

REPLY TO MASSIMO DELL'UTRI

HILARY PUTNAM

Massimo Dell'Utri knows my work very well, and, indeed, he has translated some of it into Italian. Nevertheless the temptation is always present to interpret a philosopher in such a way as to bring him close to oneself, and I think that, in places, this is what Massimo is doing here. So, it seems to me that, in one respect, I am, in a way, being interpreted out of my actual position.

I still reject the position I called “metaphysical realism” in *Reason, Truth and History*, but I now think that I chose an unfortunate name for it. It was a mistake to use that particular term, because there are *many* kinds of “metaphysical realism”, not just one—indeed, in one sense my present position (as opposed to the “internal realist” position I defended from 1976 to 1990) is a metaphysical realist one—for I *am* a realist *in* my metaphysics. Nevertheless, I am *not* a “metaphysical realist” in the sense that I attacked in *Reason, Truth and History*. In “metaphysical realism”, in the sense I attached to the term there, there were two leading ideas: one was the idea of making a catalog of all the kinds of things there are, i.e. all the kinds of things we can quantify over, and the second was that those things could be divided up into individuals and properties (or, in Quine's case, individuals and classes). Both ideas still seem to me to be “pipe dreams”. Think about the number of things that we talk about nowadays that simply don't fit in any of the classic categories. For example, what sort of an entity is a *depression*—in the economic sense of the word, not the psychological? What sort of an entity is a *war*? Constantly, as our conceptual vocabularies enlarge, we find ourselves able to refer to more and more aspects of reality that we never referred to before. The idea of a categorical list of all the fundamental aspects of reality may have seemed like a possible task to an ambitious Greek in the fifth or fourth century B.C., but I think that we should now recognize that it is tremendously overambitious. There's no foreseeable possibility of exhausting all the fundamental aspects of reality in any list we can ever make. That is one point I want to make.

The other point is that “ontology” itself, in the sense that Quine has given that term, is an extremely problematic project. To suppose that all the different aspects of reality can be cut up into “individuals” and “predicates” in just one way is a fundamental mistake—a mistake from a realist point of view. The phenomenon I have called “equivalent descriptions” (that is to say, the phenomenon of theories that if taken at face value clash, but in fact turn out to be intertranslatable) is widespread precisely in the fundamental science of physics, whose supposed “ontology” Quine so much admired. In fact

the physicists stumbled on the phenomenon quite independently of me, and they invented the term “duality” for exactly what I call “equivalent descriptions”. I do believe in realism in the sense of believing that there is a real world out there, most of which is not of our own making (we are of course very much interested in the part that is of our making, but most of it isn’t of our making), and I believe that there is a truth about that world which is not of our making—in that sense I am a realist in my metaphysics. I do believe that true empirical statements about contingent reality are made true because they correctly represent aspects of reality. That’s objectivity and I am an objectivist. But the question “What does objectivity in the epistemic sense mean?” is a much more complicated one. “Objectivity” has a number of senses; in particular it can refer for example to certain kinds of epistemic virtues, to certain ways of being detached, which are appropriate in certain contexts and not in others.

In fact, the key place where Massimo is really stating his position rather than mine occurs when he says:

An intersubjective agreement of this kind shows what we can take as ‘objective’ about a given question, what we can say is ‘true’ or ‘false’, ‘right’ or ‘wrong’, and so forth, giving content to the notions of objectivity, truth and rightness. Thus, since these contents arise from the cognitive procedures by means of which we promote discussions, and do not therefore transcend the power of the human cognitive faculties, those notions reveal themselves as *epistemic* ones.

That is what I thought in my “internal realist” period, which I gave up in 1990, and so it is not what I think now. I do not think that the notion of truth is an epistemic notion. If it were an epistemic notion, then there couldn’t be truths that are unknowable. But there *can* be truths that are unknowable. I do not subscribe to the view that truth is an epistemic notion.

It simply isn’t true for example that Peirce defined truth correctly. In several places I have stressed the deleterious effects of the Copenhagen interpretation of quantum mechanics. In *The Quest for Certainty*, Dewey argues that the real meaning of the theoretical statements in science is what they say about observables, and in support of that he cites the latest science, Bohr’s Copenhagen interpretation. (He had a granddaughter who took a PhD in theoretical physics in Copenhagen, and he talked about that with her.) So, it doesn’t matter if Dewey gave up the word “metaphysics”; he held a metaphysical view of truth, right to the end of his life. In fact, he held a metaphysical view of reality, I would say, because he had the strange view—as far as I can make it out—that reality consists of qualities, but there is no *knowledge* of qualities. This is a clear example of the fact that the generalization “Whenever a philosopher says that metaphysics is over, you can start looking for the bad metaphysics” is correct.

I believe in a big world in which human sensations are a very small part, as opposed to the empiricist-cum-idealist picture that the real world is only a very small part of a reality consisting of certain patterns in human sensations. That has always seemed to me a crazy picture. And if there is a real world of which we are only a very small part, then surely there are a lot of truths about it that are not going to be verifiable by human beings. It could be, for example, that the sentence “There are no intelligent extraterrestrials” is true—and if it’s true, it is very likely that we can never know that it is true.

Let me spell this out: suppose that there are no intelligent extraterrestrials. Perhaps that is highly improbable. Perhaps the probability is 99.999 that there are, somewhere in this big universe, intelligent extraterrestrials. But it is a *logical consequence of the notion of probability itself* that if you say that the probability is 99.999 that there are intelligent extraterrestrials, you are also saying that maybe there are none (with the probability 0.001). Suppose then that there are no such extraterrestrials. Since information cannot travel faster than light, most parts of the universe are sufficiently far away that causal signals from them showing that they contain no such extraterrestrials could never reach us. Thus it may be physically impossible for human beings ever to know the truth that intelligent extraterrestrials do not exist, if they don’t. So, for realists the idea that truth cannot outrun verifiability is unacceptable. I can see no justification for the identification of what is true with what is in principle verified or could in principle be verified. And once one says that truth outruns verifiability, then the idea that truth is epistemic is ruled out.

I would like to talk about just three more points touched on in Massimo’s paper. First, I did say once that we shouldn’t attach metaphysical weight to bivalence, but I was wrong to say that. (I think that I was overly impressed by something Wittgenstein said.) In general, I think statements *are* true or false unless they are vague. But apart from cases in which one can point to a relevant vagueness, perhaps a vagueness arising from a particular context of use, I don’t think one should reject bivalence. In particular, what I think we should say is that there are mathematical truths that outrun provability by human beings; that is, there is a fact of the matter as to the truth of mathematical statements in many cases in which human beings are unable to ascertain that truth.

Secondly, about the question “What is the difference between Quine’s position and mine regarding fallibilism”, Massimo writes—and this is correct for Quine but not for me—“Common sense may be rejected as well (as every other part of our body of knowledge)”. Well, what I want to say is that part of my position is that there are statements such that saying that they are false—even saying that they are possibly false—has no presently intelligible sense. But I also maintain that in each particular case, the judgment that a statement is necessarily true is itself corrigible. In short, I believe—and have believed ever since I wrote “It Ain’t Necessarily So” and “The Analytic and the Synthetic”—that we need the notion of a *revisable* necessity, the notion of what I have called *necessity relative to a body of knowledge*. On revisability, Quine and I agreed, of

course, but his position failed to do justice to the *difference* between, say, arithmetical truths and empirical ones.

Finally, Massimo correctly emphasized in his paper that people could actually come to agreements through *democratic and fallibilistic discussion*—which I think is the Deweyan successor to the a priori decisions of the philosophers. Not that what results from democratic fallibilistic discussion would necessarily be true—it can involve mistakes too. But to mimic what Winston Churchill said about democracy, democratic fallibilistic discussion, especially well-informed discussion, is the worst of all possible systems except for all those others that have actually been tried.

This brings us back to the question of *objectivity*—especially in ethics.

One of the familiar problems of moral philosophy is how to relate to humans who feel no obligations to the institution of morality. (It is not that one has a simple answer or the same answer in all cases.) But we often forget that one of the chief functions of morality is to enable us to resolve conflicts not with immoral people, but with other moral people. For me, it was the emphasis that Stanley Cavell put on that point in Part Three of *The Claim of Reason* that I found novel, and that to a certain extent shifted my way of thinking about morality. We are all aware that there is a question of the moral individual versus the immoral individual, but we tend to downplay the question of moral people who have disagreements, even disagreements that are not going to have any resolution. As Cavell puts it, there can be a rational argument which doesn't end in agreement—the fact that an argument doesn't lead to a conclusion that everyone agrees on doesn't show that the argument was irrational.

Moreover, I think that one thing we cannot do is to show that the unethical person is *irrational*. If we take it as a constraint on the semantics of ethical language that it should be possible to show that the unethical person is irrational, then we will lose—cognitivism will lose. Showing such a thing is simply an unrealistic ambition. I think that it is certainly true that someone could be fully rational and not ethical. Thus I think it should *not* be part of the burden of any present day ethical cognitivist to try to pretend that there is ahistorical truth in ethics. Ethics is a human institution. It rests on human interests—it doesn't rest on a transcendental principle. If we think of ethics as a human institution—and not in a metaphysical way, i.e. as something a priori—think of it as an institution which is the least violent way we have of resolving conflicts—then we may be able to see that ethics rests *not* on one fundamental principle, one fundamental interest, but on a *set* of interests, e.g. an interest in compassion, an interest in universality (ethics should apply to everyone), an interest in equality (equality before the ethical law, which is in large part something that came in with the constitutional revolutions in Europe in the 1840s). These are ideas that have a history and also possess wide appeal. Moreover, they are not ideas whose appeal affected only Europeans. The moment they reached China, they swept China; they swept to some extent Japan; they swept India. These are ideas that we have come to accept because of their wide

appeal. But if someone genuinely does *not* have these interests—if someone is not out to treat others as equals, not out to be compassionate, not out to obey the moral law, I can't say that person is *irrational*. I can't *prove* that he should behave differently—there is no argument that will prove to the bad man that if he is rational, he must become good, or at least sincerely agree that he ought to become good. That's not what we can provide. We must not, as it were, have a *magical view of rationality*. I do, however, think that believing in the objectivity of ethics is believing that there is a fact of the matter—sometimes a fuzzy one, because reasonableness is a vague notion—as to what is reasonable to do to further the interests I mentioned. And if you ask “Would the world be better off if such and such a moral idea were adopted?”, very often it would be clear that everyone who has those moral interests at all would answer “Yes”. In that sense morality is *objective*.

In sum, I think it is possible to have a kind of “moderate cognitivism” in ethics, which is fully compatible with naturalism, and which does not commit one in the ambitions of Kantian, or Platonic ethics.