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Expressivism, meaning, and all *that*

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ABSTRACT
It has recently been suggested that meta-normative expressivism is best seen as a meta-semantic, rather than a semantic view. One strong motivation for this is that expressivism becomes, thereby, compatible with truth-conditional semantics. While this approach is promising, however, many of its details are still unexplored. One issue that still needs to be explored in particular, is what accounts of propositional contents are open to meta-semantic expressivists. This paper makes progress on this issue by developing an expressivist-friendly deflationary account of such contents.

1. Introduction

Meta-normative expressivism is commonly seen as proposing an alternative to truth-conditional semantics. Recently, however, it has been suggested that expressivism is a meta-semantic, rather than a semantic view and as such compatible with truth-conditional semantics. While this approach has significant potential, many relevant issues surrounding it are underexplored. One such issue is what approaches regarding propositional contents – to which semantics explicitly appeals – are compatible with meta-semantic expressivism. This paper expands expressivists' options with a deflationary account to the contents of sentences, which allows expressivists to say that normative sentences have propositional contents as their meanings.

The paper proceeds as follows: Section 2 motivates meta-semantic expressivism and argues that it needs an account of propositional contents. Section 3 develops a deflationary account of such contents. It does so, by first identifying the role that attributions of such contents play and then giving a deflationary

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account of how they play that role using Wilfrid Sellars' work. It then demonstrates how this view fits with expressivism and also suggests a novel understanding of expressivism, which cashes out expressivism's commitments in the philosophy of mind using conceptual role semantics.

2. Expressivism: meta-semantic, not semantic

Expressivism consists of two theses.[1] First, that the meaning of declarative sentences is to be explained in terms of the judgements their assertoric uses conventionally express. Second, that there is a distinctive difference between ordinary descriptive and normative judgements: while the former are motivationally inert representational states, the latter are non-representational states that play a motivating role in the production of action. This paper focuses mostly on the first thesis. Let me first clarify the second, though.

In particular, note that 'representational' in this thesis must be understood in a particular fashion. At the end of the day, most expressivists will not deny that normative judgements are representational states in some minimal sense, e.g. in the sense of being beliefs or truth-apt. What they deny is that normative judgements are representational in the robust theoretical sense employed by representationalist accounts of domains of thought and discourse.

Representationalist accounts, roughly, hold that the distinctive nature of a relevant domain is to be explained in terms of the things it is *about* or *represents*. For example, representationalists about 'truth' or 'wrong,' would *start* by assuming that the domains invoking these terms are about or represent something, namely *truth* or *wrongness* and would then try to account for these domains in terms of the nature of these things, i.e. by investigating the nature of truth or wrongness. Representationalism, hence, gives *metaphysical* questions about what domains are about or represent explanatory primacy in accounting for those domains. Note, however, that the notions of 'being about' or 'representation' play real theoretical and explanatory work on such accounts, which could not, for example, be played by 'minimalist' or 'deflationist' accounts of these notions. Hence, representationalists need a theoretically robust notion of 'representation.' This notion is, of course, hard to specify. Whatever it ends up being, though, expressivists hold that ordinary descriptive, but not normative judgements are representational in *that* sense. With these remarks in place, let's turn to expressivism's first thesis.

This thesis has commonly been read as a *semantic* claim. *Semantics* aims at giving an account of the literal meanings of sentences in natural languages with the central aim of systematically explaining the compositionality of such languages. Part of any semantic approach is a theory of interpretation. Given that natural languages are messy, clearer meanings need to be assigned to the sentences of the language for which one is developing a semantics. To do this, one has to interpret the relevant language, the 'object-language,' in a way that

eliminates ambiguities, unpacks context-sensitivity, etc. to derive a version of it that wears its literal meanings on its sleeve. One then uses another language, the 'meta-language,' competence with which is presupposed, to specify the *semantic contents* of singular terms, predicates, and logical and sentential connectives in a way that allows us to compute the semantic contents for any arbitrary sentence from the semantic contents of its parts and their arrangement. 'Semantic contents' can be seen as the literal meanings of the linguistic items in questions, as assigned by semantics.

Located within semantics, expressivists' first thesis has been understood as the claim that the semantic contents of declarative sentences are the judgements they express. Gideon Rosen (1998, 387), for example, characterizes it thus:

> The centerpiece of any [expressivist] 'account' is what I shall call a psychologistic semantics for the region: a mapping from statements in the area to the mental states they 'express' when uttered sincerely.

Ralph Wedgwood (2008, 35–36) characterizes expressivism similarly:

> According to an expressivist account […] the fundamental explanation of the meaning of [normative] statements and sentences is given by a *psychologistic semantics*. According to a plausible version of the principle of *compositionality*, the meaning of a sentence is determined by the meaning of the terms that it is composed out of, together with the compositional structure of the sentence (perhaps together with certain features of the context in which that sentence is used). So assuming this version of the compositionality principle, this expressivist approach will also give an account of the particular terms involved in these sentences in terms of the contribution that these terms make to determining what type of mental state is expressed by sentences involving them.

And Mark Schroeder (2008, 33) proposes a similar understanding of expressivism:

> On the picture to which expressivists are committed […] [t]he primary job of the semantics is to assign to each atomic sentence a mental state – the state that you have to be in, in order for it to be permissible for you to assert that sentence. […] [The] primary semantic values of the sentences are the states that are *expressed* by the sentences, in the minimal sense advocated by the interpretation of expressivism as assertability semantics […].

Call this reading of expressivism's first thesis 'Psychologized Semantics.' This reading is common, but also deeply problematic, because Psychologized Semantics is incompatible with a common, almost orthodox, way to pursue semantics: *truth-conditional semantics*.[2] Truth-conditional semantics approaches the task of semantics through the *truth-conditions* of sentences – the conditions under which those sentences would be true. One powerful and familiar – almost orthodox – view approaches this task in terms of *propositional contents*, on which a sentence's semantic content is a *proposition* that either is or determines the sentence's truth-conditions. The semantic values of singular terms, predicates, and the logical and sentential connectives are then understood in terms their contributions to those propositional contents. While this is not the only way of

doing truth-conditional semantics, I take it that it is the most powerful research programme within truth-conditional semantics.

The problem for expressivists is that Psychologized Semantics seems *incompatible* with this way (or even any way) of doing truth-conditional semantics. After all, Psychologized Semantics assigns mental states, rather than propositions, as the contents of sentences. Furthermore, expressivists seem to be blocked from allowing propositions to be assigned to sentences derivatively – and so making use of truth-conditional semantics in that way – by pairing the sentences with the content of the assigned mental states. Very roughly, this is so, because the contents of the kinds of attitudes expressivists take to constitute normative judgements are not of the right kind to interact in the required way with both the sentential connectives and the contents of the thoughts expressed by e.g. descriptive language.[3] In the normative case, this suggests that expressivists have to claim that the attitude *is* the content of the sentence. If expressivists accept this, however, they have to accept Psychologized Semantics, which applies to all declarative sentences. This is because expressivists need a unified account of the contents of normative and non-normative sentences, to account for their contribution to the semantic contents of complex sentences with both normative and non-normative parts. This, however, forces expressivists to abandon truth-conditional semantics.

This is troublesome for at least two reasons: First, one should not have to call truth-conditional semantics into question just in virtue of accepting expressivism, a *meta-normative* view. Truth-conditional semantics is a powerful, highly fruitful, and widely accepted research program in philosophy *and* linguistics. Having to reject this program would be a significant theoretical cost and so it would be preferable if expressivists were not *committed* to doing so. This is not to deny, of course, that calling truth-conditional semantics into question *can* be fruitful. This should happen, though, on the basis of independent *linguistic* evidence for a failure of truth-conditional semantics, not on the basis of the kinds of *meta-normative* commitments that motivate expressivism (such as, for example, ontological parsimony).[4]

Having to abandon truth-conditional semantics is problematic, secondly, because it is unclear whether expressivists have a workable alternative. As the discussions surrounding the Frege-Geach Problem indicate, developing a compelling compositional semantics for normative language that does not proceed along truth-conditional lines – or at least proceeds along the lines required by meta-normative expressivism combined with Psychologized Semantics – is hard.[5]

Recently, however, some authors have suggested that expressivism is not actually committed to Psychologized Semantics.[6] Their starting point is to distinguish semantics from another project in the philosophy of language: meta-semantics. Recall that semantics proceeds to give the literal meanings of sentences in terms of *another language*, which is *presupposed* as meaningful (namely, the

meta-language). In doing so it employs semantic notions such as 'content,' 'truth,' 'extension,' etc. at least some of which are taken as theoretical primitives for the sake of investigation.

Meta-semantics, in contrast, attempts to give a deeper explanation of the phenomenon 'literal meaning,' preferably in terms not mentioning such meanings. This involves two projects. First, cashing out the semantic notions in non-semantic terms as far as possible. Here meta-semantic accounts explain what is attributed when literal meanings are assigned, when truth-conditions are specified, extension fixed, etc.[7] Second, it gives an account of those properties – the 'meaning-constituting properties'[8] – *in virtue of which* linguistic items have their literal meanings.

With this distinction in view, the crucial question is whether Psychologized Semantics is the best interpretation of expressivism's first thesis. After all, we could also locate it within meta-semantics, as the view that declarative sentences have their meaning in virtue of the judgements those sentences express. Expressivists who accept this would hold that the difference between normative and ordinary descriptive sentences lies in their meaning-constituting properties. On this account, normative sentences have their meaning in virtue of expressing non-representational, motivational states, while descriptive sentences have their meaning in virtue of expressing representational states. Note that on this interpretation, expressivism *itself* seems to have no *positive* commitment how to cash out 'literal meaning.' The same goes for all other semantic notions. Expressivism only comes with a negative commitment: the semantic notions cannot be cashed out such that normative thought and discourse become representational.

One might worry, of course, that this is *still* incompatible with truth-conditional semantics. This worry, however, is based on the false assumption that truth-conditional semantics is *committed* to an understanding of its core concepts, such as 'truth,' 'extension,' 'reference,' etc. on which those concepts concern what sentences represent or are about *in the representationalist's sense*. Only on such a reading would e.g. an assignment of a proposition to a normative sentence make that sentence representational. Such a reading, however, is a *meta-semantic* assumption about truth-conditional semantics, which is not forced on us if we accept this theoretical approach in semantics. In fact, we should assume for semantics what we assume about any of the other sciences, namely that their core concepts do not have any particular philosophical underpinning build into them, but are used *within* the relevant sciences as theoretical primitives. Of course, the success of scientific theories might only be explainable via certain philosophical underpinnings. Whether this is true for truth-conditional semantics and representationalists' approach to it, though, is an open question. After all, there seem to be legitimate ways of reading the relevant concepts that leave the legitimacy of truth-conditional semantics as an explanatory project intact, but do not require that we understand them as the

representationalist does.[9] If all of this is correct, however, there is no *in principle* reason to assume that meta-semantic expressivism rules out truth-conditional semantics.

Of course, whether meta-semantic expressivism *is* compatible with truth-conditional semantics depends on whether the semantic notions *can* be understood in expressivist-friendly ways. While some work has been done in this area – especially on the notion of 'truth' –, there is one semantic notion, namely 'propositional content' that is still under-explored. Significantly, what is unexplored is a deflationist option for the expressivist.[10]

As I understand it, *deflationism* regarding some phrase provides a *non-representationalist* account of it.[11] According to such accounts we should not proceed in terms of invoking entities the phrase represents. Instead, we give a two-part account. First, the account must specify the patterns of use that characterize the phrase, in a way that does not mention any entity it represents. Second, an account of why our vocabulary includes this phrase, which proceeds in terms of some *non-representational function*. According to accounts of this kind, we can completely explain the phrase's function in our linguistic practice *without* invoking any entity it represents. This way the second part explains why we use the phrase in question and vindicates that it is exhaustively characterized by the patterns of its use. This leads such accounts to be ontologically conservative regarding the relevant phrase.

I think a deflationist account of propositional content should be quite attractive for expressivists. First, it shares expressivism's central commitment to deflating notions that tempt representationalist inclined philosophers to expand our ontology in often problematic ways. Second, deflationary approaches to notions that seem to bar expressivism from preserving the 'realist sounding' surface features of normative discourse open the door for what Huw Price (2013) has called 'functional pluralism.' *Functional pluralism* is the view that for many different kinds of declarative sentences we should not *start* our account of those by assuming that the domain in which they figure represents something. Rather, we should account for them via some distinctive non-representational function that they play. Deflationary approaches make room for functional pluralism, by removing any representationalist commitment from exactly those notions characteristic for declarative sentences. But, expressivists should be sympathetic to functional pluralism, given that they will probably accept non-representational accounts for domains other than the normative. After all, they are *expressivists* because they think that representationalism encounters significant problems in the normative domain. But, the same likely holds for other domains as well.

For these reasons, I think it is attractive for expressivists to have a deflationary account of propositional contents as the meanings of declarative sentences in their theoretical repertoire.[12] However, even though expressivists often suggest sympathies for a deflationary account, no work has, so far, been done of fleshing

such an account out in an expressivist-friendly way or of demonstrating how it would actually fit with expressivism.[13] This is what I will do here.

Specifically, I will provide an expressivist-friendly, deflationary account of the use of *that*-clauses in *meaning-attributions*. These are sentences of the form

(M) 'S' (in language *L*, at time *t*) means *that* p.

This focus on the use of *that*-clauses in meaning-attributions, rather than on propositions is important, given that a deflationary account is a *non-representational* account. Hence it will, primarily, focus on *attributions* of propositional contents and explain (at most) what propositional contents are in a way that is derivative of that explanation and metaphysically harmless. Propositional contents, though, are attributed by certain uses of *that*-clauses. Specifically, if we are interested in propositional contents as they figure in the theory of meaning, the relevant uses are those of *that*-clauses in *meaning-attributions.* Hence, to develop a deflationary account of such contents, these are the uses that require accounting for. This is what I will do in what follows.

3. Deflationism about *that*-clauses

To structure the investigation, let me note three desiderata the account has to satisfy. First, it needs to identify and account for the role of *that*-clauses in meaning-attributions. Second, it must be compatible with *that*-clauses playing their role in some non-representational fashion. So, the account should not make reference to *that*-clauses representing certain entities. Third, the account must be compatible with expressivism. Hence, it should allow the legitimacy of meaning-attributions to declarative sentences, even if the meta-semantic account for those is non-representationalist. I will develop the account by satisfying these desiderata in turn.

3.1. The role of that-clauses in attributions of meaning

The first step is to *identify* what role *that*-clauses play in meaning-attributions. To do so, we should consider paradigmatic uses of *that*-clauses in meaning-attributions. One is the use of *that*-clauses in the context of translation. *Translation* is a situation in which one faces a sentence in a foreign language and tries to assign meaning to it: one tries to determine whether two sentences in two different languages *mean the same thing*. In such contexts *that*-clauses are used as follows:

(1) 'Heinrich ist ein Imker' (in German) means *that* Heinrich is a bee-keeper.[14]

What is going on in (1) is that we mention a German sentence and then give its meaning by introducing a *that*-clause. Specifically, we consider a sentence in a language to be assigned meaning to – the *object language* –, and then assign meaning to that sentence by pairing it with a sentence in the language in which meaning is to be assigned – the *meta-language.* But, we do not pair

those sentences in just *any* way. Rather, we *modify* the meta-language sentence *using a that-clause* and *then* assign it to the object language sentence. And, it seems exactly *this modification* that allows the meta-language sentence to play its *meaning-giving* role in (1). Neither merely mentioning nor using the sentence would straightforwardly do the job. Consequently, in this kind of situation *that*-clauses play purely intra-linguistic roles, as a tool for semantic ascent: they allow assignment of meta-language sentences to object language sentences in a *meaning-giving* way.

What goes for translation goes for *interpretation* generally. When interpreting what certain sentences mean in the mouth of other speakers of English, we can assign meaning in the same way. For example, when we interpret another speaker of English, call her 'Helene,' we can employ *that*-clauses as follows:

(2) 'Heinrich is a bee-keeper' (in Helene's idiolect) means *that* Heinrich is a bee-keeper.

Again, in (2) we consider sentences in an object language and then assign meaning to them by pairing them with a sentence modified by a *that*-clause in a meta-language. And, once more it is *this modification* that allows the meta-language sentence to play its *meaning-giving* role. So, in the case of interpretation *that*-clauses play a purely *intra-linguistic* role as well.

Hence, we've identified the role *that*-clauses play in meaning-attributions: they play an intra-linguistic role in translation and interpretation. We now need an account that explains *how that*-clauses (and meaning-attributions generally) play this role, and one on which *that*-clauses can play this role in some non-representational fashion.

A first important thing to note is a constraint on such accounts. Accounting for the role of *that*-clauses in meaning-attributions is part of meta-semantics. Specifically, it is part of an attempt to cash out the notion of 'literal meaning.' This notion, however, is already associated with certain properties of sentences. A suitably theory-neutral description of these properties can be given in terms of the role meaning-attributions play. Specifically, they are that sub-set M of the properties of a sentence S_1, for which it holds that some sentence S_2 is a good translation or interpretation of S_1 if and only if S_2 has M. I will call these properties the 'meaning-explananda.' The constraint on satisfactory accounts of meaning-attributions is that they need to say something about what accounts for the meaning-explananda.

Of course, deflationary views of *that*-clauses reject the common and straightforward way of doing so: introducing an entity (e.g. a proposition) into our ontology that is the *meaning* of the relevant kinds of sentences (and, hence, represented by the *that*-clause) and whose various distinctive features account for the meaning-explananda and, hence, the role of *that*-clauses in translation and interpretation. This would be representationalism about *that*-clauses, and so is an explanation that is closed to deflationary views of meaning-attributions. Still,

even on deflationary accounts there should be some properties of sentences that account for the meaning-explananda, properties fully describable in terms not mentioning meanings. I will call these the 'basic properties.' An example for a basic property might, for example, be the property of being used in a certain way by competent speakers.

It is important to note that commitment to a view on which the meaning-explananda are fully accounted for in terms of basic properties is in principle perfectly compatible with the following commitments: First, that explanations of the meaning-explananda that mention meaning (e.g. semantics) are perfectly legitimate. Second, that such explanations are the best explanations (currently or ever) available to us (given our cognitive and other epistemic limitations, time constraints, etc.), so that it is completely legitimate to carry out semantics employing the semantic notions, and to assume such an enterprise to be the best project available to us to account for the compositionality of natural languages. Third, that we could never engage in interpretation or translation solely in terms mentioning only basic properties instead of using terms mentioning meaning. Fourth, that ordinary speakers could never fully spell out what those properties are. All that this view amounts to is that what accounts for the meaning-explananda *fundamentally* are facts fully describable in terms not mentioning meaning. What would a view of this kind say about meaning-attributions, though? I think a plausible approach – which can be fleshed out along deflationary lines – is Wilfrid Sellars (1954) account of meaning-attributions.

It is plausible to read Sellars (e.g. 1954, 1969) as adopting a view on which the meaning-explananda can be fully accounted for in terms not mentioning meanings, namely, in terms of rules about and patterns of linguistic behaviour. However, Sellars did not doubt the legitimacy of meaning-attributions. Instead, he thought that their legitimacy could be accounted for *without* expanding the metaphysical commitments of his explanatory account.

On his account, meaning-attributions are *illustrating sortals*: 'Means that p' is a sortal phrase, which illustrates particular basic properties, and in this way, allows classifying sentences in accordance with those properties. What does this mean? According to this account, meaning-attributions are a tool for semantic ascent: by use of a meaning-attribution we introduce a meta-linguistic phrase ('means that *p*') that allows us to classify sentences in the object language as having certain basic properties. These are those (or relevantly similar) basic properties as possessed by the sentence in the meta-language we have transformed into a *that*-clause. However, meaning-attributions play this role *not* by explicitly telling us what the relevant basic properties are. Rather they do this by *illustrating* these basic properties using the meta-language sentence that has these basic properties *as an example*. It is the role of *that*-clauses in this context to *pick out* the basic properties of *sentences*. To transform a declarative sentence *S* into a *that*-clause is to transform it into a *meta-linguistic* predicate that picks out the basic properties that *S* has in our language, where *S* serves as an *illustration* for

the basic properties relevant in that context. The word 'means' in a meaning-at-tribution, according to Sellars, is merely a special copula telling us *that* the object language sentence has the basic properties picked out by the *that*-clause.

Let me make this clear with an example. Take,

(1) 'Heinrich ist ein Imker' (in German) means *that* Heinrich is a bee-keeper.

On Sellars' account, (1) attributes certain basic properties to the German sentence 'Heinrich ist ein Imker.' (1) does this by using the English sentence 'Heinrich is a bee-keeper' as an example to *illustrate* the basic properties in question. Indicating that this is what the sentence is used for is the job of transforming the sentence into a *that*-clause. More specifically, by transforming 'Heinrich is a bee-keeper,' we are introducing a predicate that serves to pick out the relevant basic properties, by using the sentence as an illustrative example for something with those properties. 'Means,' then, merely attributes those properties to the German sentence.

Sellars' account satisfies the first desideratum, as it accounts for the role of *that*-clauses in translation and interpretation. Whether it can also offer a deflationary account of *that*-clauses, though, depends on whether it can also satisfy the second desideratum, i.e. whether it is compatible with *that*-clauses playing their role in some non-representational fashion. So, let's investigate that issue.

3.2. Non-representationalism about that-clauses

I should start by noting that Sellars' account is compatible with a *reductionist* approach, on which facts about literal meanings are nothing but facts about basic properties. Such an approach would *not* fit the second desideratum, as it *would* postulate that there are literal meanings represented by *that*-clauses, which it identifies with basic properties. Endorsing such a reductionist view would also not help meta-semantic expressivism's quest toward compatibility with truth-conditional semantics, because a combination of those views would imply Psychologized Semantics. After all, on an expressivist account, the most likely candidate for the basic property of a sentence is the property of expressing a certain mental state, and so if literal meanings and basic properties are the same, we are back to Psychologized Semantics.

While the Sellarsian account is compatible with reductionism, though, it *also* does *not* entail such a reduction, i.e. it does not entail that facts about literal meanings are nothing but facts about basic properties and so does, hence, not entail that the relation in which *that*-clauses stand to basic properties is the one that would be employed by representationalists.[15] So, the account is compatible with a non-reductionist treatment, which is not, at least on first sight, incompatible with the second desideratum. Consequently, I will here only consider the non-reductionist version of Sellars' account, which I will call the 'Sellarsian account.'

Before I show that the Sellarsian account satisfies the second desideratum, let me note, though, that there are actually good reasons independently of my project to not understand the account reductionistically. This is so, because of the particular relation in which *that*-clauses stand to basic properties, which does not seem to me well understood in terms of representation. On Sellars' account, meaning-attributions assign basic properties to sentence S_1, by using another sentence S_2 as an *illustrating example*. So, the way in which talking about S_2 picks out properties should be akin to the way in which *taking as an example of* generally picks out properties. Taking as an example, though, has peculiar features.

To take some x as an example of some F is to be in a state where certain aspects of x are *salient* to oneself *as* those features something has in virtue of being an instance of F. Assume one takes David Lewis' papers as an example of papers with a high chance of getting published in high quality philosophy journals. In this case, certain aspects of David Lewis' papers will be salient to one *as* those features that papers have in virtue of having a high chance of getting published in high quality philosophy journals.

Certain aspects of an object being 'salient' in this way just means that one is disposed to give a special role to *those* aspects in determining whether *other* objects are members of the same general kind (the kind the first object is being taken as an example of). This special role is to treat those aspects as a *reference-point* in determining whether other objects fall within that general kind. This means that one's judgements about objects being identical (or relevantly similar) to x in these aspects will have some weight in settling one's judgements with regards to whether some object falls within the relevant kind. Of course, what weight one gives to these judgements can vary across cases: sometimes, one might already have extensive and explicit knowledge of the properties that instances of a general kind have and so needs to consider examples as reference-points only to confirm one's judgements about particular cases. In other cases, however, the *only way* one can explicitly think about a certain general kind is via such reference-points.

What *taking as an example of* does, is to feed on our ability to pick up on features and aspects of objects in ways that are certainly far more extensive than our ability to make explicit, both in language and in thought, to provide resources for new and often quite economical ways of thinking and talking about those features. For example, *taking as an example* actually makes it *easier* for us to deliberate about and determine whether some object x belongs to some general kind F. As long as we can rely on certain reference-points with regards to that general kind, we can determine whether x is an F by determining whether x is identical or sufficiently *similar* to the reference-points in relevant respects. Second, it makes it possible (via its expression or the invitation to others to come to be in that state) to *communicate* to others that some x belongs to a general kind F, even when we cannot spell out the features shared by instances

of *F* or the features of *x* in virtue of which it is an instance of *F*. The only thing required is that one can presuppose a common reference-point, or give others a common reference-point by pointing out an object in which, for example, the relevant features are easier to pick out than in *x*. Proceeding from there one can then rely on one's audience's abilities to pick out similarities to lead them to the conclusion that *x* is indeed an *F*.

However, if *taking as an example of* functions in the ways presented here, it will not be appropriate to think that it represents the properties that it picks out. The relationship that holds between instances of *taking as an example of* and the properties picked out by its instances is importantly different from the relationship between ordinary descriptive beliefs and the properties they pick out. If this is correct, this provides a very good reason to read Sellars' account in a non-reductive way. After all, on this account uses of *that*-clauses are just a particular instance of *taking as an example of*. With these remarks out of the way, let me now turn to the question whether the Sellarsian account satisfies the second desideratum.

It turns out that it does: the account mentions nowhere entities in a way that would play into a representationalist's hand. The only entities mentioned on the Sellarsian account are basic properties. However, the relation in which *that*-clauses stand to these properties forecloses a reduction of *that*-clauses in terms of those properties. So, *that*-clauses do not represent basic properties. But, the Sellarsian account makes no mention of any other entities either! Consequently, while we can give an account of *that*-clauses in terms of their function, it will not be the function a representationalist about *that*-clauses would appeal to. According to the Sellarsian account, the best explanation of *that*-clauses makes no reference to *that*-clauses functioning to represent entities.

Note also, that on the Sellarsian account, there will be no informative analysis of *that*-clauses. We can only characterize *that*-clauses in a relatively platitudinous way. The same goes for the verb 'means' in the context of meaning-attributions. While 'means' functions in particular ways in a meaning-attribution, 'means' will not be *analysable* in terms of this function. So, according to the Sellarsian account, there will not be much of an informative answer to the question what it is that is assigned to 'Heinrich ist ein Imker' in

(1) 'Heinrich ist ein Imker,' means *that* Heinrich is a beekeeper.

except for the answer that *that Heinrich is a beekeeper* is assigned to 'Heinrich ist ein Imker' *as its meaning*.

This means, of course, that the Sellarsian account of *that*-clauses *is* a deflationary view about *that*-clauses. What does the view say about propositional contents, though? Note first, that the Sellarsian view is compatible with *that*-clauses legitimately functioning *syntactically* as referential terms. On this account, *that*-clauses pick out basic properties by using some sentence *as an example* for something with those (or relevantly similar) properties. What will be most salient

in the context of using a *that*-clause, consequently, are those features of sentences relevant for its having particular basic properties. Thus, *that-clauses* will behave in a way that is structurally isomorphic to the basic properties of the sentence following the 'that.' This means, though, that *that*-clauses will behave, linguistically, like referential singular terms that refer to something that supervenes on, but does not reduce to, basic properties. Consequently, the Sellarsian account offers an explanation of why *that*-clauses function syntactically this way, even though the explanation of why *that*-clauses are in our vocabulary makes no reference to such entities.

If *that*-clauses behave in this way, though, we can introduce other ways of talking about what *that*-clauses refer to.[16] In particular, we can use the label 'propositional contents' to refer to what is attributed by *that*-clauses. So, for example, rather than saying

(M) 'S' (in a language *L*, at time *t*) means *that p.*

we might now, at least in some contexts, say

(P) 'S' (in a language *L*, at time *t*) expresses the proposition *that p.*

It is important to note, however, that the *metaphysical commitments* of claims made by sentences such as (P) will not go beyond those undertaken by claims invoking sentences such as (M). For example, the way in which sentences like (P) figure in giving the meaning of sentences must be derivative from the way sentences such as (M) do so. In fact, it does not seem too far-fetched to say that in contexts in which it is appropriate to use (P), it simply provides alternative ways of providing information already provided by (M). Of course, this is compatible with sentences such as (P) being more precise or expressively more powerful than simple meaning-attributions. This is especially the case when they employ formal machinery such as sets of possible worlds to make the notion of a proposition more precise. However, even if such sentences do the work of ordinary meaning-attributions much better, they do not convey information that is of a different type to the information already conveyed by meaning-attributions.

What should we say about the status of these 'propositions'? I think the following stance is most reasonable: talk of such contents is extremely useful and harmless in many cases, but we should be cautious not to read *any* metaphysical implications into it. This view fits nicely with viewing semantics and the invocation of propositional contents in that context as a *theoretical modelling exercise* set up specifically to capture very specific features of sentences in natural languages. Models can, in many cases, plausibly be thought of as useful fictions and the approach to propositional contents suggested here fits this approach nicely.

With the Sellarsian account of *that*-clauses, we now have a deflationary account of *that*-clauses that allows talk of propositional contents.[17] Furthermore, this account has no particular commitments that would rule out that *that*-clauses or propositional contents could be attributed in a meaning-giving way to normative sentences even if expressivism was true. Hence, it seems to fit our third

requirement as well. Whether it does, however, still needs to be investigated more explicitly. After all, the Sellarsian account has particular commitments about meaning, and it is unclear how these relate to expressivism's commitments about meaning-constituting properties.

3.3. The fit with meta-semantic expressivism

On the Sellarsian account, meaning-attributions are a tool to pick out basic properties and assign them to sentences without needing to be able to specify them. If we accept this account of meaning-attributions, though, what is the relation between sentences' meaning, their basic properties, and their meaning-constituting properties?

On the Sellarsian account, a sentence's meaning does not reduce to its basic properties. Nor does it reduce to *anything* fully describable in terms not mentioning meaning. However, the sentence's meaning *supervenes on* its basic properties. This makes these properties the most plausible candidate for those properties *in virtue of which* sentences have their meaning. Consequently, the relationship between sentences' meaning, their basic properties, and their meaning-constituting properties is that sentences' basic properties just are their meaning-constituting properties. In what follows, I will, consequently, use 'basic properties' and 'meaning-constituting properties' interchangeably.

This identity between the basic and the meaning-constituting properties is good news, as it makes clear how the Sellarsian account combines with meta-semantic expressivism. On the combination of those two, the meaning-explananda of declarative sentences would be fully accounted for in terms of the mental states that uses of those sentences express. *That*-clauses in meaning-attributions would then have the function of picking out the mental states expressed by the use of those sentences followed by the *that*-. And, meaning-attributions would serve to use *that*-clauses to assign the property of expressing a mental state to sentences. However, the *meaning* of a declarative sentence, on this account, would consist in a propositional content, where this is to be understood along deflationary lines presented here. Furthermore, the sentence will have this propositional content *in virtue of* expressing a mental state, so that the property of expressing a mental state will be the meaning-constituting property of that sentence. Of course, this raises a couple of further issues, which I will address for a clearer view of the picture on the table.

According to expressivism, the meaning-constituting properties involve mental states. On the traditional understanding of expressivism, these will themselves have propositional contents, but not necessarily the same propositional contents as the sentences expressing them. For example, if expressivists held – the toy-view – that

(3) Abortion is morally wrong

expresses a desire that no one commit an abortion, (3) would have the content *that abortion is morally wrong*, but this content would supervene on a desire with the content *that no one commit an abortion*. Even though this kind of structure might appear strange, let me note that it is not necessarily so. Michael Ridge (2014, 125–131), for example, has argued that normative sentences express beliefs that share the content of the sentence, but that these beliefs are constituted by a non-normative belief and desire pair that have different contents from the normative belief and the sentence.

On Ridge's account, however, the same notion of content figures in all of these cases, which is made possible by his particular account of propositions. One might ask, though, whether expressivists who use the Sellarsian approach instead are not committed to using two different notions of content: one for linguistic items and one for mental states. After all, on the above picture, the *mental* content does significant theoretical work that seems foreclosed by the deflationary approach to content suggested here. This indicates that expressivists cannot use the Sellarian account to account for both linguistic and mental content.

It is unclear how devastating this would actually be. After all, the best accounts of mental and linguistic content might not converge. It seems to me, however, that there is actually a feasible alternative to biting the bullet on this. This is to reject the assumption that for expressivists' theoretical purposes their commitments in the philosophy of mind require invoking mental content. This is a common way to understand expressivism – after all, expressivism has traditionally been understood as the view that normative judgements are *conative* attitudes –, but it is not forced on expressivists. Indeed, it seems that what should do the work of the meaning-constituting properties should be the same as that which explains in virtue of what *normative judgements* have their contents. After all, most contemporary expressivists *agree* that normative judgements are *beliefs* and so they will need an account that explains in virtue of what these beliefs have their contents. While they *can* invoke other propositional attitudes here, I see no reason why they need to. Most fundamentally, what accounts for the content of all mental states should not be something that would itself be described in terms of contents anyway, so why not invoke it to account for the contents of normative beliefs directly, if this is possible?

In fact, there is a perfectly viable approach in the philosophy of mind for accounting for mental content that would allow cashing out expressivism's second thesis, without using a notion of content that is separate from the Sellarsian account. Before I present the view, I should highlight that the approach departs in some significant ways from traditional conceptions of expressivism. In particular, it undergoes *no* commitment to the view that normative judgements are partially constituted by familiar conative attitudes such as desires, emotions, or intentions. Rather, the view suggests a different way of cashing out

expressivism's commitments about normative judgements, though one fully in line with the motivations for expressivism.

The approach I have in mind uses a certain school within functionalism about the mind. According to *functionalism about the mind*, mental states are dispositional states fundamentally characterized by their causal role within a mental economy. Functionalism itself is compatible with a notion of content figuring irreducibly in the functional characterization of mental states. However, there is a school within functionalism according to which, on the most fundamental level, propositional attitudes can be fully characterized *without* making reference to propositional content. This is *conceptual role semantics*.[18] According to *conceptual role semantics*, mental states can be *fully* characterized by their role within a mental economy. On this view, the features of mental states we would normally account for by invoking mental content can be fully integrated into that state's functional role (which then *explains* in virtue of what the state has its content).

Using conceptual role semantics, expressivists can plausibly cash out their second thesis purely in terms of functional roles.[19] For these purposes, we can first notice that the functional role of a state can be helpfully distinguished into three parts. First, 'mind-entry' conditions, which specify the state's role in the procession of sensory stimuli. Second, 'mind-to-mind' conditions, which specify the state's role in the processes of deliberation, reasoning, and inference. Third, 'mind-exit' conditions, which specify the state's role in the production of bodily behaviour.

Using this distinction, expressivists can suggest that normative judgements are characterized by very minimal mind-entry conditions, mind-to-mind conditions just sufficiently robust to account for the role normative judgements play in reasoning and deliberation, and very robust mind-exit conditions. She might then contrast this with the role that characterizes paradigmatically representational mental states, which would involve significantly robust mind-entry conditions, mind-to-mind conditions sufficiently robust to account for the role these judgements play in reasoning and deliberation, but very limited mind-exit conditions.

If expressivists endorse this view, their commitments in the philosophy of mind and, hence, their view of the meaning-constituting properties, would *not* require them to invoke a separate notion of content from that provided by the Sellarsian account. On this view, it is the *functional role* of the mental state (or at least a part of it) expressed by a sentence that figures in its meaning-constituting properties. Combined with the Sellarsian view, we get the result that it is this *functional role* that is illustrated and attributed by *that*-clauses and on which the content of that sentence supervenes. No additional notion of content is required. Of course, this does not tell us how the account can be generalized to mental content and so does not tell us whether expressivists *can* use the same account for both semantic and mental content.[20] The suggestions here suffice

to show, however, that such an approach cannot be ruled out solely based on expressivism's meta-ethical commitments. The worry that expressivists need two separate notions of content, if they endorse the Sellarsian account does not, consequently, hold water.

Notes

1. Forms of expressivism so characterized are developed by Simon Blackburn (1998), Allan Gibbard (2003), Horgan and Timmons (2006), Michael Ridge (2014), and Mark Schroeder ([2008], though he does not accept it).
2. This way of arguing against expressivism and highlighting the cost of abandoning truth-conditional semantics is prominently championed by Mark Schroeder (2008, 2010).
3. Using Psychologized Semantics, Schroeder (2008) develops a view that ends up allowing expressivists to assign contents derivatively in a way that provides a unified semantics operating on those contents. He argues, though, that this requires too many problematic commitments, without being attractive enough to be a feasible alternative to truth-conditional semantics.
4. Of course, such independent linguistic evidence could then help semantic expressivism. Nate Charlow (2014, 2015), for example, argues that the semantics of imperatives already requires a different semantic approach, which helps semantic expressivism as well.
5. Of course, philosophers have worked hard to develop such alternatives (see e.g. [Blackburn 1993; Gibbard 2003; Horgan and Timmons 2006; Schroeder 2008; Baker & Woods 2015; Charlow 2015]). I will stay neutral on whether such an account works, as surely it is better if expressivism is not hostage to fortune to one.
6. These are e.g. Matthew Chrisman (2016), Michael Ridge (2014) and Alex Silk (2013).
7. In some sense, of course, semantics is *also* concerned with an enterprise like this. So, for example, when a semanticist spells out the notion of a truth-condition in terms of a set of possible world, she *is* trying to cash out a semantic notion in non-semantic terms. This is different, though, from the enterprise that concerns meta-semantics. After all, even if we concede that a truth-condition is a set of possible worlds, there are many different *interpretations* of what we could be saying when we concede this. If we are instrumentalists about semantics, for example, we might think that all we are doing is to introduce a useful, but strictly speaking false, fiction. On the other hand, we might be *realists* and hold that we are talking about what meaning *really* consists in. It is in this sense, in which meta-semantics is concerned with the named enterprise (compare: in one sense normative ethics tries to 'cash out' the moral notions in non-moral terms as far as possible. But, there are many different *meta-ethical* interpretations of what is going on when we do this).
8. I borrow this phrase from Paul Horwich (1998a: 5).
9. See e.g. (Sellars 1974; Davidson 1990; Field 1994, 2001; Shiffer 1996, 2003; Horwich 1998b; Williams 1999).
10. Ridge (2014) and Schroeder (2013) have explored views that allow expressivists to be *realists* about propositions (Ridge's preferred account is a version of Scott Soames' view [2010]). My aim is not to argue against these views, but to put another option on the table.

11. Of course, the label 'deflationism' is used in a variety of ways in the philosophical debate and my use of this label might cut across the use of other people. What I have in mind are views committed to a particular way of *deflating* certain kinds of linguistic phrases that it is tempting to read in very theoretically committing ways. Specifically, these views do *not* deflate such notions via an representationalist order of explanation (which is also provides a possible way for 'deflation,' if one argues that the phrase is to be explained in terms of what it represents, but that theoretical requirements for the thing to be instantiated are minimal). Instead, they *start* with a non-representational explanation. Views that are deflationary in this sense are to be found e.g. in (Ramsey 1927; Grover, Camp, and Belnap 1975; Price 1988; Brandom 1994; Field 1994; Horwich 1998b). Note that such views can, but need not deny that, for example, truth is a property (or reference a relation, etc.). However, they will use *their non-representational account* to explain what it means to talk about that property (relation, etc.) in a way that doesn't increase the metaphysical commitments of the account.

12. I explain how the account offered here also covers mental content in Köhler (2017). There I argue that the account covers the content of all propositional attitudes and not only allows expressivists to hold that normative judgements are beliefs in normative propositions, but also that there are other propositional attitudes with normative propositions as their contents, such as e.g. desires.

13. Blackburn (1998, 77–83) and Gibbard (2003, 180–196) have suggested sympathies towards deflationary accounts of propositions, but neither has provided the details of such an account or how it would fit with expressivism.

14. For reasons of simplicity I omit the time parameter here and in what follows.

15. Compare: a pro-sententialist theory of truth (e.g. [Grover, Camp, and Belnap 1975]) holds that there is a relation between the truth-predicate and some entity, but it does not hold that this entity *is* truth and so invokes a different relation to the one that would be employed by a representationalist about truth.

16. Note that this further step requires us to endorse a deflationary account of *reference* for the account not to collapse into a form of *fictionalism*. Note also, that this step is not *required* by the Sellarsian account. What I've said before only shows that on the Sellarsian account, *that*-clauses legitimately behave in a *syntactic* manner like referential terms. This view is compatible with holding that *that*-clauses do not in fact refer to anything – that the surface features of language are deceiving in this case. This would be a deflationary account of *that*-clauses, but not, strictly speaking, of propositional contents.

17. Some readers might wonder what kind of compositional semantics for 'means that' fits with the Sellarsian account. First of all I should highlight that the Sellarsian account itself should be understood as a *meta*-semantic account of *that*-clauses, as well as of 'means.' Even so, the Sellarsian account might itself have certain implications for semantics, depending on how we spell it out. For example, on Sellars' original account of meaning-attributions, the *that*-clauses would be an indexical predicate and 'means' a specialized form of the copula. In this case *that*-clauses would have to be accounted for *in semantics* via extensions. However, if we follow some of my suggestions here as to how *that*-clauses function syntactically and how propositions might fit into the Sellarsian account, *that*-clauses would be singular terms and 'means' a relational term. In this case, *that*-clauses would require a referent. While the question which of these approaches we should endorse is important for further research, it is not a question that I will be concerned with here. It seems to me, though, that the availability of these options shows that the account could plausibly be compatible with different

approaches to the compositionality of 'means *that*' depending on the further commitments one will want to endorse regarding *that*-clauses. Note, though, that in both cases, a *deflationary* account of *that*-clauses will require to deflate further notions (e.g. 'extension' and 'reference' in the cases above). I do not take this to be a problem in the context of my investigation, though, as an expressivist who wants his account to fit with truth-conditional semantics will need those anyways. I'd like to thank an anonymous referee for drawing me out on this issue.

18. Proponents of this view are e.g. Ned Block (1986), Hartry Field (1978), and Gilbert Harman (1999). It is related to inferentialism in that both emphasize role for content, but differs from inferentialism in that it emphasizes causal-functional, rather than inferential role (Brandom [1994] is the most well-known proponent of inferentialism). Note that the label 'conceptual role *semantics*' is misleading, given that the account explains in virtue of what mental states have their contents and so takes up the space in the philosophy of mind that *meta*-semantic accounts take up in the philosophy of language.

19. What follows is, of course, only a rough sketch of the account.

20. As already remarked in fn. 12, I fill this theoretical gap in (Köhler 2017).

Acknowledgements

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