Values, Virtue, and the Ethical Sportsman

by Gregory Gauthier

The central project of moralists of the various non-realist varieties is to show how emotional responses can be expressed coherently as judgments, without appealing to concepts of truth or falsehood, because – by their own reckoning - a moral judgment cannot refer to anything perceived in physical space. The non-cognitivist has an even heavier burden, because without accounting for value formation, justification for actions simply boils down to whatever emotions motivate the action. One approach to this problem comes to us in the form of Simon Blackburn's 'projectivism'. Blackburn's 'quasi-realist' sketch of projectivism in chapter one of *Ruling Passions* tells us that behaviors are motivated by 'attitudes' formed in response to subjective 'representations' of features of the world that impress themselves upon the senses. I will argue that Blackburn's account of attitudes and representations, in the form of his sportsman analogy, does not support the assertion that emotions are prior to (or, a source for) moral values. At best, he may be able to sustain an account that renders emotions concomitant with values, but his sportsman illustration could just as easily be used to show that emotions are derived from moral values we choose and condition ourselves to. On this basis, I conclude that if moral values are in fact projections of feelings or sentiments onto the world, Blackburn has not demonstrated it convincingly.

To begin his case, Blackburn argues in favor of the famous fact-value distinction and offers an initial mechanical analogy to illustrate this distinction. He compares the 'ethical agent' to a 'device whose function is to take certain inputs and deliver certain outputs.' The input port on this device would receive a 'representation', which is to say, a selected set of identified properties (a 'characterization') of an action or situation or character. The output port would issue an 'attitude', which is to say, a 'favoring of policies, choices, or actions'. The label on the side of this black box would apparently read: 'ethical sensibility'.[1] In order clarify this, and to provide a context within which we can properly 'analyze this organization of input and output', Blackburn deploys the analogy of the sportsman:

> a skilled sportsman… is sensitive to features of the delivery and flight of a ball, and for each way the ball is delivered, makes the appropriate response. A less good player either notices the wrong features, or fails to notice the right ones… The player needed training to learn to separate the important features from the 'noise'… Similarly, the good person has learned to select some features of situations as demanding some responses, and to ignore others as unimportant.[2]

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1 Simon Blackburn. *Ruling Passions: A Theory of Practical Reasoning* (Kindle Locations 132-135). Kindle Edition.

2 Blackburn, *Ruling Passions*, Kindle locations 135-139.

It's fairly clear from this analogy that the previous black box analogy is not meant to imply a deterministic process in the way that Schopenhauer might have conceived it.[3] Indeed, Blackburn warns us explicitly, that the 'input-output' device is not simply a passive 'conveyor belt'. This is important, because it means that our ethical sportsman is not simply a biological machine converting fixed sets of sensible inputs into fixed sets of emotional outputs on some predictable scientific model, such as photosynthesis or digestion. The sportsman is involved in a process of active engagement with the features of the world and works to continuously refine his selection of, and sensibility to, those features. By committing to a regimen of practice and tutelage, our sportsman can tailor his selection process, and his responses to situations, until they are rendered appropriate, by some standard:

> the sportsman's only thought might be that the coming ball needs such-and-such a treatment. Yet, if his response is inappropriate, we need to factor out what it was about the delivery that made him think that, and then perhaps get him to practice a different reaction to balls of that kind.[4]

The first point to be made about this metaphor of moral sensibility, is that the sportsman must already want to do something with the ball, in order for him to respond to its presence. If this fellow is not a sportsman, the movement of the ball into his field of awareness is only going to concern him if it is headed for his face. In other words, the sportsman must already believe that his participation in whatever sport this is, is a goal for him. He must also be committed to participating with a certain degree of excellence before he will be concerned about what responses are appropriate. For the sportsman to be more than a mere passive conveyor-convertor, he must be more than a merely emotional creature, responding instinctively to natural stimuli. He must make a conscious choice, and that requires deliberation. This is made exceedingly clear in the sportsman analogy, with Blackburn's use of phrases like 'appropriate response', and 'notice the right features', and 'training to learn to separate important features from "noise"'. Yet, despite warning us against the deterministic view of the analogy, Blackburn still wants to argue that this filtering process is entirely emotional: 'In the light of emotion things which we would otherwise see become invisible, while others thrust themselves onto our attention'.[5] In other words, for Blackburn, it is a pre-existing emotional state that acts as a filter for the input port. Yet, for the ball to thrust itself upon our sportsman's attention, he must have already made the choice to be a sportsman – indeed, a good sportsman. This is a deliberative process, at least as much as it is an emotional state. To put this outside the analogy: in order to act in ways that are right and good, one must already hold rightness of action and goodness of character as an end. That means committing to it as a goal and organizing a hierarchy of values around that goal. As famously argued by Socrates in *The Gorgias*, if the impetus for

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[3] Schopenhauer, in his famous Prize Essay On The Freedom of the Will, argued for a 'black box' form of the will, in which responses to sense impressions were like sparks flying off a piece of flint struck by metal. Blackburn rejects this explicitly early on.

[4] Blackburn, *Ruling Passions*, Kindle locations 168-170.

[5] Blackburn, *Ruling Passions*, Kindle locations 150-151.

our behavior is entirely emotional, it is unlikely that actual goodness is going to be the result.[6] Thus, the pursuit of the good - whatever we may determine that to be - must at least be as much a rational process as it is emotional, and it must be chosen.

Once we have identified the good, and chosen to commit ourselves to it, there is still the matter of actually achieving it. Aristotle argues that this is done by proper training in the virtues by a good tutor, and that the right moral attitudes are expressions of this training.[7] Returning to our analogy, then, once the sportsman has committed to be a good sportsman, he must be taught what to care about. This happens when he is taught what to focus on. The sportsman forms his attitudes by conditioning himself with appropriate representations of situations, provided by his coaches. This focus on certain features and not others, guided by an expert, is part of the process of learning the virtues of the particular sport in which the sportsman is engaged. The act of focusing on certain features in a situation, as opposed to other features, is an act of conditioning. It directs the mind to what is important, and in the process, impresses a value upon the emotions. Certain features being more valuable than others, the sportsman then has a system of values that filters his experience of the features of the ball. The system of values he forms by this process outfits him with an attitude (a 'disposition', as Aristotle might say) which is appropriate in situations relative to the various attitudes of the ball. In other words, the sportsman conditions himself in what he ought to care about. That disposition can be expressed in terms of goals, both long-term and short-term. Long-term, to win the match; short-term, to master the ball in this particular situation. Blackburn admits as much when he says: *'*It may take the most delicate exercise of observation and imagination to represent a situation to ourselves in ways that even suggest a particular reaction or verdict*'*. This clearly shows that an evaluative process precedes the emotional response (or is, at least, concomitant with it). A 'representation', as Blackburn has presented it in the sportsman analogy, is necessarily a selection or filtering process whereby the full content of phenomenal reality, rather than being suppressed or enhanced by pre-existing emotional states, is pressed through a pre-existent normative sieve in order to form a morally meaningful object of consideration. That, then, is what we respond to emotionally.

Emotions serve to provide feedback relative to various goals that have been set by the ethical agent. Attainment of a goal will result in positive emotional feedback; frustration of a goal will result in negative emotional feedback. Yet, as Aristotle points out, what we want is not merely to be capable of emotions like anger and shame. What matters is being angry at the right time, for the right reasons, and in the right way.[8] To excel as a sportsman, the sportsman needs to be able to evaluate his own strengths and weaknesses, fine tune what he focuses on, and measure his emotional responses against situations, in order to maximize effectiveness on the field. What would set any one representation or attitude apart from any other? There does not seem to be any standard by which to do so on Blackburn's model, though he does argue against trying to eliminate emotions such as guilt and shame because they moti-

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6 Plato, *Gorgias*, beginning at 492d.
7 Aristotle*, Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 2, Chapter 5, Section 4.
8 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* Book 2, Chapter 5.

vate us to act well. This is true, but he offers no explanation of what acting 'well' might mean. Without a standard by which the sportsman can judge himself in the game, he is left with the prospect of being at the whim of his emotions, albeit emotions conditioned by his coaches. But if we concede this, it puts us in a logical bind. Either emotions and values are two different things, in which case there must be a standard by which we can reconcile them; or emotions and values are the same thing, in which case an explanation must be offered for how choice enters the picture. It is not enough to simply wave away determinism by insisting that it is not what you mean. Blackburn does indeed argue, later in the chapter, that our hierarchies of moral values just are a 'a spiral of emotional identifications'. By implication, then, any particular emotional response should be as good as the next. This is quite confusing when juxtaposed against his early defense of the fact-value distinction, and the insistence that the black box is not a deterministic process. The conclusion from this is clear: if the process is ballistic, then no moral values are possible, since - as Blackburn recognizes himself - it would simply be psychological determinism; if the process is not ballistic, then values must precede emotions, and they are the product of deliberative choice.

That said, our sportsman still has the problem of how to organize his values into a hierarchy, even if we take them to precede his emotions. To rescue him from this problem, what is needed is an ultimate or final value. Or, to put it in more archaic terms, a *telos*, or theory of The Good. Against this final standard, whatever it may be (and answering this broader question is beyond the scope of this paper), he can then begin evaluating his values as instrumental in certain situations, and that can be done by means of training and by deliberation. The sportsman's goals, such as 'catching this ball', or 'swinging at that pitch' could be attenuated to consider broader contextual features like the quality of the team he is playing against today, or the rigor of the week's matches, or the arc of the whole season, all in pursuit of a *telos* of, for example, attaining the championship. Emotional responses, then, will play an enormously important role in the evaluative process, offering visceral qualitative information about whether he is actually achieving that broader *telos*, which in turn contribute to re-evaluations along the way. However, absent the deliberative aspect of his desire, characterized by that *telos*, emotions would be merely ballistic phenomena. In that case, for sure, emotions could not be a source of values, let alone *values as such*, because values require an act of choice on what to focus. A doorbell does not chime when I press the button because it values my satisfaction. It simply does what physics predicts it will do when electrical current flows through it. Human emotions on the other hand, far from being behavioral determinates, rather serve as indicator lights on a dashboard that has been preprogrammed like the instruments in an airline pilot's cockpit. Before takeoff, the pilot has to program the instruments with a destination and a flight path in mind. When in the air, if he makes a faulty maneuver or takes the plane off the programmed course, his instruments will blink and squeal at him, until he rights his ship (or, alternatively, reprograms the flight computer). But we would not say that the pilot finds a quiet instrument panel to be a value in and of itself, or that it is his goal to make flight instruments operate quietly. Rather, we say his goal is to fly to a destination - a destination he has decided he wants to aim at - and the instruments, when primed properly, will tell him whether he's achieving that goal or is far off the mark.

In short, Blackburn's sportsman analogy, and his use of it in defense of projectivism, makes a much stronger case for Aristotelian virtue ethics than it does for projectivism. It is true that humans are emotional beings. But it is

also true that we are *intentional* beings, that we are self-conscious of these intentions, and that we are self-reflective of what is present in our consciousness. The non-realists are right to say that values are not intrinsic properties of objects, and non-cognitivists are right to say that we respond emotionally to the situations we find ourselves in. If the story stopped here, we would indeed be no different than most other mammals. But this is obviously not the case. Lowland silverback gorillas do not seek methods for improving their ability to strip leaves from trees or enticing females from other troupes. But sportsmen do engage in such behaviors as employing coaches, watching game films, rehearsing maneuvers, and playing scratch games, all in the hope that this will make them better sportsmen. Aristotle recognized this difference, too. For the lowland silverback, being the best is a pure accident. He is leader of the troupe just because he is the biggest, the loudest, the most aggressive, as a matter of contingent fact. But for the sportsman, *Arete* is a choice, and choice is deliberate desire to aim at a goal.

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