

# EXPRESSIVISM AND THE 'DEEP PROBLEM OF RELATIVISM'

by

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(Under the Direction of Clark Wolf)

## ABSTRACT

Many philosophers are persuaded that naturalist projects in meta-ethics must, in the end, be committed to relativism. How should a good naturalist reply to this worry? Some defenders of expressivism have attempted to respond by arguing that expressivism is not committed to relativism after all. I am convinced that these responses trade on an ambiguity in the way relativist objections are posed. In this paper I specify two distinct forms of ethical relativism and examine whether they are consistent with an expressivist account of norms. I argue that expressivist views are unable to provide a fully satisfactory response to anti-relativist worries: Expressivist theories leave open the possibility that some ethical disagreements are irreconcilable. Because of this, some philosophers will remain unpersuaded by expressivist views. But if irreconcilable disagreement really is possible, then this will not constitute an objection to expressivism after all: indeed it may be a virtue of expressivist views that they leave open the possibility of such disagreement.

INDEX WORDS: Expressivism, Relativism, Objectivity; Deadlock, Meta-Ethics, Naturalism

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A.B., University of Georgia, 2003

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2003

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DEDICATION

To Julie, who holds all secrets of humanity.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project began almost four years ago on a stationary bike alongside my mentor and great friend Clark Wolf. Throughout, Dr. Wolf has provided me inspiration, encouragement, and, most importantly, criticism. I am forever indebted for his patience and insight. I also sincerely thank Alex Rosenberg for encouraging my commitment to naturalism, and I thank Alex Kaufman for making this commitment hard to fulfill. I thank Yuri Balashov for providing the semantic tools that made this project possible. I also thank Jeff Pugh and Rachel Kassel for braving philosophical waters and forcing me to explain myself always.

This project greatly benefited from comments and criticisms of each of these wonderful thinkers. Had I taken into account each of their comments, I am confident that the final product would have been of a much higher quality. All remaining errors are undoubtedly my own.

I am forever grateful to my parents, Steve and Sally, and my brother Scott for kindling my passion for knowledge and life.

This project was made possible by a series of generous gifts from the University of Georgia Foundation Fellows Program.

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## SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION

Many philosophers are persuaded that naturalist projects in meta-ethics must, in the end, be committed to relativism.<sup>1</sup> How should a good naturalist reply to this worry? Some defenders of expressivism have attempted to respond by arguing that expressivism is not committed to relativism after all. I am convinced that these responses trade on an ambiguity in the way relativist objections are posed. In this paper I specify two distinct forms of ethical relativism and examine whether they are consistent with an expressivist account of norms. I argue that expressivist views are unable to provide a fully satisfactory response to anti-relativist worries: Expressivist theories leave open the possibility that some ethical disagreements are irreconcilable. Because of this, some philosophers will remain unpersuaded by expressivist views. But if irreconcilable disagreement really is possible, then this will not constitute an objection to expressivism after all: indeed it may be a virtue of expressivist views that they leave open the possibility of such disagreement.

In section two I examine the expressivist account of ethical statements. In section three I identify two types of ethical relativist objection and consider whether they pose a genuine threat to expressivism. After concluding that the second objection – the relativist worry that sometimes there may be irresolvable ethical disagreement – does present a legitimate objection to the expressivist view, I consider in section four whether expressivism can provide a satisfactory foundation for ethical objectivity. I distinguish three conceptions of objectivity, and consider the sense in which an expressivist can consistently regard normative statements as ‘objective.’ I argue that the sense of

objectivity available on an expressivist foundation does not allay the relativist fear of ethical deadlock; however, in section five I suggest that the possibility of such relativism should actually count as a virtue of expressivist views.

## SECTION 2: IRREALISM: MACKIE AND BLACKBURN

Some philosophers reject ethical naturalism for the following reason: Since naturalism does not recognize real ethical properties, naturalist meta-ethical theories, so they believe, allow for a plurality of incommensurable ethical systems. Famously, J. L. Mackie argues that all ethical claims are false because ethical truth-makers do not exist; thus we are mistaken if we regard any ethical claim as better or more valuable than another. Mackie's view remains widely unpopular because it disparages commonsense normative commitments in a way most people find implausible and unacceptable. In light of this, some philosophers offer naturalist accounts of norms that attempt to retain and rationalize our commonsense ethical commitments.<sup>2</sup> These theories describe ethics as a human activity by focusing on the attitudes of persons who assert ethical judgments.

Simon Blackburn has developed an influential version of this species of naturalist theory. For Blackburn, ethics is the set of practical stances we take to encourage and discourage "various choices, characters, and feelings" (Blackburn 1999, 213). Sincere ethical opinions express these natural attitudes so that they are explainable in terms that do not require highflying metaphysical commitments. Blackburn's view redefines the semantic status of ethical propositions and thereby sidesteps Mackie's error theory. Unlike descriptive statements that are true because they correspond with the external world, Blackburn suggests that ethical statements do not have truth makers; they are not "the business of representing the world" (Blackburn 1999, 214). Instead, Blackburn interprets 'true' ethical statements as those that a person holds with especially strong approval.<sup>3</sup>

### SECTION 3: ETHICAL RELATIVISM

Expressivists hold that ethical opinions are similar to expressions of other tastes and preferences, so that ethical disagreements amount to clashes of attitudes which are sometimes not resolvable. At least two objections about the consequences of value pluralism fall under the heading of ethical relativism. ‘Shallow ethical relativism’ is the view that value pluralism is possible even among persons with ideally coherent normative commitments, and that this gives us reason to qualify our attitude toward our ethical commitments. We should not impose them on others, nor should we use our norms to judge other people who justifiably accept different norms. If correct then shallow relativism implies that expressivists should qualify the value they assign to their ethical attitudes. Some people find this view unacceptable because it disparages ethical judgments to which they are strongly committed. ‘Deep ethical relativism’ is the closely related view that, because of value pluralism, no ethical judgment is universally acceptable.<sup>4</sup> Since, for any normative statement, we can conceive of a person to whom that statement cannot be justified, expressivism allows for ethical indeterminacy. Deep relativism is intolerable for those who believe that an acceptable meta-ethic must provide the possibility of a universalizable ethical structure or who believe that, without such universalizability, ethics fails to be meaningful.

The views are distinct. The objection from ‘shallow relativism’ says that ethical agents should devalue their ethical commitments because of value pluralism, while the objection from ‘deep relativism’ presents universalizability as a criterion of an

appropriate account of norms. I shall argue that shallow relativism does not pose a genuine threat to expressivism because value pluralism need not provide sufficient reason for people to temper their ethical attitudes. However, deep relativism is a real worry to philosophers who believe that an acceptable meta-ethic must provide the possibility of a universalizable ethical system.

### Ethical and Descriptive Claims

To clarify the difference between shallow and deep relativism, consider that expressivism distinguishes between ethical and descriptive propositions where the former express attitudes to encourage and discourage others while the latter possess traditional truth conditions. When employed in ethical discourse, claims express attitudinal mental states that assess the attitudes and actions of others. Otherwise, statements attempt to refer to the world as it is.

If a statement like “expressivism eschews traditional ethical truth” is offered as a normative statement then we should evaluate it in terms of its ethical acceptability. However, if it is offered as a description then we should look to the world for appropriate truth-makers. Expressivism does eschew traditional notions of ethical truth, but expressivists insist that this fact need not persuade anyone to devalue or otherwise change their ethical judgments.

Claims about value pluralism possess traditional truth conditions and may also express ethical judgments. Shallow relativism is an ethical view which holds that, because of value pluralism, no ethical judgment should be considered more valuable than any other. Deep relativism is a descriptive view that, due to value pluralism, no ethical statements are universally acceptable. I shall argue that shallow relativism is false;

expressivists need not devalue their ethical judgments. However, I shall argue that deep relativism is true; expressivism is unable to provide a universalizable ethical system.

### Shallow Ethical Relativism

Many people place special value on their ethical judgments because they regard them as true or at least as close to the truth. Since expressivists reject cognitivism, they seem to abandon ethical truth. According to the objection from shallow relativism, because expressivists are committed to value pluralism, they must also be committed to adopting a qualified attitude toward their ethical judgments. Shallow relativism is regarded as unacceptable because ethical judgments hold a privileged position, and thus any view that implies otherwise is intolerable.

In response to this objection from shallow relativism, expressivists might insist that they can accept the possibility of value pluralism and also retain the primacy of ethical judgments. Since beliefs about the value of ethical judgments are themselves ethical claims, expressivists can respond that a person must be offered respectable reasons before she will have reason to qualify her attitude toward her deepest values. Expressivists contend that the shallow relativism may reasonably be rejected, since the shallow relativist can offer no reasons that should persuade people to qualify their normative commitments.

To illustrate, Blackburn considers a hypothetical meeting with a person, say Pat, who holds repugnant views about the education of women.<sup>5</sup> Blackburn considers whether Pat could provide shallow relativist reasons to persuade him to change or otherwise qualify his deeply held view that all women deserve a first-rate education. Pat

will fail, suggests Blackburn, because “nothing worth respecting speaks in favor of [Pat’s] view” (Blackburn 1999, 215).

Pat might assert that it is true for him that women need not be educated. He might insist that Blackburn should thus qualify his own commitment since his view is not the only true opinion on the appropriate education level of women. Blackburn rejects this line of reasoning by reanalyzing ethical truth in expressivist terms. According to Blackburn, to question which ethical judgment is true is just to wonder “which attitude to adopt or endorse” (1999, 215). Expressivists may therefore regard their ethical opinions as closer to the ‘truth’, and therefore more valuable, than the opinions of others. Blackburn understands Pat’s claim to ethical truth as only a more fervent restatement of Pat’s position that women need not be educated.<sup>6</sup> Pat fails to put “that opinion in a favorable light,” and thus does not provide Blackburn reason to change his own position (Blackburn 1999, 215).

Pat might try again. He might assert that a person could still be justified in holding his view even if those like Blackburn find his view repulsive. Because Pat’s view is favorable to himself, we might be unable to provide Pat with reasons to change his beliefs. In response, Blackburn suggests that his own response would be to attempt to convince Pat that women are entitled to an adequate education. In doing so, he could appeal to Pat’s own ethical standards and beliefs. But even if he were unsuccessful, Blackburn believes that he (Blackburn) would have no reason to change his own views on the subject. Finally, Pat might point out that expressivism takes ethical opinions to be expressions of attitudes, with no traditional truth values. As an expressivist, Blackburn

cannot assert that his views are true since he holds that all such claims are *merely* truthless attitudes.

Against such an objection, Blackburn argues that even a substantive traditional conception of moral Truth could not serve to justify Pat's sexist beliefs (Blackburn 1999, 217). Suppose someone were to offer such a theory. The theory might proceed by taking some metaphysical category of Facts. And suppose there turn out to be no normative or ethical Facts. At best such a result would imply only that in holding an ethical opinion, a person is not "trespassing on the Facts" (Blackburn 1999, 217). But this conclusion does not commit Blackburn to a qualified stance towards *his own* view. The crucial flaw of Pat's position is not just that it is "trespassing on the Facts." Rather, "The main thing that is wrong with the view is that it is inhumane, cruel, arbitrary, and so on. The metaphysical cannot imply that it is all right to be like that" (Blackburn 1999, 215). Blackburn's responses to shallow relativism suggest that value pluralism need not imply that expressivists should devalue their ethical judgments. By interpreting shallow relativist claims as expressions of ethical attitudes, expressivists can provide a naturalist foundation that both accepts value pluralism and also allows people to hold their ethical opinions as 'right', 'true' and valuable.<sup>7</sup>

### Deep Ethical Relativism

It will be useful to examine a different, but closely related version of the anti-relativist challenge to expressivism. Recall that, for expressivists, ethical discourse consists of attempts to persuade agents to accept or reject ethical opinions based on other held standards and beliefs.<sup>8</sup> Some ethical disputes may not be resolvable because the agents involved do not share any relevant ethical standards that could resolve their

dispute. For any ethical judgment, we can conceive of a person who has no reason to accept that judgment because he lacks any ethical commitments others' might employ to gain his assent. Deep relativism holds that because of the possibility of total radical ethical disagreement "between persons who share no [ethical] standards at all" some ethical disputes will not be resolvable (Milo 1998, 464). In this sense, deep relativism is a claim about the very conceivability of ethical deadlock.

If deep relativism is true then no ethical judgment is universally acceptable because we can always conceive of a person who will never accept that commitment.<sup>9</sup> Many find the possibility of ethical deadlock disturbing because of the prospect that they may be unable to resolve disputes with those they take to hold reprehensible views.<sup>10</sup> Pat may never concede that women should be educated if he shares no common ethical standards with those who would hope to convince him otherwise. Those who believe that correct ethical judgments must be justifiable to everyone will be unable to accept any view that implies deep relativism. Some even suggest that ethics does not make sense without the possibility of a universal ethical system. But to avoid deep relativism, expressivists would need to show that their theory can in principle provide a universalizable ethical system.

Blackburn admits that some people may have no reason to accept our cherished normative commitments:

There is no proof procedure or for that matter no empirical process of working on the Taliban that is guaranteed in advance to bring him to my opinion. But that's just how it is (Blackburn 199, 216).

But he goes on to suggest that the possibility of ethical deadlock is not a problem for his view:

It is always contingent, and sometimes chancy, whether we can move a dissident towards concurrence with our own sympathies and attitudes. If that worries anyone, they would do well to reflect that the same is true in empirical and even mathematical or logical cases. The problem with the Taliban is that he is blind to what illustrates his error... I can show that daffodils are yellow, but I cannot necessarily show to some particular dissident that they are yellow if he refuses to look, or looks but is blind to colors. I can show that contradictions are false, but I cannot necessarily show it to some enthusiast who holds in advance that all logic is a patriarchal plot of which I am a part (Blackburn 1999, 216).

Though a dissident might never possess sufficient reason to accept certain ethical claims, Blackburn believes that this fact does not provide him (Blackburn) good ethical reason to *change his own* commitments. On his view, the claim that ethical deadlock is possible expresses a reprehensible ethical judgment. He rejects this claim on the ground that the ethical judgment it expresses is reprehensible. As Blackburn points out, if the shallow relativist objection is understood as a normative claim, then expressivists can reasonably reject it. We need not change our ethical views merely because ethical deadlock is possible.

But those worried about the possibility of deadlock may not find Blackburn's response comforting. If the assertion that ethical deadlock is possible understood as a descriptive claim with traditional truth conditions, then deadlock remains a real worry for those who seek a universal ethical system. This objection from deep relativism does not

assert the possibility of deadlock as an ethical judgment, but rather as a descriptive feature of an account of norms.

## SECTION 4: OBJECTIVITY

In order to assuage such worries, expressivists would need to demonstrate that there exists a unique and correct answer to all ethical disagreements so as to assure a set of universally acceptable norms. In recent work Blackburn claims that expressivism can support the view that normative assertions can be objective. If Blackburn can show this then perhaps expressivists could dispense with the objection from the possibility of deadlock.

But this conception of objectivity Blackburn employs is not up to the task. The distinction expressivists draw between ethical and descriptive claims will prove useful in examining the sense of objectivity available on an expressivist foundation. It will turn out the sense of objectivity offered by expressivists (objectivity<sub>2</sub>) is not the descriptive sense commonly recognized by ethical realists (objectivity<sub>1</sub>); rather it is an ethical judgment about how some ethical decisions ought to be made. In Blackburn's sense, objectivity provides no assurance of a universal ethical system since we can conceive of a person who will never accept his sense of objectivity as an appropriate ethical standard. To clarify, it will help to disambiguate several senses of 'objectivity'.

**Objectivity<sub>1</sub>:** An ethical claim is objective<sub>1</sub> just in case that claim successfully refers to a state of affairs in the world that would have existed independently of human awareness or human opinion.

**Objectivity<sub>2</sub>:** A person holds an ethical claim to be objective<sub>2</sub> just in case she believes that the claim is adequately supported by impartial reasons.

**Objectivity<sub>3</sub>:** An ethical claim is objective<sub>3</sub> just in case that claim is rationally justifiable to all rational agents.

I will examine these conceptions of objectivity to determine if each succeeds in providing universalizability and if each is consistent with an expressivist account of norms.

#### Objectivity<sub>1</sub>: Realism

Expressivists deny the existence of real ethical properties. Ethical claims do not refer to the world as it is, but rather are expressions of attitudes meant to encourage and discourage others. For an expressivist, therefore, no ethical claim is objective<sub>1</sub> because such a conception of objectivity requires a mind-independent ethical structure.

Objectivity of this type however would provide a solution to the problem of ethical deadlock since the ethical structure of the world presumably contains the unique and correct answer to all ethical disagreements. Naturalism however requires that expressivists look elsewhere.

In previous work, Blackburn has argued that to deny ethical objectivity<sub>1</sub> is to express a reprehensible judgment that ethical opinions might have been different if people had possessed different attitudes.<sup>11</sup> Suppose someone says that if the evolutionary history of humans had been different, then it might have been right to kick dogs. Surely

this claim is false since “it is not because of the way we form sentiments that kicking dogs is wrong. It would be wrong, whatever we thought about it” (1984, 217). To judge otherwise, urges Blackburn, is to attribute a specific content to ethical statements: that they are essentially about us. An expressivist can deny that ethical claims are about us, but rather assert that they are about the actions and attitudes of others. An expressivist can claim that the view that ethical judgments are not objective<sub>1</sub> expresses a normative judgment that is ‘false’ it would be reprehensible to hold the attitude expressed. Thus Blackburn concludes that ethical claims must be objective in the realist sense of the term.

But this argument once again trades on an ambiguity between ethical and descriptive claims. If we assert that normative judgments lack objectivity<sub>1</sub>, we express an ethical attitude that may affect the ethical judgments of others. Ethical opinions are therefore ‘objective<sub>1</sub>’ due to the reprehensible ethical attitude expressed by the contrary view. However if we evaluate objectivity<sub>1</sub> descriptively, independently of any normative attitudes it might express, then normative judgments are really expressions of attitudinal mental states. It is at best ‘true’ that ethical judgments are ‘objective<sub>1</sub>’ because most people value mind-independence.

As a descriptive account of norms, expressivism rejects a mind-independent ethical structure and thus cannot provide the descriptive sense of objectivity<sub>1</sub> needed to eliminate the possibility of ethical deadlock. Expressivists however can consistently assert that ethical judgments are nondescriptively ‘objective<sub>1</sub>’ because objectivity, so understood, is ethically valuable. But this ethical sense of objectivity<sub>1</sub> does not eliminate the possibility of ethical deadlock because we can conceive of a person who denies the worth of a mind-independent ethical structure.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, like Blackburn’s account

of ‘truth’, to assert the ‘objectivity<sub>1</sub>’ of an ethical judgment is just to express an especially strong form of support or approval for that judgment. Such assertions, like foot stomping, are unlikely to provide adequate reason for people to alter their ethical attitudes, leaving the possibility of ethical disagreement. Expressivism provides a satisfactory foundation only for the ethical sense of objectivity<sub>1</sub> while the descriptive sense needed to eliminate the possibility of ethical deadlock is inconsistent with an expressivist account of norms.

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#### Objectivity<sub>2</sub>: Impartiality

Blackburn urges that his expressivist theory provides a naturalized sense of normative objectivity.<sup>13</sup> To evaluate this claim, we need to consider yet another conception of objectivity. Thomas Nagel argues that claims are objective when accepted from the “view from nowhere.” To acquire an objective<sub>2</sub> understanding of a particular aspect of life, argues Nagel, is to “step back from our initial views of it and form a new conception which has that view and its relation to the world as its object” (Nagel 1986, 4). When we make ethical assertions that are not biased by our own subjective situations, or the subjective situations of others, we seem more likely to reveal relevant considerations. And in this sense our decisions appear to be more objective<sub>2</sub>.

Can expressivism pick out an appropriate range of considerations that ought to constitute an objective answer to ethical questions? Objectivity<sub>2</sub> is itself an ethical concept that many hold as a desirable virtue. We are “against [a] colleague who lets his

hiring decision be influenced by age, gender, or whatever of the applicant, and [we] express this by saying that he is sensitive to the wrong considerations” (Blackburn 1999, 221). We assert that he is “biased, not objective” (Blackburn 1999, 221). Many of us hold objectivity<sub>2</sub> as an appropriate ideal in most situations so that we encourage others to strive for objectivity<sub>2</sub> and discourage those who are biased. Objective<sub>2</sub> is normative at its core.

For this sense of objectivity<sub>2</sub> to provide universal ethical agreement, all ethical agents must hold objectivity<sub>2</sub> as a moral virtue and must also all agree on the considerations that are relevant to particular ethical questions. If not, then we may be unable to gain the assent of a person who either does not believe bias to be wrong, or else picks out the wrong considerations in a situation even if he believes he has chosen the ones most relevant. Because we may not share any ethical standards with such a person, we will arrive at ethical deadlock if we attempt to engage him in ethical discourse. Pat for example may believe that objectivity<sub>2</sub> is an imperialist, liberal idea that he has no reason to accept. Our assertion that his sexist belief is objectively<sub>2</sub> wrong would be ineffective at dissuading him of his repugnant view.<sup>14</sup> Even if we were able to convince Pat of the virtues of objectivity<sub>2</sub>, he may still disagree with us as to the relevant aspects of situations. Those who esteem objectivity<sub>2</sub> may base that value in an expressivist meta-ethic, though such ethical beliefs will not eradicate the possibility of ethical deadlock since it does not assure a universally acceptable ethical system.

#### Objectivity<sub>3</sub>: Rationally Justifiable

There is another conception of objectivity worth considering. To say that a claim is objective<sub>3</sub> is to say that it could be rationally justified to any rational being.<sup>15</sup> Parties in

dispute over an objective<sub>3</sub> claim will never reach a point at which they lack common ground that would resolve their dispute. Rationality will ensure that, in principle, an agreement can be reached. But what claims are rationally justifiable to all rational agents? If there are any such claims, then perhaps they would include laws of rationality and any other claims that are transparently derivable from such laws. They might also include other propositions—perhaps truths derivable from the laws of rationality combined with readily accessible information.

I cannot prove that there are no such claims. But I am unconvinced by arguments that purport to show that there are. At least the burden of proof would seem to lie on those who believe that some normative propositions can be universally justified in this way.

Since Blackburn's view seems not to provide a sense of objectivity that would allay worries associated with ethical deadlock, we are left with the conclusion that expressivism cannot provide an adequate means to encourage and discourage the attitudes of others; thereby providing cases in which we cannot change the views of those who hold reprehensible opinions. Since some regard the possibility of a universal ethical system as a necessary component of any plausible meta-ethic, deep relativism poses a serious threat to expressivism.

## SECTION 5: ACTUAL AND POSSIBLE RELATIVISM

Does the possibility of irresolvable ethical disagreement imply that expressivism is an unsatisfactory account of norms? If it is problematic that expressivism implies deep relativism, then perhaps we should hope that ethical realism is true since all ethical disputes would have a unique and correct answer. But before coming to this conclusion, we should consider two questions: First, do observed instances of (what we take to be) ethical deadlock give us reason to prefer realism over expressivism, other things being equal? Second, does the *possibility* of ethical deadlock provide us reason to prefer realism to expressivism, other things being equal? If deadlock is sometimes *actual*, then it will not be a problem with expressivism that the view recognizes deadlock as *possible*. And if deadlock is possible, then views that imply that it is not must be false. I suggest in this section ways in which an expressivist may allay the force of deep relativist attacks. The success of such a defense will largely depend on the work of practical ethicists.

### Actual Ethical Deadlock

Consider that when ethical realists engage in ethical discourse they rely on the ethical structure of the world to justify ethical judgments to others. Is this method of practical ethical reasoning unattainable on an expressivist meta-ethic? Expressivists do not require that ethical agents actually recognize or assent to the fact that ethical opinions are expressions of attitudinal mental states. All ethical opinions that express attitudes meant to encourage and discourage the attitudes and actions of others are consistent with an expressivist foundation because these opinions are analyzed in expressivist terms.<sup>16</sup>

If expressivism constitutes the appropriate foundation for ethics, then ethical realists may continue to make arguments based on the ethical structure of the world, even if no such structure actually exists. They may do so because their arguments are describable in terms of natural attitudes that encourage and discourage the attitudes and actions of others.

Since all ethical arguments that subscribe to ethical realism appear also to be available to expressivists, deep relativism seems to provide little reason to prefer ethical realism over expressivism. Expressivism may even be *better* suited to handle ethical disagreements. Given a plurality of competing ethical systems, the ability to persuade all groups, not just those that subscribe to ethical realism, might even reduce the pervasiveness of irresolvable ethical disputes.<sup>17</sup> Expressivism places no limits on the methods one may use in ethical discourse, and therefore allows ethical arguments from all practical ethical systems, so long as such arguments are describable, at some level, within an expressivist framework.

#### Possible Ethical Deadlock

Even if deep relativism provides little reason to prefer ethical realism to expressivism in cases of practical ethical disputes, does the mere possibility of ethical deadlock itself provide reason to reject expressivism? To determine whether an ethical dispute is at deadlock, each side must have provided *all* possible arguments to the other since those ethical arguments not presented could well have resolved the dispute. Since expressivists hold that ethics is practical, in order to determine whether the possibility of ethical deadlock constitutes a decisive reason against expressivism, all possible ethical arguments must be considered. The possibility of ethical deadlock appears therefore to

have no practical significance because it assumes that we may someday reach a level of philosophical sophistication such that the only ethical disputes left are those that are irresolvable.

Perhaps some ethical issues really are at deadlock. Still, in order to distinguish irresolvable from resolvable disputes, we must continue to find new and better reasons that might persuade others. This is the only way to determine whether an issue is, in fact, irreconcilable. This method coincides with the practical aim that expressivists set out for ethics. Even if deadlock were sometimes actual, this would in no way change the way people engage in ethical discourse. And the mere possibility of deadlock gives us no reason to reject expressivism. Expressivism provides a satisfactory foundation for practical ethical reasoning. The 'Deep problem of relativism' seems better described therefore as a shallow virtue of expressivism.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For example, Russell Schafer-Landau seems convinced that noncognitivist naturalist projects in meta-ethics are committed to ethical relativism. See Russell Schafer-Landau's excellent (if brief) reviews of books by Simon Blackburn and Mark Timmons (2001; 2001). Gilbert Harman (1996) also seems convinced that naturalist meta-ethics are committed to relativism, though he takes this as a virtue of such theories because he believes relativism to be true.

<sup>2</sup> Mark Timmons (1998) and Alan Gibbard (1990) take up this task.

<sup>3</sup> Blackburn calls ethical truth, so understood, 'quasi-truth'.

<sup>4</sup> The distinction between shallow and deep claims is not a new one. Blackburn (1993) and Dworkin (1996) draw similar distinctions. Shallow relativism, so understood, implies deep relativism since the former regards value pluralism as possible.

<sup>5</sup> I use the name Pat, Blackburn does not

<sup>6</sup> See Blackburn (1998), especially chapter 9.

<sup>7</sup> For expressivists, whether a claim is 'right' or 'true' depends on the strength with which the claim is held.

<sup>8</sup> A.D.M. Walker (1999) rightly points out that "our ethical valuings can remain inarticulate." Ethical propositions need not be articulated until such time as we wish to engage in moral discourse.

<sup>9</sup> Ronald Milo (1998) would likely disagree with the arguments I make here because he believes that moral deadlocks are in fact not possible. Though I take issue with him on

certain key points, for my purposes here I need only mention that our dispute likely amounts to a semantic one where Milo subscribes to a very restrictive definition of ‘moral’ while I and Blackburn prefer a more expansive one.

<sup>10</sup> Shafer-Landau (2001) hints at this form of moral relativism when he says that “the standards by which we assess the propriety of a set of commitments are none other than those actually endorsed by different agents. Since agents will endorse different standards of assessment, no one of which is allowed to be uniquely authoritative, I do not see how Blackburn’s view can avoid lapsing into a form of relativism.”

<sup>11</sup> For a discussion, see Blackburn (1984), especially chapter 7.

<sup>12</sup> Harman (1996) for example likely does not believe that ethical judgments are mind-independent.

<sup>13</sup> Blackburn appears to subscribe to a view of objectivity like those put forward by Darwall (1983) and Nagel (1986). He asserts that moral objectivity is characterized by a person being sensitive to the right aspects of a situation in the right way (Blackburn 1999, 220).

<sup>14</sup> Harman (1977, 91) makes a similar point when he argues that the ideal unbiased observer gives us no reason to act as that observer might act. He suggests that this objection is a version of Moore’s (1903) Open Question Argument.

<sup>15</sup> For a discussion see Williams (1985) especially chapters 8-10.

<sup>16</sup> This appears to be a plausible response to Dworkin’s (1996, 13) worry with expressivism. An expressivist can make the first-order claim that moral properties exist,

and still deny the deep claim that moral properties exist because the former is an evaluative, moral claim while the latter is a descriptive claim.

<sup>17</sup> Rachels (1986) makes a similar point when he discusses the pervasiveness of moral disagreements.

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