

Expressivism Worth The Name: A Reply to Teemu Toppinen

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TEEMU TOPPINEN HAS RECENTLY ARGUED (2014) that there is a defensible expressivist view that escapes my attack on the cogency of hermeneutic expressivism (Woods 2014). My strategy was to use the *parity thesis* – the claim that sincere moral assertions express desire-like states in *exactly the same way* that sincere nonmoral assertions express beliefs – to predict that constructions like “Murder is wrong, but I’m not against it” are Moore-paradoxical. This prediction is disconfirmed. Since hermeneutic expressivism (henceforth expressivism) is committed to a tight connection between moral assertion and the expression of desire-like attitudes, and since the typical explanation of this uses the parity thesis, expressivists need to provide an alternative account of expression or recant.

Toppinen’s strongest objection is that there is an ambiguity in how moral assertions can express desire-like states in *exactly the same way* as ordinary assertions express beliefs.¹ What I had in mind was that, like ordinary assertions, moral assertions always express desire-like states unless there is some marked aberration – for instance, a tonal change or air quotes – that justifies a nonstandard interpretation. Toppinen suggests instead that, *when* moral assertions express desire-like states, they indeed do so just as ordinary assertions express beliefs, but they do not always express desire-like states. Sometimes moral assertions express only cognitive states, even where there is no overt marking that a deviant interpretation is called for.

Call my intended interpretation of the parity thesis *strong parity* and Toppinen’s alternative *weak parity*. If weak parity holds, the expressivist can respond to me by arguing that my examples are coherent as long as they are interpreted cognitively. And, moreover, they can continue to avoid subjectivist worries by claiming that expression of desire-like states works the same way as the expression of belief by sincere, nonmoral assertion. However, it is not enough that my examples *can* be interpreted cognitively, just as it is not enough that sometimes saying “Grass is green” *can* be interpreted as not expressing a belief. We do not simply pick coherent-sounding interpretations by some form of charity when someone says something seemingly incoherent. We need to explain why – unlike “Grass is green, but I don’t believe it is” – “Murder is wrong, but I’m not against it” seems immediately coherent without any explicit indication that we ought interpret it nonstandardly.

But the moral and nonmoral uses of sentences like “Murder is wrong” also need to be sufficiently similar. “Wrong,” after all, is not lexically ambiguous, and positing two distinct and unrelated speech acts per-

¹ See the fantastic discussion on PEA soup (2014) for additional objections and responses: peasoup.typepad.com/peasoup/2014/05/philosophers-imprint-discussions-at-pea-soup-jack-woodss-expressivism-and-moore-paradox-with-critica.html.

formed by uttering “Murder is wrong” is ad hoc – especially if there are alternative explanations. Toppinen, sensitive to this worry, suggests that moral assertions such as “Murder is wrong” “always, *very roughly*, characterize murder in relation to standards or norms of a certain kind.” (Toppinen 2014: 2). Presumably the point is to link the moral and nonmoral uses so as to avoid an ambiguity charge. However, either “characterize” cannot simply mean *describe* here (desire-like states do not, by themselves, describe anything) or else moral assertions, when they express desires, do more than merely characterize. Toppinen’s suggestion needs fleshing out.

The natural way to do so explains whether we are describing norms *we ourselves endorse* or merely reporting the norms *endorsed by others* in terms of the salience of norms to conversational context. When the norms of others are more salient than our own, we should not expect incoherence – and it must be that my examples are such cases. On this contextualist gloss, moral assertions express desire-like states when they signal to speakers that we are committing ourselves to possessing certain desire-like states instead of describing the moral norms of the benightedniks.² Note that we have not yet explained the mechanism by which we manage to express desire-like states – we have only accounted for *when* we are doing so.

If this is to be an expressivist view worthy of the name, it needs a plausible account of *how* our moral assertions manage to express desire-like states, an account that vindicates weak parity. It is simple for the expressivist who accepts strong parity to explain expression of desire-like states: it is the function of moral assertion to express desire-like states just as it is the function of nonmoral assertion to express beliefs. Performing this particular kind of speech act thus commits us, *ceteris paribus*, to possessing such states, just as performing the speech act of ordinary assertion commits us to having beliefs.

Is there a similar story that preserves weak parity? According to Toppinen, “A central use for this sentence [murder is wrong] would be that of relating murder to standards that the speaker herself endorses – where endorsement is understood in terms of some suitable desire-like states” (Toppinen 2014: 2). I see two natural ways to interpret this. The first is egocentric, holding that our assertion of “Murder is wrong” commits us to a desire-like state directed toward murder when we relate murder to norms that we actually endorse – and where the fact that they are our norms is part of the contextually specified content of the utterance. Our standing endorsement of these norms generates a commitment to possessing the desire-like state.³

² Obviously, a full development of the view would need to say how we, as interpreters, figure out when folks are describing and when folks are endorsing – especially since we seem to be capable of characterizing our norms without endorsing them. For the most part, I put this complication to the side, assuming some such story can be told. Telling this story will not be easy. Thanks to a reviewer for pushing me on this.

³ Note that the particular state has as its object the action-type of murdering. Toppinen is not entirely clear about this, but his examples all involve denying possession of such a particularized state – see, in particular, (12) and (13). I thus assume that the desire-like

On the second view, we characterize the relation of murder to salient norms and also, additionally, express endorsement of them. Moral assertion is then a distinct type of speech act from nonmoral assertion because it functions, in part, to endorse. This endorsement, in combination with our characterization, commits us to possessing a desire-like state directed murderwards.

But note that weak parity is true on neither account. An assertion of p does not derivatively commit us to a belief in p *in virtue of* epistemic norms or standards we simultaneously express endorsement of – at least not typically. The relation between sincere assertion and belief is far more direct. That is one of the points of Moore’s paradox: The paradoxical feeling of such constructions in nearly all cases is explained by the fact that it is part of competence with assertion to recognize the commitment to belief in what is asserted; no additional characterization of the relationship between p and our epistemic standards is necessary.

Compare “I graded them correctly.” Asserting this relates my grading to a relevant set of standards. Moreover, the package of this characterization and my endorsement of these standards commits me to endorsing their grade. But my assertion also *directly* commits me to believing that I graded them correctly. As I have sketched Toppinen’s suggestion, desire-like states directed at, say, murder are expressed *in the same way as* my commitment to endorsing my grades, but *not in the same way as* my commitment to believing my grading was correct. But weak parity requires that the expression of desire-like states functions like the direct expression of belief, not any of its derivative consequences.⁴

Of course, epistemic modals do plausibly commit us to a certain relevant set of endorsed epistemic standards and thereby to certain patterns of belief. But note that *even if* expressivists claimed only weak parity with epistemic-modal-involving assertions, not the general category of non-normative assertion, they would have to face the problem that “It might be raining, but I know it’s not” *is* Moore-paradoxical, unlike the corresponding moral case (Yalcin 2007). There is no parity here.

Toppinen’s suggestion, then, does not present a problem for my argument since the natural developments of his suggestion do not vindicate weak parity. But we might wonder whether expressivists need a version of the parity principle at all, at least for the desire-like states directed at

state that vindicates weak parity must take as its object the action of murdering. See also the discussion, below, of endorsement, and Ridge (2014).

⁴ Ridge (2014) furnishes an interesting alternative. On Ridge’s view, normative assertions commit us to possessing normative judgments – hybrid states constituted by belief-like and desire-like components. This view still violates weak parity because the *particular* desire-like state directed at the object of the normative assertion derives from the belief-like and desire-like components of the normative judgment. Roughly, our commitment to not murdering comes derivatively from the package of our belief that any acceptable set of standards rules out murdering *and* our (desire-like) commitment to following acceptable standards. This is not parallel to non-normative assertion. As I understand him, Ridge is giving a distinct account of expression of the particular desire-like state, rather than utilizing the parity thesis directly. We may maintain weak parity with respect to expression of the *general* desire-like component, of course, similar to the second view I criticize, below.

particular actions, given a view like that sketched above. Can we explain the expression of desire-like states without poaching the connection between assertion and belief?

The parity thesis was introduced, in part, to explain how two people, expressing their own desire-like states by their seemingly identical moral assertions, could nevertheless be saying the same thing. It gave us a way of avoiding the charge that expressivism collapsed into some version of subjectivism. On the first natural way of developing Toppinen's suggestion, this worry reappears in spades since my assertion characterizes murder relative to *my norms* and yours characterizes murder relative to *your norms*. It is difficult to see how an egocentric view of endorsement can avoid this problem, especially as the standard solution of invoking parity is not available.⁵

The second way faces different problems. On this view, the desire-like state is not expressed directly, but induced from our directly expressed endorsement of whichever norms were characterized. Presumably, someone holding this view could augment it by accepting some form of parity for expression of endorsement.⁶ The trouble will then be in giving a non-egocentric account of endorsement that staves off counterexamples like the ones I gave in my original paper – to my ear, it is still coherent, if unfortunate, to say things like, “Murder is wrong, it really is, but I actually ain't against it.”⁷

Even if that can be done, the resulting view seems inferior to the non-expressivist view on which desire-like endorsement is a type of conversational implicature of the assertion in certain conversational contexts.⁸ After all, when we are describing right and wrong outside of the philosophy classroom, we are typically interested in how to act. The salient norms we are characterizing murder in relation to are thus typically ones we endorse. Given the widespread acceptance of Gricean conversational pragmatics and the naturalness of this account, it is hard to see why we should go expressivist.⁹

The possibility of weak parity provides no significant challenge to my argument. And neither does the contextualist account of which norms

⁵ Note that mere agreement and disagreement in attitude is not enough to overcome this problem. After all, when I say “I approve of murder” and you say “I do not,” we signal that we disagree in attitude.

⁶ This type of view loosely resembles hybrid views recently developed by Michael Ridge and will share many of its virtues and vices (Ridge 2014).

⁷ As I point out in the original paper, certain expressions, such as “endorse,” are hard to hear noncognitively – see Woods (2014, n. 15). So I signal lack of endorsement indirectly. See the PEA Soup (2014) discussion for additional worries about Toppinen's use of “in the reason-providing sense” in his examples.

⁸ Note that we all should agree that we sometimes manage to convey our desire-like states without directly describing them (Woods 2014: 7). Expressivism is the distinct semantic view that a core *use* of moral assertion is to directly express desire-like states, not the view that there is a pragmatic route from sincere moral assertions to the expression of desire-like states.

⁹ Note that Gricean mechanics also furnish an easy answer to *when* we pragmatically implicate our endorsement. See n. 3, above. Whether the view under consideration can do the same is an open question.

we characterize by means of our moral assertions. As I argued in my original paper, what the expressivist needs to do in order to meet my challenge is to develop an alternative account of expression. Viewed correctly, the contextualist suggestion is an attempt to do exactly this, but one that I think rather implausible.¹⁰

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