

Summary of 2009 Locke Lectures

Being Realistic about Reasons

T. M. Scanlon

1. Contrary to what is often said, the idea of irreducibly normative truths does not have troubling metaphysical implications. The idea that they do derives largely from an unexamined and unjustifiable assumption that an acceptable universe of discourse is limited to things the natural world. But there is no reason to think that the (natural) world is the only thing we can talk sensibly about, or make true claims about. Our universe of discourse (the things we refer to in our true statements) should not purport to represent a world, let alone The (natural) World.

2. Because facts about reasons are not entities existing apart from us, there is no epistemological problem of how we can "be in touch with" such facts. There are serious worries about normative knowledge, but the problems involved are internal to the normative domain itself. (Analogous points hold about mathematical truths, such as truths about sets.)

3. An agent's acceptance of a normative judgment can explain that agent's subsequent action, even if it is a kind of belief, because it is part of being a rational agent that the agent is capable of forming beliefs about reasons for action and these beliefs (normally, but not invariably) make a difference to the agent's subsequent behavior.

4. These three points undermine the case for expressivist theories. The choice between expressivism and cognitivism should then be made on the basis of which provides the best account of the role of normative judgments in deliberation and interpersonal argument, advice-giving, justification and argument. Cognitivism is preferable on this basis.

5. The essential element in normative judgments is a relation $R(p,c,a)$: "p is a reason for an agent in circumstances c to do a." This way of understanding the normative provides a better explanation of the fact/value distinction and the way in which normative judgments co-vary with, and supervene upon, non-normative judgments. It also provides a clearer way of understanding the phenomena of relative strength, overriding, and undercutting.

6. A wide range of accounts of reasons, including desire theories such as Williams' as well as Kantian theories such as Korsgaard's, try to ground substantive claims about reasons for action in ideas of rationality, or rational agency. This is seen as a way of explaining how reasons "get a grip" on agents, and as a way of accounting for the content of normative judgments. In order for this strategy to work, however, the notion of rationality that is appealed to cannot itself rest on substantive claims about reasons. But there is no narrow (formal) notion of rationality to play this role: the Kantian version does not succeed; the narrow notion of rationality described by Broome and others (the one opposed to irrational conflicts of attitudes) has no substantive implications for the

reasons people have. I know of no other plausible candidate. Any conception of rationality that could support substantive claims about reasons for action would itself be based on such claims. (Even if such an account could be found and were plausible, it would not be a source of normativity, but only a very general normative claim.) The problem of explaining the "grip" of reasons is illusory: the "grip" that the fact that p is a reason for someone in c to do a has on an agent who is in c is just that very normative relation itself: it is a reason for him or her. Rationality has an important *explanatory* role in an account of reasons (see point 3.) But it has no fundamental justificatory role.

7. The only way of arriving at and defending claims about reasons for actions is by employing the method of reflective equilibrium. The same is true of claims about sets, the difference between the two lying in the fact that this method yields rather precise claims about sets, which can then be used to derive other specific claims through rigorous logical steps. Just as the only justification for set theoretic claims is set theoretic all the way down, any justification for normative claims is normative all the way down. One might hope to establish general claims about reasons, from which other claims could then be derived. The only *global* claims of this kind that I know of, such as desire theories, are implausible. Plausible claims are more piecemeal (such as that one has reason to avoid pain), and when more general not very exact.