

SYMPOSIUM

Ronald Dworkin

(New York University and Oxford University)

"Objectivity and Truth: You'd Better Believe It"

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7he primary aim of Dworkin's essay is to defend the claim that there are objective moral (and aesthetic or otherwise evaluative) truths against a variety of "external" skeptical challenges. These challenges are "external" because they "offer to justify their skeptical claims -- that these [evaluative] domains cannot provide objective truth -- from premises that are not themselves evaluative." (p. 88)

Following Dworkin, I shall assume that one who believes that a moral (or aesthetic or otherwise evaluative) claim is *objectively* true believes, not just that it is true, but that it would be true even if nobody thought it were true. Most decent ordinary folks believe that plenty of familiar moral claims of the form "x-ing is wrong" are objectively true. They believe, for example, that torturing babies just for the fun of it is wrong and that it would be wrong even if nobody thought so. They believe that morality is, at least in large part, objective.

In Section IV of his article, Dworkin attempts to refute one sort of skeptic about the objectivity of morality. Unlike the "neutral" skeptic that Dworkin challenges earlier in the article, this skeptic denies that torturing babies (or genocide, or slavery...) is wrong. This skeptic denies that there are any objective moral truths because she denies that there are any moral truths at all. She believes that "ordinary morality is...false" (p. 113) and that "our moral opinions and the opinions of those who disagree with us are all wrong because no moral opinions can be right." (p. 122) I shall call this skeptic the "radically revisionary skeptic," or, for short, the "radical skeptic."

Generalizing a bit from what he says on pp. 117-118, I interpret Dworkin to be offering the

following argument against the radical skeptic:

Dworkin maintains that "any reason we think we have for abandoning a conviction is itself just another conviction, and that we can do no better for any claim, including the most sophisticated skeptical argument or thesis, than to see whether, after the best thought we find appropriate, we think it so." (p. 118) He believes that the radical skeptic's argument is bound to fail, since the premises of any such argument could not be "more plausible than what they require us to abandon," where "what they require us to abandon" is the belief that the following are morally wrong: "exterminating an ethnic group or enslaving a race or torturing a young child, just for fun, in front of its captive mother." (pp. 117-118) It is, of course, "startlingly counterintuitive to think there is nothing wrong with genocide or slavery or torturing a baby for fun." (p. 118)

Although Dworkin says that "[i]f you can't help believing something, steadily and wholeheartedly, you'd better believe it" (p. 118), he does not rest his case merely on the fact that our beliefs about the wrongness of torture, genocide, and the like are more strongly held than the premises of any radical skeptical argument. Unexamined prejudices and superstitions might also be more strongly held. Dworkin maintains that our moral beliefs about torture and the like gain support by virtue of their coherence in a state of "reflective equilibrium" with a range of other moral beliefs, including our abstract moral principles as well as our intuitions regarding concrete cases. Of course, there is only so much mutual support that moral beliefs can offer one another. The whole enterprise of coherentist justification of moral beliefs by other moral beliefs would collapse if these mutually reinforcing moral beliefs were to come into conflict with our most well-justified scientific (or historical, or mathematical...) beliefs. Drawing an analogy, Dworkin maintains that an astrological prediction would not be justified merely by its extraordinarily tight fit with so many principles of astrology if it also happens to fly in the face of good science. But Dworkin maintains that, since "morality and the other evaluative domains make no causal claims," moral and evaluative beliefs cannot be embarrassed by science in the way that astrological beliefs can. (p. 120) In this regard, morality, unlike astrology, is a "distinct, independent dimension of our experience, and it exercises its own sovereignty." (p. 128)

Having summarized Dworkin's method of refuting the radical skeptic, I shall now raise some objections.

Given Dworkin's aim of vindicating belief in the *objective* truth of moral claims (as opposed merely to belief in the truth of moral claims), a refutation of the radical skeptic does not get him very far. He also needs to refute a more formidable foe, whom I shall call the "modestly revisionary skeptic," or, for short, the "modest skeptic." The modest skeptic believes in moral truths. She believes, for example, that one speaks the truth when one says that torturing babies or slavery or genocide is wrong. Yet she denies that these truths are objective. In other words, she denies any *objectivity-implying* moral claim of the form "x-

ing would be wrong even if nobody thought so." Hence, she denies that torturing babies or slavery or genocide would be wrong even if nobody thought that they were wrong. She is akin to the subjectivist about the gustatory who believes that one speaks the truth when one says that chocolate is delicious but who denies the counterfactual claim that chocolate would be delicious even if nobody thought it were delicious because it instead struck everybody as disgusting.

I assume that Dworkin would agree that he needs to refute the modest as well as the radical skeptic. But I conjecture that he would argue that the very method he employs to refute the radical skeptic could also be employed to refute the modest skeptic. He would argue that the premises of any such modestly skeptical argument "could not be more plausible than what they require us to abandon," where what they require us to abandon is not the difficult-to-deny claim that torturing babies, slavery, and genocide are wrong but rather the somewhat more controversial, objectivity-implying claim that they would be wrong even if nobody thought they were wrong.

In order to determine whether Dworkin's method of refuting the radical skeptic could refute the modest skeptic, let us suppose, for the sake of argument, that people believe the following:

The raw innards of sea urchin are objectively disgusting to the taste in the following sense: they would be disgusting even if they did not strike any human being as disgusting.

Eating with one's fingers is objectively gauche in the following sense: it would be gauche even if it did not strike any human being as gauche.

Imagine that people really thought these things about sea urchins and eating with one's fingers and that these objectivity-implying beliefs were held with something approaching the degree of conviction with which we actually hold objectivity-implying belief about the torturing of babies, genocide, slavery, and the like. However much they insisted that these strongly-held beliefs were internal to the domains of the gustatory and of etiquette -- which, I remind you, also happen to be autonomous and sovereign and do not compete with empirical science -- these beliefs would, I suspect, nevertheless be unjustified. Even if people couldn't help believing, "steadily and wholeheartedly," in the objectivity of the gustatory and of etiquette, they would, I suspect, nevertheless be unjustified in rejecting the following truths: something's being delicious or disgusting consists of nothing more than its disposition to strike people as delicious or disgusting, and something's being gauche or proper consists of nothing more than its conformity or lack thereof to the practices of a given culture. Although I doubt that there are many members of our own society today who believe in the objectivity of the gustatory and of etiquette, I suspect that a great many of the inhabitants of the upper and middle classes in Victorian England

believed (or, at the very least, would have affirmed if asked), "steadily and wholeheartedly," the above (indented) objectivity- implying claims about sea urchins and eating with one's fingers. These beliefs gained support from many of their other convictions regarding taste and etiquette and did not come into conflict with the empirical science of their day. Nevertheless, these beliefs were not justified.

Dworkin would, I think, agree that the deliciousness of food and the gaucheness of table manners are subjective (or intersubjective) properties of food and behavior and that we would not be justified in believing that they were objective even if we firmly believed that they were objective in the manner just described. (He says, on p. 426n26 of *Law's Empire*, that he would hold a "silly view" if he "really did think the superiority of rum raisin [to other flavors of ice cream] was an objective fact of the matter and not just my subjective taste.") But Dworkin might add that it is no accident that, on the one hand, we do not (or at least no longer) have searingly intense objectivity-implying beliefs about taste and table manners and that, on the other hand, we do have such intense beliefs about morality. Dworkin might maintain that the best explanation of this difference is that our moral beliefs are sensitive to the genuine objectivity of moral value, whereas the absence of similar beliefs in the domain of taste and table manners reflects the subjectivity (or intersubjectivity) of taste and table manners.

I fear, however, that something like the following hypothesis might provide a better explanation of the presence and strength of objectivity-implying moral beliefs and the absence these days of objectivity-implying beliefs related to taste and table manners. The stability and long-term survival of societies require the internalization of strongly-held norms against such things as killing and torturing, and these norms would not be sufficiently strong to provide the requisite stability if people believed that they were merely a social construct rather than objectively valid. Those societies in which such norms were absent would be selected against in Darwinian fashion. But there is no similar social necessity for objective norms about taste and table manners. Consider the following remarks of John Mackie along these lines:

Moral attitudes themselves are at least partially social in origin: socially established -- and socially necessary -- patterns of behaviour put pressure on individuals, and each individual tends to internalize these pressures and to join in requiring these patterns of behaviour of himself and of others. ...We need morality to regulate interpersonal relations, to control some of the ways in which people behave toward one another, often in opposition to contrary inclinations. We therefore want our moral judgements to be authoritative for other agents as well as for ourselves: objective validity would give them the authority required.... But aesthetic values are less strongly objectified than moral ones; their subjective status ... will be more readily accepted, just because the motives for their objectification are less compelling. (*Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, pp. 42-43.)

In short, perhaps morality is no more objective than taste or table manners, but we think it is simply because of the social necessity to do so that I have just described.

Dworkin might be tempted to respond in the following fashion. Our confidence upon due reflection in the premises of such a speculative, skeptical argument could not be greater than our confidence upon due reflection in the objectivity-implying belief, e.g., that torturing babies would be wrong even if nobody thought so.

Such a response would, I think, be too quick. The skeptical argument that I have presented is not an attempt to refute the claim that morality is objective by means of supplying an argument whose contrary conclusion that morality is not objective can be deduced from premises that are held with greater confidence upon due reflection than the confidence upon due reflection with which we hold various objectivity-implying moral beliefs about torture and the like. It is not an attempt to overwhelm strongly held beliefs with more strongly held beliefs to the contrary. I concede that the odds would favor Dworkin in any such contest. Rather, it is an attempt to show that the *apparent strength* to which he would appeal of the aforementioned objectivity-implying moral beliefs can be explained away as a socially necessary illusion. It is therefore an attempt to debar Dworkin from appealing to the strength of our objectivity-implying moral beliefs in his refutation of the skeptic.

The following example might offer some support for what I have just said. Suppose that I am at a party. Out of the blue, I find myself in the incredibly powerful grip of the following disturbing thoughts: the universe is essentially a vast, dark, cold expanse of nothingness, human existence is pointless, and my own life is not worth living. My friend assures me that I shouldn't worry, since this is probably nothing more than a drug induced melancholia that will disappear in a few hours. He notes that it's not unknown for people to slip LSD into drinks at parties like this. Wondering whether my pessimism is justified or simply a drug-induced delusion, I check to see whether it coheres with my other beliefs about the value of things. Indeed it does, since a pessimism pervades all of my evaluative beliefs by now. I check to see whether my dark view of the world comes into conflict with any of my scientific beliefs. With the possible exception of my friend's hypothesis, I can see that science offers no refutation of my existential angst. Even after due reflection, the strength of my beliefs that the universe is absurd and life is meaningless is far greater than the strength of even my friend's (let alone my own) belief that I'm just on a bad acid trip. Neither my friend nor I has any hard evidence to back up his speculative, skeptical hypothesis. We don't have any hard evidence that there is somebody at this particular party who is slipping LSD into people's drinks. But I have an overwhelming and unshakable belief in the meaninglessness and emptiness of existence itself. I remember Dworkin's advice that if, upon due reflection, "you can't help believing something, steadily and wholeheartedly, you'd better believe it." So I believe it. But I shouldn't, since (as I eventually discover) it is just a drug-induced delusion, and I'm not justified in appealing to the overwhelming strength of my drug-induced beliefs as a refutation of my friend's less

strongly held skeptical hypothesis. It's not as if my friend's skeptical hypothesis would have been justified only if the drug has instead induced a rather tentative belief in the meaninglessness of existence -- a belief more tentative than the skeptical hypothesis itself.

**Back to
SYMPOSIUM
page**