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PROPOSITIONAL CLOTHING AND BELIEF

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Abstract. Moral discourse is propositionally clothed, that is, it exhibits those features – such as the ability of its sentences to intelligibly embed in conditionals and other unasserted contexts – that have been taken by some philosophers to be constitutive of discourses that express propositions. If there is nothing more to a mental state being a belief than it being characteristically expressed by sentences that are propositionally clothed then the version of expressivism which accepts that moral discourse is propositionally clothed (‘quasi-realism’) is self-refuting. Fortunately for quasi-realists, this view of belief, which I label ‘minimalism’, is false. I present three arguments against it and dismiss two possible defences (the first drawn from the work of Wright, the second given by Harcourt). The conclusion is that the issue between expressivists and their opponents cannot be settled by the mere fact that moral discourse wears propositional clothing.

According to descriptivism in meta-ethics, moral judgements function to offer putative descriptions of the world and thus express beliefs about it.¹ More precisely, descriptivists hold that the beliefs moral judgements express are beliefs about moral states of affairs. Expressivists deny that moral judgements express such beliefs. They hold instead that the distinctive import of moral judgements comes from their ability to express non-cognitive attitudes such as emotions, preferences or practical stances. The purpose of this expression is, expressivists claim, the mutual co-ordination of attitudes and actions.² A central point of disagreement between descriptivists and expressivists is therefore that the former accept, whereas the latter deny, that moral judgements express beliefs about moral states of affairs. It is somewhat surprising then, that little of the debate between them is conducted with an explicit appreciation of what it takes for a mental state to be a belief with a particular content. In this paper I seek to address this deficit.

¹ Descriptivists include Boyd 1988, Brink 1989, Jackson 1998, Lewis 1989, Railton 1986, Shafer-Landau 2003, Smith 1994 and Sturgeon 1985.

² Expressivists include Stevenson 1944, 1963, Blackburn 1984 ch.6, 1998a and Gibbard 1990.

My argument will proceed as follows. In the next section I shall clarify the claims of descriptivism and expressivism. So characterised, both are compatible with the view that the sentences of moral discourse are subject to standards of appropriate and inappropriate usage and capable of intelligible embedding in negations, conditionals, disjunctives and propositional attitude contexts, as well as explanatory contexts and those created by the locutions ‘It is true that...’ and ‘X knows that...’. I call these features of certain sentences their propositional clothing. In §2 I shall introduce the minimalist view of representation: roughly the view that there is nothing more to a mental state being a belief than that state being characteristically expressed by a sentence that wears propositional clothing. If minimalism is correct, the version of expressivism that accepts moral sentences wear propositional clothing (a view known as ‘quasi-realism’) is self-defeating. But minimalism is false. I present three arguments against it in §3. Finally, in §4 I dismiss the case in favour of minimalism. The conclusion is that the issue between descriptivists and expressivists cannot be settled by the mere fact that moral discourse wears propositional clothing.

1. Expressivism, Descriptivism and Propositional Clothing

Descriptivism is sometimes defined as the view that moral judgements – that is, sincere utterance of declarative moral sentences – express beliefs rather than non-cognitive attitudes. Conversely, expressivism is sometimes defined as the view that moral judgements express non-cognitive attitudes rather than beliefs.³ Here beliefs are considered to be cognitive or representational, that is, mental states that represent the world, or some aspect of it, as being thus-and-so. Non-cognitive attitudes such as

³ Brink 1989 pp.5 & 9, Jackson and Pettit 1998 and Harcourt 2005 p.251.

desires, idle wishes and imaginings are considered the complementary class of such states: they are mental states that do not represent the world, or some aspect of it, as being thus-and-so.

But these definitions of expressivism and descriptivism are problematic. First because though the theories are sometimes considered exhaustive – so that one may argue for either by arguing against the other – these characterisations leave logical space for a view which holds that moral judgements express both beliefs and non-cognitive attitudes.⁴ Second, because both characterisations are seriously incomplete: for they fail to specify the particular content of the belief or non-cognitive attitude that moral judgements are claimed to express.

To avoid these difficulties, we can characterise expressivism and descriptivism as disagreeing not about the capacity of moral judgements to express beliefs per se but rather about their capacity to express a particular kind of belief, which for descriptivists give moral judgements their characteristic import. Let us call the way in that a particular belief represents the world as being its representational content. When the representational content of a belief can be characterised using a moral sentence, that is, when a belief represents the world as containing or realising moral states of affairs, we can say that the belief is a state of mind with moral representational content. What descriptivists intend to assert and expressivists deny is not that moral judgements express only beliefs, but they express beliefs with moral representational content – call these moral beliefs. Descriptivism, therefore, is better characterised as the view that moral judgements express moral beliefs.⁵ Expressivists, on the other hand, need not deny that moral judgements express beliefs, but do at least deny that they express moral beliefs. Instead, expressivists claim, moral judgements

⁴ Ridge 2006 and forthcoming (1).

⁵ Shafer-Landau 2003 pp.13 & 17.

express affective non-cognitive attitudes, that is, non-cognitive attitudes with an important and immediate connection to motivation. For example, according to Blackburn’s version of expressivism, moral judgements express attitudinally ascended states of approval and/or disapproval, where a state is attitudinally ascended to the extent that it is directed not only at objects, actions, states of affairs or types of these but at attitudes towards such objects, actions, states of affairs or types.⁶ More generally, expressivists hold that moral judgements express affective non-cognitive attitudes with contents apt to play a distinctive role in the co-ordination of attitudes and actions. According to expressivism, the distinctive import of moral judgements arises from such a co-ordinating role, not from expressing states that offer moral representations of the way the world might (morally) be.

There are two important dialectical consequences of this way of characterising the debate. First, expressivism so characterised is compatible with the claim that some (perhaps all) moral judgements express beliefs, so long as the beliefs they express do not have moral representational content. This allows expressivists to accommodate the obvious fact that some actual moral judgements – notably those involving so-called thick moral terms such as ‘brave’ and ‘barbaric’ – express beliefs.⁷ Second, descriptivism so characterised is compatible with the claim that moral judgements express non-cognitive attitudes, so long as they also express beliefs with moral representational content. This allows descriptivists to accept the possibility that some (perhaps all) moral judgements express states with motivational roles akin to those possessed by affective non-cognitive attitudes such as desires and emotions. The dual effect of these points is to focus the debate not on whether moral judgements express

⁶ Blackburn 1998a pp.8-14.

⁷ Blackburn 1984 p.170, 1992 and Gibbard 1992. Note that both Smith (2001) and Jackson/Pettit (1998) have argued that a ubiquitous belief expressing component to moral judgement suffices to undermine expressivism, but this point undermines both arguments.

beliefs (or affective attitudes) but on whether they express moral beliefs, that is, mental states with moral representational content.

In order to focus on this debate, it will be necessary to introduce some further terminology. First, let me introduce the idea of the ‘propositional clothing’ of a sentence or set of sentences (what I shall call a ‘discourse’). Certain sentences – for example those concerning tables, hedges, cats and other medium-sized dry goods – possess a number of features that have been thought by some to be characteristic of sentences that express propositions.⁸ These features include: standards of appropriate and inappropriate usage; the ability to appear intelligibly in the linguistic contexts of negation, conditionalisation, disjunction and propositional attitude ascription; the warranted applicability of a truth-predicate; the ability to function in contexts of knowledge attribution; the ability to function as explaining phrases. When a set of sentences possess these features I shall say that they wear propositional clothing.⁹

It has, of course, long been recognised that descriptivism (at least in its realist versions) is compatible with moral sentences wearing propositional clothing.¹⁰ A relatively recent trend in meta-ethical thought holds that expressivists too may be able to vindicate these features for moral discourse.¹¹ Nor is there any immediate reason to rule this possibility out. Expressivism simply holds that moral judgements do not express states with moral representational content but do express affective non-cognitive attitudes. Absent an account of what it takes for the sincere expression of a state to be the sort of thing that can be subject to standards of usage, intelligibly embedded, true, known, or explanatory, this is compatible with the possibility that the

⁸ Blackburn 1998b, Wright 1985, 1998 and Harcourt 2005 p.252-4.

⁹ This terminology adapted from Blackburn 1993a p.9.

¹⁰ Brink 1989 pp.23-36. Realist versions of descriptivism hold that the descriptions moral judgements offer are sometimes true in virtue of correctly describing moral facts or states of affairs.

¹¹ Stevenson 1963 pp.214-220, Blackburn 1973, 1984 ch.6, 1988, 1998a and Gibbard 1990.

moral sentences used in moral judgement are indeed capable of all these things. The view that this possibility is realised is known as ‘quasi-realism’. That is, quasi-realism is the view that not only is expressivism the correct account of moral discourse but that moral discourse so understood legitimately produces sentences that are subject to standards of usage and capable of being intelligibly embedded, true, known and explanatory.¹² More poetically, quasi-realism is the view that propositional clothing of moral discourse can be woven from an expressivist thread.¹³ My definition of expressivism is compatible with, though doesn’t entail, quasi-realism.

Quasi-realism has an obvious advantage over an expressivist theory that denies that moral discourse wears – or can wear – propositional clothing. This unreformed expressivist position is intolerably revisionist of our actual moral discourse – which I shall assume, does wear propositional clothing – and so can be rejected.¹⁴ But quasi-realists’ acceptance of the propositional clothing of moral discourse raises further concerns. As I have characterised it the debate between descriptivists and expressivists (including quasi-realists) concerns whether moral judgements express states with moral representational content. We have yet to consider, however, what it takes for a mental state to have particular representational content. Answers to this question I shall call theories of representation. The concern for quasi-realists is that the correct theory of representation will show that moral discourse wearing propositional clothing is incompatible with it failing to express

¹² Quasi-realism is sometimes understood as the project of explaining how moral discourse, understood expressively, can come to possess these features (Blackburn 1980 p.353 and 1993a p.4). Here I shall call the project the ‘quasi-realist project’ and reserve the term ‘quasi-realism’ for the view that accommodates the successful completion of such a project.

¹³ Note that quasi-realism is not the view that we can talk and think as if moral sentences can be intelligibly embedded, true, known and explanatory, when in fact they cannot be. This is to confuse quasi-realism with fictionalism (see Blackburn 1993a pp.55-60, 1998a p.319 and 2005; although note that Blackburn’s own earlier statements of quasi-realism sometimes conflate the two views: see for example Blackburn 1984 p.224).

¹⁴ Since one of the items of propositional clothing is that some moral sentences warrant application of the predicate ‘is true’, I here put error-theoretic versions of descriptivism (for example, Joyce 2001) to one side for the same reason.

states with moral representational content. This will be so if the correct theory of representation is the minimalist theory.

2. The Minimalist Theory of Descriptive Representation and Wright’s Dilemma

The minimalist theory of descriptive representation builds on the following two thoughts. First, that a practice that looks and behaves as if it expresses representational states does express representational states. Second, that all that is required for a discourse to look and behave as if it expresses representational states is for it to possess those features of propositional clothing that the quasi-realist vindicates for moral discourse. More precisely, minimalists hold that being expressed by sentences that wear propositional clothing is both necessary and sufficient for mental states to have representational content characterisable by those sentences. In other words, there is nothing more to a mental state having representational content p than that state being characteristically expressed by the sentence p and p being subject to standards of usage and capable of being intelligibly embedded, true, known and explanatory. This theory is rightly called minimalist since it entails that whether or not a mental state is representational can be ascertained merely by observing the features of the sentences that express it. Advocates of the minimalist theory include Wright and Harcourt.¹⁵

If correct, the minimalist theory of representation is fatal to quasi-realism. For quasi-realists accept that moral sentences wear propositional clothing. But if this is so and if possessing these features is all that is required for the use of those sentences to

¹⁵ Wright is committed to accepting minimalism on the bases of the conceptual claim discussed in §4. Harcourt accepts minimalism, though admits he hasn’t argued for the whole of it, when he claims: “...[no] ground for distinguishing those truth-apt [or more generally: propositionally clothed] discourses which express representational states from those which do not seems to work. The obvious explanation...is that the distinction is chimerical.” (Harcourt 2005 p.273; see also p.254).

express states with representational contents capturable in terms of them, then it follows that moral sentences are used to express states with moral representational content. And this is just what expressivists deny. So the truth of minimalism about representation would show the quasi-realist form of expressivism to be self-defeating.¹⁶

The foregoing argument is one way in which Wright’s famous dilemma for quasi-realism would be fatal on the second horn. That dilemma is as follows:

Either [the quasi-realist’s project] fails – in which case she does not, after all, explain how the [expressivism] that inspires it can satisfactorily account for the linguistic practices in question [talk of truth, knowledge and so on] – or it succeeds, in which case it makes good all the things the [expressivist] started out wanting to deny: that the discourse in question is genuinely assertoric, aimed at truth and so on.¹⁷

In my terms, the dilemma is as follows. On the first horn, suppose the propositional clothing of moral discourse cannot be woven from an expressivist thread. Then expressivism is rendered implausible for failing to account for the actual forms of moral discourse (which, I am assuming, does wear propositional clothing). On the second horn, suppose the propositional clothing of moral discourse can be woven from an expressivist thread. Then, the argument runs, this is tantamount to showing that moral judgements express beliefs with moral representational content after all,

¹⁶ It is interesting to note that a tacit acceptance of minimalism about descriptive representation may be a cause of confusing the project of quasi-realism with the fictionalist project of justifying our right to behave as if moral sentences can be intelligibly embedded, truth-apt and so on. For if minimalism is true, the quasi-realist project is futile, leaving the fictionalist project the best that could be hoped for.

¹⁷ Wright 1987 p.35. See also Wright 1985 pp.318-9, Rosen 1998 and Harcourt 2005 p.254.

and expressivism is not only implausible but self-undermining. So expressivism is at best revisionary, at worst incoherent.

I assume that expressivists can avoid the first horn – there are no holes in their propositional clothing.¹⁸ Does that impale them on the second horn? As Wright realises, that horn is fatal only if moral discourse possessing those features that quasi-realism legitimates for expressivism is incompatible with what expressivists set out to maintain. If expressivism just is the view that moral sentences cannot be subject to standards of usage, intelligibly embedded, true, known or explanatory, then the second horn is immediately fatal. But, as I have argued, expressivism is not best defined this way. Without substantial theories of intelligible embedding, truth, knowledge and explanation, there is no reason to think that expressivism as I have defined it is incompatible with holding that moral sentences can be all these things. Yet even if we accept the success of the quasi-realist project, the second horn will be fatal if that very success suffices to show that moral judgements express beliefs with moral representational content. The truth of minimalism would be one scenario under which this conditional is true. To avoid the second horn of Wright’s dilemma, therefore, the quasi-realist must reject the minimalist theory.

Fortunately for the quasi-realist, the minimalist theory of representation is false. In the next section I explain why. In the following section I move to diffuse two reasons that have been offered in support.

¹⁸ The relevant weavings can be examined in the following places: for intelligible embedding see Blackburn 1988, 2002, Gibbard 1990 ch.5 and 2003 chs.3-4; for truth-aptness see Blackburn 1988, 1998a and 1998b; for knowledge-aptness see Blackburn 1980 and for explanatory power Blackburn 1991 and Gibbard 2003 ch.10.

3. Against the Minimalist Theory

I shall provide three reasons to think that minimalism is false, but to highlight its implausibility it is useful to the consequences were it to turn out to be true. If minimalism is correct then the true meta-ethic is wholly determined by the presence or absence on moral discourse of propositional clothing. Since, according to minimalism, there is nothing more to a discourse expressing representational states than it wearing propositional clothing, the debate about whether moral discourse expresses states with moral representational content just is the debate about whether moral discourse wears propositional clothing. It follows that any meta-ethical argument not focused on demonstrating the presence (or absence) of propositional clothing on moral discourse is otiose. This would, however, render large areas of meta-ethical debate – for example arguments based on the alleged practicality of moral convictions – redundant. Furthermore, this myopic focus on propositional clothing would extend to structurally similar debates concerning other, non-moral, discourses, such as mathematical and modal discourse. But it seems implausible to think that all philosophers, on both sides of these many debates, who have ever offered arguments for their position not focused on the presence or absence of propositional clothing, are mistaken in thinking their arguments relevant. Fortunately, this presumption of implausibility is backed-up by three further arguments against minimalism.

In the first case, there are counterexamples to the minimalist claim that being expressed in a discourse that wears propositional clothing is necessary for a state having representational content. For example, certain states of non-human animals

and the states of thermometers and fuel gauges have representational content, yet are not characteristically expressed in any sort of discourse, a fortiori not in a discourse that wears propositional clothing.

Second, there are counterexamples to the minimalist claim that being expressed in a discourse that wears propositional clothing is sufficient for a state having representational content. For example, acts of imagining and the sort of entertaining involved in engaging with fiction are both mental states that are characteristically expressed by sentences that wear propositional clothing, yet neither are representational.¹⁹

Third, according to minimalism, once a set of sentences have sufficient discipline – that is standards for appropriate and inappropriate usage – to be intelligibly embedded, described as true, known and so on then such a set expresses representational states (with contents capturable by such usage). But it should remain at least an open question whether being expressive of representational states is the only way that a set of sentences can attain such discipline. For example, according to expressivists moral sentences acquire their discipline because they express non-cognitive attitudes involved in a distinctive practice of co-ordination, whereas sentences about the weather, for example, acquire their discipline because they express states that aim to successfully describe the state of the world’s weather. Quasi-realists have argued that the former type of discipline suffices, just as much as the latter, for the sentences concerned to occur in embedded contexts, warrant the predicate ‘is true’ and so on. Those who attempt to impale expressivists on the second horn of Wright’s dilemma must agree. Now whether these two ways of acquiring sufficient discipline to wear propositional clothing straddle the divide between

¹⁹ Lillehammer 2002 p.8 and Velleman 2000 pp.250-1.

representational and non-representational states is presently the point at issue, but this should at least remain a possibility. The minimalist theory, by taking the discipline to suffice for representation, rules out the possibility that any sort of notion of representation can illuminate the distinction between the various ways of acquiring discipline. And this is certainly not obviously the case. For there is an intuitive sense in which the way that (according to quasi-realism) moral sentences acquire discipline doesn't appeal to a representational function, whereas the way in which weather sentences acquire discipline does. Whether this intuitive sense can be sculpted into a notion fit for meta-ethical debate remains to be seen, but minimalism seems to preclude this very possibility.²⁰ It is as if minimalists must accuse quasi-realists of providing an account of moral practice in terms of representational states all along, purely because of the garments they eventually weave. But this puts the cart before the horse.

Of course, this last argument presents only a defeasible case against minimalism, a case that can be overturned should there be good independent reasons to accept minimalism. But I argue in the following section that no such reason has yet been given. So the presumptive case remains.

4. Arguments for Minimalism

I turn now to two arguments in favour of minimalism. The first – conceptual – argument arises from the work of Wright. The second focuses on the supposedly unpalatable consequences of rejecting minimalism and is given explicitly by Harcourt. Both arguments fail.

²⁰ Gibbard, earlier a prominent advocate of expressivism, now professes agnosticism on this issue and thus on the question of whether his position is best described as expressivist or descriptivist. See Gibbard 2003 ch.9.

4.1 The Conceptual Argument for Minimalism

The first argument in favour of minimalism rests on a conceptual claim. According to that claim there is a necessary connection between a discourse being truth-apt – or equivalently, genuinely assertoric – and sentences of that discourse serving to express states with representational content capturable by those sentences. Here is Wright:

Assertion has the following analytic tie to belief: if someone makes an assertion, and is supposed sincere, it follows that she has a belief whose content can be captured by means of the sentences used.²¹

Although Wright talks here only of truth-aptness (or assertoricity) I shall assume that the conceptual connection holds more generally between a discourse wearing propositional clothing (of which truth-aptness is but one part) and sentences of that discourse being apt to express states whose representational content can be captured by means of those very sentences. If this is right, then minimalism is a conceptual truth about representational states. However, simply stating that minimalism is a conceptual truth is transparently question-begging here. Fortunately, Wright’s assertion rests on more than this. The underlying thought is that minimalism about representation is enshrined in our actual usage of terms like ‘belief’ and ‘represents the facts’. In particular, we might notice, we use these terms whenever discussing the

²¹ Wright 1992 p.14.

commitments of a discourse that wears propositional clothing.²² Discourse about cats, for example, is propositionally clothed and is one for which we have no qualms about using these terms, for example when we say ‘Mary believes that the cat is on the mat’ and ‘Brian’s claim that the cat is eating the mat doesn’t represent the facts of the case’. Nor are these terms out of place when applied to moral discourse. For example, we have no qualms about asserting that ‘Mary believes that testing cosmetics on animals is wrong’ or that ‘My belief that testing cosmetics on animals is wrong represents the facts’. So the argument is that minimalism about belief and representation is enshrined in our everyday usage of the terms ‘belief’, ‘represents the facts’ and their cognates.

One way to resist this argument is by distinguishing two senses of ‘belief’ or ‘represents the facts’.²³ In a minimal sense, one might claim, a belief is simply any state of mind expressed by a sentence in propositional clothing. Such states – call them ‘minimal beliefs’ – can be said to ‘represent the facts’ in a corresponding minimal sense. It is this sense of ‘belief’ that is enshrined in our everyday use of the term. In a distinct robust sense, one might claim, a belief is a state with a particular representational function. Such states – call them ‘robust beliefs’ – ‘represent the facts’ in a corresponding robust sense. This sense of ‘belief’ is not reflected in our everyday usage, but is crafted for the purpose of philosophical theory. Given this distinction we might accept that there is indeed a conceptual connection between sentences wearing propositional clothing and expressing minimal beliefs with contents capturable by those sentences (this is the insight enshrined in our everyday usage). But we can deny that there is a similar conceptual connection between

²² Blackburn 1998a pp.78 & 294-7.

²³ This is not the view that Blackburn takes in 1998b, where he prefers simply to deny the conceptual claim altogether. The present approach has the advantage of retaining some truth in Wright’s conceptual claim. {AUTHOR REFERENCE REMOVED}

propositional clothing and robust beliefs. This line of response to the minimalist argument is open to both descriptivists and expressivists: descriptivists adopting it will hold that moral judgements express states that are both minimal beliefs with contents capturable by moral sentences and robust beliefs with contents capturable by the same sentences, although they will deny that the latter is a conceptual consequence of the former. Expressivists who adopt this response will hold that moral judgements express minimal beliefs with contents capturable by moral sentences, but deny that they express robust beliefs with content capturable by the same sentences (and ipso facto will deny that the former entails the latter to be false).

Unfortunately for those who wish to resist the conceptual argument for minimalism in this way, this response comes with its own argumentative burdens. In the first place, it needs to provide an account of the distinction between minimal and robust beliefs. This task has begun to be addressed elsewhere.²⁴ But even supposing this distinction can be made out, this response will seem grossly ad hoc unless it can provide a justification for distinguishing two senses of terms like ‘belief’ and ‘represents the facts’. Harcourt expresses doubts that this can be done: “We use the same words because the two senses of ‘represents the facts’ are related”.²⁵ But fortunately for the anti-minimalist there is scope for a justification of the relevant distinction.

Why, then, should we suppose that there are two possible senses for the terms ‘belief’ and ‘represents the facts’? The first thing to say is that is from the fact the everyday discourse has only one use for a term like ‘belief’ it doesn’t follow that there is only one possible use. In particular, there is reason to distinguish theoretical and meta-theoretical uses to which a term like ‘belief’ might be put.

²⁴ {AUTHOR REFERENCE REMOVED}

²⁵ Harcourt 2005 p.269

To explain. A theoretical use of a word or phrase is a use for that word from within the discourse of which it is a part. Most words have only theoretical uses. For example, the word ‘gross’ (as in ‘Marmite is gross’) has a unique role within discourse about the disgusting. By contrast, a meta-theoretical use of a word is a use for that word in the meta-theory of a discourse, that is, when we are attempting to understand, from a detached perspective, the metaphysics, semantics, psychology and epistemology of that discourse. Meta-ethical theories such as descriptivism and expressivism are paradigm cases of meta-theories.

Once these uses have been distinguished there is reason to think that terms like ‘belief’ and ‘represents the facts’ are ripe for both. (My case study will be ‘belief’ although a similar story could be told about ‘represents the facts’.) In its theoretical use, I propose, ‘belief’ is a term of convenience used to keep track of one’s own and other’s commitments within a discourse. This is shown by the fact that a typical usage of the term ‘belief’ is to raise or foreclose questions of sincerity. For example, an agent professing a particularly controversial or unpalatable view will often be asked ‘Do you really believe what you said?’. In a related case, an agent may foreclose such questioning by stating ‘I really believe p’ rather than merely ‘p’. In both these cases, the term ‘believe’ is used in the context of a questioning of the agent’s commitments, that is, questioning of whether the agent really possesses the commitment that is conveyed by the form of words he has used. But in this sense there is no requirement that the commitment thus conveyed is understood in any particular meta-theoretical way: it could equally be a representational or non-representational state. Further support for my hypothesis regarding the theoretical use of ‘belief’ comes from conditionals such as ‘If you believe p, then you must believe q’. Here ‘belief’ is a convenient term with which to track the consequences of the agents’ commitments,

but once again there is no requirement that those commitments be understood in any particular meta-theoretical way. More generally, for any discourse that has a role for inference and an incentive to find agreement, the term ‘belief’ – as a tool for keeping track of one’s own and others’ positions within that discourse – will have a theoretically useful role. This is the use of the term that corresponds to ‘minimal belief’ as I have defined it. And of course expressivists of the quasi-realist sort, just as much as descriptivists, accept that moral discourse has a role for inference and an incentive for finding agreement. So these expressivists as well as descriptivists will accept that moral judgements express beliefs in this minimal sense.

But there may also be a distinct, meta-theoretical role for a term like ‘belief’. In particular, if we think that there is any scope for a distinction between discourses that are understood representationally and those that are understood expressively then ‘belief’ is a term apt to describe the first side of this divide. This is to offer no more than a promissory note for a meta-theoretical use that will define the term ‘robust belief’ but the important point is that there is at least a possibility of a distinct meta-theoretical role that the term might play. And it is in this robust sense that the expressivist will insist that moral judgements do not express beliefs with moral content. Finally, this point actually stands in favour of my response to the minimalist argument, since it recognises the possibility of a break between our pre-philosophical (minimal, theoretical) notion of belief and a more substantial (robust, meta-theoretical) sense. This appreciates that a proper taxonomy of types of psychological state required in mature philosophical theory may not be wholly revealed by ‘platitudes’ of common usage (that are revealing only at the theoretical – not meta-theoretical – level).²⁶

²⁶ Blackburn 1998b fn. 6.

If this is right, then we can resist the conceptual argument for minimalism as follows. There are two senses of belief defined by distinct usages to which the term may be put: the minimal sense associated with a theoretical usage, and the robust sense associated with a meta-theoretical usage. The platitudes of usage that Wright notices link for former notion to discourses wearing propositional clothing, but there is no reason to think that there is a similar link between propositional clothing and the latter notion. Furthermore, it is this latter notion that is employed in the debate between expressivism and descriptivism. This leaves both views as viable accounts of moral practice, but rejects the idea that mere presence of propositional clothing determines – through a conceptual linkage revealed in everyday usage – the meta-theoretical issues.

What then, of Harcourt’s claim that “We use the same words because the two senses of ‘represents the facts’ are related” – a point that could just as easily apply to ‘belief’? We can note that terms can be related without being synonymous. It is, perhaps, perfectly natural that the same term – such as ‘belief’ – should be used for both theoretical and meta-theoretical uses: for meta-theorising doesn’t come easily to those who engage in the practice, with the result that it doesn’t possess a unique vocabulary. To successfully meta-theorise, therefore, it will often be necessary to borrow terms with a theoretical role and give them a distinct meaning suited to a new and unusual meta-theoretical purpose. This is what happens, I suggest, in the case of ‘belief’. But though this paucity of vocabulary is to be lamented, it does not ruin the fundamental insight: that distinct notions of ‘belief’ serve distinct argumentative contexts. The possibility of such distinct contexts undermines the conceptual argument for minimalism.

4.2 The Unpalatable Consequences Argument for Minimalism

The second argument for minimalism is less direct than the first. It argues that the consequences of rejecting the minimalist theory of representation are so unpalatable as to render that rejection untenable.

As I have defined it, minimalism is the claim that being expressed by sentences that wear propositional clothing is both necessary and sufficient for mental states having representational content capturable by those sentences. The second argument for minimalism is an argument for the second of these claims – the sufficiency claim.

In the preceding section I rejected the sufficiency claim, for I argued that once we distinguish theoretical and meta-theoretical uses for ‘belief’ we can reject the idea that the mere fact that a mental state is expressed by a sentence that is propositionally clothed suffices to show that it is a (robust) belief with representational content capturable by that sentence. I shall here also assume that we can reject the claim that being expressed by a sentence that wears propositional clothing suffices to show that a mental state is not a (robust) belief with representational content capturable by that sentence. It follows that whether or not the sentences of a given discourse express robust beliefs with representational content capturable by those sentences is underdetermined by the fact that those sentences wear propositional clothing. Labelling the propositional clothing the ‘T-features’ of a discourse, Harcourt puts the point thus:

We cannot read off from the fact that the surface of a discourse has the T-features that the states it expresses are non-representational, but we cannot

read off from this same fact that the states it expresses are representational either; the T-features no more reveal or conceal the fact that a discourse which has them expresses representational states than it reveals or conceals the fact that it expresses non-representational ones.²⁷

Harcourt labels this the ‘equidistance claim’ and raises three objections.²⁸ However, all of the objections fail, and for the same reason. I shall first state the objections, then give a generic response, before considering how this response applies to each objection.

The first objection to the equidistance claim is that it entails that substantial meta-theoretical argument is required to show that any discourse – even discourses commonly assumed to express representational states – expresses representational states. This is problematic, Harcourt suggests, because ‘...we have no idea what kind of argument would be needed to show that (say) the description in a guidebook of Salisbury Cathedral expressed representational states apart from one which adverted to its T-features – which, by the equidistance claim, cannot settle the issue’.²⁹

The second objection is that the equidistance claim entails that there is no such thing as ‘...a discourse that is paradigmatic of the expression of representational states...since it must be a hidden feature of any discourse what kind of state it expresses’.³⁰ This in turn is problematic, Harcourt claims, because it becomes a mystery what exactly is significant about the propositional clothing (or T-features) as a class.

²⁷ Harcourt 2005 p.264.

²⁸ Harcourt also objects that the equidistance claim makes the Blackburn’s metaphor of ‘projection’ no longer apt to describe the quasi-realist position. This objection is omitted from the discussion since Blackburn concedes the point (Blackburn 1998a p.77).

²⁹ Harcourt 2005 p.266.

³⁰ Ibid.

The final objection is that it is mysterious, if the equidistance claim is true, why philosophers have been commonly misled to think that discourses wearing propositional clothing express representational states when they do not, and not misled into thinking discourses wearing propositional clothing express non-representational states, when they do not. If the equidistance claim is true propositional clothing fails to determine either meta-theory, so given a large enough sample, one would expect errors in both directions. But, as Harcourt notes ‘...no philosopher (as far as I know) has ever said that we are misled by surface similarities [propositional clothing] into thinking that representational discourses are non-representational’.³¹

All three objections fail, and ultimately for the same reason. The mistake is to misjudge the content of the equidistance claim. If, as I have argued, expressing representational states is not entailed by the mere presence of propositional clothing on a discourse and if, as I have not argued but assumed, expressing non-representational states is equally not entailed by the same propositional clothing then it does indeed follow that the presence of propositional clothing does not entail the truth (or falsity) of any meta-ethical theory. In this sense, at least, the meta-ethical theories of expressivism and descriptivism are equidistant from the propositional clothing of moral discourse.³² (This point generalises to any discourse that exhibits these features.)

But it doesn’t follow that in any given case the two meta-theories provide equally plausible vindicatory explanations of those features. The issue at stake here is abductive: which meta-theory can provide the most plausible vindicatory explanation

³¹ Ibid.

³² Blackburn (1985a p.4) accepts this claim.

of the propositional clothing of a discourse, that is, a story of how a discourse meeting the meta-theoretical description their theory offers can give rise to those features that constitute propositional clothing.³³ And there are good reasons, in general, to treat the descriptivist explanation as the default one, that is, as the explanation to be accepted in the absence of any objections.

First because in most cases there is no alternative expressivist explanation. Though I am assuming that the expressivist can weave the propositional clothing for moral discourse, this weaving requires much use of a claim about the distinctive (non-representational) co-ordinating function of that discourse.³⁴ The quasi-realist is not committed to the claim that any discourse whose sentences express non-cognitive attitudes can generate the requisite features, only that a discourse that has the particular role in co-ordinating attitudes that moral discourse has can. But for many other discourses – discourse about cathedrals being the most obvious example – there is no obvious comparable function that can aid the expressivist’s weaving. Note that this doesn’t mean that the propositional clothing of such a discourse now entails descriptivism – the argument remains abductive, but for such discourses there is only one putative explanation on the table.

Second, even if there were to be an alternative expressivist account of discourse about cathedrals – an account that identified a co-ordinating function for that discourse that allowed the propositional clothing to be woven – there would be no reason to accept it. For the other criterion by which meta-theories are judged – besides their ability to weave the propositional clothing – is their coherence with our wider theories of (among other things) semantics, metaphysics and epistemology.³⁵ But, in the case of cathedral discourse, there is no reason to doubt the existence of cathedrals

³³ Brink 1989 p.24.

³⁴ See, for example, Blackburn 1984 p.195 and 1998b p.190.

³⁵ Timmons 1999 ch.1.

and our knowledge of them, so no reason to doubt the descriptivist’s referential semantics and no reason to look to alternative expressivist account. More generally, in the case of a great many discourses there is no reason to doubt the metaphysical and epistemological credentials of the objects required by a realistic descriptivist understanding. For these reasons it will be warranted to treat the descriptivist explanation as the default explanation of any discourse wearing propositional clothing. So both expressivism and descriptivism may indeed be ‘hidden’ below the propositional clothing or ‘surface’ of moral discourse, but it doesn’t follow that they are at the same depth. One explanation may be more readily available and more plausible – hence, nearer the surface – than the other.

This point allows a reply to Harcourt’s three objections. Regarding the first objection, expressivism can admit that meta-theoretical argument is indeed required to show that any propositionally clothed discourse expresses representational states, but mitigate the point by noting that, in many cases, the argument for descriptivism is so uncontroversial as to be hardly worth stating. Take the case of discourse about cathedrals. The most obvious explanation of why discourse about cathedrals wears propositional clothing is that it expresses representational states, more particularly states with representational contents characterisable by sentences about cathedrals. Further, there is no reason to doubt this explanation because we have no reason to think it conflicts with our wider philosophical views of semantics, metaphysics or epistemology (no sensible person can deny that religious buildings exist, that we have good ways of finding out about them or that our words might refer to them). But the fact that this explanation is plausible provides the best possible argument for accepting descriptivism about cathedral discourse. So there is indeed a meta-

theoretical argument required and we know what sort of argument it is but it is one that no sensible person could have reason to question.

As regards the second objection the expressivist can accept that there are some discourses that are paradigmatic of the expression of representational states. The discourses we judge paradigmatic are those where the default descriptivist vindicatory explanation suffers from no obvious objections. We may of course be wrong in our judgements of what constitutes a paradigm case, but this account preserves this consequence: for we can be wrong about whether the default descriptivist explanation can be made to work. Though it appears unlikely we may, for example, be wrong to assume that there are no serious objections to the descriptivist account of cathedral discourse. In that case we would simply be wrong about its paradigmatic representational status.³⁶ In this context, it is interesting to note Harcourt’s claim that ‘we do know why it is more interesting that ethical discourse shares the T-features with [say] botanical discourse than it is that these two discourses share some other feature which they may happen to share: it is because the T-features create the presumption that ethical discourse expresses representational states.’³⁷ But properly understood the equidistance claim is consistent with the idea of an argumentative presumption in favour of descriptivism: this is just to say that the descriptivist vindication is generally more readily available, and generally more plausible, than the expressivist one. This is compatible with the claim that the propositional clothing fails to entail any particular meta-theoretical account.

³⁶ Ridge (forthcoming (2)) also notes that expressivists can, on this account, preserve a sense in which a discourse possessing T-features is significant. For a vindication of the T-features amounts to showing that the discourse in question involves genuine ‘judgement’, that is, it makes claims that can be disagreed with and require support. What the expressivist denies is that we can only enter such a space when dealing with representational states. Both Blackburn (1988 p.167 and 1998a pp.68-77) and Gibbard (2003 ch. 3) emphasise this point.

³⁷ Harcourt 2005 p.266.

Regarding the final objection, the defender of the equidistance claim can explain the relevant asymmetry. Since the descriptivist weaving of the propositional clothing of a discourse is justifiably considered the default explanation there may well be cases where it is hastily accepted, then later shown inconsistent with our wider semantic, metaphysical or epistemological theories and hence rejected. This, according to expressivism, is what should happen in meta-ethics, where an initial presumption in favour of descriptivism is overturned: both because of the possibility of an alternative expressivist weaving of the propositional clothing and because of metaphysical and epistemological difficulties with the descriptivist theory.³⁸ But there will be no cases where an expressivist account of a discourse will be overturned in favour of a descriptivist one – purely because there is no justifiable general presumption in favour of expressivist accounts of discourses. Hence the asymmetry.

Harcourt’s objections, therefore, are not fatal to the equidistance claim. Rejecting minimalism about representation leads (given further plausible assumptions) to rejecting the idea that the propositional clothing of a discourse determines meta-theoretical issues. It is by judging competing explanations of that clothing (both in terms of their explanatory power and their consistency with our wider theories) that we settle meta-theoretical issues. In the case of moral discourse, I am assuming that both descriptivism and expressivism are equally able to weave the propositional clothing. The debate between them must therefore be settled by assessing their compatibility with our wider theories. One of these theories will be the theory of representation, but Harcourt has provided no reason to think that minimalism is the correct theory in this area.

³⁸ See Mackie 1977 (ch. 1) and Blackburn 1984 p.169, 182-7 and 1985b for some of these difficulties.

My defence of the equidistance claim denies that the propositional clothing of moral discourse entails any particular meta-theoretical view while accepting that it nevertheless creates a presumptive case in favour of one such view, viz., descriptivism – the view that moral judgements express states with moral representational content. If quasi-realists are right, this presumptive case is overturned: both because there is an alternative weaving of the propositional clothing available and because the descriptivist account generates metaphysical and epistemological puzzles.

It might be objected that adopting this position commits quasi-realists to holding that moral discourse appears to express representational states – or more precisely, appears to express states with moral representational content – but doesn’t really and that this is incompatible with their mantra that they can ‘save [all] the appearances’ of moral discourse.³⁹

But quasi-realists can resist this objection by disambiguating. There are two senses in which moral discourse might ‘appear to express states with moral representational content’. In the first sense, to say that moral discourse appears to express states with moral representational content might be to say that moral sentences appear to wear propositional clothing, that is, appear to be subject to standards of usage, appear to be capable of intelligible embedding, appear to be truth-apt, appear to be knowledge-apt and appear to be potentially explanatory. In the second sense, to say that moral discourse appears to express states with moral representational content might be to say that moral discourse possesses features that generate a presumptive case for the view that moral judgements express states with moral representational content (descriptivism) – these features being, of course, the

³⁹ Blackburn 1984 p.170 and Harcourt 2005.

propositional clothing. In the first sense, quasi-realists will accept that moral discourse does indeed appear this way, but will also accept that the appearance can be saved. For quasi-realism, I am assuming, is compatible with moral sentences being subject to standards of usage, being capable of intelligible embedding, being truth-apt, knowledge-apt and potentially explanatory. In the second sense, quasi-realists can again accept that moral discourse has this appearance, but will deny that it is their task to ‘save’ it. For the rescue operation here can only involve showing that the presumptive case for descriptivism is not overturned. But showing this is not part of the quasi-realist project; nor could it be, for it is unreasonable to demand that any meta-theory preserve the conclusion of a presumptive case for its rival.

This disambiguation allows quasi-realists to hold that properly understood, the claim that ‘moral discourse appears to express representational states’ is no obstacle to their phenomenal rescue operation. What requires saving, and what quasi-realists can save, are the features of ordinary moral discourse – such as its standards of usage, truth-aptness and knowledge-aptness – not any presumptive meta-theoretical case that these features might engender. This confusion in what it is to ‘save the appearances’ is reason for favouring my alternative description of the quasi-realist project as that of weaving the propositional clothing for moral (or indeed any other) discourse.

5. Conclusion

If my arguments are correct, the minimalist theory of representation is guilty of stretching the notion of ‘belief’ beyond breaking point. In one sense, the notion of belief is tied to those features that make up the propositional clothing of a discourse. In another sense, the notion is tied to the idea of a state that has a distinctively

representational function. Minimalism supposes that these ties unite so that a discourse that wears propositional clothing is ipso facto one that expresses representational states (with representational contents capturable by the sentences of the discourse). But minimalism is false. Not only are there counterexamples, but once we distinguish the theoretical and meta-theoretical uses to which a term like ‘belief’ may be put, there is no reason to think that minimalism is supported by reflection on our everyday use of such terms. Furthermore, though rejecting minimalism entails rejecting the idea that the presence of propositional clothing on a discourse entails a particular meta-theory, this is still compatible with there being a general presumption in favour of descriptivist over expressivist meta-theories, albeit a presumption that can be overturned in particular cases.

Though I have here rejected the minimalist theory of representation and thus defended the quasi-realist version of expressivism from possible attack, this is not to side with either expressivists or descriptivists in meta-ethics. Dismissing minimalism commits one to accepting that the presence (or absence) of propositional clothing on a discourse fails to determine the meta-theoretical issues, but it also means that we need an alternative account of the nature of representational states.⁴⁰ It is only once such an account is offered that the debate between expressivists and descriptivists in meta-ethics can profitably proceed.⁴¹ In the meantime we are left with a general presumptive case for descriptivism, threatened in the moral instance by the possibility of an alternative expressivist weaving of the propositional clothing and by arguments from metaphysical and epistemological queerness. In a sometimes over-crowded field

⁴⁰ Blackburn 1993a p.5: “It teaches us a lot about representation and description that they are so cheap to purchase that even the [expressivist] can have them, along with truth, fact, knowledge and the rest.” To date this lesson is purely negative.

⁴¹ One such account is Lillehammer 2002. I intend to trace the consequences of accepting this theory in a future paper.

this leaves the only reasonable position in meta-ethics the hitherto neglected stance of agnosticism.

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