



<http://www.diva-portal.org>

Preprint

This is the submitted version of a paper published in *Philosophical Topics*.

Citation for the original published paper (version of record):

Tersman, F. (2010)

The Case for a Mixed Verdict on Ethics and Epistemology.

Philosophical Topics, 38(2): 181-204

<http://dx.doi.org/10.5840/philtopics201038219>

Access to the published version may require subscription.

N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published paper.

Permanent link to this version:

<http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:uu:diva-180965>

This is a pre-peer-reviewed version of the article. It has been published in final form in *Philosophical Topics* **38**, 2010 (181-204). Further information can be found here: <http://www.uapress.com/titles/philostopix/philostopix.html>

The Case for a Mixed Verdict on Ethics and Epistemology

Folke Tersman
Uppsala University

1. Introduction

The point of departure of an increasingly popular challenge against ethical anti-realism is the idea that ethical anti-realists are committed to being anti-realists about other areas as well, and in particular about other normative areas. For example, it has been argued that those who advocate the expressivist variety of ethical anti-realism are committed to being expressivists also about *epistemic* judgments (such as judgments about what it is reasonable to believe), at least in so far as they rely on the traditional arguments for their position.¹ Ethical expressivists appeal to the existence of extensive disagreement over moral issues and to the fact that people are normally motivated to act in accordance with their moral judgments. However, a similar connection to motivation obtains in the case of epistemic assessments (people are normally disposed to drop beliefs they judge to be irrational), and there seems to be just as much disagreement over issues about what it is reasonable to believe. So, if one accepts ethical expressivism on the basis of those considerations, one should have a similar view about epistemic judgments, or so it is held.

I'm going to call the claim that ethical expressivism and epistemic expressivism stand and fall together in this sense 'the uniformity claim'. Critics of ethical expressivism think that it is undermined by the (alleged) truth of the uniformity claim. In my view, whether that is so is far from clear. However, my main aim in this paper is to question the uniformity claim itself, rather than its alleged relevance to the assessment of ethical expressivism. I shall challenge the idea that the traditional

¹ See, e.g., Cuneo, T., *The Normative Web*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, Jackson, F., 'Non-Cognitivism, Normativity, Belief', in J. Dancy (ed.), *Normativity*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2000, 100-15, Nobis, M., 'Ayer and Stevenson's Epistemological Emotivisms', *Croatian Journal of Philosophy* IV (2004), and Pust, J., *Intuitions as Evidence*, New York and London: Garland Publishing, 2000, 97.

arguments for that position have equal force in the epistemic case. In particular, I shall focus on the argument from motivation and the argument from disagreement. My aim is to show that one can accept ethical expressivism on the basis of those arguments and still, coherently and plausibly, reject epistemic expressivism.

The plan of the paper is as follows. In the next section, I define expressivism, both the ethical and the epistemic variety. In section 3, I briefly discuss why the uniformity claim is supposed to undermine ethical expressivism. In sections 4 and 5, I argue that the versions of the arguments from disagreement and motivation that apply to epistemic judgments are less compelling than the versions that apply to ethics. In section 6, finally, I make some concluding remarks.

2. Expressivism and realism

Nothing in my discussion is going to rest on any special or controversial views about the content of expressivism. The task of defining this and other meta-ethical positions raises subtle questions, but most of them are irrelevant for my purposes.

Thus, I shall assume that expressivism states that the convictions or judgments to which it applies do not consist in true or false beliefs but rather in conative attitudes of some sort, such as emotions or desires.² Ethical expressivism implies that this holds for moral judgments (such as the judgment that it is morally right to give to charity), whereas epistemic expressivism implies that it holds for epistemic judgments. Presumably, ethical expressivists are only supposed to be committed to being expressivists about epistemic judgments to the extent that they are *normative*. This includes judgments about what we ought to believe or have reasons to believe, and judgments about when a given belief is justified or warranted by the evidence. Some epistemic assessments are not expressed with paradigmatic normative or evaluative expressions like ‘ought’, such as the claim that a theory or proposition obtains more support from the evidence than its competitors. However, I shall assume that the uniformity claim entails that ethical expressivists have to be expressivists about them too (I shall sometimes call such judgments—judgments that focus on the status of the propositions that constitute the contents of beliefs rather than on the beliefs

² Notice that I define expressivism in psychological rather than in semantical terms. By the phrases ‘moral convictions’ and ‘moral judgments’, I refer to the commitments or attitudes we express by using sentences that invoke words such as ‘right’, ‘justified’ and so on, rather than to those sentences themselves.

themselves—‘evidence-assessments’). Some epistemic judgments are trickier to classify, such as the claim that a proposition is highly likely to be true. Some deny that such assessments are normative,³ and there are of course interpretations (such as the frequency interpretation) under which they come out as being straightforwardly non-normative. However, under other interpretations, things are less clear.⁴

In any case, expressivism is contrasted with cognitivism, the position that holds that the pertinent judgments do constitute true or false beliefs, and cognitivism is in turn a part of realism, which is why expressivism is a form of anti-realism. But realism also involves other elements. Besides cognitivism, it involves the metaphysical assumption that there are facts in virtue of which some of the target judgments are true (to distinguish it from error theories of the kind associated with John Mackie).⁵ Maybe further claims should be added, to account for the fact that realists believe not only that the target judgments can be true but ‘robustly’ or objectively so. This type of qualification is often motivated by the fact that some philosophers who are taken to belong to the expressivist camp appeal to a ‘minimalist’ view of truth that allegedly allows them to hold that moral convictions, or at least the sentences we use for expressing those convictions, can, after all, be true. For, on such a view, ascribing truth to a sentence is, roughly, just to affirm it. However, as I will not appeal to minimalism, I am going to ignore the complex issues about how to spell out the qualification ‘robustly’ in clearer terms. I am also going to ignore the discussion among realists about the nature of the properties normative judgments are supposed to ascribe (whether they are natural or non-natural, etc), since that dispute is also irrelevant to the arguments I am going to pursue.

3. Ethical expressivism and the uniformity claim

Why can’t an expressivist happily *embrace* the alleged fact that the arguments on which she relies provide equal support for epistemic expressivism? Why is the uniformity claim supposed to undermine their position? On one suggestion, the reason is that epistemic expressivism can be shown to be false on independent grounds. This line is taken by Frank Jackson.

³ See Kappel, K., ‘Is Epistemic Expressivism Dialectically Incoherent?’ *Dialectica* 65 (1), 67.

⁴ See, e.g., Feldman, Richard, ‘Naturalized Epistemology’, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2008 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.).

⁵ See his *Ethics. Inventing Right and Wrong*, New York: Penguin, 1977.

In the paper ‘Non-Cognitivism, Normativity, Belief’, Jackson begins by noting that the ‘famous arguments’ for ethical non-cognitivism (including the argument from motivation and the argument from disagreement) apply *mutatis mutandis* also to non-cognitivism about rationality.⁶ He then continues:

I raise what seems to me a serious, though essentially simple, problem for non-cognitivism about rationality. But my reason for highlighting the connection between non-cognitivism in ethics and non-cognitivism about rationality is not simply to identify my target as one worth shooting at. I want there to be guilt by association. I want to strengthen the case for cognitivism in ethics. (101)

The ‘serious problem’ that Jackson mentions pertains specifically to non-cognitivism about *theoretical* rationality (the position I refer to as ‘epistemic expressivism’). The alleged problem is that this position is supposed to generate the implausible conclusion that there are no beliefs and no believers. Whether epistemic expressivism *has* that implication may be questioned.⁷ However, the important point in the present context is that Jackson does not think that ethical expressivism faces a similar problem (i.e., he does not think that ethical expressivism implies, say, that there are no actions and no agents). And the caution he expresses by using the phrase ‘guilt by association’ is due to the fact that he does not think that the (alleged) falsity of epistemic expressivism *entails* the falsity of ethical expressivism. Instead, the argument is supposed to be more indirect. Jackson never spells out the details, but the challenge might, I think, be reconstructed as follows: What the refutation of epistemic expressivism shows is that the arguments for ethical expressivism are, though famous, not so strong after all. For, if they fail to establish epistemic expressivism, why think that they do a better job in the case of ethics? That is, the idea is that the objection to

⁶ By ‘non-cognitivism’, Jackson refers to the position that I call ‘expressivism’.

⁷ I discuss, and criticize, that view in ‘Ethics, Theoretical Rationality and Eliminativism About Belief’, in *Logic, Ethics and All That Jazz. Essays in Honour of Jordan Howard Sobel* (eds. Lars-Göran Johansson, Jan Österberg and Rysiek Sliwiniski), Uppsala Philosophical Studies 57, Department of Philosophy, Uppsala University, 2009.

epistemic expressivism undermines its ethical counterpart because, given the uniformity claim, it deprives it of its justification.⁸

There is another way to try to get from the uniformity claim to a negative assessment of ethical expressivism, namely by appealing to the *implications* of epistemic expressivism rather than to its alleged falsity. For example, Derek Parfit applauds Allan Gibbard's willingness to extend his expressivism also to claims about what is rational and quotes Gibbard's claim that 'to call a thing rational is not to state a matter of fact, either truly or falsely'.⁹ But he also stresses that this concession undermines the coherence of Gibbard's position. For '[i]f there could not be truths about what it is rational to believe, as Gibbard's view implies, it could not be rational to believe anything, including Gibbard's view.'¹⁰

In other words, according to the argument Parfit hints at, if an advocate of ethical expressivism extends his position to epistemic judgments, then she is not in a position to claim that it is rational to accept ethical expressivism. If she on the other hand *rejects* epistemic expressivism, then, given that the theories can be defended on similar grounds, she cannot consistently continue to appeal to those grounds, which, again, seems to deprive her of her justification. Thus, either way, ethical expressivists end up with a position they cannot coherently hold to be justified.

Both these lines of argument leave the ethical expressivist with plenty of room to respond. For example, in response to Parfit's argument, one could point out that he makes an illegitimate move when deriving the *normative* conclusion that it is not rational to accept ethical expressivism from the *meta*-claim that 'to call a thing rational is not to state a matter of fact'. Epistemic expressivism is a theory about what it is to *think* that it is rational to have a belief, not a theory about what *is* rational. So, it might be argued, it has no implications about the rationality of belief in anything.¹¹

It is also important to realize that the target of Jackson's and Parfit's arguments is not the *truth* of ethical expressivism. Jackson's reasoning shows at best that the (traditional) arguments for ethical expressivism are no good, and Parfit's argument

⁸ As Jackson thinks that the argument by which he tries to refute epistemic expressivism is not applicable to its ethical counterpart, it might be wondered why it is not proper to conclude simply that the uniformity claim is incorrect. I shall not pursue this line of criticism, however.

⁹ See his *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990, 9.

¹⁰ *On What Matters* (vol. 2), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 409f.

¹¹ Admittedly, it does entail that the judgment that it is rational to accept epistemic non-cognitivism is not true. But it also entails that it is not false.

shows at best that someone who accepts ethical expressivism cannot coherently claim that belief in it is rational. But the claim that it is rational to *believe* in expressivism is not in turn *part* of expressivism. So, the conclusions of both Jackson's and Parfit's arguments seem perfectly consistent with it. However, since I will focus on the plausibility of the uniformity claim rather than its significance, I will not pursue any of those responses any further.

4. The argument from motivation

4.1 A sketchy formulation

The argument from motivation appeals to the fact that people normally have some motivation to act in accordance with their moral convictions. If we were convinced that someone thinks that she is morally required to give to charity, we would be surprised (and not merely annoyed) if we were to find that she is entirely unmotivated to do so. Thus stated, the main premise just states that there is a strong correlation between having moral convictions and being motivated. But this correlation is thought to constitute such a central feature of moral discourse that all viable theories about the nature of moral convictions must somehow account for it. Expressivists believe that it is best explained by assuming that moral convictions consist of conative attitudes, such as desires, rather than beliefs. After all, if judging that one is morally required to do something is to desire doing it, the connection between judgment and motivation comes as no surprise.

Thus stated, the argument essentially involves two claims:

- (i) Normally, if a person *a* judges that she is morally required to ϕ then *a* is motivated to ϕ .¹²
- (ii) (i) is best explained by assuming that *a*'s judgment consists in a conative attitude of some sort (such as a desire) rather than a belief.

This is obviously an extremely crude version of the argument I have in mind. In the literature, more complex and fine-grained accounts are provided. Such accounts may be useful for someone who wants to know what the options are for those who wish to

¹² The qualification 'normally' in (i) is meant to indicate that some obvious exceptions are excluded, such as cases of weakness of will.

resist the conclusion. However, in the present context, the sketchy formulation is sufficient. Notice that my aim is not to defend the argument but just to explore if there is an equally plausible version of it that applies to epistemic judgments. I shall just add a few details about what it is, more specifically, that needs to be explained.

The argument from motivation relies on the idea that competing accounts of the nature of moral convictions can be tested by seeing how they help to account for the role such convictions have in the production of actions, decisions and behavior. It is the fact that we are motivated to act in accordance with our moral convictions that gives them such a role, so that is one consideration that an account of the nature of moral convictions needs to explain. However, there are other relevant features of the role in question, and I want especially to stress two of them. First, although our moral convictions may influence our behavior also in unconscious ways (for example by limiting the number of options we perceive as available in a decision situation), they sometimes play a role in conscious processes of deliberation, in which moral considerations are weighed against other, perhaps self-interested concerns. Second, the motivation typically generated by moral convictions can be overridden by other motives, including self-interested ones, which helps to explain why agents sometimes ultimately don't do what they think they are morally required to do. These aspects of the motivational role of moral convictions should also be accounted for by a viable theory about their nature.

4.2 An epistemic version of the argument

Could a similar argument be developed in favor of epistemic expressivism? This may seem unlikely. For, in an analogous, epistemic version of the argument, the role that actions have in the moral ethical version would presumably be played by *beliefs*. And to say that a subject is 'motivated' to hold a belief, due to how she evaluates the evidence or the rationality of holding that belief, sounds awkward. The reason is that it seems to presuppose the implausible voluntarist view that what we believe is, like actions and decisions, in some straightforward sense up to us. Of course there are *indirect* ways of influencing one's beliefs, such as confronting oneself with certain arguments while ignoring others. But the kind of direct control we have over our actions is surely excluded in the case of our beliefs.

It might therefore seem better to try to formulate an epistemic version of (i) in terms of decisions rather than beliefs. For example, if a subject deems that there is adequate evidence for a given hypothesis then we may expect that she is motivated to stop wasting time on further inquiry. Yet, it is difficult to identify, for a given epistemic judgment, a specific response of this kind that the possession of the judgment makes all subjects disposed to make. After all, decisions about whether to continue testing a hypothesis, and so on, are likely to be influenced by a number of different considerations, depending on the subject's personal aims and projects (perhaps the subject wants to improve his ability to persuade others, and believe that gathering more evidence is instrumental to that aim). That is, any given judgment may surely make different subjects differently disposed regarding how to proceed, depending on differences in aims, beliefs, projects and so on. Moreover, in so far as epistemic judgments do influence such decisions it is probably *via* the fact that they influence the confidence with which the subject's beliefs are held.

In spite of the disanalogy between beliefs and actions, I shall therefore formulate an epistemic version of the first premise of the argument from motivation that does pertain to beliefs, although I will drop the word 'motivated'. For there *is* surely a phenomenology that is in *some* ways similar to that which is described by (i). That is, there are mechanisms that make our beliefs tend to conform to our evidence-assessments. The first premise of an epistemic version of the argument can be stated as follows:

- (i*) Normally, if someone judges that a proposition is, say, strongly supported by the evidence, she is disposed to accept it, while, if she judges that it contradicts what the evidence suggests, she is disposed to reject it.

Of course, the similarities should not be overstated, and there are also differences, for example relating to the two additional features of the motivational role of moral convictions just mentioned. Thus, moral convictions are sometimes consciously weighed against self-interested concerns in a process of deliberation. This seldom if ever happens in the epistemic case. Perhaps epistemic assessments themselves are often the result of something that can be described as deliberation. However, what seldom if ever happens is that the outcome of such a process—the conclusion that a

claim is warranted by the evidence—plays a role in a *further* process of deliberation, in which it is weighed against self-interested reasons for or against accepting that claim. Instead, beliefs are usually adopted and sustained as a more *direct* response to various factors, including sensory intake, peer pressure, authority, and so on.

This is not to say that self-interested considerations never influence our beliefs, of course. For example, there are cases of wishful thinking. If one desires to visit a friend before going to a boring meeting, one might be disposed to believe that one has enough time even if the evidence suggests otherwise. However, in such cases, it is not so that we conclude, in ‘deciding’ what to believe, that our self-interested reasons somehow outweigh epistemic considerations. What happens is rather that our desire somehow causes us to *adjust* our assessment about what the evidence suggests so that it accords with the belief, perhaps by prompting us to forget some of the evidence. That is, on this view, self-interest influences our beliefs *through* influencing our epistemic assessments, rather than by being weighed against them.

Moreover, just as people don’t always act in accordance with their moral convictions, the fact a person is disposed to drop beliefs she thinks contradict what the evidence suggests doesn’t mean that she always does drop them. For example, consider a hypochondriac who remains unmoved by his doctor’s assurances, no matter how well founded he acknowledges them to be. However, the connection between the target judgments and the corresponding responses seems *tighter* in the case of epistemic judgments as compared with moral judgments. That is, cases where people simultaneously think that a proposition P is strongly supported by the evidence and yet is convinced that not-P are less common and more mysterious than cases where subjects fail to behave in a way they judge to be right.

The second premise of the parallel argument concerns the explanation of (i*). The idea is that an epistemic expressivist could insist that the best explanation invokes the assumption that to think that P is strongly supported by the evidence is to prefer or to have a conative pro-attitude towards believing that P (or to satisfying requirements that permit it). Thus, we get an epistemic version of (ii):

- (ii*) (i*) is best explained by assuming that epistemic judgments consist in conative attitudes of some sort rather than beliefs.

Is the epistemic version less compelling than the moral version? That's the crucial question. I am going to focus on the second premise. If one wants to establish the kind of mixed verdict that I am seeking it is obviously not enough to show that there are compelling objections to (ii*). One must also provide some reason to think that these objections are not equally applicable to (ii). I will try to achieve this by offering non-expressivist explanations of (i*), and by arguing, first, that they are not inferior to the one provided by expressivism, and, second, that there are no analogous and equally plausible non-expressivist explanations of (i).

4.3 The nature of beliefs

Notice that the implausibility of naïve voluntarism is in itself a *prima facie* reason for doubting (ii*) and for preferring explanations of (i*) that don't assume that epistemic judgments consist of desire-like attitudes. After all, desires manifest themselves in actions and purposive behavior, and, since beliefs are not actions, it is initially implausible to think that they have a role in the explanation of (i*).

In part for that reason, I suggest that we instead try for explanations of (i*) that appeal to the nature of *beliefs* and to what it is to be a *believer* rather than to the nature of the pertinent judgments. For example, consider the familiar idea that beliefs and desires have different 'directions of fit'. According to the famous slogan, beliefs are states aimed at fitting with the world, while desires are states aimed at making the world fit with them. Michael Smith has tried to spell out this metaphorical talk in dispositional terms. Thus, according to Smith:

[A] belief that *p* is a state that tends to go out of existence in the presence of a perception that *not p*, whereas a desire that *p* is a state that tends to endure, disposing the subject in that state to bring it about that *p*.¹³

How is 'perception that' to be interpreted? Clearly, we should not assume that to perceive that P simply is to *believe* that P. Not because it would make the account circular (as it is not intended as an analysis), but rather because it doesn't make it very informative. Instead, I shall follow the common suggestion that the perception that P may be seen as a *seeming* or an appearance, such as a perceptual appearance.

¹³ 'The Humean Theory of Motivation', *Mind* 96 (1987), 54.

The reason why a perceptual appearance that not-P may be expected to undermine the belief that P (in contrast to the desire that P) is, I submit, that it is taken to be evidence against the belief. That is, the presence of the appearance that not-P is, in some cases, seen as evidence for the proposition that forms its content, which in turn contradicts (proposition that forms the content of the) belief. Of course, as the Müller-Lyer illusion shows, some appearances do not undermine beliefs that contradict their contents. Those familiar with the illusion will not have an inclination to stop believing that the lines are equally long in spite of having the appearance that they are not, since they realize that, in that particular case, the mere presence of the seeming provides no evidence for the proposition that constitutes its content. So, when a perception that not-P undermines the belief that P, it is not the perception itself that does the undermining but rather the fact that it is taken as evidence.

If this is the right account of why a subject is disposed to respond differently to the perception that not-P, depending on if she believes or desires that P, then the contrast between beliefs and desires can be stated in more general terms, as a difference between their responsiveness to what the believer considers to be evidence for and against the propositions that constitute their content. If so, the subject's sensitivity to her assessments of what the evidence suggests that is described by (i*) flows from the very characterization of beliefs. (i*) is simply part of what it means for beliefs to have the appropriate direction of fit. And the thing to note is that this account does not assume that those assessments consist of desires. Indeed, combining the generalized version of Smith's proposal with the expressivist idea that epistemic assessments are desires makes little sense. For, if judging that the evidence supports P is to desire that one believes that P, then the proposal has the following implication: To desire that one believes that P is to be in a state that tends to endure if one desires that one doesn't believe that P.

4.4 Charity

There are congenial but more elaborate attempts to clarify the concept of a belief that yield the same conclusion. This holds for the so-called 'interpretationist' approach

associated with philosophers such as Davidson, Dennett and David Lewis. In what follows, I shall focus on Davidson's version.¹⁴

According to Davidson, to be a believer is to be interpretable on the basis of the evidence available to a 'radical interpreter'. A radical interpreter is a person who simultaneously tries to figure out both what the speaker means by her sentences and the contents of her beliefs without having any detailed prior knowledge of that kind. Those projects—the project of interpreting the speaker's sentences and the project of determining what she believes—are in fact sides of the same coin, according to Davidson, since, given knowledge of the meanings the sentences the speaker holds to be true, one can derive a theory about her beliefs.

The evidence available to a radical interpreter comprises facts of the kind that attributions of beliefs are supposed to explain, including, crucially, information about which sentences she holds to be true and about the circumstances in which she holds them true. Which sentences a speaker holds to be true depends both on their meanings and on the speaker's beliefs. This ensures the relevance of such facts in the present context. Moreover, as they *can* be known without knowing what the sentences means, they are available to a radical interpreter.

The assumption that it is essential to being a believer that one is interpretable on the basis of such evidence entails that the evidence in question provides sufficient ground for a theory about what a speaker believes and about what her sentences means. And Davidson has famously argued that it does not provide such a ground unless we assume that the speaker satisfies certain minimal requirements of rationality. The reason is that, unless we make that assumption, the evidence radically underdetermines interpretation. For, in the absence of constraints of that kind, given any set of meanings ascribed to the sentences held true by the speaker, we could always make compensating assumptions about what she believes so as to fit the evidence. He therefore concludes that to satisfy the pertinent requirements, to a significant extent, is *also* essential to being a believer.

The requirements of rationality Davidson has in mind are summarized in his 'principle of charity'. It entails that a theory about what the speaker's sentences mean is correct only if it represents her as having beliefs that are by and large consistent,

¹⁴ The views that are summarized below are elaborated in essays 9 through 14 in Davidson's *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984.

rational, and true (by our, the interpreters' lights). The assumption that the speaker's beliefs are largely consistent with each other allows us to identify the logical constants of her language. As for the speaker's observational sentences (sentences the speaker holds true and false depending on easily detectable goings-on in her environment), the principle of charity prescribes trying for theories that imply that their truth conditions are roughly the same as the conditions under which she in fact tends to accept them. As for the speaker's more theoretical sentences (i.e., sentences that are less firmly keyed to easily detectable goings-on in the environment) we are to focus on the extent to which the speaker holds them to be true on the basis of other, more observational sentences. The principle of charity prescribes assigning meanings to the speaker's theoretical sentences such that they are in fact (by our, the interpreters' lights) supported by the evidence the speaker *takes* to support them. And the important point in the present context is that this methodology rests on an assumption congenial with (i*); i.e., the claim that the speaker is disposed to accept the sentences she thinks her evidence supports. For we conclude from the fact that she accepts some sentences on the basis of others that the latter sentences are taken by the speaker to be evidence for the former.

A similar assumption is made in the case of attribution of error. The principle of charity does not exclude attributing occasional inconsistencies or other types of errors, even at the observational level. On the contrary, if the error can plausibly be explained, for example by noting that the speaker has evidence that supports the erratic belief, it prescribes it. However, the presence of the evidence explains the error only if it is assumed, in accordance with (i*), that she is disposed to accept that which she takes her evidence to suggest. In other words, to explain errors in the relevant sense is to rationalize them with reference to her evidence and other beliefs and attitudes. And if the theory we come up with represents the speaker as believing things that contradict what she thinks the evidence suggests we haven't done so.

Davidson thinks that his ideas about interpretation have radical implications. For example, he takes them to exclude the possibility of massive error.¹⁵ That conclusion is highly controversial. However, in the present context, the relevant claim is the less contentious one that being interpretable, and thus being a believer, requires that one's

¹⁵ See 'A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge', in LePore, E. (ed.), *Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1986.

system of beliefs display a certain amount of coherence. And this includes not having beliefs that contradicts what one judge that the evidence suggests.

Both Davidson's account and the related one that appeals to the direction of fit of beliefs provide competitors to expressivist explanations of (i*), since they don't entail that epistemic judgments consist of conative attitudes. And they clearly don't seem inferior to such explanations, given the initial implausibility of the idea that beliefs are directly influenced by desires and desire-like attitudes in the way suggested by expressivist explanations. They therefore undermine (ii*) and the support epistemic expressivism may derive from (i*). There is moreover no analogous and equally plausible non-expressivist explanation of (i). My objection to (ii*) is based on the idea that it is the nature of the motivated states (beliefs) rather than the motivating ones (epistemic judgments) that explain the correlation described by (i*). (i) cannot in a similar way be derived from any plausible assumptions about the nature of actions or agency. That is, it is hardly the nature of those phenomena that explains why people are motivated to act in accordance with their moral judgments.

4.5 Evolution

One may shed further light on this contrast by reflecting on why the capacity to make epistemic assessments has evolved. Presumably, it evolved since it helped our ancestors to detect important truths and to avoid dangerous errors. This suggestion presupposes that the assessments the capacity gave rise to did influence their beliefs in the way described by (i*). For, unless they had constrained their beliefs in that way, it would not have served the pertinent function and would accordingly not have been selected. Thus, it might be argued that an evolutionary explanation of the capacity to form epistemic judgments entails (i*). Of course, it also presupposes that the epistemic assessments agents tend to make (or that our ancestors tended to make) are truth-conducive in the sense that being disposed to drop beliefs judged to be unwarranted by the evidence *does*, at least in a significant number of relevant cases, allow them to avoid errors. But, given their influence over a thinker's beliefs, the contents of the assessments have also been subjected to selective pressures: As Quine

put it: ‘Creatures inveterately wrong in their inductions have a pathetic but praiseworthy tendency to die before reproducing their kind.’¹⁶

This is also a competitor to expressivist explanations of (i*), since it does not involve the assumption that epistemic assessments consist of conative attitudes. Indeed, although that assumption is not inconsistent with the account, it fits badly with it. For if the influence a thinker’s epistemic judgments has over her beliefs is supposed to be due to the alleged fact that they consist in desires then we must assume that her beliefs are in general more sensitive to such attitudes. Given the room this would leave to factors that aren’t conducive of truth (such as wishful thinking), and given the importance of avoiding error, there has been a selective pressure against such sensitivities.

Of course, there are evolutionary accounts also of our capacity to form *moral* judgments. But in that case, the story is going to be different. On the best version of an evolutionary account of our moral views, the capacity to form such convictions has been selected because it helped our ancestors to respond to certain common collective action problems. In the relevant type of situations, when purely self-interested and rational agents interact, their choices generate outcomes that leave all worse off than if their concern for their self-interest been constrained by other motivations, such as the desire not to be a free-rider or the willingness to assign at least some intrinsic weight also to the interests of the others, etc. It is motivation of the latter kind that moral judgments provide, which in turn accounts for why the disposition to form such judgments has evolved. That is, groups of individuals whose behavior was constrained in the relevant way had an advantage relative to other groups, which explains why their genes were passed on.¹⁷

This story is easier to reconcile with the assumption that the pertinent judgments consist of conative attitudes. Notice that it does not predict that moral concerns are always overriding. After all, acting on her moral convictions can be costly for an agent, and morality is only one of the sources of motivation that evolution has

¹⁶ Quine, W.v., ‘Natural Kinds’ in *Ontological relativity and other essays*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1969, 126.

¹⁷ See, e.g. Gibbard, *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings*, Joyce, J., *The Evolution of Morality*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006, and Street, S., ‘A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value’, *Philosophical Studies* 129 (2006), 109-166, for accounts along this line. Obviously, they rest on numerous problematic empirical assumptions, including the claim that the moral convictions we hold are the result of a disposition that has a genetic basis.

endowed us with. Another is self-interest, whose significance can also be explained by evolutionary considerations. What the evolutionary account leads us to expect is rather that agents are endowed with a certain flexibility, which allows self-interested considerations, in some cases, to trump or silence the influence of moral considerations. This flexibility, which is manifested in the two additional features of the motivational role of moral convictions that I mentioned in section 4.1 (the fact that they influence decisions through deliberation and the fact that the motivation they provide is sometimes overridden by other motives), squares nicely with the assumption that those convictions consist in desires.

So, while the evolutionary account of the motivational role of moral judgments fits well with, and thus supports, the claim that they consist of desires, an evolutionary account of the way a subject's epistemic assessments constrain her beliefs provides no support for an analogous claim about them. This conclusion provides a further reason to conclude that one can accept ethical expressivism on the basis of the argument from motivation and still, coherently, deny epistemic expressivism.

5. The argument from disagreement

5.1 Inaccessibility and ambiguity

I shall now turn to the argument from disagreement. Advocates of the uniformity claim insist that there is just as much, and just as deep, disagreement over epistemic issues as there is concerning moral issues. This is typically illustrated with cases of disputes among philosophers. Reliabilists and evidentialists debate about the conditions under which beliefs are epistemically justified, just as, say, Kantians and utilitarians disagree about when actions are right. A resolution seems equally remote in both cases. However, some advocates of the uniformity claim also refer to disputes among ordinary folk. For example, Terence Cuneo mentions the controversies about the rationality of believing in God.¹⁸ Other examples concern scientific issues. Thus, people disagree about the plausibility of the theory of evolution and about the reasonableness of believing in human-induced global warming. In order to determine if the disagreement over epistemic issues really *is* relevantly similar, however, one needs to reflect a little on *why* the nature and extent of moral disagreement is supposed to generate an expressivist or anti-realist conclusion.

¹⁸ *The Normative Web*, 110f.

There are in fact several answers to that question. That is, there are in fact several anti-realist arguments that appeal to moral disagreement. Common to them all, however, is that their point of departure is not just the fact that moral disagreements occur. Rather, the central premise is the claim that many of those disagreements run so deep and seem so difficult to resolve. In the case of some disputes, including some that concern moral issues, the disagreement withers when the parties gather more evidence, enhance their reasoning skills, reflect more deeply on each other's arguments or rid themselves of unconscious biases. However, the idea is that, in the case of many moral disagreements, they would persist even if the parties were to improve their cognitive position in such respects. The alleged reason is that the disagreement is not ultimately rooted in ignorance of relevant non-moral facts, inferential error or cognitive shortcomings of similar kinds. Instead, they manifest more fundamental differences in outlook whose resolution cannot be achieved by rational means. I shall call such disagreements—disagreements that cannot be attributed to any cognitive shortcoming—'radical'.

The intractability of such disagreements is commonly supposed to support ethical anti-realism due to the way it is to be explained. For example, David Brink takes the central premise to be the claim that moral disagreements are often 'so pervasive and so intractable that the best explanation of this kind of disagreement is that there are no moral facts'.¹⁹ This suggestion might initially strike one as odd. What explains why people have different moral views is presumably that they have different upbringings, or belong to different social groups, and so on, which is something anti-realists can concede (and often stress). And empirical facts of that kind seem, at least taken by themselves, entirely consistent with realism. However, there are ways of making sense of Brink's suggestion.

Thus, it may be argued that the non-existence of moral facts help to explain why many moral disagreements are difficult to resolve since we may assume that if such facts *were* to exist, there would be less disagreements of that kind. One possible reason for accepting that assumption is the thesis that the facts in question, if they exist, are *epistemologically accessible*; i.e., such that it is possible to achieve knowledge of them, at least for a thinker who is suitably equipped from a cognitive point of view. Given the claim that they are thus accessible, then, if they exist, we

¹⁹ *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 197.

have reason to expect some convergence on them, at least among people who *are* suitably equipped. The absence of such convergence therefore indicates that they don't exist. And the point is that the existence of radical moral disagreements shows that the pertinent type of convergence *is* absent.

One way for a realist to respond to this reasoning is to deny that the truths she posits are accessible in the relevant sense. For if moral facts are not thus accessible then their existence gives us no reason to expect any convergence, not even among competent cognizers. However, this is a move that is widely held to be desperately implausible.²⁰ The argument is therefore sometimes construed as a *reductio*. In response to the existence (or perhaps mere possibility of) radical moral disagreement, realists must, it is held, assume that the truths she posits may, as Crispin Wright has put it, 'transcend, even in principle, our abilities of recognition'.²¹ Since that implication is indefensible, realism should be rejected. I shall call this argument 'the argument from inaccessibility'.

The argument from inaccessibility is an argument for ethical anti-realism generally and not just for expressivism. As such, it provides at best partial support for expressivism. There is another version of the argument from disagreement, however, that does pertain especially to expressivism. Its target is not primarily the metaphysical element of realism but rather what realism says about the nature of moral convictions and the semantical claims associated with those views, such as the thesis that terms such as 'right', 'wrong', etc, refer to real properties.

Suppose that two persons disagree about the application of a certain word and that they have difficulties in resolving their dispute. The source of inspiration of the second version of the argument from disagreement is the observation that one way to explain such difficulties is to assume that the parties use the word to refer to different properties. For example, suppose that the parties disagree about the sentence 'Peter is green'. If one of the disputants uses 'green', on this occasion, to stand for a color while the other uses it to stand for the property of being inexperienced, the second person will not persuade the other by repeatedly pointing out how young Peter is. Of

²⁰ Indeed, some moral realists make the claim that the truths they posit can be known and even that some truths are in fact known, part of their doctrine (See, e.g., Boyd, R., 'How To Be a Moral Realist', in G. Sayre-McCord (ed.), *Essays on Moral Realism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988, 182.)

²¹ *Truth and Objectivity*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992, 8f. For other advocates of the argument, see Goldman, A., *Moral Knowledge*, London: Routledge, 1988, esp. 153-60, and Tolhurst, W. 'The Argument from Moral Disagreement'. *Ethics* 97, 1987, 610-21.

course, misunderstandings of this type are often quickly revealed. But there are cases (involving complex terms such as ‘democracy’) where it might be less easy for the parties to detect what is going on. What the advocates of the second version of the argument from disagreement suggest is that precisely this holds for disputes over the application of moral terms, in so far as they are radical.

In other words, to assume that two persons who disagree about how to apply a term use it to refer to different properties is often not plausible, at least if both are generally competent speakers of the language to which it belongs. It is plausible only if certain special circumstances obtain. These circumstances include the fact that they disagree extensively about which considerations are relevant in determining the extension of the term (whether youth counts, in the case of ‘green’) and the fact that there is no plausible explanation of the error we attribute by assuming that they use it to refer to the same property (in terms of, for example, lack of certain relevant evidence). Whether such facts do undermine co-reference depends on general issues about how meaning and reference are determined. However, there are prominent views in the philosophy of language that support that conclusion.²² And the idea is that the pertinent circumstances *do* obtain in the case of radical moral disputes. Thus, in so far as the terms that are used by the parties to express their conflicting views (such as ‘right’, ‘wrong’ etc) refer at all, as realists think, they use them to refer to different properties. I shall call this diagnosis ‘the interpretive diversity claim’.²³

Why is the interpretive diversity claim supposed to provide support for expressivism? Suppose that two persons disagree about the sentence ‘meat-eating is wrong’. If the interpretive diversity claim holds for this dispute, then it does not represent a conflict of beliefs (just as the dispute above about whether Peter is ‘green’ may not constitute such a conflict). Still, I have deliberately avoided characterizing the interpretive diversity claim as stating that the parties of the pertinent disagreements ‘talk past each other’ or that their disputes are ‘merely verbal’. Of course, we are used to thinking that people disagree genuinely only if there is a true or false proposition that is affirmed by some and denied by others. But, as natural as that idea may seem, what constitutes a genuine *moral* disagreement—i.e., a genuine

²² For example, it is an implication of Davidson’s principle of charity. See his ‘Objectivity and Practical Reason’, in E. Ullman-Margalit (ed.), *Reasoning Practically*, Oxford University Press, 25.

²³ Given the conditional character of this claim (‘if at all’), it can be accepted, and adduced, also by someone who denies that terms such as ‘right’ refer.

conflict of *moral* convictions—is a contested issue and one that separates expressivists from realists. Realists and expressivists have different views about the nature of moral convictions. Realists think that to judge, say, that an action *a* is morally right is to have a true or false belief about *a*. Expressivists, by contrast, think that it is to have a conative attitude towards *a*. Accordingly, realists and expressivists offer competing views also about what it means to have conflicting moral convictions. Realists think that to disagree morally is to have incompatible beliefs, whereas expressivists hold that it is rather to have clashing conative attitudes toward the action being evaluated.

This means that, given a realist conception of a genuine moral disagreement, the interpretive diversity claim implies that radical disputes over moral issues *are* indeed merely verbal. However, the problem, according to the argument, is that this is the wrong conclusion. The claim that radical disputes are merely apparent is highly counterintuitive, in view of the fact that such disputes still display an *appearance* of a disagreement—Rawls and Nozick and other philosophers who are the best candidates of being free of cognitive shortcomings do clearly not seem to talk past each other. An expressivist, by contrast, need not construe such disputes as being merely verbal, even given that they do not involve conflicts of beliefs, and can therefore explain the appearance in question without committing themselves to that conclusion.²⁴ I shall call this argument ‘the argument from ambiguity’.²⁵

5.2 Disagreement in epistemology

There are many familiar objections against the arguments sketched in the previous section. For example, it can be argued that anti-realists underestimate the resources available to someone who wants to explain away alleged examples as being non-

²⁴ For example, Simon Blackburn considers a priest and a utilitarian who disagree over the sentence ‘Contraception should be abolished’. The utilitarian rejects it, since he believes that contraception promotes happiness. The priest, on the other hand, embraces it, on the ground that contraception is ‘against the wishes of the creator of the universe’. According to Blackburn, this difference indicates that, insofar as the sentence is used to express beliefs at all, the parties use it to express different beliefs (beliefs with different cognitive contents). Therefore, a realist must regard the dispute as merely apparent. An expressivist, on the other hand, ‘locates the disagreement where it should be, in the clash of attitudes towards contraception’. *Spreading the Word*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984, 168. See also ‘Just Causes’, *Philosophical Studies* 61 (1991), 4.

²⁵ Nicholas Sturgeon regards this as ‘a standard argument for noncognitivism’ (‘Contents and Causes’, *Philosophical Studies* 61 (1991), 20). For a more detailed account of both the arguments, see Tersman, F., *Moral Disagreement*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

radical.²⁶ However, I am by and large going to ignore those objections, since my aim is not to defend the arguments but to establish a sort of conditional thesis: That one may plausibly deny epistemic expressivism even *given* that the versions of the argument from disagreement that apply to ethics and moral judgments are compelling.

There are basically two ways to question the idea that, in so far as moral disagreement provides support for ethical expressivism, epistemic expressivism obtains just as much support from the disagreement that occurs regarding epistemic issues. One is to argue that, *pace* Cuneo, Jackson and Parfit, the latter type of disagreement is, after all, less extensive or radical. Another is to concede that it is as radical but appeal to other differences between the discourses that nevertheless allow us to draw different conclusions. I'm going to pursue both options (or what is, in effect, a combination of them). I shall start with the first.

It is silly to have strong and confident views about whether there is or is not 'as much' disagreement in one area as there is in another. Even given that one can assign a determinate meaning to phrases like 'as much', forming a justified view on that matter would require empirical research of a kind that has simply not been done. However, this criticism cuts both ways. Both critics and advocates of the uniformity claim are equally vulnerable to it. Moreover, there *are* considerations worth mentioning in this context; considerations that are overlooked in the limited literature on the subject and that do suggest that there are significant differences.

To repeat, the alleged reason why moral disagreement generates anti-realist conclusions is that much of it is due to fundamental differences in moral outlook that cannot plausibly be attributed to cognitive shortcomings (such as inferential error, ignorance of non-moral facts, and so on). This is what is supposed to undermine co-reference and what is supposed to commit a realist to assuming that the moral truths she posits are epistemically inaccessible. The question is if there is reason to think that disagreement regarding epistemic issues is any less radical. I am going to offer some support for thinking that this holds at least for some types of such issues.

There are areas that do show the kind of convergence that a realist view about those areas predicts, given the argument from inaccessibility. This is commonly conceded by ethical anti-realists and their critics alike. One noteworthy example is the

²⁶ It can also be questioned whether it is implausible to posit unknowable truths in ethics, as is illustrated by Sara McGrath's interesting contribution to this volume.

empirical sciences. At any particular time, there is a huge amount of disagreement in disciplines such as physics and chemistry. However, those disagreements tend to be resolved over time and to be replaced by new ones. Moreover, the fact that the disagreements are resolved is arguably, at least in many cases, due to the fact that more and better data are gathered, that scientists find ways of articulating the disputed theories in a way that allows for more rigorous testing, and that they quite generally become better placed at assessing them. This is exactly what the assumption that they are non-radical leads us to expect, which is why ethical anti-realists contrast the situation in these disciplines with ethics.

Of course, convergence of this kind neither entails that the views on which people converge are true nor that they should be construed in a realist way. But it does provide a response to the arguments from disagreement that ethical anti-realists appeal to. And the point I want to make is that if the convergence in science does allow a scientific realist to respond to those arguments, then we also have reason to dismiss those versions that apply to epistemic discourse.

The reason for this has to do with the strong influence a subject's epistemic judgments have over her beliefs, as advocates of the uniformity claim rightly stress in connection with the argument from motivation. Given this connection, the convergence in science is accompanied with, or indeed *explained* by, a parallel convergence regarding epistemic issues; i.e., issues concerning how to evaluate the theories and hypotheses over which agreement has emerged. The prior controversies about those theories reflect prior disagreements about their epistemic credentials, and what explains the convergence on those theories is the capacity of inquirers to overcome such epistemic disagreements.

In other words, it is *through* their capacity to resolve epistemic issues that inquirers come to agree on substantive issues within the disciplines they work. It is plausible to assume, moreover, that what underlies this capacity is the fact that there is significant overlap regarding general issues about how competing hypotheses and explanations are to be evaluated, for example regarding the importance of criteria such as simplicity, scope and fruitfulness. This overlap ensures that considerations that are considered to be significant by some of the parties are not dismissed as irrelevant by others. Unless there had been such overlap, it is unlikely that there had been any convergence. For example, consider the onset of the scientific revolution.

Arguably, what sparked this process was the emergence of some basic agreement about more modern, empiricist methodological ideas, which in turn was due, at least on the conventional story, to the fact that a powerful source of biases and cognitive shortcomings was losing its grip on the culture, namely religion and its institutions.

The sciences provide a particularly important example, since they represent our most systematic efforts at achieving knowledge. And as scientists are better trained than ordinary folk in probability theory, statistics, and other fields relevant to making epistemic assessments, whether they can resolve their disagreements over epistemic issues sheds more light over the issue of the extent to which such disputes are radical than the disputes among ordinary folk regarding the rationality of belief in human-induced global warming. The latter disputes can easily be dismissed as non-radical on the ground that the most participants to that debate have just a fragmentary understanding of the available evidence and of the theories and models that are adduced. Something similar could be said about much disagreement about moral issues, such as that concerning, say, the moral status of meat-eating. However, the difference is that while the latter debate is equally intense also among people who are arguably not subject to simple cognitive shortcomings of the pertinent kind (e.g., Peter Singer and his opponents among philosophers), there is virtually no disagreement about the existence of human-induced global warming by the experts.

The fact that there is significant overlap regarding general issues about how theories and claims are to be assessed epistemically is also what an evolutionary explanation of our capacity to make evidence-assessments leads us to expect. To repeat, such an explanation would appeal to the idea that the fact that the beliefs of a thinker are constrained by her epistemic assessments increases her chances of detecting truths and of avoiding dangerous errors. This account presupposes that the epistemic assessments agents tend to make (or that our ancestors tended to make) are truth-conducive in the sense that being disposed to drop beliefs judged to be unwarranted by the evidence *does* allow them to avoid errors of the relevant kind. The mechanisms that ensure this have constrained the general epistemic views that evolution has endowed us with, which helps to account for the overlap.

Of course, as we saw in 4.5, there are evolutionary explanations also of our capacity to form moral convictions, according to which the capacity to form such convictions has been selected because it helped our ancestors to cooperate and to

handle certain collective actions problems by constraining their concern for their self-interest.²⁷ However, as many radically different sets of convictions could serve that role—it is enough that they prompt agents to go *some* way towards acting in the interests of the group as a whole—the forces of natural selection have allowed for greater latitude regarding the contents of the convictions the capacity gives rise to. Thus it does not predict the same type of overlap or basic agreement. This helps explain why moral disagreement is both deeper and more extensive than the existing disagreements about many types of epistemic assessments.²⁸

5.3 Disagreement among experts

I have taken the convergence in science to illustrate that disagreements about certain types of epistemic issues tend to wither when the parties free themselves of cognitive shortcomings. In support of the view that there is no analogous tendency in ethics, due to a lack of overlap regarding fundamental issues about what makes actions right and wrong and so on, I have appealed to the disagreements among philosophers who *are*, arguably, freed of many pertinent shortcomings. An obvious objection to this argumentation is that there is disagreement about philosophers also about epistemic issues. Given that the disagreement among professional *ethicists* is held to support ethical anti-realism, why—it might be asked—doesn't the disagreement among professional *epistemologists* yield a similar conclusion about epistemology?

The disagreements among epistemologists to which advocates of the uniformity claim appeal concern the conditions under which beliefs are epistemically justified; an issue that provides the focus of disputes between coherentists, reliabilists, evidentialists, and so on. In the case of these disputes, I am willing to concede that a response of the type that one of the anti-realist arguments from disagreement (the argument from ambiguity) focuses on *is* the proper one. That is, in my view, it can plausibly be argued that the difficulties of resolving the dispute *is* due to the fact that the phrase used for stating the apparently conflicting views ('epistemic justification') is subject to the kind of interpretive diversity mentioned in relation to that argument. Indeed, that *has* been argued, for example by William Alston, who thinks that the best

²⁷ See Joyce, J., *The Evolution of Morality*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006, for an account along these lines.

²⁸ For further discussion, see Tersman, F., *Moral Disagreement*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

explanation of the diversity of theories about epistemic justification is that ‘justified’, as used by epistemologists, fails to pick out a single, unique objective status of beliefs. Consequently, he argues that the participants in the debate cannot plausibly be seen as disagreeing about the same property.²⁹ What I also hold, however, is that one can plausibly deny that this conclusion supports epistemic expressivism, even if one grant that the similar conclusion about moral terms supports ethical expressivism.

There are several reasons for this. First, notice that ‘epistemic justification’ is a technical term with no clear counterparts in ordinary language. It is, of course, linked in *some* ways to the use of ordinary language phrases. But it is intended to capture and purify just one of the aspects people may be said to focus on when expressing evaluations of beliefs. Therefore, what to say about its use is largely irrelevant to epistemic expressivism, at least in so far as that theory is supposed to be analogous with ethical expressivism, as the central claim of the latter theory concerns the general use of a crucial chunk of ordinary language. In the moral case, there are no such worries, as the use of professional ethicists of the terms (‘right’, ‘wrong’, etc) they employ to express their theories is continuous with that of ordinary folk.

Note also that the disputes about epistemic justification concern issues at a very general and abstract level. And they don’t typically manifest themselves in disagreement about the evaluation of particular theories or actual beliefs. The theorists may disagree about whether subjects are justified in holding some belief in certain hypothetical scenarios, but typically not about actual cases. The competing views epistemologists have about the role of evidence for the justification of beliefs do not generate systematic disagreements about what to think about scientific issues, such as global warming. This is unlike how it is in ethics, where the equally abstract discussions among utilitarians, Kantians and virtue theorists *do* translate into disputes about particular moral issues (animal rights, abortion, etc).

Second, the reason why the alleged fact that radical moral disputes cannot be construed as conflicts of beliefs is supposed to support expressivism is that they may still display an appearance of a genuine disagreement. Since expressivists can construe those disputes as genuine disagreements in spite of the fact that they don’t

²⁹ See Alston’s ‘Response to Goldman’, in Battaly, H.D., and Lynch, M.P. (eds.), *Perspectives on the Philosophy of William P. Alston*, Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005, 137f, and *Beyond “Justification”: Dimensions of Epistemic Evaluation*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005, esp. chapter 1.

represent conflicts of beliefs, they can, unlike realists, account for this appearance in a satisfactory way. This presupposes that the appearance in these cases is *worth* saving, and it might be questioned whether the same holds for the disputes between professional epistemologists regarding epistemic justification.

Notice for example that Alston is not tempted to draw any expressivist conclusions from his diagnosis. What he suggests is instead a reconstruction of the debate, by skipping the term ‘epistemic justification’ (and by replacing the search for a theory about when beliefs are justified with his own ‘desiderata approach’). Presumably, the reason for this revisionary proposal is that the conclusion that epistemologists talk past each other is the *correct* one and that there is no reason to save possible appearances to the contrary by adopting an expressivist conception of the nature of epistemic evaluations. In the ethical case, the related proposal of dropping terms such as ‘right’, ‘wrong’, etc, would be much more revisionary, as the use of those terms by philosophers is continuous with that of ordinary folk. Dropping those terms would amount to simply failing to engage with some of the issues that ordinary people are engaged in.

In my view, interpretive diversity holds also in the case of many epistemic disagreements among ordinary folk. And in those cases too, the conclusion that the parties talk past each other seems also often to be the appropriate one. When considering examples of disputes over epistemic sentences, one faces certain problems of interpretation, to a much greater extent than in the case of moral disputes. For example, consider Cuneo’s example with the disputes about the rationality in belief in God. In support of their differing views, people adduce many different types of considerations, including some that rather belong to discussions about ethics and practical rationality. For example, some motivate their judgments about the reasonableness of belief in God à la Pascal with ideas about the (non-epistemic) costs or benefits of having that belief. Differences like this are difficult to reconcile with the assumption that ‘rational’, in these contexts, refer to the same property for all parties. Or take disputes over sentences that report the probabilities of various scenarios (perhaps by assigning numbers to them). As people are not aware of, or distinguish clearly between, the frequency interpretation and other interpretations it is difficult to attribute any determinate views to them at all on the basis of their verdicts to such

sentences, let alone views that can plausibly be seen to be in conflict. Again, there is often no appearance of a genuine disagreement worth preserving.

Moreover, in so far as there *is* an appearance of a real disagreement in the case of the disputes about epistemic justification worth saving, it is doubtful if it is best explained by construing them as collisions of conative attitudes. There are independent grounds for adopting an expressivist account in the ethical case that are lacking in the epistemic case, such as, those provided by the argument from motivation. Part of the reason why the expressivist account of the appearance of a real disagreement between the parties of radical moral disputes has some plausibility is that those disputes are in a rather direct way related to practical issues about what to *do*. Once it is settled that a course of action is, say, morally obligatory then there is little room for further discussion. In the epistemic case, things are different, both because what to believe is not up to us, and because, even if it were, there *would* be room for further discussion. Roughly, the disputes about epistemic justification concern where to set the bar in order for someone to have knowledge given the folk concept of that phenomenon. Clearly one can agree on those standards, and still have different attitudes toward beliefs that satisfy them. This means that one reason for explaining any persisting appearances of a real disagreement in expressivist terms is lacking in the case of the disputes about epistemic justification. I conclude therefore that one can accept ethical expressivism on the basis of the nature and extent of moral disagreement without committing oneself to epistemic expressivism, even granted that the interpretive diversity to which the argument from ambiguity holds also in the case of some epistemic disagreements.

6. Concluding remarks

There is a significant overlap regarding the terms we use for expressing our convictions about moral and about epistemic issues ('reason', 'should', 'good', etc). This may seem to make the project of establishing the kind of mixed verdict that I am seeking more or less from the start. However, from a theoretical point of view, some similarities, even striking ones, can ultimately turn out to be superficial, as they need not exclude that there are also crucial differences. For example, all jade stones share certain common characteristics, which is why we treat them as belonging to the same kind. Still, a closer examination reveals that the chemical structure of some such

stones differs decisively from that of others (there is “nephrite” jade and “jadeitite”). I have argued that there are such differences in the case of ethics and epistemology, and that the versions of the argument from motivation and the argument from disagreement that apply to epistemic judgments as a consequence are less compelling than those that apply to ethics.

In support of my thesis, I have appealed to some rather speculative empirical claims, concerning, for example, peoples’ attitudes towards their moral and epistemic convictions. Admittedly, I have not offered any systematic evidence for these claims. I fully acknowledge my culpability in doing so and concede that my argumentation is therefore incomplete. However, I share this culpability with most participants in contemporary meta-ethical disputes, and, in the present context, the absence of conclusive evidence is not crucial. For if they have the relevance I have assigned to them, then the fact that we are not in the position to determine with certainty if they are true or not means that we are in an equally bad position when it comes to assessing the uniformity claim itself. And that’s bad news for anyone who thinks that it presently provides a decisive objection to ethical anti-realism.

References

- Alston, W.P., *Beyond ‘Justification’: Dimensions of Epistemic Evaluation*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005.
- ‘Response to Goldman’, in Battaly, H.D., and Lynch, M.P. (eds.), *Perspectives on the Philosophy of William P. Alston*, Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005.
- Blackburn, S., *Spreading the Word*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984
- ‘Just Causes’, *Philosophical Studies* 61 (1991).
- Brink, D., *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.
- Boyd, R., ‘How To Be a Moral Realist’, in G. Sayre-McCord (ed.). *Essays on Moral Realism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988, 181-228.
- Cuneo, T., *The Normative Web*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Davidson, D., *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984.
- ‘Replies to Essays’ in Vermazen, B., and Hintikka, M., (eds.), *Essays on Davidson: Actions and Events*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1985.

- ‘A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge’, in LePore, E. (ed.), *Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1986.
- Feldman, Richard, ‘Naturalized Epistemology’, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2008 Edition)*, Edward N. Zalta (ed.).
- Gibbard, A., *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990.
- Goldman, A., *Moral Knowledge*, London: Routledge, 1988.
- Jackson, F., ‘Non-Cognitivism, Normativity, Belief’, in J. Dancy (ed.), *Normativity*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2000, 100-15.
- Joyce, J., *The Evolution of Morality*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006.
- Kappel, K., ‘Is Epistemic Expressivism Dialectically Incoherent?’ *Dialectica* 65 (2011):49-69.
- Lewis, D. ‘Radical Interpretation’, in *Philosophical Papers* (vol. 1), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983.
- Mackie, J.L., *Ethics. Inventing Right and Wrong*, New York: Penguin, 1977.
- Nobis, M., ‘Ayer and Stevenson’s Epistemological Emotivisms’, *Croatian Journal of Philosophy IV* (2004).
- Parfit, D., *On What Matters*: Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Pust, J., *Intuitions as Evidence*, New York and London: Garland Publishing, 2000.
- Quine, W.v., ‘Natural Kinds’, in *Ontological relativity and other essays*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1969.
- Smith, M., ‘The Humean Theory of Motivation’, *Mind* 96 (1987), 36-61.
- Stevenson, C.L. *Facts and Values*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963.
- Street, S., ‘A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value’, *Philosophical Studies* 129 (2006), 109-166.
- Sturgeon, N., ‘Contents and Causes’, *Philosophical Studies* 61 (1991).
- Tersman, F., *Moral Disagreement*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006.
- Tolhurst, W. ‘The Argument from Moral Disagreement’. *Ethics* 97 (1987), 610-21.
- Wright, C., *Truth and Objectivity*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992.