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IS EPISTEMIC EXPRESSIVISM INCOMPATIBLE WITH INQUIRY?

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1 Introduction

In search of a satisfactory account of moral thought and practice, ethical expressivists encourage us to ask not about the nature of ethical *value* but rather about the nature of ethical *evaluations*. Their answer to the latter question typically claims some interesting disanalogy between ethical evaluations and descriptions of the world. We might call this change in question and the subsequent answer by disanalogy *the core expressivist maneuver*. In early crude forms, the core expressivist maneuver involved the idea that ethical evaluations are expressions of our noncognitive sentiments about things rather than our cognitive representations of things. In later more refined versions, expressivists have argued that ethical evaluations are expressions of special kind of belief, whose role in our cognitive economy is not that of representing the world but rather that of planning how to interact with the world. In both cases, the expressivist account of the nature of ethical evaluations is supposed to provide crucial traction against perennial ontological and epistemological problems threatening more ‘realist’ approaches to accounting for the nature of ethical value.

To put things crudely, the expressivist argues, in effect, that by construing ethical evaluations as interestingly disanalogous to descriptions of the world, we do not have to countenance some *sui generis* things—ethical facts or values—epistemic access to which is mysterious and elusive; rather we can investigate something that is quite common—ethical evaluations—by the typical philosophical means by which we come to understand

our thoughts and practices. Although it is sometimes seen as a sceptical or debunking position, there is nothing in expressivism that requires us to stop thinking ethical thoughts or to disengage from ethical practice. The view is a *metaethical* view about the nature of ethical thought and practice, which is supposed to be neutral with respect to various plausible views one might defend in the course of engaging in ethical thought and practice.

There is, of course, a healthy debate in metaethics about the viability of ethical expressivism, which has led to a number of difficult critical questions: can the expressivist satisfactorily account for the semantics of ethical language, inferences involving ethical thoughts, ordinary talk of ethical truths and propositions, the appearance of ethical knowledge, the possibility of fundamental ethical error, and the general distinction between realism and antirealism? Our project here, however, is not to enter into this debate. Rather our project stems from apparently close parallels between the issues driving that debate and issues in epistemology.

Recent epistemology has taken a distinctively metaepistemological turn: questions about the semantics of epistemic language and the nature of epistemic values have come to the fore. And, although epistemologists have been slow to see this, this turn clearly raises the question of the viability of an epistemic analogue to ethical expressivism. That is, in search of a satisfactory account of epistemic thought and practice, the *epistemic* expressivist would redeploy the core expressivist maneuver by encouraging us to ask not about the nature of *epistemic facts or value* but rather about the nature of *epistemic evaluations*. And he would claim some interesting disanalogy between epistemic evaluations and descriptions of the world. Such a disanalogy would be metaepistemologically interesting if it meant that we do not have to countenance in our meta-theory some *sui generis* things—epistemic facts or values—epistemic access to which is mysterious and elusive, and could instead investigate something that is quite common—epistemic evaluations—by the typical philosophical means by which we come to understand our thoughts and practices. Again, such position may seem to some to be a sceptical or debunking position; however, if the parallel to ethical expressivism is tight, it need not do. There should be nothing in ethical expressivism that requires us to stop thinking ethical thoughts or to disengage from ethical practice, so why think there has to

be something in epistemic expressivism that requires us to stop thinking epistemic thoughts or to disengage from epistemic practice? Epistemic expressivism is a *meta-epistemological* view about the nature of epistemic thought and practice, which is supposed to be neutral with respect to various plausible views one might defend in the course of engaging in epistemic thought and practice.

We remain unsure about the viability of epistemic expressivism. For many of the problems threatening ethical expressivism are general problems allegedly stemming from the core expressivist maneuver, and so they threaten epistemic versions of expressivism too. However, there are three recent attempts to argue against epistemic expressivism – due to Kvanvig (2003), Cuneo (2008), and Lynch (*forthcoming*) – that seek to identify some special problem with expressivism as deployed in meta-epistemology. Our goal in this paper is to rebut these arguments, which we believe will put us in a position to make more precise what epistemic expressivism is committed to and why epistemologists might want to consider it as a live option in developing their meta-theory.

2 Kvanvig on Epistemic Expressivism

2.1 Kvanvig's Argument

The first argument against epistemic expressivism that we want to consider is gleaned from Kvanvig's (2003) criticism of Field's (1996, 1998) *nonfactualism* about a priori justification. However, the point Kvanvig makes should generalize to broader sorts of epistemic expressivism. Field suggests that in calling a belief (he's specifically concerned with beliefs in logical truths) "a priori justified" we are not describing some independently existing fact about the belief's having the property of being a priori justified; rather, we are in some sense expressing an attitude or stance. He writes, "we should have a non-factualist attitude towards justification...; it is a matter of policy rather than fact,...and the question is only whether it is a good policy. It makes no sense to ask whether logic *really is* justifiable a priori" (1996: 377). This represents a form of epistemic expressivism because Field is claiming that a certain species of epistemic evaluations are not to be understood in terms of their purport to represent epistemic facts or values but rather in terms of what it is to evaluate some belief in this way. His idea is

that in claiming that *S*'s belief that *p* is a priori justified, we are taking up a positive stance towards evidential norms that would license *S*'s believing that *p*, even though that belief is not based on empirical observation. And, crucially, this seems to be different from saying that there is some *sui generis* kind of thing—the value of a priori justification—that this belief has/manifests.

This idea can be generalized by picking up on another idea that Field uses to motivate it. He suggests that there are competing epistemic standards in play whenever we evaluate a belief as justified enough for knowledge. He writes, “in the epistemological case...reliability is obviously not the only desirable goal, since high reliability is easily achieved by excessive caution. Reliability must be traded off against other things such as power and people can differ as to how the tradeoff is to be made”(Ibid.: 8). And he argues that, in any given case, there is no fact of the matter about how we have to weigh these competing considerations: For instance, “in a debate between two rather different inductive methods, it could well be that one method was better on one ... [set] of goal-cum-tradeoffs while the other was better on the other”(Ibid.). So to say that someone's inductively formed belief, for instance, is justified is not to state a fact but rather adopt a stance/policy: “it's hard to see how the issue of which method to prefer could be over a matter of fact”(Ibid.). And, the point generalizes to beliefs formed in other ways. This, if we think that knowledge requires justification, knowledge attributions would also, at least in part, involve the adoption of a stance/policy rather than a simple statement of fact.

Kvanvig argues that this sort of expressivism about claims about epistemic justification is incoherent because any argument for the view or claim that the view best explains intuitions about things like epistemic value has to presuppose the truth of certain norms of justification and explanation, in order to claim that epistemic expressivism is better justified than its competitors. However, that means that the epistemic expressivist like Field has to presuppose what his position is designed to reject—namely, that there is some truth about which epistemic norms are correct. As Kvanvig writes, “The simple point is that arguments and explanations presuppose the truth of epistemic norms, and if the norms themselves are given nonalethic status, then the explanations and arguments are simply defective in virtue of the fact that there presuppositions are not true” (2003: 176).

2.2 How the Epistemic Expressivist Can Respond to Kvanvig's Argument¹

The mistake we see in this argument is the assumption that the expressivist has to give epistemic norms “*nonalethic* status”. We take it that what Kvanvig means is that the expressivist has to deny that claims of the form ‘Evidential system *E* is correct’ and so also claims of the form ‘*S* is justified in believing that *p*’ are truth-apt. However, that’s simply a mistake about the nature of expressivism. To be sure, the earliest expressivists (e.g., Carnap, Russell, and Ayer) were, because of their commitment to logical positivism, inclined to deny that at least some normative claims are truth-apt. However, the dominant expressivist strategy in the recent metaethics literature has been to grant the cogency of ordinary normative discourse, which clearly treats normative claims as truth-apt, but then to explain the idea of a normative truth in a nonrepresentationalist or irrealist way. Indeed, a popular way to do this is to adopt something like the deflationary theory of truth that Field himself forcefully defends. The details get complicated, but the very basic idea is not: When we say that a sentence *S* is true, we should not understand this as the claim that *S* has some special property — that shared by all and only true sentences; rather, we should understand this as embodying just the same commitments as a bare assertion of *S* would. From

‘*S*’ is true,

we can disquote to get:

S,

which is why truth is, on this view, sometimes called a disquotational device.

So, since Field himself is a deflationist about truth, he’s going to have no problem at all with the idea that his theory presupposes that there’s some truth about which epistemic norms are correct, for that will just come to the presupposition that some

¹ Kvanvig offers an independent argument against epistemic expressivism, which he calls the “Spock-Problem”. This stems from his idea that Spock-like individuals who are highly intelligent but lack any affective states at all are possible and, were they to exist, they could still have knowledge. We’re unsure of this possibility (how would such an individual ever be motivated to pursue more evidence for a hypothesis?). However, in any case, it wouldn’t undermine epistemic expressivism which isn’t about the states of the putative knower but about the state of mind expressed by one who attributes knowledge, which, in this case, is one of us humans who do possess affective states. So, we won’t discuss this objection more here and refer the reader to a fuller discussion in Kappel (unpublished).

epistemic norms are correct, and he thinks such claims are not statements of fact but adoptions of stances/policies. And the same is true with any other form of epistemic expressivism that follows recent ethical expressivists in granting the cogency of ordinary normative discourse in its embedding normative claims in the truth- and falsity-predicates. On any reasonable version of epistemic expressivism, there's going to be no problem with accepting the key idea behind Kvanvig's criticism—viz., that epistemic evaluations are truth-apt. It's just that it will always be argued that this doesn't commit one to anything more than one is committed to in making the bare epistemic evaluations. And, as we insisted at the outset, epistemic expressivists, like ethical expressivists, don't encourage us to stop engaging in the practice of epistemic evaluation; they simply offer a different analysis of what this involves.

Now, Kvanvig might respond by insisting that he means something other than mere truth-aptness by 'alethic status' when he imputes to the expressivist the idea that epistemic norms don't have alethic status. For example, maybe he means something more like rejection of ontological commitment to facts of the matter about which epistemic norms are correct or objective epistemic values. We'll discuss these ideas more in §3 and §4 below; for now, however, let us say that is far from clear that we would be committed to presupposing this in putting forward our philosophical theories.

If you reason using *reductio ad absurdum*, for example, it's far from clear that you are presupposing that there is an objective fact of the matter about the correctness of classical logic (over, say, intuitionist logic). Maybe you are just adopting the policy of using classical logic; your argument will be convincing to anyone who has similarly adopted this policy, regardless of whether there is an objective fact of the matter about the correctness of classical logic. So, it seems that either Kvanvig is misinterpreting epistemic expressivism, or he is assuming something much too strong in his argument against it.

3 Cuneo on Nontraditional Expressivism in Epistemology

3.1 Cuneo's Argument

The next argument against epistemic expressivism that we want to consider comes from Terence Cuneo (2008), who is sensitive to the popularity of deflationary accounts of notions like 'truth' among contemporary ethical expressivists. This allows for what he calls "nontraditional versions of expressivism", such as the quasi-realist views defended by Blackburn (1998), Timmons (1999) and Gibbard (2003). Extending their program from metaethics to metaepistemology, Cuneo thinks, provides for a version of epistemic expressivism that "proves to be a resourceful view capable of incorporating realist-seeming elements that allow it to respond to objections—in some cases, convincingly so—that are commonly leveled against it"(2008: 145). Nevertheless, he thinks that nontraditional versions of epistemic expressivism fail. In this section, we will outline his argument and say how we think the epistemic expressivist should respond.

As Cuneo sees things, what distinguishes nontraditional expressivists from their traditional forbearers is the acceptance of a "deflationary package" which allows them to say much of the same things that realists say but without a commitment to the ontology of realism. So, in the case of epistemic expressivism, nontraditional expressivists will be able to accept claims about the truth of epistemic claims, claims about the assertion of epistemic propositions and claims about the existence of epistemic facts. This is because they will reinterpret these claims along deflationary lines. As we've already seen, one can do this with the notion of 'truth' by arguing that, for any sentence *S*, the claim

'*S*' is true

is equivalent in ontological commitment to the bare claim:

S.

This means that, when *S* is an evaluative statement, as long as the expressivist has a cogent account of the evaluations we make by stating *S*, there will be no ontological commitment added in recognizing the possibility that *S* is true. To recognize the possibility that *S* is true is just to recognize the possibility that *S*. This is what Cuneo refers to as the "deflationary sense of truth," which allows him to articulate a thesis of

nontraditional epistemic expressivism as a modification of the traditional expressivist's denial of truth-aptness:

The Modified Alethic Thesis: The contents of some epistemic claims are true, but only in a deflationary sense. (Ibid.: 147)

Moreover, this allows for a distinction between two ways of thinking of propositions. If propositions are thought of as the primary bearers of truth-values, we have, Cuneo thinks, the notion of propositions as the bearers of truth-values on a nondeflationary understanding of what it is to be true or false, but we now also have the notion of a proposition as the bearer of truth-values on a deflationary understanding of what it is to be true or false. Cuneo reserves the term 'proposition' for the former and calls the latter 'quasi-propositions', which allows him to articulate another thesis of nontraditional epistemic expressivism as a modification of the traditional expressivist's claim that pure ethical claims are not the assertions of a proposition:

The Modified Speech-Act Thesis: When an agent sincerely utters a predicative epistemic sentence, that agent does not thereby assert an epistemic proposition, but rather 'asserts' an epistemic quasi-proposition. (Ibid.)

Finally, whichever way one understands the notion of a proposition, it's natural to think that someone who is committed to p's being true is committed to it's being a fact that p. Cuneo suggests that this allows for a further distinction between 'fact' as the realist understands this notion and 'fact' as the deflationist understands it. Again, he reserves the term 'fact' for the former and calls the latter 'quasi-facts', which allows him to articulate the following thesis of nontraditional expressivism as a modification of the traditional expressivist's bare denial of epistemic facts:

The Modified Ontic Thesis: There are no epistemic facts, only epistemic quasi-facts. (Ibid.)

In light of these three commitments, Cuneo thinks nontraditional epistemic expressivists can say many plausible things that their traditional forbearers could not. From the perspective of engaging in actual epistemic discourse, they can say that:

- (i) it's true that some beliefs are well-supported while others are not
- (ii) one who claims to have good reasons for his views is asserting a proposition that may be true and may be false, and

(iii) it's a fact that not every theory can be supported by the evidence.

For they'll insist that we should understand (i) as making a claim about what's true *in a deflationary sense* of 'true', (ii) as making a claim about the assertion of a *quasi-proposition*, and (iii) as stating a *quasi-fact*.

Accordingly, nontraditional expressivists will have a way to explain and even endorse the features of epistemic discourse that may, in Blackburn's words, "tempt one to realism" (1984: 171). However, as Cuneo construes things, this is supposed to be consistent with the expressivist's antirealist view that, from the perspective of ultimate ontology, epistemic facts do not show up alongside the other facts, to whose existence we should be committed. In this way, nontraditional epistemic expressivism would clearly avoid Kvanvig's complaint that epistemic expressivism is committed, absurdly, to both the idea that epistemic claims are not truth-apt and the idea that that some epistemic claims are true. Nontraditional expressivists will simply deny the former commitment and freely grant the latter commitment. But they'll insist that we understand their commitment here in a deflationary way that doesn't commit them to the existence of (robust) epistemic facts.

Cuneo is clearly sensitive to the possibility of this maneuver, but he articulates a further objection directed specifically at this nontraditional form of epistemic expressivism. He calls this objection the "Perspective Objection" because it has to do with the way he thinks epistemic expressivists need two perspectives—one from which they can engage in epistemic discourse, saying things such as (i)-(iii) above, and another from which they can state their view including its three core theses.

He refers to these as the "internal perspective" and the "external perspective", writing:

The internal perspective...is supposed to be the perspective that captures what it is like to be an agent engaged in ordinary epistemic thought and discourse; it is the arena in which it appears to an agent that she is giving and assembling epistemic reasons, epistemically evaluating beliefs, uttering epistemic truths, representing epistemic reality, and so forth. The external perspective, by contrast, is supposed to be the perspective of the naturalist philosopher who in Terry

Horgan and Mark Timmons words is engaged in ‘metaphysical speculation or ‘theoretical inquiry’, but believes that there are no epistemic reasons or facts. (*Ibid.*: 170)

The problem Cuneo sees with the non-traditional expressivist’s commitment to two perspectives is that he thinks there can be *no such thing* as the external epistemic perspective when it comes to epistemic thought and discourse. The external perspective, he argues, would constitute a perspective from which we both (i) think that there are epistemic reasons and facts, and (ii) think that there are no epistemic reasons and facts. The reason Cuneo takes epistemic expressivists to be committed to this absurd conclusion is that he takes them to be committed to stating and arguing for their metaepistemological position from the external perspective of ‘theoretical inquiry’. However, as Cuneo puts it, “anything we could recognizably call ‘theoretical inquiry’...involves viewing ourselves as assembling reasons, epistemically evaluating claims, offering arguments, and so forth” (*Ibid.*) He thinks this makes it impossible to take the external perspective with respect to epistemic discourse and practice: “anything we could recognizably call theoretical inquiry requires taking not the external, but the internal perspective” (*Ibid.*).

So, in short, the structure of Cuneo’s argument² against epistemic expressivism is the same as Kvanvig’s. In virtue of their antirealism about epistemic facts, epistemic expressivists are committed to one thing, whereas in virtue of the general nature of inquiry—even inquiry into the correct metaepistemological view—we all, including expressivists, are committed to the opposite. Kvanvig thought the expressivist is committed to denying the truth-aptness of epistemic claims, which Cuneo recognizes to be incorrect. But he thinks the expressivist is committed to the possibility of an external epistemic perspective, where as, in virtue of the general nature of all inquiry, the expressivist is also committed to the impossibility of an external epistemic perspective.

3.2 How the Epistemic Expressivist Can Respond to Cuneo

² Cuneo offers a separate argument against epistemic expressivism, which he refers to as the “Modal Objection”. It turns on features of nontraditional expressivism that are completely general and apply to ethical and other sorts of expressivism just as much to epistemic expressivism. Thus, the objection doesn’t pose a threat specifically to epistemic expressivism and, because of this, falls outside of the scope of this paper.

The mistake we find in Cuneo's argument is suggested by the structural similarity between his argument and Kvanvig's argument. Just as Kvanvig was wrong to think that the epistemic expressivist is committed to denying the 'alethic status' of epistemic claims, we'll argue that Cuneo is wrong to think that the epistemic expressivist is committed to the possibility of the 'external perspective'.

To be fair to Cuneo, it should be noted that he takes over the idea of two perspectives from extant expressivist writings. However, we think this is an unhelpful metaphor for making sense of the core expressivist maneuver of changing the question from the nature of certain kinds of values to the nature of the correlative kinds of evaluations. If this change in question were to involve switching from one perspective on the world to another perspective on the world, then Cuneo would be correct in his insistence that there is something incoherent about stating and arguing for a metaepistemological view from an external perspective constituted in part by the denial that some beliefs are well-supported and others are not, some claims are based on adequate reasons while others are not, or some theories can be supported by the evidence and others cannot. However, we think the change in question should be understood in a more straightforward way: not as a change from one perspective on the world to another but as a change from

(i) a question about the nature of some feature of the world whose existence is disputed: epistemic facts or values

to

(ii) a question about the nature of a different feature of the world whose existence is not in dispute: epistemic *evaluations*.

An answer to (ii) can be sought from the same perspective on the world as we sought an answer to (i). It's just that the expressivist thinks the correct answer to (ii) reveals (i) to be based on the false presupposition that epistemic evaluations seek to describe the world. If we accept the expressivist's answer to (ii), it's not like we have adopted a strange perspective constituted by the denial that some beliefs are well-supported and others are not, some claims are based on adequate reasons while others are not, or some

theories can be supported by the evidence and others cannot. Rather we've accepted a theory of the nature epistemic evaluations that reveals (i) to be otiose.

Cuneo may object that surely, even after changing the question, the expressivist owes us an explanation of why it seems that epistemic claims describe the world. He often talks of the "realist-looking features of ordinary moral thought and discourse" (Ibid.: 162) or the "realist-seeming appearances of ordinary epistemic thought and discourse" (Ibid.: 170). And he suggests that the whole point of the nontraditional expressivist's deflationary package is to explain away these appearances. So, he may object that *even if* the expressivist's core maneuver is constituted in the change in question from (i) to (ii), explaining these appearances requires the illicit change in perspective from internal to external.

We think, however, that the force of this objection depends on the false assumption that it does indeed seem that epistemic claims describe the world. It doesn't seem to us that epistemic claims describe the world; it also doesn't seem to us that epistemic claims don't describe the world. We think this issue is just too theory-laden for it to seem one way or another. Notice how strange it would be to ask your mother "Does it seem to you like epistemic claims describe the world?" by contrast to the perfectly ordinary questions "Does it seem to you like this summer is hotter than last?" or "Does it seem to you like this shade of blue [pointing to an item of clothing in a shop] is darker than the other one?"

Now, perhaps there are what might be called "theoretical seemings", where, after considering a bunch of evidence and some competing hypotheses, it seems to a theoretician that one of the hypothesis the correct explanation of the evidence but he cannot argue for it. In this case, the thought would go: after considering a bunch of evidence about what ordinary speakers of English say about what's true or a fact, it *theoretically seems* that realism is the correct interpretation of ordinary epistemic discourse. But, even if this is how it theoretically seems to some philosophers like Cuneo, it's not clear how much dialectical weight to give that in the present context. For, it seems to other philosophers that this is not the case. Shouldn't we let arguments rather than theoretical seemings win the day?

Are we being uncharitable to Cuneo here? Well, here's a simple argument, which avoids the misleading metaphor of perspectives and doesn't rest on the assumption that epistemic claims seem to describe the world, which he may have meant to give:

Ontic Argument

1. The contents of some epistemic claims are true [a commitment of ordinary epistemic discourse, and something to which anyone who engages in inquiry is committed]
2. The content of a claim S is true iff it's a fact that S [analytic connections between 'true' and 'fact']
3. There are some epistemic facts [from 1, 2]
4. Nontraditional epistemic expressivism denies that there are epistemic facts [by definition: the Modified Ontic Thesis]
5. So, nontraditional epistemic expressivism is false [from 3, 4]

This argument is clearly valid. However, we think the epistemic expressivist can respond by rejecting premise 4. This premise is supposed to follow from the definition of epistemic expressivism that Cuneo gives. And it surely follows from the Modified Ontic Thesis that Cuneo attributes to expressivists, which we quote again:

Modified Ontic Thesis: There are no epistemic facts, only epistemic quasi-facts. (op. cit.)

However, notice an interesting contrast between this and the Modified Alethic Thesis as he states it:

Modified Alethic Thesis: The contents of some epistemic claims are true, but only in a deflationary sense. (op. cit.)

The Modified Alethic Thesis doesn't involve the denial that the contents of some epistemic claims are true. Because of this, we suggest that the way Cuneo has set up nontraditional epistemic expressivism imputes a negative commitment that need not be part of the view. That is to say, an expressivist could resist the conclusion of the Ontic Argument by replacing premise (3)—Cuneo's version of the Modified Ontic Thesis—with the following:

The 'Modified' Modified Ontic Thesis: There are epistemic facts, but only understood in a deflationary way.

This does implicitly involve a denial. It's the denial that there are epistemic facts, *as the realist* understands the notion of 'facts'. However, we suggest that it's open to the expressivist to insist that ordinary epistemic discourse is not committed one way or the other on the correct understanding of the notion of 'facts' that it deploys.

If this is right, then we think we've identified a further commitment opponents of epistemic expressivism have wrongly attributed to the view. Just like Kvanvig is wrong to think that epistemic expressivists deny that epistemic claims are truth-apt, we think Cuneo is wrong to think that epistemic expressivists deny that there are epistemic facts. You may be wondering, however: How can it *not* deny that there are epistemic facts; expressivism is supposed to be an antirealist view after all?!

In one sense, the answer to this question is easy. The core expressivist maneuver involves changing the question from one about the nature of epistemic facts or values to one about the nature of epistemic evaluations. Once an expressivist has given his answer to the new question by insisting on a disanalogy between epistemic thought and discourse and descriptive thought and discourse, he can just stop talking (at least in the capacity of stating his theory). He will not have thereby denied that there are epistemic facts. In a deeper sense, however, the answer to this question is a very hard one about the expressability of realist and antirealist positions once we've adopted the deflationary package. Addressing that issue requires examination of difficult issues in the theory of truth and the general debate between realists and antirealists. But all of that is outside the scope of the present paper, which aims to consider special problems that have been claimed to attach to expressivism when it is extended into the epistemic realm and not the general problems that putatively attach to all versions of expressivism.

4 Lynch on epistemic goals, epistemic values and the possibility of inquiry

4.1 Lynch's Argument

Michael Lynch (*forthcoming*) has also argued that whatever the merits of expressivism in metaethics are, its extension to metaepistemology faces a special problem. His starting point is similar to Cuneo's, but the argument is ultimately more sophisticated in its focus on the putatively unique epistemic value of truth. Like Cuneo, he suggests that the irrealist aspect of expressivism reflects a certain sort of disengaged stance from our evaluative practices. We start out thinking, e.g., that charity is ethically good and/or that true beliefs are epistemically good, but then we have to find a standpoint from which we can deny the existence of ethical and/or epistemic values. Lynch thinks that this may be possible in the ethical case, where, while we value charity (or whatever), we may bracket or disengage from our commitment to this value in order to ask about the ontological status of ethical values. However, he thinks that such bracketing or disengagement from our commitment to *epistemic* values is not likewise possible. This is because asking about the nature of our epistemic thought and practice is just one more inquiry; and we cannot inquire while disengaged from our epistemic values.

In particular, Lynch thinks that to engage in inquiry is to be committed to the value of true beliefs. He writes, "Engagement in a goal-directed practice commits me to the value of the goal I so pursue." Because Lynch takes it that inquiry is a practice directed at the goal of true beliefs, he thinks that insofar as we are engaged in inquiry, we cannot be disengaged from the value of true belief. So, epistemic expressivism, insofar as it is supposed to be a view arrived at and supported by inquiry into the nature of epistemic thought and practice, assumes that we can do something that we cannot.

Because we take this to be the most worked out challenge to expressivism as it is applied specifically in the epistemic realm, we will go into some more detail in fleshing out Lynch's reasoning and pointing out places that the expressivist might object, in order ultimately to highlight important differences between epistemic facts, values, goals, and evaluations.

Lynch's argument rests upon two key claims about truth. First is his claim that truth is the norm of correct believing, a claim Lynch calls the *truth norm*:

(TN) "It is prima facie correct to believe <p> if and only if <p> is true (p. 4 of ms).

Lynch thinks that inquiry is trying to figure out what to believe, and he takes it that "part of what it is to believe that p is to have one's beliefs governed by the norm of truth"(p. 6 of ms)—i.e. (TN). Because of this, he thinks (TN) could plausibly be thought to be a "necessary, constitutive fact about belief" (Ibid.). It is important to distinguish (TN) from Lynch's second key thesis about truth, a thesis that "ascribes value to a general state of affairs" (p. 6 of ms). He calls this the *truth goal*:

(TG) "It is prima facie good that, relative to the propositions one might consider, one believe all and only those that are true" (p. 2 of ms).

We shall discuss in due course the plausibility of each of these claims. However, for the purposes of understanding how they function within his case against epistemic expressivism, it is important to get clear about the way Lynch understands (TN) and (TG) to be connected.

Lynch argues that (TN) and (TG) are linked together by what he calls the *trivial connection principle*: "If I am committed to (TN), and I engage in inquiry, I am committed to (TG)" (p. 8 of ms). The trivial connection principle would be quite significant, if true, for the following reason: it implies that, *just by engaging in inquiry at all*, we are at the same time committed to not only a claim about the standard for correctness of belief, but also to a further claim about some general state of affairs being *good*—namely, that I believe all and only those propositions that are true. The ubiquity of inquiry would then entail a corresponding ubiquity of evaluative stances towards truth that, we shall see, he takes to be at tension with the picture offered to us by the epistemic expressivist.

The special role the *trivial connection principle* plays in Lynch's anti-expressivist critique is best understood by considering the way the principle itself functions as a key premise within a more sophisticated argument. Call this his *trivial connection argument*.

Trivial Connection Argument

1. We can form beliefs about that into which we inquire only if committed to (TN) (p. 7 of ms).
2. “If I am committed to (TN), and I engage in inquiry, I am committed to (TG)” (p. 8 of ms). [*Lynch’s Trivial Connection Principle*]
3. We can meaningfully abstract from our own epistemic goals only if we can inquire whilst not committed to (TG).
4. Therefore, we cannot meaningfully abstract from our own epistemic goals.

Important to Lynch’s argument here is the idea that we’re committed to taking it to be prima facie good to believe all and only what is true (TG) *not only* when engaging in normal sorts of inquiry, but also when inquiring into the metaepistemological status epistemic discourse itself. What results, then, is the idea that we will at the same time be committed to a thesis about the goodness of truth when inquiring into the matter of whether *epistemic expressivism* is true. But, according to Lynch, we can make sense of epistemic expressivism only if we first disengage from our commitment to accepting that it’s good to believe something (including whether epistemic expressivism is true) if and only if it’s true—something he takes as a prerequisite for accepting what the expressivist is committed to saying about the value of truth.

The conclusion of Lynch’s trivial connection argument is important not only as a claim that denies the possibility of abstracting (when inquiring) from our epistemic goals, but also for implying the impossibility of what he takes to be a prerequisite for the project of extending expressivism from ethics to epistemology. More specifically, we believe Lynch means for (4) to function as premise in a wider argument that purports to undermine not merely the *plausibility* of, but the very *intelligibility* of epistemic expressivism as a viable position. Call this his *Disengagement Argument*.

Disengagement Argument

5. We can make sense of epistemic expressivism only if we can reach an epistemically disengaged standpoint.
6. We can reach an epistemically disengaged standpoint only if we can meaningfully abstract from our own epistemic goals.
7. We can't meaningfully abstract from our own epistemic goals. (conclusion of the Trivial Connection Argument).
8. Therefore, we can't make sense of epistemic expressivism. (p. 16 of ms)

If Lynch's reasoning is correct, then the prospects for extending the expressivist project to epistemology couldn't even get off the ground.

4.2. How the Epistemic Expressivist Can Respond to Lynch

Our present aim will be to show how it's possible for the expressivist to reject the three most important elements of Lynch's argument. To this end, we shall challenge premises (1), (2), and (5). That is to say, we shall argue that it's not obvious that one is committed to letting (TN) govern one's beliefs just in virtue of being a believer, and, even if one was, it would not follow that one is therefore committed to (TG) when one engages in inquiry, and, even if that *did* follow, it's doing so would fail to count for or against the epistemic expressivist proposal. We remain neutral on which of these is the best way for the epistemic expressivist to respond to Lynch's argument; each of them would undermine his argument.

4.2.1 Rejecting (TN)

Lynch's motivation for endorsing (1) rests on the idea that (TN) states a constitutive fact about belief. In defense of this idea, he appeals to the idea that truth is the aim of belief, as advanced by *inter alia* Velleman, who writes, "The concept of belief just is the concept of an attitude for which there is such a thing as correctness or incorrectness, consisting in truth or falsity. For a propositional attitude to be a belief just is, in part, for it to be capable of going right or wrong by being true or false" (2000: 16). Lynch doesn't

endorse the conceptual claim, but he thinks that its upshot about what constitutes belief is correct: “Necessarily, an instance of *K*’ing counts as believing only if: it is *prima facie* correct to *K* that *p* if and only if it is true that *p*” (forthcoming: p. 7 of ms). The qualifier ‘*prima facie*’ is meant to allow for the fact that sometimes other norms of correctness – such as norms of morality or norms of prudence – may conflict with our epistemic norms of correctness. As Lynch puts it, the clause, “reflects the fact that while truth is a value, it is not our only value; and sometimes our values, whether they are cognitive or moral, conflict. Thus it might be good, all things considered, to believe something false, when for example, it is justified by the evidence” (p. 3 of ms).

This is a popular position in epistemology; however, we believe that Lynch has overlooked important conceptual space between the idea that belief aims at the truth and (TN), which states a necessary *and sufficient* condition on the *prima facie* correctness of belief. For clearly belief may aim at truth merely as part of aiming at something more complex than truth. For example, if we take something like knowledge or understanding to be the more complex aim of belief, and we take true belief to be a necessary but not sufficient condition on knowledge or understanding, then it’d still be correct to think that belief aims at the truth, but it’d be wrong to think that a belief is *prima facie* correct if and only if true. This is because there’d be room for a belief to be true but not correct since it didn’t amount to knowledge or understanding. So, one can clearly endorse the popular idea that belief aims at truth without being committed to Lynch’s principle (TN). And, if so, one may agree that truth is *an* epistemic standard of correctness for one’s beliefs without thinking that it is the only epistemic standard, which would undermine Lynch’s idea that forming beliefs at all requires commitment to (TN).

Perhaps, however, the epistemic expressivist shouldn’t even agree with the popular idea that beliefs constitutively aim at the truth. For Lynch, this idea seems to derive from a conception of inquiry as directed at the goal of forming true beliefs on a particular topic of interest. But consider the following choice: Before you are born, God offers you two options. Either (i) all the beliefs you will hold will be one’s you came to hold responsibly, or (ii) all the beliefs you will hold will be true. (Some but not all responsibly formed beliefs will also be true, and some true beliefs will have been held responsibly.) Is it clear that one who chooses the former option is choosing not to be a believer and ipso

facto not an inquirer? We think there may be reasons for either choice, but the mere fact that the choice could be open for a soon-to-be believer and inquirer puts pressure on the idea that it is (as Lynch suggests) a *constitutive* fact about belief that truth is its (proper) aim.

Put a bit differently, the idea that belief constitutively aims at the truth and thus that (TN) is a norm of correctness for belief seems to hold only if *epistemic value monism* is correct—the thesis that truth exhausts all possible sources of epistemic correctness. The epistemic value monist though has no way of explaining why the choice God has given you constitutes a real choice. Thus, resisting epistemic value monism — a popular move within the Value Turn in epistemology — the expressivist would gain another way to reject (TN) as a constitutive fact about belief, and in turn, premise (1) in Lynch’s argument. The point here is not to argue for value pluralism but simply to point out that its very possibility offers haven against Lynch’s argument for the epistemic expressivist. Value Pluralists deny (TN), but even their opponents will admit that they are able to inquire.

4.2.2 Rejecting the Move from (TN) to (TG)

Suppose, though, that the expressivist concedes that (TN) states a constitutive fact about beliefs, to which one is committed merely in virtue of engaging in inquiry. Even so, we think there is room for the expressivist to continue engaging in inquiry but to reject (TG). This would undermine Lynch’s *trivial connection principle* asserted in premise (2) of the original argument. About this principle, he writes, “It is a quick step between being committed to doing what is correct and being committed to the goodness of that which is correct.” Nonetheless, he defends this step by appeal to the idea that “engagement in a goal-directed practice commits me to the value of the goal I so pursue” (p. 8 of ms). This, he thinks, can be seen by considering the moral analogy:

If my action is morally correct just when what I do is right, then clearly, if I engage in moral deliberation, that is, I am *trying to figure out what to do, morally speaking*, my activity is governed by the principle that it is good to do what is right. Engagement in a goal-directed practice commits me to the value of the goal I so pursue. (Ibid.)

However, we think the epistemic expressivist could legitimately object that Lynch's analogy trades on a peculiarity of morality. Many philosophers have thought that moral norms are overriding because categorical and so moral goodness is lexically prior to other sorts of value. If true, this would explain why engagement in the goal-directed practice of trying to figure out what to do, morally speaking, commits one to the principle that it's good to do what is morally right. For once we have figured out that it is morally right to A, it will follow from the lexical priority of moral goodness that A-ing is good. However, notice that this clearly doesn't carry over to other examples.

The game of chess is a goal-directed activity. The goal is to checkmate the opponent. Thus, following Lynch, we should say that engaging in this activity commits one to the goodness of checkmating one's opponent. But clearly that's false. Parents often let their children win at chess, and are thus actually committed to the badness rather than goodness of checkmating their opponents. But still, what the parent was engaging in *was* chess. And this is true *even if*, just by engaging in chess, the parent recognizes that achieving a checkmate is the norm that governs correctness in chess moves. (In fact, she must recognize this in order to achieve the valuable end toward which she engaged in chess in the first place—to let her child *win*.)

Lynch may respond that (TN) and (TG) are statements only about *prima facie* correctness and goodness, which, as we have already seen, is meant to allow for conflicts with different norms and values. So, perhaps, the parent should be thought of as being committed to the *prima facie* goodness of checkmating his child, in virtue of engaging in the goal-directed activity of chess. And the intuition otherwise could be explained in terms of the parent's also being more strongly committed to the *prima facie* goodness of letting the child win.

We doubt that this is the correct analysis of the case, for we doubt that the parent is even committed to the *prima facie* goodness of checkmating his child. But even if it is the correct analysis, however, we think this move has untoward consequences for other examples where it seems quite clear that one isn't even committed to the *prima facie* goodness of the goal of one's goal-directed activity. For example, carrying out mass-executions is a goal-directed activity. The goal is something like killing a large group of people as efficiently as possible. Thus, if the basis for Lynch's trivial connection

principle were right, then one who engages in this activity would be committed to the prima facie goodness of killing a large group of people as efficiently as possible. But it's not clear that this is right. Can't one be an akratic executioner who executes only because of the fear of getting executed oneself and not because of thinking the goal is even prima facie good? We think it'd be silly to say that such a person is not engaged in the activity of carrying out a mass-execution, but it is not silly to think it possible that such a person is not committed to even the prima facie goodness of the goal of this activity.

Because of examples like these, we think it is simply not trivially true, as Lynch claims, that "if my believing is cognitively correct just when what I believe is true, then if I am engaged in inquiry, that is, *I am trying to figure out what to believe*, then I am normatively committed to my doxastic practices being governed by (TG)"(p. 8 of ms). This is not true because one can be engaged in a goal-directed activity without being committed to the goodness – even the prima facie goodness – of the goal. Even if it's true that, just by engaging in inquiry one is committed to recognizing that truth is norm for correctness of belief – (TN) – it will remain an open question whether one is thereby committed to the prima facie goodness of believing that *p* if and only if *p* is true. Thus, the second way the epistemic expressivist can resist Lynch's argument is by rejecting the trivial connection principle embodied in premise (2) of the original argument.

4.2.3 Rejecting Lynch's Disengagement Argument

We've provided two ways for the epistemic expressivist to respond to Lynch. In case you think those are ineffectual, we now go a step further and argue that *even if* we as believers must accept (TN) as correct and that that commits us as inquirers to (TG), it's a mistake to infer that epistemic expressivism is unintelligible. In fact, we'll show that the plausibility of epistemic expressivism is entirely independent of these considerations. This will put us into contact again with the sort of argument that Kvanvig and Cuneo wanted to give.

If our reconstruction of Lynch's argument above is correct, the trivial connection principle serves as a premise in a wider argument, which with the further premises

5. We can make sense of epistemic expressivism only if we can reach an epistemically disengaged standpoint

and

6. We can reach an epistemically disengaged standpoint only if we can meaningfully abstract from our own epistemic goals,

is meant to imply the conclusion that we can't make sense of epistemic expressivism. In our view, however, the epistemic expressivist could reasonably reject premise (5).

Why think that making sense of epistemic expressivism is something we can do only from the disengaged standpoint? Lynch's idea seems to be something like the following, which is remarkably similar to the argument stemming from the Modified Ontic Thesis that we attributed to Cuneo above:

Expressivism Argument

- (i) Expressivism is an irrealist position
 - (ii) Irrealists about some sort of value claims *E* hold that there is no such thing as *E*-values.
 - (iii) In order to make sense of the claim that there are no such things as *E*-values, one must disengage from any commitment to *E*-values, which is to take up a standpoint disengaged from *E*-values
5. So, we can make sense of epistemic expressivism only if we can reach an epistemically disengaged standpoint.

The mistake we see in this reasoning has to do with the notion of 'commitment'. Lynch is right that expressivism is typically seen as an irrealist view about whatever sort of value claims are under discussion, and so the expressivist seeks to avoid *ontological* commitment to the relevant values. That is, in the epistemic case, the epistemic expressivist seeks to avoid ontological commitment to epistemic values. The a central point of the core expressivist maneuver of encouraging us to ask not about the nature of epistemic values but about the nature of epistemic evaluations should be to avoid commitment to the idea that epistemic values are some *sui generis* kind of thing, whose

existence we are committed to in the final ontological reckoning.

However, we think that seeking to avoid ontological commitment to something is different than being implicitly committed to some value by engaging in a particular practice. At least, there's a cogent way for an expressivist to understand 'commitment to some value' by engaging in a particular practice, which doesn't equate it with 'ontological commitment to the existence of that value'. This is to redeploy the core expressivist maneuver and construe the idea of being implicitly committed to a value in terms of being committed to valuing something.

So, for example, in campaigning for a political candidate, one may be thereby committed to the political value of that candidate—that is, one is implicitly committed to thinking that this candidate is better than the other candidates, that this candidate should be elected, etc. However, that's not yet to think that there exists some *sui generis* kind of thing—political value—which the candidate possesses more of than any of the other candidates like the candidate may possess more shirts than the other candidates. Perhaps it is that, but there's an equally cogent understanding of this implicit commitment as a commitment to having a certain attitude towards the candidate. One is committed to attitudes such as hoping the candidate will win, liking the candidate more than the other candidates, etc.

Likewise, an epistemic expressivist can insist that the disengagement from commitment to epistemic values mentioned in (iii) is different from taking up the disengaged standpoint mentioned in 5. The former involves disengagement from *ontological commitment* to the values, while the latter involves disengagement from valuing certain things in a certain way. Perhaps the latter is not possible, but that doesn't imply that the former isn't possible.

To put the idea bluntly: ethical expressivists do not think that we must somehow stop *valuing* things ethically; they are not nihilists. Many ethical expressivists even think that valuing things ethically is a good and inextricable component of the human condition; perhaps we're even implicitly always already committed, in this sense, to ethical values in the very practice of choosing one way of life over another. However, all of that is consistent with disengagement from the *ontological* commitment to ethical values. Likewise, we think the epistemic expressivist could legitimately insist that even

if Lynch's argument shows that we are always already committed to valuing things epistemically, that doesn't show that we're ontologically committed to the existence of epistemic values. The whole point of the core expressivist maneuver is that by offering a theory of valuing we can avoid the problems that attach to ontological commitment to values.

So we think the epistemic expressivist could insist that that Lynch's argument from disengagement fails in its conflation of two senses of 'commitment to values'. On the ontological sense of this phrase, he's right that epistemic expressivists will want to disengage or at least avoid commitment to epistemic values. However, on the nonontological sense of this phrase, epistemic expressivists may very well be implicitly always already committed to epistemic values, like everyone else who arrives at and supports their views by inquiry. But there's a perfectly cogent expressivist understanding of that commitment in terms of a commitment to valuing rather than to the existence of a *sui generis* kind of thing—epistemic values.

5 Conclusion

Expressivism is a controversial doctrine wherever it comes up, and we have not attempted to defend epistemic expressivism from objections that threaten to undermine expressivism in general. Rather, we've articulated what we take to be the core expressivist maneuver and considered three recent arguments for the claim that the position which results from deploying this maneuver in the epistemic realm is specially problematic. We said that we hoped this would put us in a position both (i) to understand more precisely what epistemic expressivism is committed to and why epistemologists may want to consider it a live option in developing their meta-theory, and (ii) to articulate some independently interesting distinctions between epistemic truths, facts, values, goals, and evaluations. We'll conclude with brief remarks on both topics.

Some philosophers think that expressivism about an area of thought and discourse involves the denial of the relevant claims' truth-aptness. But as we saw in our discussion of Kvanvig's argument against Field based on the 'non-alethic status' allegedly given to

epistemic norms, the epistemic expressivist is not committed to denying the truth-aptness of epistemic claims. For it is open to expressivists to deploy a deflationary concept of truth in order to recognize some epistemic claims as true. That being so, other philosophers think that epistemic expressivism involves the denial adoption of an external perspective constituted by the denial that some beliefs are well-supported and others aren't, some claims are based on good reasons while others aren't, some theories can be supported by the evidence and others cannot. But as our discussion of Cuneo's argument revealed, the epistemic expressivist need not be committed to the possibility of this external perspective. All he needs to be committed to is the possibility of changing the question from one about epistemic facts or values to another one about epistemic evaluations, and to a particular sort of answer to the new question that undermines a presupposition of the old question. This just is the core expressivist maneuver as applied to epistemic thought and discourse. Even if that's right, still other philosophers think expressivism about an area of thought and discourse involves disengagement from our commitment to the relevant sorts of goals and values. However, as we urged in response to Lynch, this is not so. The epistemic expressivist does disengage from ontological commitment to epistemic values, but this doesn't imply disengagement from a commitment to valuing things epistemically.

So, epistemic expressivism is not committed to the "nonalethic status" of epistemic norms, the possibility of an "external" perspective, or "disengagement from our epistemic goals or values". It does involve switching from an investigation into the nature of something whose existence is challenged – sui generis epistemic facts or values – to an investigation into the nature of something whose existence is not challenged and is quite familiar – epistemic evaluations. Because of this, we think epistemologists should view epistemic expressivism as just as viable of option for developing their meta-theory as it is viewed in ethics.

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