COLUMBIA THEMES IN PHILOSOPHY

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son to try to bring the world into conformity with it. But this merely shows that p cannot be a correctness condition for a desire that p. It does not show, in general, that a state cannot both have correctness conditions and rationally require action. And indeed, as I observed in note 7 above, this is essentially the possibility that Smith himself goes on to argue for.

THE NATURALIST GAP IN ETHICS

Erin I. Kelly and Lionel K. McPherson

There is a truth in moral naturalism that moral cognitivists typically have shunned. Moral naturalists challenge the reason-giving authority of morality. To a certain extent, we are sympathetic to their challenge. We argue that moral reasons gain their “authority” only when they are accepted by moral agents and that persons qua rational agents do not have to accept moral reasons. Yet we agree with moral cognitivists that moral judgments are reason-sensitive and that this feature of moral judgments cannot be understood exhaustively or reducibly in the terms of psychology or biology (or, more specifically, evolution).

Moral naturalism, as we will understand it, shifts questions of justification heavily in the direction of explanation. For example, naturalists have stressed the primacy and functional role of various sentiments and reactive attitudes in accounting for the normativity of moral judgments. The idea is that psychological elements that characteristically explain why people are moved by certain considerations are the very basis of normative reasons. Yet an apparent gap lies between explanatory reasons and normative reasons: explaining why people reach the moral judgments they reach is not clearly the same as showing that such judgments are right or reasonable.
Probably the most prominent type of moral naturalist are philosophers in the tradition of Hume, who seek to describe the thought processes that lead people to come to identify and respond to certain considerations as moral reasons. Hume’s view is that moral judgments are expressions of disinterested approval and disapproval to which a person is led through a complex psychological mechanism of sympathy with other people and a disposition to avoid conflict with them. A Humean moral psychology might seem both explanatory and normative: it locates the normativity of an agent’s judgments in considerations that have motivating force from the agent’s point of view. Simon Blackburn and Harry Frankfurt have developed contemporary versions of this idea. The problem is that the explanatory story remains more obvious than the normative story.

Blackburn argues that to affirm a moral standard is to value it or to be disposed to value it and that “to hold a value is typically to have a relatively stable disposition to conduct practical life and practical discussion in a particular way: it is to be disposed or set in that way, and notably to be set against change in this respect.” This is similar to Frankfurt’s view that caring about something gives normative structure to a person’s practical deliberation. Frankfurt argues that for you to care about something is to be disposed to support and sustain that which you care about, even when you would like to do something else. For example, you might keep a vow of sexual fidelity to your spouse, despite having the opportunity to act (without complications) on sexual desires for a different person. Taking the vow is unlikely to preempt having outside sexual desires; otherwise, there would not be the familiar difficulty of keeping such a vow. Rather, assuming that you continue to care about the vow, you will try to limit your actions accordingly. Caring involves identifying with certain desires and thereby making them your own. When a person’s identification with certain desires is “wholehearted,” she establishes them as authoritative constraints that can be used to guide her decisions and considered preferences. The freely faithful spouse can acknowledge having outside desires while not identifying her, as an agent, with those desires: given that she continues to care about her vow of sexual fidelity, her outside desires do not provide her with grounds for action. By contrast, Frankfurt maintains, when a person has identified herself inconsistently or when she fails to identify with any of her desires, she fails to constitute herself as an agent and is to some degree passive with regard to the actions she performs. Her desires would drive her to act, without regard to or even despite what she cares about. In this sense, such a person would be out of control and might even lack altogether a normative perspective for self-criticism.

These philosophers locate the normativity of an agent’s judgments about what to do in the reflexive and hierarchical structure of an agent’s desires—a structure that constitutes the agent’s point of view. But the normative significance of the agent’s point of view calls for further analysis. More specifically, when different people might reach different moral judgments, or when a conflict might arise in an agent’s own thinking about what she has reason to do, this prompts the question whether there are independent criteria for resolving the inconsistencies. There is a range of views, for example, about the moral status of animals, particularly with regard to eating them, and a morally conscientious person may well be uncertain about how to balance the various considerations. In addition to the question about independent criteria for moral assessment, a related question arises when an agent reflects on whether she has adequate grounds for endorsing the values she holds. Why should an agent take the reasons that she favors to have normative significance? Moral naturalists appear to open a gap they cannot close: there appears to be no bridge between the conclusions that people actually reach, even after reflection, and conclusions about what is right or reasonable. Of course, moral naturalists might reject the idea that morality has cognitive content. Some hold the view that the normativity of morality has no source apart from the attitudes expressed by the moral commitments people have. This position, we argue, cannot be reconciled with the evaluative role that morality generally assumes vis-à-vis people’s actual behavior and commitments.

Still, there is an important gap that moral naturalists can fill. This is the normative gap between, as we shall put it, “acknowledging” and “accepting” reasons. You acknowledge a reason when you view certain considerations as counting in favor of something, for instance, that a person who plans to run a marathon has a reason to train. You accept a reason when you view it as bearing directly on your practical deliberation and decision making. Not only would you acknowledge that a marathon runner has a reason to train, but also you would accept that your plan to run a marathon gives you a reason to train. Acknowledging a reason and accepting a reason are rationally related: acknowledging reasons can be a rational basis for accepting them. But acknowledging a reason does not mean one must accept that it bears directly on one’s own deliberation. You might acknowledge reasons that it would not be irrational or rationally defective for you to disregard. The reasons may support a course of action only in relation to a situation that you do not occupy, or they may be practically relevant only in view of sensibilities or values that you do not share. Your recognition of the sensibilities or values that make a course of action compelling need not entail that the reasons supporting this course of action are reasons for you. Opera aficionados have a
reason to help sustain the art form by attending performances. But if opera does not move you or is not important to a culture with which you identify, you may have no such reason.

Morality does generate requirements of certain sorts. People who do not care about morality, however, do not accept the reasons supporting its requirements. While people who care about morality have these reasons, morally disinterested people will at most be willing to acknowledge moral reasons. We argue that such people are morally defective in a fairly obvious sense, though this defect does not necessarily point to a defect in their rational agency. The selfish and greedy who are willing to exploit others in order to promote their individual, family, or special interests are not necessarily irrational (assuming that the universality of moral reasons is not presupposed). Such people might take instrumentally rational means to accomplish their ends and might lead lives they reflectively endorse, without suffering crises of conscience. The morally disinterested do not directly have reason to do what morality requires. Moralists might hope that rational people must accept moral reasons. But the rational bindingness of moral reasons is obscure, apart from the relation of these reasons to some considerations that an agent accepts.

This means that psychological factors influence the reach of moral considerations as reasons for particular people. Specifically, the rational bindingness of moral imperatives depends on noncognitive elements. A moral agent not only will recognize that other people are sentient, concerned about their future, have meaningful relationships, and so on, but also will have a sensibility that moves her to care deeply about such facts. At the same time, we maintain that making sense of the content of morality requires a cognitivist analysis. There are truths about what morality requires or, at least, there are more and less reasonable judgments about the content of morality—judgments that roughly reflect the outer limits of defensible conduct. The Spanish Inquisition, chattel slavery, and genocide, for instance, are beyond the pale of any conception of decent treatment of people as such. Our point is that a cognitivist analysis of the content of morality cannot on its own provide an account of moral motivation nor, more controversially, of reasons that all rational persons have. A rational imperative to accept moral reasons depends on noncognitive elements at some level. Thus the directives of rational agency involve bootstrapping. This opens the door, in a limited way, to moral naturalism.

A central aim of T. M. Scanlon's "Metaphysics and Morals" is to show that moral cognitivism can provide an account of the reason-giving and

motivating quality of moral judgments—what he refers to as their "normative significance." According to Scanlon, sound moral judgments express beliefs and are supported by reasons. He addresses in separate steps the normative significance of the reasons that people address to one another and the intrapersonal normative significance of moral reasons for an agent's own decision making and action. We address each in turn.

The normative nature of the claims people make on one another, Scanlon argues, derives from the substance of morality. Normativity stems directly from the content of the reasons that support moral judgments. You claim that she should return the money she borrowed because she promised to pay it back. The normative implication of your claim is that there is reason for her to take it seriously. This implication is affirmed, Scanlon thinks, by typical responses to moral disagreements: people treat these disagreements not as reducing to differences of taste or feeling but, rather, as akin to disagreements about empirical fact, where each person claims that there are good reasons to support his or her view. Because the subject matter of morality is practical, the reasons people affirm often direct somebody to act in a certain way. Still, the claims take a cognitive form. Your normative claim on her to return the money is supported by good arguments for her to believe that she is required morally to return it.

Behind the implication that others have reasons to accept moral judgments, Scanlon argues, is a claim about the nature of normative reasons in general: a reason for you would hold for other people as well, at least when they are similarly situated. Scanlon has referred to this as the "universality" of reason judgments. The apparent universality of reason judgments lends support to a cognitivist account of morality. Anyone who is cognitively sensitive to the sorts of considerations that are morally relevant (e.g., doing X would help someone in need, doing Y would cause harm) will be in a position to acknowledge that certain moral directives are reasonable. According to Scanlon, for instance, "When I defend my action by saying that revenge was a good reason for doing what I did, the normative claim I am making on you is that you should accept this view of reasons." Here the agent would not merely be signaling that she feels strongly in favor of revenge under such circumstances. Rather, the agent believes that backing up her judgment are considerations that have merit independently of local feelings, dispositions, conventions, or traditions.

Scanlon helpfully stresses the reason-sensitive nature of moral judgments. Yet it is unclear how exactly to understand the demand that an agent accept reasonable moral judgments other people make. We need to know how to interpret the reason-giving force of moral judgments for particular
agents. A person who acknowledges that certain considerations have moral significance might not accept that those considerations have direct bearing on her own practical deliberation. This raises a question about the factors that might mediate between considerations that a person identifies as supporting a moral judgment and considerations that she accepts should influence her conduct. A cognitivist account of moral motivation would need to show how an agent's belief that morality requires action of a certain sort rationally implies that the agent must herself intend to comply with morality's requirements.

Unlike many moral cognitivists, Scanlon admits that there are no moral reasons that all rational persons must accept on pain of irrationality. Nevertheless, he thinks that moral reasons have normative authority for all rational agents. This is because his account of the normativity of morality relies on claims about the relative bindingness of competing considerations for an agent—not from the perspective of the agent's existing dispositions and motives but, rather, from the perspective of what can be justified to other people. A moral reason applies to you not because you accept it or because, in view of your dispositions, motives, and values, you ought to accept it. According to Scanlon, the normative authority of a moral reason does not depend on whether the reason is supported by the agent's own judgments. Instead, this normative authority has its source in principles that no one could reasonably reject. Further, Scanlon's account affirms the value of standing in justifiable interpersonal relations as something that all persons have reason to accept. Failure to act on a moral reason does not imply that an agent irrationally fails to act in accordance with her own judgments. The agent might not be, in this sense, irrational for failing to act on a reason that applies to her. In a broader sense, though, Scanlon believes that an agent is rationally defective in failing to accept the reasons there are. He does not, in our view, give adequate content and support to this claim.

In rejecting the idea that the content and normativity of morality derive from general principles that all rational persons as such must accept, Scanlon rejects what he refers to as "structural accounts." Structural accounts hold that the content and normative significance of moral reasons derive from unavoidable presuppositions of rational thought, communication, or agency. On these accounts, the substance of morality—its claims and directives—is unavoidable for beings who communicate, think, or act rationally. Structural accounts are attractive because they avoid metaphysical claims and are able to distinguish themselves from psychology. They avoid metaphysical claims by describing only what agents are committed to, not an independent realm of value; they distinguish themselves from psychology by focusing on the content of moral claims rather than their psychological role. Scanlon responds to Christine Korsgaard's ambitious account, and so will we.

Korsgaard argues that the normative authority of reasons is grounded in human nature, specifically, in a person's self-constitution as an agent. Agency is self-constitution, according to Korsgaard, and the normativity of reasons stems from the role they play in acts of self-constitution. She elaborates this idea as follows: Normative questions arise because, as reflective beings who act, people are faced with questions about what to do. Various inclinations provide candidate reasons for action, and an agent reflects on possible courses of action with the aim of choosing among them. In deliberating he presumes that what he does is up to him and not determined by some alien cause. This means that he in effect commits himself to choosing a course of action on the basis of a principle he gives to himself. Such a principle would be one with which he identifies. As Korsgaard puts it, "We endorse or reject our impulses by determining whether they are consistent with the ways in which we identify ourselves." In this way, and only thus, does a person act autonomously. Since action is autonomous in the sense that in acting an agent thinks of himself as self-determining rather than determined, aligning himself with action-guiding principles is the only way in which he can truly act. Acting "forces us to have a conception of ourselves ... the principle or law by which you determine your actions is one that you regard as being expressive of yourself." Korsgaard refers to a person's self-conception as that person's "practical identity": it is, she says, "a description under which you value yourself, a description under which you find your life to be worth living and your actions to be worth undertaking." An agent acts as a caring parent, a loyal friend, an aspiring writer, a patriotic citizen, a compassionate person, and so on. The normative authority of reasons stems from identities, such as these, that agents give themselves.

There is considerable affinity between Korsgaard and Frankfurt on these points, and the idea that the normative authority of reasons comes from an agent's commitment to them does have merit. Still, it is not obvious how best to analyze this idea. The features of a person's practical identity are contingent and varied. People value different pursuits and have different goals and attachments. This variation prompts the question of why practical identities should be thought to provide normative reasons. Why think, for instance, that loyalty
or patriotism could license actions that otherwise would be unacceptable? The claims that a person makes about the importance of his pursuits, goals, and attachments as he thinks about what to do are open to normative challenge. Korsgaard’s appeal to the fact that a person is characteristically moved in certain ways and identifies himself with particular aims, we are arguing, hardly seems sufficient to establish the normativity of his reasons for pursuing those aims.

Korsgaard’s idea applies more narrowly: it seems true that at the moment of decision, an agent commits himself to the normative significance of the reasons he affirms. This confers on these reasons some rational force for him, as long as he maintains a commitment to them. If the agent’s supposed commitment is not sustained over time, it cannot be understood to express or to have helped to constitute his agency or identity—and this serves to undermine the basis for maintaining that he actually has the reasons in question. In any case, the soundness of particular reasons may be questioned from the perspective of other people or later by the agent himself. This is especially true of reasons that are open to moral criticism, since the justification of moral reasons is often directed toward the interests of people who may be of no special concern to the agent.

What is left unclear in Korsgaard’s argument is how recognizing that rational agency requires action-guiding principles commits an agent to any robust, interpersonally oriented morality. Even if it is granted that all people, as rational agents, require action-guiding principles, this does not imply that all people must accept morality’s requirements. So self-constitution can be understood as the source of the rational force or bindingness of reasons for the agent who accepts them—but in a limited way that seems inadequate to establish that all people must accept the full range of moral reasons. You can be said to have moral reasons only when you accept certain kinds of considerations as fundamental, such as promoting the best state of affairs or being able to justify one’s conduct to others. The “authority” of moral reasons cannot be given a broader, structural derivation. What does seem convincing in Korsgaard’s account, though, is the idea that an agent confers rational authority on his reasons by accepting them or by accepting other reasons that commit him to the reasons in question.

The failure of structural accounts to establish that moral reasons bind all rational agents opens the possibility that a rational person may understand how reasons can be rooted in certain values without sharing those values. The reasons would lack normative bearing on such a person. Nonetheless, certain values—for example, that suffering is bad and generally worth pre-venting—might be so central to moral thought that they are constitutive of it. The cognitivist, to this extent, is right.

Scanlon admits the relevance of structural claims about rationality when he analyzes the intrapersonal normative significance of moral judgments. The structural claim that he exploits to establish that moral judgments have intrapersonal normative significance is that there is a rational connection between judging that one has a conclusive reason and intending to act on the reason. The language of conclusive reasons implies that a person who understands all the relevant considerations would accept the reason in question as a decisive basis for action. The step from accepting a reason as a decisive basis for action to intending to act on it is short enough that the following seems true: a constitutive feature of one’s judging a reason to be conclusive is one’s intending to act accordingly. As Scanlon puts the point, intention is a judgment-sensitive notion, and so it follows that a rational agent must intend to act from a reason she judges to be conclusive.

The scope of Scanlon’s structural claim about rationality is, however, narrower than he recognizes. An agent’s acknowledgment of the cognitive substance of moral reasons, which carries with it some sort of universal claim, does not support a structural derivation of an intention to act. There is a gap between the claim that rational people would acknowledge that C counts in favor of A and the claim that a person should rationally accept A as bearing directly on her deliberation. Scanlon himself, recall, is skeptical that there are moral considerations that all rational agents must accept. Yet he takes his universality thesis to suggest that all reason-sensitive people would see the reasons there as having some normative significance for them. Scanlon thinks this means that these reasons rationally imply certain motives and intentions. We resist this suggestion. You might acknowledge the normative significance of certain reasons without accepting their relevance to you.

Let’s look more closely at the kind of failure that failing to act on moral reasons might consist in, which helps to shed light on the source of those reasons. The normative significance of a reason is closely related to its motivating force, but the two notions should be distinguished. When you accept some consideration as a moral reason for you, this influences your deliberation. You believe that the reason ought to bear directly on your decision about what to do. Yet you might not be motivated to so act. If this happens, you seemingly can be faulted: your lack of moral motivation would reveal
something like weakness of will. You would be going against your own judgment that moral considerations are relevant to your deliberation and hence acting against your own commitments. The inconsistency arises because when you accept a reason, you have committed to acting in a way that is consistent with the reason. There is a rational, if not an empirical, connection between accepting a reason and being motivated to act accordingly. The judgment that a person who fails to so act is irrational does not seem particularly rationalistic.

If you merely acknowledge a reason as counting in favor of a certain course of action, however, and do not accept the reason as bearing directly on your deliberation, there may be no inconsistency or tension in your will. It may be true that you lack moral virtue, but this would not represent a defect in your rational faculties. A potential disparity between the reasons a person merely acknowledges and those she accepts may be what leads Scanlon to focus on the reasons an agent acknowledges as being conclusive, in which case the agent’s acceptance of the reasons seems built in. It is plausible to think that intending to act accordingly is constitutive of judging a reason to be conclusive. But it does not follow that one’s judging consideration C to be a reason in favor of doing A in situation S entails that in situation S one would, if rational, feel some motivation to do A, other things equal. One might not care much about the type of considerations that favor doing A.

The point of moral theory is best understood as a matter of illuminating the normative significance of certain reasons for people with certain sensibilities and values. This leads to an important contrast Scanlon draws between a rational person and a reasonable person. We understand this contrast in terms of the distinction we have introduced between acknowledging a reason and accepting a reason. The cognitive character of reason judgments implies that a rational person could understand how considerations C support action A in situation S. This motivationally detached understanding is a matter of acknowledging reasons.

We have contrasted the possibility of thus acknowledging reasons with accepting reasons—where accepting a reason entails believing that one must, in a self-generated sense, be practically guided or motivated by it. With respect to morality, this represents the domain of the reasonable. Reasonable people rationally commit themselves to acting in accordance with the requirements of morality. Questions about the importance of moral reasons are answered by analyzing their content. Such an analysis would show what is involved in taking a commitment to morality seriously. This may enable people who care about the considerations underlying moral directives to better understand what they care about and why. The reasons morally concerned

and motivated people accept are substantively justified insofar as the domain of the reasonable points to values that are plausibly thought to be constitutive of morality. But moral reasons, while justified on substantive grounds, are rationally binding only for reasonable persons—who bind themselves.

Moral naturalists would resist a structural account of rationality that aims to forge a rational connection between the belief that certain considerations are morally important and accepting the direct bearing of these considerations on one’s own practical deliberation. This resistance is plausible. At some level, noncognitive elements are indeed needed to fill the gap between acknowledging a reason and a rational imperative to accept a reason oneself. As Frankfurt and Blackburn recognize, a person’s cares and commitments are needed to account for the rational bindingness of moral reasons. Expressivists and other moral naturalists are to this extent correct about the contingency of morality as a source of action-guiding reasons. Scanlon should make this concession to the noncognitivist. Moral reasons have their “authority” only for people who have a certain kind of sensitivity to or regard for other people. But contingency in the reach of moral reason judgments is compatible with a cognitivist account of the content of morality. It would be an overstatement to think that moral judgments only express a person’s sentiments or attitudes. Rather, having certain sentiments or attitudes is a condition for having moral concern at all. When this condition is met, moral judgments become reason-sensitive. For morally interested persons, sensibilities of a characteristically moral sort frame deliberative problems such that certain considerations become important. Expressivists and other moral naturalists conflate a condition of moral concern with the content of moral reasons.

NOTES

4. Ibid., 163.
5. Here we follow and elaborate the distinction Lionel McPherson draws between there being a reason and an agent’s having a reason; see “Normativity and the Rejection of Rationalism,” Journal of Philosophy 104 (2007): 65. A similar distinction is made Sigrun Svavarsdottir in “How do Moral Judgments Motivate?” in Con-

9. Scanlon, What We Owe to Each Other, 370.
11. Korsgaard, Sources of Normativity, 100.
13. Korsgaard (Sources of Normativity, 120) argues that because all people have reasons that stem from their common humanity, they must have moral obligations to one another. This conclusion, at least with regard to anything that plausibly would be recognized as the range of morality’s requirements, does not seem to follow from the argument she gives.
15. Scanlon, What We Owe to Each Other, 367.