

# Non-Descriptivisms, Avowals and Attributions

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# The Plan

1. The argument: different versions of non-descriptivism

2. Analytic Categories

2.1 Scope: Partial, Global, Local

2.2 Individuation: Organic vs. building-block models

2.3 Source: Externalist vs. internalist approaches

3. Varieties of non-descriptivism

4. Epistemic non-descriptivism

# The Argument: Two Hypotheses

Provisional classification of non-descriptivist theories of meaning, attending to their scope:

- 1. Partial** semantic views that give the meaning of well-delimited fragments of discourse. The paradigm: classical emotivism, ascriptivism, prescriptivism
- 2. Global** semantic views that individuate propositional content via inferential relations. The paradigm: semantic inferentialism (the organic model), as defended by Frege, Brandom, and Price
- 3. Local** semantic views about higher-level concepts. The paradigm: Tractarian logical expressivism and Brandom's normative expressivism

# The Argument: Two Hypotheses

“Global” opposes to both, “local” and “partial”.

Contemporary developments of (1) include some features of (2).  
(1) is compatible with (partial) descriptivism and (3) is compatible with (local) descriptivism.

**[H1]** (1), (2), and (3) not necessarily are species of a single semantic genus.

**[H2]** (1), (2), and (3) might give correct analyses of distinguishable concepts expressed by the same terms “knowledge” and “belief”.

# Analytic Categories

Some analytic tools to argue for [H1]:

Two contrasting models of propositional individuation that might be dubbed “the building block model” and “the organic model”, respectively.

II.1.1 The *building-block* model: “If two sentences are built up in the same way out of corresponding designators with the same intensions, then we shall say that they have the same intensional structure. We might perhaps also use for this relation the term ‘synonymous’, because it is used in a similar sense by other authors” (Carnap 1947, §56, p. 56).

# Analytic Categories

II.1.2 The *organic* model: “A distinction between subject and predicate does not occur in my way of representing a judgement. In order to justify this I remark that the contents of two judgements may differ in two ways: either the consequences derivable from the first, when it is combined with certain other judgements, always follow also from the second, when it is combined with the same judgements, [and conversely] or this is not the case. The two propositions ‘The Greeks defeated the Persians at Plataea’ and ‘The Persians were defeated by the Greeks at Plataea’ differ in the first way. Even if one can detect a slight difference in meaning, the agreement outweighs it. Now I call that part of the content that is the same in both the conceptual content” (Frege 1879, §3, p. 12).

# Analytic Categories

Two competing semantic paradigms on the source of meaningfulness.

II.2.1 Internalist views that derive meaning from the agent's inner states

II.2.2 Externalist views that derive meanings from items or practices outside the agent's mind

# Analytic Categories



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The four possibilities have had historical instantiation. Case (i) corresponds to the standard Lockean view: “words, in their primary or immediate signification, stand for nothing but the ideas in the mind of him that uses them, how imperfectly soever or carelessly those ideas are collected from the things which they are supposed to represent” (Book III, chapter 2, §2)

# Analytic Categories

Ayer's view of ethical claims are mere interjections scores well as a candidate for (ii) [*organic and internalist*]. Classical representational empiricism, or the Tractarian view of elementary sentences fall under (iii) [*compositional and externalist*], and meaning as use approaches fit (iv) [*organic and externalist*].

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“Aesthetic terms are used in exactly the same way as ethical terms. Such aesthetic words as ‘beautiful’ and ‘hideous’ are employed, as ethical words are employed, not to make statements of fact, but simply to express certain feelings and evoke a certain response” (Ayer, 1936, p. 72).

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Stevenson (1937), in contrast, defends a less simplistic view and criticizes interest’s theories for failing to explain moral disagreement and for accepting scientific method in order to determine the correct application of moral terms. Stevenson adds a *pragmatist* aspect to the analysis of evaluative terms identifiable in the claim that they “are instruments used in the complicated interplay and readjustment of human interests” (Stevenson 1936, p. 20).

# Varieties of Non-descriptivism

## III.1 Partial non-descriptivism

Contemporary approaches inherit the internal as well as the pragmatic aspects, and seek a balanced between what speakers have in their minds and what speakers do with their utterances (even if sometimes the two aspects are kept part, Bar-On and Chrisman 2009). The main difference between the classical analyses and their contemporary heirs concerns the role of truth. (Chrisman 2007, p. 247) makes this point explicit when says, “it should [be] remembered that it isn’t part of any contemporary defended version of ethical expressivism to treat ethical claims as not truth-evaluable”.

# Varieties of Non-descriptivism

## III.1 Partial non-descriptivism

Partial non-descriptivisms can be *internalist* or *externalist*, but all of them are organic and non-compositional. The meaning of evaluative **terms** (“good”, “wrong”) has to be examined by taking into account the function systematically performed by the **sentences** in which they occur (the *expressivist strategy*).

# Varieties of Non-descriptivism

## III.2 Global non-descriptivism

Global non-descriptivism is the semantic counterpart of the organic model of propositional individuation. Propositions are individuated by their relations with other propositions and, according to the Fregean principle of context, the meaning of individual terms derives from their contribution to the whole. Frege's point is the core of semantic inferentialism, contemporarily developed by Brandom and Price. (Price 2011, p. 14, p. 19). Brandom's semantic inferentialism and Price's global expressivism are global non-descriptivist positions. (Barker 2007) offers a cognitivist version of global expressivism.

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Nevertheless,

Brandon's commitments and entitlements are moves in a game (1994, 2000), and Price's internal representation is of a logico-inferential nature (Price 2008). Barker (2007, p., 7, 8) adds that his is a theory of language agency, which suggests a pragmatist, externalist approach but his targets and language are closer to cognitivism than to any externalist view in which public behavior plays a relevant role.

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Harman (1982, p. 242): “A theory of conceptual role semantics involves the following two claims: 1. The meanings of linguistic expressions are determined by the contents of the concepts and thoughts they can be used to express. 2. The contents of concepts and thoughts are determined by their functional role in a person’s psychology.”

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The notion of truth-condition is used in the literature in at least two different ways that elicit at least two different senses of the expression “truth conditional irrelevance”.

# Truth-conditional irrelevance

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Let  $p$  be an elementary proposition, i.e. a propositional content whose analysis only yields first-order predicables and their nominal arguments. Elementary propositions are Recanati's Aristotelian propositions. The use in context of the following sentences gives rise to elementary propositions:

- (1) Victoria is a teenager,
- (2) I have a headache.

These sentences' truth conditions are the conditions under which they are true. Whether I have a headache or Victoria is a teenager depend on my current condition and on Victoria's properties and, according to the standard truth-conditional semantics, these truth conditions give the sentences' meaning.

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This is the first sense of "truth-condition" that I will call "Aristotelian truth conditions". Aristotelian truth conditions are relative truth conditions



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Sentences (propositions) can be the arguments of sentential (propositional) operators,  $O$ , as it happens with (1) in (3),

(3) Ten years ago, Victoria was a teenager.

Expressions indicating time, place, and possible worlds are sentential/propositional operators  $O$  that shift the evaluation context. Time and place can also be implicit in the assertion. Aristotelian truth conditions are relative truth conditions, that serve to individuate contents that might change their truth-value if evaluated in different contexts.

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Fregean truth conditions add to the Aristotelian truth conditions the values of the indexes needed to obtain absolute (non-relative) truth conditions.

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Now, an expression  $e$  can be truth-conditionally irrelevant because its meaning does not affect the lekton  $p$ , or because it does not affect the Fregean proposition,  $Op$ . In the first case  $e$  is truth-conditionally irrelevant in a relative sense, and the second case  $e$  is truth-conditionally irrelevant in an absolute sense.

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Local expressivisms defend that the terms concerned are truth-conditionally irrelevant, in a relative or absolute sense. Logical expressivism and standard accounts of discourse markers and expressives argue for the ***absolute truth irrelevance*** of the terms concerned (ineffability of expressives). Parenthetical verbs, local, temporal operators and standards of evaluation are ***irrelevant in a relative sense***.

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The historical motivation for the identification of a kind of meaning as “procedural” was provided by discourse markers, i.e. terms such as “so”, “therefore”, “nevertheless”, “but”, “and”, etc. and the label extends to cover the meaning of many other linguistic and non-linguistic categories: adverbs (certainly, allegedly, frankly), interjections (wow, oh), quantifiers (every), propositional attitude verbs, parenthetical verbs in Urmson's sense (I think, I believe), expressives (damn, the bastard), pronouns and pronominal phrases (I, this guy), and many others.

# Local Expressivism

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Wittgenstein, letter to Moore, October 1944, p. 365: “If I ask someone ‘Is there a fire in the next room?’ and he answers ‘I believe there is’, I can’t say: ‘Don’t be irrelevant. I asked you about fire, not about your state of mind!’”

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Urmson rejects that “know”, “believe”, or “regret” describe the speaker’s mental state (1952, p. 482) or her dispositions to behave in a certain way (483).

# Local Expressivism

Local expressivisms are ***compatible*** with local descriptivism and the building-block model concerning the lekton. The terms considered expressive are not building blocks but some other terms might very well be.

Minimal Expressivism (Frápolli & Villanueva 2012)

Normative Expressivism (Brandom 1994, 2000, 2008)

# Epistemic non-descriptivism

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Epistemic non-descriptivism inherits the complexity of general non-descriptivist views. Depending on the relative weight of internal and external factors in the explanation of meaning, the selected paradigm sentences are either first person present tense sentences (*avowals*) or else third person sentences (*attributions*).



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The kind of theory of meaning, externalism or internalism, authors favor can be figured out by looking at the type of sentence on which they make their analyses rest.

# Avowals and attributions

## 1. Avowals:

I know that Trump is the current President of the USA (KA)

I believe that Trump is the current President of the USA (BA)

## 2. Attributions:

Victoria knows that Trump is the current President of the USA (K3P)

Victoria believes that Trump is the current President of the USA (B3P)

# Avowals

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(Chrisman 2012, p. 3): “[Epistemic expressivism] 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 a pro-/con attitude, a conative state, or an evaluative “believe”. [...] What is important is that epistemic judgments have, at least in part, a desire-like direction of fit with the world”.

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Field 2009: epistemic claims express, in part, our commitment to specific set of norms

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Epistemic *claims* mean what they do in virtue of the state of mind they express. Something similar happens with *attributions* of justification or knowledge. For instance, “S is justified in believing that p” expresses one’s acceptance of a system of norms which one believes to positively value S’s belief that p. “S knows that p” expresses one’s acceptance of a system of epistemic norms, which one takes to positively value S’s true belief that p.



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Austin, “Other Minds”: “When I say ‘I know’ I give others my word.

”Gibbard’s and Chrisman’s Inferentialism: normative notions are defined in terms of oughts and oughts in terms of plans or intentions to action.

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[Norm of Belief] Do not assert what you do not believe

[Norm of Truth] Do not assert what you do not believe is true

Violation of [NB] is Moore's paradox:  $p$  but I don't believe it; [NT] supports the rules of introduction and elimination of the Truth operator, and Tarski's T-Convention.

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Nevertheless, by the norm of truth, an agent should not assert what she does not believe is true. From her point of view, there cannot be a difference between expressions of knowledge and expressions of belief. Gettier cases

# Avowals

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- (i) One problem is distinguishing between our beliefs meeting the standards and our belief that our beliefs meet the standards.
- (ii) Another is how to combine the two tiers (the motivational and the semantics, the first one explaining action and the second one giving the semantics) of the two-tiers expressivist view. Chrisman and Bar-On's Ethical Neo-Expressivism makes the internalist, motivational factor of ethical claims semantically irrelevant.

# Avowals

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Normativity requires an external stance

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A source of misunderstanding

- (i) conflating non-straightforward factuality, and the need of a non-descriptivist semantic picture with
- (ii) the motivational aspect of ethical expressivism, placing normativity in the subject's inner realm

# Avowals and attributions

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Global expressivism:

The contents of (KA) and (BA) and of (K3P) and (B3P) are sharply distinguished by their consequences (the fact that knowledge but not believe is factive)



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Global expressivism:

The contents of (KA) and (BA) and of (K3P) and (B3P) are sharply distinguished by their consequences (the fact that knowledge but not believe is factive)

From (KA) and (K3P), it follows that climate change is affecting the planet. From (BA) and (B3P), it does not.

# Attributions

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Rorty: Knowledge attributions comment on the status of one's beliefs among one's peers.

Craig: Epistemic concepts were developed to tag and keep track of reliable informants

Heller: "Knowledge" is our word for saying that S's epistemic condition is good enough

Blackburn: "Knowledge" serves to indicate that a judgement is beyond revision

Gibbard: "Joe knows that there are cows on the hill" means that the judgment must be relied on. Knowledge requires belief, and belief is explained in terms of plans.

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Externalist proposals in which mental states do not play any role

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Minimal Expressivism: The meaning of functions of propositions is individuated by their consequences.

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Minimal Expressivism: The meaning of functions of propositions is individuated by their consequences.

Brandom 2008: “the beginning of wisdom in assessing the significance of the justified true belief analysis of knowledge is to think about what one is doing when one attributes knowledge to another, or assesses the credentials of another as a knower”



# Attributions

(K3P) Victoria knows that the Tower of London opens on Mondays

By uttering (K3P) I do three different things:

I attribute to Victoria a *commitment* to the content that the Tower of London opens on Mondays

I attribute to Victoria the *entitlement* to that commitment (i.e. that she is in a position to make the assertion)

I *undertake* myself the corresponding commitment (I can only count as knowledge beliefs that I share).

# Attributions

(B3P) Victoria believes that the Tower of London opens on Mondays

I *attribute* to her the commitment with a content;

I *might* also attribute to her the entitlement to that commitment (I acknowledge that she has reasons to believe this way),

but I *take distances* with the content of her belief: I do not endorse it myself.

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Epistemic expressivism should get rid of the motivational internalist factor proper of classical ethical expressivism and adopt an externalist perspective that focuses on third person attributions.

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This option rules out the classical expressivist model, but other kinds maintain their options: global (or local, ME) inferentialism and normative expressivism.

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Thanks of your attention