

how not to avoid wishful thinking

Expressivists famously have important and difficult problems with semantics and logic. Their difficulties providing an adequate account of the semantics of material conditionals involving moral terms, and explaining why they have the right semantic and logical properties – for example, why they validate *modus ponens* – have received a great deal of attention. Cian Dorr [2002] points out that their problems do not stop here, but also extend to epistemology. The problem he poses for expressivists is the problem of *wishful thinking*. David Enoch [2003] has claimed that expressivists can avoid wishful thinking, and offered a fairly detailed account of how. In this paper I explain the details of Enoch’s account, and why his reasoning fails in several different places.

I **wishful thinking**

The wishful thinking problem is simple to state. Grant for the sake of discussion that expressivists have figured out how to give a semantics for conditional sentences, that it applies to mixed, normative-descriptive conditionals, and that it allows us to give a satisfactory explanation of why the following argument is genuinely logically valid:

- PI If lying is wrong, the souls of liars will be punished in the afterlife.
- P2 Lying is wrong.
- C The souls of liars will be punished in the afterlife.

The problem is that it seems that it is at least possible, in some situations, for someone to accept PI, come to accept P2, and thus conclude C. But accepting P2 is thinking that lying is wrong. And expressivism is the view that thinking that lying is wrong is a matter of having a noncognitive, desire-like attitude – of wanting something, more or less.¹

¹ Dorr and Enoch both call the view under discussion ‘noncognitivism’ or ‘non-cognitivism’ rather than ‘expressivism’. Our difference in usage is immaterial for this paper, but Dorr addresses his arguments specifically against views according to which accepting P2 involves only having a desire-like attitude, and following Gibbard ([1990], [2003]), I

So expressivists face a dilemma. Given their view, either this argument can sometimes justify its conclusion in this way, or it can't. If it can't, expressivism is inconsistent with something obvious. But if it can, then that is a problem, too, because then expressivism licenses what Dorr calls 'wishful thinking'. After all, according to expressivism, if you already accept P1 and come to accept P2, the only thing that changes about you is what you want, very broadly speaking – your noncognitive attitudes. But C is a conclusion about the world – about how things are. And it is not ever rational to change your view about how things are in order better to fit with what you want. That is *wishful thinking*. Dorr and others who have discussed this problem in the literature don't consider it a dilemma; they infer that expressivists must take the first fork. I'll reserve judgment on that; clearly it is a problem either way.

The first fork of the dilemma is to fail to explain how arguments like this one can sometimes make it rational to come to accept their conclusions. The second fork of the dilemma is to admit that it is sometimes rational to form a new belief about how the world is, on the basis only of something you want. So if solving this problem means finding a way between the forks, then solving the problem requires explaining why someone who comes to accept P2 and hence to conclude C and is rational in doing so, is not really accepting C only due to a change in what she wants.

As Dorr describes the case, however, we assume that the subject – Edgar – starts by already accepting P1 and not accepting P2 or C. This screens off the question of what sort of mental state someone who accepts P1 is in, and whether it is desire-like, or not. Then we assume that the subject comes by some route to accept P2. Accepting P2, all by itself, is only a matter of having a desire-like attitude. That is the central thesis of expressivism.² So if Edgar is to have anything other than this desire-like attitude to go on, in coming to accept the conclusion, it must either be some evidence that he comes by in the *process* of coming to accept P2, or else some piece of evidence that he gets *merely in virtue* of being in that desire-like state.

James Lenman [2003] has developed a response to the wishful thinking problem that builds on the first of these ideas, and David Enoch [2003] has developed a response that builds on

use 'expressivism' for this narrow view, reserving 'noncognitivism' for the wider class of views of which expressivism is a member, but which also includes Hare's [1952], [1963] prescriptivism, emotivist views according to which accepting P2 is a matter of issuing a command or trying to create an effect or influence, and hybrid views according to which accepting P2 involves having a belief as well as a desire-like attitude (as in Barker [2002] or Ridge [2006]).

² Again, there are other views in the neighborhood which differ on this point; Dorr's argument is not directed against them.

the second.³ Both, moreover, emphasize that to be justified in accepting C on the basis of this argument, Edgar must be justified in accepting P1, and argue that this allows us to make inferences about what else Edgar believes or would be justified in believing, which can help with explaining how C is justified.

To solve the problem, they must not only explain why coming to accept P2 can *sometimes* involve acquiring some evidence for C, or *sometimes* result in acquiring some evidence for C. They must be able to explain why this happens in *all of the cases* in which intuitively someone can come to accept C upon the basis of P1 and P2. Moreover, Dorr has anticipated these ideas in advance, and counters that the obvious fact that is rejected on the first horn of the dilemma is that someone can rationally come to accept C *on the basis of P2* – not on the basis of something else. So Lenman and Enoch must explain why their proposals account for why P2 itself is the basis for the conclusion, or else explain why the first horn is not so pointed after all, given this qualification.

2 enoch on inductive justification for p1

According to Enoch [2002], in any case in which Edgar could be justified in accepting each of P1 and P2, the fact that he is in the desire-like attitude expressed by P2 is itself evidence, relative to his background beliefs, for C. Moreover, according to Enoch, this fact is evidence that is available to him, because it is a fact that is accessible to him by introspection. So as Enoch understands evidence, Edgar's belief that C can be based on this evidence (even if he is not aware of it).

Enoch argues for this by cataloguing the various ways in which Edgar can be justified in coming to accept P1, and offering clever (though as we'll see, fallacious) arguments that for each of these ways, there is some descriptive-descriptive conditional he would also be justified in accepting, which would, together with the fact for which he has evidence in virtue of disapproving of lying, be evidence for C.

For example, one way of coming to accept P1 would be by inductive evidence for its universal generalization – that for all action-types *a*, if it is wrong to do *a*, then the souls of those who do *a* will be punished in the afterlife. Acquiring inductive evidence for this generalization requires having evidence for some range of positive examples: say, that it is wrong to adulter and the souls of adulterers are punished in the afterlife, that it is wrong to steal and the souls of stealers

³ For the sake of focusing on Enoch, I won't consider Lenman's response in this paper. Lenman's response essentially works by narrowing the number of cases in which the wishful thinking problem arises, and denying that the first fork of the dilemma is unintuitive, for the remaining cases.

are punished in the afterlife, and so on, without coming across any counterexamples. Enoch claims that anyone who has acquired all of this evidence must *also* have inductive evidence for the conditional PI*, below, by having inductive evidence for its universal generalization.

I write it first the way that Enoch does, and then translate, given the fact that according to expressivism, thinking that lying is wrong is disapproving of lying. Since expressivists think the two are equivalent, nothing can turn on the difference. But it is easier to see what is problematic about Enoch's reasoning, if we formulate it in the latter way:

(PI*) If I disapprove of lying, then the souls of liars will be punished in the afterlife.

PI* If I think that lying is wrong, then the souls of liars will be punished in the afterlife.

Why does Enoch think this? Well, he says, you can't accumulate inductive evidence for PI without *making judgments* about the range of cases that are your inductive evidence. But according to expressivism, you make the judgment that stealing is wrong only if you disapprove of stealing.⁴ So Enoch concludes that Edgar must have just as good evidence for 'I disapprove of stealing and the souls of stealers are punished in the afterlife' as for 'stealing is wrong and the souls of stealers are punished in the afterlife', and so on for each other case he considers. Hence, Enoch concludes, he must have equally good inductive evidence for (PI*) as for PI. I.e., he must have equally good inductive evidence for PI* as for PI.⁵

So Enoch's reasoning has the following form: if Edgar is justified by inductive evidence in accepting ' $\forall x(Fx \supset Gx)$ ', then he has considered a range of cases in which for some value of 'a', he thinks, 'Fa & Ga'. Moreover, in each of these cases, Edgar thinks, 'Fa' (or else they wouldn't be ones that he had considered). So he also has inductive evidence for ' $\forall x((\text{Edgar thinks } Fx) \supset Gx)$ '.

There are at least three major flaws in this reasoning. The first is that for inductive evidence to justify ' $\forall x(Fx \supset Gx)$ ', Edgar must not only think 'Fa & Ga' – he must also be *justified* in

⁴ Expressivists differ with respect to *which* noncognitive attitude they hold is involved with thinking that lying is wrong. I use 'disapproval' as a schematic dummy for whatever this attitude turns out to be. Nothing in this article turns on this choice of terminology; in fact, as we'll see, Enoch's arguments can be stated in full without ever mentioning the expressivist view that thinking that lying is wrong is disapproving of lying.

⁵ One relevant difference between (PI*) and PI* is that if Edgar does not know that expressivism is true, then he could apparently justifiably believe PI* without believing (PI*) or being justified in believing it. This is already a problem for Enoch's view, since he formulates things in terms of (PI*), but it is a problem I'll henceforth ignore.

thinking it. So similarly, for Edgar to have inductive evidence supporting ‘ $\forall x((\text{Edgar thinks } Fx) \supset Gx)$ ’, the cases, ‘(I think Fa)&Ga’ must not only be *true*, but Edgar must believe them, and be justified in believing them. But from the mere fact that whenever Edgar thinks ‘Fa&Ga’, he thinks ‘Fa’, does not follow that in any case in which he is *justified* in thinking ‘Fa&Ga’, he is also justified in thinking ‘(I think Fa)&Ga’. In fact, any case in which Edgar thinks ‘Fa’ without thinking that he does, is a case in which he may collect inductive evidence for ‘ $\forall x(Fx \supset Gx)$ ’ without collecting inductive evidence for ‘ $\forall x((\text{Edgar thinks } Fx) \supset Gx)$ ’.

The second problem with this reasoning is a related one. Edgar may think, even justifiedly, under strange enough cases, that he thinks ‘Fa’, even in cases in which he does not, in fact, think ‘Fa’. Suppose that he does – having consulted with his trusted psychotherapist about the matter, he comes to think that he thinks that viewing pornography is wrong, but in fact, he does not really think this. (Perhaps the guilty feelings he is being counseled about are really about his treatment of his father, instead.) But then he may think that the souls of pornography viewers are not, as it turns out, punished in the afterlife. And if so, then he may have conclusive counterevidence to PI*, without having counterevidence to PI.

The reasoning also fails in a third way. Even if Edgar thinks, and is justified in thinking, that he thinks ‘Fa’ in precisely all and only the cases in which he thinks, and is justified in thinking, ‘Fa’, things can still go wrong. And that is because the appropriateness of inductive inferences depends on the suitability of the predicates that are being applied – on their *projectability*. Observation of a series of eagles to determine whether they fly will lead to a successful generalization to the effect that eagles fly. But observation of the same series of birds to see whether birds fly will not lead to a successful generalization. You might observe many birds which do fly, and generalize that all do, but the class of birds is heterogeneous with respect to locomotion in a way that the class of eagles is not. Enoch’s reasoning requires that the inductive evidence work equally well when Edgar generalizes on what he thinks is wrong, as when he generalizes on what *is* wrong. But there does not seem to be any *a priori* reason to think that this is so. In fact, Edgar may explicitly think that it is not.

So things look bad for Enoch’s solution; there are at least three errors in the reasoning, even to get this far. Nevertheless, if the argument just discussed were successful, it would establish that whenever Edgar is justified inductively in accepting PI, he is also justified inductively in

accepting P1*. Enoch also claims that whenever Edgar accepts P2 (justifiedly or not), he is justified in accepting P2*:

P2* I think that lying is wrong.⁶

Hence, Enoch claims, in any case in which Edgar is justified inductively in accepting P1, and comes to accept P2, he has ‘available’ to him the argument from P1* and P2* to C. This is what makes the argument from P1 and P2 justify him in concluding C.

There still remains a significant puzzle about how the mere existence of this argument, even if Edgar does not accept either of its premises, could justify Edgar in his actual conclusion that C. Normally, evidence for some conclusion does not make you justified in believing it, unless you are aware of this evidence. Enoch appears to deny this; in fact, he appears to say that ‘reasonable internalists’ would not require that a speaker have a justification that exists ‘in actuality’, in order to actually be justified in accepting a conclusion – the justification need only be *available*.⁷ But this issue is complicated. Many (though not all) evidentialists about epistemic justification accept the basic principle that an agent’s belief cannot be *based* on some evidence, unless that is evidence that he actually possesses or grasps in the right sort of way. There appears to be some tension between this view and Enoch’s proposal, so the proposal is certainly not one that *anyone* could find amenable, even if Enoch’s arguments worked.

3 enoch on testimonial evidence for p1

So far, I’ve only considered Enoch’s discussion of the case in which Edgar is justified inductively in accepting P1. But he also considers the case in which Edgar is justified by *testimony* in accepting P1, for which he gives a different treatment. In a paradigm case of testimony, Jon tells Edgar, ‘If lying is wrong, then the souls of liars will be punished in the afterlife.’ Enoch asserts the plausible (though rejectable) claim that being justified in accepting Jon’s testimony requires being justified in thinking that Jon is reliable. That is, Edgar must accept the appropriate substitution instance of ‘If Jon thinks that P, then P.’ I.e., he must accept RI:

⁶ Again, what Enoch says is that Edgar is justified in accepting, ‘I disapprove of lying’. But recall that according to expressivism, thinking lying is wrong *is* disapproving of lying. As with the formulation of P1*, if anything, formulating things in my way ought to make things *easier* for Enoch’s view to work, because even if expressivism is true, if Edgar doesn’t know it, it is not at all obvious that he can know by introspection that he disapproves of lying, simply by accepting P2. At most what is obvious, is that he should be able to tell that he thinks that lying is wrong.

⁷ Enoch [2003, 537].

RI If Jon thinks that if lying is wrong then the souls of liars are punished in the afterlife, then if lying is wrong then the souls of liars are punished in the afterlife.

Moreover, Enoch contends, if Edgar is justified in accepting RI, he must also be justified in accepting other, closely related, substitution instances of 'If Jon thinks that P then P' – including R2:

R2 If Jon thinks that lying is wrong, then lying is wrong.

The idea is apparently (although Enoch doesn't spell any of this out carefully) that Edgar is in a position to use R2 and PI to infer PI† (PI† is supposed to do for this case what PI* did for the case of inductive evidence):

PI† If Jon thinks that lying is wrong, then the souls of liars are punished in the afterlife.

This idea is intuitive, but it is not correct. For Edgar need not be justified in accepting R2, even if he is justified in accepting RI. For example, Edgar might have reason to think that Jon is an authority on PI only because Jon is an authority on C, even though he does not think that Jon is an authority on P2 (or on the negation of PI).

Of course, in that case Edgar could plausibly not become justified in accepting C on the basis of PI and P2. Still, consider a more complicated case. Edgar might think that Jon is an authority about PI without thinking that he is an authority about P2 (or on the negation of PI), simply because he doesn't know whether Jon's authority on PI derives only from his authority on C or not.⁸ In that case, again, it would seem that Edgar can accept RI and hence be justified in inferring PI from Jon's testimony, but without accepting or being justified in accepting PI†. So this is a large gap in Enoch's argument.

Nevertheless, if this argument of Enoch's were to work, then for this to give Edgar a descriptive argument for C when he comes to accept P2, it would have to be the case that coming to accept P2 gives Edgar a justification to accept P2†:

P2† Jon thinks that lying is wrong.

⁸ For example, Amy, whom Edgar trusts about anything, may have told him: 'trust Jon if he tells you PI', but not explained why.

But even if coming to accept P2 involves having access to P2*, because P2* is a fact about your own mental state, accepting P2 surely does not involve having any access to P2†, which is a claim about *Jon's* mental state. So Enoch needs a different story about how Edgar could acquire this evidence.

There are two possible stories he might tell. One story proceeds by first discovering P2*, and then using P2* together with R3 to derive P2†:

R3 If I think that lying is wrong, then Jon thinks that lying is wrong.

The problem with this strategy, is that Enoch has given no explanation of why Edgar would be justified in accepting R3. It cannot be, for example, that Jon is Edgar's only source of information about whether lying is wrong, because Dorr deliberately set up the example so that Edgar does not accept P1 on the basis of the same source on whose testimony he accepts P1. So Enoch does not take this alternative. He suggests instead that Edgar infers P2† from P2 and R4:

R4 If lying is wrong, then Jon thinks that lying is wrong.

Notice that this would itself involve an instance of a *modus ponens* argument from a normative antecedent to a descriptive conclusion – precisely the kind of case in which the wishful thinking problem arises! Moreover, nothing in the argument rules out Edgar's accepting R3 on the basis of further testimony! For example, from Amy's testimony about Jon's reliability. Of course, ultimately, we may suppose, Edgar must have some non-testimonial justification for accepting the reliability of his first source, in order to get testimonial evidence for the reliability of other sources by testimony. So there is no vicious circle, here. But still, if there can be arbitrarily long strings of testimony by which Edgar becomes justified by testimony in accepting that others are reliable, then it would appear that the justification that is 'available' to Edgar for concluding C on the basis of P1 and P2 can become correspondingly arbitrarily complex. But this makes it even more important to understand how it is that the mere availability of this (indefinitely complex) argument makes Edgar justified in his *actual* conclusion.

But more to the point, it is not at all clear why Edgar would be justified in accepting R4, anyway. According to Enoch, R4 is supposed, like R1 and R2, to follow from the assumption that Jon is reliable about this subject matter. So Enoch's idea is that if Edgar is justified in accepting P1 on Edgar's testimony, he must be justified in accepting R1, and hence justified in

accepting R2, and hence justified in accepting R4. But this last step is even more problematic than the claim that Edgar must be justified in accepting R2, if he is justified in accepting R1. For Jon can be reliable, even about whether lying is wrong, without having a view about every case. If he is reliable, and lying is wrong, then he doesn't think that lying is *not* wrong. But he might, for all that, not believe that lying is wrong.

So there is both a gap between a justification to accept R1 and a justification to accept R2, which Enoch needs in order to get a justification for P1†, and, even granting that, a further gap between a justification to accept R2 and a justification to accept R4, which Enoch needs in order to get a justification for P2†. Moreover, even granting those gaps, the puzzle about how these facts about what Edgar *could* be justified in believing can make him justified in concluding C even though he does not, in fact, actually believe them, is aggravated by the fact that Enoch's account of the testimonial case may imbed itself an indefinite number of times, assuming that Edgar's knowledge of Jon's reliability comes by testimonial evidence from a speaker for whose reliability he has only testimonial evidence, and so on.

4 conclusion

In this paper I've rehearsed the wishful thinking problem for expressivism and explained and evaluated David Enoch's [2003] response on behalf of expressivism. Though clever in outline, Enoch's response fails in detail, and on numerous counts. The reasoning underlying his account of the case in which Edgar is justified inductively in accepting P1 is fallacious for at least three different reasons, and the reasoning underlying his account of the case in which Edgar is justified in accepting P1 on the basis of testimony contains at least two very large gaps. Finally, the account cries out for an explanation of why it is that the mere possibility that Edgar *could have been* justified in accepting an alternative descriptive argument could possibly be what makes him justified in accepting C on the basis of P1 and P2, and all the more so, when it turns out that there are cases (the embedded testimonial cases) in which this alternative descriptive argument may be indefinitely complex. I conclude that Enoch's proposal is *not* how expressivists should try to avoid wishful thinking.⁹

⁹ Thanks to David Manley for discussion.

references

- Barker, Stephen [2002]. 'Is Value Implicature a Component of Conventional Implicature?' *Analysis* 60(3): 268-279.
- Dorr, Cian [2002]. 'Non-cognitivism and Wishful Thinking.' *Noûs* 36(1): 97-103.
- Enoch, David [2003]. 'How Noncognitivists Can Avoid Wishful Thinking.' *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 41: 527-545.
- Gibbard, Allan [1990]. *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- [2003]. *Thinking How to Live*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Hare, R.M. [1952]. *The Language of Morals*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [1963]. *Freedom and Reason*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lenman, James [2003]. 'Noncognitivism and Wishfulness.' *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 6: 265-274.
- Ridge, Michael [2006]. 'Ecumenical Expressivism: Finessing Frege.' *Ethics* 116(2): 302-336.