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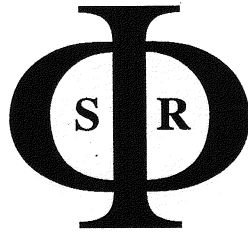
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THE REALISM IN QUASI-REALISM

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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.[1]

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.[2] 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.[3] 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.[4]

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.[5] 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.[6]

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.[7] 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.[8] 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."[9] 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."[10]

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

ground of moral judgments to be entirely subjective. For Blackburn, "to moralize at all involves commitment to some way of using an input of information to determine an output of reaction,"[11] but since not all sensibilities are equal "finding better descriptions of admirable input/output functions is the task of moral philosophy."[12] Part of what Blackburn's projectivist is thus committed to is logical consistency in moral judgments: given the same input of natural facts a moral agent *should* consistently yield the same reactive output. This not only implies that moral outlooks can be improved, it, in fact, makes it *imperative* that the moral agent attempt to find better, more consistent moral descriptions. However, logical consistency is not all that Blackburn claims we are after in attempting to improve our moral outlook. He ultimately wishes to claim that quasi-realists have as much right as realists to think of moral judgments as true or false and to resist the relativistic claim that one cannot judge the moral 'opinion' of another.[13] Hence, an 'improved set of attitudes' is, for Blackburn, not merely a logically consistent set of attitudes but one that can maintain, for example, that the practice of human sacrifice is wrong (period). Yet in order to make such claims Blackburn must rely on a notion of constructed truth that allows for one, and only one, set of 'best possible moral attitudes.' But such a claim is inimical to antirealism.

Since quasi-realism claims to account for the realist-sounding elements of ordinary moral talk, an essential element of quasi-realism is that truth can be constructed, or more appropriately, that moral judgments and evaluations do in fact have a truth content. Once we construct moral truths, we have every right, says Blackburn, to claim that moral judgments are true or false, without thereby committing ourselves to a realist ontology.[14] In constructing truth, Blackburn maintains that to moralize is not to utter judgments but rather is to express commitments. So "when we are committed to a notion of moralizing well or badly," says Blackburn, "we need to work out the implications of commitments," and since we have a need to express what is involved in these commitments, they will be capable of being improved through the process of working out their implications.[15] Our commitment to moralize well necessitates that we work out the implications of our evaluative statements, and if we can establish a single perspective on which no improvement can be made, we can then link this to the idea of knowledge. There are thus *normative* constraints involved in constructing truth: for example, our moral attitudes should be consistent. Constraints such as these are what provide us with the right to speak of improved sets of attitudes, but more importantly, these normative principles or constraints on moral

attitudes are what Blackburn utilizes to disperse the threat of relativism. In responding to this threat Blackburn writes:

> Just as the senses constrain what we can believe about the empirical world, so our natures and desires, needs and pleasures, constrain much of what we can admire and commend, tolerate and work for. There are not so many livable, unfragmented, developed, consistent, and coherent systems of attitudes.[16]

Certain constraints then are supposedly built in to the nature of moral thought. For Blackburn there are natural limits to what we can consider as morally good or bad, right or wrong, and so insofar as we function as moral agents, we should seek to improve the attitudes we project onto the world. Thus, according to Blackburn, there is one, and only one, 'best possible set of attitudes', and truth emerges from this set.[17] The problem, however, is limiting such a set to only one, for given an antirealist orientation to the problem of determining truth, it is far from clear that there can be only one best possible set. Indeterminacy concerning the truth or falsity of moral judgments must be overcome if the quasi-realist's project is to succeed.

Blackburn attempts to solve this problem by applying practical heuristic constraints to a Humean model of evaluative judgment. In order to illustrate the concept of a 'best possible set of attitudes' Blackburn presents the image "of a tree where the trunk represents a core of attitude which we regard as beyond discussion...[and where] the branching represents such divergence of opinion as is blameless on both sides."[18] The opinions that reside in the trunk of this 'tree of attitudes' are taken as truth, albeit constructed, subjective, mind-dependent truth. In principle, however, the branches that stem from the trunk are, in and of themselves, unobjectionable, and this unobjectionability is precisely why indeterminacy arises. Although the divergence of opinion along the various branches is *'blameless on both sides'*, beyond this 'blamelessness in principle' the actual practice of moral dispute requires that we pragmatically "proceed *as though* there is a right answer [italics added]."[19] Put another way, "we are constrained to argue and practise as though the truth is single, and this constraint," says Blackburn, "is defensible in spite of the apparent possibility of the tree-structure."[20] Blackburn allows that *pragmatically* we must act 'as if' there is a right and wrong answer to moral questions, and presumably, the 'right' answer will lie on the trunk (or at least nearer the trunk).

An obvious question at the point is: what constitutes this core of opinion incapable of improvement? The answer for Blackburn seems to be whatever is required for human flourishing. Moral sentiments are not given for the projectivist but rather come from social function.[21] Thus, moral thought is

purposeful and grounded in the features of human life which we value. Yet while moral thought is intended to enhance the goal or purpose of human flourishing, it is not thereby to lose its force apart from human consciousness. We are not to lose our moral resolve simply because we discover that ethics has a subjective source or is aimed only at *human* flourishing.[22] For Blackburn, respecting the right things should allow us to adjust to the fact that the source of morality lies in subjective reactions rather than objective values. Yet in order to meaningfully demarcate the 'right' from the 'wrong' with respect to the objects we *ought* to hold in esteem, Blackburn relies on *values* such as social purposes or, more generally, human flourishing; so even though Blackburn denies an essential connection between projectivism and consequentialism, he does say it is not a mistake to expect a projective theory will consort with a consequentialist first-order view. And in appealing to human flourishing, Blackburn does appear to adopt a teleological stance.

This appeal to the telos of human flourishing is the vital link in Blackburn's attempt to disassociate the advantages of moral realism from its 'unpleasant' ontological commitments. Ethical properties and judgments may be projected onto a value-neutral world and hence be grounded merely in our own attitudes, needs, desires, and natures, and assuming moral thought has the goal of human flourishing, Blackburn's account of the construction of moral truth on the basis of a 'best set of attitudes' is at least *prima facie* plausible. Nevertheless, rather than discharging the threat of moral relativism, this appeal to human flourishing actually leads back to relativism and away from an adequate explanation of our ordinary moral discourse.

Blackburn writes that "the features of human life which we value, and which would be drawn into any remotely plausible sketch of human flourishing, very probably represent a bundle of ultimately incommensurable goods, amongst which there is no systematic way of making choices."[23] Yet in *Spreading the Word* he claims that there is one 'best possible set of attitudes' and that conflict among attitudes involves only those attitudes still capable of improvement. So we have a set of incommensurable goods among which we cannot make systematic choices, but at the same time there is only one 'best possible set of attitudes'. Of course, it may be possible to argue that incommensurability need not entail that there are in fact more than one set of attitudes that could serve as the core of opinion that is beyond the pale of discussion. However, for such an argument to help Blackburn's case, it must also be capable of demonstrating that there could be no incommen-

surability among the various branches of his 'tree of attitudes.' The adoption of a consequentialist attitude cannot eliminate the problem of incommensurability unless Blackburn can establish there is in fact only one end or system of ends worthy of governing all our moral evaluations. However, it seems unlikely that we could satisfactorily establish that our needs, natures, and desires produce only one best possible teleology of ethical commitments.[24] Certainly, the burden of proof lies with the quasi-realist to demonstrate that there is one, and only one, ethical telos that can govern all moral evaluations.

The picture of quasi-realism that emerges then is something like the following. Although there are no moral values or obligations that exist in the world, human beings are capable of creating moral systems by projecting attitudes of approval or disapproval onto this value-neutral world. Although the origin of these values is subjective, the resulting moral judgments hold for any moral agent. Furthermore, such judgments retain the realist character of ordinary moral language because what lies behind them is the social purpose of moralizing; consequently, it is possible to determine a best set of evaluative attitudes to promote the end(s) of morality. The guiding force behind this assessment of evaluative or moral commitments is one of social purpose or human flourishing.

Nevertheless, by aligning himself with consequentialism, Blackburn reveals an inconsistency in his position: if he abandons the notion that values are real from a subjectivist standpoint, he will have a hard time justifying the idea of one 'best possible set of moral attitudes', but if he maintains the objective 'feel' of moral values from a consequentialist perspective, it is unclear that he can also maintain *one* 'best set of attitudes' when confronted by incommensurable goods. It seems, then, that for quasi-realism to succeed in explaining the objectivity and truth of moral judgments it must adopt a realist stance toward either values or goods.

Aside from the issue of whether the quasi-realist can or should align herself with a first-order consequentialism, a problem still remains: overcoming the tendency toward an 'objectivist illusion' inherent in quasi-realism. The two main points of quasi-realism are that values are merely human dispositions projected onto a value-neutral world and that morality can nonetheless remain true to its objective grammar despite this projective origin. In order to wed these two seemingly incompatible theses, Blackburn must blur the objective/projective distinction, and in fact, his quasi-realist project is intended to demonstrate how we can 'objectify' our sentiments. In so objectifying them, Blackburn maintains, "we commit no mistake but merely adopt a *needed intellectual orientation* toward them [italics added]."[25]

One of Blackburn's central claims is that although evaluations of dispositions are themselves 'subjective', "there is no circularity in using our own evaluations to enable us to assess, refine, [and] improve upon, our own evaluations."[26] He goes on to maintain that inferior systems of evaluations are in fact *wrong* insofar as they do not express the most coherent or consistent set of evaluations necessitated by our commitments and ought to be changed for the better. Thus, on the basis of an *assumed* commitment to moralizing well Blackburn objectifies our projections and maintains that they can be, at the very least, better and worse: the superior set of projections lies along the trunk of the 'attitudinal tree' and are incapable of being improved; the inferior sets lie along the branches and are improvable. Blackburn clearly wishes to avoid the claim that we must appeal to moral reality and, hence, wishes to avoid falling into an "objectivist illusion," namely, "think[ing] that mentioning a moral reality, and flattering our understandings of it, affords some explanation of our practices in evaluations and judgment."[27] Yet he is, at best, on the brink of falling into just such an illusion.

Although the trunk of Blackburn's tree is a core of attitudes that we regard as beyond discussion and although the divergence of opinion represented by the branches is theoretically blameless, the quasi-realist maintains that in practice not only must we proceed *as if* there is a right answer but often there *will be* a right answer.[28] With this last claim, it is clear exactly what Blackburn is doing and exactly what his problem is: quasi-realism succeeds only if grounded in an 'objectivist illusion.' Blackburn maintains that a necessary condition of an effective ethical system is that we proceed *as if* moral judgments were cognitive and *as if* there is an objective source of morality. However, Blackburn does not stop at this '*as if*' claim but rather proceeds in effect to give moral judgments actual cognitive status and to 'hypostatize' this source of morality. The problem for quasi-realism is that there is no objective source of morality; hence, there are numerous commitments we can make that may require certain evaluative judgments. In order to get the kind of 'subjective objectivity' quasi-realism requires, there must be only one commitment or set of commitments that we human beings express in morality. If we have multiple commitments, the idea of a single 'best set of attitudes' will disintegrate, for different commitments will lead to different sets of attitudes, which may be equally improved and refined yet remain distinct.

This fundamental tension in quasi-realism results from the teleological undercurrent in the theory. Morality is projected, and thus it is dependent

upon human commitments, and for these commitments to produce the apparently realistic elements of ordinary moral talk they must include, at the very least, commitments to the social purpose of moralizing and logical coherence and consistency. Although he does not tie morality to any one individual's dispositional projections, he must tie them to human projections in general, but in doing so Blackburn cannot establish that the purpose, the telos of morality, is singular. And this brings us back to the problem of what constitutes the 'right' and 'wrong' objects of our respect. In order to determine what we 'ought' to respect, Blackburn must appeal to human flourishing, which governs the appropriate objects of our respect.[29] However, insofar as he hypostatizes this telos to account for the objective grammar of morality, Blackburn falls into the same objectivist illusion his quasi-realism is intended to overcome.[30]

Notes

[1] For example, if there are no genuine values or if morality is only a matter of social constructs, why should I take seriously the moral prohibition against, say, stealing from my neighbor or cheating the elderly out of their life savings?

[2] See Chapter 6, "Evaluations, Projections, and Quasi-Realism" in Simon Blackburn, *Spreading the Word* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984); also see "Errors and the Phenomenology of Value" in T. Honderich, ed., *Morality and Objectivity* (Boston: Routledge, 1985), pp. 1-22; "Rule Following and Moral Realism" in C. Leich and S. Holtzman, eds., *Wittgenstein: To Follow a Rule* (Boston: Routledge, 1985), pp. 163-187; and *Essays in Quasi-Realism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

[3] For others who argue this same point in varying ways see Crawford L. Elder, "Antirealism and Realist Claims of Invariance," *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* XXIX (1991), pp. 1-19, and Christine Tappolet, "Le programme quasi-réaliste et le réalisme moral," *Studia Philosophica* 51 (1992), pp. 241-254.

[4] Crispin Wright, "Realism Antirealism, Irrealism, Quasi-Realism," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* XII (1988) 35.

[5] As Blackburn explains, a quasi-realist is "someone who 'starting from an antirealist position finds himself progressively able to mimic the thoughts and practices supposedly definitive of realism'" (*Essays in Quasi-Realism*, 4).

[6] Blackburn, *Quasi-Realism*, p. 7.

[7] Blackburn, *Quasi-Realism*, p. 173.

[8] Blackburn, *Quasi-Realism*, pp. 172-73.

[9] Blackburn, *Quasi-Realism*, pp. 173-74.

[10] Blackburn, *Word*, p. 197.

[11] Blackburn, "Rule Following," p. 175.

[12] Blackburn, *Word*, pp. 192-93.

[13] Blackburn, "Rule Following," p. 185; also, *Word*, p. 199.

[14] Blackburn, *Word*, p. 196.

[15] Blackburn, "Rule Following," p. 178.

[16] Blackburn, *Word*, p. 197.

[17] See Blackburn, *Word*, pp. 197-210.

[18] Blackburn, "Rule Following," pp. 177.

[19] Blackburn, "Rule Following," p. 177.

[20] Blackburn, *Word*, p. 201.

[21] See Blackburn, "Errors," p. 19.

[22] In *Spreading the Word* Blackburn writes:
"the problem is not with a subjective source for value in itself, but with people's inability to come to terms with it, and their consequent need for a picture in which values imprint themselves on a pure passive, receptive witness, who has not responsibility in the matter" (198).
Again, in "Errors and the Phenomenology of Value" Blackburn claims:
"it is not the [subjectivist] explanation of the practice per se which has the skeptical consequence. It is only the effect of the explanation on sensibilities which have been brought up to respect only particular kinds of thing. So when people fear that projectivism carries with it a loss of status to morality, their fear ought to be groundless, and will only appear if a defective sensibility leads them to respect the wrong things [italics added]" (10).

[23] Blackburn, "Errors," p. 20.

[24] The best attempt at working out such a teleology is certainly utilitarianism, but regardless of utilitarianism's strengths, it has failed to establish that 'happiness', in whatever form, is the moral telos.

[25] Blackburn, "Rule Following," p. 185.

[26] Blackburn, "Rule Following," p. 176.

[27] Blackburn, "Rule Following," p. 186.

[28] Blackburn, *Word*, p. 201; also, "Rule Following," p. 177.

[29] Blackburn, "Errors," p. 20.

[30] I would like to thank Russ Shafer-Landau and Hugh Chandler for their comments on previous versions of this paper.