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Editor

Quietism, Agnosticism and Mysticism

Mapping the Philosophical Discourse
of the East and the West

Chapter 4

Rationalistic Value Realism as a Religion Without God: An Option for Metaethical Quietism

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“Rationalism has always had a more religious flavor than empiricism.”
(Nagel, 1997, p. 130)

Abstract In his *Justice for Hedgehogs*, Ronald Dworkin defends the traditional philosophical theses of the unity and the independent reality of value, highlighting interconnections among basic ethical, moral, political and legal values and principles. His method involves a form of metaethical quietism, insofar as his arguments are deployed at the level of first-order normative thinking, without any appeal to external metaphysical theorizing. However, there seems to be a tension between his strong claims about the objectivity and truth of value judgments and his holistic, coherentist approach to the investigation of interpretive value concepts and normative principles. My analysis focuses on Dworkin’s posthumous *Religion without God*, with a view to assessing its contribution to his ambitious philosophical project. It is argued that the adoption of the religious attitude, advocated by Dworkin, sustains his moral epistemology and his substantive positions, by making prominent the phenomenology of the realm of value invoked to defend his main claims, and by reinforcing the sense of shielded, strong integrity, not only of its ethical and moral dimensions but also of its aesthetic and epistemic components guiding cosmological inquiry.

Keywords Rationalist value realism · Metaethical quietism · Coherentism · Religious attitude · Shielded strong integrity

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1 Quietist Aspects of Contemporary Rationalistic Moral Realism

Rationalistic moral realism is one of the main trends in the complex field of contemporary metaethics, assuming various forms and developing in different directions. In fact, the positions put forth by several philosophers representing this trend point beyond the moral domain to a broader dimension of norms and values are construed as constituting reasons for thought and action. A study of such approaches could begin with Thomas Nagel's *normative realism*, first elaborated in the *View from Nowhere* (1986), and include, among others, Derek Parfit's cognitivist account of the convergence of basic normative moral theories, in *On What Matters* (2011), Thomas Scanlon's *reasons fundamentalism*, in *Being Realistic about Reasons* (2014) and Ronald Dworkin's exploration of an irreducible, more or less unified realm of ethical and moral values, in *Justice for Hedgehogs* (2011).

What the proponents of the above conceptions of realism have in common is not only their opposition to most versions of hard naturalism, methodological and substantive but also their general reluctance to pursue a metaphysical inquiry which could buttress their recognition of a wide range of normative and evaluative truths. In his most recent and controversial *Mind and Cosmos*, Nagel insists that value realism "does not maintain that value judgments are made true or false by anything natural or supernatural" (2012, p. 101); in the conclusion of his extensive metaethical investigation, Parfit states that his *rationalism* could be called *Non-Metaphysical Non-Naturalist Normative Cognitivism* (2011, p. 486); in the succinct defense of his *reasons fundamentalism*, Scanlon sets aside "external questions" about ontological commitments (2014, pp. 22–30); in his early discussions of the proper way to sustain claims about the truth and objectivity of basic moral and legal claims, Dworkin urges us to give up the quest for any metaphysical support from an "Archimedean point" of view and to accept such claims simply on the basis of the conclusions of our normative debates; he later goes so far as to propose to jettison metaethical grounding projects as a whole (1996, 2011, pp. 23–98). Thus, it would be correct, I think, to attribute to these rationalist thinkers some kind of philosophical *quietism*, entailing the avoidance of substantive philosophical theorizing, because they believe that metaphysical debates in metaethics are pointless and superfluous.¹

Indeed, quietism has been recently recognized as a distinct metaphilosophical stance, the main variants of which may differ in their original *motivation* and *intent*, in their proposed *justification*, as well as in their *scope* and their *force* or *strength*.² The quietism we are dealing with here could be characterized as limited in scope, insofar as it covers only metaethics, in part, or as a whole, and appears as more or

¹ There are diverse forms of moral rationalism, sustaining both realist and constructivist views in metaethics, which do involve intricate metaphysical argumentation (cf. Jones & Schroeter, 2018). However, I shall limit my analysis to a rationalist approach directly associated with realism and quietism.

² A classification of forms and variants of philosophical quietism on the basis of these criteria is attempted in Virvidakis (2008).

less strong, depending on the character and the extent of the rejection of theoretical reasoning that it imposes.

However that may be, I am not going to dwell on most of these aspects of the alternative models of metaethical quietism. Nor shall I pursue or try to adjudicate any of the metaphilosophical debates aiming at the criticism or the defense of quietist views.³ I propose instead to concentrate on the final development of Dworkin's approach to the reality of values in his posthumously published Einstein lectures, which present the conception of a religion without god (Dworkin, 2013).

My main aim is to assess the significance of such a conception as an eventual contribution to moral epistemology. It can be pointed out that, far from indicating an unexpected turn in the evolution of his thinking, Dworkin's last positions should be regarded as the extension, culmination and completion of a line of reasoning, unfolding from the explicit pronouncement of his firm cognitivist convictions, without any appeal to an external metaphysical support, in "Objectivity and Truth: You'd Better Believe It" (1996), to their mature articulation in *Justice for Hedgehogs*. The idea of intrinsic value had already been identified in *Life's Dominion* (1993) as an essential component of our intuitions regarding human and other forms of life and as a common presupposition of both conservative and liberal views on abortion and euthanasia. It would be finally integrated into the broader framework of *Religion without God* (2013).⁴ Actually, the readers of *LD* were somehow prepared for the appeal to categories of religious discourse by Dworkin's reference to the sanctity of life and by the recognition of *sacred* values, implying a special character of inviolability (1993, pp. 71–101).⁵

It is thus no wonder that the commitment to the independent existence of a dimension of values and norms, which cannot be grounded in any natural or supernatural facts, would be presented as expressing some form of religious attitude. At the end of the day, to the extent that the beliefs we were asked to espouse couldn't be supported by further argumentation, it should be admitted that they amounted to no more than a matter of faith (2013, p. 18). Hence, the philosophical quietism reflected in Dworkin's negative stance toward metaethics would be forcefully reaffirmed, insofar as he wouldn't hesitate to talk about a *religion*, the core of which would be constituted by his ungrounded realism about value. The truth of the central value judgments entailed by the particular attitude which he advocates in *RWG* could be presumably

³ For a thorough critique of Dworkin's quietism, see Bloomfield (2009). In fact, Dworkin himself disallows the term "quietism," because he believes that his philosophical approach "... is not quietism. There is nothing it asks us to be quiet about. It is only telling it like it is" (2011, p. 419). However, he insists on his repudiation of metaethical investigations (2011, pp. 23–98, 427–30n.1–23).

⁴ I shall adopt the following abbreviations to refer to Dworkin's works: *OTYBBI* for "Objectivity and Truth: You'd Better Believe It," *LD* for *Life's Dominion*, *JH* for *Justice for Hedgehogs*, and *RWG* for *Religion Without God*.

⁵ Here, it should be noted that this early discussion of the relations between sacred and intrinsic values, as well as Dworkin's understanding of both, has drawn criticism from several philosophers, which may have led him to avoid any explicit use of the notion of the sacred in *JH*, and in *RWG*, where one might expect it to occupy a prominent position. See, among others, Kamm (2004), Dworkin (2004) and my remarks in the final section.

established independently of any “science” part, that is, any theoretical doctrines associated with comprehensive religious worldviews (2013, pp. 21–2).⁶

In any case, at least the first of the main value judgments in question, concerning the objective meaning and importance of living well and its normative implications, underlies positions that had been thoroughly discussed and defended in Dworkin’s earlier works, and are combined in the axiological theory of *JH*. However, an examination of the way in which he advances and tries to justify some of his key premises and argumentative moves, deployed in the quest for a *reflective equilibrium*, reveals epistemological tensions in his enterprise, which could perhaps be resolved only by embracing the commitments made clear in *RWG*. It is precisely these tensions and their overcoming that we are mostly interested in. In fact, the religious perspective outlined by Dworkin may cast light on the kind of deeper reasons which could inform the quietist acceptance of his rationalistic value realism, relieving, or just bypassing such tensions.

2 Dworkin’s Comprehensive Value Realism

The analysis that follows doesn’t purport to delve into particular substantive theses regarding queries and debates in ethics and, *a fortiori*, in the philosophy of law and political philosophy. Thus, we are not going to focus on the details of these theses themselves, or on the complex reasoning which leads to them. However, we cannot concentrate on the problems besetting Dworkin’s philosophical methodology and especially his moral epistemology, which must be reconsidered in the light of his religious stance, without reflecting on some of the conclusions he thinks he has already been able to reach. Here, we can simply summarize his main points.

In fact, the domain of values that Dworkin tries to chart in *JH* covers a number of central issues in practical philosophy. His philosophical inquiry, guided by the presumption of the unity of value, explores interconnections among these issues, by moving from *ethics* (the study of the principles of how to live well) to *morality* (the study of how we ought to act and treat other people) and, finally, to *politics* (the study of how the members of a political community should treat each other) and law (the study of how to create and implement just legal norms). As he puts it,

I describe a conception of law that takes it to be not a rival system of rules that might conflict with morality but as itself a branch of morality... It is also necessary to understand morality in general as having a tree structure: law is a branch of political morality, which is itself a

⁶ We may be more or less familiar with metaphysical doctrines of the major monotheistic traditions pertaining to the existence of a divine, Supreme Being, who is believed to have created and steer the world. According to Dworkin, these doctrines are no more essential to the “value part” of a religion than a moral ontology is necessary to provide metaethical grounding to moral values and principles. (See also, Putnam, 2004.) Here, it could be reminded that the very notion of quietism, expressing the reluctance to seek theoretical support for fundamental beliefs of existential significance, first originated in a religious context.

branch of a more general personal morality, which is in turn a branch of a yet more general theory of what it is to live well. (2011, p. 5)

We are thus offered a network of values and principles, which exemplify the big “hedgehog” idea providing the guiding thread of his theory:

The truth about living well and being good and what is wonderful is not only coherent but mutually supporting: what we think about any one of these must stand up, eventually, to any argument we find compelling about the rest. (2011, p. 1)⁷

Dignity is at the heart of this network and is construed as comprising self-respect and authenticity. Dworkin’s arguments aim at showing that self-respect cannot exist without a parallel respect for the lives of other human beings, and that authenticity, involving integrity and independence, has objective importance and doesn’t reflect the mere affirmation of arbitrary taste.⁸ According to his account of liberty, justice and equality do not conflict with freedom but are presented as integrated in a harmonious way. Their integration is sustained by a sense of responsibility toward oneself and towards others, expressed in various forms, and is also manifested as a responsibility of a government toward its citizens, entailing equal concern for the satisfaction of their needs and the protection of their liberties.⁹

There are original and subtle distinctions proposed at different stages in the course of Dworkin’s discussion, which play an important role in the construction of his theory, although they may at first look somewhat artificial. These include the differentiation between *ethical* and *moral* considerations, to which we have already referred; the opposition between *living well*, in the sense of fully respecting substantive normative principles, and merely having a *good life*, seeking the enjoyment of pleasures and various goods apart from any concern for the constraints of ethics and morality; and the distinction between *product* and *performance* value, reminiscent of Aristotle’s emphasis on the difference between *poiesis* (production) and *praxis* (action).¹⁰

Indeed, the ethical ideal of living well is supposed to dictate duties to oneself and to others. Dworkin invokes “Kant’s principle,” according to which, “a person can achieve the dignity and self-respect that are indispensable to a successful life only if he shows respect for humanity itself in all its forms” (2011, p. 19). Thus, self-respect entails analogous respect “for the importance of other people’s lives and for their ethical responsibility, as well as one’s own” (2011, p. 419). Moreover, as we have just remarked, essential to dignity is also authenticity, requiring integrity and independence, but its pursuit doesn’t warrant frivolousness in making choices about

⁷ Dworkin adopts the metaphor of the contrast between the mentality of “hedgehogs,” focused on one big idea, and that of “foxes,” pursuing the knowledge of many small disconnected truths, which is traced back to a famous fragment attributed to the Ancient Greek poet Archilochus (Berlin, 2013).

⁸ See Dworkin (2011), pp. 19, 209f.

⁹ A clear and extensive summary of his basic positions and arguments is provided in the introduction of *JH* (Dworkin, 2011, pp. 1–19).

¹⁰ Dworkin (2011), pp. 197–9 and cf., Aristotle (2002), 1140a2–20.

oneself and in designing one's life.¹¹ In this way, one could reinterpret "the long existentialist tradition in philosophy," or "at least extract what is most persuasive in it," rejecting common subjectivist and non-cognitivist construals of the commitment to authenticity so that it could be now regarded as compatible with some form of value realism.¹² In fact, authenticity expresses freedom, which entails responsibility, presented in different forms and interpreted both "as a virtue and as a relation to people and events."¹³ Once more, it is Kant who reminds us that rational freedom, the ultimate condition of dignity, cannot be exercised without the legislation of moral law and obedience to its objective prescriptions.¹⁴

Thus, living well requires striving for a good life, within the constraints imposed by moral rules, but "is not necessarily a matter of minimizing the chances of a bad one."¹⁵ In any case, what counts is not so much product value, or the impact a well-lived life may have on the world and other people, but rather the performance displayed in the art of living, which could be compared to the achievement of a dancer or an athlete. To be sure, a good, or even excellent performance is neither necessary nor sufficient for actual happiness, although, even if we fail in attaining our goals, it can justify our confidence that we have lived well.

Now, what we must retain from this brief summary of the reasoning deployed in *JH* is not only the guiding thread following the "tree structure" of principles conforming to the requirements of living well but also the objectivist spirit in which Dworkin appeals to a unitary and more or less homogeneous background of values. It is noteworthy that the performance value of our lives, when we have lived well, can apparently be assessed according to objective criteria of goodness or excellence. This is why we are asked to concur that "someone who leads a boring, conventional life, without close friendships or challenges or achievements, marking time to his grave, has not had a good life, *even if he thinks he has* and even if he thinks he has thoroughly enjoyed the life he has had." Such a person has supposedly "failed in his responsibilities for living."¹⁶ However, a question which remains unanswered is how we identify the criteria we appeal to and how exactly we can apply them in our evaluations. Who sets the standards of a satisfactory performance in the art of living?

3 Metaethical Cognitivism Without Metaphysics

Indeed, despite the ingenuity of Dworkin's argumentative strategy, and the plausibility of some of his premises and conclusions, the positions he tries to establish remain controversial. Moreover, although he is convinced that his claims can be presented and sustained as first-order moral judgments, without needing to resort to metaphysical theorizing, in order to fend off the threat of any external ("Archimedean") skeptical challenges, he cannot ignore important queries about the methodological and epistemological tenets guiding his defense of the substantive views he ends up adopting. One suspects it is his own tacit realization that he is unable to deal with these queries in a convincing way which is going to lead him to a kind of "confession" of religious faith in the reality of values.

The tenets in question, accompanying the objectivist *credo* from which Dworkin never seems to waver, refer to the autonomy of the realm of value, to a more or less minimalist construal of truth and to a notion of interpretive concepts, informing his original theory of law, since his earlier works. Doing justice to the various aspects of these issues, to which he devotes more than three chapters of *JH*, would call for a separate study. Here, it may suffice to pinpoint some of the difficulties and the tensions to which we have already alluded.¹⁷

The argument sustaining the belief in the metaphysical independence of the domain of moral and other values is based on "Hume's principle," that is, the denial of the logical derivability of an "ought" from an "is," also invoked in *RWG*. Hence, "no series of propositions about the way the world is, as a matter of scientific or metaphysical fact, can provide a successful case on its own, -without some value judgment hidden in the interstices- for any conclusion about what ought to be the case."¹⁸ However, Dworkin stands this sharp "is-ought"/"fact-value" distinction on its head, since he uses it in order to promote, rather than to debunk realist conceptions of value. His cognitivist epistemology of value judgments has nothing in common with the expressivist positions which are often attributed to Hume by various contemporary philosophers.¹⁹

Of course, the account of the unity of value elaborated in *JH* is presented as true, and the particular ethical and moral claims which it entails, concerning dignity, justice, liberty, authenticity and responsibility, are to be regarded as truth-apt. In *OTYBBI* Dworkin had argued that we shouldn't hesitate to put forth positive moral judgments, interpreted "at face value." He was ready to allow "baroque formulations" about their "timeless truth," although he considered such formulations to be unnecessary. He acknowledged that his refusal to employ any robust idea of ethical

¹¹ "... Living well means not just designing a life, as if any design would do, but designing it in response to a judgment of ethical value". See Dworkin (2011), p. 212.

¹² Dworkin (2011), p. 231. He proposes an analogous reading of Nietzsche, which goes against most dominant anti-realist and perspectivist construals, insofar as he attributes to the author of *Ecce Homo* the firm conviction that some lives are *really* (objectively) better than others (2011, pp. 209–10, 258–60). For a similar defense of an objectivist approach to authenticity, see Taylor (1992).

¹³ Dworkin (2011), p. 102f.

¹⁴ Dworkin (2011), p. 19.

¹⁵ Dworkin (2011), pp. 198–9.

¹⁶ Dworkin, p. 196 (my emphasis).

¹⁷ For an analysis of Dworkin's methodological positions and directives, one has to focus on Part Two of *JH* (2011, pp. 99–190).

¹⁸ Dworkin (2011, p. 44). Hence "One cannot support a value judgment –an ethical or moral or aesthetic claim—just by establishing some scientific fact about how the world is or was or will be." (2013, pp. 26–7).

¹⁹ See Ayer (1980) and the more nuanced reconstruction of Hume's thought by Simon Blackburn, inspiring his own "quasi-realist" projectivism (Blackburn, 1984).

truth, or property, or existence,” might induce critics to describe his position as a form of *minimalist* realism, although he did not see the point in distinguishing between minimalism and maximalism, since he didn’t believe we need and could provide a richer metaphysical notion of moral objectivity (1996, pp. 126–7).

Thus, the conception of truth he adopts in *JH* is not supported by any substantive metaphysics. Truth itself is understood as a “wide-ranging interpretive concept,” which we can study “just by attending to its various paradigms in different domains, without any overall abstract formulation.” Dworkin doesn’t simply endorse some version of a minimalist theory of truth. He proposes his own “abstract characterization,” partly inspired from a non-substantive construal of C.S. Peirce’s pragmatist idea according to which, “truth is what counts as the uniquely successful solution to a challenge of inquiry.” Hence, “the value theory would be a candidate account for success across the whole domain of interpretation” and the theory of moral responsibility developed in his book “would be a candidate application of the value theory to the more specific interpretive domain of morality” (2011, pp. 173–9).

Now, in order to understand the kind of inquiry we must pursue in the field of practical philosophy and the distinctive way to seek truth in it, we have to realize that the concepts we are dealing with, such as those referring to norms and values, are “interpretive.” Their meaning is not provided by any relation to the natural world, nor is it a matter of arbitrary stipulation and definition.²⁰ A correct understanding of their content could be attained through a lengthy process of interpretation, involving a multiplicity of theoretical and practical considerations, undertaken with a view to reaching agreement on the most coherent account of our intuitions and principles, examined together. According to his description of the philosophical strategy he employs at all levels,

We defend a conception of justice by placing the practices and paradigms of that concept in a larger network of other values that sustains our conception. We can in principle continue this expansion of our argument, exploring other values until...the argument meets itself. The circularity, if any, is global across the whole domain of value. That is the method of formal moral and political philosophy (2011, pp. 162–3).

In fact, Dworkin implements a holistic, coherentist approach to axiological issues, which is inspired by an ideal of *reflective equilibrium*, characterized as more “ambitious and hazardous” than Rawls’ original conception, insofar as it aspires to moral and interpretive truth. The question is whether his pretensions to truth are justified; in other words, whether he succeeds in establishing his unequivocal claims about the reality and the unity of value, and the conclusions regarding the interdependence of particular concepts and principles which he arrives at in *JH*.²¹

To be sure, the circularity in his reasoning, which he acknowledges, may not be vicious. However, one wonders whether coherence can provide a secure basis both for

²⁰ As it happens with those which Dworkin describes respectively as “natural-kind” and “criterial” concepts (2011, pp.158–60).

²¹ Dworkin (2011, pp. 263–264) makes clear his distancing from Rawls’ more cautious procedure, which lends itself to antirealist, constructivist construals. For the method of reflective equilibrium, its origins, its different forms, its strengths and weaknesses, and its prospects, see Virvidakis (2015b).

the “independence thesis” and for the synthesis of liberal, Kantian and perfectionist insights constituting the core of his theory of living well, with its constraints and its implications.²² Dworkin admits that coherence as such should be regarded as a necessary, though not as a sufficient condition for truth, but also believes that moral truth is a matter of argument rather than evidence. The autonomy of value doesn’t seem to allow for any factual support for his premises apart from value judgments themselves.²³

In any case, he urges us to forget metaethical “pigeonholes” when we try to classify his positions, insofar as “none of the existing labels fits exactly, because each is stained with the mistaken assumption that there are important philosophical questions about value that are not to be answered with value judgments.” Nonetheless, in *OTYBBI*, he was willing to assert that “his realism knows no bounds.” He could even endorse the use of the term “Platonism” as a description of his cognitivist conception, provided it were understood as a simple repetition of first-order assertions, such as that “genocide is wrong.” (Dworkin, 1996, pp. 128, 110).

It seems that, after all, the arguments supporting the theses of the reality and the unity of value draw, tacitly, but sometimes also openly, on more or less disputable premises, required to play an important role in Dworkin’s integrated epistemology. Although the author of *JH* doesn’t discuss moral intuitionism, appealing to either G.E. Moore’s early model, or to contemporary, supposedly improved versions, and although he is reluctant to engage in ontological talk about properties, we can discern obvious similarities with such views. The analogy between the acceptance of truths about moral and value concepts, which “we’d better believe,” since they cannot be grounded in either natural or supernatural facts, and the idea of an immediate grasp of an irreducible non-natural quality of “goodness” is striking.²⁴ What is not so clear is whether a coherentist interpretive enterprise can manage to accommodate such truths.

Actually, Dworkin does appeal to moral experience in a broad sense, involving thoughts and feelings which arise on crucial occasions of practical deliberation, although he doesn’t explicitly mention it as a source of evidence for his positions. The weight of moral intuitions, which we discover and use to explain our feelings and reactions when we encounter dilemmas about abortion and euthanasia, had already been highlighted in *LD*. In a bold move, demonstrating his realist convictions, he

²² For particular problems besetting his objectivist understanding of kinds and degrees of success in realizing performance value, essential to the assessment of “living well,” see Virvidakis (2014). There seems to be a tension between Dworkin’s robust, substantive conception of objective “goodness,” sustaining the perfectionist aspects of his thinking, and the spirit of egalitarian liberalism he also endorses. See also Larmore (2013).

²³ A coherentist conception of truth presented as compatible with realism is elaborated in Dancy (1986). In fact, Dancy also adopts a form of strong, particularist and non-naturalist moral realism, going along with a holistic epistemology (1993, 2004).

²⁴ For a brief reference to this parallel with Moore, see Wettstein (2014). Dworkin’s emphasis on “Hume’s principle” seems to caution us against committing new forms of the “naturalistic fallacy” described in Moore (1994). There are new, sophisticated versions of intuitionism, and it may be worth exploring parallels and affinities with Dworkin’s approach. See, among others, Huemer (2005). In this context, one could also examine Iris Murdoch’s peculiar Platonism and intuitionism (1993).

ventures there a comparison of intuitions to material objects. He argues that becoming aware of the function in our thinking of a strong intuition about the intrinsic value of life, should be regarded as analogous to the discovery of the planet Neptune, the gravitational pull of which had to be taken into account for the explanation of observational data in tracking the movement of the planet Uranus (1993, pp. 68–69).

In *JH* he invokes the phenomenology apparently ignored by proponents of subjectivist accounts of authenticity:

[They] could not deny the inescapable phenomenology of value in people's lives. So they declared that it is we—human beings who long for value—who create that value for ourselves, by acts of will and fiat. This strategy fails because it does not redeem the phenomenology that inspires it. We do create our lives but we do it aiming at value, not trying to invent it. Otherwise the struggle for authenticity these philosophers salute would be barren and pointless. We cannot escape in how we think an assumption that value exists independent of our will or fiat (2011, p. 214).²⁵

For philosophers who don't acquiesce in the deliverances of any apparently "inescapable phenomenology," there are serious doubts about the fully independent existence of a realm of value. Even if they don't dismiss the particular phenomenology, they may interpret it in different ways. They may rely on intuitions pointing to a combination of both discovery and creation or invention in our grasp of the realm in question and eventually opt for a moderate, anthropocentric moral realism.²⁶

However that may be, Dworkin's project of integration of values and normative principles exploits a variety of assumptions, the justification of which can be easily contested. The a priori repudiation of the resources of metaphysical theorizing, which he regards as external to the domain he is exploring, limits the "width" of the reflective equilibrium which he is trying to attain. Thus, in order to avoid the problems of objectionable circularity, he needs to appeal to the authority of phenomenological data and intuitive convictions. Unfortunately, the specter of a certain kind of dogmatism looms large over some of his affirmations and cannot be fully checked by any coherentist scrutiny. One could expect some further philosophical ploy, perhaps

²⁵ See also Taylor (1992). Dworkin repeatedly stresses his unambiguous solution to the famous dilemma first formulated in Plato's dialogue *Euthyphro* (10a2–3), with regard to piety and its definition as "what is loved by the gods." He shall refer to it explicitly in the concluding section of *RWG* (see below, note 31). According to the general form of the dilemma, we have to decide whether "something is x (possesses a value property x), because we judge/desire/want/will it to be so, or we judge/desire/want/will it to be so, because it is x ." As he puts it, "you want your life to be successful because you think that its success is important, not the other way around" (*JH*, 206).

²⁶ For some of the early models of such a moderate moral realism, including conceptions elaborated by David Wiggins and John McDowell, see Virvidakis (1996), pp. 144–209. Dworkin is reluctant to endorse such views, which he regards as too weak to sustain full-blown objectivism (1996, 2011, pp. 444–445 n.6). In recent years, there is a proliferation of technical metaethical theories proposing new hybrid epistemological and metaphysical models, which combine cognitivism with non-cognitivism and realism with constructivism or projectivism (see, among others, Fletcher & Ridge, 2014). It is certain that Dworkin would disapprove all of these scholastic endeavors, which he would consider to be futile and perhaps pernicious,

opening up a new perspective, to redeem some of his key premises or his more controversial conclusions.

4 Groundless Value Realism as a Religion Without God

At this point, we have to turn to *RWG*, which recapitulates and extends the central ideas of Dworkin's moral vision. In fact, this rather sketchy but insightful work seems to constitute a *coda* or a lengthy appendix to the magisterial synthesis attempted in *JH*.²⁷ As I have already suggested, it contains novel elements that complement Dworkin's moral cognitivism in an original way. It is on these elements that I am going to concentrate in this section, with a view to assessing the extent to which they may help elucidate and corroborate his positions. I shall argue that the religious attitude which he advocates casts light both on the nature of the domain of value which is the object of his investigation in *JH*, and on his epistemological and normative commitments.

Indeed, the opening of the book summarizes the key idea which Dworkin is going to develop:

Religion is a deep, distinct, and comprehensive worldview: it holds that inherent, objective value permeates everything, that the universe and its creatures are awe-inspiring, that human life has purpose and the universe order. A belief in a god is only one possible manifestation or consequence of that deeper worldview... The conviction that a god underwrites value, however, ... presupposes a prior commitment to the independent reality of that value. That commitment is available to nonbelievers as well. (2013, pp. 1–2)

Here, we witness a variant of the familiar thesis of the autonomy of the realm of value, which is clearly conceived as independent, not only from the desires and wills of human beings but also from those of any god whose existence we may recognize.²⁸ Thus, faith in the "value part" of a religion can arise and function separately from faith in its doctrinal part supporting theistic beliefs, and it turns out to be what is most important. In any case, it has a clear normative priority for the orientation of our living.

What the author of *RWG* wants to highlight is a religious stance, which imposes the acceptance of two main truths:

²⁷ The book is based on Dworkin's Einstein lectures, delivered at the University of Bern in December 2011, and its topic seems to lend itself to a kind of spiritual testament. Actually, one gets the impression that his arguments require further elaboration and the style needs polishing. The publisher's note introducing *RWG* informs the reader that the author "...planned to greatly extend his treatment of the subject over the next few years, but he became ill in the summer of 2012 and had time only to complete some revisions of the original text before his death in February 2013" Dworkin (2013), p. ix. In any case, one cannot fail to recognize the importance of this small work, as a significant addition to Dworkin's *corpus* (cf. Halbertal, 2013).

²⁸ Once more we come across Dworkin's acceptance of one of the horns of Euthyphro's dilemma, which is clearly the alternative that Plato himself would endorse.

The religious attitude accepts the full independent reality of value. It accepts the objective truth of two central judgments about value. The first holds that human life has objective meaning or importance. Each person has an innate and inescapable responsibility to try to make his life a successful one: that means living well, accepting responsibilities to oneself as well as moral responsibilities to others, not just if we happen to think this important, but because it is important whether we think so or not. The second holds that what we call “nature”—the universe as a whole and in all its parts—is not just a matter of fact but is itself sublime: something of intrinsic value and wonder ... I shall take these two—life’s intrinsic meaning and nature’s intrinsic beauty—as paradigms of a fully religious attitude to life. (2013, pp. 10–11)

Thus, to the ethical and moral judgments concerning dignity, self-respect and respect for others, which were prominent in *JH*, Dworkin now adds aesthetic judgments regarding the beauty and sublimity of the natural world.²⁹ In fact, the religious attitude is presented as opposed to all forms of naturalism, because it entails the acceptance of a strong aesthetic realism, which, like its ethical and moral counterpart, acknowledges the independent, distinctive and irreducible character of value.

It insists that values are real and fundamental, not just manifestations of something else; they are as real as trees or pain. It also rejects a very different theory we might call grounded realism. This position, also popular among philosophers, holds that values are real and that our value judgments can be objectively true—but only on the assumption, which might be wrong, that we have good reason, apart from our confidence in our value judgments, to think that we have the capacity to discover truths about value. (2013, pp. 13–4)

Among the scientists, philosophers and theologians, in whose thought Dworkin discerns manifestations of the religious attitude, we encounter Albert Einstein, Baruch Spinoza and Paul Tillich, who advances some form of negative theology. Despite their differences, what unites them seems to be an awareness of what Rudolf Otto, describes as the “numinous,” the mysterious sense of an all-pervasive spiritual reality. Dworkin points out that it would be more accurate to describe pantheists—including Spinoza—as religious atheists, rather than attribute to them faith in a non-personal god.

Moreover, he argues that the existence of real beauty cannot be correctly explained by naturalists, insofar as the latter find the source of aesthetic value in the *pleasure* we derive from our reaction to the deliverances of our senses, or seek its ground in material and mental states, denying its autonomous existence. Thus, he reaffirms and extends to the field of aesthetics his familiar opposition to moral naturalists, who are often inclined to jettison the independence of moral values, construing them as projections of our desires, or, if they opt for a form of realism, still try to derive them from natural facts and states of affairs.

Now, we may observe that Dworkin’s conception of naturalism is too narrow, and cannot countenance expressions of a religious temperament and spirituality if they don’t involve an acceptance of his metaphysics of fully autonomous value. We could also point to exegetical problems in his reading of Spinoza, who would be reluctant

²⁹ Dworkin doesn’t dwell on the distinction between the *sublime* and the *beautiful*, which, at least since the time of Kant, has been an object of aesthetic theory. He seems to use the terms for the relevant qualities, attributed to a variety of phenomena of the natural world, interchangeably.

to endorse any form of moral realism, or Platonism about value. We shall certainly acknowledge a Spinozist religious attitude conforming with a much broader, non-reductionist naturalism, although it wouldn’t necessarily entail a commitment to value realism, and, *a fortiori*, realism of a strong, ungrounded kind.³⁰

Actually, an effort to elucidate further the religious outlook at issue unfolds in the central chapter of *RWG*. What is particularly interesting for the pursuit of Dworkin’s larger project is the association of aesthetic to epistemic values and norms of inquiry. Thus, we are asked to examine the extent to which beauty and sublimity may be related to truth, in the areas, not only of abstract mathematical reasoning, but also of natural science, especially physics, astronomy and cosmology, where we aspire to construct a “final theory of everything.” If we take seriously the idea behind John Keats’ poetic affirmation that “beauty is truth, truth is beauty,” and we don’t have decisive evidence in experiment or observation for one of the different candidates for such a theory, we may think that “the most beautiful among them is most likely to be true.” We might even go further and believe that “beauty is not just evidence of a theory’s truth, but part of what makes the theory true” (2013, pp. 53–55).

Dworkin is not just trying to remind us of a semantic point about the definition of truth in science. He endorses a realist conception of a mind-independent universe and supposes that the conceptual link between truth and aesthetic qualities, such as coherence, simplicity, elegance and symmetry, is not only a feature of our mental states and activities. For him, the eventual success of our theory and its connection with the beauty we discover cannot be a simple coincidence. Thus, we could and should advance a combination of presumptions about the fabric of the world and about the reality of values, stronger and bolder than any ordinary hypothesis:

Cosmic beauty is something different from either evidence or coincidence: it is a presumption—or rather an aspect of a presumption. The physicists who believe that the universe has great beauty also believe that it has some fundamental unity: they presume that there is, waiting to be discovered, a comprehensive, simple, and unified explanation of how the universe was born and how it works, from the tiniest particle... This apparently strong connection between the twin presumptions—that the universe is comprehensible through a unified theory and that it is transcendently beautiful—suggests that the latter presumption is part of the former. It is part of the dream that the final theory will radiate that transcendent beauty. That is not itself a scientific hypothesis on a narrow empiricist conception of science. (2013, pp. 61–2)

The beauty of such a theory would be characterized by a form of necessity or inevitability which should be related to its integrity. And this integrity would be “shielded,” since the reasons for its acceptance would *emerge from the theory itself*. There wouldn’t be any need to resort to any external grounding. Prior explanations or justifications would make no sense (2013, pp. 86–7). Here, Dworkin’s example from the domain of mathematics points back to the discussion of his conception of value realism:

³⁰ For a broad conception of an expansive naturalism, which could accommodate a theistic worldview, see Ellis (2014). Ellis draws on the work of John McDowell (1994), who appeals to Aristotelian insights and moves in the direction of a naturalized Platonism and of a moderate moral realism, making possible a kind of re-enchantment of the natural world.

The question why it is necessarily true that five and seven make twelve might call for mathematical demonstration. But if it asks for an external explanation of mathematical necessity, it becomes nonsense. In that way the necessity of mathematics is shielded. I have made the same claim of shielded integrity for the realm of value: that claim is part of my account of ungrounded value realism. A sound system of moral conviction has strong integrity—a coherence in which each judgment of personal or political morality supports the others—and that integrity is shielded, as in the case of mathematics, by the conceptual truth that nothing but another value judgment can support another judgment of value. (2013, pp. 89–90)

Moreover, his account of the inevitability of the cosmological truth to be discovered and of the beauty that is expected to characterize it is elucidated by appealing to one more analogy between the integrity sought in physical theory and that of artworks. The beauty in different dimensions of reality resides in the necessity of the strong coherence we find in them:

... [Physicists] sense beauty in the fact—if it is a fact—that the laws that govern everything there is in the vastness of space and in the minutiae of existence are so delicately interwoven that each is explicable only through the others, so that nothing could be different without there being nothing... It is part—though only part—of what we admire in great creative work that given its boundaries every part seems essential to the others, its beginnings can be read from its endings, its top from its bottom, its middle from those boundaries. (2013, pp. 98–9)

In this way, it becomes clear how the religious attitude sustains the scientific presumption, bringing together comprehensibility, necessity and beauty, as essential features of the universe, to be reflected in a final theory:

...A mathematical proof or legal argument, as much as a poem or a play, becomes more beautiful as unnecessary lines or assumptions are eliminated, as it becomes more evident that it had to be that way. For those of us who think beauty real, the scientific presumption that the universe is finally fully comprehensible is also the religious conviction that it shines with real beauty. (2013, pp. 103–4)

Thus, Dworkin's analysis of the interconnections between aesthetic values and epistemic norms and of their metaphysical implications discloses the main components of his religious faith, extending the integration of ethical and moral values to an equally important dimension of the axiological realm. In the third chapter of *RWG* he focuses on practical issues regarding the legal protection of religious convictions and ritual practices within a liberal framework, but does not add much to the discussion of the metaethical issues we are mostly interested in. We should simply remark the emphasis on the general right to ethical independence, as the central principle which is taken to suffice for the relevant decisions, without the need for any special right to religious freedom. To be sure, it is once more the religious attitude which undergirds the acceptance of all principles concerning basic values, such as that of ethical independence.

However, we cannot close our overview of the different aspects and functions of the religious attitude, without noting Dworkin's final musings on death and immortality. We would undoubtedly expect someone who preaches the adoption of a religious attitude, with a view to casting light on the nature of value, to have something

to say about these matters. If he eschews the comforts of any supernaturalist metaphysical beliefs and professes some kind of atheist or agnostic faith, one wonders if he can still suggest a plausible form of immortality to hope for.

Indeed, Dworkin's strong value realism indicates an answer that is available to both religious theists and religious atheists, although the former may also embrace faith in the divine assurance of an afterlife. In any case, what counts for him is our recognition of objective standards of living well, existing prior to any god who would create and impose them through his fiat.³¹ We would be motivated to respect these criteria by our religious attitude, independently of any eventual fear of punishment of transgressions, or expectation of a reward, by a God who will judge our good and evil deeds. Hence, we ought to content ourselves with the realization of a good performance in the art of living, which could be regarded as a satisfactory achievement, complete in itself, as it had been already argued in *JH*. Dworkin acknowledges that this conception may not allay the fear of death and that many people would find it wanting. However, he insists on his religious conviction that "it is the only kind of immortality we can imagine" and "at least, the only kind we have any business wanting."³²

5 Concluding Queries

We can now sum up our remarks on the religious perspective outlined in *RWG*, and try to assess its contribution to Dworkin's cognitivist moral epistemology. Before concluding, we shall point to some of the more general questions and objections that can be raised regarding his approach as a whole. We will have to limit ourselves to a brief exposition since their proper analysis and evaluation would require a detailed treatment.

To begin with, we should dwell on the framework of religious epistemology within which he elaborates the central theses of his original project. The very concepts of a "religious attitude," of "conviction" and of "faith," allow Dworkin to make clear that what is at stake is not an ordinary set of beliefs, justified by austere epistemic standards. His large-scale interpretive enterprise is now enriched by the appeal to the emotional aspects of the mental states he is referring to. Thus, conceptual analysis and the investigation of the inferential links connecting the basic steps of his reasoning are complemented by a phenomenology of "awe" and "wonder," and are sustained by the appropriate existential stance. Ethical, as well as epistemic virtues, the exercise of which facilitates access to the reality of intrinsic value, is to be combined with religious ones, such as reverence.³³ This is how we can fully acknowledge the peculiar

³¹ See Dworkin (2013), p. 154. Here the author of *RWG* mentions the dilemma described in Plato's *Euthyphro*, asserting again his realism about ethical and moral values. See above, notes 25 and 28.

³² A similar construal of immortality is defended by Mark Johnston (2010). However, Johnston's general approach, presented as a form of *panentheism*, doesn't countenance non-naturalism and is closer to Spinoza's original outlook (2009).

³³ See Woodruff (2014).

quality of the “numinous,” in the guise of which we rediscover the “sacredness” of certain values, which had not been mentioned since *LD*.

One understands that we are offered something essential missing from *JH*. The realm of values calls for more than dispassionate intellectual inquiry. The acceptance of its independent existence relies also on our affective faculties, inspiring the commitment to an entire moral vision. The scientific presumption itself, regarding the connection between beauty and the comprehensibility of the universe, which guides our research for a true final theory, is not an ordinary empirical or theoretical hypothesis, but “a religious conviction which shines with real beauty.” And an aspect of this beauty is a sense of inevitability of the relations among the different parts and elements of the cosmos, which engages our feelings, but discloses a real dimension and is not just a product of subjective reactions.

Hence, we could say that we witness substantial progress in the pursuit of the project of integration undertaken by value “hedgehogs.” We have just remarked that the argumentation unfolding in *RWG* indicates a wider and stronger shielded integrity of the axiological domain. In *JH*, devoted primarily to ethical, moral, legal and political concerns, Dworkin had focused on dignity and freedom, justice and authenticity, the responsible pursuit of which is reflected in self-respect and respect for others. In *RWG* he explores further interconnections of aesthetic and epistemic values. His account seems to hint at the traditional Platonic conception of a necessary convergence of the *true*, the *good* and the *beautiful*.

To be sure, Dworkin’s religious attitude is not presented as requiring any irrational “leap of faith.” His steady orientation toward his far-reaching goals, his systematic use of concepts and principles and his argumentative methods and style testify to his rationalist temperament. We could perhaps speak of a *rational faith* in the independent existence of value, constituting the core of a moral religion of a Platonist, rather than of a Kantian anthropocentric kind.³⁴

Unfortunately, there are a host of plausible objections that can be addressed to Dworkin’s holistic project at various stages of its conception and implementation. One may still question both his basic intuitions about the independence and the unity of value and his philosophical methodology. Setting aside worries about the cogency of his arguments put forth to sustain substantive positions regarding particular values and normative principles, one could dispute the force of Hume’s principle, or its use to defend the total insulation of the axiological realm and the a priori rejection of both external skeptical threats and attempts at natural or supernatural grounding. Metaethical quietism—if the term is allowed—would then have to be abandoned. Moreover, for those who see no prospect of convergence in moral inquiry and are inclined toward relativistic or pluralistic construals of thoroughgoing disagreement, the notion of objective interpretive truth may seem spurious. Truth and objectivity concerning the realm of value could perhaps be accepted as regulative ideas, but

³⁴ An anthropocentric, humanist religion, inspired by Kant, is advocated by Ferry (1996). See also Kolenda (1976).

that wouldn’t justify the adoption of strong realism of any kind. As we have already observed, it is difficult to reconcile coherentism with pure cognitivism and realism.³⁵

In fact, those who find Dworkin’s objectivism dogmatic or insufficiently supported by the practice of first-order normative moral thinking wouldn’t be moved by any religious shift or extension of his reflections. Moral intuitionism would appear to them bad enough, but, from their philosophical point of view, the appeal to a religious attitude would look worse, and its adoption would be most probably dismissed as a hopeless gambit. The phenomenology of religious experience invoked in *RWG* to elucidate and justify faith in value would be repudiated or explained away by hard-core atheists and reductionist naturalists of all stripes.

Now, *RWG* may be equally criticized by sympathetic thinkers who acknowledge the significance of the phenomenology in question, but believe that Dworkin doesn’t do justice to it. According to them, it should be interpreted as evidence for theism. These include a variety of sophisticated believers of the main theistic religions, who may also reject Hume’s principle and claim that it is wrong to draw a sharp line between the “value” and the “science” parts of a religion. They would then express the hope for a more rigorous and consistent pursuit of integration, made possible by the overcoming of any strong fact-value distinction. They could argue that theism provides a more satisfactory explanation of the unity of the realm of value than Platonism, by referring it to a supreme, Divine Mind, or to the personal God of the great monotheistic traditions.³⁶

Some of them would follow Dworkin in the appreciation of cosmic beauty, but could take its recognition as a basis for the reconstruction of *arguments from design*, a reference to *intelligent design*, or to some *anthropic principle*, supposedly explaining the “fine-tuning” of the universe, which makes possible the emergence of life and the evolution of our species on Earth. In fact, the author of *RWG* mentions theological arguments related to cosmology and those based on the *anthropic principle*, as well as the *multiverse hypothesis*, which is supposed to provide a rebuttal of the latter. In any case, he regards the “shielded strong integrity” provided by his account as superior to theistic alternatives (2013, pp. 88–97).

In any case, religion usually involves practices of cult, ritual and prayer, regardless of whether these are connected to doctrines about some supernatural Being or beings, or about the divine nature of the universe as a whole, as in the case of pantheism.³⁷ Dworkin, who doesn’t seem to pay due attention to obligations of worship, should perhaps be more cautious in using the term “religion,” limiting his analysis to the notions of a religious stance, attitude, point of view, sensibility or temperament. What matters are the depth, the ultimacy and the motivating power of such a stance, point of view or sensibility, which could arise out of a “fundamental religious impulse,” and be related to an “instinct of value, presumably shared by religious theists and religious atheists alike” (2013, p. 146).

³⁵ For an attempt at their reconciliation, see above, note 23.

³⁶ Theism is defended by John Cottingham (2014) in his elaboration of moral arguments for the existence of God.

³⁷ For an informative analysis of different conceptions of religion, see Smith (2017).

Moreover, one could recognize the conception of a “religious temperament,” which doesn’t necessarily entail the positive conclusions and commitments described by Dworkin. According to Nagel’s much more pessimistic approach in most of his works, until quite recently, it is precisely to such a temperament that we could attribute the sense of absurdity thematized by existentialist philosophers.³⁸ This sense seems to arise out of the inevitable discrepancy we feel exists between our subjective attribution of importance to our own life and its contingent and gratuitous character when we approach it from an objective point of view. If we find it hard to espouse Platonism, we may have to resign ourselves not only to the idea that the existence of the world is just a cosmic accident, which Dworkin characterizes as “deeply unsatisfying” (2013, pp. 78–9), but also to the realization that there is no meaningful way we can endow our lives with real value.³⁹

The notion of spirituality, which has recently become fashionable among theistic and atheist or agnostic philosophers, interpreted in the proper way, could perhaps be used to express Dworkin’s insights, provided it could accommodate his robust understanding of the phenomenology of value. However, the meaning of the term “spirituality” appears to be rather vague and indeterminate. Dworkin might perhaps regard it as too general and too weak to denote the focused religious attitude he presents as entailing faith in the strong integrity of the domain of value. This doesn’t mean that a spiritual dimension isn’t involved in the phenomenology he describes, but this isn’t just any kind of spirituality.⁴⁰

Here, we shall reiterate our conclusion to the effect that Dworkin’s posthumous work contains particularly interesting material which could be regarded as supporting and extending his earlier positions. Had he lived longer, he would have probably tried to develop his claims further and to defend them against most of the criticisms we have mentioned. On the one hand, we could draw on his account of religion without god, in order to explore its further potential for supporting forms of quietist moral realism and cognitivism, moral intuitionism and non-naturalist moral epistemology in general; on the other, we could pursue the fruitful comparison of his positions to more or less analogous, theistic and atheistic, naturalist and non-naturalist approaches in the philosophy of religion.⁴¹

³⁸ See Nagel (1979 and 2010).

³⁹ In *JH*, Dworkin explains his disagreement with Nagel’s pessimism by invoking his conception of living well, which entails the realization of performance value, supposedly assessed by objective criteria (2011, pp. 214–18). The religious attitude presented in *RWG* presumably reinforces the conviction that faith in real value is justified and that the meaning of our lives resides in our aspiration and efforts to live well. It must be noted that Nagel himself develops a more optimistic outlook in his *Mind and Cosmos*, where he moves in the direction of a form of objective idealism (2012). For a critical survey of the evolution of Nagel’s metaethical positions, see Virvidakis (2018).

⁴⁰ I examine a variety of forms and expressions of religious and secular spirituality, positive and negative, in Virvidakis (2015a). For the spiritual dimension of theistic, and, more particularly, Christian religion, see Cottingham (2005). There are various accounts and defenses of kinds of atheist spirituality, including, Comte-Sponville (2007), Gray (2018), Harris (2004), Kitcher (2014), and Solomon (2002).

⁴¹ Here, one could study, among others, Carroll & Norman (2017), Ellis (2014), Johnston (2009), Scruton (2012), and the works cited in the previous note.

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Chapter 5

Does the Ineffability of Brahman Lead to Quietism? Śaṅkara on the Indispensability of Language

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Abstract This chapter examines the indispensability of language and its limitation in Śaṅkarādvaita philosophy, which seems to advocate that Brahman is beyond mind and speech, hence ineffable. Starting from Śaṅkara and in and through the *avasthātraya* post-Śaṅkara tradition, it is admitted by Advaitins that it is the *Upaniṣadic* revelation (*Śruti*)—the only means of knowing Brahman, which results in liberation and that the authority of *Śruti* is not inflexible but Brahman is beyond words and mind. Thus, we face not only the dilemma as to how to account for knowledge without mind and understanding without language but also the question of whether Brahman's ineffability leads us to quietism. The chapter discusses Śaṅkara's philosophy that *Śruti* is not binding on those who have realized Brahman since once the truth is known to them, the Vedas become non-Vedas (*yatra vedah aveadah bhavanti*) and *Śrutis* non-*Śrutis*. *Śruti* is also false but as *śabda pramāṇa*, it still has the capacity to denote the truth. The chapter argues that the ineffable reality, Brahman at the *pāramārthika* level can be perceived as the reality in quietude since the identity relationship between *Ātman* and Brahman completely diminishes the scope of any language or word. This leads Śaṅkara's philosophy to a point of quietism since the knower and the known are the same. At the *vyavahārika* level, on the other hand, where Advaitins believe in the language of creature, creation, and creator, Brahman is merely an adequate expression of freedom and liberation.

Keywords Brahman · Ineffable · Śaṅkarādvaita · Liberation · Revelation · Quietism

1 Introduction

Śaṅkarādvaita Vedānta is very particular about the necessity and limitations of the sources of knowledge in general and verbal cognition in particular. Although Advaitins are in general said to have numerated and accepted six *pramāṇas*, namely

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