Representation, Deflationism, and the Question of Realism

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How can we distinguish between quasi-realist expressivism and normative realism? The most promising answer to this question is *the "explanation" explanation* proposed by Dreier (2004), Simpson (2018), and others: the two views might agree in their claims about truth and objectivity, or even in their attributions of semantic content to normative sentences, but they disagree about how to *explain* normative meaning. Realists explain meaning by invoking normative facts and properties, or representational relations between normative language and the world, the thought goes, while expressivists appeal instead to desire-like mental states in their explanations of meaning. However, I argue that, if we adopt a deflationary approach to representation and other related notions, there need be no such explanatory divide between expressivism and anything recognizable as a plausible notion of normative realism. Any alleged explanatory criterion for realism will either be incompatible with deflationism, or it will fail to capture some standard versions of normative realism. I conclude that, in a deflationary framework, expressivism is compatible with genuine realism.

1. Introduction

Quasi-realist expressivism aims to make good on key tenets of normative realism—for example, that there are objective normative facts, and our beliefs about such facts are by-and-large true—by adopting a deflationary approach to truth, fact, and other related notions, on which realist commitments are treated as internal to normative discourse (Blackburn 1993; 1998; Gibbard 2003; 2012). Quasi-realists claim that they are still offering an anti-realist conception of normativity, which avoids the metaphysical and epistemological problems

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faced by realism. But how can we distinguish quasi-realism from genuine realism, if the two views agree in their core claims about normative reality and our access to it?

The most promising answer to this question is *the "explanation" explanation* proposed by Dreier (2004), Simpson (2018), and others: while quasi-realists and realists might agree in their claims about truth, objectivity, or knowledge, they disagree about how to *explain* the content of normative judgments.[1] (This idea is also known as *explanationism*, a label I will use from here on.) Realists explain the meaning of normative judgments by invoking normative facts and properties, or representational relations between normative language and the world, the thought goes, while expressivists appeal instead to desire-like mental states in explaining semantic content. Moreover, these explanationist proposals dovetail with recent attempts to redefine expressivism as a *metasemantic* view, that is, as an account of *why* normative sentences have the meanings that they do, where this is compatible with a truth-conditional semantics for normative discourse (e.g., Silk 2013; Ridge 2014; Chrisman 2016). The new metasemantic conception of expressivism seems to bring the explanatory contrast with realism clearly into view: even if quasi-realism and realism agree in their attributions of truth-conditional meanings to normative claims, they must explain normative meaning in conflicting ways. Or so the argument will go.

In this paper, I argue that explanationism does not succeed in drawing a stable divide between quasi-realism and realism: if we adopt a deflationary approach to the relevant metaphysical and semantic notions, there need be no explanatory conflict between expressivism and anything recognizable as a plausible notion of normative realism. Here is my argument in a nutshell. Take any explanation of normative meaning that we might plausibly attribute to realists. This explanation will either rely on inflationary metaphysical or semantic notions, in which case it cannot help define realism in a deflationary framework, or it will fail to capture some versions of normative realism. And the same goes for any *disjunction* of explanations of meaning that might be put forward as a criterion for realism: either some of its disjuncts will be incompatible with deflationism, or the disjunction as a whole will leave out some versions of realism. Therefore, deflationary expressivists should think of their view as compatible with genuine realism. In making this case, I will focus on Simpson's (2018) version of explanationism, which appeals to the role of representation in explanations of meaning, but my arguments can be extended to other versions of explanationism as well, including Dreier's.

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1. See Blackburn (1993), Fine (2001), Gibbard (2003), and Dunaway (2016), among others, for similar proposals.

My case against explanationism builds on arguments that have been made before. In Golub (2017: 1406), I argued that deflationism undermines the attempt to draw the divide between quasi-realism and realism in terms of explanations of semantic content,[2] and Taylor (2019) has developed a similar idea,[3] while Tiefensee (2016: 2451–56) has argued that certain explanations of meaning that might be compatible with a deflationary framework—for example, explanations in terms of tracking relations between normative language and the world—cannot serve as a good criterion for normative realism because this would leave out standard versions of non-naturalist realism.[4] But the *joint* force of these arguments against explanationism has not been fully appreciated yet,[5] so my main goal in the present paper is to show how these arguments work together as two horns of a dilemma for explanationism. Moreover, in developing this dilemma, I will explore whether the commitments of non-naturalist realism might be captured in terms of a *non-causal* notion of tracking or representation that is nevertheless compatible with deflationism. I will argue that no such notion can be found, so we cannot draw an explanatory divide between quasi-realism and non-naturalist realism in a deflationary framework.

2. Creeping Minimalism and Explanationism

The contrast between expressivism and realism about normativity has become blurred in recent decades. Expressivists like Simon Blackburn (1993; 1998) and Allan Gibbard (2003; 2012) now endorse core tenets of normative realism—for example, that there are objective normative facts, of which we are reliable judges—by adopting a deflationary approach to truth, fact, and other related notions. On this deflationary account, realist commitments are interpreted as internal to normative discourse: for instance, to say that it is a fact that "Genocide is wrong" is simply to rehearse the verdict that genocide is wrong. Nonetheless, Blackburn

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2. In that paper, I also made another argument that I now find misguided: I suggested that expressivists can accommodate the explanatory value of realist explanations of content by treating such explanations as internal to normative discourse. I agree with Dreier (2018: 541–43) that, whatever value expressivists might find in realist claims about semantic content, this cannot be explanatory value in the theory of meaning.

3. Unlike me, Taylor sees this argument as a *reductio* of deflationism. Moreover, he does not consider representationalist explanations of meaning that might be compatible with deflationism, such as explanations in terms of tracking relations.

4. See also Golub (2017: 1400, 1407) and Dreier (2018: 538) for arguments similar to Tiefensee's.

5. See, for instance, Simpson's (2018: 525–26) suggestion that we can rely on tracking explanations of meaning to isolate the sense in which expressivism is opposed to representationalism. This move might avoid the argument from deflationism, but it falls on the second horn of the dilemma that I develop here.

and Gibbard label their view "quasi-realism," a term meant to indicate that, for all the realist-sounding claims, we are still dealing with an anti-realist theory of normativity. This matters, they argue, because quasi-realism has important advantages over realism: it explains the connection between normative judgment and motivation, and makes good on commitments to truth and objectivity in the normative domain while avoiding the metaphysical and epistemological problems faced by realism.

However, it is far from clear how to draw a divide between this view and genuine realism, given that quasi-realists seem able to endorse a deflationary version of anything that realists might want to say about normative reality and our access to it. The challenge of isolating a divide between quasi-realism and realism has become known as *the problem of creeping minimalism*, due to Dreier (2004).[6] *Creeping* refers to the expansive nature of the quasi-realists' deflationism, which can be naturally extended from truth and facts to other metaphysical and semantic notions in terms of which realism has been traditionally stated, such as property, reference, or representation.[7] This is what makes it hard to find any realist thesis that cannot be appropriated by quasi-realists in a deflationary framework.

Dreier (2004) was among the first to propose an *explanationist* response to this problem: realists appeal to normative facts and properties when explaining what it is to have a normative belief or to make a normative claim, while expressivist explanations appeal instead to desire-like attitudes. Here is how Dreier articulates this idea in a recent paper:

> What it is to believe that abortion is permissible is to stand in a certain relation to abortion and permissibility, according to realism. But Quasi-realists have a different story, one that does not involve the property of permissibility. They think we are *prescribing* when we make normative claims, and thinking about *what to do* when we have normative thoughts. There is no explanatory weight borne by these normative properties in the account of what we are doing when we use normative concepts. (Dreier 2018: 533)

Let us call this *ontological explanationism*.[8]

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6. I use *deflationism* and *minimalism* interchangeably in this paper.

7. More on this expansive deflationism, in Section 3.

8. For similar versions of explanationism, see Blackburn (1993: 7–8, 30–32, 155, 175–76), Fine (2001), Gibbard (2003: 62–63, 184–86), and Dunaway (2016). See also Rosen (1998: 397–401) for discussion.

Now, there are some problems with this view. As Chrisman (2008: 348) pointed out, Dreier's proposal runs into trouble when dealing with *false* claims in any domain of discourse, because their meanings cannot easily be explained by appeal to corresponding entities. More recently, Simpson (2018: 516–17) has argued that ontological explanationism fails to capture the contrast between expressivism and other representationalist theories in metaethics, such as error theory or views that do not rely on facts or properties in explanations of meaning, for example, views that appeal to propositions in a fundamental role.

For these reasons, Simpson suggests that the creeping minimalism debate should focus on how to define *representationalism* about normative discourse in a way that keeps it distinct from expressivism, where representationalism is not limited to realism. More substantively, he argues that the contrast between expressivism and its rivals is best stated in terms of the explanatory role of *representation*: realists and other theorists claim that representational relations play a substantive role in explanations of meaning, while quasi-realists deny this. Here, representational relations include truth, reference, aboutness, as well as representation itself. To be sure, quasi-realists can accept, in a deflationary framework, that normative claims are truth-apt or representational. But they deny that these features of normative discourse play any significant role in explanations of normative meaning, and this is the sense in which their view is opposed to representationalism, according to this proposal. Call this *representational explanationism*.

Aside from avoiding the problems faced by ontological explanationism, Simpson's proposal also matches Blackburn's and Gibbard's recent statements about what distinguishes their quasi-realism from a representationalist approach to normative discourse. Here is, for instance, Blackburn (2015: 851): "Representation is . . . not the key concept to deploy when the desire for philosophical explanation of our practice in some area is upon us. It is not the way to understand the kind of thought or the part of language in question." Similarly, Gibbard (2015: 211) explicitly contrasts expressivism with views that ascribe a substantial explanatory role to representational relations: "Whereas standard 'representationalist' views invoke substantial notions of denotation and the like to explain the workings of thinking and language, expressivists treat representation by deflation."

I find representational explanationism the most promising response to the problem of creeping minimalism and will focus on it from here on. But I am still interested in the question of *realism*: I want to examine whether Simpson's proposal draws a plausible contrast between quasi-realism and standard versions of normative realism, setting aside whether it also succeeds in distinguishing quasi-realism from other metaethical views such as error theory.

To sum up representational explanationism as applied to the question of realism, it seems plausible that all realists about a domain D accept the following thesis:

(RE) Representational relations explain attributions of meaning to sentences in D.[9]

Expressivists about D reject (RE), and this is what their anti-realism consists in. Or so the story goes.

2.1. Interlude: Explanationism and Metasemantic Expressivism

It is worthwhile to note that explanationism, in any of its versions, dovetails with recent attempts to redefine expressivism as a *metasemantic* view (e.g., Silk 2013; Ridge 2014; Chrisman 2016).

These new versions of expressivism rely on the distinction between first-order semantics and metasemantics. A semantic theory for a given language is a formal model that tells us how to assign semantic values to linguistic items, and how these values combine to give rise to semantic contents for entire sentences. Metasemantics examines what it is in virtue of which linguistic items have the semantic values that they do.[10] Expressivism was traditionally expected to provide a psychologistic semantics that would match normative expressions with desire-like attitudes, and which would compete with a truth-conditional semantics for normative terms. Metasemantic expressivists do *not* attempt to provide such a semantic model. They aim to provide instead an expressivist account of *why* normative language fits the description provided by truth-conditional semantics, which competes with a *representationalist* metasemantics for normative discourse.[11]

Expressivism thus redefined can avoid the well-known difficulties faced by expressivist semantic theories in accounting for the content of normative terms

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9. A clarification is in order: a view subscribes to (RE) insofar as it explains at least *some* part of meaning in the given domain by appeal to representational relations. For instance, someone who endorsed a conceptual role semantics with respect to the *sense* of normative terms, but who relied on representational relations to explain the *reference* of said terms, would comply with (RE).

10. Cf. Williams (1999: 556) on the distinction between theories of meaning in a *narrow* sense (i.e., axiomatic theories that generate the meaning of every sentence of some target language) and in a *broad* sense (i.e., accounts of what meaning consists in), and Dummett (1975) for a similar distinction between *modest* and *full-blooded* theories of meaning. See also Suikkanen (2009) for a discussion of the semantics/metasemantics distinction and its import for metaethics.

11. I focus here on expressivist views compatible with truth-conditional semantics, but this is not the only option for metasemantic expressivists. For example, Charlow (2014) combines a metasemantic version of expressivism with a non-propositional semantics for normative language.

in logically complex sentences—the cluster of issues known as the Frege-Geach problem.[12] If expressivism is compatible with an orthodox truth-conditional semantics for normative terms, including truth-conditional accounts of validity and logical connectives, then Frege-Geach issues disappear, or can be addressed using tools available to cognitivists as well.

Moreover, metasemantic expressivism can fit within a particular truth-conditional semantic model that has become paradigmatic in linguistics and the philosophy of language, namely a Kratzer-style contextualism for deontic modals (Kratzer 2012), which can be expanded to deontic and evaluative terms more generally.

Chrisman (2016: 175–76), for example, defines expressivism as a view about what we mean when we attribute context-sensitive meanings to normative claims: truth conditions for a sentence articulate the thought that someone who asserts that sentence canonically ought to have, and the thought to which we are committed in making normative assertions has a directive functional role, rather than a descriptive one.

Ridge's (2014) view is even more deeply linked with contextualism: he proposes that desire-like attitudes help determine the semantic content of deontic and evaluative terms in normative contexts of use. For example, "You ought to donate a large part of your income to charity", when used in a normative sense, means that any acceptable standard of practical reasoning would recommend that you donate a large part of your income to charity, and to judge that a standard is acceptable is to endorse a normative perspective that does not rule out that standard. More generally, on this picture, any normative claim expresses (1) a normative perspective, understood as a non-cognitive practical stance, and (2) a belief to the effect that the given object of evaluation is ranked in a certain way by standards not ruled out by the agent's normative perspective.[13]

However it is implemented, the metasemantic conception of expressivism seems to support the explanationist response to the problem of creeping

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12. See Geach (1960), Schroeder (2008; 2010), or Woods (2017).

13. Finlay (2014: 6) and Alwood (2016: 15–16) argue that this version of expressivism is not properly called *metasemantic*. As Finlay puts it, attaching this label to a view like Ridge's comes from the "discredited idea that the meaning of a sentence just is its truth conditions" (2014: fn. 9). Now, without fully engaging in the debate about what counts as a genuinely metasemantic theory, let me point out that Ridge does abandon the psychologistic semantics that is at the center of standard semantic expressivism and replaces it with a truth-conditional account of compositionality, and his view provides us with a clear sense in which desire-like attitudes help explain why normative claims have the semantic contents that they do. (Compare with Chrisman, who does not seem to offer such a direct kind of metasemantic explanation and adopts instead the sideways approach of identifying the mental states expressed by attributions of truth conditions.) For these reasons, I am comfortable with applying the label *metasemantic expressivism* to Ridge's view.

minimalism, and in particular Simpson's representational explanationism. If quasi-realism is taken to involve an expressivist metasemantics, then it looks like we can draw a clear divide between this view and genuine realism: while the two views might agree in their attributions of truth-conditional meanings to normative terms, they disagree about how to *explain* semantic content. Realists explain meaning by invoking representational relations between normative language and the world, while expressivists appeal instead to desire-like attitudes in explaining why normative claims have the meanings that they do. For instance, an expressivist like Ridge will not appeal to semantic notions like reference or representation when explaining how the standards parameter of normative claims is fixed, identifying instead the desire-like mental state that constitutes judging a standard to be acceptable. In contrast, we should expect a realist to invoke representational relations in explaining this element of normative meaning—say, by claiming that "acceptable" refers to the property of acceptability.

To be clear, I am not attributing any specific version of metasemantic expressivism to quasi-realists like Blackburn and Gibbard, though both have played down their commitment to semantic expressivism in recent works. I should also note that actual proponents of metasemantic expressivism do not embrace the broad deflationism that defines Blackburn's and Gibbard's quasi-realism, so they do not face the problem of creeping minimalism as typically stated. Chrisman (2016) disavows the project of making good on realist claims about objectivity in an expressivist framework, while Ridge (2014) pursues a version of quasi-realism that does not rely on deflationism about truth and other related notions as an essential component. But it *is* possible to be a quasi-realist who adopts both metasemantic expressivism and an expansive deflationism. (I for one am attracted to the quasi-realist project thus understood.) And the metasemantic conception of expressivism would then seem to support explanationism as an account of what separates quasi-realism from realism. This might be taken as further evidence that explanationism is the right answer to the problem of creeping minimalism.

However, I will argue that, if we adopt a deflationary approach to the relevant metaphysical and semantic notions, there need be no explanatory divide between expressivism and anything recognizable as a plausible notion of normative realism. Again, my arguments will focus on Simpson's representational explanationism, but they can be extended to other versions of explanationism as well.

3. The Case against Explanationism

My case against representational explanationism takes the form of a dilemma. If realist explanations of meaning are understood to involve general semantic

notions like truth, reference or representation, then such explanations are indeed in conflict with quasi-realism, but this explanatory contrast does not provide us with a useful notion of realism in a deflationary framework—that is, a notion that would allow someone to be a quasi-realist about normativity and a realist about, say, mid-sized dry goods. If, on the other hand, we focus on explanations of meaning in terms of causal "tracking" relations between language and the world, then this again does not deliver a plausible criterion for realism in meta-ethics, because it leaves out some standard forms of normative realism.

I will also consider a third option. Someone might argue that a *disjunctive* explanatory criterion would account for all standard forms of realism: for example, a criterion that attributed tracking explanations of meaning to (at least some) naturalist realists and captured other forms of realism in terms of a non-causal notion of tracking or representation. However, I will argue that, if such a disjunctive criterion for realism is to be comprehensive enough, it must rely on semantic and metaphysical notions that are incompatible with deflationism, so it will not provide a good response to the problem of creeping minimalism either.

3.1. *The Argument from Deflationism*

Let me begin with the first horn of the dilemma. I will assume a deflationary theory of truth, facts, and other related notions. Here are the main tenets of this theory, first with respect to truth and truth-aptness:[14]

- For a sentence or mental state to be truth-apt, it is enough for it to meet certain minimal conditions concerning its structure and its interaction with other parts of language and thought. (For instance, according to the version of deflationism known as *disciplined syntacticism*, any sentence that has a declarative form and is governed by sufficient standards of warrant is thereby truth-apt.[15] But the details may vary between different deflationist theories.)

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14. This is based on the canonical deflationary theories of truth developed by Field (1986) and Horwich (1998), as well as Williams's (1999) deflationism about truth-conditional semantics, but I want to remain neutral on some issues on which deflationists might disagree, e.g., whether the theory primarily applies to sentences or propositions.

15. It is widely accepted, including among deflationists, that syntax alone is not a sufficient condition for truth-aptness, given that some well-formed declarative sentences intuitively lack truth value, e.g., sentences that include nonsense words or have false presuppositions (thanks to an area editor for *Ergo* for the examples). Moreover, it is contentious whether the additional conditions needed to rule out such cases, such as the discipline condition, can be spelled out in a way that is compatible with deflationism. I believe that they can, but arguing for this goes beyond the scope of the present paper.

- The notion of truth has an expressive role, allowing us to endorse first-order claims, and to abbreviate and generalize when talking about claims that we endorse or reject.
- The meaning of 'true' is exhausted by biconditionals of the form " 'p' is true if and only if *p*".
- The notion of truth plays no substantive explanatory role in the theory of meaning.

Importantly, this deflationary package does *not* entail the rejection of truth-conditional semantics. Deflationists can accept that the meanings of sentences are given by truth conditions. What they claim is that attributions of truth conditions are not grounded in some metaphysical property or relation between language and the world, called *truth*. Instead, deflationists take the function of truth talk to be expressive rather than explanatory, even in such semantic contexts.[16]

This deflationary picture can be extended to other metaphysical notions in terms of which realism is typically stated—for example, fact and property—as well as other semantic notions with which truth is connected in representationalist theories of meaning, such as reference, satisfaction, or representation itself (Dreier 2004: 29–30; Taylor 2019: 13–16).

I will focus on deflationism about representation in what follows, primarily because this notion plays a key role in Simpson's explanationism. In particular, I will rely on the following deflationary theses about representation:

1. For a sentence (mental state) to be representational, it is enough for it to have a declarative form (be expressible through a declarative sentence) and be governed by sufficient standards of warrant.
2. The notion of representation, *understood as a general semantic notion*, plays no substantive explanatory role in the theory of meaning.

Note the qualification in thesis (2). What deflationism rejects is any explanation of meaning in terms of general semantic notions like truth, reference, or representation, understood as metaphysical relations between language/thought and the world, and applicable in principle to a wide range of domains of discourse.[17]

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16. See Williams (1999: 547) and Field (1994), who similarly claims that truth conditions do not play a central role in the *theory* of meaning and content, even while playing such a role in *ascriptions* of meaning and content.

17. As Price (2015: 146–47, my italics) puts it: "There is no useful external notion, of a *semantic* kind—in other words, no useful, *general* notion of relations that words and sentences bear to the external world, that we might usefully identify with truth and reference." See also Price (2013: 192–93, my italics): "[Anti-representationalism will] give up the idea that *semantic* 'aboutness,' in the *general* sense, is a relation of correlation or correspondence between sentences (or thoughts) conceived as items in the world, on the one hand, and other items in the world, on the other."

But it allows that there are representational relations between certain mental or linguistic items and the natural world, namely causal tracking relations that can be fully described in naturalistic terms. Indeed, deflationists can rely on such tracking relations in *local* explanations of meaning, for example, for our terms for mid-sized dry goods, while denying that these relations provide a reduction base for semantic notions of reference or representation that can play a broader explanatory role in the general theory of meaning.[18] Moreover, according to deflationism, the ordinary notion of representation involved in such claims as "'2 + 2 = 4' represents a fact" or "'Genocide is wrong' represents genocide as being wrong" cannot be reduced to tracking relations, and thinking of representation as a metaphysical relation between language/thought and the world will not shed light on what the word "represents" means in such contexts either. Deflationists adopt instead a sideways approach to this ordinary concept of representation: they identify its expressive function as a device for endorsement and generalization, akin to the expressive function of "true" and "fact."

Now, this is only a quick overview of deflationism about representation, and I will not try to provide an argument for the view here. But I will assume this deflationist view in what follows, not only because I find it plausible and Simpson relies on it in his explanationist proposal, but also because quasi-realists have come to adopt deflationism about representation,[19] and this expansive deflationism has become the framework for the debate about how to distinguish quasi-realism from realism: it is when we extend deflationism from truth and facts to reference, properties, or representation that the question of how to keep quasi-realism and realism apart seems to become intractable.

Similarly, Simpson (2020) defines representationalism and what he calls *global expressivism* in terms of the explanatory role of general semantic notions.

18. More on tracking explanations of meaning and how they play into this debate, in Section 3.2 below.

19. See, e.g., Blackburn (1998: 79), or Gibbard's (2015: 211) claim that "talk of representation emerges from an expressivistic treatment, but not in a way that gives it a substantial role in explaining the workings of language". An anonymous reviewer suggests that Blackburn and Gibbard might not accept the strong version of deflationism stated above: while they rely on a deflationary notion of representation to make good on certain realist claims, they might not agree that representation has no role to play in the theory of meaning. For instance, they might hold that a semantic notion of representation helps explain the meaning of our terms for mid-sized dry goods, while rejecting such an explanatory role for representation in the normative domain. My response is twofold. First, as mentioned before, I agree that deflationists can rely on naturalistically understood representational relations in local explanations of meaning. What they deny is that such explanations of meaning involve *general semantic notions* that can be applied in principle to a wide range of domains of discourse. Secondly, I concede that it is not obvious that Blackburn and Gibbard do reject all explanations involving semantic notions of representation, reference, etc., i.e., that they are deflationists in the sense I have defined. However, I follow Williams (2013), Price (2015) and others in thinking that thoroughgoing deflationists *should* adopt this stance on the explanatory role of semantic notions, and for this reason I treat it as an ingredient of quasi-realism.

In particular, this expansive deflationism undermines the contrast between representational and non-representational mental states, on which expressivism has traditionally relied. If deflationists are right, then we do not need to appeal to representation in order to explain how a thought *gets to be* representational. Representationality is instead grounded in structural features of mental states and how they interact with other mental states, and these features can be found in any domain of thought where we make assertions. Moreover, those who take deflationism seriously should not only claim that all mental states that meet the minimal structural conditions are representational, but also that there is no meaningful distinction between thoughts that are representational only in a "minimal" sense and those that are "robustly" representational: any mental state that meets the structural conditions is thereby fully and genuinely representational.[20]

For all I have said so far, explanationism still seems to stand as a response to the problem of creeping minimalism. After all, its core idea is that quasi-realism and realism do not diverge in the features they *ascribe* to normative language and thought, such as truth-aptness or representationality, but in how they *explain* these features. In particular, Simpson can still claim that, even though expressivists might agree with realists that normative judgments are representational, they reject an explanatory role for representation in the theory of normative meaning and in an account of *why* normative judgments have this feature. Indeed, Simpson's proposal seems to become even more plausible if we explicitly include deflationism about representation in the quasi-realist package. Take again (RE):

(RE) Representational relations explain attributions of meaning to sentences in D.

Both expressivism and deflationism reject (RE) with respect to the normative domain, and this seems to be the sense in which quasi-realism is opposed to realism.

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20. To be sure, expressivists can still claim that normative thoughts are non-representational in a sense that is compatible with deflationism by appealing to functional differences between types of mental states: ordinary descriptive beliefs have the function of tracking facts in our environment, while normative thoughts have a practical or action-guiding function. See, e.g., Blackburn (2015), Gibbard (2015), or Köhler (2017: 203): "Representational states are characterized by their function to track features of our external environment . . . Conative attitudes . . . do not function to track anything in the external environment. Instead, they motivate the agent to move around in, interact with, and manipulate her environment." But this narrow naturalistic notion of representation will not allow us to draw a contrast between expressivism and realism in metaethics, because many realists will also reject the idea that normative beliefs are representational in this sense. More on this, in Section 3.2.

Here is now the first argument against (RE) as a criterion for realism.

If we understand (RE) as referring to representation as a general semantic notion, then expressivism is indeed in conflict with (RE): for example, Ridge's explanation of how the standards parameter of normative claims is fixed relies on normative perspectives, understood as desire-like mental states, rather than on representational relations between normative terms and facts about acceptable standards.[21] Moreover, combining expressivism with deflationism *reinforces* this conflict, given that deflationism rejects an explanatory role for representation in the theory of meaning more generally.

However, this is not a good way to understand the divide between quasi-realism and realism, precisely because it because it relies on attributing to realism explanations of meaning that are incompatible with deflationism. Here is what I take to be a constraint on any good response to the problem of creeping minimalism: it should provide a criterion for realism that is compatible with a deflationary framework. (RE) understood in terms of general semantic notions does not meet this constraint.

To be clear, I am not claiming that all normative realists should be happy with this constraint on criteria for realism. Many self-professed realists do accept inflationary explanations of meaning in terms of notions like truth and reference, and might even take such explanations to be constitutive of their realism. But the question in which we are interested is whether we can draw an explanatory divide between quasi-realism and realism *in a deflationary framework*. That is, we are looking for a criterion for realism that would allow someone to be a quasi-realist about normativity and a genuine realist about other domains of discourse, as quasi-realists like Blackburn and Gibbard take themselves to be.

(RE) understood in terms of general semantic notions fails to deliver such a criterion, precisely due to the wide reach of deflationism. Deflationism applies to *all* domains of discourse, not only to normative discourse: it denies that representation and similar semantic notions explain meaning even for paradigmatically descriptive regions of discourse, such as our claims about mid-sized dry goods. This means that the deflationists' rejection of (RE) does not allow us to draw an explanatory contrast between domains of discourse where realism holds true, for example, our claims about tables and chairs, and areas amenable to a quasi-realist account, like normative discourse. From a deflationary standpoint, realism defined in terms of (RE) disappears as a theoretical option in all

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21. I should note that, for Ridge, representational relations do help explain the *non-normative* content of normative claims, e.g., the content of the representational belief that is part of any normative judgment on his view. So his rejection of (RE) will only apply to explanations of *pure* normative content (i.e., how the standards parameter of normative claims is fixed), rather than to the full content of normative claims.

areas of discourse, so acceptance of (RE) cannot constitute a plausible criterion for normative realism.[22]

3.2. *Tracking Explanations of Meaning and the Missing Realists*

A key premise in my argument above was the claim that quasi-realists must reject an explanatory role for representational relations in the theory of meaning in all domains of discourse. Someone might object, however, that this ignores a type of representationalist explanation of semantic content that is not undermined by deflationism, namely a causal explanation that appeals to tracking relations between language and the world to explain the emergence and use of certain bits of language. Therefore, we can still articulate a divide between quasi-realism and genuine realism by taking (RE) to refer to such explanations. Or so the argument would go.

Tracking explanations of meaning can take different forms: for example, causal theories of reference for proper names or natural kind terms, or teleosemantic theories of the sort offered by Millikan (1984) or Dretske (1986; 1988). But we do not need to engage with these details here. What matters for our purposes is that it is exceedingly plausible that *some* such story is true for *some* parts of language, and deflationary expressivists should have no problem acknowledging this. Indeed, the endorsement of tracking explanations of meaning for our terms for mid-sized dry goods and the like is a staple of expressivist and pragmatist literature. See, for instance, Price's (2013: 36) notion of *e-representation*, which applies to mental and linguistic items whose function is to "co-vary with some (typically) external environmental condition", or Williams (2013), whose explanations of meaning in terms of use for ordinary descriptive terms like "red" appeal to reliable discriminative reactions to environmental circumstances.

Indeed, Blackburn and Gibbard often invoke such explanations of semantic content when articulating the sense in which normative discourse is *not* representational. Gibbard (2015: 213), for example, takes environmental tracking to be a *paradigm of representation*, which can be used to articulate a bifurcation thesis between genuinely descriptive language and those areas of language which only

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22. In addition to Golub (2017) and Taylor (2019), Dreier (2018: 539) also argues that, if we adopt deflationism and representational explanationism, we might not be able to make sense of robust realism in *any* domain of discourse. However, this overgeneralization worry would seem to apply to Dreier's ontological explanationism as well. Price (1994) makes a similar point about the upshot of his semantic deflationism for the debate between factualists and non-factualists in various domains of discourse: if we reject inflationary notions of representation and description, he argues, we should not think of ethics, for instance, as somehow less factual than other areas of discourse. See also Macarthur and Price (2007) for a related argument to the effect that semantic minimalism leads to global expressivism.

mimic genuine description, like normative discourse. Moreover, Simpson (2018: 525–26) appeals precisely to tracking explanations of meaning to argue that deflationism does not undermine his version of explanationism: expressivists can still say that normative discourse is non-representational in an interesting sense, he argues, given that they take its content not to be amenable to tracking explanations, while accepting that such explanations are available in other areas of discourse.[23]

This brings us to the second horn of my dilemma for representational explanationism.

I agree that there is a narrow notion of representation, understood in terms of tracking relations, which survives the expansion of deflationism and allows us to claim that normative discourse is non-representational in a meaningful sense. Again, deflationism rejects an explanatory role for representation *understood as a general semantic notion*, but is compatible with local explanations of meaning that appeal to tracking relations.

However, such a naturalistic notion of representation cannot be used to answer the question of realism in metaethics. This is because standard forms of *non-naturalist* realism, like the views defended by Enoch (2011) or FitzPatrick (2011), reject tracking explanations of meaning as well, given that they take normative facts and properties to be causally inert. Moreover, even certain versions of *naturalist* realism, like Jackson's (1998) analytic descriptivism, might not be covered by (RE) thus understood, as they do not seem to rely on tracking explanations of meaning either: on Jackson's view, the semantic content of moral terms is fixed by our folk theory of morality (or, more precisely, by an idealized version of said folk theory), rather than by causal relations between our language and the world.[24] But all these realist views should be covered by any plausible criterion for normative realism. Therefore, the appeal to tracking explanations of meaning cannot vindicate (RE) as an account of the divide between quasi-realism and realism either.

At this point, Simpson might object that his goal is to articulate what separates deflationary expressivism from *representationalism*, rather than to define *realism* in a way that keeps it distinct from quasi-realism. But insofar as representationalism is meant to include all forms of realism, as it *should*, the objection

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23. In a more recent paper, Simpson (2020: 157) similarly argues that expressivists can reject explanations of meaning that rely on general semantic notions in all domains of discourse while accepting that meaning is explained by the relevant *subject matter* in some areas: "Invoking relations to subject matter is not the same as invoking *general* word-world relations" (his italics). Again, the upshot is that, by relying on certain explanations of meaning in terms of subject matter, expressivists can still be representationalists about some areas of discourse and anti-representationalists about normative discourse.

24. Thanks to Jessica Isserow for discussion on Jackson's view and how it plays into this debate.

I raise here still applies: there is little use for a notion of representationalism in metaethics that leaves out standard forms of non-naturalist realism and perhaps even some versions of naturalist realism.

To sum up the argument so far: if (RE) is understood in terms of general semantic notions, then it is incompatible with deflationism and therefore cannot serve as a good response to the problem of creeping minimalism; if (RE) is understood in terms of a naturalistic notion of tracking relations, then is it is too narrow as a criterion for realism.

3.3. A Disjunctive Explanatory Criterion for Realism?

Someone might argue that the two horns of my dilemma do not exhaust the options for explanationism. We need not seek a *unique* explanatory commitment that is characteristic of all forms of realism, the argument would go, whether this is a commitment to tracking explanations or to explanations of meaning in terms of general semantic notions. Perhaps the right way to understand (RE) is in a *disjunctive* way: a view is committed to (RE) if it endorses either tracking explanations of meaning or other kinds of metasemantic explanations that involve representational relations. This might deliver a criterion for realism that covers all forms of normative realism.

Now, remember the key constraint on any good criterion for realism in the context of this debate: it should be compatible with a deflationary framework. In particular, it should not rely on ascribing a substantive role to general semantic notions of truth, reference, or representation in realist explanations of meaning.

Here is a disjunctive reading of (RE) that explicitly runs afoul of this constraint: a view complies with (RE) if it subscribes either to tracking explanations of meaning or to explanations of meaning in terms of general semantic notions. (RE) thus understood may well capture all versions of normative realism, and moreover, it allows quasi-realists to distinguish between regions of discourse: they can accept (RE) in some areas, in virtue of endorsing tracking explanations of meaning in those domains, while rejecting (RE) for normative discourse because they reject both inflationary representationalist explanations and tracking explanations of meaning for normative terms.

However, this reading of (RE) does not provide a good response to the problem of creeping minimalism, because it invokes an explanatory commitment that is in conflict with deflationism. Again, many self-professed realists will see no problem here, but for quasi-realists and others who accept deflationism, this will not do: if we take deflationism seriously, we should treat inflationary representationalism as a mistaken view about the nature of truth and representation,

rather than as the ingredient of a substantive form of normative realism that we should reject. (Compare with the question of realism in other domains: someone can be both a deflationist about truth, facts, etc. and a scientific realist in any sense that matters, at least by their own lights.)

Can we articulate a different disjunctive criterion for realism, which does not rely on explanations of meaning incompatible with deflationism? For instance, someone might suggest that the explanatory commitments of non-naturalist realism, and perhaps those of analytic naturalism as well, can be captured in terms of a non-causal notion of tracking or representation that is neutral with respect to the question of deflationism in the same way that the causal notion of tracking seems to be neutral on this issue. This might deliver the second disjunct that we need in a successful explanatory criterion for realism.[25]

I believe this proposal does not work either. In what follows, I will briefly discuss two options for capturing non-naturalist realism in explanatory terms, but the lesson is more general: there is no way of making good on the metasemantic commitments of non-naturalism without relying on explanatory theses that are in conflict with deflationism. I am less certain what to say about analytic naturalism, but ultimately this does not matter much for my case against explanationism, given that any plausible criterion for realism should cover standard versions of non-naturalist realism.

The two ideas I want to discuss are two responses to *the problem of semantic access* for non-naturalist realism: how is it that our normative terms refer to certain non-natural properties? The first proposal is *reference magnetism*: on this picture, normative properties are reference magnets for normative terms in virtue of being metaphysically elite.[26] Can this alleged metasemantic mechanism be the non-naturalists' version of tracking relations and provide a second disjunct in an explanatory criterion for realism?

Without weighing on the merits of this proposal, what matters for our current purposes is that the reference magnetism view relies on metaphysical and semantic notions in central explanatory roles, particularly the notions of property

and reference, and for this reason cannot be used as part of an explanatory criterion for realism in a deflationary framework.[27]

Enoch (2011) proposes a different answer to the problem of semantic access, partly based on the conceptual role semantics proposed by Wedgwood (2007): the hypothesis that our normative terms refer to certain normative properties—for example, "wrong" refers to wrongness—best makes sense of the inferential rules governing our use of normative terms, like the norm that someone who believes that a certain action is wrong should form the intention to avoid that type of action. Moreover, Enoch argues, we can explain the correlation between our relevant inferential practices and the normative properties by appealing to a pre-established harmony story: evolutionary factors pushed us toward certain patterns of thought and action, such as valuing reciprocity and acting accordingly, which (we can independently judge) happened to track normative facts.[28]

I believe Enoch's proposal does not fit in a deflationary framework either. It still relies on an inflationary notion of reference, that is, on reference understood as a substantive metaphysical relation between normative terms and non-natural properties, which can play a broader explanatory role in the general theory of meaning.[29] To be clear, this is an inflationary picture that quasi-realists reject, and many realists accept. But this disagreement between deflationists and inflationary representationalists cannot provide us with a criterion for realism in the context of this debate, which assumes deflationism as a framework.

You can see where this is going. Any explanatory criterion for realism that will cover standard forms of non-naturalist realism will have to invoke inflationary semantic and/or metaphysical notions, but precisely for this reason no such criterion can be a good response to the problem of creeping minimalism. In other words, precisely because they reject an inflationary representationalist metasemantics, deflationary expressivists should think of their view as compatible with realism pure and simple.[30]

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27. An anonymous reviewer notes that reference magnetism explanations need not apply to all areas of discourse: perhaps they are only meant to work in certain domains, just as tracking explanations of meaning are meant to apply only to certain kinds of claims. This might suggest that such explanations are compatible with deflationism after all. Now, this restricted form of reference magnetism may well be an option for normative realists, but it would not make the relevant explanations compatible with a deflationary framework, insofar as those explanations would still rely on the semantic notion of reference understood as a metaphysical relation between linguistic items and properties, which can apply in principle to a wide range of domains of discourse.

28. This is modeled on Enoch's response to the reliability challenge to normative realism.

29. Enoch says that the problem of semantic access should concern even someone who is a deflationist about reference. Even if this is true, his answer to the problem is not compatible with deflationism. Thanks to Mike Ridge for discussion.

30. An anonymous reviewer suggests that, if views like Enoch's or the reference magnetism proposal are in conflict with deflationism, this might also hold for causal tracking explanations

One final issue: how does Jackson's (1998) analytical descriptivism fit into this discussion? I previously noted that this version of naturalist realism also seemed to be left out by an explanatory criterion for realism in terms of causal tracking relations, and any good criterion for realism should arguably cover this view as well. As a reminder, for Jackson, the semantic content of moral terms is fixed by an idealized version of the folk theory of morality. This metasemantic picture would presumably extend to normative terms more generally. Is there an explanatory conflict between this view and expressivism, and if so, would this help vindicate Simpson's explanationism?

Now, Jackson explicitly relies on metaphysically robust notions of property and reference (e.g., 1998: 15–16, 117–18), so his view would seem to fall under the first horn of my dilemma: it *is* in conflict with expressivism, but its explanatory commitments are not compatible with deflationism, and for that reason cannot help answer the problem of creeping minimalism.

However, I am not sure that analytical descriptivism as a general method *must* rely on inflationary metaphysical and semantic notions. Deflationists might be able to accept *some* version of this method (roughly speaking, using platitudes of moral folk theory and reflective equilibrium to assign extensions to normative terms) by reinterpreting it as an exercise in normative theory that aims to answer questions such as what makes an action right or wrong—though, to be sure, this wouldn't be exactly Jackson's project, and even calling it a *metasemantic* view might be a stretch. But this view would also seem to be compatible with expressivism, so focusing on it would not help vindicate explanationism.

In any case, the status of analytical descriptivism in this debate makes little difference to my case against explanationism, which primarily relies on the idea that we cannot capture the metasemantic commitments of robust non-naturalist realism in a way that is compatible with a deflationary framework.

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of meaning, which I have assumed to be compatible with deflationism. I believe that there is a significant difference between these metasemantic pictures, namely that tracking explanations of meaning do not rely on a semantic notion of reference understood as a metaphysical relation between language and the world, and this is why such explanations can fit into a deflationary framework, unlike Enoch's proposal and the reference magnetism idea. But I will not try to properly defend this idea here. Instead, let me point out that, even if tracking explanations of meaning were incompatible with deflationism, this would not weaken my case against explanationism. On the contrary, this would mean that explanationism has trouble accounting even for the divide between quasi-realism and naturalist realism. In this context, I should note that Field (2001) proposes a radical version of deflationism on which tracking relations between mental or linguistic items and the world (or "indication relations," as he calls them) can explain the reliability of our beliefs in the given domain, but not facts about meaning or reference, even though they will "involve some of the ingredients that inflationists tend to put into their theories of reference" (2001: 263). However, I take it that quasi-realism need not rely on such a radical version of deflationism.

4. Creeping Minimalism as a Tool, Not a Problem

Here is how I expect some readers to respond to my arguments: this might all work as a case for erasing the divide between expressivism and realism, *if we adopt deflationism about the metaphysical and semantic notions in terms of which realism is usually stated*. But so much the worse for deflationism! Not only is deflationism independently implausible, the argument would go, but now we have further circumstantial evidence against it, namely its flattening impact on the intuitive contrast between expressivism and realism in metaethics.

A more moderate version of this response would be that, even if deflationism is plausible for certain notions like truth and fact, my case against explanationism is a cautionary tale about the risks of adopting an expansive deflationism in metaphysics and semantics. If we adopt a restricted version of deflationism that does not extend to representation, for instance, we can still easily state the contrast between expressivism and realism by using the standard Humean distinction between representational and directive mental states, without even having to bring up explanations of semantic content.[31]

Now, I have not tried to defend expansive deflationism in this paper, and I acknowledge that it is a controversial view. But let me end by saying that I do not see deflationism as creating a *problem* in metaethics, namely how to distinguish quasi-realism from realism. Rather, I see it as a *tool* for reconciling two metaethical views that have long been seen as incompatible and which both have important virtues. Both expressivism and realism capture central features of normative discourse, such as its action-guiding character, its acrimoniousness, or its aspiration to truth and objectivity, and it is a *benefit* of deflationism, I believe, if it enables us to endorse a metaethical view that delivers all these goods.

Of course, the idea of reconciling expressivist insights into the nature of normative discourse with realist-sounding commitments to truth and objectivity is not new. Aside from Blackburn's and Gibbard's quasi-realism, versions of this goal have also been pursued by Copp (2001) and Horgan and Timmons (2006a; 2006b), among others. But none of these other views fully embraces *both* expressivism and realism. Copp, for instance, defends a robust naturalist realism about normativity but relegates expressivism to the level of *pragmatics*, as a theory of what is implied by normative assertions, rather than as a theory of meaning. However, it is precisely for this reason that his theory faces difficulties

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31. An anonymous reviewer suggests another way to weaken deflationism: someone who recognizes a deflationary sense of truth, fact, representation, etc. can accept that more robust versions of these notions are also intelligible, e.g., notions that can play a substantive role in explanations of meaning. This weaker version of deflationism would not support my arguments in this paper either.

in accounting for the motivational force of normative judgments and for the intelligibility of radical normative disagreement. Horgan and Timmons do rely on expressivism as a semantic theory and aim to vindicate a form of objectivity for normative claims, but they reject the existence of normative facts and other realist theses that are arguably part of the commonsense conception of morality.[32]

In contrast, by combining expressivism as a theory of normative meaning with a deflationary account of truth, facts, etc., we can make good on the central tenets of realism while fully using the explanatory resources of expressivism. Moreover, if my arguments in this paper are correct, this is not a mere "quasi"-realism, to be distinguished from "genuine" realism in explanatory terms: in a deflationary framework, expressivism is compatible with realism pure and simple.[33] To be sure, this expressivist realism rejects tracking explanations of meaning for normative terms, but it is no less realist for that reason.[34]

This reconciliation between expressivism and realism might not be an *argument* for deflationism as such, but it is not a reason to *worry* about it either. If anything, it provides a new incentive to explore the prospects for a general deflationism about truth, representation, and other related notions.

Acknowledgments

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32. "There are no moral properties or relations to which moral terms (and the concepts they express) might be used to refer and, relatedly, there are no moral facts that moral judgments might describe or report" (Horgan & Timmons 2006b: 75).

33. To be clear, I am not claiming that expressivism and realism can *only* be reconciled in a deflationary framework. I leave open the question of whether a version of normative realism that relied on inflationary representationalist notions might also be combined with expressivism as a theory of meaning.

34. Indeed, the rejection of tracking explanations of meaning is arguably a virtue of this view, insofar as it helps avoid the Moral Twin Earth problem faced by realist views committed to a tracking-style metasemantics. See Horgan and Timmons (1991), and Hare (1952) for an earlier version of this problem.

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