



IS GIBBARD A REALIST?

BY LAURA SCHROETER & FRANÇOIS SCHROETER

JOURNAL OF ETHICS & SOCIAL PHILOSOPHY

VOL. 1, No. 2 | AUGUST 2005

URL: WWW.JESP.ORG

COPYRIGHT © LAURA SCHROETER & FRANÇOIS SCHROETER 2005

IS GIBBARD A REALIST?

By Laura Schroeter & François Schroeter

COULD THERE BE PEACE at last in metaethics? Early expressivists like Ayer (1946) and Stevenson (1937) took their semantics for moral terms to be the very antithesis of realism about moral discourse. More recently, however, expressivists have become more conciliatory. Simon Blackburn's quasi-realist program, for instance, aims to show that expressivism has the resources to vindicate many of the apparently realist features of normative discourse (Blackburn 1984, 1993a, 1998). In his new book, *Thinking How to Live*,¹ Allan Gibbard goes a step further and claims he has now bridged the gap between expressivism and realism. Using only expressivist resources, Gibbard thinks he can show that there is a natural property signified by normative terms. So there is no need to choose between expressivism and realism: Gibbard thinks he can have both.

Gibbard's conciliatory gesture is not just a pious hope. Gibbard develops an ingenious and original version of expressivism which is grounded in a detailed and sophisticated exploration of some of the deepest logical and semantic issues in metaethics. Although the semantic account he provides for normative terms takes a distinctively expressivist form, he argues at length that metaethical realism is a natural consequence of this semantic proposal. There is much to admire and much to be learned from Gibbard's probing discussion of these issues. However, we think realists ought to reject Gibbard's claim that he has vindicated realism. Gibbard's proposal, we will argue, fails to capture what is distinctive of the realist's view. The prospects for peace and reconciliation in metaethics, we believe, are much dimmer than Gibbard suggests.

1. Gibbard's new proposal

People disagree widely about what it takes to fall into the extension of normative terms. Some think that what is right to do is what maximizes personal preference, some that it is what matches objective standards of perfection, while many others simply don't have any definite opinion on the matter. Following Moore (1903), Gibbard thinks that these divergences in our standards for deciding what is right pose a challenge for the semantics of normative terms. On the one hand, the definition of what is right may itself involve normative terms. Gibbard thinks normative definitions may provide an analytic equivalence, but they simply postpone the problem of giving a full specification of what it takes to fall into the extension of normative terms. On the other hand, the definition may provide a genuine naturalistic specification of what it takes to be right. But in that case Gibbard thinks the equivalence – although possibly true – won't qualify as an analytic equivalence between

¹ Gibbard (2003). All page references in the text will be to this work.

naturalistic and normative terms. Competent subjects may rationally doubt or even reject the putative definition. In effect, Gibbard and Moore are appealing to a familiar Fregean cognitive difference principle for individuating concepts. The concepts expressed by “a” and “b” are distinct if a rational subject can doubt the identity “a=b” or, more generally, can accept a sentence schema which involves one term while rejecting the same sentence schema that involves the other (25).

The lesson Gibbard is inclined to draw from these Moorean observations is that attempting to provide a naturalistic definition of normative terms is the wrong strategy for the semantics of normative terms. He thinks that a more promising approach is to focus on how these terms are tied to motivation. Roughly, to judge an action right is to have some pro-attitude (or attitude of favoring) toward that action. Consider the following claims: “I think this is truly the best thing we can do, but I don’t favor it,” or “I favor this action but I don’t think it is good.” According to Gibbard, both of these claims will strike us *prima facie* as incoherent in much the same way as “He is a bachelor, but he is married” strikes us as incoherent (29). Thus, Gibbard thinks that motivation internalism is a thesis that passes the Moorean test: it is obvious to minimally competent subjects that judging right entails having the corresponding motivation. Gibbard’s ambition is to construct a full semantic account for normative terms from the motivations which survive the Moorean test. His expressivist account, he believes, can vindicate the validity of reasoning involving normative terms and realism about normative discourse.

Endorsement – or, more precisely, the state of accepting a system of norms – is the fundamental pro-attitude Gibbard appeals to in the expressivist account of normative terms he develops in his first book, *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings* (1990). The new proposal focuses on a more familiar type of pro-attitude: decisions, intentions, and plans.² To judge that an action is the right thing to do (or simply “the thing to do,” to use Gibbard’s favorite phrase) is to express one’s decision, or plan to do it.³ Unlike simple desires, plans and intentions are clearly bound by a norm of consistency. Whereas there is arguably nothing wrong in having mixed feelings toward Cunégonde and toward the idea of courting her, it is much more difficult to imagine being simultaneously in a state of planning to court her and of planning not to court

² Gibbard suggests that simple intentions or plans can be considered as the basic elements out of which systems of norms are constructed. The new proposal should thus not be seen as discontinuous with the old one.

³ “If I assert ‘Fleeing is the thing to do,’ I thereby express a state of mind, deciding to flee” (8). It is worth noting that once we replace the vague idea that to judge an action right is to favor it with Gibbard’s precise proposal that to judge an action right is to plan to do it, Gibbard’s account clearly fails his own Moorean test. There is no conceptual incoherence in thinking that one can judge that an action is the right thing to do and yet not plan to do it. Indeed, the idea that this is possible is often treated as a platitude in moral psychology: it amounts to the claim that weakness of will is possible.

her. Perhaps you have not yet made up your mind whether or not to court her. But if you do decide to court her, form a corresponding intention and start to plan the courtship, you commit yourself to not intend anything which is inconsistent with courting her – including, of course, intending not to court her. Gibbard relies on this notion of consistency in planning to develop a logic for inferences involving plans that mirrors the valid patterns of inference we recognize in the case of reasoning involving belief. This is the key to Gibbard's solution to the famous Frege-Geach problem (Geach 1965), which has been one of the most notorious difficulties facing expressivist semantics for normative terms.

Gibbard's new proposal represents an important advance on his earlier attempts. However, we won't try to adjudicate whether the solution he proposes is completely successful in vindicating all aspects of normative reasoning. We are interested in examining the realist consequences which Gibbard thinks follow from his account. We agree with Gibbard that conceptually competent subjects are committed to the claim that being the right thing to do strongly supervenes on a natural property broadly construed.⁴ But we doubt that Gibbard's account succeeds in vindicating what the realist means by this claim. If we are right, solving the Frege-Geach does not *eo ipso* provide the resources for vindicating realism.

2. Normative terms signify natural properties

Gibbard introduces the notion of a hyperplan which specifies what to do in all possible circumstances.⁵ Using possible worlds semantics as his model, he suggests we can use the set of all possible hyperplans to keep track of an ordinary subject's partial plan. Joe's plan to court Cunégonde can be captured by the set of all possible hyperplans which have Joe court Cunégonde – just as the content of Joe's belief that Séraphine has rejected him can be captured by the set of all possible worlds in which she rejects him.

Gibbard's argument for supervenience starts with the observation that plans must specify situations and actions in terms of their prosaically factual properties (indeed Gibbard thinks we must ultimately cash out situations and actions in terms of observational properties). After all, plans must be applicable by the planner and if two situations differ in no discernable way, one cannot plan to treat them differently. So we can imagine the goddess Hera who, unlike us, is fully opinionated about what to do in all possible situa-

⁴ Gibbard follows Jaegwon Kim (1993) in his discussion of the supervenience relation. See chapter 5, in particular 89-90.

⁵ One can plan, Gibbard tells us, not just for one's own circumstances; one also can plan for being in other people's situation. Joe, for instance, can form a plan to court Cunégonde if in Lancelot's situation. This isn't full-fledged, literal planning, Gibbard says, it is hypothetical planning: Joe is thinking as *if* he could plan what to do in other people's plight (49-50). Hyperplans cover other people's circumstances as well as one's own.

tions. As Gibbard puts it, she leaves no hypothetical bridge uncrossed in her planning. Hera thus accepts one determinate hyperplan. As a coherent planner, her plans will respect the supervenience thesis: there will be no difference in what she plans to do in two situations without a prosaically factual difference between the two situations. So she is committed to the claim that being the right thing to do supervenes on prosaic facts.

Now consider Joe, a less than ideal planner. Joe's plans, we will assume, are not inconsistent, but he has made up his mind only on a tiny subset of the situations on which Hera is decided. Still, Gibbard suggests, we can characterize the content of Joe's state of planning in terms of the entire set of hyperplans which would be consistent with his actual partial plans. Each of these hyperplans represent ways that Joe could become fully decided in his plans without changing his mind. All of these hyperplans, like Hera's hyperplan, will respect the supervenience thesis. So Joe is committed to the supervenience thesis, since it is entailed by what he already accepts. On Gibbard's account, entailment can be cashed out in terms of the standard model of inclusion: Q entails P iff the set of hyperplans representing P is wholly included in the set of hyperplans representing Q . Thus Joe's plans commit him to the supervenience thesis, since the supervenience thesis holds for every hyperplan, and Joe's plan can be cashed out in terms of a subset of these hyperplans.

The upshot of this argument is that every consistent planner is committed to the supervenience thesis. This means that if the meaning of "is the right thing to do" is cashed out in terms of plans, then speakers are committed to there being a natural property – perhaps complicated, or even infinitely disjunctive – which is necessarily coextensive with what is right to do. The supervenience basis provides a naturalistically specifiable extension for the term and this is sufficient to specify a natural property on a minimalist approach to properties. Gibbard even goes so far as to say that this natural property *constitutes* what is the right thing to do in much the same sense that being H_2O constitutes being water: the two are necessarily coextensive and being water depends on being H_2O .

This is a result which Gibbard is particularly happy about because he thinks that it allows him to vindicate the essential features of common-sense realism about normative discourse. Common sense suggests that there is a property of being the right thing to do and Gibbard thinks he has shown that his expressivist proposal allows him to agree: on his semantic account there is indeed a natural property which constitutes being the right thing to do.

As a result, Gibbard thinks an expressivist can agree with one of the main tenets of naturalist realists like Peter Railton, Michael Smith, Canberra planners, and Cornell realists.⁶ Normative predicates pick out or – as Gibbard puts it – "signify" ordinary natural properties. But naturalist realists are mis-

⁶ See Railton (1986), Smith (1994), Jackson and Pettit (1995), Jackson (1998), Boyd (1988), Brink (1989) and Sturgeon (1985).

taken, in Gibbard's view, if they attempt to cash out the meaning of normative terms via this relation to a natural property. Just as competence with "water" does not require a subject to recognize that water is H_2O , Gibbard thinks that competence with "is the right thing to do" does not require a subject to endorse any particular claim about what natural properties constitute rightness. Thus Gibbard's semantic account generates a position which resembles Moore's intuitionist realism: the truth of what constitutes goodness is not analytically entailed by linguistic or conceptual competence with the corresponding normative term. Unlike Moore, Gibbard thinks there is no need to appeal to non-natural properties to characterize what is signified by normative terms: normative terms signify ordinary natural properties.

3. Univocity and Objectivity

Should realists welcome Gibbard as an ally? We will argue that realists, whether Moorean or naturalist, should reject the idea that Gibbard has succeeded in vindicating the core commitments of realism.

We can set aside the question of whether natural properties are analytically associated with normative terms. Questions of analyticity concern the sense or mode of presentation associated with normative terms. To say that a definition is analytically true is to say that competent speakers could not rationally deny it. Most realists agree with Gibbard that there are no natural properties analytically associated with normative terms. Indeed, most realists are very dubious about the notion of analyticity; they believe that there are very few, if any, analytic truths even in the case of prosaically factual discourse involving natural kind terms.

What is crucial to the realist position – whether Moorean or naturalist – is the claim that normative terms have a determinate reference and signify a specific property. It's distinctive of the realist position Gibbard wants to vindicate that all competent speakers signify the very same natural property – that is, no matter how different speakers might vary in their specific conception of what it takes to fall into the extension of a term, their different uses of the term always signify the very same property. Call this the *Univocity thesis*. It's also distinctive of the realist position that speakers' opinions about what falls into the extension of normative terms are fallible. One's judging an action to be right does not make it so: there is an independent standard of correctness for normative judgments to which speakers are answerable. Call this the *Objectivity thesis*. Moorean and naturalist realists accept both the Univocity and Objectivity theses and take them to be constraints on an adequate realist account of the signification of normative terms. Is Gibbard right to think he can agree with Moorean and naturalist realists at the level of signification?

First consider the Univocity thesis. The crucial question is which natural property is signified according to Gibbard's proposal by a competent speaker's use of the term "is the right thing to do"? Gibbard does not explicitly address this question. In fact, it's not a question he believes his semantic

account needs to answer. According to Gibbard, it is important to distinguish two separate theoretical tasks. The first task is to provide a semantic theory which specifies what it takes for a speaker to be competent with the meaning of a normative term. The second task is to provide a substantive normative theory that specifies precisely which property is signified by a speaker's use of this term. Gibbard thinks he only needs to address the first of these two tasks in order to vindicate a form of normative realism. The second task, he believes, is the job of substantive normative theorizing and does not belong to semantic theorizing: just as it is the job of chemists, not semantic theorists, to tell us precisely which natural property is signified by our use of the term "water," it is the job of normative theorists, not metaethicists, to tell us precisely which property is signified by our use of the term "is the right thing to do." Gibbard therefore does not address the question of precisely which natural property is signified by normative terms anywhere in the book.⁷

We don't think these two theoretical tasks can be separated in the way Gibbard assumes. The semantic theorist must be able to explain why a particular referential assignment is the correct one – otherwise the referential assignment will be arbitrary. Consider a hypothetical speaker who associates the following competence conditions with the pair of terms "water" and "retaw." He takes the word "water" to apply to any instance of the natural kind that fills local lakes and rivers, normally appears clear and odourless, is potable and has played an important role in his life to date. He takes the word "retaw" to apply to whatever he intends to drink at the time he is making the judgment. Chemists may tell us that H₂O is the natural kind that plays roughly the role our subject associates with the term "water." In this case, H₂O is a good candidate for what is signified by his use of the term "water": any charitable interpreter should recognize that this assignment vindicates our speaker's most important commitments about the property his word picks out – even if it does not vindicate every aspect of his understanding of the term. On the other hand, there is no such justification for assigning H₂O as the reference of "retaw." Even if he tends to apply the word "retaw" predominantly to samples of H₂O, there is no reason to think our subject would be saying something false if he were to call a glass of vodka or even gasoline "retaw" – provided he intends to drink it. It should be obvious that the conditions for competence with "retaw" simply don't provide the resources for identifying a natural kind like H₂O as what is signified by our subject's use of the term when he plans to drink many different kinds of beverage.

Now let's return to Gibbard's semantics for normative terms. According to Gibbard, a speaker uses a term with the meaning that English speakers standardly associate with "is the right thing to do" just in case he uses that term to express his plans. Consider for instance a monomaniacal hand-clasper whose only intrinsic plan in life is to maximize long-term prospects of

⁷ Thanks to Allan Gibbard for alerting us to the importance of the distinction between these two tasks in his semantics for normative terms.

hand-clasping.⁸ Andy the hand-clasper intends to maximize hand-clasping in every possible circumstance. Let's also assume that Andy uses the term "is zing" to express his plans. According to Gibbard, Andy's words signify the very same property as we signify with the predicate "is the right thing to do" – the property which normative theorists are actively trying to identify. Is this a charitable interpretation of the meaning of Andy's term?

We think not. Let's assume that one of the standard normative theories, say a form of Aristotelian perfectionism, proves correct: substantive normative theorizing establishes that what is right is what promotes a list of intrinsic goods which are necessary for human flourishing. In that case, hand-clasping will almost never be the right thing to do. It is highly implausible, we submit, to interpret Andy's words as signifying Aristotelian perfectionism. A charitable interpretation of Andy's term "is zing" must make best sense of the most important aspects of Andy's own understanding and use of that term. Charitable interpretations can be grounded in different aspects of the subject's linguistic practice: for instance, a charitable interpretation can be justified by the subject's naïve criteria for applying a term, by historical facts about how he has applied the term in the past, by his theoretical commitments about the kind of property which is signified by the term, or by his epistemic commitments about how to refine his current criteria for applying the term. In the case of Andy, however, no aspect of his use of the term "is zing" would justify the proposed interpretation. Andy's criteria for determining whether "is zing" is applicable to an action do not overlap in any way with those that are relevant to determining whether an action promotes Aristotelian perfectionism. We may assume that Andy has always applied the term in the same way and that the history of his use won't be of any help here. Moreover, Gibbard's competence conditions do not require Andy to have any particular theoretical beliefs about the nature of the property picked out by "is zing," nor do they require him to have any dispositions at all to revise his monomaniacal hand-clasping plans in a way that might bring them more in line with Aristotelian perfectionism. In short, the proposed interpretation of Andy's term is the very antithesis of charity: it is entirely ungrounded in Andy's own understanding of what it takes for an action to be zing. A much more natural interpretation of Andy's words, we suggest, would be to take his terms to signify the property which unites all and only those things which he currently plans to do – that is, the property of maximizing hand-clasping. Such an interpretation would not be arbitrary: it would be grounded in Andy's own understanding of the term. Indeed, this interpretation would vindicate the *only* aspect of Andy's linguistic practice that is included in the competence conditions Gibbard proposes for that term.⁹

⁸ The example is based on Foot (1978), 112.

⁹ A caveat: since the conditions for competence Gibbard proposes are so minimal, one might worry that the notions of signification or reference are simply out of place here. Is the relation between a system of plans and the things one plans to do the same as the relation between an ordinary predicate like "is water" and the things that fall into its extension?

Once we recognize that a charitable interpretation must be grounded in the individual subject's own linguistic practice, it should be clear that Gibbard's semantics for normative terms fails to vindicate the Univocity constraint. Consider Greta, the monomaniacal grass-counter. We can assume that Greta, like Andy, uses the predicate "is zing" to express her current plans. It is natural to interpret Greta's use of the term "is zing" to signify the natural property of maximizing grass-counting. Thus, from the perspective of a charitable interpreter, Greta's use of the term signifies a different natural property than Andy's. Gibbard's proposal thus violates the Univocity thesis and fails to qualify as a version of realism. In contrast, realists insist that all competent speakers use normative terms to signify the very same property.

Signification tells us which property a competent speaker's words pick out: it is the relation that holds between the competent speaker's use of a word like "water" and the property H_2O . Because a realist about water-talk thinks that all competent speakers signify the very same property with their word, she undertakes an important justificatory burden: she must explain why the property H_2O is the correct property to assign on the basis of the subject's own use of the word. This is no trivial task. The realist must explain why, in our actual shared circumstances, anyone who meets the competence conditions must co-signify. Given the variety of beliefs and cognitive dispositions competent speakers associate with the word "water," it is not obvious why they are guaranteed to co-signify. Realism may in the end turn out to be untenable. Gibbard has not discharged this central justificatory burden: he offers no account of the signification relation which connects all competent speakers' use of the term "is the right thing to do" with the very same natural property. According to Gibbard, what it takes to be competent with the term "is the right thing to do" is to use it to express one's current plans. Given this very minimal account of what it is to be competent with "is the right thing to do," it is utterly mysterious how different subjects with radically different plans could signify the same property.

It is not just that there is a justificatory gap in Gibbard's account, this gap seems to be unbridgeable given the resources allowed by his expressivist approach. The problem here stems from the very minimal competence conditions which Gibbard proposes for normative terms. According to Gibbard, the only common element in competent speakers' use of the term "is the right thing to do" is that they use this term to express their own current plans. Thus plans are the only subjective element Gibbard can invoke in order to explain how different speakers manage to signify a natural property. To be sure, on Gibbard's account each planner associates the term with some natural property. But there is no single natural property that every planner associates with the term. In order to vindicate realism, what Gibbard

Gibbard acknowledges that there may be differences, but he wants to emphasize what he sees as broad structural similarities between the two cases (see for instance 116). We won't press this worry here.

needs is a theoretical explanation of what makes it the case that all competent users of normative terms signify the very same property. On the face of it, this explanation will have to appeal to something more than just plans. Given his expressivist account of conceptual competence with normative terms, it is hard to see how Gibbard could possibly satisfy the realist's Univocity thesis.¹⁰

Now consider the realist's Objectivity thesis. According to the realist, judging that a particular action is right does not make it so. Beliefs about whether an action is right are answerable to substantive epistemic standards grounded in the competent subject's practice with the relevant normative term. The correctness of any particular judgment you make must be evaluated in the light of the substantive epistemic constraints you implicitly recognize. Since these constraints are heterogeneous and complex, you will often be far from confident that a particular normative judgment is correct. And if you are reasonable you will readily admit that further reflection could in principle show that your current judgment is false. In short, as a competent subject you take your own current judgments about what is right to be fallible.

A standard complaint about expressivism is that it cannot account for this apparent fallibility. Expressivism seems to make normative judgments self-validating. If judging right is simply expressing one's current pro-attitude – for instance one's plans – there seems to be no room for mistakes in normative judgment: as long as one sincerely expresses the relevant attitude, one's normative judgment is bound to be correct.

Expressivists have a standard response to this worry, which Gibbard again appeals to in his new book. Gibbard points out that on his expressivist account speakers are not committed to accepting the claim that the truth of a normative judgment is determined by whether the speaker actually accepts it (183). Hera, the ego-hedonist, plans to do what maximizes personal pleasure for all possible circumstances. So, for instance, she plans to maximize pleasure if she finds herself in Zeus' shoes. Zeus, on the other end, always plans to do what maximizes glory: he accepts triumphalist plans and so rejects Hera's plans for his situation. So Hera will think that Zeus is mistaken in his judgments about what to do. Thus she will take the truth of normative judgments not to depend on the speaker's current plans – she will take the truth of Zeus' normative judgments not to depend on the plans Zeus actually accepts.

Realists, however, will be unmoved by this attempt to satisfy the Objectivity thesis. It is much easier to pass the test Gibbard is endorsing for Objectivity than the test the realist is interested in. To see this, consider the natural interpretation of the signification relation we proposed earlier for Gibbard's expressivist account of normative terms: what is signified by a term governed

¹⁰ Notice that introducing higher-order plans in the account of competence conditions won't help resolve the worry we are raising. Two subjects' plans about how to plan can diverge just as radically as their first-order plans. So higher-order plans do not help explain how co-signification is possible.

by Gibbard's competence conditions for "is the thing to do" is whatever natural property unites all and only actions the speaker currently plans to do – in Hera's case the property of being ego-hedonic. Since Zeus' plans don't conform to ego-hedonism, Hera will accept the generic claim that what is right for a subject to do is not determined by that subject's own judgments about what is right. However, acceptance of this generic claim does not amount to a vindication of the fallibilism the realist is interested in. According to the realist, Hera should recognize that her own current opinions about what is right may be mistaken. On the present semantic proposal, however, there is no way for Hera's own current opinions to be false.

The realist will thus reject the idea that the expressivist's standard response is sufficient to vindicate the Objectivity thesis. It is one thing to show that the expressivist can explain why subjects will accept generic claims about fallibility, it is another thing to provide a genuine vindication of the fallibility of the subject's current pro-attitudes. Given the semantic interpretation of Gibbard's account we have proposed, there is no genuine epistemic justification for our doubts and hesitations about our own current normative opinions. In order to provide a genuine vindication of fallibility, we need a signification relation which is not determined by the subject's current plans. As we have seen, Gibbard does not explain how such a signification relation can be derived from his expressivist account.

One lesson of our discussion of the Objectivity thesis is that the realist should not take the fact that expressivists can endorse a certain form of words to show that expressivists are in genuine agreement with the realist position. The fact that expressivists can provide an explanation of why subjects should endorse the claim "Thinking an act is right does not make it so" does not constitute a vindication of the realist's commitment to first-person present-tense fallibility. Similarly, the fact that expressivists can provide an explanation of why subjects should endorse certain platitudes about univocity does not constitute a vindication of the realist position.

Consider the sentences "What is right in given circumstances does not vary according to who is making the judgment" and "Normative terms signify the same property in the mouth of all speakers." Expressivists like Gibbard can argue that speakers are committed to accepting these sentences. Hera, for instance, thinks that being the right thing to do is being ego-hedonic. Moreover, Gibbard suggests, Hera treats her opinions about what is right as settling the extension of "is the right thing to do" in other people's mouths. In chapter 14, Gibbard tries to show that planners in general commit themselves to this type of hegemonic practice: planners act as if they were all signifying the same property with the term "is the right thing to do" and each takes his or her own opinions about what property this is to be the correct one.¹¹ If Gibbard is right about this, then Hera and other speakers are

¹¹ In the next section, we will come back to Gibbard's discussion of these issues in chapter 14.

committed to accepting sentences describing the Univocity thesis. Since each speaker treats normative terms as signifying the property captured by what he himself plans to do, regardless of who is using the term, each speaker will endorse the claim “Normative terms signify the same property in the mouth of all speakers.” But the expressivist’s explanation of why they endorse this claim need not posit any specific property which all competent speakers signify in common. Instead the explanation is that each speaker takes everyone to signify his or her own pet property, though there is no single property which the account singles out as signified by everyone. The expressivist account does not provide the materials for validating any particular speaker’s perspective on the question of which property is being signified by “is the right thing to do.”

Realists will not take this expressivist strategy to validate the Univocity thesis. If this is the end of the expressivist’s explanation, the realist will say that speakers are simply mistaken in their belief that they co-signify with others: there is nothing that makes it the case that their uses of normative terms signify the very same property. The Univocity thesis won’t be vindicated unless our semantic story provides a perspective-neutral way of isolating one specific property as that signified by every competent speaker. As we have seen, Gibbard provides no such account. This lacuna is hardly surprising since the point of expressivism is to explain the use of normative terms wholly in terms of the perspective of different speakers expressing their idiosyncratic pro-attitudes. Until Gibbard offers an account of the signification relation which connects all competent speakers’ use of the term “is the right thing to do” with the very same natural property he will have paid only lip service to the Univocity thesis. Realism is not simply a matter of showing why certain types of sentences are assertible: contrary to what Gibbard suggests, expressivism does not seem to be compatible with the deep motivations behind realism.

In contrast with Gibbard’s expressivist proposal, both the naturalist realist and the Moorean non-naturalist have a non-perspectival way of explaining the signification relation. Naturalist realists – like Canberra planners or Cornell realists – appeal to substantive epistemological practices which the competent subject associates with normative terms. These realists claim that the property signified by a particular subject’s use of the term is determined either by the upshot of reflective equilibrium based on the subject’s own current understanding or by the “elite” property which is the “best satisfier” of the job description that reflective equilibrium yields. The point is to single out a particular property which is signified by all competent speakers. The realist’s strategy may of course fail to secure univocity: different speakers may have slightly different epistemic sensibilities which will mandate the ascription of different properties to their words. So speakers may in the end be wrong in taking their use of normative terms to be univocal. But naturalists give us a story about how univocity might be achieved. Moreover, the realist semantic account allows us to make sense of the possibility of first-person

present-tense error. Normal speakers have not reached full reflective equilibrium. So their current judgments are not an infallible guide to what their normative terms really signify. In addition, those realists who appeal to a purely externalist constraint on reference – i.e. they think there are objective metaphysical facts about the “eliteness” of properties that make some properties better candidates for signification – may insist that reaching full reflective equilibrium is no guarantee against error about what it takes to fall into the extension of one’s own normative terms. Thus realists are not content to simply show that speakers will accept the Univocity and Fallibility theses. They provide a theory of signification which shows how it could be that there is only one property in question and how normal subjects may be wrong about its nature.

A proponent of non-naturalist realism à la Moore can be seen as endorsing a similar approach to signification. Mooreans may insist that competent subjects simply “perceive” what is right and its attractiveness.¹² On a quasi-perceptual model of competence, reasoning and reflection will play little if any role in determining which property is signified by the subject’s use of normative terms. Instead it will be the subject’s perceptual faculty together with the distinctive non-natural attractiveness or motivational character of the right which explains why all competent speakers’ uses of normative terms signify that particular non-natural property. Fallibility of the competent subject’s current judgment can then be explained by the possibility of malfunctioning of the subject’s perceptual faculty. The fact that the Moorean posits a distinctive non-natural property which is a highly eligible candidate for signification plays a crucial role in explaining both the Univocity and the Fallibility theses.

Gibbard thinks he can vindicate a position which resembles Moorean realism without having to postulate mysterious non-natural properties. However, he has traded one mystery for another: instead of a mysterious non-natural property, he appeals to a mysterious signification relation. It is utterly mysterious on Gibbard’s account how there could be a signification relation – naturalistic or non-naturalistic – which connects all speakers’ use of normative terms to the same property.

4. Is disagreement the key?

Shared meanings, Gibbard tells us, go hand in hand with the notion of genuine disagreement: to say that two speakers associate the same meaning with a term, according to Gibbard, is to say that genuine agreement and disagreement is possible between them (169, 194). Gibbard’s whole semantic approach to normative terms is an effort to capture our intuitions about the possibility of genuine agreement and disagreement. Gibbard proposes an

¹² Recent advocates of this type of approach to realism include McDowell (1979), McNaughton (1988) and Dancy (1993).

original and nuanced account of *disagreement in plan*, which he takes to be “the key” to his expressivist semantics for normative terms (65). Gibbard tells us that planners can agree or disagree with their past selves as well as with other planners: in his view, two planners whose plans for given circumstances are mutually inconsistent can be involved in a genuine disagreement about what to do when they express their plans. Gibbard takes this notion of disagreement in plan to vindicate the idea that planners are addressing a common subject matter when they plan. So perhaps disagreement in plan can help the expressivist meet the Univocity constraint which, we have suggested, is crucial to a realist approach to the semantics of normative terms. Gibbard discusses the notion of disagreement in plan in two places, in chapters 4 and 14. We will examine the material he introduces in these two chapters to see whether it should convince realists that Gibbard is one of their own after all.

In chapter 4, Gibbard addresses the Frege-Geach problem: his aim is to show how expressions of plans can figure in valid patterns of argument and can be embedded within logical operators. Unlike acts of accosting or headaches, Gibbard argues, expressions of plans have a stable content with which a subject can agree or disagree. When you plan today to catch the 8 a.m. flight tomorrow morning, your plan is something you can agree or disagree with when you wake up at 6 a.m. tomorrow morning. You can either continue to accept the plan and get out of bed, or you can reject the plan and turn off the alarm. Unlike a headache, a plan is an appropriate object of acceptance or rejection. In this respect plans resemble beliefs. Plans also resemble beliefs in that it is incoherent to both accept and reject the very same plan. You cannot genuinely plan both to get up and not to get up for your flight, just as you cannot both genuinely believe that your flight leaves at 8 a.m. and that it does not leave at that time. Gibbard argues that these notions of consistency and disagreement in plan provide the resources to cross the Frege-Geach gap. It is because plans are the stable objects of acceptance or rejection and because we cannot both accept and reject the same plan, Gibbard argues, that plans can figure in valid patterns of inference. Indeed, the logical connectives ought to be understood, Gibbard suggests, in terms of acceptance or rejection of a stable attitudinal content like a plan or a belief.

We agree with Gibbard that plans are subject to a requirement of consistency and that they are appropriate objects of acceptance or rejection. We won’t challenge his claim that these two characteristics of plans allow him to develop a logic for plans and to show, *pace* Frege and Geach, how plans may be embedded within logical operators. However, we insist that these two characteristics cannot help Gibbard meet the Univocity constraint which is central to a realist semantics for normative terms. Crossing Frege-Geach is one thing, vindicating realism another.

The norm of consistency simply requires that no planner should accept at the same time “Do X in circumstances C!” and “Don’t do X in circumstances C!” Consistency does not imply that one of these plans is the all-told

right thing to do; indeed it does not even imply that one is better than the other. Consider our two monomaniacal, but consistent planners: Andy the hand-clasper plans to maximize hand-clasping in all circumstances, while Greta the grass-counter plans to maximize grass-counting in all circumstances. Since plans are subject to a requirement of consistency, we are ready to grant Gibbard that there is a logic governing Andy and Greta's planning. But it should be clear that the fact that there is a logic for plans does not help Gibbard explain how Andy and Greta can be signifying the same property when they use a predicate to express their respective plans.

The realist will insist that Gibbard's notions of acceptance and rejection of plans should be distinguished from the notions of agreement and disagreement about a common subject matter. Genuine agreement or disagreement, according to the realist, is only possible if there is an objective co-signification relation that establishes that different speakers are talking about the very same subject matter. Gibbard, in contrast, seems to be using the notions of agreement and disagreement as synonymous with the notions of acceptance and rejection. The fact that Andy and Greta do not accept the same plan, Gibbard suggests, suffices to establish that they are disagreeing about a common subject matter – they disagree about what is the right thing to do. But the realist will reject this conclusion: Andy and Greta are simply accepting conflicting plans, there is no subject matter they are disagreeing about. What is missing from Gibbard's account is an explanation from the theorist's perspective of what makes it the case that the two signify the very same property.¹³

In chapter 14, Gibbard returns to the question of what constitutes genuine agreement or disagreement about a single subject matter. Whereas in the earlier parts of the book, Gibbard writes as if rejection of a plan suffices for disagreement about a common subject matter, in this final chapter he suggests that more is required for genuine disagreement. Hera accepts the plan "Maximize one's happiness in circumstances C," whereas Zeus, the triumphalist, rejects this plan. Gibbard now tells us that Hera and Zeus need not be disagreeing. They can take two different stances toward this difference in the plans they accept: "[they] can regard the difference either as a disagreement or as a mere personal difference that does not constitute a disagreement" (280-1). If Hera and Zeus regard their difference in plan as a mere personal difference, they will be treating it in just the same way they treat their different tastes in ice-cream flavors. If I like vanilla and you don't, we are not disagreeing about anything; we are not making any claim about the

¹³ Gibbard can, of course, descend from the theoretical perspective and occupy the perspective of one of the participants of the debate. From the participant perspective, Gibbard can assert, "There is just one property signified by normative terms – it's BLAH," where the blank is filled in with the property that's shared by all the acts Gibbard himself plans. However, this descent into the participant perspective does not answer the realist's challenge. What the realist wants is an explanation *from the neutral perspective of the semantic theorist* of what makes it the case that different competent speakers all signify the same property.

objective likeability of the flavor. Much of chapter 14 is devoted to arguing that planners should treat their differences in plans as disagreements rather than as mere personal differences.

For our purposes, the important point is that Gibbard now suggests that an additional element over and above mere acceptance or rejection of a plan is required in order to enter into a genuine disagreement about what is the right thing to do. To determine whether two subjects are genuinely disagreeing, Gibbard tells us, we need to take into account whether they *treat* their divergent plans as a real disagreement or as a mere personal difference (279). What does this extra element – the stance of treating something as a disagreement – consist in?

Treating how to live as a topic for agreement and disagreement, I have maintained, depends on according us all a kind of fundamental epistemic symmetry. Not that we are all equally good judges of how to live, but if we aren't, some explanation is to be had. The explanation must be non-indexical; it must not depend, at base, on picking out my judgments as mine and yours as yours. (281-2)

What we now need to determine is whether the new element Gibbard adds to his account – the idea of fundamental epistemic symmetry – can help vindicate the Univocity thesis. If two planners grant each other fundamental epistemic symmetry, will the terms they use to express their plans signify the same property?

To clarify things, let's consider what Gibbard's idea of fundamental epistemic symmetry implies in the case of Hera and Zeus. Hera and Zeus have reached a discursive impasse: no matter how much they talk to each other, neither can convince the other to change their plans; it seems clear to both that no amount of persuasion can bring the other around. Still, according to Gibbard, they can grant fundamental epistemic symmetry to each other and be genuinely disagreeing about a common subject matter: all they need is a non-indexical explanation of why the other is not a good judge of what to do. Hera, for instance, explains why Zeus does not embrace ego-hedonism in terms of Zeus' fundamental perversity in desire. Zeus' psychological constitution – his excessive attachment to glory – prevents him from seeing what is really valuable. So no matter how good his practical reasoning is, he will never be able to come to the correct verdicts about what is right. Zeus, on the other hand, explains Hera's divergence from his judgments in a different way. Zeus is not worried about Hera's basic desires, but he thinks she has mistaken views about what constitutes good practical reasoning. If she were to adopt sound reasoning procedures in forming plans, Zeus is confident that she would ultimately embrace triumphalism as the right thing to do. It is just that there is no way to persuade Hera to change her reasoning procedures: although mistaken, her procedures are self-ratifying. Thus, Hera and Zeus both grant epistemic symmetry to the other. Although they discount the other's judgments, they don't discount them on the ground that they are

someone else's judgment and not their own. So Hera and Zeus meet Gibbard's requirement for genuine disagreement on a single subject matter. This is a conclusion Gibbard himself embraces: he insists that genuine disagreement is possible even if subjects reach discursive impasses similar to Hera's and Zeus' (283).

The realist will insist that meeting Gibbard's epistemic symmetry constraint does not suffice to vindicate the Univocity thesis. What Gibbard adds to his account in chapter 14 does nothing to alleviate the realist's worries about co-signification. The epistemic symmetry requirement does not provide a perspective-neutral account of how Hera and Zeus could manage to signify the very same property with their different uses of the term "is the right thing to do." All that is needed to meet the epistemic symmetry requirement is a disposition on the part of speakers to rationalize their rejection of other people's plans in a non-indexical way. It is easy to meet this symmetry requirement: there is nothing indexical, for example, in saying that what is wrong with Zeus' plans is that he is insensitive to the desirability of maximizing one's happiness. Adding a disposition for rationalization of this sort does not help address the realist's fundamental worry. We still have no account of a signification relation that would vindicate the Univocity thesis. It still remains a mystery how planners who accept radically different plans could manage to signify the very same natural property.

5. Conclusion

Gibbard claims that his expressivist semantics can vindicate realism for normative discourse. His solution to the Frege-Geach problem, he thinks, provides the resources needed to underwrite the realist's claim that there is a natural property signified by our normative judgments. We are willing to grant that Gibbard has provided reasons to think that a wide variety of realist-sounding claims will be assertible by participants in the expressivist practice he envisages. On Gibbard's account, users of normative language should endorse claims like "There is a natural property signified by normative terms," "Everyone signifies the very same property," "Judging something right does not make it so," "If your normative judgments are wrong, it is not simply because you are you and I am me," "True moral judgment does not *eo ipso* qualify as moral knowledge," etc. However, we have argued that simply showing that these sentences are assertible does not amount to vindicating realism. The realist must vindicate the Univocity and Objectivity theses – that is, the realist must provide a perspective-neutral explanation of why different speakers signify the same property with their use of normative terms despite differences in the way they understand these terms, and the realist must be able to explain how one's own current normative judgments could be false. Gibbard's expressivist proposal does not meet this central realist requirement.

Gibbard is not alone in his attempt to reconcile realism with an expressivist account of the competence conditions for normative terms. Ralph Wedgwood, for instance, has argued that his version of conceptual role semantics can vindicate a realist interpretation on the basis of competence conditions very similar to those proposed by Gibbard.¹⁴ We have argued elsewhere that Wedgwood's proposal, like Gibbard's, violates norms of charitable interpretation.¹⁵ Simon Blackburn, even if he is less committal than Gibbard or Wedgwood, also has indicated he is open to the possibility that his expressivism may in the end vindicate a form of realism.¹⁶ Our discussion in this paper, however, suggests a principled objection to any attempt to reconcile expressivism with realism: the purely perspectival theoretical elements invoked by expressivism do not seem to provide the resources needed to vindicate the realist's core commitments to Univocity and Objectivity. We have not argued for realism in this paper: for all we have said, one can either be a realist or an expressivist about normative discourse. Our point is that there is strong reason to think one cannot be both.¹⁷

Laura Schroeter
School of Philosophy and Bioethics, Monash University
Laura.Schroeter@arts.monash.edu.au

François Schroeter
Department of Philosophy, Melbourne University
fschro@unimelb.edu.au

¹⁴ Wedgwood 2001.

¹⁵ Schroeter and Schroeter 2003.

¹⁶ See, for instance, Blackburn 1993b.

¹⁷ Thanks to Allan Gibbard and an anonymous *JESP* reviewer for helpful comments.

REFERENCES

- Ayer, A.J., *Language, Truth and Logic*, London: Gollancz (1946).
- Blackburn, Simon, *Spreading the Word*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (1984).
- Blackburn, Simon, *Essays in Quasi-Realism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (1993a).
- Blackburn, Simon, "Realism, Quasi, or Queasy?" in *Reality, Representation, and Projection*, ed. J. Haldane and C. Wright, Oxford: Oxford University Press (1993b): 365-84.
- Blackburn, Simon, *Ruling Passions: A Theory of Practical Reason*, Oxford: Clarendon Press (1998).
- Boyd, Richard N., "How to be a Moral Realist," in *Essays on Moral Realism*, ed. G. Sayre-McCord, Ithaca: Cornell University Press (1988): 181-228.
- Brink, David O., *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1989).
- Dancy, Jonathan, *Moral Reasons*, Oxford: Blackwell (1993).
- Foot, Philippa, *Virtues and Vices*, Berkeley: University of California Press (1978).
- Geach, Peter, "Assertion," *Philosophical Review* 74 (1965): 449-65.
- Gibbard, Allan, *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings: A Theory of Normative Judgment*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press (1990).
- Gibbard, Allan, *Thinking How to Live*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press (2003).
- Jackson, Frank, *From Metaphysics to Ethics: A Defence of Conceptual Analysis*, Oxford: Clarendon Press (1998).
- Jackson, Frank and Philip Pettit, "Moral Functionalism and Moral Motivation," *Philosophical Quarterly* 45 (1995): 20-40.
- Kim, Jaegwon, *Supervenience and Mind: Selected Philosophical Essays*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1993).
- McDowell, John, "Virtue and Reason," *Monist* 62 (1979): 331-50.
- McNaughton, David, *Moral Vision*, Oxford: Blackwell (1988).
- Moore, George Edward, *Principia Ethica*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1903).
- Railton, Peter, "Moral Realism," *Philosophical Review* 95 (1986): 163-207.
- Schroeter, Laura and François Schroeter, "A Slim Semantics for Thin Moral Terms?" *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 81 (2003): 191-207.
- Smith, Michael, *The Moral Problem*, Oxford: Blackwell (1994).
- Stevenson, Charles L., "The Emotive Theory of Ethical Terms," *Mind* 46 (1937): 14-31.
- Sturgeon, Nicholas L., "Moral Explanations," in *Morality, Reason and Truth*, ed. D. Copp and D. Zimmerman, Totowa: Rowman and Allenheld (1985): 49-78.
- Wedgwood, Ralph, "Conceptual Role Semantics for Moral Terms," *Philosophical Review* 110 (2001): 1-30.