

## “On Stephen Barker’s Expressivist Proposal”

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In “Truthmaking, Expressivism and the Incredible Lightness of Being”, Stephen Barker has put forward an expressivist conception of truth, as an alternative to truth-conditional, epistemic and minimalist accounts in their different versions. Right from the beginning, he points out that the kind of expressivism that he is going to argue for is one that allows for the following three well-known platitudes about truth:

- (i) Tarski’s truth schema T: *<S> is true if and only if S*
- (ii) The so-called truth-making schema TM: *<S> is true because S*
- (iii) What he calls F: *It is a fact that S if and only if S*

Since Tarski, respect for (i) has been taken to be a condition of adequacy for any theory of truth. So, it is natural to require that any account of truth should be informed by the purpose to respect (i). In contrast, what is rather surprising is Barker’s concern for both (ii) and (iii). According to him, this makes for a clear distinction between his expressivist proposal and all versions of the minimalist conception, which do not consider it necessary to make room for the intuitions underlying (ii) and (iii). The two main ideas offered in order to make expressivism compatible with those platitudes are the following:

1. facts are not entities (i.e., what he calls “the non-ontic conception of fact”)
2. the asymmetry between *<S>* and *<S> is true* can be explained without appealing to a correspondence relation between language and reality

Therefore, there is something that Stephen recognizes to have in common with any truth-conditional approach, namely, a concern to make sense of (ii) and (iii).

In what follows, I intend to point out a number of aspects of the proposal that are not entirely clear to me.

## I.

First of all, I will say just a word on Stephen's account of the semantic functioning of fact-locutions. It is clear to me that this could only be accepted if we were already persuaded of the adequacy of the overall alternative semantic picture. In the absence of a general argument, I don't find the argument offered at this point particularly persuasive since it involves the counterintuitive thesis that the notion of object is to be defined in terms of the notion of denotation. To me, the notions of object, reality and existence are intuitively more basic than any semantic notion, such as denotation, reference and the likes, and a theory that makes the former depend on the latter seems to me to be putting the cart before the horse. I am not saying that metaphysical and semantic theories cannot leave certain intuitions behind: what I am saying is that if we are not going to save certain intuitions, we had better have an independent argument –namely, an argument in favour of the theory that does not rest on definitions that contradict the intuitions in question, such as the definition of object put forward by Stephen. To put it in slightly different terms, the thesis that the notion of object must be defined in terms of denotation should be presented as a consequence of accepting the independently argued for STA and not as a reason for its acceptance.

## II.

So, let's focus on Stephen's presentation of STA, namely, the semantic theory that is advanced as an alternative to other theories, specially, in the light of Stephen's own emphasis, to truth-conditional semantics. As said before, it is in terms of this theory that we have to understand Stephen's first main idea, namely, the idea that facts are not (objective) entities, which opens up the possibility of a new interpretation of (ii) and (iii) above.

Stephen points out that STA is a form of semantic expressivism, that is, an approach according to which linguistic meaning is to be explained in terms of the notion of expression of subjective attitudes. A paradigmatic example of such a kind of theory can be found in Stevenson's moral expressivism, which takes the meaning of the predicate "good" to be given by a subjective attitude of approval that gets expressed through its use. Stephen's expressivism is *global*, that is, it is meant to cover all the expressions in a natural language; more specifically, it is thought to

apply to (i) evaluative terms, (ii) logical terms, and (iii) descriptive terms. (As for the truth-predicate, Stephen seems to be considering it to be a logical predicate –we will say more on this below.)<sup>1</sup>

Moral expressivism has provided us all with a clear characterization of what expressivism may amount to when applied to evaluative terms. As far as logical terms are concerned, I think that Stephen’s proposal is clear enough too: each logical connective is taken to be associated with a certain subjective attitude that gets expressed by means of its use. For instance, a negation is taken to express the attitude of rejecting an attitude associated with the (possible) assertion of what is being negated. A material conditional is taken to express an attitude of committing oneself to express a certain attitude given that one has already expressed another attitude. Setting the details aside, it is clear how the appeal to the notion of an expressed attitude can provide us with an alternative to the notion of a represented entity, which is appealed to in most truth-conditional approaches. Echoing Stephen’s complaints, would that be a negative objective fact and a conditional objective fact, respectively? If that were not the case, how should those objective complex facts be construed?<sup>2</sup>

I am doubtful, though, whether expressivism can be applied to descriptive terms. More specifically, in this regard, I don’t see in what sense the position is taken to constitute an alternative to truth-conditional accounts of meaning.

According to Stephen, a sentence has meaning in so far as it is used in an act of assertion. This act in turn is to be construed as the act of defending a certain  $\pi$ -property or, in other terms, manifesting a reason-giving disposition in relation to possessing a certain  $\pi$ -property. A speaker has a reason-giving disposition in relation to possessing a  $\pi$ -property just in case he is disposed, under prompts from peers, or his own inner querying, to indicating reasons for tokening the  $\pi$ -property in

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen calls “ET (Expressivism about Truth)” the part of STA concerned with the truth-predicate.

<sup>2</sup> At this point, it is worth pointing out that there might be an alternative for truth-conditional approaches to committing themselves to the existence of such questionable entities: they might combine a truth-conditional account of descriptive expressions with an inferentialist account of logical ones.

question.<sup>3</sup>  $\Pi$ -properties are taken to be mental states of different varieties, namely, motivational, intentional, rejective, etc. Given that they may give rise to acts with the complexity of, for instance, the act of asserting that Peter is thin (which involves attributing a certain property to a particular individual), at least some  $\pi$ -properties must be themselves complex –Stephen says that they have a compositional structure (cf. p. 14). Now, according to Stephen,  $\pi$ -properties do not have content. In connection with this, he says that they are -in contrast to beliefs- pre-doxastic states.

1. First of all, I am not sure about Stephen's ontological commitment regarding  $\pi$ -properties. It seems to me that he wants to be a realist about mental states but sometimes he sounds as if he only wanted to be committed to the existence of linguistic entities and acts of assertion.

2. If he intends to be a realist –strictly speaking, an intentional realist-, why does he restrict mental states to pre-doxastic states? Among realists, it is usual to classify mental states in at least two main groups, qualitative states and propositional attitudes, and these in turn are usually divided in at least two new groups, doxastic states (paradigmatically exemplified by beliefs) and conative states (paradigmatically exemplified by desires). Why does Stephen consider all mental states to be pre-doxastic? (It is clear, though, why *he needs* to say this: to justify their lack of aptness for truth.)

3. Another related question follows: what does he mean exactly by “pre-doxastic states”? He says:

“Think of U's mind at the sub-doxastic level as containing a sub-system that processes  $\pi$ -properties. Its processing involves extracting causal consequences from given tokened states. This is how it carries out its computations. It is not so much a syntactically driven system as a causally-structurally driven system.” (p. 10)

Does he then mean by “pre-doxastic states” what is meant by “sub-doxastic states” on a standard functionalist theory, namely, sub-personal states, whose main features are their unconscious character and their inferential isolation, paradigmatically exemplified by some states of our visual system and the so-called tacit knowledge of

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<sup>3</sup> According to my interpretation of the text, the reason-giving disposition is a *ratio cognoscendi* (and not a *ratio essendi*) of the possession of the  $\square$ -property in question.

grammatical principles? But, on the one hand, such states are usually conceived of as representational and contentful states. On the other hand, this conception does not seem to fit in with the kind of mental states that we associate with most of our assertions!

4. Moreover, I take it that  $\pi$ -properties are what allows us to distinguish among different assertions -what distinguishes assertion  $x$  from assertion  $y$  is that when asserting  $x$  we are defending a certain  $\pi$ -property, for instance, a determinate representational intention, while when asserting  $y$  we are defending another  $\pi$ -property, for example, a desire to travel around the world. But, if this is so, how can Stephen say that  $\pi$ -properties do not have content? Aside from their different kinds (namely, the difference between, for instance, an intention and a desire), when  $\pi$ -properties of the same kind are at stake, content is just the concept for that aspect of a  $\pi$ -property that allows us to distinguish one  $\pi$ -property from another, and hence one assertion from another. There does not seem to be any other criterion of identity for  $\pi$ -properties and, therefore, for assertions.

5. Another point that is obscure to me is the following one. Stephen sometimes suggests that some  $\pi$ -properties *may* be representational, that is, they may be intentions to represent real complexes in the world, such as, for instance, the complex constituted by a certain rose and the property of being red, whereas others are purely expressive, such as, for instance, the  $\pi$ -property corresponding to a certain feeling of anguish. On the contrary, he also says that “in its strong form GE [Global Expressivism] claims that  $\Pi$ -properties are never representational states” (p. 14). First of all and putting the ambivalence aside, I don’t see how  $\pi$ -properties like the former could fail to be representational, on pain of not getting properly distinguished from  $\pi$ -properties of the likes of the latter.

Let’s then suppose that there are some representational  $\pi$ -properties, which are to be construed as a combination of what is expressed in a proto-referring act and what is expressed in a act of applying a predicate on the basis of a canonical ground (as suggested by Stephen in his book *An Expressivist Theory of Truth*). On the one hand, it is not at all clear to me in what sense the referential component involved in the proto-referring act is to be understood in a way that differs from the representational way that characterizes the truth-conditional approach. On the other

hand, as far as empirical predicates are concerned, Stephen says that the concepts corresponding to them, such as  $P_{\text{red}}$  or  $P_{\text{dog}}$ , are mental states that can be acquired either by possessing the corresponding perceptual concept (triggered by the presence of an external object) or by causally interacting with other possessors of that concept –as it happens in testimony. In both cases, there seems to be a causal relation involved that is typical of truth-conditional accounts of the fixation and transmission of reference –it is not clear which role is assigned to that relation in Stephen’s proposal, though.

Consequently, on the assumption that there are  $\pi$ –properties that are representational, it is not clear whether the proposal constitutes a defence of *global* expressivism: it does not seem to be providing us with a purely expressivist explanation of the meaning of the ubiquitous category of descriptive atomic sentences, such as “This rose is red”.

6. Stephen introduces a difference between an assertion and a proto-assertion.

In his words:

“In performing a proto-assertion, U *advertises* a defensive state. To proto-assert is to utter a sentence -or produce it mentally- with the intention of engaging in a behaviour characteristic of someone who, following certain rules, defends a  $\pi$ –property. From the fact that U performs a proto-assertion it does not follow that U has the state she advertises.” (p. 13)

This concept enables him to account for various *phenomena*, such as insincerity, the meaning of the sentential components of complex sentences –threatened by the problem of embedding- and the semantic paradoxes. However, I have a basic doubt concerning the availability of the concept in the framework of the proposed theory.

As far as I have understood, an assertion is defined in terms of a certain  $\pi$ –property that gets expressed by means of it. For instance, the act of asserting “Peter is thin” is the act of defending the  $\pi$ –property of having the intention to represent Peter as being thin; the act of asserting “Snow is white” is the act of defending the  $\pi$ –property of having the intention to represent the snow as being white; the act of asserting “I have a headache” is the act of defending the  $\pi$ –property of feeling a certain pain, etc. Each assertion is identified by selecting a  $\pi$ –property that must then be instantiated in order for the assertion to be the act of defence that it is. In other

words, an actual assertion cannot be identified by means of a merely possible  $\pi$ -property: given that assertions are defined in terms of  $\pi$ -properties, there must be an actual  $\pi$ -property corresponding to each actual assertion. If each type of assertion is defined in terms of a type of  $\pi$ -property, each instance of the first type (an assertion-token) must be accompanied by an instance of the second type (a  $\pi$ -property-token). But, if this is so, there cannot be cases of assertions in which their corresponding  $\pi$ -properties are not instantiated, i.e., there cannot be *proto*-assertions.

(The argument presented above has a certain similarity with the main thesis of what is usually known as “the token-token theory of mind-brain identity”: since, according to this theory, all mental states must have a physical realization, any instance of a mental state involves an instance of a brain state. I do not mean to suggest, though, that  $\pi$ -properties are brain states, given that Stephen says explicitly that they are mental.)

### III.

Finally, I have some worries related to Stephen’s second main idea, namely, the thesis according to which the asymmetry involved in TM can be accounted for with no appeal to a correspondence relation between language and reality pointed out by truth-conditional theorists. As must be remembered, Stephen claims that in order to make room for the asymmetry it is enough to take into account that (i) the truth-predicate can be taken to be introduced in the language by means of an introduction rule similar to the ones that govern the use of the logical connectives and (ii) this introduction rule licenses an inference from  $\langle S \rangle$  to  $\langle S \rangle$  *is true* (but not the other way around) that provides us with an account of the priority of  $\langle S \rangle$  over  $\langle S \rangle$  *is true* that is captured by TM.

Now, this explanation of the asymmetry rests on an analogy between the truth-predicate and certain logical terms. The analogy in question urges us to assimilate the semantic functioning of the truth-predicate to the semantic functioning of the logical connectives. Since it is taken for granted that the semantic functioning of the latter can be given in terms of rules, the same should be assumed concerning the semantic functioning of the former, namely, the truth-predicate. My first point of concern is that Stephen cannot be proposing a *complete* assimilation of the semantic functioning of the truth-predicate to what a use theory of meaning has to say about

the logical connectives. If that were the case, there would be no difference between expressivism and inferentialism about truth –which does not seem to be one of Stephen’s purposes.

I will then assume that Stephen is taking the analogy to illuminate just *a partial aspect* of the semantic functioning of the truth-predicate. But, now, I do not see any reason to put all the emphasis on introduction rules, while setting elimination rules aside: according to an inferentialist or use theory of meaning, the meaning of a logical connective is given by the set of introduction and elimination rules that governs its use. The same should then be said regarding the truth-predicate: there is no priority of one kind of rules over the other kind. But then the analogy in question should enable us to go both ways: from  $\langle S \rangle$  to  $\langle S \rangle$  *is true* as well as from  $\langle S \rangle$  *is true* to  $\langle S \rangle$ , with the consequence that the desired asymmetry would not be preserved.

Eduardo Barrio has suggested to me that Stephen might be thinking of an asymmetry among uses according to which there are certain uses of the language (simple sentences about the world with no metalinguistic predicates) that are more basic than others (sentences containing metalinguistic predicates such as the truth-predicate). The alleged sense of being basic seems to be related to a chronological priority in the process of acquisition of the language. I think that this might be descriptively adequate, but it is certainly no part of what is established by the proposed analogy with the logical connectives.

Both Ezequiel Zerbudis and Gonzalo Rodríguez-Pereyra have interpreted that the point of the analogy was not so much throwing some light on the meaning of the truth-predicate but on its functioning in TM, namely, towards truthmaking. I agree that this might have been Stephen’s intention but, once again, I think that the analogy does not justify focusing on introduction rules, unless we made it explicit that this is exactly what would allow us to do justice to the asymmetry. In my view, this turns the analogy useless or makes the whole strategy sound circular.