Why Expressivists about Value should Love Minimalism about Truth

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Does expressivism about value depend on views about the nature of truth and truth-assessability beyond those that we glean from a minimalist account of truth and truth-assessability? More precisely, if minimalism tells us all there is to know about truth and truth-assessability, does it follow that there is no room left for the expressivist's distinctive claim that evaluations are not truth-assessable?

So two minimalists, Crispin Wright [24] and Paul Horwich [10], have recently argued. But it seems to me that they are very much mistaken. Expressivists who make this distinctive claim should *love* minimalism about truth, because minimalism shows us just how few assumptions about the nature truth and truth-assessability are required to get going the problem with evaluations to which this distinctive claim is, according to the expressivists, the solution.

Don't misunderstand me. I am not a fan of the expressivist's solution. But I do think that expressivism is one of several solutions we might give to a problem with evaluations that expressivists, among others, rightly bring to our attention. I have elsewhere called this the 'moral problem' ([21], [23]). Unfortunately for minimalists, however, though that problem does indeed require certain assumptions about the nature of truth and truth-assessability, the assumptions required are just those that the minimalist makes as well.

The paper is in four main sections. In the first I explain why Crispin Wright thinks that minimalism excludes expressivism. In the second I explain why expressivists are expressivists, and why Wright's argument therefore fails. In the third I use the discussion of Wright outlined in the first and second sections to throw light on Paul Horwich's recent account of the relationship between minimalism and expressivism. And in the fourth section I explain the role minimalism has to play in our attempt to understand, and ultimately to solve, the moral problem. I hope, thereby, to explain why Wright and Horwich have been so misled.

1. *Wright on minimalism and expressivism*

According to Crispin Wright, a sentence is truth-assessable just in case it figures in an area of discourse which is *disciplined*, and just in case it possesses certain *syntactic features*. That is, a sentence *s* is truth-assessable just in case, first, it figures in an area of discourse for which 'there are firmly acknowledged standards of proper and improper uses of its ingredient sentences' ([24], p. 29). We regularly say things such as 'I said *s* before, but now I see that I was wrong', so subsequently withdrawing assertions that met the standards for assertion when they were first made. And just in case, second, the sentence is capable of 'conditionalisation, negation, embedding in propositional attitudes, and so on' ([24], p. 29). We can say things such as 'If *s* then *s**', 'Not-*s*', 'I wonder whether or not *s*', 'I think that *s*, but I'm not sure', 'I believe that *s*', 'I desire that *s*' and the like. If these conditions are met, then, according to Wright, that is what it is for *s* to be truth-assessable.

Why is Wright's a *minimalist* theory of truth-assessability? Because the truth-assessability of a sentence can simply be read off from its surface features; from the fact that it figures in an area of discourse with all of the marks of truth-assessability. As Wright puts it:

> ... there is no notion of genuine – deep – assertoric content, such that
> a discourse which exhibits whatever degree of discipline ... and which
> has all the overt syntactic trappings of assertoric content ... may
> nevertheless fail to be in the business of expressing genuine assertions.
> Rather, if things are in all these surface respects as if assertions are
> being made, then so they are. ([24], p. 29)

This minimalist theory of truth-assessability then naturally gives rise to a minimalist theory of truth.

According to the minimalist, a truth-assessable sentence, *s*, is true if and only if the conditions on *s*'s proper use are met: that is, if and only if things are as *s* says they are. And to be prepared to say that things are as *s* says they are we, as theorists, need simply be prepared to utter *s* itself. No heavy-duty theory of truth there.

We can set this minimalist theory of truth to one side. For the expressivist's distinctive claim is that evaluative sentences, like 'It is right to give to charity', are not even truth-assessable; this is why they claim that utterances of such evaluative sentences are not assertions. Accordingly, in Wright's view, we only need the minimalist's theory of truth-assessability to exclude this distinctive expressivist claim. How does it do that?

As Wright points out, expressivists must agree that evaluative discourse exhibits discipline. For we just do ordinarily say things like 'I said that giving to charity is right, but now I see that I was wrong', and, when we

do so, we do so under pressure from the acknowledged standards for the proper and improper use of sentences like 'Giving to charity is right', standards beyond those of correct assertion. Moreover, expressivists must also agree that the sentences we use in evaluative discourse have the syntactic features he identifies: they figure in conditional contexts – we say 'If giving to charity is right, then I will give to the Red Cross Appeal next time it is on', – they figure in negation contexts – we say 'It is not the case that it is right to give to charity' – and they figure in propositional attitude contexts – we say 'I wonder whether or not it is right to give to charity', 'I think that it is right to give to charity but I am not sure', 'I believe that it is right to give to charity', 'I desire that it is right to give to charity' and so on.

But if they agree with all of this then, according to Wright, given that there is no notion of deep assertoric content to be had, it follows that, contrary to the expressivist, evaluative sentences like 'Giving to charity is right' are truth-assessable. Or, better, to think that they are not must be to make assumptions about the nature of truth-assessability *beyond* the minimalist's assumptions. Minimalism excludes expressivism.

Wright's argument is potentially very powerful indeed. In the next section I will show that the argument needn't worry an expressivist, however. For it is simply unsound.

2. *Why expressivists are expressivists*

Expressivists think that if someone utters the sentences 'Giving to charity maximizes happiness' and 'Giving to charity is right', then though it may appear that two assertions have been made, really only one has been made: 'Giving to charity maximizes happiness' is truth-assessable, and this the utterer does assert, but 'Giving to charity is right' is not truth-assessable, and, accordingly, this the utterer does not assert. But why do they say this?

Everyone agrees that a sentence that is truth-assessable, if uttered sincerely, is an assertion. And everyone agrees that the function of an assertion is to convey the fact that the utterer believes that what the sentence uttered says is so is so. Wright himself puts the latter point this way.

> ... assertion has the following analytical tie to belief: if someone makes
> an assertion, and is supposed sincere, it follows that she has a belief whose
> content can be captured by means of the sentence used. ([24], p. 14)

Thus, when someone says 'Giving to charity maximizes happiness', we take her to be expressing her belief that giving to charity has, as a consequence, the fact that happiness is maximized.

Belief is just the right kind of psychological state to be expressed in an assertion, because it is in the nature of beliefs that they purport to represent the way things are. That is, roughly speaking, beliefs can have as their

contents all and only those contents apt for expression in truth-assessable sentences.[1] And this is in turn important, for it shows that our ideas of assertion and truth-assessability are tied to the idea of a folk psychology that recognizes a category of belief.

In fact however, though Wright does not acknowledge the point, our ideas of assertion and truth-assessability are tied to a folk psychology that recognizes even more kinds of psychological state. For an assertion is an action, and a psychology rich enough to explain actions must also recognize a category of desire, alongside the category of belief (Smith [19]).

Desires differ from beliefs in being, not representations of how things are, but representations of how things are to be. If we think of this difference between belief and desire as a functional difference – if we think, again very roughly, that the belief that p is a psychological state produced by the fact that p under appropriate circumstances, whereas the desire that p is a psychological state that makes it the case that p under appropriate circumstances – then we can see why beliefs and desires can together combine to produce actions, even though neither beliefs nor desires can manage to do that all by themselves.

Desires cannot produce actions all by themselves because, though they tell us how the world is to be, they do not tell us the way the world is, and thus don't tell us whether the world has to be changed at all in order to make it that way, let alone how it has to be changed. Thus, even if desires do typically cause things, they cannot cause anything all by themselves. And neither can beliefs produce actions all by themselves because, though they tell us how the world is, and thus tell us all manner of ways in which it could be changed to make it different, they do not tell us how it is to be changed. Beliefs and desires can together produce action, however, because then our beliefs have the role of telling us how the world is, and thus how it has to be changed if it has to be changed at all, in order to make it the way – now focusing on the role of desires – our desires tell us it is to be.

We have already noted that our ideas of assertion and truth-assessability are tied to the idea of a folk psychology that recognizes a category of belief – for assertions typically express beliefs. And what we have just seen is that, since an assertion is an action, those ideas are in turn tied to the idea of a folk psychology that recognizes a category of desire as well. These ideas therefore stand or fall together: truth-assessability, assertion, desire and belief.

What we want to know is why expressivists deny that sentences like 'Giving to charity is right' are truth-assessable. The answer is now easy to state. Expressivists deny this because they deny that, strictly speaking, such

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[1] 'Roughly speaking' because of complications to do with sentences like 'The belief that p is false', which is truth-assessable but which I may not be able to believe if, for example, I believe that p; sentences that are too long to be entertained; and so on.

sentences are apt to give the content of the utterer's beliefs. The reason why goes back, of course, to Hume ([11], pp. 413–17). As he reminded us, when someone sincerely utters an evaluative sentence we are typically able to conclude something about what that person is disposed to do, given suitable means–ends beliefs, and thus we are able to conclude something about the state of her desires. If we know that someone has sincerely uttered the sentence 'Giving to charity is right' then we know that, other things being equal, *she desires to give to charity.* But how is it that knowledge of a person's sincere utterance puts us in a position to draw this conclusion? After all, if the utterance is an assertion, then it is an expression of that person's beliefs. So how can it be that a sentence which, when uttered, tells us about the content of the utterer's beliefs, also tells us about the state of her desires? If, according to our folk theory, no belief *is* a desire, that is problematic.

One answer – perhaps Hume's own ([11], pp. 468–69) – requires a subjectivist account of the meaning of the sentence 'Giving to charity is right'. What that sentence literally means, according to the subjectivist, is 'I desire to give to charity'. This allows us to hold on to the idea that an utterance of the sentence is an assertion, because the sentence 'I desire to give to charity' is straightforwardly truth-assessable, apt to give the content of a belief, and so apt to be asserted. It therefore should come as no surprise, if this is what evaluative sentences like 'Giving to charity is right' mean, that we typically find out what an utterer desires when we know what evaluative sentences she asserts, even conceding that no belief is a desire.

But expressivists famously reject subjectivism. Under the influence of Moore they claim that, since the sentence 'I desire to give to charity, but it is not right to do so' is not self-contradictory, so it follows that the sentence 'It is right to give charity' does not mean the same as 'I desire to give to charity' ([2], Ch. 6; [18]). And since they can think of no alternative content for the sentence 'Giving to charity is right', which would both allow it to express a belief and yet explain why an utterance of it, when sincere, tells us about the state of the utterer's desires, they go on to give what they think is the only plausible explanation of this fact. An utterance of the sentence 'Giving to charity is right' is not, strictly speaking, the expression of a belief at all; it is rather, typically, the expression of a desire.

This, then, is why expressivists deny that evaluative sentences are truth-assessable; this is the relevant contrast between the sentences 'Giving to charity maximizes happiness' and 'Giving to charity is right'. Expressivists agree with minimalists that truth-assessable sentences give the contents of beliefs, not desires. And they agree with minimalists that assertions express beliefs, not desires. But what they also think is that, as Hume reminded us, evaluative sentences, like 'Giving to charity is right', when uttered

sincerely, typically tell us about the state of the utterer's desires. And they can see no way of squaring this with the fact that the utterance of an evaluative sentence is an assertion; no way of squaring it with the fact that the uttered sentence expresses the content of the utterer's beliefs. This is the relevant point of contrast with non-evaluative sentences like 'Giving to charity maximizes happiness'. For, according to expressivists, there is no corresponding problem in thinking of such non-evaluative sentences as giving the content of the utterer's beliefs.

Does expressivism make any assumptions about the nature of truth-assessability beyond those minimal assumptions made by Wright himself? It would seem that it does not. For in giving his minimalist account of truth-assessability Wright himself acknowledges that assertion has an analytical tie to belief: a sentence with assertoric content is, when asserted sincerely, apt to give the content of one of the utterer's beliefs. This is, in part, why he rightly insists that a necessary condition for a sentence's being truth-assessable is that it has, among its various syntactic features, the potential for being embedded in belief contexts. But what expressivists deny is precisely that evaluative sentences, even when uttered sincerely, are, strictly speaking, apt to give the contents of the utterer's beliefs.

The 'strictly speaking' is important. For expressivists need not deny that we ordinarily *say* such things as 'Y believes that it is right that p', and nor need they deny that we are entitled to do so, a fact to which we will return at the end. The point that expressivists insist upon is simply that, since the concepts of belief and desire are defined by their role in folk psychology, a theory that tells us, *inter alia*, the differential contribution of belief and desire to action, so the mere fact that we say such things as 'Y believes that it is right that p', and get away with it, is therefore insufficient to show that utterances of 'It is right that p' do express beliefs.

What we have to be able to do, in order to show that this is the case, is tell a story about the meaning of 'It is right that p', and a story about the meanings of 'belief' and 'desire' as those terms are used in folk psychology according to which, when someone utters the sentence 'It is right that p', we can take her to be expressing her belief that it is right that p, despite the fact that, typically, we thereby come to discover something about the state of her desires: that she desires that p. In essence, expressivism is the view that this cannot be done, and that we must therefore suppose that such sentences express desires instead.

3.   Horwich on minimalism and expressivism

In *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings* [7] Allan Gibbard argues that, for roughly the Humean reasons given above, we cannot think of an utterance of 'x is rational' as the expression of a belief. According to Gibbard, 'x is rational'

is therefore not truth-assessable; it is rather a sentence whose utterance is best thought of as an expression of the utterer's desires concerning x ([7], pp. 6–10).

In 'Gibbard's Theory of Norms' Paul Horwich takes Gibbard to task for making this distinctive expressivist claim [10]. The reason for the complaint is that, according to Horwich, the minimal or deflationary theory of truth he defends elsewhere shows the claim to be false [9]. Horwich's main argument is much the same as Wright's. The interesting difference is that, according to Horwich, expressivists need not make this distinctive claim. Rather, in his view, expressivism's central insight is in fact consistent with minimalism. This is because, according to Horwich, the central expressivist insight is that we can analyse or define 'Y believes that x is rational' as 'Y has certain desires concerning x' ([10], pp. 76–77). And someone who accepts such an analysis simply has no reason to deny that 'x is rational' is truth-assessable; for, given the analysis, though that sentence does indeed express a desire, it expresses an appropriate belief *as well*.

I will have more to say about this sort of analysis in the next section. For now the important point is simply that the insight that for Horwich lies at the core of expressivism is something that, on my understanding, expressivists who go on to claim that moral sentences are not truth-assessable crucially think is false. Rather, adapting the points made about morals in the last section to the case of rationality, they think that someone who sincerely utters the sentence 'x is rational' typically has certain desires concerning x. And they think that, since there is no way that this could be so if the utterance were the expression of the utterer's beliefs, so it follows that, strictly speaking, an utterance of 'x is rational' must just be the expression of a desire; not the expression of a belief *at all*.

And again, the idea that the terms 'belief' and 'desire' are to be interpreted strictly is important. For, to repeat, Horwich's claim is precisely that expressivists

> … should not, strictly speaking, deny that one can believe something to be rational; for what they really provide is an account of what any such belief consists in (that is, the possession of a certain pro-attitude) ([10], p. 77).

And my reply has been that this is exactly what expressivists who think that moral sentences are not truth-assessable should and do deny. For they think that the claim that a belief may be constituted by a desire is a claim we should make only if it is entailed by folk psychology, the theory we all use to explain the differential contribution of belief and desire to action. Given that they do not think that our folk theory entails any such claim, they insist that utterances of 'x is rational' are not, strictly speaking, expressions of beliefs.

The point is worth underscoring. For it suggests that minimalism about truth isn't really so minimal as the minimalists think. For, in essence, what we have seen in our discussions of both Wright and Horwich is that minimalism about truth in fact *presupposes* an understanding of folk psychology, an understanding of a theory whose concepts of belief and desire will in turn constrain which sentences can and cannot count as truth-assessable. But if minimalism presupposes an understanding of folk psychology in this way then, given that that theory is a substantive theory about the way human beings work, it follows that minimalism itself requires substantive assumptions in giving accounts of truth and truth-assessability after all. We will return to this point briefly below.

4. *Minimalism and the moral problem*

I said at the outset that expressivism is one of several solutions we might give to the moral problem. This problem can be stated in the form of three plausible, but apparently inconsistent, propositions:

1. Moral judgements express beliefs.
2. Moral judgements have a necessary connection of sorts with the will: that is, with being motivated.
3. Motivation is a matter of having, *inter alia*, suitable desires.

In this final section I want briefly to say what role minimalism has to play in our attempt to understand, and ultimately to solve, this problem. I hope, thereby, to diagnose the mistake made by Wright and Horwich.

To begin, note that there would seem to be just four sorts of response that we might give to the moral problem. One denies the alleged inconsistency by trying to find an analysis of evaluative sentences that makes it plain why (1) is true and yet consistent with (2) and (3). As we saw, this is the subjectivist's line. I have more recently attempted a variation on such a solution myself under the banner of the dispositional, or response-dependent, theory of value ([21], [22], [23]). The remaining three responses all accept the inconsistency.

The first holds that, since (2) and (3) are true, so we must deny (1), and claim instead that moral judgements express the very desires that constitute our moral motivations. As we have already seen, this is the expressivist's line, taken by the likes of Ayer [2], Hare [8], Blackburn [3] and Gibbard [7]. The second holds that, since both (1) and (3) are true, so we must deny (2), and claim instead that moral judgements have no special connection with motivation; that we can make moral judgements and yet, quite rationally, remain entirely unmoved by them. This is the externalist's line, taken by the likes of Frankena [6], Foot [5], Scanlon [17], Railton [16] and Brink [4]. And the third holds that, since (2) is true, and since both (1)

and (3) buy into an implausible Humean conception of belief and desire inconsistent with (2), so we should revise our understanding of folk psychology wholesale. We should do away with the Humean idea that reality is motivationally neutral, an assumption the other solutions all make, and claim, instead, that whether or not there are any beliefs and desires, there are most certainly 'besires', to use J. E. J. Altham's wonderful term [1]: states which are belief-like with respect to one content, and desire-like with respect to another. Another way of putting the same point would be this: whether or not there are beliefs and desires that are *distinct existences*, there are most certainly beliefs which *are* desires [20]. When a subject is in such a state, she is in a state apt to be expressed in an assertion – this is the belief-like part – and she is also therefore in a certain motivational state – this is the desire-like part. Evaluative sentences, according to this view, are apt to express besires. This is the line taken by anti-Humean theorists of motivation like McDowell [12], Platts [14] and Price [15], and perhaps also by Nagel [13].

Does minimalism about truth favour any particular solution to the moral problem? No it does not. Minimalism is a theory about the nature of truth and truth-assessability, not a meta-ethical theory, and so it has no bearing on the truth or falsity of (2). Nor, as we have seen, though it presupposes a folk psychological theory rich enough to explain actions like assertions, is minimalism itself an interpretation of folk psychology, and so it does not bear on whether or not folk psychology should be framed in terms of the concepts of belief and desire or, instead, besire – something that is, presumably, to be decided by arguments in the philosophy of mind. (Incidentally, Horwich's view that certain beliefs are constituted by desires may now be seen as an implicit endorsement of an interpretation of folk psychology according to which there are besires; and here, accordingly, lies the substantive psychological assumption that informs Horwich's minimalist account of truth and truth-assessability.) And finally, since minimalism is not itself a theory concerned with the analysis of evaluative sentences, so it has no bearing on whether or not there is available a plausible analysis of evaluative sentences that shows why (1), (2) and (3) are not really inconsistent. But in that case, what role does minimalism have to play in our attempt to understand, and ultimately to solve, the moral problem?

In my view, minimalism tells us something about what an expressivist solution to the moral problem would have to look like. For what minimalism reminds us is that evaluative sentences do in fact have many of the features of sentences that are truth-assessable. In Wright's terms, they figure in a disciplined area of discourse, and they have many of the syntactic features he mentions. We just do say things like 'If giving to charity is right then I will give to the Red Cross Appeal next time it is on', 'It is not the case

that giving to charity is right', 'I wonder whether giving to charity is right', 'I think that giving to charity is right, but I am not sure', 'I believe that giving to charity is right', 'I desire that giving to charity is right' and so on.

Of course, in conjunction with (2) and (3), minimalism also tells us that (1) may yet not be true because, given that the concepts of belief and desire are defined, in part, by their role in folk psychology, a theory that tells us, *inter alia*, the differential contribution of belief and desire in the production of action, so we may be unable to account for the fact that evaluative sentences are apt to give the content of beliefs. But never mind that. At this stage the important point is that minimalism reminds us that the expressivist who *merely* denies (1) is in deep trouble.

What does minimalism tell us expressivists must do in addition? It tells us that expressivists must explain how it is that a sentence that is typically used to express a desire can yet have so many of the features of an assertion: that is, they must explain why utterances of evaluative sentences comprise a disciplined area of discourse, and why such sentences have so many of the syntactic features Wright mentions; why we are able to say all of the things he points out that we do say, including things like 'I believe that giving to charity is right'. Minimalism is not itself an explanation of this fact, of course. What is needed a theory like Simon Blackburn's quasi-realism ([3], especially pp. 189–202). But it is minimalism that forces the expressivist to be in the business of giving a theory like quasi-realism.

It seems to me that this is where Wright and Horwich were misled. For quasi-realism, if successful, will explain how a set of sentences that are not truth-assessable can yet have so many of the features that minimalists fix on in giving an account of truth-assessability itself. It will even explain why we are entitled to say such things as 'I believe that it is right to give to charity', despite the fact that an utterance of 'Giving to charity is right' does not express a belief, strictly speaking. But so long as expressivists can make out the claim that utterances of evaluative sentences not just *are not*, but *cannot be*, expressions of beliefs, strictly speaking – that they are rather expressions of desires, as the terms 'belief' and 'desire' are used in a properly interpreted folk psychology – then it seems to me they will have a theory whose coherence minimalists will have to happily, even if in some cases reluctantly, concede.[2]

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