



SYMPOSIUM:

Ronald Dworkin

(New York University and Oxford University)

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

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Ronald Dworkin says he does not believe in the metaphysics of morality. He is a 'quietist' about this issue. He thinks that there are no coherent 'external' or 'archimedian' questions that we can raise about the whole discipline of moral thought and talk, and that the only questions we can raise are 'internal' ones about what moral thoughts we should think. Dworkin thinks that *some* metaphysical debates can go ahead, it is just the metaphysics of morality that is ill-gotten. This is because those other areas of thought involve causal claims about the origins of our thought, as part of their content; but moral thought does not (p. 119). So Dworkin thinks that religious and astrological thought can be assessed in terms of the causal claims they make, but moral thought is not the *kind* of thought which can be assessed in that way. But is moral thought really answerable to nothing except itself? How convenient for it! Furthermore, does this unanswerability generalize to *any* form of thought which does not involve causal claims? For example, is the attempt to give mathematics a foundation misguided and worthy of the derision that Dworkin heaps on meta-ethics? Are morality and mathematics as it were free-floating modes of thought held up by nothing? Even if Dworkin is right that some forms of thought are not to be measured in causal terms, the idea that they are answerable to *nothing* is bizarre.

Dworkin's central strategy is to take sentences which one might think expressed external metaphysical claims and show how they can be given an internal interpretation -- as a claim from within the kind of thought or discourse. This strategy is, of course, one which Simon Blackburn pioneered as one aspect of his 'quasi-realist' program. External claims are about the nature of our moral judgments and about what makes them succeed or fail.

But internal questions ask about the permissibility of abortion and the like. So, on the face of it, they seem like very different kinds of claim. And despite forceful assertion, Dworkin fails to argue that there are no distinctively external or archimedean questions about morality, whether skeptical or affirmatory. He assumes that the burden of proof over the question of whether there is an external sense is with the other side. But merely showing that certain claims *can* be read internally does not by itself show that they *must* be -- that there is no coherent external sense.

The internal reading plays a different dialectical role in Blackburn's work. Blackburn treats "Kicking dogs would be wrong whatever we thought about it" as a substantive claim so as to show that the distinction between realism and projectivism cannot be characterized in terms of *those* claims, and so our tendency to assent to those claims provides no support for realism. Blackburn's use of the internal reading is defensive. The fact that an internal reading of mind-independence is possible defuses the objection that projectivism makes the truth mind-dependent. Unlike Dworkin, Blackburn does not try to show that *only* an internal reading of mind-independence is possible. In order to reach the conclusion that there is no intelligible realism debate, one must make an inductive inference and arrive at the proposition that there is *no* way to mark that distinction. Quietism will not follow if there is some other way to carry on the debate. Just because a projectivist can say that there are moral truths and that the truth is independent of what we think, that need not lead to metaphysical despair. Like too many others, Dworkin asserts that Blackburn's projectivism undermines itself at this point. But this is a mistake. For Blackburn, it is considerations of *explanation* that give sense to realism issues. Roughly, the issue is whether our F judgments are causally responsive to an F reality.

The point of appealing to considerations of the explanation of moral thought is that the explanation of our moral thought need not be *transparent* to those who deal in moral concepts and think in moral terms. The philosophical methodology here involves a shift from a methodology of conceptual analysis to one of explanation. Those who see philosophy as conceptual analysis will inevitably be blind to the program. Conceptual analysis might tell us that moral judgments aspire to truth, that moral judgments should obey normal logical canons, that a supervenience constraint holds, or that the moral truths are independent of what we think. But the question of the psychological story underlying such a practice is another matter, which need not be transparent to those who moralize in accordance to these conceptual requirements. It is this kind of enterprise that Dworkin overlooks.

(Dworkin's blindness to issues of explanation is systematic. For example, Dworkin misdescribes Mackie's relativity argument precisely by missing the fact that the argument does not hinge on the mere variation in moral judgment but on the *explanation* of the variation (p. 113). And Dworkin's interpretations of Mackie's metaphysical and epistemological queerness arguments are not the obvious ones, so Dworkin fails to do justice to these important arguments. Mackie is asking about the explanation and epistemic

status of moral judgments and about the metaphysics of moral properties. A tone of dismissiveness cannot silence central questions of this sort.)

Dworkin objects to naturalist theories, by expressing skepticism about the idea that moral properties themselves impinge on our moral judgments in an unmediated way. He calls this the 'moral field theory'. I happen to agree that moral naturalism faces problems here. But the issue turns on considerations to do with supervenient causation, and Dworkin does nothing to finesse the complexities of the issue. Still, it is good to see some old fashioned metaphysics being done! But what is puzzling about Dworkin's objection is that it is not just that he thinks that the moral field theory is *false*, which it may well be, but that "no one believes that about morality..." (p. 105). But this is irrelevant. The explanation of why we hold certain moral judgments need not be transparent to those who think in that way. Compare perception. The Greeks could see perfectly well even though some of them had false theories about how it was that they saw. Similarly, ordinary folk can moralize without having to know the true explanation and nature of moral thought.

Maybe there is a contrast here with our thought about the external world and the past, although it is not the contrast that Dworkin has in mind. To some extent (but only to some extent) the explanation of our thought about the external world and the past is built into our forms of thought. So we know that our judgments are caused by what they are about. This is included in our concepts of perception and memory. But this is not the case in our moral thought. Maybe we just *make* moral judgments, and we don't have theories about their nature and origin. This contrast is not the one that Dworkin finds -- that moral thought has no explanation at all.

Just how far does Dworkin want to go in his meta-ethical quietism? We can imagine someone wanting to deny that an interesting debate can be cast, say, in terms of whether there are moral 'facts' or 'truths'. But what about the issue over whether moral *judgments* are cognitive or non-cognitive? Does nothing really hang on whether moral judgments should be categorized as beliefs or some other kind of state? The categories of belief and desire are hardly ones invented by philosophers. Is there no interesting distinction between beliefs and desires such that we can ponder whether moral judgments are more like one or the other? Surely that would be an extravagant conclusion. But if that issue is a genuine one then the metaphysical questions are not so far away. Why refuse to philosophize when there are substantive issues to be discussed?

Here's another question: what explains the normativity built into moral thought (the fact that we aim to make the right judgments)? The moral concepts themselves will not tell us; they just *enshrine* that normativity. Moral realists offer an answer. Blackburn offers an answer. Kantians offer an answer. But Dworkin does not see the question. There is somehow nothing to be explained. But this is just to ignore the philosophy.

For Dworkin, the practice of moral judgment has no explanation. It has no need of justification. There is no issue about whether moral judgments are more like beliefs or desires. And the normative aspiration of moral judgment needs neither explanation nor justification. This is obscurantism. Moral judgments are like miracles only worse. They are completely anomalous -- like miracles without God.

But there is another tendency in Dworkin. Dworkin says that religious or astrological judgments are like scientific judgments in that they are subject to tests of reliability, and in this there is a contrast with moral judgments. We might note that Sturgeon and Co. will deny this and Dworkin presents no argument against them, but let us put that to one side. The point is that Dworkin clearly holds a substantial metaphysical position, although he thinks he doesn't. And in this he keeps company with all those who affect to eschew metaphysics. Dworkin thinks that scientific judgments are subject to tests of causal reliability (translation: are beliefs, true in virtue of states of affairs which cause the beliefs) whereas moral judgments have some other role. Moral judgments, he thinks, are not fact-stating in the sense that they are causally responsive to the facts. Dworkin gives no hint of a positive view of moral judgments beside their *not* being causally-responsive-beliefs. He is shy about that. But Dworkin clearly *has* metaphysical, external, archimedian views. Those who preach abstinence, metaphysical or sexual, can often be found sinning against what they preach. Dworkin is in his terms a 'neutral archimedian skeptic' in denial. I urge him to admit it.

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