



# Remembering Ronnie: Remarks at the Memorial for Ronald Dworkin

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Remarks at the Memorial for Ronald Dworkin, NYU, October 2, 2013

T. M. Scanlon

There is much to say about Ronnie. But in the few minutes that I have today I will confine myself to putting three thoughts before you: the first about confidence, the second about creating one's own life, the third about luck.

Ronnie's remarkable confidence was evident at two levels. It manifested itself in his famous eloquence: He had the confidence to finish each sentence in a triumphal manner, rather than, like some of us, to start doubting, and introducing qualifications, before completing the thought. His confidence was manifested also at a deeper level in the boldness with which he took up challenging projects. This was evident, at the beginning, in his undertaking to challenge Herbert Hart's theory of law, and then, in the last chapter of *Taking Rights Seriously*, defending the idea that there are right answers even in the hardest cases.<sup>1</sup> This chapter then grew into a bold theory of interpretation, which he applied not only to law and to philosophy, but to history and literature as well, and into an account of objectivity that addressed some of the deepest and most difficult questions in philosophy. Finally, at the end of his life, he was boldly taking on questions about physics and religion, which the more timid among us might have decided to steer clear of.

Ronnie's confidence involved no attitude of superiority—no suggestion that he knew better and could do better than the rest of us. Rather, his confident enthusiasm invited us to join him in taking on these difficult and interesting questions. Marshall Cohen once told me that when Ronnie was an undergraduate at Harvard he was already

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<sup>1</sup> RONALD DWORKIN, *TAKING RIGHTS SERIOUSLY* (1977).

the Ronnie we knew, brilliant and full of confidence. Ronnie's own description of his time at Harvard was this: "Arriving at Harvard was wonderful," he said. "It was like a feast. Here were all these brilliant people. *And they were willing to talk with me!*" But the reaction of these brilliant people, as Marshall described it to me, was: "Here suddenly was this brilliant undergraduate. Where in the world did he come from?"

Where indeed? More than anyone I have ever known, Ronnie seemed to have created himself. And this matched his own view of how one should live. In *Justice for Hedgehogs* he writes that we each have an ethical duty of self-respect, which requires that "Each person must take his own life seriously: he must accept that it is a matter of importance that his life be a successful performance rather than a wasted opportunity."<sup>2</sup> A second ethical duty, he writes, is authenticity: "Each person has a special responsibility for identifying what counts as success in his own life; he has a personal responsibility to create that life through a coherent narrative or style that he himself endorses." Ronnie took those duties seriously and lived up to them as much as anyone I can imagine.

Finally, luck. By any measure, Ronnie had a very fortunate life, as I am sure he would have agreed. In his writings on equality he imagined the possibility of neutralizing the effects of luck by means of insurance policies that would provide compensation if one did not have a certain measure of good fortune. The premiums would of course vary depending on the level of good luck that was guaranteed, and I think few could afford the premiums for an insurance policy that would guarantee a life as fortunate as Ronnie's.

Ronnie was lucky in having the love and care of two wonderful women; lucky in his remarkable intellectual talent; lucky in being born at a time when the state of academic philosophy, American law and politics, and even the political moment in other

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<sup>2</sup> RONALD DWORKIN, *JUSTICE FOR HEDGEHOGS* 203 (2011).

parts of the world, provided fertile conditions for the exercise of his particular talents, allowing him to make important contributions in all of these domains. In particular, he was lucky that the New York newspaper strike occurred when it did, leading Bob Silvers and others to create the *New York Review*, which provided an ideal vehicle through which Ronnie's brilliance could have broad and beneficial effects.

Like his confidence, Ronnie's bounteous good fortune was not something that set him apart, but something that he generously shared with all of us. We are all supremely lucky to have been his beneficiaries.