

# MORAL AND EPISTEMIC EXPRESSIVISM

## 1 Moral Expressivism

*Some Puzzling Features of Morality:*

- *Metaphysical puzzles:* Are moral properties located in space and time? If so, where are they? Can they stand in causal relations with us? (If not, can we even refer to them? Do they pose a threat to metaphysical naturalism?)
- *The motivational puzzle:* Some metaethicists have argued that there's a particularly close connection between moral judgment and motivation. According to these *motivational internalists*, if someone judges that they morally ought to e.g., giving to charity, then they will necessarily be at least somewhat disposed to give to charity. What explains why moral judgments generate this motivational pull?
- *The epistemological puzzle:* Most of us think that moral knowledge is possible. We know, say, that torturing innocent people is wrong. But how is it that we come to know these things?
  - Contrast with perceptual knowledge, which seems comparatively unmysterious. Do we perceive moral properties/facts?

Some have sought to answer these questions by adopting some version of *moral expressivism*.

*Moral Expressivism (the basic idea):*

Moral discourse does not aim to represent the world. When I say, "Torturing animals is wrong", I'm not trying to describe some mind-independent facts (in the way I would be if I said e.g., "The universe is 13 billion years old"). Rather, it's a way of expressing my desire-like attitudes. (What counts as a "desire-like" attitude? Standard candidates include desire, preference, approval, intentions, and the like.)

- The simplest version of expressivism (really, more a caricature of the theory) says that moral terms are like "wheee", "yay", "boo":
  - "Killing is wrong"  $\approx$  "Booo killing!"
  - "Giving to charity is good"  $\approx$  "Yay giving to charity!"

*Some questions to think about:*

- Does moral expressivism account for the puzzling features of morality? If so, how?
- Is moral expressivism a naturalistic theory?

- Consider the following objection: “Moral expressivism can’t be right because it can’t account for moral disagreement. When A says, ‘Killing is wrong’ and B says, ‘Killing is not wrong’, A and B disagree. But if expressivism is true, then A’s utterance just means something like ‘I (A) disapprove of killing’, and B’s utterance just means something like ‘I (B) don’t disapprove of killing’, hence there’s no disagreement.” How would expressivists respond to this objection?

## 2 Epistemic Expressivism

Some have argued that the puzzling features of morality also arise in epistemology.

- Q: Is this right? What would be the epistemic analogues for the three puzzling features of morality?

If this is correct, then some have argued we should provide parallel solutions in the two domains—whatever account explains the puzzling features of morality should also carry over to explain the puzzling features of epistemological properties/discourse. For those who think that moral expressivism is a promising way of explaining the puzzling features of morality, one natural thought is that we should also adopt an expressivist account of epistemic discourse.

*Epistemic Expressivism (the basic idea):*

Epistemic discourse does not aim to represent the world. There are a couple of ways of developing this idea, depending on what sort of epistemic discourse one focuses on. But to illustrate with justification ascriptions, the idea is that when I say “S’s belief that  $p$  is justified”,

I’m not trying to describe some mind-independent facts. Rather, I’m expressing certain desire-like attitudes.

- Simple implementation:
  - When I say, “S is justified in believing  $p$ ”, I’m expressing my approval of S believing that  $p$ .

Some questions:

- Is it right that expressivists about moral discourse should also be expressivists about epistemic discourse? Is there any reason for thinking that expressivism is more plausible in one domain than the other?
- Is epistemic expressivism compatible with the other naturalistic accounts of justification that we’ve considered, such as process reliabilism? Or should it be viewed as a rival to such accounts?
- One challenge that arises for combining moral and epistemic expressivism is the challenge of distinguishing between moral and epistemic evaluations. For example, when I say that someone’s belief is justified, I am typically *not* making a moral claim (i.e., that their belief is morally good). Similarly, when I say someone’s action is wrong, I am typically not making an epistemic claim. But according to the moral + epistemic expressivism combo package, both moral and epistemic evaluations are just expressions of desire-like states. So what is the difference between the two?

### 3 Fleshing out Epistemic Expressivism

#### Expressivism about Epistemic Justification

One way of developing an expressivist account of epistemic justification—due to Field (2009)—is to extend Gibbard’s (1990) framework for analyzing moral discourse.

#### Gibbard’s Framework

Gibbard’s framework starts with a *possible worlds model of content*. This is the idea that the meaning of a sentence can be given the set of possible worlds in which it is true, e.g.:

- The content of “Grass is green” is the set:  $\{w \mid \text{grass is green at } w\}$ .
- The content of “Singapore is south of Malaysia” is the set:  $\{w \mid \text{Singapore is south of Malaysia at } w\}$ .
  - Q: what are the pros and cons of this model of content?

Gibbard’s idea is to enrich and extend this possible worlds model. Rather than taking contents to be sets of worlds, he takes them sets of *world, norm pairs*.

- What’s a norm? Roughly, we can think of it as representing the content of a desire-like state. One way of modeling norms is to think of them as imperatives—that is, they are of the form, *In circumstances C, do/believe X!* Some candidate norms:
  - *If you make a promise, keep it!*

Gibbard’s idea is that the content of a sentence like, “People ought to give to charity” is a set of world, norm pairs:

- $\{\langle w, n \rangle \mid n \text{ requires people to give to charity at } w\}$ .

Q: What would Gibbard take to be the content of a sentence like, “Lin gave to charity and ought to be praised”?

#### Field’s Extension of Gibbard’s Framework

Field proposes that in addition to moral norms, there are epistemic norms. For example:

- *If it perceptually appears to you that p, believe p!* (epistemic norm)
  - Q: How do we distinguish between moral and epistemic norms?

The idea is that justification ascriptions express sets of world, norm pairs. For example:

- The content of “Roxanne is justified in believing the gas tank is full” =  $\{\langle w, n \rangle \mid n \text{ permits Roxanne to believe the tank is full at } w\}$ .
  - How would this account handle sentences that mix moral and epistemic content, e.g.: “People ought not to steal and Norman is not justified in believing the President is in New York”?

#### Expressivism about Knowledge

While Field focuses on expressivism about justification, many epistemic expressivists focus on knowledge. One way to be an epistemic expressivist about knowledge is via a justification condition: if “S knows

$p$  entails “S is justified in believing  $p$ ”, and the latter expresses some desire-like state, then presumably the former does too.

A different approach is developed by Gibbard (2003), who takes knowledge attributions to express plans to defer to other people’s judgment.

- Rough idea: An utterance of “S knows  $p$ ” expresses that the speaker plans to defer to S’s judgment on  $p$ -related matters.

*Potential further motivation for expressivism about knowledge:*

- Many epistemologists have thought that knowledge is distinctively *valuable*. Knowledge is a valuable state to be in—more valuable than (mere) true belief, or even (mere) justified true belief. What explains this?
- According to epistemic expressivists, there is no great mystery here: knowledge is valuable because making a knowledge attribution amounts to make a normative judgment, which is an expression of a desire-like attitude.
  - Q: Does this strike you as a promising explanation of the value of knowledge?

## 4 Further Questions

1. One argument for moral expressivism is the (supposed) intractability of moral disagreement. The argument is, roughly, that in science disagreements are fairly limited, and tend to diminish over time: the more we use empirical inquiry, the more we come to a rough consensus on what the world is like. By contrast, in moral matters disagreement is rampant, and there are fewer signs of progress/emerging

consensus. The best explanation of this difference is that whereas there are objective, mind-independent facts to converge on when it comes to scientific matters, there are no such facts to converge on when it comes to moral matters.

- Is the corresponding argument in the epistemic domain plausible? Is there intractable epistemic disagreement, and, if so, would this be an argument for epistemic expressivism?
2. One challenge for moral expressivism is to account for the fact that we take ourselves to have moral *knowledge*. Most of us take ourselves to *know* that murder is wrong. But how is moral knowledge possible, if expressivism is true? After all, if expressivism is true, when I say, “Murder is wrong” I am expressing something like a desire that no one murders. How could this desire amount to knowledge?
    - Expressivists in the ‘quasi-realist tradition’ try to make sense of how moral knowledge is possible. They want to say that we can coherently say things like, “Sarah knows that murder is wrong”, even though the claim “Murder is wrong” is just an expression of a desire-like attitude. (Blackburn 1998; Gibbard 2003; cf. Moss 2013). Q: can epistemic expressivism help explain how this is possible?

## References

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