

Wittgenstein and Expressivism

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Introduction

From his first publication, the *Tractatus*, to the posthumous publication of the *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein draws attention to the way in which surface grammatical similarities mask underlying grammatical (or logical) diversity.

In the *Tractatus* he writes,

Language disguises thought. So much so, that from the outward form of the clothing it is impossible to infer the thought beneath it. (1961, 4.002)

And in the *Investigations* we find a closely related thought expressed in terms of the same metaphor of clothing disguising or masking how things really are,

We remain unconscious of the prodigious diversity of all the everyday language-games because the clothing of our language makes everything alike. (1958, 224)

What such remarks give voice to is one of Wittgenstein's central themes: that the "uniform appearance" of language, its surface grammatical features, tend to mask

the great diversity there actually is in our employments of words and their various functions, something he also speaks of in terms of our not realizing the complexity of the logic of our language. As he puts it in the *Tractatus*: “Everyday language is a part of the human organism and is no less complicated than it” (1961, 4.002).

One of the primary misconceptions that we fall victim to on account of the uniform appearance of language is the so-called Descriptivist Fallacy¹: the idea that indicative language always functions to describe its own set of ‘objects’, a distinctive region of reality.² Austin, for example, speaks of

the assumption of philosophers that the business of a ‘statement’ can only be to ‘describe’ some state of affairs, or to ‘state some fact’, which it must do either truly or falsely. (1962, 1)

¹ Paradoxically, it has sometimes been argued that Wittgenstein himself subscribed to this kind of descriptivism. Sabina Lovibond writes:

What Wittgenstein offers us... is a homogeneous or ‘seamless’ conception of language. It is a conception free from invidious comparisons between different regions of language... The only way... in which an indicative statement can fail to describe reality is by not being true – i.e. by virtue of reality not being as the statement declares it to be... Wittgenstein’s view of language confirms us... in the pre-reflective habit of treating as ‘descriptive,’ or fact-stating, all sentences which qualify by grammatical standards as propositions. Instead of confining the descriptive function to those parts of language that deal with a natural-scientific subject-matter, it allows that function to pervade all regions of discourse irrespective of content. (1983, 25-7)

Lovibond’s reading arises from taking indicative language and a deflationary conception of truth to straightforwardly lead to a kind of across-the-board realism. This is to forget one of Wittgenstein’s cardinal rules, that meaning (or use) cannot simply be read off the sentence considered in isolation.

² (1958, #304)

Acknowledging the philosophical allure of the Descriptivist Fallacy, Wittgenstein speaks of the importance of

mak[ing] a radical break with the idea that language always functions in one way, always serves the same purpose: to convey thoughts -- which may be about houses, pains, good and evil, or anything you please. (1958, #304)

The recognition that language does a great deal more than to simply describe (some region of) reality and Wittgenstein's oft-noted comparison of a cry of pain with the utterance "I'm in pain" (1958, #244) has led influential commentators to suppose that Wittgenstein is an expressivist of a traditional sort at least with respect to current first-person mental utterances, that is, *avowals*.³ Such a reading certainly captures Wittgenstein's opposition to treating introspection as a kind of observational awareness of objects in a private mental landscape. It is in light of this reading that I want to, firstly, consider whether Wittgenstein is an expressivist with respect to avowals. I shall go on to consider whether he endorses any philosophical thesis that might usefully be termed expressivist.

Note that I shall be using the term 'expressivism' to refer to traditional expressivism unless otherwise indicated. I shall consider Wittgenstein's discussion of the avowal "I am afraid" in Part II section ix of *Philosophical Investigations* in order to show that Wittgenstein sees more variety in the uses of language than the

³ Fogelin (1976, ch.14), Rosenthal (1993, 203), Bar-On and Long (2001, 321-3) Wright (1998, 34).

expressivist does. Furthermore, I aim to show how Wittgenstein provides grounds for thinking of the expressivist as *still* being in the grip of central assumptions of his descriptivist opponent. I will then turn to consider two areas of discourse which have traditionally come in for expressivist treatment, the ethical and the aesthetic. About the ethical I aim to cast doubt on Simon Blackburn's claim that Wittgenstein's "Lecture on Ethics" (1929) is an endorsement of an expressivist or proto-expressivist view. Nonetheless, I want to do justice to the kinship that Blackburn sees with expressivism. With regard to the aesthetic, however, there are grounds for thinking that Wittgenstein's view is strongly opposed to expressivism. As we shall see, Wittgenstein can be read as holding the view that some aesthetic judgments are *typically* descriptive.

In the last part of the paper I want to draw some wider implications of the discussion for the relation between Wittgenstein and Blackburn's sophisticated quasi-realist expressivism. Here there is an important contrast between an all-purpose minimalist conception of description and Wittgenstein's richer more variegated account of our everyday use of the term "description".

Traditional Expressivism

Let us begin with a characterization of a traditional expressivist. Such a philosopher notoriously argues that certain sentences that may superficially look like descriptions are, in fact, expressions. He holds two claims:

1) A semantic thesis: target sentences lack truth values.

and

2) A functional role thesis: target sentences express, but do not describe, certain mental states or attitudes.⁴

Ayer's emotivist treatment of ethical, aesthetic and religious sentences provides a well-known example. As he explains, "Stealing money is wrong" is not a description of some state of affairs in the world; it is a mere expression of feelings of disapproval directed towards the stealing of money. The expressed mental state, being a feeling, is not truth-assessable. This sort of emotivism has subsequently come to be thought of as the classic form of non-cognitivism.

In order to consider the question to what extent Wittgenstein is an expressivist in this traditional sense let us consider his treatment of avowals since, as previously noted, this is the topic that commentators have been most inclined to interpret along expressivist lines. Here, then, is an important and telling discussion of the avowal "I am afraid":

⁴ Ayer (1936, 142).

But here is the problem: a cry, which cannot be called a description, which is more primitive than any description, for all that serves as a description of the inner life.

A cry is not a description. But there are transitions. And the words “I am afraid” may approximate more, or less, to being a cry. They may come quite close to this and also be far removed from it...

But if “I am afraid” is not always something like a cry of complaint and yet sometimes is, then why should it *always* be a description of a state of mind? (1958, 189).

Note, first of all, that Wittgenstein does not simply identify the avowal “I am afraid” with a cry of fear; he *compares* the one with the other. He says that sometimes the avowal is something like a cry and sometimes it is very far removed from being so.

Take the case where it is something like a cry. Suppose that one’s car breaks down in a dangerous part of town at night. Then one might say “I am afraid” as a spontaneous response to the situation. In this context the utterance functions as an expression of one’s fear in a very similar way to a cry of fear. It is, we might say, wrung from us by fearful circumstances just as a cry might be. In such a case one need not be trying to inform anyone of one’s state of mind; one may even be speaking to oneself, so let us grant that it is a non-descriptive use. But, for all that, Wittgenstein says that it only *approximates* to being a cry; in other words, it is not *equivalent* to one. Why not? It is important to notice that in questioning whether

the utterance “I am afraid” *always* functions as a description, Wittgenstein is taking it for granted that on some occasions it does indeed function in this way. That is, he is taking it for granted that “I am afraid” has a truth-evaluable content that can, on occasion, function as a description of one’s state of mind. It is *because* the sentence “I am afraid” is truth-evaluable that Wittgenstein thinks we are tempted to suppose that it *always* functions as a description of an inner state – which is a form of the Descriptivist Fallacy. It is in order to combat this temptation that Wittgenstein reminds us that when I say “I am afraid” I may be simply expressing my fear through a linguistic form of behaviour; but it is not a *mere* expression like “Help!” because it can be judged true or false.

This account of why Wittgenstein does not assimilate “I am afraid” to a cry of fear shows that he is fully sensitive to the differences in logical and grammatical relations into which the avowal enters as compared with the cry. Unlike a cry, which is neither true nor false, the avowal can be embedded in conditionals such as “If I am afraid, then I’d better get out of here”. It bears inferential relations to “He is afraid” and “Someone is afraid”, both of which will be true if what the avowal says is so. And another person, thinking that one’s avowal of fear is a deliberate ruse, might accuse one of lying, something that would make no sense in the case of a cry. What *would* make sense in that case is the accusation of pretending or feigning to be afraid.

A further consideration along these lines is that if an avowal were a mere expression it seems that then there would be a genuine state of affairs in the world,

namely, one's current state of mind, that others can describe or talk about but that I, mysteriously, could not describe or talk about (unless I'm reflecting upon it as in the past). To suppose that Wittgenstein is committed to *that* bizarre view seems most uncharitable. We can conclude this line of thought by saying that, on Wittgenstein's account, the sentence "I am afraid" has an assertoric dimension in addition to its expressive dimension.⁵ And, we might add, it is precisely this dimension of the avowal that is overlooked by the expressivist who is intent on assimilating the avowal to a cry.

Now let us consider a case in which "I am afraid" is far removed from being a cry. Suppose one is a member of a group of mountain-climbers and that the group leader asks how the members of the group are feeling about the next most dangerous stage of the climb. In this case saying "I am afraid" functions as a description of one's state of mind in so far as one intends to tell another how one feels. Of course in this employment it still functions as an expression: describing or reporting one's mental states is, after all, one way of expressing them.⁶ On the everyday understanding of the term 'expression' that Wittgenstein employs, expressing and describing are not the mutually exclusive categories the expressivist

⁵ In this I agree with David Finkelstein. See, his (2003, ch.4).

⁶ The possibility of being both a description and an expression is consistent with what Wittgenstein calls his "plan for the treatment of the use of first-person present indicative sentences" (1967, #472). He writes of avowals as expressions but qualifies this by saying that this thought is "not quite right". I take it that Wittgenstein is here acknowledging that such sentences, unlike exclamations like "Ouch!", are truth-evaluable, hence potentially available for descriptive employment.

assumes them to be. To express is simply to make manifest.⁷ If I say “I have a constant headache that’s like a tight band around my head” in the doctor’s consulting rooms I describe or report my pain and this description or report *is* an expression of my pain.

One can even imagine more atypical uses of the utterance “I am afraid” that are not expressive of one’s mental state at all but are, nonetheless, descriptive of it. For instance, suppose you are in therapy and your psychoanalyst convinces you on the basis of psychological theory and your past actions that you are, despite what you are still inclined to believe, actually afraid of your father. In this context saying “OK. Now I see how I *must* be afraid of him” may well be a correct description of one’s mental state (from this theoretical perspective) but it is not an *expression* of it in so far as one’s fear is still repressed. Such a case is, as Wittgenstein puts it, “very far removed” from a cry of fear. Indeed in so far as we think of avowals in terms of expressions of one’s state of mind we might not want to speak of this use of the utterance as an *avowal* of fear at all.

Let us summarize the differences between Wittgenstein’s treatment of the utterance “I am afraid” and an expressivist treatment of it. From Wittgenstein’s point of view the expressivist starts in the right place by correctly noting that the grammatical surface of the utterance tends to lead us into the mistake of thinking that it always functions as a description. But to assume that it never functions as a

⁷ Of course, this is not to say expressing is itself a single category. There are many modes or styles or ways of expressing and many different states, attitudes and feelings that can be expressed.

description is to go from one extreme to the other and to thereby miss the variety of uses to which it can be put. The expressivist seems to assume that being truth-evaluable is equivalent to being a description so that the denial of descriptive functionality is at the same time a denial of truth-evaluability. Unlike the expressivist, Wittgenstein admits that in saying "I am afraid" one *can* be describing one's state of mind and thereby expressing it. Wittgenstein says, "Describing my state of mind (of fear, say) is something I do in a particular context" (1958, 188). For example, the context in which one has been asked "What's wrong with you?" In different circumstances, of course, one may be simply giving voice to one's fear: something Wittgenstein characterizes as an 'approximation' to a cry. But, as we have seen, it is *only* an approximation, since the sentence, unlike the cry, is truth-evaluable and, on account of that, has logical and grammatical relations to other sentences. To suppose that the avowal functions in just the same way as a mere expression like "Yikes!" or "Help!" is, from Wittgenstein's point of view, to overlook the differences between it and a cry of fear. The expressivist acknowledges the expressive dimension of the avowal but overlooks its assertoric dimension and its descriptive employment.

The Fallacy of Descriptivism

We are now in a position to see that, compared with Wittgenstein's elucidation of the use of "I am afraid", expressivism has only partially overcome the fallacy of Descriptivism. We can distinguish four components of Descriptivism:

- 1) The **functional univocity thesis**: the claim that the target discourse functions in just one distinctive way.
- 2) The **functional transparency thesis**: the claim that a sentence's function can be simply read off from the form and/or content of the sentence itself.
- 3) The **descriptive function thesis**: the claim that the function of the target discourse is to describe its own distinctive region of reality.
- 4) The **unity of description thesis**: the claim that description is a single functional category (say, truth-assessable language).

Although the Expressivist gives up the descriptive function thesis (3), he retains a commitment to the other three of the Descriptivist's theses: the functional univocity thesis (1), the functional transparency thesis (2) and the unity of description thesis (4). Whereas the Descriptivist thinks of indicative language in general as having the distinctive function of description, the expressivist thinks of its target discourses as having the distinctive function of expression in contrast to description. But Wittgenstein is constantly drawing our attention to the diversity and plurality of the functions of language, not only within the category of indicative sentences, but also within a particular discourse, at the level of individual sentences and words. By treating the functional plurality of language as a phenomenon restricted to entire discourses – each discourse having its own distinctive function – the expressivist retains the Descriptivist thesis of the functional univocity of her target discourses.

Wittgenstein, alternatively, wants to demonstrate the way in which philosophical theorizing tends to deny or falsify the great variety of functions which characterize our actual linguistic practices. Hence his constant refrain to consider particular cases and examples: to “focus on the details of what goes on” (1958, #51).

Apart from undermining the functional univocity thesis the consideration of cases and examples also serves to undermine the thesis of functional transparency. The expressivist, again like the descriptivist, thinks that the function of a sentence is simply revealed by the sentence itself: it may be the form of the sentence (e.g. being indicative, or first-person present) that is the supposed key to functional role; or it may be the presence of certain key terms (e.g. “good”, “beautiful”). The common mistake, as Wittgenstein sees it, is to try to discern the function independently of a careful consideration of how the sentence is used in such and such circumstances. As he puts it,

One cannot guess how a word functions. One has to *look at* its use and learn from that. (1958, #340)

The remedy, then, is to look to the actual use of the sentence in specific circumstances; something Wittgenstein believes philosophers are reluctant to do since it involves moving away from making general explanatory claims and back to the “rough ground” of the examination of examples and their specific details. If we do that we will see that there is much more functional variety than either

descriptivists or expressivists suppose. The irony is that despite criticizing the descriptivist by flying the banner of functional variety, the expressivist is revealed as failing to acknowledge the true extent of the variety that there actually is, a variety that is much greater than we tend to realize (or, perhaps, want to realize).

The third commitment of the expressivist position that Wittgenstein rejects is the unity of description thesis. He remarks:

Think how many different kinds of thing are called “descriptions”:
description of a body’s position by means of its coordinates; description of a facial expression; description of a sensation of touch; of a mood...

What we call “*descriptions*” are instruments for particular uses. (1958, #24, #291).

Following Wittgenstein we might contrast the description of a mental state, say, a particular sensation, which is a matter of bodily location, intensity and character, with the description of one’s room, which is a matter of spatial dimensions and physical objects laid out in some spatial arrangement. And both of these differ from the engineer’s description of a machine by way of an cross-sectional elevation (1958, #292). Elsewhere Wittgenstein points out that there are a range of things that might be meant by a “description of what is seen” (1958, 200). In saying that description is all of these different activities Wittgenstein is decisively breaking with the tendency to treat the description of middle-sized physical objects before one’s

eyes as the paradigm of description in general.⁸ There are many different techniques of description --- and it should not be assumed that every type of description is about its own distinctive set of objects. For example, the description of a facial expression or a mood, for example, is a description of a person not a special set of objects. The moral is that there is an open-ended variety of what we call describing with no neat or simple or general philosophical story to tell.

If there are so many things that count as descriptions, why does Wittgenstein resist saying that “I am afraid” is *always* a description, especially in view of the fact that he accepts that the utterance of this sentence is truth-evaluable. Why not call it a description simply because it can be true or false? The key to understanding Wittgenstein here it is see that he is, here as elsewhere, recounting our everyday use of the term “description” and not offering a philosophical theory of description, not even a so-called minimalist or deflationary theory. In its everyday sense we do not speak of every truth-evaluable sentence as a description or report. Consider, for example, this sentence:

It is not both raining and not raining.

This is a true sentence but we would not ordinarily call it a description, perhaps because we only speak of description where we are conveying information about the world and none is conveyed by this sentence. Of course this is not to say that

⁸ For Wittgenstein it is important to see that there is no such thing as description as *such*.

philosophers could not *extend* the notion of description to cover such a case by saying that it describes a logical truth. But that is not how Wittgenstein uses the term “description”. Whether a form of words counts as a description is a matter of the circumstances of its use, not just its sentential form or content. If I avow the sentence “I am afraid” with no thought of telling others that I am afraid – it is simply something I come out with as a reaction to some perceived threat – then Wittgenstein wants to say that in that case it does not count as a description or report. Describing or reporting is, at a minimum, a matter of telling someone or other something and I may not be aiming to do that. But there is more to it than simply intending to communicate something since we do not speak of *describing* the moral or mathematical situation or reality, and that suggests that we have fairly definite ideas about what can be described. For one thing, it does not seem to include truths about abstract matters such as these.

The Question of Ethical and Aesthetic Expressivism

Although I have only made the case with respect to one kind of avowal – those that concern the emotions – Wittgenstein’s texts reveal a similar treatment of avowals of sensations such as “I am in pain” and of sentential attitudes such as “I believe that it is raining”. Both of these kinds of avowals have assertoric and expressive dimensions as well as descriptive uses where they are used to

introspectively report on some inner state.⁹ If that is right then Wittgenstein is no expressivist with respect to avowals quite generally.¹⁰ But what of other regions of discourse?

Apart from Wittgenstein's notorious anti-theoretical approach to philosophy, a general reason to be suspicious of the claim that Wittgenstein is an expressivist about any region of discourse is his rejection of the functional univocity thesis: the same sentence typically serves many more functions than philosophical theorists tend to imagine. In support of this suggestion I want to consider Wittgenstein's treatment of cases drawn from ethical and aesthetic discourse, respectively.

Simon Blackburn has argued in a number of places that Wittgenstein's "Lecture on Ethics" (1929) is a version of ethical expressivism or proto-expressivism.¹² Although I have no positive reading to offer in its place I want to

⁹ Wittgenstein gives the following examples of the descriptive employment of avowals: "I'm sad"; "I'm in a good mood"; "I'm in pain" (1980, #470); "I'm very irritable at present"; and "I believe any bad news very readily at present". (1980, #502).

¹⁰ One might think that one ought to be an expressivist about performatives (e.g. "I promise", "I bet", "I apologize") at the very least since they are non-descriptive. However, performatives are not best interpreted as the expression of an attitude. They are better thought of in terms of undertaking various commitments and responsibilities. Promising may be associated with the intention to keep one's promise but not every performative is like that. Some (e.g. "I do" or "I hereby name this ship") don't seem to involve any distinctive attitude at all.

¹² Blackburn explains his general approach to interpreting Wittgenstein as follows: "I can think of no area that [Wittgenstein] did work upon, in the later period, without invoking a *distinctive* and *non-descriptive* function for some commitments." (1998, 164). His expressivist reading of the "Lecture on Ethics" can be found in numerous places including (1998, 161-3).

cast doubt on that claim. Blackburn correctly notes that in the lecture Wittgenstein draws a distinction between what he calls “Ethics” and factual discourse in general on the basis of his understanding of what we are doing when we make an ethical utterance. Wittgenstein imagines a book of the world “contain[ing] the whole description of the world” and he remarks:

this book would contain nothing that we would call an ethical judgment or anything that would logically imply such a judgment (1965, 6).

This non-descriptivist thesis with respect to the domain of ethics certainly shows a kinship between the middle period Wittgenstein and expressivism; but it is far from establishing the expressivist reading.

What Blackburn fails to make sufficiently clear in his discussions of this material is the extent to which Wittgenstein’s thinking about ethics significantly departs from expressivism. To this end it is important to see that expressivists accept that ethical utterances, although non-factual, do in fact make perfectly good sense. They are to be understood in terms of the expression of some mental state or attitude. But Wittgenstein thinks of the ethical, in this lecture at least, in a very heterodox way as a matter of what he calls “absolute judgements of value,” which he conceives of as being *completely nonsensical*. Indeed, he goes further in saying that the nonsensicality of ethical sentences is not simply a matter of our failing to find the right analysis or expression but that “their nonsensicality [is] their very

essence.” By that he means that any attempt to say what significance these utterances have or what they are doing, presumably including the construal of them as expressing some mental state or attitude, he would dismiss out of hand as missing what is truly ethical about them. Indeed, as if to hammer the point home, he denies that he would give any empirical significance to such utterances at all, anything concerning what people do or think or feel.

Blackburn tries to soften this account by suggesting that on Wittgenstein’s view there are various experiences that may be thought of as animating ethical utterance, perhaps as being what such utterances express. Blackburn describes these as experiences of “wonder, fear, or a feeling of safety, or of the miracle of existence” (1998, 161). But wonder, fear, a feeling of safety, and existential awe, make perfectly good sense. Wittgenstein’s expression of the relevant experiences differs crucially from Blackburn’s in being totally – and, on Wittgenstein’s account, intentionally – nonsensical. Wittgenstein writes of experiences of what he is inclined to call “wondering at the existence of the world,” where he means wondering at the *world as a whole*, or of experiences of “feeling *absolutely safe*”, saying that they make no sense at all since he can give no content to the notion of *the world as a whole* or of what *absolute safety* might be. Wittgenstein tries to get us imaginatively to enter into the illusion that a certain form of words makes sense before leading us to see that we would not accept anything as an account of what we meant. These experiences and the ethical utterances they give rise to convey nothing except the attempt to “go beyond... significant language”. The important

point for our purposes is that to think of utterances as expressions of feeling or attitude is, on this account, not to be thinking of anything Wittgenstein wants to call the “Ethical”. So the middle Wittgenstein may be a non-descriptivist, but an expressivist he surely is not.

These skeptical remarks are only aimed to put some distance between Wittgenstein and the expressivist. But the gap between the “Ethical,” in Wittgenstein’s very peculiar transcendental sense, and the philosophical use of the term for a distinctive subject matter that we can theorize about seems to me to put serious constraints on any attempt to fit his view into a recognizable position in philosophy.

Let us leave the matter there. I want to finally turn to the issue of aesthetics where this is to be understood in terms of our reaction to works of art as opposed to our response to natural wonders. In a set of notes dictated to G.E. Moore and published posthumously under the title “Wittgenstein’s Lectures 1930-33”, Wittgenstein gives numerous examples of aesthetic judgments that run quite counter to an expressivist treatment of them.

Consider this example of an aesthetic judgment about a double bass: “It is too heavy; it moves too much” (1955, 18). In explicating what this means Wittgenstein denies that it says “If it moved less, it would be more agreeable to me”. Rather he treats the judgment as a matter of an approximation to an ideal, and says that that the bass should be quieter is an end in itself, not a means to some other end. In this discussion Wittgenstein is at pains to deny any important link

between the aesthetic judgment and such psychological states of the judger as impressions of pleasure or displeasure or attitudes of liking, preferring or their contraries.

Wittgenstein goes on to give various examples that he takes to demonstrate that positive judgments of aesthetic value (or “greatness”) have nothing to do with being agreeable or disagreeable. Great works of art (e.g. King Lear) might actually be experienced as disagreeable; and, on the other hand, one might find an inferior work the more agreeable. He imagines preferring one piece of music over another despite judging that it is, in aesthetic terms, “just nothing” (1955, 18). In these cases Wittgenstein is, amongst other things, rejecting an expressivist treatment of aesthetic value according to which to say an artwork has aesthetic value is to express a preference or liking for it. On the contrary, Wittgenstein treats central cases of aesthetic utterances as matters of *judgment* for which the bearing of *reasons* for and against is paramount. “The question of Aesthetics,” Wittgenstein says, “is not ‘Do you like this?’ but ‘Why do you like this?’” (1955, 19). We may conclude that he is certainly no non-cognitivist or traditional expressivist about aesthetic judgments.

Even more problematic for the expressivist interpretation, Wittgenstein claims that reasons in the aesthetic domain are “of the nature of further descriptions” involving the articulation of the details of the work, including, amongst other things, comparing it with works by the same artist, as well as with works by other artists within the same category of art. This provides strong evidence

that Wittgenstein allows that aesthetic judgments can count as descriptions of the artworks they are about. On this view an aesthetic judgment is often employed as a description of an artwork and reasons in support of that judgment are, on Wittgenstein's view, "further descriptions" of it. Here it is important to recall Wittgenstein's rejection of the unity of description thesis held by descriptivists and expressivists alike: he does *not* accept that there is a primary or basic sense of description such as the description of what Austin called 'middle-sized dry goods' or, for that matter, the fundamental objects of physics.

The technique of description we tend to employ in the aesthetic case he explains in terms of the notion of an ideal. We say things like "That won't do; it isn't right" to register departures from the ideal. And concerning the worry about how we can have epistemic access to the ideal, Wittgenstein notes that we should not treat this platonistically as an 'object' of some sort to which we have some queer sort of access and which we are trying to copy. Rather, we rely on recalling examples of artworks which we are inclined to call "perfectly right". These function as ideal cases against which to judge the work in question.

Quasi-Realist Expressivism & Minimalism about Description

If Wittgenstein is not a traditional expressivist one might still think, with Simon Blackburn, that perhaps he is a sophisticated expressivist, at least with respect to some regions of language – like Blackburn himself. Blackburn endorses a minimalist conception of truth, and so is well positioned to distinguish both the

expressive and the assertoric dimensions of avowals since he can acknowledge that they are true or false in a minimal sense. His quasi-realist expressivism is in the business of explaining the assertoric features of avowals (and other target discourses), given an account of them as having a distinctive kind of non-descriptive function and so not being explicated in terms of some distinctive reality. But for that very reason we might be tempted to think that quasi-realist expressivism is unable to acknowledge that avowals can, on occasion, function as descriptions of inner states. However, in a discussion of Wittgenstein, in which he is labelled a “non-descriptive functionalist,” Blackburn seems to show sympathy for a move he characterizes as “throw[ing] “description” into the minimalist pot” (1998, 167). That is, he seems willing to allow the quasi-realist a minimalist conception of description as nothing more than mere truth-evaluability. As Blackburn puts it, “it is not what you finish by saying, but how you manage to say it that matters” (1993, 168). Although this move seems to threaten to undermine the distinction between the quasi-real and the really real discourses, it does serve to make available the possibility of admitting that avowals, for example, can be descriptions of inner states in so far as they are (minimally) true.

Here it is important to see that Wittgenstein does not employ Blackburn’s deflationary conception of description as mere fact-stating or truth-telling. His reason is simple: this is not the conception we employ in our ordinary linguistic practices. It is true that Wittgenstein does claim that the ordinary use of the term “true” is such that the expression “‘p’ is true” is, for the most part, functionally

equivalent to the sentence “p”. So he can, in a sense, be called a minimalist or deflationist about truth.¹³ But he does not take the minimalist’s *further* step of supposing there is no difference between asserting “p” and issuing a description, namely, that p. It is only by drawing a distinction between asserting and describing that Wittgenstein can do justice to the way in which the avowal “I am afraid” may or may not function as a description depending on the circumstances even despite acknowledging its truth-aptitude. Ordinarily we employ the term “description” only when we are telling or informing someone about “a reality” such as one’s mental life, or the state of one’s bedroom, or an artwork. This connection helps to explain Wittgenstein’s reticence to speak in terms of description in moral or mathematical cases on the ground that there is no ordinary use for such expressions as ‘moral reality’ or ‘mathematical reality’.¹⁴

The quasi-realist expressivist who subscribes to a minimalist theory of description seems forced to have to extend the notion of description to cover all avowals, and all ethical and aesthetic sentences in so far as these are all truth-evaluable. In contrast, Wittgenstein’s fidelity to the familiar, and thicker, conception of description allows for a more nuanced account of the descriptive/non-descriptive distinction: one that can distinguish within the class of avowals or aesthetic sentences some that are descriptive without admitting that they all are. With regard to ethical sentences, I think it would be true to his later

¹³ That is, so long as we do not take him to be offering an analysis or explanation of various features of our use of the term “true”. He sees himself as providing a description of this use.

¹⁴ See Lovibond quote: fn1.

teaching to think that, for example, “He is honest” could count as a moral description of a person.

So, in somewhat different ways, both traditional and sophisticated expressivisms stand accused of offering an inadequate (because partial) account of the actual functional diversity of our linguistic practices, including the diversity of our employments of the term “description”. And in both cases Wittgenstein would trace the problem to the functional univocity thesis: that the target discourse – or the sentences taken as representative of the target discourse – function in just one distinctive way; a fallacy, it is worth noting, that also applies to Wittgenstein’s own middle period treatment of ethical utterance.

Global Expressivism?

We might finally ask, is there *any* sense in which Wittgenstein can usefully be called an expressivist? In a recent co-authored paper Huw Price and I (2007) wondered whether Wittgenstein could be thought of as ‘global expressivist’, a position arrived at by globalizing Blackburn’s quasi-realist strategy, that is, the strategy of explaining on an expressivist non-representationalist (or non-descriptivist) basis how talk can properly acquire the trappings of genuinely descriptive talk.¹⁵ The global expressivist adopts a 3rd-personal scientific stance towards entire discourses (e.g. ethical discourse) or our practices of employing a

¹⁵ Blackburn’s quasi-realist expressivist does not allow one to invoke any substantial theoretical semantic notions such as reference, representation or description in theorizing about some area. Of course, minimalist (theoretically deflationary) versions of these notions are perfectly admissible.

certain term (e.g. “true”) in the hope that such large-scale patterns of usage will be explicable in terms of serving such and such functions.

Although this is not the place to explore this question in detail there are several aspects of Wittgenstein’s practice, apart from his anti-theoretical stance, that collectively point towards a negative answer. Firstly, the term “use” in Wittgenstein refers to something quite specific, someone or other’s use of words on a certain occasion for a certain purpose. It is not a matter of entire discourses or empirically discoverable patterns of use in a population. Wittgenstein is concerned with a sense of “use” recoverable from someone or other’s everyday employments of words, say, by way of memory or projective imagination. That is, it is concerned with how I (or you) project ordinary concepts into new, different or just further contexts of use. Secondly, Wittgenstein time and again draws the distinction between the conceptual and the empirical in order to distinguish his conceptual investigations from scientific studies concerned with offering causal hypotheses about the origins and instrumental function of our linguistic practices. What is hidden in the sense of being unavailable from an ordinary grasp of language by a competent speaker – without relying on statistical evidence or empirical inquiry – is of no interest to ‘philosophy’ in Wittgenstein’s sense.¹⁶ Thirdly, Wittgenstein writes: “We must do away with all *explanation*, and description alone must take its place” (1958, #109). On Wittgenstein’s view, description of linguistic practices is a difficult discipline that, amongst other things, requires one to overcome a constant

¹⁶ (1958, #126).

temptation to offer general explanations (in particular, those of metaphysics, including, of course, a metaphysics of language and a metaphysics of science). The explanatory pretensions of philosophy, in fact, stand in the way of describing the highly complex terrain of the “rough ground” of our practices.

Conclusion

In this paper I have primarily wanted to contrast Wittgenstein with the position of the traditional expressivist since his work on avowals has notoriously attracted this particular interpretation of it. I have also tried to show that Wittgenstein’s thought about ethics and aesthetics is not best understood in terms of expressivism in either of its traditional or sophisticated forms. Wittgenstein is, of course, engaged in a project with which the expressivist ought to have a great deal of sympathy: the investigation of the many and various descriptive and non-descriptive functions served by language. And it is no doubt true that in moving against the Descriptivist Fallacy he is very often, as Blackburn has argued, in the business of invoking non-descriptive functions where philosophers have been tempted to think in terms of the description of reality or realities. But for all his commonality with expressivism, Wittgenstein’s work of assembling reminders of ordinary use – including the ordinary use of the term “description” – ultimately makes available a serious criticism of the expressivist tradition, namely, that expressivism is still in the grip of central features of the Descriptivism that it is rightly trying to free itself from.

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