

# Can expressivism have it all?

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**Abstract** Quasi-realist expressivists (or simply “expressivists”) set themselves the task of developing a metaethical theory that at once captures what they call the “realist-sounding” elements of ordinary moral thought and discourse but is also distinctively antirealist. Its critics have long suspected that the position cannot have what it wants. In this essay, I develop this suspicion. I do so by distinguishing two paradigmatic versions of the view—what I call Thin and Thick expressivism respectively. I contend that there is a metaethical datum regarding our epistemic achievements in the moral domain that presents challenges for each variety of expressivism. Thin expressivism opts not to accommodate and explain this datum but I contend that its rationale for not doing so rests on a suspect methodology. Thick expressivism looks as if it must accommodate and explain this datum but I argue that it is poorly situated to do so. I conclude that we have reason to believe that paradigmatic expressivism cannot have all that it wants.

**Keywords** Expressivism · Realism · Epistemic achievements · Methodology

Quasi-realist expressivists (or “expressivists”, for short) set themselves the task of developing a metaethical theory that at once captures what they call the “realist-sounding” elements of ordinary moral thought and discourse but is also distinctively

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antirealist.<sup>1</sup> Its critics have long suspected that the view cannot have what it wants. In this essay, I develop this suspicion.

I do so by calling attention to a series of passages in which expressivists explain how their view can “progressively mimic” the “realist-sounding” elements of the moral domain, such as the claims that there are moral truths or facts, by appealing to deflationary or minimalist accounts of moral thought and discourse.<sup>2</sup>

These passages fall into two groups. The first group includes passages such as the following from Allan Gibbard:

There are, I take it, true normative thoughts, such as AGONY IS WORTH AVOIDING. In this sense of the word ‘fact,’ then, there are normative facts. ‘That agony is worth avoiding is a fact’ just amounts to saying that agony is worth avoiding.<sup>3</sup>

And from Simon Blackburn:

After all, minimalism about truth allows us to end up saying ‘it is true that kindness is good’. For this means no more than that kindness is good, an attitude we may properly want to express.... Minimalism seems to let us end up saying, for instance, that ‘kindness is good’ represents the facts. For ‘represents the facts’ means no more than: ‘is true’. It might seem, then, that our investigations have ended up with a position remarkably like that of Moore. The ethical proposition is what it is and not another thing; its truth means that it represents the ethical facts or the ethical properties of things. We can throw in mention of reality: ethical propositions are really true.<sup>4</sup>

These passages share a common structure. They move seamlessly from apparent claims about ethical reality—such as that it is a fact *that kindness is good* or *that torture is wrong*—to metasemantic claims—which concern what it is to think or say that it is a fact that kindness is good or that torture is wrong (and vice versa).<sup>5</sup> I’ll have more to say later about why expressivists would advocate transitions of this sort. For present purposes, it is enough to note that passages such as these present expressivists as especially concerned with what it is to think or say that it is a fact that kindness is good or that torture is wrong.

The second group of passages includes ones such as the following from Gibbard:

Are there, then, normative facts? It depends ... on what “facts” are meant to be.... By “facts”, then, do we mean states of affairs that obtain...? Then

<sup>1</sup> I take the phrase in quotes from Blackburn (1994, 315). *cf.* Blackburn (1993, 77, 151) and (1984, 180). For reasons I offer in Cuneo (2017), I doubt that there is any such thing as “realist-sounding” or “realist-seeming” elements of moral thought and discourse, so, I’ll continue to put these phrases in scare-quotes.

<sup>2</sup> The first phrase in quotes is from Blackburn (1993, 4).

<sup>3</sup> Gibbard (2003, x), *cp.* (2012, 49).

<sup>4</sup> Blackburn (1998, 79).

<sup>5</sup> I use the term “metasemantic” broadly to cover what are really metalinguistic (what it is to say something), metacognitive (what it is to think something), and metasemantic (what is to mean something) claims.

clearly, if my quasi-realism is correct, there aren't distinctly normative facts, only naturalistic facts. Or by "facts" do we mean true thoughts...? If so, then perhaps we have seen that there are, after all, normative facts distinct from all natural facts. I'll use the term 'fact' in this second sense, so that a "fact" is a true thought, and look to the possibility of normative facts in this sense.<sup>6</sup>

And the following from Blackburn:

Yes, I am an anti-realist; no, this does not mean that there are no facts of an ethical or normative kind.

Quasi-realism ... refuses to give ethical facts a typical explanatory role. This is already heralded when we turn our back on ethical representation. A representation of something as F is typically explained by the fact that it is F. A representation *answers* to what is representational. I hold that ethical facts do not play this explanatory role.<sup>7</sup>

Unlike the passages that belong to the first group, these are not primarily concerned with telling us what it is to think or say something is a moral fact, but to offer positive information regarding what these facts are like.

I have said that my project in this essay is to develop the suspicion that expressivism cannot get what it wants, capturing both the "realist-sounding" appearances of the moral domain while remaining distinctively antirealist. Central to this project is a diagnosis of why it might appear that expressivism can have what it wants and an argument, in light of this diagnosis, why it probably cannot.

According to the diagnosis, the appearance that expressivism can have it all is due largely to the fact that expressivists develop their view in two ways that fit uneasily together, often moving seamlessly between them.

I call the first approach, which is illustrated by passages that belong to the first group, *Thin expressivism* ("thin" because its ontological commitments are so thin).<sup>8</sup> When addressing the metaethical question "Are there moral facts?" Thin expressivism employs a method of avoidance. Rather than answer the question directly, the view offers (*inter alia*) an expressivist account of moral thought and discourse of what it is to think or say that there are moral facts. Moreover, it holds that this account of moral thought and discourse "undercuts" (or legitimately avoids) any theoretical requirement to theorize about moral reality and our relation to it.<sup>9</sup> Roughly, the idea is that, since moral thought and discourse are not in the business of representing moral reality, there is insufficient reason to posit or investigate moral facts and how we might be related to them. The view has this

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<sup>6</sup> Gibbard (2003, 182).

<sup>7</sup> Blackburn (1999, 216). For other passages that fall into the second group, see Blackburn (1998, 80).

<sup>8</sup> Schroeder (2008a, 8), (2008b, 151), Carter and Chrisman (2012, 314), Chrisman (2012), and Sinclair (2012, Sect. 3) and (2017, 647) appear to interpret expressivism along these lines. See also what Dreier (2015, 292) calls the "first fork".

<sup>9</sup> Carter and Chrisman (2012, 314); the approach developed in their essay closely resembles what Dreier (2015) calls the "Expressivist Sidestep." Carter and Chrisman emphasize that Thin expressivism needn't deny that there are moral facts, as it can remain noncommittal regarding this issue.

significant implication: If Thin expressivism were to find itself tasked with developing views regarding the character of moral facts and how we grasp them, it will have failed to achieve its explanatory ambitions, as this is the very task it is designed to avoid.

I call the second approach, which is captured by passages that belong to the second group, *Thick expressivism* (“thick” because its ontological commitments are thicker than its thin cousin).<sup>10</sup> This view employs a method of partial avoidance. Unlike Thin expressivism, this position directly answers the metaethical question “Are there moral facts?” in the affirmative. But in doing so, it avoids making any commitment to there being any moral facts as metaethical positions such as realism typically think of them, claiming that these facts are mere “shadows” of moral thought and discourse.<sup>11</sup> Thick expressivism, then, makes no attempt to undercut or avoid any theoretical requirement to posit or investigate moral facts, provided that they’re understood along deflationary lines. Given its method of partial avoidance, Thick expressivism will *not* have failed to satisfy its explanatory ambitions if it were tasked with developing views regarding the character of moral facts and how we grasp them. The view is designed to avoid not a commitment to moral facts as such, but only a broadly realist account of them.

Thin and Thick expressivism are importantly different. The first view does not commit itself to the existence of moral facts; the second does. Moreover, the conditions for their satisfying their respective explanatory ambitions are incompatible: Thin expressivism will have satisfied its ambitions only if it undercuts (or legitimately avoids) any requirement to theorize about the character of moral reality, whereas Thick expressivism commits itself to offering such a characterization (albeit deflationary in character). Given that these views can be developed along different lines, a full and thorough treatment of each would require a stand-alone discussion of its own. My project in this essay, however, is not to trace these approaches through all their possible permutations. I want instead to engage with paradigm versions of each type of approach, identifying a fundamental challenge that each faces. My reason for doing so is not simply that it will enable us to get the main issues on the table. It is also because, if the diagnosis mentioned above is correct, it is important to consider both versions of the approach side-by-side. This will enable us to keep distinct issues distinct while noting what these approaches have in common and where they differ.

I can now briefly state the argument I’ll offer for the claim that expressivism cannot have it all. The argument presents a metaethical datum that every metaethical theory has *prima facie* reason to accommodate and explain (or adequately explain why it needn’t be accommodated and explained). Thin expressivism employs a methodology whereby it is legitimate not to accommodate and explain this datum. I argue that the methodology is suspect. Thick expressivism,

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<sup>10</sup> Rosen (1998), Dreier (2004), Street (2011, 8), Asay (2013), and Dunaway (2016) appear to understand expressivism in this way.

<sup>11</sup> As I indicate in Sect. 3, it is very difficult to say what such a characterization comes to. But I can say at least this: It does not merely consist in a metasemantic claim that licenses the use of moral predicates. See Sinclair (2012, Sects. 3 and 8).

in contrast, does not deny that it must accommodate and explain this datum. I contend that it lacks the resources to do so. The conclusion I draw is that we should probably accept neither position. I hasten to add that I do not conclude that we should reject expressivism as such. In a moment, I'll explain why.

## 1 Characterizing expressivism

Attempts to critically engage expressivism fall into a recognizable pattern. A critic presses a line of objection against the view. Expressivism's defenders respond by maintaining that the critic has misunderstood the position in some fundamental respects.<sup>12</sup> These exchanges should give anyone who wishes to engage with expressivism pause. By all appearances, satisfactory characterizing the view is extraordinarily challenging.

The problem is not so much that there is no canonical account of what expressivism is (although there is none). It is rather that the term "expressivism" is probably best understood to designate not a philosophical position, but a *research program* whose realizations or developments can take a variety of different (and sometimes incompatible) forms.<sup>13</sup> In this section, I offer a characterization of the core commitments of this research program and the development of it with which I'll engage.

The characterization I offer proceeds in two steps. The first step is to identify a range of data that any satisfactory metaethical position must accommodate and explain (or adequately explain why its members require no accommodation or explanation),<sup>14</sup> such as:

*Judgment* Moral judgments have the marks of a descriptive belief: they are classificatory, truth-evaluable, apt candidates for knowledge, and apt for inference

*Practicality* Moral judgments have the marks of a practical attitude: they are often directive and motivationally efficacious.

*Mistake* Not any response to a moral question will do; we can make moral mistakes.

*Epistemic Achievements* Some moral judgments enjoy epistemic achievements in the sense of being trustworthy, warranted, or justified.

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<sup>12</sup> See, e.g., the exchanges between Parfit (2011) and Blackburn (2011), Egan (2007) and Blackburn (2009), Harcourt (2005) and Ridge (2006), and Street (2011) and Dreier (2012).

<sup>13</sup> Here I intend to take very seriously Blackburn's (1993, 7) claim according to which quasi-realism isn't one more 'ism' among others but is a research program of a certain kind.

<sup>14</sup> Roughly, accommodation concerns what makes a claim probable, while explanation concerns that in virtue of which a claim holds. Bengson et al. (Forthcoming a) offers a fuller discussion. There is overlap between this section and Cuneo (2017) and Bengson et al. (Forthcoming b).

Call these the *core metaethical data* (or simply “core data”). I’ll have more to say about how to understand these data and others like them in the next two sections.<sup>15</sup> For now, however, think of the core data as having the following features.

First, the core data provide the *starting points* of metaethical theorizing; they are the inputs to (and not the outputs of) such theorizing. Second, these data are *inquiry-constraining* in the sense that they function to anchor metaethical inquiry to its subject matter, specifying what it is that theories have *prima facie* reason to accommodate and explain. Third, data are *theory-neutral* in the dual sense that they function as common currency among theorists at the outset of theorizing, while also being fallible to the extent that a particular datum might be mistaken. To which I’ll add that, given their status as common currency, the data are fairly indeterminate. Different theories may wish to offer different specifications of them. For example, a datum such as Practicality, which states that moral judgments are often motivationally efficacious, can be specified in different ways.

The second step toward arriving at a satisfactory characterization of the expressivist program is to specify whether it or its rivals endeavor to accommodate and explain these data and how.

Realism (understood here as a position and not a research program) typically attempts to accommodate and explain the full range of the core data stated above. It does so primarily by appeal to the following two theses:

*Moral Representation* Moral thought and discourse represent moral facts. That is, they have moral representational content

And:

*Moral Facts* There are moral facts

According to realism, its first thesis accommodates and explains data such as Judgment. It is because moral thought and discourse represent moral reality that moral judgments have the marks of descriptive beliefs. Realism adds that it’s the combination of these two theses that accommodates and explains (at least in part) data such as Mistake and Epistemic Achievements. In some cases, we make moral mistakes when we inaccurately represent the moral facts, and our moral beliefs are trustworthy only to the extent that they reliably and accurately represent these facts. (Practicality is a thesis that many realists have attempted to accommodate and explain but requires realism to supplement itself in certain ways that go beyond the realist theses.) The point to underscore for our purposes is that realism also commits itself to the following methodological claim:

*Explanation* When attempting to accommodate and explain the core data, appeal to Moral Representation and Moral Facts

For ease of reference, let’s call the package of Moral Representation, Moral Facts, and Explanation *the realist’s theses*.

<sup>15</sup> The data stated above, then, do not represent the full range of core data. Bengson et al. (Forthcoming b) offers a more expansive list (and characterization) of the core data.

It is unclear whether the expressivist project commits itself to accommodating and explaining the full range of core data stated above (although more on this in a moment). What is clear is that expressivists—that is, those who've dedicated themselves to developing the expressivist research program—have devoted most of their energies to developing realizations of this program that accommodate and explain Judgment. Their attempted accommodation and explanation is distinctive in two respects.

First, unlike realism, it does not appeal to Moral Representation. Instead, it appeals to:

*Attitude* Moral thought and discourse are or express attitudinal states. These are states of commendation and condemnation that lack moral representational content

Second, expressivists have often *embraced* the first two realist theses stated above. Nonetheless, they have steadfastly maintained that developments of their program are not versions of realism, since they reject Explanation in favor of:

*No Explanation* When attempting to accommodate and explain core data such as Judgment, do not appeal to Moral Representation or Moral Facts. Rather, appeal to claims such as Attitude

Blackburn is explicit about the negative component of this commitment when he writes that the expressivist program is “visibly anti-realist, for the explanations offered make no irreducible or essential appeal to the existence of moral ‘properties’ or ‘facts’”.<sup>16</sup> In what follows, I'll call the combination of Attitude and No Explanation *the expressivist's theses*.

This characterization of the expressivist program leaves a good deal unspecified. Rather than attempt to sift through and adjudicate its various and competing realizations, I shall simply present the development of the program with which I'll engage. For reasons that will become apparent, I call this position *paradigmatic expressivism*.

Paradigmatic expressivism makes three commitments. First, it commits itself to the expressivist's theses. This is as it should be. Since these commitments appear to be constitutive commitments of the research program itself, any development of it must embrace them.

Second, paradigmatic expressivism endeavors to accommodate and explain a wide (and perhaps the full) range of core data. Attributing this commitment to paradigmatic developments of the expressivist project is more controversial, but the attribution finds textual support. When Gibbard writes that “[a]lmost all of what descriptivists insist on can be embraced and explained by an expressivist” and that what “quasi-realism mimics is not tempered realism as a whole but tempered

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<sup>16</sup> Blackburn (1993, 175). See also Rosen (1998, 387), Gibbard (2003, 183), (2011, 46), Dreier (2004, 41–42), and Dunaway (2016).

realism in all but one aspect”, he indicates that expressivism has wide ambitions.<sup>17</sup> The position attempts to “mimic”—or, as I’ll put things, accommodate and explain in an expressivist-friendly way—what realism attempts to accommodate and explain. Not only does this second commitment find textual support, it comports with how expressivists have developed their position. When Nicholas Sturgeon charges that expressivism cannot capture the explanatory role of moral reality, Blackburn replies that it can.<sup>18</sup> When Andy Egan contends that expressivism cannot explain what it is to judge that we can make certain kinds of moral mistake, Blackburn maintains that the charge is untrue.<sup>19</sup> And when Sharon Street charges that expressivism cannot vindicate the trustworthiness of moral judgments, Gibbard replies that this is not so.<sup>20</sup> In this respect, paradigmatic expressivism is unlike positions such as subjectivism and error theory, which (under a natural reading) do not attempt to accommodate and explain the full range of core data stated above.

Third, paradigmatic expressivism understands No Explanation to concern the full range of core data stated above. That is, the position understands this thesis to concern not only data such as Judgment but also Mistake and Epistemic Achievements: moral facts do not explain either the workings of moral thought and discourse or the fact that some of our moral judgments are trustworthy.<sup>21</sup> Attributing this commitment to paradigm developments of the expressivist project is more controversial, since there are passages in which expressivists seem to allow that moral reality plays some explanatory roles.<sup>22</sup> In Sect. 3, I consider some of these passages. For now, I note the following points.

First, if expressivists were to allow moral facts to explain some elements of the core data (such as Epistemic Achievements), but not others (such as Mistake), this would present them with the challenge of explaining what would justify this division of labor. To my knowledge, no expressivist has defended such an approach. Second, we saw above that the appeal to deflationary understandings of moral truths and facts is central to paradigmatic developments of the expressivist project. But a distinctive mark of deflationism with regard to entities of some kind is that deflated entities of that kind fail to play *any* interesting explanatory roles. To borrow from

<sup>17</sup> Gibbard (2003, 20) and (2011, 45). “Tempered realism” is the term that Gibbard uses to refer to non-naturalist positions such as Parfit’s and Scanlon’s. The “one aspect” is tempered realism’s commitment to the thesis that I’ve called Explanation.

<sup>18</sup> Sturgeon (1991) and Blackburn (1993, ch. 11); *cp.* Sinclair (2012).

<sup>19</sup> Egan (2007), Blackburn (2009), *cp.* Ridge (2016).

<sup>20</sup> Street (2011) and Gibbard (2011).

<sup>21</sup> Metaethical theories can supplement themselves in order to accommodate and explain core data that their fundamental commitments do not themselves accommodate and explain. I’ll understand No Explanation expansively so that it implies that there is no supplementation that paradigmatic expressivism might endorse such that it implies that moral facts explain the core data stated above. Sinclair (2012), which represents the most thorough (and sympathetic) treatment of an expressivist approach to normative explanation of which I am aware, also understands No Explanation broadly. In Sects. 3, 6.3, and 8 of his essay, Sinclair maintains that, while expressivists can appeal to moral predicates when explaining, they do not appeal to moral properties or facts in doing so; see, especially, pp. 155, 157, 174.

<sup>22</sup> Although, there are others in which expressivists seem to say the opposite; see Blackburn (1993, ch. 9).



what Blackburn writes about goodness understood along deflationary lines, “there will be almost nothing to say” about it, including what explanatory roles it plays.<sup>23</sup> But if moral facts were to accommodate and explain core data such as Epistemic Achievements, there would be informative things to say about them, including how they could play these explanatory roles, and why they play some such roles but not others.<sup>24</sup> There appears, then, to be a principled, general reason why paradigm developments of the expressivist project would maintain that moral properties and facts do not explain core data such as Judgment: if such properties or facts exist, they do not explain *anything*.<sup>25</sup>

I believe that the general view just described represents an accurate characterization of a paradigmatic development of the expressivist research program.<sup>26</sup> Nonetheless, experience has taught me that it would be naïve to expect this claim to command widespread convergence. Still, we have to start somewhere and the characterization just offered seems like a good place to start. I’ll add that the present characterization has this virtue: those who reject it are now well-positioned to specify which component they reject and why. Those who reject the second commitment, for example, will need to explain why paradigmatic developments of the expressivist research program are not in the business of accommodating and explaining a wide (and perhaps the full) range of core data stated above. And those who reject the third commitment need to explain why it would be that, according to paradigmatic realizations of the expressivist research program, moral facts do not explain the workings of moral thought and discourse but might explain other elements of the data, such as Epistemic Achievements.

Be that as it may, I can now address two claims that I’ve assumed are true. The first is that, although they fit poorly together, Thin and Thick expressivism are versions of paradigmatic expressivism. The second is that the argument of this essay does not imply that we should reject expressivism full stop. It should be clear why. At most, the argument implies that we should reject two paradigmatic developments of the expressivist program. There might be other developments of the program that remain untouched by what I say here.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Blackburn (2010, 310–311). Cuneo (2013) explores this issue at greater length.

<sup>24</sup> See, also, note 54 for another reason for attributing a broad understanding of No Explanation to paradigmatic developments of the expressivist research program.

<sup>25</sup> In Dreier’s (2015, 291) words: “To put it glibly, moral facts and properties are explanatorily lightweight”.

<sup>26</sup> Those familiar with Dreier’s (2004) “‘explanation’ explanation” will recognize parallels between it and the proposal above. They differ in at least this respect, however. Dreier’s proposal focuses on “that in virtue of which it is true to say” that you have some moral belief (2004, 38). In contrast, the proposal above identifies a range of core metaethical data that a theory must accommodate and explain (or justify why they do not require accommodation and explanation). Chrisman (2008), Cuneo (2013, 244–247), and Asay (2013, 217) voice concerns regarding the “‘explanation’ explanation”.

<sup>27</sup> Both Timmons (1999) and Ridge (2014) eschew certain commitments commonly associated with paradigm expressivism. Ridge, for example, does not embrace deflationary accounts of truth and facthood, which play a fairly significant role in the versions of paradigm expressivism with which I’ll be engaging. See, also, the discussion of Gibbard (2003) below.

## 2 Thin expressivism

In the introduction, I drew attention to passages in which expressivists appear to move from metasemantic claims such as:

(A) “It is a fact that torture is wrong” means nothing more than “torture is wrong”,

directly to apparent conclusions about moral reality such as:

(B) It is a fact that torture is wrong,

and vice versa. These passages are puzzling in two respects.

For one thing, there is no direct route from claims of the sort expressed in (A) to those expressed in (B) (or vice versa). Why, then, would expressivists write as if there is? For another, many of the core data appear to be concerned with such things as the epistemic status of our moral judgments (e.g., Epistemic Achievements) and whether our moral judgments satisfy correctness conditions (e.g., Mistake). Telling us *what is to think or say* that a judgment is accurate, true, or mistaken, however, would go little distance toward accommodating and explaining these data.<sup>28</sup> So, why would expressivists write as if appealing to deflationary understandings of what it is to think or say something is a fact (or is true or mistaken) is the sort of thing that would position their view to accommodate and explain the core data?

The clue to unlocking these puzzles, I believe, lies in passages such as the following from Blackburn:

So the expressivist thinks we can say interestingly what is involved for a subject *S* to think that *X* is good. It is for *S* to value it, and this can be explained in natural terms.... If you go on to ask this strategist what it is for something to *be* good, the response is that this is not the subject of this theoretical concern—that is, not the subject of concern for those of us who, while naturalists, want a theory of ethics. Either the question illegitimately insists that trying to analyse the ethical proposition is the only possible strategy, which is not true. Or it must be heard in an ethical tone of voice. To answer it then would be to go inside the domain of ethics, and start expressing our standards.<sup>29</sup>

While there are questions to raise about the details of this passage, its thrust is clear. Thin expressivism is not interested in telling us what it is for something to be good and, by extension, what it is for moral judgments to be true, mistaken, or trustworthy. Instead, when it comes to issues that allegedly concern (or have direct implications regarding) moral reality, Thin expressivism is exclusively concerned with telling us what it is to think or say that something is good, wrong, or right, and,

<sup>28</sup> How much distance will probably differ from datum to datum. Ascertaining what it is to think or say something might help us to identify the correctness or aptness conditions for thinking or saying that thing. Still, doing so would not explain what it is that these conditions *consist in* or *whether* they are satisfied, and, so, would not explain the datum.

<sup>29</sup> Blackburn (1998, 50). I'll return to the issues raised in this passage in Sect. 3.

by extension, what it is to think or say that moral judgments are true, mistaken, or trustworthy. What Thin expressivism tells us is that to think or say these things consists in “expressing our standards”. When we read the passages belonging to the first group identified earlier in light of this last passage from Blackburn, it is easier to see what they are saying: while passages from the first group might appear as if they are addressing issues such as whether it is a fact that torture is wrong and what this fact is like, they are really doing no such thing. Thin expressivism is simply telling us what it is to think or say such things as it is a fact that torture is wrong.<sup>30</sup>

I’ll be addressing this last point more fully later, but let me now return to the two puzzles just raised. The first puzzle consists in the fact that expressivists appear to move from metasemantic claims directly to claims about moral reality (and vice versa). If what Blackburn says in this last passage is correct, however, there is no such movement. For, properly understood, the apparent claims about moral reality as found in (B) are simply expressions of attitude or “standards”. The movement, then, is from metasemantic claims as given in sentences of type (A) to expressions of attitude as given in sentences of type (B). Admittedly, there is also no direct route from metasemantic claims to expressions of attitude. But given an appropriate principle that links them together—which I assume will not be difficult to identify—there is no deep puzzle here to solve.<sup>31</sup>

The second puzzle consists in the fact that there is an apparent misfit between the core data, on the one hand, and expressivist accounts of what it is to think or say that something is a moral fact, or that a moral judgment is mistaken or trustworthy, on the other. For merely providing an account of what it is to think or say that something is a moral fact, or that a moral judgment is mistaken or trustworthy, would not explain such things as how we could make moral mistakes or form trustworthy moral judgments (at best, they might set the stage for what such an explanation must accomplish). The passage just quoted from Blackburn implies that there is no puzzle here, since Thin expressivism understands certain data differently from the way that metaethical theories such as realism do. According to Thin expressivism, what needs to be accommodated and explained is not anything about moral reality, or the alethic or epistemic status of moral judgments. Rather, what needs to be accommodated and explained is what it is to think or say that something is a moral fact or a moral judgment mistaken or trustworthy. Thin expressivism

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<sup>30</sup> In what I take to be a vivid statement of Thin expressivism, Sinclair (2017, 647) writes that deflationary expressivism “is not the view that moral facts are lightweight *things*, rather it is the view that talk of moral facts is no more than talk of right and wrong (expressively construed), and thus as ontologically non-committal as the latter”.

<sup>31</sup> An anonymous referee suggested to me that, in the passages quoted earlier, expressivists mean only to claim that (A) is *compatible* with (B). I doubt this could be correct. For, by all appearances, the point of these passages is to help explain how expressivism could mimic what realism says. But *every* metaethical view should agree that not only is (A) compatible with (B), it is also compatible with:

(C) It is *not* a fact that torture is wrong.

But affirming that (A), (B), and (C) are compatible, I take it, would contribute nothing to explaining how expressivism could mimic realism. Given the assumption that this is the aim of these passages, we should probably reject this “compatibilist” reading.

furnishes the materials by which to accommodate and explain data of this sort by (in part) appealing to theses such as Attitude.

The point is worth expanding upon, since it will figure importantly in the subsequent discussion. Consider the datum we called:

*Epistemic Achievements* Some moral judgments enjoy epistemic achievements in the sense of being trustworthy, warranted, or justified

Realists and other “factualists” maintain that this datum expresses a metaethical claim concerning the epistemic status of moral judgments (as opposed to one that focuses on what it is to think or say that a moral judgment is trustworthy).<sup>32</sup> These theories, then, agree that (all else being equal) what needs to be accommodated and explained is the fact that moral judgments enjoy a variety of epistemic merits. Realists claim that this can be done (in part) by appealing to theses such as Moral Facts and Moral Representation.

In contrast, Thin expressivism endeavors to accommodate and explain not Epistemic Achievements (or any specification thereof) but:

*Epistemic Achievements\** Agents aptly *think* or *say* that some moral judgments enjoy epistemic achievements, such as being trustworthy, warranted, or justified

Under a charitable reading, Thin expressivism does not take Epistemic Achievements\* to be what Epistemic Achievements actually says. (It seems no more plausible to hold that what Epistemic Achievements really states is Epistemic Achievements\* rather than the reverse).<sup>33</sup> Nor does it take Epistemic Achievements\* to be a specification of Epistemic Achievements. Instead, when charitably interpreted, Thin expressivism presents Epistemic Achievements\* as a metasemantic “rephrasal” of the Epistemic Achievements datum, which is substituted for the original datum. Thin expressivism endeavors to accommodate and explain this rephrased datum.<sup>34</sup> Since this represents an important difference between Thin expressivism and realism, I want now to take a closer look at what data Thin

<sup>32</sup> I am working with what Bengson et al. (Forthcoming b) calls the *epistemic conception* of data, according to which  $\phi$  is a datum if and only if, and because,  $\phi$  is a claim (or what is expressed by a claim) that theorists (considered collectively) have epistemic reason to believe at the outset of inquiry. This position rejects the *psychological conception* according to which the data concern only how things appear or seem (e.g., *It appears as if* some moral judgments are trustworthy). Bengson et al. (Forthcoming b, Sect. 3) provides an argument against the psychological conception.

<sup>33</sup> Although, see Blackburn (1998, 297), which seems to claim that realists could not be saying what they think they are saying.

<sup>34</sup> Expressivists sometimes suggest that apparent metaethical claims are really just first-order expressions of attitude. See Blackburn (2010). Under this interpretation of Thin expressivism, data such as Epistemic Achievements are expressions of attitudinal states (perhaps of a complex sort). I am not going to directly engage with this approach for two reasons. First, not only is the view highly contentious (the realist theses certainly do not appear to express first-order claims), it has yet to be worked out in sufficient detail to evaluate. Second, suppose, for argument’s sake, Epistemic Achievements were an expression of an attitudinal state of a certain kind. What would it be to accommodate and explain it? It would be, at least in part, to identify that in virtue of which it is an expression of an attitudinal state of that kind. And that, in turn, would be to identify *what it would be* to (aptly) express an attitudinal state of that kind, which edges us toward the metasemantic question that Epistemic Achievements\* addresses.

expressivism endeavors to accommodate and explain, and why it endeavors to accommodate and explain them.

The core data listed in the last section divide into two categories: those that appear to concern issues regarding moral thought and discourse but not moral reality (Judgment and Practicality), and those that appear to concern moral reality itself or have direct implications regarding it (Mistake, Epistemic Achievements). Thin expressivists approach these two categories of data differently. They work with face-value, object-level specifications of the data that belong to the first category. When it comes to Judgment and Practicality, what needs to be accommodated and explained (at least in the first instance) is how moral thought and discourse work, and how they connect with motivation or action. What it is to think or say that moral judgments bear marks of descriptive attitudes or that they are intimately linked to motivation is not at issue. But Thin expressivists handle the second category of data differently, offering rephrasals of them according to which what must be accommodated and explained is what it is to think or say that a moral judgment is mistaken or trustworthy. What it is for a moral judgment to be mistaken or enjoy epistemic achievements is not at issue.

There is, I believe, something importantly right and something importantly wrong about the way in which Thin expressivism handles the core data. Here is what seems right: Thin expressivism needn't accommodate and explain all the core data. As indicated in the last section, it is legitimate for a theory not to accommodate and explain a datum by (*inter alia*) offering a "rephrasal" of that datum. Suppose, for example, reflection were to reveal that a datum is incoherent or that accommodating and explaining it would require us to possess fantastical powers, such as ESP. Then we would legitimately conclude that the datum is one in name only. It should not be accommodated and explained (but perhaps rephrased).

Here, though, is what seems wrong about how Thin expressivism handles the data: the core data are supposed to be the theory-neutral starting points of metaethical inquiry in the sense that they function as fallible, common currency among different metaethical theories, anchoring metaethical inquiry. When and only when they play these roles can theories engage in intertheoretic evaluation and comparison, ascertaining to what extent they or their rivals accommodate and explain the data. It follows that, when theories maintain that they do not need to accommodate and explain a datum, they need to provide a cogent explanation for invoking this "escape clause". What seems importantly wrong about Thin expressivism's methodology is that it fails to provide such an explanation.

Consider, for example, the following passage from Blackburn, which acknowledges that there is a sense in which expressivism cannot accommodate and explain the datum—call it *Independence*—that the wrongness of an action doesn't depend on whether we disapprove of it. Blackburn responds by writing:

According to me, there is only one proper way to take the question 'On what does the wrongness of wanton cruelty depend?': as a moral question, with an answer in which no mention of actual responses properly figures. There *would* be an external reading if realism were true. For in that case there would be a fact, a state of affairs (the wrongness of cruelty) whose rise and fall and

dependency on others could be charted. But anti-realism acknowledges no such state of affairs and no such issue of dependency. Its freedom from any such ontological headache is not the least of its pleasures.<sup>35</sup>

There are at least two ways to read what Blackburn says in this passage.

Under the first reading, the passage claims that how we should understand the Independence datum, and whether it deserves to be accommodated and explained, depend on the truth of a given metaethical view. If realism were true, then we should accept an “external”, object-level reading of the Independence datum, reading it as a metaethical claim regarding dependence (or grounding) relations that hold between moral and non-moral reality. However, if expressivism were true, then we should accept an “internal” reading of this same datum, which asks what it is to say or think that the wrongness of an action doesn’t depend on whether we disapprove of it (what I’ve called a “rephrasal” of the datum). Under this reading, the general principle to which the passage appears to appeal is something like this: how we understand the core data, and whether they deserve to be accommodated and explained, depend on which metaethical theory is correct.

This principle cannot be correct. The problem is that data are supposed to function as the theory-neutral starting points (in the sense described above) of metaethical theorizing. We determine the adequacy of metaethical theories *by* advertent to them, determining to what extent different theories accommodate and explain them (and how they do so, or whether they provide satisfactory explanations for not doing so). Indeed, expressivism has long argued that data such as Judgment and Practicality should function as common currency among metaethical theories. These theories should be assessed by how well they accommodate and explain these data. But expressivists have not claimed that, how we understand these data, and whether a theory needs to accommodate and explain them, depend on the truth of any particular metaethical view (or exactly how they are specified). Since, under this first reading, data such as Judgment and Practicality could not function as theory-neutral starting points by which we construct and assess metaethical theories, it follows that this reading could not be correct by Thin expressivism’s own lights. Instead, what we need is a general principle that offers an adequate explanation why data such as Judgment and Practicality require accommodation and explanation, but data such as Mistake and Epistemic Achievements do not (but should be rephrased, and accommodated and explained so rephrased). The general principle articulated above does not, however, furnish this explanation or even hint at what it could be.

We can spell this out further. Suppose Attitude were the correct account of moral thought and discourse, as expressivists believe. Then it might be true that Thin expressivists wouldn’t have to pay any attention to data such as Mistake, Epistemic Achievements, or Independence: the expressivist account of moral thought and language—or so the argument runs—renders questions about how we represent that reality and what it is like superfluous (again, I’ll address the issue in Sect. 3). But note that the route by which expressivists reach the conclusion that their view of moral thought and language is correct *runs through* data such as Judgment and

<sup>35</sup> Blackburn (1993, 173). See also p. 174 and Gibbard (2003, 186).

Practicality, where they are treated as common metaethical currency that anchor metaethical debate. Indeed, a theme common to all the major presentations of expressivism is that realism is unable to accommodate and explain Practicality while expressivism does so swimmingly.<sup>36</sup> If this is right, then it is not true in general—or even by expressivism’s own lights—that whether a datum ought to be accommodated and explained depends (or ought to depend) on whether these theories are true, as the passage quoted (under the present interpretation) above claims.<sup>37</sup>

The second reading of the passage above maintains that it should be interpreted to say something more modest. Specifically, the passage should be interpreted to say that, when reflection reveals that very substantial problems arise when attempting to accommodate and explain a datum, then theorists are warranted in either rejecting that datum or accepting a rephrasal under which it can be accommodated and explained. Given the “ontological headaches” to which (realist) theories are allegedly subject when trying to accommodate and explain the Independence datum, theorists are warranted in opting (*inter alia*) for rephrasals of this datum, such as metasemantic ones, under which it can be accommodated and explained.

This principle is no more satisfactory than the first one we considered. The basic problem is that, even if there are serious theoretical challenges to face when attempting to accommodate and explain a datum, this is generally not sufficient to establish that theorists are warranted in rejecting it or opting for a rephrasal of it. To illustrate, it has been evident for years that accommodating and explaining Judgment is a daunting task, given only the expressivist’s theses. Frege/Geach stands in the way. The conclusion to draw from this, however, is not that theorists (and expressivists in particular) are warranted in rejecting this datum or accepting a metalinguistic rephrasal of it, which they can accommodate and explain. Likewise, arguments that appeal to various versions of motivational internalism have made it evident for years that accommodating and explaining Practicality given only the realist theses is extremely challenging. The conclusion to draw from this, however, is not that theorists (and realists in particular) are warranted in rejecting this datum or accepting a rephrasal of Practicality, such as a metasemantic one, that they can accommodate and explain. These claims appear to be true, moreover, by Thin expressivism’s own lights.

There might be other readings of the passage I have quoted from Blackburn which reveal that Thin expressivists operate with a satisfactory principle by which to determine which data require accommodation and explanation and which do not (but admit of, say, rephrasing). However, I am aware of no such interpretation. And I am aware of no other passages in which expressivists articulate such a principle.

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<sup>36</sup> See Gibbard (1990, ch. 1), (2003, ch. 1), Blackburn (1984, 187–189) and (1998, 70).

<sup>37</sup> There is a related reading of the passage from Blackburn, suggested by Blackburn (1998, Appendix), which appeals to the following even stronger claim: it’s not simply that there would be an external reading of data as Independence and Epistemic Achievements were realism true. Rather, it is that there are no coherent specifications of these data. What I’ve called a rephrasal is the only genuine option. Since I am aware of no arguments for this extremely strong claim, I propose to bracket it.

Although I do not wish to claim that there is no such principle, it is now possible to succinctly present the objection I am pressing against Thin expressivism.

Thin expressivism is, by its own lights, a compelling theory only insofar as it accommodates and explains a wide (and perhaps the full) range of the core metaethical data (see Sect. 1). But it can do so only when it takes some data (such as Judgment and Practicality) as common starting points that anchor metaethical inquiry but treats other data (such as Epistemic Achievements and Independence) differently, offering metalinguistic rephrasals of them. In principle, this approach could be justified. But Thin expressivism would have to present a satisfactory explanation of why it is justified. The view offers no such explanation. Moreover, it is unclear that there is any such principle that would vindicate Thin expressivism's preferential treatment of some core data. If there is not, then the appearance that Thin expressivism successfully mimics the putatively realist-sounding elements of ordinary moral thought and discourse is due to its employing a suspect methodology according to which certain data receive special treatment (such as Judgment and Practicality), being treated as metaethical common currency, but others do not (such as Independence and Epistemic Achievements).

### 3 Thick expressivism

At the outset of our discussion, I suggested that expressivists appear to move fluidly between two different versions of their view, which I've called Thin and Thick expressivism. In the last section, I considered Thin expressivism, arguing that it rests on a suspect methodology. In this section, I turn to Thick expressivism, asking whether it is better positioned to vindicate the claim that expressivism can progressively mimic the allegedly realist-seeming elements of ordinary moral thought and discourse while remaining distinctively antirealist.

Recall that Thick expressivism is a view that emerges from a natural reading of what I called the second group of passages, which includes ones such as this from Blackburn:

Now, if the projectivist adopts quasi-realism, he ends up friendly to moral predicates and moral truth. He can say with everyone else that various social arrangements are unjust, and that it is true that this is so. Once this is said, no further theoretical risks are taken by saying that injustice is a *feature* of such arrangements, or a quality that they possess and that others do not. The first step, in other words, is to allow propositional forms of discourse, and once that is done we have the moral predicate, and features are simply abstractions from predicates.<sup>38</sup>

In this passage, Blackburn begins by canvassing what it is that expressivists can say. He then appears to claim that, according to expressivism, there are moral features

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<sup>38</sup> Blackburn (1993, 206); cf. 8, 181 and (1996, 92). I take Blackburn to use the term "projectivist" interchangeably with "expressivist" in this passage.



that have a certain character: they are “abstractions” from or “semantic shadows” of predicates.<sup>39</sup> These claims fit with passages quoted earlier in which Blackburn says that, according to expressivism, there are moral facts (which do not “answer” to moral judgments) and in which Gibbard offers a partial characterization of them, claiming that they are not state of affairs that obtain but true thoughts.

Before articulating the challenge I wish to press against Thick expressivism, let me offer an initial observation about the view. At several points, I’ve noted that there are a variety of passages in which expressivists appear to move seamlessly from claims such as:

(A) “It is a fact that torture is wrong” means nothing more than “torture is wrong”,

directly to apparent conclusions about moral reality such as:

(B) It is a fact that torture is wrong.

I suggested that, under a Thin expressivist reading, there is no substantial gap between (A) and (B), since (B) does not express a commitment to there being moral facts (but expresses an attitudinal state). These passages are, however, much more perplexing under a Thick expressivist reading. For if Thick expressivism is correct, (B) expresses—or is legitimately employed to express—commitment to there being moral facts. So, if Thick expressivism is true, there really is a gap between (A) and (B), as there is no direct route from one to the other. The gap may be traversable. But, to my knowledge, Thick expressivists do not say how to make the crossing.<sup>40</sup>

This point having been noted, let me now turn to the primary concern I want to raise concerning Thick expressivism. In the passage just quoted, Blackburn writes that expressivism incurs no “further theoretical risks” by committing itself to moral properties or facts, provided we see such properties or facts as “shadows” or “abstractions”. I have my doubts. For when a theory commits itself to facts of any type—whether they be mathematical, chemical, or moral—it is legitimate to raise questions about what they are like, how we can grasp them and, more generally, how they interact with whatever data that might belong to a given domain. In this regard, call to mind the Epistemic Achievements datum once again. It is legitimate to ask how, given its commitment to the existence of moral facts and its understanding of them, Thick expressivism endeavors to accommodate and explain this datum (or to adequately explain that it requires no accommodation and explanation).

I see two primary options. The first is to accept a metasemantic rephrasal of this datum, as Thin expressivism does. There is textual evidence that this is the approach that Thick expressivism would take.<sup>41</sup> But it is difficult to see how the approach could be meshed with Thick expressivism.

<sup>39</sup> See Blackburn (1993, 181). I am unaware of any passage in which expressivists tell us what it is for a property or fact to be an “abstraction” from or a “semantic shadow” of a predicate or how this account yields a view of moral facts.

<sup>40</sup> Dunaway (2016, 243) offers a proposal on expressivism’s behalf.

<sup>41</sup> See Gibbard (2011) and Dreier (2012).

The problem is not so much that, by accepting such a construal, Thick expressivism would expose itself to an objection like that leveled against Thin expressivism in the last section, according to which the view lacks a principled rationale for accommodating and explaining the data in some cases but opting for rephrasals in others. It is rather that, as noted a moment ago, when a position commits itself to the existence of facts of a given type, it is legitimate to raise questions about their character and how they interact with the core data. By accepting a metasemantic rephrasal of Epistemic Achievements, Thick expressivism would address none of these questions. That is, by focusing entirely on what it is think or say that a moral judgment is trustworthy, warranted, or justified, Thick expressivism would tell us nothing about whether it is likely that we grasp moral facts, how we might do so, and whether doing so is ever an epistemic achievement. But failing to address these questions, or bracketing them for expediency, does not make them go away or render them illegitimate. It follows that there is what I called earlier a “misfit” between what the Epistemic Achievements datum requires—namely, accommodation and explanation (or an adequate explanation that this is unnecessary)—and what is offered in response, which is merely an account of what it is to think or say that a moral judgment is trustworthy.<sup>42</sup>

The second option would be to endeavor to accommodate and explain Epistemic Achievements. The problem with this approach is that it does not look as if Thick expressivism allows itself the resources to do so.<sup>43</sup>

To see why, observe that Thick expressivism affirms three claims. First, it embraces Moral Facts, albeit working with an ontologically “lightweight” characterization of these facts. Second, it commits itself to Epistemic Achievements, rejecting moral skepticism.<sup>44</sup> Third, unlike realism and other “factualist” positions, the view denies that moral judgments are trustworthy, warranted, or justified because they accurately represent the moral facts. This follows from our earlier interpretation of the expressivist thesis that I called:

*No Explanation* When attempting to accommodate and explain core data such as Judgment, do not appeal to Moral Representation or Moral Facts. Rather, appeal to claims such as Attitude.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Cp. Dreier’s (2015, 11.5) observation regarding expressivism’s efforts to “sidestep” the supervenience problem.

<sup>43</sup> The objection I am about to press resembles one that Sharon Street (2011) has pressed against both realism and expressivism. There is, though, an important difference between the objection I am pressing and Street’s. Street’s objection invokes a skeptical scenario—roughly, that evolutionary processes have skewed our moral belief-forming capacities—that is supposed to cast doubt on whether there could be an adequate explanation of the truth of the “tracking” propositions stated below. The objection I offer invokes no such scenario. It rests only on the claims that, according to Thick expressivism, (1) there are moral facts to which we must bear some appropriate relation in order for our moral judgments to enjoy epistemic achievements and (2) by their very nature, these facts could not (even in part) explain how we do so.

<sup>44</sup> See Gibbard (2003, Part IV).

<sup>45</sup> Recall, also, Blackburn (1999, 216), cited earlier.

The conjunction of Moral Facts, Epistemic Achievements, and paradigm expressivism's understanding of No Explanation, I want now to suggest, exposes Thick expressivism to the following objection.

The objection states that Thick expressivism commits itself to a vast array of propositions regarding our moral judgments that are true, but whose truth would be a remarkable coincidence. The charge is troubling because, if it holds, then Thick expressivism would fail to accommodate and explain core data such as Epistemic Achievements.<sup>46</sup>

The propositions I have in mind are ones which affirm that we bear *some* appropriate relation to the moral facts, including being able to “track” them, such that when we bear this relation to these facts, we are thereby poised to form trustworthy, warranted, or justified moral judgments.<sup>47</sup> These propositions include:

Your judgment that torture is wrong tracks the fact *that torture is wrong*.

Your judgment that inflicting agony on others is wrong tracks the fact *that inflicting agony on others is wrong*.

And:

Your judgment that lying simply to save face is wrong tracks the fact *that lying simply to save face is wrong*.

Or so runs what I'll call the *remarkable coincidence objection*.

There are two opposite angles from which Thick expressivism might address this objection. Approaching the objection from one angle, Thick expressivists might commit themselves to claims similar to those which some nonnaturalists do when addressing a similar objection.<sup>48</sup> More specifically, expressivists might propose that there are non-moral facts—call them *intermediary facts*—such that, when we track them, we thereby track the moral facts in a way that can generate trustworthy moral judgments. (I'll offer an example of an intermediary fact in a moment.)

There are probably a variety of ways to run this type of response to the remarkable coincidence objection. For our purposes, the details won't matter because any such response must satisfy two conditions. First, the intermediary facts

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<sup>46</sup> In a passage cited earlier, Blackburn commits expressivism to a deflationary view of representation. Might that help address the concern voiced here? Cuneo (2008, Sect. 3) and Asay (2013, 218) argue that it does not.

<sup>47</sup> See Gibbard (2003, 224). Two clarifications: With Gibbard, I help myself to the ideology (in Quine's sense) of tracking, but offer no account of what it is for a judgment to track a fact. Due to puzzles regarding how to formulate an account of tracking, Clarke-Doane (2015) suggests that we abandon the notion. I myself think that such a conclusion would be premature. However that may be, questions about how to spell out the tracking relation shouldn't obscure from view what is at issue, namely, that for an agent to accurately represent or know some fact, she must bear *some* appropriate relation to it. Let me add that to track the moral facts is what poises one to form moral judgments that are epistemic achievements, such as being trustworthy. What is at issue, then, is not simply whether paradigm expressivism can explain why moral judgments tend to be true, since true judgments might be completely due to luck. These true-by-luck judgments would not poise one to form judgments that are epistemic achievements.

<sup>48</sup> I have in mind so-called third-factor approaches, such as those developed by Enoch (2011, ch. 7) and Wielenberg (2014, ch. 4).

(whatever they might be) must be correlated in the right way with the moral facts. Second, moral agents who form trustworthy judgments must recognize (if only implicitly) that there is some such correlation. That each condition holds requires explaining.

According to Thick expressivism, the moral facts could not explain why they are correlated with the intermediary facts in the right way. This is an implication of a very modest extension of No Explanation, according to which moral facts can no more explain why they are correlated (in the right way) with the intermediary facts than they can explain why moral judgments have the contents they do. But if moral facts cannot do the explaining, then there must be something else that does, and does so in such a way that can guarantee that our moral judgments are trustworthy. Suppose there were such a thing. Suppose, for example, the fact *that an agent is engaged in torture* is an intermediary fact that explains why torture is wrong in virtue of being its ground. To form a trustworthy judgment that a given act of torture is wrong, however, it would not be enough for you to grasp this non-moral fact. Nor would it be enough to grasp a fact such as *torture fails to maximize happiness* (assuming that this fact is what makes torture wrong). You must also understand (whether implicitly or explicitly) that:

Torture is wrong

or:

Failing to maximize happiness is wrong,

which supply information about how non-moral features such as torture and failing to maximize happiness are related to moral features such as wrongness.<sup>49</sup> Under any view according to which there are moral facts, however, the two claims above state or designate moral facts (at least given some broadly consequentialist assumptions in the case of the second claim). But either moral facts explain (at least in part) how an agent comes to understand that acts of torture and failing to maximize happiness are tethered to the moral domain or they don't. If they do, then Thick expressivism cannot endorse this option, given No Explanation. If they do not, then the coincidence remains.

What I have called the broadly nonnaturalist strategy for addressing the remarkable coincidence objection, then, faces challenges. But there is another, opposite angle from which to approach the objection that takes inspiration from the moral naturalists. Interestingly, this is the approach that Gibbard appears to take in places. According to Gibbard, “normative terms like ‘ought’ ... signify natural properties”.<sup>50</sup> Gibbard suggests, for example, that the term “ought” might refer to the natural property “being *unihedonic*”, going on to claim that expressivism can

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<sup>49</sup> Two points: First, this does not imply that in order for your judgment to be trustworthy, it must be inferred from facts such as *torture is wrong*. Some particularists, for example, will understand this fact in such a way that it does not state a general moral fact. Second, I follow Dreier (2004, 39) in assuming here that paradigm expressivists reject reductionist versions of naturalism which maintain that facts such as *failing to maximize happiness* are themselves moral facts. Although, see the discussion of Gibbard below.

<sup>50</sup> Gibbard (2002, 54).

affirm that “the property being what one ought to do just *is* the property of being unihedonic”.<sup>51</sup> That is, Gibbard appears to affirm that there is a property *being what one ought to do*, which actions have, and it is identical with a natural property.<sup>52</sup> Given the additional assumption that things having moral properties are moral facts, it follows that moral facts are ordinary natural facts.<sup>53</sup> And natural facts are the sort of thing that could explain how our moral/metaethical judgments reliably track the moral facts and, hence, are trustworthy.

There is a great deal to say about this proposal. Among other things, it sits very uneasily with what Gibbard says in other passages: it is not apparent how normative facts could be *both* true thoughts (in some deflationary sense) and natural facts that play robust explanatory roles. To reiterate a point made earlier, under a standard understanding, what renders a fact minimal or deflated (a mere “shadow”) is that it does not play such roles. Moreover, if such facts were to play these explanatory roles, then there would have to be special reason to hold that they do not play other roles, such as fixing or contributing to the content of moral judgments, which is a role that No Explanation rules out.<sup>54</sup>

For our purposes, however, we needn’t enter into these issues. It is sufficient to note that that the version of Thick expressivism at issue violates No Explanation, since it implies that moral facts explain how we track them and, hence, why some of our moral judgments are trustworthy. The position, then, is not a version of paradigmatic expressivism as I earlier characterized it. Admittedly, that might strike you as an odd implication. But I believe it is not so odd. For what it may reveal is that Gibbard’s view (under the present interpretation) represents a sharper break from the expressivist tradition than advertised. It is a *non*-paradigmatic realization of the research program. Let me add that, if the argument offered here helps us to see that the most promising realizations of the expressivist program are non-paradigmatic, then that would be an instructive conclusion.

## 4 Conclusion

I began our discussion by noting that critics have long suspected that expressivism cannot have it all; it cannot genuinely capture the allegedly realist-seeming appearances of ordinary moral thought and discourse and remain distinctively

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<sup>51</sup> Gibbard (2002, 56).

<sup>52</sup> Gibbard (2003) states that these properties are constituted by natural properties. The distinction won’t matter for present purposes.

<sup>53</sup> Describing his view, Gibbard writes: “Indeed, in a way, normative facts turn out to be plain old natural facts. In another way, indeed, normative facts turn out to be non-natural facts” (2003, x).

<sup>54</sup> Schroeder (2008b, chs. 11–12) maintains that a satisfactory expressivist semantics must incorporate “mistake conditions.” If moral features are natural, and they figure in those mistake conditions—and it is difficult to see how they could not if moral judgments “pertain” to them—then expressivism would be forced to reject No Explanation as it pertains to Judgment. That, however, would be no small concession. For No Explanation as it pertains to Judgment is, according to paradigmatic expressivism’s primary expositors, supposed to be what distinguishes the view from its rivals.

antirealist. I've offered a diagnosis of why it can seem that paradigmatic expressivism can have it all, and an argument why it's likely that it cannot.

The diagnosis is that paradigmatic expressivism is developed in two different ways. When developed in one way—a way this is keen to avoid any ontological commitments to there being moral facts—the position takes the form of Thin expressivism. When developed in the other way—a way that takes significant steps toward mimicking realism by making some ontological commitments—it takes the form of Thick expressivism. I've emphasized that, since these positions are importantly different, having (*inter alia*) incompatible explanatory aims, we need to consider them individually. The argument that Thin expressivism cannot have it all turns on the claim that every metaethical view has *prima facie* reason to accommodate and explain metaethical data such as Epistemic Achievements (or to adequately explain why it needn't). Thin expressivism maintains that it needn't actually accommodate and explain this datum. I've argued that, while this response is legitimate in principle, Thin expressivism fails to provide a satisfactory explanation for this; the methodology it employs is deeply suspect. Thick expressivism does not claim that it needn't accommodate and explain data such as Epistemic Achievements. In fact, it affirms that there are moral facts with a certain character. I argued that this position must provide informative answers regarding how we might track these facts. The view, I've claimed, lacks the resources to provide these answers.

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