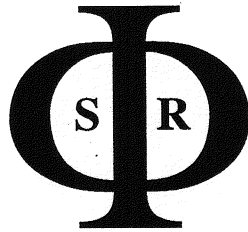


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## THE REALISM IN QUASI-REALISM

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One of the traditional divisions of metaethical debates is between those who advocate a realist source for moral values and obligations and those who deny the existence of moral facts. Although ethical discourse appears to commit one to the existence of moral facts and values, which in turn confer truth or falsity onto ethical judgments, the nature of these facts and values (as well as the moral epistemology surrounding them) is highly problematic. Rather than sharing a consensus about what moral values or moral facts obtain, we appear to exhibit a great deal of ethical diversity and often fail to agree about 'right' and 'wrong.' Yet if one takes such disagreement as symptomatic of the absence of *real* moral facts and values, we seem at a loss not only to explain the realist-sounding elements of moral discourse but also to explain the obligatory force of ethical dictates or the nature of the content of ethical judgments.<sup>1</sup>

Simon Blackburn's quasi-realism attempts to resolve this tension between ethical realism and antirealism by demonstrating how a projectivist account of morality can make sense of the realist-sounding claims in our ordinary moral discourse without realism's ontology.<sup>2</sup> Blackburn believes that a projectivist who adopts quasi-realism can both explicate and justify our ordinary ethical judgments and can establish that there are naturalistically and *internally* real moral obligations and values, without allowing the existence of externally mind-independent, objective obligations and values. Yet the fundamental tension in Blackburn's attempt to combine the subjective source of morality provided by projectivism with the objective 'feel' of a "properly working morality" ultimately makes quasi-realism appear either self-contradictory or thoroughly realist.<sup>3</sup> As Crispin Wright puts it:

Either his [Blackburn's] program fails—in which case he does not, after all, explain how the projectivism that inspires it can satisfactorily account for the linguistic practices in question—or it succeeds, in which case it makes good all the things the projectivist started out wanting to deny: that the discourse in question is genuinely assertoric, aimed at truth, and so on.<sup>4</sup>

Any view on which Blackburn's projectivism succeeds must allow that moral discourse is assertoric and aimed at truth. Yet in accounting for the assertoric force and the notion of truth (and falsity) inherent in the realist-seeming elements of our ethical linguistic practices, the quasi-realist falls

victim to the 'objectivist illusion' against which Blackburn warns: rather than making the realist's ontological commitments superfluous the quasi-realist actually demonstrates the need for mind-independent properties in moral judgments.

While many of the concerns or claims of ethics seem to assert a realist ontology, Blackburn believes that "the thoughts and practices supposedly definitive of realism" can be mimicked by an anti-realist.<sup>5</sup> The project of the quasi-realist is, in essence, to remove the ontological baggage of moral discourse by utilizing a non-descriptivist projective morality to explain and justify our actual moral practices using words like 'truth', 'fact', and 'objectivity'. In order to succeed, then, quasi-realism must accomplish two things: first, since ethical discourse prescribes behavior and pronounces judgments of approbation or blame, it must explain our ethical discourse and the role it plays in our lives without allowing that ethical theory describes any genuine aspect of reality, and second, if it is to be true to our use of ethical language it must also explain ethical discourse without admitting relativistic moral commitments.<sup>6</sup>

The central element of the quasi-realist's doctrine is that morality is "spread on the world:" it is a function of human emotional or attitudinal responses that are projected onto a value-neutral world. However, the rejection of a realist ontology does not lead Blackburn's projectivist to hold moral truth to be mind-dependent.<sup>7</sup> Quasi-realism provides projectivism with a distinction between internal and external readings of moral statements that refuses to allow any external reading of ethical judgments. Only when moral statements occur within the ordinary practice of moral discourse (the 'internal' sphere) may they be accepted as true or false; otherwise, moral statements have no role in describing how the world is since ethical properties are not literally *made* by our sensibilities.<sup>8</sup> A quasi-realist allows discussion on external questions of metaphysical dependency only on the basis of "a naturalism that places the activities of ethics in the realm of adjusting, improving, weighing, and rejecting different sentiments or attitudes."<sup>9</sup> Quasi-realism allows that moral truth is *internally* mind-independent (insofar as it depends on natural facts) yet denies that moral statements express any external ontological commitments. In other words, "quasi-realism is trying to earn our right to talk of moral truth, while recognizing fully the subjective sources of our judgments, inside our own attitudes, needs, desires, and natures."<sup>10</sup>

While denying that moral properties ontologically depend on sensibility (since they are in no sense real), Blackburn's brand of projectivism finds the

