

Being realistic about reflective equilibrium

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Abstract

In *Being Realistic About Reasons*, T.M. Scanlon develops a non-naturalistic realist account of normative reasons. A crucial part of that account is Scanlon's contention that there is no deep epistemological problem for non-naturalistic realists, and that the method of reflective equilibrium suffices to explain the possibility of normative knowledge. In this critical notice we argue that this is not so: on a realist picture, normative knowledge presupposes a significant correlation between distinct entities, namely between normative beliefs and normative facts. This correlation calls for an explanation. We show that Scanlon does not have the resources to offer such an explanation.

Keywords: *T.M. Scanlon, reflective equilibrium, reasons, realism*

1. Introduction

In his *Being Realistic about Reasons* (2014), T.M. Scanlon develops and defends a new version of robust non-naturalistic realism about normative reasons. The book comprises his widely discussed John Locke Lectures, held at the University of Oxford in 2009. Lecture 1 introduces and motivates what Scanlon calls 'Reasons Fundamentalism', the claim that facts about normative reasons are not reducible to, and cannot be explained in terms of, any other (normative or non-normative) facts. Lectures 2 to 4 attempt to offer defences against three of the most common, and most pressing, objections against non-naturalistic normative realism: namely, those that focus on the metaphysical status of irreducibly normative facts (lecture 2), the motivational force and practical significance of normative judgements (lecture 3), and the possibility of knowledge of normative facts (lecture 4). Scanlon tackles these issues head-on, arguing that there is no particular problem

with the metaphysical and epistemological status of normative facts, and that the motivating force of reason-judgements does not count against their being, in the relevant sense, truth-apt judgements about objective facts. Along the way, Scanlon sketches a novel and nuanced account of ‘being a reason for’, namely as referring to a fundamental relation that holds between a non-normative fact, an agent, a set of conditions, and an action or attitude. The fifth and final lecture supplements that view with an account of what it is for a reason to have a certain strength and how normative reasons can be weighed against each other. In what follows, we focus on Scanlon’s discussion of epistemological worries about non-naturalistic normative realism, and in particular on the fourth lecture’s attempt to explain how knowledge of irreducibly normative facts is possible.¹

One prominent strategy to explain how, on a realist view, one can have normative knowledge, is to postulate a faculty of normative intuition analogous to sensory perception. Scanlon agrees with many critics that this strategy is implausible. Consequently, his aim is to show that knowledge of normative facts does not require such a faculty. In order to do so, Scanlon first argues that the tendency to assume that normative realists need to postulate a quasi-perceptual faculty of intuition rests on a mistaken analogy with knowledge of empirical facts – this is what Scanlon calls the negative component of his epistemological account. The second, positive component is, then, a detailed description of the method of reflective equilibrium. The overall idea is that once we have rid ourselves of mistaken analogies with knowledge of empirical facts, a good understanding of the method of reflective equilibrium is all we need to understand how knowledge of irreducibly normative

¹ At the beginning of lecture 4, Scanlon frames his discussion in terms of knowledge, later in terms of justification. We will focus on knowledge, but we believe that our arguments also work against a Scanlonian theory of justified normative beliefs.

facts is possible.

We will argue that Scanlon misconceives the actual source of the pressure to combine normative realism with the claim that one needs a faculty of normative intuition to explain the possibility of normative knowledge. That source is, we believe, the fact that normative knowledge, on a realist picture, presupposes a significant correlation between metaphysically independent entities, namely, between normative facts and our beliefs about them. This presupposed correlation must be explained, and assuming a faculty of normative intuition is one step toward such an explanation. Once this fundamental worry has been laid open it will become clear that Scanlon's positive epistemological account – his version of the method of reflective equilibrium – is at a crucial joint incomplete and unsatisfactory: it presupposes a significant correlation between distinct entities, but does not offer any explanation for why that correlation should hold.

2. The fundamental worry: metaphysical distinctness, not spatial distance

Let us begin with the negative component of Scanlon's account. On Scanlon's view, the tendency to assume that normative realists need to postulate a quasi-perceptual faculty of intuition rests on a mistaken analogy with knowledge of empirical facts. Typically, some kind of reliable perception must be involved in the acquisition of empirical knowledge. According to Scanlon, many believe that if there are normative facts that are just as mind-independent as typical empirical facts, then there must be some analogous, quasi-perceptual faculty involved in the acquisition of normative knowledge. Scanlon, however,

presents the following argument in order to show that this line of thinking is mistaken: in the case of empirical knowledge, a faculty of perception is needed because it makes possible a causal link between empirical objects and us. That empirical knowledge requires such a causal link is, in turn, due to the fact ‘that it is part of the content of most empirical judgments that they are about objects that are distant from us in space’ (2014, 70). On Scanlon's non-naturalistic account, however, normative facts are not located in space. Scanlon thus concludes that normative knowledge does not require a causal link between us and normative facts. As a consequence, a quasi-perceptual faculty is not needed either.

We believe that Scanlon’s diagnosis of why empirical knowledge appears to require a causal link is misguided: it is not the fact that the objects of our empirical judgements are distant from us in space that explains why empirical knowledge appears to require a causal link. Consider judgements about oneself, such as the judgement that I have short hair. The object of that judgement seems to be me. Obviously, I am not spatially distant from myself. But still, my knowing that *I* have short hair seems to require some kind of causal story just as much as my knowing that *my partner* has short hair. Therefore, spatial distance is not what underlies the need for a causal connection in the case of empirical knowledge.²

The following is, we believe, a more adequate diagnosis of the appeal of a causal account of empirical knowledge. Many of our ordinary empirical beliefs are immediately

² One might object that the object of the judgement ‘I have short hair’ is not *I*, but *my hair*, and that there is spatial distance between me and my hair. However, nothing hangs on this particular example. As long as the relevant ‘me’ has some specific spatial location (and Scanlon is committed to this), there will be a class of empirical judgements whose objects are not distant from me in space – plausible candidates might be judgements about my whole body, or my brain or parts of my brain. Thus, Scanlon is committed to there being a number of empirical judgements that have an entirely different epistemological standing: they do not require a causal link simply in virtue of the spatial location of their objects.

or indirectly based on sensory impressions. Of those empirical beliefs that are *immediately* based on sensory impressions, we take most to constitute knowledge and (given that knowledge is factive) to be true. However, our empirical beliefs and the empirical facts they are about are, plausibly, metaphysically distinct entities. Therefore, the assumption that (a significant subset of) our empirical beliefs are mostly true presupposes that there is a significant correlation between distinct entities.³

Given that empirical beliefs and the objects of these beliefs – empirical facts – are distinct entities, any assumed significant correlation between them calls for an explanation. A causal link from empirical facts to empirical beliefs suggests itself as a very attractive candidate for such an explanation: causal connections are prime candidates for explaining significant correlations and, given what we know about human perception, it is plausible that there is a causal chain from empirical objects to sensory impressions and from sensory impressions to those empirical judgements immediately based on such impressions. What really drives the wide-spread tendency to resort to a causal link in the case of empirical knowledge, then, is not the fact that the objects of empirical knowledge ‘are distant from us in space’, but the necessity to account for the significant correlation between our empirical beliefs and the empirical facts that is presupposed by our assumption that a significant number of those beliefs constitute knowledge.

Scanlon draws on the assumption that it is spatial distance that makes a causal story attractive in the case of empirical knowledge in order to establish a crucial disanalogy

³ We understand the claim that there is a significant correlation between a set of beliefs *S* about a certain subject matter and the facts that these beliefs are about as follows: *S* contains a significantly higher number of true beliefs than what we would expect from a randomly generated set of beliefs about the same subject matter.

between empirical knowledge and normative knowledge: unlike the former, the latter does not require a causal link because its objects – contrary to the objects of empirical knowledge – are not distant from us in space. But this attempt to establish a disanalogy fails: as we have just argued, the real appeal of a causal story is its ability to explain the significant correlation between distinct entities, namely between empirical beliefs and empirical facts. However, *prima facie*, at least on a realist view of normative facts, normative knowledge also presupposes a significant correlation between distinct entities, namely, between normative beliefs and normative facts. This significant correlation requires an explanation just as the significant correlation in the case of empirical knowledge does.⁴ And as in the case of empirical knowledge, a causal link between normative beliefs and normative facts would do the job. If one rejects the idea that there is such a link, one needs an alternative story in order to explain the correlation between normative beliefs and normative facts.

Offering an explanation for the supposed correlation between normative beliefs and normative facts is a challenge that every robustly realist account of normative knowledge faces.⁵ So let us see whether the positive component of Scanlon's epistemological account can rise to this challenge.

⁴ This claim may underlie part of Street's (2006) 'Darwinian Dilemma'. On one possible reading of Street, the explanatory challenge that moral realism faces is identical to the challenge we develop in this section. Contrary to Street, however, we neither claim that normative realists *cannot* offer a plausible explanation for the supposed significant correlation between our normative judgements and normative facts, nor do we argue that the unavailability of such an explanation would be a knock-down argument against normative realism. Rather, we claim that being able to offer a plausible and informative explanation of that correlation is a significant theoretical advantage, and that one important motivation for postulating a quasi-perceptual faculty of normative intuition is to offer such an explanation.

⁵ This way of putting the challenge is close to the epistemological challenge developed by Enoch (2010).

3. Reflective equilibrium is not enough

In this section, we will turn to Scanlon's positive account of normative knowledge and argue that it cannot rise to the challenge that we developed in the last section, namely to explain the significant correlation between normative facts and our beliefs about these facts.⁶

Scanlon's theory about how we can gain normative knowledge is a broadly Rawlsian version of the method of reflective equilibrium. This method involves three steps: first, one identifies one's considered judgements about the relevant issue. Second, one tries to unify this set of considered judgements by formulating general principles that imply these judgements. In most cases, there will be conflicts between the principles we come up with and some of our considered judgements. Therefore, in a third step, one tries to resolve these conflicts by either modifying the principles or by giving up some of one's considered judgements, or a combination of the two.

As we pointed out in the last section, for our beliefs to constitute knowledge, there must be some kind of significant correlation between our beliefs and the facts these beliefs are about. Consequently, the claim that the method of reflective equilibrium creates

⁶ Before presenting his positive account of normative knowledge, Scanlon (2014, p. 72-76) discusses how we come to have knowledge of sets and contends that we attain such knowledge by employing the method of reflective equilibrium. We will not discuss Scanlon's assertions about the epistemology of set theory. Generally speaking, we share McGrath's (forthcoming) concerns about the aptness of the comparison between irreducibly normative truths and irreducibly mathematical truths. Moreover, even if this analogy were apt, this would not allow Scanlon to refute the explanatory challenge that we raise: on the contrary, a Scanlonian account of mathematical knowledge – since it is plausibly committed to a systematic correlation between our mathematical judgements and mathematical facts – seems to invite an analogous challenge (for such an analogous challenge to mathematical Platonism, see Field 1989, 25-30).

knowledge is plausible only if it is reasonable to assume that there is indeed a significant correlation between the beliefs that are the output of the method and the facts that these beliefs are about. This is the significant correlation that Scanlon's account is committed to and that calls for an explanation.

Let us see what such an explanation might look like. Steps two and three of the method of reflective equilibrium primarily serve to create coherence. Thus, if the considered judgements we started with in step one are roughly correct, then steps two and three can increase the degree to which our beliefs correlate with the facts. But if there is not already a significant correlation at the level of one's considered judgements, then correctly following steps two and three will typically not create such a correlation. Therefore, any plausible explanation of the supposed correlation between the output-beliefs of reflective equilibrium and the normative facts must include the claim that there is already a – perhaps less strict – correlation between the input-beliefs and the normative facts. The challenge of providing an explanation for significant correlation thus re-emerges at the level of the considered judgements.⁷ We will now argue that on Scanlon's conception of considered judgements no such explanation is available.

According to Scanlon, considered judgements 'are judgments that seem clearly correct and seem so under conditions that are conducive to making good judgments of the relevant kind about this subject matter' (2014, 77). Let us start with the condition that the respective judgements must seem clearly correct to us. Can this condition contribute to the

⁷ Thus we agree with Kelly's and McGrath's diagnoses that 'the most interesting part' of the epistemological story offered by those like Scanlon who want to combine the method of reflective equilibrium with a realist understanding of the respective domain 'concerns not the pursuit of equilibrium itself' (Kelly and McGrath 2010, p. 353), but rather the epistemic properties of those judgements that are the starting points of such pursuits.

explanation of the significant correlation between considered judgements and normative facts? Referring to what seems clearly correct is only helpful if one already assumes that what seems correct to us tends to be correct. But assuming that what seems correct to us tends to be correct amounts to stipulating *another* significant correlation between metaphysical distinct entities that is just as much in need of an explanation as the one between considered judgements and normative facts. Thus, the fact that considered judgements seem clearly true to us does not in itself suggest an explanation of why considered judgements significantly correlate with normative facts.

The claim that only those judgements count as considered judgements that seem clearly true to us '*under conditions that are conducive to making good judgments of the relevant kind about this subject matter*' (2014, 77) might seem like a more promising candidate for our purpose. Scanlon (2014) does not say much about how exactly to understand these conditions. However, in his earlier work (2003) – which he relies on in his book (see 2014, 76, fn. 12) – he states that the conditions that are conducive to making good judgements about normative matters are in place 'when one is fully informed about the matter in question, thinking carefully and clearly about it, and not subject to conflicts of interest or other factors that are likely to distort one's judgment' (2003, 140).

So let us see whether the fact that considered judgements fulfil these conditions can help to explain the supposed significant correlation between one's considered judgements and normative facts.

In other domains, it seems plausible that the fulfilment of conditions like those identified by Scanlon can contribute to such an explanation. Take, for instance, the case of judgements about spatial distance. If a certain set of conditions is fulfilled, for example we

are not drunk, the light is good, both our eyes are open and so on, then it is reasonable to believe that our judgements about spatial distance are roughly true. Moreover, in ordinary life, citing the fulfilment of these conditions is usually taken to be a satisfying explanation for why a particular judgement about spatial distance can be trusted. The fulfilment of these conditions, however, only provides a satisfying explanation against a specific background assumption, namely that our sensory impressions normally track facts about spatial distance. This background assumption is an essential component of a complete explanation of the significant correlation between judgements about spatial distance and the facts they are about. The contribution this assumption makes to the explanation of the fulfilment of the aforementioned conditions merely consists in guaranteeing that the exercise of our capacity to track facts about spatial distance was not interfered with. If we were to assume that we had no such capacity, referring to the absence of these factors would have no explanatory power.

We hold that the same is true in the normative domain. Given the background assumption that we have the capacity to track normative facts, citing the fulfilment of the conditions identified by Scanlon seems to be – at least in everyday life – a satisfying explanation of why a particular normative judgement can be trusted. But without that background assumption, citing the fulfilment of these conditions has no explanatory power.

One might think that the condition that considered judgements must be the product of clear and careful thinking enjoys a special status. For it seems plausible to grant initial credibility to judgements produced in this way. Therefore, one might be tempted to argue, the fact that our considered judgements result from clear and careful thinking (plus the fact that distorting factors are absent) is all one needs in order to successfully meet our

explanatory challenge.

Referring to clear and careful thinking, however, is on its own not helpful. Of course, if one already assumed that clear and careful thinking about normative matters tends to produce correct results, referring to our ability to do so might indeed explain the supposed correlation between our considered judgements and normative facts. However, this assumption presupposes another significant correlation, namely between the products of clear and careful thinking and normative facts. Such a correlation would be in equal need of explanation and explaining it would be no easier than explaining the correlation that gave rise to our challenge.

The general upshot of our discussion is this: any attempt to explain the significant correlation between our considered judgements and normative facts that cites the fulfilment of the conditions suggested by Scanlon but does not offer any *positive* explanation of how judgements formed under these conditions manage to significantly correlate with normative facts is crucially incomplete. Scanlon does not offer such an explanation. This explanatory shortcoming threatens the overall plausibility of his account.

4. Possible replies

In this section we will discuss two possible replies on Scanlon's behalf. First, one might argue that a closer look at Scanlon's metaphysics reveals that Scanlon does provide an explanation of the supposed correlation between our normative beliefs and normative facts after all. Second, one might argue that even if Scanlon does not offer such an explanation,

this does not count against his epistemological theory.

Let us start with the first reply, which seeks to exploit Scanlon's general metaphysical framework (see 2014, lecture 2). On one possible interpretation of that domain-based metaphysics, what makes judgements in a certain domain true is that we would make them if we were to reason in compliance with the standards for correct reasoning for that domain. For the normative domain, these standards are provided by the method of reflective equilibrium. Assuming this, there is an explanation for the supposed significant correlation between normative judgements that are the output of that method and the normative facts these judgements are about: if being the result of the correct application of the method of reflective equilibrium is what *makes* normative judgements true, then this also explains why (correctly) applying that method tends to produce true normative judgements.

While it provides an explanation of the supposed significant correlation, this reply ultimately fails because it relies on an interpretation of Scanlon's metaphysics that is, on the whole, implausible (though we admit that some passages in lecture 2 can be read as supporting this interpretation). First, on the interpretation just offered, Scanlon's metaphysical theory would be essentially constructivist.⁸ But in lecture 4, Scanlon takes pains to distance himself from normative constructivism. Second, the contention that the method of reflective-equilibrium is sufficient to account for normative knowledge is only interesting on a realist understanding of normative facts. On a constructivist understanding

⁸ According to the well-accepted *Euthyphro* criterion, the distinguishing feature of constructivism about a certain domain is the claim that facts about that domain are grounded in facts about what we would believe after idealized deliberation (see e.g. Enoch (2009) and Street (2010)).

this contention would be fairly uncontroversial.⁹ We thus conclude that one should read Scanlon as embracing a notion of normative truth in which normative facts are not metaphysically dependent on what the employment of correct reasoning would lead us to believe. On that reading, our explanatory challenge has not yet been answered.

However, one might object that even if Scanlon's account of normative knowledge cannot live up to this challenge, this does not count heavily against it. This second reply to our reasoning comes in two versions: first, one might claim that some correlations between distinct entities might simply be brute facts that cannot be further explained. Second, one might object that it would be demanding too much of one theory about a subject matter to explain every significant correlation that theory is committed to.

To the first version, we reply that being committed to a significant correlation between distinct entities that is brute and principally unexplainable makes a theory *ceteris paribus* less attractive than a theory that does not share that commitment. This is especially so if the theory seeks to explain how we come to have normative knowledge and if the unexplained correlation is one that is crucial for having that kind of knowledge. One might even suspect that such a theory has simply failed to achieve its goal. The second version, the overdemandingness objection, can be refuted in a twofold manner: first, as we have just pointed out, the unexplained correlation is not just any correlation, but is at the very heart of normative knowledge. Second, many competing theories either do not have that problem, or at least try to offer a solution: as we argued above, certain forms of normative constructivism do not have that problem because they can claim that normative facts are

⁹ Among the philosophers that contend that a constructivist metaphysics fits naturally with a purely coherentist epistemology are Dworkin (1973), Mackie (1977), Timmons (1990), Street (2006) and Enoch (2009).

grounded in certain normative judgements, which would explain the significant correlation between them. Naturalistic normative realists who take normative facts to be causally efficient can offer a causal story that can at least in principle explain the correlation between normative judgements and normative facts. Finally, there are non-naturalistic realist attempts to explain the correlation between normative facts and beliefs about them. Enoch (2010), for example, suggests a pre-established harmony between them that is evolutionarily possible. With respect to the epistemological challenge we discussed, all these accounts fare better than Scanlon's account does.

5. Conclusion

In this paper we have argued for two claims. First, we have argued that Scanlon misconceives the fundamental worry that drives the postulation of a faculty of normative intuition: on the assumption that normative beliefs and normative facts are metaphysically distinct entities – to which every realist is plausibly committed – normative knowledge seems to presuppose a significant correlation between normative beliefs and normative facts that needs to be explained. Postulating a faculty of normative intuition seems to be a first step toward such an explanation. Second, we have shown that Scanlon's positive account of normative knowledge, his version of the method of reflective equilibrium, has no resources to rise to that explanatory challenge.

Now, it might still turn out that despite this explanatory shortcoming, Scanlon's meta-normative non-naturalistic realism is overall more plausible than competing theories.

Nonetheless, not being able to explain the supposed significant correlation between normative beliefs and normative facts is a clear theoretical disadvantage.¹⁰

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