

# SYMPOSIUM

**Ronald Dworkin**

(New York University and Oxford University)

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

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Dworkin's paper is long, but the central claim can be put surprisingly briefly. Consider the following three theses (p. 92; I abbreviate slightly):

1. Genocide in Bosnia is wrong, immoral, wicked, odious.
2. These opinions are true, and we know them to be true.
3. These are all objective matters.

These three illustrate something Dworkin thinks we all believe: the '*face value view*' of morality. His central claim is that each of these three can have only an 'internal' reading, according to which they make moral remarks and are to be assessed as such. They none of them stake out a second order, or metaethical position. (3), for example, is equivalent 'in ordinary discourse' to the claim that genocide in Bosnia would have been wrong whatever people thought about it (p. 98). This, in turn, is a moral remark, not one from an essentially distinct philosophical or second-order theory. In fact, (2), and (3) are naturally read as 'emphasizing' (p. 98), or 'repeating or clarifying or supplementing' the original claim, with the clarification or supplementation being versions of the subjunctive conditional just quoted.

I was pleased to find this exact repetition of, for instance, p. 4 of the introduction to my *Essays in Quasi-Realism*. Indeed, although he does not acknowledge it, and the editors of *Philosophy and Public Affairs* presumably did not know it, Dworkin's central technique—that of insisting that what appear to be 'external' or philosophical questions, about the mind-dependency of values are heard only in an 'internal' sense, demanding answers to be given from within the enterprise of judging values—is a claim I have often

made, and indeed I rather thought I had pioneered, back in 1980. And as Dworkin now says, and like Ramsey I have said for many years, the theoretical temperature should remain the same whether we say 'slavery is bad', or 'it is true that slavery is bad', or 'it is really true and corresponds to the world that slavery is bad', or the like. Call this *metaethical minimalism*. There is not a self-extracting ladder of philosophical ascent here. So people cannot rely on their ordinary (moral) reactions to propositions couched in these terms to make allegedly theoretical, philosophical capital. We shall see later that Dworkin has only half absorbed this lesson, but it is a good one.

The agreement goes on and on. Like me, Dworkin is now mistrustful of secondary-quality theories of moral properties, once so prevalent in Oxford. Like me, he sees no prospect of coherent primary quality theories of them. Like me he thinks that many 'externalist' positions, such as Platonism, fail to show their own coherence, and that many writers have thought that inverted commas and capital letters suffice to identify versions of 'realism' from which they dissent. He is no skeptic about ethics but like me thinks that we have quite a lot of moral knowledge. He denies that the 'morality of the face value view needs non-moral foundations' (p. 127), and I too have always insisted that it takes a value to make a value, and to undermine one as well. Dworkin also echoes my doubts about the philosophical interest of property identity claims (see, e.g. *Essays in Quasi-Realism*, pp. 180—181, and pp. 198—209). It was also cheering to find him admitting an inherent connection between recognizing a value and motivation (p. 116), although I am not quite so confident as he is that a Davidsonian thesis about interpretation finally explains the connection.

It was good too to find Dworkin realizing that, given so much minimalism, people who might sound quite like himself can find they have no place to stand (p. 126). These are theorists, who strive to give more 'metaphysical resonance' to claims about objectivity and truth than they will bear, en route not to denying them to moral commitments, but to applying them. They think it is important semantically or metaphysically or in the philosophy of mind to say things like (3). It is essential to realize that for a minimalist like Dworkin there can be no such resonance. If Ramsey's path is horizontal in one direction, it is horizontal in both.

Dworkin's courtroom style requires finding opponents: the dire 'archimedean', who inflate 'objectivity' and the rest, in order to deny them to moral commitments. But it is really not at all clear what makes an 'archimedean', nor why the term is appropriate. Was Descartes an archimedean? Was Hume? Is the *Third Critique* an archimedean work about aesthetics? Was Wittgenstein an archimedean about mathematics or necessity (or ethics or psychology?). We at least have one bearing: Rorty is an arch-archimedean, apparently. But once we have thoroughly understood the minimalism that they share, it is very hard indeed to tell the difference between Dworkin and Rorty. After all Rorty is similarly, and above all, concerned to pull the rug from under discussions couched in terms of philosophically heavyweight or 'robust' notions of objectivity and truth, knowledge and fact. This is just

what Dworkin is announcing as done. The remaining difference, if there is one, seems to be one of mood. Like Montaigne, Rorty retreats to the countryside, with commitments, but with a certain aesthetic detachment about them. Dworkin wants to stay in the metropolis, arguing the rights and wrongs of this and that. I think the real difference is that Rorty is not so sanguine that you can sanitize the old vocabulary as easily as Dworkin thinks, and I shall soon show that in this he would be right. But remember that, rather than 'Objectivity and Truth: You'd Better Believe It', Dworkin's title might as well have read 'Slavery is wrong: you'd better believe it', or, given that the apparent threat seems a little vulgar, just 'Slavery is wrong', or, since we are not really talking about the wrongs of slavery, perhaps 'Slavery or abortion or genocide or... is wrong or right or indeterminate' (p. 137). There is nothing to frighten Rorty there.

It is clearly essential to Dworkin's position that he really can emancipate himself and us from any lingering second-order taint—any view that the face value represents a second-order claim presented in terms of robust, metaphysical notions. But there is good reason, indeed decisive reason, to doubt whether he has entirely removed the metaphysical taint. Notice for instance that he thinks the face value view is 'full-blooded' and 'shameless' (p. 127). But what can this mean? There is nothing full blooded or shameless about saying that genocide is wrong, or even repeating it, banging a drum. But also when it suits, he very clearly interprets the face value view as containing views about morality. Otherwise, why could he possibly think that expressivists, who do have a view about morality, are held to require revision of what 'people' think (p. 109)? If people's thoughts are entirely confined to the moral then there is absolutely nothing revisionary about expressivism. Expressivists aren't in favor of genocide. Once the face value views are interpreted, as Dworkin interprets them, as repetitions or emphatic ways of reaffirming moral convictions and the standards with which to hold them, I have no reason at all to be skeptical about them, and neither have others like Gibbard or Hare.

So it seems that the actual value of the face value view is not, in Dworkin's mind, exactly what he thinks it ought to be. And there are probably other people who try to give it more metaphysical resonance. These people may be sensitive to a historical deposit the terms bear. They may have thought that they were succeeding in making further claims: notably ones that explain or underwrite or justify their moral judgments, or more probably ones that explain or underwrite or justify their right to think of them as judgments, rather than as mere sounding off (Kant's problem with judgments of taste). It is an empirical question whether anybody putting forward the claims of the 'face value' does think this. But unless Dworkin himself invests the face value view with more than minimal metaethical commitments his discussion of expressivism is unintelligible.

There is one part of his paper where Dworkin tries to grapple directly with my views (pp. 111 - 112). He is right that I 'must find some external statements of the right kind with which to declare [my] own projectivism or non-cognitivism'. (For the record I should say that I for many years strenuously opposed the label 'non-cognitivist', and again, it is

obvious that finding the label appropriate is a prime symptom of failing to stand by the advertised minimalism.) My view is that the right place to start, in considering ethical commitment, is with its essential function, the function without which it loses its identity, which is that of motivating action (as we have seen, Dworkin seems to agree); that given this function something equivalent to Kant's antinomy of taste confronts us; and that the way to disarm it (to show how the moral judgment is possible, in Kantian terms) is to explain the nature of the moral proposition in a certain way. As Dworkin presumably knows, I have approached this problem, as Gibbard and Hare have done, in ways that require quite delicate work in the philosophy of logic and language, including the work on interpreting subjunctive conditionals that he now appropriates. But it is in my view premature to say whether the suggestions I have made on these matters stand up or not.

Dworkin fails to recognize that this is an explanatory project, not an adversarial one. It is not, for me, primarily a matter of locating something (Platonism, for instance) that I dissent from: it is a matter of understanding the nature of the moral judgment, and of exploring and explaining our right to the propositional attitudes it supports. In this, for instance, I am following Ramsey's exploration of probability, Kant's exploration of the judgment of taste, and of course other naturalized epistemologists such as Hume and Wittgenstein.

Now, there is certainly a fashionable way of pretending that any such project is invisible. This is to confiscate, successively, all the words that could be used to describe it. In his remarks on Wright, Dworkin indicates that this is the line he would take. But first it is not as plain sailing as he thinks, and second, it is consistent with the expressivist and quasi-realist package. Indeed it arguably depends upon it. To take just one problem: as Anscombe said, and Michael Smith and others have made clear, 'representation' suggests one direction of fit with the world, while 'motivational state' suggests the other. So one might have thought that it is not just a question of inflating a term like 'representation' to cover ethical commitment, but of showing that one has a *right* to do so given the different functional essence of the state expressed—which is the very project the quasi-realist is pursuing. In fact Rorty correctly perceived that the approach of my 'Truth, Realism, and the Regulation of Theory' would be a useful support of his minimalist pluralism. He saw immediately that the claim, that 'realism, in the disputed cases of morals, conditionals, counterfactuals, or mathematics, can be worth defending only in an interpretation that makes it uncontroversial' was what needed to be established for his position to go through (Rorty, *Prospects for Pragmatism*, p. xlv). It is good that Dworkin has now arrived at the same point.

If an expressivist has to locate himself against an adversary, in order not to disappear from Professor Dworkin's world, then what I am against is this: thinking that taking seriously the motivational and other practical states as those that ethics exists to express, requires 'reform' of the face value of ethics. This is a proposition which, as we have seen, Dworkin certainly does hold, but, thankfully, his only reason for doing so is the lingering belief in

metaphysical resonance that he officially denies.

Dworkin tells us (p. 128) that his position has important implications for morality, although he does not tell us what they are. I could not myself see what they might be. After all, he has, directly, no view about morality. He asserts various moral claims, and he asserts the third-order view that there are no philosophical, second-order theories, about morality's aptitude for truth or objectivity. So I found myself worried by the note of uplift at the end of the article. Who knows whether the people, depressed and unconfident, are likely to be grateful for this ceremonial return of words like 'objectivity' and 'truth'? They might think that with the resonances gone, they have been offered only a mocking corpse. As far as the people go it is, after all, only mood that separates Dworkin from the postmodernists he despises. But there is one more fear to express. When he comes close to locating his targets, Dworkin becomes positively incoherent with scorn: his enemies are people who think that 'even our most confident convictions' are 'just our convictions' (p. 87), or who identify 'instinct, imagination and culture' as having some shaping influence on the ethics we hold (p. 87) or who think that our convictions are just 'steam from the turbines of our emotions' (p. 139; turbines actually run on steam, they do not produce it). Now why is it so bad to think that our convictions are just our convictions, and indeed has Dworkin told us any more (how could he, when that 'just' has nothing with which it can be contrasted, so his alleged target is, in his own mouth, a tautology?). And why so bad to think that instinct, imagination and culture play a role in determining them? 'Instinct' is not a biological category most theorists work with, but would our ethics be better if imagination and culture had no such role? Does Dworkin want unimaginative and uncultured ethics? Pondering this, I begin to think that the real agenda is not cognitivism or realism or objectivity, but rather the need to defend a kind of arid legal intellectualism. Lawyers are happy with certain sources of authority: texts, and the best theories of them. They cannot happily work with emotions, instinct, imagination and culture. And that in turn may be, to echo Dworkin's words, part of what makes their incursions (there are honorable exceptions, of course) into philosophy so wearying, pointless and unprofitable, and the prominence they get such an indicator of the leaden spirits of our age.

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