Fictionalism, Quasi-Realism and Pragmatism

Abstract

Moral discourse seems to be realist: it seemingly presupposes that there are objective moral properties, and that our moral language expresses beliefs about these properties. However, the ontology of this realist discourse is non-natural. Contemporary meta-ethics faces a dilemma: either embraces a non-natural ontology or become an eliminativist about morality. The eliminativist price seems too great a price to pay as morality plays an important social role in human life. There are meta-ethical proposals which are trying to find some way to retain our realist discourse without its accompanying undesirable commitments. The most prominent view of this kind is quasi-realism of Simon Blackburn which desires to vindicate our realist-seeming moral talk, but without thereby being committed to any kind of moral ontology. The other anti-realist approach is fictionalism which accepts that our moral talk is as it appears to be, but that it is false – the only reason we should retain the moral talk is due to its usefulness. It has been argued by David Lewis that Blackburn's quasi-realism leads him to fictionalism. The aim of my paper is to critically analyse, why this charge has been made, and if is it a charge which Blackburn can adequately respond to. I will approach this question in the following way. Firstly, I will reconstruct the Lewisian argument for the identification of quasi-realism with fictionalism. Secondly, I will describe and analyse Blackburn's response to this argument. Thirdly, and finally, I will propose two arguments for the differentiation of quasi-realism from fictionalism. My arguments will consist in two claims: (i) Lewis' argument loses its force due to a failure of the 'preface' – 'prefix' distinction in the sense proposed by him when we apply it to quasi-realism; and (ii) Quasi-realism is distinctively different from fictionalism by its pragmatic character.