

Ecumenical Expressivism Ecumenicized: Comments on Ridge's *Impassioned Belief*

Jennifer Carr

University of Leeds

j.carr@leeds.ac.uk

Ecumenical views in metaethics hold that normative utterances express hybrid mental states, states which include both a cognitive and a conative component. The ecumenicist can have her cake and eat it too: the view reaps the benefits of both cognitivist and noncognitivist theories of normative judgment. The conative component of normative judgments accounts for their necessary link with motivation and rational action. The cognitive component makes it possible for the ecumenicist to endorse expressivism without facing the most difficult Frege-Geach challenges. Ridge's book provides a defense of ecumenical expressivism about practical normativity that is both ambitious and compelling.

In what follows, I'll discuss and try to challenge two (unrelated) parts of the view. In the first section, I'll raise a question for Ridge's strategy for addressing the Frege-Geach problem, and in particular his proposed recipe for how to interpret normative assertions of arbitrary logical complexity. Then I'll discuss Ridge's defense of cognitivism about rationality. I'll try to highlight some considerations that make expressivism about theoretical and practical rationality attractive.

1 Normative perspectives and embeddings

The core of Ridge's view, as I understand it, goes as follows: Normative assertions get their meanings from the normative judgments they conventionally express. Normative judgments are relational states, relating normative perspectives with representational beliefs of a particular kind.

Normative perspectives are broadly conative. Like desires, they are not representational states. Instead, they are attitudes toward sets of (maximally specific) standards of practical rationality. Normative perspectives rule some standards in and others out.

The representational belief component of a normative judgment can be interpreted as partly self-ascriptive: *Every admissible (by my perspective) stan-*

dard of practical reasoning recommends giving to charity. This is part of what makes their contents descriptive. They could be simple functions from world's to truth values, instead of from world-perspective pairs to truth values, for example.

Assertions of the form "X is good" express contents of the form 'X would be highly ranked on any acceptable standard' (for some contextually specified type of standard). When the contextually specified standards are the standards of practical reasoning compatible with the agent's normative perspective, this form of assertion counts as a normative assertion, expressing a normative judgment. Similarly stories can be told for atomic sentences with normative vocabulary other than "good."

What about nonatomic sentences? How does ecumenical expressivism avoid Frege-Geach worries? Ecumenical expressivism has a leg up over other forms of expressivism because of the representational contents it attributes to normative judgments. Whatever normative complexity is present in a normative assertion is mirrored in the logical complexity of an associated representational belief, with contents that characterize what all admissible standards of practical reasoning would have to say on the topic. Importantly, "admissible" is not a piece of normative vocabulary in this context: it simply adverts to what isn't ruled out by the subject's normative perspective.

So, for example:

- (1) Either killing pigs is wrong, or else if you prohibit killing pigs, you're doing something wrong.

This normative assertion expresses the two components of a normative judgment:

- (2)
 - a. A normative perspective.
 - b. A representational belief with the content: 'Either all admissible standards rank killing pigs very low, or else, if you prohibit killing pigs, you do something that all admissible standards rank very low.'

This strategy is easily generalized. As Ridge explains (145), for any logically complex sentence *S* containing a normative predicate, *S* will express both a normative perspective and a representational belief. The relevant representational belief is expressible by *S**, a variant of *S* in which all normative predicates are replaced by corresponding characterizations of any admissible standard.

Ridge concludes: “we have a recipe for going from any arbitrarily logically complex sentence in which a normative predicate is used (outside an intensional context) to a normative judgment expressed” (146).

One could (probably uncharitably!) read this as a very ambitious claim. So it’s helpful to consider some questions regarding what the recipe recommends for conditionals. My intention here is not (solely) to nitpick. Instead, I want to point the way to some interesting open questions about the relation between normative perspectives and epistemic possibilities.

Suppose that a speaker firmly believes that lying is permissible in some (perhaps uncommon) circumstances. Her normative perspective will presumably have thrown out all standards that make an absolute prohibition on lying. Even with this normative perspective, she could still sincerely assert (3):

(3) If Kant is right, then lying is always wrong.

Let’s consider three ways that the ecumenical expressivist would cash out a conditional like this, represented by glosses (4), (5), and (6).

(4) If Kant is right, then every (*from the speaker’s perspective*)¹ admissible standard prohibits lying.

This is the gloss that follows Ridge’s recipe. But obviously it doesn’t gloss the assertion correctly in the context described.² From the speaker’s perspective, there are many standards on the table that permit lying. Her perspective at the time of utterance is not determined by Kant’s rightness or wrongness. And it doesn’t change merely because she has uttered an *if*-clause. If this gloss were correct, in the situation described the speaker couldn’t sincerely assert (3).

Another attempt:

(5) Every (*from the speaker’s perspective*) admissible standard is such that (if Kant is right, then lying is prohibited).

The problem here has a quite different form. If this gloss were correct, then admissible standards would have to include descriptive information about

¹ The examples will generate the same problems if we construe the contextually salient normative perspective as some agglomerate of all conversational participants’ normative perspectives, or an assessor’s normative perspective, *mutatis mutandis*.

² Of course, if Kant is not right, then the material conditional is true. But natural language indicative conditionals are not material conditionals.

what Kant believed. But even if that were plausible, it's compatible with the context that the speaker believes (like the rest of us) that the permissibility of lying is independent of Kant's beliefs. And so admissible standards should dictate whether lying is permitted independently of Kant's beliefs.

Suppose that in fact, the speaker's normative perspective treats the permissibility of lying as independent of Kant's beliefs. Then the gloss in (5) is equivalent to the gloss in (5'):

(5') Every (*from the speaker's perspective*) admissible standard is such that lying is never permitted.

This sentence is obviously false in the context of our example. It describes a normative perspective that is completely disjoint from the normative perspective of our speaker, who is committed to the occasional permissibility of lying.

Let's consider a better candidate for a gloss of (3):

(6) Kant believed ϕ such that all (*from the speaker's perspective*) admissible standards that include ϕ prohibit lying.

This seems closer to getting the content right. But because our speaker is committed to the permissibility of lying (on some occasions), then I take it that on Ridge's account, there simply are no admissible standards (according to her perspective) that include whatever this ϕ is. And so (6) should only be trivially true: (7) should be equally true, on this gloss:

(7) If Kant is right, skateboarding is always wrong.

Moreover: suppose the speaker's normative perspective did include standards that categorically prohibit lying. What are the composition rules that would suggest (6)? Still, what allows us to predict that the *if*-clause will, in effect, generate a restriction on the set of standards compatible with the speaker/evaluator's normative perspective? We need more complicated compositional rules to understand what representational belief is (part of what's) expressed by (3). For example, compare:

(8) If Kant is right, then intuitions without concepts are blind and lying is wrong.

How do we generalize from (6) such that we avoid predicting that (9) or (10) is expressed by (8)?

(9) Kant believed ϕ such that all (*from the speaker's perspective*) admissible

standards that include ϕ prohibit lying and dictate that intuitions without concepts are blind.

- (10) Intuitions without concepts are blind and Kant believed ϕ such that all (*from the speaker's perspective*) admissible standards that include ϕ prohibit lying.

If (9) were the correct gloss, then normative perspectives would take a stand on philosophy of mind. If (10) were the correct gloss, then the speaker would be asserting, among other things, that intuitions without concepts are blind.

It might be that all of these glosses share the same mistaken starting point. It's reasonable to interpret conditionals like (3) as expressing what follows from a moral perspective other than the speaker's own (Kant's, for example). In some cases, this reading seems obligatory:

- (11) If Kant is right, then my beliefs about lying are incorrect and lying is wrong.

What about normative counterfactuals? These seem utterly unconstrained by the speaker's or assessor's normative perspective.

- (12) If Kant were right, then lying would be wrong.

Now, Ridge might deny that (11) and (12) count as genuine normative assertions. It might be that they aren't genuine assertions: they expressions of "merely simulated normative perspectives" (p. 140). And so they are more like suppositions or fictional discourse. Alternatively, it might be that they are not genuinely normative. They might be merely descriptive characterizations of Kant's views. But for the case of our original example, (3), this isn't intuitive. (3) seems to be an expression of a practical, all-things-considered, bona fide normative judgment.

To be clear: I don't think it's Ridge's responsibility to work out all the details for a semantics for deontic conditionals. I only want to make the following general point: on Ridge's view, in the all-things-considered, "settling the thing to do" sense of "normative" (p. 18), both of these are true:

- A speaker's normative assertions are expressions of the speaker's normative judgments; and
- The speaker's normative judgments are constrained by the speaker's normative perspective.

But in the Kant example, we have every appearance of a genuine normative assertion (oriented toward settling the thing to do) that doesn't express (or is not constrained by) the speaker's normative perspective—at least not the ways that Ridge's view immediately allows.

What to say here hinges, I think, on the interaction between normative perspectives and epistemic possibilities. So I mean this as an invitation to Ridge to perhaps say more about how he sees these as interacting. Here's a possibility: in such examples, the *if*-clause is restricting the set of standards of practical reasoning. This is, of course, exactly what one would predict from marrying Ridge's semantics with Kratzer's familiar restrictor analysis of conditionals.³

In order for this to deliver the right predictions in the example I've described, however, it would have to be the case that the following states are compatible: (i) being committed to the permissibility of lying in some circumstances, and (ii) there being some normative standards compatible with your normative perspective that categorically prohibit lying. Kratzer's semantics predicts this, because it doesn't treat normative vocabulary as quantifying over the set of possibilities that haven't been ruled out. So to pursue a strategy of this form, Ridge's official statement of his view would need to be revised.

2 Ecumenical cognitivism about rationality

While Ridge is an ecumenical expressivist about rationality, he defends ecumenical cognitivism about rationality. Rationality, on his view, is not genuinely normative. It doesn't "settle the thing to do": an agent might judge some action rational and yet have no commitment to perform the action. Rationality, on Ridge's view, is a matter of bare coherence: of having one's beliefs, desires, intentions, and actions hang together in ways that are not self-undermining. And so it can be given a realist reduction.

Ridge distinguishes two senses of rationality: the capacity sense and the success sense. In the capacity sense, a "rational" creature is one that is interpretable as having beliefs, desires, intentions, and so on. In order for this to be so, the agent must mostly conform to certain norms: conformity to them is constitutive of rationality. In the success sense, a "rational" agent conforms to all of these norms. Because the norms are mere internal coherence norms, they are amenable to a naturalist reduction. And so rationality

³ See Kratzer 1981, 1991, 2012.

attributions don't deserve an expressivist (meta)semantics.

It is open to debate, though, whether the norms constitutive of agency or capacity rationality are bare internal coherence norms. Defenders of charity principles (Davidson 1973, 1977, Grandy 1973, Lewis 1974, Williamson 2004), for example, take it to be necessary for interpretability, hence intentionality, that we take an agent to be "a believer of truths, and a lover of the good" (Davidson 1970, 97). Both of these are more substantive constraints than mere coherence. Davidson and Williamson both defend charity principles that require treating agents as though their beliefs are mostly true. Grandy and Lewis defend rationality-based versions of charity, but even these are not mere coherence constraints. In order to infer what an agent believes on the basis of what evidence she's been exposed to, we would need an impermissive theory of rationality: one that permits only one rational response to every body of evidence. Impermissivism of this sort goes beyond coherence constraints on belief: it places substantive constraints on how one must respond to evidence.

Ridge cites Dennett on the intentional stance here, and so I suspect he's not entirely opposed to the interpretationist picture of intentionality and agency. But on the interpretationist view, it's not clear why the idea that rationality (whether coherence-based or more substantive) is necessary for agency is evidence that rationality is not normative.

After all, one might wonder: why does the interpretationist think that we can learn what beliefs and desires an agent has on the basis of what attitudes an ideal radical interpreter might attribute them? Why should we think that beliefs and desires are the kinds of things such that an ideal radical interpreter couldn't be radically mistaken about them? A plausible answer: it's because belief and desire attributions are in some sense normative. While an ideal interpreter might be mistaken about various descriptive facts, normative truths (whatever they may be) couldn't be inaccessible to the ideally rational subject.

A possible response: in the specific sense of "normative" Ridge has in mind, the truly normative "settles the thing to do," whereas norms of rationality only place disjunctive constraints on what to do. As Ridge writes,

Judgments of irrationality can only settle that here and now I must not both act in a given way and hold on to some relevant end, given my beliefs. That is a much weaker sense of "settling" the thing to do, since it leaves it entirely open that I might perform the very action, here and now, and just give up the end. It is in this sense that what is settled is only something negative—do not both hold onto the relevant end

and perform this action (which by your lights makes achieving the end impossible). (240)

Reply: how deep should we consider the distinction between “settling the thing to do” and merely “settling something negative” or disjunctive? A normative judgment that I should buy some soy milk doesn’t settle whether I should buy the box on the left or the box on the right. A normative judgment that I shouldn’t punch people leaves open an enormous disjunction of different options for how to go about not punching people.

Conversely, it seems to me that in some cases, plausible theories of rationality do settle the thing to do—at least in the case of theoretical rationality. For example, rationality might place diachronic coherence constraints on belief, like conditionalization. One consequence of conditionalization is that you receive no new evidence between t_1 and t_2 , you must not change your beliefs between those times. That settles the thing to do at t_2 ; there’s no option of going back in time and changing what you believed at t_1 . And so even a bare coherence constraint can settle the thing to do.

On Ridge’s view, I take it that the following datum is supposed to support the idea that rationality isn’t normative: the following sentence is perfectly natural and, we imagine, true in many cases:

(13) I think it would be irrational for John to ϕ , but I still think he ought to ϕ .

If this sentence is true, then rationality doesn’t settle the thing to do, even when ϕ maximally specifies a positive, nondisjunctive action. And on Ridge’s view, if rationality doesn’t settle the thing to do in this sense, it’s not normative.

But I’m not entirely convinced: after all, we can also say:

(14) I think it would be immoral for John to ϕ , but I still think he ought to ϕ .

For example, maybe I think self-interested considerations in some cases outweigh moral considerations. It would clearly be odd to think that moral judgments aren’t normative judgments, even in cases where they don’t settle the thing to do.

Let me close with an argument for why expressivism about rationality should be an attractive view.

According to Ridge, there aren’t the same motivations for an expressivist treatment of rationality that there are for an expressivist treatment of

morality. For example, Ridge suggests that there aren't really fundamental disagreements about rationality in the way that there are about morality.

I disagree: there are real world cases that are plausibly cases of fundamental disagreements about rationality. In the theoretical realm, consider hung juries, where jurors have fundamental disagreement about whether a shared body of evidence supports the belief that a defendant is guilty beyond a reasonable doubt. In the practical realm, consider the fact that couples frequently fight about money. A plausible diagnosis: in at least some cases these fights boil down to fundamental disagreements about how much risk-aversion is rational (and so how much money to save).

There are more theoretically driven reasons to be attracted to expressivism about rationality. As Bertrand's paradoxes show, there are reasons to doubt that our evidence can determine a unique epistemically responsible belief state. Consider van Fraassen's famous cube factory example:⁴ A factory can make a cube of any size less than or equal to $1m^3$; it makes cubes at random. What credence should you have that the next cube will have an edge length of $.5m$ or less? or that will have a face area of $.25m^2$ or less? Or that it will have a volume of $.125m^3$ or less? Indifference reasoning apparently leads to incompatible answers to all of these questions, even though their contents are equivalent.

Upshot: there are reasons to worry about how the physical world could determine a unique rational response to each body of evidence. Some respond to this worry by accepting that rationality permits many responses to a single body of evidence. Like the moral subjectivist, the rational permissivist infers from the unavailability of a certain kind of reductive story to the conclusion that anything that seems to an agent right is right (up to bare coherence).

But it is hard to see how rationality could permit more than one epistemic response to evidence. It doesn't possible, or anyway rational, for an agent to simultaneously believe p and believe that she has no more reason to believe p than to suspend judgment. If she believes the latter, it's hard to make sense of the idea that she's genuinely committed to p .⁵ Like the moral expressivist, the rational impermissivist should be able to commit to normative judgments about rationality without having to take on the problematic metaphysical and epistemological commitments of a cognitivist impermissivism. So some form of expressivism here has always seemed to me to be an attractive option.

⁴ van Fraassen 1989

⁵ For a more thorough argument to this effect, see White 2005.

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