

Expressivism and Moore's Paradox

Expressivism is not a view about how we should think and talk when we engage in moral thought and talk. It is a view about how we *do* think and talk when we so engage. It's the view that we do not use moral thought and talk to represent or, at least, not only to represent; we use moral thought and talk to express affective or conative attitudes and that this expression of affective or conative attitudes is, in some sense, a primary function of moral thought and talk. Expressivists are thus committed to the claim that when we make moral assertions, we thereby express affective or conative attitudes and that some sort of recognition of this tight connection between moral assertion and expression of affective or conative attitudes is part of being competent with moral language. In what follows, I give some reason to doubt this claim. Here's a brief sketch of the argument below: I motivate a distinction between expressing and asserting by considering Moore's paradox. I then discuss a principle linking expression in the case of non-moral assertion to expression in the case of moral assertion. I use this principle to formulate a prediction about the incoherence of a moral analogue of Moore-paradoxical assertions. I then argue that this prediction is disconfirmed and that this disconfirmation makes it implausible that recognition of the expression of affective or conative attitudes is part of the competence conditions of moral assertion.

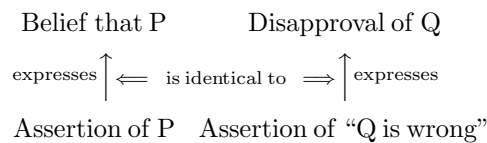
It's generally agreed that there is a tight connection between sincere assertion and belief. One reason for this arises from cases of incoherent assertions first noticed by Moore. He noticed that assertions of the form '*p*, but I don't believe that *p*' are strikingly incoherent, while assertions of the form '*p*, but he doesn't believe that *p*' are perfectly fine. The proper explanation of this is that when *I* assert *p*, I somehow commit myself to believing that *p*, but *not* by asserting that I believe that *p*.¹ Since I've committed myself to believing

¹The murky bit of this explanation is how we get from asserting *p* to the commitment to believing that *p*. Various stories can be told about this connection, but the details of these don't matter for my purposes. I discuss particular accounts of the connection in the longer

that p , when I go on to say ‘I don’t believe that p ’, I’ve undercut my immediate prior commitment and left my audience in a muddle as to what I was up to in so asserting.² We can call this connection between my asserting p and my belief that p ‘expressing’. So, when I sincerely assert p , I express, though I don’t assert, my belief that p . It’s this feature which gives rise to the incoherence of an utterance of the form ‘ p , but I don’t believe that p ’. The incoherence is a result of my incurring a commitment I explicitly deny I meet.

This relationship is important for the expressivist. Expressivism is the view that when we assert ‘Murder is wrong’ we are not—or not only—ascribing a property of wrongness to murder, but conveying our disapproval³ of murder. This invites the charge that expressivism is nothing more than a fancy version of the subjectivist view that my assertion of ‘Murder is wrong’ means ‘I disapprove of murder.’ The proper response to this is that an assertion of ‘Murder is wrong’ no more means ‘I disapprove of murder’ than an assertion of ‘Madison is in Wisconsin’ means ‘I believe that Madison is in Wisconsin’. Rather, just as the assertion of ‘Madison is in Wisconsin’ means ‘Madison is in Wisconsin’ and expresses that that I believe that Madison is in Wisconsin, the former assertion means ‘Murder is wrong’ and expresses that I disapprove of murder. So the expressivist here borrows from the account of non-moral assertion. Instead of offering a distinct view of how we get from ‘Murder is wrong’ to the disapproval of murder, they borrow the relation that we already accept obtains between ‘Madison is in Wisconsin’ and my believing that Madison is in Wisconsin. Following (Schroeder 2008), we’ll call this the ‘Parity Thesis’: Moral assertions express non-cognitive attitudes like disapproval in exactly the same way that non-moral assertions express cognitive attitudes like belief.

Here’s an illustrative depiction of the Parity Thesis:



version of this paper.

²This resulting incoherence is similar to the incoherence that is produced if I were to promise to do something, then immediately declare that I have no intention of honoring my promise.

³Or some other conative or affective attitude. In the rest of this abstract, my use of ‘disapproval’ should be understood as a placeholder for whatever conative or affective attitude particular expressivist accounts hold is expressed by moral assertions.

The important fact about the Parity Thesis is that it allows us to use features of the connection between assertion and belief to test the putative connection between moral assertion and disapproval. If, as the Parity Thesis has it, the relationship of expression is the same in the two cases, we ought to expect that well-known features of the connection between assertion and belief reappear in the connection between moral assertion and disapproval. We've already discussed one such feature above. It's a feature of the connection between assertion and belief that Moore-paradoxical assertions are incoherent. Given the above explanation of the incoherence of Moore-paradoxical utterances and that expressivism is a *descriptive* theory, we can use the Parity Thesis to formulate a prediction about moral assertions. If, as the Parity Thesis has it, moral assertions express non-cognitive attitudes like disapproval in exactly the same way that non-moral assertions express cognitive attitudes like belief and if, as the correct explanation of Moore's paradox has it, it's the expression relation that gives rise to cases of Moore's paradox, we should expect moral versions of Moore paradox. The presence of such cases increases the plausibility of the expressivist's story; the lack of such decreases its plausibility. In what follows, I argue that there are no such cases.

Consider the following claims involving a conventional device for expressing disapproval or negative feelings:

- 1 Down with Murder! (but, I don't disapprove of murder.)
- 2 Broccoli? Gross! (but, I don't dislike broccoli.)
- 3 Murder?...Boo! (but, I have no negative feelings toward murder.)

After we get over the difficulty in parsing these, they have similar incoherence to ordinary cases of Moore-paradoxical assertions. Contrast these with:

- 4 Murder is wrong, but I don't disapprove of murder.
- 5 Murder is wrong, but I don't accept a system of norms which rules it out.⁴
- 6 Murder is wrong, but I'm not against murder.⁵

⁴This example requires some discussion which cannot be fit into this abstract. Let me just flag that I recognize this and that the full version of this paper contains such a discussion.

⁵In the full paper, I discuss the proper formulation of such examples.

Are these Moore-paradoxical? No. They are a bit strange, but they're not incoherent like 'Madison is in Wisconsin, but I don't believe Madison is in Wisconsin' or like 'Down with Murder! (but, I don't disapprove of murder.)'. Just as the incoherence of 'Madison is in Wisconsin, but I don't believe Madison is in Wisconsin' demonstrates that competence with assertion involves recognition of the commitment to believing what you sincerely assert, the coherence of 'Murder is wrong, but I don't disapprove of Murder' demonstrates that competence with moral assertion doesn't involve recognition of a commitment to disapproving of what you sincerely assert is wrong. We can make a separate point in this connection. Note that 'Murder is wrong, but I don't believe murder is wrong,' *is* incoherent in exactly the same striking way that 'Madison is in Wisconsin, but I don't believe Madison is in Wisconsin' is. In addition to suggesting that some type of belief ought to be involved in understanding how moral assertion works, this example emphasizes the lack of similar incoherence in (4-6) above.⁶ Given the expressivist story about moral assertion, (4-6) ought to be incoherent in the same way, but they're not.⁷

So, we have a feature of the connection between assertion and belief which is not replicated in the putative connection between moral assertion and disapproval. This casts doubt on the Parity Thesis. The expressivist can respond in a two ways. They could deny the Parity Thesis or they could raise worries about (1-3). In the full version of the paper, I explore both responses and give reasons to think that they do not work. I also suggest that expressivism about domains other than the moral may do better with regard to arguments like the above. In particular, expressivism about rationality⁸ and about epistemic modals seems to escape examples like (1-3). Regardless of the success of my particular arguments against expressivism about moral thought and talk, paying attention to the descriptive character of expressivist views suggests we should be attempting to use claims like the Parity Thesis to test the adequacy of expressivist views.

⁶This point about moral assertion and belief is noticed by Richard Joyce in (Joyce 2009). However, he doesn't recognize the lack of infelicity with examples like (4-6).

⁷I provide more examples and discuss details of the cases in the full version of the paper.

⁸As explored in (Gibbard 1992).

References

- Gibbard, A. 1992. *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ Press.
- Joyce, R. 2009. Expressivism, Motivation Internalism, and Hume. In *Hume on Motivation and Virtue*, ed. C. Pigden. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Schroeder, M. 2008. Expression for expressivists. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 76(1): 86–116.