Minimal Expressivism

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is twofold. Our aim is, first, to outline a version of non-descriptivism, 'minimal expressivism', that leaves aside some of the long-standing problems that have been traditionally associated with expressivist views. Secondly, we will show how familiar expressivist's results can be accommodated within this framework, through a particular inter pretation of the role that the *expressive realm* has to play in a theory of meaning. Expressivist theories of meaning only face some of the classical problems attributed to this position when they undertake the task of offering an explanation concerning *why* the expressions they deal with have the meaning that they have. A position can nevertheless be dubbed 'expressivist' –in the minimal sense that we favour– simply by paying attention to 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 how the world is.

1. What does it take to be a minimal expressivist

Expressivism is a way to approach the meaning of a certain kind of expressions. A theory of meaning can be called 'expressivist' if it holds at least two of the following theses:

(1) Certain predicables do not take simple objects under their scope, but complexes of properties and their bearers, i.e., propositions. These predicables are 'second-order' predicables, or, as we prefer, *functions of propositions*. Not every second order predicable is a function of propositions, though, some of them are functions of functions. Examples of this latter kind are standard quantifiers, some uses of negation and conjunction, first-person operator (according to Anscombe-Wiliams' and Recanati's views) and others. This paper will focus on a particular subset of second-order predicables, those that can be used to produce propositions out of other propositions[1]. They are non truth-functional –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 not extensional –embedded co-extensional expressions cannot be intersubstituted *salva veritate*. At least one of the items of the following list can be explained as an instance of this kind of propositional functions: Belief, knowledge, a priori, necessity, possibility, good, bad.

(2) These functions of propositions do not *describe* the way the world is.

(3) Expressions containing these functions of propositions lack truth conditions, even if they are syntactically correct –they are not 'truth-apt'.

(4) These functions of propositions are used to express some attitude A towards a particular piece of content.

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[1] Thesis (1) can be easily extended to cover predicables which arguments are predicables, and not complete propositions. It would suffice to modify (1) in the following sense;
(1') Certain predicates do not take single objects under their scope but n-adic predicables ($0 \leq n$, being 0-adic predicables propositions)
This modification would incorporate standard quantifiers, the first person operator (in Anscombe, Williams, or Racanati's sense) and second order identity among the candidates for an expressivist treatment. Second order predicables would then become functions suitable to produce propositions out of predicables with any adicity.

These four theses are logically independent. In order to have an idea of what a minimally expressivistic position would look like, it is important to assess the logical space of possible positions that a single basic take on the meaning of a certain group of expressions can generate.

A minimal expresivist position, one that accepts (1) and (2), opens the door to a reasonable account of the meaning of a relevant subset of the set of second-order predicables. Under the light of contemporary philosophy of language, (3) can be modified so as to retain some intuitions that have historically supported it, and at the same time, to answer to the legitimate criticisms raised against it from non-expressivists lines. Minimal expressivism is a semantic position and it is neutral regarding standard disputes that have traditionally surrounded the analysis of normative notions. Over and above, one is perfectly entitled to add cognitive, epistemic or emotional aspects to the overall meaning of these notions, aspects that would fall under (4). Our claim is, nevertheless, that these aspects do not belong to the semantic core that accounts for the inferential behaviour of expressivist concepts.

Functions of propositions and relationalism

Imagine a world that contains only middle size objects. Think of a linguistic tool that could be used to spell out the details of such a world. Arguably, only referential expressions and predicates would be necessary to specify how is every object located within such a world, and, all in all, how the whole thing looks like. Include now objects of any size, every object you can see around, or think of, and picture how that linguistic tool had to be altered in order to do its job. That such a tool is not a natural language is as easy to see as to check that it is *extensional*, while natural languages host intensional contexts. According to thesis (1), natural language differs from the tool just described because the latter lacks *normative* words which express second-order concepts, like 'believes', 'thinks', 'good', 'bad', 'correct', whose main goal is not to allow us to talk about how an object is placed with respect to another. Natural language counterparts of functions of propositions also have a peculiar logical status: they look like run-of-the-mill predicates –they are *unsaturated*, in need of completion– but their arguments are not always the kind of objects one should expect to find under the scope of predicates like 'being red', 'being tall', etc. Thesis (1) simply states that natural language contains a peculiar group of expressions that can be characterized by the nature of their arguments.

Nevertheless, thesis (1) does not amount to saying that functions of propositions are not *relations*, a relation being a particular kind of function taking simple objects as arguments. It does not go that far. (1) certainly excludes Russell's *multiple relation* take on belief reports, for example, as a good candidate for an expressive account of the meaning of these expressions –where 'believes that' connects an agent with a set of things, typically including a property and an object. (1) exclusively requires the argument of the second-order operator not to be a single simple object. If propositions, complexes of objects and properties, were treated as objects themselves, then second-order notions could receive a *relational* analysis.

Relational predicates are characteristically used to talk about objects, and how they stand with respect to one another. One might assume that dyadic second order operators simply connect especial kind of objects, they allow us to describe how a special kind of object, a subject, stands with respect to another special kind of object, a fact, a proposition, a complex entity of some other sort, etc. This view has been traditionally found problematic, since these out-of-the-ordinary objects, together with the special nature of the relation referred to with the aid of the second-order operator, are difficult to accommodate within the most basic naturalistic framework, one that follows Moore's reaction against *spooky entities*. Moore declared himself to be a non-naturalist. We

would say rather that he is a non-reductionist naturalist. And we follow this line. According to a relational view on functions of propositions, we would not only need to provide a functionally appropriate definition of 'proposition', but also to determine what kind of object a proposition is. Correspondingly, one should be able to determine what kind of property is referred to when predicates like 'believes', 'knows', 'is good', 'is true' are used. We have no opinion on whether this enterprise can be successfully accomplished, we simply think it is not necessary to undertake it if our goal is to offer an account of the meaning of these expressions, both truth-conditionally and inferentially adequate.

A defender of (1) could accommodate a relational view on functions of propositions by postulating isomorphism between second order operators and second order, or derivative, properties. The world we introduced at the beginning of this section could be enriched so as to include not only objects and their properties, but also properties of those properties. According to Molnar:

> Df1 F is a derivative property of a iff a has the property F and a's having F ontologically depends on some properties of some parts of a, or a's having F ontologically depends on some other properties of a.
>
> Df2 F is a basic property of a iff a has the property F and a's having F does not ontologically depend on any properties of any parts of a, and a's having F does not ontologically depend on any other properties of a. (Molnar 2003, 29)

Molnar's metaphysics could be made compatible with thesis (1) if isomorphism was added to the picture. If one were to suppose that our use of second-order operators necessarily corresponds to an attempt to say how the world is, higher order concepts could be seen as representations of derivative properties.

Building up on Molnar's account on basic vs. derivative properties, one could modify (1) along the following lines in order to construct an even weaker thesis:

(1') Second-order operators can only be applied iff another predicate is included in the same utterance or thought. At least one of the items of the following list can be explained as an instance of a function of propositions: Belief, knowledge, a priori, first person thoughts, truth, good, bad.

(1') does not exclude Russell's multiple-reference theory, for example. Moreover, to our knowledge, there are no accounts on logical, doxastic, alethic, or epistemic expressions that allow these expressions to be applied to unqualified objects. It would be daring to provide a theory for the meaning of those expressions that took uses such as 'I believe the chair', 'It is possible that the chair' 'I know the chair', 'The chair is true' as acceptable. It is striking for us to realize that the story has been dramatically different for predicates such as 'is good'. It is somewhat difficult to understand what someone is trying to say when she utters 'John is good' if she is not trying to say something like 'most of the things John does are good' or else 'John is a good something'. Sentences like these two are typically used to convey general thoughts. Quite the same happens with its traditional antonymous 'evil'. Even though it can be argued that 'evil' can only be *predicated* of names, rather than sentences, it is crucial to realize that the arguments of this *predicate* are typically nominalized verbs, as in 'killing is evil', 'cheating is evil', etc. The ontological consequences of treating 'evil' and 'good' as first order predicates instead of second

order operators are a burden that a theorist willing to re-interpret them as building blocks of general claims does not have to carry. In addition to explaining the ontological nature of the new things that would overcrowd the world now, the defender of the predicate analysis would have to come up with a plausible explanation of inferences such as 'if killing is evil, then Kennedy's assassination was evil', something that the operator theorist gets for free.

On a somewhat more extreme way, it has been argued that there is no reason to suppose that there is a principled difference between those predicates that are the normal target of an expressivist theory and run-of-the-mill predicates like 'tall', 'blue', etc., that there is no way to spot the difference between the group of expressions normally addressed by expressivists and the rest of predicates just by looking at the surface structure (see Schroeder 2008; Thomas 2006).

> 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 claim cannot be meant to establish that there is no difference in the syntactic behaviour of these expressions, since it is clear that only the expressions highlighted by the expressivist can take complete sentences as their subject or direct object, instead of simple nominal phrases. Take 'tall' and 'good' as 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 like 'believe', 'knows' 'necessarily', 'a priori' *can* take whole sentences as their arguments. Maybe they can also be genuinely satisfied by simple nominal expressions, like in 'I believe you', but they can certainly be satisfied by that-clauses containing complete sentences as well, unlike predicates like 'being tall', and 'being red'.

Schröder might be right in that 'everything that you can do syntactically with a descriptive predicate like 'green', you can do with a moral predicate like 'wrong'', we are not going to discuss this point, but there are reasons to deny that the converse is true. There are syntactic moves that you can perform with a second order predicate that cannot be performed using a first order predicate. Second order concepts need arguments that are also concepts or concepts-plus-their-arguments. They can appear 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 run-of-the-mill predicates, 'That John comes is good' and 'That snow is white is true'. There also are dyadic second order concepts, like '...believes that---', '...knows that---'. A syntactic difference between them and first order diadic concepts such as '... is at the left of...' and '...is higher than...' is that the former, but not the latter, need whole sentences as syntactic arguments (and have complete propositions under their scope). Epistemic second order concepts have produced some debate about their logico-semantic

status due in part to the fact that they need singular terms as their left-hand arguments. Thus, interpreting them as run-of-the-mill relations is a natural temptation. Nevertheless falling too deep into the temptation to the extent to requiring that all their arguments have the same syntactic status produces difficulties that are easily avoidable. Prior understood epistemic concepts as being half predicates (because of their left-hand arguments) and half connectives (because their right hind arguments) (Prior 1971: 135); the term 'connecticate' have been coined to cover them. To see that predicates of first and second order do not belong to the same syntactic category[2], it suffices to apply the test of sustitutivity *salva grammatica*: two expressions have the same grammatical category if, and only if, the substitution of one of them for the other neither converts a grammatical expression into ungrammatical, nor restores the grammaticality of an ungrammatical expression. Take the following expressions:

> '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'

At least the last four are ungrammatical, and possibly the first one is ungrammatical too.

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 look like they are 'fit for making assertions' (Thomas 2006), their use is no different from other expressions that render 'truth apt' sentences, sentences that can be used to make a claim that can be evaluated as true or false (Lenman 2003). This claim has nothing to do with the distinction defended in (1), but more with (2), and (3), as we will see in the following sections. Thus (1) –or its relational-friendly version (1')– is immune to the kind of criticisms that seek to question the syntactic specificity of the group of expressions singled out by expressivism.

Expressions lacking truth-conditions

Thesis (2) is the point where expressivism parts ways with any form of *relationalism*. Second-order predicates, an expressivist would claim, do not *describe*, they are not used to talk about how the world is, about the relative position of one object with respect to the others. A complete description of the way the world is would not be modified by our talking about good or bad actions, ascriptions of truth, discourse about things that might have been different, people's beliefs, etc. Of course, all this talking is important, it is indeed essential to our endeavour as human beings, as rational creatures. It is nonetheless irrelevant if our purpose is to provide an answer to questions such as 'what's the world like?'. A simple relationalist, for instance a follower of Russell's multiple-relation theory (see Moltmann 2003), or an ontologically committed relationalist, somebody who is ready to sign metaphysical checks to afford the analysis of expressivist notions, could object to (2) by claiming that expressions containing expressivist notions are nonetheless 'fit for making assertions'. Nevertheless, the expressivist who holds (2) does not need to deny that complex expressions containing higher order notions can be used to make assertions. It is all about the *kind of assertions* that we make when we use them. Proposition-guise expressivism, as defended by Pendlebury (2010), for instance, claims that normative sentences are apt to make assertions although the propositions asserted are not factual. Expressivist notions may not be used to describe and still be part of assertions. Our take on (3) would clarify this point.

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[2] The Greek distinction between categorematic and syncategorematic terms and its Medieval use to demarcate the class of logical constants is a further intuition against Schröder's claim. Besides quantifiers and connectives, normative notions such as 'necessarily' were counted among 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., identify sets of especial notions that don't behave like the rest.

Even though (2) seems to be hard to swallow for those who treasure moral, semantic, epistemic concepts, etc. close to their hearts, the real source of concern for them should be thesis (3). Non-descriptivism could even perhaps be interpreted in a way such that its intuitively counterfactual effect could be tempered, but these expressions lacking truth-conditional import would systematically alter what we take ourselves to be doing when we think about what is right or wrong, what others believe, etc. Crucially, either we get rid of the idea that valid inferences are truth-preserving moves, or there would be no moral reasoning. According to (3), expressions containing second-order concepts lack truth conditions. The argument to reach (3) from (2) seems to be quite straightforward: if second-order concepts do not describe, and we think that the content of a complex expression is a function of the content of the parts, then having a hole introduced by a content-less second order expression would amount to saying that the whole expression lacks content altogether. The effect would be similar as to that of introducing random strings of letters in a sentence. 'John is xgsnebfj', as interpreted in standard English, lacks truth conditions; its utterance does not say anything about the world. As a matter of fact, it does not say anything at all, the interpretation process is blocked for good once we found 'xgsnebfj' in our way.

This conclusion is not only contested on *affective* grounds –by "objectivity-minded" theorists, to use perhaps a more neutral, if not entirely fair, characterization (see Pendlebury 2010), there seems to be also logical reasons to reject it. Those who cherish their moral notions, for example, taking realism to be the only way to match their level of affection towards them, would feel rather disappointed by a view on the meaning of moral words that ends up saying that sentences like 'sleeping with your neighbour's wife *is bad*', or 'aiding Haiti *is good*' cannot be used to say something *true* or *false*. Belief-ascriptions, knowledge-ascriptions, etc. would receive the same fate under (3). Are we suddenly unable to know, believe, or be true to the facts?

Besides, on the logical side, if complex expressions containing second-order predicates lack truth conditions, what happens when these complex expressions occur under the scope of truth-functional expressions, such as logical connectives? The mere fact that we can meaningfully say things like 'sleeping with your neighbour's wife is *not* bad', placing a complex containing a second-order expression under the scope of a truth-functional expression, shows that the original complex expression didn't 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 are not damaging to all forms of expressivism. If (3) followed from (2), together with a truth-functional account of logical-connectives, expressivism as a whole would be jeopardized, since (1) is a too weak to be established as a theoretical alternative and (4) is not possible without the intuition behind (2). Nevertheless, (3) does not follow from (2). We have claimed that theses (1)-(4) are logically independent, and now we will explain in which sense this is true of (2) and (3). (2) states that second-order expressions are not descriptive, 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 Haiti is good' exemplifies, second-order expressions are not holes in linguistic structures, they do not block the interpretation process[3]. The content of an act of assertion of a sentence such as 'aiding Haiti is good' can be disclosed in truth-conditionl terms, even though the concept 'good' doesn't aim to describe. There is a big difference between being truth-conditionally irrelevant and blocking a truth-conditional interpretation. To be a proper consequence of (2), (3) should be rephrased as (3'):

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[3] In fact, blocking the interpretation process in real communicative exchanges is not easy. Deference operators and context help the hearer to obtain genuine contents even from defective inputs.

(3') Second-order predicates do not modify the truth-conditions of expressions under their scope.

The connection between lacking descriptive character and the absence of truth-conditions was taken to be obvious –and unproblematic– by some of the first supporters of the theory in the XXth Century. Ayer, for example, writes in 1936:

> If now I generalise my previous statement and say, 'Stealing money is wrong,' I produce a sentence which has no factual meaning–that is, 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 dispproval 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 takes the inferential move from (2) to (3) 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. Nonetheless, for (3) to be derived from (2), 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 is the one that Frege favoured. Nevertheless, this version of the Principle of Compositionality is only justified if the gap is produced by a word whose function is to provide an essential component to the truth-evaluable content of the act at stake. Consider the following cases:

He is tall

John is rsquo.

In the first case, unless appropriate contextual cues are provided, a pronoun, whose only job is to point to an object of a certain kind contextually salient, lacks the appropriate content. In the second case, there is a meaningless string of symbols in the place of the predicate. In both cases, the failure is infectious, and affects the determination of the truth-value. But not every statement containing truth-conditionally inert material behaves in the same way, for some words and concepts don't have as their job either pointing or describing, 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: i) what would be the world like if what I'm saying/thinking were true?, ii) what follows from my assertion/thought and what does it follows from? When the topic of truth-conditions is assessed, only question i) is at stake. Second-order expressions affect the inferential potential of the things we say/think, but they are irrelevant with respect to question i). Take modal operators, for example. Except for those who believe in primitive modalities, from (Kripke 1963) on most philosophers agree on a view on possibility according to which 'Possibly p' is true if there is a possible world in which p is true. 'Possibly' is taken to be second-order and non-descriptive, but there is also a consensus concerning the impact on the truth

conditions of the expressions under its scope. In this case, 'possibly' does not alter the truth-conditions of 'p' it just qualifies the possible worlds in which 'p' has to be the case for we to say something true. To the question 'what would be the world like if 'possibly p' was true?', the answer is simply 'p has to be the case (in some possible world)'. The modal expression does not have an impact on the truth-conditions of p. In the same vein, the expressivist thinks that words like 'good', 'believe', 'true' etc., do not modify the truth-conditions of the expressions under their scope, 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 systematically found in the literature on procedural meaning (see for example Blakemore 2002, chaps. 2 and 4; Ifantidou 2001), and in the analysis of deferential utterances (see Stojanovic et al. 2007)

There are two different ways in which one might talk about "truth-conditions", and therefore about 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, truth-conditions are explicitly represented content, whatever determines the state of affaires that we have to contrast 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 under a moderate relativist framework (see Recanati 2007, 65-72). Expressivist expressions are claimed to be truth-conditionally irrelevant only in the second weaker sense. It can be argued, as it was 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. (3') is thus in principle immune to the affective and the logical criticisms described above, even though they might still be harmful for a position that developed this minimal thesis into a fully explanatory theory.

To sum up, (2) is no more than one side of the Humean view on ethical statements, namely his negative stance towards their status as judgements. Several attempts have been made to accommodate (2) and deny (3) (see Popper 1945, 51, 204; Findlay 1944; but also Horgan and Timmons' 2006, 230-231; Pendlebury 2010, 190). Pace Ayer, we also think that (2) and (3) are logically independent, but we believe so as the result of taking different arguments into consideration. In the first place, we think that the step from (2) to (3) involves an assumption that can be proven false on empirical grounds. Secondly, our view is that a slightly modified version of (3) can still be sustained, one that remains faithful to the original gist of the theory but is safe from the logical argument against expressivism.

Up until now, our characterization of expressivism has been purely *negative* (see Jackson and Pettit 1998, 239). Expressivists have nonetheless undertaken the task of providing a positive account of the meaning of second-order notions, instead of simply saying what these notions are not, from (Stevenson 1937) to (Gibbard 1990). Thesis (4) is usually endorsed by expressivists who think that if normative expressions do not describe, something should be said about what they do, something concerning the kind of things that we *talk about* whenever we use those words. Gibbard, for example, maintained that whenever something like 'p is good' was uttered, a speaker was expressing an attitude to the effect that it was reasonable to feel bad for whoever failed to do p, and it was reasonable to be mad at this person. Some of the reactions against expressivism hinge only on the specific positive account of the meaning of second-order concepts. Thus Gibbard's account has been assessed on psychological grounds: the particular attitudes that a speaker is said to be expressing when she uses ethical terms have been questioned (see e. g. Ball 1995). On a more general line, Jackson and Pettit have argued that the relation of "expressing" was not the kind of connection that the expressivist need to posit between a speaker and a certain attitude (see Jackson

and Pettit 1998). Our own position is that, in spite of its name, an expressivist theory can perfectly walk without the limp of its positive side. Only failing to see the appropriate consequences of an expressivist position makes the expressivist to take an unnecessary step further. We call the conjunction of theses (1), (2), and (3') *minimal expressivism*, and the aim of the rest of the paper is to present this position under a plausible light.

2. What is *minimal expressivism* good for

Minimal expressivism is the joint conjunction of (1), (2), and (3'). Let us have a reminder:

> (1) Certain predicates do not take simple objects under their scope, but complexes of objects and properties. These predicates are 'second-order' predicates, or functions of propositions. At least one of the items of the following list can be explained as an instance of a second-order predicate of the kind described at the beginning of the paper: Belief, knowledge, a priori, necessity, possibility, good, bad.

> (2) Second-order predicates do not *describe* the way the world is.

> (3') Second-order predicates do not modify the truth-conditions of expressions under their scope.

Our claim is that such a position can satisfy our theoretical concerns about the meaning of second order expressions, at least on a preliminary approach. A further task would be to determine the particular function that several sets of second order notions perform, i.e. to provide with the elements that allow us to distinguish between logic, epistemic, semantic, and evaluative notions. Throughout this section different kinds of minimal expressivisms will be reviewed, so as to show that (4) is no more than an explanatory hypothesis to obtain generalizations on the inferences that can be drawn from and to statements containing second-order expressions.

Modal, semantic, and doxastic minimal expressivism

Modal notions are the first kind of notion to which minimal expressivism can be applied. Modal expressions, such as 'possibly' and 'necessarily', it is commonly assumed, do not take simple objects as their arguments, they are *saturated* instead by complete propositions. The usual semantics for modal expressions presupposes that these expressions do not modify the truth-conditions of the propositions under its scope, which perfectly fits (3'), one of the basic requirements of *minimal expressivism*. Again, the answer to the question 'what would be the world like if 'possibly p' was true?' would simply be 'p would have to be the case', at least in one possible world. *Modal expressivism* could only be rejected by someone who believed in *primitive modalities*, someone who thought that modal words are used to describe how the world is. This is the kind 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 'possibly p'. No reflection on the "attitude expressed" by the use of this word is needed at all.

A similar story could be told about *semantic expressivism*. We do not usually expect complicated stories about the attitudes behind semantics' technical terms, such as 'synonymy', 'meaning', 'reference', etc. This does not amount to saying that providing the meaning of these terms is an easy task, nor that a general reflection on notions such as 'reference' is not important, or

even completely irrelevant with respect to the first task. Our contention is that these two enterprises should not be conflated. In what sense is there something else that needs to be explained once we have a theory on the meaning of these notions that successfully gives an account of the inferences that they might be involved in? If a theory of meaning renders consistently 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 says all that is to be said about the meaning of these terms. The opposite view, semantic realism, should start by saying why an account of the attitudes expressed by the use of these words is needed at all.

When we move to *doxastic attitudes*, minimal expressivism seems to lose its initial grip. More often than not, it is assumed that a proper theory on the meaning of belief reports needs to start by clarifying what it is to have a belief, what it is to believe something, what kind of mental states are beliefs, and so on. Nevertheless, as we saw above, such a relational theory of belief reports faces a serious challenge when trying to explain what kind of objects are the believer and the belief, 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 she attributes beliefs to others with the aid of sentences of the kind 'A believes p'. Other concerns are possible, of course, but the treatment of higher-order functions advices to demarcate the scope of any proposal as clearly as possible. For a minimal expressive view on belief reports, it would be enough to provide an adequate account of the inferential potential of doxastic expressions. Still, somebody might think that facing the obvious problems that a relational theory seems to have is worth it in order to have an account of the meaning of such notions. Our view is different, though. We think that understanding when we are justified to use a particular doxastic term and to which other contents we get committed by its use, we know everything that should be known in order to master the meaning of doxastic expressions.

Our commitment with the idea that mapping belief attributions' inferential potential within a net of propositions containing higher-order notions *is* characterizing the meaning of belief reports can be casted out in the following terms:

> *Empirical hypothesis (EH)*. Every set of propositions that can be inferentially linked to propositions of the form ßp, where ß is a doxastic operator and p is a random proposition, must contain at least one proposition of the form ∂q, where q is a random proposition and ∂ is a function of propositions. ßp and ∂q are non-extensional contexts.

(EH) posits that our talking about beliefs can only be inferentially linked with propositions containing functions of propositions of the kind specified at the beginning of this paper. In other words, (EH) claims that doxastic notions cannot be analysed away.

(EH) can be divided into two claims:

> (EH1) *Non-introduction of doxastic operators*: from q no proposition of the form ßp follows

> (EH2) *Non-elimination of doxastic operators*: from ßp no proposition of the form q follows.

An empirical hypothesis such as (EH) would hold not only for doxastic expressions. We think that it could be generalized for semantic, ethical, and normative terms. Thus, for example, no proposition including the predicate 'being wrong' can be deduced from a simple factual statement, and no factual statement can be deduced from a proposition containing the higher-order logical counterpart for 'being wrong'. This intuition can be casted out in the following terms:

> *Generalized Empirical hypothesis (GEH)*. Every set of propositions that can be inferentially linked to propositions of the form ∂p, where ∂ is a *function of propositions** and p is a random proposition, must contain at least one proposition of the form ∂q, where q is a random proposition. ∂p and ∂q are non-extensional contexts.

> (GEH1) *Non-introduction of functions of propositions**: from q no proposition of the form ∂p follows

> (GEH2) *Non-elimination of functions of propositions**: from ∂p no proposition of the form q follows.

> Where *functions of propositions** are a particular subclass of the expressions that the expressivist typically tries to explain.

(GEH) expresses application conditions and consequences of the use of second order functions. Functions of propositions* cannot be analyzed away without leaving a second order remainder. They *don't touch the world*, they are second-order since they express features of other functions and not properties of objects. (GEH) implies that their meaning cannot be obtained from descriptive contexts, no feature of the state-of-affairs or the speech act inferentially implies a non-descriptive operator. Higher-order notions mark higher-order acts, and the meaning of these have to be understood over and above the meaning and content of the communicative act that serves as their trigger.

This hypothesis, (GEH), lives and dies on empirical grounds –if the criterion does not select a meaningful set of higher-order expressions, then it should be discarded. In a sense it needs no more justification, but here is a possible story about the origin of this phenomenon. If intentionality could be essentially linked to the possibility of *being wrong* –both about the meanings of the words that we use and about the truth of our judgements, then the *human sphere* would at least partially be characterized by its having correction conditions. There is no discourse about our actions and thoughts that lacks higher-order notions, since they are natural language devices to talk about correction conditions. These expressions are the distinctive mark of a discourse in which the possibility of being wrong is built-in, and thus any intent of moving from the normative side to the purely descriptive side would be blocked. (GEH) is inspired in –if not equivalent to– Moore's anti-reductionism[4]. There is no set of propositions that contains no function of propositions* from which a proposition containing a doxastic operator can be inferred. Belief is essentially connected to action and perception, and this shows up in its inferential behaviour. Consider in contrast what

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[4] The wide acceptance of the so called 'naturalistic *fallacy*' was considered at the core of the motivations for xxth century's first takes on sentimentalism (see Prior 1949, 54 and ff). From a purely historical point of view, it is interesting to see how the overwhelming discussion on some of the best known objections against expressivism as it was presented in the thirties vividly contrasts with the status of the naturalistic fallacy, whose prestige has remained almost unaltered. This situation is partly due, in our minds, to the assumption that (3) followed necessarily from (2).

happens when normative expressions are absent: 'if my table is green, then it is not blue', 'if the computer is on the table, then it is not below the table', etc. (EH) is the claim that this kind of inferences are impossible *from* or *to* propositions containing normative operators.

Now if (EH) holds, what reason could there be to think that the meaning of functions of propositions* is not exhausted by an expressivist characterization, one that does not care about explaining the "positive side" of these expressions, the kind of attitude that we ascribe to someone when we attribute a belief to her? What kind of work is this "positive side" going to do for our theory? Again this is not to say that a positive account of doxastic mental states is not useful or important, minimal expressivism only maintains all we have to say about the content of normative expressions is to spell their connections with other normative expressions. This view is neither radical nor new. Old-fashioned accounts of action, belief, and desire showed no relational commitments at all, they simply made explicit the connections between different normative concepts. Thesis (4), the positive requirement for an expressivist theory of meaning, would give us, if we are lucky, possible basis for the generalizations concerning the inferences that we can do using functions of propositions*, but their use could be completely master just by paying attention to the map of possible inferences.

Of course, we do not want to claim that every function of propositions that the expressivist is interested in belongs to the set of functions of propositions*. Factive attitudes, for example, can be used as premises to reach factual conclusions. Even though some doubts have been recently raised against the most common assumptions concerning factive expressions (Hazlett 2010), it has not been defended yet that expressions like 'know' have no factive uses. On the modal side, 'necessarily' clearly does not have an inferential behaviour that can falls within (GEH). And 'truth' is a third notion for which it can be argued that (GEH) doesn't hold (although non-classical logicians sometimes restrain the scope of the operations of introducing and eliminating the truth operator, see Field 2008, chapters 7 and 8). The set of higher-order notions whose meaning could be explained with the aid of expressivism is not homogeneous, and this is something that we consider worth stressing. Logical constants, for example, the target of another classical branch of expressivism (logical expressivism), do not only fall outside (GEH), but they are truth-functional (although their natural language counterparts do not need to be, see Carston 2002, chapters 3 and 4, Blakemore & Carston 2005). An explanation of the behaviour of every group of non-descriptive higher-order notions would exceed the reach of the paper.

Ethical minimal expressivism

We have already mentioned that some of the reactions that expressivism gets when ethical terms are at stake are of an emotional nature –if these terms are not descriptive, the critic seems to think, then a real foundation for our moral judgements cannot be offered, and we do not know what is good or bad anymore. It is not our intent to argue against this feeling (see Popper 1945, 54 and ff., for example, for someone who does), only to provide an argument that might put ethical expressivism under a different light.

An ethical realist would have to show that (GEH) is false for the case of ethical terms, that is, that there can actually be inferences from purely descriptive to evaluative propositions, or vice versa. This 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 enough, most reactions against moral expressivism also include a rejection of reductionism. On ethical expressions, minimal expressivism is a non-reductionist naturalistic view. It can cope with a

hypothesis about 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 perfectly open for discussion the realm of the normative, and so it does not include any revisionist attitude towards standard conceptual analysis.

3. Conclusion

A theory of meaning can be called 'expressivist' if it holds at least two of the theses stated at the beginning of the paper. Expressivism is a thesis about the meaning of a particular kind of notions, and it is perfectly sound to be an expressivist about some higher-order notions and being a descriptivist about some others. For instance, logical expressivism, the position held by Wittgenstein (1922) and Brandom (1994) about logical constants, doesn't force anyone to be an expressivist about moral notions, and the other way around –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 (1) and (2), that spotted the presence in natural language of a special group of expressions of a non-descriptivist nature, but rather at theses (3) and (4). Thesis (3) posits that complex expressions containing counterparts of higher-order expressions lack truth conditions, but only (3') is a consequence of (2) –provided that their job is not to describe how the world is, second-order expressions do not modify the truth-conditions of the expressions falling under their scope. Some other objections concern thesis (4), the specific characterization of the positive work that second-order expressions do. We think that (4) 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 spelled out. This map of possible inferences would make apparent the relationships between some higher-order notions and others. *Positive* expressivist accounts of the meaning of these expressions are only worthy –from the point of view of the things that we as speakers can do with them– as long as they inspire hypotheses that might modify the inferential map. Here we have sketched a semantic view on a group of expressions particularly reluctant to traditional analyses. But this is only a first step. On similar lines, other sets of philosophically relevant notions admit an expressive 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 point of view of their inferential behaviour once that we get rid of the classical descriptive approaches that have led most debates on higher-order notions to a disheartening dead-end.

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