



**DISCUSSION NOTE**

# **EXPRESSIVISM AND MOORE'S PARADOX: A REPLY TO WOODS**

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JOURNAL OF ETHICS & SOCIAL PHILOSOPHY

DISCUSSION NOTE | AUGUST 2014

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## Expressivism and Moore's Paradox: A Reply to Woods

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**I**N A RECENT PAPER, JACK WOODS (2014) gives what I take to be the following argument against moral expressivism:

- (i) If moral expressivism is true, then the *parity thesis* is true, that is, moral sentences express desire-like states (e.g., being in favor of or against something) in exactly the same way as a nonmoral sentence “*p*” expresses a belief that *p*.
- (ii) The way in which nonmoral sentences express beliefs explains why sentences of the form “*p*, but I do not believe that *p*,” where “*p*” is a nonmoral sentence, are Moore-paradoxical.
- (iii) If the parity thesis is true, then the way in which moral sentences express desire-like states should explain why sentences such as “Murder is wrong, but I am in no way against it” are Moore-paradoxical.
- (iv) These latter kinds of sentences are not Moore-paradoxical. So:
- (v) The parity thesis is not true. So:
- (vi) Moral expressivism is not true.

Woods' focus is on arguing for (v). The conclusion that expressivism (I will drop the qualification “moral” from this point on) is not true is drawn only very tentatively. More precisely, then, the conclusion of the paper is that, given the plausible assumption that expressivists should accept the parity thesis, expressivism is not true. It is also worth pointing out, perhaps, that the parity thesis does not say that moral sentences express *only* desire-like states in exactly the same way as nonmoral sentences express beliefs. So, the argument threatens also views according to which moral sentences express, in the relevant sense, both desire-like states and “representational” normative beliefs. Some “ecumenical” forms of cognitivism and “besire” views may, then, be within the target area of Woods' argument.

The argument puts nice pressure on expressivist views, but I do not think that it succeeds. It is best to begin with premise (iv), which Woods mostly concentrates on. Consider the following claims (taken, with a slight modification, from Woods (2014): 5):

- (11) Murder is wrong, but I don't believe it is wrong.
- (3) Fuck the Yankees! I have no negative attitude toward the Yankees.
- (8) Murder is wrong, but I'm in no way against it.<sup>1</sup>

Woods suggests that (11) and (3) are incoherent in a way in which (8) is not. I am inclined to agree. Or at least I am inclined to agree that it is

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<sup>1</sup> Woods' original example is “Murder is wrong, but I'm not against it.” This is problematic, as someone could sensibly use this sentence to indicate that she is not against murder, *all things considered*, where this would be compatible, of course, with her having some suitable desire-like attitudes against murder. I believe that Woods' argument remains equally persuasive once this modification has been made, but if this is not so, this simply points toward another problem with the argument. This became clearer to me thanks to a comment from Eric Campbell.

easier to hear (8) as coherent than it is to hear (11) or (3). A possible, quite plausible explanation for why this is so is this: "Murder is wrong" may express a belief that murder is wrong without expressing, in the same sense, any desire-like attitude against murder. This is the explanation favored by Woods, and this explanation may indeed sound like a bad fit with expressivism. However, it seems to me that expressivists can accept it. They can do this, assuming that "wrong" is a context-sensitive term that can be used to make both normative and nonnormative judgments, where the former consist (at least in part) in desire-like attitudes, and the latter consist in nonnormative beliefs. If something along these lines makes sense, and if the nonnormative uses of "wrong" are central and common enough, then it is no wonder that sentences such as (8) are given coherent readings more easily than, say, (11) or (3).

The expressivist could suggest that when we use the sentence "Murder is wrong," for example, we always, *very roughly*, characterize murder in relation to standards or norms of a certain kind. Perhaps the relevant kinds of norms are norms for when to feel guilt and resentment. (Perhaps they should be understood quite differently, but this should suffice for illustrative purposes.) However, just which norms of the relevant kind get to determine the specific meaning of what is said might vary from one context to another. In some contexts, "Murder is wrong" might be used to make a claim about the relation of murder to the norms that have currency in the speaker's own society. In others, this sentence might express, for example, a belief about the norms of some other, salient society, or about the norms that the speaker *used to* endorse (before having suffered severe brain damage, say). A central use for this sentence would be that of relating murder to standards that the speaker herself endorses – where endorsement is understood in terms of some suitable desire-like states. This, the expressivist might say, would be the genuinely normative use of the sentence. It would be just this specific sense of "wrong" that the expressivist would wish to give an expressivist account of. This rough proposal is very much inspired by Michael Ridge's (2014, ch. 1) recent, relatively detailed and sophisticated account of the meanings of "good," "ought," etc., in his *Impassioned Belief*, but the basic idea of there being a variety of descriptive uses for terms well suited for making normative judgments is, of course, a familiar one (see, e.g. Ayer (1946): 21; Blackburn 1998: 60).

If the expressivist should say something along these lines, then premises (i) and (iii) of Woods' argument are not true. The expressivist now admits that, in many contexts, the sentence "Murder is wrong" does *not* express any desire-like state in the same sense in which nonnormative sentences express beliefs. Premises (i) and (iii) could be fixed, perhaps, by restricting them to normative readings of moral sentences. However, once we do this, premise (iv) does not seem true anymore.

Let us first consider a couple of normative claims that are not specifically moral, and that are not so easily given nonnormative readings. Consider:

- (12) All things considered, we ought not to murder, but I am not in any way against murdering.  
 (13) There is some reason not to murder, but there is nothing about murder that I would be against.

On the most natural readings, these seem incoherent to me, just like, for instance, (11) or (3), above.<sup>2</sup> That is a neat prediction of expressivism. How about wrongness in a normative, “reason-implying” sense?

- (14) Murder is wrong – that is, wrong in a sense that implies that there are weighty reasons not to murder – but I am in no way against it.

Again, this seems clearly incoherent. So, it seems that once we force normative readings of sentences such as “Murder is wrong,” (8) is rendered incoherent. Given, then, a restriction to moral sentences with normative meanings in premises (i) and (iii) of Woods’ argument, premise (iv) does not seem correct anymore.

Woods (2014: 7) considers an objection that bears some similarity to the one that I have offered. He acknowledges that one might object that the “relative felicity of the examples [such as (8)] is due to an inverted-commas use of ‘wrong.’ When so used, ‘Murder is wrong’ means something like ‘Murder is wrong (by the moral standards of the prevailing society).’”

Woods is not happy, at all, with the inverted-commas response. He suggests that “such an aberrant interpretation of the meaning of ‘Murder is wrong’ is implausible without conditions suggesting such an interpretation” (Woods 2014: 7). However, first, I do not think that this is a very aberrant interpretation. For instance, when I teach ethics, there often are people in the audience who have some difficulty seeing how “Murder is wrong” could have any *other* kind of meaning. So, it seems to me that an inverted-commas reading of sorts is very much available for this sentence. In any case, I have suggested that there is a wider range of descriptive ways of using “wrong,” and not all of these seem aberrant.

Second, it seems quite plausible that utterances of (8) themselves suggest a nonnormative interpretation of some kind exactly because, in using this sentence, the speaker is reporting that she does not have the attitudes that one would take “Murder is wrong” to express when used normatively, as it is perhaps most commonly used. Now, Woods (2014: 8) does consider the idea that “it is the mere availability of an inverted-commas reading that renders the examples coherent.” He notes that “inverted comma readings are often indicated by stress, but [(8) does] not require stress to be felicitous” (Woods 2014: 8). However, the inverted-comma (or the other nonnormative) readings of sentences such as “Murder is wrong” need not be indicated by stress, so this seems irrelevant.

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<sup>2</sup> These sentences, too, *can* be given nonnormative readings along the lines suggested above, which might explain why some do not find them incoherent quite in the same way as, say, (11).

Woods (2014: 8) also argues that “the mere existence of an inverted comma reading [...] is not sufficient for the coherence of such examples” because “predicates of personal taste, for example, clearly have an inverted commas reading, but ‘Broccoli is delicious, but I don’t like it’ is still strikingly incoherent” without an appropriate stage setting. Now, it is true that there *just being* a sensible nonnormative reading for the relevant sentences is not sufficient to make them sound coherent. However, such readings may be more or less easily available or accessible to a hearer. “Wrong,” it seems to me, is quite often used nonnormatively. So, here a nonnormative reading would be easily available. “Delicious?” Not so often, it seems. Now that I have given the sentence “Broccoli is delicious, but I don’t like it” some thought, I can easily hear it as coherent (perhaps the speaker has a history of being a broccoli lover, or perhaps she is deferring to those with a more “refined” taste in order to avoid being a nuisance). However, this sentence was, at least in my case, somewhat more resistant to a coherent interpretation than “Murder is wrong, but I’m in no way against it.” I would not say that one sentence sounds *more* incoherent than the other, but it is easier (for me) to hear the latter as coherent.

So, I do not think that Woods’ response to the objection from inverted commas offers him any help in the face of my objection. Indeed, for the reasons given above, I do not think that his response succeeds even against the inverted-commas objection, as he states it. Anyway, the inverted-commas objection can be further strengthened by acknowledging a wider range of nonnormative meanings for terms like “wrong.”

Does acknowledging that there are nonnormative uses for “wrong,” which are central enough to account for the relative ease of finding (8) coherent, somehow dilute expressivism? Surely expressivism should be a story about *the core uses* of moral terms.<sup>3</sup> It is. Or at least it is a story about *a* core use. There is no need to try to settle how *common* the different uses of moral terms are. Many, but not nearly all, of the judgments that we make using terms such as “wrong” or “ought” or “good” have seemed philosophically puzzling in certain familiar ways (e.g., action guiding and reason-implying). The expressivist account is meant to cover roughly this interesting subset of the judgments made by using the relevant terms. If the rest are dealt with differently that should not be problem, as long as the overall story is plausible enough. I have not tried to argue, here, that an expressivist-friendly story is the most plausible one, but such stories seem to offer enough resources for dealing with Woods’ challenge.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> I thank Jussi Suikkanen and Jack Woods for pressing me on this.

<sup>4</sup> An early version of this note was posted on PEA Soup blog (<http://peasoup.typepad.com>) to kick off what turned out to be a very helpful discussion of Woods’ paper. I am grateful to PEA Soup for organizing this discussion, and to Eric Campbell, Sade Hormio, Pekka Mäkelä, Michael Ridge, Whitney Schwab, Jussi Suikkanen, Jack Woods and the Helsinki metaethics reading group – Aino Lahdenranta, Ninni Suni and Vilma Venesmaa – for very helpful comments. I also thank the Kone Foundation for the grant that made writing this paper possible.

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