

Whose Metaethical Minimalism?

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1. In the published version of his John Locke lectures, originally delivered in Oxford in 2009, T. M. Scanlon defends a position he calls ‘Reasons Fundamentalism’ (2014).¹ Scanlon’s position maintains that the normative notion of a *reason* – a consideration that ‘counts in favor’ of an action or an attitude – is an *irreducibly* normative notion. He thinks that reasons are fundamental in the sense of being irreducible. Scanlon characterizes his position as follows:

I will maintain that truths about reasons are fundamental in the sense that truths about reasons are not reducible to or identifiable with non-normative truths, such as truths about the natural world of physical objects, causes and effects, nor can they be explained in terms of notions of rationality or rational agency that are not themselves claims about reasons. (2014, p. 2)

Having rejected those ‘naturalistic’ possibilities, Scanlon also says that in order to maintain that moral propositions are sometimes straightforwardly *true* we need not appeal to any kind of “special metaphysical reality” (2014, p. 52). Thus it might seem that Scanlon is defending a very unappealing metaethical position, since the resources that he rejects here – both ‘naturalism’ and the *type* of ‘non-naturalism’ that invokes a ‘special metaphysical reality’ – might seem to exhaust the possibilities for normative ‘truth makers.’ Scanlon’s position might seem to be that although moral propositions can be straightforwardly true, there is *nothing* that makes them true. According to this metaethical ‘minimalist’ position, there are true moral propositions but “there are no moral properties – not on earth, in Plato’s

¹ These remarks were originally presented as a commentary on what is now Donelson (2018) at the annual meeting of the Southwestern Philosophical Society at Baylor University in 2017 and I would like to thank the conference organizers for the invitation to comment on the paper.

Heaven, or anywhere else.”² However, I believe that a closer look at Scanlon’s discussion reveals that Scanlon does not in fact hold any such view. I will come back to that below. Here I want to emphasize that the issue is not just about understanding Scanlon, although his position does often seem to be misunderstood.³ The actual position defended by Scanlon might, more significantly, point the way toward a satisfying non-reductive position in metaethics, one that embodies the ontological *modesty* that disavows any appeal to a ‘special metaphysical reality’ in Scanlon’s sense.⁴

² That is one characterization of the ‘minimalist’ position that Donelson finds unhelpful for advancing semantic, epistemological, and practical discussions in metaethics (Donelson, 2018, p. 127); I quote the full passage from which this characterization comes in §2 in the main text.

³ See Birondo (2017) on the apparent misunderstanding displayed in Dreier (2015) of Scanlon’s repudiation of ‘special metaphysical reality.’ The objection to ‘Reasons Fundamentalism’ from so-called ‘counter-reasons’ (Enoch, 2011, pp. 122–127) also seems to involve a misunderstanding of Scanlon’s position, given Scanlon’s sensible response to that objection (Scanlon, 2014, pp. 29–30). Here it is important to mention that Scanlon revised the text of his Locke Lectures between their occasion (2009) and their publication (2014), and that Enoch rightly acknowledges Scanlon’s intention to do so (Enoch, 2011, p. 122, n. 74).

⁴ What sense is that? It seems to me that *any* ‘standard of existence’ that is genuinely ‘domain-independent,’ as Scanlon characterizes that latter notion (2014, Lecture 2), would thereby invoke (even in the case of *physical* objects) the ‘special metaphysical reality’ that Scanlon repudiates in the normative case. On the one hand, Scanlon says that if we respond to the ‘anti-Platonist’ worries of someone like J. L. Mackie by “denying that numbers, say, are part of the natural world, while still insisting that they are part of ‘the world’ we invite questions about what this shadowy ‘world’ is [i.e., something having domain-independent metaphysical reality] to which numbers and perhaps other non-spatial entities all belong” (2014, p. 24; citing McDowell 1985). But Scanlon makes the same point about *physical* objects: “For physical objects to exist is for them to have spatio-temporal location, to have various physical properties, and to interact causally with other objects. The relevant idea of ‘thickness’ [of existence] is thus domain-specific. It is not provided by some further idea of metaphysical reality [NB] over and above the properties just mentioned” (2014, p. 28). Scanlon says that his position regarding ontology here agrees with the position of his long-time colleague Hilary Putnam (Scanlon, 2014, p. 25, n. 11; citing Putnam 2004).

2. In a recent paper Raff Donelson (2018) aims to make problems for a position that he calls ‘metaethical minimalism’ – a position that he finds in the recent work of Scanlon and also in the work of Richard Rorty, Hilary Putnam, and Ronald Dworkin (2018, p. 125). According to Donelson, metaethical minimalism is the view that “first-order moral judgments can be true but nothing makes them true” (2018, p. 125). On this view everyday moral claims such as “murder is wrong” can be true even though there are no moral ‘truth makers’ – e.g., no metaphysical “objects” or “real normative *things*” (Donelson, 2018, p. 125) – that make it true that murder is immoral. One of Donelson’s criticisms of this position is therefore that, according to it, true moral propositions seem to be “totally unmoored from the world” (2018, p. 129).

Donelson’s central criticism of metaethical minimalism is that such a position fails to deliver any theoretical gains over its metaethical rivals (2018, pp. 127–129). Specifically, metaethical minimalism fails to make any theoretical gains over the type of metaethical ‘error theory’ or ‘eliminativism’ defended by J. L. Mackie and others up until the present day. This error-theoretic position denies that there are any moral propositions that are non-trivially true *precisely* because it denies that there are any normative ‘objects’ or ‘properties’ that could make such propositions true. Donelson thinks that minimalists try to have it both ways. He says: “According to the minimalist, ‘Murder is wrong’ is true, so, yes, it is fact [*sic*] that murder is wrong. However, the minimalist will not assent to the existence of some wrong-making property that licenses one to say ‘Murder is wrong.’” (2018, pp. 125–126). Donelson makes the point more emphatically in a further passage (already quoted in part above):

As I see it, minimalism has no theoretical advantages relative to an error theoretic eliminativist strategy. Or, to put the point another way, I can see no reason to insist that moral propositions are true, if one agrees with the error theorist that there are no moral properties – not on earth, in Plato’s Heaven, or anywhere else. (2018, p. 127)

This understanding of metaethical minimalism lies at the heart of Donelson’s misgivings about there being any semantic, epistemological, or practical gains for minimalism over its rivals. But it seem to me that any plausible metaethical position in this vicinity, including

Scanlon's own non-reductive position, will *not* in fact agree with the error-theoretic claim that there are no moral, or more generally normative, properties.

3. In articulating his own position, Scanlon draws upon the work of Rudolph Carnap, William W. Tait, and others in order to enlist the idea that there are different 'domains' of intellectual inquiry with their own standards of inquiry: so, for instance, the scientific domain, the mathematical domain, and the normative domain (Scanlon, 2014, Lecture 2). Scanlon says that these different domains have their own 'internal' criteria for assessing the truth of propositions within the relevant domain, including claims about what there is. The normative domain is unlike the scientific domain, Scanlon says, since the normative domain "is not a realm of objects" (2014, p. 19).

But even so Scanlon says explicitly that: "Things in the natural world, such as persons and their actions, have normative properties, and most normative claims are about such things" (2014, p. 19). Now it is not exactly clear what the word 'things' refers to in the last part of this claim, what the 'things' are that normative claims are said to be about; but the most likely possibility is that these things are a combination of natural and normative items. The position seems to be that "most normative claims" are about persons and the actions they perform, items in the natural world that have various normative properties, but that such claims fall partly within the 'normative domain' – i.e., "the domain of judgments about reasons" (2014, p. 34). This passage indicates that Scanlon does *not* think that there are no normative properties. His position seems to be, as he says, that things in the natural world have normative properties, and that most normative claims are about such things.⁵

⁵ The qualification that "most" normative claims are about such things reflects Scanlon's view that most normative claims are 'mixed' rather than 'pure.' Scanlon says: "Most of the claims we commonly think of as normative are not pure normative claims, but *mixed normative claims*. They involve pure normative claims but also make or presuppose claims about natural facts" (2014, p. 37). Scanlon says that a 'pure' normative claim is "a claim that $R(p, x, c, a)$ holds (or does not hold)" understood as involving the four-place relation R 's "essentially normative content," viz. that "whether p obtains or not, *should* p hold then it is a reason for someone in c to do a " (Scanlon, 2014, pp. 36–37). Much of Scanlon's discussion in Lecture 2, especially in §5, is devoted to explicating this four-place relation. I take Scanlon's disavowal of (italicized) normative "*properties*" (2014, p.

Scanlon makes a similar point when he compares his own view to the views of Crispin Wright and John Skorupski, two philosophers whose views Scanlon takes to be similar to his own. Regarding mathematical and other non-spatiotemporal ‘objects,’ Scanlon says:

My view about the criteria of existence for numbers and other non-spatio-temporal objects is very close to Wright’s. But saying that these things are ‘furnishings of the world’ seems to me misleading, and unnecessarily to invite a response like Mackie’s [according to which one would be appealing to a ‘special metaphysical reality’]. On the other hand, while I am in broad agreement with John Skorupski’s [*sic*] view, particularly with his view that normative propositions need not have ‘truth makers’ *that enter into causal relations*, I would not say that this makes normative relations *irreal*. (2014, p. 24, n. 9; my emphasis in the longer phrase, and my brackets)

Scanlon’s claim in the phrase I have emphasized – that non-spatiotemporal ‘truth makers’ need not enter into any *causal* relations – obviously falls well short of the extreme ‘minimalist’ idea, that there are no normative ‘truth makers’ *at all*. Moreover, in this passage Scanlon explicitly *denies* that normative relations are in any way ‘irreal’ – let alone non-existent. Such passages sharpen the question of whose position ‘metaethical minimalism’ is supposed to be, the position that Donelson’s paper is so concerned to criticize.⁶

What is ultimately more important here is the *tendency* manifested in this overall line of criticism: insisting that something can be a ‘truth maker’ for a normative proposition only if it is either (1) an object, property, or state of affairs ‘within’ the natural-scientific domain

52, n. 62.) to reflect his repudiation of properties having the ‘special metaphysical reality’ that he refers to only a few sentences earlier.

⁶ On Hilary Putnam, see n. 4 above; Ronald Dworkin’s position hardly points in a different direction from the positions of Putnam and Scanlon, at least for anything Donelson says about Dworkin’s position (2018, p. 125); and Richard Rorty rejects altogether (since at least Rorty 1979) any role for propositional ‘mirroring,’ and so need not appeal to ‘truth makers’ in order for moral propositions to be adequately ‘moored’ to the practical world.

of inquiry or (2) something that has the ‘special metaphysical reality’ of something like ‘Plato’s Heaven.’ But a more plausible *moderate* intermediary position also remains possible here. Such a position maintains that there are moral, and more generally normative, propositions that are non-trivially true. Such propositions are not made true by items ‘within’ the natural-scientific domain of inquiry, nor by anything having ‘special metaphysical reality.’ Now it may be, as Scanlon sometimes suggests, that there is nothing especially interesting or informative to be said about the *ontology* of the normative properties that underwrite true moral propositions, ‘over and above’ our invoking such properties in normative reasoning. But, then again, maybe there is something interesting and informative to say here after all: consider, for instance, the excellent recent discussions by William J. FitzPatrick (2014, 2008).⁷

In these brief remarks I have not myself aimed to defend, nor even to make plausible, this type of a moderate intermediate position, but only to emphasize the very *possibility* of such a position, which can sometimes be overlooked altogether. What should be clear by now is that this type of moderate intermediate position, including Scanlon’s ‘Reasons Fundamentalism,’ is *not* a version of metaethical ‘minimalism’ since it does *not* involve the extreme ‘anti-Parmenidean’ idea that there can be true moral propositions and that *nothing* makes them true.

⁷ FitzPatrick says of his own project: “The hope is to begin to carve out a viable and attractive middle position between the extreme version of realism portrayed in Mackie’s caricature of it and the naturalistic versions typically offered as alternatives” (FitzPatrick, 2008, p. 160). My suggestion here is that FitzPatrick and Scanlon occupy a *broad* middle ground, whose very existence this overall line of criticism fails to recognize. FitzPatrick’s ‘robust ethical realism’ differs from Scanlon’s ‘Reasons Fundamentalism,’ insofar as FitzPatrick is “liberal about the kinds of fundamental, irreducibly evaluative or normative properties there can be as part of the value laden-ness of the relevant parts of reality” (FitzPatrick, 2008, p. 196, n. 82; contrasting his view with Birondo 2006); and FitzPatrick is more comfortable than Scanlon and others, including John McDowell, to engage in normative metaphysics (but cf. FitzPatrick, 2008, p. 183, n. 61; and see FitzPatrick 2016). In spite of their differences, the intermediate positions defended by Scanlon, FitzPatrick, Putnam, McDowell, and others share much important philosophical ground. On McDowell’s position in this area (and disengaging from metaphysics) see my early discussion, Birondo (2006).

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