

# SYMPOSIUM

**Ronald Dworkin**

(New York University and Oxford University)

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

*Philosophy & Public Affairs*, vol. 25, Spring 1996, pp. 87-139




REPLY BY

Ronald Dworkin, *Oxford and New York University*

[75322.3100@CompuServe.com](mailto:75322.3100@CompuServe.com)

Posted 4/9/97

 Blackburn doesn't like lawyers, but he adopts the familiar lawyer's device of arguing in the alternative. He says that I am dead wrong, and besides he said it first. The second claim is sad and false. I have been arguing for the main theses of my article for twenty-five years, in a variety of seminars, lectures, articles and books. Nor is there much overlap between our positions: in fact, as his arguments show, our views are dramatically opposed.

I said that Blackburn's "quasi-realist" defense of his "Humean projectivism" is self-defeating for the following reason. Suppose he agrees, as he says he does, that the various philosophical positions that his projectivism might be thought to oppose -- the supposedly second-order view that moral judgments are "descriptive" of an "independent moral reality," for example -- can themselves only be understood as first-order, substantive moral views of the kind he says projectivism has no quarrel with. Then projectivism cannot identify any position it opposes: it has left itself no world to bustle in.

Blackburn says that this argument misunderstands his philosophical project which is only an "explanatory" one that aims at "understanding the nature of the moral judgment and explaining our right to the propositional attitudes it supports," and that requires "quite delicate work in the philosophy of logic and language." It is not immediately clear what "explaining" this "right" would mean, however. If my right to the attitude of belief toward the proposition that ethnic cleansing is wrong were challenged, I could only defend that right by providing substantive moral arguments why ethnic cleansing is wrong. But that would not involve any philosophy of language, and Blackburn plainly has something else in mind. His reference to Kantian antinomies, and to the supposed puzzle about

motivation, suggests what it is. He proposes to defend our right to hold firm to our moral opinions in the face, not of moral objections, but of various philosophical puzzles.

The motivation puzzle, which he offers by way of example, is a useful one. Most of us think three things. First, that our moral convictions are beliefs about facts (such as the fact that ethnic discrimination is morally wrong) that are independent of our own will or desire or motives, and that our moral convictions are true when they correctly report those facts and false when they do not. Second, that these moral beliefs have inherent motivational force of their own, that is, that no one really believes an act to be morally obligatory (except, perhaps, if he suffers from some mental pathology) unless he feels at least some actual motivational tug toward that act, whatever other, independent, motives for choosing or avoiding it he might have. Third, that no belief about a mind-independent state of affairs can have any inherent motivating force of its own: that it is only contingently true, for example, that my belief that a liquid is poison moves me to avoid drinking it, since I may not be so moved if I want to die.

These three propositions are in apparent conflict: if there are mind-independent moral facts, and our moral convictions are properly understood as beliefs about those facts, then how can those beliefs be inherently motivating? Philosophers have proposed various solutions. Some deny the second proposition, and declare that even people who hold correct and sincere beliefs about moral duty will not be motivated to act in accordance with them unless they also have a conceptually independent desire to be moral. Other philosophers qualify the third proposition: they say that moral facts are different from other facts precisely because the perception of a moral fact is automatically motivating. I defended a different proposal: that we should treat the second proposition as describing an interpretive consequence of the normative content of moral judgments, a consequence that does not contradict the third proposition when the latter is properly understood. We cannot make best sense of someone's overall behavior by ascribing a moral conviction to him unless he is either responsive to that conviction or his lack of response can be explained through some psychological incapacity.

But among the most popular responses to the problem of motivation is a different, skeptical one: that we abandon the first proposition and treat our moral convictions not as hypotheses about mind-independent moral reality but as "projections" of motives we already have. That would immediately explain the close connection between moral conviction and motivation stated in the second proposition in a way that is perfectly consistent with the third one. The difficulty in that solution, however, as it stands, is that we can't believe it. It makes no sense for us to treat our moral convictions as only projections of emotion rather than as reports of mind-independent moral facts unless we have already decided that there are no mind-independent moral facts for our convictions to report, and we cannot believe that there are no such mind-independent facts because we cannot believe (for example) that genocide would cease to be wicked if no one thought it was or if no one projected a disapproving emotion toward its occurrences.

Blackburn is a projectivist: his project is to save the projectivist solution to the motivation puzzle from this objection by showing us that even if we abandon the first proposition and treat our moral convictions as only projections, we can nevertheless sensibly say everything we want to say, including that genocide would still be wrong even if people no longer thought it was. This does indeed require "quite delicate work" in language and logic, because it requires explaining, for example, how we could make sense of embedded uses of moral claims in that way -- how if we thought moral opinions were only projections we could nevertheless make sense, for example, of the proposition that if ethnic persecution were wrong its perpetrators would deserve punishment by an international body.

But if the quasi-realist establishes only the linguistic point that we can interpret ordinary moral claims as projections without violence to logic, his efforts cannot save projectivism as a solution to the problem of motive (or any other philosophical problem) because the difficulty we have in accepting that solution is not that we wish to continue uttering certain sentences, but that we cannot abandon the substantive moral position we now use those sentences to assert, namely the substantive position that there are mind-independent moral facts. So it is no help to be told that even if we agree that there are no such facts, we can sensibly continue to utter the same sentences. If the quasi-realist is to meet the objection, which is a substantive not a linguistic one, he must show how we can combine projectivism with an objectivist first-order substantive morality, not merely with speech that mimics what someone who accepted such a morality would say.

Blackburn apparently thinks he can do even this through second-order linguistic philosophy, by reading *any* attempt to state what I just called an objectivist first-order substantive morality as only itself a projection. Does an indignant moralist, reading a projectivist account of morality, declare that his moral beliefs are not projections upon reality, but reports of independent moral facts that make those beliefs really, actually, true? The quasi-realist only nods agreement, noting (to himself) that these indignant objections are themselves just projections of attitudes he happens to share. But, as I said, that strategy backfires, because it leaves the projectivist no way to disagree with anything and therefore with no philosophical position to defend. It leaves him, in particular, with nothing to say about the kind of philosophical puzzle Blackburn says it has been his project to dissolve. The motivation puzzle arises, for example, as I said, because we believe that moral convictions describe independent facts, that moral convictions motivate in themselves, and that an appreciation of independent facts cannot in itself motivate. Any solution of the puzzle must challenge or qualify or change the content of at least one of these beliefs. The quasi-realist says we can believe all three, so long as we add, in a separate philosophical moment or tone of voice, that the first is only a projection. But this is helpful only if he can explain how that separate philosophical proposition does qualify or alter the content or sense of the first proposition -- how, if we accept the philosophical proposition, we will have a different understanding of the kind of fact a moral conviction describes, or of the

kind of independence such facts have from our will or desires. If he insists there is *nothing* that we must change our opinion about -- that we can continue to insist that moral facts are in no way *whatever* dependent upon or connected to our desires or impulses or emotions -- then he has contributed nothing to our situation. We are left with exactly the puzzle we had before.

I hope this clarifies my remarks about whether Blackburn's quasi-realism is neutral with respect to substantive morality. He says I claim that quasi-realism takes sides on substantive moral issues, whereas he denies that it does. In fact, I didn't say this: I said that it aims at neutrality, but swallows itself in achieving it. Blackburn apparently agrees with me that propositions like the proposition that moral convictions describe an independent moral reality are themselves substantive moral convictions. Since projectivism, before quasi-realism, denies that proposition, it is not substantively neutral. Blackburn's quasi-realist does not deny it, and therefore preserves neutrality, but at the cost of then having nothing helpful to say at all.

I should add that Blackburn, to his credit, doesn't try to achieve neutrality in the different way I described: by rewriting or attenuating projectivism so that it doesn't even appear to challenge the independence of moral facts from desires or emotions. A self-described projectivist might say, for example, that he denies only what I called the moronic thesis: that moral opinions are caused by the phenomena they report. But if projectivism is declared to be neutral about substantive morality in that way, its philosophical impact is dissolved at once. The motivational puzzle arises because we think that moral opinions report independent moral facts, not because we think that those independent facts cause the moral opinions that report them. So the puzzle would be in no way solved or even affected if we were to announce that they do not cause them. I should also add that Blackburn's final comments, about lawyers, show great ignorance of American legal culture.

### *Otsuka*

I am unclear about the pertinence of Professor Otsuka's drug-induced Oblomovism. I agree that on my advice he could do no better, in the circumstances of the party, but to believe what he did believe. I also agree that he was right later, when evidence of the drug had emerged, to think that he had earlier made a mistake. But I find no argument in those propositions. Should he have thought, at the party, that the bare possibility of the drug gave him reason to believe that his life was full of meaning? Or that it gave him reason to try to suspend all belief on the matter? It is at least a bare possibility, at every moment of our lives, that we have unknowingly ingested a belief-altering drug. That doesn't give us a reason for suspending all the beliefs we have. It would indeed be a mistake, however, as Otsuka's story does show, to think that strong and enduring conviction in some proposition adds to the case for that proposition, let alone guarantees that it is true. I also warned against that misunderstanding, on page 118.

Now consider Otsuka's remarks about taste. Some concepts seem semantically indexed to

subjective reactions of some kind: the idea that a phenomenon might be "objectively unfamiliar" -- unfamiliar no matter how many people were familiar with it -- seems ruled out on semantic grounds. Otsuka does not think that "disgusting" and "gauche" fall into the indexed category, however. He thinks that it is intelligible to think that sea urchins are objectively disgusting to eat and that eating with one's fingers is objectively gauche, and the pertinence of his story to the moral case requires that he think this. But what mistake can his obscure Victorians have made about sea urchins and table manners, if it was not a semantic one?

I said that mistaken claims of objectivity about a particular domain are mistakes within that domain. Some such mistakes -- I gave the example of claims about the objective nobility of wine -- are aesthetic ones. I assume that the Victorians' mistake is also aesthetic: like wine snobs, they think that taste in food is subject to standards that parallel those governing taste in fine art. How else can we understand our disagreement with them? The story is meant to help us grasp the arguments of someone Otsuka calls a "modest" skeptic, who does not deny that genocide is wrong but thinks it would cease to be wrong if no one thought it was. I did discuss this "modest" view -- on pages 101-6, I said that it could only be understood as itself a substantive moral position. If so, then whether it is correct is also a substantive moral -- not an independent philosophical -- question.

Otsuka is right to warn us that people of a later day might think our contemporary moral opinions wrong -- they might be "modestly" skeptical about much that we think a matter of objective moral truth, or think that much of what we think a matter of taste is actually a matter of objective morality. We can do no more, however, in the face of that caution, than to think again with that possibility in mind. The prospect of future change, like the certainty of past disagreement, should no doubt make us more tentative and thoughtful. But it cannot count, in itself, as any argument against our present opinions, including our convictions about the objectivity or subjectivity of convictions and tastes.

### *Zangwill*

Professor Zangwill asks, "Are morality and mathematics as it were free-floating modes of thought held up by nothing?" His metaphor assumes that the respectability of an intellectual domain depends on the existence of some external "support"; it assumes that mathematics and morality would fall down or float away unless something else held them up or tied them down. I pointed out, as many others have, that that gravitational thesis cannot hold for the complete set of our convictions as a whole. I argued, moreover, that even though that thesis plainly fails for both mathematics and morality, that failure does not in itself justify an anti-realist attitude to those domains. If some kind of "external" support for these domains is both necessary and possible, it must be a very different kind from that supposed in the "hold it up" language. So, while I concede that Zangwill's question will seem very troubling to many readers, I also wish he had replied to the arguments I made.

He properly points out that "merely showing that certain claims can be read internally does not itself show that they must be -- that there is no coherent external sense." I agree: I distinguished the two issues and pursued the latter as far as I could by considering all the suggested external readings of the "certain claims" that I could find or imagine. I didn't mean to rely on a burden of proof, but only on what lawyers call a burden of going forward. I had investigated several proposed external readings, could think of no more, and suggested that it was now up to someone defending the possibility of an external reading to propose one that I hadn't considered, which Zangwill doesn't do. He does answer the question I put to Blackburn on the latter's behalf: he says that, "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." Of course, if that is the issue, then realism fails in morality, as it does in mathematics and everywhere else but in empirical science. But, as I just said, an anti-realism built on refuting morons would hardly be worth constructing.

However, Zangwill thinks I am "blind" to questions of explanation, and he cites my discussion of Mackie as evidence. My argument was, however, more complex than Zangwill allows. Mackie was certainly right, as I emphasized, in thinking that we cannot causally explain moral diversity by supposing differently charged morons in different times or places, or differently sensitive moron-receptors in different human beings. He thought, however, that the fact that we had to seek causal explanations of such differences elsewhere supported his further claim that ordinary moral judgments are mistaken. That is why I said that his argument succeeds only if morality is a theater (as zoology is but philosophy is not) in which diversity of opinion is ground for radical skepticism when that diversity cannot be explained by describing the causal impact of what in dispute on human minds. Zangwill can defend Mackie only by showing why the latter's truism about causal explanation supports an error theory, and I find no such argument in the former's comments.

Zangwill also thinks I am a "quietist" and a closet metaphysician, and he ends by challenging me to come out. The proliferation of "isms" in a discipline -- we now have realism, anti-realism, irrealism, quasi-realism, minimalism and now quietism in philosophy -- generally means that something has gone wrong, and I tried to say what I think it is. I don't like the term "quietist" for the reason I mentioned: it suggests that some more "robust" sense of objectivity makes sense but is wrong. Zangwill thinks that I'm a metaphysician because I accept that a failure to show how fact causes belief would be worrying in some department of empirical science. He asks why, if I accept this supposedly metaphysical thesis for science, I reject it for morality, mathematics, aesthetics and law. But I tried to show why empirical science is different, not in virtue of some difference in metaphysical respectability or support, but simply in virtue of content. The kind of support a judgment can and therefore should have depends, I said, on what it is about, and since empirical judgments -- I included astrological and the most familiar religious claims in that department -- are about phenomena that supposedly can causally

affect our own experience, directly or indirectly, it is sensible to count evidence of some such impact as supporting those judgments, and lack of such evidence, in circumstances when it might have been expected, as impeaching them. Judgments of morality and judgments within the other disciplines just mentioned have a very different content, and must therefore seek support in other ways. So I fear there is no interesting closet for me to come out of.

**Back to  
SYMPOSIUM  
page**