Epistemic Expressivism:
For and Against

1. The Parity Thesis (and two reactions to it)

Some epistemic expressivists argue that the same sort of considerations that motivate moral expressivism also carry over to motivate epistemic expressivism. Call this the "Parity Thesis":

> **Parity Thesis:** If expressivism is the correct theory of moral discourse, it is also the correct theory of epistemic discourse.

One sort of question to ask is, "Is the Parity Thesis true?" Another sort of question to ask is, "If the Parity Thesis is true, what should we conclude from this?" On the latter question, there are at least two ways to go. Some philosophers take the Parity Thesis to be an argument for epistemic expressivism. These philosophers roughly argue as follows:

1. Expressivism is the correct theory of moral discourse.
2. If expressivism is the correct theory of moral discourse, it is also the correct theory of epistemic discourse. (Parity Thesis)
3. Expressivism is the correct theory of epistemic discourse.

However, other philosophers who embrace the Parity Thesis draw a very different conclusion. For example, Cuneo (2007) accepts the Parity Thesis but regards it as a *reductio* of moral expressivism. He argues roughly as follows:

1. If expressivism is the correct theory of moral discourse, it is also the correct theory of epistemic discourse. (Parity Thesis)
2. But expressivism about epistemic discourse is absurd.
3. Expressivism about moral discourse is false.

One question to consider then, is whether epistemic discourse gives rise to special problems – whether, that is, it is incoherent or self-undermining in some way in which moral expressivism is not.

2. Greco's Open Question Argument for the Parity Thesis

Greco (2015) offers one way of arguing for the Parity Thesis. One standard motivation for the moral expressivism is Moore's Open Question Argument. Greco suggests that the analogous argument in favor of epistemic expressivism is equally successful.

The Open Question Argument

Suppose you are convinced that some action X (e.g., pushing someone in front of the trolley) maximizes utility. Moore famously argued that you could still coherently ask whether X-ing is good, or whether it is the action that you ought to perform:

Q1: Granted, X-ing maximizes utility. But should I X?

As Moore put it, this question seems to be "open". This contrast with a closed question such as:

Q2: Granted, X-ing maximizes utility. But does X-ing maximize utility?

Moore took this to show that concept of "good" – or the concept of "the action I should do" – can't be analyzed or defined in terms of "maximizing utility". Moreover, he thought this argument generalized. For any natural property N, the question:

Q3: Granted, X-ing is N. But should I X?

is open. Moore took this to show that we can't simply define moral concepts, such as "the action I should do", in terms of natural properties.

Questions: What does Moore mean by an "open" question? Is this argument against reductive naturalism convincing? If so, does it support expressivism?

The Epistemic Open Question Argument
Greco starts by pointing to an apparent disanalogy between the moral and the epistemic. In morality, there is considerable disagreement about the ultimate goals or ends structuring morality – is it utility, fairness, something else? By contrast, in epistemology there seems to be a clear candidate for the ultimate goal/end: namely, *truth.* Does this show that there are no open questions in epistemology in the same way that there are in morality?

Greco thinks not. The property of *being justified* – or *having good reason to believe* etc. – is not the same as the property of *being true*. And for any natural property N that might be put forward as a candidate for what being justified consists in, Greco thinks that we can form open questions of the form:

Q4: Granted, p has property N. But should I believe p?

Greco considers one candidate for "N" that might seem to give rise to closed questions, namely "having a high objective chance":

Q5: Granted, p has a high objective chance of being true. But should I believe p?

However, Greco poses a dilemma for anyone who advances Q5 as a closed question. Either the property of "having a high objective chance" is a purely natural, non-epistemic property or it isn't. If it is, then Greco thinks Q5 is actually an open question. If it's not, then "having a high objective chance of being true" is itself an

epistemic notion, and hence the closed nature of Q5 has no bearing on the open question argument.

> *Questions:* Do you find Greco's arguments convincing? Is the OQA more promising in the moral domain than in the epistemic domain, or are they on a par?

3. Is Epistemic Expressivism Absurd?

Some authors have suggested that there is something absurd or self-undermining about the very idea of epistemic expressivism. For example, Lynch (2009) argues that part of what distinguishes beliefs from other states (imaginings, hopings, etc.) is that they are correct only if they are true:

> **Truth Norm:** It is correct to believe p iff p is true.

And this, Lynch thinks, leads to the idea that truth is the goal of belief, from which we can derive claims about when beliefs are epistemically good:

> **Truth Goal:** It is *prima facie* good that, relative to the propositions one might consider, one believes all and only those that are true.

Moreover, since Lynch thinks this follows from the nature of belief, he thinks that we are all implicitly committed to the truth goal *qua* inquirers (that is, *qua* agents who are going about the business of forming beliefs).

Why is this a problem for epistemic expressivism? Lynch seems to think that epistemic expressivism requires the possibility of adopting two different perspectives:

> **Engaged Perspective:** Using our own epistemic standards and practices, we assess one epistemic norm/goal as better than another.
> **Disengaged Perspective:** We abstract away from our epistemic standards and practices and adopt an objective/impartial point of view. From this perspective, we say that no epistemic norm/goal is better than any other.

Lynch seems to think that if we are all implicitly committed to the truth goal *qua* inquirers, it won't be possible to adopt the disengaged perspective that epistemic expressivism requires.

> *Questions:* Is this a compelling argument? Are we all committed to the truth goal by virtue of being inquirers? How exactly should we understand the differences between the engaged and the disengaged perspective? And does epistemic expressivism require adopting the disengaged perspective?