

FICTIONALISM  
IN  
METAPHYSICS

Edited by

Mark Eli Kalderon

CLARENDON PRESS · OXFORD

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UNIVERSITY PRESS

Great Clarendon Street, Oxford OX2 6DP

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Published in the United States  
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First published 2005

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Data available

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data

Data available

Typeset by SPI Publisher Services, Pondicherry, India

Printed in Great Britain

on acid-free paper by

Biddles Ltd, King's Lynn, Norfolk

ISBN 0-19-928218-8 978-0-19-928218-0

ISBN 0-19-928219-6 (Pbk.) 978-0-19-928219-7 (Pbk.)

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*In memory of David Lewis*

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## *Quasi-Realism is Fictionalism*

DAVID LEWIS

Suppose that Simon Blackburn's quasi-realist program (1984, ch. 6, 1988) has succeeded perfectly on its own terms—something I think not unlikely. The quasi-realist has offered a special semantics for sentential expressions of moral attitudes; he has thereby earned the right to echo everything the moral realist says; and he has chosen to exercise that right. He even echoes all the realist says about moral psychology and metaethics, since those opinions are entangled with the realist's moralizing. Now he challenges us (1993b): wherefore am I a *quasi*-realist rather than a *queasy* realist? Once my agreement with the realist is exceptionless, why doesn't that prove that I'm a realist too?<sup>1</sup>

It's clear enough that the special quasi-realist semantics of assertibility conditions differs from the standard realist truth-conditional semantics. But that doesn't help if, once the quasi-realist semantics is perfected, it becomes inapplicable. It's plausible to think that a semantics is right for someone in virtue of best fitting his linguistic dispositions (and not, say, in virtue of fitting his philosophical predilections, making what he's disposed to say come out true by his own lights). Presumably the realist semantics is right for the realist. It best fits his linguistic dispositions. But once quasi-realism has been perfected, the quasi-realist's linguistic dispositions are exactly the same, so the realist semantics best fits them, so it's right for the quasi-realist too.

'Quietists' take Blackburn's challenge to be unanswerable. Others (for instance Fine, 2001) think it is answerable only if we help ourselves to a primitive distinction between truth *simpliciter* and *factual* truth. (Or between facts and \*F\*A\*C\*T\*S\*, or . . . .) I'd like to think there's an easier answer. We shouldn't look for something the realist says that the quasi-realist will not echo. *Ex hypothesi* there is no such thing. Rather, we look for something the

quasi-realist says that the realist will not echo. And when that's what we look for, we find it. So the realist's and the quasi-realist's linguistic dispositions are not, after all, just alike.

There are prefixes or prefaces (explicit or implicit) that rob all that comes after of assertoric force. They disown or cancel what follows, no matter what that may be. Once the assertoric force is cancelled, no amount of tub-thumping will regain it. If you've disowned what follows, it doesn't matter whether you then say just that eating people is wrong, or whether you say it's true in the most robustly realist sense imaginable that eating people is wrong, or whether you say the wrongness of eating people is built into the very fabric of mind-independent reality—whichever you say, it comes pre-cancelled. Here are some examples of disowning prefixes and prefaces.

- (1) According to the pack of lies my opponent has told you. . . .
- (2) I shall say much that I do not believe, starting *now*.
- (3) According to the Sherlock Holmes stories. . . .
- (4) What follows is true according to the Holmes stories.
- (5) Let's make believe the Holmes stories are true, though they aren't.

I classify (1), (3), and (4) as *prefixes*, (2) and (5) as *prefaces*. (So in view of (4), the distinction I'm drawing is not between complete sentences and mere phrases.) When the assertoric force of what follows is cancelled by a prefix, straightway some other assertion takes its place: an assertion, as it might be, about what my opponent's lies or the Holmes stories say or imply. Not so for prefaces. In the case of (5), a replacement is at least suggested, but it is not yet asserted. In the case of (2), no replacement assertion is even suggested.

I think that when the quasi-realist echoes everything the realist says, one sufficient reason why his 'assertions' are quasi-assertions is that they are preceded, explicitly or implicitly, by a disowning preface. That preface is to be found in the endorsement of projectivism that precedes and motivates his advocacy of quasi-realism (Blackburn, 1984, ch. 5). It is something the quasi-realist says that the realist will not echo.

There is a certain distinctive error that Blackburn takes to be characteristic of moral realism. Let us, for convenience, henceforth reserve the name 'moral realism' for a moral theory that is indeed committed to this error. (I myself think that some theories not guilty of the error deserve the name 'moral realism' equally well.) The distinctive error of 'moral realism' says that there are properties, perhaps non-natural properties, such that we can somehow detect them; and such that when we do detect them, that inevitably evokes in us pro- or con-attitudes toward the things that we have detected to have these

properties. ('Inevitably' might mean 'necessarily', or it might mean 'as a matter of exceptionless psychological law'.) *Projectivism* is the view that this is indeed an error; our pro- and con-attitudes actually originate within us as a result of contingent aspects of our psychology and upbringing. Blackburn's quasi-realism is explicitly motivated by the wish to uphold projectivism and to avoid the error it rejects.

By now, morality has been accused of presupposing quite a variety of errors. Most simply, there is the error of supposing that the dictates of morality are divine commands when in truth God does not exist. There is the error of supposing that our moral attitudes are uniform, when in fact they differ widely (Burgess, unpublished). Surely this is indeed an error. To see that it is, we need not consider alien cultures living on remote islands—our friends and neighbors will suffice. Perhaps there is the error of supposing that our underlying dispositions to form moral attitudes are uniform. But it is not obvious that this is an error, since the diversity we observe might be due not to differences in our underlying dispositions but rather to the fact that different ones of us have actualized different ones of our shared dispositions (see Lewis, 1989: 125ff). There is the error of supposing that moral beliefs automatically motivate: one inevitably desires what he judges to be right or good. That is an error, sure enough, as witness the possibility of a sadist enamored of evil for its own sake (Rosen, unpublished). Perhaps there is the error of supposing that moral beliefs automatically motivate the rational: anyone rational inevitably desires what he judges to be right or good. If the rational are those who are good at logic, good at revising their beliefs in the way warranted by their total evidence, and good at serving their desires according to their beliefs, then this is an error, sure enough. But 'rationality' is an elastic notion. If someone sees fit to classify the pursuit of the right and good as an aspect of 'rationality', I am not as sure as I'd like to be that he has exceeded his linguistic rights; and under that usage it is trivially true that moral beliefs automatically motivate the rational. Perhaps there is the error of supposing that the dictates of morality give us reasons for acting regardless of our actual or potential desires (Joyce, 2001). But again I am not sure that this is yet an error, because I am not sure that someone who sees fit to use 'reason' in such an expansive way has exceeded his linguistic rights. I do agree, however, that it is an error to suppose that the dictates of morality give us reasons that are reasons in just the same non-disjunctive sense in which reasons based on serving our actual and potential desires are reasons, so that moral and desire-based reasons can compete for the status of reasons *simpliciter*.



The error Blackburn attributes to 'moral realism' is another error of which morality may stand accused. It overlaps several of the errors previously listed. If it were true, and if all of us were equally capable of detecting the moral properties of things, that would at least tend to make us alike in those of our moral attitudes that are evoked solely by the detection of moral properties; and it would make us still more alike in our dispositions to form such attitudes. If it were true, at least those of our moral beliefs that were evoked solely by the detection of moral properties would inevitably motivate us. If it were true, the question what to say about moral reasons unsupported by actual or potential desire would not arise, because all moral reasons would be supported at least by potential desire.

Morality as such *could* presuppose an error. It consists in part of a (rather ill-defined) system of alleged truths; in part of a practice of appealing to those alleged truths in order to guide one's own conduct or that of others; and maybe in part of other things, for instance a distinctive way of seeing-as. Whatever may be said about the rest of morality, at least the alleged truths might carry presuppositions, and those presuppositions might include one or more of the listed errors (those of them that really are errors). It could be so—but I don't think it is.<sup>2</sup> The system of alleged truths is just too ill-defined.

There are familiar examples of error-ridden theories that could not survive the correction of their errors. Phlogiston theory is one convincing example. The errors are so inextricably involved in the working of the theory that without them it just wouldn't be phlogiston theory (not even if it retained the word 'phlogiston'). Witchcraft theory is a second convincing example. Tapu theory (Joyce, 2001) is a third. Error theorists think that morality is in the same boat.

But other cases of error-ridden theories point in a different direction. The ancient theory of sunrise and sunset posited an absolute vertical: a uniform direction, parallel anywhere to what it is anywhere else, opposite to the uniform direction of gravitational motion. The erroneous ancients thought that when the sun rose, it moved in (approximately) the absolute vertical direction, and when it set it moved in (approximately) the opposite direction. (*How* ancient is this theory? Archaic antiquity. Educated medievals knew better, and so did educated Greeks of classical antiquity.) That was an error, sure enough. But it was not inextricably involved in the working of the theory. Another part of the theory says that when the sun rises its elevation over the horizon increases from zero to nearly a right angle, and when it sets its elevation decreases to zero again. That part (together with what's said about which plane perpendicular to the ground intersects the sun when) is free of error. The ancients believed it, and we believe it too. And this

error-free part of the theory is the part that systematizes our observations, and that explains, for example, the behavior of shadows. Even if we suppose that the error-free part is deduced initially from the erroneous part—and by what right could we attribute that deductive order rather than its opposite to the erroneous ancients?—still the erroneous part soon retires and the derived error-free part does the work from then on. So correction of the error leaves most of the working of the theory intact.

I think that morality is more like the ancient theory of sunrise and sunset than it is like phlogiston theory. There may be errors in morality as such but correction of them is not tantamount to the abandonment of morality. Morality may be erroneous, but not essentially erroneous. I further think that the content of morality is sufficiently ill-defined that we cannot show that any errors are errors of morality as such, and not just the errors of some moralists.

But what should we do if, *contra* what I've just said, we become convinced that the error theorists are right and morality as such does indeed presuppose some error? We might abandon morality, as we have abandoned the error-ridden phlogiston theory. Or we might correct morality so that it no longer presupposes the error, unless correction would be tantamount to abandonment. These are the most straightforward responses, but they are not the only ones and they might not be the best. A more conservative alternative is *moral fictionalism*: we could retain morality, but treat it as a fiction. We could cease to hold it true, but we could make believe that it was true—errors and all. (Compare not holding the Holmes stories true while making believe that they are true, something we do quite often.) Joyce (2001) makes an unexpectedly strong case that moral fictionalism need not be either dishonest or irrational, and that it might be a better way to retain the practical benefits of morality than either abandonment or correction.

The same choice of responses is available if, like me, you think that not morality as such, but only some particular system of morality—as it might be, theistic morality or Moorean morality or Kantian morality or 'moral realism'—presupposes one or another of the errors. Again, you have three choices. You could abandon that system; or you could correct it, unless that would be tantamount to abandoning it; or you could treat it as a fiction, make-believably believing it, errors and all, while at the same time really disbelieving it.

Now we focus our attention in particular on the error of 'moral realism'. I agree that it does indeed presuppose an error, and probably in such a way that correction would be tantamount to abandonment. We can see that quasi-realism and fictionalism are at least very much alike. They share a spirit of

respectful, conservative debunking. They aim at avoiding the error of moral realism; but at the same time, they aim at retaining, unscathed, the error-ridden practice.

(You might take fictionalism or quasi-realism in two alternative ways: as possible revisions of our thinking in response to the discovery of an error, or as descriptions of how we are thinking already. Or there is an intermediate alternative: you might describe us—some or all of us—as being in a state of confusion such that fictionalism or quasi-realism would be the minimal unconfused revision of our present state. These alternatives cut across the purported difference between fictionalism and quasi-realism, so I shall not consider them further.)

Fictionalism is an easy way to achieve the avowed aim of the quasi-realist: to earn, and exercise, the right to echo the moral realist while avoiding his errors. The fictionalist is willing to say everything that the moral realist says, provided that he has first provided his disowning preface:

(6) Let's make believe that moral realism is true, though it isn't.

Thereafter he says just what the realist does, including whatever the realist may say about moral properties and facts, the objective truth of moral judgments, and so on and so forth. But the fictionalist is not asserting what he says, rather he is quasi-asserting it because of his disowning preface. So he is not making the errors he might appear to be making. And the reason why he is a kind of quasi-realist, not a queasy realist, is that he says more than the realist would: he provides his disowning preface, the realist never would.

But I think I can say more: Blackburn's quasi-realism *is* just this kind of moral fictionalism. For Blackburn's quasi-realism does not come out of thin air. (If it did, perfected quasi-realism might indeed be indistinguishable from realism.) It is motivated by the previous discussion of projectivism. One of Blackburn's avowed aims is to earn the right to say what the 'moral realist' does: that means either being or make-believedly being a realist. Another of his avowed aims is to avoid the realist's errors: that means not being a realist. Taking these aims together, he aims to make-believedly be a moral realist. So I think the fictionalist's disowning preface to all that comes after has in fact been provided in Blackburn's motivating discussion. When the quasi-realist goes on to exercise his newly earned linguistic rights, the disowning preface robs all he says of assertoric force. Like the explicit fictionalist, he is quasi-asserting what he seemingly asserts.

If this is on the right track, quasi-realism is a variety of moral fictionalism. It earns the right to agree with all the moral realist says in just the same way

explicit fictionalism does, whether or not it goes on to earn that right twice over by offering its special semantics.

## NOTES

Thanks to Stephanie Lewis for her kind permission to publish this chapter. [Editor].

1. A parallel situation arises in the metaphysics of time. It's famously difficult to distinguish a genuine presentist from a quasi-presentist: a four-dimensionalist who earns the right to echo all the presentist says by insisting that English grammar forbids any use of tenseless verbs. Both alike will deny, for instance, that there are any non-present things. The presentist denies it because he does not believe in non-present things; the quasi-presentist imposter denies it because he thinks—falsely—that it must mean that there are in the present non-present things. Likewise in the metaphysics of modality: we need to distinguish actualists from quasi-actualists.
2. I hope that I have given a fragment of a moral system (Lewis, 1989) that avoids all the listed errors (those of them that are errors) and yet is recognizably still a variety of morality. Values are those properties that we are, under certain ideal circumstances, disposed to value; valuing is an attitude that is connected, but only in a multifariously defeasible way, to desire. My view is a kind of analytic naturalism, though I admit that (like most interesting analyticity) it may be analytic under some and not all legitimate resolutions of semantic indeterminacy. It is a kind of subjectivism, though remote from simpler kinds of subjectivism. It is conditionally relativist: if we turned out to differ in our underlying dispositions to value, 'we' could refer not to everyone, but to as large a uniform population (including the speaker) as we could get away with. Whether my view is realist depends on whether 'realism' is deemed to be committed by definition to the errors that my view is built to avoid.

What I've said so far is of course a very incomplete fragment of morality. For one thing, it needs completion in the light of empirical information about what we are in fact disposed to value under the appropriate circumstances. We can but guess. (An optimistic guess is that what we are disposed to value coincides fairly well with what some of us actually do value.) Settling the question properly must be left to empirical psychologists—presumably those of the distant future.

For another thing, as it stands mine is a theory of the good—of values—and not yet of the right. Let us augment it as follows. When we are disposed to value a certain property, it may happen that having that property (or having it to the fullest possible extent) requires unconditional compliance with certain constraints on conduct. (It might even require unthinking compliance—compliance with no

thought to the advantages of doing otherwise.) If so, I shall say that the constraints built into the value are the obligations associated with that value.

Since this is an account of obligations associated with particular values, it has the consequence that obligations can be as incommensurable as values themselves. That is an inconvenient predicament for us to be in, sure enough; but it is an advantage, not a drawback, of a theory that it finds us to be in that predicament.

Given obligations, we have much else besides. We have permissions: absences of obligations to refrain. And if we also help ourselves to a causal notion of 'seeing to it that' some proposition holds, we have several different varieties of rights (see Kanger and Kanger, 1966).

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