The Southern Journal of Philosophy (2007) Vol. XLV

Objective Reasons

Michael Pendlebury
North Carolina State University

Abstract

In order to establish that judgments about practical reasons can be objective, it is necessary to show that the applicable standards provide an adequate account of truth and error. This in turn requires that these standards yield an extensive set of substantive, publicly accessible judgments that are presumptively true. This output requirement is not satisfied by the standards of universalizability, consistency, coherence, and caution alone. But it is satisfied if we supplement them with the principle that desire is a source of minimal reasons. This principle is justified despite currently fashionable arguments against the claims of desire.

1. The Issue

I am interested in whether it is possible for normative practical reasons to be objective.[1] In exploring this issue I will use Scanlon's well-known discussion of reasons in *What We Owe to Each Other* (1998, ch. 1) as both a resource and a foil. I will draw on Scanlon's conception of reasons, but will cast doubt on his defense of the objectivity of practical reasons and seek to develop the beginnings of a more robust alternative.[2] I am not so much interested in promoting a final solution as in doing some basic groundwork, outlining what I take to be a worthwhile approach and displaying some of its main attractions. Many of

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Michael Pendlebury is Professor of Philosophy and Head of the Department of Philosophy and Religion at North Carolina State University. He previously taught at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. He is a former editor of the journal Philosophical Papers *and has published articles in several fields of philosophy ranging from philosophy of language to political philosophy. His current research is concerned mainly with the nature of normativity.*

the ideas that I will use appear in some form or other in the philosophical literature, but I hope that the angle from which I approach them and the ways in which I combine them will help to cast new light on my topic.

The problem as I wish to understand it is modest and constrained. I am not concerned with what it is for practical reasons to be *adequate*, *good*, *impartial*, *morally authoritative*, *rationally compelling*, or *overriding*; or for a choice to be *ideally rational*, *not irrational*, *morally required*, or *morally permitted*; or with other big questions like these. In Scanlon's words, a normative reason for someone to do something is "a consideration that counts in favor of it" (1998, 17).[3] But to this I want to add the important rider: *however slightly*. This is necessary in order to emphasize that reasons might be of very limited force, could be outweighed, overridden, or disabled by countervailing considerations, and may not be strong enough to qualify as sufficient, good, or compelling reasons even if they contribute toward such reasons. My question is whether even the slightest of reasons—which I will describe as "minimal reasons"—can be objective in the sense that they are reasons independently of whether anyone judges them to be reasons in the cases to which they apply.

I will clarify this conception of objectivity in section 2 and will discuss the conditions of its application over the course of the paper. What I cannot overemphasize now is that, in terms of this conception, to say that a consideration counts objectively in favor of x's A-ing is not to claim that it is independent of x's desires, ends, needs, interests, loves, cares, concerns, well-being, or conception of how to live; it is not to characterize the consideration as impartial or moral or to say anything about its moral authority; it is not to claim that there are no countervailing considerations against x's A-ing; it is not to imply that the consideration provides an adequate, good, compelling, or overriding reason for x to A; and it is not to suggest that x's A-ing is required or permitted by either rationality or morality. Although recent writers on reasons are alive to most of the differences between mere reasons and reasons qualified in ways like those just mentioned, too many of them, including Scanlon, mistakenly identify normative reasons with good or sufficient reasons, that is, considerations that count considerably in favor of an agent's doing something, or enough to justify her doing it—which leaves no room for minimal reasons.[4] As we will see, this has unfortunate consequences.

The most profound philosophical questions concerning agent-neutral reasons (Nagel 1986, 152–53), impartial reasons, moral reasons, good and compelling reasons, the requirements of rationality or morality, and so on are extremely challenging, and it is difficult to make substantial headway on them. The modest question of whether minimal reasons can be objective should be

much more tractable, if only because there ought to be less room for disagreement about whether a consideration is a minimal reason. But the other, deeper issues depend ultimately on whether minimal practical reasons can be objective. Thus, although my topic is not grand, it is consequential, and I believe it to be of fundamental importance for ethics, political philosophy, and the theory of rationality.

When I say that I am concerned with practical reasons, I mean to cast my net widely enough to cover any normative reasons other than theoretical reasons, that is, veritistic considerations in favor of beliefs and other doxastic acts and attitudes. Thus in my terms practical reasons embrace not only reasons for what Velleman (2000, 189) calls "full-blooded action"—that is, action robustly understood as a behavioral product of an agent's decision or intention—but also reasons for doing or not doing anything whatever with respect to which talk of reasons can make sense. Among other things, this covers (a) behavior that may not be intended but is potentially subject to indirect intentional control, like waking up—or not waking up—at 3 a.m.; (b) what Scanlon describes as "judgment-sensitive attitudes," such as intentions and decisions, feelings of "fear, anger, admiration, [or] respect" (1998, 20), and desires for which there can be reasons, including "motivated desires" (Nagel 1970, 29);[5] and (c) affective responses that one might seek to influence, like being amused—or not being amused—by a joke or type of joke. For the sake of brevity, I will use the term "belief" for objects of theoretical reasons in general, and "behavior" for objects of practical reasons in general. At times I will even use "behavior" for objects of reasons *tout court*, covering both beliefs and behavior more narrowly construed. These terms should be understood as broadly as the context requires.

I fully agree with Scanlon that theoretical reasons and practical reasons are "reasons in the same sense."[6] But for present purposes it is necessary to distinguish between the two because theoretical reasons are widely assumed to have a much stronger claim to objectivity than practical reasons. I will take it for granted that theoretical reasons can be objective and will trade on considerations about their objectivity in thinking about whether practical reasons can be objective.[7] This approach should not be taken to imply that I think either that theoretical reasons are more primitive or that theoretical reasons and practical reasons are species of reasons at the same level.[8]

I want to appeal to the case of theoretical reasons right away to support my strategy of aiming low and seeking only to make sense of the possibility of objective minimal reasons for behavior, rather than, say, the possibility of objective *justification*, or objective *compelling reasons*, for, despite ongoing advances in epistemology, we do not have a broad and general understanding of the conditions under which a belief is epistem-

ically justified or of the conditions under which there are compelling epistemic reasons for someone to believe something. Such conditions—which depend in part on how minimal reasons combine, compete, and are influenced by circumstance—are a matter of ongoing disagreement and debate, are subject to contextual relativity, and could for all we know be massively indeterminate. To complicate matters further, pragmatic considerations can also make a significant difference to whether we count a belief as justified. But all this still leaves room for objectivity to squeeze into the realm of theoretical reasons through minimal reasons, for it does nothing to undermine the key thought that a consideration counts, however slightly, in favor of a belief if, other things being equal, it makes it more likely that the belief is true. The moral I draw from this is that our best hope of finding space for objectivity in the domain of practical reasons is by making sense of the possibility of minimal practical reasons' being objective.

2. Objectivity

Since the term "objective" is applied to practical reasons in different ways in the philosophical literature, I should explain how I will understand it. To repeat, when I say that practical reasons are objective, I do not mean that they are impartial or that they are independent of the agent's desires, preferences, interests, and concerns.[9] I mean only that they are objective in what I take to be the ordinary sense in which we count some theoretical reasons as objective. As I have indicated, what is crucial here is that their being reasons is, in an appropriate sense, independent of their being judged to be reasons. In particular, it must be possible for instances of any of the following claims to be true.

(1) C is a reason for x to A, but nobody (including x) judges it to be a reason for x to A.

(2) One or more people (possibly including x) judge that C is a reason for x to A, but C is not a reason for x to A.

(3) One or more people (possibly including x) judge that C is not a reason for x to A, but C is a reason for x to A.

In other words, objectivity requires the possibility of ignorance—as represented by (1)—and error—as represented by (2) and (3). We will have to consider whether these are genuine rather than merely seeming possibilities, but at this point it is enough to notice that parallel possibilities are required by the thesis that theoretical reasons can be objective.

The possibility of objectivity clearly requires that we be liable to ignorance and error with respect to the domain in ques-

tion. I will focus mainly on the possibility of error as a test of objectivity—or, perhaps more accurately, of whether "the subjective-objective contrast" (Davidson 1985, 480) applies to the relevant class of judgments. In order to pass this test, it must be genuinely possible for such judgments, unlike mere tastes and affective states, to be correct or incorrect. In the case of theoretical reasons, objectivity thus understood in no way implies that reasons cannot be agent-relative considerations. In fact many important theoretical reasons that we take to be objective are clearly agent-relative. For example, the fact that *she* is having a visual experience of a tree is a reason for Maropeng to believe that there is a tree before her; the fact that *he* remembers bantering with his mother on the phone an hour ago is a reason for Sam to believe that she was alive then. Likewise, objectivity with respect to practical reasons does not imply that the considerations in question are agent-neutral. If someone will be killed by a falling rock unless he moves, then this consideration, which is clearly agent-relative, is an objective reason for him to move if what he most wants is to survive.[10] All this is in line with Scanlon's views on the possible objectivity of practical reasons.[11]

I am also at one with Scanlon's decision to separate the issue of objectivity from semantic and metaphysical questions about whether claims concerning reasons are to be understood realistically.[12] Scanlon counts himself as a realist about reasons, but his realism is modest inasmuch as it involves none of the semantic or metaphysical commitments that are often associated with realism in other domains[13]—even though it is bold insofar as it is committed to the primitive, irreducible, and literal truth and falsity of judgments about reasons. In any event, Scanlon does not foreclose the possibility of a nonrealist account of the objectivity of practical reasons and makes it clear in particular that he does not rule out an expressivist account of judgments of practical reasons that is consistent with their objectivity (1998, 58–59). This makes good methodological sense. Since realism apparently yields a prepackaged account of objectivity in the relevant domain, it is all too easy to identify a commitment to objectivity with realism. This move is often applied to morality and value in metaethics, but it is far too hasty.[14]

The hope or suspicion that objectivity is possible in a given domain does not entitle us to help ourselves to objectivity simply by embracing realism. It testifies, rather, to the need for a critical evaluation of what Gibbard (1990, 155) calls the "objective pretensions" of our thought and talk about that domain. This would involve an examination of that thought and talk to ascertain whether it displays robust signs of objective commitment and, if so, to determine whether, taken in context, it provides the resources needed for an adequate account of the possibility of correctness and incorrectness (which we may

reasonably describe as truth and error in the case of indicative sentences and thoughts expressible by means of indicative sentences).

It is important to recognize that robust signs of objective commitment are possible in the absence of resources for an adequate account of the possibility of correctness and incorrectness. Discourse about what is funny exhibits strong pretensions of objectivity insofar as it includes sophisticated arguments, judgments of correctness and incorrectness, and agreements and disagreements that seem to be substantive. Yet it is not obvious that these pretensions are justified, for it is unclear that a judgment that something is funny amounts to very much more than an expression of amusement accompanied by the sense that others whose sense of humor one admires would also find it amusing.[15]

An examination of the evidence for objectivity in a particular case may well push us toward realism, but if it leaves room for an account of objectivity that is neutral between realism and nonrealism, then wisdom dictates that we opt for such an account and deal with the semantic and metaphysical issues separately. I will, however, assume that realism applies to ordinary descriptive judgments and that it plays an important part in explaining their objectivity.

That the possibility of objective reasons does not require semantic/metaphysical realism is well illustrated by the case of theoretical reasons, for it is easy to accept that theoretical reasons can be objective without taking a stand on whether assertions about them are to be understood realistically. We could, for example, agree (in appropriate circumstances) that

(4) Maropeng's having a visual experience of a tree is a reason for her to believe that there is a tree before her,

is objectively true and that

(5) Sam's remembering that he was bantering with his mother on the phone an hour ago is a reason for him to believe that she was dead then

is objectively false without being willing to hazard an opinion on whether they are best understood realistically as descriptions of features of the world. Scanlon makes an analogous point about arithmetic, namely, that "understanding arithmetic as objective ... does not require accepting a form of arithmetical Platonism" (1998, 63).[16]

When claims about theoretical reasons are objectively true, their truth is grounded in part in considerations that they do not explicitly describe or mention, including relevant relations of logic, which we may presume to be objective. It seems to me

that there is cause to doubt that the correctness of fundamental laws of logic is due to their describing facts about reality, for—since all intelligible talk about realistic judgments describing facts about reality presupposes the authority of some logical laws—the authority of these laws cannot simply be a matter of their describing such facts (Nagel 1997, 61). This abstract argument is reinforced by Lewis Carroll's famous demonstration (1895) that on pain of infinite regress we cannot make sense of a rule of inference like Modus Ponendo Ponens by treating it as a premise of an inference that it warrants. If we did this, we would require a *further* rule of inference to take us from our enlarged set of premises to our conclusion, and treating *this* rule as a premise would in turn require a further rule, and so on, *ad infinitum*. We may assume that Modus Ponendo Ponens has the authority to warrant an inference because it is objectively correct. But if this objectivity were understood realistically as a matter of the rule's being a true description of some feature of an independent world, then it *should* be possible to explain how it warrants an inference by treating it as a premise. Carroll's demonstration that this is not possible therefore casts doubt on a realist account of its objectivity.

But this goes beyond what I need, which is merely that a commitment to the objectivity of logic does not *require* one to be a realist about it. Since objectivity in the case of theoretical reasons is sometimes in part constituted by objective considerations about logic, there is some reason to think that the possibility of objective theoretical reasons does not require realism. This in turn suggests that it is not far-fetched to suppose that we can hope to investigate the possibility of objective practical reasons without pursuing questions about their ultimate nature.

The crucial question is, in Scanlon's words, whether "there are standards of correctness for attitudes of the relevant sort" (1998, 59). But these standards must obviously be appropriate. In the case of judgments about practical reasons, Scanlon thinks that there are appropriate standards. As he puts it,

> we have a general method for thinking about [practical] reasons ... in the right way that is similar to the method employed in regard to beliefs of other kinds, that is stable in its results, and that supports wide interpersonal agreement on a significant range of conclusions. All of this taken together provides ample ground for saying that judgments about [practical] reasons ... are the kinds of things that can be correct or incorrect, even though there are many cases in which we may continue to disagree as to which of these is the case. (Scanlon 1998, 70)[17]

This is in line with my insistence that the way to make headway on the issue of objectivity is by determining whether our thought and talk about the relevant domain provides the resources for

an adequate account of the possibility of truth and error. So I think that Scanlon is on the right track.

But the mere existence of a range of similarities between standards that apply in a domain in which we are interested and standards that apply in other domains in which the subjective-objective contrast is presumed to hold is not enough to establish the possibility of objectivity in the case of the former.[18] Consider Creation Science. In critical mode, true believers in Creation Science use standards that are similar in many respects to those that apply to ordinary factual and scientific discourse. They draw significantly on the resources of our logical vocabulary in the formulation of complex claims and arguments, strive for consistency and coherence, and (to repeat Scanlon's words) apply "a general method ... that is similar to the method employed in regard to beliefs of other kinds, that is stable in its results, and that supports wide interpersonal agreement on a significant range of issues." But of course there are also important differences that explain why Creation Science is not a field of objective inquiry (see Kitcher 1982).

Whether Scanlon's case for objective practical reasons succeeds depends on whether the standards he identifies yield an adequate account of truth and error. I will not attempt to specify a general test of adequacy here, but there are two important criteria that must be satisfied.[19] First, the standards must be consistent with those of empirical science and good epistemic practice concerning everyday factual beliefs. Second, they should, if properly applied, yield a fairly extensive, publicly accessible set of nontrivial judgments about practical reasons that are presumptively warranted in terms of the standards regardless of contingent features of those who apply them. In other words, the "stable results" on which there is "wide interpersonal agreement" should be due to the standards themselves rather than to the fact that those who apply them happen to share significant views, tastes, interests, or predilections. If well-educated Americans and Al Qaeda both apply the standards honestly and well, and agree on the background facts, then there should be significant agreement between the conclusions that they draw in like cases.

The need for the first of these two criteria is obvious, and there is no cause to doubt that the standards Scanlon identifies satisfy it. The second, which I will refer to as the *output requirement*, expresses the need for a class of judgments to play the same sort of role in pinning down the system as perceptual judgments play in pinning down our empirical judgments in general. The most important judgments about theoretical reasons that play this role are judgments, like (4) above, that claim that the occurrence of a specified perceptual experience is a reason for accepting the state of affairs that it represents. The output requirement is important because in the absence of a

fairly extensive, publicly accessible set of presumptively warranted judgments about practical reasons, indefinitely many incompatible systems will qualify as equally correct. Thus the only errors allowed for will be failures of consistency and coherence relative to a particular system, which may itself be arbitrary with respect to the applicable standards. Such errors are ultimately trivial and are consistent with an absence of substantive error. If robust objectivity is what we are after, we must be able to accommodate the possibility of substantive errors in judgments about practical reasons. As we will see, the standards identified by Scanlon do not pass this test.

3. Core Standards

An indispensable standard for judgments about reasons (both practical and theoretical) to which Scanlon is rightly committed is that of universalizability (1998, 73–74).[20] I want to say something about what universalizability involves and why it does not succumb to the challenge of current "particularism" about reasons, of which Dancy is the most prominent champion,[21] before asking whether universalizability satisfies the output requirement in its own right.

As I wish to understand it, universalizability does not mean that if a consideration is a reason for someone to do something, then it follows that whenever an exactly parallel consideration applies to someone else, it must also be a reason for her to do the same thing. This is, in any case, false, for we can consistently claim that heavy traffic is a reason for Sam to walk while denying that heavy traffic is a reason for Maropeng to walk. The difference could easily be due to unmentioned factors, for instance, that Sam is off to buy stamps at the post office three blocks away, while Maropeng is heading for the far side of town. Universalizability also does not require the existence of exceptionless universal principles from which any particular judgments about reasons could be derived, given a complete specification of the facts of the case. And we have reason to doubt that there are such principles.[22] At any rate, I see no hope of formulating an unrestricted universal principle from which it would be possible, given full information, to determine correctly in every imaginable case whether heavy traffic is a reason for the agent concerned to walk, for there are endlessly many factors that could make a difference. Finally, universalizability does not require that particular judgments about reasons be based upon previously accessible general principles that may permit exceptions.

What universalizability in my sense requires can be explained as follows. If a consideration, C, is a reason for someone, x, to A, then it follows that whenever C applies to someone else, y, it must also be a reason for y to A, *unless there is some relevant*

difference between x and y[23]—as illustrated by the case of Sam and Maropeng. If the exemptive clause does not apply, then that is the end of the matter. But if it does apply, it implicitly involves a further generalization. Assume that the supposed relevant difference between the two parties is that y, but not x, has a certain property, P, for example, that she is travelling a considerable distance. If this difference really is relevant, then, other things being equal, it must also make a difference in further cases. Thus, if consideration C applies to a third party, z, who also has property P, then it must be that, just as C is not a reason for y to A, it is also not a reason for z to A, *unless there is some relevant difference between y and z*. Again, if the exemptive clause does not apply, that ends the matter. But if it does apply, then a further generalization with a similar exemptive clause follows. And so on—in principle without end.

Universalizability thus understood is quite compatible with the holism about reasons on which Dancy bases his particularism, but it also does justice to the ways in which generality enters into our thinking about reasons. According to Dancy, "That one of the candidates wants the job very much indeed is sometimes a reason for giving it to her and sometimes a reason for doing the opposite" (2000a, 132–33). No doubt. But if we are told that Andrea's intense desire for a job is a reason to give it to her while Ahmed's equally intense desire for the same job is a reason not to give it to him, then we are entitled to an account of the difference between them in virtue of which equivalent desires provide reasons that pull in opposite directions. And, as implied by universalizability, we are entitled to have the difference presented in general terms that could also be applied to other cases. One might expect that those who call themselves *particularists* would allow that the only relevant difference might be that Andrea is Andrea while Ahmed is Ahmed. But of course this is not Dancy's view, and his examples regularly trade on general considerations or (as in the case at hand) on our ability to imagine possible relevant differences that could be specified in general terms. The point of universalizability is not to oppose holism or contextualism about reasons but to exclude the trivial fact that a person is who she is as a consideration that (under normal circumstances) qualifies as a reason, and to recognize the importance of general patterns in our thinking about reasons—especially in the evaluation of judgments about reasons. Universalizability *is* incompatible with Dancy's claim that "the behavior of a reason ... in a new case cannot be predicted from its behavior elsewhere" (1993, 60) if we read this as a universal negative, but in that case the claim is quite obviously false.

In the end, Dancy actually accepts the universalizability of reasons as I understand it when he admits that "if two cases are relevantly similar, what is a reason in one must be a reason

in the other" (2004, 95). But he immediately goes on to claim that this is "toothless," which is false. Universalizability makes room for the possibility of innumerable inconsistencies between possible judgments about reasons. It therefore yields significant constraints on our thinking about reasons, makes considerable room for error, and helps to distinguish our judgments about reasons from mere expressions of taste. But it remains a question whether, on its own, universalizability satisfies the output requirement for objectivity. In some of his later work, Hare claims that universalizability suffices for objectivity in the domain of morality (see, e.g., 1993), but this is because he interprets it as a strong requirement of impartiality. In earlier work he understood it as a much weaker logical requirement more akin to universalizability as I have explained it, and recognized that on its own it cannot show that any substantive moral belief is determinately in error (see, e.g., Hare 1963, especially 30–33). In line with this, as Scanlon recognizes (1998, 73), the universalizability of reasons does not yield any particular substantive judgments about reasons and is consistent with many different systems of such judgments. This includes quite bizarre systems, such as those based on the idea that, other things being equal, a consideration is a reason for x to A only if it provides prima facie evidence that x's A-ing would increase the amount of pain and suffering in the world. It is, therefore, clear that universalizability on its own does not satisfy the output requirement.

The other standards for considered judgments about practical reasons that Scanlon advances presuppose universalizability and are of the type that one would apply if one were aiming at a broad reflective equilibrium. As he puts it, starting with what he calls a "seeming reason" (1998, 65–66),

> the process ... is to characterize the potential reason more fully, to ask whether it seems, so characterised, to be a relevant reason for the ... [behavior] in question. In addition, one can look for other cases on which it would have a bearing if it were a ... reason, to see whether it seems to be a reason in those cases, to test one's reaction in these cases for signs of unreliability, to consider the plausibility of alternative explanations of these reactions, and so on. In short, one tries to see whether this reason would be included in the most coherent and complete account of what reasons there are. (1998, 68)[24]

Scanlon goes on to insist that although an agent's ends or aims can alter the reasons that there are for him to do something, they "are not basic sources of reasons" (1998, 70).

If they were, then this would lead to the satisfaction of the output requirement. For the claim that ends are basic sources of reasons implies that if, given a certain consideration, C, x's A-ing would promote the satisfaction of one or more of x's ends,

then there is a presumption that C is a reason for x to A.[25] This principle would yield a very extensive set of judgments about practical reasons that are presumptively warranted independently of the views, tastes, interests, and predilections of people other than the agent who might make judgments about the reasons that apply to her. (And as we have already seen, objectivity cannot require that these judgments be warranted independently of her own views, tastes, interests and predilections.)

The only possible alternative "basic sources of reasons" for which Scanlon makes room are the "seeming reasons" that happen to occur to us, sometimes without prompting and sometimes in the course of our thinking about reasons. "Seeming reasons" are considerations that seem to us to be reasons even though we may not judge them to be reasons (Scanlon 1998, 65). They are, therefore, mere appearances, and it is clear that they exist only insofar as they occur to us. Thus, however well we apply the critical apparatus of reflective equilibrium, the substantive conclusions that we reach will depend crucially on which "seeming reasons" we begin with and which "seeming reasons" occur to us in the process of reflection. This is not determined by the critical apparatus itself. Whether the standards identified by Scanlon satisfy the output requirement depends, therefore, on whether the "seeming reasons" that occur to different people would, subject to appropriate qualifications, yield an extensive set of publicly accessible judgments about practical reasons that are presumptively warranted.

One difficulty that we face in attempting to come to terms with Scanlon's views on right thinking about practical reasons is that he presents them from the perspective of an agent who wishes to determine what reasons there are for *him* to do various things. Our interest, however, is not only in the first-person case but in judgments about practical reasons in general, including third-person judgments that apply to other agents. I have done no violence to the main drift of Scanlon's ideas by presenting them in third-person mode, but his "seeming reasons" are much more closely tied to the first-person perspective. For Scanlon sees them as "the central element in what is usually called desire" (1998, 65), by which he means that desire involves "a tendency to see something as a reason" *for oneself* to do something (1998, 39).[26] Although this does not exclude "seeming reasons" that apply to others, it does not leave room for very many of them.

Now, on the assumption that one's "seeming reasons" are not much more numerous than one's desires, the application of the methods of reflective equilibrium to these "seeming reasons" may in favorable circumstances yield an extensive set of first-person judgments about practical reasons applying to oneself that are presumptively warranted regardless of the views, tastes, interests, and predilections of others. But even if this applied in

the case of every agent, there would still be little overlap between the contents of the relevant sets of judgments, and most of them would be epistemically accessible only to the agent concerned. In short, they would not provide an adequate basis for a single, publicly accessible set of judgments about practical reasons that are presumptively warranted independent of contingent features of those who make such judgments. Thus the standards for judgments about practical reasons identified by Scanlon do not satisfy the output requirement for objectivity.

4. Groundings

One obvious way to meet the output requirement is to supplement the standards of universalizability, consistency, coherence, and caution with the idea that the desires of a rational agent are a presumptive source of reasons that apply to that agent. I now want to argue against Scanlon and others[27] that desire is a presumptive source of practical reasons. More specifically, I will be supporting the thesis that, other things being equal, agents' desires are reasons for them to pursue the objects of those desires.[28]

In order to forestall irrelevant objections, I'd like to distinguish my thesis from some others with which it might be confused. First, I do not endorse a comprehensive "desire-based" account of practical reasons according to which "all practical reasons are grounded in the present desires of an agent" (Chang 2004, 56). I fully recognize that facts other than desires can be reasons and that taking them into account would help to secure the output requirement. These include, in particular, facts about what would be good for the health or well-being of the agent; what would increase her pleasure, enjoyment, or other positive feelings; and what would reduce her pain, discomfort, or other negative feelings.[29] I want to concentrate on desire because it seems to me that most writers who recognize other factors like these as sources of reasons are much too ready to dismiss the claims of desire. In addition, what people desire is much more determinate than what would be good for them or affect their feelings in various ways. Indeed, the objectivity of such considerations is itself subject to dispute because of their counterfactual status (and, in some cases, their dependence on matters of value). Thus an account of the objectivity of practical reasons that is based on such considerations runs the risk of merely relocating the problem. An account based on actual desires avoids this difficulty.

Second, my thesis does not incorporate or seek to advance any unitary philosophical account of the source of practical reasons. I do not see such an account as either necessary or desirable for my purposes.[30] In particular, I do not seek to promote a reductive account of practical reasons, for I endorse Scanlon's decision to

"take the idea of a reason as primitive" (1998, 17). Third, my thesis does not imply that, in general, desires are good or sufficient reasons; or that the strength of a reason provided by a desire is proportional to the strength of the desire; or that reasoning about what to do is anything like the weighing of desires (cf. Scanlon 1998, 50–55). The thesis is *merely* that, other things being equal, agents' desires are minimal reasons for them to pursue the objects of those desires.

Like Chang, I want to stress the "essentially affective nature" of desire (2004, 58). I will be especially concerned with felt inclinations to do, have, get, give, be, avoid, and so on, including not only physiologically based urges and transitory impulses but also inclinations that give expression to the agent's commitments, cares, loves, and sense of identity. I do not count mere dispositions to behavior as desires because this falsely implies that people desire to do everything that they happen to do. Thus my thesis does not involve a commitment to the absurd idea that the dispositions underlying any behavior provide reasons for that behavior (Quinn 1993, 235–42).

I should emphasize that my understanding of desire is at odds with Scanlon's, in terms of which desires are constituted largely by "seeming reasons." I reject Scanlon's account of desire, in part because it cannot do justice to the fact that brutes and infants have desires even though they lack the concept of a reason and so cannot have "seeming reasons, " that is, inclinations to see things as reasons.[31] Scanlon's account would not be very plausible if desires were not frequently associated with reasons in our everyday thought and talk about reasons, but I see this association as better evidence for the more straightforward alternative that we have a natural inclination to treat desire as a source of reasons, which in turn supports my thesis.

In my terms, an agent's desires include not only what we would ordinarily describe as wants, but all her urges, wishes, preferences, cares, concerns, fears, and so on, regardless of whether they are "backward-looking, forward-looking, self-centered, not self-centered, moral, [or] non-moral" (Blackburn 1998, 123). An agent's desires, in other words, include everything in what Williams calls her "subjective motivational set" (1981, 102). But my thesis is different from Williams's internalist view of reasons (1981, 1995), which, in one of its forms, is equivalent to the claim that a *necessary condition* for a consideration C to qualify as a reason for an agent, x, to A, is that, given C, x's A-ing would serve one or more of x's desires.[32] My claim, in contrast, is that this condition is *sufficient* for C to qualify as a presumptive reason for x to A.[33] Since an agent's desires can be known by others, this yields an extensive, publicly accessible set of substantive judgments about the practical reasons applying to all agents that are presumptively warranted independently of the views, tastes, interests, and predilections of others.

As indicated earlier, when I say that desires are presumptive reasons, I mean that, other things being equal, they *are* reasons. Someone may object that it is not clear what, if anything, this rules in or out. I reply that I am claiming that desires are *typically* reasons, that it is possible to identify exceptions in ways that respect the principle of universalizability and are therefore not ad hoc, and that the most important kinds of exceptions can be spelled out in advance. These include, in particular, desires that the agent possesses only because of false beliefs[34] and desires that belong to a recognizable pathological type that, if satisfied, frequently and predictably frustrate the agent's goals or undermine his good. Furthermore, contextual presuppositions about the capacity in which the agent is acting can also disqualify his personal desires as reasons, as when a department head is deciding on salary increases.

The core of the case for the thesis that desire is a source of practical reasons is that it does justice to much of our everyday thought and talk about reasons without implying that there are no other sources (which would be inconsistent with that thought and talk). People regularly cite desires as reasons to do things: that Sam feels like hiking all day in the mountains counts (however slightly) in favor of his doing so; that Maropeng simply does not want to be a lawyer (which actually means that she wants not to be a lawyer) is a reason for her not to join her family's law firm; that Ahmed, who is in love with Andrea, wants to please her is a reason for him to give her a rose; that Andrea feels like listening to the German Requiem counts in favor of her doing so; and so on. Other considerations may of course outweigh or override such desires, and in some circumstances may disqualify them as reasons. But in the case of personal behavior that is not constrained by an office or role, such desires are undoubtedly among the sorts of considerations that someone could under normal circumstances include in a list of pros and cons when deliberating or providing guidance about what to do, or evaluating conduct retrospectively. And pros and cons are nothing if not reasons.

The thesis that desire is a source of practical reasons is extremely modest and should be easy to accept given that it is concerned only with minimal reasons and begs no questions about what is required or permitted by morality or rationality, or what there is most reason for somebody to do. The thesis is even available to Kantians, for it does not imply that agents should ever be governed heteronomously by their desires, but only that they should consider their desires and take them into account in deciding what to do—providing there is no reason not to. The thesis also has a very important benefit in addition to the fact that it allows for the satisfaction of the output requirement, namely, that it provides a basic foothold for reasons for other-regarding behavior. Numerous desires, including many of

those that express an agent's commitments, cares, and loves, are themselves other-regarding. Thus, unlike considerations about what is good for the agent, such desires provide direct reasons for other-regarding behavior. This is not to deny that there may also be other, deeper, moral reasons for such behavior. But the nature, grounding, and validity of such reasons is subject to significant dispute, and their status probably depends on whether objective practical reasons are independently possible. Such reasons do not, therefore, provide a good basis for an account of objective practical reasons.

All in all, the thesis that desire is a source of practical reasons has considerable attractions. But these attractions cannot justify an endorsement of the thesis in the absence of a response to the kinds of arguments that Scanlon and others advance against it. Actually, many of the arguments that are ostensibly directed against desires being reasons count only against comprehensive desire-based accounts. This includes Scanlon's argument that practical reasoning has too complex a structure for it to be represented simply as an exercise of balancing the weights of competing desires (1998, 52–55), which I accept. I set such arguments aside as irrelevant to my thesis in the absence of a persuasive case for the widespread assumption that only a unitary, comprehensive account of practical reasons is acceptable.[35]

In broad, general terms, it is possible to understand most of the remaining arguments against desires' being reasons, including Scanlon's, as attempts to contribute towards establishing that any practical reasons that ordinary sensible people might be tempted to attribute to desires are best reassigned to something else, like supposed reasons for the desires, goods in virtue of which we have them, or benefits that would result from their being satisfied.[36] As in the case of Scanlon's reasoning, such arguments often trade heavily on examples.

One of Scanlon's examples is Quinn's infamous case of the man who is disposed to turn on radios even though he anticipates no benefit from doing so.[37] Scanlon uses (or appears to use) this example for two different purposes, which are to some extent in tension. First, he offers it in support of his account of desire in terms of "seeming reasons" on the ground that the radio man's disposition should *not* be viewed as a desire and also does not qualify as one according to this account (Scanlon 1998, 38). Second, he presents it as an example of a hypothetical desire that provides no reasons because it does not involve any reasons that could (as I have put it) be reassigned to something else (1998, 43). The example counts against the thesis that desire is a source of reasons only if it is a desire. As Quinn describes the case, it is a mere disposition to behave in a certain way, and so lacks the affective element that I see as essential to desire. However, at one point Scanlon describes it

as an "urge" (1998, 38). Understood in this way, I think that it is a desire.

But is this desire a reason for the radio man to turn on radios? In the absence of further details, a determinate answer is impossible. It is easy to imagine that the radio man's urge belongs to a recognizable pathological type of desire that, if satisfied, frequently and predictably frustrates his goals or undermines his good. If this holds, then his urge is not a reason. But if it does not hold, then I am happy to accept it as a minimal reason. Some philosophers respond with horror when I say this, but I don't see why the thought should be regarded as repugnant given that in most ordinary circumstances considerations other than the radio man's desire would ensure that there are no *good* reasons for him to turn on radios. And if we bracket off the possible pathology of the radio man's desire and the probability of strong reasons for him not to act on it—both of which no doubt influence our initial response to the example—then there isn't a big difference between his desire and cases like Scanlon's feeling like "walking from home to ... [his] office ... [by] one route rather than another" (1998, 47–48). Funnily enough, Scanlon allows that "in some such cases the fact that I 'felt like' doing something is a reason," but he thinks that "these are special, rather trivial cases, not central examples" (1998, 48). I would guess that they are much more common than he supposes. But, be that as it may, I do not think that we should give much weight to bizarre examples like the radio man's urge, which are likely to steer our intuitions astray precisely because they are so unlike our everyday desires.

Scanlon's example of his desire to have a new computer does not fall foul of this stricture. Here's what he says about it:

> Suppose that ... I am beset by a desire to have a new computer.... [D]oes my being in this state make it the case that I *have* a reason to buy a new computer...? Such a state can occur ... even when my considered judgment is that I ... have no reason to buy a new machine since I believe (correctly, let us suppose) that the features of the newer models would be of no real benefit to me ... (aside, perhaps, from the indirect one that it would put an end ... to my being nagged by the desire...). It is not just that the reason provided by the desire is outweighed by other considerations. I would not say, "Well, I do have *some* reason to buy the computer, since it would satisfy my desire, but on balance it is not worth it." The desire ... provides no reason at all (except possibly the indirect one just mentioned).
>
> Now suppose that I ... take myself to have good reason to buy a new machine.[38] Even in this case, the reason that I have for buying a computer is not that it will satisfy my desire, but rather that I will enjoy having it, or that it will help me with my work, impress my friends and colleagues, or bring some other supposed benefit.[39] (1998, 43–44)

Thus desires are not reasons, but when they lead us to think that we have reasons, these reasons (or, possibly, "seeming reasons") are always considerations other than the desires themselves. Scanlon makes the same move with respect to the other examples to which he gives considerable attention, namely, his desire to eat coffee ice cream (1998, 44–47) and the powerful desire of Owen Wingrave, the Henry James character, not to have a military career (1998, 48–49).[40] I won't discuss these in detail but will take them into account in responding to the above argument.

Regarding the first phase of the argument, it is true that Scanlon could desire a new computer even though he correctly believes that "the features of the newer model would be of no real benefit to [him]."[41] And it is easy enough in these circumstances to imagine him telling himself that he has "no reason to buy a new machine"—especially as this would help him resist the force of the desire. But this does not establish that we sober commentators should accept that (setting aside Scanlon's indirect reason) his desire "provides no reason at all." Notwithstanding what Scanlon says, his desire provides a very slight reason that is completely outweighed by other considerations, including the fact that the computer's features "would be of no real benefit." As Stampe observes, "we say that a person 'has no reason whatever' for an action when we mean merely 'no *good* reason' " (1987, 345).[42] Of course Scanlon's desire would be disqualified as a reason if the issue was whether he should use limited university funds to buy the computer for work purposes. But if (as I will assume) the issue is whether he should buy it with his own money, then the fact that he wants to surely counts, however little, in favor of his doing so. Indeed, there could be circumstances in which his desire counts considerably in favor of it. If Scanlon were very wealthy and could buy the computer without compromising any of his projects, obligations, needs, cares, loves, concerns, and other significant desires, then someone could reasonably recommend that he buy it on the strength of his desire; and he himself could reasonably cite his desire in his defense if he does buy it. But these possibilities would make little sense if Scanlon's desire did not count at all in favor of his buying the computer in other circumstances in which it is not disqualified as a reason.

Part of the explanation of why Scanlon claims that his desire provides no reason for him to buy a new computer is that he rightly thinks that it is not a good reason, but he mistakenly identifies *normative reasons* with *good reasons*.[43] He makes this identification explicitly near the beginning of Chapter 1 (1998, 19) and it has a significant impact on his discussion of desire as a possible source of reasons later in the chapter, as in the case at hand. But it is an error, for it is quite easy to come up with a normative reason for something—that is, to repeat Scanlon's words, "a consideration that counts in favor of it" (1998, 17)—

without coming up with a good normative reason for it—i.e, a consideration that counts *considerably* in favor of it. Indeed, some of the considerations that Scanlon lists as possible good reasons for buying a new computer in the second phase of his argument, for example, that it will "impress my friends and colleagues," would in many circumstances be minimal reasons and certainly not good reasons.

Scanlon could perhaps concede that not all reasons are good reasons but still claim that—as suggested by the second phase of his argument—if there is a reason for someone to do something that he desires, the reason is "almost never" the desire itself,[44] but some benefit that the satisfaction of the desire would yield. Now it is true that if someone desires something only because he anticipates a certain benefit from it—as Scanlon desires coffee ice cream only because "he would enjoy eating it" (1998, 44)—then the desire cannot provide any reason *over and above* those deriving from the benefit.[45] But from this it does not follow that the desire is not a reason,[46] for there is absolutely nothing in the concept of a reason—namely, that of "a consideration that counts in favor of something"—which implies that reasons cannot overlap, or that the combined weight of two or more reasons taken together must be at least equal to the sum of their weights taken separately. Moreover, it would be intolerable to impose any such restriction on reasons, not only because it is inconsistent with our everyday thought and talk about reasons, but also because—in the absence of an adequate account of legitimate reasoning about reasons, which we do not yet have—it is not clear how the restriction could be applied to candidate reasons that overlap. Overlapping reasons, like conflicting reasons, are a feature of our normative predicament. Thus we cannot establish that desires are not reasons on the ground that they would overlap with other reasons.

Besides, it is not difficult to come up with examples in which the force of a desire as a reason goes beyond the net benefits that would result from the agent's acting on it. Andrea hopes ultimately for a career as a professional musician and has the chance to take up either the clarinet or the cello. Taking everything into account, including the availability of excellent teachers, her potential talent, how hard she would work, costs, opportunity costs, and the market for musicians, it is not possible to predict which alternative will work out better. But if she wants to learn to play the cello more, doesn't that count in favor of her taking up the cello even if the effects of her having the desire have been included in the evaluation of costs and benefits?

It is also easy to come up with cases in which the benefits of satisfying a desire depend significantly upon the desire rather than the other way around. Many social, sexual, and physical activities are enjoyable or rewarding—or more enjoyable or rewarding—because we desire them. The much deeper case

concerning Owen Wingrave's desire not to have a military career also belongs in this category. Scanlon attempts to accommodate this example by assigning the reasons for Wingate not to join the army to the harms that would result if he were to do so (1998, 49). But these harms clearly depend upon Wingate's desire, which is therefore a powerful reason for him not to join the army.[47]

Scanlon himself admits that, as in the Wingate case, "Many of our reasons do have subjective conditions" and that "differences in what one is drawn to ... can make a difference to what one has reason to take up" (1998, 49, 48). Others who insist that desires are not reasons agree. Parfit, for example, forthrightly declares that "we usually have some reason to fulfil our desires ... in part because, in most cases, what we want is in some way worth achieving" and also that "there are certain other reasons that we *wouldn't* have if we didn't have desires" (2001, 19). Such observations come close to an admission that, other things being equal, the fact that someone has a certain desire provides some evidence that there is a reason for her to pursue the object of that desire. But if this is the case, then the desire itself is a consideration that counts in favor of her doing so, and is therefore a reason.

In order to block this move it is necessary to treat a reason for something as *more* than merely a consideration that counts in favor of it. I do not wish to claim that there is never any point in doing this, because it may, for example, be useful for some philosophical purposes to seek to regiment our talk of reasons with a view to eliminating overlapping reasons or treating only considerations of a certain type as canonical reasons. But such objectives might not be easy to achieve without loss; it is not clear that they would contribute toward the goal of establishing that practical reasons can be objective; and they should not be allowed to interfere with that goal, which concerns everyday judgments about practical reasons and the standards that apply to them, not regimented judgments devised for special purposes, however legitimate those purposes may be. I therefore conclude that within the framework of this paper, the view that the reasons that we are ordinarily inclined to ascribe to desires should be reassigned to something else does not carry much weight.

So far my argument for the thesis that desire is a source of practical reasons has been that it does justice to our ordinary thought and talk and that the main arguments against it are defective. But is it possible to back this up with an *explanation* of why desire is a source of practical reasons? The case of theoretical reasons may help to clarify the challenge. I suggested in section 2 that perceptual experience is a source of theoretical reasons, and it would be possible to defend this thesis by invoking our everyday thought and talk and to answer

arguments against it. But *why* is perceptual experience a source of theoretical reasons? Of course we have an excellent answer to this question at which I hinted earlier, namely, that perceptual experience is a sign of *truth*.[48] Likewise, if desire really is a source of practical reasons, we should be able to explain why.

One obvious strategy for doing this would be to seek a property that is crucial to objects of practical reasons as truth is to objects of theoretical reasons, and attempt to find a connection between desire and this property that is analogous to the connection between perceptual experience and truth. Given the endless diversity of objects of practical reasons, we cannot hope to succeed with this strategy by looking for a single, substantial "constitutive aim" that applies to all objects of practical reasons.[49] Writing a philosophy paper, trying to lose a game of chess without exposing one's intention, not going to a meeting, waking up in the middle of the night, feeling angry with one's neighbor, not being proud of the President, and being amused by a joke do not, in themselves, have anything notable in common.

But to the extent to which they are things for which there are reasons, they share the abstract property of *serving some appropriate end*, for it makes little sense to say that

(6) There is a reason for x to A, but x's A-ing would serve no appropriate end.

In this context an appropriate end is not of course an end that may be pursued regardless of the circumstances, but a prima facie possible end that could be ruled out as a legitimate goal by other factors. Notice also that if someone's doing something serves an appropriate end, then there is a reason for her to do it, for

(7) x's A-ing would serve some appropriate end, but there is no reason for x to A

also makes little sense. We may, therefore, treat behavior for which there is a reason as coextensive with behavior that serves appropriate ends. Now an end is something aimed at. Thus, taking a cue from Aristotle's assertion that "the good has rightly been declared to be that at which all things aim" (1925, 1094[a]3), I am tempted to say that the crucial property of objects of practical reasons is that they *aim at the good*, thus invoking the truism that inspires value-based theories of reasons but is not their exclusive property. But of course this truism is merely a neat formulation of the claim that objects of practical reasons serve appropriate ends, and it does not have any implications about the nature of the good in general or in any particular case.

We can, nonetheless, ask whether there is a suitable connection between desire and the good—analogous to the connection

between perceptual experience and truth—to underwrite the view that desire is a source of practical reasons. I think that there is because, other things being equal, desire can reasonably be taken as a sign of the good. I will not attempt to argue in detail for this claim but will merely gesture at a few considerations that make it more plausible. To begin with, it is natural to include something in an agent's good[50] if she desires it when she actually has it, and there is a high enough correlation between advance desire and desire in possession for the former to count as a sign of the latter. Next, the biological function of desire is to bring about behavior that serves the good of the individual or species. Connected with this, there are psychological mechanisms by means of which desires evolve in response to experience so as to conform more closely with that good (Railton 2003a, 13–15). Finally (and no doubt in part because of considerations like the above), in attempting to achieve philosophical clarity on an agent's good, one plausible strategy is to ask what she would desire under certain idealized conditions (see, e.g., Railton 2003, 9–17). However the details are worked out, it is to be expected that there will be a high enough correlation between actual desire and idealized desire for the former to qualify as a sign of the latter and, therefore, as a sign of the good.

I should, however, emphasize that the proposition that desire is a sign of the good is itself a normative judgment, which need not be understood realistically, and that it is not subject to decisive evidence or conclusive proof. But it is also a very modest claim that leaves plenty of room for things that are desired but not good and also for things that are good but not desired. It is, therefore, easy to accept, and I suspect that it expresses something that is almost common ground between ordinary people who think and talk about ends and reasons. But those who are unwilling to accept it have cause for skepticism about my case for objective practical reasons.

5. Overview

In general, the way to show that objectivity is possible in a given domain is to establish that our thought and talk in that domain is subject to standards that provide the resources for an adequate account of substantive truth and error. This requires in particular that those standards satisfy the output requirement, that is, that they yield a fairly extensive set of substantive, publicly accessible judgments that are presumptively true independently of contingent features of those who apply them. With respect to judgments about practical reasons, I have argued (fairly schematically) that if we supplement the standards of universalizability, consistency, coherence, and caution with the principle that desire is a source of minimal reasons, then the output condition will be satisfied and also that,

notwithstanding currently fashionable arguments against the claims of desire, it is indeed a source of minimal reasons.

But in the end what seems to me most important if we wish to secure the objectivity of practical reasons is that we should focus on the basic case of minimal reasons, set aside the question of whether judgments about reasons are best understood realistically, concentrate on whether the standards of correctness that apply to our everyday discourse about reasons satisfy conditions of objectivity something like those that I have sketched, and abjure the assumption that some grand unifying theory of reasons must be correct.[51]

Notes

[1] In this paper, I reserve the term "reasons" for normative reasons but occasionally add the adjective "normative" as a reminder.

[2] However, this paper is not intended as a general critical evaluation of chapter 1 of Scanlon 1998, which contains a great deal of interesting material that I will not touch. This includes the details of Scanlon's moral psychology, which is insightfully criticized in Copp and Sobel 2002. As I will indicate by means of appropriate citations, almost every significant point from Scanlon that I take up (either positively or negatively) is one on which he agrees with other important writers. I am concerned with Scanlon's work only insofar as it can in some respects be taken as representative of a certain general theoretical orientation.

[3] Others who give similar characterizations of reasons include Darwall (1983, 80), Dancy (2000b, 1–3; 2004, 29) and Parfit (2001, 18; Forthcoming, ch. 1).

[4] See, e.g., Darwall 1983, 80, 201; Bond 1983, 27–31; Gibbard 1990, 161; Smith 1994, 95; Hampton 1998, 51–52, 85–91; Scanlon 1998, 19, 44–45; Gert 1998, 56; and Dancy 2000b, 1–5. The error does not occur in, e.g., Nagel 1970 (see 49–51, where "prima facie reasons" seems to include minimal reasons), Stampe 1987 (345–46), and Dancy 2004. Dancy's arguments for particularism concentrate heavily on reasons that could be minimal. He dubs these "contributory reasons," which misleadingly suggests that they are reasons only to the extent to which they contribute to "what there is overall reason to do" (2004, 15–16). But Dancy disowns this suggestion and, indeed, argues at length that "contributory reasons" cannot be defined in an informative way in terms of their contribution to the determination of what to do (2004, 17–29). This is correct, for we simply don't have an account of how minimal reasons combine and interact to form sufficient reasons. And even if we did, it would still not follow that minimal reasons are not reasons in their own right.

The phrase "*pro tanto* reasons" covers minimal reasons on some but probably not all of its uses. I therefore prefer to avoid

it—more so because the account of *pro tanto* reasons advanced by one of the more prominent philosophers who makes extensive use of the term limits *pro tanto* reasons to "the context of a weighing explanation" (Broome 2004, 37), a restriction that I cannot accept.

[5] Scanlon (1998, 20–21) claims that all reasons can be understood as reasons for judgment-sensitive attitudes and that apparent reasons for overt behavior and action can be reconstrued as reasons for related judgment-sensitive attitudes. I am skeptical about whether this can be done without losing something important, but even aside from that, I see no benefit from adopting the position within the context of this paper.

[6] Scanlon 1998, 19. This view is also accepted by others, including Parfit (Forthcoming, ch. 1) and (implicitly) Gibbard, who applies "rational" to beliefs and behavior in the same way (1990, 36–37). For an enlightening comparison of theoretical and practical reasons that identifies many of their similarities, see Edgley 1965.

[7] Others who (in different ways) appeal to analogies between theoretical and practical reasons to make sense of the latter include Railton (1993, 292–300; 2003b), Velleman (2000), and Dancy (2004, 73–78).

[8] I am more inclined to count all normative reasons as practical reasons and treat theoretical reasons as qualified practical reasons (along with, e.g., moral, prudential, and legal reasons). But such matters of classification make no difference to this paper.

[9] This use of "objective" appears in, e.g., Nagel 1970 (90–98) and Darwall 1983 (117–45). It also shows up in Nagel 1997 (123) even though Nagel also uses "objective" in a sense similar to mine in his 1997 (101–103).

[10] Parfit presents this example to support the claim that there are objective practical reasons rather than to illustrate the idea that objective practical reasons can be agent-relative. The example appears immediately after the important observation that "The question of objectivity can best be pursued if we consider, not just moral reasons, but all kinds of reasons for acting" (Parfit 1984, 452), which I endorse.

[11] Although Scanlon seldom uses the words "objective" or "objectively," it is clear that the heart of the relevant discussion (1998, 64–72) is about objectivity in my sense.

[12] Scanlon 1998, 59–64. See also Wiggins 1995, 252–53.

[13] See, e.g., Dummett 1978, 1993a, and 1993b, and my manuscript in preparation ("Realism versus Objectivism").

[14] This claim is, of course, meant to apply only with respect to the particular sense of "objectivity" with which I am concerned. Philosophers who have distinguished between a commitment to objectivity in this sense and realism with respect to morality or value include Hare (1993), Putnam (1995), and Davidson (2000).

I attempt to get clear on the differences between realism and objectivism in a manuscript in preparation.

[15] Wright's careful discussion of what he calls "comedy" (1992, 100–107) is relevant here, and his suggestion that discourse about what is funny does not satisfy his condition of "Cognitive Command" may fairly be understood to imply that its pretensions of objectivity are not justified. Note, however, that Wright tends to assimilate a commitment to objectivity and realism, which I want to distinguish.

[16] Blackburn (1993, 157) also makes a similar observation.

[17] I have substituted "practical reasons" for "reasons for action" in this passage because both Scanlon and I are interested in practical reasons broadly understood rather than reasons for actions proper. Similar arguments for the objectivity of morality or value are advanced in Hare 1993, Putnam 1995, and Davidson 2000. None of these arguments escape my criticisms of Scanlon's.

[18] This is in effect recognized by Nagel, who notes that we do not have "uncontroversial and well-developed methods for thinking about morality" comparable to those that apply in science (1997, 102). He goes on to suggest that the same applies to practical reasons in general.

[19] I pursue these matters in greater detail in a manuscript in preparation.

[20] Scanlon does not use the term "universalizability" but talks instead about "the universality of reasons judgments" (1998, 73). Although he does not offer a precise account of this concept, it is clear that he is committing himself to universalizability in the sense in which I explicate it below, or something very much like it. Others who are committed to the universalizability of reasons in something like this sense include Edgley (1965, 185–91), Williams (1985, 60), Nagel (1997, 5, 119–20), and Korsgaard (2002, Lecture 2, 19–22).

[21] See, e.g., Dancy 1993 (73–108), 2000a, and 2004 (73–85). I will not address most of the details of Dancy's arguments against the universalizability of reasons directly but will give an account of universalizability in terms of which the claim that reasons are universalizable escapes these arguments and those of other particularists, e.g., the arguments of Raz 1999b.

[22] McDowell (1998, 38) makes the same point more carefully about principles of virtue.

[23] This is in line with Hare's definition of universalizability (1963, 139), which Dancy accepts (1993, 57, 80; 2004, 130–32). However, I reject Hare's standards of universalizability (Hare 1961, 49–54; 1963, 10–11) on the ground that they involve a commitment to unrestricted universal principles and are, therefore, too demanding.

[24] In line with note 5, I have substituted "behavior" for "attitude" in the second line of this quotation. More significantly, I have also deleted "good" from "a good reason" in the fourth line

because my concern is with whether minimal reasons can be objective. In any case, the reasons that Scanlon ought to be concerned with here are not *good reasons* but *real reasons*, i.e., objective reasons.

[25] Someone might protest that under the condition specified there would at best be a presumption that *there is* a reason for x to A, but no presumption that C itself is a reason for x to A. I address this sort of concern in section 4.

[26] It will become clear in section 4 that I reject Scanlon's claim that desires are constituted largely by "seeming reasons."

[27] See Scanlon 1998 (41–49) and, e.g., Quinn 1993, Gert 1998 (62–64), Raz 1999a, Dancy 2000b (26–43), and Parfit 2001 and Forthcoming (ch. 1).

[28] Because of considerations of space, my arguments will be fairly schematic. For a more careful presentation of the case for the thesis that desire is a source of practical reasons within a framework that is consistent with my overall position, see Chang 2004.

[29] See especially Grice 1967 (10–12, 16–17) and Bond 1983 (33–40).

[30] In fact, given the heterogeneity of the facts that we cite as reasons in everyday discourse, I cannot make complete sense of why so many philosophers who are concerned with reasons wish to give a homogeneous account of them for any purposes.

[31] For a careful and effective critique of Scanlon's account of desire, see Copp and Sobel 2002 (254–69). The point about brutes and infants comes up on p. 258.

[32] See Williams 1981, 101. However, Williams usually works with another form of internalism according to which someone has a reason to ϕ if he "could reach the conclusion that he should ϕ (or a conclusion to ϕ) by a sound deliberative route from the motivations that he has in his actual motivational set" (Williams 1995, 35). Note, incidentally, that this implicitly involves an unwarranted assimilation of all reasons to good reasons, as does Williams's nondeliberative version of internalism. But this is something that I sidestep in the sentence to which this note is attached.

[33] Williams indicates in passing that he also accepts something like this view but does not pursue it further (1995, 35–36).

[34] It might be possible to avoid this exception by restricting the thesis that desire is a source of reasons to "intrinsic desires" (see, e.g., Parfit 2001, 20), but I prefer not to depend upon this notion because it is implicitly counterfactual and its application may often be indeterminate.

[35] This assumption is usually unstated but is very close to the surface in Parfit 2001 and Forthcoming (ch. 1), where Parfit mentions two approaches to practical reasons, viz., desire-based theories (on which all reasons are provided by desires) and

value-based theories (on which none are), and proceeds to argue as if there are no other alternatives. Parfit, incidentally, counts Scanlon's primitivism about reasons (with which he expresses sympathy) as a value-based theory (Parfit 2001, 19–20). This is odd given Scanlon's commitment to the "buck-passing" analysis of value, in terms of which values are based on reasons rather than reasons on values (1998, 95–100). Moreover, the "buck-passing" account of value renders the connection between reasons and values analytic. Thus, in the absence of further assumptions, it has no substantive implications about whether desires—or any other kinds of facts—are or are not reasons.

[36] Good examples of such reasoning appear in, e.g., Raz 1999a (50–62), Dancy 2000 (35–43), and Parfit 2001 and Forthcoming (ch. 1). The following criticisms of Scanlon's arguments can be adapted to apply to other similar arguments in the literature.

[37] Quinn 1993, 236–37. For a useful discussion of Quinn's example in relation to Scanlon's reasoning, see Copp and Sobel 2002 (255, 258–63).

[38] In this sentence I leave out a clause that presupposes the correctness of Scanlon's account of desire, on which the argument should not depend.

[39] Here Scanlon attaches an endnote in which he attributes similar points to others. His citations include the following: Darwall 1983, chs. 3 and 6; Bond 1983, 31; Parfit 1984, 121; Raz 1986, 140–44; and Schueler 1995, 91–97.

[40] Williams (1981, 106–11) introduced the Wingrave example into the philosophical literature in order to support his internalist account of reasons, but it provides far stronger support for the thesis that desire is a source of reasons.

[41] It is not, however, plausible that someone could have a nonpathological desire for something while believing that it would provide no benefits whatever (including, e.g., a bit of pleasure). Thus, if in the first phase of Scanlon's argument, his desire for a new computer is meant to be understood as accompanied by the belief that the computer would provide absolutely no benefits, then the example should be rejected. Someone could, nonetheless, desire something without having any beliefs about the benefits it would provide—as brutes and infants often do.

[42] A similar point applies in the theoretical domain. While writing this paper, I more than once had to resist the temptation to say that there is no reason at all for accepting some philosophical claim against which I think there is a powerful case, even though I was well aware of considerations that count, however slightly, in favor of it.

[43] See note 4 for citations of other works that commit the same error.

[44] This clause is intended to correspond to Scanlon's statement that "my reason for doing something is almost never 'that it will

satisfy my desire' " (1998, 44), which I take to be equivalent to the much more straightforward claim that "my reason for doing something is almost never that I desire to do it." Scanlon's rather ungainly formulation of this claim makes it appear more plausible than it is, but I won't labor the point.

[45] Scanlon says that the desire "does not, in itself, provide an *additional* reason for action" (1998, 45; emphasis added).

[46] Raz (1999a, 56–62) makes it clear that he is committed to the assumption that if a desire does not provide a reason that is independent of anticipated benefits in virtue of which the agent has the desire, then it cannot provide a reason at all. Scanlon's commitment to this assumption is less explicit, but his reasoning depends upon it.

[47] Here someone might observe that Wingate's desire is an expression of his sense of identity, and protest that the desire does not provide any reason over and above that provided by his sense of identity. But, as before, this overlap does not imply that the desire itself does not count in favor of Wingate's not joining the army.

[48] This is not to suggest that a judgment to the effect that a consideration C is a theoretical reason for the belief that p can be *reduced* to the judgment that C is a sign that p is true (or that C increases the probability that p is true), for any such reduction would threaten the normativity of judgments of theoretical reasons. I claim only that if C is a sign that p is true, then we should treat C as a minimal theoretical reason for the belief that p because this is what reasonable, competent, well-informed, and unprejudiced judges would do.

[49] Velleman (2000, 188–97) argues that objects of practical reasons do have a constitutive aim, viz., autonomy, but his case depends on the assumption that objects of practical reasons are always full-blooded actions, which I set aside in section 1. In any event, even though maintenance and enhancement of the agent's autonomy may be important desiderata in deliberating about what to do and evaluating conduct, it is implausible that autonomy could provide a sufficiently broad and stable basis for the satisfaction of the output requirement.

[50] I purposely use this phrase in order to fudge the distinction between what is *good for* and what is *good to* an agent.

[51] I owe thanks to Karen Green, Tim Hinton, Terry Horgan, Keith Lehrer, Graham Macdonald, Seumas Miller, Darrel Moellendorf, James Pendlebury, David Schmidtz, Michael Smith, Mark Timmons, and Mary Tjiattas, as well as others who participated in discussion when I presented earlier versions of some of this material at the Australian National University, the Annual Conference of the New Zealand Division of the Australasian Association of Philosophy, Auckland, December 2001, the University of Arizona, the University of Memphis, Georgia State University, and North Carolina State University.

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