

Simon Blackburn:  
*Ruling Passions*

Chapter 9  
Relativism, Subjectivism, Knowledge

**Q:** Is this is what ethics comes to, then can't it be invented in different ways? How could any one way be known to be the right one?

§ Relativism

\_\_\_ The last word in moral discussion is the same as the last word in etiquette, which is only: this is how *we* do it.

\* Two Forms of Relativism

[A] Relativism *within* ethics – relativism as first-order ethic

[A-1] Confinement:

\_\_\_ While I abide by my principle, I have no opinion about what *you* should do; white it is a matter of principle for me to do *x*, it does not matter to me whether *you* do so.

\* “In face, the most central and deeply felt practical attitudes of many people frequently consist in devotion to prohibitions and ritual duties that belong exclusively to one tribe, nation, religion, or other social group. People typically bother more with obedience to dietary laws, or

such things as prescribed dress or sexual etiquette, than they do with the wider human good, or with universal duties of justice or benevolence.”

**Q:** What is the justification for the sense of loyalty in most sorority or fraternity groups?

**Q:** Can we be so apathetic about others’ immoral behavior while maintaining our own moral status?

**Blackburn:**

\_\_\_ Of course, people are often egoistic and limited in their practical concerns, but the combination of limiting one’s own concerns to the immediate circle, and the presenting the limitation as a matter of *principle*, and therefore requiring respect by those outside the circle, is difficult to admire.

**[A-2] Toleration towards Others:**

\_\_\_ First, one must understand the alien culture or form of life.

\_\_\_ Second, one must reflect whether it is not a proper, admirable, adaptation to whatever circumstances the people find themselves in.

\_\_\_ Third, one should replace colonial interference or outright indignation with benign toleration.

**Blackburn’s Critique:**

\_\_\_ It is possible that one should understand an alien culture’s attitudes and way of life, yet find oneself invoking moral indignation and outrage against them. This is

typically so when, deep in a culture, lie norms that lead to the mistreatment of its own minorities, or its women, its children, its infirm, or its old people, or those of the wrong kind of birth or class.

**Sometimes we admire the others, sometimes merely tolerate them, but sometimes it may be right to interfere.**

The attitude of toleration is just that: an attitude. It is not all that admirable when the others do not deserve it. Rules of etiquette are indeed *intra*-social. But a moral claim can in principle regulate our attitude to outsiders who do not share it.

## **[B] Relativism *about* Ethics**

### **[B-1] Richard Rorty**

**— Anything can be made to look good or bad by being *redescribed*.**

Rorty is an ironist: he takes his philosophical stance to make attractive, a figure who faces up to the contingency of his or her own most central beliefs and desires – someone sufficiently historicist and nominalist to have abandoned the idea that those central beliefs and desires refer back to something beyond the reach of time and chance.

Ironists are ‘meta-stable’: never quite able to take themselves seriously, because always aware that the terms in which they describe themselves are subject to change,

always aware of the contingency and fragility of their final vocabularies and thus of themselves.

### **Blackburn's Critique:**

- 1. Between the unreflective and inflexible moralists and the ironists, what we want is a *mean*. You do not want to be a bigot, but neither do you want to be a weightless aesthete, to whom all real commitment is a subject of joke or parody.**
  
- 2. You need to be able to judge when the time for pastiche and irony is past, when the chips are done and people are counted and things need saying.**
  
- 3. Some judge it too quickly, and others too slowly, but it lies somewhere. Knowing where it lies may take the Aristotelian qualities of maturity and judgment: it is itself a piece of moral knowledge.**
  
- 4. 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.**

**[B-2] Ronald Dworkin**

\_\_\_ All the relevant questions are internal, first-order, moral questions. We only have views *within* ethics; we do not have a view *about* ethics. We have to be metaethical minimalists.

**Blackburn's Critique:**

It is one thing to say that Rorty, for example, improperly tries to support an ethical position with a metaethical thought. It is a much stronger thing to say that there is no such thing as metaethical thought at all.

**§ Relativism and Authority**

**Relativism is a real issue in ethics, and only an unreal one in elementary arithmetic. We need to find ways to distinguish our ethical judgments from those made by the fashion editor or the racist, the bigot.**

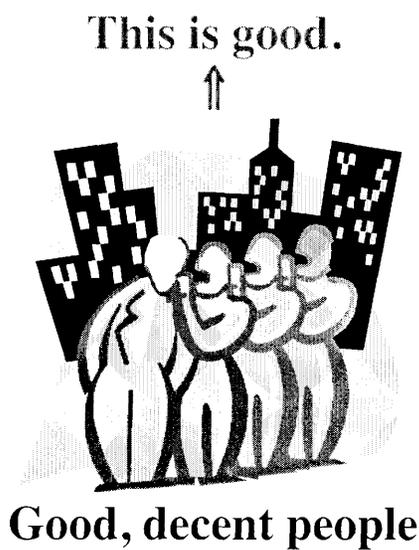
**Ethical truth as it is conceived by us, as we debate, cannot be a truth about where we will end up or would end up after certain empirical procedures. Rather, we conceive of it as truth about where we *ought* to end up, or would end up after *commendable* procedure, or where we would end up if we were *good*, just as in science we conceive of it as where we ought to end up, if we are to represent nature in the right way – which here means representing it to ourselves as it really is.**

Our actual practices of argument and persuasion require only the hope that there is nothing else for *decent* people to think.

Certainly we are talking only of what *must* be thought ethically, but the necessity is itself *ethical*. The ‘must’ is the same as in people must keep their promises. To try to show that something must be thought is no more, but no less, than to try to show that it is the right thing, or the best thing, to think. To do this we will be deploying values as we go.

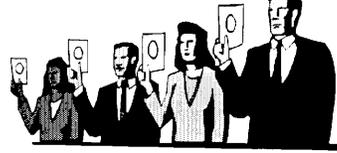
What we hope to show, as we preserve with analyses of social phenomena, deploying analogies, turning the values involved around in our minds, is that there is nothing else for good, decent people to think.

⇒ Virtue Ethics





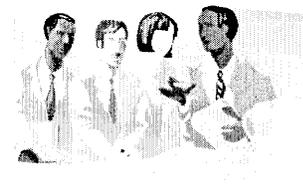
This is ugly.



This is bad.



This is useless.



This can't be done.

## § Knowledge, Objectivity, Truth

**'The last word' is the first word:**

**\_\_\_ We stay with the original moral claim, and deliberate about it as best we can.**

### **Examples:**

- (1) Slavery is a bad system.
- (2) Our opinion is this: slavery is a bad system.  
[Expressivism]
- (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.

**With [4], we have no conception of the nature of this independent order.**

**The right approach is to reduce (3) to (2); and (2) to (1).**

**In many cases I do have ethical knowledge: I know that happiness is better than pain, that promises deserve some respect,....**

**There is objectivity in the sense of fairness and impartiality, the virtue above all of 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.**

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

**[Conclusion]**

**We cannot think that each situation, in its full particularity, needs treating distinctly from each other situation, for then we have no ethic to communicate and to rely upon. And we do not want glacially abstract**

**general principles, for then we miss the interesting textures of particular problems. Our sensibility needs to be firm, but flexible, for both these are virtues.**

**⇒ the virtue of *the mean*.**

**For quasi-realism, an ethic 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 live it.**

**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.**