Ethical Neo-Expressivism

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On the a/s distinction

What behaviors do we call 'expressive'?
-   natural expressions, like yelps and grimaces
    o   the behavior and its connection to the expressed states are instilled by nature
-   conventional nonverbal expressions, like tipping a hat
-   conventional expressive verbal utterances, like "ouch!", or "I hate you!"
-   Verbal expressions of belief, like "there is a cat in the corner"
-   Speech acts

What do all these have in common? They all express states of mind, rather than propositions, concepts or ideas.

We can conceive of these sorts of expressions as 3 place relations that hold between the minded creature performing the act, and the mental states the act expresses. Call this a-expression. An agent a-expresses some mental state M by expressive means E.

And we can contrast this relation with that which holds between sentence-tokens and their semantic contents. Call this s-expression.

Intuitively, a-expression is more basic than s-expression
-   nonhuman animals and prelinguistic children are able to express states of mind without invoking the use of sentences to s-express propositions.

Motivational Asymmetry

Motivational Internalism (MI): it is necessary that anyone who makes moral judgments will be thereby motivated to comply

This means that if someone judges some act A to be wrong but has no motivation to refrain from doing A, they must not have *really* judged A to be wrong, as to do would constitute motivation to refrain from doing A.

If MI is true, then it seems to be part of the 'job' of ethical claims to express certain motivational attitudes. Even if MI is false, and it is not a necessary condition for moral judgment that the speaker be motivated to act accordingly, we still seem to expect people's ethical claims to be accompanied by motivations to act in certain ways.

- Consider the following two sentences

1. "Hunting for sport is wrong", and
2. "Hunting for sport is expensive"

There seems to be some *motivational asymmetry* here between ethical claims and ordinary, grammatically similar, descriptive claims: we can't imagine someone who sincerely and competently makes the claim in (1) and feels completely motivationally indifferent towards hunting for sport.

However, it is much easier to imagine someone who sincerely and competently makes the claim in (2) and feels completely motivationally indifferent towards hunting for sport.

Why the asymmetry? How do we explain the connection between ethical claims and motivation?

One response: Ethical expressivism

Here are some motivations for ethical expressivism. You might want to be an anti-realist about moral properties. Or, you might think it does a better job explaining the motivational efficacy of moral judgment.

Here's what the expressivist says: sincerely made ethical claims betray the speaker's conative attitude by directly expressing it.

There is a divorce between what ethical claims express and what they assert – expressivists hold that they make no assertions whatsoever.

Another response: Ethical Neo-expressivism

First, what is ethical neo-expressivism?

Two main tenets of ethical neo-expressivism:
1.) The products of ethical claims, s-expressed true/false propositions, are semantically continuous with ordinary descriptive claims. The propositions expressed should be specified disquotationally; "Lying is wrong" s-expresses the proposition that lying is wrong.
2.) The agent who makes an ethical claim a-expresses a motivational state.

Bar-on thinks that asymmetries of this sort, and the route we ought to take to solve them, should not seem novel to us, but rather reminiscent of the epistemic asymmetries that plagues avowals and the avowal neo-expressivist solution.

Quick refresher: Avowal neo-expressivism tries to solve the epistemic asymmetry between avowals and other expressions of mental states: why do avowals enjoy such special security? Avowal neo-expressivism says that avowals *directly a-express* the mental state avowed and, as such, are protected from epistemic criticism, but that avowals also have as products sentence (or thought) tokens with genuine truth conditions. Someone who is avowing feeling annoyed, as opposed to reporting it in consequence of therapy, is engaging in an act of direct expression of annoyance, rather than simply expressing the belief that she is annoyed. It is a propriety condition on avowing that the avower is in the avowed state – it is part of the norm for avowing properly.

The ethical counterpart solution to the motivational asymmetry claims that someone who is making an ethical claim, as opposed to offering a descriptive report of some state of affairs, is a-expressing the relevant motivational attitude. In making ethical claims, the neo-expressivist maintains that we a-express the very same states For a person to make a genuinely ethical claim is for her to express a motivational attitude, and having this attitude is a propriety condition on properly expressing the claim. You cannot properly express an ethical claim unless you are in the appropriate motivational state.

So, as with avowals, we appeal to the expressive character of the act of making ethical claims to explain away the asymmetry.

Some push-back against the 2nd tenet:

1.) Ethical graffiti

   Written anonymously on the board is the following:

   > "Roses are red,
   > Violets are blue,
   > Stealing is wrong,
   > And murder is too."

   How many ethical claims are being made here? Intuitively, two. But it seems that the ethical neo-expressivist is going to say that the number of ethical claims depends on the writer. If she were motivated not to steal, or not to commit murder, we might be able to maintain our intuitions on the neo-expressivist account—there really are two ethical claims on the board. But, suppose she's not motivated not to steal, or not to commit murder, but rather just thought the combination of words made pretty art (or something to that effect). Are there still ethical claims on the board?

2.) Lying about beliefs

I don't believe that lying is wrong, and yet I tell you "lying is wrong". Suppose you later find out that I am not the sort of person who is motivated not to lie. You might say to me, "You lied earlier! You lied when you said lying is wrong, because you don't believe that it is!" If I were a neo-expressivist, I might respond with "I didn't lie, I just failed to properly make an ethical claim". This seems like a strange interaction. It doesn't seem that I just missed the point of making an ethical claim, or committed some sort of expressive failure, but rather that I just lied about a belief.

Some push-back against the 1st tenet:

1.) Must we insist that ethical claims s-express a truth-evaluable proposition, even if we start from a anti-realist assumption about ethical facts? Why do we need to understand ethical claims as s-expressing propositions at all, if we think the world just isn't furnished with ethical properties? Why not just be an expressivist?