# Simon Blackburn:
## *Ruling Passions*

## Chapter 4
## The Ethical Proposition: What It Is Not

## § Dionysus and Apollo

|            | Dionysus |            | Apollo |
| Emotions   | Desires  | Attitudes  | Cognition |
|------------|----------|------------|-----------------|
| Upsets     | Impulses | Stances    | Representations |
| Passions   | Whims    | Dispositions | Knowledge    |
| Arousals   | Lusts    | Sentiments | Truth           |
| Excitement | Urges    | Postures   | Reasons         |

*Q*: **Is ethics more on the side of Apollo, as traditionally viewed by most philosophers, or more on the side of Dionysus, as Blackburn is arguing here?**

## § Cognitivism
**\_\_\_ The view that ethics is about analyzing the content of an ethical belief, or giving the truth conditions of an ethical proposition.**

[Cognitivism]:
\_\_\_\_ 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 concerns, i.e., determine our attitudes, desires and feelings. But beliefs are things that are true or false. Hence, in general, cognitivism is the view that moral judgments have a truth value – are true or false.

[Non-Cognitivism]:
____ 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 – our desires, attitudes and emotional states. Accordingly, non-cognitivists believe that moral judgments serve a very different function from judgments which make statements about the world. *In making a moral judgment, we are not describing the world; rather, we are giving expression to our feelings, attitudes and desires.* As such, non-cognitivists do not believe that moral judgments [e.g. 'Abortion is wrong'] make statements that can be either true or false [e.g. Monday is a national holiday]. Rather, when people make such judgments, they are giving expression to their attitudes or feelings about actions -- they are either approving or disapproving. *So, in general, non-cognitivism can be described as the view that moral judgments have no truth value – they are neither true nor false.*

[Ethical Naturalism]:
____ The view that moral properties can be defined over a set of naturalistic properties; properties that can be investigated in natural sciences.

**\* Moore's "Open Question Argument" against ethical naturalism:**

**\_\_\_ It is always an open question, something that can be discussed and denied, whether some given feature of things is the thing that determines whether they are good. For any proposed reduction of the ethical proposition, there are always a different context in which we would question the given definition or paraphrase. We can always doubt the given definition even if we understand perfectly what it means.**

**\_\_\_ Ethical dispute is not a mere verbal dispute; it can never be settled by pointing purely to meaning or semantics of ethical terms.**

**Note:**

G. E. Moore's open question argument:

\_\_\_ G. E. Moore's contention that any effort to define the good must fail, since it always remains possible to ask significantly whether or not the proposed definiens is actually good.

\_\_\_ Moore claimed that for any proposed naturalistic property, N, we may know that $X$ is N and yet whether $X$ is good will still be an open question. That is, even though it is clear that $X$ is N, we may still sensibly ask "But is $X$ good?" Moore argues that if "$X$ is good" really did just mean "$X$ is N," then it would not be sensible to ask of something that is N "Is it good?" For example, it is not sensible to ask "Is a bachelor an unmarried man?" The latter is *not* an open question.

\_\_\_ 'Good' is a simple (foundational), non-natural and indefinable property. 'Good' simply cannot be defined in

terms of natural properties. To do so is to commit "the naturalistic fallacy."

[from various sources]


**Blackburn:**
**___ Therefore, we cannot simply *analyze* the content of the ethical proposition.**


**\*\*\* Three Prominent Contemporary Approaches to Ethical Propositions:**

## § I. McDowell's Theory

1. **There is no sharp or interesting distinction between facts and values, so that there is no need to find anything special about the moral proposition. The dichotomy between reason and passion is false.**
2. **There is realism and truth attached to ethics, but the ethical properties are not observable from the outside the standpoint of those with the ethical practices in question.**
3. **Ethics is observable from within the practices, "forms of life," or "whirls of organism' that constitute moral, logical, or mathematical practices.**
4. **Thus, to understand a concept is simply to master a rule of application, a rule determining to which things it is correct to apply it, to which things it is incorrect. And, to master the latter is to be involved in a form of life.**

**5. Within this form of life, we can *know* the meaning or usage of a given ethical proposition. ⇒ cognitivism.**

**6. In conclusion, our moral voices are essentially voices from within shared practices.**

*Q*: What does "cool" signify to your group? What does "cool" signify to your parents or grandparents' group?

*Q*: What does being a "good" student stand for to your group? What does being a "bad" student stand for to your peer?

**\* Blackburn's Critique:**

      **(1)  People sharing the same form of life do not always agree on the usage of a term.**

      **(2)  It is not a philosophical truth that the majority determine what is right.**

      **(3)  ['fat↓'] – a concept in transition: Do we have a distinctive concept here and a distinctive proposition, capable of truth and falsity?**

      **(4)  It is wrong to assume that there is a property which has a cognitive status, something that is perceptible at all.**

**E.g. the 'cute' and the 'lewd'**
**___ *Q*: What is his point with these examples?**

## § II.  Response-Dependent Accounts  or Philosophical Analysis Method

1. In doing ethics, we should analyze what is thought: a way of revealing what the words involved "really" mean.
2. We should analyze ethical concepts in 'response-dependent' terms, that is in terms of *actual* human responses: attitudes, desires, etc.
3. The moral proposition becomes a proposition about our own motivational responses or attitudes to the world.
4. e.g. $X$ is good/right/justifiable $\equiv$ $X$ tends to elicit [reaction R] from [person $P$] under [circumstance $C$]
5. This equivalence relation gives the truth conditions for a given ethical proposition.
6. Therefore, we can *know* the truth conditions for a given ethical proposition through empirical studies of people's responses. $\Rightarrow$ cognitivism.

* Blackburn's Critique:

### Two Disasters:

| Scylla | Charybdis |
|---|---|
| We falsify the kind of judgment made by saying '$X$ is good', representing it as an empirical, sociological, remark. | We get it right, but at the cost of making the same kind of judgment at some place within the right hand side, and thereby forfeiting the claim to advance. |

| We make a naturalistic or empirical approach in which we depict actual people's responses. | We turn the right-hand side into an ethical judgment itself. |
|---|---|
| *e.g.* $X$ is such as to elicit desires from us as we actually are. | *e.g.* $X$ is such as to elicit desires from good people. |

(1)  If we define '$X$ is good' as '$X$ is such as to elicit approval from good people under the ideal circumstances,' then the definition is trivial.

(2)  Even if we do have definitions of this sort, this does not help us to better understand the nature of ethical judgment. That is to say, the equation gives us a piece of ethics, but tell us nothing about what it is to think in ethical terms.

(3)  When I make an ethical assertion, the assertion is not that everyone *will* fall in with our judgment, but that everyone *ought* to agree with it. In other words, the logical space I enter when I make my verdict is not that of an empirical hypothesis about the reactions of some identifiable group of people.

(4)  Ultimately, this view conflates speaking from within a moral perspective, and describing truth about those who speak from within it.

## § III. Cornell Realism

1. We don't have to say what moral terms mean to give a satisfying picture of ethics. It is enough to find the properties these moral terms "refer to."
2. We can identify the 'truth-makers' for our ethical thoughts, identifying what properties of things make them true, rather as the scientist identifies the property of stuff that identifies water or gold. ⇒ cognitivism
3. Ethical predicates refer to real natural properties of things. ⇒ naturalism

* Blackburn's Critique:
   (1) In the 'fat↓' example, we have shown that no objective property is found; we have shown that no special cognition is involved.
   (2) It is a mistake to think that there is something objective at stake in ethical disputes.

* Blackburn's Argument:
   1. Beliefs do not normally explain actions: it takes in additional a desire or concern, a caring for whatever the desire describes.
   2. In the absence of care or concern, agents would not even take actions.
   3. Therefore, without this mental state of care, we cannot explain the agent's behavior.

**4. Therefore, ethics is about people's practical, dynamic state: a concern or stance or attitude involved in translating belief into action.**

**[Conclusion]**

**We do not see that ethical disputes are about naturalistic properties in the external world. Ethical disputes are better understood by expressivism: they are disputes over people's expressed valuative judgments.**