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Blackburn's Quasi-Realism

4.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter I looked at problems for emotivism, and I discussed emotivism in terms of the metaphor of projection. Emotivism is a version of projectivism. Blackburn's quasi-realism is also a version of projectivism, explicitly designed to meet the problems raised for emotivism. But what is the difference between a *mere* projectivist and a quasi-realist? What does quasi-realism *add* to projectivism? Blackburn explains the distinction as follows:

Projectivism is the philosophy of evaluation which says that evaluative properties are projections of our own sentiments (emotions, reactions, attitudes, commendations). Quasi-realism is the enterprise of explaining why our discourse has the shape it does, in particular by way of treating evaluative predicates like others, if projectivism is true. It thus seeks to explain, and justify, the realistic-seeming nature of our talk of evaluations – the way we think we can be wrong about

them, that there is a truth to be found, and so on. (1984: 180)

In other words, quasi-realism is the project of explaining how we can legitimately say things like 'It's true that murder is wrong', 'It's false that breaking promises is the right thing to do', 'Jones believes that murder is wrong' and so on, even though we do not *begin* with the assumption that moral predicates refer to properties, or the assumption that moral judgements express beliefs, or the assumption that moral evaluations are truth-apt. It is the project of explaining how we can legitimately talk *as if* we were entitled to the assumption that there is a distinctively moral reality, even though we are not: it is the project of explaining how we can legitimately talk *as if* we were entitled
to assume that moral predicates express properties and so on, even though we are not.[1]

4.2 Blackburn's Arguments For Projectivism

Before looking in detail at how Blackburn develops his own quasi-realist brand of projectivism, I'll run through three of the arguments Blackburn uses in order to motivate the adoption of projectivism in the first place.

Argument 1: Metaphysical and epistemological solvency

This is simply the familiar argument (also utilized by the emotivist in 3.4) that projectivism betters cognitivism on the score of metaphysical and epistemological economy:

The projective theory intends to ask no more from the world than what we know is there – the ordinary features of things on the basis of which we make decisions about them, like or dislike them, fear them and avoid them, desire them and seek them out. It asks no more than this: a natural world, and patterns of reaction to it. (1984: 182)

Projectivism thus differs from cognitivism, which has to posit a realm of distinctively moral facts, as well as a mechanism which accounts for our awareness of those facts. Non-cognitivism can get by with much less.[2] Blackburn is a naturalist, in the sense that he 'tries to see man as a part of nature and tries to explain morality as arising out of man's nature and situation'.[3] But he tries to do this without *reducing* moral facts to natural facts:

[T]he problem is one of finding room for ethics, or placing ethics within the disenchanted, non-ethical order which we inhabit, and of which we are a part. 'Finding room' means understanding how we think ethically, and why it offends against nothing in the rest of our world-view for us to do so. It does not necessarily mean 'reducing' ethics to something else. (1998a: 49)

Blackburn is thus a Humean, or explanatory, or methodological naturalist, but not a substantive naturalist about ethics.

Argument 2: Supervenience and the ban on mixed worlds

In 3.3 I introduced the idea that, as a matter of conceptual or logical necessity, the moral features of a

situation supervene on its natural features: someone who gave differing moral evaluations of two situations without thinking that he had to point to some natural difference between them would thereby display his lack of competence with moral concepts. Blackburn uses this idea to develop an ingenious argument in favour of projectivism.

Before introducing that argument, a few remarks on the notion of logical necessity are required. One way to explicate the notion of logical necessity is as follows: a statement that P is *necessarily true* if it is true in *all possible worlds*. Likewise, a statement that P is *contingent* if it is true at *some* possible worlds but false at others; necessarily false if there are *no* possible worlds in which it is true. Thus, the statement that $2 + 2 = 4$ is necessarily true because there are no possible worlds at which it is false (can you imagine one?); the statement that there is a red postbox at the end of Grosvenor Street is contingently true, because although it is true at *this* world, the *actual* world, there are other possible worlds in which it is false (it is easy to imagine one).

We can summarize as follows the claim that the moral supervenes on the natural as a matter of conceptual necessity. Let N be a complete description of all of the natural properties of an act, event or situation. Then, if two acts, events or situations are N, if they both have the same complete naturalistic description, then they must also receive the same moral evaluation.

Now contrast this notion of supervenience with a stronger notion, *necessitation*. To say that natural

properties necessitate moral properties is to say that in any possible world, all of the moral properties of an act or event are determined by its complete naturalistic description N. To explain further, necessitation means that for a given moral property M, it is necessarily the case that: if an act, event or situation has N, then it has M.

It may appear at first sight that there is no difference between necessitation and supervenience. But they are different. First, although we have seen that the moral status of a situation plausibly supervenes on its complete naturalistic description, it is less plausible that the complete naturalistic description necessitates the moral evaluation. Blackburn puts this latter point as follows:

It does not seem a matter of conceptual or logical necessity that any given total natural state of a thing gives it some particular moral property. For to tell which moral quality results from a given natural state means using standards whose correctness cannot be shown by conceptual means alone. It means moralizing, and bad people moralize badly, but need not be confused. (1984: 184)

Someone could be quite competent with all of the concepts implicated in the naturalistic description N, and yet move from the judgement that a situation is N to the wrong moral evaluation of that situation. Lyndon B. Johnson understood the naturalistic concepts involved in the complete naturalistic description of the use of napalm in the Vietnam War, but he still managed to come to the erroneous judgement that its use was

morally permissible. Johnson was not confused about any of the relevant naturalistic concepts: rather, he was a morally base individual.[4]

Second, supervenience allows some sorts of possible worlds which necessitation rules out. For example, consider a world containing only one individual object b:

World W1: b is N and b is not M.

Supervenience allows W1: it only says that if two things are alike in point of N, they must also be alike in point of M. Since there is only one thing which is N in W1, namely b, W1 respects supervenience.[5]

What supervenience does rule out is the possibility of 'mixed worlds', such as:

World W2: a is N and a is M, c is N but c is not M.

Supervenience 'bans' mixed worlds. Now suppose you believed that moral properties supervene on natural properties, but that natural properties do not necessitate moral properties. Then you would have to explain the ban on mixed worlds: given that God could have created a world W1 in which b is N but not M, why could he not have chosen to create a world in which c is N but not M even though in that world a is N and also M? What is the explanation of the fact that there are no mixed worlds?[6]

Why does this constitute an argument in favour of projectivism? According to Blackburn the ban on mixed

worlds looks especially hard to explain from a cognitivist base:

These questions are especially hard for a realist. For he has the conception of an actual moral state of affairs, which might or might not distribute in a particular way across the naturalistic states. Supervenience [and the ban on mixed worlds] then becomes a mysterious fact, and one of which he will have no explanation (or no right to rely on). It would be as though some people are N and doing the right thing, and others are N but doing the wrong thing, but there is a ban on them travelling to the same place: completely inexplicable. (1984: 185–6)

On the other hand, claims Blackburn, the projectivist has a straightforward explanation of supervenience and the associated ban on mixed worlds:

When we announce our moral commitments we are projecting, we are neither reacting to a given distribution of moral properties, nor
speculating about one. So the supervenience can be explained in terms of the constraints upon proper projection. Our purpose in projecting value predicates may demand that we respect supervenience. If we allowed ourselves a system (schmoralizing) which was like ordinary evaluative practice, but subject to no such constraint, then it would allow us to treat
naturally identical cases in morally different ways…. That would unfit schmoralizing from being any kind of guide to practical decision making (a thing could be properly deemed schbetter than another although it

shared with it all the features relevant to choice or desirability). (1984: 186)[7]

Argument 3: Moral judgement and motivation

Suppose you accept the *Humean Theory of Motivation*: the view that explanation of rational action always requires the citation of both beliefs and desires. How do we explain someone's morally motivated actions? Suppose Jones decides not to steal the exam papers from his tutor's desk. In explanation of this, we might say something like 'Jones judges that stealing is wrong'. Now does his moral judgement express a belief or some non-cognitive sentiment, such as a desire? If it is the former, then the story we just gave as to why he was motivated not to steal the exam papers would, according to the Humean Theory of Motivation, require supplementation with reference to some desire which Jones possesses (presumably the desire not to do wrong). But it seems to need no such supplementation: so long as Jones is sincere in making his moral judgements, no reference to a desire is necessary. If the latter, we would expect his judgement to need supplementation by mention of a belief. And this is exactly what we find: our explanation of Jones's motivation needs to cite his judgement that stealing is wrong and his belief that taking the exam papers would be stealing. The conclusion is thus that non-cognitivism sits better with the best account of moral motivation, the Humean Theory of Motivation.[8]

How convincing are Blackburn's arguments in favour of projectivism? I will not attempt a serious assessment

here, but offer instead a few comments in passing. Argument 2, from supervenience and the ban on mixed worlds, deserves more discussion than I can attempt here, but the curious reader will wonder why the explanation of the ban on mixed worlds which Blackburn offers on behalf of the projectivist cannot be co-opted by the cognitivist:

[T]he supervenience can be explained in terms of the constraints upon the proper formation of moral belief. Our purpose in forming moral beliefs may demand that we respect supervenience. If we allowed ourselves a system (schmoralizing) which was like ordinary evaluative practice, but subject to no such constraint, then it would allow us to treat naturally identical cases in morally different ways…. That would unfit schmoralizing from being any kind of guide to practical decision making.

What is wrong with this argument? Perhaps Blackburn will reply that it only works if we can view moral beliefs as essentially practical in their upshot, an assumption that the Humean Theory of Motivation will disallow. What is important for supervenience is that we take different evaluative stances only towards situations that differ in some natural respect: for the Humean, an evaluative stance is always the product of a belief and a distinct desire, so constraining moral belief to respect supervenience will not by itself ensure that supervenience is respected. Evaluative stances which differ only in respect of the attendant desires can, so far as the constraints on the formation of moral belief go, fail to differ with respect to naturalistically identical

situations. So unless we reject the Humean Theory of Motivation, the suggested explanation fails to ensure that supervenience is respected. I have no idea whether Blackburn would actually proffer this style of response to the suggestion: but, if he does, even if the response is sound it will depend on a result in favour of the Humean in the province of moral psychology. So until we discuss these matters in chapter 10, the argument from supervenience and the ban on mixed worlds can at best be accorded provisional credence. A fortiori, the same comment applies to argument 3, from moral judgement and motivation.

Argument 1, from metaphysical and epistemological solvency, depends on the success of the positive aspect of the quasi-realist project: these considerations only have the force intended by Blackburn if the quasi-realist reconstruction of the 'realistic-seeming' aspects of our moral practice is successful. So an evaluation of argument 1 must wait until we have a proper assessment of Blackburn's reconstructive project, and its capacity to see off the objections which beset emotivism. It is to this that I now turn.

4.3 Blackburn's Response to the Frege-Geach Problem

Can the quasi-realist give a projectivist account of, for example, the semantic function of 'Murder is wrong' as it appears in an unasserted context such as:

(2) If murder is wrong, then getting little brother to
    murder is wrong.

Blackburn writes:

Can [projectivism] explain what we are up to when we
make these remarks? Unasserted contexts show us
treating moral predicates like
others, as though by their means we can introduce
objects of doubt, belief, knowledge, things which can be
supposed, queried, pondered. Can the projectivist say
why we do this? (1984: 191)

And, of course, a constraint on the projectivist's account
of why we do this must be that it doesn't convict
logically valid arguments like

(1) Murder is wrong.
(2) If murder is wrong, then getting little brother to
    murder is wrong.

So:

(3) Getting little brother to murder is wrong.

of a fallacy of equivocation.

So what is the projectivist account of what we are doing
when we say things like (2)? Recall that one source of
the problem was that we normally give an account of
(material) conditionals as follows: a conditional is false
if it has a true antecedent and a false consequent, true
otherwise. But how can we invoke this account in cases
like (2), which at this stage in the story cannot be

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