

Notes on *Expression, Truth, and Reality: Some Variations on Themes from Wright*
Pt. 2: Simple Avowal Expressivism and Avowal Neo-expressivism

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The Big Question/The Epistemic Asymmetry:

Why is it that avowals, understood as true or false ascriptions of contingent states to an individual are so rarely questioned or corrected, are generally so resistant to ordinary epistemic assessment, and are so strongly presumed to be true?

Sincere, False Avowals and Simple Avowal Expressivism

“...as you sit on the dentist’s chair and say “My tooth hurts!” before the drill reaches your mouth, your dentist may sensibly question whether you really are in pain, even without questioning your sincerity...At first blush, this kind of case may seem grist to the materialist introspectionist mill: your tooth doesn’t really hurt, but your internal instrospector mistook what is in fact (say) fear of the approaching drill for pain, and it is this finding that your false avowal represents. But how plausible is it to regard your exclamation “My tooth hurts!” as a report of your (false) belief that your tooth hurts? After all, under the circumstances, you might have equally said: “Ouch!,” or emitted a yelp, or winced. Should we think of the wince as equally the upshot of a false belief that you formed about your internal state? Isn’t it much more plausible to regard the exclamation as...on par with the wince – as something forced out of you..?” (167)

The question here is: how are we to best understand these sorts of cases?

One possible answer is through

Simple avowal expressivism: avowals are similar to natural expressions in being bits of behavior that typically serve directly to express our present mental states rather than to report their presence.

On this view, avowals resemble descriptive reports, but logically and semantically they are more akin to spontaneous natural expressions (grunts, groans, grimaces, etc.), and in no way meant to express a judgment or belief. Natural expressions, it seems, aren’t subject to epistemic assessment. We don’t expect someone who smiles or gasps or cringes to give reasons. We don’t challenge it whatsoever.

How to Solve the Epistemic Asymmetry with Simple Avowal Expressivism in 2 Steps

Step 1: Admit that, *grammatically speaking*, mental terms don't pick out mental states and ascribe them to individuals, but only express subjects' mental states, like gasps or winces. (the 'no-ascription' aspect)

Step 2: Conclude that, *epistemically speaking*, it is a mistake to appeal to introspection to explain the special, secure epistemic status of avowals! Just don't concern yourself with the epistemic basis of avowals, because they do not serve to describe the avower's mental states in the first place. They are in the wrong 'grammatical category' to be subject to epistemic assessment. "A subject who avows 'I am in pain' is just like one who spontaneously lets out a cry: such a one cannot be legitimately asked to give reasons, questioned, or challenged.

(Bonus! This also lets us avoid Cartesian ontological commitments to "especially accessible mental items that are referred to by sensation"!)

2 Problems for Simple Avowal Expressivism

1.) The Frege-Geach problem

If avowals do not involve genuine ascription of mental states to their avowers, how can they have 'truth-conditional equivalents' that *do* involve such ascriptions? How can they be interchanged in certain contexts? How can they serve as legitimate premises in logical conclusions? They can't. By accepting the 'no-ascription' aspect, we seem to give up on important semantic continuities between avowals and other ascriptions.

In this way, simple avowal expressivism is reminiscent of traditional ethical expressivism, wherein ethical claims are mere expressions of our emotions, preferences, etc., not genuine, truth-evaluable assertions. Both ethical expressivism and avowal expressivism seem unable to accommodate semantic continuities between ethical/mentalist discourse, respectively, and ordinary descriptive discourse. But the ethical expressivist can maintain in response to the Frege-Geach problem that sentences containing ethical terms must have whatever semantic features allow sentences to function like ordinary indicative sentences.

Here are some things avowals can do: be embedded in "force-stripping constructions," for instance, "if I am in pain, then bring me an aspirin", admit of tense-transformation "yesterday, I was in pain," so on and so forth.

In these contexts, avowals don't plausibly serve to express the mental states they name. *I am in pain* works importantly differently in embedded contexts than when uttered on its own. But the avowal expressivist can also maintain, following the ethical expressivist, that *avowals* must possess whatever features make a sentence take indicative form, but

they don't have to conclude that such sentences must *always* be used to make assertions or descriptive reports, rather than serving to express desires outside such contexts.

Wright thinks that the Geach problem causes more trouble for ethical expressivism than for avowal expressivism. It seems to show that, "insofar as [these sentences are] capable of making positive contributions to truth conditions (in force-stripping contexts)," these embedded sentences must possess "truth-evaluable" contents. This is problematic for the ethical expressivist because she is committed to the view that there are no real moral states of affairs. She is in the business of promoting an anti-realist agenda. Avowal expressivism is importantly different; you *can't* be both an avowal expressionist and an anti-realist about mental states.

2.) There is psychology!

the sentence "I have a toothache" makes no genuine reference to a state of an individual. It's just an "ouch" or "aaahhh" or grimace. The ethical expressivists' commitment to anti-realism implies that ethical terms do not refer to genuine ethical properties no matter where they occur. But the simple avowal expressivism has to reconcile the truth-conditional equivalence between sentences like "I have a toothache," which makes no genuine reference to a state of an individual, with non-expressive utterances which *do* make such reference, like the sentence "I had a toothache yesterday".

Neo-Expressivism

An adequate solution to the puzzle about epistemic asymmetries must have the following things in mind:

1. It must respect the features of avowals that set them apart from certain nonmental present-tense self-ascriptions
2. It must not compromise the semantic continuities between avowals and other ascriptions.
3. It must not be fashioned after anti-realist accounts in other areas.

Avowals enjoy two kinds of immunity:

- immunity to error through misidentification (IETM)
 - o Here are some important features of ascriptions that are IETM
 - The class of ascriptions that are IETM is *heterogenic*: it includes mental self-ascription, bodily self-reports, perceptual self-reports, and demonstrative descriptions.
 - If an ascription of form "I am F" is IETM, it is possible to fail to be F, but it is not possible to have reason to think *someone* is F that isn't at the same time reason to think that *I* am F. Any error here is not due to recognitionally mistaking one person for another.
 - Whether or not an ascription is IETM doesn't depend on its semantic content, but its epistemic basis.

- immunity to error through misascription
 - o When I think “I want some water,” I have no reason to think that someone wants water other than the reason to think it’s I who wants water. But I also have no reason to think I want some substance that isn’t a reason to think I want water.
 - Whatever mental state you’re in, call it M. You have no reason for think that you are in some state separately from whatever reason you have for thinking you are in M. (181)
 - Misavowing is not due to mistaking one mental state for another.

Because avowals have both of these immunities, they are protected from a wider array of epistemic errors than all other ascriptions. So, avowals distinctive security are a matter of their unique immunity to misascription. But this is not a full explanation!

Two further questions:

- 1.) Why is it that avowals are not only immune to error through misidentification
- 2.) Immunity to error is no guarantee of truth – why are avowals so strongly presumed to be true?

To answer these, we should “appeal to [avowal’s] expressive character” (182).

Avowal neo-expressivism maintains that we should see avowals as direct expressions of subjects; self-ascribed mental states, but, unlike natural expressions, avowals represent genuine, truth-evaluable ascriptions.

Two different senses of expressions: A-expressions vs. S-expressions

A-expression: *action* sense, a *person* expresses a state of hers by intentionally doing something

ex. When I give you a hug, I a-express my joy at seeing you. I express my joy in the *action sense*.

Questions about a-expression: how broad is the scope a-expression? Does blushing a-express embarrassment? Is it specialized? What does my walking downstairs a-express? That I have some desire? That I have a brain? That I have a beating heart? If I don’t intentionally phi, does phi-ing a-express anything?

S-expression: *semantic* sense, a *sentence* expresses an abstract proposition, thought or judgment by being a conventional representation of it.

Ex. The sentence “the dog is sleeping on the mat” s-expresses that proposition that at time [t], the dog is sleeping on the mat. The sentence s-expresses the proposition.

The Act/Product Distinction

“avowal” admits of two different readings. The first refers to someone act of avowing – an event with action-properties. The second refers to the result of the act of avowing – a linguistic token with certain semantic properties.

The product of natural expression does not s-express anything. There are no semantic rules that tell us cowering stands for fear. But avowals, understood as products, s-express propositions, namely, that the avower is in some state. Avowals and natural expressions differ in terms of their products.

But what happens when we look at avowals as *acts*, not as products? There can still be notable similarities between the act of avowing a state and the act of naturally expressing it (e.g. between “this is fun!” and “yaaaayy!”), even if there are difference in the products of avowing acts and naturally expressive acts.

“...consider a linguistic utterance such as “It’s so good to see you!” It typically serves to express the speaker’s joy. But, it seems, one can equally express her joy by avowing “I am so glad to see you!” Armed with the act/product distinction, as well as the distinction between a- and s- expression we can capture the similarities and differences between the two utterances. They can both be seen as instances of the same type of act, and they both a-express the same type of mental state. But the product of these two acts, though both linguistic, are (semantically) different. The first sentence token s-expresses the proposition that it is very good to see one’s hearer. By contrast, the second sentence token is self-ascriptive: it s-expresses the proposition or thought that the speaker is very glad to see her hearer. By contrast, the product of an act of giving your friend a cheerful hug is not governed by any syntactic or semantic rules of English, and it does not s-express anything. Still, it can equally be seen as an act of the same type, which a-expresses your joy at seeing your friend.”

This is meant to show that our everyday notion of expression applies equally well to expressive vehicles of all sorts. An expression is “an act, whether linguistic or nonlinguistic, whose point is none other than either to make public, put forth, share, or aire, or else just to give vent or voice, rather than to offer a descriptive report, make an assertion, or inform someone about the speaker’s present thoughts, feelings, emotions, or attitudes.”

Solving the Asymmetry with Neo-Expressivism

According to avowal neo-expressivism, avowals are a certain class of expressive acts in which a subject gives linguistic vent to present mental states. Acts of avowing are epistemically unmediated, but have *products* that have truth-values.

Take the scary dog example. When you exclaim, “That dog is scary!” you have expressed your present mental state by giving voice to your fear by means of a linguistic vehicle. The linguistic vehicle can be either true or false, depending on whether the dog is

“scary”. When you avow “I am scared of this dog”, you have expressed your fear using a linguistic vehicle that is semantically about you and your fear, and can be either true or false depending on whether or not you are actually afraid of the dog. The truth-makers of avowals are straight forward.

How does this help us solve the epistemic asymmetry? Why do avowals enjoy such special status?

When you avow, you “a-express the very same state whose presence makes true the proposition s-expressed by the avowal.” It is reasonable to assign subjects inalienable and non-transferable first-person authority on the “strength of recognizing their avowals as acts in which they directly express the very states they self-ascribe through the products of those acts at the same time as they self-ascribe them.” (186)

Avowal neo-expressivism does not take the special epistemic status of avowals to be products of the semantics or grammar of avowals *understood as products* – rather it appeals to their (a-) expressive character.

The upshot

Neo-expressivism allows us to

- A.) endorse the positive expressivist claim (i.e. maintain that mentalistic thoughts and utterances serve to a-express the mental states of the subject),
- B.) reject the negative semantic claim (i.e. maintain that utterances/thoughts in mentalistic discourse are truth-evaluable in that they s-express truth-evaluable propositions), and
- C.) reject the negative ontological claim (i.e. refuse to commit to there being no mentalistic facts of the matter, and no mental objects or properties to constitute proper subject matter for mentalistic discourse).

Neo-expressivism! Hurrah!