

# Epistemic Expressivism

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## Abstract

Epistemic expressivism is the application of a nexus of ideas, which is prominent in ethical theory (more specifically, metaethics), to parallel issues in epistemological theory (more specifically, meta-epistemology). Here, in order to help those new to the debate come to grips with epistemic expressivism and recent discussions of it, I first briefly present this nexus of ideas as it occurs in ethical expressivism. Then, I explain why and how some philosophers have sought to extend it to a version of epistemic expressivism. Finally, I consider a number of objections and replies with the aim of giving the reader the tools needed to begin to evaluate the promise and prospects of epistemic expressivism.

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## 1. *What is Ethical Expressivism*

In ethical theory, in addition to normative ethical questions about what is right, wrong, etc., we seek answers to metaethical questions about what it means to claim that something is right, wrong, etc. and what connections these claims have to our motivations to act and the way the world is. Ethical expressivism is a view in this latter debate. It is inspired by the projectivist view sometimes attributed to Hume that ethical words “gild and stain” reality “with the colours borrowed from internal sentiment” (294) rather than describe something always already there. It’s also inspired by the emotivist view associated closely with Ayer (1936/1946) and Stevenson (1937) that ethical words are used to express and evoke our emotional attitudes.<sup>1</sup> And it is closely related to the prescriptivism of Hare (1952), which holds that ethical claims are semantically similar to imperatives.<sup>2</sup>

In ethical expressivism, however, these ideas become more concrete and precise. The view is basically that, as descriptive claims express factual beliefs, ethical claims express a distinctive non-representational kind of mental state – what we might call a “pro-/con-attitude,” “conative state,” or even an evaluative “belief” (as long as we distinguish this from a descriptive belief).<sup>3</sup> Whatever we call it, the idea is that ethical judgments have, at least in part, a desire-like “direction of fit” with the world.<sup>4</sup>

Some metaethicists endorse ethical expressivism because they think it makes the best sense of the distinctive way ethical claims are connected to action. Here, expressivists argue that there is a special “internal” connection between ethical claim-making and action, such that we expect someone who sincerely makes an ethical claim, which bears on their own actions, to be at least somewhat motivated to act in a way that accords with the claim. Insofar as we accept a belief-desire psychology of action, the most parsimonious place to locate the desire-like element needed to explain this internal connection would be in the mental state expressed by the ethical claim itself. Hence, expressivists think this mental state is distinct from the sorts of factual beliefs expressed by descriptive claims.

Another reason to endorse ethical expressivism is that it comports with a thoroughgoing naturalism. Here, expressivists argue that ontological commitment to ethical properties

generates metaphysical and epistemological puzzles. If one thinks ethical properties are identical to (or even just constituted by) natural properties, then one is committed to a metaphysical reduction which is hard to pull off. If one thinks ethical properties are not identical to (or constituted by) natural properties, then one is committed to a type of property, knowledge of which is difficult to explain. Moreover, many philosophers hold that, in some sense, the ethical supervenes on the natural; but this relation is hard to explain if ethical properties are irreducible to natural properties. Expressivists argue that these puzzles can be avoided by viewing ethical claims as expressing mental states which are not conceived of as representing the way the world is but as putting a special sort of pressure on motivation to action.

## 2. *What is Epistemic Expressivism*

As in ethical theory, in epistemological theory we seek answers to questions both about what sorts of beliefs are justified, rational, known, etc., and about what it means to claim that a belief is justified, rational, known, etc. and how these claims are connected to inquiry and to the world. Although they are rarely called such, these separate sets of questions could be called “normative epistemological” and “metaepistemological” questions. Epistemic expressivism is, again, a view in the metaepistemological debate. It is related to Austin’s early suggestion that “When I say ‘I know’, I give others my word” (99). However, it is more akin to Rorty’s pragmatist view that knowledge attributions do not describe a mirroring relation between mind and world but comment on the status of one’s beliefs among one’s peers (175) and Craig’s suggestion that epistemic concepts were developed to tag and keep track of reliable informants (1–11). In a similar vein, Heller presents an expressivist friendly idea writing “‘Knowledge’ is our word for saying that S’s epistemic condition is good enough when she has a true belief without saying exactly what that condition is” (119).

In epistemic expressivism, however, these ideas become more concrete and precise. Generically, it is an application of the core ideas of ethical expressivism to the epistemic case. Predictably, this means that an epistemic expressivist holds that, as descriptive claims express factual beliefs, epistemic claims express a distinctive non-representational kind of mental state. Again, we can call it a pro-/con-attitude, a conative state, or an evaluative “belief.” It doesn’t have to be the same kind of non-representational state as expressivists think is expressed by ethical claims; and most epistemic expressivists think there must be both cognitive and conative elements in the state. What is important is that epistemic judgments have, at least in part, a desire-like direction of fit with the world. Some authors apply this idea specifically to attributions of knowledge, other authors apply this idea specifically to attributions of justification, and still others think that it applies to attribution of knowledge in virtue of its applying to attributions of justification and justification’s being conceptually related to knowledge. In any case, there are at least four different ways to motivate epistemic expressivism that have been put into print. I outline these briefly in what follows (roughly in chronological order of when they first appeared).

## 3. *It is Needed to Support Ethical Expressivism*

One of the liabilities of ethical expressivism is that it appears to contradict important aspects of ordinary ethical discourse. For example, ordinary speakers seem to treat ethical claims as the expression of beliefs, which when well supported can count as knowledge.

To appreciate this, just think of what things you'd say that you know are wrong. Of course, there are hard cases in ethics, but surely we all *know* that torturing babies for fun is wrong. But if the claim "Torturing babies for fun is wrong" is not itself the expression of a belief, then how can we know it is true? After all, knowledge is standardly thought to require *at least* belief that correctly represents the world and is well supported.

In response to this difficult question, most contemporary expressivists pursue some version of the program Blackburn called "quasi-realism" which "tries to earn, on the slender basis [of expressivist anti-realism], the features of moral language...which might tempt people to realism" (1984: 171). This usually involves some form of minimalism about the notions of *truth* and *assertion*, which helps to accommodate some of the ways we ordinarily talk about ethical matters. But perhaps the most difficult feature of ordinary ethical discourse to capture within an expressivist theory is these attributions of ethical knowledge. However, Blackburn, Gibbard, and others have suggested that this difficulty can also be overcome within the confines of quasi-realist expressivism.

To this end, Blackburn argues that, "...the primary function of talking of 'knowledge' is to indicate that a judgment is beyond revision" (1998: 318). We are marking it out as "beyond revision" in the sense that "no further useful investigation or thought ought to undermine the [judgment]" (1996: 87). And Gibbard claims that knowledge attributions, such as "Joe knows there are cows on the hill...means very roughly...that judgments like his are to be relied on" (2003: 227). In his preferred terminology, this means that they are "plan-laden" rather than "prosaically factual."

The implicit strategy here is to address the objection to expressivism based on ordinary attributions of ethical knowledge by rejecting the assumption that knowledge requires a belief which correctly represents reality. If, instead, we think that attributions of justification and knowledge are themselves, at least in part, the expressions of a commitment to a judgment's being "beyond revision" or to a judgment's being of a kind "to be relied on," and we conceive of these commitments as non-representational attitudes, then we can make theoretical room for different sorts of knowledge. Some knowledge (e.g. empirical knowledge of the natural world) may involve representational beliefs but other knowledge may involve non-representational judgments with a special role in motivating action. The important thing is that the attribution of knowledge is no mere description of the relation of these judgments stand in to reality. For there is always a question of how reliable or well supported a judgment should be before it counts as knowledge, and the answer to this question may be more a matter of our endorsement of certain standards of judgment than something we can find already there in nature.

In this vein, Ridge writes,

The first reason to favor an expressivist account of knowledge claims is that such an account can accommodate and explain the pre-theoretical intuition that attributions of normative knowledge are intelligible in the face of the fact that normative judgment itself is best understood in expressivist terms. (86)

In sum, one reason to be an epistemic expressivist is that it coheres well with ethical expressivism, especially in the way that it helps to avoid an objection based on the way ordinary ethical discourse includes the attribution of ethical knowledge.

#### *4. Attributions of Justification and Knowledge are Normative*

A second way to motivate epistemic expressivism stems from the apparent normativity of epistemic claims. Although we are always interested in truth when evaluating

someone's beliefs epistemically, we are also interested in other things: whether the belief is based on good reasons, formed by a reliable process, explanatorily powerful, etc. Most philosophers agree that it's something in this nexus of further considerations which make the difference between a true belief and knowledge. Moreover, these further considerations are broadly normative considerations. All epistemic expressivists stress this, though there is considerable debate about what exactly makes a claim or consideration a normative one.<sup>5</sup>

According to Field, there are two basic ways to think about these further normative considerations relevant to knowledge – one descriptivist and the other expressivist. On the first way, they comprise something like a “justificatory fluid” (1998: 7) that rises and falls based on the interaction of all of the elements. Then, “the job of the epistemologist is to come up with an epistemological dipstick that will measure what overall level of justification we end up with in any given situation” (2009: 249). On the second way, there are no robust normative facts about precisely which extra elements and in what balance are necessary for knowledge. Rather the nature and level of “justification” required for knowledge is the product of epistemic norms or policies meant to govern belief formation. Thus, we should see epistemic claims as expressing, in part, our commitment to a specific set of norms or policies for belief formation. This stands in contrast to seeing epistemic claims as expressing purely factual beliefs.

Field endorses the latter picture, which is why he thinks that, “if you ask ‘Where does the justification come from? What is its source?’ you’re asking the wrong question: you’re thinking of justification as like well water” (2009: 287). According to him, to claim that “a belief as justified (or reasonable, or rational, or whatever) is evaluating it, and evaluations aren’t straightforwardly factual” (2009: 250). He admits, that “one might reject the justificatory fluid picture and still regard epistemological debates as fully factual: one might say that the factual question is about which inductive policies have such properties as *reliability*” (1998: 8). But according to him,

this ‘naturalization move’ obscures the fact that we are interested in which policies have factual properties like reliability only insofar as this bears on the practical question of which policies to employ. It is the practical question that is primary, and it is not itself a factual question. (1998: 8)

More generally, many who favor an expressivist account in the ethical case do so for reasons that seem to apply to all normative claims. So, if we agree with Field that epistemic claims are also normative claims, then similar reasons should lead us to a form of epistemic expressivism. For example, Field’s “justificatory fluid” picture is clearly a parody of non-naturalist philosophers who think that normative properties exist somehow over and above the natural properties we are more familiar with in our everyday lives and scientific investigations.

### 5. From Epistemic Contextualism to Epistemic Expressivism

A third and related way to motivate epistemic expressivism comes from recent debate between “invariantists” and “contextualists” about knowledge. Invariantists claim that the truth conditions for knowledge attributions do not vary from context to context of utterance. This speaks to certain intuitions about cross-context agreement and disagreement; however, it faces trouble making sense of the ways attributions of knowledge are sometimes “shifty” across contexts of utterance. Often, it seems that we’ll say a sentence of the form “S knows that p,” from one (“low-standards”) context, whereas

from another (“high-standards”) context we’ll deny this, even though nothing has changed about S’s epistemic standing vis-à-vis p. Contextualists argue that this is best explained by seeing our knowledge attributions as implicitly context-sensitive. What this means is that there is no invariant knowledge relation one must stand in to a proposition in order to count as knowing it but rather a family of epistemic relations, any one of which may in principle be picked out in a particular context when someone says that someone knows some proposition. This, of course, makes sense of the shiftiness, but it has trouble explaining intuitions of cross-context agreement and disagreement.

This issue has been widely debated in recent epistemology. In Chrisman (2007), I argued that much of the debate ignores a third option – expressivism about knowledge attributions. The idea, which draws on Gibbard’s (1990) treatment of attributions of rationality, is to view knowledge attributions as expressing both the factual content that the subject’s true belief meets certain standards and the non-factual acceptance of these standards. In addition to the reasons given for epistemic expressivism above, the reason I proposed this position is that it seems to me to get the primary benefits of both invariantism and contextualism while also avoiding each of their primary drawbacks. Let me explain.

Unlike the contextualist, the epistemic expressivist thinks that knowledge attributions express more than the factual belief that some target belief is true and meets certain standards. Knowledge attributions are thought also to express acceptance of these standards. This is what helps the expressivist, like the invariantist, to explain intuitions of cross-context agreement and disagreement. For the expressivist, this will be a matter of agreeing and disagreeing about which epistemic standards to accept. However, like the contextualist, the epistemic expressivist can explain the apparent shiftiness of our knowledge attributions by saying that, in different contexts, a knowledge attribution can relate to different epistemic norms or standards.

Hence, if invariantism and contextualism are opposed positions that both have benefits and drawbacks, epistemic expressivism may offer the best of both worlds. (Of course, this is true only if it doesn’t carry further problems of its own. In Chrisman (2010) I suggest that it does.)

## 6. *The Value of Knowledge*

The final motivation for epistemic expressivism I want to mention derives from discussions of the value of knowledge. It has been widely noted that we value knowledge more than mere true belief and even more than true belief that is justified but somehow falls short of knowledge. Epistemologists and value theorists have attempted to explain this since Plato’s *Meno*. Some think that it puts a constraint on acceptable theories of the nature of knowledge, whereas others think that it needs to be explained but they deny that its explanation lies in the nature of knowledge.

From the point of view of an epistemic expressivist, this debate looks to be both spurious and an opportunity. It looks spurious because an expressivist thinks that knowledge and justification have no more of a nature, which may or may not explain our valuing it, than goodness has a nature which explains our motivation to pursue it. According to the expressivist, this is the wrong way to look at the issue, in both cases. If ethical and epistemic claims are expressions of at least partially non-representational mental states, then they shouldn’t be viewed as representing something in reality with a nature that might explain these things. Rather, explanation of our valuing knowledge and pursuing goodness should

be explained in terms of what it is to judge that something is a case of knowledge or goodness and how these judgments relate to our broader practices.

In this vein, Kappel has argued, debate about the value of knowledge also presents an opportunity for the epistemic expressivist. For, if claiming someone knows something is itself to express a pro-attitude towards that belief, then it's hardly surprising that we positively value those beliefs which we take to be knowledge. To explain this further, Kappel argues that there are special norms or inquiry – what he calls the “k-norms” – that are related to knowledge attributions. These norms say when someone should regard a proposition as true, exempt a proposition from doubt, cease inquiry about the truth of the proposition, etc. It is pragmatically useful for a belief to meet these norms, since it means that one's cognitive energies can be devoted to other matters. Hence, Kappel suggests that the reason why we express a special pro-attitude when attributing knowledge is that we take someone to be in this pragmatically useful state. The epistemic status of their belief is “good enough” to regard it as true, cease inquiry, exempt the belief from doubt, etc. This supports the expressivist idea that knowledge attributions express a pro-attitude (whatever is involved in taking a belief to be “good enough”) rather than a factual belief.

## 7. Objections

Most objections to epistemic expressivism in print have not sought directly to undercut the sorts of motivations outlined above but rather to show that epistemic expressivism has other drawbacks.<sup>6</sup>

For example, Cuneo argues that epistemic expressivists face a special problem of undercutting the very epistemic commitments needed to argue for their theory. His idea is that, as part of the quasi-realist program mentioned above, expressivists will typically have to speak from two perspectives – one “internal” to or embedded in the relevant area of thought and discourse and the other “external” to or abstracted away from this area of thought and discourse.

In the ethical case, this causes no special problem. Here, from the perspective internal to ethical thought and discourse, the expressivist will do something that looks very much like giving and assembling ethical reasons, ethically evaluating actions, uttering ethical truths, etc. However, from the external perspective of theoretical inquiry into the metaphysics and epistemology of ethical thought and discourse, as the expressivist will deny that there really are ethical reasons and facts, as he thinks ethical claims express non-representational states of mind rather than factual beliefs.

According to Cuneo, a special problem with this move comes when it's made in the epistemic case. For there's a sense in which there can be no such thing as an external perspective of theoretical inquiry on our epistemic thought and discourse. As Cuneo puts it, “anything we could recognizably call ‘theoretical inquiry’...involves viewing ourselves as assembling reasons, epistemically evaluating claims, offering arguments, and so forth” (170). He thinks this makes it impossible to take the external perspective with respect to epistemic discourse and practice: “anything we could recognizably call theoretical inquiry requires taking not the external, but the internal perspective” (170). If this is right, it means there is no cogent way for an epistemic expressivist to argue for his own view.

In a similar vein, Lynch argues that, insofar as one is engaged in any inquiry whatsoever, one is committed to the *prima facie* goodness of coming to believe truths about the relative matter over falsehoods. He thinks we can view that as a constitutive goal or norm



of inquiry. However, he thinks this is already problematic for an expressivist view about claims of epistemic value. For

...we can't meaningfully abstract from our own epistemic goals, which in turn means that we can't reach the epistemically disengaged standpoint. Yet if we can't reach the epistemically disengaged standpoint, then it is unclear how we can even make sense of epistemic expressivism. (90)

Carter and Chrisman (forthcoming) seek to reconstruct Cuneo's and Lynch's objections in more detail, draw out their similarities, and show how an epistemic expressivist could respond. The issue turns crucially on whether epistemic expressivism is committed to two "perspectives" as Cuneo thinks of them or an "epistemically disengaged standpoint" as Lynch thinks of that. We suggest instead that the epistemic expressivist should be understood, instead, as seeking to answer one question (about epistemic evaluations) in a way that obviates the need to answer another metaphysical question (about the nature of epistemic values and facts).

But even if a response along these lines to Cuneo's and Lynch's objections works, there are two more worries that any form of epistemic expressivism will have to overcome in order to be viable.

First, insofar as it parallels ethical expressivism, epistemic expressivism is not just the thesis that epistemic claims are non-representational. It's the thesis that epistemic claims are non-representational because they express a type of mental state that plays a desire-like rather than belief-like role in the psychology of motivation. In the ethical case, this is in turn supported by the "internalist" fact that we expect one who makes particular ethical judgments (basically the ones bearing on his own actions) to be at least somewhat motivated to act in their accord. Ethical judgments, as we might put it, are deeply practical.

There is debate about how exactly to spell out this "internal" connection between ethical judgment and motivation, but whatever it turns out to be, it seems that, if there is a connection in the epistemic case, the connection is considerably looser. Although it may make some sense to talk about policies for belief formation, as Field does, the relevant claims here (e.g. attributions of knowledge and justification) seem to be directly about whether particular beliefs *someone already has* are good or bad beliefs to have, and only indirectly connected to particular actions which might be said to be in accord with the epistemic judgments. So, we cannot say that there is an internal connection between epistemic claims and motivations to believe. (Moreover, many epistemologists are skeptical of the idea that there can be "motivations to believe" like there are motivations to act.) Of course, there are the actions of inquiry and testimony, where one's own view of which beliefs are known or justified will matter for which particular actions one performs. However, there seems to be no epistemic analog of the case where one judges that Xing would be the ethically right thing to do, and so one is motivated to X. For the object of our epistemic evaluations are not actions but beliefs.

This isn't a knockdown objection against epistemic expressivism. But what it means is that, at least initially, the epistemic expressivist's story about the nature of the mental state expressed by epistemic claims is a less precise and more difficult to assess than the ethical expressivist's story. Perhaps there are other non-representational mental states besides the ones which play a desire-like role in the motivation of action, and the epistemic expressivist can point to these as examples of the types of states expressed by epistemic claims. Or perhaps there are other ways to endorse a form of expressivism besides thinking that

the reason epistemic claims are non-representational is that they express non-representational states of mind.<sup>7</sup>

Second, the main worry metaethicists have had about ethical expressivism is that it's inconsistent with a plausible semantics for ethical sentences. Debate about this usually goes under the heading of the "Frege-Geach" problem. Geach noticed that expressivists will have a hard time explaining the way ethical claims can be embedded in logically complex contexts to support certain kinds of inferences. However, the problem appears to be even more general than that. Although some philosophers have proposed expressivist accounts of the semantic contribution of ethical words, it is by no means clear that there is a satisfactorily general semantic account that is consistent with expressivism. Since it is explained well in many other places<sup>8</sup>, I won't attempt to explain the problem further here, except to say that insofar as this is a major worry about ethical expressivism, clearly it will carry over to epistemic expressivism as well.

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### Short Biography

Matthew Chrisman is a lecturer at the University of Edinburgh and in 2011 was a visiting fellow at the Centre for Time at the University of Sydney. His research is in Ethics (especially metaethics), Epistemology (especially epistemic normativity), and the Philosophy of Language (especially semantics). He has published papers in the *Journal of Philosophy*, *Oxford Studies in Metaethics*, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, *Philosophers' Imprint*, and *Philosophical Studies*. He completed his PhD at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 2006.

### Notes

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<sup>1</sup> See my forthcoming 2013 for more discussion of emotivism.

<sup>2</sup> See my forthcoming for more discussion of the relation of these proto-expressivist views to contemporary versions of ethical expressivism. There I also characterize the main arguments for and against ethical expressivism in much greater detail.

<sup>3</sup> Expressivism is often characterized as the view that ethical claims express attitudes *instead of beliefs*. However, this characterization presupposes a representationalist conception of beliefs. Recently, most expressivists have rejected this presupposition and argued that their view is consistent with thinking that the relevant claims express beliefs, as long as we have an alternative conception of beliefs that allows for a distinction between factual beliefs and evaluative (or "practical" or "normative") beliefs. In what follows I will sometimes speak of epistemic and ethical "judgments" to refer neutrally to the mental state expressed by ethical and epistemic claims, whatever that happens to be. This is standard practice in metaethics, although it runs roughshod over the distinction of the mental act of judging and the mental state of belief.

<sup>4</sup> There are many authors working in this area. See especially the seminal works of Blackburn (1984), Gibbard (1990), and Schroeder (2008a). See Schroeder (2010) and my forthcoming for more citations and discussion of the different versions of ethical expressivism.

<sup>5</sup> Although it raises further interesting questions, Sellars' characterization of knowledge may be helpful for appreciating the way in which epistemic claims are normative. He writes, "...in characterizing an episode or state as that of *knowing*, we are not giving an empirical description of that episode or state; we are placing it in the logical space of reasons, of justifying and being able to justify what one says" (§36). This gets taken up in different ways by



Brandom (2000: ch. 3) and Rosenberg (2002: ch. 5). However, I don't think either of them count as epistemic expressivists in the sense extended from the metaethical debate.

<sup>6</sup> One exception: Kvanvig argues that Field's version of epistemic expressivism cannot explain the value of knowledge because it is committed to the "non-alethic status" of epistemic norms. I'm not sure why he thinks this is true, since most contemporary expressivists hold that the relevant claims are truth-apt. Kappel (op. cit.) responds briefly to this charge, and it is also taken up in Carter and Chrisman (op. cit.).

<sup>7</sup> This is the claim I pursue in Chrisman 2010. However, I don't think it's right to call the resulting view a form of "expressivism."

<sup>8</sup> See especially Schroeder (2008b, 2010) for further discussion.

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