

Saying what we Mean: An Argument against Expressivism

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Some years ago I heard a well-known professor tell an audience that the best response he had witnessed to expressivism was that of a colleague who pointed to an expressivist paraphrase of a moral sentence on a blackboard and exclaimed, while rapping his knuckles on the board, that this paraphrase did not capture what he meant to say when engaging in moral discourse. On that occasion, I recall feeling that this was a simple-minded response to a very subtle position. I think now, however, that this response is in its fundamentals correct, and I shall endeavor in this essay to explain why. The argument I will develop is not a variant of what is now the standard objection to expressivism, namely, that it cannot explain the phenomenon of so-called embedded contexts.¹ Rather, it is one that draws upon contemporary speech act theory and maintains that expressivism is false on account of its being unable to accommodate properly the illocutionary act intentions of agents who engage in ordinary moral discourse. More precisely, the objection hinges on the question of whether, when agents engage in ordinary moral discourse, they intend to assert moral propositions. I argue that both an affirmative and a negative answer to this question yield unacceptable results for the expressivist. Given several plausible assumptions about the nature of illocutionary acts, an affirmative answer implies that expressivism is

I have two groups of scholars to thank for their help with this essay. Among the philosophers, I thank Chris Eberle, Phil Goggans, John Greco, Steve Layman, Pat McDonald, Mark Murphy, Ryan Nichols, Sarah Stroud, Russ Shafer-Landau, and C. J. Van Dyke for their comments. Jimmy Lenman and Christian Miller, in particular, saved me from committing some egregious errors. Among the sociologists, I thank Michael Emerson, Jennifer McKinney, Dave Sikkink, Christian Smith, and participants in the workshop 'Morality, Culture, and the Power of Religion in Social Life' held at Calvin College in February 2003. Finally, thanks to Luke Reinsma for editorial suggestions.

¹ See Geach (1960, 1965) for the classic formulation of the objection.

false, while a negative one (among other things) falls afoul of our best empirical evidence for what at least many agents intend to say when engaging in ordinary moral discourse. In what follows, I shall present what I will call the 'Core Argument' for this conclusion in schematic form, commenting on each premise, and then consider four replies to the argument.

I. Preliminaries

By a 'moral sentence' I shall mean an atomic sentence that has the surface form of predicating a moral property of an entity. 'Smith's assassination of Jones is wrong' and 'Sam is compassionate', according to the present view, are examples of moral sentences.² By 'moral discourse' I shall mean discourse that consists only in the sincere utterance of moral sentences. By a 'moral proposition' I shall mean the content (or, if you like, the object) of a moral sentence that (in at least some cases) purports (robustly) to represent a moral fact.³ And by a 'moral fact' I shall mean a feature of the world that makes the content of moral sentences true (or perhaps makes the sentences themselves true), and that can be represented by the content of such sentences (or perhaps the sentences themselves).⁴ *That Smith's assassination of Jones is wrong* and *that Sam is compassionate* are examples of moral facts as I am thinking of them.

² I will not take a view about whether sentences such as 'murder is wrong', which are naturally thought of as being universal generalizations, are moral sentences. By stipulating that the sentences in question are atomic, I mean to exclude from the class of moral sentences so-called molecular sentences that express disjunctive moral propositions, negative moral propositions, and so forth.

³ Three clarifications are in order. First, in what follows, I adopt the simplifying assumption that the logical form of moral propositions corresponds to the semantic components of the moral sentences that express them. Thus, if a sentence such as 'Sam is compassionate' expresses a moral proposition, it expresses the proposition *that Sam is compassionate*. Second, as I suggest above, I will use the term 'represent' in a robust, non-deflationary sense (although I make no suggestion about what this relation consists in). Third, I say that moral propositions represent moral facts 'in at least some cases' only because I wish to leave open the possibility that in some cases true moral propositions *are* moral facts and, thus, are what is represented in moral discourse and not what represents such facts in moral discourse.

⁴ What I say about moral facts is intended to be largely neutral regarding their nature. It is e.g. compatible with robustly realist and constructivist accounts of such facts. However, I assume that the present account of moral facts is not compatible with so-called deflationary accounts of moral facts according to which such facts cannot be robustly represented by (the content of) moral discourse. I explore this issue at more length in Cuneo (n.d.: ch. 6).

By 'expressivism' I mean any view that embraces the following two theses:

Moral Nihilism: There are no moral facts.

The Expressivist's Speech Act Thesis: When an agent sincerely utters a moral sentence, that agent does not thereby assert a moral proposition, but rather (at least) expresses an attitude of endorsement, approval, condemnation, disapproval, or the like toward a non-moral state of affairs or object.⁵

Common to both expressivism thus understood and its cognitivist rivals is an affirmation. Both positions maintain that ordinary moral discourse *looks* as if it were discourse wherein agents assert moral propositions. For example, ordinary moral discourse appears truth-apt (e.g. 'It is true that you ought to x') and embeds in conditionals (e.g. 'If you ought to x, then you ought to y') and propositional attitude ascriptions (e.g. 'I believe that I ought to x'). Unique to expressivism, however, is a denial. The expressivist denies that the surface form of moral discourse gives us very good reason to believe that it is genuinely assertoric moral discourse. We cannot, says the expressivist, read off the linguistic function of some area of discourse simply by gazing at its surface syntax.⁶

Thus described, expressivism is a very general position that includes among its members such diverse views as emotivism, prescriptivism, norm-expressivism, quasi-realism, and assertoric non-descriptivism.⁷ While the differences between these views are not unimportant, I am going to focus primarily not on what divides, but on what unites these positions. And what unites these positions, I suggest, is not simply the two theses that I have just identified, but a common rationale for accepting them. Simon Blackburn states this rationale when he writes that the very 'essence' of

⁵ I understand by a 'sincere' utterance of a moral sentence an utterance that is not intended for the purpose of dissembling. I use the locution 'expressing an attitude' to stand for those illocutionary acts that Alston (2000: ch. 4) calls 'expressives'. An act of expressing an attitude is an act of expressing a non-assertoric attitude devoid of moral propositional content. Or to use the terminology employed by Horgan and Timmons (2000), these attitudes are devoid of moral 'descriptive' content. Finally, the qualifications I introduce in the previous footnotes regarding moral facts are intended to apply to moral states of affairs and objects.

⁶ See Blackburn (1993: 57; 1998: 50)

⁷ See Ayer (1936), Stevenson (1963), Hare (1981), Gibbard (1990), Blackburn (1984, 1993, 1998), and Timmons (1999). Gibbard (2003) calls the view he develops an expressivist position. However, since Gibbard intends to be noncommittal on the issue of whether there are moral facts (see p. x) and takes his view merely to depict a way in which moral discourse might work (see pp. 6, 8), the view he develops in this book isn't clearly an expressivist view in the sense I am using the term. Accordingly, I will not assume that the argument I develop against expressivism applies to it.

expressivism is 'to protect ... against the descent into error theory'.⁸ Central to expressivism, then, is the conviction that any view that implies that ordinary folk are massively in error about morality is unacceptable.⁹ Accordingly, the expressivist urges that any acceptable moral theory should satisfy the following injunction:

The Expressivist's Guiding Rationale: Avoid an error-theoretic account of ordinary moral thought and discourse.

The Expressivist's Guiding Rationale is crucial in two respects for understanding expressivism. In the first place, it explains why expressivists reject cognitivist views of moral discourse in favor of The Expressivist's Speech Act Thesis. For suppose we were to accept Moral Nihilism or the claim that there are no moral facts. And suppose also we were to accept moral cognitivism or the view that moral discourse expresses moral propositions. Having accepted these two views, we would find it impossible to satisfy the guiding rationale, for then we would be committed to a view according to which moral discourse purports to represent moral reality, but fails to do so because there is no such reality to represent. If expressivists are right, the only plausible way by which we can at once accept Moral Nihilism and satisfy the guiding rationale is by embracing the claim that moral discourse does not even purport to represent moral reality. Then (and perhaps only then) there is—to use Blackburn's words—'no real *mismatch* between the truth about the nature of [moral] ... claims, and their content'.¹⁰

The second respect in which the guiding rationale is crucial for understanding expressivism is that it helps us to see that we have good reason to understand The Expressivist's Speech Act Thesis not as a proposal for how we ought to use moral discourse, but as a descriptive claim about how we actually use ordinary moral discourse. For notice, if the speech act thesis were simply a proposal for how we ought to engage in moral discourse,

⁸ Blackburn (2002: 167).

⁹ At least this is true of expressivism in its most powerful and sophisticated guises. See e.g. Blackburn (1993: ch. 8; 1984: 171). Like Blackburn, Gibbard (1990: 8) claims that his account does not leave 'normative language defective or second-rate'. Timmons (1999: 175) says something similar when he writes that, in his view, assertoric non-descriptivism is not at odds with our ordinary moral practice because 'I just do not think that ordinary moral discourse presupposes that ethics is objective *in the sense that realism and some versions of constructivism attempt to capture*'. See also Hare (1981: 81–3).

¹⁰ Blackburn (1993: 56). In a somewhat different context, Blackburn (1999: 214) writes that for the expressivist there 'is no problem of relativism because there is no problem of moral truth. Since moral opinion is not in the business of *representing* the world, but of assessing choices and actions and attitudes in the world ...'

it would be compatible with the view that ordinary moral discourse is massively in error and, thus, incompatible with satisfying The Expressivist's Guiding Rationale. In saying this, I don't mean to claim that expressivists have been entirely clear about the way in which the speech act thesis should be understood. They haven't.¹¹ I suggest, however, that interpreting the speech act thesis as a descriptive claim is the best way to make sense of the reasons expressivists offer in favor of their view.

I now want to identify a tension between The Expressivist's Speech Act Thesis and The Expressivist's Guiding Rationale with which I will be concerned in the remainder of this essay. What opens the conceptual space for the speech act thesis is the broadly Wittgensteinian insight that the surface form of an area of discourse can mask the genuine linguistic function of that area of discourse. However, it is widely accepted that Wittgenstein taught us another lesson, namely, if we want to find out what the linguistic function of some area of discourse is, we should pay close attention to the ways in which we *use* the sentences that comprise that area of discourse. The thesis I wish to defend is that, while expressivists have taken the first Wittgensteinian lesson to heart, they have ordinarily not done so with the second. To put the matter in the jargon of contemporary speech act theory: while expressivists have paid a great deal of attention to the manners in which the sentences used to express attitudes can mimic the syntactic properties of sentences that express moral propositions, they have paid comparatively little attention to what it is for the sentential act of uttering a moral sentence to count as the illocutionary act of 'expressing an attitude' or asserting a moral proposition. In particular, they have paid comparatively little attention to the role that illocutionary act intentions play in the performance of speech acts such as expressing an attitude and asserting. Getting clear on this issue, I suggest, will help us see why we should reject The Expressivist's Speech Act Thesis.

¹¹ Timmons (1999: 154) apparently takes the speech act thesis to be a descriptive claim: 'Moral statements, in their primary use, do not purport to make such ontological claims; rather, their primary function is to evaluate, not to describe'. Joyce (2001: 201 n. 38) and Dreier (1999) interpret Blackburn's quasi-realism as a project that seeks to protect ordinary moral discourse. Hare (1981: 86), moreover, writes that 'ordinary people when they use these [moral] words are not intending to ascribe objective prescriptive properties to actions'. Allan Gibbard (1990: 154) is more ambivalent, claiming, on the one hand, that 'norm-expressivism is meant to capture whatever there is to ordinary notions of rationality if Platonism is excluded'. On the other hand, Gibbard makes it clear that his account of rationality is not so much intended to capture what people ordinarily mean by the term 'rational', but is a proposal about how we can plausibly reconstruct normative language (ibid. 30–4). In light of The Expressivist's Guiding Rationale, I shall take the former strain of Gibbard's thought as more nearly approximating his considered view in Gibbard (1990). For a different interpretation of Gibbard, see Sturgeon (1995).

II. The Core Argument

The Core Argument I wish to develop is predicated on the assumption that we perform illocutionary acts such as asserting, insisting, promising, commanding, expressing contempt, and the like. Let me now say something about how I shall think about such acts.

I assume, first of all, that we standardly perform illocutionary acts by way of uttering sentences of certain types. So, for example, a standard way of asserting *that the car won't start* is by uttering the sentence 'The car won't start.' I do not assume that performing so-called sentential acts is the only way by which we can perform illocutionary acts.¹² I can also perform the act of asserting *that the car won't start* by, say, signing or sending a smoke signal. However, on this occasion, I shall be exclusively concerned with those illocutionary acts that we perform by way of uttering sentences.

Furthermore, I will assume that illocutionary acts have *content*. By the content of an illocutionary act I mean (roughly) what a person who performs that act seeks to communicate by the performance of that act—what the hearer must grasp to understand what the speaker is saying by the performance of that act.¹³ Thus understood, the content of an illocutionary act should not be identified with *propositional* content since what an agent can express by the performance of an illocutionary act can include non-propositional elements (such as feelings of disapproval).

Finally, and most importantly, I will assume that an agent's performing an illocutionary act is something that she does deliberately or intentionally. Performing an illocutionary act isn't something that merely *happens* to an agent; it is something an agent does. In saying this, I don't mean to suggest that when a speaker performs an illocutionary act of a certain type, her intention to perform that act is always explicit to her. Rather, I will assume that a speaker's intentions can come in varying degrees of explicitness and precision. In certain cases, it may be perfectly evident to a speaker what illocutionary act she intends to perform by way of uttering a given sentence. In other cases, the intention in question may be elicited only by skillful questioning. After I have uttered the sentence, 'Eat the leftovers!' you may ask me: 'Are you commanding or merely exhorting me

¹² Thus understood, 'sentential acts' are a subset of what J. L. Austin (1962) called 'locutionary acts'.

¹³ See Alston (2000: 15). Of course an agent can seek to communicate (say) displeasure with someone by using a certain kind of tone of voice or facial expression when performing an illocutionary act. But this is not what I have in mind by the content of an illocutionary act. The content of an agent's illocutionary act concerns *what* he says and not *how* he says it (ibid. 108).

to eat the leftovers?' If I truthfully tell you that I was merely exhorting you, this settles the issue of the illocutionary act type I performed.¹⁴ Modulo certain exceptional cases, my intention to—or better, my endeavoring to—perform an illocutionary act of a given type by uttering a given sentence determines whether I in fact performed an illocutionary act of that type by uttering that sentence.¹⁵

With these distinctions in hand, I can now introduce the concept of 'ordinary optimal linguistic conditions'—or 'ordinary optimal conditions', for short.¹⁶ Ordinary optimal conditions are ones in which a speaker and his audience have competence with a given language L, and the speaker performs an illocutionary act of a certain kind by way of performing some appropriate sentential act that conforms to the norms of L. Ordinary optimal conditions, then, are ones in which the speaker's audience has sufficient clues that he intends to perform a speech act of a given type by way of performing a sentential act of a certain kind (e.g. he does not use a secret code with which his audience is unfamiliar), the speaker doesn't misuse language or engage in a slip of the tongue in performing the sentential act in question, or the like. Keeping in mind these qualifications, here is the first premise of the Core Argument I want to develop:

- (1) In ordinary optimal conditions, an agent performs an illocutionary act of Φ ing by way of performing a sentential act if and only if that agent intends to Φ by way of performing that sentential act.¹⁷

¹⁴ To say that my illocutionary act intentions can become evident to me upon reflection or skillful questioning is not to claim, however, that they are always very precise. Upon reflection, I may be aware that when I utter the sentence 'The dinner was delicious', I intend to say, of the dinner, that it was delicious. But I may have no view about what deliciousness consists in, or whether each course of the dinner was delicious, and so forth. Vagueness of this variety, I shall suggest later, is not something that affects the main lines of the argument I am developing.

¹⁵ Two points: first, philosophers such as Bratman (1987: 133) distinguish between (standing) 'intentions', on the one hand, and 'tryings' or 'endeavorings', on the other—the latter being (roughly) a certain way of expressing intentions. In deference to common usage, I have spoken of (and will continue to speak of) 'illocutionary act intentions' when referring to those intentions that determine the character of an illocutionary act. But, unless the context reveals otherwise, these mental states are best thought of as being endeavorings. Second, Bratman (ch. 8) distinguishes between intentions and intentional actions, denying that intending to act in a certain way is the expression of an intention to act in that way. Bratman may be right about this. In the interest of simplicity, however, I have spoken as if intending to act in a certain way expresses the intention to act in that way.

¹⁶ I borrow the term from Rosati (1996), but not the details of her way of understanding it.

¹⁷ The scope of the relevant intention concerns only the illocutionary act in question. Thus it should read as follows. In ordinary optimal conditions, an agent performs an

(1), I submit, states a truism about illocutionary acts: given that the proper conditions hold, necessary and sufficient for performing a speech act of a certain kind by way of performing a sentential act of a certain type is that agent's intending to perform a speech act of that kind by way of performing that sentential act. But it also raises a question. What exactly is involved in a speaker's intending to perform an illocutionary act of a given type?

I propose to remain neutral on this question. One might hold, along with 'perlocutionary intention' theorists such as H. P. Grice and Stephen Schiffer, that the relevant intention in question consists in a speaker's getting his audience in a certain state of mind on account of his uttering a sentence of a certain type.¹⁸ One might believe, for example, that what makes it the case that Sam performs the illocutionary act of asserting *that the car won't start* by sincerely uttering the sentence 'The car won't start' is that Sam intends his audience to believe that the car won't start and intends them to believe this on the basis of his uttering this sentence. Alternatively, one might believe, along with 'illocutionary intention' theorists such as John Searle, William Alston, and Nicholas Wolterstorff, that the intention in question is one in which a speaker intends to take responsibility for a certain state of affairs.¹⁹ So, for example, according to the illocutionary intention account, for me to assert *that the car won't start* by way of uttering the sentence 'The car won't start' is for me to leave myself open to appropriate correction, blame, reproach, or the like in case it is false that the car won't start. It is my deliberately taking responsibility in this fashion for the fact *that the car won't start* that brings it about that my uttering this sentence counts as an assertion. Although I myself find the latter view considerably more plausible than the former, the argument I shall develop can be understood in terms of either position.²⁰

The second premise of the Core Argument I am propounding is entailed by The Expressivist's Speech Act thesis and the claim that this thesis concerns ordinary optimal conditions. It says:

- (2) If expressivism is true, then, in ordinary optimal conditions, when an agent sincerely utters a moral sentence, that agent does

illocutionary act of Φ ing by way of performing a sentential act if and only if that agent intends [to Φ] by way of performing that sentential act. Moreover, I understand the qualifier 'ordinary optimal conditions' in such a way that it qualifies both the performance of and the intention to perform the illocutionary act in question.

¹⁸ See Grice (1957) and Schiffer (1972) for a defense of the perlocutionary view. Schiffer has subsequently abandoned this view.

¹⁹ See Alston (2000), Searle (1969), and Wolterstorff (1995: ch. 5). Williamson (2000: ch. 11) briefly defends something like the illocutionary intention view, while Brandom (1994) has some affinities with it.

²⁰ See Alston (2000: ch. 2) for an argument against the perlocutionary view.

not thereby assert a moral proposition, but expresses an attitude toward a non-moral state of affairs or object.²¹

As I've already indicated, I am using the locutions 'expresses an attitude' and 'assert' to denote different illocutionary act types.²² So, I assume that

- (3) Expressing an attitude and asserting are distinct illocutionary act types.

Let's now combine the first three premises of the argument. When we combine (1), (2), and (3) we get this:

- (4) So, if expressivism is true, then, in ordinary optimal conditions, when an agent performs the sentential act of sincerely uttering a moral sentence, that agent does not thereby intend to assert a moral proposition, but intends to express an attitude toward a non-moral state of affairs or object.

I want now to draw attention to what expressivists say about what we purport to do when we utter moral sentences. At the beginning of his book *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings*, Allan Gibbard writes that

normative talk is part of nature, but it does not describe nature. In particular, a person who calls something rational or irrational is not describing his own state of mind; he is expressing it. To call something rational is not to attribute some particular property to that thing—not even the property of being permitted by accepted norms.²³

Strictly speaking, in this passage Gibbard is elaborating upon an expressivist account of rationality, and not morality. However, that shouldn't matter for our purposes since Gibbard's expressivist account of moral discourse is simply an extension of his expressivist view of rationality. In Gibbard's view, to say that a person's act is, say, wrong is (roughly) to say that it is rational to blame her for performing that act.²⁴ In any case, the important point to notice is that Gibbard doesn't say that in uttering the sentence 'Sam is rational' a person doesn't *purport* to call Sam rational. He merely says that in uttering this sentence a person does not thereby assert that Sam is rational. But the first premise of our argument tells us that, in ordinary optimal conditions, what we intend to do by uttering a sentence determines

²¹ Strictly speaking, this premise should say that, if expressivism were true, then when uttering a moral sentence an agent *at least* expresses an attitude toward a non-moral state of affairs or object. I'll leave this qualification implicit.

²² In so doing, I follow both Searle (1969) and Alston (2000).

²³ Gibbard (1990: 7–8).

²⁴ At least this is true of his view in Gibbard (1990: see esp. ch. 3).

what illocutionary act(s) we perform by uttering that sentence. So, our question is this: according to the expressivist, when an agent sincerely utters a sentence such as 'Sam is compassionate', does that person thereby intend to assert the proposition *that Sam is compassionate?*

The response to which the expressivist appears committed is, No. In sincerely uttering a sentence such as 'Sam is compassionate,' a speaker does not thereby intend to assert a moral proposition—and for two reasons. To begin with, this denial is entailed by the three premises we've considered thus far—premises that expressivists themselves would appear to accept.²⁵ Second, on the assumption that (1) is true (and ordinary optimal conditions hold), if the expressivist were to say that, when we engage in moral discourse, we thereby intend to assert moral propositions, she would commit herself to an error theory of morality similar to the kind J. L. Mackie defended.²⁶ But as I've already emphasized, expressivists themselves indicate that this is an unacceptable consequence, for it is precisely this kind of view that expressivist positions are designed to avoid.

So, the view to which the expressivist appears committed is what we should expect: by sincerely uttering a moral sentence, an agent does not thereby intend to assert a moral proposition, but rather (at least) intends to express an attitude. But now consider what expressivists say about what we do when we engage in moral discourse.

In *Spreading the Word*, Simon Blackburn suggests that engaging in moral discourse is a matter of 'projecting' attitudes: 'we *project* an attitude or habit or other commitment which is not descriptive onto the world, when we speak and think as though there were a property of things which our sayings describe which we can reason about, know about, be wrong about, and so on'.²⁷ And in *Essays in Quasi-Realism*, Blackburn hypothesizes that projections thus understood are the upshot of a 'mechanism whereby what starts life as a non-descriptive psychological state ends up expressed, thought about, and considered in propositional form'.²⁸

In *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings*, Gibbard says something striking concerning discourse about what is rational:

When a person calls something rational, he seems to be doing more than simply expressing his own acceptance of a system of norms . . . he claims to *recognize and report* something that is true independently of what he himself happens to accept or reject. . . . Any account of his language that ignores this claim must be defective. It

²⁵ That Gibbard e.g. accepts the centrality of intentions to the performance of speech acts is evident in Gibbard (1990: 84–6; 2003: 76).

²⁶ Mackie (1977: ch. 1). For a defense of a view similar to Mackie's, see Joyce (2001).

²⁷ Blackburn (1984: 170–1). ²⁸ Blackburn (1993: 5).

may capture all that the speaker could claim without illusion, but it will not capture all that he is *in fact claiming*.²⁹

Finally, in a more recent article on expressivism, Justin D'Arms and Daniel Jacobson write that

philosophers such as Blackburn see little reason for noncognitivists to forgo property talk and are even willing to speak of the truth of evaluative claims. All [i.e. expressivists such as Gibbard and Blackburn and realists such as John McDowell] grant, too, that the phenomenology of valuing is such that sentiments purport to be sensitivities to features of the world—that is, to evaluative properties. Hence, we agree with McDowell that the only way to understand our responses as they do and must seem to us, whatever our metaethics, is to be prepared 'to attribute, to at least some possible objects of the responses, properties that would validate these responses'.³⁰

If D'Arms and Jacobson are right, expressivists don't believe that 'valuing' simply consists in registering a vague 'evaluative response' to a state of affairs. Rather, valuing purports to be a 'sensitivity' to evaluative features of the world. As such, the states of mind expressed in valuing—what D'Arms and Jacobson call 'sentiments'—purport to be *about* evaluative features of the world. If we add the plausible assumption that, by uttering a moral sentence an agent thereby intends to express a 'sentiment', then what D'Arms and Jacobson tell us is that expressivists themselves hold that, when we engage in moral discourse, we purport to say something about moral reality.

A very natural way to read these quotations is in light of what Gibbard says in the second passage I have quoted from him. In this passage, Gibbard says that when an agent calls something 'rational', that agent 'claims to recognize and report something that is true independently of what he himself happens to accept or reject'.³¹ We could, suggests Gibbard, offer a different gloss on what this agent is claiming, but it would not capture 'all that he is in fact claiming'.³² And what Gibbard appears to mean by this is that an alternate gloss on what this agent is saying wouldn't capture everything that this agent *purports* to claim.

I believe that what Gibbard says here is true. In the ordinary case, when an ordinary agent calls a particular action 'rational', 'wrong', or 'compassionate', he means to predicate of that action the property of being rational, wrong, or compassionate respectively. Nonetheless, what Gibbard

²⁹ Gibbard (1990: 153; italics mine).

³⁰ D'Arms and Jacobson (2000b: 730). The quote is from McDowell (1985: 207). Compare, also, what D'Arms and Jacobson (2000a) say at p. 69 n. 9.

³¹ Gibbard (1990: 153). ³² Ibid.

says here is not something an expressivist should say. For one thing, if premise (1) of the Core Argument is true, what Gibbard says here is in direct contradiction with what he says in the first passage I have quoted from him ("To call something rational is not to attribute some particular property to that thing . . ."). More importantly, if we combine what Gibbard says in this passage with (1) and (3), it implies what I shall call the 'strong result':

- (5) It is false that, in ordinary optimal conditions, when an agent performs the sentential act of sincerely uttering a moral sentence, that agent does not thereby intend to assert a moral proposition, but intends to express an attitude toward a non-moral state of affairs or object.

And this entails that

- (6) Expressivism is false.

III. Four Expressivist Responses

What I have called a 'natural' reading of the passages quoted from Blackburn, Gibbard, and company is not, of course, the only way to read them. In what follows, I want to explore four expressivist responses to the Core Argument, all of which attempt to avoid the conclusion that The Expressivist's Speech Act Thesis is false. The first position, which I shall call 'perspectivalist' expressivism, responds to the Core Argument by employing a distinction, popular of late among expressivists, between different perspectives regarding ordinary moral discourse. The second position, which I call 'illusionist' expressivism, maintains that, although we may *think* we express moral propositions when engaging in ordinary moral discourse, we do not actually do so, but rather express attitudes of various sorts. The third position, 'agnostic' expressivism as I call it, flatly denies that we can gain a cognitive grip on our illocutionary act intentions. And the fourth position, what we can call 'sophisticated' expressivism, contends that although we can ascertain our illocutionary act intentions, our moral discourse consists primarily in our intending to perform assertion-like acts that mimic genuine acts of assertion. Of these four responses, it is the last that will occupy most of my attention, for two reasons. In the first place, this position is arguably the most promising of the expressivist views we'll consider and, as such, deserves the most attention. Second, to this point I've said rather little about why we should accept premise (5) of the Core Argument, merely pointing out that expressivists themselves at times appear to accept it. But I think

there is more to be said in favor of premise (5). In particular, in response to sophisticated expressivism, I wish to suggest that discerning the character of our illocutionary act intentions is largely an empirical matter and that there is good empirical evidence to marshal in favor of the claim that, when engaging in ordinary moral discourse, many agents intend to express moral propositions and not merely express attitudes.

The first response: perspectivalist expressivism

The first expressivist response I wish to consider—what I call 'perspectivalist' expressivism—takes its inspiration from an interpretation of the passages quoted earlier from Simon Blackburn. Perhaps the best way to understand what Blackburn says in these passages is first to introduce a concept central to Blackburn's 'quasi-realist' expressivism and then clarify another.

The concept I'd like to introduce is that of a 'perspective' on what we are doing when we engage in moral discourse. In several places, Blackburn suggests that we can distinguish between an 'internal' and 'external' perspective of what we are doing when we 'moralize'.³³ The internal moral perspective, in Blackburn's view, is one of an engaged participant in ordinary moral practice. From the internal perspective, we say that we respond to moral features, claim that moral judgments are true by virtue of representing those features, and say that moral truths obtain independently of our feelings. Indeed, in some places Blackburn is willing to say that, from the internal perspective, some of our moral judgments *are* true—though Blackburn denies that we should see this as having any metaphysical import.³⁴ The 'external' perspective, by contrast, is that of the observer not engaged in moralizing—in Blackburn's case, the perspective of the philosopher committed to a robust version of naturalism who is diagnosing what agents do when they moralize. From the external perspective, the philosopher denies that there are moral facts, and interprets what happens from the internal perspective as simply the 'adjusting, improving, weighing, and rejecting [of] different sentiments or attitudes'.³⁵ From the external perspective, there are no 'moral properties . . . made for or by sensibilities', and 'the only things in this world are the attitudes of people'.³⁶ A perspectivalist expressivist view, then, 'deserves to be called anti-realist because it avoids the view that when we

³³ See esp Blackburn (1993: ch. 9, ch. 8, p. 157; 1984: 247; 1998: 50). See also Timmons (1999: 150–2).

³⁴ See Blackburn (1998: appendix).

³⁵ Blackburn (1993: 173–4). ³⁶ *Ibid.* 174.

moralize we respond to, and describe, an independent [moral] aspect of reality'.³⁷

Now let me turn to the concept I wish to clarify—that of 'projecting an attitude'.³⁸ What Blackburn says in the passages quoted earlier is that for an agent to project an attitude that is not descriptive onto the world is for that agent to speak and think as though there were a property that her sayings and thoughts describe. Accordingly, to project a *moral* attitude is for an agent to project an attitude that is not descriptive onto the world in such a way that she speaks and thinks as though there were a moral property of things that her moral sayings and thoughts describe. So, definitive of Blackburn's view is the thesis that we can distinguish between the surface 'propositional' form of an attitude that is expressed and the attitude itself (or what the attitude expresses). Of course in claiming this, Blackburn is not suggesting that to project an attitude is thereby to 'play act'—to act as if something is there that we know isn't. Nor does Blackburn maintain that ordinary folk engaging in ordinary moral discourse operate with the distinction between the propositional form of an attitude expressed and the attitude itself (or the content thereof). Rather, what Blackburn suggests is that, as far as ordinary moral discourse goes, to express an attitude in propositional form is simply to think of that attitude (or better: what that attitude expresses) *as a proposition or claim*—something that can be true or false.³⁹

The distinctions between different perspectives on what we are doing when we moralize and the notion of projecting an attitude are supposed to do a great deal of work in Blackburn's project. They are supposed to be the materials by which a quasi-realist can at once show that we make true moral claims *and* that expressivism is true. The idea is that, from the internal perspective, we make moral claims, some of which are true (in some sufficiently thin deflationary sense). However, from the external perspective, these claims are interpreted as projections or expressions of attitude that don't in any sense represent moral facts.

There is a problem with all this. For suppose we assume with Blackburn that the internal perspective of what we are doing when we engage in moral discourse is supposed to capture what it is like to engage in ordinary moral discourse and practice. As Blackburn himself emphasizes, however, from

³⁷ Blackburn (1993), p. 157. Blackburn goes on to suggest that a realist view of obligation is 'unintelligible or marks a mistake about explanation' (ibid. n. 9). See also Blackburn (1981: 164–5).

³⁸ Blackburn (1998: 77) expresses some reservation about using this locution. But, as Blackburn emphasizes, this is not because he rejects the notion of projecting an attitude, but because he realizes that using this term 'can make it sound as if projecting attitudes involves some kind of mistake' and this 'is emphatically' not what he intends.

³⁹ See Blackburn (1998: 317–19).

the internal perspective we don't think *as though* Smith's assassination of Jones is wrong; we think of it *as being* wrong. Moreover, from the internal perspective, when Sam sincerely utters the sentence 'Smith's assassination of Jones is wrong', he doesn't think of what he says *as though it is about* the wrongness of Smith's action; he thinks of it as *being about* the wrongness of what Smith did, and intends to express this thought by way of uttering the sentence in question. We can grant, then, that Blackburn is entirely correct to claim that we can offer an external reading of what Sam says—a reading according to which Sam expresses an attitude toward Smith's killing without asserting a moral proposition. And we can even grant that this maneuver can assuage certain types of worry one might have regarding the expressivist enterprise. But offering an external reading of this type is not a particularly helpful response to the Core Argument developed thus far. This is because whether we can give an external reading of what we are doing when we engage in moral discourse has no bearing upon what we actually intend to do when we engage in moral discourse. For if premise (1) of the Core Argument is true, in ordinary optimal conditions, necessary and sufficient for determining what type of speech act an agent performs by way of uttering some moral sentence is what that agent *intends* to do by way of uttering that moral sentence. It follows from this that, if we assume from the internal perspective that we intend to assert moral propositions, perspectivalist expressivism is also committed to the strong result, or the claim that

- (5) It is false that, in ordinary optimal conditions, when an agent performs the sentential act of sincerely uttering a moral sentence, that agent does not thereby intend to assert a moral proposition, but intends to express an attitude toward a non-moral state of affairs or object.

And the strong result, we've seen, yields

- (6) Expressivism is false.

The second response: illusionist expressivism

Earlier I considered the following passage from Allan Gibbard:

When a person calls something rational, he seems to be doing more than simply expressing his own acceptance of a system of norms . . . he claims to *recognize and report* something that is true independently of what he himself happens to accept or reject. . . . Any account of his language that ignores this claim must be defective. It may capture all that the speaker could claim without illusion, but it will not capture all that he is *in fact claiming*.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Gibbard (1990: 153; italics mine).

In the last section, I claimed that a natural reading of this passage entails that expressivism is false. But there is another reading of what Gibbard says in this passage. What Gibbard says is that a position that rejects a cognitivist account of moral discourse may capture all that an agent could be doing *without illusion*. This suggests that there may be available to the expressivist a distinction between what it *seems* to an agent he is doing and what he is *actually doing* when he utters a moral sentence, which is different from the internal/external distinction that Blackburn employs. According to this alternative, the expressivist can readily admit that when an agent utters a moral sentence, it seems to him that he thereby intends to assert a moral proposition. However, this doesn't imply that by uttering a moral sentence the agent in question thereby intends to assert a moral proposition. It may be the case that we are ordinarily confused or misled about what we intend to do when we engage in moral discourse. So, it is available to the expressivist to say that what an agent really intends to do by uttering a moral sentence is not assert a moral proposition, but to express an attitude toward a non-moral state of affairs. This position is what I have called 'illusionist' expressivism.

I doubt that an expressivist should be very happy with the claim that we are massively confused or misled about what we intend to do when engaging in moral discourse. In this regard, it is helpful to distinguish between a first-order and a second-order error theory. A first-order error theory is of the sort that Blackburn and Gibbard want to avoid. It says that the content of all our moral statements is mistaken inasmuch as it purports, but fails, to express true moral propositions. (This may be because either these propositions are false or are neither true nor false, since the subject terms of the sentences that express them fail to refer.) A second-order error theory, by contrast, says that the content of what we take for granted or believe *about* what we intend to do by uttering moral sentences is mistaken. (This may be because either the contents of these attitudes are false or neither true nor false, since the subject terms of the sentences that express them fail to refer.) Now it should be admitted that the expressivist view under consideration avoids a first-order error theory of moral discourse. But the view doesn't avoid a second-order error theory. Indeed, given a plausible assumption, the position implies it. The plausible assumption is that, if it appears to an ordinary person in ordinary circumstances that she intends to Φ at t , then (in the absence of relevant defeaters) she takes it for granted or believes that she intends to Φ at t . According to the present view, then, since it appears to an ordinary agent in ordinary circumstances that she intends to assert a moral proposition at t , then (in the absence of relevant defeaters) she takes it for granted or believes that she intends to assert a moral proposition at t . But the present expressivist view also says that we are confused or misled about what we are doing when we utter moral sentences, and don't really

intend to assert moral propositions by uttering moral sentences. It follows that the content of all these second-order taking for granted or beliefs is mistaken. And, thus, it follows that an expressivist who adopts this position is committed to a second-order error theory.

Now, strictly speaking, a second-order error theory is consistent with The Expressivist's Guiding Rationale, as the contents of our second-order beliefs are not themselves moral propositions, but propositions that concern our illocutionary act intentions. Still, I think that an expressivist should be no more enthusiastic about a second-order error theory than a first-order one. We can look at the matter this way. According to a first-order error theory, the content of all our moral statements is mistaken. The content of our second-order taking for granted and beliefs about our illocutionary act intentions, however, is true: we correctly take it for granted or believe that when we engage in moral discourse we intend to say things about moral reality. According to the expressivist view under consideration, by contrast, the content of our moral discourse is not mistaken. But the content of all our second-order taking for granted and beliefs about what we intend to do when we engage in moral discourse is: we incorrectly take it for granted or believe that when we engage in moral discourse we intend to say things about moral reality. So, according to a first-order error theorist, we have a set of first-order statements whose content is mistaken and a set of second-order attitudes with respect to those first-order statements whose content is not. According to the expressivist view under consideration, by contrast, we have a set of first-order attitudes whose content is not mistaken and a set of second-order attitudes with respect to those first-order attitudes whose content is mistaken and one whose content is not. Given this type of parity between the two views, however, it is difficult to see why illusionist expressivism ensures that moral discourse and belief are somehow in better shape than if a first-order error theory were true. Claiming that expressivism is in better shape because it guarantees that the content of our first-order attitudes is not mistaken, and that these attitudes are somehow more important or fundamental than our second-order ones, isn't very promising. As Harry Frankfurt and Charles Taylor have taught us, our second-order attitudes often have enormous practical and theoretical importance.⁴¹

The third response: agnostic expressivism

The obvious way to address the problems with both perspectivalist and illusionist expressivism is to make two moves: first, reject the claim that

⁴¹ See Frankfurt (1971) and Taylor (1985).

from the internal perspective we intend to assert moral propositions and, second, reject the idea that we are systematically deceived about the nature of our illocutionary act intentions. Rejecting the former claim can itself take one of two forms. One could claim either that we cannot get a cognitive grip on what ordinary agents intend to do when sincerely uttering moral sentences, or that agents who participate in ordinary moral discourse intend to express entities that resemble genuine moral propositions—call them ‘moral quasi-propositions’—by way of performing speech acts that closely resemble acts of assertion. There is evidence that expressivists have endorsed both of these positions. Let’s consider them in turn.

To gain a better grip on the third type of expressivist response to the argument I have developed—what I am calling ‘agnostic’ expressivism—let me quote a lengthy passage from Simon Blackburn’s essay, ‘Errors and the Phenomenology of Value’:

It is in principle possible that we should observe the practice of some subjects as closely as we wish, and know as much as there is to know about their ways of thinking, commending, approving, deliberating, worrying, and so on, yet be unable to tell from all that which theory they hold. The practice could be clipped on to either metaphysic. . . . To use a close analogy, there are different theories about the nature of arithmetical concepts. Hence a holist may claim that a subject will give a different total meaning to numerals depending on which theory he accepts, and this difference will apply just as much when the subject is counting as when he is doing metamathematics. All that may be true, yet it would not follow that any practice of counting embodies error. That would be so only if one could tell just by observing it which of the competing metamathematical theories the subject accepts. In the arithmetical case this would not be true. Similarly, I maintain, in the moral case one ought not to be able to tell from the way in which someone conducts the activity of moralizing whether he has committed the ‘objectivist’ mistake or not; hence, any such mistake is better thought of as accidental to the practice.⁴²

About this line of argument let me make several comments.

Begin with the ‘close analogy’ between mathematics and ethics that Blackburn employs. Suppose we extend the analogy a bit by assuming that our two best theories about the nature of numbers and mathematical thought and discourse are Platonism and expressivism (with regard to mathematical discourse) respectively. Suppose also that both do a fairly nice job of accounting for various features of mathematical discourse and thought, even if many philosophers have found it natural to understand ordinary mathematical discourse and thought as being implicitly committed to Platonism. Suppose, moreover, that (for reasons that most ordinary people

⁴² Blackburn (1993: 151). Blackburn (1998: 51 and 121) seems to say something very different, however. I am unsure how to reconcile these different passages.

are unaware of) Platonism is false and, hence, understanding mathematical discourse in expressivist fashion saves participants in mathematical discourse from an ‘objectivist’ mistake. Suppose, finally, that after having paid close attention to mathematical discourse, we cannot tell which theory ordinary participants in the discourse embrace: either metaphysic can be ‘clipped on’ to their discourse and practice. The thrust of Blackburn’s thought appears to be that, in this situation, we ought not to interpret what participants in the discourse say as being committed to Platonism. Rather, we ought to interpret what they say along expressivist lines since only the latter will give us a plausible account of various features of mathematical discourse and also save its participants from error.⁴³

This line of thought seems to me correct in one respect and mistaken in another. What’s correct is the claim that, if we can’t tell what theory ordinary folks are committed to and, thus, cannot get at their relevant illocutionary act intentions, we ought not to interpret what they say as being committed to Platonism. What’s mistaken, however, is that this gives us any reason to construe what they say in expressivist terms. If we are genuinely trying to settle the empirical issue of what the participants in the discourse are actually trying to say by way of engaging in that discourse, and what they are trying to say about the nature of numbers remains inscrutable on account of our having no idea of what theory they are committed to, then I submit that it is evident what we should conclude: we should either (i) be agnostic about whether they intend to assert propositions about numbers Platonistically understood or whether they intend to express attitudes toward non-mathematical reality or (ii) conclude that there is no fact of the matter about what they intend to do. Either way, we should not attribute to them intentions to express attitudes toward non-mathematical reality. (I do not claim, incidentally, that if we had some sort of access to the theoretical commitments of participants in ordinary mathematical discourse, and these fit poorly with Platonism, then we should remain agnostic about what they intend to say. In that case, I concur that charity suggests that no ‘objectivist’ mistake is being made. Rather, the suggestion is that, in the absence of such access, agnosticism or the belief that there is no fact of the matter about what agents intend to assert is the appropriate stance. I shall have more to say about this in the next section.)

Now turn to the moral case that Blackburn suggests parallels the mathematical. Suppose all the relevant parallels hold: moral realism and

⁴³ Once again, for reasons cited earlier, I assume that Blackburn does not wish to offer expressivism as a mere recommendation for how we might transform moral and mathematical discourse, but as an account of how to ‘protect’ ordinary moral and mathematical discourse.

expressivism are our best candidates for understanding moral thought and discourse, there are no moral facts (but most ordinary folk are not aware of the arguments for this), and so on. According to Blackburn, in the moral case we ought not to be able to tell from the way in which we moralize whether we are committed to the existence of moral facts or not. But if our commitments concerning whether or not there are moral facts are genuinely inscrutable and, hence, the relevant class of illocutionary act intentions are as well, then our conclusion ought not to be that The Expressivist's Speech Act Thesis is true—even if adopting it establishes that the folk are not in error. Rather, it should be either (i) agnosticism about whether participants in ordinary moral discourse intend to assert moral propositions about moral facts or express attitudes toward non-moral states of affairs or objects or (ii) admission that there is no fact of the matter about this issue.⁴⁴ We cannot settle the empirical question of what persons who engage in ordinary moral discourse intend to say by way of *superimposing* an interpretation upon what they claim. (I grant, however, that if we were to discover that the theoretical commitments of ordinary folk fit poorly with realism about morals, that would give us reason to believe that no 'objectivist' mistake is being made in moral discourse.)

So, what follows? If the line of argument I have developed is correct, it doesn't follow that agnostic expressivism is false. Rather, what follows is what I shall call the 'weak result'. The weak result says that we have strong (objective) reason not to believe The Expressivist's Speech Act Thesis.

Recall that agnostic expressivism tells us that the way to save agents who engage in ordinary moral discourse from the 'objectivist' mistake is to interpret what they say as the expression or 'projection' of attitudes. Now, if the interpretation I've offered of Blackburn's argument is correct, then either the relevant illocutionary act intentions of agents who engage in ordinary moral discourse are inscrutable or there is no fact of the matter about whether they intend to assert moral propositions or express attitudes toward non-moral states of affairs or objects. It follows—to employ the terminology of the Core Argument—that the following disjunctive claim is true: it is either false or inscrutable that, in ordinary optimal conditions, when an agent sincerely utters a moral sentence, that agent thereby intends to express an attitude, and does not intend to assert a moral proposition by way of uttering that sentence.

⁴⁴ It is worth noting that what Blackburn says here about the inscrutable nature of moral discourse sits uneasily with his repeated claims that moral discourse is non-representational. See Blackburn (2001a: 31; 1999: 214; 1996: 83–6); as well as Gibbard (1990: 107); and Timmons (1999: 139–47).

Consider the first half of this disjunction. If this half of the disjunction is true, then it is false that, in ordinary optimal conditions, when an agent sincerely utters a moral sentence, that agent thereby intends to express an attitude, and does not intend to assert a moral proposition by way of uttering that sentence. Since this is incompatible with The Expressivist's Speech Act Thesis (when interpreted as a claim about moral discourse in ordinary optimal conditions), it follows that expressivism is false. Now consider the second half of the aforementioned disjunction. If this half of the disjunction is true, then it is inscrutable whether in ordinary optimal conditions an agent who sincerely utters a moral sentence thereby intends to express an attitude, and does not intend to assert a moral proposition. It follows from this that (as a thesis concerning moral discourse in ordinary optimal conditions) The Expressivist's Speech Act Thesis is either false or inscrutable. Either option gives us strong (objective) reason not to believe that expressivism is true.

As we might put it, thorough-going agnosticism about our illocutionary act intentions functions as an 'undercutting' defeater for accepting expressivism.⁴⁵

The fourth response: sophisticated expressivism

At the outset of the last section I noted that remedying the problems with both perspectivalist and illusionist forms of expressivism can take either of two forms. One might claim, on the one hand, that we cannot get a cognitive grip on what ordinary agents intend to do when sincerely uttering moral sentences or maintain, on the other, that agents who participate in ordinary moral discourse intend to express entities that resemble genuine moral propositions—call them 'moral quasi-propositions'—by way of performing speech acts that closely resemble acts of assertion. I have argued that the former route is not one that should appeal to expressivists. In the remainder of this essay, I want to consider the latter approach—the position I call 'sophisticated' expressivism—as I suspect it best captures what expressivists should say about our illocutionary act intentions.

Sophisticated expressivism hinges upon a distinction between performing acts of asserting and performing assertion-like acts. Acts of assertion, as I indicated earlier, are such that their content aims to represent reality; to assert that *p* is to purport to represent the fact *that p*. Thus understood, assertions explicitly express propositions, where propositions are understood to be the content of assertions—entities whose job description (at least

⁴⁵ Of course it also functions as an undercutting defeater for cognitivism!

in a wide array of cases) includes representing the world. Assertion-like acts resemble acts of assertion insofar as they manifest certain features characteristic of assertions. For example, assertion-like acts are such that their content embeds in propositional attitude ascriptions and conditionals, is truth-apt, and is irreducible to what is expressed in non-declarative sentences such as imperatives and questions.⁴⁶ However, what is 'asserted' does not purport to, nor does it, represent what the world is like. To perform the assertion-like act of uttering *p*, then, is not thereby to purport to represent the fact *that p*; it is rather to do something different such as 'evaluate' a state of affairs.⁴⁷ As we might put it, moral assertion-like acts express moral quasi-propositions, where moral quasi-propositions are understood to be the content of such acts—entities whose job description includes mimicking moral propositions in certain important respects, but that do not in any sense purport to represent moral reality.⁴⁸

While the concepts of an assertion-like act and a quasi-proposition call for more elaboration, I am going to assume for present purposes that we have a sufficient understanding of them to see their importance for the expressivist project.⁴⁹ Their importance, I judge, is threefold.

First, by employing such concepts, the sophisticated expressivist can take full account of the illocutionary act intentions operative in ordinary moral discourse. More specifically, the sophisticated expressivist can say that we should view ordinary moral discourse as that in which agents intend to perform not acts of asserting that express moral propositions, but assertion-like acts that express moral quasi-propositions. If this suggestion is right, then it is not the case that sophisticated expressivism is open to the objections raised earlier against perspectivalist, illusionist, and agnostic

⁴⁶ It is this last feature of assertion-like acts, I take it, that distinguishes them from Blackburnian projections of attitude.

⁴⁷ Timmons (1999: 139) puts the matter thus regarding moral judgments: 'moral judgments are not aimed at representing or describing a world of facts. Their content is not representational but evaluative—aimed at choice and guidance of action.'

⁴⁸ The distinction between propositions and quasi-propositions parallels the distinction that Horgan and Timmons (2000) make between the cognitive and the descriptive content of a belief. The main difference between my and Horgan and Timmons's way of putting things is that they believe that something can count as a genuine (predicative) belief or assertion even if it or its content does not purport to represent the world. I, by contrast, deny this. In my view, essential to something's being a predicative assertion or belief is its being such that it or its content purports to represent reality.

⁴⁹ In fact, those who defend the idea that we perform assertion-like acts whose content is comprised of quasi-propositions have rather little to say about their nature. Probably the most detailed account of their nature is found in Horgan and Timmons (2000), although their terminology differs from mine. See, however, Horgan (2002: 330), in which he expresses sympathy for the idea that quasi-propositions do not exist.

expressivism. Contra perspectivalist expressivism, it is not true that when agents engage in ordinary moral discourse they intend to assert moral propositions. Rather, they intend to perform assertion-like acts that express moral quasi-propositions. And contra illusionist expressivism, such agents are not systematically mistaken about what speech acts they intend to perform when engaging in ordinary moral discourse. Once again, such agents intend to perform assertion-like acts that express moral quasi-propositions and do not suppose they are doing otherwise. And contra agnostic expressivism, it is not true that we cannot discern what agents intend to do when engaging in ordinary moral discourse. Rather, ascertaining what agents intend to do when engaging in ordinary moral discourse reveals that such agents intend to perform assertion-like acts and not acts of asserting moral propositions. The sophisticated expressivist can say all these things (in part) because she denies that the syntactic trappings of moral sentences function to *mask* their genuine content. As the sophisticated expressivist sees things, the syntactic features of moral discourse reveal discourse of this sort for what it is: discourse wherein agents express moral quasi-propositions.

Second, by giving illocutionary act intentions their due, sophisticated expressivism avoids commitment to any form of error theory—whether first- or second-order in character. When we maintain that agents who participate in ordinary moral discourse intend to perform assertion-like acts that express moral quasi-propositions and not acts of asserting that express moral propositions, we guarantee that there is both no mismatch between the content of moral discourse and reality and no mistake about what we intend to do when engaging in such discourse.

Third, and finally, once we grant that moral discourse expresses moral quasi-propositions, the sophisticated expressivist can help herself to two realist-looking claims. In the first place, she can say that moral quasi-propositions (or the sentences that express them) are true. And, second, on the assumption that the content of a claim that *p* is true if and only if it is a fact that *p*, then she can say that there are moral facts. Granted, these realist-seeming doctrines need to be interpreted aright. An agent's ascribing truth to a moral quasi-proposition that *p* (or to the sentences that express it) is not thereby to claim that that quasi-proposition represents moral reality (or even that it possesses the property of *being true*). Rather, if expressivists such as Blackburn and Gibbard are right, it is to do something else such as merely endorse that quasi-proposition.⁵⁰ Likewise, to say that

⁵⁰ See Blackburn (1993: 129; 1998: appendix; 2002: 128). See also Gibbard (2003: 18) and Lenman (2003). I should note that, while in numerous places Blackburn says

it is a moral fact that *p* is not to claim that there is some entity that is the intentional object of our moral claims. Rather, it is to do something else such as simply repeat the claim that *p*.⁵¹ As far as sophisticated expressivism is concerned, however, this is as it should be, for as Blackburn says in one place, deflationary views of this kind are so minimalist in character that an expressivist can toss them 'in for free, in the end'.⁵²

At this point, however, sophisticated expressivism needs to take another step, for simply insisting that ordinary moral discourse consists in intending to perform assertion-like acts is not itself a satisfactory reply to the Core Argument. We should also want some reason to believe that we perform acts of this kind and not acts of asserting moral propositions when we engage in ordinary moral discourse. (Simply claiming that the reasons for affirming moral cognitivism and sophisticated expressivism are on par won't do; this would yield the so-called weak result.) It is worth stressing, however, that if we grant that there are such things as assertion-like acts and that there are no moral facts, there is a powerful-looking argument to affirm sophisticated expressivism. After all, if we grant these assumptions and also hold that a charitable interpretation of moral discourse demands that we avoid an error theoretic account of moral thought and discourse, then sophisticated expressivism looks to furnish the best explanation of ordinary moral discourse for which we could hope. Given the aforementioned assumptions, sophisticated expressivism, unlike moral cognitivism and other versions of expressivism, can both honor The Expressivist's Guiding Rationale and capture everything we could plausibly mean by the sincere use of moral sentences.

As I read some contemporary expressivists, something like the argument just offered on behalf of sophisticated expressivism constitutes a central rationale put forward in favor of their view.⁵³ Moral realists resist it along two fronts. They reject either Moral Nihilism, claiming that the sorts of considerations furnished by expressivists in favor of this claim fail to hit

that moral 'opinion' is not in the business of representing moral reality, he sometimes indicates that the quasi-realist can deflate representation too. According to his (1998: 79) take on deflationary views of representation, "represents the facts" means no more than "is true"—where we understand "is true" in a deflationary way. Given this identification in meaning, I shall assume that what I say about deflationary views of truth holds *mutatis mutandis* for deflationary accounts of representation.

⁵¹ See Gibbard (2003: 18).

⁵² Blackburn (1998: 80). Elsewhere, Blackburn (1993: 5) writes, 'It teaches us a great deal about representation and description to learn that they are so cheap to purchase that even the Humean [i.e., the quasi-realist] can have them, along with truth, fact, knowledge, and the rest'. My own judgment is that matters aren't as straightforward as this. See Cuneo (n.d.: chs 5 and 6).

⁵³ See e.g. Blackburn (1993: 4).

the mark, or the claim that there are assertion-like acts that express moral quasi-propositions, arguing that any sophisticated expressivist position that genuinely captures what we mean when engaging in moral discourse collapses into a form of moral cognitivism.⁵⁴ While I have some sympathy with these lines of response, I do not on this occasion wish to pursue them. Rather, I propose that we simply concede for the sake of argument that there is conceptual space for there being assertion-like acts that mimic genuinely assertoric moral discourse (and, hence, for there being deflationary moral 'truths' and 'facts'). Moreover, I propose that we concede for argument's sake that there are no moral facts. I want to suggest that, even if we concede these two assumptions, sophisticated expressivism should be rejected, for the rationale offered on its behalf rests on a further implausible assumption. Identifying this assumption is the first step toward assembling a positive case for premise (5) of the Core Argument.

The assumption I have in mind is that a charitable interpretation of a given range of discourse demands that we interpret the content of that discourse in such a way that it does not turn out to be systematically mistaken.⁵⁵ For consider: a charitable interpretation of Euclid's views about geometry is not one that attempts to guarantee that Euclid's views about geometry do not come out false. Likewise, a charitable interpretation of Anselm's views about God is not one that tries to ensure that Anselm's views about God do not come out false. And while I do not propose to offer anything like a developed account of what a charitable interpretation of a speaker's discourse consists in, I suggest that a more nearly adequate account of the *aim* of charitable interpretation is this: the aim of a charitable interpretation of a speaker's discourse is to get at what that speaker is trying to say by way of that speaker's engaging in that discourse. The aim of a charitable interpretation of Anselm's views about God in the *Proslogion* is to try to get at what Anselm was actually trying to say about God by way of his having engaged in theological discourse of a certain kind. To be sure, this will typically involve a certain amount of reconstructing what Anselm says. It may, for example, involve disregarding slips of the pen, ambiguity in expression, infelicitous examples, and the like. And, all other things being equal, it will dictate that we interpret what Anselm says as not being plainly obtuse or blatantly confused. But it is not such that it attempts to guarantee that what Anselm says is *not false*.

⁵⁴ See Hale (1993), Rosen (1998), and Dworkin (1996) for examples of this type of strategy.

⁵⁵ This assumption is, of course, associated with the work of Donald Davidson. I think Davidson's more careful formulations of the principle of charity do not imply it, however.

Let's now add to this the following point. Getting at what an agent intends to say by way of engaging in discourse of a certain kind is not a matter of mere guesswork; it requires taking into account certain facts about that agent, among which are that agent's convictions about the nature of certain features of reality. For example, when Euclid propounds the parallel postulate, we do not interpret him as trying to say something about two-dimensional, positively curved Riemannian space; rather, we read him as trying to say something about three-dimensional 'flat' space. That's because Euclid explicitly speaks of three-dimensional flat space, and was entirely ignorant of the concept of Riemannian space. Similarly, when Anselm claims in the *Proslogion* that God is a being of which a greater cannot be conceived, we do not interpret him as intending to say something about the pantheon of gods worshipped by the ancient Egyptians; rather, we interpret him as intending to say something about God as God was understood by traditional medieval theists. The reason for this is that Anselm was a traditional medieval theist who rejected Egyptian polytheism.

If this is right, then the aim of a charitable interpretation of what we are doing when we engage in moral discourse is not to guarantee that the content of moral discourse is not false. Rather, it is (roughly) to get at what agents who engage in moral discourse are trying to say by way of their engaging in that discourse. And, thus, it is a matter of attempting to get at what agents who engage in moral discourse intend to say by way of their engaging in it. Moreover, getting at what agents intend to say by way of engaging in moral discourse is not mere speculation; it requires taking into account their commitments about the nature of reality and interpreting what they say in light of those commitments.

Why we should reject sophisticated expressivism

Suppose, then, we accept the assumption that (in a wide range of cases at least) we can discern the relevant illocutionary act intentions of participants in ordinary moral discourse. And suppose also that we agree that a charitable interpretation of moral discourse requires that we do our best to get at what agents are trying to say by way of engaging in such discourse. I now want to suggest that these assumptions generate a difficult type of case for sophisticated expressivism. The type of case on which I have my eye is one in which an agent both sincerely engages in ordinary moral discourse and clearly rejects Moral Nihilism or the claim that there are no moral facts. About putative cases of this type, I want to raise two questions. First, are there cases of this type to be found? And, second, how should we interpret the moral discourse of an agent who figures in such a case?

Let me take these questions in turn. In response to the first question, I submit that there are many cases of this type to be found. In what follows, I want to describe what is, in my estimation, the most vivid example of such a case. Having this case before us will allow us to address the second question I have raised.

Consider a figure whom we can call 'the traditional religious believer'. As I think of her, the traditional religious believer is a traditional Jewish, Christian, or Muslim theist, a person who believes such things as: that a personal God exists; that God has various characteristics such as being the creator of the world, being perfectly good, all-powerful, and all-knowing; that God acts in human history and has revealed God's self in various ways to human beings; that a sacred text (or texts) such as the Bible or the Koran or a particular religious tradition is authoritative on matters of faith and morals; and so forth. Thus described, the traditional religious believer is a theological realist; she rejects all 'naturalistic' accounts of the nature of reality. She is also a moral realist. The traditional religious believer is someone who believes that there are both 'divine' and 'ordinary' moral facts—facts that, on the one hand, concern God and God's activity such as *that God is just, that God is merciful, and that God has exercised compassion toward the outcast* and, on the other, concern human beings and their activity such as *that Mother Teresa was compassionate, that Smith's assassination of Jones is wrong, and that one ought to give to the poor*. Let's note that the traditional believer needn't have a very well worked-out account of the nature of these facts; she usually believes that they in some way depend on God's nature or will. Nevertheless, the traditional religious believer does not hesitate to invoke such facts to explain states of affairs and events in the world. The traditional Muslim believer, for example, appeals to Allah's mercy when explaining the goodness of creation. The traditional Christian believer, similarly, appeals to God's love and our having wronged God to explain why God became incarnate. Furthermore, the traditional religious believer holds that we experience moral reality in various fashions. She sometimes speaks of being presented with God's goodness in mystical experience and of experiencing the moral goodness of those who have dedicated themselves to lives of obedience to God and the pursuit of charity.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ See Alston (1991: ch. 1) for a catalog of experiences of the first kind. One person Alston cites says 'all at once I ... felt the presence of God—I tell of the thing just as I was conscious of it—as if his goodness and his power were penetrating me altogether' (p. 12). An example of the second kind of experience surfaces in Linda Zagzebski's defense of what she calls a 'pure' virtue theory. Zagzebski (1996: 83) writes, 'Many of us have known persons whose goodness shines forth from the depths of their being. ... I

I take the foregoing to be a fairly uncontroversial characterization of what a traditional religious believer is. I also take it to be evident that considerations of charity dictate that we should not interpret the traditional believer's moral discourse as the sophisticated expressivist suggests. Given her rejection of Moral Nihilism, we should no more interpret the traditional religious believer's moral discourse as the performance of assertion-like acts in which she explicitly presents moral quasi-propositions anymore than we should interpret Anselm's discourse in the *Proslogion* as the performance of assertion-like acts in which he explicitly presents various 'theological' quasi-propositions. Rather, we should interpret the traditional religious believer's ordinary moral discourse in light of her realist commitments and, thus, as being what it seems: discourse in which she intends to predicate moral features of various kinds of persons, their intentions, actions, and so on. Granted, if this account of the traditional religious believer's moral discourse is correct and naturalism is true, then the propositional content of the traditional religious believer's ordinary moral discourse is systematically mistaken. In that case, her moral and religious utterances are of a piece.

The figure of the traditional religious believer is of heuristic value because she provides a vivid example of someone who both engages in ordinary moral discourse and rejects Moral Nihilism. What I should now like to add is that the heuristic value of the figure of the traditional religious believer extends beyond this, for unlike other characters familiar to moral philosophers such as the amoralist, the radical skeptic, or the ideal observer, the traditional religious believer is not a philosopher's fiction.

Earlier I said that the case I would make in favor of premise (5) of the Core Argument would be empirical in nature. I am now suggesting that the description I have offered of the traditional religious believer is an empirical claim. It is not, I think, a terribly controversial empirical claim to make. Blackburn, in one place, affirms that there are people who suffer from 'such defects' as believing that 'things really matter only in so far as God cares about them'.⁵⁷ In our own discipline, numerous philosophers acquainted with the debates surrounding expressivism and

believe it is possible that we can see the goodness of a person in this rather direct way. She may simply exude a "glow" of nobility or fineness of character, or as I have occasionally seen in a longtime member of a contemplative religious order, there may be an inner peace that can be perceived to be good directly . . .'

⁵⁷ Blackburn (1993: 156–7). (See, also, Blackburn 2001a: part one, in which Blackburn seems to admit that there are those who mistakenly believe that morality in some interesting sense depends on the existence of God.) See also Timmons (2002: 23), in which he states that 'in the minds of many people, there is a deep connection between morality and religion'.

moral realism claim to be traditional religious believers. In so doing, they take themselves not to espouse a highly stylized philosophical position divorced from those of ordinary religious believers, but to adopt a view that ordinary theists have defended and espoused for a very long time.⁵⁸ I suppose, however, if one wanted a better feel for the sorts of conviction harbored by ordinary religious believers, the natural place to turn is not to the philosophers, but to the sociologists, for sociologists have paid a great deal of attention to the ordinary religious believer. If what the sociologists tell us is true, the vast majority of the adult population of the United States—some 85 per cent—identifies itself as religious, indeed as theists of some variety.⁵⁹ Most relevant for our purposes is that the percentage of what I have called 'traditional religious believers' among those who identify themselves as religious appears to be very high. While there are several ways to measure for whether a person who identifies herself as religious is a traditional believer, the standard way of doing so among sociologists is to identify the manner in which this person claims to interpret sacred texts. According to what sociologists tell us, nearly a third of the surveyed adult American population claims that 'the Bible is the actual word of God and is to be taken literally, word for word'. And, predictably, these numbers soar when we consider the largest subset of religious Americans, namely, regular church-going Protestants. Nearly three-quarters of such folk claim to be literalists, while over 20 per cent claim that the Bible is divinely inspired.⁶⁰ What is more, the evidence strongly suggests that the moral views of religious believers do not float free from their theological convictions, but are deeply affected by them. To cite just two examples: the empirical evidence indicates that because religious people have theological convictions about taking care of the poor, they are much more likely (in fact, twice as likely) to give to the poor than non-religious people;⁶¹ the evidence also strongly supports the claim

⁵⁸ Mitchell (1980) and natural law theorists such as MacIntyre (1992) are nice examples of this.

⁵⁹ Unless noted otherwise, the data I shall use are gleaned from the 1998 General Social Survey, a national, full-probability sample drawn from non-institutional English-speaking persons 18 years of age or older. More precisely, the data tell us that about 85% of the US population identifies itself as Christian, Jewish, or Muslim. Of that 85%, some 82% identifies itself as Christian, with 52% identifying itself as 'practicing Christian'.

⁶⁰ More exactly, 31% of the surveyed adult American population claims that 'the Bible is the actual word of God and is to be taken literally, word for word'. 70% of regular church-going Protestants affirm this, while 21% claim that the Bible is divinely inspired. Note also that, in a survey taken in 1996, 75% of Christian evangelicals, who comprise roughly 10% of the Christian population, and 62.5% of so-called fundamentalists said that morals are based on an absolute, unchanging standard. See Smith (1996).

⁶¹ See Regnerus *et al.* (1998).

that religious convictions and the belief that there are absolute standards of morality are the most dominant variables in determining conservative attitudes toward abortion.⁶²

For those who are not hard-nosed skeptics about whether sociological data give us any reliable information about what people believe, data of this sort can be a helpful reminder that there is often less than a comfortable fit between the convictions of ordinary folk and those of most philosophers. In any event, I will assume in what follows that these sociological claims are sufficiently well established, and that our best empirical evidence supports the claim that there are millions of traditional religious believers in the United States alone. In light of these data, I suggest that we can simply grant that the sophisticated expressivist is correct to say that there are moral quasi-propositions that nicely mimic genuine moral propositions. I suggest, moreover, that we can simply grant that the sophisticated expressivist is correct to say that agents can say of such quasi-propositions that they are true, provided that the sense of 'true' is sufficiently deflationary and consists in no more than doing something like repeating or endorsing such quasi-propositions. I submit, however, that considerations of charity dictate that it would be mistaken to interpret what traditionally religious folk say as consisting in the expression of such quasi-propositions. Rather, we should interpret what traditionally religious folk are saying when they engage in ordinary moral discourse in light of their theological and moral commitments. Doing so, I suggest, gives us decisive reason to believe that when these agents engage in ordinary moral discourse they (among other things) intend to refer to moral features of God and the world, and do not intend to perform assertion-like acts that, according to the sophisticated expressivist, mimic such acts.

Suppose, then, for argument's sake, that we grant both that there are no moral facts and that there are assertion-like acts that express moral quasi-propositions. Now ask yourself the following question: Are there traditional religious believers? If the answer is 'Yes, there are lots of them', then, I am suggesting, we should also believe that there are many ordinary folks who reject Moral Nihilism. (If you believe that this implies that the account I have offered of the traditional believer's moral discourse is 'too metaphysically loaded', ask yourself whether you believe the foregoing account I have offered of the traditional believer's religious discourse is also too metaphysically loaded.) But if we believe that there are many ordinary folks who reject Moral Nihilism, then, I have been contending, we should also believe that (with respect to a large subsection of such people)

⁶² See Emerson (1996). See also Hamil-Luker and Smith (1998).

- (5) It is false that, in ordinary optimal conditions, when an agent performs the sentential act of sincerely uttering a moral sentence, that agent does not thereby intend to assert a moral proposition, but intends to express an attitude toward a non-moral state of affairs or object.

And this implies that

- (6) Expressivism is false.

An objection

Let me conclude this section by canvassing an objection to a central premise of the argument just offered against sophisticated expressivism. The premise in question is the claim that there are traditional religious believers, and the objection is one that flatly denies this. Perhaps the most obvious way of running the objection is to offer a Wittgensteinian-expressivist interpretation of religious discourse according to which religious discourse is also non-assertoric and entirely consists in the expression of religious quasi-propositions.⁶³ According to this view, by sincerely presenting quasi-propositions of this sort when engaging in religious discourse, an agent does not thereby intend to say anything about God, but intends to express attitudes toward some non-divine object or state of affairs.

My reply to this objection is brief: I deny that such a view accurately represents what ordinary religious believers intend to say when engaging in religious discourse. It is of some comfort that an expressivist such as Simon Blackburn appears to agree. Here is what Blackburn says on the matter:

To suppose, for instance, that the world exists as it does because it ought to do so might be the privilege of the moral realist. To suppose that the world exists because God made it is the privilege of the theological realist. If this kind of belief

⁶³ I won't consider a slightly different case in which religious believers are best understood as being cognitivists and realists about theological discourse, but expressivists about moral discourse. I ignore such a case because it seems to me a very strange hybrid. It asks us to imagine that traditional religious believers believe in such things as God, angels, demons, and so on, but do not believe that there are genuine moral features of these and other entities. It is difficult to see, however, why they would accept the former and not the latter sorts of thing—it can't be because the latter are more 'queer' than the former! Moreover, it is difficult to see, according to such a view, what could be made of the putative experience of qualities such as God's goodness. The official projectivist stance is that in some sense we project our attitudes—in this case, upon God—and read them off that on which we project them (see Blackburn, 1984: 181). But I take it to be fairly clear that traditional religious folk don't think of putative perception of God or God's qualities in this fashion. See e.g. Alston (1991). So, I don't see how the position could avoid being an error theory of some kind.

is intrinsic to first-order theorizing (as in the theological case), the kind of diagnosis of the commitments offered by a projectivist will indeed find error in the everyday practice, as well as in various interpretations of it; this is why a 'Wittgensteinian' protection of religious belief is a kind of cheat. Ordinary religious belief, thought of in an expressive way, involves the mismatch referred to above.⁶⁴

The mismatch of which Blackburn speaks is that which is involved in what I called a 'first-order error theory'. The mismatch obtains because it is intrinsic to both first-order theological theorizing of the sort engaged in by figures such as Augustine, Maimonides, al-Ghazali, and the religious discourse of ordinary religious folk, that persons involved in such theorizing and discourse genuinely believe that God exists, loves the poor, will exercise justice on the part of the oppressed, and so forth, and regularly express these propositions in ordinary religious discourse. To which I add the point that some of our most prominent contemporary philosophers of religion who are well aware of the issues that divide expressivist accounts of religious discourse from ordinary cognitivist ones make it clear that when *they* use theological discourse, they intend to say things about God and God's activity and not just express attitudes of various kinds. According to these philosophers, their use of such language is not idiosyncratic, but entirely in keeping with the religious traditions of which they are a part.⁶⁵

IV. Conclusion

I close by recapitulating the Core Argument I have defended. In its basic form, the Core Argument runs as follows:

⁶⁴ Blackburn (1993: 58).

⁶⁵ See Alston (1989: 6–7), Plantinga (1983: 19), and Wolterstorff (n.d.). On a different note, Jimmy Lenman has suggested to me that perhaps the moral and theological cases are not on all fours. Imagine an agent, Peter, who decides that J. L. Mackie is right about both religion and morality: both are irredeemably riddled with error. It is plausible to conjecture that Peter would continue to moralize by way of expressing attitudes because the things that concern him in the moral realm would continue to do so, and he would need a language to express these concerns. But arguably he would cease to theologize because it would appear silly and pointless.

In response, I do not think it is obvious that moral concerns would continue to concern Peter while he would view theologizing as silly and pointless. The two may be too intertwined in Peter's life for him simply to abandon theologizing. More importantly, it seems to me that even if the two cases were disanalogous in the sense that the objection specifies, this is irrelevant to the argument I am making. My argument concerns the actual illocutionary act intentions of traditional religious believers who moralize and theologize. Whether they would become expressivists after discovering that traditional religion or morality is false is an interesting empirical question that doesn't bear upon this issue.

- (1) In ordinary optimal conditions, an agent performs an illocutionary act of Φ ing by way of performing a sentential act if and only if that agent intends to Φ by way of performing that sentential act. (Assumption)
- (2) If expressivism is true, then, in ordinary optimal conditions, when an agent sincerely utters a moral sentence, that agent does not thereby assert a moral proposition, but expresses an attitude toward a non-moral state of affairs or object. (From The Expressivist's Speech Act Thesis)
- (3) Expressing an attitude and asserting are distinct illocutionary act types. (Assumption)
- (4) So, if expressivism is true, then, in ordinary optimal conditions, when an agent performs the sentential act of sincerely uttering a moral sentence, that agent does not thereby intend to assert a moral proposition, but intends to express an attitude toward a non-moral state of affairs or object. (From (1), (2), and (3))
- (5) It is false that, in ordinary optimal conditions, when an agent performs the sentential act of sincerely uttering a moral sentence, that agent does not thereby intend to assert a moral proposition, but intends to express an attitude toward a non-moral state of affairs or object. (As argued in sections II and III)

So,

- (6) Expressivism is false. (From (4) and (5), MT)

I have claimed that premises (1) and (3) are platitudes about illocutionary acts that all philosophers ought to accept. Premise (2) follows (when conjoined with a claim about ordinary optimal conditions) from The Expressivist's Speech Act Thesis while (4) follows from premises (1)–(3). If that is right, this leaves (5) as the only vulnerable premise. I have suggested that, according to a fairly natural reading of some passages, expressivists such as Gibbard actually accept (5). I have also suggested that the most obvious manners in which an expressivist might reject (5) are unpromising. Perspectivalist expressivism fails to take into account the role that intentions play in the performance of illocutionary acts; illusionist expressivism commits the expressivist to an error theory of a certain kind, thus violating at least the spirit of The Expressivist's Guiding Rationale; agnostic expressivism yields the result that it is inscrutable what illocutionary acts we perform when we engage in ordinary moral discourse;⁶⁶

⁶⁶ Here I oversimplify. Claiming that it is inscrutable what illocutionary acts we perform when we engage in ordinary moral discourse implies not (6), but the claim that we have strong reason not to believe that expressivism is true.

and sophisticated expressivism falls afoul of our best empirical evidence of what at least many agents intend to do when engaging in ordinary moral discourse. (In fact, if this last line of argument is correct, it suffices also as a reply to both illusionist and agnostic expressivism.)

In closing, let me emphasize two points. First, if sound, the argument I have defended does not directly count against viewing expressivism as a proposal for how we might reconstruct moral discourse. Frankly, I have my doubts about why we should adopt an expressivist account of moral discourse if there were no moral facts. But this is not an issue I will attempt to settle here.⁶⁷ Second, I have not argued that, when engaging in moral discourse, agents *never* intend to express attitudes and not assert moral propositions. Perhaps they do. But if they do, I judge that this does not affect the main lines of the argument I have offered. Indeed, it may make expressivism a less attractive thesis than it might seem otherwise. For if expressivism were understood merely as a claim about the manner in which some subset of agents engages in ordinary discourse, it would follow that persons who do not intend to express moral propositions in moral discourse and those who do are saying very different things when engaging in such discourse.⁶⁸ In such a scenario, we would have reason to believe that we are often quite literally talking past each other when engaging in ordinary moral discourse. And while one probably cannot rule out that

⁶⁷ The view doesn't seem to me obviously preferable to a type of moral fictionalism wherein we assert moral propositions in our ordinary lives and think and act as if there were moral facts while admitting in our more reflective moments there are none. See Joyce (2001: chs. 7 and 8) for a defense of a similar position.

⁶⁸ Is the view I defend subject to the same complaint? Well, suppose moral cognitivism is true and that a theist were to claim that eating meat is wrong. Suppose also that in saying this she is supposing that eating meat is wrong because it is forbidden by God's law. Now suppose an atheist were to claim that eating meat is permissible. In doing so, he does not think that the moral propriety of eating meat has anything to do with God. According to the view I've defended, won't one agent intend to say something about an action being contrary to the commands of God while the other won't? If so, how could these two figures possibly disagree with one another?

The problem, I think, is only apparent. After all, if cognitivism is true, these agents disagree about this much: whether eating meat has the property of being wrong. These agents are, accordingly, not talking past each other by predicating different properties of different things, but are saying different things about the same thing (eating meat). To be sure, each agent disagrees about whether the property of wrongness depends on God's commands or not. But, once again, this does not preclude genuine moral disagreement. For suppose we assume that both agents share certain assumptions about the nature of wrongness—e.g. that if an option were right and others wrong, she ought to take the right one, that a right option that is chosen because it is right is always morally justifiable, and so forth. Then the disagreement on this level is also a matter of saying different things about the same thing, namely, the nature of wrongness. The theist contends that the property of wrongness depends on God's will, while the atheist denies this.

this in fact is what happens in ordinary moral discourse—one thinks of Alasdair MacIntyre's claim in *After Virtue* that this is precisely what happens in moral discourse—it is nonetheless a result that most cognitivists and expressivists have been eager to avoid.

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