

Simon Blackburn, *Essays in Quasi-Realism*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1993.

Hard philosophical problems often have homely roots. Some of the most intractable puzzles in modern philosophy concern the status of commonplace notions such as right and wrong, possibility and necessity, belief and desire, and cause and effect. Notions like these are puzzling because while they seem indispensable—they seem to be things that ordinary folk need to talk about—it is hard to see what kind of things they could be, what place there is for them in a rigorous naturalistic account of the contents of reality.

Philosophers have four main ways of attempting to deal with these dilemmas. One approach is to reject the naturalism—this might be called the Hamlet plan, for its claim is that there are more things in Heaven and Earth than are dreamt of in naturalistic philosophy. The second option is reductionism, which tries to cash out the problematic “folk” notions in naturalistic terms. The third is expressivism, which says that the folk talk in question is not really about anything in the world, its function being rather to give voice to some attitude or sentiment of the speaker (in somewhat the way that a cheer does, for example). And the fourth is eliminativism, which is the view that the ordinary folk simply get it wrong (and hence that we serious people would do better not to talk that way). None of these approaches seems entirely satisfactory, however. The Hamlet plan seems to many to involve a kind of metaphysical fairy story, while the other strategies seem in different ways to devalue or misrepresent the folk discourse we started with. So disquiet remains—and yet to many in contemporary philosophy there doesn’t seem to be anywhere else to turn.

Simon Blackburn claims to offer us a way out of this rather stagnant and unsatisfactory dialectic. The central idea is one for which he finds precedents in Wittgenstein, Ramsey and especially Hume. It is that we should begin with expressivism—itsself a naturalistic account of why ordinary folk talk in the ways in question—but then show that talk with these origins can properly acquire the trappings of genuine descriptive talk. We should show that its uses may properly be said to be true or false, for example. Blackburn calls the latter stage of the project “quasi-realism”. Though it begins with expressivism, its upshot, in effect, is Hamlet without the metaphysical tears: we explain why we folk talk of “ghosts” (goodness, possibility, chance, causation, or whatever), without compromising our naturalistic principles, and without in any way undermining our right to go on talking this way.

The position is attractive, but delicately balanced, and liable to be attacked from all four corners of the conventional debate. In the papers in this collection, however, Blackburn defends the view with great subtlety against critics from all sides. The papers span nearly twenty years, and although some are well known, it is useful to have them in one volume—especially as Blackburn has not written on quasi-realism in book form. (His *Spreading the Word* (Oxford University Press, 1984) is primarily a more general introduction to the philosophy of language.) In such a rich field it is difficult to nominate favourites, but of the more recent papers, ‘Morals and Modals’ and ‘Losing Your Mind: Physics, Identity and Folk Burglar Prevention’ seem to me to be especially noteworthy. The former contains a particularly fine version of the quasi-realist’s manifesto, while the latter shows Blackburn at his critical best, in an insightful assault on some of orthodoxies of contemporary metaphysics.

As might be expected in unconventional work of this kind, Blackburn spends much of his time simply marking out the ground, and defending his back against more orthodox opponents. But what of the next stage? Is the position ultimately a tenable one, and if so in what final form? One area of concern is Blackburn's account of how it is that expressive discourse properly comes to be treated as true and false. He suggests that although the sentiments expressed in such talk are not true and false in the way that genuine judgements about the world are, they may nevertheless be correct and incorrect in other ways. And this supports a kind of surrogate standard of truth and falsity: 'truth corresponds to correctness in [the expressed] mental states, by whichever standards they have to meet.' (p. 55) However, the nature of these standards may vary from case to case, say from the moral case to the modal case, which threatens to make the account of truth dangerously non-univocal.

Indeed, as Blackburn presents the matter, the different cases seem to involve quite different philosophical stances. In the moral case the relevant standard for attitudes is itself a moral one—some moral sentiments are simply more admirable than others—and therefore itself a proper object of the quasi-realist's attention. In the probabilistic case, however, where the expressivist move is to say that idioms such as "It is probable that ..." are primarily expressions of speakers' degrees of confidence, the standard of correctness is naturalistic: some degrees of confidence lead to behavioural success, and some do not. So already we have two species of quasi-truth, whose similarities mask very different origins and constitutions. And in the background there is also supposed to be "real" truth, of the kind possessed by genuine beliefs and judgements about the world (though which are these?) Aside from their intrinsic inelegance, these case-by-case differences leave weak spots in Blackburn's defences. His Hamletian opponents may charge that quasi-realism gives only an ersatz respectability to non-naturalistic discourse; reductionists may claim that where the standard of correctness is itself naturalistic, quasi-realism amounts to a naturalistic reduction of the topic in question; and so on.

However, it is important to appreciate that even if concerns of this kind are telling against Blackburn's approach, they do not necessitate a retreat to the tired conventional positions. Another option is to move more resolutely forward, applying the quasi-realist strategy to truth itself, in all its uses. (After all, truth too is surely one of the puzzling folk notions with which we began.) Blackburn himself has sometimes canvassed this option, but appears to shy at the thought that there is no solid footing of intrinsically descriptive discourse. The more convincing he makes his case, however, the more plausible it seems that the assumption that there is such a footing is simply a ladder to be kicked away, once the quasi-realist has shown us how to account for the appearances. After all, if a quasi-realist discourse is not a second-rate discourse, then even a quasi-realist science is not a second-rate science. We lose nothing by applying the strategy everywhere, and gain the elegance and stability of a univocal approach.

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