What Would an Expressivist Semantics Be?

We were taught at Grandfather’s knee that mankind has a common store of thoughts, and that the purpose of language is to express them. According to Grandfather, our sentences express our thoughts, and our thoughts, purporting to represent the world, are true or false. An account of meaning is an account of how this comes to be: it tells how syntax and contributions from the words in a sentence determine a thought, as well as how the thought determines truth.

Grandfather’s view was slightly more nuanced than I just let on. He held that interrogatives express a thought (or an incomplete thought) and a “request” concerning it. He held that imperatives “don’t contain thoughts”. But imperative sense, he said, “is on the same level” as indicative sense. Frankly, it’s hard to see why Grandfather didn’t see imperatives as, like questions, involving a thought and a mental attitude. In so far as this is plausible, neither the imperative nor the interrogative poses a serious challenge to the sort of semantical hegemony of truth that Grandfather seemed to advocate.¹

What would pose a serious challenge to hegemony are indicative sentences which do not express (truth evaluable) thoughts but which seamlessly compound with sentences that do. There is an argument suggested by remarks of Grandfather’s, according to which the fact that a sentence embeds easily is a reason to think that it expresses something truth evaluable. When a sentence \( S \) embeds in the antecedent of a conditional, the

¹ I think Grandfather recognized sentences like ‘OW!’’. But such sentences do not even disjoin with one another, much less with the likes of ‘that didn’t hurt’.

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conditional and $S$ can pair up to form the premises of an instance of the valid argument schema

1. If $S$, then $T$; $S$; thus, $T$.

For most values of $S$, the explanation (1)’s validity will obviously presuppose that $S$ expresses a truth evaluable thought, and that the conditional expresses a thought that implies $T$’s truth given $S$’s. But presumably the explanation of the validity of an instance of (1) is the same no matter what instance we consider. So smooth embedding is the sign of a sentence that is a vehicle of assertion, a sentence that expresses belief in a truth evaluable thought.

This argument notwithstanding, there are large classes of sentences – sentences about one or another normative realm, sentences that express evaluations or preferences –that embed easily but, many say, do not express truth evaluable claims. For example, the sentence

2. Hunting for sport is wrong,

is supposed to express an attitude of disapproval towards hunting for sport, but not say anything which one could sensibly say is true. If one thinks this, one may well think the central semantic fact about such sentences is that they express such attitudes. And if one thinks that, one may think that the central fact about every sentence is that it is a medium of attitude expression. Some sentences expresses evaluations, pro or con; others express attitudes like belief or wonder towards the truth evaluable; others express more complex mental relations, like my requesting of you that you make it the
case that such and so. And sentences that arise from compounding, either
with connectives or the devices of variable binding, express complex mental
states that are determined in some way by the mental states expressed by
their constituents. So at least one might think.

Such a view owes us a story about how we get from the meanings of
simple sentences to the meanings of complex ones. It owes us a response to
Grandfather’s worries; presumably the latter will come from the former.
Mark Schroeder discusses these problems in recent work; it is fair to say, I
think, that Schroeder thinks the prospects for telling such a story
successfully are dim.² It is worth looking briefly at what he says.

Schroeder suggests that an “expressivist semantics” –which he takes
to be an account that systematically associates sentences with attitudes that
they express –is straightforward so long as we confine attention to a single
attitude.³ Let S be a (finite) collection of sentences that express beliefs, with
$S_i$ expressing belief in proposition $p_i$. Consider a language L1 based on S
whose sentences are the result of closing S under compounding with the
connectives $\text{not, and}$, and so forth. Here is the start of a semantics for L1 on
which its sentences express mental states:

I. Each $S_i$ expresses the attitude believing $p_i$.

II. If one sentence expresses the attitude believing $p$, and a second
expresses the attitude believing $q$, their conjunction expresses the
attitude of believing the conjunction of $p$ and $q$.

³ The view I describe is Schroeder’s, but the manner of exposition is my own.
III. If a sentence expresses the attitude believing \( p \), then its negation expresses the attitude believing \( p’s \) negation.

The same strategy, according to Schroeder, works if we start with sentences, all of which express a particular pro-attitude. Suppose that sentences of the form \( a \) is bad express the attitude approving of condemning \( a \), and that sentences of the form \( a \) is better than \( b \) express the attitude approving of preferring \( a \) over \( b \). Let \( S^* \) be a (finite) set of such sentences, with \( S_i \) in \( S^* \) expressing approval of property \( F_i \). Consider a language \( L_2 \) based on \( S^* \) whose sentences are the result of closing \( S^* \) under compounding with the connectives \( \text{not}, \text{and} \), and so forth. Here is the start of a semantics for \( L_2 \) on which its sentences express mental states:

IV. Each \( S_i \) expresses the attitude approval of \( F_i \).

V. If one sentence expresses approval of \( F \) and a second expresses approval of \( G \), their conjunction expresses approval of the conjunctive property \( F \) and \( G \).

VI. If a sentence expresses approval of \( F \), its negation expresses approval of the complement of \( F \).

There is no obvious way to generalize this strategy to a language based on both \( S \) and \( S^* \)—that is, no way to generalize to a language some of whose sentences express one attitude, others another. At least there’s no way to do this unless what appear to be fundamentally different attitudes are in reality instances of a single attitude. In this regard, note that \( L_2 \) seems to
have both sentences that express (relative) approval (sheepherding is better than hunting for sport) and sentences that express disapproval (hunting for sport is bad). L2’s semantics in effect identifies disapproval with a certain kind of approval – disapproving of F is approving of condemning F. One strategy for combing L1 and L2 is to say either that approval is a sort of belief, or that belief is a sort of approval.

Schroeder investigates the idea that belief is a kind of approval. He briefly considers identifying belief with approval of a certain course of action: believing p is approving of proceeding as if p. As Schroeder notes, this fails to guarantee that a belief expressing sentence φ expresses belief that φ. For suppose that ‘hunting is expensive’ expresses the belief that hunting is expensive –suppose, that is

3. ‘Hunting is expensive’ expresses approval of proceeding as if hunting is expensive,

(V) above requires that we say that

4. ‘Hunting is not expensive’ expresses approval of not proceeding as if hunting is expensive.

Unfortunately, on the proposed analysis

5. Believing that hunting is not expensive is approving of proceeding as if hunting is not expensive,
so ‘Hunting is not expensive’ doesn’t express the belief that hunting is not expensive. The same problem arises for any proposal that believing p is identical with approving of bearing R to p, for any relation R.

Schroeder’s goal is to investigate whether expressivism is tenable, where expressivism is construed as the view that, quite generally, sentences express mental attitudes, and thus semantics must systematically assign to sentences the mental attitudes they express. So Schroeder investigates a more complex account of belief, on which to believe p is to have a pair of attitudes: The proposal is that ***Believing p = approval of pai p + approval of ¬ pai ¬ p.*** (Here: pai p abbreviates *proceeding as if* p.) This requires complicating the semantics sketched above – every sentence turns out to express a pair of attitudes, and clauses (IV) through (VI) in turn become much more complicated.  

\[4\] Here are some of the details. For each simple belief expressing sentence S there will be a proposition p such that S expresses <approving of pai P, approving of ¬ pai ¬ p>. For each simple normative sentence F there will be a property F such that S expresses <approving of F, approving of F>. (In this case, the multiplication of attitudes is just to keep the statement of the semantics simple.) One now replaces (V) and (VI) above with

\[V'.\] If φ expresses <approval of F, approval of F'> and μ expresses <approval of G, approval of G'>, then φ and μ expresses <approval of the conjunctive property F and G, approval of the conjunctive property F’ and G’>

\[VI'.\] If φ expresses <approval of F, approval of F'> then not φ expresses <approval of the complement of F’, approval of the complement of F'>.

On this view

‘Hunting is fun’ (=F) expresses <approval of pai F, approval of not pai not F>

‘Hunting is expensive’ (=E) expresses <approval of pai E, approval of not pai E>

‘not E’ expresses <approval of pai not E, approval of not pai hunting E>

‘F&E’ expresses <approval of (pai F&E), approval of (not pai not F fun and not pai not E)>.
I’m going to suppress the details. Even when the account is complicated in this way, generally it still isn’t the case that a belief expressing sentence \( \phi \) expresses belief that \( \phi \). And even more importantly, the whole approach seems wrong headed. First and perhaps most fundamentally, the idea that if one or more sentences express simple pro-attitudes like approval, then so will the result of applying sentence compounding devices to them seems wrong. Suppose I think that one and probably only one of two sorts of acts –singing and dancing, let’s say – are wrong. My opinion is then that

\[(M) \text{ Either singing is wrong or dancing is wrong.}\]

I spared you the clause for disjunction for L2 above, but it’s what you would expect:

5 Schroeder’s expressivist wants his semantics to assign the attitude of believing \( p \) to a sentence when it is a conventional expression of belief in \( p \). So ‘Hunting is fun and hunting is expensive’ –F&E, for short --should be assigned belief in the conjunctive proposition that hunting is fun and hunting is expensive. This doesn’t happen. What happens is that

\[ F&E \text{ expresses approval of (pai F&E) + approval of (not pai not F and not pai not E)}.\]

This is not the state of believing that F&E according to this approach; that state is

\[ \text{approval of (pai F&E) + approval of (not pai (not (F&E))}.\]

That the two are states are not far from each other –that they are “close enough for shaving”, as Schroeder says about another example in which it turns out that sentence \( S \) does not express the belief that \( S \) –doesn’t show that the approach almost works; it shows that it fails. (The example in question is negation; see Schroder, p. 100. As Schroeder eventually observes, there is pretty much no case where a complex sentence \( S \) expresses the belief that \( S \) on the semantics he develops.)

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VII. If one sentence expresses approval of F and another expresses approval of G, then their disjunction expresses approval of the disjunctive property F and G.

This tells us that my utterance of (M) comes to an expression of approval for the disjunctive property of either condemning singing or condemning dancing.

Does endorsing (M) mean that I approve of or am in favor of the disjunctive property? It is a bit obscure what it is to be in favor of such property to begin with. I’m certainly not in favor a blanket policy of condemning both activities, so there are instances of the property I’m not in favor of. Schroeder doesn’t really tell us what it is to be in favor of disjunctive property, so I’m a bit at sea here. But in a way it seems irrelevant, for endorsing (M), I think, isn’t having a pro-attitude to begin with.

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6 When one thinks of “non-baroque” (e.g., non-disjunctive) properties, such as dancing, singing, or napping, approving of a property is presumably something along the lines of being favorably disposed towards any (thing one takes to be an) instance of the property simply because it is an instance of the property. But I don’t think this can in general be what it is to approve of a property, at least not if approving of a property is going to the sort of work Schroeder needs it to do. It is a logical truth in the system Schroeder sketches that either torturing is wrong or it’s not the case that torturing is wrong. The relevant disjunction expresses approval of the property of either condemning torture or not condemning it. Since the sentence is a logical truth, it presumably expresses an attitude everyone has, or least one everyone who understands the sentence and reflects on it has. But I seriously doubt that I am disposed to have a favorable attitude towards everything in virtue of its having a certain tautological property. (Neither am I disposed to think, of everything there is, that it is a good thing that it has the property --this, I think, scotches the idea that being favorably disposed towards a property is being disposed to think of any of its instances that it is good that they have the property. It isn’t good that p v ¬p; it just is.)

For obvious reasons it will not do to say that approving of a disjunctive property is approving of one of its disjuncts –not, at least, if property approval is to the sort of work Schroeder needs it to do. I frankly have no idea what Schroeder meant, when he speaks of approving of disjunctive properties.

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with. If I accept (M), I think there’s a pro-attitude out there I ought to have –I ought to be in favor of opposing dancing or in favor of opposing singing. But to think *that* isn’t to have a pro-attitude.

Second of all, I rather doubt that belief can be identified with any (complex of) pro-attitude(s). It *surely* can’t be understood as Schroeder’s expressivist understands it. I can be completely, unreservedly in favor of proceeding as if p when I don’t believe p. As I understand it, this is what the constructive empiricist tells us we should do with the (as he sees it) unverifiable pronouncements of our best scientific theories. Perhaps the constructive empiricist is wrong to say that we should so proceed instead of believing what those theories tell us. I doubt, however, that he is simply airing a conceptual confusion –which he would be doing if believing is nothing more than approving of proceeding as if. Much the same point can be made about the neighbor who knows full well that his partner is still smoking but foolishly approves of a policy of proceeding as if he isn’t.

Schroeder is not building a case for expressivist semantics, but trying to fill what he sees as a lacuna in the literature. He writes that “no expressivist view…offered in the last twenty years…offers an actual account of the mental state expressed by any logically complex sentence.” It is thus no wonder that his final assessment is dismal: “Expressivism, I hope to have shown…, is coherent, interesting, and potentially explanatorily powerful. But I…hope to have assembled significant cause to believe it is false.” I don’t think that the case for an “expressivist semantics” is as dismal as Schroeder does. But this is in good part because I disagree with Schroeder about what such a semantics ought to look like.

Different people have different doctrines in mind when they talk about expressivism. I take expressivists to be united by the idea that the fundamental semantic fact about many simple indicative sentences is *not* that they express something truth evaluable (a “proposition”), but that they are vehicles for expressing an attitude that is not a relation to a proposition. This implies that a good bit of semantics –not all, but a good bit –does not proceed by assigning propositions (or truth conditions) to sentences. But what else does it imply about semantics?

To find an answer, we do best to think about the nature of the relevant attitudes. Examples of attitudes that might plausibly be thought to be expressed by simple imperative sentences are: belief; doubt; valuing; approval; disapproval. These attitudes have three things in common. (1) Each is or at least crucially involves a mental relation to an object: belief and doubt to propositions; valuing, approval, and disapproval to states of affairs, traits, act types and tokens. (2) Each is an attitude that is supposed to be grounded in reasons: it is always appropriate to ask on what basis someone believes, doubts, values, approves, or disapproves. (3) Each involves a distinctive sort of commitment; that the commitment involved in an attitude is misplaced is a decisive reason for dropping the attitude. Belief involves a commitment to the truth of its object; doubt to its falsity. Valuing and approval involve commitment to their object’s being worthy of value or approval; disapproval to its being worthy of disapproval.

Some of the commitments just mentioned are of course commitments whose aptness is explained in terms of truth. To believe the claim that hunting is expensive is to be committed to its truth; the commitment is apt

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9 I am setting those attitudes that have their own grammatical forms –wondering whether, why, or what; imperatival desire –to the side.
just in case the claim is true. Commitments to something’s being worth valuing or worth disapproving, however, are not obviously commitments to something’s truth.

What are they? Well, what exactly are valuing, approving, and the like? Presumably they are, like belief and doubt, relations one bears in virtue of their object playing a certain role in one’s mental economy. To value something is for perceptions and representations of it to play a role that typically involves a disposition to be favorably inclined towards the object because of one’s interests. On this view, and putting it very crudely indeed, for me to value x is for me to be disposed to act favorably towards x in virtue of x’s playing the sort of role in my mental economy that things play when my interests give me reason to be favorably disposed towards them.

An expressivist should, I think, explain the commitment that valuing or approving of x involves –the commitment to x’s being valuable --in terms of valuing’s functional role. The natural story to tell, if one says that valuing x is x’s playing a role like the role a thing plays when one’s interests give one reason to value it, is that for x to be valuable is for one’s interests to in fact give one reason to have the relevant pro-attitudes towards it. One

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10 In what follows I do not distinguish between valuing and approving. Neither do I make any attempt to distinguish the various types of value or approval one might express when one says that something is good or right.

11 If this is not clear: When one values X one takes one’s self to have reason for being favorably disposed towards X, or, at least, one finds one’s self in a state of being favorably disposed towards X that one would, if one thought about it, naturally take to be a sign that one had reasons for being favorably disposed towards X. Call this A (for actually) valuing X. The text identifies valuing X with A-valuing X.

One may A-value X erroneously. One may (practically) reason badly, or may reason from false premises, or one may not really reason at all but end up in a state of A-valuing because of lust, greed, anger, or some other vice. And one may fail to A-value things because one doesn’t consider whether they are to be valued, though one would
can say this without holding that to think that something is valuable is to think that it bears a certain relation to my interests, or to say anything truth evaluable at all. To think x valuable, according to the expressivist I’m expositing, is to value x –it is for x to play a motivational role that a thing is supposed to play when one’s interests and the facts give one reason to favor it.

Suppose this much be accepted. What is it for someone to express an attitude? What has to be true of a sentence for it to be a (conventional) vehicle for such expression?

There are many things we describe as expressing an attitude. Some attitude expression is not conventional – consider the angry ‘I asked you to stop that’. Some attitude expression is conventional but does not articulate what the attitude is an attitude towards –such is applause. Others attitude expression –tears of joy, for example –is an unintended byproduct of an attitude; such expression does not involve commitment to the attitude’s being appropriate. None of these is a good model of the use of ‘hunting is expensive’ or ‘hunting is good’ to express belief or approval. What is distinctive of this sort of expression?

Consider the case we think we understand the best, that of the assertive expression of belief. To express belief in p, I normally pick an indicative sentence, utterance of which expresses the object of the belief, and use it assertively. What does doing this accomplish? Well, to assert p is to make one’s commitment to p’s truth manifest; and the characteristic

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value them if one reasoned from one’s actual interests and the facts. Say that one I-values X when (roughly put) one would A-value X, were one to adequately deliberate about X, making no mistakes due to false beliefs, things like lust, anger, or greed, or due to fatigue, etc., etc. There is thus a gap between A-valuing and I-valuing; A-valuing is a commitment to the soundness of I-valuing. Or so I am proposing.

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commitment of belief is to the truth of its object. Thus, expressing the belief that \( p \) by uttering its conventional expression is making it “conversationally manifest” that one has the belief by performing an act that itself incurs the characteristic commitment of the belief.\(^{12}\) To say things like “the sentence ‘hunting is expensive’ expresses the belief that hunting is expensive”, I think, is to say that in virtue of its meaning, the sentence ‘hunting is expensive’ is a conventional means for expressing the belief in the sense just given.

Analogously, to express approval of hunting, in the sense in which the expressivist is (or should be) interested, is to make one’s approval conversationally manifest by performing an act that itself incurs the characteristic commitment of such approval – commitment to hunting being worth valuing. The sentence ‘hunting is good’ expresses such approval because it is, in virtue of its meaning, a conventional means for expressing such a commitment.

What does all this tell us about semantics from an expressivist perspective? According to the expressivist, the basic semantic fact about sentences like ‘hunting is expensive’ is that they are means to expressing belief --that is, they enable us to display the sorts of commitments we have in virtue of having beliefs. A semantic theory thus needs, in one way or another, to encode such facts. It needs, for example, to encode the information that ‘hunting is expensive’ is a sentence that one can use to make manifest one’s belief that hunting is expensive, and that it is such

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\(^{12}\) Actually, the story we should tell about attitude expression is more complicated than this, since there (presumably) has to be an intentional dimension of attitude expression, perhaps even an intention that one’s actual or potential audience be able to recognize the performance for what it is. So far as I can see the details here are completely orthogonal to the issues we engage when we discuss expressivism, and so I will ignore them.
because its serious use is to be understood as manifesting a commitment to the truth of the claim that hunting is expensive.

Commitments are things that are apt or otherwise; one way to characterize a commitment is to give the conditions under which it is apt. In the case of the commitment one has in virtue or believing or asserting p, one’s commitment is to the truth of p, and so all an expressivist semantics needs to tell us about ‘hunting is expensive’ is that its use incurs a commitment that is apt iff it is true that hunting is expensive. The expressivist, as I am interpreting her, suggests that when a semantic theory culminates in an assignment of the proposition that hunting is expensive to the sentence ‘hunting is expensive’, or in a definition of truth that tells us that the sentence is true iff hunting is expensive, the theory is to be understood as implicitly characterizing the sort of commitment I have been discussing.¹³

Turn now to sentences that express valuing or approval. If the expressivist is correct, such sentences do not express propositions, and so semantics is not in the business of telling us what propositions they express. Rather, semantics should associate with them the commitments they express. ‘Hunting for sport is good’ expresses my approval for hunting; such approval commits me to hunting having (a certain sort of) value; this commitment is apt provided my interests (and the way things are) give me reason to value hunting. An expressivist semantic theory should in one way or another tag the sentence with this commitment. As just noted, one way in which to associate a commitment with a sentence is to assign the commitment’s aptness conditions to the sentence, and this is how I would

¹³ Like Grandfather, I ignore context sensitivity throughout.
proceed if I were an expressivist. I can think of two ways to do this, though I don’t claim that they are the only two.

The first is a variant on a strategy once adopted by Allan Gibbard.\(^{14}\) The strategy assumes that there are such things as interests and such things as possible worlds. It further assumes that a set of interests along with a possible world determines a (partial) classification of objects as valuable or otherwise.\(^{15}\) Given these assumptions, we may represent the aptness of the commitment expressed by ‘Hunting for sport is good’ using pairs of worlds and sets of interests. The commitment is apt relative to a world \(w\) and set of interests \(i\) provided that someone whose interests are exactly those in \(i\) has, in virtue of those interests and the way things are in \(w\), reason to value hunting for sport. One does need not wait for the second coming of Richard Montague to see how to assign a meaning to ‘is good’ that associates such sets with sentences of the form \(a \text{ is good}\).

If a semantics for English makes such an assignment to the predicate of the sentence

\[ \text{6. Hunting for sport is good,} \]

the sentence bears to the attitude **approving of hunting for sport** exactly the relation that the sentence

\[ \text{7. Hunting for sport is expensive} \]

\(^{14}\) In *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings* (Harvard University Press, 1990); see especially Chapter 5.

\(^{15}\) ‘otherwise’ is a complicated category, which has to include at least two subcases: (definitely) not valuable, and indeterminate. I have discussed some of the complications here in Chapter 3 of *When Truth Gives Out*. 

bears to the attitude **believing that hunting for sport is expensive**. Because a correct semantic theory assigns (7) the proposition that sport hunting is expensive –and thus (implicitly) assigns a commitment to the truth of that proposition --(7) is a conventional means for expressing the commitment that one incurs by believing that hunting for sport is expensive. Because a correct semantic theory assigns to (6) the locus in “the space of commitments” relative to which hunting for sport is valuable –and thus (implicitly) assigns a commitment to the value of hunting --(6) is a conventional means for expressing the commitment one incurs by approving of hunting for sport. Given, then, that expressing an attitude is a matter of making it manifest that one has the attitude, and that the canonical way of doing this among humans is to seriously utter a sentence that (it is common knowledge) incurs the commitment associated with that attitude, we have an account of how it comes to be that sentences of the form *a is good* are our canonical means of expressing certain attitudes.

An expressivist semantics should begin as follows. First, determine, for each simple sentence of the language you are studying, what attitude the sentence is a means to expressing. This will usually be determined by vocabulary –sentences of the form *a is expensive* express beliefs, sentences of the form *a is good* express (one or another form of) approval. Next, determine what commitment is characteristic of the attitudes expressed, in the way in which what is characteristic of belief is commitment to the truth of the object of belief, and characteristic of approval is commitment to being located “in a place in the space of commitments” in which one’s interests give one reason to value what is approved. And then assign such commitments or their representatives to the sentences.
Why proceed thus instead of assigning the relevant attitudes to the sentences? Because the field of commitments—or the field of their aptness conditions—can be expected to be closed under algebraic operations, while the field of attitudes cannot. The aptness conditions of a commitment to the truth of the claim that hunting is expensive can be thought of as the set of worlds in which hunting is expensive. These conditions have a complement, the worlds in which hunting is not expensive. Likewise for the aptness conditions of a commitment represented by a set S of interest-world pairs: its complement is just the set of interest-world pairs not in S. If ‘hunting is good’ express a commitment apt in just the set of those <i,w> such that someone with exactly interests i has, given the facts of w, reason to favor hunting, ‘hunting is not good’ will express its complement—which is, of course, the set of those locations “in the space of commitments” in which one’s interests do not give one reason to value hunting. Something analogous can be said of the commitments expressed by conjunctions and disjunctions of normative sentences, which will be straightforwardly determined by union and intersection of the commitments of their sub-sentences.

Likewise for combinations of descriptive and normative commitments. There is something that unites everyone who thinks that if hunting for sport is bad, then Wilhelm will not take it up. From the perspective of someone who thinks that ‘hunting for sport is bad’ expresses disapproval, not belief, what is common to all who think this is a complex commitment, a commitment that is apt provided either (a) one’s “location in the space of commitments” (i.e., one’s interests and possible world) do not provide one with reason to disapprove of hunting for sport, or (b) one’s location in the space of commitments make it true that Wilhelm will not take
up hunting for sport. What unites those who think *if it’s bad, Wilhelm won’t do it* is a certain commitment. It is far from clear that there is a mental attitude, in any useful sense of mental attitude, being in which is necessary and sufficient for having this commitment. But there is no need, if one thinks the primary semantic fact about ‘hunting for sport is bad’ is that *it* expresses a mental attitude, to think that the same thing must be true of the conditional. An “expressivist semantics” should stick with the idea that since a sentence’s expressing an attitude is a matter of its use making the attitude’s characteristic commitment manifest, semantics should assign commitments, not attitudes, to sentences.

I said that I could think of two ways to implement the expressivist idea, that semantics should associate with a sentence S the commitment incurred by someone who has the attitude S expresses. Here is the second, applied to our running example of a language whose simple sentences may express quotidian beliefs and attitudes of approval.

Suppose that I have a particular set of interests i and inhabit a particular possible world w. My interests and the facts give me reason to value certain things and thus reason to approve of them –what is valuable (for me) supervenes on my interests and the facts. Thus, my interests and the facts determine that a certain collection of objects is (for me) of value; my saying that X is good is my committing to X’s being among these objects. All we want an expressivist semantics to do is to assign to each sentence S (a representative of) the commitment incurred by someone who seriously tokens S in thought or speech. Since the commitment of one who thinks hunting is good is that hunting is worth valuing, we can represent that commitment by designating a certain set *set of things which are worth valuing* and putting hunting therein. Analogously, when a sentence
expresses belief in p, its use incurs commitment to p’s truth; we can represent the commitment associated with it by designating a certain set set of things are true and putting p in it.

This suggests representing a commitment C as a sequence <T, F, V, N> of sets: T contains the propositions to whose truth C commits, F the propositions to whose falsity C commits, V the things to whose value it commits, N the things to whose lack of value C commits. It is straightforward to systematically assign such commitments to sentences, and their aptness can be straightforwardly defined relative to a field of interest-world pairs.16

This approach makes an expressivist semantics a close cousin, from a formal perspective, of accounts on which normative sentences express truths, but truths that are typically or invariably only relatively true. Does that mean that the approach is “really” one on which normative sentences express truth evaluable claims, albeit ones that are only relatively true? I don’t think so, but the question is a delicate one. Suppose you and I are arguing over whether Hondas are good cars for city dwellers. What is the nature of our disagreement? Prima facie, there is a difference between saying that we have incompatible beliefs about Hondas, and saying that we have ‘opposed attitudes’ of approval and disapproval. If we think that this is a genuine difference and we think that the nub of the disagreement is in the attitudes expressed by banging a fist on the table and screaming ‘Hondas are good!’, ‘They are not!’, then we will not want to say that the views are merely notational variants of one another. Neither will we want to say this if we think the idea of relative truth is incoherent: there is nothing incoherent about the idea that sentences express mental states beyond ones that have

16 The idea here is sketched in the appendix.
propositional objects and that those states (and those states and beliefs) stand in relations of compatibility and incompatibility. I’m inclined to think that the views are not simply notational variants of one another, if only because they seem to have very different commitments about the nature of mental states. But since my topic is not the relative merits of, or differences between, expressivist and relativist accounts of normative states, I will say no more about this issue.  

Let me shift gears. The story I have been outlining is one on which a connective like ‘or’ in sentences like

8. Hunting is good or swimming is good
9. Hunting is expensive or swimming is good

does not function as we tell our students in baby logic. Baby logic’s ‘or’ connects sentences that express truth evaluable claims; it picks out an operation on truth values or, if you prefer, an operation on the bearers of truth values. The ‘or’ in (8) and (9) maps pairs of commitments to commitments. Sometimes it deals with a commitment to the truth of a claim

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17 I was once inclined to favor expressivism over relativism about claims like that made by ‘Hondas are good cars for city dwellers’. Relativism, I argued, was committed to the following argument: if I think that it is true from my perspective that Hondas are good cars, then (because the schema

S is true from my persepctive iff S is true

is logically valid for the relativist), I must think that anyone who doesn’t believe that Hondas are good cars is making a mistake. But I need not think this, as I may think that opinions about such matters that don’t match my own need not be mistaken (since whether such opinions are correct turns on the interests of he who holds them). Since an expressivist account need not see any mistake in such a case, I concluded it was preferable. (Such an argument can be found in the early part of Chapter 5 of When Truth Gives Out.)

I now disavow this argument. For an extended discussion, see ‘What is Disagreement?’
(as in ‘Hunting is expensive’), but sometimes not (as in ‘Hunting is good’). There is nothing formally untoward about this, and it should be easy enough to reconstruct the formalism from the remarks I have made. But one might well worry that the treatment I am sketching requires a sacrifice.

I will close by considering an objection to this effect, one that begins by asking whether ‘or’ is univocal in the sentences (8), (9) and

10. Hunting is expensive or swimming is healthy.

If it is, goes the objection, then (10) doesn’t express belief in the disjunctive proposition that hunting is expensive or swimming is healthy. For if ‘or’ means the same thing in all three sentences, it must express a Boolean operation on commitments, and so does not express the Boolean operation on propositions we normally take it to express. In this case, (10) is not associated with the disjunctive proposition that either hunting is expensive or swimming is healthy, but instead with a complex commitment that is appropriate iff belief in the disjunctive proposition is apt. This is perhaps not an intolerable outcome, but it suggests that something has gone wrong – surely we can straightforwardly express the disjunctive belief, and surely the way to do this is to utter a sentence that has the disjunctive proposition associated with it.

Suppose, on the other hand, that ‘or’ (and all the other sentence compounding devices) are ambiguous –sometimes they express the sorts of operations on propositions we are familiar with from sentence logic, sometimes they are “devices of commitment compounding”. Then, the objection goes, we should find some trace in the minds of speakers of this sort of ambiguity –speakers must be aware at some level that they are
choosing one or the other reading of ‘or’ when they use (10). But there is precious little reason to think that this is so.

The objection demands that we choose between a single meaning for a connective and two meanings. I say the expressivist should choose the road of ambiguity, and do so with a clear conscience.\textsuperscript{18} Here is why.

The sensible expressivist will acknowledge that there are many facts about the mental role of normative talk that suggest that its semantics is not interestingly different from that of non-normative talk. After all, in some important sense, we “process” and “think with” normative sentences in the same way that we “process” and “think with” non-normative ones. Both sorts of sentences have what we might label a “discursive functional role”. It is because of this, after all, that Grandfather’s worries about expressivist views have force to begin with.

Traditional semantics takes this parallelism between normative and non-normative discourse as the decisive fact, for semantic purposes, about normative sentences, holding that this fact requires that normative and non-normative discourse get the same semantic treatement. Once we are done doing semantics, the traditionalist tells us, there are various stories we might tell, about what to make of normative discourse. Perhaps we should say that its claims are non-problematically, non-relatively true. Perhaps we should say that its claims are true, but only relatively so. Perhaps we should adopt an error theory, or tell some other sort of story. None of this, however, is supposed to be a matter for the semanticist, who gets to keep her hands clean and ignore messy metaphysical issues.

\textsuperscript{18} I hear this sort of objection occasionally to the account I sketch of the connectives in Chapters 2 and 3 of \textit{When Truth Gives Out}. The response I am about to sketch is part of my response to such objections. I elaborate on this response at the end of the appendix to the paper.
The expressivist, as I understand her, thinks that the messy issues of metaphysics and ethics are not irrelevant to the enterprise of semantics. Semantics is part of an enterprise in which we try to understand what we are doing when we talk to one another, an enterprise in which we will be successful only if, when we are done, we can see what we are doing when we speak as “making sense”. The expressivist is moved by worries that we often do not understand normative disagreement in terms of truth and falsity, or perhaps by skepticism that the “right kind” of propositions exist to interpret normative discourse, or simply by the idea that the discursive functional role of normative discourse is far less important than the discourse’s role in expressing approval and disapproval. Such considerations make her think that we will not make sense to ourselves if we ascribe the same sort of semantic properties to normative sentences that we ascribe to non-normative ones.

The expressivist, as I understand her, thinks that semantics is in important respects not simply descriptive, but is also an interpretive enterprise: it is a matter of imposing an interpretation on our behavior that makes the best sense of it. Often the interpretation that an adequate semantics places on our speech is marked in syntactic from, or in things (e.g., “lexical entries”) that we expect to be mentally realized. But some aspects of semantics may trace back to our (best) understanding of what it is, or should be, that we are doing when we speak. Like all interpretation –like all making sense of behavior in the context in which it occurs –semantics sometimes involves assigning a meaning to behavior. Sometimes, the meaning to assign to behavior is not to be simply read out of the mind of the actor, but can only be determined by looking at how the actor’s behavior makes sense in a broader context. When this is so, we typically do not
expect that the meaning assigned to the actor’s words or behavior is represented in the actor’s mind.

According to the expressivist, the way we best make sense of our discourse, both normative and non-normative, is by understanding the normative discourse as having a somewhat different role than the non-normative. “ambiguating” the connectives is of a piece with this: it is justified, provided it is part of an interpretation that makes better sense of us than any other interpretation we can provide.

Appendix

What follows is a sketch of the semantics discussed at the end of the paper. Suppose we base a language on a set of sentences \( P = \{P_1, P_2, \ldots, P_n\} \) understood as expressing belief in the propositions \( p_1, p_2, \ldots, p_n \) respectively, along with a set of sentences \( Q = \{Q_1, Q_2, \ldots, Q_n\} \) understood as expressing approval of \( a_1, a_2, \ldots, a_n \) respectively. The language \( L_3 \) is generated from these sets as follows:

1. Let \( T \) be the result of closing \( P \) under truth functional compounding (i.e., \( T \) is the smallest set including all of \( P \) and such that if \( x \) and \( y \) are in \( T \), then so are: \( x \)’s negation, the conjunction of \( x \) and \( y \), their disjunction).

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19 What follows is a simplified (and in some ways transformed) version of the account sketched at the end of Chapter 3 of *When Truth Gives Out.*
2. Let \( W \) be the result of closing the union of \( T \) and \( Q \) under compounding with the “commitment connectives” not, and, and or. \( W \) is the set of sentences of \( L3 \).

A semantics for this language needs to assign aptness conditions to each of its sentences, thereby representing the commitment associated with the sentence. We introduce two kinds of representations. First are what we call first order commitments (FOC’s), which are of the form

1. \(< \alpha, \alpha', \beta, \beta'>, \)

\( \alpha, \alpha', \beta, \) and \( \beta' \) (possibly empty) sets. \( \alpha \) and \( \alpha' \) are sets of propositions, \( \beta \) and \( \beta' \) sets of objects; (1) is a commitment to the truth of all of \( \alpha \), the falsity of all of \( \alpha' \), and to the value of all of \( \beta \), and the lack of value –i.e., the not being worthy of approval –of all of \( \beta' \).\(^{20}\) Thus, for example,

2. \(< \{p\}, \phi, \phi, \{u\}> \)

\(^{20}\) To say that \( x \) is not worthy of approval is not to say that it is bad or worth disapproval. Sand is (by and large, anyway) not worthy of approval. But that doesn’t mean it’s worthy of disapproval.

As observed below, in a more nuanced treatment, in which we could draw distinctions between being indifferent and being bad, we would need to complicate the commitments assigned to sentences.
represents a commitment to the truth of \( p \) and to \( u \)’s not being valuable. A first order commitment of the form of (1) is apt iff all of \( \alpha \) is true, all of \( \alpha' \) is false, all of \( \beta \) is worthy of approval, and none of \( \beta' \) is.\(^{21}\)

Second of all, there are what we call second order commitments (SOCs), which are sets of FOCs; the SOC \{c1, c2, \ldots, cn\} is apt iff at least one of its constituent commitments is.

The semantics assigns SOCs to sentences, and thus associates functions from (tuples of) SOCs to SOCs with the “commitment connectives” and, or, and not. The idea is that, for example, the sentence P1, which expresses belief in the proposition p1, should be associated with the commitment

\[ 3. \{<\{p1\}, \phi, \phi, \phi>\}, \]

while the sentence Q1, which expresses approval of a1, should be associated with the commitment

\[ 4. \{<\phi, \phi, \{a1\}, \phi>\}. \]

The semantics would proceed as follows. We are assuming that the members of P are already associated with propositions. Suppose propositions to be assigned to all members of T using the obvious induction.

\(^{21}\)Aptness here is relative to a pair \(<i,w>: <<a, a'>, <b,b'>>\ is apt at \(<i,w> provide all of \( a \) is true at \( w \), all of \( a' \) is false there, all of \( b \) is worth valuing given exactly the interests in \( i \) and the facts from \( w \) and none of \( b' \) is.

A more nuanced treatment would allow for indeterminacy. See Chapters 2 and 3 of When Truth Gives Out.
Then the semantics contains a clause that tells us that if sentence s is a member of T and is assigned the proposition p, the SOC associated with s is

5. \{ < \{p\}, \phi, \phi, \phi> \}.

Likewise, we are assuming that each member Qi of Q is a sentence that expresses approval of ai. So the semantics contains a clause that tells us that if a sentence s is a member of Q and expresses approval of a, the SOC associated with s is

6. \{< \phi, \phi>, <\{a\}, \phi>\}.

All that remains is to assign to each of the “commitment connectives” a function that maps (tuples of) SOCs to SOCs.

This is just a matter of combinatorics. Let lower case c range over FOCs, upper case C range over second order commitments. Say that when a and b are n-tuples <a1,…an> and <b1,…, bn>, a+b = <a1∪ b1,…, an ∪ bn>; when a is as before and C is a set of n-tuples, {c1, …ck}, a + C is {a + c1, a +c2, …, a +ck}. We now define three operations on SOCs. DISJ is simply set theoretic union. CONJ is defined as follows:

\[ \text{CONJ} ( \{ c \}, C ) = c + C \]
\[ \text{CONJ} ( \{ c \} ∪ C', C) = c + \text{CONJ} (C', C) \]

INV is also defined inductively:
INV( {<a, a', b, b'>} ) = the {< A, A', B, B'>} such that for some q one of the following holds:

- q is in a, A' = {q}, and A = B = B' = φ;
- q is in a', A = {q}, and A' = B = B' = φ;
- q is in b, B' = {q}, and A = A' = B = φ;
- q is in b', B = {q}, and A = A' = B' = φ.

INV( {c₁, c₂, …, cₖ} ) = CONJ( INV(c₁), INV(c₂), …, INV(cₖ)).

Commitments can now be assigned to moleculars in the obvious way: If the commitments associated with S and T are C and C', then the commitment associated with not S is INV(C), with S and T is CONJ(C, C'), and with S or T is DISJ(C, C').

One might ask: Couldn’t we avoid ambiguating natural language’s ‘and’, ‘not’, and ‘or’ by simply denying that they express the truth functional operations assigned to them by baby logic? In the context of the example of a language based on the sets S and S*, the suggestion is that we could proceed as follows. The formal language contains only the “commitment connectives” not, and, and or; the sentences of the language are the result of closing the union of S and S* under compounding with those connectives. The semantics goes thus:

1. Assign to each Sᵢ in S the commitment {<pᵢ, φ, φ, φ>};
2. Assign to each Sᵢ in S* the commitment {<φ, φ, {aᵢ}, φ>};

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22 Both Dilip Ninan and Scott Sturgeon pressed this sort of worry in a discussion of this paper.
3. Assign to not $\phi$ INV of the assignment to $\phi$; CONJ of the assignments to $\phi$ and $\varphi$ to their conjunction; DISJ of the assignments to those formulas to their disjunction.

This semantics, thought of as a regimentation of the semantics of English, does not directly assign a commitment to the truth of the proposition that Mary is not tired to the sentence ‘Mary is not tired’. Rather it assigns a commitment to the truth of the proposition that Mary is tired to ‘Mary is tired’, and the inverse of this commitment to ‘Mary is not tired’, which is a commitment to the falsity of the claim that Mary is tired. Likewise, it does not assign a commitment to the truth of the conjunctive claim, that Mary is tired and Martin is sad, to ‘Mary is tired and Martin is sad’; rather, it assigns to the conjunction a commitment to the truth of all the members of {that Mary is tired, that Martin is sad}. But this, it might be said, is surely acceptable—it is easy enough to get from the commitments to the truth of each conjunct to the commitment to the truth of the conjunction. And this, it might be said, is preferable to ambiguation.

No, it is not. We need to be able to distinguish between a commitment to the truth of the claim that Mary is not tired—that is, to the truth of the truth functional negation of the claim that Mary is tired—and a commitment to the claim that Mary is tired not being true. The latter commitment, as I see it, is one that is apt in two sorts of cases: first, when the claim that Mary is tired is false (and so its truth functional negation is true); second, when, because Mary is a borderline instance of being tired, the claim that she is tired is neither true nor false.\(^{23}\) We will not be able to do

\(^{23}\) The same sort of distinction needs to be drawn with respect to disjunctions and conjunctions, of course.
this unless we see English’s ‘not’ as playing two roles, sometimes contributing truth functional negation, sometimes acting as a “commitment connective.”

This is obscured in the account sketched at the beginning of this appendix, where—in order to keep matters as simple as possible—we did not allow for the possibility that some of the sentences in the set S might express propositions that are neither true nor false. Once we allow for this, we must adjust the account given of what a first order commitment is. As before, we represent such commitments as sequences of the form

1. \(<\alpha, \alpha', \beta, \beta'>\),

where \(\alpha\) and \(\alpha'\) are sets of propositions and \(\beta\) and \(\beta'\) are sets of objects. But we now understand the commitment represented by (1) to be a commitment to the truth of all the members of \(\alpha\) along with a commitment to the lack of truth—the falsity or truth-valuelessness—of all the members of \(\alpha'\).\(^{24}\) Given this understanding of what things of the form of (1) represent, the semantics otherwise proceeds exactly as before. In this language, we can distinguish between a commitment to the truth of the truth functional negation of Mary is tired—it is expressed by something along the lines of \(\neg S_3\) and represented by

7. \(<\{\text{that } \neg \text{ Mary is tired}\}, \phi, \phi, \phi>\)

\(^{24}\) A similar adjustment must be made with respect to \(\beta\) and \(\beta'\), given that we will want to allow that it may be indeterminate whether certain things are worth valuing.
--and a commitment to the non-truth of the claim that Mary is tired—which is expressed by something along the lines of \( \not \alpha \) and represented by

8. \(< \phi, \{\text{that Mary is tired}\}, \phi, \phi >\).

If we interpret every English ‘not’ using the “commitment connective” ‘not’, we would not be able to draw this distinction. Indeed, we would never interpret someone who utters an English negation as committed to truth of anything.

To reinforce the point: Observe that there are cases in which speakers are best understood as using (different tokens of) natural language’s idioms of negation to express both truth functional negation and a denial of commitment to truth. Confronted with a sentence like ‘what this sentence says is false’ and a standard argument from the assumption of bivalence to a contradiction, the thoughtful person may well say ‘Hmm. The sentence (what the sentence says) isn’t true, and isn’t not true, either.’ And here, I would say, the thoughtful person gets it exactly right: we should deny—eschew the commitment associated with—the liar sentence, and deny—eschew the commitment associated with—the truth functional negation of that sentence. This, of course, is exactly the right thing to do, given that the sentence says something that is neither true nor false. Likewise for the application of a vague predicate to one of its borderline instances.

The moral to draw here is that expressivism, in so far as it is to be identified with the view that discursive language frequently expresses
commitments that cannot be explained in terms of truth, can be motivated without any reference to the normative.  

To close, let us return to the objection discussed at the end of body of the paper – that, because there is no reason to think that speakers are cognizant of the ambiguity posited in ‘not’ and the other connectives, there is no reason to think that it is ambiguous. Now, the view I’ve just been sketching arguably is not one on which ‘not’ and the other connectives are ambiguous, in any normal sense of ‘ambiguous’. ‘not’ has a single sense, which is some version of truth functional negation. But there are two ways in which we use the idioms of negation: sometimes we use it so that its use contributes its sense to determine a proposition which is asserted by utterance; sometimes we use it to signal that we are denying the commitment associated with a mental state or sentence. Sometimes, that is, ‘not’ contributes to sense, sometimes it signals force. It is the latter use of ‘not’ (and the other connectives) that is being regimented in the formalism in this appendix with the ‘commitment connectives’.

I think that once one appreciates this point, the “ambiguity” the account posits looks pretty benign. To see this, consider a fairy tale. Once upon a time, our language lacked many speech act verbs it now has: it did not, for example, have the verbs ‘promise’ and ‘warn’, or any (simple) verbs that were even roughly synonymous. This did not keep people from making promises or warning one another of dangers. Not only did people make

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25 Richard 2008, in fact, develops the account of the connectives sketched here in order to account for talk involving vague predicates and talk about failures of bivalence and only afterwards applies that account to examples that normally motivate expressivists. My paper “Indeterminancy and Truth Value Gaps” (in Dietz and Moruzzi, eds., *Cuts and Clouds*, Oxford University Press 2010), begins by motivating and defending the idea that applications of vague predicates to borderline cases produce sentences that say things neither true nor false.

26 I lean towards using the strong Kleene tables for the connectives.
promises and issue warnings, they tended to do these things in more or less predictable ways. People who wanted to put themselves under an obligation to help in the mammoth hunt would grunt things like

(C) I will be at the tar pit when the sun goes down;

when someone wanted to warn his companion about a mammoth, he would yell

(D) Here comes a mammoth.

Of course sometimes such sentences were used not to promise or warn, but simply to comment on the passing (or upcoming) show. End of fairy tale.

In a situation like the one described in this story, sentences (C) and (D) are of course not ambiguous. They are just used in different ways. They could have been used in these different ways, I think, without the users having much of an appreciation of the fact that the sentences were being used in different ways. I don’t have to conceptualize an utterance of (D) as a warning – I don’t have to have the concept of a warning – in order for its utterance to be such. It suffices that my utterance was prompted by, or would be rationalized by, appropriate desires (e.g., that you live to see tomorrow) and beliefs (e.g., that if you don’t pay attention to that mammoth, you may not.)

I would say that something like this is true of the idioms of negation. They are univocal, with meanings along the lines of Kleene’s strong negation. When we use a sentence in which ‘not’ occurs to make an assertion or express a belief, it is this meaning that is to be used in
interpreting the act performed. But we are often best understood as using sentences in which negation occurs to do things other than make assertions. For example, we are sometimes best understood as denying what someone else says, where to deny something is to do something appropriate iff what is denied is false or truth valueless. That this is so does not mean that we have to conceptualize our utterance as a denial. Just as I can warn you about the mammoth without having the concept warning, I can deny your claim about a liar sentence, or that Jones is bald, without having the concept of denial.

I think we would be very surprised to learn that there was a language in which there was one set of linguistic forms for predicting that I will be at the tar pit at sundown, a disjoint set of forms for promising this. That doesn’t mean that sentences used to make the prediction don’t also have a use for making the promise. I would be surprised indeed to learn that there was a language that did not use its idioms of negation for the purposes of disagreeing. I don’t see that this gives us much of a reason to think that all dissent is a matter of asserting a negation, or even that all dissent involves a difference about something truth evaluable.

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