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Sense and Sensibility
Four Essays on Evaluative Discourse
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Abstract

The subject of this thesis is the nature of evaluative terms and concepts. It investigates various phenomena that distinguish evaluative discourse from other types of language use. Broadly, the thesis argues that these differences are best explained by the hypothesis that evaluative discourse serves to communicate that the speaker is in a particular emotional or affective state of mind.

The first paper, “Aesthetic Evaluation and First-hand Experience”, examines the fact that it sounds strange to make evaluative aesthetic statements while at the same time denying that you have had first-hand experience with the object being discussed. It is proposed that a form of expressivism about aesthetic discourse best explains the data.

The second paper, “Evaluative Discourse and Affective States of Mind”, discusses the problem of missing Moorean infelicity for expressivism. It is argued that evaluative discourse expresses states of mind attributed by sentences of the form “Nils finds it wrong to tell lies”. These states, the paper argues, are non-cognitive, and the observation therefore addresses the problem of missing infelicity.

The third paper, “Sensibilism and Evaluative Supervenience”, argues that contemporary theories about why the moral supervenes on the non-moral have failed to account for the full extent of the phenomenon. Supervenience pertains not just to the moral but to the evaluative in general, it is a conceptual truth and it involves a relationship with a certain directionality. While all these points have been individually recognized at various points in the literature on moral supervenience, no theory accounts for all them. It is suggested that a kind of sensibilist semantics, according to which the extensions of evaluative terms are determined by how we feel about things, explains the full phenomenon.

The fourth paper, “Sensibilism and Imaginative Resistance”, discusses why we refuse to accept strange evaluative claims as being true in fictions, even though we are happy to accept other types of absurdities as fictionally true. The paper argues that the sensibilist semantics outlined in the third article offers a good diagnosis of the puzzle and compares this to other approaches.

Keywords: aesthetics; aesthetic language; evaluative language; expressivism; Allan Gibbard; R.M. Hare; David Hume; John MacFarlane. metaethics; moral language; philosophy of language; predicates of personal taste; relativism; speech-acts

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List of Papers

This thesis is based on the following papers.


(III) Franzén, Nils. (manuscript) Sensibilism and Evaluative Supervenience.

(IV) Franzén, Nils. (submitted) Sensibilism and Imaginative Resistance.

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1. Introduction

We sometimes say things like the following:

(1) Murder is vicious.
(2) It’s cruel to eat meat.
(3) St Mark’s basilica is incredibly beautiful.

These are all evaluative statements. They communicate, among others things, that there is something bad about murder and meat eating, and something good about St Mark’s basilica. This doctoral thesis is a study of the nature of such statements.

In particular, the four articles of the thesis all argue that there is a close relationship between the meaning of evaluative terms, their sense, and our emotional and affective life, that is, our sensibility. In order to obtain some initial sense of the kind of ideas that are discussed, consider the following passage from David Hume’s *A Treatise of Human Nature*:

Take any action allow’d to be vicious: Wilful murder, for instance. Examine it in all lights, and see if you can find that matter of fact, or real existence, which you call vice. In which-ever way you take it, you find only certain passions, motives, volitions and thoughts. There is no other matter of fact in the case. The vice entirely escapes you, as long as you consider the object. You never can find it, till you turn your reflection into your own breast, and find a sentiment of disapprobation, which arises in you, towards this action. Here is a matter of fact; but 'tis the object of feeling, not of reason. It lies in yourself, not in the object. So that when you pronounce any action or character to be vicious, you mean nothing, but that from the constitution of your nature you have a feeling or sentiment of blame from the contemplation of it (Hume, 1888/1740, p. 468).

Hume makes two important claims in this passage. First, he says that there is, as he puts it, no fact of the matter, no “real existence” in the object, which corresponds to the evaluative terms ‘vice’ and ‘vicious’. Vice “lies in yourself, not in the object”. It is we because we feel in a certain way about murder, that it can be said to be vicious. Although it is not said explicitly in the quote, it is clear that Hume here sees a contrast with other qualities, like, for instance,
that the murder took place on a certain date, which could properly be said to “lie in the object”. The act’s moral properties are, Hume thought, special in this regard.

Secondly, Hume also makes a claim about language. When we pronounce an action to be vicious, we mean nothing but that we have a certain feeling of blame in relation to it, the passage says. On Hume’s view, not only do moral properties have a special ontological status, in that they don’t have “real existence”, but this is also built into the way that moral language works. When attributing moral properties, we do not even aim to say something about mind-independent reality, but only, somehow, about our feelings.

Hume did not only hold this view of moral language, he also thought that evaluative aesthetic claims work in the same way. Beauty and deformity, Hume argued “[…]are not qualities in objects, but belong entirely to the sentiment[…]” (Hume, 2009/1757, p. 217). As with moral discourse, Hume believed that this relation to sentiment is built into the very meaning of aesthetic terms.

Others have advocated similar ideas. Immanuel Kant, for instance, seems to have held a similar view specifically about aesthetic discourse. A judgement of taste is according to Kant “not a judgement of cognition”, i.e. a judgement by means of which we gain further insight in what the world is like, but is instead a judgement “by which nothing in the object is signified” and which “determining ground can be nothing but subjective” (Kant, 2009/1790, §1). Perhaps Baruch Spinoza had similar ideas in mind when he wrote that:

As for the terms good and bad, they indicate no positive quality in things regarded in themselves, but are merely modes of thinking […] (Spinoza, 1677, Part IV)


Not everyone agrees. There is an equally strong tradition, going back at least to Plato, which maintains that goodness and beauty are objective qualities, of at least equal standing with, for instance, the property of being 185cm tall. In the 20th and 21st centuries, such positions have been by defended by, among others, G.E. Moore (1903), Thomas Nagel (1986) and Derek Parfit (2011) (the latter two specifically about moral goodness). In addition to alternative ontological views, these authors do not see the same strong connection between the meaning of evaluative (or specifically moral) terms and emotions as does Hume in the above quote.

The four articles of this thesis side with Hume in this debate. There is, they argue, an essential connection between the meaning of evaluative terms and our affective experience in the world. The third and fourth articles also join in with the other aspect of Hume’s claim: on the view advocated in these articles,
there is in a certain sense no “real existence” corresponding to evaluative terms.

The phrasing above is fairly abstract and general. Even someone who finds something intuitively plausible in Hume’s view should wonder what it really means that evaluative properties have no “real existence”, and that evaluative discourse says something about our feelings, rather than the external world. Furthermore, we should, of course, ask why we should believe that something along the lines of what Hume says is true. What arguments are there for these claims?

This is not an exegetical thesis, and so it will not dwell on what Hume himself might have had in mind concerning these questions. Instead, the guiding question of the thesis is what the best way to make sense of a view like Hume’s is, and furthermore what hitherto unconsidered reasons there are for believing that something like it is the correct view of evaluative language.

The approach in each of the four articles is what one might call ‘puzzle-oriented’. They each discuss a fairly specific peculiarity pertaining to evaluative discourse and propose explanations of it in the spirit of Hume’s view in the quote above. A drawback of this kind of problem-focused approach is that a bigger picture is lacking. One might feel that even if the proposed explanation of the phenomenon under discussion in each article is plausible, one would like to see how it fits in with the broader dialectical perspectives of metaethics, meta-aesthetics and the philosophy of language. In this general introduction I try to provide some such broader background.

The procedure will be the following. First, I describe the content of each of the four articles which constitute the thesis, and discuss in what way they relate to each other; secondly, I make some comments on the relationship between the first article and similar discussions within aesthetics; third, I provide a closer look at sensibilism, the generic view that plays a major part in the third and fourth articles, and discuss which version of that view I find most plausible. For this discussion in particular, I think it might be an advantage to have read the articles in questions. Fourth, I try to zoom out a bit from the specific topics discussed in the articles, and say something more general about anti-realism about the evaluative; and finally, in the last section of this general introduction, I make some remarks about the methodology employed in the articles.

Before all this, it should perhaps be noted that this work does not operate with a very precise definition of what it takes for a term to be evaluative. Instead, it relies on that it is, for the most part, intuitively clear which terms that are evaluative and which ones that not. The examples of evaluative terms employed in the articles are moral terms, such as ‘wrong’ and ‘cruel’, evaluative aesthetic terms, such as ‘beautiful’ and what is sometimes called predicates of personal taste, like ‘tasty’ and ‘funny’. The thesis does not explicitly engage with evaluative epistemic terms, like, for instance, ‘justified’ as when applied to beliefs, but such terms are meant to be covered by the discussion as well.
In contemporary philosophical discussions, moral, aesthetic and taste predicates are most commonly not treated under the same heading, perhaps for the reasons discussed in Section 5 of this introduction. The most important reason for why they are grouped together in this thesis is that they share many peculiarities with each other which distinguish them from most non-evaluative terms. The phenomena discussed in the second, third and fourth articles are all examples of this.

A kind of term which is not meant to be covered by the discussion is that of racial and ethnic slurs, like the n-word in English or ‘wop’ for an Italian-American, even though they might be taken to be evaluative in an intuitive sense. The reason for this is that they behave quite differently from other evaluative terms. They do not, for instance, embed felicitously under ‘find’, which is the focus of discussion in the second article, and, in contrast to other evaluative terms, they have very clear descriptive criteria of application.

Insofar as one thinks it is clarifying to work with an explicit definition of ‘evaluative’, I think Pekka Väyrynen’s definition of an evaluative term as a term which communicates that something is good or bad in a way that captures the intuitive notion that I operate with here reasonably well (Väyrynen, 2013, p. 31).

2. Article Summaries

I. Aesthetic Evaluation and First-hand Experience

The first article of the thesis concerns a peculiarity of aesthetic and taste assertions known as the acquaintance inference. Consider:

(3) St Mark’s basilica is incredibly beautiful.

In making such a statement, a speaker communicates, without straightforwardly asserting, that she has had first-hand experience with the object in question. This is shown by, among other things, that it sounds strange to make such an assertion while at the same time denying being acquainted with the object:

(3b) ?? St Mark’s basilica is incredibly beautiful, but I have never seen it.

As is pointed out in the article, the fact that the acquaintance inference is cancellable speaks against it being a conversational implicature. This, as well as other data points, instead speaks in favor of it being specifically related to the

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1 This qualification is discussed in the third and fourth articles.
speech-act performed with the utterances in question. According to an idea tentatively endorsed by Dilip Ninan, the knowledge norm of assertion, along with the widespread notion that aesthetic knowledge requires first-hand experience, can explain the acquaintance inference. If an assertion communicates that the speaker knows the asserted proposition, and if such knowledge requires first-hand experience, then this would explain why the relevant assertions communicate that first-hand experience is at hand. The article criticizes this proposal on several grounds, the most important being that we lack independent reasons for believing that aesthetic knowledge requires first-hand experience.

The positive proposal of the article is that sentences like (3) are used to perform an alternative speech act to that of assertion. Types of speech acts are individuated by the types of mental states that they express. For instance, assertions are taken to express cognitive states like beliefs. Among other things, this is indicated by the fact that it is infelicitous to make an assertion while denying being in the corresponding belief-state:

(4) ?? Ingeborg is on the mat, but I don’t believe that Ingeborg is on the mat.

Similarly, one cannot felicitously perform the speech-act of promising while denying being in the corresponding state of intending:

(5) ?? I promise to go to the party, but I don’t intend to go to the party.

The basic idea of the article is that the acquaintance inference is well explained by the hypothesis that evaluative aesthetic statements express affective states of mind, such as, for instance, appreciation, similar to how assertions express beliefs and promises express intentions. These affective states are such that one cannot be in them if first-hand experience is lacking. One cannot appreciate a painting that one has never seen or like the taste of a kind of beer that one has never tasted.

That evaluative assertions express non-cognitive, that is non-representational, states of mind in a similar fashion to how non-evaluative assertions express beliefs is a major tenet of expressivism. However, while the acquaintance inference supports expressivism in this respect, a related data point constitutes a problem for the most common way of developing it. Pure expressivists maintain that evaluative discourse expresses only non-cognitive states, and not beliefs. A question facing any pure expressivist is what to say about seemingly cognitive attitude attributions involving evaluative vocabulary, as in:

(6) Ingeborg believes that St Mark’s basilica is beautiful.
Pure expressivists commonly maintain that these attitude ascriptions are really ascriptions of non-cognitive states of mind. But if (6) really ascribed a state of mind similar to appreciation to Ingeborg, it should exhibit a similar kind of experience requirement as:

(7) Ingeborg appreciates St Mark’s basilica.

Unlike the ascription of an affective state in (7), the belief-ascription can be true even if Ingeborg lacks the requisite experience. This makes it unlikely that (7) ascribes the same kind of state as (6). For this reason, the pure expressivist who believes that aesthetic statements express states like appreciation must find some alternative account of cognitive-attitude embeddings of aesthetic and taste predicates. It is suggested that a potential remedy to this problem would be to exchange the pure expressivist view for a hybrid one. According to hybrid expressivism, evaluative discourse expresses both cognitive and non-cognitive states of mind.

II. Evaluative Discourse and Affective States of Mind

The second article of the thesis can be read as a companion piece to the first one. The first article calls attention to a peculiarity of aesthetic discourse and argues that it supports a central tenet of expressivism. The second article looks at the prospect of finding similar phenomena that support expressivism about the evaluative in general. The article begins by calling attention to the lack of linguistic evidence supporting the expressivist hypothesis about natural language. Moreover, not only is such linguistic evidence wanting, but a crucial predication that expressivism makes about natural language seems to not be borne out. According to a central tenet of expressivism, the Parity Thesis, evaluative discourse expresses non-cognitive states of mind in exactly the same way as assertions express beliefs. As previously noted, the expression-relationship between assertion and belief is manifested in the infelicity of asserting while simultaneously denying being the corresponding belief-state, as is evinced by Moore’s famous paradox:

(4) ?? Ingeborg is on the mat, but I don’t believe that Ingeborg is on the mat.

If the Parity Thesis is on the right track, then making an evaluative assertion while denying being in the corresponding non-cognitive state of mind should give rise to similar infelicity. But statements like (8) do not sound bad in an analogous way:

(8) Murder is wrong but I don’t disapprove of it.
As several theorists have noted, similar statements with other non-cognitive states of mind are also not marked in a way analogous to (4).

The article picks up this gauntlet on behalf of expressivism. There is, the article argues, a type of non-cognitive state of mind which it is infelicitous to deny being in when making an evaluative assertion. These are the states of mind which are attributed with the locution ‘find’ in English:

(9) ?? Murder is wrong, but I don’t find it wrong.

The article offers several arguments for why we should think that ‘find’-states are non-cognitive, the most important one being that they are inapt for attributions of truth and falsity, as evinced by the infelicity of:

(10) ?? What Ingeborg finds is true/false.

Drawing from evaluative aesthetic discourse and the data discussed in the first article of the thesis, the article furthermore offers additional evidence that ‘find’-states are non-cognitive in nature and that being in such states is a requirement for sincere assertions of evaluative sentences. Similar to affective states like loving, liking and appreciating, ‘find’-states exhibit an experience requirement, specifically in aesthetic and taste contexts:

(11) Ingeborg appreciates the taste of Saltimbocca.
(12) Ingeborg finds Saltimbocca tasty.

Both (11) and (12) require that Ingeborg has tasted Saltimbocca, which distinguishes them from the corresponding cognitive attitude-ascriptions. If evaluative aesthetic statements express such states, they should communicate that the speaker has had first-hand experience with their object. As discussed thoroughly in the first article, this prediction is borne out. Making an evaluative aesthetic or taste-assertion while denying having had the experience is not felicitous, as predicted by the theory.

The second article ends on the same negative note as the first. While the discussion vindicates the Parity Thesis, the data discussed in the article speak against the pure expressivist’s notion that cognitive attitude embeddings involving evaluative vocabulary are, in fact, attributing the relevant non-cognitive states. As in the first article, hybrid expressivism is offered as a potential remedy.

III. Sensibilism and Evaluative Supervenience

The supervenience of the evaluative on the non-evaluative is the phenomenon that there can be no evaluative difference without a non-evaluative difference. For instance, two paintings cannot be exactly the same in their non-evaluative properties, but nevertheless differ in that one is beautiful and the other one is
not. There must be some further difference between them for them to differ in their aesthetic qualities. The third article discusses this phenomenon, and offers a semantic explanation of it.

The article starts out by quoting R.M Hare’s original observation regarding the supervenience phenomenon, and argues that the literature on the subject has failed to consider the full extent of all of Hare’s insights. The relevant supervenience thesis is a conceptual truth, it pertains to the evaluative in general rather than just to morality, and underlying it is a relationship with a certain directionality. For instance, a sunset is beautiful because of its non-evaluative traits. While all of these features have been individually recognized, the article argues that current accounts of supervenience look less plausible when all of them together are taken into consideration. Most importantly, it is argued that purported explanations of the supervenience of the moral all seem less convincing as generalized to the evaluative in general. While this is not a knock-down argument, it motivates the search for a theory of the supervenience of the evaluative in general, which also explains the other features mentioned above.

The second half of the paper offers such a positive view, which I call ‘sensibilism’. Sensibilism is defined as the view that the extensions of evaluative predicates are determined by the way we feel about things. Formally, it is implemented as an extension of the possible-worlds framework for propositions. On the suggested view, we think of propositions as sets of pairs of worlds and ‘sensibilites’. A sensibility is modelled as a formal object which, analogous to how a possible world is maximally decided on the extension of every descriptive predicate at that world, is maximally decided about the extension of evaluative predicates at the same world. Sensibilism is compatible with several different metaethical theories, roughly corresponding to whose sensibility is taken to be relevant for settling the truth-value of unembedded evaluative assertions. The article develops sensibilism as a form of semantic relativism, according to which it is the sensibility of whoever assesses the sentence that is relevant for determining its truth-value. Other ways of developing sensibilism, such as expressivism, deliver the same results concerning evaluative supervenience.

The explanation of the supervenience that this view offers is the following. The extensions of evaluative properties at non-actual worlds are settled by the way we feel about things in the actual world. The attitudes relevant for settling the extension of evaluative predicates are property-oriented. For instance, appreciating the taste of a glass of wine is effectively to appreciate the way it tastes, i.e. a property. When looking at the extensions of evaluative predicates at non-actual worlds, such as, for instance, when thinking about what could have been the case, we are bound by the same attitudes. A thing which tastes the same way as something we find tasty in the actual world will accordingly also be tasty. The article argues that this theory accounts for other aspects of Hare’s observation as well.
IV. Sensibilism and Imaginative Resistance

The fourth article engages with the problem of imaginative resistance. Normally, an author gets to decide what is true and what is not in fictions of her creation. If she wants there to be hobbits and dragons in the fiction, she can decide that there are hobbits and dragons in the fiction, even though there are no such creatures in the real world. However, with evaluative truths, things are not so straightforward. In this case, the authority of the author seems curiously restricted. The evaluative outlay of the world of her creation is not up to her. We would, for instance, refuse to accept the following statement as true in a fiction (so long as the story does not provide us with information that would make us approve of the action if it occurred in the actual world):

(13) In killing her baby, Giselda did the right thing; after all, it was a girl.

The fourth article strikes a similar chord as the third one, in arguing that sensibilism offers the best solution to this restriction of the author. In essence, the diagnosis is the same as that of evaluative supervenience. Sensibilism takes the extension of evaluative predicates at non-actual worlds to be settled by our affective attitudes in the actual world. Following a common approach in the philosophy of fiction and philosophy of language, the article takes statements about what is the case in fictions to contain a (potentially covert) intensional operator which switches the world of evaluation of the sentence from the actual world to the world(s) of the fiction. Switches the world(s) of evaluation that is – the sensibility index is not switched. Therefore, when taking a stance on whether Giselda did the right thing, we employ our actual sensibility, rather than that of, for instance, the author. To put things in less technical terms, when engaging with fictions, we leave our beliefs about what the world is like behind, but we take our feelings and attitudes with us into the fiction.

The second part of the article discusses alternative explanations of the phenomenon, and argues that the sensibilist one is preferable. Some alternative explanations locate the problem in violations of conceptual truths or in that we don’t understand the relevant scenarios. These struggle to explain why we would refuse to accept, for instance, Nazi ideology as true in a fiction. We do, after all, understand what Nazi ideology amounts to quite well. Other theories locate the problem in that the relevant fictions violate some kind of metaphysical relationship which the reader takes to hold between evaluative and non-evaluative properties. These are incompatible with the fact that we often accept things as true in fictions even though we take them to be metaphysically impossible. In many fictions, human personhood is constituted by an immaterial subject, like the soul. Even someone who believes that this is necessarily false will readily go along with the story in Dante’s The Divine Comedy.
The phenomena discussed in the third and fourth articles are reminiscent of one another. The supervenience thesis says that there could not have been a painting with similar non-evaluative properties as a beautiful painting, which was itself not beautiful. Imaginative resistance, in the form that it is discussed in the fourth article, shows that even in fictions, evaluative truths are constrained by what is actually taken to be the case. Fundamentally, both phenomena concern restrictions on what evaluative truths can obtain in non-actual scenarios. The sensibilist explanation is, to the best of my knowledge, the only account which gives the same diagnosis of both phenomena. I think that this is something that recommends it.

3. The Relation to Aesthetics

This thesis connects the field of aesthetics in several ways. In particular, this is the case in the first article which discusses the acquaintance inference for aesthetic and taste discourse, and in the fourth article, which discusses peculiarities of evaluative statements in the context of fictions. In this section I make some comments on the relationship between the thesis and discussions within analytical aesthetics.

Let me first briefly note that while the sort of non-factualism (see below) about aesthetic terms and properties developed in the third and fourth articles of the thesis is not a widespread view in contemporary aesthetics, it is not completely foreign to it either. Roger Scruton defends a view similar view in his seminal (1974). More recently, aesthetic quasi-realism, a specific form of non-factualism, has been discussed by Robert Hopkins (2001) and defended by Samuel Cain Todd (2004). As pointed out in the introduction, the view has historical precursors in the works of Hume and, on some interpretations, Kant’s third critique.

The second thing that I wish to comment on concerns the first article. Here, one might feel that there is gap between the discussion about aesthetic testimony conducted in the article, and the thriving literature on this subject within aesthetics. This is partly true. The particular phenomena discussed in the first article is linguistic in nature: it concerns a peculiarity of aesthetic and taste statements, namely that they communicate that the speaker has had first-hand experience with the object to which the predicate is applied. In the aesthetic literature, on the other hand, the major focus has been on what is known as the acquaintance principle, which is the notion that aesthetic knowledge requires first-hand experience. Insofar as the linguistic phenomenon is discussed in aesthetic literature, it is mostly in passing, such as when Malcolm Budd remarks that the alleged fact that aesthetic statements conversationally implies that first-hand experience at hand does not support the acquaintance principle for aesthetic knowledge (Budd, 2003, p.391). The only aesthetician
who discussed the linguistic phenomenon in any detail is Jon Robson (2015), whose work is commented on in the article.

Having said this, there are some points in the article that relate directly to the discussions concerning aesthetic knowledge within aesthetics. Since, as pointed out by Ninan (2014), the linguistic phenomenon is, in fact, not a conversational implicature, it can, when combined with the knowledge norm of assertion, offer some support for aesthetic knowledge requiring first-hand experience. This is important, since the acquaintance principle has come under attack during the last 20 years. In an influential article, Paisley Livingston (2003) discusses a number of potential arguments for the acquaintance principle, including that a complicated relationship of determination holds between lower-level properties and aesthetic properties and, alternatively, that some form of aesthetical particularism is true. He concludes, rightly in my opinion, that neither of these views would support the acquaintance principle. In another influential article from the same year, Budd conducts a similar exercise with the same result. There is, he thinks, no good argument for why aesthetic knowledge would require first-hand experience (Budd, 2003).

However, as is discussed in the first article of the thesis, the linguistic phenomena, that aesthetic and taste statements communicate that first-hand experience is at hand, in combination with the knowledge norm of assertion, provides an argument for the acquaintance principle that is considered by neither Livingston nor Budd. While my article argues that this is ultimately not the best explanation for the linguistic phenomenon, I do think that it is an argument that deserves be taken seriously, and one that should be considered by aestheticians as well. One might even conjecture that the aestheticians who originally endorsed the acquaintance principle, like Richard Wollheim (1980), implicitly did this with something like Ninan’s idea in mind.

As a final comment on the subject, it is perhaps interesting to note that the positive view offered by the first article is, in the end, not very far from Livingston and Budd. These theorists both end their contributions to the debate by noticing that while the acquaintance principle is unsupported, there is another experience requirement in the vicinity which is a truism. Here is principle that Livingston endorses:

S aesthetically gauges or appreciates the inherent aesthetic value of some item only if S has an aesthetic experience of that item, where such experience requires S’s direct contemplation of either the item or some adequate surrogate for it (Livingston, 2003, p. 277).

Similarly, Budd thinks that

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2 Actually, Livingston discusses the notion that “adequate aesthetic judgements” (he identifies judgements with beliefs), rather than aesthetic knowledge, require first-hand experience. This alternative formulation does not make a difference for the current discussion.
[...] appreciation of a work is not a matter of knowing what its aesthetic properties are, but of perceiving them as realized in the work. So you do not appreciate a work even if you know at second hand as full a characterization of its aesthetic properties as might be given by one who is perceiving the work. And attitudes and reactions linked to appreciation—liking or disliking, admiration, contempt, revulsion, and so on—are denied to you: you cannot like a work’s gracefulness if you are unacquainted with the work. (Budd, 2003, p. 392).

The fact that states like appreciating a work of art require first-hand experience is exploited in my article as an explanation of why aesthetic statements communicate that first-hand experience is at hand.

To sum up, while the first article is directly concerned with a linguistic phenomenon, rather than with whether aesthetic knowledge requires first-hand experience, it makes a contribution to the latter debate through its critical discussions of Dilip Ninan’s explanation of the acquaintance inference. It is through this argument that it connects most immediately with the discussion of similar topics within aesthetics. Like Livingston and Budd, the article concludes that the mental state which obviously requires first-hand experience is not aesthetic knowledge or belief but states like appreciation.

4. Sensibilism

The common theme in the articles is the relationship between evaluative discourse and our emotional and affective life. All four articles follow the schematic structure of discussing a peculiarity of evaluative discourse, and argue that the best explanation of this phenomenon is that a special relationship pertains between the evaluative discourse and our emotional faculties. However, there is a tension between, on the one hand, the two first, and, on the other, the third and the fourth articles. The first two articles discuss a specific view of the relationship between affective states and evaluative aesthetic discourse, namely expressivism. In contrast, the third and fourth articles argue that sensibilism offers the best explanation of the phenomena discussed in these articles. Sensibilism is a generic view of the semantics of evaluative terms, which is compatible with expressivist, relativist and contextualism/subjectivist views.

A natural question to ask is whether the arguments in all four articles are compatible with each other. A natural response would seem to be that yes, the positive view of each article converges on expressivism since, as mentioned, a specific form of expressivism is compatible with sensibilism as defined.

Unfortunately, things are not so easy. Both the first and second articles end on a negative note. While the phenomena discussed offer support for a central tenet of expressivism, the Parity Thesis, they also speak against the expressivist maneuver of identifying seemingly cognitive attitudes involving evalu-
ative concepts with the corresponding non-cognitive state. Again, pure expressivists, who maintain evaluative statements express only non-cognitive attitudes, most commonly think that:

\[(14) \text{Holmes believes that killing is wrong.}\]

attributes to Holmes whatever non-cognitive attitude the expressivists think that evaluative statements express. Both the first and the second articles of the thesis argue that this maneuver is untenable, leaving the pure expressivist without an account of attitude-attributions like (14).

An alternative, suggested in both articles, would be to abandon pure expressivism and endorse a hybrid view of evaluative language, according to which it expresses both non-cognitive attitudes and beliefs. Another alternative would be to see whether pure expressivism can be combined with a different account of cognitive-attitude attributions like (11). But then the question again arises of whether such accounts are possible to square with sensibilism as defined in the third and fourth articles.

It is worthwhile to consider whether the form of relativism discussed in the third and fourth articles might bind all the articles together. At first glance, this might seem as a non-starter, since expressivism and relativism are normally considered to be mutually exclusive views on evaluative language. But looking more closely, they actually have many things in common. As noted in the third and fourth articles, in Allan Gibbard’s (1990, 2003) expressivist semantics for normative language, contents are taken to be sets of pairs of ‘norms’ (in the earlier work) or ‘hyperplans’ (in the later work) and possible worlds, similar to how relativists and contextualists have recently proposed concerning (among other things) predicates of personal taste.\(^3\) The version of expressivism discussed in the third and fourth articles shares this basic structural feature with relativism. Moreover, there are additional similarities, relevant to the current context. MacFarlane considers it a data point that taste-statements express the non-cognitive attitude of appreciating the taste of something and thinks that relativism can explain this. He calls this Expression of Attitude:

The relativist account also satisfies the fifth desideratum, Expression of attitude. In asserting [This is tasty], a speaker performs an action that is mutually known to be correct only if her tastes approve of the flavor of the demonstrated food. Performing such an action thus gives others pro tanto reasons to think that the speaker likes the food in question and intends others to recognize this. In that sense it expresses the attitude of liking the food (MacFarlane 2014, p.146).

\(^3\) In this literature, what corresponds to Gibbard’s hyperplans are often called ‘judges’. MacFarlane calls the corresponding formal object a ‘taste’. The third and fourth articles call the corresponding object a ‘sensibility’.
Since, on relativism, a taste-statement is only true if the assessor, in this case the speaker herself, approves of the food, we can assume that this is the case when she makes the relevant assertion. In this way, whenever a speaker makes a taste-assertion, we are given evidence to the effect that she is in the state of appreciating the taste of whatever ‘tasty’ is attributed to. In this way, the speaker expresses the state in question. Of course, she might try to mislead us by making such a statement even in the case when she does not appreciate the flavor, but this would still count as expressing the attitude in question in the relevant sense. The speaker would still represent herself as being in the state. If one generalizes MacFarlane’s view to all evaluative predicates, as is suggested in the third and fourth articles, they should, by parity, express non-cognitive states in the same way. But if this is right, one would like to know wherein the difference between relativism and expressivism really lies. Here is MacFarlane’s take on this issue:

The central difference, I think, is this. While both the relativist and the expressivist hold that one can believe a content whose intension is a set of world/taste pairs, they give very different explanations of what it is to do this […] For the expressivist […] the surface language of ‘believing’ masks a deep difference in psychological kind. In saying ‘he believes that it is tasty’, we attribute the very same kind of state we could also attribute using the language of preference: ‘he doesn’t like its flavor’.

For the relativist, by contrast, there is a real difference between the state we attribute using ‘he believes that it is tasty’ and any state we could attribute using the language of preference. Where the expressivist sees only one state, which can be attributed in either way, the relativist sees two states. Where the expressivist appeals to the identification with a preference to explain what it is to believe that a particular flavor is tasty, the relativist appeals to generic features of beliefs. To be sure, a belief that something is tasty will have a different functional role than a belief that it is red, but that (the relativist holds) can be explained in terms of differences between the contents believed, given an appropriate generic understanding of what it is to believe something. (MacFarlane 2014, p.172-173).

In essence, the difference between the relevant versions of relativism and expressivism on MacFarlane’s view is then that the expressivist identifies the seemingly cognitive state of believing that something is tasty with the non-cognitive state of taste-appreciation. The relativist does not. MacFarlane continues:

Why might it matter whether there is one state or two? The expressivist view makes it conceptually impossible to think that something whose taste one knows first-hand is tasty while not liking its taste, while the relativist view allows that one could be in such a state (MacFarlane 2014, p. 173).

This distinction is of special relevance in the present context, since the first and the second articles provide evidence for both the claim that evaluative
discourse expresses non-cognitive states and for the claim that these states are non-identical with the states attributed with belief-ascriptions involving evaluative predicates. This indicates that relativism should be our preferred version of sensibilism, since it holds that there are two different states in play here. It seems that it will let us have both the expression-relationship between evaluative discourse and non-cognitive attitudes and the non-identity of these states with the states attributed with evaluative belief-ascriptions. There is even a sense in which relativism about ‘tasty’ can be counted as a form of hybrid expressivism, if the latter is defined as the view that the relevant kind of statements express both beliefs and non-cognitive attitudes. It is furthermore a form of hybrid expressivism that preserves the ontological parsimony which has traditionally motivated pure expressivism.

However, there is a caveat. In the above, MacFarlane identifies the demarcation point between relativism and expressivism about ‘tasty’ as being that the relativist maintains that it is possible to believe that something is tasty without appreciating its taste.4 On the other hand, we have seen that he takes it to be a data point that unembedded taste-sentences express appreciation when used, and he explains this by the fact that these assertions can only be correct, i.e. true, when the speaker appreciates the relevant taste. But if one can be in the state of believing that something is tasty without appreciating its taste, how come that a speaker nevertheless expresses appreciation in making the statement? Why does she not only express the allegedly distinct belief-state? From the perspective of the thesis, this question is important, since the first article appeals specifically to the expressal of states like appreciation to explain the experience requirement on evaluative aesthetic discourse.

I will not pursue this question further in this context. I take the upshot of the discussion to be that relativism might be compatible with the argument of all four articles, but that there is a tension between, on the one hand, the distinctness of the relevant attitude-attributions, and, on the other, the claim that unembedded sentences express the non-cognitive states. Perhaps there is a way of smoothing this tension within the relativist framework. Alternatively, one might try to pursue pure expressivism, and give an alternative explanation of the seemingly cognitive attitude attributions. Perhaps it could be argued that belief attributions involving aesthetic and taste vocabulary really are beliefs about what reactions one would have, were one to have the relevant type of experience of the object, or something similar. They would, in this sense, be ‘parasitical’ on the relevant non-cognitive states. Perhaps such an analysis could somehow be extended to moral vocabulary. While I do not currently know of any way of making this idea precise, I do not think it is obvious that it could not be made to work. I leave it to future research to assess its potential.

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4 Also when putting abnormal circumstances to the side, as when one’s taste is distorted through the influence of say, toothpaste.
5. Non-factualism

In an intuitive sense, sensibilism is a form of anti-realism about the evaluative. It is a disjunction of (specific forms of) relativism, expressivism and subjectivism which all have in common that it is sufficient for there to be evaluative properties that there are persons who feel about things. On these views, the evaluative does not add an extra layer to reality. When God had made people and given them the capability of taking attitudinal stances, he did not have to add anything further to the world for there to be an evaluative realm. In addition, if some version of sensibilism is true, two people can both be maximally informed about the way the world is, but still disagree on evaluative matters. It is notoriously difficult to define anti-realism, but hopefully this makes it clear enough in what sense sensibilism falls under the term.

It is important to distinguish this form of anti-realism from error theory, which maintains that evaluative discourse aims to describe a mind-independent reality, but that it fails to do so (see Olson, 2014 for an overview.) If some version of sensibilism is true, it is built into the way the evaluative thought and discourse works that the extensions of evaluative predicates are fixed by the way we feel about things. I will speak of ‘non-factualism’ to distinguish sensibilism from this other kind of anti-realism.

It should perhaps be noted that there are forms of non-factualism which do not fall under sensibilism as defined, since it does not take evaluative discourse to be tied specifically to emotional or affective attitudes. Gibbard’s view in his (2003) is an example this kind, since it maintains that the extensions of the most basic normative predicates are partly fixed by intention-like states.

While none of the four articles of the thesis aim to vindicate non-factualism all things considered, they argue that such views have an explanatory advantage as it concerns the specific phenomena discussed in each article. In this section, I discuss non-factualism, and objections to it, more generally. The aim of the discussion is not to refute the objections in question, but rather to provide an overview of the dialectical landscape.

Let me begin by making a sociological remark, based on personal conversations with people at conferences and similar events. I suspect that many theorists think that there is presupposition failure involved in asking about the correct semantic theory for such a diverse range of predicates as ‘morally right’, ‘cruel’, ‘beautiful’ and ‘funny’. Although they are all evaluative in the sense defined above, they are very different, and they should therefore be subjected to diverging semantical and ontological treatments, the idea would be. Most (but far from all) metaethic Peace to think that non-

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5 This description is complicated by the fact that the arguments in the first and the second articles are equally compatible with hybrid expressivism, and that they both end by pointing to an explanatory advantage for hybrid expressivism over its non-hybrid cousins. I put these considerations aside for the purpose of this section.
factualism is false about moral predicates, while some form of it is probably true about evaluative aesthetic predicates such as ‘beautiful’, and taste predicates, such as ‘funny’. People specialized in aesthetics, on the other hand, tend to be more realistically minded about evaluative aesthetic terms such as ‘beautiful’ while sharing the non-factualism of their colleagues in metaethics as concerning ‘tasty’ and ‘funny’. In the philosophy of language and semantics, it seems to me that most people who have an opinion on the matter are non-factualists across the board. This picture is also complicated by the fact that there is also a small minority of theorists who endorse realism even about such predicates as ‘tasty’ (Wyatt, 2018). Needless to say, these are all very rough generalizations, reflecting, at best, the state of the art in 2018. The reason that these differences between disciplines are worth mentioning is that they indicate that there is a certain parochiality involved in what is taken to be obvious regarding non-factualism about different domains of the evaluative. We are well advised not to take any seeming obviousness at face-value, but rather look at the specific arguments for and against the theories in question.

What then are the most widespread reasons for theorists to reject non-factualism? Here, it matters what kind of non-factualism one has in mind. Starting with expressivism, by far the most widely discussed form of non-factualism, a major stepping stone has been the Frege-Geach problem, on which an enormous amount of ink has been spilled in philosophical journals. Briefly, this problem arises from that the expressivist identifies the meaning of her target discourse with the attitudes that unembedded occurrences of the relevant terms supposedly express. Statements like:

(15) Murder is wrong.

might express disapproval of murder, but the following statement clearly does not:

(16) If murder is wrong, then Hume was right.

The Frege-Geach problem is the problem of accounting for what contribution the relevant terms make to the meaning of the more complex expressions which they form a part, like in (16) (Geach, 1960; Searle, 1962).\(^6\)

A related problem for expressivists, much discussed in recent years, is the negation problem. This, again very briefly, is the problem of how the expressivist should distinguish the states attributed by these three sentences:

(17) John does not think that murdering is wrong.
(18) John thinks that murdering is not wrong.

\(^6\) As first discovered by Allan Gibbard (1990), expressivism based on the kind of semantics outlined in the third and fourth articles does not face this problem.
John thinks that not murdering is wrong.\(^7\) (Schroeder, 2008 pp.45-49. See also Unwin, 2001).

These are just two of a whole of host of problems with which expressivists have been charged.

Relativism of the relevant kind has not been as widely discussed as a view of evaluative discourse in general (an exception is Brogaard, 2008). Accordingly, fewer objections have been raised to it. However, as a view on predicates of personal taste specifically, it has, among other things, been challenged on the grounds that it fails to account for disagreement when two people assert a sentence and its negation respectively in the same context. The problem, somewhat simplified, is that since relativism is built into the very meaning of the terms involved, both parties will tacitly know that the statements they make will be evaluated for truth and falsity at a different perspective, (in the terminology of this thesis, a different ‘sensibility’) by the other party. This seems to undermine the rationality of the disagreement, allegedly perhaps to the point of it not deserving to be called disagreement at all (see, for instance, Moruzzi, 2008; Stojanovic, 2007). Insofar as this is a problem for relativism about predicates of personal taste, it would be inherited by the extension of the relevant kind of relativism to the evaluative in general. The kind of subjectivism is briefly outlined in the third and fourth articles as a possible version of sensibilism would face the same issues.\(^8\)

What the final verdicts regarding these objections are remains to be seen. As noted several times already, the kind of sensibilism defended in the third and fourth articles of the thesis is a generic view. Even if it turned out that some of these problems and objections are fatal to the view that they target, it does not show that sensibilism as such is false, but only that this specific way of substantializing it is misguided.

For the remainder of this section, I will consider a different kind of objection. It seems to me that there is a discrepancy between the arguments that have been discussed most frequently in the literature on various versions of non-factualism, and \textit{the actual reasons} for why people find it implausible. David Enoch puts this point well, when explaining why he himself endorses non-naturalist realism in ethics:

\begin{quote}
I suspect that as a psychological matter, I hold the metaethical and metanormative view I in fact hold not because of highly abstract arguments in the philosophy of language, say, or in the philosophy of action, or because of some general ontological commitments. My underlying motivations for holding the metaethical view I in fact hold are – to the extent that they are transparent to
\end{quote}

\(^7\) Many theorists believe that the kind of expressivist semantics put forth as a version of sensibilism in the third and fourth articles struggles with this issue, or that it is even fatal for the view. I am not among them.

\(^8\) This kind of subjectivism would not struggle with the more standard difficulties concerning disagreement that traditional subjectivism faces (MacFarlane, 2014, pp. 102–108).
me – much less abstract, and perhaps even much less philosophical. Like many other realists (I suspect), I pre-theoretically feel that nothing short of a fairly strong metaethical realism will vindicate our taking morality seriously (Enoch, 2011, p. 8).

I think that Enoch is on to something important here. The kind of “abstract” objections that were brought up in the previous paragraphs are probably not, for many at least, the main motivating reasons for theorists to be skeptical about non-factualism. The problem is a more intuitive one. These theories do not attribute to morality the sort of seriousness that it evidentially has. I conjecture that theorists who are realists about aesthetic value have similar intuitions.

Let us try to get clear on what this worry could amount to. First, it should be noted that to endorse non-factualism is not to take a stance on whether the target discourse is philosophically interesting or not. This point might seem obvious but it is nonetheless important to make, as some people seem to think that believing that, for instance, expressivism is true about moral or aesthetical discourse implies that one thinks that they have somehow lesser status than descriptive discourse. It is not clear to me why anyone would think this. Part of the reason why I myself find evaluative discourse so interesting has to do with the connections I think it bears to our emotional life. As Wilfrid Sellars once remarked, non-descriptivism about a part of language does not amount to “relegating it to second-class citizenship in discourse”. Again with Sellars, evaluative discourse is, on the view advocated in this thesis, “not inferior, just different” (1957, p. 282).9

There is another misdirected worry in the vicinity. Some people might think that non-factualism is the relevant sense implies that “anything goes”. Jonas Olson (2010) has dubbed this faulty line of reasoning The Freshman Objection to expressivism:

The Freshman Objection: If expressivism were true anything would be morally permissible.

The idea is that if there are no moral truths (or no ‘robust’ moral truths) then everything is allowed. But this is, of course, not the case. These theories say what a judgement to the effect that something is morally permissible consists of. They do not say anything about what is morally permissible and what is not. The objection rests on the mistake confounding first-order moral theories (what is permissible and what is not) with second-order moral theories.

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9 There is a sense in which the relevant versions of relativism and subjectivism are descriptive theories. Read descriptivism above “aiming to describe mind-independent reality”. In general, these kinds of concern seem equally relevant to the specified kind of relativism and subjectivism as to expressivism.
(roughly, what is the nature of moral thought, moral discourse and moral properties). The same thing goes for aesthetic evaluation.  

So much for clearly bad ways of spelling out the sort of worries to which Enoch gives voice. Now let us consider two ways with a little more bite. Simon Blackburn, who defends a similar view of evaluative language as the one advocated in this thesis, considers the following objection to his own view. What Blackburn calls ‘projectivism’ in the following quote is also a kind of non-factualism:

> Our story about ethical commitment is to explain it, not to explain it away. But projectivism threatens to do the latter […] It threatens to do so because it shows us that our commitments are not external demands, claiming us regardless of our wills or in direct opposition to our passions. It makes our commitments facets of our own sentimental natures; this softens them, destroying the hardness of the moral must (Blackburn, 1993, p. 176).

The worry is that taking the evaluative to be (in a certain sense) dependent on our feelings and attitudes undermines the “hardness of the moral must”. And since the moral must is in fact “hard” projectivism (and in general, non-factualism) is false, I take to the imagined objection to be. Non-factualism cannot, account for the absoluteness of morality. Against this, I am happy to give Blackburn’s own response:

> Does the lover escape his passion by thinking “Oh, it’s only my passion, forget it”? When the world affords occasion for grief, does it brighten when we realize that it is we who grieve? (1993, 176).

The answer to these rhetorical questions is clearly no. By analogy, the fact that it turns out that the evaluative is mind-dependent (in the relevant way) should not have any bearing on the importance that we attribute to it.

It should be recognized that there are potential comebacks for the realist. Even if Blackburn is right that, in general, the recognition that something is mind-dependent does not make it unimportant, it could be that this would be so specifically in the case of evaluative facts. Consider an analogy: a believer who learned that there indeed is a God, but that he is a projection of our minds would perhaps think something analogous to “Oh, it’s only my passion, forget it”. Perhaps it could be argued that the evaluative case is similar (see Schroeder, 2005 for a discussion of similar issues).

Enoch himself offers a similar way of substantializing the intuitive worry. Ordinarily, in situations where we have conflicting preferences, it makes sense to compromise. If you and I have decided to go to the cinema but have different preferences regarding what movie to watch, it would be wrong for

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10 A worry in the vicinity is that non-factualism implies: If I condoned of murder, murder would not be wrong. For reasons explained in the third article, sensibilism does not have this implication.
either of us to stand his or her ground. Instead, we should, for instance, flip a coin. Enoch thinks that examples like this motivate the following principle:

**IMPARTIALITY**: In an interpersonal conflict, we should step back from our mere preferences, or feelings, or attitudes, or some such, and to the extent the conflict is due to those, an impartial, egalitarian solution is called for. Furthermore, each party to the conflict should acknowledge as much: Standing one’s ground is, in such cases, morally wrong (Enoch, 2011, p. 19).

Moral conflicts, Enoch observes, seem different in this regard. If you and I disagree concerning a moral issue, such as, for instance whether abortion is wrong, I *should* stand my ground. There is an asymmetry here which is incompatible with that a conflict concerning what is morally wrong bottoms out in us having conflicting non-cognitive attitudes, as non-factualism would have it. Again, the charge is that non-factualism dissipates “the hardness of the moral must”, by assimilating moral conflicts to the kind of disagreement we have in the movie-case.

There are several things to say about this argument. First, it seems questionable that there really is such a stark contrast between all cases of intrapersonal conflict explicitly due to conflicts in non-cognitive attitudes, and moral conflicts. One could, for instance, imagine that in lowkey moral disagreements, such as, for instance, whether to hand in a fifty-dollar bill found on the street to the police, it would actually make sense to flip a coin rather than to stand one’s ground. One might also wonder whether the argument extends to aesthetic case.\footnote{Enoch (2014, p. 268, footnote 1) thinks that it does not.}

But even granting Enoch that there is in general a stark difference between moral conflicts and preferential conflicts, I think that there are other ways to explain this. What the non-factualist should say is that the difference lies in the fact that moral issues, in most cases, are much more *important* than questions concerning what movies to watch. That is why one should stand one’s ground in the moral case, but not in conflicts about what movies to watch. ‘Important’ is an evaluative term, and is accordingly subject to the same non-factualist treatment as other evaluative terms.

Enoch recognizes that it is open for the non-factualist to respond to the objection by appealing to a normative difference between the cases. However, he thinks that the objectivist is in a better position to *explain* this normative difference. The objectivist can claim that the difference in importance derives from that one kind conflict concerns mere preferences, whereas the other one a purely factual disagreement. (Enoch, 2011, pp. 32–33). The non-factualist, Enoch claims, has no answer to the question of why one is more important the other. Here the realist has an explanatory advantage.
Contrary to Enoch, I think that there are several things that the non-factualist can say to motivate that one issue is more important than the other. Normally, we motivate our stance on abortion by appealing to, for instance, concerns about life and death and the individual’s control of her own body. Conflicts about what movie to see do not have these features. This is why abortion is an important issue, not because it is mind-independent in the relevant sense. Similar things can be said to motivate the importance of other moral issues, it would seem.

Having said this, I want to acknowledge that Enoch calls attention to an under-discussed topic. I do not mean to convey that the brief remarks that I offer here settle the issue. Nor do I wish to pretend that I don’t feel any force in the intuitive worry that the kinds of ideas argued for in this thesis somehow undermine the hardness of the moral must. My ambition has been to point out some inaccurate ways of substantializing this worry, and that it is at least not obvious that even Enoch’s way of doing it really hits its mark. The topic certainly calls for further discussion.

6. Methodology

I. Philosophy of Language

In the final two sections of this introduction, I outline the basic features of the methodology employed in the thesis. I begin by describing how questions regarding the meaning of terms and concepts are addressed in contemporary semantic methodology. In the next section, I make some comments on the relationship between this methodology and the philosophical discussion concerning the nature of value.

At the basis of contemporary natural language semantics lies the fact that meaning supervenes on use. What a term means is determined by the way that speakers of language use the term. Furthermore, there is no other way of finding out what a term means other than to study the way in which it is used. The meaning of evaluative terms and concepts is accordingly the study of systematic facts about how these terms are used. This is the kind of ‘data’ which the discussions of the articles of the thesis draw from.

It difficult to pin-down what features of language use are relevant for delimiting meaning and which ones are not. To illustrate the contrast, consider the following two examples. Suppose it could be shown through an empirical study that the English term ‘salt’ is very often used around the dinner table. This would be a fact about language use and it would presumably be explained by that the term ‘salt’ refers to salt, which is often used at mealtime. Still, it is not the kind of fact that is of primary interest for semantics. The reason for this is that it is not directly relevant for theories about the meaning of the word. Even a society which has never used salt at dinner, and accordingly did not
exhibit analogous verbal behavior, could still have a word with the exact same meaning as ‘salt’. Compare this to another kind of fact about language use. In discussions within ethics, it is often assumed that sentences of the form “x is ought to φ” means that the agent is obliged to φ (see for instance Tännö, 2010, p. vii; Wedgwood, 2007, p. 113) This view about the meaning of ‘ought’ predicts that a statement like:

(20) Students ought to attend all lectures but they are not obliged to.

should sound like a contradiction. It does not. Compare the corresponding sentence with ‘must’:

(21) ?? Students must attend all lectures but they are not obliged to.

The ‘must’-sentence does sound contradictory. This little piece of linguistic evidence seems to support that the modal ‘must’ and not ‘ought’ is used to express obligations in English.

The point with this example is not to argue for a specific theory about the meaning of ‘ought’ and ‘must’, nor is it to contrast facts about entailment and contradiction, as in the ‘ought’- and ‘must’-case. The point is that one of these facts is of direct systematic relevance for the meaning of the word, whereas the other one is not. A word could not have the same meaning as ‘must’ while being combinable with what is expressed with ‘not obliged to’. A word could mean what ‘salt’ means while never being used at the dinner table.

I know of no attempt to the provide an exhaustive account of the kind of linguistic facts that are systematically relevant for meaning in the way illustrated above. However, Seth Yalcin provides the following list, which seems to contain the most commonly used types of data for semantic theorizing:

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(D1) Productivity facts. Speakers of a given language can understand and produce complex expressions in that language that they have never before encountered.
(D2) Entailment facts. Some sentences in a language entail others; some sentences are inconsistent with others. Competent speakers manifest knowledge of such facts.
(D3) Communication facts. Speakers of a common language can transfer an abundant range of information systematically using that language.
(D4) Acceptability facts. Some sentences or discourses in a language are judged to be unacceptable, or uninterpretable, or marked, by speakers of that language, while others are not.

12 It should be noted the topic of the papers in this thesis is somewhat broader than just semantics, in that the two first also concern systematic facts about the speech acts performed with the relevant kind of sentences. Still, sufficiently broadly understood, some of these evidence types serve as grounds for theorizing about such potentially extra-semantic issues as well.
(D5) Truth/appropriateness facts. Some sentences in a language are judged to be true or appropriate by speakers relative to actual or stipulated scenarios, while others are judged false or inappropriate relative to such scenarios. (Yalcin, 2014, p. 20)

Let me expand a little on how the articles of the thesis relate to these examples of linguistic facts. Starting with (D1), another way to put this observation is that although we, as language users, only know the meanings of a few thousand words, we seem to be able to compose and understand an astronomically large amount of more complex expressions, like sentences, with this knowledge. This has been taken to show that the semantic values (or, if you like, ‘meanings’) of complex expressions, like sentences, are in part or fully determined by the semantic value of its part and their mode of composition (Pagin & Westerståhl, 2010). For this reason, semantic values are formally modelled by the means of functional application in contemporary philosophy of language and theoretical linguistics (see Heim & Kratzer, 1998, for an introduction). The idea is to think of semantic values of predicates and other ‘incomplete’ expressions as functions which, given a certain input, provide a certain output (a truth-value or another function). In this way, the fact that our linguistic competence allows us to understand and produce an infinite number of sentences which we have never heard before is of a kind with our capacity to, given our command of the ‘+’-function and the terms for some of the natural numbers, understand an enormous number of additions. While (D1) this is not a major theme in this dissertation, it is assumed that any satisfying theory of evaluative discourse must be compatible with the productivity of natural language and therefore with a view of the meanings of expressions along the lines of functional application. The kind of semantic view discussed at the end of the second article in this thesis, as well as in the third and fourth articles, contains the germs for theories of this kind.

The focus point of the first two articles lies on paradigmatic examples of facts of the kind (D4). As is discussed in the first text, making an aesthetic or taste assertion while denying having had first-hand experience is, in the terms used in the text, ‘infelicitous’. The article discusses what this tells us about the meaning of aesthetic terms, and specifically how it relates to a metanormative theory, namely expressivism. The second article strikes a similar chord in discussing the fact that evaluative discourse embeds felicitously under ‘find’, and argues that this vindicates a major contention of metanormative expressivism.

The focus points of the third and fourth articles are on facts of kind (D5) in that they discuss why two specific classes of sentence are judged to false relative to specific scenarios. The third article discusses why certain kinds of statements, those which if true would violate the relevant kind of evaluative supervenience, are deemed to be false on a priori grounds. The fourth article
seeks to explain why we refuse to accept certain statements involving evaluative vocabulary as true-in-the-fiction, even though authors are normally taken to decide what is true and not in their stories.

To sum up, it is perhaps fair to say, as did a commentator of an earlier draft of the thesis, that it focuses on “the way we talk”, rather than moving directly on the philosophical issues. But it is only fair to say this if by “the way we talk” one has in mind the kind of robust evidence outlined by Yalcin in the quote above. Furthermore, I hope that it is clear that this focus is not an end in itself, but rather an instrument for theorizing about the meaning of evaluative terms. Addressing questions of linguistic meaning in this way is a philosophical and linguistic orthodoxy.

II. Metaethics and Meta-aesthetics

These articles do not only aim to contribute to natural language semantics and pragmatics, but also to metanormative theorizing. One could worry that the kind of methodology employed, while suitable for natural language semantics, is not appropriate for metaethics or meta-aesthetics. Why, after all, should someone who is interested in the nature of goodness and beauty be particularly oriented towards language?

As a first answer to this question, I would like to point out that the methodology employed here is not qualitatively different from the one standardly used in a large part of metaethics. The sort of linguistic data which form the basis of discussion in these articles has always constituted one of the primary sources of evidence in metaethical discussions. Consider for instance G.E. Moore’s classical argument against metaethical naturalism. Naturalism was conceived of by Moore as a thesis about the meaning of ethical terms. Moore refuted (or at least aimed to refute) the thesis by pointing out that such a view predicts that some question of the form “x is N but is N morally right?” where N stands for a specific natural property, should be closed. Since no such question appears to be closed, analytic naturalism is false (Moore 1903) Fundamentally, Moore’s argument is based on the observation that analytic naturalism predicts that certain entailments facts should hold, and by pointing out that they do not. In other words, it relies on facts of type (D2) in Yalcin’s list.

Other examples from the history of metaethics appealing to linguistic evidence of the kind mentioned above involves R.M. Hare’s supervenience observation (1963/1952) which is the subject of the third article in this thesis; Peter Geach’s (1960) and John Searle’s (1962) celebrated objections to non-cognitivism and Horgan and Timmons moral-twin earth thought experiment (Horgan & Timmons, 1992). This is well-entrenched in the tradition of these authors.

But this only shows that language has been a major concern within metaethics, not that it should be. Someone might be inclined to think that these authors belong to a past era of analytical philosophy, during which it was thought that the study of language was the proper and scientific way of doing
philosophy. This view, of course, has been almost universally abandoned. Accordingly, someone might think, there is no reason why metaethics and meta-aesthetics should dwell in these retrograde discussions. I have never come across this objection in print, but I imagine that it reflects the tacit views of some theorists.

It should certainly be acknowledged that there are questions that are left unacknowledged by the linguistic approach. For instance, it seems consistent to believe both that some kind of non-factualism is true about ordinary evaluative terms and that there are nonetheless mind-independent evaluative properties. In this scenario, there would be such properties, but we would not talk about them with terms such as ‘right’ ‘cruel’ and ‘beautiful’. Perhaps it could be held that some people, for instance some philosophers, possess the terms with which to denote these other, substantial properties. Since this scenario is consistent, even a definitive proof that non-factualism is true about our ordinary evaluative terms would not settle the question whether there are mind-independent evaluative properties.

But even on this, in my own view quite far-fetched, scenario, the definitive proof of non-factualism for our ordinary terms would tell us a great deal about the evaluative. For example, we would learn that the sort of worries discussed in the previous section are unfounded. An evaluative practice does not as such aim at mind-independent truths. So even while it is true that the focus in on language leaves this further question unaddressed, I see no reason here for why focusing on language would be a fruitless enterprise. And this is all that is needed to address the imagined objection. It is not a claim of the thesis that everything interesting there is to say about the evaluative concerns semantics.

A related worry is the following. This is a thesis about the semantics of our actual evaluative terms, like ‘cruel’, ‘wrong’ and ‘beautiful’. But why focus on the terms and concepts that happen to be our actual ones? Why not instead focus on the best possible evaluative concepts? Behind these questions lies a suspicion that there might be something wrong, or at least non-ideal, with the evaluative terms currently in use. It is, for instance, reasonable to maintain that there is something deficient about racial slurs, like the n-word and ‘wop’ for Italian-Americans. These terms somehow seem to ‘misevaluate’ their target. Evaluative terms like ‘cruel’ ‘wrong’ and ‘beautiful’, could be similarly deficient, and so it seems like an argument is needed for privileging our actual concepts (Eklund, 2017).

As a first response to this worry, it should be noted that it is not clear that the alleged problem concerns the focus on our actual terms and concepts in particular. Similar questions could be raised in relation to a completely non-linguistic enterprise. Why, for instance, ask oneself what the right thing to do is in a given situation, instead of asking which action instantiates an alternative property, right*? Why privilege right over right*? Since the question about properties, rather than terms and concepts, is analogous, any problems
or unanswered questions here do not reside with the linguistic approach as such.

Secondly, I think that investigating allegedly ideal evaluative terms and concepts presupposes that a grasp of the semantics of our actual ones. Knowing, for instance, that the term ‘beautiful’ expresses a deficient or at least non-ideal concept, and that a concept expressed by a stipulated term, ‘beautiful*’, would be its ideal counterpart, would require that we knew something about the semantics of the original term. Knowing that the alternative term, ‘beautiful*’, could play the role of ‘beautiful’ seems to require that we knew what role that is. Similarly, even someone who maintained that we should not have the concept of beauty at all in our conceptual economy, would need to motivate this claim by pointing to some non-desirable features of it. That is, they would need to say something about the meaning of our actual term. For this reason, I think that the sort of conceptual engineering envisaged by the objection is not so much an alternative to doing natural language semantics, as a project that builds upon it.

Let me close this introduction with a final note. While appeal to linguistic evidence of the kind discussed in this work is indeed abundant in metanormative theorizing, it has here been my aim to bring some new topics of discussion to the table. The phenomena discussed in each of the articles have all received critical scrutiny before, but only evaluative supervenience has received extensive treatment concerning its implication for the semantics and ontology of evaluative terms. Hopefully, even someone who does not agree with the arguments put forward in these texts will nonetheless be able to appreciate the effort to introduce new data to the discussion, and to build on it in their own attempt to come to grips with the nature of evaluative thought and discourse.
Bibliography


