

BOOK REVIEW

Passions & Projections: Themes from the Philosophy of Simon Blackburn. EDITED BY ROBERT N. JOHNSON AND MICHAEL SMITH. (Oxford: OUP, 2015. Pp. ix–xix + 276. Price £40.00.)

Simon Blackburn has not shied away from the use of vivid imagery in developing, over a long and prolific career, a large-scale philosophical vision. Here one might think, for instance, of ‘Practical Tortoise Raising’ or ‘Ramsey’s Ladder’ or ‘Frege’s Abyss’. Blackburn develops a ‘quasi-realist’ account of many of our philosophical and everyday commitments, both theoretical (e.g., modality and causation) and practical (e.g., moral judgement and normative reasons). Quasi-realism aims to provide a naturalistic treatment of its targeted phenomena while earning the right to deploy all of the ‘trappings’ of realism—i.e., while eschewing any idea that our normal thought and talk about such phenomena are pervasively in error. The quasi-realist project is that of explaining how (as Huw Price puts it here) ‘the folk come to “talk the realist talk” without committing ourselves—us theorists, as it were—to “walking the metaphysical walk”’ (p. 136). Quasi-realism, too, can speak of truth, facts, properties, belief, knowledge, and so on. The imagery in this collection also abounds, though, in capturing a different view of quasi-realism: No fewer than three of the contributors picture Blackburn as wanting to have his cake and eat it too (Louise Antony asking, in addition, ‘Who doesn’t? It’s *cake*’ [p. 19]).

Anyone who has any interest in Blackburn’s work—or more generally in any version of expressivism, projectivism, prescriptivism, pragmatism, or anti-realism—should get their hands on this volume. The collection certainly provides a fitting, and very personal, tribute to the philosophical themes developed in Blackburn’s pioneering work—in the sense that many of the contributors, as indicated in the essays, have been profitably engaged with Blackburn’s work for decades. The essays are in two parts. Part I focuses on themes in metaphysics and epistemology, and part II focuses on themes in metaethics and moral psychology. There are fourteen essays altogether, eight in part I, all by highly esteemed philosophers in their fields. Five of the fifteen authors (none in part II) are women. The volume opens with an Introduction by the editors,

mainly surveying the content of the essays, and then—preceding the essays themselves—a fascinating, five-page ‘Apologia pro Vita Sua’ by Blackburn himself. (More on Blackburn’s contribution in a moment.)

The most remarkable contribution comes from Jamie Dreier, in the form of a sustained attack on Scanlon’s account of ‘Reasons Fundamentalism’ in Scanlon 2014 (hereafter *RR*)—a revised version of the 2009 John Locke Lectures that Scanlon delivered in Oxford. Dreier’s essay is titled ‘Another World: The Metaethics and Metametaethics of Reasons Fundamentalism’. The subtitle gestures at a dialectical instability in the debate between quasi-realists and their realist opponents. Dreier himself has memorably christened this the ‘Problem of Creeping Minimalism’. In the current volume, Dreier argues in favour of quasi-realism and against Reasons Fundamentalism. The title of his essay encapsulates what Dreier takes Reasons Fundamentalism to include—a commitment to normative truths that somehow inhabit Another World. Leaving aside the accuracy of that characterization of Scanlon’s position, Dreier’s reasons for this characterization are curious. Dreier represents Scanlon’s book as maintaining that the relation, ‘is a reason for’, is a three-place relation, $R(p, c, a)$ —where p is a proposition (or fact), c is a set of conditions, and a is an action or attitude (p. 156 ff). But Scanlon’s book actually maintains that this is a four-place relation, $R(p, x, c, a)$, where the additional relatum, x , is an agent (*RR*, p. 31). This inaccuracy may seem substantively innocuous; but Dreier’s main substantive criticism of Scanlon also hinges on a misinterpretation. Here is one instance. Dreier represents Scanlon’s book as follows (I am quoting Dreier from the present volume):

‘Normative truths,’ he says, [*sic*] constitute a distinct realm and need no metaphysical reality in order to have the significance that we commonly grant them’ (Scanlon 2014). The idea that they do constitute a distinct realm, *another world*, but need no metaphysical reality, is somewhat puzzling. This is one face of the problem that I will return to at the end of the chapter. (pp. 157–8; cf. p. 169)

But Scanlon’s book actually says, quite differently, that ‘Normative truths, in my view, constitute a distinct realm and need no natural or special metaphysical reality in order to have the significance that we commonly grant them’ (*RR*, p. 52). The position that Scanlon actually sketches here will, no doubt, still strike many people as puzzling, and the use of the phrase ‘distinct realm’ is unfortunate. But Scanlon’s actual position is certainly less puzzling than the one Dreier discusses: normative truths constituting a ‘distinct realm’ even though they need *no* metaphysical reality whatsoever. It is a substantive question, therefore, how much of Dreier’s criticism of Scanlon would be affected by a more accurate and charitable interpretation of the text published by Scanlon.

It might be true, as Blackburn says here, that ‘creeping minimalism’ calls into question the place of *realism* as a reliable philosophical landmark. That

traditional assumption, about realism as a philosophical default—and ‘error theory’ as its alternative—was anyway ‘the excuse for what I now fear may have been a slightly inept name’ (p. xvii). What, then, would replace the quasi-realist label? Blackburn says that, ‘perhaps something like “propositional functional pluralism” would now strike me as a more accurate, though less memorable, label’ (p. xvii).

The majority of the contributors press mostly sympathetic arguments against Blackburn’s positions, urging clarification of his views about, e.g., modality, conditionals, singular thought, artistic expression, the metaphysics of colour, and fundamental moral error. Louise Antony, for one, is happy to be an ally with Blackburn in defence of folk psychology. She explicitly wonders: ‘Who wants to be on the business end of one of his rhetorical rapiers?’ (p. 3). Other contributors also wonder about Blackburn’s responses, Frank Jackson noting, almost impatiently, ‘Why guess when he’s available to tell us?’ (p. 49). But Blackburn unfortunately does not tell us—at least not here. On this occasion, Blackburn says, it would be ‘churlish’ for him to engage in ‘the thrust and parries and rebuttals of rebuttals that mark so much of academic life’ (p. xv). We can only hope, therefore, to see Professor Blackburn wielding his philosophical rapier on another occasion, when he is not the honouree of such a warm and fitting volume, when he can once again poke and parry, thrust and cut.

REFERENCE

Scanlon, T.M. (2014) *Being Realistic about Reasons*. Oxford: OUP.

Wichita State University, USA

NOELL BIRONDO