

Comments on: Malte Willer, “Advice for Noncognitivists”
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Expressivism Updated?

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This is a very nice paper. And the general banner — which reads, in part, “Dynamic Semantics Is Very Cool So Pay Attention Philosophers” — is one that I have been happy to march under from time to time. Also: I am not usually accused of being preoccupied with debates in ethics. So perhaps I am not the ideal candidate for a commenter. But this is really metaethics, and metaethics is philosophy of language, and philosophy of language is formal semantics. And so here I am.

1 Attitude Coordination

I want to start with highlighting and then pressing a little on a Big Picture idea in the paper. The idea is that language is a tool for coordinating rational activity and so we should focus on language’s role in coordinating attitudes. This is importantly different from the thing that expressivists tell us. They say that language is a mechanism for expressing states of mind (some of those states being non-cognitive).

The new idea here is that it’s not about what prior attitude or state of mind I express when I tell you something it is about what posterior attitude or state of mind we coordinate on as a result of it. That does seem like just the sort of picture that a dynamic set-up seems right for. Glossing things:

- (1) It is raining.

Meanings are going to be identified with how they induce changes to “states”. No change induced means the sentence is true in or supported by the state. So when I utter (1) to you then: (i) my state should support it, (ii) your state should come to support it as a result of applying the meaning to your state, (iii) mine continues to support it, hence (iv) we are coordinated rain-wise as a result of my utterance.

But there is a wrinkle. It’s not a wrinkle that can properly be expressed in the fragment in the paper, but the idea of the wrinkle is simple enough to see that that shouldn’t be an obstacle. Here’s the wrinkle. There might be no coordinating state. For some perfectly ordinary discourse, there is no prior state that I am in that is the one that I want you to be in post-assertion such that the meaning of the thing I assert is the transition between the two. Examples:

- (2) a. You don’t know it is raining but it is.
- b. It is raining but you don’t know it.
- c. You aren’t for blaming for parking here, but it isn’t allowed.
- d. Parking here isn’t allowed but you aren’t for blaming for it.

These can be used to inform you about how things are: that it’s raining, that parking isn’t allowed. In that case we have different prior states. So far so good. But if I am successful, our posterior states — though coordinated — will not be ones that support the information conveyed by utterance. In each case the second conjunct destroys what the first conjunct needs.

Does this pose some sort of insuperable problem for dynamic semantics or for the use to which it is put here? Nope. Not even close. But it does put highlight a way in which the philosophical gloss and the semantic machinery don’t mesh seamlessly and thereby puts a little pressure on the idea that language is primarily for coordinating attitudes and that that coordination is achieved by applying the meanings to our respective states.

2 Dynamic How?

So, a question: in just what sense is the proposal in this paper dynamic? Here’s what is not an answer: because meanings are updates/transitions/relations between states and so not propositions.

This is for two reasons. The first is that those answers don't track what is "dynamic" in any important sense. That is because those things aren't sufficient. For instance: we can give a perfectly boring "dynamic" account of propositional logic — it's just classical propositions and classical entailment in a somewhat roundabout way.¹

Claim 1. Take the toy semantics for propositional logic in Section 3.1. For any ϕ : $W[\phi]$ has exactly the properties the classical $[[\phi]]$ has. Moreover: $\sigma[\phi] = s \cap [[\phi]]$.

Also: those answers — the updates/transitions/relations between states sorts of answers — aren't necessary for something to look, walk, and quack in relevant respects like a dynamic duck. That is because we can embed dynamic proposals of this-or-that into a suitably flexible otherwise-seeming static framework. There are lots of examples, but I'll mention one that is dear to me: a dynamic strict conditional story about indicative conditionals is equivalent to context-dependent strict conditional story which permits both index-shiftiness (because the conditional is a modal) and context-shiftiness.

The second reason why our list of answers don't answer in just what sense it is that the proposal here is dynamic is less abstract. Well, it's still pretty abstract but it has to do with the specific update system in this paper. It seems — modulo the hedging about the "Claim" label — that what's going on in this system doesn't have the traditional hallmarks of dynamics.

Claim 2. $\sigma[\phi][\psi] = \sigma[\psi][\phi]$

This is not an objection. On the contrary: if updates didn't commute we'd expect some clear examples — say, conjunctions — of moral and descriptive discourse that are happy one direction and at least marked or degraded in the other. Maybe there are such cases to be found, but I very much doubt they'd be adequately expressible in the language we are using here (that is, a propositional language with no modal decorations). So, it's not an objection that updates don't commute. But since failure of commutativity is a hallmark of dynamics, it underlines the question of just in what sense this set-up is dynamic.

¹ "Claim" rather than "Fact" or "Observation" because, well, in some cases I haven't done a proper proof, though I'm pretty sure the hand waving I've done to myself has been convincing.

One more way of asking this: it looks like $\sigma[\phi]$ can be reduced in a precise sense to a system in which we isolate the non-update-y content of ϕ and combine that in a totally classical way with the information in σ .

Claim 3. Let \leq order states by their informativeness. $\langle \Sigma, \leq \rangle$ is a lattice. Let $+$ be the induced join operation it. Then $\sigma[\phi] = \Sigma[\phi] + \sigma$.

So what if the proposal is or isn't dynamic? Who gives two updates? Well, yeah, I agree to some extent. On the other hand if the advice for noncognitivists is "Hey, people, be dynamic to solve your problems!" then it's sorta important to figure out what is doing the work promised in the advice. So if it's not the dynamics, then we should want to know what, precisely, it is.

My two cents that no one asked for: it looks very much like what is doing the work here is the splitting up of "states" and the simultaneous but separate bookkeeping relevant for different bits of language — descriptive as opposed to moral bits. If it's done right, then logical operators like conjunction can be given a uniform treatment that doesn't require that they express boolean combinations of contents. That's important, but it seems in principle separable from the issue of dynamics. (Whatever that is.)

3 Splitting the Atoms

There is also this question: dynamic where? Clearly all the action here is on the differential treatment of descriptive atomic sentences and non-descriptive/"moral" atomic sentences. That leads me to the next thing.

Here's the situation as I would have liked it. We have descriptive atomic sentences. Moral discourse is encoded as a modal where the wrongness modality scopes over the descriptive sentence.

- (3) a. Alex stole the cake.
in $\mathcal{L}^* : p$
- b. It is wrong that Alex stole the cake.
in $\mathcal{L}^* : Wp$

It's up to the semantics to give a noncognitivist account of the wrongness modality in terms of being-for or some similar attitude). This way we get an

explanation of how being for blaming Alex for stealing the cake relates to worlds in which Alex steals the cake.

But here's the situation as I understand it. We have two sorts of atomic sentences: moral and descriptive. The descriptive ones get truth-values at worlds, the moral ones don't. In the language \mathcal{L} as we actually have it the representations of (3) are not illuminating:

- (3) a'. in $\mathcal{L} : p$
b'. in $\mathcal{L} : q$

So there just is no way we can probe the relationship between the meaning of (3a) and (3b). The way Definition 4 works reveals this: the left-hand side is a function taking an atomic sentence p but the right-hand side never mentions p , only it's normal propositional content p —that's fine for descriptive p 's but I don't know how to do this in a noncognitivist-friendly way for moral p 's.

But things are actually a little trickier than that. That is because the intuition behind Definition 4 requires that somehow we do hook up moral atomic sentences with specific descriptive contents. That's the idea: updating with a moral p induces a noncognitivist state of mind wrt what a descriptive sentence means. This looks like a mismatch.

What's the upshot? I think the proposal here is exactly as it needs to be, in a sense. But that still leaves this seeming mismatch between what the noncognitivist promises and what the noncognitivist can get. That might just be the way the universe is and if so this paper makes that clearer.

4 Suspiciously Philosophy-Looking Dilemma

OK, so one charge that certain expressivists have to deal with is the charge that their invented relation of "disagreement" that holds between various attitudes isn't explanatory because it's made-up. (It's fine to make things up but then we need some independent reason to think the made-up thing tracks something we care about. In this case the charge is that we need some independent reason to think the made-up disagreement-relation tracks

inconsistency.) One of the advantages the advice here promises is a solution to this problem: inconsistency is explained, rather helpfully, as inconsistency.

But there's an interesting thing in the neighborhood. Dynamic set-ups offer a richer logical environment than the classical one we grew up on and in this richer environment there are multiple relations that can plausibly be called "inconsistency". Two come to mind: one is doomed-to-crash inconsistency the other is no-non-empty-fixed-point inconsistency. Rather than trying to keep track of all the various negations, let's talk in terms on consistency.

Definition 1. ϕ and ψ are inconsistent iff there is no σ such that $\sigma[\phi][\psi] \neq \emptyset$. ϕ and ψ are incoherent iff there is no $\sigma \neq \emptyset$ such that $\sigma[\phi][\psi] = \sigma$.

Clearly inconsistency implies incoherence. Now here's a fact. In not-actually-dynamic set-ups, incoherence also implies inconsistency.

Claim 4. If $[\cdot]$ isn't actually dynamic then ϕ and ψ are consistent iff they are coherent.

(To see what's going on it might be helpful to think about the toy language in Section 3.1.)

OK, so what? Well either we have a dynamic update operation or we don't. If we do then it seems that even the dynamic noncognitivist faces the charge that the invented relation of "doomed-to-crash inconsistency" isn't explanatory. We'd need just as much an independent story about why this notion of inconsistency as we'd need an independent story about disagreement. On the other hand, maybe we don't have the sort of dynamics that offers a richer logical space so that the various notions of inconsistency collapse. The good news then is that we don't require an explanation for selecting one of them as special. But the somewhat less rosy news is that we don't quite know what it is that is getting the noncognitivist out of the soup.

Is this an objection? Still nope! But it is an invitation that I'd like to know better understand what's going on.