PART II

Metaethics and Moral Psychology
1. Reasons Fundamentalism

This is a chapter about a currently popular view in metaethics, or more properly metanormativity. It is Scanlon’s view (Scanlon 2014), and Derek Parfit’s (Parfit 2011). The view is what Jonas Olson calls the New Non-Naturalism (Olson 2009). Following Scanlon, I will call it Reasons Fundamentalism, and my focus will be on Scanlon’s formulation, explication, and defense.

Reasons Fundamentalism shares with Good Old Non-Naturalism, à la Moore (Moore 1993), the plank saying that there are irreducible, non-natural normative facts. As with Moore’s view, it can be a bit difficult to see what is meant by “non-natural,” but I won’t worry too much about this (I am pretty sure that non-natural facts do not cause anything, but beyond that I have only a dim idea). The facts are about non-natural properties. But unlike Moore, Reasons Fundamentalists say that the fundamental normative facts are facts about which things are reasons to do what in which circumstances. Facts about what is good, and about what is wrong, can be explained in terms of the more fundamental facts about reasons. The most fundamental normative property is the property of being a reason. (This is not quite right; I’ll correct it in a moment.) Thus the name.

In the first section, I provide a little background, explaining just a few details of Reasons Fundamentalism, and then briefly look at the traditional metaphysical problems associated with similar views. The rest of the chapter will sound two themes of Simon Blackburn’s work. First, we should demand of a metaethical theory that it give us a
compelling story about the connection between normative thought and action; expressivism has such a story. For Blackburn,\(^1\) normative thought is broadly speaking emotional, passionate, conative on its own; for Gibbard (2003) normative thought is planning. But we can start off with an open mind, allowing that there might be some other satisfactory story. So in section 2 I look into the question of what sort of account Reasons Fundamentalism can give of moral motivation; I argue that the account is unsatisfactory because it leaves the practical essence of the normative unexplained. Scanlon’s metanormative approach has come some distance since the few off-hand thoughts in *What We Owe to Each Other*, so my examination of the resources his sort of view has to explain the practicality of practical reasons will be rather more complicated than Blackburn’s quick objections in (1999).

Second, Reasons Fundamentalism contains a quietist strain, by which I mean it seems to want to avoid heavy-duty metaphysical commitments. We know from Blackburn’s work that a quasi-realist expressivism can, insofar as it is successful, end up sounding like non-naturalist realism without a lot of heavy-duty metaphysical commitments.\(^2\) So the question arises how, if at all, Reasons Fundamentalism differs from Blackburn’s own view. In the last section, I look more carefully at what sort of theory Scanlon’s Reasons Fundamentalism really is, and how it is to be distinguished from quasi-realism.

1.1 What Reasons Fundamentalism says

Reasons Fundamentalism gives a buck-passing account of value, and a contractualist account of moral obligation, or perhaps some other account as long as it is in terms of reasons. But it has reasons, and the property of being a reason, on the explanatory ground floor.

Reasons, according to Reasons Fundamentalism, are propositions, or facts. (The official line is that they are facts, but it turns out to be more convenient to adopt the closely related view that they are propositions.) There is nothing metaphysically interesting about these facts or propositions; they are just ordinary ones, like that fact that I will miss the train if I stop to buy a sandwich, or the proposition that somebody needs my help. These are natural facts, and the propositions made true by them involve natural properties (only, perhaps; anyway we may assume so). The non-natural element is the fact that these are reasons for me to do certain things (skip the sandwich, help).

I said that the fundamental normative property is the property of being a reason, but then I added that this is not quite right. The fundamental normative element, according to Reasons Fundamentalism, is a relation, not a property. It is the relation

\[ \lambda p, c, a \ (p \text{ is a reason to do } a \text{ in } c) \]

\(^1\) Throughout his work, but particularly in Blackburn (2001).

\(^2\) Blackburn (1984b, esp. 196): “we can happily say that moral judgments are true or false, only not think that we have sold out to realism when we do so.”
Scanlon says, “The things denoted by terms occupying the first position in a statement, \( R(p, c, a) \)—the things that are reasons—are not some special kind of normative entity but ordinary facts, usually facts about the natural world.” As an example, he adds: “the fact that a piece of metal is sharp, is a reason to use it in order to cut something, and under most conditions a reason not to press one’s hand against it (unless other factors give one reason to cut one’s hand.)” (Scanlon 2014).

Suppose I was in a situation yesterday, a circumstance \( c \), and in that circumstance the fact that I would miss my train if I stopped to buy a sandwich was a reason for me to skip the sandwich. I think Scanlon intends the circumstances to be extremely specific (I won’t go into why), so it’s not a good idea to try to spell it out explicitly; let’s just say, \( c \) is the circumstance in which I found myself yesterday at St Pancras Station. The proposition, \( p \), is the proposition that (in \( c \)) I was going to miss my train if I stopped to buy a sandwich. And \( a \) was the skipping of the sandwich. All of these items mentioned are part of the natural world, as Scanlon says. What is not part of the natural world is the relation, \( R(<I\ miss\ my\ train\ if\ I\ stop\ to\ buy\ a\ sandwich>,\ my\ circumstances\ at\ the\ station,\ skipping\ the\ sandwich) \). It’s a fact that it was a reason for me to skip the sandwich, and there was a reason-relation that held between my circumstances and the proposition and the skipping, but that fact and that relation are not part of the natural world. According to Scanlon, “contrary to what is sometimes said, belief in irreducibly normative truths does not involve commitment to any special entities. The essential element in normative statements is not a term referring to an entity, but a relation: the relation \( R(p, c, a) \).” (Scanlon 2014). Here Scanlon just means that the irreducible, non-natural element is not a particular but a relation (there is also the non-natural fact). It may seem odd to stress that the non-natural relation is not an entity. What he’s trying to make out in this passage (and closely following ones) is that Reasons Fundamentalism carries a rather light ontological commitment. I don’t mean to endorse what he’s saying here, but later I will indeed want to try to sort some things out, so let me elaborate just a bit.

On the one hand, Scanlon wants to be clear that his belief in non-natural properties (relations, of course, but he does often say “property”) isn’t anti-scientific in the way that belief in ghosts is unscientific.

If by a normative property one meant a property in the physical world, then I agree that this would be odd. But if all one means by something’s having the property of being a reason is that the concept, reason, properly applies to it, then I see no oddity. There would be a normative property only in a minimal sense corresponding to the minimal notion of truth, which Gibbard seems to accept. (Scanlon 2014)

And he cites (with approval) Simon Blackburn’s remark to the effect that it is harmless (ontologically noncommittal) to refer to properties when these properties are “shadows” of predicates.3 “Normative truths,” he says, constitute a distinct realm and need no

3 One of Blackburn’s preferred ways to put essentially this point is to speak of “Ramsay’s Ladder,” the metaphorical step from first-order talk in a given domain to talk of truth in that domain, or of facts, or from
metaphysical reality in order to have the significance that we commonly grant them” (Scanlon 2014). The idea that they do constitute a distinct realm, another world, but need no metaphysical reality, is somewhat puzzling. This is one face of the problem that I will return to at the end of the chapter.

1.2 Metaphysics of Reasons Fundamentalism

Here are a couple of brief remarks about traditional metaphysical problems.

A metaethical theory is supposed to explain supervenience. And it is supposed to explain the apparent irreducibility of normative facts to nonnormative, descriptive ones. I believe that Scanlon’s explanation for irreducibility is that there is a distinct realm of normative properties and facts. I don’t have much to say about this; I’ll say something at the end.

Since Reasons Fundamentalism has some metaphysics in common with Moorean Non-Naturalism, we may wonder whether it is subject to the same objections. It is tempting to think that certain metaphysical problems, in particular the problem bruted by R. M. Hare and Simon Blackburn of explaining supervenience, can be handled very easily by Reasons Fundamentalism. Some philosophers, indeed, have thought so. I think this is an error. McPherson (2010) and Olson (2009) have both argued that there is no advantage to Reasons Fundamentalism over Moorean Non-Naturalism when it comes to explaining supervenience, and I have nothing to add. I agree with critics like McPherson and Olson that Reasons Fundamentalism has metaphysical difficulties, but I’m leaving them aside. Instead, my concerns will focus on the account of moral motivation available to Reasons Fundamentalists.

2. Reasons and Motivation

A lot of philosophers think there is some special connection between reasons and motivations. Some think the connection is between having a reason to Φ and being motivated to Φ, and some think it is between judging that one has a reason to Φ and being motivated to Φ (Darwall 1983; and Finlay and Schroeder 2008). And metaethicists have typically thought that this connection is difficult for realists to explain, and that it tends to support constructivism or expressivism of some kind.

In a nutshell, Scanlon says that there is a mistake in identifying the phenomenon to be explained, and that once we identify the mistake we’ll see that there is no difficulty for Reasons Fundamentalism.
The cognitivist view I have been defending has two important features in common with Gibbard’s expressivism and Blackburn’s quasi-realism. It does not presuppose normative properties in the (natural) world. And it interprets claims about reasons as reactions to the (natural) world: more specifically, claims about the appropriateness of certain reactions to it. Where my view differs most obviously from Blackburn’s and Gibbard’s is in maintaining that normative claims can be true or false (although more needs to be said about how much this comes to). My view also differs from these non-cognitivist views in the explanation it offers of the “motivational” power of normative claims. (Scanlon 2014)

This passage introduces the issues I will be discussing. Scanlon notes a similarity between Reasons Fundamentalism and expressivism: that neither identifies the property of being a reason with a natural property—a property in the natural world, as Scanlon puts it.6 But it’s the differences between the views that interest me. Scanlon thinks there are two. First, there is the semantic difference: Reasons Fundamentalism asserts that normative claims can be true or false; expressivism denies this. He adds that more should be said about what this amounts to, and indeed I think it turns out to be much harder to make out this difference than Scanlon realizes. Second, there is a difference in the explanation the kinds of theories give of the “motivational power” of normative claims, and here I agree that there is a significant difference. I’ll start with this difference. The semantic difference will return in the last section.

2.1 The Rationality Connection

Expressivists note that there is a special, “internal” connection between normative judgment and motivation. To put it brashly, normative judgments can motivate us all by themselves, without the help of an ulterior motivation. By contrast, the factual judgment that there is some water in the bottle can motivate me to take the bottle and bring it to my lips, but only in the presence of a further state, a desire (to drink some water). Beliefs, expressivists note, do not motivate of their own accord. So, they conclude, normative judgments are not beliefs. They are desires, or desire-like states, with the telic direction of fit.7 One way Blackburn has suggested understanding quasi-realism is that it is the task of earning the right to speak of a state of mind with the telic direction as a “representation” (Blackburn 1996).

Expressivists sometimes go on and add that normative judgments, since they are telic, are not bearers of truth and falsehood. This is a Humean view. But it is an unnecessary part of expressivism, and as Blackburn now says, it can be dropped without harm (but I defer further discussion to section 3). It is, or goes along with, what has been called the Minimalist Turn, or as I’ve called it, Creeping Minimalism (Dreier 2004). The general idea is that once we accept a minimalist conception of truth,

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6 The second similarity is a bit harder to understand—neither Gibbard nor Blackburn interprets claims about reasons as claims about the appropriate reactions to the natural world. They understand claims about reasons as reactions, I would say. Perhaps Scanlon means to point to this broader, more nebulous similarity: that he and Gibbard and Blackburn all think of claims about reasons as reaction to the natural world?

7 That is, a state with world-to-fit-the-mind direction of fit; see Humberstone (1992).
proposition, fact, property, belief… there is no longer any call for denying that normative sentences can be true, express propositions, denote facts, are objects of belief, and so on. All of these further forms of words will be metaphysically non-committal. As we will see, Scanlon wants non-committal metaphysical-sounding talk, too, though he approaches from the opposite direction.

So, as I said, expressivists draw a conclusion from the intrinsic motivational power of normative judgment: that such judgment is non-cognitive. Scanlon thinks this is a mistake. The challenge, as he sees it, is not to see how normative judgment does motivate a person, but rather to understand “normative authority. The question is not how an agent might come to respond to the fact that X is a reason for her to do A, by accepting that it is a reason, but rather a question of why, if she does have these reasons, she must so respond.” The connection between normative judgment and motivation, according to Scanlon, is a normative one rather than a conceptual connection. A person can be unmotivated by her normative judgments. It’s just that when she is unmotivated, there is something wrong with her. She is irrational. The connection between normative judgment and motivation is mediated by our rationality.

It is often said that an adequate account of reasons must explain how they motivate people to act, but it is not clear exactly what kind of explanation is thought to be required. The term “motivate” has a dual character. This is brought out by considering the contrast between my view and desire theories, which are generally seen as providing a more satisfactory explanation of the kind in question. On the one hand, when it is said that only desires can motivate, and that beliefs are “motivationally inert” the motivation in question may seem to be a kind of causal efficacy. But “motivate” also has a rational, or even normative aspect: desires are not only supposed to cause actions but also to “rationalize” them, as Davidson famously said. I take this to mean, at least, that a desire makes an action (believed to promote its satisfaction) understandable, or perhaps even makes it “rational.”

If to rationalize an action is to make it understandable, and even rational, for the agent to so act, then it would seem that an agent’s belief that she had a reason to perform an action, even if it is a belief, could rationalize her action just as well as a desire could.

[A] being is a rational agent only if the judgments that it makes about reasons make a difference to the actions and attitudes that it proceeds to have. A perfectly rational agent would always have attitudes and perform the actions that are appropriate according to the judgments about reasons that he or she accepts. A rational agent will generally intend to do those actions that he or she judges him or herself to have compelling reason to do, and believe a proposition if he or she takes him or herself to have good evidence for its truth. A perfectly rational agent will always do these things. (Scanlon 2014)

8 Here again we are “climbing” Ramsay’s Ladder; see n. 3.
9 Scanlon (2014). Here Scanlon is discussing Christine Korsgaard’s “normative question,” a question she thinks is unanswerable by normative realists; see Korsgaard (1996, esp. 44–6). I am very sympathetic to Korsgaard’s line of argument, and it is closely related to the line I am following here, but the dialectical situation between Korsgaard and the Reasons Fundamentalists is tricky so I cannot explicate it in this chapter. See my (2014).
Scanlon concludes that the correct understanding of the motivation/judgment connection leaves wide open the possibility that normative judgment is cognitive. It is a form of belief. It is belief about the reasons one has. Of course, this judgment is not intrinsically motivating. Its motivational force is really normative force, and when it produces motivation this is because it is processed, so to speak, by our rationality. Our rational nature is, one might say, a black box (for all that’s been said, anyway) that takes our normative beliefs as input and yields motivations as outputs. (Compare: our rational nature takes beliefs as inputs and yields beliefs in the logical consequences as outputs.) There is nothing metaphysically worrisome here,¹⁰ nor does there seem to be any puzzle about how a thetic state¹¹ could be internally connected to a motivation: the “internal” connection is still an extrinsic relation.

2.3 Does the Rationality Connection have an explanation?

It would be nice to have an explanation for why it is rational to be motivated by your judgments about the reasons you have. There is an illusion, I think, that this is something so obvious that it needs no explanation. As Scanlon notes, it does seem perfectly natural to think of a belief about your reasons to be just as capable of “rationalizing” a motivation as a pre-existing desire is. There’s nothing puzzling about this, so why do we need any explanation? But remember the underlying model. There is a non-natural relation that obtains between your condition and a proposition and an action. There is quite literally nothing we can say about what this non-natural relation is. Instead of calling it the reason relation, we could call it Relation R. And when a person believes that the relation holds between a certain proposition and her condition and a given action, then (as long as she also believes the proposition) she is rationally compelled to want to perform the action. Rationality requires of her that she want to perform the action. When things are put like this, it does seem somewhat mysterious, in the sense that a philosopher, at least, would like to have an explanation for why rationality requires this. What if another philosopher tells you that he has just intuited yet another relation, Q, with the same feature—that you believe that Q(p, your condition, a) you are rationally required to want to do a. It isn’t the reason relation, of course; you already know about that one. Are you merely skeptical that there is some other such relation, Q, or are you also wondering how on earth this mysterious relation could carry such a rational requirement with it? But nobody can tell us anything at all about the difference between Q and R. Saying, for instance, that R is the counting in favor relation is completely unhelpful, since that is just another name for R (and of course, we could give Q another name as well!).

We would like to have an explanation. But, there is one conception of how the Reason-Rationality-Motivation connection works that might be satisfactory, and I suspect this is the one Scanlon has in mind, or anyway that it’s one Reasons

¹⁰ As Korsgaard (1986) pointed out.
¹¹ That is, a state with the mind-to-fit-the-world direction of fit; see again Humberstone (1992).
Fundamentalism might adopt. According to this conception, it is part of the nature of
rationality, its essence, that it is (or at least includes) a disposition to be motivated to do
those things you believe you have reason to do. Rationality must have some basic
content, and, as Scanlon says, it is pretty plausible that part of its content is the
requirement to be motivated by the reasons you believe you have. So, rationality is
(partly constituted by) the disposition in question.

There is something perfectly sensible about this approach, I think, but also some-
thing vacuous. Both are illustrated by comparing the type of explanation at work here
with another sort. Here’s my analogy. Suppose I am thirsty, and you are not. My thirst
is a disposition. (This is probably an oversimplification, but surely thirst is at least in part
a disposition.) It is a disposition to be motivated by one’s beliefs about water. So, when
I believe that there is some water in a bottle on the table, and so do you, I am motivated
to take the bottle and put it to my lips, whereas you are unmoved. There is no mystery
about how water bottle beliefs can be motivating. They are not intrinsically motivat-
ing. Rather, they motivate a thirsty person—and it is a necessary truth that they do, of
course, but the necessity resides in the dispositional nature of thirst. We can also say, it is
of the nature of water that beliefs about it motivate a thirsty person. Now compare: it is
of the nature of the property, being a reason to do a, that beliefs about it motivate a
rational person to do a. It is a necessity, though we might add that the necessity resides
in the dispositional nature of rationality.

So, first, there is presumably no problem with the Thirsty explanation. There is no
metaphysical mystery. If I just said, “It is of the nature of water that beliefs about it
motivate us,” you would find this perplexing; but if I added, “Of course, I mean only,
insofar as we are thirsty,” you would conclude that what I was asserting was quite trivial
and not puzzling at all. So it is with reason-beliefs and being rational, on the proposed
model. So far, so good.

But second, somehow rationality has been deracinated by this account. For when
I am thirsty and you are not, I do not think of you as missing out on some facts because
you are unmotivated by your belief that there is water in the bottle. It is no error on
your part, your thoughts aren’t incorrect, you do not fail to accurately represent any
aspect of the world. You just lack this disposition that I have, that’s all. It is a difference
between us, and not a disagreement. But now suppose you are rational, and I am not.
We both recognize that there is a reason in our situation to make plans for our future
financial well-being, but this moves you and not me. When someone insists, “But
Jamie, you have a reason to save some of your monthly paycheck in a 401K,” I don’t
deny this—I heartily agree. Yes, of course there is exactly the reason you say, and it is
most definitely a reason for me to do it, and the reason is undefeated, but this is all
boring metaphysics and doesn’t move me. On the model of Thirsty motivation, it
seems, you must conclude that I am making no error. I am not misunderstanding what
a reason is, I am not incorrect, I am managing to represent reality in perfect accuracy.
It’s just that I lack a certain disposition that you have: the disposition to be motivated by
thoughts about this special, ineffable non-natural property.
This seems wrong. It is not the way we think about rationality. I doubt that it could be even close to what we are talking about when we are talking about rationality. At best it is rationality yanked out by the roots.

When you are irrational, in the sense of failing to be motivated by the reasons you recognize as reasons, you are making an error. Scanlon himself suggests a nice way to put this error. When someone is aware of a truth that does in fact have normative significance, he says, but fails to notice that it has, then she “is open to rational criticism for not treating this fact as a reason. But the failure to do so is not always irrational. By contrast, it is irrational to judge some consideration to be a reason to do a, and then refuse to treat it as a reason” (Scanlon 2014). This seems exactly right.12 The form of irrationality in play here is the failure to treat what you acknowledge to be reason as a reason. It’s like the failure to treat what you recognize to be a logical consequence as a logical consequence, or the failure to treat what you acknowledge to be likely as something likely (by betting against it at even odds, say). The necessity of logic, the force of a reason, the persuasiveness of probability: these can all be thought of as matters of rationality. Simon Blackburn’s work treats all three of these subjects in an expressivist, “side-on” way; “Opinions and Chances,” for instance, treats the connection between our credences and our judgments of the objective chances, and “Morals and Modals” gives the expressivist explanation of how motions of the mind follow by rational compulsion along the traces of perceived necessitation.13 Maybe a good way to trace the common thread is to note that there is something special about treating what you regard to be a reason as a reason, treating what you think is a necessity as a necessity, treating what you take to be a probability as a probability. We make a particular kind of mistake—maybe a rational mistake—when we fail in any one of those. Compare: there is no similar mistake to be made when you fail to treat what you acknowledge to be a piano, as a piano, say by declining to play it, or by using it as fire wood. (Aesthetically or even ethically abhorrent, no doubt, but not irrational—not a mistake so much as evidence of one’s barbarism . . .)

The expressivist explanation of this difference is simple: judging something to be a reason just is a state with a certain conative role. The rational ties grow from the state’s essential role. Compare: the essential role of a conditional belief is to generate the belief in the consequent when supplied with belief in the antecedent. That doesn’t mean every conditional belief is a can’t-miss candidate for modus ponens, but it does mean that a belief type that you never use for modus ponens and have no inclination so to use

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12 Actually, there is an issue, perhaps terminological, that Scanlon is taking a stand on here and which I do not mean to take a stand on. It is an issue about which of two ways is the proper way to use the words “reason” and “rational.” Some people think that they must be understood so as to link them up like this: being rational is being properly responsive to reasons. Scanlon does not think this is right; I have no view about this, but I have a meta-view: this is not something that is worth arguing about. So here and now I say: let’s just use the terms in the Scanlon way, and say that a person who fails to respond properly to her reasons “is open to rational criticism but [may not be] irrational” (she may not be aware that it is a reason).

13 See Blackburn (1980 and 1993).
simply isn’t a conditional belief. Without committing to any full-blown theory of rationality, we might say that states are rationally tied together when they may in fact fail to be linked causally, but only because of some kind of systemic failure, the failure of a process that must normally or ordinarily be in place in order for the states to be the kind of states that they are.

Return to the analogy with thirst. Of course, sometimes lacking thirst is a kind of mistake, or fault. When someone is dehydrated after a long desert walk, she is supposed to be thirsty; she should have the disposition to be motivated to drink stuff she believes to be water. Being thirsty is for something. It is a disposition we need, at certain times, and at those times to lack it is to suffer from a kind of defect. Maybe being rational is for something, too. Maybe it is for: being motivated by our reasons. It would be a defect, surely, to lack this disposition (maybe at all times!). Is this the explanation we were looking for?

Verdicts of rationality or irrationality do not seem to me to work this way. Rationality is a kind of coherence. It is a relation among intentional states. It fails when these states are not doing what they are supposed to do. For example, when a conjunctive belief fails to yield belief in its conjuncts, when the occasion arises to consider the conjuncts, it has gone badly wrong.

It’s not so much that rationality is for getting conjuncts from conjunctions. It’s that conjunctions are for getting their conjuncts. (Of course, one could instead give up the conjunction.) Irrationality arrives when the states are not fulfilling their own essential roles. So, if failing to be motivated by one’s normative judgments is a kind of irrationality, this must be, I think, because it is part of the essential role of a normative judgment that it motivates.

Fortunately for me, Scanlon appears to agree.

Suppose we know the set of triples \((p,c,a)\) such that a language user assents to \(R(p,c,a)\). Does this amount to “the complete story” about how that language user understands the relation \(R\)? It seems to me that it does not. What we need to know further is how that language user responds when he believes that the relation \(R(p,c,a)\) holds. In order to know whether the language user assents to \(R(p,c,a)\) just when he or she takes it to be a “true thought” that \(p\) counts in favor of \(a\) for someone in \(c\), we need to know whether he or she generally treats \(R(p,c,a)\) as relevant to the question of whether to do \(a\) when he or she takes him or herself to be in circumstances \(c\) and believes \(p\). (Scanlon 2014)

This seems about right to me. The point is somewhat more forceful, to my mind, if the translation is of an entire community rather than an individual.

Suppose we meet a group of people who seem to speak English: the Perverse. They have a word, “exton,” which has the extension of our word “reason.” (The extension is a set of triples, as Scanlon puts it. In other words, for each fact we think is a reason for a person to \(a\) in a certain circumstance, the Perverse say that this fact is an exton for doing \(a\) in those circumstances.) But they seem utterly uninterested in this relation, and when questioned they admit that it doesn’t have much point. They have another
word, “motivon,” with the conceptual role that “reason” has for us. That is, when they notice a fact they call a “motivon” to do a, they tend to be motivated to do a, and when they are trying to decide whether to do or believe something, they consider all the “motivons” for and against doing it. But “motivon” doesn’t have the extension of “reason” (or “exton”). They do not count the welfare of foreigners as motivons, and they do count the protection of cassowaries as motivons above all others. Which of their words means “reason”?

Maybe you think I’ve left something out. Besides the extension, after all, there is also the property (or relation) itself. But if we add that by their faculty of intuition, the Perverse have grasped the non-natural relation and can see perfectly well that its extension is the extension of “exton,” this does not dissuade us from our interpretation.

3. Metametaethics of Reasons Fundamentalism

3.1 Another World

Scanlon agrees that judging something to be a reason is a state with a special role, a role unlike that of most beliefs. In particular, he agrees (with Blackburn) that if we want to know whether someone is thinking about which items are reasons, what we need to know is not the extension of a certain predicate, but rather how these thoughts figure in her practical decision-making. A reason thought is picked out by the role it plays in decisions about what to do, and not by its extension. Expressivists think this provides support for their view, but Scanlon thinks it supports Reasons Fundamentalism! For although he agrees (apparently) that a belief about the natural world couldn’t have this sort of role as part of its nature, he claims that beliefs about Another World could:

For any proposition $p$ about [the natural] world, a belief that $p$ has a mind to world direction of fit—that is to say, a person is open to rational criticism if he or she does not modify this belief in the face of credible evidence that $p$ is false. Any such $p$ might also be a good reason for some action $a$. If so, then a person who believes $p$ and fails to treat it as a reason for $a$ is making a normative error and thus open to a kind of rational criticism. But this criticism is appropriate in virtue of the truth of a further normative claim $R(p, r, a)$, not simply in virtue of the fact that the agent believes $p$. So a belief that $p$ is linked to standards of correctness (must “fit the world”) simply by being the kind of state that it is, but it is not rationally tied to action in this same way. This argument depends, however, on the assumption that the belief in question is a belief about the natural world. If it is not—if the relevant standard of correctness is not “fitting with” the natural world but some other form of correctness—then the second half of the argument fails. In particular, if the belief in question is a belief that $p$ is a good reason to do $a$, then it is true simply in virtue of being the kind of state that it is (and not in virtue of any further normative fact) that a person who has that belief would be irrational in refusing to treat $p$ as such a reason. The plausibility of the argument that a state cannot have both “mind to world” and “world to mind” directions of fit is limited to cases in which “the world” referred to in both cases is the natural world. The tendency to think that this argument rules out interpreting normative judgments as a kind of belief is thus another instance of the tendency mentioned in my second lecture, to
identify the set of all things independent of us about which our opinions can be correct or incorrect with “the natural world.” (Scanlon 2014)

So, briefly, suppose you believe that $x$ has $N$, a natural property. Your belief that $x$ has $N$ is thetic, because it is tied constitutively to evidence that $x$ does have $N$, so you are being irrational if you maintain it in the face of evidence that $x$ does not have $N$. But it is not tied constitutively to any action (not all by itself), so it cannot be a telic state as well. However, if we replace $N$ with $R$, which is non-natural, then the argument fails, because beliefs about which things have $R$ are indeed constitutively tied to action.

Is this really a point that can be used in support of Reasons Fundamentalism? It sounds to me like something an expressivist would say. Here is a state, he says, whose whole point and purpose is to drive action; it fails to do so only by being embedded in some kind of systemic failure. Call it a belief if you will, but recognize that it is in its essential respects conative. Can Scanlon agree with all of this but jump off right before the finish?

Here is what he seems to be stuck saying. When your belief switches from attributing one property, $N$, to $x$, to attributing a different property, $R$, to $x$, it changes its essential role in your conative/cognitive economy. This is because $N$ is in the natural world, and $R$ is not. When your thoughts, your representations, turn from our natural world to this other world, they take on special new roles.

Recall Mackie:

No doubt it was an extravagance of Moore to say that “good” is the name of a non-natural quality, but it would not be so far wrong to say that in moral contexts it is used as if it were the name of a supposed non-natural quality, where the description “non-natural” leaves room for the peculiar evaluative, prescriptive, intrinsically action-guiding aspects of this supposed quality. (Mackie 1991, 32)

I find this absolutely incredible. How could the non-naturalness of the property (or relation) in question foil what would otherwise be a cogent argument against cognitivism? The direction-of-fit problem does not appear to be a problem regarding the nature of the thing represented, but rather with the incompatible features of the representing state.

3.2 A metametaethical problem

I suspect that there is a dialectical problem at the center of this debate. On many of what each side thinks of as the central issues, there is no substantive disagreement.

For example, Reasons Fundamentalists like Scanlon make much of the fact that our moral judgments figure in certain kinds of arguments and embed into various contents as

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14 Compare Blackburn’s Practical Tortoise, in Blackburn (1995). The difficulty the Tortoise is having (or really, is pretending to have) is in bridging the gap between an apprehension and a motivation. There is no assumption sneaked past the sharp-eyed Achilles that the apprehension is of a natural fact, nor is that assumption needed, nor, apparently, could it do any extra work at all.

15 For elaboration of this point, see Dreier (2010).
if they had truth conditions; expressivists, famously, agree. And both are happy with the
idea that the truth borne by normative statements is metaphysically “light”, or “minimal"
(as in the quotations at the end of section 1.1). Reasons Fundamentalists argue: since we
incur no problematic metaphysical commitments by speaking of truths and facts about
what reasons people have, there is nothing to impugn our common sense view that there
are moral facts and truths, and so expressivists cannot get the leverage they need. But
expressivists retort that these sorts of facts and truths (and properties, etc.) are perfectly
compatible with what they mean to be saying about normative thought and talk.

A second example: as we have seen, Scanlon and Blackburn seem to agree that our
most basic normative thoughts have a special, definitive conceptual role, in that they
are linked to practical choice in a way that (for want of a better term) plain factual beliefs
are not. But then Blackburn concludes, “so, they are not beliefs,” while Scanlon
concludes, “they are a different kind of belief (they have a special content).” He
recognizes that some will complain that beliefs cannot have this kind of rational
connection with action,” but he says this just looks like a stipulation about a word.
“Little turns on the term ‘belief’ as long as it is recognized that judgments about reasons
can be correct or incorrect independent of their being made, and thus that they behave
like beliefs in interpersonal argument and disagreement” (Scanlon 2014). Of course,
Scanlon is right that little turns on the term “belief.” Blackburn made the same point
about one apparent dispute between realists and anti-realists in the philosophy of
science: insofar as one camp recommends that a scientist believe a theory on the grounds
that it has great theoretic virtues while the other recommends only accepting the theory,
but both the inputs and the outputs of this whatever-you-call-it intentional state are
agreed upon by both sides, that’s a sign that we are ready to deflate the dispute, or as
Blackburn (2002) says, “deconstruct” it. And nobody really wants to fight over who
gets to use the term “belief” in some rhetorically helpful way.

Is it possible that Reasons Fundamentalism and expressivism are really the same
metaethical view? Are the remaining disputes about nothing but which terminology is
better?

3.3 My suggestion: the explanation explanation

I have a suggestion for fleshing out the dispute, so that it can be seen to be about
something other than words. Normative thought and talk has some odd or remark-
able features: the supervenience relation its content bears to naturalistic, descriptive
thought and talk; the special role that it plays in decisions about what to do. Philo-
sophers wonder what explains these remarkable features. The answers, the explanations
they give, can belong to either of two types. First, they can try to explain the special
features by reference to special features of the facts and properties that normative
thought and talk are about. As an analogy, think of how a realist about causation

tries to explain the special feature of our thinking about cause and effect, that we leap from believing that the one event has occurred to believing that the other has without room for doubt. That’s because the cause bears a real, in-the-world determination relation to the effect, and since we can grasp this relation our thoughts follow a pattern isomorphic to the pieces of the world. By contrast, an irrealist about causation thinks that the pattern of our thinking comes first, and using that pattern explains what we are on about when we take the effect to follow with necessity from the cause. And similarly, the normative irrealist (here, the expressivist) wants to begin with the role and pattern of our normative thoughts and assertions, and her explanation runs from this pattern to the (ontologically light) idea of a normative truth or fact. The crucial difference, I suggest, is that, for an expressivist, the reason relation itself plays no role in the best explanation of our reason thoughts and their special, remarkable features.

This, I suggest, is what expressivists have in mind when they say, “Normative beliefs are not really beliefs, though it is harmless to speak of them as beliefs.” They mean, these beliefs with a special character are not beliefs about a subject matter that has special characteristics. The full story about how we come to have such thoughts and why we do with them what we do, need never mention the reason relation itself. So expressivists claim.

Compare two philosophers on why plain factual reasoning doesn’t settle ethical questions. Moore did think that the reason there is always an “open question” when we ask whether something with certain natural properties is also good, is that good is its own, fully distinct property. That is the explanation of the openness. Whereas Hare, of course, thought that the full explanation could be found by looking at the prescriptive force of evaluative and ethical talk, and that there was no need to mention any presumed property of goodness (Hare 1991).

I like this way of drawing the line, of sharpening the dispute between linguistically concessive expressivists (who tolerate and even encourage talk of properties and facts and truths and beliefs) and anti-reductive realists. But I do have certain misgivings in the present context. I am not sure that Scanlon is willing to be saddled with the kind of explanatory ambitions that I am claiming are definitive of realism.

3.4 What do Reasons Fundamentalists believe?

On the one hand, some things Scanlon says suggest that he does take the explanation of the remarkable features of normative thought to be located in some special features of the objects of that sort of thought. Recall:

The plausibility of the argument that a state cannot have both “mind to world” and “world to mind” directions of fit is limited to cases in which “the world” referred to in both cases is the natural world. The tendency to think that this argument rules out interpreting normative judgments as a kind of belief is thus another instance of the tendency mentioned in my second lecture, to identify the set of all things independent of us about which our opinions can be correct or incorrect with “the natural world.” (Scanlon 2014)
But on the other hand, I interpret the passages in which he denies that normative facts and relations have “metaphysical reality” to undermine my interpretation of Scanlon as a robust realist: “Normative facts about reasons, as we understand them are ‘part of the world’ only in the broader sense in which ‘the world’ is simply the reflection of all true sentences.” He also writes, apparently intending to agree with Blackburn and Gibbard, “I myself believe that normative statements can be true, can be facts in this minimal sense, and that this is all we need.” And he says that normative truths “constitute a distinct realm and need no metaphysical reality in order to have the significance that we commonly grant them.” (Emphasis added.)

I worry that Scanlon simply rejects my schema, that he would not recognize my explanation question as a genuine question. He seems to recognize my earlier worry that there might turn out to be no substantial question that distinguishes Reasons Fundamentalism from expressivism: “The obvious significance of judgments about reasons lies in their rational links with action,” he says. “If this is all there is, then it would seem that the ‘cognitivism’ I am proposing will just be another form of expressivism.”

And I think he recognizes, too, that the semantic remarks, that normative judgments can be true, state facts, and so on, won’t help. “The idea that normative judgments are correct when they correspond to the normative facts is no explanation if these ‘facts’ are, as I have suggested, merely ‘the reflection of true thoughts.’” And he admits, “the question remains what the content of these thoughts is and what makes these thoughts true?”

But in the end I fear that he might just reject my attempt to draw the distinction by reference to the material ingredients of the respective explanations of normative thought’s remarkable features given by Reasons Fundamentalism and expressivism. When he considers the question of what makes these thoughts true, and what the nature of their content might be such that they are able to play the role that they do play, he seems to reject the very question:

At this point, I believe, defenders of irreducibly normative truths must dig in their heels. The idea of some consideration’s being a good reason for some action or attitude is a perfectly intelligible one . . . Given the intelligibility of this idea, and the fact that taking it at face value provides the best fit with our practices of thinking about reasons and arguing about them with others, we should reject it only if it gives rise to some difficulties that cannot be answered satisfactorily. (Scanlon 2014)

Of course, I agree, and I suppose any expressivist would agree, that the idea of something’s being a good reason is perfectly intelligible. But the question isn’t whether we should reject the very idea of a consideration’s being a good reason for some action or attitude. The question is what account to give of this idea, and how a reasonable account can explain the interesting features of normative thought and talk.

My idea was that expressivists differ from Mooreans in that the latter take the best account to appeal to the normative facts and properties themselves, while the former
think a full story can be told without mentioning the elements of any normative world. But I am afraid that Scanlon may not be willing to play this game at all. He sees no need for any philosophical explanation; the facts of our common practices are these, and they are in order just as we find them. I wonder whether Scanlon is really an expressivist quasi-realist after all; or, if not, what it is that prevents him from accepting quasi-realism.

References


