
Blackburn's Projectivism: An Objection

Author(s): M. H. Brighthouse

Source: *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition*, Vol. 59, No. 2 (Jun., 1990), pp. 225-233

Published by: Springer

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4320130>

Accessed: 26/01/2010 14:21

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=springer>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Springer is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition*.

BLACKBURN'S PROJECTIVISM — AN OBJECTION

(Received in revised form 20 January, 1989)

In his *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, J. L. Mackie outlines a picture of ethical thinking with two central elements. The first concerns the nature of 'value' judgements; he, like Hume, considers them to be a projection of the subject's attitudes onto the world. In other words a 'judgement' that something is (morally) good is just an expression of a favourable attitude that one has towards the object being considered. The second element concerns the phenomenology of value judgements. He supposes that, to the person making the 'judgement', it seems that she is responding to some feature that the object possesses independently of their interaction with it, and that their judgement is of a kind with judgements of objects that they possess a particular primary quality. So, simply, although value judgements are *projective*, to those who make them they seem *objective*. So Mackie's position is called, appropriately, 'error theory'.

Of course anyone holding this position must show why value judgements cannot be objective in the relevant sense, and must show that this is the same sense in which we take them to be objective. The existence of the error must also be explained. But my concern here will not be with Mackie's error theory, but with a response to it which tries to avoid the imputation of error to English-speaking moral agents.¹ There are two possible responses which give up the imputation of error. One is to demonstrate that moral judgements *can indeed* be objective, at least in the way that the people who make them think of them as being objective. The other, with which I shall be concerned here, is to deny Mackie's claim about the phenomenology of value judgements, while accepting that they are in fact projective. This second response, which has been promoted by Simon Blackburn in his book *Spreading the Word* and in a series of recent articles, represents a return to the emotivism of the mid-twentieth century. In what follows I shall show

merely that Blackburn is overoptimistic about the prospects for a reconstructed emotivism, and that his evidence for the denial of Mackie's claim about the phenomenology of value is much weaker than he seems to think.

I

Summoning evidence for a claim about the phenomenology of some kind of value judgement is no easy task. Introspection on the part of any philosopher would hardly be reliable evidence. But questioning subjects is also of dubious value. An unreflective subject may well declare that her belief that Mrs Thatcher is evil is the same kind of commitment as her belief that mass is not invariant with respect to velocity. But point out to her that the former belief makes her feel a certain way about Mrs Thatcher and she may well revise her declaration. The revision could take any of a number of forms; it could lead to an acceptance that some primary quality judgements are reason giving (or at least attitude-evoking), or to an acceptance that value judgements are not on a par with ordinary judgements, or even to a claim that they are on a par and that the hatred is entirely independent of the value judgement.²

Traditionally attention has focused on the syntax of the moral fragment of our language. It has been assumed (and I take it that Mackie and Blackburn share this assumption) that if it is possible to give, for each moral assertion in English, an equivalent in terms just of the expression of attitudes by the speakers then this is at least *prima facie* evidence that English speakers think of themselves as merely expressing attitudes with those assertions. In fact, of course, *prima facie* evidence is the most that it could be.³ Proper support for Blackburn's position would require a demonstration either that the usage was incompatible with a 'primary quality' analysis,⁴ or that, although the usage is compatible with either analysis, the attitude-expression analysis somehow takes precedence.

More importantly, though, for the availability of the attitude-expression analysis to give support to, in the sense of removing an obstacle to, the phenomenology claim, the mere existence of a sentence expressing an attitude corresponding to each sentence in the moral fragment of

English would not suffice. In order for an analysis of syntax to demonstrate even the compatibility of our usage of the moral fragment of English with a subjectivist phenomenology there would have to be available a full reduction, with rules revealing a systematic relation between the moral pseudo-predicates and the attitudes expressed and showing how it is exploited in our usage.

So the assumption shared by Mackie and Blackburn is false. What does seem correct however is the weaker claim that the unavailability of a reduction of the kind described in the previous paragraph would be evidence against the phenomenological claim. In what follows I shall show that there are sentences in English using moral terms for which Blackburn is unable to give an attitude-expressing equivalent. If I succeed and this claim is correct then Blackburn's position must be wrong. However, I hope to have given substance in this section to the suggestion that even if Blackburn is able to come up with a 'translation' of the kind of sentence I will indicate, this would be far from a vindication of his position.

II

It is worth looking at Blackburn's analysis in some detail. He invites us to consider what he calls an 'expressive' language, E_{ex} , which, instead of terms such as 'good' and 'bad', utilises the expressive operators H! and B!, which stand (more or less) for the attitudes 'hooray' and 'boo'.⁵ We shall look at the structure of E_{ex} later; what is relevant now is that Blackburn's claim is that every meaningful sentence in the moral fragment of English has an E_{ex} sentence which properly expresses its meaning. The reason, he claims, that we use the pseudo-predicates which we do is just linguistic convenience; it enables us to express ourselves briefly, argue about things, etc.

So how does E_{ex} work? The H! and B! operators attach to things rather than to expressions. So

(1) Mrs Thatcher is evil

translates into the E_{ex} sentence

(1_{ex}) B!(Mrs Thatcher).

It is not hard to see how this works at the level of straightforward indicative subject-predicate sentences. But the problem which led to the abandonment of the search for an emotivist reduction of moral language was that it is not clear how to construe 'moral' sentences when they are embedded in unasserted contexts. For example, sentences like (1) repeatedly occur as the antecedents of such conditionals as (2) and (3),

- (2) If Mrs Thatcher is evil then we ought to assassinate her.
- (3) If lying is wrong then teaching people to lie is wrong.

In such contexts no attitude is expressed towards Mrs Thatcher, or to lying, so if (1_{ex}) gives the meaning of (1) then (1) must differ in meaning from the antecedent of (2) (in other words moral sentences must mean something different in unasserted contexts). But this undermines the validity of the conclusion from (1) and (2) using *modus ponens* that we ought to assassinate Mrs Thatcher. So (1_{ex}) cannot properly represent the meaning of (1).⁶

Blackburn thinks that the force of the traditional objection to expressive analyses outlined above relies, in part, on an overrestrictive conception of the semantic role of sentence connectives. To generalise from his loose definition of the role of 'and' we might take C1 as the given definition of a sentence connective:

- C1: A sentence connective operates on two or more sentences to form a sentence the truth value of which is determined by the truth values of the constituent sentences in a way specified by the truth table for that connective.

Although intuitively pleasing this definition is, as Blackburn says, overrestrictive. Consider (4) and (5):

- (4) Hump that barge and tote that pole!
- (5) Are my ears deceiving me or am I not understanding the English language?

In (4) and (5) the connectives do not seem to operate truth-functionally, but they do seem to mean the same as they do when they are used to connect sentences of assertoric force. So C1 is supposed to be inadequate.⁷ To define the role of connectives properly, according to Blackburn, we must introduce the notion of a 'commitment' which is

broad enough to include commands, questions, propositions, and, crucially, expressions of non-propositional attitudes; as Blackburn says "the notion of a commitment is capacious enough to include both ordinary beliefs and those other attitudes, habits and prescriptions".⁸ So, once more generalising from Blackburn's definition of 'and' (that "and' links commitments to give an overall commitment which is accepted only if each component is accepted"), we might give the following definition:

- C2: A sentence connective operates on two or more commitments to form a sentence the acceptability of which depends on the acceptability of its components in a way specified by the acceptance table (whatever that is) for that connective.

C2 helps the expressive theorist by enabling him to provide an explanation of what we are doing with sentences like (2) and (3). We are supposed to be working out the implications of attitudes and expressing our endorsement of combinations of attitudes or sensibilities (actually it is not clear what to make of the notion of implication in this context, but I shall let this pass). So (3) can be mapped onto the sentence (3_{ex}).

- (3_{ex}) H!(/B!(lying)/;/B!(teaching people to lie)/).

On this interpretation (3) actually expresses endorsement of the disposition to disapprove of teaching people to lie given disapproval of lying. (3), then, constitutes a commitment even though the connective involved is not operating truth-functionally (just as is the case with (4) and (5)).

Blackburn continues that a form like that of E_{ex} underlies our usage of moral terms in English; as he says,

in short, E_{ex} needs to become an instrument of serious reflective evaluative practice, able to express concern for improvements, clashes implications and coherence of attitudes . . . one way . . . is to invent a predicate answering to an attitude and treat commitments as if they were judgements, and use all the natural devices for debating truth.⁹

So the gap between surface syntax and underlying form is explained, plausibly, by appeal to linguistic convenience. But, as I suggested in section I, for the claim to stand up there must be available a system of

rules of reduction from English sentences to sentences of E_{ex} . I shall show in the next section that, not only is this not the case, but that there is no apparent reason to suppose that there exists, for every legitimate sentence in the moral fragment of English, an underlying form expressible in E_{ex} , and that Blackburn is therefore unable to reclaim either our ordinary thinking or the linguistic practice which accompanies it.

III

The expansion of our notion of a sentence connective that Blackburn suggests amounts to thinking of them as forming commitments out of constituent commitments. (4) and (5) bear out the need for this expansion. But notice that in (4) and (5) commitments of the same sort are linked to form a further commitment of the same sort. Consider (6) and (7):

- (6) Shut that door and is there any pudding.
- (7) Are you going to Rome or Rome is beautiful in the spring.

Anyone who uttered (6) or (7) could legitimately be accused of not knowing what the connectives in question are capable of. Each seems to consist of two sentences of differing force, not properly connected at all. This points to the need to recognise constraints which operate on particular connectives. Each connective is, of course, constrained differently. 'And' and 'or' seem to be capable only of linking commitments of the same kind, to form a further similar commitment.¹⁰ Conditionals are different in that the implication sign can only take propositions as antecedents, with commands, questions, or propositions as consequents, with the resulting commitment taking the force of the consequent, e.g. (8) and (9):

- (8) If he falls down then help him up again!
- (9) If it fails then do you want to try again?

Now consider (10)

- (10) If Mrs Thatcher is evil then she will win the next election.

Intuitively this is a meaningful sentence of the English language. But, if the constraint which I have suggested, that only propositions can

appear as the antecedents of conditionals, is correct and if, as according to Blackburn, the antecedent of (10) is the expression of a non-propositional attitude, then (10) cannot be a legitimate sentence.

Blackburn's reply must, of course, be that the legitimacy of (10) shows that some expressions of non-propositional attitudes can indeed occur as the antecedents of conditionals (although there are no other types of non-propositional attitude that can do this; consider 'ouch' and 'damn'). Let us concede this.¹¹ What type of commitment would (10) itself be? The two candidates are proposition, and expression of a non-propositional attitude. But, if one of the component commitments is non-propositional (i.e. (1)), then (10) cannot be a proposition, since it is not capable of having a truth value. On the other hand, it is hard to see what content it could have as the expression of a non-propositional attitude. It is clearly not an endorsement of the coexistence of an attitude towards Mrs Thatcher with the state of affairs in which she wins the election. Nor, though, is it a claim that an implication (in whatever sense of implication we are now using) of my attitude towards Mrs Thatcher is that she will win the election. If we make certain plausible assumptions about democracies, such as that people do not vote for people they do not like, (10) cannot either be an assertion that Mrs Thatcher's victory will be linked to a prevailing anti-attitude towards her.

The final position available to Blackburn is simply to deny that sentences like (10) are legitimate and meaningful sentences of English. This, I think, would be an unacceptably *ad hoc* move. Sentences like (10) — that is, conditionals containing moral predicates in the antecedent and only naturalistic predicates in the consequent — are regularly used by English speakers of English, and constitute a significant part of the moral fragment of English. If they are not legitimate English sentences then it must not be because there is no translation of them in E_{ex} . Rather there must be some set of considerations independent of the issues we are discussing which render them so, without similarly rendering sentences in which moral predicates appear in both the antecedent and the consequent illegitimate. Obviously, if there are such considerations, then my argument fails, but to my knowledge nobody has ever advanced such considerations, and it is therefore unlikely that Blackburn would want to adopt this position.

IV

Now it is very difficult to prove that Blackburn *cannot* give an E_{ex} rendering of (10). What I hope to have demonstrated is just that, given his outline of projectivism, it is not clear how he can deal with conditional sentences which contain moral terms in their antecedents but none in their consequents. Were the claim merely that every sentence of English has an E_{ex} equivalent, this might not be so worrying a problem, since it may be possible to find some *ad hoc* way of dealing with such sentences, although, if there is such a way, it is far from obvious. But, as I pointed out earlier, the projectivist analysis is being used by Blackburn to remove an obstacle to a very strong claim about the phenomenology of value. In order to remove this obstacle successfully, Blackburn must clearly display the systematic connections between the sentences of English and those of E_{ex} . If there is not even an obvious *ad hoc* way for the projectivist to deal with the sentence then this must at least cast considerable doubt on the thesis about the phenomenology of value for which Blackburn is seeking support.

The challenge that the projectivist who does not want to impute error has to meet, then, is that of finding a rendering of sentences like (10) which is not *ad hoc*, and meshes with the theory outlined in his book in a way easily assented to by ordinary English speakers. I doubt that this challenge can be met.¹²

NOTES

¹ The contemporary debate starts from J. L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, London, Penguin, 1977. It is pursued in Simon Blackburn, *Spreading the Word*, Oxford, O.U.P., 1984; 'Errors and the Phenomenology of Value', in Honderich, ed., *Morality and Objectivity*, London, R.K.P., 1985; 'Rule Following and Moral Realism', in Holzman and Leich, eds., *Wittgenstein — To Follow A Rule*, London, R.K.P., 1981; and in John McDowell, 'Virtue and Reason', in *The Monist*, 1977; 'Non Cognitivism and Rule Following', in Holzman and Leich, eds.; and 'Values and Secondary Qualities', in Honderich, ed.

² Of course, it is not to be taken for granted that it seems any particular way to unreflective moral speakers. It may be that morality is just a practice and that speakers uncorrupted by theory have no particular view of the ontological status of their moral claims.

³ I am attributing to Blackburn only the claim that his analysis is *prima facie* evidence for the thesis about the phenomenology of value which he holds: i.e. that it removes one obstacle to holding this thesis.

⁴ As far as I know there is no literature suggesting that the syntax of English

contradicts the 'primary quality' thesis about the phenomenology of value. If such literature exists it has been ignored by the protagonists in the contemporary debate.

⁵ Morally loaded terms such as 'courageous', which even the non-cognitivist acknowledges to have descriptive elements, may require a more complex analysis. They may, indeed, be impossible to account for. But since I think Blackburn's account fails for morally 'pure' terms, I shall ignore such complications.

⁶ I should make it clear that what follows is an analysis of Blackburn's response to this problem, and that I do not want to commit myself to any of his claims. I just want to show that, even allowing all the moves that he makes, there are sentences which he cannot account for. I shall use the term 'proposition' by which I shall mean nothing more exciting than whatever is expressed by a sentence the semantic structure of which goes no deeper than the subject-predicate form of its surface syntax, and the phrase 'non-propositional attitude', by which I shall mean whatever it is that Blackburn thinks moral assertions express. I shall follow Blackburn in ignoring problems arising from quantified sentences, since these raise complications which would take us too far afield.

⁷ In fact, a Davidsonian theory of force would allow the meaning of connectives in non-indicative sentences to be explained just in terms of their meanings in indicative sentences.

⁸ *Spreading the Word*, p. 192.

⁹ *Spreading the Word*, p. 195.

¹⁰ Sentences like 'Do that again and I will hit you' might be raised as counterexamples, but I suspect they have the underlying form of the conditional 'if you do that again then I will hit you', or can at least be dealt with in some other way. More needs to be said about this, but not here. The first reason for this is that I only wish to point out that constraints exist — what the constraints actually are does not matter, as long as the suggestion that expressions of non-propositional attitudes cannot serve as the antecedents of conditionals has some plausibility. The second reason is that Blackburn does not provide himself with the theoretical space to recognise the existence of the constraints I suggest, and I therefore need and provide an independent argument against him.

¹¹ For a position opposed to Blackburn's which is less concessive than mine see G. F. Schueler, 'Modus Ponens and Moral Realism', *Ethics*, vol. 98, 1988. I am very sympathetic to Schueler's paper, which has a wider scope than mine, attacking Blackburn's metaphysical position of 'quasi-realism'. However, my concerns are more parochial, and this makes possible my strategy of conceding to Blackburn nearly every claim he wants to make about attitudes and language, and then showing there are fragments of language which he does not seem to be able to deal with.

¹² My thanks to Mark Sainsbury for extensive criticism of versions of this paper, to John Barrett, Richard Spencer-Smith and Marianne Talbot for helpful discussions, and to an anonymous reader for *Philosophical Studies*. A version of this paper was read at Liverpool University in May 1987.

*School of Philosophy,
University of Southern California,
Los Angeles, CA 90089,
U.S.A.*