



# Error and the Limits of Quasi-Realism

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## Abstract

If ethical expressivism is true, then moral judgements are motivational desire-like states and do not robustly represent reality. This gives rise to the problem of how to understand moral error. How can we be mistaken if there is no moral reality to be mistaken *about*? The standard expressivist explanation of moral doubt is couched in terms of our fear that our judgements may not survive improvements to our epistemic situation. There is a debate between Egan (Australas J Philos 85(2):205–219, 2007), Blackburn (Australas J Philos 87(2):201–213, 2009), Köhler (Australas J Philos 93(1):161–165, 2015) and Ridge (J Ethics Soc Philos 9(3):1–21, 2015) on the adequacy of this explanation when it comes to the phenomenon of *fundamental* moral error. This paper is my contribution to the debate. I argue, contrary to Blackburn and Ridge, that expressivism is committed to some first-order anti-realist sounding claims, and thus quasi-realism fails. If expressivism is true, none of us can coherently believe we might be fundamentally mistaken. However, contrary to Egan and Köhler, I do not think this is bad. Expressivists can still do what motivated the project of quasi-realism in the first place: they can interpret, make sense of, and vindicate *ordinary* moral discourse. I end by showing it yields some positive results for moral philosophers too – it effectively amounts to a transcendental argument against unhealthy moral scepticism.

**Keywords** Expressivism · Quasi-realism · Error · Inquiry · Fallibility · Scepticism

## 1 The Quasi-Realist Project

Early expressivists (Ogden and Richards 1923; Ayer 1936) wore their anti-realism on their sleeves. They were happy to accept, for instance, that a moral sentence such as ‘stealing is wrong’ “expresses no proposition which can be either true or false.”<sup>1</sup> This clearly contradicts

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<sup>1</sup>Ayer (1936, p.107).

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folk practice – ordinary speakers will attribute truth and falsehood to moral claims. Contemporary expressivists tend to be uncomfortable about attributing widespread error to common sense. Blackburn (1984) began *the quasi-realist project* with the Wittgensteinian conviction that ordinary language is, by and large, just fine as it is. It *works*. We should aim to keep moral thought and discourse intact, and if the philosopher cannot make sense of it, it is the philosopher who is more likely at fault. Here is Blackburn:

I call the enterprise of showing that there is [no mistake in ordinary moral thinking] – that even on antirealist grounds there is nothing improper, nothing “diseased” in projected predicates – the enterprise of *quasi-realism*. The point is that it tries to earn, on the slender basis, the features of moral language ... which tempt people to realism. (Blackburn 1984, p.171.)

The quasi-realist project begins with minimalism about truth. Quasi-realists make what Ridge calls “The Deflationist Gambit”<sup>2</sup> – they put all their eggs in the truth minimalist’s basket in order gain moral truth on the cheap. To run through it *very* quickly, the idea is this. Judging that *p* is true is no different from judging that *p*. So, if ‘stealing is wrong’ expresses disapproval of stealing, ‘it is true that stealing is wrong’ expresses that very same disapproval. Judging *q* to be false is no different from judging that not *q*. Thus, if expressivists can solve the negation problem (Unwin 1999) and provide us with an account of what ‘stealing is not wrong’ expresses, they also have an account of what it is to say it is false that stealing is wrong.

The project is now up and running. If it is true that torture is wrong, it is hard to see why it is not a *fact* that torture is wrong – ‘it is a fact that torture is wrong’ expresses disapproval of torture too. We might also express such disapproval by saying torture exhibits the moral property of wrongness. If beliefs are simply judgements that can be true or false, then moral judgements are beliefs. If ‘torture is wrong regardless of what we think of it’ can be interpreted as the expression of disapproval towards torture in all circumstances, including those in which we like torture, then we can talk of moral properties being mind-independent. Ever and on it goes, until the quasi-realist can, sincerely and without gritting her teeth, make those very same moral claims that “tempt people to realism.”

A pressing worry is that in “appearing in as many ways as possible like realists”<sup>3</sup> the expressivist *becomes* a realist. Blackburn was alive to this potential upshot of quasi-realism: “I take it that its success would be a measure of the difficulty of defining a genuine debate between realism and its opponents.”<sup>4</sup> This is *the problem of creeping minimalism*. And if the expressivist becomes a realist, she risks inheriting the very same problems.<sup>5</sup> Mind-independent moral properties, whether “quasi-” or not, require an explanation for how we can know about them and why they supervene on natural properties.<sup>6</sup>

The quasi-realist wants to be “progressively able to mimic the intellectual practices supposedly definitive of realism.”<sup>7</sup> We should clarify that the intellectual practices in question are those at the first-order level. The quasi-realist’s project is to show that any ethical statement

<sup>2</sup> Ridge (2014, p.200).

<sup>3</sup> Blackburn (1993, p.17).

<sup>4</sup> Blackburn (1993, p.15).

<sup>5</sup> See Wright (1992) and especially Dreier (2004) who gave the problem of creeping minimalism its name.

<sup>6</sup> Street (2011) argues that her Darwinian dilemma, and Dreier (2015) argues that the supervenience objection, applies just as equally to the quasi-realist as to the realist (although see Toppinen (2018) for an argument that the quasi-realist can answer the supervenience challenge in a way the realist cannot).

<sup>7</sup> Blackburn (1993, p.15).

a realist can say, the expressivist can too. Again, this needs further clarification. Where speech is free, expressivists can *say* anything they like. Anyone can say there are mind-independent moral facts, and they can say the moon is made of cheese. The task is to *vindicate* these claims such that an expressivist, free from incoherence and without self-deception, can assert them sincerely.

I will argue there is a limit to quasi-realism. There are some sentences at the first-order level that a realist can say but a quasi-realist cannot. Minimalism only creeps so far. This means that the quasi-realist project, at least as initially stated by Blackburn, fails. The silver lining is that it provides us with a solution to the problem of creeping minimalism – a difference between the realist and the expressivist shows up at the level of first-order moralising. Furthermore, this difference makes epistemological challenges easier to meet. The area of first-order discourse where quasi-realism fails to mimic realism is that of moral doubt.

## 2 Expressivism and Error

We do not typically think of desires as the type of mental state that can be mistaken. This contrasts starkly with beliefs. If I believe the cat is on the mat when it isn't, I am mistaken. If I desire the cat to be on the mat when it isn't, I am *unsatisfied* but I needn't have made a mistake. Moral judgements are clearly possible to be mistaken. While the early expressivists may have been happy to reject this, *quasi-realist* expressivists seek to vindicate the thought that our judgements might be wrong.

An important part of ordinary moral thought involves doubt. Our moral judgements have been wrong in the past, and there seems to be no reason to suspect we currently have everything right. We might explain error minimally – my judgement that stealing is wrong is mistaken if and only if stealing is *not* wrong. This is fair enough when thinking at the first-order level. It isn't particularly revealing, but it is no less revealing than any other first-order discourse about error. My judgement that grass is green is mistaken if and only if grass is not green. What more could one say? Instead, the problem arises at the second-order level when *interpreting* judgements about first person potential error. Consider the following sentences and the mental states they supposedly express.

Sentence 1: *I think grass is green, but I might be mistaken.*

Expression 1: [Belief that I believe grass is green] & [Belief that this belief may not accurately represent reality]

Sentence 2: *I think stealing is wrong, but I might be mistaken.*

Expression 2: [Belief that I disapprove of stealing] & [Belief that this disapproval may not...?]

We may worry about the first conjunct in Expression 2. When a robust realist takes herself to judge stealing is wrong, presumably she thinks she is in a representational state of belief. When an ordinary speaker, untrained in metaethics, takes himself to judge stealing is wrong, presumably he has no opinion on what type of mental state that judgement amounts to. There are two ways to proceed. We might say that, if expressivism is true, then ordinary speakers and even realists implicitly take themselves to disapprove of stealing even if it requires a lot of argument before they realise it. The second way is simply to focus on what a conscientious expressivist would think they were up to when judging an opinion of theirs may be false, and

whether they could continue to make the judgements in good faith. The worry is that “proper consciousness of the activity of judgement would unmask and undermine the activity itself.”<sup>8</sup> The quasi-realist, then, owes us an explanation of what it is to believe one’s moral judgement – a non-representational state – might be mistaken, such that acceptance of the explanation does not force us to dismiss that healthy, common sense uncertainty of our moral opinions. The most prominent account is given by Blackburn in his *Ruling Passions* (1998).

## 2.1 Truth Survives Improvement; Error Does Not

When it comes to giving an expressivist picture of what it is to believe one’s moral judgements may be mistaken, the following passage from *Ruling Passions* has become ubiquitous:

Well, there are a number of things that I admire: for instance, information, sensitivity, maturity, imagination, coherence. I know that other people show defects in these respects, and that these defects lead to bad opinions. But can I exempt myself from the same possibility? Of course not (that would be unpardonably smug). So I can think that perhaps some of my opinions are due to defects of information, sensitivity, maturity, imagination, and coherence. If I really set out to investigate whether this is true, I stand on one part of the (Neurath) boat and inspect the others. (Blackburn 1998, p.318.)

The idea is intuitive enough. When I worry that an opinion of mine might be mistaken, I fear for its longevity in the face of improvements to my epistemic situation. My belief that my ethical opposition to eating meat might be in error is my recognition that I might change my mind if I gained more information, or became more imaginative or more coherent.

To clarify, expressivists can be minimalists about what error actually *is*. Moral judgements are erroneous when they’re false, and there’s not much more to be said. To judge somebody else’s opinion to be erroneous is to judge it false. Furthermore, while it is not possible to judge one’s own current opinion as erroneous, we can acknowledge the possibility that we (or anyone else) *might* be in error. On Blackburn’s picture, this judgement amounts to recognising that we may change our minds after various improvements to our epistemic situation.

## 2.2 Is there an End to Inquiry?

If you’re like me, visual aids can be very helpful. When thinking about this theory of doubt I imagine hypothetical *people* instead of uninstantiated admirable features. I picture a Great Hall of ideal observers, stretching out in several dimensions, lined up according to “scores” denoting their admirable qualities. Let us consider only two dimensions. The observers are arranged such that the ones further north are more descriptively informed than the ones further south, and the ones further east are more sensitive than the ones to the west. Let us consider a specific judgement: the judgement that it was wrong to invade Iraq in 2003. Now, somewhere in this Great Hall are you and me. We are *instantiated* observers. Suppose I can be found at Sensitivity Level 9 and Information Level 12, with coordinates (SL9, IL12). From this epistemic vantage point, I judge the Iraq invasion to be wrong. Of course I might be mistaken, and in thinking so I approve of a range of observers from the Great Hall – say, all of those further north and east than (SL90, IL95) – and believe that some of them may not judge that it was wrong to invade Iraq. But this is not quite right, for there is a complication.

<sup>8</sup> Blackburn (1993, p.3).

For simplicity, suppose I am unusually specific in my epistemic admirations. I totally and utterly admire being at (SL97, IL99). Let us call the hypothetical observer with these qualities ‘Irene’. Irene is my ideal. The simple case is that when I doubt myself, I acknowledge the possibility that Irene disagrees with me. But Irene may not think she’s perfect herself. Irene has her own opinions on improving her epistemic situation. And, if she thinks she ought to be at different coordinates, I think I’d better believe her. What I’m *really* approving of, then, is to be where Irene approves of being. And of course the observer in this position may be unsettled too, thinking *he* may have more epistemic work to do. Eventually, we might arrive at an observer – Edna – who is *settled*. Edna is happy where she is and would not approve of any change to her situation. Edna, we might say, is the end of inquiry.

Must this process to come to end? No. There are two other options. First, inquiry might go on indefinitely, such that observers always judge there is more epistemic work to be done. Every hypothetical observer has an ideal who is not themselves – I admire Irene, Irene admires Jon, Jon admires Karen, and so on forever. And while perhaps Irene disagrees with me about Iraq, maybe Jon is on my side. In this case, what we need is not an end to the process but a point at which no further inquiry will overturn judgement. If Jon, Karen, and the infinitely many observers they approve of all think the Iraq invasion was wrong, then that’s the truth.<sup>9</sup> If there is no such point, and further ideal inquiry will *always* change our minds, then we will never settle on the truth, since we could always improve and overturn our judgement. The second option is for inquiry to go in a circle. Perhaps Karen actually admires Irene. In this case, everything Irene, Jon and Karen agree on is the truth.

I will assume, again for simplicity, that inquiry comes to an end. In the case we considered above, Edna was the end of *my* inquiry. Two questions naturally arise: “Is Edna my only end?” and “Is she your end too?” Edna is surely not the only *settled* hypothetical observer. We can imagine plenty of people stuck in their ways, disapproving of any change to their situations whatsoever, believing there is no way they can improve. Most of these people are rather unadmirable creatures – creatures exemplified by so-called “ideally coherent eccentrics.”<sup>10</sup> I hope none of my ideals set me on a path that leads me to become one of *these*. But it is conceivable that Irene might approve of both Jon and Jerry, and that these two observers would take me on diverging paths leading me to different, hopefully admirable, ends of inquiry, all of which have happily settled at different coordinates in the Great Hall. Likewise, there doesn’t seem to be any guarantee that your epistemic paths of improvement will lead to Edna. It might be the case that all settled observers happen to agree about everything. But it is the possibility of settling at different ends and yet making different judgements that drives the biggest challenge to quasi-realism.

### 3 Egan’s Challenge: Immunity to Fundamental Error

Andy Egan poses a trilemma for quasi-realist expressivists. He believes Blackburn was right to deny a first person exemption to error. In general, we should not think of ourselves as having

<sup>9</sup> We are not *identifying* the truth with their judging so, or saying that moral truths are *made* true by the responses of ideal observers. We are simply saying that the best (hypothetical) observers believe truths. No particular order of explanation is implied.

<sup>10</sup> Street (2009).

more privileged access to the truth than other people, at least without good a posteriori reason to think so. Egan uses the thought that we are not special as his first lemma:

NO SMUGNESS: There isn't any sort of moral error to which others are subject, but against which I have an a priori guarantee of immunity. (Egan 2007, p.210.)

Before moving on to Egan's next premise, we should clarify what kind of claim NO SMUGNESS is. Since expressivists are silent about error on the metaethical second-order level, Egan's premise must be a first-order claim: it is the claim that, *prima facie*, my own epistemic situation is *no better* than anyone else's. It is an evaluative claim, which on the expressivist picture is a desire-like attitude. This point is not drawn out in the literature. As a first-order claim, the expressivist is not committed to it. But, if quasi-realism is to succeed, it must be possible to vindicate the claim as making sense on the expressivist picture.

Egan's next step is to define *stability*. A given judgement of mine is stable if it would survive all changes I see as improvements. Ridge (2015) helpfully clarifies different possible readings of stability. Take a series of changes to one's epistemic situation. Perhaps the first stage was to gain more coherence and the second stage was to gain more information. One may endorse (or not) these changes before the whole process, after the whole process, or at each stage. The best way to understand stability is in terms of endorsing each stage of changes at the moment they happen.<sup>11</sup> Stable judgements are those that will survive any such process of endorsed-at-the-time changes. In terms of my hypothetical ideal observers, the judgements of mine that are stable are the ones that all my ideal observers on the path to Edna (including Irene, Jon, Karen, and so on) agree with me about.

Are any of my judgements stable? I don't know for sure, but perhaps. Maybe there's no way to convince me (in ways that I endorse) to abandon my judgement that it is wrong to torture innocent people for no comparable gain in pleasure, happiness or desire satisfaction. Call this judgement 'J'. Now, it seems possible that somebody else could judge that *not J*, and for this judgement of theirs to be stable. Many philosophers, both realists and anti-realists, believe that ideally coherent eccentrics are a theoretical possibility. That is, there are potential people whose beliefs and desires are internally coherent but particularly deviant. Imagine an ideally coherent Caligula who judges that torturing people is the thing to do, and that no series of endorsed-at-the-time changes would lead him to abandon that judgement.<sup>12</sup> Caligula stably judges that J is false. But J is surely true, and so we arrive at Egan's second lemma:

FUNDAMENTAL FALLIBILITY: It's possible for people's stable moral beliefs to be mistaken. (Egan 2007, p.213.)

Egan then considers whether we could be fundamentally mistaken ourselves and reaches his third lemma:

For me to be fundamentally in error, I need to have some moral view that's (a) stable, and (b) mistaken. But given Blackburn's account of moral error, this can't happen. For my moral belief that P to be stable is for it to be such that it would survive any improving change (or course of improving changes). For my moral belief that P to be mistaken is for there to be some improving change (or course of improving changes) that would lead

<sup>11</sup> Ridge (2015, p.3) explains the 'each stage' reading of a judgement's stability is best because it is the only way to ensure that "there will be no rational way for the believer to abandon it."

<sup>12</sup> The example of an ideally coherent Caligula who "aims solely to maximise the suffering of others" comes from Gibbard (1999, p.145).

me to abandon P. So on Blackburn's account of moral error, a moral belief is mistaken only if it's not stable. So for me to be fundamentally in error, I'd need to have some moral view that was (a) stable, and (b) not stable, which I pretty clearly can't have. ... So the quasi-realist is committed to:

FIRST-PERSON IMMUNITY: I have an *a priori* guarantee against fundamental moral error. (Egan 2007, p.214.)

Egan's three lemmas contradict. If people such as the ideally coherent Caligula can have FUNDAMENTAL FALLIBILITY while individual expressivists are committed to FIRST-PERSON IMMUNITY, this violates NO SMUGNESS. There is a type of error that I know *a priori* I do not suffer from, but I cannot say the same of anyone else. As an expressivist I must judge that other people may be cut off from the moral truth in a way that I am not. And this seems unpardonably smug of me.

### 3.1 Blackburn's Reply & Köhler's Rejoinder

In Blackburn's (2009) response, he identifies the ways in which Egan's argument misrepresents the quasi-realist's commitments. Blackburn makes the distinction between "(M) If something is entrenched in my outlook, in such a way that nothing I could recognize as an improvement would undermine it, then it is true" and "(I) If something is entrenched in my outlook, in such a way that nothing that is an improvement would undermine it, then it is true."<sup>13</sup> He states that he agrees with I but disagrees with M, and M is what's needed for Egan's argument.<sup>14</sup>

Blackburn's response is important. He clarifies the quasi-realist position and what commitments he associates himself with, most notably the fact that the expressivist is silent on what moral error *is* – that is a normative question, and "instability" is an implausible answer for anyone without pragmatist leanings. But Köhler (2015, p.163) argues the reply misses the mark, since Blackburn does not attempt to give a coherent state of mind expressed by the sentence 'I might be stably mistaken.' Egan's problem is best understood as a *challenge* for expressivists to characterise this judgement in expressivist-friendly terms.

It is clearly possible to think somebody *else's* opinion O is stable and yet might be mistaken. This consists in the belief that the agent's judgement O will survive any series of changes to her epistemic situation that *she* considers improvements at the time, along with the judgement that O might be false – where this is a complex state of (i) approving of end-of-inquiry-Edna and (ii) the belief that Edna may not judge that O. Köhler thinks expressivists cannot consistently believe this of themselves, revivifying FIRST-PERSON IMMUNITY and violating NO SMUGNESS. For to believe that I might be *fundamentally* mistaken in my judgement J is to think that J is stable, such that no series of changes I consider improvements will lead me to abandon it, and yet to also approve of Edna and think that I might abandon J after I become like her.

Consequently, the very thought that I might myself be in fundamental error is *inconsistent*. So, I *do* have an *a priori* guarantee against this kind of error. Expressivists are still committed to FIRST-PERSON IMMUNITY. Quasi-realism is still threatened by Egan's challenge. (Köhler 2015, p.165.)

<sup>13</sup> Blackburn (2009, pp.205-6).

<sup>14</sup> See Egan (2007, p.214) for the slip between what Blackburn calls "M" and "I".

### 3.2 Ridge's Distinction: 'Could' or 'Would'?

Look closer at the interpretation on offer:

Sentence 3: *My judgement J is stable, but might be mistaken.*

Expression 3: [Belief that J will survive all changes I consider improvements] & [Approval of a process of changes] & [Belief that J might not survive the (whole) process of changes I expressed approval of]

Ridge (2015) shows that, contrary to what Köhler says, this judgement is consistent. It is perfectly fine to think that J *might* not survive certain changes while thinking that J in fact *will* survive those changes. Thoughts of this kind are easy to come by. I believe the sun will rise tomorrow while at the same time recognising the (small) possibility that the earth will stop turning and I'll be stuck on the dark side. In light of this, Ridge constructs a version of Egan's argument couched in terms of "hyper-stability."<sup>15</sup> To judge something hyper-stable is to be certain it is stable. Ridge's new problem involves this judgement that one's opinion *must* survive all possible changes one considers improvements.

Sentence 4: *My judgement J is 100% certainly stable, but it might be mistaken.*

Expression 4: [Belief that J *must* survive all changes I consider improvements] & [Approval of a process of changes] & [Belief that J might not survive the (whole) process of changes I expressed approval of]

This is now enough to guarantee a contradiction between the two belief components. It is the contradiction that Egan was looking for in order for his trilemma to apply. If this is the correct expressivist account of error, the conscientious expressivist cannot sincerely assert Sentence 4, as they would be aware that it expresses two beliefs that cannot both be true. (They know that the changes they consider improvements are precisely those they express approval of.) If the conscientious expressivist believes a judgement of theirs is hyper-stable (100% certainly stable), they are forced to say their judgement is immune to error. FIRST-PERSON IMMUNITY applies, and this is smug.

### 3.3 This is Smug, but so What?

Ridge (2015, p.18) agrees that this is smug, but he thinks this isn't a problem with expressivism. Instead, it's a problem with anyone who makes the judgement of hyper-stability. Anyone who is 100% certain that a judgement of theirs is stable is being very smug! How can anyone sensibly rule out the possibility of changing their minds about any of their judgements? We would think such a person smug whether we're expressivists or not. The vice of smugness arises not from the expressivist interpretation of the judgement, but from the agent's absolute certainty. All it takes is a mere flicker of humility to recognise that a judgement of yours, while it may be *likely* to be stable, has a chance of being abandoned after what you see as improving changes.

Ridge's strategy is effectively to bite the bullet: expressivism *does* imply that someone who thinks a judgement of hers is hyper-stable must also think she is not

<sup>15</sup> Ridge (2015, p.17).



fundamentally mistaken about it (and she need not think the same of *other* people's hyper-stable judgements), and this agent is unpardonably smug. However, she is *already* smug to be so certain that there is no chance she would ever change her mind after any possible series of changes that she sees as improvements at the time. So it seems that all Egan and Köhler have going for them is the worry that someone, who smugly thinks one of her judgements is hyper-stable, must also smugly think she cannot be fundamentally mistaken. "In that case, though, the conclusion of the argument would only be that being both an expressivist and independently of one's expressivism being unpardonably smug entails that you are unpardonably smug."<sup>16</sup> And that doesn't seem like a worry at all.

Beware the equivocation of the word 'smug'. It may be an epistemic vice to be absolutely certain that you will never change your mind after any possible series of seen-by-you-as-improvements, but this isn't smugness as defined by Egan in his trilemma. Egan's 'smugness' is exemplified by an agent who thinks he has a special a priori guarantee of first-person immunity from fundamental error that nobody else has. The vice Ridge discusses is different, and we should give it a different name. I'll call it 'misplaced certainty.' The conclusion of Egan's argument, contrary to what Ridge argues, is not that expressivism plus smugness entails smugness. The conclusion is that expressivism plus *misplaced certainty* entails smugness.

The reader may wonder why this matters. If expressivism is true, it means that one vice entails another – no biggie. But, first of all, it is an entailment that does not hold for a realist. Secondly, the problem can be reinstated even for agents that do not exemplify the vice of misplaced certainty.

### 3.4 The Anti-Realist Conditional

I do not rule many things out entirely, and nor should you. But this includes the possibility that one of our judgements is actually stable in the sense that, while unbeknownst to us, there really are no possible changes we would endorse at the time that would lead us to abandon that particular judgement. Given that this is a possibility, we can think about what would follow from it. I shall argue the conditional we are forced to accept, on the assumption that expressivism is true, is this:

*Anti-Realist Conditional (ARC):* Necessarily, if my judgement *J* is stable, then it is true.

No realist would accept this conditional. Expressivists must. This is because an expressivist cannot consistently believe its negation – that there is a possibility that their judgement *J* is both stable and false. Let us bring out why.

Sentence 5: *It is possible my judgement J is false and stable.*

Expression 5: [Approval of a process of changes] & [Belief that it is possible that: *J* might not survive the (whole) process of changes I expressed approval of *and J* must survive all changes I consider improvements]<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Ridge (2015, p.20).

<sup>17</sup> The first modal operator is epistemic whereas the second and third are metaphysical. It is the belief that, for all I know, there is and is not a metaphysical chance that *J* won't survive until the end of inquiry. Thanks to Jimmy Lenman for this point.

Sentence 5 expresses an inconsistent belief because, as Blackburn knows, the changes I express approval of *just are* the changes I consider improvements. It is therefore inconsistent to deny ARC. The inconsistency is hidden in the psychology, not something that can be read off the sentence. Nevertheless, insofar as we are to eliminate inconsistencies from our beliefs we must believe ARC, even without misplaced certainty that any of our judgements are *actually* stable. We smugly have to believe we have an a priori first-person immunity from moral opinions that are stably false. Egan was right after all.

#### 4 The Limits of Quasi-Realism

Instances of the Anti-Realist Conditional are first-order sentences. If expressivism is true, a “proper consciousness”<sup>18</sup> of the mental states these conditionals express forces us to accept them. Expressivists must accept that necessarily, if a judgement of theirs is “locked” into their perspective, then it is true. What does this mean for expressivism? It means that expressivism commits us to some first-order claims. It means that quasi-realism, at least on my reading of Blackburn, fails. What we end up with is some form of quasi-anti-realism. Exactly what form this is will depend on the first-order choices the expressivist can make.

We have seen that, despite arguments from Blackburn and Ridge to the contrary, the expressivist is committed to FIRST-PERSON IMMUNITY, the lemma that she herself has an a priori guarantee against fundamental moral error. This yields a choice: reject NO SMUGNESS or give up FUNDAMENTAL FALLIBILITY. To choose the latter is to judge that nobody can be fundamentally mistaken. On this view, nobody stably believes anything false – there’s hope for everyone. And there are two ways to accept this. Firstly, we could be optimistic about the idea of eventual convergence of opinion. Perhaps everyone will reach Edna at the end of their ideal inquiry. Eccentrics would never be *settled* – there would always be changes they would be happy to call improvements to their situation that would eventually lead them to Edna. This, we might say, is a kind of quasi-Kantianism.

The second way to give up FUNDAMENTAL FALLIBILITY is to relativise truth. Settled eccentrics are possible, but they are not mistaken. Their judgements are correct; they’re just different. When we talk of the moral truth, we’re talking about what we’ll find at the end of *our* inquiries, perhaps hoping our interlocutor is on a similar path. But when we consider strange creatures who moralise in very different ways and with whom we cannot hope to have a productive moral argument, we don’t *disagree* with them as such.<sup>19</sup> What we end up with here is a kind of quasi-relativism.

For my part, I find it plausible that settled ideally coherent eccentrics are possible but I also believe they can be wrong. No matter how strange a settled ideally coherent Caligula would be, I cannot bring myself to think he speaks the truth when he says it is right to torture innocent people for no comparable gain in pleasure, happiness or desire satisfaction. My favoured route is to reject NO SMUGNESS and accept that I have an a priori guarantee that I can correct any of my mistakes in ways I see as improvements, and yet I cannot say the same of anyone else, such as the settled Caligula. Luckily I can know a posteriori that other people are not cut off from the truth. As it happens, I haven’t met a single person I believe *is* in such a hopeless situation. But, since I must inspect each new person I meet (including my past and future

<sup>18</sup> Blackburn (1993, p.3).

<sup>19</sup> This echoes the “relativism of distance” of Williams (1985, ch.9).

selves) to check they are not like Caligula, I am the only person that I can know a priori has IMMUNITY from being stably mistaken. Perhaps we can call this a kind of quasi-idealism.

#### 4.1 This isn't so Bad

The language in this particular area of philosophy can be misleading. Egan (drawing from Blackburn's text) gives us a very specific definition of 'smugness' that is important to distinguish from common parlance. Even though I personally reject NO SMUGNESS, I do not have any *misplaced certainty* in any of my opinions. I believe even my most firmly held judgements might be wrong. Of course, given my commitment to ARC, I do not believe I am cut off from the truth. Wherever I'm wrong, I must believe there is a *possibility* that I can improve enough to access the moral facts. But then again, I do not believe that you are cut off either. I believe you can access the moral truth just as well as I can. And I believe there are many people who are much better at ethical inquiry than I am and from whom I can learn a lot.

The word 'fundamental' is misleading too. In Egan's sense, to be fundamentally mistaken is to have an irreparably false judgement that you cannot get rid of through any process you'd be willing to call improvement. It is to be *severed* from the moral truth in a most heinous way. It is not simply to be mistaken about fundamental truths. Given that I believe *any* of my moral judgements are up for grabs – I can't know for sure what will result from the process of moral inquiry before I've gotten anywhere near finishing it – I also believe I might be mistaken about the fundamentals.

In short, I instantiate SMUGNESS but (I hope) I'm not *smug*, and while I cannot coherently believe I might be FUNDAMENTALLY mistaken, I very much do believe I might be *fundamentally* mistaken about any of my dearest and most firmly held judgements. So why is this supposed to be bad for the expressivist? Egan thinks it is because "NO SMUGNESS captures an important part of our ordinary way of thinking about morality."<sup>20</sup> But who is he referring to? Ordinary people do not think about the a priori. They do think about error, and presumably they think they can go wrong in the same ways as everyone else they've met – they do not think they're special in having privileged access to the truth. But, as I have explained, I do not think I'm special either. In my experience, people tend to have the same kinds of faculties as I do. I know this a posteriori, but how else could I find out whether I'm a special or a common creature around here?

What was initially attractive about Blackburn's quasi-realist project was its mission of vindicating ordinary moral thought and discourse. Recognising the truth of expressivism should not prevent us from making the same kinds of judgements we made before philosophy distracted us. Egan thinks he has shown otherwise. "If quasi-realists are obliged to reject NO SMUGNESS, then they won't be able to just go on as before—being a quasi-realist will force a major revision of our ordinary ways of thinking and talking about moral matters."<sup>21</sup> Again, I strongly disagree. When I reject NO SMUGNESS, I'm going to continue *exactly* as I was before. As long as I do not have any *misplaced certainty* in any of my particular opinions, I will continue to doubt myself at appropriate times and inspect the Neurath boat while it's at sea. This vindicates *ordinary* moral practice, and that's all we as expressivists are required to do.

<sup>20</sup> Egan (2007, p.215).

<sup>21</sup> Egan (2007, p.216).

Egan's challenge shows that, contrary to Blackburn's hopes, expressivism does commit us to some first-order claims that a realist is able to reject. But this isn't so bad. Acceptance of Anti-Realist Conditionals does not force us to see ourselves as superior, it leaves us plenty of room for healthy scepticism, and it allows us to vindicate everything to be found in ordinary moral discourse.

## 4.2 Silver Linings

I have discussed why the limits to the quasi-realist project are not bad for expressivism. I will end with reasons to welcome them. To begin, it yields an answer to the problem of creeping minimalism: there are first-order claims that a realist can make but an expressivist cannot. More importantly, it means expressivists evade some of the epistemological challenges that plague realists. For imagine what it would be like if we thought the ideally coherent Caligula was just as likely to be right as we are. If I genuinely believed that, I do not think I could go on as before. It would be *realism* that was the threat to ordinary moral thought.

Moral realists I'm sure would deny that Caligula is just as likely to be right as we are. After all, Caligula is an awful person. He thinks it right to torture people for the sole reason of maximising suffering! The moral realist might say we can tell, a posteriori, that Caligula's moral faculties are faulty. But how do we know it is Caligula's faculties at fault and not our own? Why think that *we* have access to the realm of moral facts? In answering this question, expressivists have a weapon realists don't: we think it because we must.

You might fear this makes it mysterious why the moral truth hangs round people like us and not people like Caligula. What's so special about us? How can it be reassuring to think I can access the moral truth *just because I'm me*?<sup>22</sup> In response, I would first reiterate that there is no commitment to the moral truth being in any way mind-dependent. The reason torture is wrong need not have anything to do with me or my moral sensibility, and judgements about what the moral truth depends on are to be assessed from the first-order level. I would then emphasise that the same applies to our epistemic access: the *reason* I can access the moral truth is not that I'm me, but that I possess certain features that make me a somewhat decent moral inquirer. Caligula lacks these features. Judgements about what makes a good inquirer (and what makes a terrible one) are to be assessed from the first-order level, and *the fact that I'm me* is a bad answer. If these judgements are first-order, what progress has been made? Well, what I have argued in this paper is that if expressivism is true, we cannot coherently think of ourselves as hopeless inquirers. Radical scepticism undermines itself, and so expressivists do not have to answer radically sceptical worries. Therein lies the epistemic advantage of expressivism over realism.

In summary, on the expressivist picture I can doubt the truth of every single one of my judgements. What I cannot do, on pain of inconsistency, is believe my false ones are incapable of correction. If the possibility of being severed from the truth is what Egan is fighting for, I want no part of it. It is far healthier to always believe we might be mistaken, and to always believe we can correct our mistakes.

<sup>22</sup> Thanks to Elinor Mason and Alex Gregory for raising this concern and to Daniel Elstein for helpful discussion of the response to it.

## 5 Conclusion

I have argued that quasi-realism fails. There are some first-order claims an expressivist cannot coherently deny. Far from being a reason to reject expressivism, this is a reason to favour it, as the expressivist has the beginnings of an answer to the moral sceptic. What the moral truth *actually is*, expressivists do not say. Ask an ethicist – we remain silent on the matter. But what we *can* say to ourselves is this: find stability and you'll find truth. How do we find stability? In much the same ways as before: collect evidence, cohere your thoughts, become more sympathetic, reflect. *Improve*. Moral truth needn't be identified with stability, but we do have to believe our stable beliefs are true. After all, stability is the end of inquiry. This is not a very realist thing to say, and it is a limit on quasi-realism, but it is no bad thing. It only means expressivists must accept that, at the end of inquiry, *truth will out*. To think otherwise is to abandon hope.<sup>23</sup>

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