

EXPRESSING HIS ETHICAL ATTITUDES

An interview with Simon Blackburn.

Av Kalle Grill og Niklas Möller.



Simon Blackburn (b. 1944) is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Cambridge and Fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge. His main contributions have been in philosophy of language and moral philosophy (notably meta-ethics), and among his books are *Spreading the Word* (1984), the collection *Essays in Quasi-Realism* (1993), and *Ruling Passions* (1998). This spring in Oslo (March 27-30) he gave a post-graduate course in meta-ethics, focusing on various aspects of the expressivistic theory he has named Quasi-Realism.

What distinguishes a good meta-ethical theory?

First of all it has to accord with the world, as we believe it to be, so it better be naturalistic in that sense. I don't think it should draw on anything very strange, metaphysically or supernatural, like a deity for example. It has to preserve a great deal of the surface phenomena of ethics. In other words it has to be consistent with many of our practical ways of thinking. It can be revisionary in principle of particular aspects of our current moral worldview, but I don't think that would be a fatal problem. But the more that it is presuming to be revisionary on meta-ethical grounds, the more likely it is that something has gone wrong. So I prefer a fairly conciliatory, a vindictory story which is consistent with our naturalistic picture of the world. That

would be my preferred way of going about it.

In light of that answer, what is the greatest strength of your own theory? Maybe you can introduce your theory a little bit while answering that question?

My own theory, as you know, is called Quasi-Realism, and the quasi bit is that I suggest that we can speak about some things thought to be true by those who call themselves realist as if they were true. I don't think that we need any heavy-duty metaphysics for doing that, so my own theory tries to get everything that puzzled people about ethics on to a non-puzzling basis. It does that by saying that in ethics we are in the domain of attitude where we are expressing attitudes. Attitudes are thought of as akin to desires in the sense that they have a direction of fit to the world that is there in order to put pressure on the choice of action, just as desires put pressure on the choice of actions. Of course, attitudes are much more interpersonal – we put pressure on each other with ethics much more than we do with straightforward desires. The apparatus of ethics, and the way we think in terms of truth, knowledge and objectivity, and the way we worry about things like relativism; all that is explained as a function of our need for social communication, social coordination, social solidarity, and, to use Richard Rorty's term (who sees us

all endlessly discussing, rejecting, accepting, modifying and making claims), our need for doing all the things that make ethics sound like a science.

One thing your theory acknowledges is ethical propositions and truth-values for those propositions. To deny that possibility is one common way to distinguish expressivism from realism. So why do you, as an expressivist, choose to sway from that distinction?

Well, it goes back to what I said earlier about trying to preserve, explain and, if possible, do something to justify the surface phenomena of ethics. We do talk about truth and falsity. We say that people are right or wrong, and we worry about whether we might improve, whether we might ourselves be the victims of various flaws or failures, either in ourselves or in our cultures. In every way we discuss ethics as if we are seeking the truth and sometimes possess it. Expressivists often thought that they had to deny that appearance, and to say that it was illusionary to ask such questions; that they somehow constituted a set of mistakes about ourselves, or that we were in the domain of make-believe or fiction somehow. I want to deny that. I say that those phenomena are perfectly in order, and I don't seek to undermine them. On the contrary, I try to show how you could have them on an expressivist basis. So I'm much more conciliatory, if you like. I'm a non-revisionary expressivist.

One tool that you frequently use to help you establish what you want in your theory is the minimalist notion of truth. It is common to hold that a minimalist notion of truth comes along with a minimalist notion of representation, yet in your theory you seem to demand more than a minimal notion of representation. Can you say something about why you think this is necessary?

You put your finger on a very interesting problem area, and it is a much-contested area too. It has been a subject of a lot of papers especially over the 1990s and into this millennium. Minimalism about truth is the view that there is nothing much to say about the truth-predicate. I want to say that there is a lot to say about the ethical proposition, and how we get to have such a proposition. It may be that the last chapter on truth is very short, but any theorist has to say something about the nature of our moral planes if she is to place propensity for ethics in the natural world. In other words, she must say something about the nature of the ethical propositions we insist on. If minimalism is right, there is no particular problem with adding truth on in the end because that is adding on a free gift. However, I don't think one can take the line of its being free all the way down, so that there will be nothing to be said about

terms which at least bear some affinities with the notion of truth. You mentioned one already: representation. I think the expressivists need to say something about that, because she needs to start off with the claim that we are in the domain of non-representative states of mind to begin with. We are not representing ethical truths; we are doing something different, namely enjoying, or prescribing, or admiring, or expressing approval towards different aspects of the world. So yes, there is a tension there and one has to try something to resolve it. I have a longer story about minimalism but it becomes quite technical as it were.

Another interesting and important topic is the question of objectivity or relativism. You have put a certain amount of energy into showing that the threat of relativism is not there on your account. But still, a lot of commentators and a lot of us students have sensed the possibility for some sort of relativism in the way that you lean on evolutionary accounts and explanations that are based on our being a creature among creatures. Do you think there is something to the intuitions of commentators and students? And if so, is it a threat?

Well, again you put the finger on a set of real concerns. I think the simplest way for me to try to answer is this: people get worried about relativism, just as they worry about truth, and so they present themselves with an image of there being no ethical truth; therefore no opinion is better than any other. That is roughly their idea. And the "no ethical truth" is supposed to be meta-theoretical; it is a thought about ethics. I want to say that there may be a sense in which there is no ethical truth – that would be using truth as realists conceive of it. And because I'm against realism I could express myself like that. But then, when the inference is drawn that no ethical opinion is better than any other, I want to say: "No, some ethical opinions are much better than others." But the standard is not one of conformity to this metaphysically heavyweight idea of truth; it comes from within ethics. Since my standards include things like respect for kindness, respect for promises, respect for property and so on, I will say that an ethic is better insofar as it shares those values. A way of putting it, which is not entirely misleading, is that in ethics we strive for solidarity as much as we strive for truth. That is the way Richard Rorty would put it. I don't quite like that because it has some misleading connotations; it implies that the world is going well just insofar as we are all marching in step, and I don't think that. We are afraid of all marching in step when heading in the wrong direction. So, since we have other values than mere conformity with others, solidarity is not a unique, overriding value. The best way to think about relativism is that, since we have to stand on our own feet, we need to forge our own values.

It does not follow that any way of doing it is equally good. It is in fact very difficult to find a defensible, coherent way of living, which is also imaginatively open, mature and sensible. The most coherent ethics tend to be very simplistic, like the stoic: “don’t feel anything”. Well, that is coherent, but it is not all that admirable. The point is to find a coherent set of admirable values, and that’s very difficult. Once you have set out on that enterprise the thought that we are choosing between lots of different systems goes away; our problem is finding one system, not selecting one amongst many equally good ones, and not being afraid of relativism due to there being many equally good ones saying different things. The brutal truth is that we can’t even find one, let alone the whole mass of equally good different ones. So I see relativism as not constituting a real practical problem. It is a problem that arises from an image of what ethics might be, which I think is illusionary.

That leads quite naturally to our next question: the relation of normative ethics to meta-ethics. Are there any ways of looking at normative ethics that are more plausible than others, or would you say that your view of meta-ethics is compatible with almost any normative ethics?

I think that logically it is consistent with almost any ethics. You could have a very strange set of values and yet think that I was right about the nature of ethics. You could be a stoic, as I have just mentioned. I find stoicism distasteful but that is an ethical distaste; it is an ethical reaction. There is an affinity, to use a deliberately vague word, between naturalist approaches to ethics, such as mine, and so-called teleological or forward-looking, consequential ethics. It is very, very slight but there is an affinity, because if you are a naturalist you are going to think that our propensity for ethics is some kind of adaptation to social living. That is a very bland thing to say but I think it is true. In that case, our liking for rules, regulations, obligations and principles is in a sense conditional: it is conditional upon their use in promoting the ends we have as social animals. And once you have that thought there are limits to the extent you can be wholehearted about absolute prohibitions, come what may. That is, it would be rather strange to say that my dislike for killings is an adaptation that has a very good functional explanation, a very good animal explanation, and yet it overrides the well being of the species to the extent that even if the heavens are going to fall you must not kill. People do take up such an absolutist ethic, but I think it is rather difficult to maintain it given a naturalistic picture of the way in which ethics comes to be. So there is a sort of tension there that has bothered writers from the

conservative or catholic side, like for instance Elisabeth Anscombe. That is why she dislikes naturalistic attempts to explain ethics, and eventually had to recourse to a theory leaning on some kind of divine command, which I think is crazy.

In the example that you have been giving throughout your course you have talked about the pain of dogs or children giving rise to certain duties. These examples sound in my ears as if they might support ethical particularism, a recent theory that has some affinity to your view.

Yes, particularism comes in different strengths. At its strongest I can’t agree with it. The strongest would be that you could never judge a feature or make a verdict on a situation, or even to make a choice unless you have the absolutely whole picture of the situation. And that strikes me as unreasonable. If you took an equivalent view, say from aesthetics, it is true; you can’t judge a painting or a symphony from a fragment. There you need to see the whole thing. But the analogy is misleading because ethics is essentially about choice, and often in situations of choice we obviously don’t know the full story. To take an example: if I have to choose whether to break the promise to grandma and go to the football game, or to keep my promise, I can’t say: “O well, I’m paralysed, so I cannot make that decision until I know the entire situation.” There may be things I need to know but meanwhile many good people would say: “Look if you made the promise, you have to keep it.” We are much quicker to come to verdicts than the particularist would come to acknowledge. But, as I say, particularism comes in various flavours. I think an Aristotelian particularism is very sensible, which holds you open in the sense that you keep looking out for mitigating facts, like excuses or difficulties that may change the verdict of a situation. I tend to find myself very sympathetic to that.

One thinker that you have mentioned often and seem to consider a brother-in-arms, so to speak, is Allan Gibbard. Could you say something about your biggest similarities or about your potential differences?

Well the similarities are very remarkable and I think historical as well doctrinal. We believed ourselves to be working on these issues sort of single-handedly through the 1970s and up until 1985 or so, but then we met and discovered great affinities in where we arrived at. I admire Allan’s work enormously and am very proud to say that he has been very kind about mine. So we do share a great deal. Differences; Allan is slightly more hospitable to certain

kinds of evolutionary approaches than I am. It is not that I am a priori against them, but I think Allan believes that they deliver slightly more than I do myself. I tend to think in terms of culture being that big determinant of ethics, whereas he thinks this in terms of evolutionary adaptation. That is possibly just a difference of stress rather than emphasis. In his latest book [Thinking How to Live, ed. note] he has put the kind of logic that we expressivists need absolutely wonderfully, and provided a possibility-proof to the effect that some of the objections critics have raised over the years were more effectively answered there than in anything I have ever written to answer them myself. So I'm very grateful, and yes, I do regard him as a brother-in-arms. It is not too much to say that I'm very proud about him regarding me as one. In other words we complement each other.

What do you think of holding this course in Oslo? Did you get any interesting impressions or learn anything?

I was very anxious to try to note some things that came up at various points. There is one in mind just now because it came up this afternoon. Somebody was pointing out that I was working under the conditional: "if quasi-realism works as a semantic program, is the right interpretation of it for example fictionalism?" This person pointed out that also for people who think that it does not work as a successful semantic program, it could be interpreted as fictionalism. So fictionalism can come into the picture in two quite different places. That interested me and I have not thought of that as a structure before. Also I got clearer about the relationship between what I call real realism and quietism, so in effect various ways of interpreting the upshot of the program now begin to fall into place better than when I was thinking about them a week ago. So I have learnt something, yes. I always do.

Finally, is there something that you think we should ask and that you would like to answer? You could ask yourself a question and then answer it!

One thing that puzzles me is that a lot of people take themselves to have theories of ethics, so they think they have a standpoint from which expressivism looks very dangerous; a kind of debunking theory. They think of themselves as being in the possession of a more robust and somehow more defensible story about ethics. Often I'm puzzled about where the source of this lies. I think it has got an emotional source; that people need something,

which they feel that the expressivist or quasi-realist is not giving them. It often puzzles me to know what it is that they need. It puzzles me more to know how they think they got it. Some of my opponents in these areas think that they can't be expressivists, saying: "That's out!" I often read their work and think: "Well, it's fine; it's nice, it's civilized stuff, but why do they think that they've got a theory here? They are just telling me that they do ethics!" They are reminding me of the surface phenomenon, but they are not trying to dig below the surface in an explanatory way. I find that very strange, and I would like a story about why people are like that.

The last example brought out a final question from me. It reminds me of John Rawls and his theory of justice where he imagined the potential attacks on his work coming from the left, whereas in fact it was people like Nozick who gave him the hardest work. Who gives you the most trouble?

There is "the different shades of pink" phenomenon: the people in the Labour Party are always fiercest about people who are slightly more or less pink than themselves. There are people, who from the outside look to be more or less indistinguishable from them, that they hate the most. Theories that are sentiment-based and whose authors are very hot against expressivism, such as those of John McDowell and David Wiggins, give a lot of trouble and they have many followers in places like Oxford. That always puzzles me, since, as far as I can see; they are getting to exactly the same place by simply taking shortcuts. Now they may argue that the shortcuts are legitimate, but I don't think they are. In any case, why worry about going the long way around if you are ending up saying more or less the same things? So the opposition from that quarter puzzles me. Oppositions from Kantians are sometimes very firm, and that puzzles me too. Because if you junk the dispensable metaphysics in Kant he is in many respects very much like an expressivist about ethics; he emphasizes things like prescriptions, he emphasizes attitudes like respect for the law, and he does not think about ethics as purely a matter of empirical judgements; indeed, not as judgements about the way of the world at all. In many respects he is like an expressivist. The difference is of course that he thinks there are very strong rational constraints on attitude. Most expressivists don't; they think there is much more freedom in how you pick up attitudes. But that seems also a rather small difference. So Kantians think of themselves as opposing expressivism root and branch; that is a strange problem for me too.