Rethinking Creeping Minimalism

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Abstract: Most solutions to the Problem of Creeping Minimalism accept the following claims. First, "minimalism" about truth, facthood, and related notions allows expressivists to agree with realists about the existence of normative truths, facts, etc. Second, the "creep" of minimalism stops somewhere: that is, there is some metaphysically, substantive notion over which realists and expressivists disagree. This collection of claims is unstable, as the existence of a non-minimal notion of belief or reference allows us to define other non-minimal semantic notions, such as truth and fact. I argue that the resources which are needed to generate the Problem of Creeping Minimalism do not include minimalism as a thesis about the nature of truth. Instead, we need only minimal claims about what semantic competence with 'true' requires. This does not require that the nature of truth be minimal; in fact, if a realist explanation of the normative is correct, expressivism is inconsistent with the existence of normative truths.

1 Preliminaries

This paper is about the "Problem of Creeping Minimalism" (or, to save space, the "Problem"). Broadly the topic is about characterizing meta-ethical theories that are intuitively not metaphysically inflationary. What claim do these theories deny, where this denial is what makes the theory distinct from a metaphysically inflationary realist theory? Typically, the

competitor to realism that is discussed in the literature is expressivism, and for concreteness I will follow this practice here.[1] There is a serious question about what distinguishes these views because expressivists such as Blackburn (1993) and Gibbard (2003) have deployed "minimalist" semantic machinery to claim that core claims of realism are in fact compatible with expressivism. The canonical presentation of a distinctive *problem* arising out of these discussions is Dreier (2004). In one passage, Dreier states the problem as follows:

> Minimalism sucks the substance out of heavy-duty metaphysical concepts. If successful, it can help Expressivism recapture the ordinary realist language of ethics. But in doing so it also threatens to make irrealism indistinguishable from realism. That is the problem of Creeping Minimalism. (p. 26)

There is a substantial literature following Dreier's paper, most of which aims at presenting a solution to the Problem of Creeping Minimalism. (Though some, such as Golub (2017), argue that extant solutions fail, or that there can be no solution). This paper will not contribute to those debates. Instead I will be asking what the Problem *is*.

My main conclusion is that the most intuitive way to motivate the Problem relies on an unstable package of assumptions concerning minimalism about truth, reference, and the like. We cannot simultaneously hold that it is minimalism which allows expressivists to mimic the claims of the realist, while holding at the same time that the problem can be solved, i.e., there is some significant claim over which realists and expressivists disagree. The upshot will be twofold. First, stating the Problem needs to be done carefully: the literature presupposes a number of different formulations of how minimalism generates the Problem of Creeping Minimalism. Some present more serious problems for metaethics than others. Second, once we have an adequate formulation of the Problem, standard solutions from the literature have surprising and wide-ranging consequences for minimalism, even in its most plausible

[1] Though similar considerations would apply to other versions of non-cognitivism, and quietist "realism" as well.

applications. In short, according to the standard presentation of the Problem, realism and expressivism agree on some basic claims about the metaphysics of normativity, such as claims affirming the existence of normative truths.[2] The only question is how far the minimalism creeps. There are compelling reasons to reject this characterization of the Problem.

I close with a diagnosis of why there is a Problem of Creeping Minimalism, even if it is not exactly the one the literature describes. The diagnosis appeals to the distinction between what truth is, and what it takes to competently make claims about truth. If one of the standard solutions to the Problem are correct, then the nature of truth is not minimal. Expressivism is incompatible with the existence of normative truths. However, this does not mean that expressivists are misusing the concept of truth when they claim that there are normative truths. Even if there is a substantial difference between realism and expressivism over the metaphysics of the normative, competence with the relevant concepts is not enough to discover the difference, and in fact expressivists are compelled by the dispositions needed to be competent with 'true' to make the same claims realists make.

2 Minimalism, acceptance, and agreement

I will give a very brief summary of what is the by now very familiar Problem of Creeping Minimalism. The goal is not to give a detailed presentation of the problem and its significance, which has been done in numerous places elsewhere. Instead I want to highlight some under-discussed questions about the Problem, and to take a stand on how these questions should be answered.

[2]Here and in what follows, I will usually focus on truth. But if the claims I make are correct, they will also apply to the nature of reference for normative terms, the existence of normative facts and properties, among others.

2.1 *Minimalism: the basics*

Realists about the normative are at home with the claims that there are normative truths, that normative facts and properties exist, and there are normative beliefs and assertions. For the realist, the normative domain—and our thought and talk about it—is not fundamentally different from the canonically descriptive aspects of reality, it is very natural to apply the same metaphysical categories and representational vehicles to it.

Dreier calls mid-20th Century metaethics "The Gold Old Days" because it was easy to characterize the opponents of realism as denying this core tenet of realism. He says:

> In the Good Old Days, there were two kinds of irrealists. Non-factualists like Ayer denied that moral judgments express any sort of proposition at all, while Error Theorists like Mackie insisted that they do express propositions, only uniformly false ones.[3]

Expressivist views of normative thought and language appear to be part of the same irrealist tradition. For instance Allan Gibbard (1990) begins with analyzing the normative term 'rational' as follows:

> [W]e are to understand the term 'rational' by understanding what it is for a person to think something rational—by understanding what it is to make a normative judgment. Normative judgments are to be explained psychologically, and so I need a psychology. (p. 26)

Although the details do not matter for present purposes, the psychology Gibbard goes on to offer has some important features. He characterizes normative judgment as a state of *norm-acceptance*, where norm-acceptance has the function of regulating feeling and behavior and coordinating one's own feelings and actions with others. The important part is that its function is not to represent normative reality. Other expressivist explanations will differ over the naturalistic function of normative judgment, but

[3] Dreier (2004, p. 23)

will agree with early Gibbard in appealing to purely natural explanatory resources that do not involve normative reality.

Wise Choices, Apt Feelings is Gibbard's early development of expressivism and it keeps continuity with the Good Old Days: since normative truths play no role in explaining normativity, Gibbard concludes that they do not exist. His expressivistic view fits neatly alongside the views of Ayer and Mackie. But in later work Gibbard says this is not essential to his view.[4] The key is, allegedly, *minimalism* about truth.

Minimalism about truth is committed to every instance of the following biconditional:[5]

T It is true that p iff p.

Minimalism must involve more than simply commitment to all instances of **T**; even inflationary conceptions of truth accept the relevant instances of **T**. Minimalism is distinctive because it claims that that **T** in some way tells us all there is to truth. David Taylor (2020) characterizes this characteristic feature of minimalism as consisting in two claims. One is a claim about the meaning of 'true': all there is to the meaning of 'true' is its role in securing the relevant instances of **T**. The second is that the meaning of 'true' exhausts the nature of *truth*. That is, there is nothing more to truth than its role in serving as the meaning that validates all instances of **T**.[6]

It will be helpful to codify these distinctive claims of minimalism about truth here. One reason is that in the next section I will be engaging with Taylor's argument that minimalism is inconsistent with common solutions to the Problem of Creeping Minimalism. Thus it will be important to have the premises Taylor deploys explicitly laid out. The other is that, while I am focusing only on truth here for ease of exposition, the Problem requires that minimalism can be extended to a number of other semantic and metaphysical notions as well, and so there

[4] Gibbard (2003). Blackburn (1993) pursures a similar line of argument.

[5] Some restrictions will need to be in place to avoid paradox. I will not delve further into what those restrictions are.

[6] Taylor (2020, 103)

should be a straightforward recipe for taking a biconditional like **T** and supplementing it with the claims that are distinctive of minimalism.

The first claim is that the *meaning* of 'true' is minimal. We can take this to mean that in the meaning validates the relevant instances of **T** and nothing more:

Minimal Meaning The meaning of 'true' (partly) explains why the relevant instances of **T** hold, and there is nothing more to the meaning of 'true'.

In later sections I will raise more detailed questions about what meaning is, and whether we should expect that the claims that are "guaranteed" by the meaning of a term need to be *true*. So Minimal Meaning will need to be refined, or perhaps replaced, depending on how we understand meaning. Nonetheless there is a core idea behind Minimal Meaning which we will want to keep: that it is not an accident that instances of **T** are true, and this is because it is part of the meaning of 'true' that it guarantees these instances. Moreover, there are no other claims that enjoy this privileged connection with the meaning of 'true'; the claims that are guaranteed to hold in virtue of the meaning of 'true' are limited to the instances of **T**.

The second is a connection between truth the meaning of 'true' given in Minimal Meaning. Here, the connection is an extremely tight one: there is nothing more to say about truth than what is said by explaining the meaning of 'true':

Exhaustion The role of the meaning of 'true' exhausts the nature of truth; there is nothing more to the nature of truth than its role in guaranteeing that the appropriate instances of **T** hold.[7]

Again there are substantial questions about Exhaustion that need to be addressed. However these are resolved, the key claim in Exhaustion is

[7]Exhaustion doesn't explicitly say what the nature of truth *is*; it simply says that whatever the nature of truth is, it does not add anything to what is said to explain the meaning of 'true'. The natural way to think of truth on this view is that it just is the property which serves as the (minimal) meaning of 'true', but this goes beyond what Exhaustion explicitly says.

that we are not adding anything substantial to the claim that p when we add that it is *true* that p. Exhaustion fleshes this out by limiting the nature of truth to what explains why 'true' behaves this way. Some claim along these lines is needed: some terms have very simple meanings yet introduce substantial ontological or metaphysical commitments.[8] Truth, for the minimalist, is not like that.

2.2 *Creeping minimalism*

If truth is minimal, then it is straightforward to argue that expressivists can accept that there are normative truths. Expressivists give a semantics for normative sentences which explains their meaning by saying what mental state they express. Details aside, these states will not be characterized as beliefs, but rather as some non-cognitive, intrinsically motivational mental state. For instance in Gibbard (2003), normative sentences express *planning states*, which have the function of ruling out certain courses of action in a circumstance. Roughly, the sentence

L Lucy ought not to lie in c

expresses a planning-state that rules out telling a lie in c.

For the expressivist who accepts **L**, minimalism about truth has the consequence that it is true that Lucy ought not to lie in c. First, by Minimal Meaning, the meaning of 'true' makes it the case that instances of **T** hold, including

TL It is true that Lucy ought not to lie in c iff Lucy ought not to lie in c.

It would seem that this is all the expressivist needs to accept that there is a normative truth. Given **L** and **TL**, one application of modus ponens yields the conclusion *it is true that Lucy ought not to lie in c*.

However, Minimal Meaning on its own will not entail on its own that expressivism is consistent with the claim that there are normative truths.

[8] Suppose the Kaplanian semantics in "Demonstratives" gives the meaning of 'that' (Kaplan 1989). These rules for determining a referent in a context are quite simple. However, the truth of a sentence that contains a demonstrative might be quite substantial, for instance, if we are able to demonstrative God or the big bang.

The fact certain inferences are built into the meaning of a term does not guarantee that those inferences are true.[9] So, even if the meaning of 'true' requires that **TL** holds, it does not follow that **TL** and its consequences are true. Some meanings are defective. More importantly, even if those inferences are guaranteed to be true, it does not follow that they are consistent with every possible view—including false views—about the nature of the subject-matter. Even if the meaning of 'true' guarantees the existence of normative truths, expressivism might have a picture of the metaphysics of the normative that cannot accommodate this.

This is why Exhaustion is needed for minimalism as well. Exhaustion tells us that the modus ponens inference from **L** and **TL** does not introduce any metaphysical baggage that is inconsistent with expressivism. Exhaustion guarantees that the commitments of the truth predicate are extremely minimal—roughly, the commitments involve a property that secures the instances of **T** and nothing more. So, there is nothing in this picture that is inconsistent with expressivism. Minimalism allows expressivists to accept that there are normative truths.

Minimalism creeps further. Once we have deployed minimalism about truth, it is natural for expressivists to adopt minimalism about other semantic notions. In the interest of space I will not spell out the details, because they are variations on the same theme. If we accept minimalism about truth, then analogous positions about reference, satisfaction,and property-instantiation will be natural to accept as well. There are biconditionals that are central to these notions, where a, P, and F are schematic variables:

$\forall x$ 'a' refers to x iff $a = x$;

$\forall x$ x satisfies 'P' iff x is P;

$\forall x$ x instantiates F-ness iff x is F.

Minimalism about reference, satisfaction, and property-instantiation will add analogues of Minimal Meaning and Exhaustion for each of these biconditionals.

[9] See Tappenden (1993) and Eklund (2002).

Minimalism creeps into representational notions as well. A minimal notion of what it is to be representational can be defined in terms of the possession of truth-conditions. Since truth is minimal, representation defined in this way will be minimal as well. Likewise, reference and satisfaction are minimal if we let minimalism creep further as described in the previous paragraph. So a definition of representationality in terms of reference and satisfaction conditions will also be minimal. While this does not entail that there is no other non-minimal resource that could define representation, the minimalist will be able to point to some workable notions of representation that are definitely minimal.

The foregoing suggests a picture on which the Good Old Days are over. Expressivists who accept minimalism across the board will end up saying the same things realists say about all of the important questions about normative metaphysics, belief, and language.

2.3 Acceptance and agreement

The previous subsection sketched the resources that, allegedly, generate the Problem of Creeping Minimalism. This subsection turns to the upshot of the Problem. That is, if the creep to minimalism is *extensive*, what follows? The general outlines of the significance are clear: the extensive creep of minimalism would reduce, or eliminate, the differences between realism and expressivism. That is, extensive creep supports, or makes it more difficult to deny, what I will call the No Difference thesis:

No Difference There is no difference between realism and expressivism.[10]

The question here ism in virtue of what is No Difference true? This is a distinct question from what the downstream significance of No Difference

[10]Some qualifications: (i) No Difference should say that there is no *significant* or *non-trivial* difference between the views; (ii) "significant" differences are to be spelled out in terms of differences over the metaphysics and semantics of the normative, and (iii) the absence of the significant differences are due to minimalism about the central semantic notions. For simplicity, I will not include these qualifications in the official statement of No Difference.

would be, if it were true. As it turns out, the first question is one that has been answered in different ways in the literature, which are not all equivalent. Some answers do not provide a compelling account of the absence of a difference between the realist and expressivist views. Others present a compelling problem, but as I will argue below, raise significant questions for the role of minimalism in generating the problem.

Begin with one possible answer: an expressivist who accepted minimalist theses would, given their minimalist commitments, accept all of the same *sentences* about normative truth, facthood, representation, etc., as the realist. Thus, while the realist accepts 'It is true that Lucy ought not to tell a lie in c', the expressivist has a semantics for 'true', given by the minimalist theses for **T**. And this semantics for 'true', plus the expressivst's (assumed) acceptance of **L**, implies that the sentence 'it is true that Lucy ought not to tell a lie in c' can be accepted by the expressivist as well. Let's assume that minimalism can be deployed in the same way for all of the other sentences stating the realist's significant claim, and call the result Sentential No Difference.[11]

Sentential No Difference puts a relatively light burden on minimalism. There is no presupposition that minimalism is true, or even the most plausible account of truth. Instead, it only assumes that minimalism is a theory of the truth predicate that the expressivist can accept. If the expressivist does accept the theory, then the sentences that can be used to state the core claims of realism will be acceptable to the expressivist as well.

The problem with this approach is that convergence at the level of language does not imply that the two views are in any kind of substantial agreement. There is debate in meta-metaphysics over which disputes in metaphysics are *merely verbal*. Roughly, these are disputes which appear to be substantial disagreements, but in fact arise only because the parties

[11] The official statement:

Sentential No Difference There are no differences in which sentences are acceptable to a realist, and an expressivist who accepts the relevant minimalist theses.

to the dispute are using language differently.[12] Sentential No Difference guarantees only merely verbal *agreement*. 'True' in the expressivist's mouth means what it means in English, and so by accepting the same sentences as the realist, they would agree. However, for all Sentential No Difference says, the theory the expressivist adopts when accepting sentences involving 'true' might not be the correct theory of the truth predicate in English. It might not even be a theory of truth at all. In this case, if the truth predicate in the expressivist's mouth were to mean what the expressivist says it means, then there would not be genuine agreement at all—both parties would accept the same sentence, but it not the same proposition.[13]

A second way to explain what the source of No Difference is, is to point to the fact that minimalism is, at minimum, a plausible view about truth that expressivists can accept. If the expressivist accepts minimalism about truth, then given expressivism and additional commitments, there are normative truths. That is, normative truths exist, from the expressivist's perspective. This is Perspectival No Difference.[14]

Perspectival No Difference does not require that minimalism—or any other part of expressivism—be *true*. What it requires is that, if we are to show that there is a difference between realism and expressivism, we have to show that the difference is one that can be recognized from the expressivist's own perspective—that is, one that can be recognized while accepting all of the theses the expressivist accepts. Any purported difference that requires that we reject some of the expressivist's assumptions is

[12] More precisely, the disputants would mean different things, and not disagree at all, if each were treated as the supervenience base for the meaning-facts in their own language. See Hirsch (2009).

[13] The "agreement" would be similar to two distinct speakers who both accept the sentence 'I am cold'. See Schroeder (2005) for a similar point.

[14] The official statement:

Perspectival No Difference From the perspective of the expressivist's commitments, including minimalism, there is no difference between realism and expressivism.

not one that solves the Problem of Creeping Minimalism.[15]

The problem with taking Perspectival No Difference to be the underlying explanation of No Difference is that it does not capture a very compelling *problem*. There are many assumptions which are inconsistent with genuine explanatory solutions; that does not render the solutions uninteresting or lacking in any respect. Take as an example the rejection of evidence neutrality in responding to skeptical arguments in epistemology: although the skeptic will not concede some of the premises ("here is a hand"), there are good arguments that we are not in a skeptical scenario.[235] The interesting explanatory project is to explain what is wrong with skeptical views; not to explain to the satisfaction of someone who adopts faulty assumptions where they go wrong.

A better characterization of what is at issue in the Problem of Creeping Minimalism is the following. The problem is not that there is some set of assumptions including the minimalist theses characterized above, which if we accepted them would commit us to thinking that No Difference is true. Rather the problem is that these assumptions seem to be *true*. Since they are true, all parties to the debate will be forced to accept the same claims, and so No Difference is true. That is how Gibbard describes his own reasoning in several places, where he starts with the claim that the minimalist account of truth and other notions is the *correct* account:

> Explain to me "real facts", "substantial truth", and "genuine belief", and I can think how to answer [...] I do think now, though, that we should at least find these distinctions suspect, and not help ourselves to them until they have been explained and vindicated, to some degree at least. (Gibbard 2003, 182)

> Eventually, though, I was convinced—especially by Horwich—that deflationary truth was the only kind of truth I understood. (Gibbard 2015, 211)

[15] See Golub (2017, xx): "[W]e must articulate a conflict between the two views that would persist *even if* we treated all talk of normative truths, facts and properties as internal to first-order normative discourse, in the way that minimalist expressivists do."
[235] Williamson07

Dreier likewise suggests that creeping minimalism is a problem because the minimalist package of theses seems to be true. Speaking of non-minimal notions of TRUTH, FACT, PROPOSITION, and the like which are designated by the all-caps convention, he says:

> [I]t is not very easy to say just what these block letter terms are supposed to mean. Timmons, for example, says that they are supposed to denote parts of "a mind independent world of entities, properties, relations, or, more simply, facts (construed as constellations of the former)" (Timmons 1999, 116). But that explanation, adequate though it may seem to convey the idea, can't be literally correct. (Dreier 2004, 29)

The Problem of Creeping Minimalism implies, or at least threatens to imply, that realists and expressivists *genuinely agree* over all of the important metaphysical and semantic questions that can be asked. It is not simply the claim that proponents of each view will accept all of the same sentences. And it does not arise from the fact that one party will think that their answers are the same. Creeping Minimalism becomes a Problem when all if the claims realists and expressivists make are in agreement with each other.[16]

Before moving on, I want to highlight one implication of understanding the Problem of Creeping Minimalism in terms of genuine agreement between realists and expressivists. This not an additional assumption, but rather an (important) presupposition of understanding the Problem in terms of agreement. The implication is that minimalist theses about the relevant metaphysical and semantic notions are not only legitimate notions of truth, reference, etc. In addition, the minimalist theses give the

[16]That is, No Difference is explained by the fact that Genuine Agreement obtains:

Genuine Agreement Realists and expressivsts can accept all of the same important metaphysical and semantic claims about the normative.

The two parties agree because minimalism about the crucial notions implies robs us of the machinery needed for stating an additional claim that is both distinctive of realism and also something expressivists are forced to reject.

only legitimate understanding of these notions. There would be no Problem if realists and expressivists agree on all claims about minimalist truth, minimalist reference, minimalist facthood and so on, but there is also some inflated concept in good standing—say, non-minimal TRUTH—according to which there are normative TRUTHS given realism, but not expressivism. Call this assumption Uniqueness, as it will be important in what follows.[17]

3 Explanatory solutions to the Problem: an unstable resolution?

3.1 Explanatory solutions sketched

The previous section outlines what minimalism *threatens*, if it creeps across all of the important semantic and metaphysical categories. But almost no one thinks that minimalism in fact creeps this far. Most hold that there is, at some point, a central notion that is not minimal. There is a non-minimal, substantial notion at issue because expressivists and realists will both adopt a different explanation of what it consists in. This is an *explanatory solution*. The proponent of an explanatory solution argues that there is a metaphysical explanation of some core notion that realists, but not expressivists, will accept. There is no single answer to the question of what this explanation is. Explanatory solutions are a class of solutions which all claim that there is some substantive explanation that realists and expressivists will disagree over. Which explanation is up for debate, and proponents of explanatory solutions have proposed different answers.

Gibbard (2003), sketches one: while, he says, he can claim with the realist that there are normative truths, facts, and the like, he also adopts an explanation for what constitutes normative belief that the realist will likely not accept. That is because he invokes a psychological state that is

[17] Officially:

Uniqueness The minimalist understanding of the core semantic notions is the only legitimate understanding.

A "legitimate" understanding is one that is, at minimum, not incoherent, intelligible, and possible (given other reasonable assumptions) non-empty.

non-cognitive as a starting point, such as norm-acceptance (or planning), which is not one the realist will need.

O'Leary-Hawthorne & Price (1996) focus on the functional role of the state that explains normative belief is distinct from the role played by the state the explains normative belief on the realist picture. Fine (2001) holds that the normative will play a fundamental role in explaining what the facts about normative belief and assertion consist in. Dreier's own suggestion in Dreier (2004) is that normative properties enter into explanations of normative belief where expressivists would proceed with only psychological states. Dunaway (2016) claims that the realist's normative properties will play an explanatory role which includes settling the determinate reference of normative terms, making them metaphysically elite, while the role of the elite property will be absent on the expressivist view.

Each of these explanatory solutions claims that some important semantic concept is not minimal. This is either belief (Gibbard, Hawthorne & Price, Dreier), assertion (Fine), or reference (Dunaway). But these solutions also concede that there is something compelling about the appeal to minimalism that generates the Problem of Creeping Minimalism. Belief, assertion, and reference are all fairly sophisticated semantic notions, and if minimalism fails to be the correct account for these, we can still grant the expressivist the right to adopt minimalism about the more primitive notions of truth, facthood, and property. In other words, these explanatory solutions are all fairly concessive to the expressivist appeal to minimalism, allowing it to creep *moderately*, stopping it before it engulfs every important semantic and metaphysical notion. We can call this a Moderate Solution:

Moderate Solution (i) Expressivists agree with realists about the existence of normative truths, facts, and perhaps some other notions, because these notions are minimal. (ii) However, they do not agree about every important semantic claim, because some semantic or metaphysical notions have a substantial explanation, as captured by an explanatory solution.

There is, then, something of a consensus that the solution to the Problem

of Creeping Minimalism will entail a Moderate Solution.[18] Minimalism is a resource that expressivists can appeal to to get the Problem started, by going minimal about truth and facthood (and perhaps other notions). But there is a substantive solution to the Problem, as eventually we will run into a non-minimal notion that will force realists and expressivists into disagreement. Where exactly that point is is a matter for debate. But that there is some point at which we can stop creeping minmalism after it starts is a point of agreement among proponents of an explanatory solution.

3.2 *Instability in the Moderate Solution?*

While this is an appealing resolution to the Problem, there is an argument that it cannot be correct. David Taylor (2020) presents an extended version of it, but I will focused on a simplified version. The conclusion of the argument is that the two claims that make up the Moderate solution are incompatible with each other. That is, either no explanatory solution is correct, or minimalism even about a basic notion like truth is false.

It would be surprising if either claim were true. Take the claim that no explanatory solution is correct: not only have many authors claimed that there is an explanatory solution, it seems very natural to think that these explanatory solutions are attempts to capture what is distinctive about realism. So aside from solving the Problem of Creeping Minimalism, the whole project of formulating and defending realism becomes impossible. On the other side, part of the appeal of a Moderate Solution is that minimalism about basic notions like truth seems quite plausible—or, at least, it is not so objectionable that we should not allow that the expressivist can adopt it when making the case that there are normative truths, on the expressivist view.

[18]The consensus is not unanimous. Golub (2017) is one example of a proponent of the idea that the creep of minimalism can't be stopped, though some of the argument appears to rest on the assumption that Perspectival No Difference is the target for a solution. Dunaway (2010) argues that there are first-order syntactic distinctions between realism and expressivism, and so the differences in explanatory resources are not needed.

What is the argument against the Moderate Solution? The central premise is that the core semantic and metaphysical notions at the heart of the Problem of Creeping Minimalism are conceptually connected to each other. For the sake of definiteness (and to follow Taylor's presentation) I will say that there are *analytic* connections between them. Take truth, reference, and property-satisfaction. The following version of a Tarski-like schema has a good claim to being analytic:

TRI 'a is F' is true iff $\exists x$: 'a' refers to x and x instantiates the property expressed by 'F'.[19]

There are also analytic connections between meaning and propositional attitudes, on the one hand, and truth-conditions, one the other. For instance, having a belief that p plausibly entails being in a state which is such that that state is true iff p is true. Similarly for assertion and other representational notions.

The second key premise is what I will call No Substantive-Minimal Connections:

No Substantive-Minimal Connections There are no analytic connections between substantive and minimal concepts.

That is: given a minimal notion like truth, there cannot be a substantive, non-minimal notion such as reference or meaning, which is analytically connected to truth. This premise requires some cleaning up. Some instances of analytic principles involving truth clearly involve substantive claims. 'God exists' is a substantive metaphysical claim, and it is part of the concept of truth that the following holds:

God exists iff it is true that God exists.

Clearly No Substantive-Minimal Connections is not meant to rule out the analyticity of claims like this. The needed qualification needs to

[19] Taylor (2020, 107). Here I use a sentential truth predicate and a and F as schematic variables whose instances are obtained by replacing them with names and predicates, respectively.

make good on the idea that truth can be minimal and bear a general analytic connection to a non-minimal notion of reference or satisfaction in a principle like **TRI**. Instead of fussing with the needed refinements here, I will simply point to why we should think that there is something in the vicinity of No Substantive-Minimal Connections that we would accept, if we want to get the Problem of Creeping Minimalism going.

Recall the Uniqueness assumption introduced at the end of §2, according to which the minimalist understanding of truth is the only legitimate one. Suppose that there were some non-minimal notion of reference or instantiation which is analytically connected to truth. Then, even if there is a minimalist understanding of truth, there will *also* be an inflated concept of truth, which can be defined by using analytic connections with the inflated notions. This would prevent us from getting the Problem of Creeping Minimalism started in the first place: we can define a concept of TRUTH which is had only by propositions which REFER, or only those which we can bear the BELIEF-relation to. If, as explanatory solutions hold, there is some substantial explanation of reference, belief, or the like for the realist, which deserves the all-caps designation, then there will also be an all-caps TRUTH predicate, and in virtue of its analytic connections with the other concepts, normative TRUTHS do not exist for the expressivist.

3.3 Summary: explanatory solutions and minimalism

The foregoing suggests that there is a tension between the claims that make up a Moderate Solution to the Problem of Creeping Minimalism. An explanatory solution in some form appears to be compelling; realism must be committed to explaining *something* using more than the psychological and semantic resources of expressivism. On the other hand, minimalism about truth and some other basic semantic notions appears to be a fairly innocuous—and even plausible—concession to the expressivist. Even if minimalism is not compelling across the board, it would be an extreme response to deny that expressivists manage to agree with realists about normative truth. The step from an expressivist accepting a bare normative claim, to accepting that the claim in question

is true, seems to be so small that it is hardly worth contesting. But, if the argument sketched in this section is correct, we have to give up something. Either an explanatory solution in every form must go, and the broad strategy for characterizing the difference between realism and expressivism must be rejected. Or, we need to deny that there is a minimal notion of truth that the expressivist can appeal to to get the minimalist project started at all. Either solution is extreme, in one of two directions. Either we deny that the Problem can get started at all; or, we deny that the Problem can be solved. In each case we must give up on some of the attractions of a Moderate Solution.

4 Rethinking the Problem

I do not want to endorse the argument against the Moderate Solution. I think it goes wrong, but it does so because it shares some assumptions in common with the usual ways of presenting the Problem. These assumptions are wrong, but they are not introduced by the argument against the Moderate Solution. So, assessing and rejecting the argument against a Moderate Solution requires us to rethink what the Problem of Creeping Minimalism is in the first place.

4.1 A warm up: expressivist explanations

Begin with a reason to think that something has gone wrong with the argument against the Moderate Solution. This isn't a very probative reason, as it doesn't point to any particular diagnosis of what is wrong. (It doesn't deductively entail that there is something wrong with the argument either.) But it does suggest that we move too quickly from the assumption of an explanatory solution to the rejection of minimalism about truth.

The starting point is a development in Gibbard (2013). Part of Gibbard's project in *Meaning and Normativity* is reconcile two parts of his expressivism. One is his view about what it is to *express* a mental state, which he needs in order to develop his expressivism as a view about the meaning of normative sentences. Here he commits to the

slogan "meaning is normative": to explain the meaning of a sentence is to explain under what circumstances one *ought* to use it.[20] The second part of his project is his expressivism about normative claims: this is the familiar expressivist semantics, but with the added complication that it is applied to claims about meaning itself. A large part of the book is devoted to developing and explaining this circularity in the mature Gibbardian picture.

Importantly, in the course of developing his view on meaning, Gibbard adopts expressivist-friendly accounts of reference and satisfaction. For instance, here is the account of reference that Gibbard accepts:

R-normative $\forall x$ 'a' refers to x iff [$\forall y$ one ought to apply 'a' to y iff x = y]

It is fairly clear that **R-normative** is not a deflationary account of reference. First, it is not compatible with a Minimal Meaning and Exhaustion thesis for reference. Either there is more to the meaning of 'refers' than the simple biconditional **R**, or **R** does not capture all there is to the nature of reference.[21] Second, **R-normative** is part of a program according to which "meaning is normative" and so makes an important non-minimal claim about truth, reference, and the like.

If the argument against a Moderate Solution is correct, then even the move to a view on which meaning is normative implies a wholesale rejection of minimalism, including minimalism about truth. Perhaps that is right: by going in for the normativity of meaning, Gibbard has departed from the minimalist program that he and other expressivists adopted in earlier writing. But that's not how Gibbard presents the developments in *Meaning and Normativity*. Like the proponents of explanatory solutions to the Problem, he is naturally read as presenting a view which adds an additional layer of explanation about meaning. This is a different type of explanation than those typically found in explanatory solutions, since it is an expressivist-friendly mode of explaining meaning, and not a realist

[20] See also Schroeder (2008, 108-9).

[21] Gibbard would say **R-normative** captures the meaning of 'refers' and so would hold that Minimal Meaning is, strictly speaking, false.

one. But it is a non-trivial solution nonetheless. Given the foregoing, it is not also an explanatory project that is compatible with minimalism.[22]

If realists and proponents of explanatory solutions are committed to rejecting minimalism, and expressivists are committed to rejecting it as well, then it looks like minimalism is not an uncontroversial thesis that both sides should be happy to grant. Instead, it looks like an extremely contentious thesis that implies that there cannot be any explanatory project of the kind either realists or expressivists wish to undertake. So instead of minimalism starting the Problem of Creeping Minimalism by introducing a relatively uncontroversial thesis about truth, it is instead a non-starter for both sides.

4.2 Agreement and truth: what does minimalism need to do?

Recall §2 which argued that the Problem is constituted by the apparent fact that realists and expressivists can *agree* over a substantial range of semantic and metaphysical claims about the normative. The role of minimalism in generating the Problem is that it provides a theory of truth which allows them to accept that there are normative truths—that is, they can accept all of the standard claims about the existence of normative truths without giving up expressivism. They agree with the realist, in the sense that there is *genuine agreement* between the two parties.

A more probative consideration, beyond the surprising apparent result from §4.1 that even canonical expressivsts are not minimalists, comes from asking what we need from a "minimalist" theory of truth to secure this result. Minimalism is a view about both the meaning of terms like 'true', and the nature of truth itself. The meaning claim is that there is very little associated with the meaning of 'true'. This is captured by Minimal Meaning: the meaning of 'true' is to secure the instances of the biconditional **T**, and nothing more. The claim about the nature of truth

[22] Although I have illustrated the point with Gibbard's sophisticated development of an expressivist theory of meaning, the point extends to other expressivists as well. Schroeder (2008) canvasses a variety of candidates for what expressivists can say expression is. Not all of these are the normatively laden accounts that Gibbard and Schroeder favor, but they are all substantial accounts which will be committed to some form of a substantial explanation of meaning.

is that there is no substantial nature to truth, beyond what is required to make instances of **T** hold. This is Exhaustion.

What is needed for expressivists to be able to *agree* with realists about the existence of normative truths? I will argue that we don't need both Minimal Meaning and Exhaustion. Minimal Meaning is sufficient to allow for expressivists to agree with realists about the existence of normative truths. Even if Exhaustion were false, and truth has a substantial nature, it can still be the case that there is genuine agreement between realists and expressivists. To argue for this claim, we need to make some clarifying remarks about what meaning is, and what the modality 'can' amounts to in the context of Genuine Agreement.

First, meaning: there are many views about the theoretical role meaning plays. I cannot outline and evaluate all of them here, so I will simply state an account of meaning that is natural to use in the context of the Problem of Creeping Minimalism. This is the idea that the meaning of a term gives the rules a competent user of the term must be disposed to accept.[23] Thus understood, the minimalist commitment to Minimal Meaning amounts to the claim that competent speakers will be disposed to accept all instances of **T**, and moreover to accept these instances of **T** in virtue of what truth is.

Second, the modality 'can': in what sense can the expressivist accept that there are normative truths? We can treat 'can' as a possibility modal, where some restriction (either explicit or contextually supplied) determines a set of worlds.[24] In this case, when we ask "can an expressivist accept p", we are asking whether the proposition *an expressivist accepts* p is compatible with a certain set of possible worlds—that is, whether it is true in some of them. What is the relevant restriction on the set of worlds our purposes here? If we are too liberal with the restriction, it

[23]Contrast with an externalist theory of meaning, which holds that the meaning of a term is the object, property, relation, or operation that the term refers to. An externalist conception of meaning is not at home in the minimalist framework, since it runs together the meaning of 'true' and the nature of truth. As will become clear below, it will be helpful to keep the distinction between what competent speakers know, or are disposed to infer, separate from the question of what the full nature of the thing referred to is.

[24]Kratzer (1977, 347)

will come out as true that an expressivist can accept stark, raving realism. If the set of worlds includes worlds where the expressivist endorses a non-expressivist view, then there clearly are worlds in this set where the expressivist accepts raving realism. Of course, when stating the Problem we are not interested in these possibilities: roughly, we are interested in the possibilities where expressivists accept certain claims while holding their meta-ethical views fixed.

That is not the only restriction we need. We are only interested in the possibilities where expressivists accept realist-sounding claims without introducing obvious inconsistencies into their beliefs. It is possible that an expressivist makes an obvious logical mistake and accepts a realist claim that directly contradicts expressivism. That likewise does not show that expressivists can agree with realists in the sense we are interested in.

Perhaps we need to restrict the relevant set of worlds even further. Instead of pursuing this, I want to focus in a restriction that should *not* be in place, given the argument of §3.2. If realism is correct and there is an explanatory solution to the Problem, the existence of normative truths is not consistent with expressivism. In more detail: suppose that realism is true and an explanatory solution is correct. Plausibly, it is necessary that both are correct. Given the argument of §3.2, realism entails not only that there is some inflated expressivist-unfriendly notion, the notion of truth is inflated and the existence of normative truths is incompatible with expressivism. So there are no possibilities where expressivists accept, consistently with their view, that there are normative truths. If there is a Problem, the restriction we are interested in when formulating it is not to worlds where the content of all of the claims expressivists accept are consistent with expressivism.

We can regiment the restriction on the relevant worlds in 'can' so that, despite being wrong about truth, expressivists can accept that it is true that telling lies is wrong, and can agree with realists that it is true that telling lies is wrong. There is a very natural sense in which what expressivists can accept is determined by what they should accept by following the meaning-constituting rules associated with the terms in their language. Importantly, the rules that any competent speaker for a

term must accept, are not identical to the claims that fully account for the nature of the subject-matter that the term refers to. In the case of 'true', competent speakers plausibly must be disposed to accept **T**. Even if there is an inflated nature to truth, speakers are not required to—and can even reject—that truth has this inflated nature, and yet still competently use 'true' to make claims about truth.

So, consider the set of worlds where expressivists have dispositions to use 'true' in accordance with the meaning-constituting rules for the term, which we are assuming are captured by **T**. In some of these worlds, where they accept that telling lies is wrong, they also accept that it is true that telling lies is wrong. Thus when 'can' is restricted to worlds where we are disposed to use 'true' in accordance with its meaning-constituting rules, the proposition that expressivists accept that there are normative truths is true with respect to some of these worlds.[25]

What this shows is that, if Minimal Meaning is correct, there is a Problem of Creeping Minimalism. It does not require that Exhaustion be the correct account of the nature of truth. The §3.2 argument against the Moderate Solution shows that if an explanatory solution involving some core semantic notion is correct, then then nature of every relevant notion will be inflated, including truth. That means that the nature of truth involves more than just its role in making instances of **T** true, and

[25] An analogy: take a proponent of the phlogiston theory of combustion, who disagrees with the modern oxygen-based theory. The friend of phlogiston has very different views about what substances exist, why objects combust, and what causes combustion to cease. Nonetheless, suppose we are watching a burning building with the proponent of the phlogiston theory, who says

> That building is on fire.

It is clear that we agree with the proponent on this claim. There is the demonstrated building, *b*, the proposition *b is on fire*, and the propositional attitude of belief or acceptance which both parties to the debate bear toward the proposition. In virtue of being competent with 'fire' we will both be disposed to form this belief when presented with a building in *b*'s condition. So we agree.

The proposition that *b* is on fire is, however, not consistent with the beliefs held by the proponent of the phlogiston theory. Given the facts about combustion, there are no possibilities where the phlogiston theorist accepts that *b* is on fire and retains the belief in the phlogiston theory without holding inconsistent beliefs.

so Exhaustion is false. But the Problem does not require Exhaustion. In short, the Problem of Creeping Minimalism does not require minimalism.

The key to this claim is that genuine agreement over the existence of normative truth is not threatened by the inflationary metaphysics of truth that an explanatory solution implies. Agreement only requires that both realists and expressivists use the core terms such as 'true' with the same meaning-constituting dispositions. They can do that. And they can do so even if they do not agree on a full substantive theory of the nature of truth, which they do not. So the §3.2 argument shows that explanatory solutions imply an inflated notion of truth which is incompatible with minimalism. We don't need to reject this claim. The implication appears significant only if we wrongly (though understandably) assume that the Problem requires minimalism.

5 Consequences and clarifications

I conclude with some brief remarks on the significance of this claim, and some clarifications on where it leaves the Problem of Creeping Minimalism.

5.1 The Good Old Days are back

Suppose realism is true, and that some explanatory solution is correct. We can not only state the difference between realism and expressivism, where they disagree over some claim, which might be a fairly sophisticated one about belief or reference. This implies that there is a metaphysically heavy-duty notion of TRUTH, and realism entails that normative claims are TRUE, while expressivism does not. Given Uniqueness, this is the only notion of truth, and so expressivism does not entail that there are normative truths. (Even if Uniqueness is not true, there is *a* notion of truth for which expressivism entails that normative truths do not exist.) The good old days are back.

This is a substantial difference between the views, and it does solve the Problem. But, as stated, it relies on a non-trivial assumption: that realism is true. After all, if there is an inflationary notion of TRUTH, it has to actually be the case that there is an inflated REFERENCE or BELIEF which can be used to define the inflated TRUTH. It is not enough for realists to simply think that these inflated notions exist. Suppose the realist is wrong, and there are no metaphysically privileged normative properties that explain the reference of normative terms, or what it is to have a normative belief. Then, there is no such thing as REFERENCE or BELIEF. And so there is no such thing as the inflated TRUTH, which is defined in terms of REFERENCE or BELIEF.

Thus the "Good Old Days" solution is not *transparent*, in the following sense: it will not be accepted by all sides of the realism vs. expressivism debate, regardless of what view one accepts. It will be an acceptable solution only if one accepts the metaphysics of realism. If expressivism is true, then there is no metaphysically privileged normative property that explains why normative terms refer, or what it is to have a normative belief. And so if expressivism is true, attempts to define a realist-friendly inflationary notion of truth will fail. (What truth is, if expressivism is true, is a question I return to below; here the only point is that it can't be metaphysically heavy-duty TRUTH.)

What we learn from §3 is that the differences between realism and expressivism, as captured by an explanatory solution, ramify into differences over what basic notions like truth are. We can talk about truth using the English 'true' without appreciating the full nature of truth, or even if we are wrong about it. But one will not be able to appreciate the full nature of truth, including that it is incompatible with the expressivist metaphysics, if one does not accept the realist view that allows us to describe its full nature. And so, one will not appreciate the difference over truth if one does not know that realism is true. Even if a difference over truth indicates a genuine difference between the views, it does not do so in a way that is "transparent" to all parties to the debate.

5.3 The dialectic

In the old version of the Good Old Days, non-cognitivists described themselves as denying that normative claims are true. This makes a certain kind of argument dialectically effective against their view: since ordinary speech allows us to predicate truth of normative claims, and these claims behave syntactically and semantically like other truth-apt claims, the non-cognitivist is forced to reject some prima facie strong arguments for holding that there are normative truths. Perhaps this is not a decisive argument against the view, but it does seem like disconfirming evidence which can, at best, be outweighed by other considerations in favor of it.

There is no prospect of giving a dialectically effective argument against expressivism like this, even with the return of the Good Old Days. Since expressivists will reject that there is a truth predicate which does not apply to normative claims, they will reject that their view has the consequence that there are no normative truths. Of course, if realism is correct, they will be wrong about this. But the fact won't figure in an argument that is compelling to the expressivist, because they will be able to appreciate the consequence of their view only if they have already rejected it.

Of course, not all arguments need to be dialectically effective in the sense that even an opponent of the conclusion can appreciate its force. Some arguments are valuable because they diagnose, or illuminate, the nature of an important phenomenon, even if their force is not transparent to everyone. Perhaps the argument against normative truth given expressivism has this kind of significance. But there is clearly a dialectical significance to normative truth in the Good Old Days that we will not get back.

5.4 Minimalism for the expressivist?

If realism is not true, and so there is no inflated notion of TRUTH, then what is truth? One possible answer is that minimalism is correct account of truth, given expressivism. That is, even if realism entails that the

full minimalist theory is false, standard presentations of the Problem get something right in presenting minimalism as the theory of truth the expressivist should accept. This requires going in for both Minimal Meaning and Exhaustion.

This does not have to be correct, and there is an argument (which I will not make in detail here) that it cannot be correct. Recall that, in §3.1, I argued that we should rethink the relationship between explanations of belief and reference and minimalism in the formulation of the Problem, because even some expressivists adopt substantial explanations of reference. The example I gave was the normative account of reference in Gibbard (2013). But many expressivists give substantial, non-trivial account of normative belief; arguably what is definitive of expressivism is that it adopts a certain kind of psychological approach to explaining the phenomenon. And given definitional connections between truth and belief, there will be a substantial and non-trivial account of what truth is that follows from expressivism.

If that is so, then it turns out that no party to the debate in the Problem of Creeping Minimalism accepts minimalism, strictly defined. Everyone thinks that truth does something more than merely explain why instances of **T** hold. They disagree about what does the explaining, but it turns out this rejection of minimalism is irrelevant for the Problem. Since the Problem is fundamentally about genuine agreement over some semantic and metaphysical claims, we only need them to share whatever it is that guarantees that they make claims that genuinely agree with each other—that is, that they not simply be engaging in a merely verbal agreement. For this, Minimal Meaning is sufficient, and so the distinctive claim of minimalism that the nature of truth is exhausted by its role in explaining Minimal Meaning is irrelevant.

5.5 Meaning and truth-preserving inferences

If Minimal Meaning is true, the competence-conditions for 'true' require being disposed to accept instances of **T**. Expressivists, I have claimed, can have these dispositions. However, if Exhaustion is false and truth is an inflated property, the nature of truth is such that the existence of

normative truths is incompatible with expressivism. Inflated truth is a consequence of any standard explanatory solution that realists might accept. This puts the realist in the following position when describing expressivists. Expressivists can (and, perhaps, should) have dispositions to accept instances of **T**, including instances that involve normative claims. In virtue of this shared meaning-constituting disposition, they mean the same thing as other English speakers, including realists, when they use the word 'true'. This means they end up accepting the same claims about the existence of normative truths.

However, since the nature of truth is inflated, the meaning-constituting dispositions for 'true' lead the expressivist to say something that is *false* about normativity, given their other commitments. If expressivism were true, there would be no such thing as inflated truth.And so, by accepting instances of **T** and inferring that there are normative truths, expressivists accept something that is false by their own lights.

There is nothing incoherent in describing expressivism in this way. Tappenden (1993) observes that analytic sentences need not be true (see also Boghossian (1996) and Eklund (2002)). This observation is made in the context of vague and other paradox-inducing predicates that, the story goes, have competence-conditions that require competent speakers to have dispositions which sometimes lead them to accept false claims. Here the claim is not that competence with 'true' always involves a disposition that is defective in this way. However, it might be defective in a weaker way, if it will lead speakers to accept claims that are inconsistent with other premises which are, on their own, not contradictory. That is the case for the expressivist's competence with 'true' and the core claims of expressivism.

What does the Problem look like from the perspective of the expressivist? If expressivism is true, then the nature of truth is not metaphysically inflationary (though a substantive approach to the normativity of meaning may imply that it is not strictly minimal, either). So the implications of **T** that the expressivist is disposed to accept will not be inconsistent with expressivism. The realist will think that there is some inflated notion of reference or belief, and that the inflated notion can be

used to define an inflated notion of truth. But the realist will be wrong about the existence of these inflated notions. They will agree over the existence of normative truths, but will be wrongly committed to thinking that the nature of normative truth involves substantially more than it actually does, owing to the connection with the (purportedly) inflated notions of reference or belief.

When we distinguish meaning from reference for the crucial semantic notions used to formulate the Problem of Creeping Minimalism, we can make some important distinctions. What speakers need to accept to mean the same thing, and make claims that genuinely agree with each other, requires only that the speakers agree on some core meaning-constituting claims, or be disposed to do so. Since the Problem of Creeping Minimalism is about what realists and expressivists can agree on, it only requires that the meaning-constituting claims for 'true' and other important notions are acceptable to both realists and expressivists. But we are competent with many terms that refer to something with a nature that goes beyond what is captured by the meaning of these terms. Minimalism says that there is no further nature to what 'true' and related terms refer to. But this is immaterial to whether realists and expressivists can agree about the existence of normative truths. They *can* agree, even if one is wrong about the full nature of what they agree on. Minimalism is not a required assumption to get the Problem of Creeping Minimalism going. And we can make sharp distinctions between realism and expressivism with foundational notions like truth, just as we did in the Good Old Days.

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