

**PHIL 470: Seminar: Metaphysics & Epistemology
Truth and Reality**

Handout (25)

Simon Blackburn: How to Be an Ethical Anti-Realist

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§ Blackburn's theory: Projectivism

[Summary]

- 1. There is no external moral fact. There are no objective ethical properties in actions or states of affairs.**
- 2. When we give an ethical judgment, when we express an ethical proposition, we are not *describing* anything external to, and independent of, our very judgment.**
- 3. The ethical proposition gets its identity as a focus for practical thought, as people communicate their certainties, insinuations and doubts about what to value. There is no "truth-condition" for any ethical statement.**
- 4. What we express is merely our own states of mind, how we value things.**
- 5. But we do not *describe* our states of mind; we simply *voice* them.** (For example, it is not that we state, "I judge murder to be wrong." It is rather that 'Murder is wrong' *expresses* my attitude on murder.)
- 6. Ethical phenomenon is essentially *people valuing things*. For a subject *S* to think that *X* is good, is for *S* to value it.**
- 7. This evaluative state of mind is nonetheless a "natural" state, and a naturally describable state. It can be explained in natural terms.**
- 8. Ethics remains essentially practical, a matter of attitude, disposition and emotion.**
- 9. Ethics is not strictly about the way the world is; it is about the way we view the world and the way we value things in the world.**
- 10. For every fact, there is a question about what to do about it. Ethics is just a discussion of what to do about things.**

Notes:

1. 'Projectivism' = 'expressivism' = 'quasi-realism' = 'practical functionalism'
 ___ It is a form of non-cognitivism and has commonly been interpreted as a form of anti-realism.

2. Realism/Anti-realism in ethics
 ___ A realist will emphasize that the way we think of moral issues is independent of our own opinions. It is an objective matter whether something is good, or a certain act moral.
 ___ An anti-realist will emphasize the contingent and variable patterns of attitude that lead different people to respect different rights and duties and suggest that rather than reflecting on an ethical reality, it is these responses that create it.

3. Realism / Cognitivism
 ___ A realist about X holds that discourse about X is *apt* for truth or falsity. Cognitivism is the view that moral judgments have a truth value – are either true or false. A cognitivist claims that beliefs are at the foundation of morality. We have beliefs about what is good, beliefs about what is worth valuing and beliefs about what are good reasons for acting, and these beliefs determine our attitudes, desires and feelings. Beliefs are things that are true or false.

Anti-realism / Non-cognitivism

___ . In general, non-cognitivism can be described as the view that moral judgments have no truth-value – they are neither true nor false. For a non-cognitivist, ethical statements about X do not function in a genuinely descriptive way, but rather some other linguistic function. Ethical statements are expressive or imperative (giving commands), rather than descriptive of facts. The attitudes, feelings and desires we have are fundamental in morality; our morality and the value we give to particular actions reflect the concerns we have.

4. Ethical naturalism: external naturalism vs. internal naturalism
 ___ The external naturalist thinks that “once we understand the nature of reality (metaphysics) and the nature of human perception in understanding the reality (epistemology), ethics follows logically from the relation of man’s place in reality’s order. The principle of morality can be derived from objective reasoning, i.e., from the observation and explanation of ‘facts’ about the natural world and humankind’s place in it. Thus moral behavior is simply rational choice.” – William Merriman
 ___ The internal naturalist thinks that we can still understand ethics in naturalistic terms, but where we would locate these natural properties are not the outside world, but our own states of mind. Given that we humans are part of nature, our desires, preferences, dislikes, emotions, etc., should all be seen as ‘natural’. To understand ethics, we need to understand humans instead of “the world.”

* **Simon Blackburn is clearly**

- (i) a projectivist;
- (ii) a non-cognitivist;
- (iii) an ethical anti-realist; and
- (iv) an internal naturalist.

§ Examples of A Projectivist Synthesis of Ethical Propositions

1. Being that X is good or right → roughly having an appropriate satisfactory valuation of X.
2. Wondering whether X is good or right → wondering what to do /what to admire or value.
3. Denying that X is good or right → rejecting a favorable attitude to X.
4. Being certain that X is good or right → having a settled attitude (rejecting the possibility that improvement could result in change)
5. Knowing that X is good or right → knowing to choose X or admire X, etc.

§ Projectivism but NOT Relativism

There is one last charge of the would-be realist. This claims that projectivism must lead to relativism. ‘Truth’ must be relative to whatever set of attitudes is grounding our ethical stance; since these may vary from place to place and time to time, truth must be relative. Yet, surely this is a mistake. The verdict is ‘relative’, having no truth outside the local system of presences that causes it. The image is plain: a projectivist may inhabit a particular ethical boat, but he must know of the actual or potential existence of others; where, then, is the absolute truth?

The answer is that it is not anywhere that can be visible from this sideways, theoretical perspective. It is not that this perspective is illegitimate, but that it is not the one adapted for finding ethical truth.

* Two claims of ethical relativism:

- (1) **Richard Rorty – Anything can be made to look good or bad by being *redescribed*.**
- (2) **Ronald Dworkin – We only have views *within* ethics; we do not have a view *about* ethics. All the relevant questions are internal, first-order moral questions.**

* Blackburn’s critique:

___ There is no way of escaping from ethics. Faced with different vocabularies and voices, we compare theirs with ours. If they seem to have got something right which we have not, we learn from them. If we have something right that they have not, we may be able to teach them. If their attitudes are foul and frightful, we may have to be at war with them.

___ Ethical truths as it is conceived by us, as we debate, cannot be a truth about where we will end up or would end up after certain empirical procedures. Rather, we conceive of it as truth about where we *ought* to end up, or ... where we would end up if we were *good*.

___ What we hope to show, as we preserve with analyses of social phenomena, deploying analogies, turning the values involved around in our minds, is that there is nothing else for *good, decent* people to think. → **virtue ethics**

___ For quasi-realism, an ethics is the propositional reflection of the dispositions and attitudes, policies and stances, of people. The virtue of a system of ethics are simply the virtues of the people who have it.

___ **The last word is the first word: We stay with the original moral claim, and deliberate about it as best we can.**

Good, decent people:



This is good

§ Examples of Different Positions:

- (1) Slavery is a bad system.
- (2) Our opinion is this: slavery is a bad system. [*Projectivism*]
- (3) Slavery is a bad system. That is *just* our opinion. [*Relativism*]
- (4) Slavery is a bad system. That is an opinion reflecting an independent order of reason. [*Absolutism*]

Blackburn: (1) = (2); (3) is just a concession, while with (4), we have no conception of the nature of this “independent” order.

§ Objectivity

___ **Objectivity is a moral virtue, and one to be striven and respected.**

We are social animals, with certain biological needs. We have to coordinate our efforts; we have to establish systems of property and promise-keeping and sometimes even government. We can take comfort in reflecting that there are not so many admirable, coherent, mature, livable ethical systems on offer.

There is objectivity in the sense of fairness and impartiality, the virtue above all law courts and public administration. And there is objectivity of recognizing that it is not our own opinions that ground the rightness and wrongness of things. Cruelty is not bad because I think it is bad, but because it exhibits the intention to cause pain.

What we need to do is to make our responses mature, imaginative, cultured, sympathetic, and coherent, and we can accept what help we can from people who have thought more deeply about human life.

Persons on different mountains need not perturb us, unless they can show that they are where we ought to be. But to show that they must do some ethics, and we in turn will be using our values as we respond to theirs. **We stand on our feet, and our feet are human feet. This is how it is, and how it must be.**

§ Conclusion: How to do Ethics (*a la* Projectivism)?

1. **One might be tempted to think that if there is a real property identity, anyone might be tempted to think that if there is a real property identity, anyone missing it must be making an objective, metaphysical error. But this is not so, since all it takes to miss it is a defective ethical sensibility.**
2. **Ethics is about our attitudes, our deliberation and our action: its function is to mediate the move from features of a situation to a reaction, which in the appropriate circumstances will mean choice.**
3. **It is because our responses that we say that cruelty is wrong, but it is not because of our responses, scrutinized and collective or otherwise, that cruelty is wrong.** (It is tempting to think: on this metaphysics the world contains nothing but us and our responses, so the fact that cruelty is bad *must* be created by our responses. What else is there for it to be dependent upon? The prejudice is to treat the moral fact as a natural one, capable of being constituted, made, or unmade, by sensibilities.)
4. **The only things in this world are the attitudes of people, and those, of course, are trivially and harmlessly mind-dependent. It matters to us that people have some attitudes and not others, and we educate them and put pressures on them in the hope that they will.**
5. **In saying these things I am, of course, voicing some sentiments of my own ethical stances, but, as I promised, it is only by doing this that ethical truth is found.**
6. **This is the world seen from the viewpoint that sees different and conflicting moral systems – but inevitably sees no truth in just one of them. To ‘see’ the truth that wanton cruelty is wrong demands moralizing, stepping back into**

the boat, or putting back the lens of a sensibility. But once that is done, there is nothing relativistic left to say.