A dilemma for expressivism about normative judgements

Carlos Núñez

In this paper, I argue that expressivists about normative judgments face a dilemma: they can either make sense of interpersonal disagreement, or they can make sense of agent-relative normative judgments. Unfortunately, they cannot make sense of both.

Here is the basic idea: consider a version of expressivism about ought judgments according to which for a judge J to judge that subject S ought to φ is for J to have some kind of pro-attitude in favor of S's φ-ing. Here is a generic version of this theory: for J to judge that S ought to φ is for J to want that S φs, where "want" stands as a place-holder for whatever conative attitude (desires, intentions, preferences, etc.) the expressivist singles out as constituting normative judgments. So, for example, Jane's judgment that Sam ought to see the doctor is constituted by her wanting that Sam sees the doctor.

There is an immediate problem with any view of this form. To see this, consider the following case: suppose Ana and Ben are playing a match of chess. Suppose both of them are of the opinion that, when playing chess, one ought to play the move that maximizes one's chances of winning. Suppose it's Ana's turn to move. Suppose that, whereas she believes she would win iff she takes Ben's knight, Ben believes she would win iff she castles. Because of this, whereas Ben believes Ana ought to castle, Ana herself believes she ought not do so—she believes she ought to take Ben's knight instead. Suppose, moreover, that Ana and Ben are enemies who despise each other and who want nothing more than to defeat the other in chess. So each of them wants to win and in no way wants the other to win. Since Ben believes that Ana would win iff she castles, he does not want her to castle. In fact, he very much wants her not to.

This scenario seems possible. That is, it seems possible that Ben might judge that Ana ought to castle and yet in no way want her to do so. This version of expressivism, however, is forced to say that this scenario is *metaphysically* impossible. Since, according to it, a judge's J judgment that subject S ought to φ is constituted by J's wanting that S φs, it cannot be the case both that Ben judges that Ana ought to castle and that he does not want that she does. This version of expressivism, then, cannot account for agent-relative normative judgments.

Precisely because of this problem, some expressivists have formulated versions of the theory according to which, for J to judge that S ought to φ is instead for J to have some

kind of pro-attitude in favor J's own φ-ing in case of being in a situation that is relevantly like S's. Here is the generic version of the theory: for J to judge that S ought to φ is for J to want to φ herself in case of being in a situation relevantly like S's. So, for example, Jane's judgment that Sam ought to see the doctor is constituted by her wanting to see the doctor if in a situation relevantly like Sam's.

Unfortunately, there is also an immediate problem with any view of this form. Consider Ana and Ben again. Ben believes that Ana ought to castle, Ana believes she ought not to. I take it as a datum that Ana and Ben thereby disagree. Part of what makes their disagreement possible, however, is that their respective judgments concern the same issue: whether Ana ought to castle or not. If their respective judgments did not concern the same issue, then they would not thereby disagree. The problem with expressivist views that take this form, then, is that they construe the attitudes that constitute these judgments as concerning different issues: Ben's attitude concerns his own actions, Ana's attitude concerns her own. Ben wants himself to castle in case of being in Ana's situation. Ana wants herself not to castle in case of being in the situation she is in. Even granting that there is disagreement "in attitude," there is no recognizable sense in which they disagree. To see this, consider whether there would be disagreement in belief if Ben believed that he himself would castle in Ana's situation, and Ana believed that she herself would not castle in case of being in the situation she is actually in. Clearly, they would not thereby disagree. Their beliefs are perfectly consistent, because they concern different issues. The same, I argue, would be true regardless what attitude the expressivist picks as constituting normative judgments. This version of expressivism, then, is unable to account for interpersonal disagreement.[1]

So, in order to account for interpersonal disagreement, there is pressure on expressivists to make the respective attitudes concern the same issue. However, to account for agent-relativity, there is the opposite pressure on them to construe such attitudes as concerning different issues. That is the dilemma. To the best of my knowledge, there is no version of expressivism that can account for both interpersonal disagreement and agent-relative normative judgments.

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[1] To deal with this problem, some expressivists (most famously, Allan Gibbard) appeal to centered propositions as contents. In the paper, I explain why such appeals do not solve the problem. But this can already be seen by attending to the fact that there would not be disagreement in beliefs with corresponding contents, *even if* we thought of the contents of such beliefs as centered propositions.