

Blackburn's Wittgenstein:

The Quasi-Realist

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1. Introduction

Simon Blackburn has written extensively on a wide range of topics, including meta-ethics, philosophy of language, philosophy of mind, epistemology, metaphysics and philosophy of religion. He has been under the influence of David Hume in introducing and defending his well-known 'quasi-realism' in meta-ethics, which has had a huge impact on his reading of Wittgenstein's later remarks. Blackburn has called his Wittgenstein 'Blackburn's Wittgenstein' or 'BW' (1984a, p. 286)¹ and contrasted him especially with Kripke's Wittgenstein.² Wittgenstein appears repeatedly in most of his writings on quasi-realism, pragmatism, relativism and minimalism about truth. I call this figure Blackburn's 'quasi-realist Wittgenstein'. My goal is to elucidate the main features of such a figure's view of the moral and the semantical.

Since Blackburn has been developing quasi-realism, and his related reading of Wittgenstein, for over 40 years, it would be practically unattainable for this chapter to cover all of his relevant intriguing discussions, especially those of pragmatism and relativism, considering that part of the chapter has to be dedicated to an introduction to quasi-realism. I will rather concentrate on his reading of the following Wittgensteinian ideas: minimalism about truth, the relation between grammar and expressed commitments, the notion of a practice, the role of a speech-community, rule-following considerations, and the private language argument. I begin with an introduction to quasi-realism because, as he puts it, we can 'well identify him [Wittgenstein] as a protagonist of quasi-realism' (1981, p. 185).

2. Blackburn's Quasi-Realism

Let us start with an early characterization of quasi-realism and develop on that: 'the programme ... I have called 'quasi-realism' ... shows how far a projectivist may adopt the intellectual practices supposedly definitive of realism' (1981, p. 164) so that '[i]f quasi-realism is successful, a projectivist has the right to think of moral judgments as true or false' (1981, p. 185). In his earlier works, he counts quasi-realism as an unproblematic version of 'projectivism' (1981; 1984a; 1984b), while he later prefers to call it a type of 'constructivism' (1986), 'non-descriptive functionalism' (1990, p. 211), 'local pragmatism' (2009, pp. 32, 39), or more famously 'expressivism' (2001; 2012).

What all these views have in common has already been encapsulated in the Humean title of his celebrated book *Spreading the Word* (1984b), according to which *we*, as human beings, react in certain ways to the world, which also includes humans and their actions, and thereby form certain attitudes – sentiments, emotions, feelings, etc. – toward a variety of subject matters in

different areas of discourse, such as morality, causation, modality, rule-following and so forth; equipped with such attitudes, our minds then *project* certain properties, or *spread* itself, onto the world. In this picture, our relevant utterances are not taken to have a descriptive function, i.e., that of *describing* or *representing* a mind-independent, objective reality. Rather, they are *used to express attitudes*. As Blackburn characterizes the broad projectivist view, '[p]rojectivism is the philosophy of evaluation which says that evaluative properties are projections of our own sentiments (emotions, reactions, attitudes, commendations)' (1984b, p. 180). One such evaluative property is (moral) wrongness. According to projectivism, we depict the world as containing such properties so that our pertinent utterances can be said to express our subjective attitudes toward such features, while there really are no such features, properties or values *in* the world. This view stands against the realist conception of these matters, which often appears to be too appealing to philosophers and which seems to be present in our everyday talk of them.

Consider the utterances like 'That cube has square faces' or 'It's raining outside.' In asserting these, we do not simply express some feelings or attitudes, contrary to the case of the utterances like 'I hope it won't rain tomorrow' or 'You ought not lie.' The 'direction-of-fit' of the former is to fit, represent or describe the world as is, while the direction-of-fit of the latter is 'to have the world conform to them' (1988a, p. 504). For a realist, by uttering sentences of the first sort we express our *beliefs* about the world. Beliefs represent the world. Thus, they are *truth-apt*, capable of being true or false: either they represent the world as it really is, in which case they are true, or they fail to do so, in which case they are false. In this sense, 'That cube has square faces' is said to have a *truth-condition*:

'That cube has square faces' is true if and only if it has square faces.

The sentence is true if the cube, an object in the world, has the property of having square faces, or if the *fact* that it has square faces obtains in the mind-independent world.

The broad realist view in meta-ethics is often called 'cognitivism.' For a cognitivist, we talk more or less similarly about another category of things, i.e., humans' actions conceived as events taking place in the same objective world and as things possessing certain properties, among which is the evaluative property of being wrong. In this case, 'Kicking dogs for fun is wrong' expresses a belief, which is true or false and which has a truth-condition: it is true if and only if the (moral) fact that kicking dogs for fun is wrong obtains. For such a realist, there is a reality that contains values, duties, rights and so forth, and it 'is well explained only by seeing us as able to perceive, cognize, intuit, an independent moral reality' (1981, pp. 164-165). Cognitivist views can be of different sorts, such as reductionist naturalist, non-naturalist, non-reductionist, and of different strengths.³ For instance, G. E. Moore (1903) rejects naturalist cognitivism, the view that goodness is a sort of natural property specified by natural sciences. Moore's version of non-naturalist 'intuitionism' had it that there are (non-natural) normative facts and that we have a distinct faculty for capturing them, i.e., intuition. Blackburn is unhappy with both naturalist and non-naturalist versions of cognitivism. If we go naturalist, the content of our judgments of goodness would turn into whatever natural science tells us to be, in which case 'the account conflates "is" with "ought"' (2006, p. 148). We do not want that: we ordinarily think of the realm of morality as a normative one, telling us what is wrong and right and consequently what we ought to do. The sort of non-naturalist Moorean view is also problematic because it makes the nature of such primitive normative facts and our first-personal epistemic access to them, via 'a strange, tailor-made faculty' (2006, p. 148), mysterious.

Once we abandon cognitivism and enter the realm of non-cognitivism, we face two general options: (1) to go totally irrealist and endorse a view along the lines of A. J. Ayer's 'emotivism'

(1936), which focuses on the practical function of expressing emotions. For Ayer, when we utter ‘Stealing money is wrong’, we have said nothing but ‘You stole that money’: adding ‘wrong’ to it adds nothing to what the sentence has already expressed. By saying that stealing is wrong, ‘I am simply evincing my moral disapproval of it’ (Ayer, 1936, p. 107). On this view, moral claims are not viewed as truth-apt because they do not express beliefs at all. According to Blackburn, however, Ayer’s version of expressivism ‘fails because of the nebulous subject matter with which it purports to deal’ (2006, p. 148). The problem is that this is not the way we *ordinarily* treat morality: we do not consider people as merely expressing their feelings when they moralize. Kicking dogs for fun is really wrong for them. (2) The second option is closer to our normal practices, in that although moral statements are still taken to express attitudes, we are allowed to think of them as truth-apt, capable of possessing truth-conditions; we are so permitted because of their grammatical form and the way we use them. Nonetheless, as there really is *no* distinct moral reality, they are all systematically false. John Mackie’s ‘error-theory’ (1977) is one such theory, motivated by the metaphysical peculiarity of the supposed objective values and ‘the corresponding epistemological difficulty of accounting for our knowledge of value entities’ (Mackie, 1977, p. 48). Again, Blackburn does not think that we normally take ourselves to be in error all the time when making moral judgements.⁴

Quasi-realism is an attempt to steer a middle course: (1) it aims to remain expressivist but avoid the difficulties attached with it and (2) seeks to preserve ‘the realist surface of everyday moralizing’ (2006, p. 153), without engaging in the metaphysical and epistemological problems accompanied with realism. Quasi-realism is faithful to two important features of our ordinary conception of language, thought and practice. The first is that they are *normative* disciplines: ‘there is a normative order, a way things ought to be’ (2006, p. 153). Second, when we moralize, we take ourselves to be expressing what we have *found* right, i.e., mind-independent moral truths. We think we may fail, or make mistakes, to correctly detect them so that it is not the case that whatever seems right to us is right: our everyday practices take our responses ‘to answer to the moral truth. They do not create it’ (2006, p. 153). Blackburn’s pre-1986 works introduce quasi-realism as the view that ‘we speak and think “as if” the world contained a certain kind of fact, whereas the true explanation of what we are doing is that we have certain reactions, habits or sentiments, which we voice and discuss by such talk’ (1984a, p. 284). In the post-1986 works, he thinks of this way of phrasing quasi-realism as misleading: the quasi-realist does not claim that we have *already* had a fixed notion of genuine moral facts but failed to capture them and now we just treat ourselves *as if* we know them. A quasi-realist is not a realist dealing with epistemological problems. The central goal of quasi-realism is to grant us all the *right* we can have in talking about moral truths, facts or propositions: ‘*The contrast with simple realism comes not in the things you end up saying, but in the theory which gives you the right to say them*’ (1986, p. 206). How can a quasi-realist succeed to do that?

A quasi-realist does two main things: (1) she holds onto expressivism and denies the simple realist claim that there is a distinct moral reality that (a) *explains* why we have the moral attitudes that we do and (b) *explains* the truth or falsity of our moral claims. For a quasi-realist, we merely express our attitudes. (2) She then shows how this expressivist view can preserve the realist surface of our ordinary moral talk. In order to do so, it would be enough to make it a plausible claim that we are entitled to use the phrases like ‘It is a fact that’ or ‘It is true that’ without any cost. As we will see, she does this by appealing to two Wittgensteinian claims: (a) we always begin by clarifying the *non-descriptive* function of moral claims in our lives and (b) we admit a minimalist view of truth. The combination of these two would enable the quasi-realist to talk about ‘truth’ and ‘facts’ without making any claim about what *constitutes* them.

Before explaining Blackburn's reading of Wittgenstein, let me briefly review some of the striking features of quasi-realism, especially its naturalistic framework.

2.1. Quasi-Realism, Naturalism and Dispositions

Blackburn's general approach is naturalistic: 'expressivism itself aspires to being a naturalistic story about human propensities to evaluate and forbid and require things' (2006, p. 159) so that '[a]n attitude can be compared with a disposition' (2006, p. 150).⁵ Note that these claims are not in conflict with his resistance to naturalist realism. For, contrary to a realist of this sort, Blackburn does not claim that our common natural dispositions *explain* anything. Facts about dispositions do not constitute any moral fact.

Blackburn's claim is that the attitudes we form toward admiring, condemning, approving or disapproving things are the consequences of our common natural reactions, propensities or dispositions to respond to the world. This is a Humean approach because, for Hume, 'the world proper, the sum totality of facts, impinges upon us. In straightforward judgment we describe the facts that do so. But in addition to judging the states of affairs the world contains, we may react to them' (1981, p. 163). We do not describe the world just by reporting the empirical data we collect. Often, we do more: we organize them in various ways, react to them, form dispositions to draw inferences among them, and so forth. The result of such reactions and interactions is the emergence of a variety of habits, commitments, attitudes or sentiments. We then view the world as containing a class of facts responsible for such reactions. Recall that quasi-realism aimed to preserve the realist surface of our moral talk, i.e., that moral facts are discovered, not invented. Consequently, we see that '[t]he "mind-independence" of such facts is part of our ordinary way of looking at things' (1984b, p. 217). Consider Blackburn's defense of the dispositional view of meaning and rule-following against Kripke's Wittgenstein's objections (see Kripke, 1982, pp. 22-32).

According to the dispositional view, the rule a speaker follows can be read off from her dispositions to respond in certain ways on specific occasions. For instance, she follows the addition rule if she is disposed to respond with '125' to '68 + 57 =?'. Kripke's Wittgenstein's first objection is that dispositions are finite so that even the totality of the speaker's dispositions fails to determine what rule she follows: even if the speaker responds with the sum of numbers in her entire life, this fact is still compatible with the sceptical hypothesis that she has been following the *skaddition* rule, a hypothetical function whose output is the sum of numbers *if* they are not too huge for the speaker to calculate their sum in her life; otherwise, the output is 5 (see Kripke 1982, pp. 29-30). Thus, meaning facts cannot be reduced to dispositional facts.

According to Blackburn, however, this objection fails. For one thing, we can expect the dispositions of a right-rule follower and those of a bent-rule follower to diverge. For instance, a bent-rule follower, for whom 'add 2' means 'add 2 up to 1000 and then add 4,' may fail to do certain things; perhaps, he cannot carry four bricks at a time. At some point, he would complain: 'I will not be able to carry on after moving 1000 bricks because I cannot carry four bricks at a time!' For another, '[i]t is not obvious that dispositions in themselves are either finite or infinite' (1984a, p. 289). We need to – and Kripke's Wittgenstein's sceptic fails to – distinguish between constitutive scepticism about dispositions and 'inductive scepticism about the concept of a disposition' (1984a, p. 290). A dispositionalist can claim that, no matter at what time and on what occasion I am asked to add, there are definite answers I *would* accept 'by reiterating procedures I *am* disposed to use, a number of times' (1984a, p. 289). Therefore, I follow the addition rule, not the *skaddition* rule. Doubting this would be a doubt about the

notion of a disposition itself: ‘The fact that I am not disposed to follow those procedures that number of times [as they are too huge] seems like the fact that the glass cannot get to Alpha Centauri’ (1984a, p. 289). A glass is disposed to shatter when struck by a rock. But, would it have the same disposition on Alpha Centauri? Our answer is ‘it would.’ This has nothing to do with the fact that the glass may never make it to Alpha Centauri: it may completely decay during such a travel. Similarly, I *would* answer by the sum of two numbers, no matter how large they are, even if I cannot live forever!

The sceptic’s second objection is that we have dispositions to make mistakes. If the speaker makes systematic mistakes, we cannot claim that she is following the right-rule but is simply making mistakes: from such different dispositions, we can only infer that she is following a different rule. A dispositionalist cannot presuppose that the speaker has been following this rather than that rule: it is the speaker’s dispositions that were supposed to tell us what rule she is following. Blackburn’s response is that the sceptic ‘seems to ignore surrounding dispositions’ (1984a, p. 290). In addition to dispositions to give answers, a calculator, for instance, can also possess ‘dispositions to withdraw them and substitute others’ (1984a, p. 290). Call the speaker’s dispositions that include such (self-correcting) dispositions the ‘extended dispositions.’ The dispositionalist can claim that by ‘+’ I mean a certain function, A, if that function is in accordance with my extended dispositions, and an answer accords with such dispositions if and only if ‘(i) it is the answer I am disposed to give and retain after investigation, or (ii) it is the answer I would accept if I repeated a number of times procedures I am disposed to use, this being independent of whether I am disposed to repeat those procedures that number of times’ (1984a, p. 290). The second proviso is added to disarm the problem with the finiteness of dispositions. Having this sort of dispositions allows us to claim that the speaker has been following the addition rule but is now disposed to make mistakes, as she possesses the required dispositions to notice and correct them. The extended dispositions ‘enforce this judgement. They make it the only possible judgement about ourselves, when we describe each other’s thoughts’ (1984a, p. 291).

The sceptic also claims that facts about dispositions are *descriptive* not *normative*: they do not tell us, or prescribe, how the speaker *ought* to respond in the future; they rather describe how she used, uses, or will use the words (see Kripke 1982, pp. 37, 89). As we will see, quasi-realism would enable us to construct a notion of truth, as well as that of mistake. Nonetheless, Blackburn believes that we *cannot* expect facts about dispositions to constitute meaning facts at all because they are not supposed to constitute *anything*. His defense of the dispositional view is not to submit to an ‘ism,’ especially of the realist sort: he does not aim to *explain* our ordinary notion of moral and semantical rightness by appealing to some moral and semantical facts and a story about how they are constituted. Blackburn is a quasi-realist who believes that the speaker forms certain dispositions as the result of her reactions to, and interactions with, the world and other people. After all, the speaker just expresses her attitudes. Consider the meaning-ascribing sentence like ‘Jones means *plus* by “plus”.’ This sentence, according to our ordinary way of talking about meaning, can be true or false and have the following truth-condition:

‘Jones means *plus* by “plus”’ is true if and only if Jones means *plus* by ‘plus.’

The sentence is true if the fact that Jones means *plus* by ‘plus’ obtains. We can then read off what rule Jones follows, i.e., the addition rule, from his dispositions to respond with the sum of numbers. Putting to one side the non-reductionist view that meaning facts are primitive, the realist regards the fact that Jones means *plus* ‘plus’ as constituted by some other fact about Jones, such as those about his dispositions, internalized instructions, mental images, Ideas in his mind, and so forth. For Blackburn, we have no such a task to accomplish because our overall

view of the discourse is quasi-realist: the practice, or language-game, of attributing meaning to utterances has a *non-descriptive* role to play in our lives, which is the starting point of our account. It is only then that we can make a claim about whether such sentences express a proposition, represent a reality or describe a fact. These are directly related to the two important distinctions that Blackburn draws: (1) the belief-stance distinction and (2) the distinction between quasi-realist and descriptive commitments that our utterances may express.

2.2. The Belief-Stance Distinction

Blackburn calls commitments to a proposition with a truth-condition '*belief*' and any other sort of commitment a '*stance*' (1986, p. 201). We want to gain the right to say that our moral discourse has the *realist belief-surface*, that our relevant judgments express propositions, which can be true or false, while our *stance* – the meta-theory of moral and semantical claims – remains *quasi-realist*. This distinction helps Blackburn explicate why we are entitled to continue talking about facts but stay expressivist. Suppose one offers a possible world, in which people think that kicking dogs for fun is right. If our view is expressivist, we have nothing else to appeal to but people's attitudes. The claim would appear to be that kicking dogs for fun *is* right simply because people have that attitude toward it. Similarly, one may claim that if people's attitude is that 'green' applies to green objects until *t* and to blue ones after *t* – and thus 'green' means *grue* – we have to accept *this* as what 'green' means. But, a quasi-realist by no means embraces such claims.

Blackburn reminds us of our natural dispositions and the natural properties of things in the world: 'Naturally, these scenarios or possibilities excite condemnation, and so the answer is that ... [kicking dogs for fun] is wrong, whatever you or I or anyone else thinks about it' (2006, p. 154). In making such judgments, we are *within* our own moral stance. For this reason, we are not a realist. Nor are we committed to what we may call an 'attitude-transcendent moral truth.' The truth of our relevant claims is still confined by our attitudes. Nonetheless, (1) this is not a defect of quasi-realism because there is no other way to assess such situations: 'One cannot pass a verdict without using those parts of one's mind that enable one to pass a verdict' (2006, p. 154). (2) Yet, it is perfectly conceivable that such attitudes, sensibilities and dispositions *improve* as we go through reasoning and investigate the natural. We may not know what the moral truth for certain moral situations is. In this case, 'the quasi-realist will encourage a pragmatic or practical construal' (2006, p. 155): we are undecided between two judgements; we continue searching, gathering evidence, considering possible improvements of our understanding of the situation and so forth; doing so would lead to weigh one option against the other; we choose that one. We accept 'the optimism that our best efforts can, in the end, close any issue, provided we keep at it long enough' (2006, p. 155).⁶ The point is that the person who claims that if he had different sentiments, it would have been right to kick dogs for fun 'is in a mess. He will fail to be confident in truths about the actual world when he should be' (1984b, p. 218). What makes it wrong to kick dogs is the fact that doing it is cruel and causes them pain. Consequently, we form certain (common) attitudes toward it: '*That* input should yield disapproval and indignation as the output' (1984b, p. 218).⁷

Yet, how can we say that we have expressed a proposition, while our stance is quasi-realist? Here, Blackburn's Wittgensteinian distinction between quasi-realist and descriptive expressed commitments and BW's minimalist view of truth play the main role.⁸

3. The Quasi-Realist Wittgenstein

Blackburn believes that the quasi-realist's insistence on the existence of a moral reality 'is part of normal thinking. It is part of the way of life, or way of thought or talk, which quasi-realism can protect for us. So there must be room for a different version of LW. This one would abandon his hostility to facts' (1984a, p. 285). For Blackburn, a Wittgensteinian and an expressivist agree on many basic matters. At least, they (1) agree that moralizing involves 'a progress of the sentiments, that some are better at it than others, that there are mistakes and failures' (2006, p. 159), and (2) they permit 'talk of truth' (2006, p. 159). According to Blackburn, Wittgenstein is an advocate of quasi-realism who splits 'the theory of the proposition or commitment, from the theory of truth' (2012, p. 197).

3.1. Blackburn's Wittgenstein, Syntacticism and Minimalism about Truth

Blackburn attacks the reading of Wittgenstein that presents him as a proponent of what he calls 'syntacticism,' according to which grammar can give us everything we need: 'not only (a) that propositions are all equally subject to assessment as true or false, in terms of correlative notions of fact or reality, but also (b) anything with the grammatical form of an indicative sentence expresses a proposition' (1990, p. 203).⁹ For BW, however, it is *not* because of their grammatical appearance that sentences describe or fail to describe facts. In the same vein, Blackburn also criticizes what he calls 'the received view' of Wittgenstein, according to which Wittgenstein's central concern in his later works has been the philosophies that have deceived us to contemplate 'from some superior standpoint how well we are managing to depict reality. But there is no such standpoint' (1990, p. 201). BW makes no such claim because he has no intention to reject an 'ism,' such as realism, and defend another, such as anti-realism.

For Blackburn, Wittgenstein's discussion of ethics, modality, arithmetic, psychology and knowledge reveals that he admits neither syntacticism nor the received view. As Wittgenstein emphasizes, 'we remain unconscious of the prodigious diversity of all the everyday language-games because the clothing of our language makes everything alike' (Wittgenstein 1953, p. 224). Missing such a plurality of use leads to bad philosophies. But, BW's quasi-realism is 'the enterprise of justifying and explaining the reason why all claims wear the same "everyday clothing" as empirical, or observational or other paradigm naturalistically legitimate claims' (2019, p. 125). For instance, Wittgenstein thought that 'the verbal form of mathematical statements can delude us with a myth; in certain language games mathematical propositions play the part of rules of description, as opposed to descriptive propositions' (1990, p. 207). According to the received view, however, since mathematical statements have the indicative form, they express propositions describing a mathematical *reality*. In the case of psychology too, Wittgenstein warns us against the temptation to take a descriptive sentence, such as self-ascriptions of the form 'I believe ...' or 'I intend ...,' to be describing any reality. For BW, '[t]o understand the language game in which they occur, we need to see their use in other terms' (1990, p. 208).

Wittgenstein's later philosophy constantly reminds us of the fact that certain areas of discourse are always understood *in other terms*, i.e., in terms of the *non-descriptive* plural functions of the commitments expressed by them. Since we do not start by viewing such statements as representational, there is no obligation to engage in any explanation of facts making them true. BW is an expressivist trying 'to understand many areas of discourse in terms other than those of "representing the facts"' (2001, p. 78). Thus, when Wittgenstein claims that the surface of our moral talk is propositional, his claim is that 'the moral proposition was a "propositional

reflection” of states that are first understood in other terms than that they represent anything, and that remains the core claim’ (2001, p. 77). It is just that the function of our thoughts in such areas, and not merely the grammatical form of the sentences expressing them, is different from that of representing the world. Once we realize that, we can see that ‘[c]harting their actual role in our activities and our lives shows some to be used as norms, others as rules, as expressions, as endorsements, and as attitudes, and so on’ (1990, p. 211). Given this picture, BW can allow sentences in certain areas of discourse to express propositions, which are truth-apt. This owes to another important feature of Blackburn’s reading of Wittgenstein: part of our ability to think of propositions as such has its roots in what we may call ‘minimalism about truth,’ the ‘deflationary theory of truth’ or the ‘redundancy theory of truth.’ Blackburn extensively discusses this view in his works. Here, I can only review his (anti-quietist) reading of Wittgenstein’s approval of it.¹⁰

BW is faithful to the implications of a minimalist view of truth, according to which ‘there is no difference between saying that it is true that p and that p or between saying that it is a fact that p and that p ’ (1984a, p. 285). This helps the quasi-realist to dodge an important objection, i.e., that she ‘rides roughshod over our everyday confidence that there are moral truths’ (2012, p. 195). Since a quasi-realist is an expressivist, she can make no stronger claim than that what we do is to express attitudes. Minimalism, however, enables her to claim that we can, without any cost, add ‘It is true that’ or ‘It is a fact that’ to claims like ‘Stealing is wrong’ because the predicate ‘is true’ introduces no (genuine) property. All we need is a sentence with a proper syntactical form to express attitudes and then adding ‘It is true that’ to it. To this extent, minimalism provides assistance to quasi-realism: if a realist claims that moral opinions are really true, ‘the expressivist can readily agree’ (2006, p. 160).

Nonetheless, if the expressivist embraces minimalism in its full force, it would become unclear what makes expressivism different from realism.¹¹ Minimalism can be expanded to terms like ‘representing’ and ‘describing,’ in which case the realist would find himself entitled to claim that ethics, on the expressivist view too, is genuinely representational, just as our empirical talk of the world is. Blackburn needs to block the route to such a conclusion. For him, Wittgenstein’s general adherence to minimalism by no means commits him to an ‘ism,’ especially realism. BW ‘relies upon a contrast between descriptive and non-descriptive uses of language’ (1993a, p. 6). He does not need to tell a story about what makes a proposition true: if one asks for some fact making such judgments true, he can ‘profit from deflationism, and simply say that what makes it true that honesty is good is that honesty is good. Nothing else needs to be said, wearing allegedly metaphysical hats’ (2012, p. 195).¹²

Note that the use of the terms like ‘truth’ and ‘facts’ is harmless only if we seriously take the above two points into account: (1) for BW, because of minimalism about truth, we are entitled to say ‘It is true that kindness is good,’ simply meaning that kindness is good, which is an attitude we express by using that sentence. Thus, ‘[w]e can say that the proposition represents the fact that kindness is good’ (2001, p. 79). By doing so, we endorse no realist view: we have just preserved the realist surface of our ordinary moral talk by earning the right to talk about facts as we ordinarily do, without losing anything because (2) BW emphasized that these ‘commitments must first be understood in other terms’ (2001, p. 80). How does BW distinguish between such different sorts of commitments?

3.2. Quasi-Realist vs. Descriptive Commitments

For BW, the quasi-realist focuses on the non-descriptive function of different sorts of commitment expressed in different sorts of activity. Call those commitments for which our view is quasi-realist, ‘quasi-realist’ or ‘QR’ commitments. On BW’s view, ‘the route to understanding them lies in first considering them in the light of a non-descriptive function they have’ (1990, p. 215). This is to understand them in *other (non-descriptive) terms*. Does this mean that no sentence can express ‘ordinary descriptive’ or ‘OD’ commitments? OD commitments are those that ‘are to be thought of as genuinely representative, descriptive, hard’ (1998b, p. 174), such as ‘It’s raining outside.’ The quasi-realist’s claim is that different sentences in different areas of discourse may express different sorts of commitment, OD or QR, but when we attribute a truth-condition to them, such a practice is to be seen from a *quasi-realist* or *stance-based* point of view, i.e., by first considering the non-descriptive role they play in our lives. This does not imply that all the commitments expressed by such sentences are thereby QR. Rather, what we need to do is

to press a non-descriptive function for paradigmatic assertions: philosophical assertions express grammatical rules; ethical assertions do not describe facts; mathematical assertions characteristically lay down rules of description; assertions about oneself do not describe, but have the function of avowals; and so on for religious language, expressions of certainty, and indeed everything that he [Wittgenstein] treated in any detail at all. (1993a, p. 6)

Once we pondered such roles in different language-games, we can then benefit from minimalism and deploy terms like ‘facts’ and ‘truth’: we have revived the realist surface of our ordinary talk of them. Again, this is not to endorse any ‘ism.’ For, being a *minimalist about truth* is not in any conflict with holding an *unminimal theory of assertion*, i.e., a quasi-realist one: ‘*That* the sentence says what it does is so dependent [on use]; *what* it says is not’ (1990, p. 216; see also 1993a, p.7). When are we allowed to say that one has made a mistake in expressing a commitment?

3.3. Hard vs. Soft Mistakes and Normativity

Blackburn distinguishes between two cases of mistakes: hard and soft. Suppose that someone claims that ‘Glaciers do not flow.’ What we can do in this case is to think of her as refusing to use ‘flow’ for the movement of ice. For the quasi-realist, this way of using ‘flow’ is a *mistake*, which appears as the upshot of others’ attitude toward the sort of use this person makes of the term. Here, the claim that the dissident’s use is *wrong* is not a hard one: we do not claim that what he says is false *because* it fails to correspond to a fact or reality. The mistake is ‘soft’: *we* do not use ‘flow’ in this way; we are uniformly disposed to apply it to *both* liquids and glaciers.

Now, consider a situation in which the dissident claims that glaciers do not move at all. In this case, we have a hard mistake to deal with: the mistake is a *descriptive* one, i.e., ‘something disproved by ordinary tests for movement’ (1990, p. 218). For, it is not merely the upshot of our attitudes that the dissident’s use of ‘flow’ is wrong. Here, ‘no question of reinterpretation arises: the *procedures* are agreed and so is their result’ (1990, p. 218). The claim that ‘Glaciers do not move’ is a mistake that directly goes against our *ordinary* conception of moving, glaciers, and flowing. Quasi-realism was supposed to preserve the ordinary way of talking about such things and the dissident’s claim violates it. In this sense, quasi-realism has proposed some *standard* or *norm* to determine when a mistake has happened and whether it is a QR or an OD mistake (see also 1998b, p. 178). A person who makes a hard, OD mistake can usually

be corrected: we can show him the way we ordinarily use ‘flow’ and ‘move,’ as well as other available evidence about liquids, glaciers and movements. He would probably admit his mistake. But, if he refuses to do so, we cannot ignore it as a soft deviation from the ordinary use: ‘[a]pparently the methodology of movement has changed; the riverbed has shifted, the door has become unhinged. We are at a loss – all we can do is deem him to be out of the game’ (1990, p. 218).

Although it is extremely rare, hard mistakes *may* have the power to open our eyes to new possibilities of reinterpretation. In order to take such possibilities seriously, we need strong evidence and compelling force, of the sort scientific or historical discoveries have. Normally, we do not consider mistakes as possible correct instances of a different rule. But, it is possible that we do: ‘we only dignify a dissident as in command of a different concept when we can admit his sayings to be part of a technique – a way of classifying things that has a use’ (1990, p. 219). Blackburn nicely wraps up his Wittgenstein’s broad quasi-realist view as follows:

To do philosophy, to understand the language game, we start with the non-descriptive function of these commitments in our activities; the result is an appreciation of just *how* a content emerges, giving us a proposition – something properly called true or false In telling this story about *how* a content emerges, no explanatory work can be done by mathematical, ethical, etc. ‘reality’. But it does not follow that mention of such a reality cannot be tossed in at the end – for, given the redundancy theory, that is to toss in nothing extra. (1990, p. 212)

This is the reason why BW is not hostile to the notion of ‘facts’; he invites us to consider what can grant us a legitimate use of it. But, how does BW treat the rule-following problem and the private language argument?

4. Quasi-Realism and Rule-Following

Considering our previous discussion of what it is to make a mistake, we can now see why BW can legitimately claim that ‘you ought not apply “green” to this red rose’ or that “‘5” is a wrong answer to “68 + 57 =?”.’ In making these claims, we regard ‘wrongness’ as a hard mistake because ‘we are sure, as we often are, that no new technique prompted it’ (1990, p. 219). Such a use, if repeated, stands against our ordinary conception of what plus and green are. Thus, an expressed OD commitment is objectively false if by expressing it the speaker makes an OD mistake.

For BW, insisting on the existence of meaning facts is simply part of our normal way of thinking about meaning, ‘part of the way of life, or way of thought or talk, which quasi-realism can protect for us’ (1984a, p. 285). As previously indicated, BW’s general approach to the problem of rule-following is to focus on the non-descriptive function of attributions of rules and meaning and see how they can be viewed as expressing an OD commitment. In the case of rule-following, BW makes a negative and a positive point. Wittgenstein never aimed to introduce any fact of the sort realists were after, especially a behavioral fact, which supposedly determines meaning and correct use and which remains, in a queer way, immune to the problem of the regress of interpretations. For, as Wittgenstein says, ‘you have no model of this superlative fact’ (Wittgenstein 1953, §192). Blackburn calls this view, ‘a *wooden* picture of the use of language,’ according to which ‘the only fact of the matter is that in certain situations people use words’ (1981, p. 183). Wittgenstein is read by Kripke (1982) as arguing that there is no such fact. For Blackburn, Wittgenstein’s concern is not the notion of ‘facts’ at all; rather

‘he is teaching us to see them rightly’ (1981, p. 184). He wants to unveil how we can earn the right to talk about them without falling into metaphysical and epistemological confusions.

Wittgenstein’s negative point has been to reject what Blackburn calls ‘a *dog-legged* theory’ (1984b, p. 40), according to which there is to be something *mediating* between our use of words and our understanding of them. Any attempt to fix such a medium leads to the vicious regress of interpretations, which in turn amounts to the bizarre conclusion that ‘[n]o thing can halt the regress of interpretation, for any thing can be taken in different ways, or in no way at all’ (1984b, p. 72). When we understand words, we know how to use them. This is a fact, which we ordinarily have no problem conceding. But, the problem emerges when we try to *explain* this fact. In doing so, we appeal to some medium, such as some Idea, mental image, method of projection and so forth, which gives rise to the problem of determining what these latter mediums are and what constitutes them. Otherwise, we have to appeal to some superlative fact doing all these without being susceptible to the regress problem, which brings us back to the metaphysical and epistemological perplexities with such a peculiar fact. The result is the paradox that Wittgenstein introduces in §201 of the *Investigations*: ‘no course of action could be determined by a rule, because every course of action can be made out to accord with the rule. The answer was: if everything can be made out to accord with the rule, then it can also be made out to conflict with it. And so there would be neither accord nor conflict here’ (Wittgenstein 1953, §201).

Wittgenstein’s positive answer is offered in the second part of the same section, when he states that ‘there is a way of grasping a rule which is *not* an *interpretation*, but which is exhibited in what we call “obeying the rule” and “going against it” in actual cases’ (Wittgenstein 1953, §201). For Blackburn, this is to draw our attention to the ordinary use of words as what links them with the world: ‘It is our use of them, our habit of taking them in one way and not in another, which confers their powers on them’ (1984b, p. 40). This is to suggest a quasi-realist view of rule-following, which starts with detecting the non-descriptive use of the terms like ‘... means ...’ in everyday practices. For Blackburn, however, while quasi-realism heavily relies on the notion of a practice, the notion of a speech-community has no essential role to play in it.

5. Practice, Community and Private Language

According to Blackburn, if quasi-realism works, it works for both the case of an individual and that of a speech-community. Although in a community, its members are encouraged, or even forced, to use words in agreement with one another and thus, to count one way of using words as correct, the case of an individual and a community differs non *metaphysically*. Wittgenstein’s negative point was quite general: no thing can stop the regress of interpretations *if* we think of the relation between understanding and use as mediated by some thing, communal or otherwise.

The point of introducing the notion of a speech-community seems to be that its members can ‘see each other as’ a rule-follower, while an individual cannot see herself as such. BW sees this line of reasoning as entirely misleading. For, can we view others as rule-followers if we *ourselves* do not know what it is to be a rule-follower? It seems we cannot. We know what it is to see something as a duck *because* we know what ducks are. But, ‘we don’t know what it is to see someone as obeying a principle of application, unless we know what it is to follow one, and this is the fact of which we still have, so far, no conception’ (1984a, p. 293). We can imagine a community following a bent-rule, such as skaddition. The agreement in responses in

that community would not matter because they are compatible with both the addition rule and the skaddition rule. We cannot solve such a metaphysical problem by claiming that ‘this is how we respond or see each other’ – what Blackburn calls the ‘flat reply’ (1984a, p. 299). For, such a reply is available to Robinson Crusoe too, a person in isolation from birth in an island: he follows the addition rule simply because he sees himself as such. Speaking a language is not like playing in an orchestra. As Blackburn famously says,

in the orchestra, harmony with others provides a direct standard of correctness. This is just not so with judgement. If my community all suddenly started saying that $57 + 68 = 5$, this fact does not make me wrong when I continue to assert that it is 125. I am correct today in saying that the sun is shining and daffodils are yellow, regardless of what the rest of the world says. (1984a, pp. 293-294)

Crusoe need not refer to *others*’ way of responding to a red rose in order to judge that the rose is red because all that is needed is that he has his *own* practice. This is related to another objection to the case of Crusoe: for Crusoe, whatever seems right to him is right and thus, the whole notion of following a rule correctly disappears. On Blackburn’s view, not only does this objection apply to the case of a community too, but we can even imagine that ‘[t]he members of a community stand to each other as the momentary time-slices of an individual do’ (1984a, p. 294). All we need is the *possibility* that the past Crusoe interacts with the present Crusoe in order to establish an agreement or disagreement. And, there seems to be nothing that makes this scenario impossible. This means that BW defends no community view: he brings in the notion of a ‘practice,’ *without* reading it as ‘the practice of a community.’ For Blackburn, ‘we must not fall into the common trap of simply equating practice with public practice’ (1984b, p. 85). We have no argument in favor of treating a practice as a necessarily public one, which can rule out the case of Crusoe as a rule-follower but not that of a group of them. This in turn implies that Crusoe’s own idiolect is *not* what Wittgenstein calls a ‘private language.’ His notion of a private language is much stronger: ‘Its terms are given their meanings by reference to private episodes, such as sensations’ (1984b, p. 92). BW’s negative point was that this is wrong.

For BW, we ‘simply cannot deliver, in other terms, accounts of what constitutes shared following of a rule, or what the fact of a rule being in force “consists in”’ (1984a, p. 300). Nonetheless, this must not prevent us from philosophizing. Blackburn coined ‘quietism’ or ‘dismissive neutralism’ for the view ‘which urges that at some particular point the debate is not a real one, and that we are only offered, for instance, metaphors and images from which we can profit as we please’ (1984b, p. 146). On Blackburn’s view, quietism stands against quasi-realism by claiming that we can hope for no mind-independent view of the world that reveals its true shape. We are rather wholly bound to our own subjective description of it: no ‘right’ can be earned to express any proposition about the world. For Blackburn and his Wittgenstein, however, quietism ‘is intellectual suicide’ (1993a, p. 51). BW is not a quietist: if we are therapists diagnosing philosophical diseases, we must search deeper and think more accurately: our therapeutic attitude must be ‘to insist upon constant exercise’ (1993a, p. 51).¹³

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¹ References are all to Blackburn’s works, unless otherwise is indicated.

² And sometimes with others’, such as McDowell’s, Peacocke’s, Wright’s, Rorty’s and Brandom’s Wittgenstein. See, e.g., (1981; 1984a; 1984b; 1998b; 2010; 2019).

³ Different, reductionist and non-reductionist, versions of this view have been supported by, e.g., Moore (1903), Sturgeon (1988), Boyd (1988), Brink (1989), Brandt (1979), Railton (1986), McDowell (1998) and Wiggins (1987).

⁴ On different cognitivist and non-cognitivist views, see Fisher (2011), Kirchin (2012), Miller (2003) and van Roojen (2015).

⁵ See also (1988b). This approach helps Blackburn to explain weakness of the will. See, e.g., (2006).

⁶ This pragmatist element grows in Blackburn’s recent works, see (2005; 2009; 2010; 2011; 2019).

⁷ In this sense, quasi-realism may be viewed as a branch of functionalism (1990, p. 211).

⁸ A problem, which quasi-realism must deal with and which we have no space to discuss here, is the Frege-Geach problem. Blackburn has changed his view of how to deal with it. See, e.g., (1984b; 1986; 1988a; 1993b; 2006). For more on Blackburn’s quasi-realism, see Brighthouse (1990), Gibbard (1996), Hale (1986), Kirchin (2000), Kölbel (2002, Chapter 4), McDowell (1998), Miller (2003, Chapter 4) and Wright (1988; 1998).

⁹ Blackburn believes that this view has been supported by Horwich (1990), Lovibond (1983) and, a different version of it, by Wright (1992).

¹⁰ See, e.g., (1984a; 1984b, Chapter 7; 1998a, Chapter 3; 1998b; 1999; 2006; 2010; 2012; 2019). Ramsey has certainly been an influential figure in Blackburn’s works as well as his reading of Wittgenstein; the latter manifests itself especially in BW’s endorsement of minimalism about truth. For him, Ramsey has been “both a minimalist about truth and a quasi-realist about many categories of commitment” (1993a, p.7) and “[t]he interpretation that most clearly saves Wittgenstein is the one that construes him as working in the spirit of F. P. Ramsey” (1998b, p.165). As Blackburn mentions in an exchange with me on this chapter, “Ramsey was an early proponent of thinking (a) that what he called a redundancy theory of truth was correct, but (b) that it left the job of better understanding the kinds of proposition that we call true. His work on singular case probabilities is a brilliant example of this combination. When Wittgenstein says in the Preface to the *Investigations* that he owed a huge amount to Ramsey, I take it that it is this combination he had in mind.” Explicating the influence of Ramsey on Blackburn’s philosophy, however, is the subject of an independent investigation.

¹¹ There is an important distinction between minimalism about *truth* and minimalism about *truth-aptness*, which has been brought up by Jackson, Oppy and Smith (1995) to redirect the potential tension between expressivism and minimalism. On this, see Boghossian (1990), Divers and Miller (1994) and Miller (2013).

¹² See also (2009, p. 45). For Blackburn, deflationism can help avoid the charge of relativism. See (1981; 1984b, Chapter 3; 1988b; 1999; 2004; 2012).

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