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## 9

## Properties for Nothing, Facts for Free? Expressivism's Deflationary Gambit

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It is astonishing (to many of us) that early versions of expressivism gained any traction among philosophers. These views, after all, barely tried to accommodate central features of ordinary moral thought and practice. Take A. J. Ayer as an example. In his classic defence of expressivism, Ayer develops a view according to which moral sentences express not moral propositions but emotive states of various sorts, such as states of condemnation and commendation. Ayer forthrightly acknowledges that, if his view were correct, then there would be no sense in which moral judgements could be true or cases of knowledge. These implications seem not to bother Ayer; he presents them as being entirely innocuous. To many of us, however, these implications seem far from innocuous. Ayer, we would say, has produced a metaethical view that doesn't even come close to being satisfactory.

Most contemporary expressivists would agree with this last claim. Although these philosophers defend a position in the lineage of Ayer, they (unlike Ayer) work very hard to fashion positions that accommodate and explain deeply embedded features of ordinary moral thought and practice, including the apparent facts that many of our moral thoughts are true and cases of knowledge. Central to the success of this accommodation project has been the deployment of what we might call 'the deflationary package'—this being (roughly) the view that moral propositional content, properties, facts, and truth admit of a deflationary (or minimalist) treatment. Expressivists often present their position as if it were tailor-made for the appropriation of the deflationary package. For by appropriating this package, they indicate, they can say just about everything that moral realists do but without compromising their expressivism.<sup>1</sup>

Other philosophers worry that this is not so. Those who press the 'creeping minimalism' objection, for example, maintain that taking the deflationary

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Blackburn (2005b: 59) and (1998: ch. 3).

turn threatens to collapse the distinction between realism and expressivism or at least leaves us without the resources to say what it is.<sup>2</sup> In some places, some expressivists seem unconcerned about this apparent implication of their position; realists and expressivists, they suggest, have arrived at the same position in two different ways.<sup>3</sup> The rest of us, however, worry that expressivists should be concerned about this apparent implication of their view. Philosophers introduced expressivism, after all, as an alternative to realism. It would be very surprising to discover that, when looked at from the right angle, there is nothing particularly alternative about it. It would, for example, be very surprising to learn that, when looked at from the right angle, sophisticated expressivism is really an idiosyncratic version of Moorean non-naturalistic realism.

My aim in this chapter is not to ring changes on the creeping minimalism objection. It is, rather, to explore the more general question of whether expressivism really is tailor-made for appropriating the deflationary package. I am going to argue that the answer to this question is no; the two views do not fit well together. Or more accurately, I am going to argue that, given a prominent understanding of deflationism, which some expressivists appear to accept, it is very difficult to see how the views fit together. Of course, expressivists needn't embrace what I am calling a prominent understanding of deflationism; they are free to devise as many alternative understandings of deflationism as they like. But if they were to reject this understanding of deflationism, then there would be new work to be done. We would need to understand what these new proposals might be, why they would qualify as being deflationary in any recognizable sense, and whether they were compatible with expressivism. One could, for example, imagine a version of deflationism according to which talk of moral properties is mere pretence. This view would not, however, be available to expressivists, for fictionalism with regard to the moral domain is a view that expressivists explicitly disavow.<sup>4</sup>

## 1. THE EXPRESSIVIST EXPLANATORY STRATEGY

Let's take things from the top. In its most sophisticated guises, expressivism is presented not so much as a positive metaethical position but as a type of

<sup>2</sup> Dreier (2004) and Rosen (1998) present the creeping minimalism objection. In certain places, Blackburn seems keen to collapse the distinction between realism and expressivism. See Blackburn (1993: 4) and (2005b: 117–121).

<sup>3</sup> See Gibbard (2003: ch. 9).

<sup>4</sup> Armour-Garb and Woodbridge (2011) propose a view about truth along these lines. Blackburn (2005a) maintains that expressivists reject fictionalism as applied to the ethical domain.

explanatory strategy that incorporates distinctive commitments about the nature of moral concepts.<sup>5</sup> The strategy is to begin with this understanding of the way in which moral concepts work and, on the basis of this understanding, attempt to account for a wide range of phenomena, such as the existence of moral properties, propositions, and facts. It will be helpful to begin by having an outline of the strategy before us, one which blends together various claims that expressivists make.<sup>6</sup>

We begin with moral predicates such as 'good' and 'wrong'. Everyone acknowledges that moral predicates figure in ordinary indicative sentences such as 'Jack was a good man' and 'It would be wrong to harm Jack's cat'. What is the semantic contribution that these predicates make to the sentences in which they figure? A plausible position is that they are used to do such things as commend and condemn. Under a standard use, to utter the sentence 'Jack was a good man' is to commend Jack. Likewise, under a standard use, to utter the sentence 'It would be wrong to harm Jack's cat' is to condemn harming Jack's cat. Arguably, however, meaning is a function of use. So, we can say that the meaning of these sentences (and their sub-sentential components) is provided by the mental states of commendation and condemnation that they are standardly used to express. According to contemporary metaethical lore, it is this last thesis that represents the centrepiece of the expressivist explanatory strategy. Rather than explain the meanings of moral sentences in terms of their truth conditions, expressivists contend, we explain them in terms of the mental states these sentences are standardly used to express. Expressivism thus understood is a species of mentalism, where 'mentalism' is the view that the meaning of a linguistic item is given by the mental states (or the concepts) that it standardly expresses.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Regarding expressivist quasi-realism, Blackburn (1993) writes: the 'expressivist will say that there are ethical truths, and even that they are independent of us and our desires. But it is confusing to call the position realist, precisely because at no point does it regard our behavior in this area as explained by any kind of awareness of an area of reality, or a real feature or property of things. It is here that the 'quasi' comes in: we *end up* saying things that sound superficially distinctive of realism, but *the explanation* of what we are doing in saying them and of how we get to say them is different' (98).

<sup>6</sup> The blend I present incorporates claims found in Blackburn (1993) and (1998), Gibbard (2003: 18, 88, 182–183), Horgan and Timmons (2000), and Wright (1992). Wright, let me add, does not defend expressivism. I should also note that the version of expressivism I outline fits better with Blackburn's and Timmons' views than Gibbard's. But see n. 30.

<sup>7</sup> To put the view this way is to leave unspecified what, according to expressivists, concepts are and the relations they bear to mental states. According to expressivists, are concepts Lockean mental pictures, Fregean modes of presentation, Ockhamist acts of cognition? It is difficult to say; expressivists say little about the issue, often freely sliding between talk of mental states and concepts. In what follows, then, I will also say little about the issue, often sliding between talk of mental states and concepts.

Having taken the expressivist turn, we now add layers that early expressivists such as Ayer did not. In the first place, we help ourselves to properties, as these come 'for free' with well-behaved predicates.<sup>8</sup> According to expressivists, properties are pleonastic: corresponding to every well-behaved predicate such as 'good' or 'wrong' is a corresponding property—in this case, the properties *being good* and *being wrong* respectively. We needn't, though, be stingy when it comes to pleonastic entities. We can also help ourselves to propositions or 'declarative contents'.<sup>9</sup> For recall that the moral predicates in which we are interested are themselves constituents of indicative moral sentences. But with indicative sentences—so it is said—come propositions. The existence of propositions, it is claimed, provides the most elegant explanation of the validity of certain types of inferences—ones, for example, which say that since both Jack and Martha judge that it is wrong to harm his cat, there is something they both judge: namely, that harming Jack's cat is wrong. But propositions, all will agree, carry with them truth conditions. We know, for example, that it is true that harming Jack's cat is wrong if and only if harming Jack's cat is wrong. We can say the same thing by invoking facts. We know that it is a fact that harming Jack's cat is wrong if and only if harming Jack's cat is wrong. Now we add a final layer: it is, of course, wrong to harm Jack's cat. It is a truth, a fact. No decent person would deny it.

This, in broad outline, is the way in which contemporary expressivists tend to present their project. Note, however, that in my presentation of the expressivist strategy I said nothing about deflationism. In what ways, then, does the strategy incorporate deflationary commitments? Well, it does not do so in virtue of its opening or closing moves. A position is not deflationary simply in virtue of embracing a mentalist account of meaning. Nor is it deflationary in virtue of claiming that there are moral truths. Perhaps, then, the deflationism enters elsewhere, although we didn't explicitly flag it. Perhaps the expressivist's strategy incorporates deflationary commitments inasmuch as it claims that properties and propositions are pleonastic—that they come for free with well-behaved predicates and indicative sentences. This, at least, is a natural way of interpreting some things that expressivists say.

This diagnosis, however, would be mistaken. For some philosophers, such as Nicholas Wolterstorff, believe that properties come for free with well-behaved predicates—properties themselves being predicables that can be predicated of various things. But philosophers such as Wolterstorff are not deflationists about properties. To the contrary, they are Platonists.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, other philosophers, such as Stephen Schiffer, endorse

<sup>8</sup> Blackburn (1998: 80).

<sup>9</sup> This last term is the one favoured by Horgan and Timmons (2000).

<sup>10</sup> See Wolterstorff (1970: 85) as well as Schiffer (2003) and van Inwagen (2004).

'something-for-nothing' transformations according to which we get propositions more or less for free with indicative sentences. But these philosophers are not deflationists about propositions (at least they are not simply in virtue of holding that propositions are pleonastic). They are also Platonists, holding that propositions are abstract, mind- and language-independent entities that have their truth conditions essentially.<sup>11</sup> In fact, it is worth emphasizing the following point about the expressivist explanatory strategy, at least as I have presented it. Realists can endorse every one of its steps, including mentalism about meaning. Admittedly, it would be unusual for a realist to champion mentalism about meaning, but, so far as I can tell, there is no conceptual barrier to doing so.<sup>12</sup>

I do not take these observations to support the claim that there really are no deep differences between expressivism and moral realism. I take them only to support the claim that we need to specify what these differences are, however difficult that may be. Arguably, the most natural place to look for illumination on this issue is what expressivists themselves say about their deflationary commitments. For a commitment to the deflationary package is an important respect in which expressivist and realist views seem to differ; expressivists accept the package, while realists do not. In this case, however, the most natural place to look is probably not the most helpful. Although expressivists regularly employ the deflationary package, they tend to say little about how to understand it. Often we get nothing more than metaphors to the effect that moral facts are 'shadows' of moral sentences and pronouncements that moral properties are 'the semantic projection of predicates'.<sup>13</sup> I say this not in a tone of exasperation. Philosophers who work in metaethics do this sort of thing all the time. They borrow from other sub-fields of philosophy without offering anything like a substantive account of that which they are borrowing. We scratch only when it itches! Still, it is time to take a closer look at the deflationary package. We need to have a better idea of what expressivists have in mind when they say that, in their view, there are moral properties and propositions but only of the deflated variety.

<sup>11</sup> See Schiffer (2005). Schiffer's case is, admittedly, complicated, as his Platonism has a deflationary flavour to it. But, as I indicate in the text, it is not simply in virtue of his employing something-for-nothing transformations.

<sup>12</sup> Dreier (2010) writes 'expressivism explains normative language by saying what states of mind people are expressing by their sincere assertions of normative sentences. It is compatible with some notion of normative truth, but only a pretty thin one... In short, expressivism is compatible with a deflationary conception of truth but not an inflated one' (153). This seems to me mistaken, at least given Dreier's description of how expressivists explain normative language. Presumably, it is possible to fashion an account of propositional content along mentalist lines—say, by developing an inferentialist account of meaning—and then combine it with a robust account of truth, such as the correspondence view.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Blackburn (2010: 311).

The best way to do that, I propose, is by tightening our focus for a moment. Specifically, I propose that we take a closer look at what philosophers have said about deflationism regarding truth. For this is the arena from which expressivists seem to have drawn much inspiration and in which deflationary views have been most carefully worked out.<sup>14</sup> There is, unfortunately, no quick route through deflationism about truth; the view is both subtle and elusive enough to require some unpacking. In what follows, then, I want to say just enough about deflationism regarding truth to explain why it is difficult to see how we could marry expressivism to deflationism.

Before I begin, however, I need to add a caveat. The phrase 'deflationism about truth' means different things in the mouths of different philosophers. In this section, I will present not a composite portrait, but simply a prominent version of deflationism. In the back of my mind is the supposition that when expressivists espouse the deflationary package, they have something like this prominent version of deflationism in mind. I recognize that I might be wrong about this last claim. Perhaps there is no view or cluster of views that expressivists have in mind when they avail themselves of the deflationary package. Or perhaps—as I have heard suggested—when expressivists talk of there being moral truths, they do not wish their pronouncements to be taken with full seriousness. Perhaps they mean only to advance a metalinguistic thesis about what it is that we are doing when we *say* that there are such truths—this thesis being compatible with there being no such truths in any sense. These, as I say, are possibilities that I cannot rule out. But they are possibilities whose pursuit I will have to leave for another occasion.<sup>15</sup>

## 2. DEFLATIONISM ABOUT TRUTH

Deflationism about truth, as I understand it, incorporates three core commitments.<sup>16</sup> First, deflationists hold that the truth concept is a mere expressive or quantificational device. To illustrate: suppose I wish to express agreement about what you have said about Ella Fitzgerald's career. I can do so simply by saying 'What you said about Fitzgerald's career is true'. This is a very economical way of affirming what you said. Or, suppose somewhat differently,

<sup>14</sup> This is explicit in Blackburn (1998: 75).

<sup>15</sup> At least for the most part; I revisit the issue of deflationism as a metalinguistic thesis in section 4.

<sup>16</sup> In what follows, I draw upon Lynch (2009: ch. 6), as Lynch provides the most lucid exposition of the deflationary account of truth of which I'm aware. Lynch's presentation, in turn, draws from Horwich (1998). I should add that, while sympathetic with certain aspects of deflationism, Lynch does not defend it.

I want to testify to your reliability about the details of Ella Fitzgerald's career. In such a case, I can simply say 'Nearly everything that you've said about Fitzgerald's career is true'. This saves me the trouble of uttering a long string of sentences such as: 'You said p about Fitzgerald's career and p', 'You said q about Fitzgerald's career and q', 'You said r about Fitzgerald's career and r', and so on. Using the truth concept allows us to economize our words. An omniscient being that could hold an infinite number of propositions before its mind's eye wouldn't need the truth concept. But the rest of us do.

Second, deflationists claim that the whole essence of the truth property is revealed by the truth concept. Somewhat more precisely, the claim is that the schema:

TS: the proposition p is true if and only if p

conveys our ordinary truth concept. This concept, moreover, is such that it reveals all there is to know about the essence of truth; there is no other truth concept such that it reveals more about the essence of truth. In this regard, a property such as *being a conjunction* provides an interesting parallel. Our notion of this property is simply that of a sentence of the form A & B—where such a sentence is true when and only when both its conjuncts are true. As such, one grasps all there is to know about the nature of this property simply by grasping its correlative concept. There is nothing for the property to be beyond that which the concept reveals it to be. The essence of the property is completely transparent.<sup>17</sup>

Third, and finally, deflationists embrace the slogan that 'truth has no nature'. This slogan is a somewhat cryptic way of advancing two related ideas. The first idea is that there is nothing informative to say about the nature of the truth property. It does not have a hidden essence that we can discover through either empirical or philosophical investigation. The nature of the truth property, then, does not consist in a proposition's being such as to correspond to a correlative fact or its being such as to be a member of an ideally coherent system of propositions. For, according to deflationists, there is nothing informative to say about that in virtue of which a proposition is true. Deflationists, of course, do not deny that we can rightfully say things such as:

A proposition is true just in case it corresponds to a correlative fact.

<sup>17</sup> Lynch (2009: 106–107). In his presentation of these issues, Lynch speaks of the truth concept revealing the essence of the truth property. But it may be best to understand deflationists to claim that it is the *competent employment* of the truth concept that reveals the essence of the truth property. In what follows, I'll ignore this nuance.

But, they insist, this is simply a more elaborate way of stating schema:

TS: the proposition *p* is true if and only if *p*.

The second related idea expressed by the slogan that truth has no nature is that neither the truth concept nor the truth property plays any significant explanatory roles (beyond being an expressive or quantificational device). For, presumably, if they did, then there would be interesting and informative facts to discover about the nature of truth, which, according to deflationism, there is not. When they make pronouncements such as these, deflationists such as Paul Horwich do not specify exactly what they have in mind when they use the phrase a 'significant explanatory role'. But it is clear from the examples they use that, in their view, something plays a significant explanatory role if it figures in ordinary scientific explanations, such as ones in which we appeal to a thing's real Lockean essence to explain its superficial properties or to account for causal happenings in the world.<sup>18</sup> Under a natural reading, however, deflationists wish to cast their net wider than this. For there appear to be ways in which something could play a significant explanatory role other than those just mentioned. Most obviously, a feature might play an important explanatory role in accounting for phenomena that not scientists but philosophers wonder about.

Consider modal attributions as an example. Suppose someone were to say that time travel is impossible or that the property *being rational* belongs to the essence of being human. How shall we understand claims of these sorts? Some philosophers propose that we do so in terms of possible worlds. According to these philosophers, the best way to understand what it is for something to be impossible or what it is to belong to the essence of a thing is by quantifying over possible worlds. If they are right about this, then we have good reason to believe that possible worlds do important explanatory work; they help explain deeply puzzling issues, such as the character of modal attributions.

Suppose, then, we think of deflationism about truth as incorporating these three core claims about the truth concept and property: the truth concept plays a mere expressive/quantificational role; the truth concept reveals all there is to know about the essence of truth; and the truth property has no nature, playing no significant explanatory roles. Of these three core claims, I take the last to be the heart of deflationism, its living soul. If you were to surrender it—say, by claiming that truth consists in a correspondence with the facts or plays a robust explanatory role—then you would no longer be a deflationist about truth.

<sup>18</sup> Horwich's views seem to have shifted over the years. In his (1998), he works with a contrast between substantial properties and deflated ones. In later work—(2010: ch. 12)—he maintains that there is no such distinction available.

Let me elaborate upon this last claim, since it is important for the argument I am about to offer. Consider a prominent version of the correspondence theory of truth. Advocates of this position maintain that schema TS conveys our ordinary truth concept. Not only does schema TS convey our ordinary truth concept, to grasp this concept, these philosophers say, is simply to be disposed to accept all the instances of schema TS. In this respect, deflationists and correspondence theorists see eye to eye. Still, there is an important difference between these two views. Correspondence theorists hold that there is a great deal more to say about the truth *property* than deflationists believe. For if correspondence theorists are right, the truth property consists in a robust correspondence relation between a proposition and a correlative fact. Understood thus, correspondence theorists maintain that not only is there a great deal to say about truth's essence, but also that the truth property may also do important explanatory work. It may, for example, form the backbone of our best theories of meaning and epistemic warrant.<sup>19</sup>

A prominent version of the correspondence theory, then, accepts a broadly deflationary understanding of the truth concept but a robust account of the truth property. How do deflationists propose to shrink conceptual space so that it does not admit of such a position? Enter the second deflationary thesis, which tells us that the truth concept reveals all there is to know about the essence of truth. This thesis we can call:

**Truth Transparency:** The truth concept reveals the entire essence of the truth property. One grasps the essence of *being true* simply by grasping the concept *being true*.

Truth Transparency plays a pivotal role in the deflationary project. It provides a rationale for believing the third deflationary thesis. For suppose we combine the first deflationary thesis—the claim that the truth concept plays a mere expressive/quantificational role—with Truth Transparency. Then the third deflationary thesis follows. From the fact that the truth concept has a mere expressive/quantificational function, we know that the truth concept fails to play any significant explanatory role (beyond, that is, of being an expressive or quantificational device). If, however, the truth concept conveyed by schema TS gives us complete insight into the nature of the truth property, then we also know that the truth property has no nature. It has no hidden essence to discover and fails to play any significant explanatory roles.<sup>20</sup> Together with Truth Transparency, the first deflationary claim 'hems in' the truth property, eliminating the possibility that the character and

<sup>19</sup> The view I have just articulated is that defended in Alston (1996: ch. 8) and (2001).

<sup>20</sup> This is to simplify. In the next section, I'll indicate why.



explanatory profile of the truth property outstrip that revealed by the concept. According to deflationism, the most we can say is that a proposition has the truth property if and only if it satisfies schema TS. That's the whole story about truth.

I need now to lay bare two assumptions required to make this last line of argument go through. The first assumption concerns the truth concept. It is commonly accepted that there can be different concepts of the same property or other type of conceptualized object. I can, for example, think of the number two by employing the concepts the smallest prime number or the smallest positive even number. Some concepts are, however, richer than others. By this I mean that some concepts convey additional information about the nature of the conceptualized object and often in ways that are more articulate than other concepts, allowing us to appreciate dimensions of the nature of the conceptualized object that we had not previously discerned. Among the various concepts that stand for some object, there are some that are special, however. These we can call the *limit concepts*. Let us say that C is a limit concept if and only if there is no richer concept C\* such that C\* denotes the same object as C.<sup>21</sup> Limit concepts are special because, for any given conceptualized object for which there is a limit concept, no matter how much more we learn about the world, we are not going to discover more about the nature of that object than is revealed by its limit concept. An apparently paradoxical implication of this account of a limit concept is that a particular limit concept might not itself convey detailed information about some conceptualized object. For that concept might reveal that there is very little to say about the nature of that conceptualized object.

Return now to truth. Like other concepts, there are numerous truth concepts; some emphasize that truth is the goal of inquiry, others stress that it is intimately related with the mind being adequate to reality. Deflationists needn't deny this. But they hold that there is something special about the truth concept, T, that is conveyed by schema TS. According to deflationists, this truth concept is special not simply because it is the one we ordinarily use when making truth attributions. It is also special because it is a limit concept. That is, deflationists maintain that the truth concept T is such that there is no richer truth concept T\* that denotes the same property as T. No matter how much more we learn about the world, we are not going to discover that there is more to truth than what is revealed by T. This is why—or so I hazard—deflationists can say that the truth concept reveals all there is to know about the nature of truth. For when deflationists speak of

<sup>21</sup> For present purposes, I understand denotation in a very thin way so that it is neutral between non-deflationary and deflationary understandings of the concept.

'the' truth concept, they have in mind the concept conveyed by schema TS. And, they hold, this concept is not simply one among other truth concepts but a limit concept.

Now for the second assumption: I have said that, according to deflationists, the truth concept reveals the entire essence of the truth property. It reveals, among other things, that there is nothing in which truth consists. But if the truth concept reveals this, then we need to understand the phrase 'the essence (or nature) of a property' broadly. Under a broad understanding, this phrase denotes (among other things) that in which a property F consists, where this includes its being such that there are considerations necessarily in virtue of which something is F. One way to see why deflationists need to accept this broad understanding of a nature is to consider the alternative.

Suppose, for argument's sake, we were to draw a sharp distinction between the essence of a property F, on the one hand, and a property F's being such that there are considerations necessarily in virtue of which something has it. This last property, we are supposing, does not belong to the essence of F. Now let us suppose that Truth Transparency is correct: the truth concept reveals the entire essence of the truth property. These two assumptions have the implication that one could be a deflationist about truth—since the truth concept reveals its entire essence—and also agree that, necessarily, true propositions are true in virtue of their corresponding to the facts (where this last phrase is understood as correspondence theorists understand it).

I take the position that I have just described, however, to be deflationary in name only. It is entirely antithetical to the spirit of deflationism. After all, were it correct, then the debate between deflationists and their rivals would turn on a technicality, namely, how broadly to understand the concept of a nature. That, however, doesn't seem right. For one thing, it is not how deflationists themselves cast the fundamental differences between their view and their rivals. These philosophers indicate that there is something more substantive at stake between their view and those of their rivals than which way we jump concerning a contested issue in the metaphysics of modality. Moreover, were we to allow that deflationism is compatible with the view that, necessarily, propositions are true in virtue of their corresponding to the facts, then it is difficult to see how deflationists could rule out the view that the truth property plays significant explanatory roles, such as explaining the nature of epistemic warrant. For it might be that the truth property plays very significant explanatory roles, even if it does not do so in virtue of its nature; it might, for example, play these roles in virtue of its having certain essential properties such as its being such as to supervene on a proposition's corresponding to the facts. In light of this, it seems that when deflationists such as Horwich maintain that truth 'has no underlying nature', we should

understand them as operating with a liberal account of the nature or essence of truth.<sup>22</sup> According to this understanding, were propositions true in virtue of their corresponding to the facts, this would belong to the essence of the truth property. Or so I shall suppose. Since this is a controversial claim, I will return to it later.

My purpose in this chapter is not to investigate the deflationary account of truth. Rather, it is to explore the issue of whether the deflationary package and expressivism are hospitable company. Still, I take our discussion of the deflationary account of truth to have highlighted two important features about deflationism regarding any concept/property pair.

First, deflationary views regarding some concept/property pair *F* are committed to the claim that the members of *F* have no nature, playing no significant explanatory roles. They do not enter into paradigmatic scientific or philosophical explanations in which we attempt to account for one or another phenomenon. This claim, I suggested, is the heart of deflationism; deny it regarding some property/concept pair *F* and you are not a deflationist about *F*. Second, Truth Transparency plays a pivotal role in the deflationary project. It is what justifies the claim that the truth property has no nature. Were one to surrender it—or something close enough to it—then one would have also surrendered the main reason for holding that deflationism about truth is correct.<sup>23</sup> Otherwise put, Truth Transparency is what guarantees that the truth property is entirely innocuous, something that does not invite ‘difficult philosophical questions’.<sup>24</sup>

### 3. BEING WRONG: A DILEMMA

In the opening pages of *Thinking How to Live*, Allan Gibbard writes that, as he understands it, expressivism covers ‘any account of meanings that follows this indirect path: to explain the meaning of a term, explain what states of mind the term can be used to express’.<sup>25</sup> Earlier I specified the states in mind in question very broadly, as being not ordinary beliefs but states of

<sup>22</sup> Horwich (2004: 1). Deflationists could, I suppose, state their own position by claiming that it belongs to the essence of truth that there is nothing in which truth consists.

<sup>23</sup> There are, I imagine, weaker versions of Truth Transparency that could do the same work, ones according to which the truth concept reveals not the whole essence of the truth property but enough about it for us to be able to see that there is little to it and that the truth property cannot play any significant explanatory roles. In what follows, I shall ignore this nuance, working with a robust account of Truth Transparency.

<sup>24</sup> This phrase comes from Blackburn (1998: 75).

<sup>25</sup> Gibbard (2003: 7).

commendation and condemnation. This is helpful for getting an idea of the sorts of states of mind expressivists think determine meaning. But it is only a start. States of commendation and condemnation, after all, come in many varieties, not all of them ethical. It would be instructive for our purposes, then, to have before us an expressivist account of a paradigmatic moral concept, such as the concept which is expressed by the phrase ‘being wrong’. What would an expressivist account of this concept look like?

Mark Schroeder, in his book *Being For*, contends that expressivists have been relatively inarticulate when addressing this question. Moreover, when they have offered proposals regarding the nature of this concept, they have failed to explain how it is that the contents of sentences that express it, such as ‘Fratricide is wrong’, could be logically inconsistent with sentences that are their duals, such as ‘Fratricide is not wrong’. Expressivists, Schroeder suggests, can do better.

The way forward, Schroeder maintains, is to modify Gibbard’s suggestion in *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings*, maintaining that the term ‘being wrong’ expresses the concept (or mental state) being for blaming. According to this view, to say ‘Fratricide is wrong’ is to express the concept being for blaming fratricide. Of course under this understanding, the concept being for blaming does not function predicatively. One does not predicate being for blaming of fratricide when one competently employs this concept. Rather, the concept functions expressively. One employs the concept to express being for blaming fratricide. Schroeder concedes that expressivists are not as such committed to this particular proposal regarding that concept which is expressed by the phrase ‘being wrong’. Rather, his claim is simply that his proposal is an example of the *type* of position that an adequate expressivist account of moral concepts would have to defend. For it is the sort of position that would allow expressivists to explain how moral sentences such as ‘Fratricide is wrong’ and ‘Fratricide is not wrong’ could be logically inconsistent.<sup>26</sup>

Let us suppose that Schroeder is right about this. Being for blaming is a representative example of what the phrase ‘being wrong’ would have to express, were expressivism true. Under this understanding, the concept expressed by the phrase ‘being wrong’ would exhibit features very similar to the truth concept. Like the truth concept, it would primarily function as an expressive device—although, in this case, it would be used as a device not to express agreement but being for blaming. And, if Simon

<sup>26</sup> For the argument, see Schroeder (2008), especially chs. 3–4. Schroeder conducts his discussion in terms of not concepts but predicates, attitudes, and properties (see p. 58). As well as I can tell, however, we do no violence to Schroeder’s approach by couching it in terms of concepts.

Blackburn is right, it might even play a quantificational role.<sup>27</sup> These roles would more or less exhaust the function of being for blaming in ordinary moral thinking.

With an expressivist understanding of the concept being wrong in hand, we now put the expressivist's explanatory strategy to work. We add layers to our metaethical position that early expressivists such as Ayer did not, helping ourselves to the property *being wrong*, declarative contents that express this property, and various truths in the neighbourhood, including the truth that *harming Jack's cat is wrong*. We saw earlier, however, that implementing this strategy is not quite this straightforward. For those who advocate a deflationary understanding of a concept/property pair F do not hold that, given a deflationary account of the concept 'being F', it simply follows that the correlative property *being F* also ought to be understood along deflationary lines. A property might, after all, have an essence in virtue of which it plays explanatory roles, which outstrips what a concept tells us about it. So, deflationists regarding F offer us a justification for thinking that a property *being F* bears the tell-tale deflationary marks. This justification goes through the following general claim, a substitution instance which we have already encountered in our discussion of truth:

**Transparency:** The concept being f reveals the entire essence of the property *being F*. One grasps the essence of *being F* simply by grasping the concept being f.

Suppose the phrase being wrong expresses the (expressive) concept being for blaming. When applied to the case of wrongness, Transparency implies that the concept being for blaming reveals the entire essence of the property *being wrong*; nothing is left hidden. There is nothing about an action's having the property *being wrong* that is not revealed by the concept being for blaming.

I can now state the dilemma that I take expressivist views to face. Either the concept being for blaming purports to reveal the essence of the property *being wrong* or it does not. If it does, then expressivism is incompatible with just about every substantive view in normative ethics that philosophers have defended. If it does not, then it is possible that the property *being wrong* has a hidden essence that plays substantive explanatory roles. The first horn of the dilemma is unacceptable, for expressivism should not be incompatible with just about every substantive view of normative ethics that philosophers have defended. The second horn, however, is no better. For to accept it is to surrender deflationism about *being wrong*.

<sup>27</sup> See Blackburn (2010).

Let us begin with the dilemma's first horn. Bring to mind the various proposals offered by philosophers concerning that in which wrongness consists. They include claims that wrongness consists in:

*being such as not to maximize value;*  
*being such as to fail the categorical imperative;*  
*being condemned by an ideal observer;*

and:

*being forbidden by God.*

Call these the *normative proposals*, since they represent various proposals made in normative ethics concerning the nature of wrongness. When, for example, Kantians say that wrongness consists in violating the categorical imperative, I take them to be offering not the mere observation that wrong actions happen to have the property *being such as to fail the categorical imperative* in common. Rather, I understand them to offer a view about the nature of wrongness. Wrong actions are, according to Kantians, necessarily such as to violate the categorical imperative; that's what wrongness consists in.

For present purposes, it does not matter how we understand the 'consists in' locution that I have been employing. We can take it to be neutral between views that would identify wrongness with one or another property specified by the normative proposals, on the one hand, or maintain that the proposals specify that (necessarily) in virtue of which an action is wrong, on the other. However we understand it, at least this much will be true: the concept being for blaming would not reveal all there is to know about the nature of wrongness; there would be important information about the essence of the property—that in which the property consists—that the concept would not reveal. To grasp the concept being for blaming would not, for example, reveal that an action is wrong in virtue of failing the categorical imperative or being forbidden by God. Indeed, note that even if wrongness were a primitive property such that there is nothing to say about that in which it consists, the concept being for blaming would not reveal its nature. This is not simply because there would be nothing to reveal, but also because the property's nature would not incorporate any information about blaming, such as that wrong actions are such that agents are for blaming them.

Philosophers have often written as if one could, with adjustments here and there, combine expressivism with just about any normative proposal about the nature of wrongness.<sup>28</sup> Expressivism might even encourage this

<sup>28</sup> See Bennett (1995), Blackburn (1998 and 2011), and Unger (1996: 22–23), for example.



optimism, since it tells us that there are moral properties such as *being wrong*. But if the line of argument we are exploring is correct, such optimism would be misplaced. The combination of expressivism and Transparency would rule out accepting nearly every view defended by normative theorists regarding the nature of wrongness.

But it would not rule out all such views. There is one view about *being wrong* that is compatible with Transparency, namely, ethical subjectivism. According to ethical subjectivism:

An action  $\Phi$ ing is wrong (for agent S) if and only if  $\Phi$ ing is such that S is for blaming it.

If this view were correct, an agent S's grasp of the concept being for blaming would reveal all there is to know about wrongness. For wrongness, according to this view, is an indexical property. Actions are never wrong *tout court* but only for a given agent. Accordingly, if S is aware that an action is wrong for her, then she can infer a priori that she is for blaming it; that is simply what the property consists in. And if she is aware that she is for blaming it, then she knows it is wrong for her. In this regard, the parallel with deflationism with respect to truth is manifest. Deflationists with regard to truth hold that, for every substitution instance of schema TS, we can infer what is stated on its right-hand from what is stated on its left-hand side and vice versa. This, they conclude, is reason to believe that the truth concept is merely an expressive or quantificational device. Were expressivists to reason similarly, they would be reasoning in precisely the way that deflationists do with regard to truth.

Those unsympathetic to expressivism have long suspected that ethical subjectivism is the view to which expressivism inevitably leads.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, they have rightly insisted that if it did, this would be fatal to expressivism, since expressivism was expressly designed to be an alternative to subjectivism. I do not wish to defend the claim that expressivism collapses into subjectivism. At this point, I wish only to present the first horn of the dilemma, which is that if expressivists accept Transparency, then their view would be incompatible with just about every substantive view in normative ethics that philosophers have defended—the notable exception being subjectivism, which is a view that no expressivist would accept. Metaethical positions may have various implications for normative ethics. But those that affirm that actions have properties such as *being wrong* shouldn't have the implication that engaging in normative ethics is impossible (or a convenient fiction) since their views about the nature of wrongness are incompatible with all the normative proposals.

<sup>29</sup> See Jackson and Pettit (1998). Also see Egan (2007).

Let us now turn to the dilemma's second horn. Suppose expressivists were to reject Transparency with regard to being for blaming. By rejecting Transparency with regard to being for blaming, expressivists would have rejected the idea that this concept is a limit concept. They would have thereby opened up the possibility that there are other concepts expressed by the phrase 'being wrong' that are more articulate than it, perhaps even revealing the essence of wrongness. While this seems like a sensible move to make, it presents expressivists with the challenge of crafting a position that is compatible with the normative proposals but also recognizably deflationary. How might one do that?

The place to start, it seems, is to identify a target concept of wrongness that has the following three features. First, it has to be a plausible candidate for being that normative concept which is expressed by ordinary people when they say things such as 'Harming Jack's cat for fun is wrong'. Second, it must be an expressive concept—a device for expressing attitudes such as being for blaming. And, third, it should allow expressivists to be deflationists with respect to wrongness and yet also engage in normative ethics, since expressivism is, in principle, compatible with an array of normative proposals. That is the aim.

There are, however, constraints on how to achieve this aim. We will need to assume that, whatever target concept we identify, it and being for blaming pertain to the same property, namely, wrongness. So, being for blaming and our target concept must be related in such a way that it is reasonable to believe this. There is, then, pressure not to pack too much content into the target concept; if we did, we might be hard pressed to explain why the target concept and being for blaming pertain to the same thing. Not only this, we want to be able to explain why it is that Kantians, consequentialists, divine command theorists, and the like are not talking past each other but disagreeing about the nature of wrongness. This means that we cannot identify our target concept with, say, the Kantian or the consequentialist understanding of wrongness. For if we did, then there would be reason to doubt whether these views are saying different things about the same thing, namely, wrongness. And, finally, we want to be able to leave open the possibility that one of these normative views, such as Kantianism or consequentialism, is correct. How can we satisfy these desiderata?

As well as I can tell, the only plausible option is to understand the target concept expressed by the phrase 'is wrong' as being gappy. At a first approximation, we could say that our target concept is:

Being for blaming  $\Phi$  in virtue of \_\_\_\_\_.

The blank can be filled in various ways. In principle, we could fill it in with the property-denoting phrase  $\Phi$ 's *being such as to fail the categorical*

*imperative*, or  $\Phi$ 's *being such as to fail to maximize value*, or  $\Phi$ 's *being such as to be forbidden by God*. Note that a proposal of this sort at least has a fighting chance of fulfilling our desiderata. In principle, it could explain why the more clipped concept being for blaming pertains to wrongness. It is simply an abbreviated version of our target concept. Moreover, a proposal such as this could account for the fact that Kantians, consequentialists, and divine command theorists genuinely disagree with each other. They agree that calling an action wrong is being for blaming it in virtue of its having one or another feature. However, they disagree about what that feature is, how to fill in the blank. And, finally, the proposal allows for the possibility that one or another way of filling in the blank is correct, thereby legitimizing the project of normative ethics.

The proposal we are considering, then, has virtues. The problem with it is that it is in no sense deflationary. In fact, we've seen that deflationism with respect to a property is designed to rule out the very sort of view we are describing. To return to the parallel with which we've been working, according to deflationism about truth, truth has no hidden essence; there is nothing about its nature that we could discover through empirical or philosophical investigation. But if our proposal is correct, our ordinary concept of wrongness is not at all like that. It tells us that wrongness has a nature, something that wrongness consists in. This nature might be discoverable by empirical investigation, as some naturalists and divine command theorists believe, or by philosophical investigation, as Kantians believe. We might, moreover, be genuinely surprised about what that nature is, were we to discover it. We might discover, among other things, that it plays significant explanatory roles of which we had previously been ignorant. When they have done their work, then, normative ethicists might tell us interesting and enlightening things about wrongness that are not revealed by our target concept. And that is bad news for being a deflationist about wrongness.

In summary: suppose the phrase 'being wrong' expresses the concept being for blaming. Either this concept satisfies Transparency or it doesn't. If it does, then expressivists are committed to rejecting nearly all the various normative proposals, save subjectivism. Suppose, however, that being for blaming does not satisfy Transparency. Then it is difficult to see in what sense expressivism is compatible with deflationism about wrongness. This is because the most promising candidate for being that concept which, according to expressivists, is expressed by ordinary uses of the phrase 'being wrong' explicitly leaves open the possibility that the property *being wrong* has a real Lockean essence that plays robust explanatory roles, just as many realists claim. But to leave open this possibility is to surrender deflationism with respect to wrongness, at least as I have presented the view. Whether

we accept Transparency or not, then, it is difficult to see how to marry expressivism to deflationism thus understood.<sup>30</sup>

#### 4. OBJECTIONS

The dilemma I have posed invites numerous objections. Let me consider three.

The first place to press on the dilemma is its claim that deflationists should understand the concept of a nature or essence broadly. Recall that I argued for this claim as follows. Philosophers do not agree about how to understand phrases such as 'the essence of F'. Some operate with a maximally liberal understanding of the phrase according to which the phrase denotes all those properties that are essential to F. For example, if true propositions are such that, necessarily, they are true in virtue of corresponding to the facts, then the property *being such as to correspond to the facts* belongs to the essence of truth. Other philosophers, by contrast, work with a much narrower understanding of the phrase, holding that some subset of a thing's essential properties constitute its nature. According to these philosophers, it might be that true propositions are such that, necessarily, they correspond to the facts. However, these philosophers would deny that this implies that the property *being such as to correspond to the facts* belongs to the essence of truth.

Imagine that deflationists were to accept a fairly narrow understanding of what it is to be a nature, one which excludes that in which a property necessarily consists. Imagine, furthermore, that, necessarily, true propositions

<sup>30</sup> Those familiar with Gibbard's work know that Gibbard employs the idea that natural properties constitute normative *concepts* such as being what one ought to do (Gibbard 2003: 94). Does Gibbard also hold that these natural facts constitute the property *being what one ought to do*? The issue is not so clear. In some places, Gibbard seems to deny that there is any such property (50, 88). In other places, however, Gibbard concedes that there may be truths or facts about what one ought to do, so long as we understand them in a deflationary way (18, 182). Is Gibbard's view, then, that while there might be a truth that an agent ought to do  $x$ , that agent does not have the property of *being such that she ought to do  $x$* ? It is hard to know, as Gibbard does not commit himself to there being deflated normative truths. However that may be, suppose that there are deflated normative truths or facts, which are constituted by normative concepts. Then the sorts of worries I am raising about deflated moral properties would apply to Gibbard's view, at least if Gibbard were to admit that there are deflated normative truths or facts. After all, a concept such as being for blaming would not reveal the nature of the fact *that an act is wrong*. And, so, for all we reasonably believe, these facts or truths might have a hidden essence that plays robust explanatory roles. If so, then it is difficult to see in what sense they are genuinely deflated truths or facts.

correspond to the facts. Imagine, finally, that the truth concept reveals all there is to know about the essence of the truth property. It follows from these three claims that deflationism is compatible with a robust version of the correspondence theory of truth, according to which, necessarily, propositions are true in virtue of corresponding to the facts. That, however, doesn't seem right. The correspondence theory and deflationism are supposed to be importantly different. There would be no important difference between these views, however, if they were both to agree that, necessarily, propositions are true in virtue of corresponding to the facts but disagree simply about whether the property *being such as to correspond to the facts* belongs to the nature of truth.<sup>31</sup> This, I claimed, is reason to believe that deflationists about truth should accept a broad understanding of what it is to be a nature. For only if they do so will they be able to defend the claim that their view is importantly different from rival positions, such as the correspondence theory. However, if they do accept a broad understanding of what it is to be a nature, I further argued, then expressivism falls to the dilemma I presented last section. For, among other things, the concept being for blaming would fail to reveal the essence of the property *being wrong*.<sup>32</sup>

Expressivists could respond to this line of argument by rejecting a broad understanding of what it is to be a nature. This might allow them to avoid the dilemma I have presented. For they might say that *being wrong* is one thing and *being that which makes something wrong* is another. The fact that a concept such as being for blamings tells us nothing about that which, necessarily, makes something wrong is—it might be said—neither here nor there, for it is not something that belongs to the nature of wrongness, narrowly understood.

<sup>31</sup> Wright (1992: 27) makes a similar reply to Horwich's attempt to reconcile deflationism with the 'Correspondence Platitude', noting that 'deflationism, and hence minimalism have no difficulty in accommodating intuitions about the relationship between truth and correspondence so long as doing so is held to require no more than demonstrating a right to the *phrases* by which those intuitions are characteristically expressed'. No deflationist, Wright continues, 'can or *should* want to entitle herself' to a '*seriously dyadic*... perspective on the truth predicate' according to which "'representation of the facts" is not just... a harmless gloss on talk of truth' (83).

<sup>32</sup> Ralph Wedgwood works with an account of the nature of normative properties that is similar to the one that I have employed. In his (2007), Wedgwood writes that the 'central task for the metaphysics of normative properties and relations is to give an account of the nature of these properties and relations'—what he calls a *constitutive account* of these properties or relations. If, for example, the property in question is *being valuable*, then we offer such an account, Wedgwood claims, when we 'speak of an account of what *constitutes* a thing's value, or of what its being valuable *consists in*' or 'that *in virtue of which* a thing is valuable'. This, Wedgwood says, is to 'speak of *what it is* for a thing to be valuable' (136).

This response is, I believe, less impressive than it might initially seem, as it shifts rather than solves the problem that the dilemma targets, allowing it to re-emerge in a slightly different form. To see this, suppose, on the one hand, that Transparency is true and being for blaming reveals the nature of wrongness. By hypothesis, the phrase the 'nature of wrongness' is being understood to have a narrow scope so as not to include that in which wrongness necessarily consists or what makes things wrong. If so, then the nature of wrongness does not include one or another of those properties specified by the normative proposals, such as *being such as to fail the categorical imperative*. Nor does it include that property which subjectivists believe that wrongness consists in, namely, *being such that an agent is for blaming it*. Nor, finally, is wrongness a primitive property about whose essence we can say virtually nothing. In that case, the concept being for blaming would fail to reveal its essence, for its essence does not include anything about blaming. What, then, is left? Having accepted a narrow account of what an essence is, it is difficult to see what the essence of the property wrongness could be such that the concept being for blaming reveals it. In this regard, wrongness is importantly disanalogous to truth (at least if subjectivism is false). For, when it comes to wrongness, there is nothing remotely analogous to schema TS, which could plausibly be understood as conveying all there is to truth.

Now suppose, on the other hand, that Transparency is false and the concept being for blaming fails to reveal the essence of wrongness. The difficulty in this case is that, for all we reasonably believe, wrongness may have a hidden Lockean essence that plays all sorts of interesting explanatory roles. But to leave this possibility open, to say it once again, is simply to surrender deflationism with regard to wrongness. I suppose one could *stipulate* that, although the concept *being for blaming* fails to reveal the essence of wrongness, the property of wrongness fails to have a hidden essence or enter into any sort of robust explanatory roles. But this won't do. Look at the matter this way: sophisticated expressivists introduce into their ontology moral properties. This invites the question as to why these properties are innocuous, as expressivists maintain. What Transparency provides is a *reason* for thinking that moral properties are innocuous in so far as they neither have a hidden essence nor play any interesting explanatory roles. If we surrender this reason for thinking that moral properties are innocuous, however, then it is time to furnish a new justification for believing that they (to allude to Blackburn's phrase) invite no 'difficult philosophical questions'. If this last point does not seem evident, put the shoe on the other foot for a moment. Imagine a realist were to announce that there is a property of wrongness—since properties come for free with well-behaved predicates—and that it plays philosophically interesting explanatory roles. This strategy

would cut no ice. Having introduced this property into our ontology, we would need a reason to believe that it plays interesting explanatory roles. But if this strategy cuts no ice, then neither should one according to which we simply announce that, while wrongness exists, it fails to have a hidden essence or play any sort of interesting explanatory roles.

Let me turn to a second place to press on the dilemma, which is to object that it fails to locate the crucial difference between deflationism and realism regarding some property *being F*. The real difference between these views, it might be said, is that while realists maintain that our behaviour is explained by our awareness of things being F, deflationists deny this. When characterizing expressivism, Blackburn puts the matter this way: the 'expressivist will say that there are ethical truths, and even that they are independent of us and our desires. But it is confusing to call the position realist, precisely because at no point does it regard our behavior in this area as explained by any kind of awareness of an area of reality, or a real feature or property of things.'<sup>33</sup> James Dreier calls this way of distinguishing realism from deflationism the "explanation" explanation'.<sup>34</sup> The basic idea is that one is a realist with regard to some domain of facts only if our judgements with regard to those facts are explained by our awareness of them; otherwise, one is not a realist.

This strikes me as a type of view that expressivists should want to work. But I doubt that it does. Expressivists, after all, maintain that actions of various sorts have the property *being wrong*. They also typically maintain that actions have this property in virtue of their having other properties, such as those specified by the normative proposals. Call these the *determining properties*. Both realists and expressivists agree that we can be and often are aware of the determining properties. Realists will say that we believe that actions of various sorts are wrong because we are aware of their having determining properties of various sorts. Expressivists, according to the 'explanation explanation', would have to deny this, however. Our wrongness-involving judgements, they would have to say, are not explained by our being aware that actions are wrong in virtue of their having one or another determining property. This, to say it again, is because they hold that our moral judgements are not explained by our being aware of moral reality. If so, the resulting view implies these two claims:

There are actions that are wrong in virtue of having some determining property of which we can be and are aware.

<sup>33</sup> Blackburn (1993: 98).

<sup>34</sup> Dreier (2004: 38).

And:

Our moral judgements that actions are wrong are not formed in virtue of our being aware of their being wrong.

Why would one hold this second claim? Presumably, because one accepts this further claim:

We cannot be aware of an action's being wrong in virtue of our being aware of its having one or another determining property.

I find this combination of claims baffling. Having conceded that actions are wrong in virtue of their having determining properties, and that we can be aware of these latter properties, what reason could there be to believe that we cannot be aware of these actions being wrong in virtue of our being aware of their having these determining properties? The stipulation looks arbitrary. Not only does it look arbitrary, the stipulation is also deeply puzzling. I do not understand how a competent moral agent could be aware that, say, an action causes gratuitous pain, judge that it is wrong, and fail to be aware that it is wrong *in virtue of* its being such as to cause gratuitous pain.<sup>35</sup>

I turn to a third response to the dilemma that I have posed, one that I suspect will be on the minds of many.<sup>36</sup> According to this response, the dilemma I have posed misrepresents the way in which expressivists employ the deflationary package. The proper way to understand their position is instead as follows. Expressivists begin by accepting deflationary schemata

<sup>35</sup> Asay (2011) offers a fascinating interpretation of quasi-realist expressivism, one that attempts to distinguish it from realism. According to Asay, the primary difference is this: both realists and quasi-realists agree that moral truths have truth-makers. They differ, however, about the nature of the truth-making relation. Realists hold that the truth-making relation is 'of a mind independent variety... involving *de re* essential properties'. Quasi-realists reject this, holding that 'to account for why certain natural facts make ethical judgements true, we need an account of how ethical properties are projected (by us) onto the world'. I have two observations about this proposal. First, while Asay offers textual evidence in its favour, he radically downplays the deflationary pretensions of quasi-realism. As well as I can tell, according to Asay's reading, expressivists needn't be deflationists about anything, I, by contrast, have tried to offer a rendering of expressivism that takes the expressivists' deployment of the deflationary package seriously. Let me add that I do not claim that my reading is more faithful to expressivism than Asay's. Rather, it seems to me that we pick up on different—and, I believe, incompatible—strands in the expressivist project. Second, I have doubts that we can offer a principled reason for holding that the truth-making relation is, according to quasi-realism, mind-dependent rather than maintaining that *ethical truth-makers* are, according to quasi-realism, (in part) mind-dependent. This is not simply because I am not sure the texts bear this reading but also, if they do, that quasi-realists themselves have the resources to draw this distinction in a principled fashion.

<sup>36</sup> An anonymous referee pressed this objection, as did Don Loeb in conversation.

for general notions such as truth, fact-hood, and property-hood. For example, a deflationary account of property-hood might say:

F is a property if and only if F can be instantiated by some object x.

According to this schema, the concept conveyed by this schema reveals all there is to know about what it is to be a property. Expressivists can then combine this schema with a deflationary schema regarding what it is for something *to have* a property. Such a schema might say:

x has the property *being F* if and only if x is F.

Like its counterpart, this schema conveys all there is to know about what it is for something to have a property. Now consider a normative property, such as *being wrong*. By the above schema, we know that an action has the property *being wrong* if and only if it is wrong. If one is a Kantian, however, one will also say that:

An act has the property *being wrong* because it has the property *being such as to fail the categorical imperative*.

But to say this, expressivists will claim, is not to offer a proposal about the nature of wrongness. Rather, it is simply to express being for blaming actions in virtue of their being such as to fail the categorical imperative. If so, the worries articulated earlier about the expressivist project melt away. Since the aim of the project was never to offer an account of that in which wrongness consists, it cannot be faulted for being unable to supply one.

While there is much to say in reply to this objection, the response I offer can be brief. Contemporary expressivists claim that there are moral properties such as *being wrong*. They also claim that this admission is innocuous, as their view can avail itself of a deflationary understanding of these properties. For those of us trying to understand what this means, there are two primary interpretive options. On the one hand, the deflationism in question might be or include an ontological thesis regarding the nature of moral properties. On the other, it could simply be a metalinguistic thesis about what it is to think or say that there are (or things have) moral properties. At the outset of our discussion, I said that I would focus on deflationism understood in the first sense. My project, I said, is to understand how we might combine expressivism with a deflationary account of not apparent moral property attributions but moral *properties*. I have argued that it is very difficult to see how we can make sense of the combination.

It is no part of my argument, though, to deny that various things that expressivists say strongly suggest that, when they claim that their view can accommodate the existence of moral properties, they wish merely to furnish a metalinguistic thesis, a deflationary account of moral property-thought

and talk. In fact, one conclusion to draw from the dilemma I have posed is that this might be the best way to interpret what expressivists are up to when they embrace deflationism, since to interpret them as doing ontology is a dead-end. This conclusion would have the happy result of throwing the differences between realists and expressivists into much sharper relief. Among other things, it would establish that, contrary to what many have assumed, there is no worry about creeping minimalism, for expressivists are offering theses about not the existence and nature of properties, but simply the character of apparent property attributions. Their account is, moreover, plainly incompatible with what realists say about the character of these attributions.

## 5. POLICING DISCOURSE

The dilemma I have posed to expressivism is a plea to understand. It is an expression of puzzlement regarding how it is that expressivists could plausibly embrace the deflationary package and also engage in normative ethics in which we say all sorts of informative and surprising things about the nature of wrongness. But it may be that I have failed to recognize nuances in the expressivist position that should alleviate this puzzlement. So let me conclude by considering a recent essay in which Simon Blackburn lays out how he views the interplay between expressivism, deflationism, and normative ethics.<sup>37</sup>

A central aim of Blackburn's 'Truth, Beauty and Goodness' is to argue that while expressivists should be extremely wary of engaging in traditional metaethics, they needn't be reluctant to engage in what he calls first-order ethical thinking—what I have termed normative ethics. Blackburn's point of departure is the ways in which ethicists use Mill's Method. Mill's Method is a method by which we try to ascertain determination relations between ethical and non-ethical features. One sets up an ethical scenario and rotates the non-ethical variables. Doing so allows us to see whether the ethical features of a situation change with the rotation of the non-ethical variables. If they do, then we have good reason to believe that we are tracking dependence relations. When it comes to normative ethics, Blackburn maintains that employing the method is perfectly legitimate. We ask whether an act is wrong by considering its consequences. If we find ourselves with the conviction that it is wrong even when it fails to have those consequences, this is reason to believe that the action's wrongness does not depend on its consequences. But with regard to metaethics, Blackburn claims, using the

<sup>37</sup> Blackburn (2010).



method is useless. Why is that? Here are several passages in which Blackburn lays out his answer:

We should agree that there is only one way of assessing propositions of the form 'the value of X depends upon Y' and it is indeed Moore's or Mill's way. We must contemplate the scenario in which Y is varied and see whether a result X varies. But as the beginner suspects, we will necessarily be 'standing within' as we do this, or in other words, deploying our own evaluative sensibilities. This is a perfectly good thing to do, and it needs stressing that there are perfectly good questions of this kind, for first-order ethicists.

When it is a question of [metaethical] valuation any MM [Mill–Moore] test merely shows us contouring our first-order ethics, and projectivists have no problem with contouring our first-order ethics as well-brought up persons should. We project our sentiments by valuing things in the way we do in the words we do. But we do not indulge a first-order ethics in which the disvalue, say of wanton cruelty depends on someone disvaluing it. It only depends on the things that make cruelty abhorrent, which are primarily the distress to its victims.

But what about the metaethicist, trying to understand the Place of Value in the World as a whole? Can't she use MM dependencies as a guide? No... We cannot pretend to escape from using our own sensibility as we use it.<sup>38</sup>

The argument is embryonic. But its central claims seem to be that when we engage in normative ethics, we employ our ethical sensibilities, thereby valuing and disvaluing things. This is legitimate. When we engage in metaethics, it turns out, we do the same thing. Metaethical thinking, then, is really disguised first-order normative ethical thinking, nothing more. This is because 'We cannot pretend to escape from using our own sensibility as we use it'.<sup>39</sup> There are no 'external' dependency claims in which we can sensibly say whether a thing's having moral features depends on our valuing it.<sup>40</sup>

The argument is striking, if only because it is redolent of the way in which logical positivists and Kantians have approached philosophical issues. The broadly positivist/Kantian approach has been one in which philosophers have a clearly defined role: it is to play a policing function, telling us what can and what cannot be intelligibly said or done. Expressivism, at least as it is presented here, is in the same business; it tells us what activities ethicists can intelligibly perform—engaging in normative ethics—and what they cannot—engaging in traditional metaethics. I myself find both this methodology and the justification that Blackburn offers for it deeply suspect. But let us suppose, for argument's sake, that metaethics is simply normative

<sup>38</sup> Blackburn (2010: 297–298, 301).

<sup>39</sup> Blackburn (1998: 298).

<sup>40</sup> Blackburn (2010: 299–300).

ethics under a different guise. My question is how, given their commitment to the deflationary package, expressivists could be so sanguine about engaging in normative ethics, as Blackburn clearly is.<sup>41</sup>

Expressivists, after all, are enthusiastic about deflationism regarding moral features such as goodness. Moore, says Blackburn, was right when he said that there is 'almost nothing to say' about goodness. Goodness, writes Blackburn, 'will indeed resist analysis, resist any account of empirical or causal access, and bear a relation of supervenience to other properties'. As with truth, Blackburn continues, we can say 'that there is a property there, if properties are just the semantic shadows of predicates. But there is no topic there, no residual mystery, therefore, about how we get our hooks into it nor why we should want to do so'.<sup>42</sup>

I find that none of this dispels my puzzlement about the marriage of expressivism and deflationism. If anything, I find my puzzlement heightened. We are told:

- (i) Moral features, such as goodness and wrongness, supervene (or depend) on non-moral ones. In fact, we can find out valuable information about goodness and wrongness, such as which actions are good or wrong, by employing Mill's Method.
- (ii) There is almost nothing to say about the nature of moral features such as goodness and wrongness. There is no topic, no residual mystery about them. There is nothing to say about their explanatory roles or how we could gain epistemic access to them.

These are the very claims, I have been claiming, that do not fit together comfortably. In reply, I suppose it might be said that Blackburn's talk of moral properties depending on non-moral ones should be taken very loosely.

<sup>41</sup> I will say this much about the justification Blackburn offers for the claim that engaging in traditional metaethical inquiry is impossible. Suppose we distinguish between metaethical inquiry—the sort of inquiry in which philosophers such as Parfit, Shafer-Landau, and Sturgeon take themselves to engage, in which we genuinely ascertain whether moral features depend on our valuing—and 'metaethical inquiry'—the activity in which Blackburn says we can engage, in which we talk of whether moral features depend on our valuing. Suppose Blackburn is right: when engaging in 'metaethical inquiry', we (i) make first-order moral judgements and (ii) must employ our ethical sensibilities. Why, however, should this make any difference as to whether it is possible to engage in metaethical inquiry? From the fact that we render first-order moral judgements when engaging in 'metaethical inquiry', why think that such inquiry consists in nothing more than the expression of first-order moral judgements? Moreover, philosophers such as Parfit, Shafer-Landau, and Sturgeon have not held that we must somehow escape our sensibilities when engaging in 'metaethical inquiry', grasping dependency relations from no perspective whatsoever. Why would one think otherwise? Why, in particular, would one hold that metaethical inquiry is impossible, given that we must employ these sensibilities? To these questions, I see no answers in Blackburn's essay.

<sup>42</sup> Blackburn (2010: 310–311).

Strictly speaking, it might be said, expressivists hold that it is expressing attitudes such as being for blaming which supervenes on natural features.<sup>43</sup> Fair enough. Expressivists can certainly say that expressing mental states such as being for blaming supervenes on natural features or the violation of standards, such as the categorical imperative. Still, by all appearances, expressivists tell us that there are moral properties such as *being wrong* that correspond to concepts such as being for blaming. They say that these concepts pertain or realize these properties. We need to know something about these properties and, in particular, why they are not as realists say they are. And about that topic, I find myself in darkness.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> In the same essay, Blackburn writes: 'So: the magnetic property of Goodness, that so excited and repelled John Mackie, becomes no more than the fact that you do not call things good unless you are also disposed to endorse them' (310). In light of what Blackburn has said about the impossibility of engaging in metaethics, I find that claims such as this raise more questions than they answer.

<sup>44</sup> Three audiences gave me helpful feedback on earlier versions of this chapter: those who attended the UVM Ethics Reading Group in July 2011, those present at the Ontology of Moral Reasons Workshop at the University of Oslo in August 2011, and those at the Madison Metaethics Workshop in September 2011. I found conversations with my colleagues Louis deRosset, Tyler Doggett, and Don Loeb especially helpful when thinking through some of the topics treated in this chapter. Finally, I thank Doggett and two anonymous referees for their written comments, which helped me to see that I still had work to do.

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