

impact. We act under the aspect of good, as Aristotle said. But what justifies us in acting may instead be something we want to avoid—namely, unanswered criticism.⁴

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Values, Reasons and Oughts

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What is the relation between values and reasons for action? Something’s being good is often taken to be essential to one’s having a reason to act. Consider, for example, the intrinsic goodness of certain experiences: the value of the experience of walking in the mountains is naturally seen as a reason to walk in the mountains. In such a case, our reason is grounded in the value of our experience.

A stronger claim is that all reasons are grounded in values, where values include non-moral as well as moral values. This is, for instance, how E. J. Bond sees things: “there is a connection between reasons and values that seems plain at the start, for to believe that one has reason for or against doing something, in the context of deliberation, is to believe that there is something of value or worth to be achieved (or preserved) by doing it, as the case may be” (1983, 2, quoted in Dancy 2000a, 30). If one adds to this the thought that values themselves depend on non-evaluative or factual features of things, one gets what one can call after Dancy the “layer-cake conception”. Here is how he explains it: “The suggestion (...) is that instead of being based on or grounded in desires, our normative reasons are based on values. (...) At bottom there are the features that generate value; above that there is the value so generated, and above that are the reasons and requirements that are laid on us by the prospect of value; and only by that.” (2000a, 29)

Such a picture is quite common in the literature. This has of course not prevented others from voicing their disagreement. In a recent discussion, Thomas Scanlon argued that we should replace the layer-cake conception by what he calls the “buck-passing account of values” (1998). The main characteristic of this conception is that it denies that reasons are grounded in values. This is not because some reasons would fail to be grounded in values. Rather, Scanlon’s claim is that values cannot ground reasons at all.

Which of the two pictures, if any, is closer to the truth? I shall argue that Scanlon’s conception does not get things right. As we shall see, this does not entail that we have to opt for the layer-cake picture. There are many other ways to conceive of the relation between values and reasons. I confess, however, that I am attracted by the layer-cake conception.

The debate about the relation between values and reasons is related to another, more general debate concerning the relation between two kinds of concepts: evaluative concepts, such as *good* and *bad*, *admirable* and *despicable*, *kind* and *cruel*, etc., on the one hand, and what can be called *normative* (or *deontic*) concepts, such as *obligatory*, *required*, *permissible*, *forbidden* and also *ought*, on the other hand. To understand the relevance of this broader question to the question of the relation between values and reasons, it suffices to see that the concept of reason can be considered to fall on the normative or deontic side of the divide: the concept of reason would be of the same sort as the concept of requirement. This is how Dancy views the matter (see Dancy 2000a, 29 and 2000b, 163).¹ Moreover, I shall argue, this is also

4. A condensed version of this paper was read at the 27th International Wittgenstein Symposium of the Austrian Ludwig Wittgenstein Society in August 2004. For comments on earlier drafts let me thank John Broome, Joshua Gert, Scott James, Karen Jones, and Mark Schroeder.

1. Dancy now distinguishes between ‘peremptory’ reasons, which stand in close relation to oughts, and ‘enticing reason’, which do not (2002, 2004, p. 21).

Scanlon's view: his account of values amounts in fact to a normative or deontic definition of the evaluative.

1. Scanlon's buck-passing account

Scanlon proposes an account of values that is based on the concept of reason. Let us therefore look at what Scanlon tells us about the concept of reason. Scanlon considers this concept to be both primitive and unproblematic. It is unproblematic because it would be a mistake to think that the notion of reason stands in need of a philosophical explanation. It would be a mistake to think that one ought to explain it in terms of less doubtful notions, such as the concept of an expressed attitude. Instead, Scanlon favours a conception that is objectivist, but not naturalist. Our judgements about our reasons to act or to think can be true or false, but they are not about the natural world. This does not mean that they are about another non-natural or platonic world. According to Scanlon, these judgements are like mathematical judgements in that they are about an independent subject matter, without describing a platonic world. What is needed in order to say that reasons are about an independent subject matter is simply that there are standards for arriving at correct conclusions concerning reasons (1998, 62-3).

Another important point is that the notion of reason that Scanlon has in mind is *normative*. Scanlon is very clear about this, for quite early in the book he specifies that the sense of the term "reason" he is concerned with is "the standard normative sense", which is related to the notion of justification (1998, 18). It is the kind of concept we have in mind when we ask "Why *should* one think that the volcano will erupt? What reason is there to think this?" (*ibid.*, my italics)

Now, given the usual distinction between the evaluative and the normative, the question is how to understand Scanlon's claim. Scanlon uses the term "normative" in a broad sense, for he says that "'the good' and 'the right' are generally treated as prima facie distinct normative domains" (1998, 79). But it is quite clear that he sees the concept of reason as falling on the side of the right. When he introduces the notion of reason, he compares the question of what reason there is to think something, to the question of why one *should* think this thing. Thus, he would certainly subscribe to the idea that having a reason for something is to fall under a (*pro tanto*) *ought*. More precisely, the claim would be that an agent has a reason for an action (or a belief) if and only if she (*pro tanto*) *ought* to perform that action (or to have this belief).

Moreover, if Scanlon wants to avoid an account of value concepts that is circular, he is forced to deny that the notion of reason is an evaluative one. And since it is plausible that he would agree that the choice is between the evaluative and the normative in the narrow sense I have used—let me stress that he does not introduce a further category—there seems to be no other possibility than to claim that the notion of reason is normative in the narrow sense, or deontic.

Let us now look at Scanlon's account of values. Scanlon's starting point is the claim that to value something consists in taking oneself to have reasons for holding certain positive attitudes toward it and for acting in certain ways in regard to it (1998, 95). Admiration and respect are given as examples, as well as preservation and protection. However, to value something is not yet to claim that something is valuable, or that something is good, for to claim that something is valuable is to say that "others also have reason to value it, as you do." (*ibid.*) We can take this to

mean that the reasons others have are the same as the ones we have.² Thus, to judge that something is valuable or good is to judge that there is a reason for holding certain positive attitudes toward it and for acting in certain ways in regard to it. This might involve the promotion of the existence of the good thing, but being a good neo-Kantian, Scanlon immediately points out that judging something to be good is not equivalent to judging that there is a reason to promote its existence. On the contrary, Scanlon follows Elizabeth Anderson (1993) in claiming that there is a wide variety of attitudes and actions that might be considered appropriate, such as preservation, protection or respect.

The crucial point is that on Scanlon's account of value, being valuable is not a property that provides reasons for action or for thought. That something is of value would not give us reason to appreciate or to admire it, nor would it give us reason to promote or to protect it. On the contrary, to say that something is valuable consists in saying that it possesses properties that are not evaluative, and which provide reasons to act and react positively toward it (1998, 96-7). These are the properties which Scanlon tells us are often physical or psychological—a bit later on he talks about natural properties (1998, 97)—which directly give us reasons, without any evaluative intermediary. The concept of value merely indicates that these natural properties pass on the buck (or the hot potato!) of justification to actions and reactions, hence the name of the account that Scanlon offers. Mixing metaphors, one could say that value properties are not in the race; they do not pass anything on to anything else, for the simple reason that the natural properties of things do not give them anything they could pass on; natural properties prefer to give the buck directly to our actions and reactions. Thus, reasons for action and reaction are grounded directly in the natural properties of things, without any detour through their value.

In a nutshell, Scanlon's account is the following:

- (1) x is valuable iff x possesses natural properties that provide (or constitute—Scanlon uses both terms) reasons (for everyone) for acting and for reacting in certain ways with respect to x.

The ontological lesson to be drawn here is the following: being valuable (or good) is not a substantial property. This is how Scanlon explains his account when comparing it to Moore's: "to be good or valuable is to have other properties that constitute such reasons. Since the claim that some property constitutes a reason is a normative claim, this account also takes goodness and value to be non-natural properties, namely the purely formal, higher-order properties of having some lower-order properties that provide reasons of the relevant kind." (1998, 97)

However, since Scanlon's concept of reason is deontic (or normative in the narrow sense), it would also be true that the concept of value or goodness has been reduced to a deontic concept. To be valuable or good would be nothing else than to have natural properties that make it the case that one *ought* (or maybe that one *pro tanto ought*) to act or to react in certain ways. An imperative would lie at the heart of values.

2. Cf. Dancy 2000b, 162.

2. Dancy's objection

The underlying motivation behind Scanlon's proposal lies in normative ethics. It is the rejection of a teleological approach, according to which our reasons, and in particular what we have to do, depend on values. By reducing once and for all the property of goodness to an *ought*, Scanlon attempts to get rid of the good as a goal for our actions, as something which attracts us and therefore justifies requirements made on us. Thus, his conception will seem all the more plausible if one tends to reject teleological conceptions, according to which norms and reasons depend on values. Insofar as there seem to be no other possibilities, one will be tempted to embrace the buck-passing account to avoid the pitfalls of teleology or consequentialism.

As Dancy argues, this is a false impression: there are many more possibilities than Scanlon has imagined. Dancy enumerates five ways of conceiving the relation between values and reasons. (2000b, 164-5) The first two possibilities are two versions of the layer-cake picture I introduced earlier on. (Note that " \rightarrow " refers to the grounding relation.)

1) $f \rightarrow (v = r)$. This is one form the layer-cake picture can take. According to this conception, which can be traced back to the Moore of the *Principia* (1903), reasons are reduced by definition to values. Just as Moore defined the right in terms of the good that can be promoted, what we have reasons to do would be reduced by definition to the values that we can promote through our actions. Thus, what we ought to do is nothing else than what promotes values. These values are themselves based on natural properties, *f*. As Dancy reminds us, even Moore recognized he was wrong. He came to realise that it is an open question whether the right is what promotes the good.

2) $f \rightarrow v \rightarrow r$. According to this second version of the layer-cake picture, which Dancy traces back to the later Moore's (1912) claims about goodness and rightness, reasons are not reduced to values and their promotion, but are grounded in values. What we have reason to do is exclusively grounded in what promotes values. These values are themselves grounded in how things are. For Dancy, this presupposes that values add to the reasons that the natural features of things provide. He sides with Scanlon here and claims that it would be wrong to think that, in addition to its being painful, the badness of having a toothache adds anything to the reason one has to go to the dentist.

3) $f_1 \rightarrow v, f_2 \rightarrow r$. This is a conception that goes back to how Ross viewed the concepts of the right and the good (1939, 257). According to this account, values and reasons are entirely distinct, and their bases are also entirely distinct.

4) $v = (f \rightarrow r)$. This is Scanlon's buck-passing account (my schema differs from that of Dancy, who has a vertical arrow going from an underlying *v* to the relation between *f* and *r*, but this does not make for a substantial difference.)

5) $f \rightarrow v, f \rightarrow r$. According to the last possibility Dancy mentions, reasons and values are distinct, but they have the same grounds, *f*. That I have a toothache grounds a negative value, but it also grounds the reasons I have to go to the dentist.

Briefly put, Dancy's argument is the following. Scanlon is right to reject the first two conceptions, both of which correspond to a teleological approach—one wonders where the sympathies for layer-cakes Dancy manifested in his book *Practical Reality* have gone. But what Scanlon misses is that this does not yet force us to adopt the buck-passing account. There are at least two other possibilities that are not threatened by Scanlon's objections against teleological approaches.

Dancy's conclusion is correct. However, the first part of his argument should be resisted. I would like to make two points.

First, it is not obvious that 1) is false, or more precisely, that it is false that values and reasons are one and the same thing, a thing which depends on natural features of the world. The problem with Dancy's line of thought is that he just considers definitional reductions. He seems to have forgotten that identities can be established without providing a definitional reduction or a conceptual analysis. One obvious possibility is to refer to the model of the relation between the concept H_2O and the concept of *water*. The concepts of reason and the concepts of value here could be different, but they would correspond to the same thing. Moreover, it is not clear that one has to interpret the arrow in 1) (and the first arrow in 2)) as referring to the grounding relation. Obviously, this depends on what one takes this grounding relation to be. But whatever the answer, one should make room for the claim that evaluative features simply supervene on natural features.

The second point is that Dancy goes too fast when he accepts Scanlon's criticism of 2). The badness of the toothache makes a difference, or so I shall argue.

3. The explanatory power of values

The main argument which Scanlon offers for his account is that an explanation of reasons can dispense with value properties (1998, 97). The reasons we have are fully explained by the natural features of things. For example, the fact that a discovery casts light on the causes of cancer gives a "complete explanation" (the expression is Scanlon's) of the reasons we have concerning it, such as the reasons to applaud it and to support further research of that kind. According to Scanlon, "These natural properties provide a complete explanation of the reasons we have for reacting in these ways to things that are good or valuable. It is not clear what further work could be done by special reason-providing properties of goodness and value, and even less clear how these properties could provide reasons." (*ibid.*)

This argument is far from obvious. It is not clear that the simple fact that a discovery casts light on the causes of cancer can provide a "complete explanation" of the reasons we have concerning it. Is it not rather because casting light on the causes of cancer is a good thing, that we don't hesitate to say that we have reasons to applaud such a discovery, in the sense that a better understanding of life and its pathologies is a good thing (not to mention the medical application for cancer patients that might become possible)? It seems that if the discovery was not a good thing in itself, or would not have positive consequences, we would have no reason to applaud it. More precisely, it seems that it is *because* the discovery is a good thing that we have reasons to applaud it.

The problem in evaluating the force of this objection is that Scanlon could simply reply that he agrees that if the discovery had been no good, we would have had no reason to applaud it. Translated into his vocabulary, this means that if the discovery did not provide reasons to applaud it, we would have no reason to applaud it. Thus, what we need to show is that the values of things have a role to play in the explanation of reasons which cannot be reduced to the one expressed by these conditional propositions. More precisely, it has to be shown that an explanation of reasons that only takes natural properties into account has to be completed with an explanation that appeals to the values of things.

First of all, it must be emphasized that Scanlon's conception tends to invert the order of things that is commonly admitted. We think that if a child has a reason to learn to play a musical instrument, it is because this is something good. In the same way, it is natural to think that we have a reason to refrain from doing an action because it is cowardly or cruel, and hence bad in these respects. Ordinary thinking assumes that our reasons to act and react, or at least some of them, are grounded in the value and disvalue of things. Thus, it is natural to give values a role in the explanation of reasons.

It could be said that this observation does not go very far: ordinary thinking might just be muddled. Perhaps, but there are two other problems with Scanlon's account.

The first is that it is not always clear what are the natural features of things which are supposed to give us these "complete explanations" of reasons. Consider so-called thick concepts, such as *cruel*, *courageous* or *generous*, which do have a descriptive component, but no descriptive equivalent (Williams 1985). When we use such concepts, it seems difficult to claim that the reasons for action entirely depend on the presence of natural features. This would amount to the claim that some unknown natural features explain our reasons to act and react in certain ways. However, these unknown natural features can hardly be said to offer a complete explanation of the reasons we have. In contrast, simply mentioning the thick evaluative features of things seems quite sufficient to fully explain the reasons in question.³

Actually, I think that it is partly because Scanlon did not take less general evaluative terms into account that he was tempted by his buck-passing conception. This is particularly obvious when he observes that another source of support for his account "is the fact that many different things can be said to be good or to be valuable, and the grounds for these judgments vary widely." (1998, 98) He points out that "there does not seem to be a single, reason-providing property that is common to all these cases." (*ibid.*) This is correct. However, if one considers that goodness and value are but the most general concepts of a big family encompassing concepts such as "beautiful", "kind", "courageous", "admirable", "amusing", etc., Scanlon's observation only underlines the fact that our reasons are based on a variety of ways of being good, not to mention the ways of being bad.

The last reason why I doubt Scanlon is right when he says that the explanation of reasons can do without values, is that this means that a natural, non-evaluative and non-normative property can, on its own, provide and completely explain a reason. This seems very close to committing the naturalistic fallacy, that is, the fallacy of claiming that a non-normative fact can entail a normative fact. Scanlon does not speak of entailment, but one nonetheless wonders how it can be possible for a natural fact to provide us with reasons and to completely explain these reasons. If I tell you that I have taken an umbrella because it is raining, I offer you an explanation of my action. But it could not be a complete explanation. Depending on the conception of reason that is favoured, different additional ingredients are (thought) necessary. In general, it is either a motivational state of the subject that is appealed to—a desire to stay dry, for instance; an evaluative belief—the belief that staying dry is desirable; or an evaluative fact—the value of staying dry. By itself, the simple fact that it is raining is not a sufficient explanation.

It should be underlined that this remark is quite consistent with the claim that a number of different relations hold between natural facts, values and reasons. One might deny that natural

3. Scanlon seems to have changed his mind on this matter, for he now acknowledges that more specific evaluative properties provide reasons (2002, 513).

facts provide a complete explanation of reasons and allow for a supervenience claim. Reasons could be supervenient on natural facts, without these facts being all that it takes to explain the reasons we have. This would be so on what seems to be a sensible reading of the first version of the layer-cake picture (possibility 1) above. Reasons would be defined in terms of values, and values would be taken to supervene on natural facts.

Conclusion

Where does this leave us with respect to the question we started with? It seems to me that Scanlon's attempt to reduce evaluative concepts to the concept of reason, or more generally to reduce the evaluative to *oughts*, fails.

This does not mean that we have to opt for the layer-cake picture. As Dancy's diagrams suggest, there are more possibilities than one would have thought. However, the layer-cake picture comes out strengthened. Pace Scanlon, it has not been shown that values are an unnecessary flourish in the explanation of reasons. Moreover, the two alternative models which Dancy mentions are not very plausible. It is difficult to believe that values and reasons have nothing to do with each other, as the Rossian model claims. It is also difficult to believe that values and reasons depend on the same natural features without being either identical, or at least in close justificatory relation. Given this, one or the other version of the layer-cake picture seems the best option.

I shall conclude with a tentative argument in favour of the layer-cake picture. For given what I have just said with respect to Scanlon's account, one can mount a little argument for the conclusion that values have to be appealed to in order to explain our reasons. Suppose that a natural fact cannot completely explain our reasons. And suppose that one has either to appeal to a subjective state (a desire or an evaluative judgement) or to values. Since it is not plausible to appeal to a subjective state, one has to invoke values.

As in the case imagined by Warren Quinn (1993, 236-37) of someone who is inclined to turn on radio shows, the simple fact of being motivated to do certain things, in the sense that one has a disposition to perform certain types of actions, does not provide a reason for action. According to Quinn, what is missing is a value judgement, the judgement that to accomplish the action is something good, something pleasant or beneficial (1998, 43). However, it is far from clear that a value judgement will do the trick. If we judge that achieving a certain thing is desirable, while we are in fact wrong about this, it is not clear that our judgement provides a reason for action. Therefore, it would seem that it is only if what one does is really valuable that one has a reason for doing it. If so, one has to conclude that the reasons we have are grounded in how things are, evaluatively speaking, and not merely in what we desire or how we see things.⁴

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