this co-ordinating role if agents employing those concepts do not accept that their correct application is, quite generally, mind-independent. And since all expressivists hold that moral concepts are essentially those deployed in this

practice of mutual co-ordination they can claim that unless one adopts generalised mind-independence for the correct application of a set of expressive concepts then those concepts are not moral at all.[18]

To see this, consider Freddy, who uses the term 'blad' to express his disapproval of actions, such as kicking dogs. Freddy also accepts generalised mind-dependence for 'blad', that is, he deems his application of the term 'blad' to be correct just in case he so applies it. And since Freddy applies 'blad' only to actions he disapproves of, he deems his application of the term 'blad' to an action correct just in case he disapproves of that action. Freddy's term 'blad', and the reasons that can be offered in support of its application, cannot be used to co-ordinate attitudes or actions, for two reasons. In the first place, for all that has been said Freddy's attitudes may be extremely fickle. His 'blad' judgements will reflect any fickleness, making it extremely hard to predict his attitudes on the basis of these judgements. Secondly and more importantly, Freddy will not be able to use his term 'blad' and the reasons why he applies it to effectively persuade others to share his attitudes of disapproval. Suppose Freddy disapproves of kicking dogs and expresses this by saying 'Kicking dogs is blad'. Someone else, who understands that 'blad' expresses disapproval, asks: 'Why is kicking dogs blad?'. What might Freddy say? Since he thinks it correct to apply 'blad' to an action just in case he so applies it, he might say that kicking dogs is blad because he thinks it is. This is not going to persuade anyone to adopt a similar attitude. Alternatively, since he also uses 'blad' to express disapproval, Freddy might say that kicking dogs is blad because he disapproves of it. But this is clearly no reason for anyone else to share that disapproval. Thus for Freddy, there is no reason he can give that might be used both to justify the bladness of kicking dogs and to persuade

people to adopt an attitude of disapproval towards the practice. More generally, reasons for bladness could never be reasons for possessing particular attitudes. Therefore though Freddy's term 'blad' expresses attitudes, it cannot be used to co-ordinate them.

On the other hand, if a set of concepts are used to express attitudes, and the correct application of those concepts depended on something other than the fact that agents so applied them, those concepts *would* be apt to co-ordinate attitudes. Consider Faye, who uses the term 'bland' to express disapproval of actions. Unlike Freddy, Faye accepts the generalised mind-independence claim for 'bland', that is, she deems the correct application of the term 'bland' to depend on something other than the fact she so applies it. In fact, Faye takes the blandness of actions to depend on whatever the associated attitude depends on. For example, if she disapproves of kicking dogs because it causes them pain, the judgement of blandness that expresses this disapproval will likewise depend on the fact that kicking dogs causes them pain. When someone asks Faye 'Why is kicking dogs bland?' she will have a response: kicking dogs is bland because it causes them pain. This is the reason that Faye takes kicking dogs to be bland, but also a reason that might persuade others to adopt the disapproval towards kicking dogs that such a judgement expresses.[19] Thus for Faye there is a feature of kicking dogs that *both* justifies its blandness and can be used to persuade others to adopt an attitude of disapproval towards it. More generally, reasons for blandness can also be reasons for possessing particular attitudes.[20] Therefore Faye's term 'bland' can be used both to express attitudes and to co-ordinate attitudes with others.

The difference between Freddy and Faye is that the former rejects, whereas the latter adopts, the commitment which, according to the internal reading, is

expressed by generalised mind-independence. So these examples demonstrate that unless agents adopt the commitments expressed by statements of mind-independence for a set of attitude-expressing concepts they will not be able to use those concepts to co-ordinate in the way morality requires. Thus the expressivist response to Zangwill's objection can proceed: since moral concepts are essentially co-ordinating and since one cannot use a set of attitude-expressing concepts to co-ordinate unless one accepts their correct application to be governed, quite generally, by mind-independence, it follows that mind-independence is, quite generally, a conceptual truth about morality. Since this is compatible with understanding claims of mind-independence in the expressivist way Zangwill is wrong to maintain that the internal reading cannot account for the conceptual status of moral mind-independence. [21]

Zangwill anticipates the claim that the adoption of certain (second-order) attitudes towards ways of forming (first-order) attitudes may be necessary for the latter to count as *moral* attitudes and raises two objections (1994 pp.215-7). The first is that such an account must abandon the internal reading, since any attitude that converts first-order attitudes such as those of Freddy into moral attitudes such as those of Faye cannot itself be a moral attitude. But this is simply false. Faye accepts, whereas Freddy rejects, that one's attitude to kicking dogs *ought not to* depend on that very attitude (or – equivalently – that the correct application of the attitude-expressing concept *ought not to* depend on its very application). The above argument shows that one must adopt this attitude if one is to engage in a practice of co-ordination and hence make any further moral judgements.[22] But it doesn't follow that the attitude is not itself a moral one. The expressivist can insist that competence with moral concepts requires taking at least one substantive moral position, just as competence

with some descriptive concepts requires applying them to some paradigm cases. This does, of course, alter the *justification* for the attitude expressed by claims of mind-independence, that is, it abandons the third stage of the standard view. For the reason to adopt such attitudes is no longer that the alternatives are 'immodest' or not 'admirable' but that one couldn't attempt to co-ordinate otherwise. But in so far as the needs of co-ordination justify the adopting of an attitude (and hence a moral position) the internal reading persists.

Zangwill's second objection is that on this expressivist account, moral attitudes are not appropriate or inappropriate in themselves, but only when regulated by a system of higher-order attitudes such as those possessed by Faye. According to Zangwill, 'this loses track of the intuitive idea that the feeling, say, of moral horror, is appropriate just in virtue of that to which the horror is a response' (1994 pp.216-7). It is true that on the present account attitudes such as approval and disapproval are not appropriate or inapprioriate in themselves, but only when located within a practice of mutual co-ordination, a practice which mandates the adoption of certain higher-order attitudes. But this is to be expected – a similar point applies to beliefs, whose appropriateness or inappropriateness can only be understood by reference to the practice in which they are embedded, in their case the practice of correctly representing the state of the world. Furthermore, the present account is able to explain the 'intuitive idea' that Zangwill elucidates, for from the perspective of an agent such as Faye (who adopts the higher-order attitude of mind-independence mandated by the needs of co-ordination) the appropriateness of moral horror will depend solely on features of the world (the pain caused by kicking dogs, for example). So having the attitude expressed by claims of moral mind-independence is an enabling condition for the phenomenology that Zangwill highlights.

There are three final points to note about this reply to Zangwill. First, it emphasises that the original motivation for the internal reading was not a distrust of conceptual claims about morality. Despite sometimes being thought of as a view that prefers to treat all apparently meta-ethical questions as immanent ones, the form of expressivism that embraces the quasi-realist project is comfortable with claims about the machinations of our moral concepts. One of these is the expressivist insight that it is constitutive of competence with moral concepts that one uses them to express attitudes. The present reply merely extends the point: it is also constitutive of that competence that one accepts mind-independence. These conceptual claims can now be seen to have the same origin: the needs of mutual co-ordination. So mind-independence adds substance to quasi-realist talk of the *standards* governing the co-ordinating practice their view identifies with morality (see Blackburn 1984 ch.6).

Second, this discussion (following Zangwill) has concerned only what we might call *judgement*-independence, that is, the independence of moral value from our judgements about such value. We may distinguish other forms of mind-independence, for example *blushing*-independence – the independence of the moral value of actions from our propensity to blush at those actions – and *nausea*-independence – the independence of the moral value of actions from our propensity to be made nauseous by those actions. Thus we might consider a stronger claim of mind-independence: that the moral value of actions does not depend on *any* of our reactions towards them.[23] This appears true in some cases. For example, the wrongness of kicking dogs doesn't depend on us thinking it wrong, but neither does it depend on the fact that most of us find such acts shocking. The wrongness depends on facts about dogs (their sentience) not on facts about us. It is important to note that Zangwill's argument for conceptual status doesn't apply to non-judgemental types of mind-independence. This is because

moral concepts could still be incorrectly applied if their correct application depended on our responses, so long as the responses their correct application depended on were not the judger's own moral judgements. For example, the view that the wrongness of actions is dependent on whether or not they make Gordon Brown blush could still accept that all judgements of wrongness (including those made by Gordon Brown) may be incorrect. For non-judgemental forms of mind-independence, therefore, the expressivist can adopt the standard view. To assert that the wrongness of actions does not depend on whether they make Gordon Brown blush is to express disapproval of a moral sensibility for which moral attitudes to actions depend on one's beliefs about Gordon Brown's reactions to those actions. Adopting such an attitude is not a condition on using moral concepts at all (moral concepts could still be used to co-ordinate if their correct application depended on Gordon Brown's proclivities) but remains an implausible moral position. So where claims of moral mind-independence are conceptual expressivists can adopt the response elucidated here to explain why they are. Where such claims are not conceptual the unsupplemented standard view will suffice.[24]

One final desirable feature of this account of the common-sense commitment to moral mind-independence is that it is, in structure, no different to the account one might give of the mind-independence of more straightforwardly descriptive predicates, such as 'is circular'. For this case, the mind-independence conditionals are (where C is 'circular'):

(3a) It is not the case that if we think that *x* is C then *x* is C

(3b) It is not the case that if we do not think that *x* is C then *x* is not C.

And the mind-dependence conditionals:

(4a) If we think that *x* is C then *x* is C

(4b) If we do not think that *x* is C then *x* isn't C.

Here, the same commitment-theoretical account will apply: accepting (4a) and (4b) is to tie oneself to (i) believing that *x* is C should one come to believe that we think *x* is C and (ii) rejecting the belief that *x* is C should one come to believe that we lack this thought. Likewise, accepting (3a) and (3b) is to commit oneself to rejecting these complex commitments. The former will be to hold that the predicate 'circular' is correctly applied just when we apply it; the latter that the conditions of its correct application depend on something other than our mere propensity to apply it. The only difference with the moral case, so far, is that here both of the basic commitments involved are beliefs, whereas in the moral case one of the commitments is a moral attitude.

Again mirroring the account of moral mind-independence, the reason agents might want to tie themselves to the particular combinations of commitments expressed by (3a), (3b), (4a) and (4b) is because they endorse particular ways of forming and regulating commitments; in this case particular ways of forming and regulating beliefs about circularity. Call a particular way of forming and regulating a commitment (be it belief or moral attitude) a *sensibility*. Only an agent who endorses a sensibility on which beliefs about circularity depend on our beliefs about those very beliefs would share the commitment expressed by (4a) and (4b). Conversely, only an agent who rejects a sensibility on which beliefs about circularity depend on our beliefs about those very beliefs would share the commitment expressed by (3a) and (3b). Thus, as in the account of *moral* mind-independence, the debate about *circular* mind-independence can be traced to a debate about which ways of forming and regulating commitments we are best to endorse.

The difference between the mind-independence in the case of moral values and mind-independence in the case of circularity (for example) is only made apparent when we consider the story concerning *why* particular sensibilities are the best to endorse. In the circularity case, the ways of forming and regulating commitments it makes sense to endorse will be those that are considered likely to produce beliefs whose descriptive content matches the state of the world. One reason for endorsing these mechanisms rather than others is the *function* of beliefs: beliefs function to guide us around the world and we are more likely to be successful in our actions when the descriptive content of beliefs matches the state of the world.[25] Likewise, in the moral case, I have argued that the ways of forming commitments that it makes sense to endorse are those that aid the function of morality, namely co-ordination. (I then argued that endorsement signalled by certain claims of moral mind-dependence make such co-ordination impossible). In general then, what sensibilities (ways of forming and regulating commitments) we endorse will be those considered most likely to be conducive to the function of the commitments in question. Though beliefs and moral attitudes have different functions, both these functions are aided when we endorse sensibilities which reject the idea that the commitment is correctly held just when we (or others) hold it. In so far as the claims of mind-independence have us expressing these endorsements, the claims of mind-dependence in the two cases are dealt with in fundamentally the same way. What differs is the reason why we make these endorsements and that in turn depends on the differing functions of the commitments in question. The key insight of the foregoing account is that it is not only the descriptive function possessed by beliefs that necessitates endorsing the sort of sensibilities that make the correct application of a predicate dependent on something other than the mere fact we apply it.

5. Essential Mind-Independence

A recent paper (Jenkins 2005) has argued that there is a further type of mind-independence that expressivism cannot accommodate. According to this view we can distinguish the following claims: :

(1) *What it takes* for kicking dogs to be wrong is independent of our own responses.
(2) *What it is for* kicking dogs to be wrong is independent of our own responses.

The first claim concerns the issue of what standards have to be met in order for the relevant sentence to be correctly asserted; it is a matter of sufficient conditions for correct assertion. More precisely, it asserts that the conditions that have to be met in order for 'Kicking dogs is wrong' to be correctly assertible do not involve our own responses. The second claim expresses an *essentialist* notion of mind-independence: it is no part of what it is for *kicking dogs is wrong* to be the case that our mental lives are thus-and-so (or perhaps *would* be thus-and-so after tutoring).

The distinction between these claims is brought out by the following example. *What it takes* for Blackadder to be funny is for him to start singing a song about a goblin, but *what it is for* him to be funny is to make us laugh. The former is an issue of what the standards governing the application of 'funny' *are* (apply this concept when someone sings goblin songs) the latter an issue of what those standards are *for* (tracking our mirth). In the moral case, the internal reading allows the quasi-realist to accommodate the first sort of mind-independence: the standards governing the

application of moral concepts make that application responsive to features of the actions judged, not the judger's own responses. It is approval of such standards that, on the internal reading, is expressed by claims of mind-independence. (I have argued above that in some cases the basic needs of co-ordination necessitate such approval). The worry is that when it comes to the second type of mind-independence – the *what it is for* type – the quasi-realist must say the same about morality as seems plausible for being funny, thus committing himself to a form of mind-*dependence* after all.

The worry is not fatal to expressivists, for two reasons.[26] First, though Jenkins rightly argues that it is the essentialist kind of mind-independence that best characterises realism, it is debateable whether the expressivist who embraces quasi-realism is under an obligation to provide an alternative, non-realist interpretation of such claims. This is because of the remit of the quasi-realist project. For it is not the quasi-realist's task to provide an expressivist-friendly interpretation of *everything* the realist says (or should say) in characterising their position. Rather, their task is to provide an expressivist-friendly interpretation of those claims that are embedded in our everyday moral thought and discourse and which have been thought by some to demand a realist meta-ethic. And it is certainly not obvious that the type of mind-independence assumed by ordinary moralisers is the essentialist type identified by Jenkins as opposed to the non-essentialist type characterised by (1a) and (1b).

Second, even if expressivists were forced to commit to a position on the *what it is for* question they are not committed to ascribing the same essential mind-dependence to moral concepts such as wrongness as seems plausible for concepts such as being funny. Note that in the latter case the answer to the *what it is for* question provides an *analysis*: being funny just *means* being mirth-producing. But expressivists eschew analyses of moral concepts in favour of systematic *synthesis*: for

expressivists we understand the distinctive meaning of moral concepts by understanding their distinctive role in the practice of mutual co-ordination of which they are a part.[27] This means that the expressivist answer to the question of *what it is for* an action to be wrong will not be as simple as the answer given for what it is for something to be funny. In fact, the most perspicuous (though still in many ways unsatisfactory) way of phrasing the expressivist answer to that question is something like: *what it is for* something to be wrong is for the particular moral attitude that is expressed by judgements of wrongness to be warranted by the standards applying to the distinctive practice of mutual co-ordination of attitude and action that is morality. Note that this answer adopts an external, meta-ethical perspective; so this is one instance where the internal reading is not enough. It also requires much elaboration: the expressivist must say just what the distinctive moral attitude is and what the standards governing the co-ordinating practice are. (As I have argued above, the latter will include judgement-independence. Blackburn (1984 p.186) also suggests supervenience.) But however the details are filled in, this answer to the question of what it is for something to be wrong distinguishes expressivists both from realists and from those who would accept the essentialist type of mind-dependence for wrongness as seems plausible for being funny. Realists will say that what it is for something to be wrong is for it to possess the property of wrongness (and may go onto say that this is reducible to other properties) and hence that the standards for saying whether an action is wrong make us responsive to this property. Those who accept essentialist mind-dependence will say that what it is for something to be wrong is for us to judge it wrong (or disapprove of it, or be made nauseous by it or…) and hence that the standards for saying whether an action is wrong are standards that make us responsive to our own reactions. The expressivist denies both claims: for expressivists the

standards for saying whether something is wrong make us good co-ordinators, not good detectors of either moral properties or our own reactions. Thus expressivism can simultaneously avoid the unflattering comparison with the account of being funny whilst distinguishing themselves from realists.

Jenkins objects to this expressivist way of answering the *what it is for* question. By interpreting essential mind-independence as an external, meta-ethical claim and by denying that moral standards function to make us responsive to our own attitudes, the expressivist, Jenkins claims, is committed to a position in tension with her anti-realism. This is because the debate between realism and anti-realism concerns 'whether or not something's being wrong…is a matter of our taking a negative attitude towards it' (Jenkins 2005 pp.207-8), with the anti-realist presumably answering that it does. But if this is 'anti-realism' it is not part any professed expressivist view. Expressivists do not claim that an action's *being* wrong is a matter of taking an attitude towards it – they claim that *judging* an action wrong is a matter of taking an attitude towards it. Theirs is a theory of judgement, not of value. For expressivists an action's being wrong is *either* – on the internal reading – a matter of it meeting one's standards governing the formation of moral attitudes (e.g. being such as to cause pain) *or* – on the external reading – a matter of being such that a distinctive negative attitude towards it is warranted by the standards governing mutual co-ordination (of which, I have argued, judgement-independence is one, supervenience another). To think otherwise is to revert to the error of mistaking expressive theories of ethics for subjective ones.[28]

6. Conclusion

I have argued that expressivism doesn't entail implausible claims of mind-dependence and that it can accommodate the conceptual status of all claims of moral mind-independence that have that status (namely, those of judgement-dependence). This is, of course, to carry out only one small part of the quasi-realist project for expressivists for there are myriad other assumptions and forms of moral discourse that seem ill-suited to an expressivist meta-ethic.

Nevertheless, the treatment of claims of mind-independence expounded here highlights two important features of a powerful expressivist tactic that could in principle be applied to any of the forms and assumptions of moral discourse. First, the expressivist gains when there is available a meta-theoretically neutral account of the supposedly realist claims embedded in moral discourse. In this case, I argued that the claims of moral mind-independence can be given a meta-ethically neutral reading if they are understood as claims concerning the application conditions governing predicates. This 'domestication' of claims mind-independence is structurally isomorphic with popular minimalist treatments of truth, which discern a meta-theoretically neutral role for a truth-predicate. No surprise, then, that expressivists typically embrace minimalism about truth.[29] Second, expressivists gain by emphasising that the expressive practice which they place at the centre of ethics is not merely a communal show-and-tell; the purpose of the expression of attitudes is a distinctive practical one. This practical role is what necessitates the adoption of certain standards governing the application of moral terms understood expressively, and also what allowed Stevenson to claim that the practice of giving reasons is as admissible in ethics as it is in descriptive disciplines.

Together, these two aspects of the expressivist strategy provide considerable cause for optimism. In so far as the first aspect of the strategy is available, the features

of moral discourse that need accommodating become less daunting. In so far as the practical nature of morality is understood the resources available to the expressivist to explain the complexities of moral discourse are increased. That is why quasi-realism is still news. [30]

References

Ayer, A.J. 1936. *Language, Truth and Logic*. London: Gollancz.

Blackburn, S. 1973. 'Moral Realism' in J. Casey, ed., *Morality and Moral Reasoning*. London: Methuen. 101-124.

——. 1980. 'Truth, Realism and the Regulation of Theory', *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* V. 353-71.

——. 1981.'Rule-following and Moral Realism' in S.H. Holtzman and C. M. Leich, eds, *Wittgenstein: to Follow a Rule*. London: Routledge and Kegan-Paul.

——. 1984. *Spreading the Word*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

——. 1988a. 'How to be an Ethical Anti-realist', *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 12. 361-75.

——. 1988b. 'Attitudes and Contents', *Ethics* 98. 501-17.

——. 1993. *Essays in Quasi-Realism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

——. 1998. *Ruling Passions*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

——. 2002. 'Précis of *Ruling Passions*' and 'Replies', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 65. 122-135 and 164-176.

Gibbard, A. 2003. *Thinking How to Live*. Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard University Press.

Hale, B. 2002. 'Can Arboreal Knotwork Help Blackburn Out of Frege's Abyss?', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 65. 144-49.

Jenkins, C.S. 2005. 'Realism and Independence', *American Philosophical Quarterly* 42(3). 199-209.

Miller, A. 2003. *An Introduction to Contemporary Metaethics*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Nolan, D., Restall, G., West, C. 'Moral Fictionalism versus the rest', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 83. 307-30.

Rasmussen, S. A. 1985. 'Quasi-realism and mind-dependence', *Philosophical Quarterly* 35. 185-91.

Stevenson, C. L. 1950. 'The Emotive Conception of Ethics and its Cognitive Implications', *The Philosophical Review* 59. 291-304.

——. 1962. 'Relativism and Nonrelativism in the Theory of Value', *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 35. 25-44.

——. 1963. *Facts and Values*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

Unwin, N. 1999. 'Quasi-Realism, Negation and the Frege-Geach Problem', *Philosophical Quarterly* 49. 337-352.

Whyte, J. 1990. 'Success Semantics', *Analysis* 50. 149-157.

Zangwill, N. 1994. 'Moral Mind-independence', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 72. 205-19.

[1] I talk of moral values attaching to actions merely as a matter of convenience. They may also attach to other things: states-of-affairs, people, habits, institutions and so on. Mind-independence can also be expressed in terms of moral *truth* without raising the theoretical stakes – see Zangwill 1994 p.207 and Blackburn 1998 pp.311-21, *pace* Rasmussen 1985.

[2] For a recent expressivist account of the distinctive moral attitude see Blackburn 1998 pp.8-14.

[3] Stevenson 1950 and 1962.

[4] Similarly, what *makes it the case* that a joke is funny is not that we think it funny, but the feature of the joke to which our mirth is a response. This will be so even if *what it is for* something to be funny is for us to think it funny. I discuss whether expressivism can avoid this latter sort of mind-dependence in

§5. The present point is just that expressivism is not committed to the thought that what *makes it the case* that an action is right is that we think it so.

[5] Zangwill 1994 p.208. One may reject the assumption that mind-independence is part of ordinary moral thought, but here I accept it for the sake of argument. Note that if claims of mind-independence are not part of ordinary moral thought, the expressivist is under no obligation to accommodate them.

[6] The following draws on remarks from Blackburn 1973, 1981 pp. 179-80, 1984 pp.217-19, and 1998 p.296n.

[7] There is a sense in which expressivists too can accept that moral predicates are property-ascribing, namely the sense in which 'properties are the semantic shadows of predicates' (Blackburn 1993 p.8). I assume here that the moral properties that realists believe in and that expressivists deny are more than mere phantoms.

[8] These indicative conditionals are stronger than material conditionals and should be understood in modal terms. (2a), for instance, asserts that there is no possible world in which we think that x is M and yet X is not M (thus can be false even if the antecedent is false) and (1a) asserts that there is such a world. Hence (1a) and (1b) capture what Jenkins (2005) calls 'modal independence'.

[9] See Blackburn 1998 pp.68-77, 1988b and 2002. Terminology from Hale 2002.

[10] Blackburn 1998 p.71. Cf. Blackburn 1988b p.512 and 2002 pp.168-72.

[11] Unwin 1999 p.341.

[12] I here assume that the distinctive attitude of moral disapproval is 'emotionally ascended', that is, it involves not merely disapproval of an action, but disapproval of those who fail to share that disapproval, the latter amounting to an insistence that others share one's disapproval (see Blackburn 1998 pp.8-14). It is this insistence that those asserting the relevant negation are opposed to.

[13] One objection to this account of conditionals and other nonassertive contexts is that it represents any failure to live up to the commitments thus expressed as a mere attitudinal, and not a logical failing. Blackburn answers this point thus: '…if anyone represented themselves as holding the combination of 'p' and 'if p then q' and 'not-q' we would not know what to make of them. Logical breakdown means failure of understanding…this result [is] secured, on my approach…because the person represents themselves as tied to a tree of possible combinations of…attitude, but at the same time represents themselves as holding a combination of attitudes that the tree excludes. So what is given in one moment is taken away the next, and we can make no intelligible interpretation of them…Logic is our way of codifying and keeping track of intelligible combinations of commitments.' Blackburn 1998 p.72. Cf. Gibbard 2003 ch.4 and Blackburn 2002 p.168.

[14] (i) and (ii) are the commitments resulting from reading the conditionals left-to-right. Contraposing, (2a) and (2b) will also express commitment to (iii) rejecting the belief that one has the M_x-attitude should one come to reject the M_x-attitude and (iv) rejecting the belief that one does not have the Mx-attitude should one come to endorse the M_x-attitude.(Similar remarks apply to the account of the mind-independence conditionals given below).

[15] Blackburn 1980 §II, 1981 §III and 1984 pp.189-98.

[16] Note although the mind-(in)dependence conditionals can therefore be understood to express second-order attitudes, they do so only through expressing the tree-tying commitments referred to above. This is one difference between this view and that expressed in Blackburn 1984 pp.189-96.

[17] Stevenson 1944 p.13. See also Ayer 1936 p.143 and Blackburn 1998 pp.8-14.

[18] Zangwill holds that conceptual truths are truths knowable by conceptual means, that is, by 'following out the implications of what we must know in order to successfully deploy [the] concept' (1994, pp.211-2). The expressivist claim is therefore that the co-ordinating role of moral concepts is a truth knowable by conceptual means. But it doesn't follow that we can tell by examining our existing use of words like 'right' and 'wrong' that they are used to co-ordinate. Knowing what counts as successful deployment of moral concepts is itself not a purely introspective matter, but involves empirical theorising concerning of the sorts of useful roles that moral terms *could* play (see, for example, Gibbard 2003). By such lights, it may be that some of our existing uses of terms like 'right' and 'wrong' do not count as successful deployments of moral concepts. (As I explain in section 5, expressivists typically reject the idea that an adequate understanding of the meaning of moral terms can be acquired through introspective analysis.)

[19] This mirrors Stevenson's account of reasons adduced in support of moral claims – see Stevenson 1950, 1962 and Blackburn 1988a.

[20] This is not to say that reasons for blandness are necessarily *good* reasons for attitudes. Margrit may disapprove of kicking dogs because Faye does, or because the majority of people do, but these factshave limited practical import (averting to them will not help to change Faye's attitude, nor the attitudes of the majority). . The important point is that agents who accept mind-independence for an

expressive term can at least offer *some* reason which serves both to justify the judgement and may potentially alter attitudes. Agents who deny mind-independence for such terms (such as Freddy) can achieve no such leverage through their usage.

[21] Might a similar reasoning apply to comic or gastronomic judgements? While it is true that an agent who accepts mind-dependence for his comic judgements cannot hope to offer reasons to persuade others to share them, it seems less obvious that comic judgements are essentially part of a co-ordinating practice. Attempts to persuade others to share our sense of humour usuallygive out long before attempts to persuade others to share our moral outlook.

[22] It follows that all moral thinkers are either implicit aware of morality's co-ordinating function (where this recognition constituted by the adoption of the moral mind-independence attitude) or both implicitly and explicitly aware of this. This seems reasonable given that all discussions of moral mind-independence present it as an integral part of everyday engagement with moral discourse.

[23] Since not all reactions are psychological 'response-dependence' might be a more appropriate term here.

[24] Zangwill (1994 p.207) points out that many non-judgemental forms of mind-independence are substantially controversial. Adopting the standard view for such claims preserves this controversy. It is also worth noting that in all his discussions of mind-independence referenced here Blackburn concerns himself with more than just judgement-independence.

[25] Cf. Whyte 1990.

[26] Jenkins also suggests that the quasi-realist might simply insist that the only question of mind-independence concerns the *what it takes* question (2005 p.207). I agree that this is unnecessarily evasive.

[27] Stevenson 1963 p.214 and Blackburn 1998 pp.48-51.

[28] See Ayer 1936 pp.144-5 and Stevenson 1962. Despite being more than half a century old, this point is still ignored today. For example, Nolan et al. write that on expressivist approaches '…moral claims are made true (or false) by facts about people's attitudes, or perhaps facts about what people's attitudes would be under suitably idealised conditions' (2005 p.321). Not only is this simply false; it was ever thus.

[29] One of the earliest examples being Stevenson 1963 p.216.

[30] My thanks to Carrie Jenkins for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.