

**RELATING TO REASONS**

by

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## Abstract

While each of us has an intuitive sense of what a reason is, when considered more carefully the concept is not so clear. There are a number of questions to which any successful account of reasons will provide some answer. For example, on some accounts reasons may appear to be metaphysically odd entities, unlike other sorts of facts in our world. From here there are very serious questions which spring up regarding the motivational efficacy of reasons: given the nature of reasons, as respective accounts describe them, how is it that reasons get a grip in an agent? Further, whatever reasons are, and in whichever relation agents stand to reasons, how is it that agents get in touch with truths about reasons? How in theory – and importantly, in practice – do agents figure out which reasons apply to them?

I will be defending a view of reasons in which reasons are primitive. This is what T.M. Scanlon calls 'Reasons Fundamentalism'. In particular, I will defend this view against charges which claim that an account of reasons as primitive or fundamental fails us in the following three respects: 1) it cannot provide us with an adequate account of what sorts of facts reasons are, and how they intermingle with other sorts of facts; 2) it cannot provide us with adequate account of how a consideration can count as a reason for an agent even if that agent fails to be gripped by the consideration, and; 3) it cannot provide us with an adequate account of how we figure out, in principle and in practice, what count as reasons and which reasons apply to us.

If reasons are fundamental, existing and applying to us independently of anything already true of particular agents and are the sorts of things we can come to understand through reflection, it seems that such a story also succeeds in capturing our

phenomenological experience of practical reasoning in our every day lives. This, I will suggest, goes some distance toward setting it apart from – and ahead of – other accounts.

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# Chapter 1 – Introduction

## Ontology and Reasons

### **Introduction**

What do we mean when we say that an agent has reason to  $\Phi$ ? We might mean simply that she desires to  $\Phi$ ; or that there is something which is true of her which enables her to see considerations which count in favor of  $\Phi$ -ing as reasons; or we might be claiming that, in virtue of her goals and projects, or some constitutive element of her identity,  $\Phi$ -ing would be part of satisfying one of these projects. It strikes me that none of this is quite what we mean when we say that an individual has a reason.

There are a number of questions to which any successful account of reasons will provide some answer. Some such questions are epistemological, others metaphysical in nature and still others are concerned with the motivational efficacy of reasons. Let us briefly consider some of these issues.

What sort of thing is a reason? A reason seems to be a fact of some description – but of what kind? Are reasons just the conclusions of practical reasoning? Are they just products of desires – i.e. do we have reasons just in case we have corresponding desires? Or are reasons more basic – things which just exist? And in any case, how are they different, if at all, from other sorts of facts? All of these questions are metaphysical at root – inquiring into the ontology of reasons. Depending on the answers given, reasons may appear to be metaphysically odd entities, and in turn, further questions naturally follow.

From here there are very serious questions which spring up (depending on the ontological story provided) regarding the motivational efficacy of reasons. This is to say, given the nature of reasons, as respective accounts describe them, how is it that reasons get a grip on an agent? Some views give more intuitively appealing answers to this question than do others. If reasons are just derivative of desires, then the way in which reasons motivate an agent, or help an agent view a given consideration as a reason is fairly straight forward. Alternatively, if reasons are just bare facts, it is not initially clear what sort of relationship exists between agents and reasons.

Further, whatever reasons are, and in whichever relation agents stand to reasons, how is it that agents get in touch with truths about reasons? How in theory – and importantly, in practice – do agents figure out which reasons apply to them? If reasons do not just depend on desires, for example, reasons must be strange sorts of facts – ones which leave us with no clear access route. But if reasons are just products of desires, then do we have reason to do anything that we desire, even if the desire seems to be non-sensical or pathological? And do not some reasons appear to be especially strong, while others weaker – even optional? How do we make sense of this apparent optionality?

These are all questions that need answering on any account of reasons. No doubt this is not an exhaustive list of the relevant questions, but these, I take it, are among the most important. In this project I will be defending a view of reasons in which “truths about reasons are irreducibly normative truths”<sup>1</sup>. This is what T.M. Scanlon calls 'Reasons Fundamentalism'. And in doing so, I will try to answer these questions. Admittedly, some of these issues, and their nuanced elements will be given deeper treatment than others. In particular, I will defend this view against charges which claim that an account of reasons as primitive or fundamental fails us in the following three

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<sup>1</sup> Scanlon, T.M. “Being Realistic About Reasons.” *The John Locke Lectures* (2009). Lecture 1, 3

respects: 1) it cannot provide us with an adequate account of what sorts of facts reasons are, and how they intermingle with other sorts of facts; 2) it cannot provide us with an adequate account of how a consideration can count as a reason for an agent even if that agent fails to be gripped by the consideration, and; 3) it cannot provide us with an adequate account of how we figure out, in principle and in practice, what count as reasons and which reasons apply to us.

In this chapter I will begin by discussing J.L. Mackie's Argument from Queerness in which Mackie criticizes objective, basic normative facts or reasons (where reasons are taken to be the kinds of things that Reasons Fundamentalists take them to be) as being metaphysically odd – entities which do not seem to fit into our world. In turn, I will lay out Scanlon's account of reasons as fundamental and will hopefully allay the concern that taking reasons to be irreducible leaves us with untenable ontological consequences. It is an interesting question though: how do reasons fit in *as real things in our world*? Importantly, Scanlon distinguishes between the empirical universe and the universe of discourse. The empirical universe is composed of just those physical entities which we think are part of the natural world. The universe of discourse however, is merely a formal notion which is “a way of representing all those things that are presupposed by some set of statements, about the natural world or anything else.”<sup>2</sup> And the set of statements that is included is the set which comprises all those statements which are products of first-order domains which are internally and externally consistent and which we have reason to care about. To suggest, then, that some consideration, x, counts as a reason is just to claim that relative to the domain of practical reasoning which is fixed by “a certain number of things taken to be settled truths that employ this concept, and accepted procedures for

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<sup>2</sup> Scanlon, “Being Realistic About Reasons”, Lecture 2, 4

settling questions employing these concepts”<sup>3</sup>, we can derive x as a conclusion about how to behave in a given circumstance.<sup>4</sup>

In the second chapter I will take up the following question: in what sense does an agent have a reason to  $\Phi$  if he simply does not take himself to have such a reason? What can a Reasons Fundamentalist say to this agent other than simply insisting that, in fact, he does have a reason? I will use Bernard's Williams objections to what he calls 'external reasons statements' to set up this concern. Williams claims, in effect, that an agent has a reason to  $\Phi$  just in case  $\Phi$ -ing would satisfy some element in the agent's subjective motivational set, which is the set of one's desires broadly construed.<sup>5</sup> This, I think, is too restrictive – i.e. there are reasons which may apply to an agent even if they are not derivative of the agent's subjective motivational set. We can get a grip on this claim by taking on board what Scanlon refers to as the universality of reason judgments, which is effectively the thought that, in coming to hold the belief that he has a reason to  $\Phi$ , an agent is also committed to the belief that anyone else in relevantly similar circumstances also has reason to  $\Phi$ . As I will attempt to argue, it strikes me that agents sometimes take themselves to have reasons and act on reasons which are not relative to anything in their subjective motivational sets. If this is true of agents, and if there really are such reasons, and such reasons generalize to everyone else in relevantly similar circumstances, then it seems that an individual can have a reason even if she fails to feel the force of the consideration. In other words, desire is not a necessary condition for a consideration counting as a reason.

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<sup>3</sup> Scanlon, “Being Realistic About Reasons”, Lecture 2, 7

<sup>4</sup> Importantly, as I will discuss in the second section, it is not in virtue of these internal standards that a reason is a reason. If reasons are basic, as I will argue they are, then it is not in virtue of anything else that a reason is a reason. What the internal standards of a domain help us with is *understanding* why a given consideration counts as a reason.

<sup>5</sup> Williams, Bernard. “Internal and External Reasons.” *Moral Luck*. Cambridge University Press 1983: 101-113., 105

In the third chapter I will explore a question which is sometimes discussed as being an epistemological question, but which I take to have practical implications: how is it that we come in contact with the reasons which apply to us? If reasons are primitive – i.e. they are not physical or empirical things, or discoverable just by examining our desires – what sorts of things are they and how do we get in touch with them? As Scanlon argues, we can take a cue from other first-order domains to help us answer this question. He suggests that through a process of seeking reflective equilibrium we can come to know what reasons there are and when they apply to us. This, I think, is right. And, importantly, in understanding what he means by reflective equilibrium we can also derive a practical method of determining which reasons apply to us. As I see it there are two questions in play here: the epistemological question, which is concerned primarily with how, in theory, we are able to come in contact with reasons, and the practical question, as I will call it, which is a matter of identifying some method by which we actually figure out the reasons which apply to us and how we ought to behave. I will argue that Scanlon can provide us with answers to both.

If reasons are fundamental, existing and applying to us independently of anything already true of particular agents, and are the sorts of things we can come to understand through reflection, it seems that such a story also succeeds in capturing our phenomenological experience of practical reasoning in our everyday lives. This, I will suggest, goes some distance toward setting it apart from – and ahead of – other accounts. For now I will take time to set up the problem: What are reasons and where do they come from?

## Section 1: Argument from Queerness – The Metaphysical Worry

Scanlon thinks that a reason is just a consideration which counts in favor of some belief or action.<sup>6</sup> Further, the character of reasons is such that they are fundamental. Reasons are just reasons – there is no deeper truth maker which makes them so. But if reasons are irreducible normative truths, it is harder to understand their nature; what sorts of things are they?

J.L. Mackie set out the Argument from Queerness, which gets at this question. He argues against objective values in particular, but as Scanlon suggests, it is consistent with Mackie's argument to broaden his criticisms to a discussion of normativity more generally.<sup>7</sup> He asks: “If there were objective values [or reasons] then they would be entities or qualities of a very strange sort, utterly different from anything else in the universe.”<sup>8</sup> And in turn, he wonders “if we are aware of them, it would have to be by some special faculty of moral perception or intuition, utterly different from our ordinary ways of knowing everything else.”<sup>9</sup> In this chapter I will deal with the first (metaphysical) strand of the Argument from Queerness, and deal with the second (epistemological) strand in the third chapter.

If there are normative truths, Mackie thinks, it is unclear how they would fit into our world. They would have to be quite different than other sorts of truths. An objective good, for example, “would be sought by anyone who was acquainted with it, not because of any contingent fact that this person, or every person, is so constituted that he desires this end, but just because the end has to-be-pursuedness somehow built into it. Similarly, if there were objective principles of right and wrong, any wrong (possible) course of

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<sup>6</sup> Scanlon, T.M. *What We Owe to Each Other*. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998., 17

<sup>7</sup> Scanlon, “Being Realistic About Reasons”, Lecture 2, 15

<sup>8</sup> Mackie, J.L.. *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*. New York: Penguin Books Ltd, 1977., 38

<sup>9</sup> Mackie, 38

action would have not-to-be-doneness built into it.”<sup>10</sup> But what could this even mean?

How could some fact have this 'motivational force', we might call it, built into it?

Anticipating the realist counter that there can be normative truths in the same way there can be truths about any empirical field, Mackie effectively rejects any such account. This is to say, adequate scientific accounts can be given for truths about physics, but no such account can be given for ostensibly normative truths. But, he adds, anything else which *is* similarly metaphysically odd ought also to be omitted from our ontology: “I can only state my belief that satisfactory accounts of most of these [empirical realms] can be given in empirical terms. If some supposed metaphysical necessities or essences resist such treatment, then they too should be included, along with objective values, among the targets of the argument from queerness.”<sup>11</sup>

Importantly, Mackie presses, it is unclear how so-called normative facts fit in with respect to non-normative facts. So, for example, how do we make sense of the *value* 'cruelty'? We can understand what it is for someone to cause pain just for fun, but how do we derive from this that doing so is morally reprehensible?<sup>12</sup> Or, to use a non-moral, but still normative concept, what do we make of the concept 'unreasonable'. We can understand that a person may weigh a given consideration lightly when we think he ought to give it considerably greater weight. But how do we derive from this that there is a right way he should have gone about deliberating – that he was unreasonable? As Mackie puzzles (about the cruelty example): “the wrongness must somehow be 'consequential' or 'supervenient'; it is wrong because it is a piece of deliberate cruelty. But just what in the world is signified by this 'because'? And how do we know the relation that it signifies, if this is something more than such actions being socially condemned and condemned by us too, perhaps through our having absorbed attitudes

<sup>10</sup> Mackie, 40

<sup>11</sup> Mackie, 39

<sup>12</sup> Mackie, 41

from our social environment?”<sup>13</sup> Effectively, if normative claims supervene on natural facts, how do we derive normative claims? We can assert that there is such a relationship; but in virtue of what should we believe such claims? Perhaps there are only natural facts, from which we have *chosen* to derive normative requirements, even though there is not actually any such connection independent of our construction. Mackie seems to think that given the sorts of metaphysical things that normative facts would have to be, it is unclear why we should accept them into our ontology.

Christine Korsgaard suggests that Mackie does not actually prove that the realist is wrong – “that such entities couldn't exist.”<sup>14</sup> She too presses those theorists whom she calls the substantive realist<sup>15</sup> on the issue of how we can be sure that these metaphysically odd entities are real: “if someone falls into doubt about whether obligations really exist, it doesn't help to say ‘ah, but indeed they do. They are real things.’”<sup>16</sup> But their concerns are evidently different. Mackie seems to think that the argument from queerness shows that we should reject realist arguments on the grounds that the sorts of metaphysically odd entities that would have to be posited in consequence do not actually exist. Korsgaard, on the other hand, is not interested in throwing out realist notions altogether – i.e. that there are objective normative truths. Rather, her disagreement with the substantive realist is based on the way in which the realist argues for objective normativity.

In inquiring into the source of normativity – i.e. the grounds from which truths about reasons are derived – Korsgaard discusses what Kant called the 'search for the unconditioned'.<sup>17</sup> This is a continual stepping back and examination of the reasons we

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<sup>13</sup> Mackie, 41

<sup>14</sup> Korsgaard, Christine M. *The Sources of Normativity*. Onora O'Neil. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996., 38

<sup>15</sup> She distinguishes between procedural realism which “is the view that there are answers to moral questions; that is, that there are right and wrong ways to answer them” and substantive realism, which “is the view that there are answers to moral questions because there are moral facts or truths, which those questions ask about.” (Korsgaard, 35). The difference between the two is a matter of why there is a correct procedure for answering moral questions (Korsgaard, 37. note 58).

<sup>16</sup> Korsgaard, 38

<sup>17</sup> Korsgaard, 38

take ourselves to have. This is to say, in attempting to determine why I have a reason to  $\Phi$  in some particular situation, I must find the source of this reason so that I understand why it is, as a matter of fact, that I have reason to  $\Phi$ . And additionally, I must continue to search for this source until there is nothing further to be discovered; until I have found the very basis for the consideration in question. So, I might think I have reason to  $\Phi$  given some consideration  $x$ . But then I can ask, in turn, in virtue of what does  $x$  give me reason to  $\Phi$ ? After further consideration, I might think the answer is that it is in light of  $y$  that  $x$  gives me reason to  $\Phi$ . Importantly, she insists, this process continues and the search is only completed – the answer only found – when it is “impossible, unnecessary, or incoherent to ask why again.”<sup>18</sup> But the realist, she says, never genuinely reaches this end, but rather brings “this regress to an end by fiat: he declares that some things are intrinsically normative.”<sup>19</sup>

Korsgaard compares realist arguments to cosmological arguments for God's existence. Such arguments claim that there must be a necessarily existing entity. Otherwise each entity would exist only contingently. This is to say, for every entity which does not necessarily exist, it exists in virtue of some other entity. And this goes on ad infinitum if there is no necessarily existing entity, which started the process. Therefore, cosmologists argue, there must be some necessarily existent being, and this being is God.<sup>20</sup> But, the cosmologist makes two unwarranted assumptions: 1) that contingent beings *must* have existed (i.e. that history could not have been otherwise, such that the beings which do exist might not have), and 2) that given the first assumption, the necessary being must be God. Similarly, “the realist like the cosmologist places necessity

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<sup>18</sup> Korsgaard, 33

<sup>19</sup> Korsgaard, 33

<sup>20</sup> Korsgaard, 33

where he wanted to find it. And the argument cannot even get started unless you assume that there are some actions which it is necessary to do.”<sup>21</sup>

Effectively, the realist assumes that there is some such necessity, and further that the necessity is the foundation of normativity; with respect to the moral sphere, there are actions we must perform, and performing these actions is our moral duty. The problem is, Korsgaard reminds us, that this is the very question into which we are inquiring.<sup>22</sup> To the question 'what is the source of our obligation?' the realist answers 'the source of our obligation is found in these actions we must perform – actions which we are obligated to perform'. And this, it appears, is plainly circular.

As Korsgaard notes, when people find themselves in a situation in which they are doubting whether there are such things as obligations, and ask themselves the normative question – i.e. whether some claim on them is justified – the realist seems to be empty-handed as far as a helpful response goes. The realist can insist that, indeed, the agent does have such a reason – that, indeed, they do have such an obligation. But this does not get any traction on the agent who is, at the moment, skeptical of any such suggestions. And this is when the normative question is most compelling – when ostensibly self-evident reasons are not evident at all. This, Korsgaard says, is the problem with realist responses to the normative question: “[realism] refuses to answer the normative question. It is a way of saying that it cannot be done. Or rather, more commonly, it is a way of saying that it need not be done.”<sup>23</sup>

Thomas Nagel, who is himself a realist, notes that “realism need not (and in my view should not) have any metaphysical content whatever. It need only hold that there are answers to moral questions and that they are not reducible to anything else.”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Korsgaard, 34

<sup>22</sup> Korsgaard, 34

<sup>23</sup> Korsgaard, 39

<sup>24</sup> Nagel, Thomas. “Universality and the Reflective Self.” *The Sources of Normativity*. Onora O’Neil. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996: 200-209., 205

Korsgaard suggests that realist arguments which simply “rebut the skeptical arguments against the reality of reasons and values” are “expression[s] of confidence and nothing more.”<sup>25</sup> But the question of what reasons are, says Scanlon, is mistakenly thought to be a metaphysical or ontological question. Instead, it should be thought of as a normative question.

But normative questions are really just questions about reasons. Unlike Korsgaard, Scanlon does not have a story which shows us from what reasons derive their normativity, because he believes that normativity just consists of reasons. Scanlon argues that “we should decide what sentences to accept [as true sentences about the world] by applying the criteria appropriate to relevant first-order disciplines [...] and our ontology is simply the set of ontological commitments that these sentences have.”<sup>26</sup> This perhaps sounds a bit puzzling. And it may seem that this would make our ontology somewhat bloated. So, I will spend the next two sections attempting to bring out why this view is right, even in the face of the sorts of metaphysical worries brought out both by Mackie and Korsgaard. First though, I will say a bit about ontology – and why we need not think that facts about reasons, or normative facts, would be as metaphysically odd as perhaps they have been made to sound.

What sort of thing is a set? What type of unity is it? It is not obviously clear that whatever such a thing is it cannot be both real and abstract. It may be wise to take a cue from Henry Laycock and consider thinking of plural referring expressions, or sets as “the verbal or linguistic equivalent of a bag or a box or some other collecting device or container, serving as an ‘external’ unifying agent for its ‘contents.’ [...] and what [set members] would count as the ‘contents’ of would be a linguistic or semantic object of a certain kind.”<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Korsgaard, 41

<sup>26</sup> Scanlon, “Being Realistic About Reasons”, Lecture 2, 2

<sup>27</sup> Laycock, Henry. *Words Without Objects*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006., 93

Importantly, for there to be a relationship between such a container and the contents, which may even be of a physical nature, the relationship itself need not be (and in some cases, at least, *must* not be) of the physical or concrete variety.<sup>28</sup> And we do not find this to be a puzzling concept. Importantly, physical objects can be unified in some way without the unity being physical. For example, all the things in the world that are yellow are not physically tied together. But we can, of course, talk about the set of all those things that are yellow. Whatever this unity consists of it is not physical – the unity is, in some sense, abstract. And it is not clear why this is incoherent.<sup>29</sup> In fact, we *must* think of a unity (of physical or non-physical things) as abstract “if we are to think of a number of objects as such as having a certain unity, utterly regardless of, and abstracted from, any spatial or temporal relationships they might or might not have.”<sup>30</sup> Suppose a piece of a chess set is lost. There is still a meaningful sense in which we can talk about the set as a whole, even if the lost piece found its way to the other side of the world, never to be reunited with the rest of the set again. Perhaps whatever unity now exists which ties together all the members of the set is different from the unity that existed when the pieces and board were all together. But there is, no doubt, still some unity – some set – we can talk about. What could such a unity be if not fundamentally abstract?

This is all I will say now with regard to set-talk (though, sets and mathematics more broadly will figure in this project to some extent as helpful in understanding reasons and how we get in touch with them). But the point of this discussion is just to suggest that there is no reason to think that in accepting the empirical world we are, *ipso facto*, limiting what we can take as real in our world in a broader sense. In accepting physical facts into our ontology we are not then precluded from accepting abstract facts.

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<sup>28</sup> Laycock, 94-95

<sup>29</sup> Laycock, 95

<sup>30</sup> Laycock, 95 - Laycock also notes that we cannot look at the members of such a unity as concrete. Such a relationship (part/whole) requires that both be of the same general type, and such is not the case where set is abstract and the members concrete.

Suppose I have a sharp knife in my hand. There are certain physical facts about the knife and its sharpness, and further facts about my hand and its sensitivity to sharp blades, and *still* further facts about what will happen if I press the blade into my hand. But why should we think the facts stop here? Perhaps there are no further physical facts to note, but as I will discuss, it strikes me that there are nonetheless further facts in play; for example the normative fact that, at least most of the time, I have a reason not to press the blade into my hand. It is not clear that there is anything in the empirical world which rules this out. And so I do not think there is any *prima facie* reason to reject an account of reasons as basic, just insofar as they are not 'real' in a traditional sense. But I will argue for this throughout this chapter.

## **Section 2: Domain-Relative Truth**

There is an important distinction to be made between two possible questions about reasons. Scanlon's account helps make sense of why some consideration *x* counts as a reason. But, it does not claim to explain what makes a reason a reason. The question of why *x* counts as a reason or how we understand why *x* counts as a reason is an importantly different question, the sort that can be answered only through reflective examination (I will say more about this in the third chapter) relative to the internal standards of the domain of practical reasoning (which I will discuss at length in this chapter). But what makes a reason a reason? Well, a reason just is a reason – it is a consideration which counts in favor of performing some action, or holding some belief. 'What makes a reason a reason' is not a question we can sensibly answer. To ask it betrays a misapprehension of the sorts of things that reasons are. What it means for reasons to be fundamental is that there is no thing more basic which makes them so.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Accordingly, when I speak of truths about reasons being determined, or first-order domains producing truths about reasons, I mean to suggest that such truths are, in effect, discovered.

Scanlon is, what Tristram McPherson calls, a *quietist realist*. He is silent on what it is for a reason to be a reason, precisely because he thinks no such question can be properly asked in the first place. In being a quietist, Scanlon takes his account to eliminate the concerning metaphysical questions which may seem to plague realist accounts. This is what I will attempt to show throughout this chapter.

In line with what Mackie thinks is true of empirical claims, I will argue that there is, in fact, a satisfactory account which can be given for the truth of normative claims too. Scanlon argues for what he calls a 'permissive first-order view' for which, in deciding what sentences to admit into our ontology, we should do so "on the basis of the best first-order reasoning appropriate to them, that is to say, the forms of reasoning such as scientific reasoning, moral reasoning, and practical reasoning about reasons more generally. These first-order domains are not always autonomous: if the claims of one domain can conflict with those of another, then these claims need to be reconciled, and some of them, perhaps given up."<sup>32</sup> But what is a first order domain?

Before I attempt to answer this question, I want to help bring out why this concept of a first-order domain is relevant to a realist account of reasons. In some of his earlier work, Scanlon takes truths about reasons to be matters which can be determined relative to substantive standards of reasoning.<sup>33</sup> McPherson suggests that Scanlon's attempt to eliminate puzzling metaphysical questions about reasons by setting up substantive standards for reasons fails to do so. The thought behind this is that "we can raise these questions about the normative system as a whole"<sup>34</sup> - that is, the standards themselves. He suggests that Scanlon's "discussion of standards for reasoning may at best prompt us to think about whether we should direct such metaphysical questions at some

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<sup>32</sup> Scanlon, "Being Realistic About Reasons", Lecture 2, 3

<sup>33</sup> Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, 62-63

<sup>34</sup> McPherson, Tristram. "Against Quietist Normative Realism." *Philosophical Studies*. Published online by Springer Netherlands on March 11<sup>th</sup> 2010., 9

fundamental normative notion or at a normative system as a whole.”<sup>35</sup> So, McPherson thinks Scanlon's account only succeeds in refocusing the persisting metaphysical questions from reasons in particular to the normative system which ostensibly is able to provide answers to questions about reasons. As McPherson himself admits, however, Scanlon has worked out in greater detail an argument for his quietist realism in the Locke Lectures he recently presented. Much of the work in this chapter comes out of these lectures, and as I will try to show, even if we shift the metaphysical questions from reasons in particular to the normative system in general, there are no genuine metaphysical questions which remain about normativity. We can understand the work in these lectures, then, as blocking this shift, or at least undermining it. There are merely substantive questions leftover. So, on to the question of what a first-order domain is.

First-order domains fix the standards or criteria for determining truths about a given subject. Scanlon uses the example of a first-order domain about witches, which provide us with the grounds on which we can determine, for example, whether or not an individual is a witch. But, this evidently has implications for the empirical or natural world – ones which conflict with our best science. And so, insofar as our first-order domains must be consistent with each other, the domain of witches and the domain of science must be reconciled, with the domain of witches, of course, being set aside.<sup>36</sup> Insofar as science gives us our best explanation of the empirical world, other potential domains need to stand in line with it. This leads some to question the legitimacy of arguments which claim that reasons are fundamental. Does not the idea of a reason which exists as an irreducible entity conflict with our best account of the natural world? Ought not we just include those things which the universe comprises, and nothing else? This does not seem to capture all we want to include within our ontology, however.

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<sup>35</sup> McPherson, 9-10

<sup>36</sup> Scanlon, “Being Realistic About Reasons”, Lecture 2, 3

Mathematical truths, presumably, belong in our ontology. But, no doubt, mathematical entities are not constitutive of the empirical universe. So, how do we make sense of this apparent conflict? Scanlon suggests we should distinguish between 'the universe' which designates our physical or empirical universe, and a 'universe of discourse' which is "merely formal: a way of representing all those things that are presupposed by some set of statements, about the natural world or anything else."<sup>37</sup> So, while the conclusions of other domains which we accept into our universe of discourse must be congruent with the conclusions produced by science, accepting the scientific world does not, as such, limit our universe of discourse to just those things which fit in the empirical universe. In particular, there is no clear reason to think that our acceptance of irreducibly normative truths would be in conflict with our acceptance of scientific truths about our natural world.<sup>38</sup>

This alone, though, does not make sense of what it means for truths about reasons to be irreducibly normative truths. In virtue of what should we take this to be true? What is it for a reason to 'exist'? On Scanlon's view "existence' is univocal in that what it expresses is captured by the existential quantifier and the logical rules governing its use. But what is required to justify any existential claim, and what follows from such a claim, varies, depending on the kind of thing that is claimed to exist."<sup>39</sup> This is to say, the justifications of existential claims vary in accordance with the type of thing that is in question insofar as the truth of claims about the thing in question hinges on the domain in which that thing is ostensibly a member. If we want to know whether or not claim  $e$  about some thing  $k$  is true or false, we assess the truth of  $e$  relative to the domain in which  $k$  is said to be a member. If  $k$  is an object, or might be an object, within the domain of math, then we assess  $e$  relative to the domain of math. If  $k$  is an object, or might be an

<sup>37</sup> Scanlon, "Being Realistic About Reasons", Lecture 2, 4

<sup>38</sup> Scanlon, "Being Realistic About Reasons", Lecture 2, 5

<sup>39</sup> Scanlon, "Being Realistic About Reasons", Lecture 2, 5

object within the domain of science, then we assess  $e$  relative to the domain of science and so on and so forth.

As noted, the standards of a domain are fixed by that domain. As Scanlon puts it: “a domain is determined by a set of concepts that it deals with [...] a certain number of things taken to be settled truths that employ this concept, and accepted procedures for settling questions employing these concepts.”<sup>40</sup> Within set-theory, for example, various axioms have come to be accepted over time; some because they are necessarily true, others because they have been shown to be justified.<sup>41</sup> And these axioms, for example, set the standards for that domain. So too in the domain of practical reason, the standards for determining what reasons an agent has in a given situation are standards which are internally fixed. But does this not leave open the possibility of allowing just about any domain into our ontology which is internally consistent and does not conflict with any of the other established domains?

Speaking about ontology is a bit misleading. Assuming that it is otherwise consistent (i.e. a domain does not conflict with other established domains), when assessing whether we ought to include a domain in our ontology, Scanlon argues, the “only relevant criteria of existence arise from the particular first-order domains that we have reason to take seriously. [...] If we do [have reason to take them seriously], then there is reason to count them among our ontological commitments and part of our (purely formal) universe of discourse.”<sup>42</sup> This may sound odd – to think that that which exists is determined by what we have reason to care about.

Well, we could think that just any domain (which is consistent) exists – but this does not mean we have any reason to talk about them. And if we have no reason to talk

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<sup>40</sup> Scanlon, “Being Realistic About Reasons”, Lecture 2, 7 In the third chapter I will deal with what such concepts and procedures might be.

<sup>41</sup> Scanlon, “Being Realistic About Reasons”, Lecture 4, 5

<sup>42</sup> Scanlon, “Being Realistic About Reasons”, Lecture 2, 6

about them, then what does this concern amount to? What of it? If a domain in question is irrelevant then why bother talking about whether or not there is an existential quantifier which ranges over its members? There appears to be no point at all. So, though it may sound strange, it seems reasonable to maintain that the relevant criteria for counting a domain and its conclusions as things which belong in our universe of discourse is whether we have any reason to talk about them. Importantly, of course, we have reason to care about the first-order domain of practical reasoning.

Notably, this might sound circular. To justify an independent first-order domain of practical reasoning, we appeal to the notion of a reason. We count some first-order domain and its members as constitutive of our universe of discourse just in case we have reason to care about the domain and its members. Insofar as we have reason to care about a first-order domain of practical reasoning, then we count this domain and its members as constitutive of our universe of discourse. It sounds as though we employ the use of a reason to establish that there are such things as reasons. Do we not first need to determine what is a reason within the domain before we can employ the concept? As McPherson puzzles: “Because Scanlon suggests that the existence of standards is ‘a matter of’ what we have reason to think, his explanation thus suggests implausibly that the nonexistence of normative standards would follow from a preponderance of a certain kind of misleading evidence.”<sup>43</sup> Effectively, if reasons are just reasons in case they 'pass the test' set by the standards internal to the domain, how can we already employ the use of a reason? However, this embodies a confusion about Scanlon's position. We should return to the distinction made earlier between what it is that makes a reason a reason and why some consideration x counts as a reason.

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<sup>43</sup> McPherson, 8

Insofar as reasons are basic, it would be a mistake to think that they are reasons just by virtue of being members of this domain. They are not reasons because they are members of this first-order domain; rather, they are members of this first-order domain because they are reasons. We just come to understand why a given consideration counts as a reason within this domain, but whether it is or is not a reason is a matter independent of our understanding. And so whether we have reason to care about a given domain is also a matter independent of our understanding.<sup>44</sup> So, if someone were to object that the account given is circular and demand to know what a reason is so that we can understand what it means for us to have a reason to care about some specified domain, it is simply a question that cannot be properly asked. If an attempt *is* made to ask the question, all we can say – given the nature of reasons – is that reasons are fundamental. We can understand why a given consideration counts as a reason through reflection on the standards fixed by the domain of practical reasoning, but anything which is a reason just is a reason. If this account is at all circular, it strikes me as an innocent type of circularity – one that we cannot avoid insofar as we understand the nature of reasons as basic.

Some will question though, understandably, whether we can really come to answers about various domains within the respective domains. They may suggest that there is a separate first-order domain in which the answers about reasons (and all other things in our world) are located – some first-order domain of ontology. If this is the case, then the domain of practical reasoning is going to have to jive with the domain of ontology. And if this is so, it would not really be the first-order domain of practical reasoning which produces truths about reasons. It would be the first-order domain of

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<sup>44</sup> Importantly, whether we have reason to care about some thing in particular is not wholly independent of us – for example, given various social and cultural concerns we may have reason to care about different things. But, given our social and cultural commitments, there is a matter of fact about what we have reason to care about, a reason whose truth is independent of our understanding.

ontology which would do this. Questions about the foundation of reasons would therefore seem to remain firmly on the table.

But, as Scanlon argues, it is not clear that we should think any such first-order domain exists. Recall that on Scanlon's picture of reasons the only criteria for determining whether we admit a first-order domain into our universe of discourse is whether or not we have any reason to be concerned with the conclusions of the domain in question. Do we have reason to care about conclusions within the domain of ontology? It is not clear that we do. How could such a domain, in itself, determine the truth or falsity of various statements? Surely there is not some ontological domain within which the answers about questions in physics are produced. It seems that such a domain of ontology would just be composed of the answers yielded by other domains. In turn, as Scanlon notes: "our only reasons for being concerned with what this formal universe contains are ones that arise from the particular domains that contribute to it. We have no domain-independent reason to be concerned with how many things are quantified over in all of our first-order domains taken together, or with whether these things are abstract or concrete."<sup>45</sup> Effectively, an ontological domain would settle nothing on its own – it is just composed of the truths which are produced within other domains. So why should we care about such a first-order domain? It seems we should not. Any ways in which we would care about it would just be the ways in which other domains have contributed to it. So really, we must just be concerned with these other domains.

Notably, some might object that, of course, there is *some* interest in such a domain. After all, might this not be the sort of thing which philosophers in particular are interested in? The very fact that the question is raised about whether there might be a first-order domain of ontology clearly indicates there *is* some such interest. So then,

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<sup>45</sup> Scanlon, "Being Realistic About Reasons", Lecture 2, 11

should we include such a domain and its members as part of our universe of discourse, and does this reopen the question of whether questions about reasons are determined in their own first-order domain or within some strictly ontological domain?

We need not think this follows, or that this is much of a worry. I say this for a couple of reasons. First, it remains unclear how an independent domain of ontology is capable of settling any issues in other domains. It seems that those matters are dealt with within each respective domain and a domain of ontology would just be composed of all those true statements produced by other domains. We would not be interested in this domain in itself, but only with respect to how it would contribute to other domains – and it remains unclear that it would be capable of doing so. Further, this seems to be more of a *meta* worry, than a first-order worry. It points to a more general question about the sorts of things we are interested in and are concerned with rather than having any implications at the first-order level. Philosophers would not be interested in such a domain qua a first-order domain, but in light of its contents presumably. This seems on a par with various sorts of interests that people have in various topics and issues which do not say anything about what first-order domains we take there to be.

Importantly, it is not as if this makes figuring out which reasons there are and which reasons apply to a given agent an easy question. As I will discuss in some depth in the third chapter, I think we do have the reasoning apparatus in place to have a good go at it, but it is not simple. Nor is it Scanlon's intention to make it appear as such. Rather, I think, Scanlon is aiming at showing that whatever questions there are about reasons are normative questions, not ontological or metaphysical ones. When Mackie asserts that normative facts would be of a metaphysically odd variety, he has effectively made a category mistake. Reasons are purely normative entities. The Argument from Queerness is asking the wrong sort of question. Even so, there are important 'external' questions

which can be asked about first-order domains, which “arise from a first order inquiry but cannot be answered satisfactorily within it.”<sup>46</sup> Take morality, for example.

People quite naturally talk about actions being morally right or wrong, and this, of course, indicates that there are standards against which we measure such actions. But it is not altogether clear what such standards are. When we assert that an agent ought to  $\Phi$  or ought not to  $\Phi$ , we are asserting that there are reasons she has which count in favor of  $\Phi$ -ing or not  $\Phi$ -ing. But what are these reasons? It is left a bit unclear and thus there is “an external question whether there are such reasons – whether the usual ways of establishing that a form of conduct is wrong also guarantee that there are good reasons not to engage in it.”<sup>47</sup> But the questions which remain are not metaphysical questions. They are questions about what we actually have reason to do – they are, as such, *normative* questions.<sup>48</sup> Contrary to Korsgaard argues, it is not that the Reasons Fundamentalist is simply ending the regress (of asking further questions about a given reason) by assuming a necessary starting point which suits the Reasons Fundamentalist. It is just not clear that there is anything else we can appeal to. With respect to any given question about a reason, perhaps we can always continue asking 'why', but at some point it will no doubt be *unnecessary* to do so (even if it is not impossible or incoherent). And wherever this point is, it will be at the foot of some reason. What else could it be?

At this point, I realize I have not said much about reasons themselves. For now my hope is just to have laid out the framework within which we can talk more explicitly about reasons. This framework should look something like this: the universe of discourse is a formal way of representing all those things which we talk about as being real in some sense, though not just empirically real as would be the case if we were talking exclusively about the empirical universe. And those statements, sentences etc.

<sup>46</sup> Scanlon, “Being Realistic About Reasons”, Lecture 2, 9

<sup>47</sup> Scanlon, “Being Realistic About Reasons”, Lecture 2, 9

<sup>48</sup> Scanlon, “Being Realistic About Reasons”, Lecture 2, 9

which we accept are the products of various first-order domains. First-order domains, themselves, determine the truth and falsity of statements given internal criteria. And insofar as the various first-order domains are reconcilable with each other, they are admitted into the universe of discourse just in case we have reason to care about their conclusions. Thus, in the case of morality, or practical reasoning broadly speaking, there is no reason to think that such first-order domains conflict with the other established domains (e.g. math, science, etc.). And no doubt we have reason to care about their conclusions. It therefore seems clear that we should count such first-order domains as domains within our universe of discourse. Given the internal criteria of practical reasoning, truths about what reasons there are – about what reasons we have – can be discovered. And any questions which remain are normative questions.

I will now turn my attention to reasons more specifically, trying to make sense of what sorts of facts they are, how they relate to other sorts of facts, and what we mean when we say that an agent has a reason.

### **Section 3: Reasons, Natural Facts and Supervenience**

There are important questions about how the terrain is divided with respect to various sorts of facts. Scanlon suggests that there is an important distinction to be made between two sets of facts in particular: a) “those that comprise the natural world” and b) “those that are simply the reflection of all the things that are quantified over in statements that we accept as true.”<sup>49</sup> In effect, there are facts about the natural world, which we can call natural facts or non-normative facts. And there are facts about reasons, which we can call normative facts.<sup>50</sup> But what more can be said? How do these two sorts of facts

intermingle? I will say a bit about each set of facts, and then move on to talk about how

<sup>49</sup> Scanlon, “Being Realistic About Reasons”, Lecture 2, 15

<sup>50</sup> This is not to say the distinction is this clean (e.g. we need to make sense of where math falls in) but it should do as a crude divide for the purposes here.

they relate. But first, with respect to the nature of the relationship between normative facts and natural facts, it will be useful to discuss the 'fact/value distinction'. This should help frame the discussion as a whole.

Consider a so called 'thick' normative concept – one that is used as “evidence for the thesis that facts and values are inextricably intertwined.”<sup>51</sup> One such concept could be 'unreasonable'. Some argue that while perhaps we can understand the sufficient conditions for individuals counting as unreasonable, we cannot understand the concept apart from making a normative criticism of them. This is to say, if people fail to give proper weight to consideration x in their deliberation and we claim that they are consequently unreasonable, we are not just declaring some fact about the situation. Instead, we are, at the same time, making a normative claim about her behavior; attaching a value judgment to it. But is this so? As noted, we can distinguish between types of facts. From here, perhaps we can make better sense of the difference between fact statements and value statements, and how they can be independently true.

Natural facts are, effectively, just conclusions of science, matters of fact in the world and so on. Facts about physics, for example, count as natural facts. But also counted in the realm of non-normative facts, I take it, are facts about relationships, agreements etc. Thus, it might sound strange to count the fact that there is a contract which exists between two parties as a natural fact, and while it no doubt has normative implications, it itself is not a normative fact; it is, rather, a non-normative fact. It is just true that two parties stand in a particular relation to each other.

Normative facts, on the other hand, are facts about reasons. When we make a normative claim – i.e. a claim about what a given agent has reason to do in a given situation – we are not asserting some fact about the world, but rather, as mentioned, a

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<sup>51</sup> Scanlon, “Being Realistic About Reasons”, Lecture 2, 18

claim about the reasons which apply to that person. So, the fact that someone has a contract with someone else, gives both parties reason to abide by the contract (barring extenuating circumstances). McPherson suggests that we need a relational account of how it can be that such a reason exists. Mistakenly, though, he thinks that this relation is inherently metaphysical or that whatever these relational structures are they must be contained within our metaphysics.<sup>52</sup> No doubt there is an important relationship which exists such that some propositions count as reasons and others do not. But as I will discuss, this relationship is normative – not metaphysical.

We can capture this relationship, which is the “essential element in normative statements”<sup>53</sup> – i.e. between the agent, the circumstances and the claim that she ought to abide by the contract – in a three place relation symbolized as  $R(p,c,a)$ , which “holds between a proposition, a set of conditions, and an action or attitude when  $p$  is a reason for a person in situation  $c$  to do or hold  $a$ .”<sup>54</sup>

Notably, the ' $p$ ' place is typically occupied by natural facts about the world. In line with the example used thus far in this section, the fact that a contract obtains between two parties is some such fact. The fact that a knife is sharp, for example, is also a natural fact which might figure in a normative claim. So, under ordinary circumstances,  $c$ , the fact that a knife is sharp,  $p$ , seems to give an agent reason not to slide the blade across her hand,  $a$ . When  $R(p,c,a)$  holds, what we mean is that if  $p$  is true, then  $p$  is a reason for a person in situation  $c$  to do  $a$ . (Importantly, returning to the distinction made in the previous section between the 'universe', and the universe of discourse, normative facts ( $R(p,c,a)$ ) are facts about the world in this second, broader sense<sup>55</sup>). Whether the agent has a reason to do  $a$  depends on the fact of  $p$ . So do normative facts supervene on non-

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<sup>52</sup> McPherson, 7

<sup>53</sup> Scanlon, “Being Realistic About Reasons”, Lecture 2, 13

<sup>54</sup> Scanlon, “Being Realistic About Reasons”, Lecture 2, 13

<sup>55</sup> Scanlon, “Being Realistic About Reasons”, Lecture 2, 16

normative facts? And would this be problematic in some sense? Here we can see one of Mackie's worries coming into focus. If normative claims depend on natural facts, why think that this normative claim is anything other than a social construction of some sort – or that we hold it just in virtue of our social environment?<sup>56</sup>

There does seem to be a reasonable concern lingering here. If the normative claim is to hold, it seems to depend on the truth of  $p$ , the non-normative component of the claim. And if this is true, we seem to be deriving a “normative conclusion from purely non-normative premises.”<sup>57</sup> If this is how we get conclusions about reasons, can we hold onto the claim that truths about reasons are determined within a first-order domain of practical reasoning? It seems as though, perhaps, we cannot. Reasons would not depend on the internal criteria of the domain of practical reasoning, but on some other domain, ones which deal with facts about the natural world.

But this is not how the relationship between non-normative and normative facts works. Rather, the truth of  $R(p,c,a)$  is independent of the fact of  $p$ : “it lies in the claim that, whether  $p$  is the case or not, if  $p$  were the case it would be a reason for someone in  $c$  to do  $a$ .”<sup>58</sup>

Scanlon suggests we should understand normative claims as being of one of a couple varieties: mixed normative claims, or pure normative claims. Understanding  $R(p,c,a)$  as independent of the fact of  $p$  is to understand  $R$  in a subjunctive form – as a pure normative claim.<sup>59</sup> Understanding the relationship as a subjunctive or counterfactual conditional helps make sense of its independence of the fact of  $p$ .

In  $R(p,c,a)$  what we see is that: if proposition  $p$  is true in circumstances  $c$ , then the agent should  $a$ . Now, whether an agent has this reason in a particular case will

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<sup>56</sup> Mackie, 41

<sup>57</sup> Scanlon, “Being Realistic About Reasons”, Lecture 2, 19

<sup>58</sup> Scanlon, “Being Realistic About Reasons”, Lecture 2, 19

<sup>59</sup> Scanlon, “Being Realistic About Reasons”, Lecture 2, 20

depend on the truth of the proposition and the circumstances, but the truth of the *conditional* does not, *itself*, depend on the truth of p. The further claim, which a pure normative claim makes, is that *if p and c, then a*. So, we can understand this independence in terms of the thesis of autonomy of the normative from the naturalistic. This means that *pure* normative claims are not entailed by empirical or psychological facts – suggesting that a given normative claim is true is indeed a further claim.<sup>60</sup>

Mixed normative claims involve pure normative claims but also include claims about natural facts: “p is a reason for x to do a’ is a mixed claim, since it cannot be true unless p is true, and it also presupposes that there are conditions c such that the pure normative claim R(p,c,a) is true and x is in circumstances c.”<sup>61</sup> And so, mixed normative claims *do* depend on non-normative facts; they covary with the non-normative facts. But this of course makes sense, since mixed normative claims are, in effect, directives. They are directives which we apply to ourselves or others; telling ourselves or others to perform some action. Naturally this depends on the facts of the situation. But the principle which undergirds this directive (i.e. the claim that given the facts of a situation, you have a reason to perform some specified action) is a further claim, and one which we only get from the pure normative claim, R(p,c,a). This is not something we get from natural facts themselves. So while the truths about some normative facts supervene on truths about natural facts, these normative facts are just those whose truth consists in mixed normative claims, but the same is not true for pure normative claims.<sup>62</sup>

Coming back to how we make sense of thick normative concepts, then, such as the concept 'unreasonable', we can understand the two sorts of statements as being independently true. So, we might truly think that Mitch does not give certain considerations very much weight in his deliberation. This might just be true of his

<sup>60</sup> Scanlon, “Being Realistic About Reasons”, Lecture 2, 20

<sup>61</sup> Scanlon, “Being Realistic About Reasons”, Lecture 2, 20

<sup>62</sup> Scanlon, “Being Realistic About Reasons”, Lecture 2, 24

psychology and his behavior. But, when this is true, depending on the circumstances, this might warrant a judgment that he fails to give proper weight to such considerations and that it was bad of him to do so (in some sense). Alternatively, using Scanlon's example, we can say that Caligula was cruel, and this is just to say that he was indifferent to the suffering of others. It certainly attributes a normative view *to* Caligula, but it does not itself make a normative judgment.<sup>63</sup> But, when we claim that Caligula was cruel, as an empirical matter, *and that he ought not to have been*, we are putting forth a normative judgment as well. So, cruel can be used in a purely descriptive sense – noting the non-normative facts of the situation. And it can be used in an normative sense – attaching a value judgment to one's behavior. What we can see, then, is that normative claims do not exclusively supervene on non-normative claims in the way Mackie puzzled over. Pure normative claims are not just social constructions which are derivative of natural facts. Pure normative claims are independently true, and are irreducible. Importantly, then, the Reasons Fundamentalist is committed to some propositions being strictly normative. But this does not appear to be obviously problematic.

What else is there to be said about the nature of reasons? Reasons are considerations which count in favor of performing some action. Pure normative claims about reasons are claims that a relation holds between an agent, circumstances and some fact about the world which prescribes some action. Which pure normative claims are true is a matter which is discovered within the first-order domain practical reasoning. And such questions are normative; not metaphysical. So, is there anything deeper than reasons themselves to which we can appeal in figuring out which considerations count as reasons and for whom? Scanlon suggests not – reasons are fundamental:

Since the concept of a reason, like that of moral wrongness, is a normative concept, it would seem that any further

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<sup>63</sup> Scanlon, "Being Realistic About Reasons", Lecture 2, 23-24

characterization of what it is to fall under that concept would also need to be normative. But if the domain of the normative consists solely of claims about reasons, then no normative characterization of the concept of a reason itself can be given, since it would have to employ this very concept. So, given this way of understanding normativity, and this idea of what a further explanation of the concept would have to be like, it seems to follow that the concept of a reason is fundamental.<sup>64</sup>

This of course is not the last word on the matter. In the final section I will set up a couple of questions which I will attempt to deal with in the remaining chapters. I will avoid saying too much for either side of the debate, but I will try to make it clear why such questions may pose difficulties for the Reasons Fundamentalists in particular.

### **Conclusion – Where Do We Go From Here...**

Assuming that such a picture of reasons is plausible, which I think it is, there are serious questions about how agents interact with reasons. There are a couple of questions, in particular, which spring to mind.

When R holds between a proposition, circumstances and an action (or whatever the appropriate response to the proposition is) we think that given the circumstances and the fact that p, the agent involved has a reason to perform a. While it is well and good to say this, this does not immediately give us a clear picture of how we actually come to this determination.

Sometimes we will think (at least some of us will) that an agent has a reason to perform a given action. Given certain facts and circumstances we will think there are certain responses which are appropriate. But suppose the agent in those circumstances simply resists the claim that the action we feel is prescribed by the facts and circumstances is in fact prescribed. We may feel he should  $\Phi$ , and he will not see why this is so. We can try to explain to him where he stands in this relation, but he will just

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<sup>64</sup> Scanlon, "Being Realistic About Reasons", Lecture 2, 29

deny it. And what else is there to say to him? The Reasons Fundamentalist can insist this is so. But as Scanlon notes, “the fundamental disagreement is whether there is some further explanation that can and should be given of why the agent in this situation *must* treat X as a reason.”<sup>65</sup> Korsgaard, for example, argues that if a sense of ‘must’ is built into a given reason, this must be so in virtue of something already true of the agent – otherwise, the reason will be unable to get a grip on the agent. It strikes me that sometimes people will fail to be gripped – even after trying to explain to them why they ought to be so gripped. It may not be that they are incapable of feeling the force of a reason, but whatever the reason, they simply do not. But I wonder, even when they are not gripped, is there some explanation which can be given to them which should suffice, even if it fails to convince them?

Successfully convincing everyone seems, to me at least, to be an unreasonable expectation of the Reasons Fundamentalist, or any account of reasons, for that matter. Convincing everyone does not seem to be the mark of successful accounts or arguments in other disciplines. Surely we do not call heliocentrism into question because there are select groups of people who, for poor reasons perhaps, take it to be false. There are always skeptics, people who are less trusting etc., who may just be in a different epistemic position than others. People will not always agree. Does this divergence mark a failure in the conclusion that an agent has a reason to  $\Phi$ ?

Different people may stand in a slightly different relation to the same reasons such that, upon examining evidence, two people may rationally reach different conclusions. For example, a very skeptical person and a very trusting person stand in a different relation to a set of evidence – from the perspective of the trusting person, the evidence may seem more convincing, whereas the contrary is true of the skeptical person.<sup>66</sup> But,

<sup>65</sup> Scanlon, “Being Realistic About Reasons”, Lecture 1, 15

<sup>66</sup> Scanlon, T.M. “Reasons: A Puzzling Duality.” *Reason and Value: Themes from the Moral Philosophy of Joseph Raz*. R. Jay Wallace, Philip Pettit, Samuel Scheffler, Michael Smith. New York: Oxford

even if neither is irrational, cannot one be right and the other wrong? Importantly, it may just be that we cannot convince the individual who is wrong that in fact he is wrong. So, it may just be that an individual can interpret the evidence for a given belief, including a belief about what reasons he has, in a way which leads him to adopt a false belief.

Whether or not someone has a reason, arguably, is independent of their subjective interpretation of a situation.

I have perhaps digressed a bit too far. This discussion has been undertaken with a view to setting up the question of what to make of an agent who fails to be gripped by some consideration which the Reasons Fundamentalist will want to insist is nevertheless a reason for that agent. While it strikes me that universal convergence, or a given agent agreeing that a reason applies to him, is *not* a necessary condition for a consideration counting as a reason, more needs to be said. This is what I will try to discuss in the following chapter.

In this discussion I will attempt to show why an agent recognizing a consideration as a reason is not necessary for that consideration counting as a reason. But even if this account is successful, it still leaves open a question about the means by which we get in touch with reasons. So, while I will give a negative account of what is not necessary for a consideration to count as a reason, a positive account of how we figure out which reasons apply to us will be missing. This of course is crucial to our understanding of reasons.

If reasons are basic, and not natural facts, how do we interact with them? Or, perhaps a better way of asking this question within the framework laid out is, how do we discover truths about pure normative claims? The fact that, however it is done, it is done within the first-order domain of practical reasoning does not really help all that much. It

defines the materials that are available to us, but it does not specify how to use these materials in a way that yields proper results. In this sense, desire based accounts seem to have an edge over the Reasons Fundamentalist account. In such a picture, we get at reasons by looking at things already true of agents – i.e. in light of desires they have, or goals they have set. It is a pretty easy process of looking and finding. But the Reasons Fundamentalist does not have this tool in his chest. Another story needs to be told about how to determine what reasons there are.

But if we accept the claim that practical reasoning is its own first-order domain, presumably a cue can be taken from other first-order domains, such as math and science, regarding how they produce conclusions about the truth of propositions within their domains. No doubt, given the lack of well-defined criteria in practical reasoning – at least compared to these other domains – there are limitations on how easily conclusions can be secured. But it seems that whatever the answer is, it can be modeled after these other domains.

I have gestured at some ways in which the above questions about how agents interact with reasons can be answered. In the subsequent chapters I will attempt to set out arguments in line with these suggestions. By the end I hope to have shown that not only is Reasons Fundamentalism an initially plausible view about reasons, but it can withstand the test of some deep issues it faces and offer more satisfying answers to the concerns such questions pose than can competing views of reasons.

## Chapter 2

### Agents and Reasons

#### **Introduction**

In *Internal and External Reasons*, Bernard Williams argues that “external reason statements, when definitely isolated [...] are false or incoherent.”<sup>67</sup> Williams takes his opponent, which includes the Reasons Fundamentalist, to believe both of the following suppositions: 1) that a given consideration may count as a reason for an agent, even if acting on that reason would not satisfy any of the agent's desires<sup>68</sup>, and; 2) that an agent who fails to view a consideration as a reason, which ostensibly applies to her, is irrational.<sup>69</sup> Williams denies both of these and concludes that we cannot “define a notion of rationality where the action rational for [some agent] A is in no way relative to A's existing motivations.”<sup>70</sup> Williams and the Reasons Fundamentalist diverge on at least the following question: what do we make of the agent who fails to be gripped by a given consideration? In this chapter I will attempt to answer this question by examining the two claims above. I will begin by setting out Williams' position on this issue, and then proceed to give an alternative view bolstered by Scanlon and Raz in line with the account of reasons offered in the first chapter. If reasons are fundamental – just considerations which count in favor or performing some action or holding some belief, then whether or not an agent is gripped by a given consideration is immaterial to the truth of whether, in fact, that consideration is a reason. As such, I will be arguing throughout that Scanlon and Raz, jointly, offer us the best account of the relationship between agents and reasons.

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<sup>67</sup> Williams, 111 – I will not be speaking in terms of internal and external reasons specifically. I will simply be looking at Williams' account of reasons, and what it is that, I think, he fails to capture. Importantly, those who he takes to be externalist about reasons include Reasons Fundamentalists, such as Scanlon.

<sup>68</sup> Williams, 108-109

<sup>69</sup> Williams, 110

<sup>70</sup> Williams, 112

To the first question – i.e. is a person who fails to be gripped by a given consideration, as such, irrational? – using Scanlon's distinction between strict irrationality and broad rational failure<sup>71</sup>, I will re-characterize the evaluation of the person who is insensitive to certain considerations. As Williams admits, such a person, while not irrational, is open to criticism. I will argue we can only make sense of this criticism in terms of a failure in rationality. We are able to gain traction on the claim that such criticism must be couched in terms of rational failure if we accept Scanlon's view about the universality of reason judgments; in effect, when an agent takes herself to have a reason to perform some action, she is also committed to the belief that anyone else in relevantly similar circumstances also has that same reason. Understanding the universality of reason judgments also goes a long way toward helping us make sense of how an agent can have a reason even if such a reason fails to grip the agent.

To the second question – i.e. how does a consideration count as a reason for an agent, if acting on that consideration would not satisfy any of the agent's desires? – I will argue that, not only do reasons apply generally, or universally, but that given the structure of reasoning, and the nature of the will, as portrayed by Raz, agents often act for reasons which are not derivative of any desires they possess. Insofar as we are rational beings we have the capacity to, in principle, recognize any reasons which may apply to us.<sup>72</sup> When we form a belief, or perform an intentional action, these are responses to the reasons we take ourselves to have. As I will try to show, it sometimes seems that there are reasons we take ourselves to have and actions we perform for these reasons which do not aim at satisfying desires. This, of course, is in line with the position that truths about reasons are irreducibly normative truths – i.e. a reason is a reason independent of whether we recognize it as such.

<sup>71</sup> Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, 25-30

<sup>72</sup> Raz, Joseph. "Reason, Reasons and Normativity." *University of Oxford Legal Research Paper Series* 11 (2007), 1

If, in fact, people have reasons which are not derivative of their desires, and the universality of reason judgments hold, then reasons seem to generalize such that even if a person is not gripped by a consideration, it may nevertheless be a reason for that person. Whether or not a consideration counts as a reason for an agent is simply a matter of the circumstances in which they stand and whether there is a pure normative claim which prescribes a given action in such circumstances.

### **Section 1: Williams On Reasons**

Williams argues that the reasons an agent has must be relative to her subjective motivational set (S), which is effectively the set of her desires, broadly construed, so as to include “dispositions of evaluation, patterns of emotional reaction, personal loyalties and various projects, as they may be abstractly called, embodying commitments of the agent.”

<sup>73</sup> So, if I have a reason to  $\Phi$ , my reason arises from the fact that  $\Phi$ -ing would satisfy (or be part of satisfying) some desire which is part of my S. This is to say, there must be a “sound deliberative route” from my S to any conclusion that some consideration counts as a reason which applies to me.<sup>74</sup> How could it be, Williams wonders, that there is some reason which applies to an agent which that agent could not reach through a sound deliberative route leading back to her S?

Williams presses his opponent, who believes that for a consideration to count as a reason, it need not bear this relationship to an agent's subjective motivational set, on the following question: “*What* is it that one comes to believe when he comes to believe that there is a reason for him to  $\Phi$ ?”<sup>75</sup> He denies that when an agent comes to believe a reason, that agent comes to believe there is a consideration, which is a reason and which already applied to her, but which was not previously constitutive of her subjective

<sup>73</sup> Williams, 105

<sup>74</sup> Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each other*, 364

<sup>75</sup> Williams, 108-109

motivational set. As Scanlon puts Williams' objection: a change in what one cares about cannot be brought about "by coming to see that one already had a reason for caring about that thing (a reason not grounded in one's S, as it was previously constituted)."<sup>76</sup> Why would we think a person would come to care about something, by coming to believe that she should have previously cared about it, even though there was nothing already true of her which could have lead her to care about that thing? This seems to simply insist that we come to care about things which we, apart from anything already true of our subjective motivational set, see as reasons. But does this not just *assume* that reasons are independent of desires?

It seems, Williams argues, that by claiming that an agent can have a reason independent of anything in the agent's S, we are, in effect, claiming "that if the agent rationally deliberated then whatever motivations he originally had, he would come to be motivated to  $\Phi$ ."<sup>77</sup> But if this second claim follows from the first, argues Williams, then it appears that any claim that an agent has such a reason (i.e. one not derivative of her S) must be false, "for, ex hypothesi, there is no motivation for the agent to deliberate from, to reach his new motivation."<sup>78</sup>

I take it his worry works something like this: how is an agent moved to deliberate or entertain considerations, if entertaining such considerations is not derivative of his subjective motivational set in the first place? It seems there is no other thing which would give rise to such deliberation; any such motivation which existed would already be part of an agent's S. If he is not so moved, he will not entertain new considerations. But if he *is* moved to deliberate, it is because there was a desire already part of his subjective motivational set to do so. When an agent comes to view a consideration as a reason for

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<sup>76</sup> Scanlon, What We Owe to Each Other, 366

<sup>77</sup> Williams, 109

<sup>78</sup> Williams, 109

him, it is in virtue of something already true of his S that he is able to take this consideration to be a reason.

So, Williams thinks, we cannot make sense of reasons apart from the desires already part of an agent's S. Any 'reason' which is not a product of an agent's S will not get a grip on an agent and it becomes difficult to see how it could be a reason for the agent. No doubt, the agent, himself, will certainly not see it. And it is unclear what we could say to him to convince him otherwise. As Christine Korsgaard puts the concern: "If someone finds that the bare fact that something is his duty does not move him to action, and asks what possible motive he has for doing it, it does not help to tell him that the fact that it is his duty just is the motive. That fact isn't motivating him just now, and therein lies his problem."<sup>79</sup> Perhaps an example will help bring out this point.

Suppose that at the dinner table, it is inappropriate to have your elbows on the table. Sally is a person who is concerned with acting appropriately. So, when she deliberates carefully about things, it sometimes turns out that she comes to new conclusions about how to act, in light of reasons she did not previously view as reasons which applied to her. A concern for acting appropriately is an element in her S. From Sally's perspective, before deliberating about it, it had not seemed important to keep her elbows off the dinner table. But, caring about acting appropriately and recognizing that some people find it rude, she deliberates about it, and comes to realize that having her elbows on the table is, in fact, inappropriate. She is consequently motivated to stop putting her elbows on the dinner table. It is not that she now cares about something which she realizes she should have previously cared about but which was not already part of her subjective motivational set. Rather, it *was* already part of her subjective motivational set to desire to act appropriately, whatever that may entail. Had it not been

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<sup>79</sup> Korsgaard, 38

the case that she cared about acting appropriately, however, and assuming there was nothing else in her S that might entail that she should care about keeping her elbows off the table, how could she have come to view this consideration (that it is inappropriate to put her elbows on the table) as a reason which applies to her? What could we say to Sally to make her believe that she ought not put her elbows on the table? As Korsgaard notes, it does no good to dig our heels in and insist that she has such a reason. But it is not clear there is anything else to be said, precisely because it seems the agent has no such reason.

Suppose that acting appropriately is not a desire of Sally's. She therefore does not view this consideration as a reason to keep her elbows off the table. Does this necessarily make her irrational? In such a case, where Sally fails to view a consideration as a reason, Williams believes that his opponent will “say that what is particularly wrong with the agent is that [she] is irrational.”<sup>80</sup> Williams denies this. Now, of course, he admits, there are all sorts of ways in which we can criticize individuals who fail to be motivated to  $\Phi$  (where we think  $\Phi$ -ing is appropriate); we can say that they are “inconsiderate, or cruel, or selfish, or imprudent.”<sup>81</sup> But, there is a problem with taking criticisms of this sort to be accusations of irrationality on the part of the individual failing to be motivated to  $\Phi$ . It seems that when we make such criticisms we are *not* claiming that rational deliberation would lead to this agent being motivated to  $\Phi$ .<sup>82</sup> In turn, how is it irrational for some consideration to not be constitutive of an individual's S? Indeed this does seem off.

Williams fails to see how we can make sense of a picture of rationality which is not relative to an agent's subjective motivational set. It is neither clear that we can give a proper account of how an agent can have a reason which is not a product of a desire already in an agent's S nor how it is that an agent is irrational in virtue of a given consideration not being constitutive of her S.

<sup>80</sup> Williams, 110

<sup>81</sup> Williams, 110

<sup>82</sup> Williams, 111

## Section 2: Irrationality – Narrowly Construed

Williams is quite right to think it is wrong to believe an individual who fails to be motivated by some consideration is, for that reason, irrational. But the Reasons Fundamentalists need not hold such a view. Scanlon makes an important distinction between what it is for someone to be irrational and what it is for someone to be, broadly, open to rational criticism. Understanding this distinction can help us deal with this issue raised by Williams.

Scanlon argues that we ought to view irrationality in a narrow sense, where a person is irrational just in case she “recognizes something as a reason, but fails to be affected by it in one of the relevant ways.”<sup>83</sup> But there are of course times when a person flat-out fails to be sensitive to a given consideration. The question at issue is, if this person does not count as irrational what *do* we say of her?

Suppose that, when marking papers, Professor Jones assigns grades not based on the merit of the work, but rather based on how pleasant a personality she finds the respective students to have. This is how, from her perspective, papers ought to be marked. And suppose that marking based on the merit of the papers would satisfy no element of her subjective motivational set. On Scanlon's model, it appears that her marking methods are not irrational. And why should we think they are? While there is room for substantive disagreement about how papers, in fact, ought to be graded, it is not as if Professor Jones' attitudes do not line up. It is not as if she believes that grades ought to reflect the quality of the essays, but fails to respond appropriately to this belief. She simply holds the belief that grades ought to be given relative to a student's personality, attitude etc., and assigns essay marks accordingly.

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<sup>83</sup> Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, 25

Of course, she is nonetheless open to criticism. It would be reasonable to call her unfair, fickle and so forth. It seems that Williams would admit as much. Though, it is not clear how Williams can make sense of the criticism other than expressing a negative attitude toward the professor's methods. Is there a better way of explaining this criticism, though?

As Scanlon notes: "Williams is quite right to think that this claim [that a person who fails to recognize a certain consideration as a reason is, as such, irrational] would be implausible, but wrong, I think, to hold that his opponent is committed to making it."<sup>84</sup> While such a person is not being irrational, strictly speaking, the person is open to criticism of some sort, no doubt. Williams himself notes that we can criticize a person, insofar as she is not motivated to  $\Phi$  (where we think  $\Phi$ -ing is appropriate, or that it would be better if she did  $\Phi$ ) as being inconsiderate, cruel, selfish etc. But, what are these criticisms expressing if not some sort of rational criticism?

When we criticize Professor Jones, which we no doubt would, for being unfair or fickle, what could these criticisms be expressing other than that there was some sort of rational failure on her part? Claiming that she is being unfair seems to be saying that she is not taking a specific consideration as a reason; in this case that it is not fair to grade essays on anything but their merit alone.

It seems that the grounds on which this sort of behavior is unacceptable are on precisely the grounds that the professor is failing to be reasonable – she is failing to take certain considerations, which are reasons, *as reasons*. As Scanlon suggests:

These criticisms do involve accusing [her] of a kind of deficiency, namely that [she] fail[s] to be moved by certain considerations that we regard as reasons. (What else is it to be inconsiderate, cruel, insensitive and so on?) If it is a deficiency for [her] to fail to see these considerations as reasons, it would

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<sup>84</sup> Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, 27

seem that they must be reasons for her. (If they are not, how can it be a deficiency for [her] to fail to recognize them?).<sup>85</sup>

When a person fails to be motivated by some consideration she may be open to criticism. Now, the proper charge is not that of irrationality. A person is irrational just in case she fails to be responsive to reasons she takes herself to have. But insofar as she is open to criticism what sort of criticism could this be other than a sort of rational criticism claiming that she failed to be responsive to a reason? There is some reason which applies to her, which she fails to appreciate. But how can we get traction on this criticism beyond merely insisting that she has been insensitive to a reason?

More can be said, I think, to strengthen this claim. Suppose a different professor, Professor Black, reasons that papers ought to be marked exclusively on the basis of merit. Her belief might be based on any number of factors: that testing students aims at evaluating which students are competent in the subject and grades are the way in which professors communicate this judgment to students; if merit was not the fundamental criterion it would mean the assignments, in effect, have nothing to do with the course, etc. Whatever the considerations are, we can call this set of factors 'G'. So, in virtue of G, Professor Black believes herself to have reasons to mark essays based on their merit. Now, in accepting that G applies to her, she is, in turn, committed to the belief that G applies to everyone else who stands in relevantly similar circumstances. If she were not committed to this further claim, then what would her reasons amount to in the first place? It is hard to get a handle on how they could really be reasons for her at all. And so, if Professor Black is right about how papers ought to be marked<sup>86</sup>, then Professor Jones,

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<sup>85</sup> Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, 367

<sup>86</sup> In addition to her taking herself to have such a reason, there needs to be a pure normative claim supporting this. So, for example, it would also have to be true that in such circumstances, where she is marking students' essays, the proposition that grades are supposed to be reflective of an evaluation of a student's understanding of the course material is true, and as such the professor has a reason to mark the essays based on merit.

despite what she may think, also has reasons to grade papers based on merit alone. This is an instance of what Scanlon calls the universality of reason judgments, which is

a formal consequence of the fact that taking something to be a reason for acting is not a mere pro-attitude toward some action, but rather a judgment that takes certain considerations as sufficient grounds for its conclusion. Whenever we make judgments about our own reasons, we are committed to claims about the reasons that other people have, or would have under certain circumstances.<sup>87</sup>

A brief look at some of Thomas Nagel's work might help get us clear on this point.

It might not be altogether clear what it means for one to be simultaneously committed to the belief that when one takes herself to have certain reasons, that she, in turn, takes everyone else in relevantly similar circumstances to have those very same reasons. As Nagel puts the question: “What is it to accept the same judgment about another person that one accepts about oneself in acknowledging a reason to act, or in reaching a conclusion about what one should do?”<sup>88</sup>

In order to apply such judgments to others, one must take the impersonal stand point, as Nagel calls it, which is the perspective from which an agent views herself as just one individual among many. From merely a personal stand point, an individual cannot guarantee that a reason generalizes to others. To use Nagel's example, when I judge that “I should leave the building before the bomb goes off”<sup>89</sup> the agent should, at the same time be committed to the same impersonal judgment that whoever 'I' designates is subject to the same consideration. If we accept this, Nagel suggests, then it turns out that “one's basic principles must be universal.”<sup>90</sup> But why does this necessarily follow?

Nagel asks, “why cannot each of us content himself with principles which state what he should do (principles like 'I should always act in my own interest') instead of

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<sup>87</sup> Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, 73

<sup>88</sup> Nagel, Thomas. *The Possibility of Altruism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970., 107

<sup>89</sup> Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism*, 107

<sup>90</sup> Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism*, 107

expanding them into principles which yield reasons for everyone?”<sup>91</sup> Principles which just state what an individual should do (rather than ones which generalize to all agents), however, cannot be properly applied impersonally. Any attempt to apply a principle to just oneself, but from the impersonal perspective, results in dissociation. And when such dissociation from oneself occurs, it is unclear that the reason in question actually applies to the agent.

The claim 'I should do what will keep me alive' might be thought to apply impersonally. Cannot I, for example, claim that 'C.L. should do what will keep him alive' and as such 'impersonalize' the claim that 'I should do what will keep me alive'?

An application of a principle to oneself is impersonal just in case it can be applied to oneself *apart from the fact that it is oneself*. But how can this be done if a principle ostensibly applies just to a single individual, and does not universalize? Whether I am C.L. is irrelevant to the judgment that 'I should do what will keep me alive' and “to add that justification to the premise of the corresponding impersonal practical judgment would be to alter the reasons for the judgment substantively, and not just by converting them from personal to impersonal form.”<sup>92</sup> Perhaps an example will help bring out this point.

Suppose that I wake up from a coma, with no recollection of who I am or anything about my life. But I wake up in a building in which, as I am told, there is a bomb about to go off. Suppose that when I awake I have a name tag on that says 'John Smith' (when in fact my name is Chris Langlois). It would be a mistake to think that I could impersonalize 'I should get out of this building before the bomb goes off' into 'J.S. should get out of this building before this bomb goes off' and properly include myself under that description. If my name tag said 'Chris Langlois' then it would be true, in this

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<sup>91</sup> Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism*, 108

<sup>92</sup> Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism*, 108

case, that 'I should get out of this building before the bomb goes off' means the same thing as 'Chris Langlois should get out of this building before the bomb goes off', but it would be only accidentally true. It just so happens that I should get out of the building before the bomb goes off and that my name is Chris Langlois. But the fact that my name is Chris Langlois is irrelevant to the truth of the claim that 'I should get out of the building before the bomb goes off'. So, however we understand reasons, it cannot be in virtue of identity conditions – and so we cannot just content ourselves with principles which just apply to ourselves. Because, however it is that we understand the reasons which apply to us, it must be in a way which is sensitive to the circumstances in which we stand rather than our identity. And so reasons, being sensitive to circumstances, must universalize.

Now, certain identity conditions may be part of our circumstances. The fact that I am a philosophy student seems to be constitutive of my identity. And further, it seems to give me reason to read philosophical texts. But this is true of anyone who is in such a circumstance – i.e. who is a philosophy student – not just me. Such a reason universalizes or generalizes to anyone else in relevantly similar circumstances.

Importantly, even if we accept the universality of reason judgments, we do not close the door on the above issue of how it is that essays ought to be graded. There is of course room for substantive disagreement. Though it seems unlikely, perhaps Professor Black is wrong about how essays ought to be graded. Further, Williams may even be able to endorse the universality of reason judgments. As Scanlon notes, “even if all reasons are based on desires, the universality of reason judgments still holds that if I have a reason to do something because it will satisfy my desire, then anyone else who has that same desire (and whose situation is like mine in other relevant respects) also has this

reason.”<sup>93</sup> In effect, we have not allayed Williams worries, because it might just be that one of the relevant circumstances which is necessary for generalizing or universalizing reasons is a desire on the part of the agent.

However, if we accept the universality of reason judgments, *and* it turns out that sometimes people have reasons independent of their subjective motivational sets, and act for reasons which do not satisfy any of their desires, then we have something to say to the person who fails to be gripped by a consideration. If it turns out, for example, that Professor Black is correct about how essays ought to be marked, and that desiring to mark in this way is not one of the relevant factors which gives her reason to do so, then regardless of whether Professor Jones is properly gripped and whether or not it satisfies any desire she has, she too has a reason to grade based on merit alone. Scanlon notes that while some reasons have subjective conditions “there are other reasons whose normative force seems not to depend on our motivations.”<sup>94</sup> In the final two sections I will try to make sense of reasons whose normative force does not depend on motivation. If we understand reasons to generalize, then those reasons whose normative force does not depend on motivation apply to everyone (in the right circumstances) whether they desire to act accordingly or not.

### **Section 3: Reasoning As Constitutive of Personhood**

Williams thinks we cannot give an account of rationality that is not relative to an agent’s subjective motivational set. An individual has a reason to  $\Phi$  just in case  $\Phi$ -ing satisfies an element of the agent’s S. I hope to show why, even though  $\Phi$ -ing would satisfy no element in her S, an agent may sometimes still choose to  $\Phi$ . And given the structure of rationality I will present, insofar as an agent is acting intentionally an agent is acting for

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<sup>93</sup> Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, 74

<sup>94</sup> Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, 367

reasons. As such, in a case where an agent is  $\Phi$ -ing despite the fact that doing so does not serve any desire she has, the reasons she is acting on must not be derivative of her S. In other words, the fact that a reason is not derivative of an agent's S does not mean it is not a reason for that person. Being derivative of a desire is not a necessary condition for a consideration counting as a reason.

If this can be established, then when we take this along with the universality of reason judgments we can make sense of how Professor Jones might have a reason to grade on the basis of merit, or how anyone else might have a reason to  $\Phi$  despite the fact that  $\Phi$ -ing would serve no element in their respective subjective motivational sets. So, what does the structure of reasoning look like?

I will set up both Raz's picture of theoretical reasoning as well as his picture of practical reasoning. He argues that there are parallels, but importantly, there is space between the two accounts. It is this space which, I think, allows us to escape Williams' worries in some sense.

How are we to understand the relationship between beliefs and theoretical or epistemic reasons? Well, Raz argues, there are two dimensions which are fundamental to this relationship: First, belief is subject "to the normativity of reasons, its being subject to evaluation as warranted or unwarranted depending on its conformity with reasons; and, second, the fact that it is automatically, as it were, self correcting. Failures to conform to reasons are self-correcting when we become aware of them."<sup>95</sup> Beliefs do not seem to be the sorts of things which we decide upon. Our beliefs *just are* the conclusions of theoretical reasoning.<sup>96</sup> When I have examined the evidence supporting the acceptance or denial of some proposition p, however it is that I view the evidence *is* my belief.

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<sup>95</sup> Raz, "Reason, Reasons and Normativity", 14

<sup>96</sup> Rödl, Sebastian. *Self-Consciousness*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007., 69

Theoretical reasoning, I think, is constitutive of personhood. Insofar as we are rational beings who assess facts, evidence, arguments and so forth, we come to form beliefs. Beliefs are the sorts of things which can be evaluated as warranted or unwarranted, and if the agent becomes aware of evidence that shifts what one has most reason to believe, the agent's belief will automatically shift accordingly.

Importantly, if Raz took practical reasoning to follow an identical structure, this would be a problem, indeed. Part of Williams' concern with pictures of reasons in which reasons exist independent of agents' subjective motivational sets is that reasons seem to lack subjective elements altogether. Our actions would be merely accidental to our reasoning, and we would fail to get a grip on how it is that agents' relate to the reasons they take themselves to have. But the two accounts are not identical.

A belief is an automatic, consistent response to the evaluation of a body of evidence. Practical reasoning is importantly different in some respects, but also shares some similarities to theoretical reasoning. Practical reasoning, Raz argues, is also constitutive of personhood. Raz claims that “while not all actions are performed for a reason, when we do something with the intention of doing it, which is roughly when we have a purpose in doing it, see a point in doing it, we act for a reason, that is we act in the belief that there is a reason for the action.”<sup>97</sup> This is to say, when we act towards some end, we act that way in light of reasons which we believe prescribe this action. From our perspective, this action is an appropriate action to take in light of the end we are aiming at. Unlike belief, an action is not an automatic response to the reasons we take ourselves to have. But, like belief, in cases of intentional or purposeful action, actions are what we view as appropriate responses to the reasons we see ourselves as having. This is what purposeful actions are. And insofar as we take ourselves to be rational agents, capable of

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<sup>97</sup> Raz, “Reason, Reasons and Normativity”, 15

this sort of intentional action, we cannot help but accept that we act for reasons. This is part of what it is to be a person.

Notably, in practical reasoning, the space which exists between reasoning and action allows for the subjective dimension that we tend to think our actions, or at least some of our actions have. This space can be explained in terms of the will, which I will set aside now and return to in section four.

As rational agents we are constantly engaging reasons. In our assessment of evidence of what to believe and how to behave, we cannot help but be reasoning. We cannot divorce ourselves from it in any meaningful sense. We can be poor reasoners, and even attempt to be such, but we cannot hang up our reasoning belts and call it a day. But, if this were somehow possible, we would cease to be rational agents at that point.

Raz goes on to note that we recognize failures to act in accordance with the reasons we take ourselves to have as instances of irrational action (such as Scanlon describes it). We recognize them as failures against a backdrop of success in which we are properly responsive to reasons. Importantly, Raz notes, “people who fail to respond appropriately in any way at all do not fully recognize the existence of the reasons. Attribution of belief depends on the existence of a variety of criteria of belief and they include not only avowing the belief, and attesting to reasons for it, etc. but also responding to it appropriately.”<sup>98</sup>

Importantly, it seems that Williams would be on board with this description of rationality (or at least there is nothing here which is obviously incongruent with his view) at least up until the discussion of failures to respond to reason. But, importantly, and *contrary* to Williams' view, it is not clear that there is anything in Raz's account which precludes the possibility of an agent reasoning to the conclusion that there is something

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<sup>98</sup> Raz, “Reason, Reasons and Normativity”, 11

she should do despite the fact that doing so would not satisfy any of her desires. If purposeful actions are responses to reasons that agents take themselves to have, then it seems that when agents act in a way which does not aim at satisfying desire, then such actions must be responsive to reasons<sup>99</sup> which are not products of their subjective motivational sets. And we thus seem to have found reasons which are independent of desire. In the final section, I will explore the relationship between desire, reason and action and try determine whether sometimes people do, in fact, act for reason alone, where the reason is not derivative of a desire.

#### **Section 4: From Reason to Action**

Suppose that an individual is told that his partner is being unfaithful to him. And suppose that he catches his partner in the act. Surely he does not want to believe that his partner is cheating. But, given the evidence, the agent comes to believe that this is unfortunately the case. He comes to a conclusion given the reasons he has, despite the fact it was not something he wants to believe. Can we say something similar about action?

Surely, sometimes an agent reasons to the conclusion that there is some action she must perform, even if she does not want to. A mother who loves her son dearly may conclude that she must turn him into the police because she knows he committed a violent crime. She would like to believe he would not do it again, and that it was some sort of mistake, but she knows that her son did commit the crime, and she should turn him in. Suppose she does turn him in. Her action is a response to reasons she takes herself to have. Do we say that her reasons for turning him in are derivative of her S? Does turning in her son satisfy a desire of hers? It would be odd to think so. But, given

the relationship between reasoning and intentional action laid out by Raz, how else could

<sup>99</sup> Once again, assuming they are right that such reasons exist. But, presumably when agents act in such a way they are at least sometimes (if not most of the time or always) right that there actually is such a reason.

Williams, on his account, explain this action, if it is not performed for reasons derivative of her S? This is where, I think, Williams account starts to lose some of its force.

I should say that it is not inconceivable that there is something in the mother's S which leads her to turning in her son. Importantly for Williams' account, an agent can see a consideration as a reason just in case that consideration would satisfy some element of the agent's S. In other words, an element being constitutive of an agent's S just makes it eligible for being a reason. But then it does not sound as though we are talking about desire anymore. Notably, Raz primarily criticizes narrow desire theories, rather than an account, like Williams', where desire takes on a very broad meaning. But importantly, Raz argues that if you do not have a narrow desire theory, you do not have a desire theory at all. His reason for this is that desire theories which construe desire more broadly depend on an appeal to other values or reasons – they do not take “desires as inherently worthy of satisfaction. [...] [Broad desire-accounts] presuppose values whose normative force does not derive from the fact that people desire to pursue them.”<sup>100</sup> Effectively, desire-accounts which are not of the narrow variety rely on more than just desire to account for reasons. That is what I will try to bring out in this section. Whatever we want to say of an individual's actions, there are times where it certainly seems as though they are acting with no desire in mind.

As discussed, unlike between reasoning and belief, in the case of action, there is space between reasoning and the subsequent action. This space can be understood by reference to the will. And the will, in turn, helps us understand action which does not aim at satisfying desire.

How are we to understand the will? What sort of capacity is it? A dispositional capacity is such that, in effect, if you define the input you can successfully predict the

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<sup>100</sup> Raz, Joseph. “Incommensurability and Agency.” *Engaging Reason*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999., 51-52

output: suggesting that a human can survive for three days without water means that if a human goes three days without water she will likely survive.<sup>101</sup> A dispositional capacity might fail or turn out to be falsified, but not due to a failure on our part, since, after all, such capacities are not the sort of things we exercise. When I go three days without water I am not exercising any sort of ability. I may be testing this capacity, but I am just disposed to last three days without water, though it may turn out that I die.

A 'two-way' capacity is the sort which we can exercise (or not exercise) at our discretion. Walking and running are examples of this. So, why is it that I sometimes run and sometimes I walk? Well, if I want to get some exercise, or I am about to miss the train, I may choose to run. If I want to spend some leisurely time outside, or am on my way to an appointment, but in no hurry, I may choose to walk. Such responses to the reasons we have are not automatic in any sense. The reasons we take ourselves to have and the actions we perform are mediated by the will. Intentional actions, or exercises of the will, generally speaking can be thought of as a two-way capacity. They are *decided* upon, but guided by the reasons we take ourselves to have at the time. So, whatever reasons we may see ourselves as having, we are capable of responding in turn.

Some may press, “when and why do we use that capacity correctly, why do we sometimes react rationally, and sometimes not?”<sup>102</sup> This is to say, perhaps the will makes sense of how we are capable of acting in accordance with reason, but, if we do in fact sometimes act just in light of some consideration yet not toward the end of satisfying a desire, why do we do this – why do we sometimes behave 'rationally' (where we are responsive to considerations we see as counting in favor of some action) and sometimes 'irrationally' (where we are not responsive to considerations we see as counting in favor

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<sup>101</sup> Raz, Joseph. “Explaining Normativity: Reason and the Will.” *Engaging Reason*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999., 14

<sup>102</sup> Raz, “Explaining Normativity: Reason and the Will”, 114

or some action)? It is not enough to repeat that the will is the capacity to act intentionally, since “pointing to the ability will not explain its use.”<sup>103</sup>

Raz argues that the will has two functions. First, as I have suggested in the discussion of the will as a two-way capacity, “the will is the capacity for intentional action, which is instantiated in every intentional action. [...] Having a will is the ability to act at will, that is the ability to direct one's actions in light of one's understanding of oneself and of one's situation.”<sup>104</sup> Raz distinguishes between two ways in which a 'want' or desire can accompany an action. Understanding the will as the capacity for intentional action gets us at the first sense of want, or what he calls a 'thin-want'. A thin-want is just the sort of want present in any intentional action. So, to say I wanted to perform an action in a thin-sense is just to say that I intentionally performed the action. As Scanlon puts a similar point: “It is trivially true that whenever a person is moved to act he or she has an 'urge' to act in that way.”<sup>105</sup>

The second role of the will has two aspects, the second of which I will focus on: 1) expressing the varying degrees of our attachment to different possible actions and; 2) determining our attitudes toward our actions. As Raz notes, we can intentionally perform an action “willingly or reluctantly, enthusiastically or grudgingly and so on. Sometimes we do what we do unwillingly (as when a child, when told to do so, unwillingly lets a sibling play with a toy). [...] Sometimes we do things which we very much do not want to do but recognize an obligation to do. In this sense, not every intentional action is done because we want to do it.”<sup>106</sup> Here, insofar as an agent still acts intentionally – i.e. for the reasons she sees herself as having – there is a want present. But it is only a thin-want. This, of course, does not get us at desire in any robust sense, and is not the sort of desire

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<sup>103</sup> Raz, “Explaining Normativity: Reason and the Will”, 114

<sup>104</sup> Raz, “Explaining Normativity: Reason and the Will”, 111

<sup>105</sup> Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, 40

<sup>106</sup> Raz, “Explaining Normativity: Reason and the Will”, 110

which Williams is after. Want in the sense Williams has in mind is closer to what Raz calls a 'thick-want', and is present where an agent performs an action enthusiastically, or willingly, for example.

The will determines our relationship with the reasons we act on – i.e. whether we view the appropriate actions as ones we wish to perform, or ones which we begrudgingly perform. It is thus the will which allows us to act intentionally in a way which does not aim at the satisfaction of any desire. So, when might an agent act with only a thin-want in mind?

Suppose that Professor Black has a student who is lazy, insolent, rarely attends class and appears to have done none of the reading in the course. All the student *has* done is hand in the final essay which is worth the entire mark for the course. Moreover, for various reasons (which cannot be substantiated) Professor Black suspects the student did not, himself, write the essay he has handed in. She would rather give the student a failing grade in the course, and all things considered, she thinks this would best reflect the student's work in the course. But, given that she has no proof he cheated, and feels she has an obligation to mark the essay exclusively on the basis of the quality of the essay despite how she might feel about the student, she gives the student a mark appropriate for the quality of the paper, which is a B. She reasons that she has this obligation, and her will is guided by these reasons she takes herself to have, despite the fact she desires to do otherwise. Understanding the will as allowing for intentional action and determining our attitude toward our reasons and actions, we can make sense of Professor Black's action as one she performed with only a thin-want present; she gave the student a B, begrudgingly. She recognizes she would otherwise have been acting irrationally, where we understand irrationality as a failure to respond to the reasons she takes herself to have.

This strikes me as a case in which a person acts with no thick-want – toward no end of satisfying a desire. Professor Black acts just on the reason that she sees it as her obligation to mark the essay on its merit alone, despite the fact that this is not the mark she believes the student deserves. The normative force of her reasons do not seem to depend on motivation.

Williams may think we have slipped back into loose talk about desires. He may wish to remind us that desires ought to be broadly thought of as including “dispositions of evaluation, patterns of emotional reaction, personal loyalties and various projects, as they may be abstractly called, embodying commitments of the agent.”<sup>107</sup> So, he might say, it *is* part of Professor Black's S to mark essays on the basis of their merit alone. It is simply mistaken to think that she is acting just from the motive of obligation. Marking fairly is part of what it is to be a good professor, and surely being a good professor counts as one of her projects (or something to this effect). Had it been the case that being a good professor was not a goal or project of hers, she would not have been gripped by the consideration that papers ought to be marked on merit alone.

As Scanlon points out, it seems to ring false from a person's subjective point of view that all of her actions are performed in light of a motivating desire.<sup>108</sup> Will it not sound strange to Professor Black to find out she is grading the paper this way because really, she is motivated to do so by an element of her S, or a desire she has, rather than because she simply thinks this is what she ought to do?

While broadening our conception of desire to this extent may add plausibility to Williams' view – insofar as it is able to make sense of all sorts of cases where we think surely an agent has a reason to  $\Phi$  even if  $\Phi$ -ing does not satisfy a desire in a more typical

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<sup>107</sup> Williams, 105

<sup>108</sup> See Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, 367: “Williams' examples are all put in the third person; they concern the claims we can make about the reasons other people have. But his internalism seems to force on us the conclusion that our own reasons, too, are all contingent on the presence of appropriate elements in our subjective motivational sets.”

sense – from an agent's subjective standpoint, it seems to be open to objection. It is, arguably, inconsistent with what Williams' account seemed to be getting at in the first place. If we describe desire so broadly that the desires become unrecognizable to the agent, it seems that we have perhaps lost a grip on why we should think of such things as desires at all. Desires are fundamentally subjective.<sup>109</sup> It is unclear how we could make sense of desires as things which exist independent of an agent being able to identify them as such. Perhaps the following example will help bring this out.

Suppose that John sacrifices his life to save the life of a stranger named Mary. John is a single adult with no kids. Mary has a partner and two children. John judges that it would be a great shame for that family for Mary to die, while he has no family who would suffer such a loss. So he decides to give up his life to save hers, even though he desperately does not want to. His action is a response to the reasons he sees himself as having. In what sense does this action serve as an element of his S? I suppose that Williams could suggest that being altruistic or saving lives is a project of John's (though I suspect Williams would not want to go so far).

Imagine what John would think to find out that his decision to give up his life was for the sake of satisfying an element of his S. This seems as though it might produce the opposite problem to the one I have been working toward explaining throughout this paper. Recall, the concern I have been trying to deal with is how we make sense of an agent having a reason which does not get a grip on that agent. So, when an agent fails to feel the force of some consideration, in what sense does that person really have a reason? Here, however, it seems we would need to insist that despite what a person may think – i.e. despite the fact that from his perspective John is acting from no desire at all<sup>110</sup> – in

<sup>109</sup> While I recognize that Williams will say the same of reasons, at least with respect to reasons there can be competing stories told. It is unclear that any picture of desires as independent of an agent being able to recognize them could even get off the ground.

<sup>110</sup> Of course, it is possible for an agent to be acting on an unconscious desire, or to sacrifice his life thinking that such an act will certainly lead him to heaven upon his death, but this is not the case in this

fact he *is* acting toward the satisfaction of some desire. Where he would suggest he has no such desire, we would have to dig in our heels and insist that, in fact, he does. But importantly, it is unclear there is any sound deliberative route leading from the reasons for performing this action, back to his S. So, unless we want to insist that even when it appears otherwise from an agent's subjective point of view, and despite a lack of any clear sound deliberative route from a reason back to an agent's S, an agent only ever acts on those reasons which serve an element of the agent's S, then it turns out that sometimes agents act for reasons which serve no desire at all.

Perhaps another way of thinking of the problem I am trying to point to in Williams' account is by asking what kind of phenomenological account he would be able to give for the sorts of actions I have described. On Raz's picture this seems to be a request easily satisfied. Given the structure of reasoning, agents simply take certain considerations as being part of the case for, or as counting in favor of, performing some action. And if they take the reasons to be sufficient for performing the subsequent action, then they may well choose to perform the action even if no thick-want is present. But on Williams' account, we are going to have to keep wrestling with the example until we, perhaps in a somewhat ad hoc fashion, devise a story in which the agent really did desire to perform the action she performed. But it seems that whatever the story is, on some examples it will be like jamming a square peg in a circular hole. Desire simply will not properly fit. If Williams insists that his view is a desire account, then it seems it is going to be hard to make sense, phenomenologically, of the mother turning in her son, or John sacrificing his life. These actions simply seem to have been performed in virtue of reasons that agents took themselves to have, whether or not they wanted to perform these actions in a thick sense.

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example.

Now, maybe it is in virtue of things already true of these agents that they saw these considerations as reasons, but it is not as if the actions are necessarily tied to their identities in any strong sense. Take John, for example. No doubt his action was brave and honorable, but we would not say that had he had chosen not to perform that action he would have betrayed his identity in some sense. No doubt we would have found it reasonable if he had chosen not to sacrifice his life. And at this point, it strikes me that we have lost a grip on how desire fits into the picture except as understanding our relationship with the actions we perform. Desire is effectively an after-thought. Why should we think some consideration is not objectively a reason just because an agent did not see a consideration as such?

It seems that we have something to say to the individual who fails to be gripped by a consideration, after all. If we accept the universality of reason judgments, in conjunction with the fact that sometimes people act on reasons which satisfy no desires of theirs, then whether a given person desires to  $\Phi$  or not is, at least in cases where the normative force of a reason does not depend on motivation, irrelevant to the truth of whether they have a reason. While the example of John<sup>111</sup> might seem to indicate a very narrow class of reasons which may count as independent of desire, my hope was just to open the door a crack. I suspect the class is much larger, but this at least shows that a desire is not a necessary condition for the existence of a reason.

### **Conclusion – What's Next?**

Williams is concerned with how it is that a consideration which, if acted on, serves no element of an agent's S might get a grip on that agent. When it invariably does not, what

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<sup>111</sup> I should note that I am not claiming that everyone in John's situation has decisive reason to give up their lives. But, given the reasons he takes himself to have, giving up his life to save the life of Mary is rendered an eligible option. The point is just to consider a case where clearly the agent's action is not based on reasons which aim at satisfying a desire. And in turn, showing that desire is not a necessary condition for a consideration counting as a reason.

do we say to him to convince him that the consideration is, in fact, a reason? If there are reasons which apply to us but are not already part of our subjective motivational sets, how is it that we can be moved to view them as reasons and act accordingly? Are we not moved by just by those things which are constitutive of our subjective motivational sets? Do not just those things which serve our desires count as reasons? And why does not viewing certain considerations as reasons for us make us irrational?

To the last concern, as Scanlon points out, not being moved by reasons does not make us irrational – it just entails that we are insensitive to those reasons. But, importantly, our insensitivity to those reasons does not mean that such considerations are not indeed reasons. When we criticize someone in such cases, as Williams allows, what we are doing is making a rational criticism, suggesting precisely that they are not sensitive to reasons which they ought to be sensitive to. But more needs to be said to make sense of why this criticism can only be thought of as a rational criticism – or rather, why, despite the fact that a consideration fails to grip an agent, that consideration is not precluded from counting as a reason. And this can be explained by reference to the universality of judgments about reasons.

In accepting the universality of judgments about reasons, we recognize that when we take ourselves to have reasons to perform some action, we are also committed to the belief that anybody else in relevantly similar circumstances has those same reasons. Reasoning is constitutive of personhood. On an ongoing basis people evaluate considerations, and form beliefs and perform actions accordingly. Intentional actions can only be made sense of by reference to reasons. Sometimes, the conclusion of reasoning is that we have reason to do some particular thing, even if we do not genuinely desire to do so. But, insofar as a rational being has a will, which is the capacity for intentional action, and which determines our attitude toward our reasons and actions, we can

intentionally act with no desire in mind. That is, we can act for reasons which are not derivative of our subjective motivational sets.

Effectively, what matters is whether substantive disagreements about reasons result in the proper conclusions. And whatever the right answer is in a given circumstance, the answer applies to everyone in relevantly similar circumstances, whether they desire to act accordingly or not, since, as I hope to have shown, desire is not a necessary condition for a consideration counting as a reason.

Up until this point in the project I have tried to tackle two potential concerns with Reasons Fundamentalism: 1) does it have untenable ontological consequences? and 2) does it allow for reasons to have subjective conditions of the kinds that may sometimes seem to be the case? I have argued that indeed it can successfully deal with both issues. Reasons are basic – just considerations which count in favor of performing some action or holding some belief. We come to understand truths about reasons through examination within a first-order domain particular to practical reasoning. Reasons are not metaphysically odd entities; they are just facts about relationships which hold between agents, their circumstances and specified propositions. In turn, we understand reasons not as things which exist just insofar as agents recognize them. Rather, reasons exist independently of anything already true of an agent. But rational agents have in principle the capacity to recognize any reason which exists and as such make judgments about what reasons they take themselves to have and form intentions, perform actions and so forth accordingly. And importantly it is the will that bridges the gap between reasoning and action, and allows us to have a conception of our actions as things we perform willingly or reluctantly, thereby making sense of the apparent subjective nature of the reasons we take ourselves to have. However, so far I have been silent on how it is that

agents actually come to such conclusions. How is it that agents determine what reasons they have?

Since reasons are basic, independent facts, it follows that determining which reasons agents have is a process of discovery, similar to the the first-order domain of mathematics. And importantly, insofar as agents' abilities to view considerations as reasons is not limited to things already true of themselves, this process of discovery is not directed toward something internal to an agent, such as examining what desires they have. Rather, in trying to understand what reasons they have, agents must seek reflective equilibrium; they must work within the standards fixed by the first-order domain of practical reasoning in order to come to conclusions about reasons. This process is what I will explore in the final chapter. I will put it up against another well-regarded view and consider them both with respect to our phenomenological experience of reasoning to see which seems more plausible.

## Chapter 3

### Deliberation and Reasons

#### **Introduction**

Recall the Argument from Queerness: if normative entities are objectively real, they must be metaphysically odd, and if we are to get in touch with them it must be with some similarly odd perceptual equipment that we are able to do so.<sup>112</sup> This argument can be seen as having two strands; the first metaphysical (about the sort of things that normative truths would have to be) and the second epistemological (about how we get in touch with these metaphysically odd entities). In the first chapter, I dealt with the metaphysical worry. If we take reasons to be basic - just considerations which count in favor of some belief or action, and about which propositions are understood to be true or false in virtue of the internal conditions of the first-order domain of practical reasoning – then it appears that, in accepting objective normative truths, we need not posit odd metaphysical entities after all.

Richard Joyce suggests that “these are not independent arguments, since we are forced to posit weird epistemological equipment only if it has already been established that the properties in question are weird. Thus really it is the metaphysical strand of the Argument from Queerness that is load bearing.”<sup>113</sup> If this is right, then perhaps there is no epistemological problem left over. But this seems wrong. Quite reasonably, people might question how it is that we determine truths about reasons even where reasons are understood in the way in which I have defended them. That is, even if we understand reasons as basic and true (or false) relative to the domain of practical reasoning, we still

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<sup>112</sup> Mackie, 38

<sup>113</sup> Joyce, Richard. "Mackie's Arguments for Moral Error Theory." 2007:  
<<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/moral-anti-realism/moral-error-theory.html>>

do not have an answer about how, in principle and in practice, we are actually able to make such determinations. In other words, there remains a question about how we get in touch with truths about reasons. Given the character and relational nature of reasons, how do we take the next step and understand how we figure out which reasons there are and when they apply to us? Effectively, there is a question of how we discover which pure normative claims are true.

I take this question to have both a theoretical and practical dimension. So first, how, in principle, do we determine truths about reasons? In the tradition of John Rawls, Scanlon offers us an account of reflective equilibrium. In seeking reflective equilibrium we are, in effect, taking our considered judgments about reasons and evaluating whether they can stand up against the standards internal to the domain of practical reasoning. Out of this, we can understand the practical dimension of the question: how is it in practice, then, that we determine, on a day-day basis, what reasons we have and how we ought to behave? Once again, citing Scanlon, I will suggest that there is a four-step process which we undertake (or which we should undertake) in deliberating about reasons. Importantly, it is not as if we must think in terms of these four steps, but rather these four steps are, informally, constitutive of sound deliberation.

I will begin by quickly reviewing Mackie's initial worry about getting in touch with normative entities. From there, as a well-regarded alternative to the view of reasons I have defended thus far, I will sketch out Korsgaard's account of deliberation: being self-conscious entails that we are necessarily reflective. And as such we are not just reflective on our actions but on our identity. We have reason, then, to act in ways that ensure that our actions are manifestations of the descriptions under which we identify ourselves and which can be willed as universal law for anyone else with such an identity. Following the sketch of Korsgaard's account, and picking up the account I have been

defending in the first two chapters, I will turn my attention to Scanlon's work on reflective equilibrium and practical deliberation about reasons. I will wrap things up by discussing why I think this account should be preferred to Korsgaard's account (at least) with respect to this question about getting in touch with reasons.<sup>114</sup> Ultimately, Scanlon offers us a picture of practical reasoning which not only is plausible and not obviously problematic in any deep sense, but which also seems to capture our experience of reasoning. And this, I think, is important. Surely an account which is not only plausible but also experientially true to life should be prized. This, in turn, lends greater legitimacy to Reasons Fundamentalism as a whole which I have defended throughout this project.

### **Section 1: Argument From Queerness – The Epistemological Worry**

Mackie argues that if there are objective moral facts then they must be metaphysically odd – different than everything else in the world. As Scanlon points out, while Mackie is speaking about moral facts in particular, it is reasonable and consistent with his account to expand this class of facts to normative facts in general. And so, Mackie's argument continues, if we are aware of these normative facts “it would have to be by some special faculty of moral perception or intuition, utterly different from our ordinary ways of knowing everything else.”<sup>115</sup> As I have suggested, even if normative facts are fundamental and not metaphysically odd, this epistemological worry lingers. While it is perhaps out of fashion to suggest that we understand normative truths just by intuition, Mackie believes that “however complex the real process, it will require (if it is to yield authoritatively prescriptive conclusions) some input of this distinctive sort, either premisses or forms of argument or both.”<sup>116</sup> Effectively, even if a realist account suggests

<sup>114</sup> Of course, in introducing Korsgaard's view I am just considering it as an alternative to answering this particular question, rather than all of the questions about reasons I have been considering throughout this project.

<sup>115</sup> Mackie, 38

<sup>116</sup> Mackie, 38

that the process of determining which reasons there are is deep and complex, it has to start somewhere. And wherever it starts (or perhaps wherever it ends) there is going to be some normative intuition which we will cite, or at least rely on.

But, one might counter, if we take knowledge about normative perceptions to be very odd, why should we stop there? Would we be wrong to mount similar worries with respect to discerning truth about empirical domains? Mackie cites Price on this point, asking: “If the understanding, which Price defines as the faculty within us that discerns truth, is also a source of new simple ideas of so many other sorts, may it not also be a power of immediately perceiving right and wrong, which yet are real characters of action?”<sup>117</sup> Mackie does not take this worry especially seriously, though. He asserts his confidence in the ability of other domains to offer sufficient empirical explanations, but bites the bullet suggesting that any domains which cannot ought to be viewed with the same skepticism as normative entities – and ultimately discounted.

There are, in effect, two worries. First, how do we get in touch with normative facts? And further, whatever we take to be the proper process of deliberating about reasons, somewhere along the line will it not involve us pulling from our intuitions in a way that understanding truths in other domains simply does not require? If this is true, then it is unclear why we should accept this. I will now consider two accounts of how we come to conclusions about what reasons we have, which might be able to get around this worry.

## **Section 2: Korsgaard On Practical Reasoning**

As discussed in the first chapter, Korsgaard is also skeptical of the responses that the realist will give about the character of reasons and how it is that we get in touch with

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<sup>117</sup> Mackie, 39

them. But, unlike Mackie, her concern is not that there are no normative truths – indeed she seems to endorse the view that normativity has an objective basis (as I noted in the first chapter, she herself is a type of realist). Rather, she insists that the Reasons Fundamentalists' responses to these questions are dogmatic and insufficient.

Korsgaard argues that the human mind is essentially reflective.<sup>118</sup> So, not only do we have perceptions and desires, and not only are we aware of them, but we think *about* them. This entails the capacity to call them into question – it allows for normative consideration.<sup>119</sup> It cannot be that the impulses that arise from our perceptions and desires will, alone, lead us to action. Our minds, being necessarily reflective, require that we act for reasons, which Korsgaard suggests displays a type of reflective success.<sup>120</sup> So, an agent has a reason just in case his impulses “withstand reflective scrutiny.”<sup>121</sup> When he decides he does have a reason, he is endorsing this impulse – when he decides he does not have a reason, he rejects this impulse, counting it as something he ought not to pursue.<sup>122</sup> But how does an agent make this determination? In virtue of what does he decide that a given impulse does or does not withstand reflective scrutiny? How does he know that some consideration is a reason? And here “all of the arguments against realism await us. Does the desire or its object inherit its normativity from something else? Then we must ask what makes that other thing normative, what makes it the source of a reason. And now of course the usual regress threatens. What brings such a course of reflection to a successful end?”<sup>123</sup> Korsgaard's answer to the regress, however, is not to demand that normative entities seem to be fundamental. Instead, she appeals to the will and what it is to be a free agent.

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<sup>118</sup> Korsgaard, 92

<sup>119</sup> Korsgaard, 93

<sup>120</sup> Korsgaard, 93

<sup>121</sup> Korsgaard, 93

<sup>122</sup> Korsgaard, 97

<sup>123</sup> Korsgaard, 97

The will, which is an agent's capacity for practical reason as Korsgaard describes it, cannot act but for a reason.<sup>124</sup> And reasons are derived from principles – i.e. we understand reasons as being derivative of principles – so given circumstances *c*, and principle *p*, I have a reason to perform action *a*. So if the will is practical reason and reasons are derivative of principles, then the will, itself, must have some principle. But insofar as the will is free, whatever this principle is, it must be self-imposed (otherwise the will could not be free, since it would be externally constrained).<sup>125</sup> Following Kant, Korsgaard takes this principle to be “the categorical imperative, as represented by the Formula of Universal Law, [which] tells us to act only on a maxim which we could will to be a law. And *this*, according to Kant, *is* the law of the free will. [...] It does not impose any external constraint on the free will's activities, but simply arises from the nature of the will.”<sup>126</sup> So, the will restricts itself to deciding to act only judgments which could be willed as universal law for any relevantly similar will. Importantly, we must ask, is there anything distinctive about each individual's will?

As Korsgaard argues, the mind being self-conscious entails that it is necessarily reflective. Not only does this mean that our actions must be performed for reasons, but given our nature we are compelled “to have a *conception* of ourselves.”<sup>127</sup> From the third-personal perspective it may seem that an individual's choices are not tightly connected to who she is – these choices may seem to be products of whatever desires just happen to win out. But this, Korsgaard argues, does not track the first personal experience of making a choice. Rather, there is something deeper which makes our decisions, something which can be more truly said to be *you*, and something which can be more truly said to be *me* which chooses. And our actions are manifestations of this

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<sup>124</sup> Korsgaard, 97-98

<sup>125</sup> Korsgaard, 98

<sup>126</sup> Korsgaard, 98

<sup>127</sup> Korsgaard, 100

deeper self. Importantly, this is how being self-conscious entails that we must come to have a conception of ourselves: insofar as being self-conscious forces an agent to reflect on her perceptions and desires, and she understand her choices about which perceptions and desires to act on as being made by this thing *which is herself*, then in her reflecting on her perceptions and desires and on which to pursue, she *is* reflecting on who she takes herself to be. Insofar as she is self-conscious, she cannot help but have a conception of herself – “this is a fact about what it is *like* to be reflectively conscious.”<sup>128</sup> Accordingly, the law we must impose on ourselves must be reflective of this *self* – or the identity we take ourselves as falling under.

Given our identity and the demand of the categorical imperative, an agent must act only in a way which someone with such an identity could will universally: “This means that the principle or law by which you determine your actions is one that you regard as being expressive of yourself. To identify with such a principle or way of choosing is to be, in St. Paul's famous phrase, a law to yourself.”<sup>129</sup> Importantly, though, this identity is practical. Reflecting on and understanding the description under which we identify ourselves is not a matter of finding some scientific truth about who we are. Rather, one's practical identity is the amalgamation of various practical roles that an agent inhabits and “a description under which you find your life to be worth living and your actions to be worth undertaking.”<sup>130</sup> The principle of the will, then, is the categorical imperative in the formula of the universal law, which is determined relative to the description under which an agent identifies herself. This, Korsgaard argues, is the source of normativity.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> Korsgaard, 100

<sup>129</sup> Korsgaard, 100

<sup>130</sup> Korsgaard, 101

<sup>131</sup> Korsgaard, 103-104

Still remaining is the questions how we know what could be willed as law. Korsgaard suggests, again citing Kant, “that we can tell whether our maxims should be laws by attending not to their matter but to their form.”<sup>132</sup> And importantly, the “form is not merely the arrangement of the parts; it is the functional arrangement – the arrangement that enables the thing to do what it does. [...] So: if the action and the purpose are related to one another so that the maxim can be willed as a law, then the maxim is good.”<sup>133</sup> So a maxim with an intrinsically normative structure is one which can be willed as a law. The following example should help makes sense of what it means for the action and the purpose of a maxim to be related so that the maxim can be willed by law.

Suppose that Nathan and Lucas get in an altercation on the road one day. After some verbal sparring, Lucas pushes Nathan. In trying to decide how to respond, there are three alternatives which Nathan is considering:

- 1)He should not push Lucas back, because he wants to show himself to be the 'bigger person'.
- 2)He should push Lucas back, because he wants to show himself to be the 'bigger person'.
- 3)He should push Lucas back, because doing so would actually push him out of the way of an oncoming car.

In determining which of these maxims can be willed as law, we notice that it cannot just be either the action alone, or the purpose alone that makes a maxim universalizable. We see that the actions are the same in two and three, but they are performed for different reasons or purposes. And in one and two the actions are different but both toward the same end. So, the functional structure of a maxim is what we should attend to in deciding whether it can be willed as law. If the action and the purpose are tied together so that the maxim can be willed as law, it is a good maxim.

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<sup>132</sup> Korsgaard, 107

<sup>133</sup> Korsgaard, 108

Korsgaard sums up her position nicely: “When an impulse – say a desire – presents itself to us, we ask whether it could be a reason. We answer that question by seeing whether the maxim of acting on it can be willed as a law by a being with the identity in question. If it can be willed as a law it is a reason, for it has an intrinsically normative structure.”<sup>134</sup> So, this is how I determine what reasons I have. It does not posit reasons as odd metaphysical entities, and it is simply by reflecting on my identity and what actions are universalizable for someone with such an identity that I determine what my reasons are.

Importantly, I think Korsgaard's view is able to accommodate Mackie's worries. He may insist that there will still need to be the resort to an intuition somewhere in the process, but that seems unfair. Trying to determine what actions could be willed as universal law by anyone with a given identity is, no doubt, not an exact science. But we need not think that a lesser degree of precision eliminates rigor from the process. After all, the universalizability test is itself quite strict. Without clear and evident answers, reflection might need to be even deeper and more greatly considered if one is to make a good faith effort. Though less precise, such a process when properly exercised is arguably *more* rigorous.

But while I think Korsgaard's view is able to accommodate this worry I still think it ultimately gets the structure of reasoning wrong. For reasons I will discuss later, while it might initially appear to give a proper account of the subjective experience of reasoning, it stops short of being able to explain all of our experiences. For now, I will turn my attention to an alternative account of how agents get in touch with reasons – one which picks up on the account of reasons and agents that I have laid out in the preceding two chapters. When I have concluded that discussion I will compare Korsgaard and

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<sup>134</sup> Korsgaard, 113

Scanlon's accounts with respect to their ability to capture the phenomenological experience of reasoning.

### **Section 3: Reflective Equilibrium**

Given Scanlon's picture of reasons, which I have presented over the first couple of chapters, we might be able to guess how he thinks we figure out which reasons we have. Insofar as he takes truths about reasons to be irreducibly normative truths, where standards of truth are determined relative to the domain of practical reasons, the next logical step in the story must be that we discover what reasons there are by reflecting on competing considerations. But no doubt this is a hazy concept, so this is what I will try to explicate over the next two sections. To start, I will discuss another first-order domain, so that we can take some cues from it to help us understand how things will work within the domain of reasons.

Scanlon suggests of one subsection of mathematics – a well established first-order domain – that “arithmetical competence is a matter of mastering this form of reasoning and, in general, being able to tell when it is being done well, when badly. The thinking of a good mathematical reasoner 'represents' or 'tracks' the truth about arithmetic insofar as it takes into account the right considerations in the right way.”<sup>135</sup> Similarly, speaking about the history of set-theory, another branch of theoretical mathematics, “we begin with a claim, the Naive Conception, that seems very plausible. Investigating its consequences we see that it leads to unacceptable results. Looking back, we can see that these flow from a mistake in our original thinking: there is a way in which the Naive Conception should not have seemed so plausible, because it fails to do justice to the idea that members of a set are 'prior to' the set itself. Taking this into account, we formulate a new

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<sup>135</sup> Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, 63

claim, the Iterative Conception, and investigate *its* implications.”<sup>136</sup> I will not explore the nature of these different conceptions of sets – this is peripheral to my goal here.

Importantly, though, Scanlon points to how we come to hold truths in two branches of mathematics. And in both cases it is, essentially, through reflection, or what he calls, through seeking reflective equilibrium.

We understand mathematical truths with reference to the internal constraints and rules of mathematics. As discussed in the first chapter, first-order domains self-determine their guidelines. So, with respect to set theory, for example, it is through reflection on various conceptions and whether they are internally consistent that we are able to reach conclusions about whether they have 'gotten it right'. And so, “the problem is not how we could 'be in touch with' the abstract structures that mathematics is about, but how we can characterize these structures in a way that makes clear which principles and modes of reasoning about them are valid.”<sup>137</sup> This, I think, in principle is the same process we go about with respect to determining truths about reasons.

Some will immediately object, however, that something different is going on in practical reasoning. In math, it is much more likely that there will be convergence on the answer to a given problem. How we typically evaluate success in each domain – i.e. within mathematics versus within practical reasoning – is different. Essentially, while there is a great amount of convergence within mathematics, this is not the case in practical reasoning. Even after great consideration, and much debate within the domain of practical reasoning, there remain large divergences in the conclusions we come to. Insofar as practical reasoning is naturally less precise there is a less clear methodology for going about reasoning, unlike in mathematics. Even in cases of good practical reasoning, people are bound to be mistaken sometimes. And as I have just suggested, we

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<sup>136</sup> Scanlon, “Being Realistic About Reasons”, Lecture 4, 8

<sup>137</sup> Scanlon, “Being Realistic About Reasons”, Lecture 4, 3-4

can still count it as *good* reasoning. Where we take people to be mistaken in practical reasoning, it often is not a methodological issue such as it is in mathematics. Sometimes there will simply be substantive disagreements about what reasons we have. In some cases an agent will reason to one conclusion only to be told he or she is mistaken. In such cases the agent may look at the reasoning behind the correction and take the amended view on board – in other cases the agent may steadfastly disagree. Accordingly, we treat 'being wrong' within practical reasoning differently than we do in mathematics, since even good reasoning can go astray, and substantive disagreements linger even after rich discourse. Practical reasoning being just that – practical – there are limitations on the sorts of methods of reasoning and argumentation that can be employed to determine truths about reasons. Given the character of set theory, it is “possible to argue about it in a precise and formal manner” whereas practical reasoning “is much less precise, perhaps incapable of being rendered so.”<sup>138</sup>

Now importantly, there is some extent to which similar criticisms can be mounted against set-theory: “there are ways of thinking about sets which reach determinate conclusions that command wide agreement, but the best efforts of mathematicians deploying these methods still leave important areas of disagreement, uncertainty, and perhaps even indeterminacy.”<sup>139</sup> So, some disagreements within mathematics may themselves be substantively driven and may not yield determinate answers. This is not to say that, really, practical and mathematical reasoning are the same, but only that even within domains more widely accepted than that of practical reasoning similar problems can arise. Thus we need not think that even though the evaluation of success is typically different in these distinct domains they are engaging in an entirely different process; they

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<sup>138</sup> Scanlon, “Being Realistic About Reasons”, Lecture 4, 12

<sup>139</sup> Scanlon, What We Owe to Each Other, 63-64

both engage in a process of seeking reflective equilibrium toward the end of discovering truths within their respective domains.

It is evidently a more difficult or at least less certain process in the case of practical reasoning, than in the case of mathematical reasoning. Keeping in mind Mackie's objection, it may seem that there will always be some appeal to intuition in coming to conclusions about reasons. But as I said at the end of the previous section, I think this is unfair. As I have been stressing – and as I will try to show more expressly – the process of seeking reflective equilibrium with respect to reasons is not so different from the process with respect to areas within mathematics. There is no clear reason for thinking that, even if there is a difference in the degree of accuracy which can be yielded by reflecting on considerations, there is a difference in kind between the sorts of processes which are appropriate for reflection in the case of mathematical reasoning and practical reasoning. And once again, a lesser ability to yield precise results does not warrant an accusation of intuitionism. If I were to draw a triangle, I would be fundamentally unable to draw an exact, precise, perfect triangle. But it does not mean I cannot draw an accurate representation of a triangle. And importantly, this does not mean that in order to draw an accurate representation of a triangle I have to appeal to my intuitions about what a triangle is; I *understand* what a triangle is, but this just does not ensure I can draw it perfectly. Similarly, I can *understand* what a reason is, and reason well without appealing to intuition in spite of the fact that the process is not exact and precise.

As I have been hoping to show, just as in the case of mathematical reasoning, “conclusions about reasons for action are justified simply by thinking carefully about them in the mode described by the method of reflective equilibrium: considering what general principles about reasons would explain them, what implications these would

have, considering the plausibility of the implications of these principles and so on.”<sup>140</sup>

Admittedly, the concept of reflective equilibrium has not yet been elaborated, and so it is fair to ask: what does this process of seeking reflective equilibrium look like? What is involved in determining the principles of practical reasoning?

In the Locke Lectures, Scanlon does not go into great detail about what reflective equilibrium amounts to, but notes that when we come to conclusions about conceptions of sets or what reasons we have, “all we can say is that they seem extremely plausible, and that there seem to be no obvious problems with their implications or with the line of thought that leads to them.”<sup>141</sup> But we get a richer sense of what reflective equilibrium means when we look at Scanlon's work on John Rawls and justification. While this piece is on reflective equilibrium with respect to justification, I see no reason why we cannot expand this discussion to include normativity in general so that it can help us make sense of what reasons we have in a given situation.

In seeking reflective equilibrium, as Scanlon describes it, there are three stages: 1) the identification of considered judgments; 2) the formulation of principles which are able to capture all such judgments; and 3) an evaluation of how these principles may diverge from some of the considered judgments in play, and how this divergence is to be reconciled.<sup>142</sup>

We can understand a considered judgment as some judgment for which there are supporting reasons and that are reflective of peoples' general convictions.<sup>143</sup> These judgments are made when one is “fully informed about the matter in question, thinking carefully and clearly about it, and not subject to conflicts of interest or other factors that

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<sup>140</sup> Scanlon, “Being Realistic About Reasons”, Lecture 4, 17

<sup>141</sup> Scanlon, “Being Realistic About Reasons”, Lecture 4, 6

<sup>142</sup> Scanlon, T.M. “Rawls On Justification.” *The Cambridge Companion to Rawls*. Samuel Freeman. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003: 139-167., 140-141

<sup>143</sup> Scanlon, “Rawls on Justification”, 141

are likely to distort one's judgment.”<sup>144</sup> So, obvious examples of such considered judgments might be that 'it is good to take my friend's interests into account' or 'it is bad to trick someone into doing something solely for my own benefit'. The principles which are supposed to account for considered judgments of justice ought to be ones that we could plausibly be led to just on the basis of the judgments at issue, rather than by trying to think about what justice is independently – “principles such that, had one simply been trying to apply them rather than trying to decide what seemed to be the case as far as justice is concerned, one would have been led to this same set of judgments.”<sup>145</sup> So, apart from independent views of justice, but with the above two considered judgments in mind, we might suggest that the principle which accounts for these judgments is that 'it is bad to use our people only as our means, rather than considering them as ends in themselves'. And importantly, the third step in the process is where we try to account for any considered judgments which do not fall under the principle, or where the principle seems to be overly inclusive in that it could cover judgments which there are not good reasons for or which do not reflect peoples' general convictions. This is an ongoing process, in which one continues reflecting on judgments and principles and how they fit together “until one reaches a set of principles and a set of judgments between which there is no conflict. This is what Rawls calls reflective equilibrium.”<sup>146</sup>

Notably, while it is a state we may never conclusively reach, it is an ideal we can continue to strive for, thereby improving our sense of justice.<sup>147</sup> But principles and judgments are not fixed; they may undergo change as we give them greater consideration, either being continually reinforced or shown to be mistaken. Importantly, this is what the process of seeking reflective equilibrium is after – determining whether

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<sup>144</sup> Scanlon, “Rawls on Justification”, 140

<sup>145</sup> Scanlon, “Rawls on Justification”, 140-141

<sup>146</sup> Scanlon, “Rawls on Justification”, 141

<sup>147</sup> Scanlon, “Rawls on Justification”, 141

the considered judgments and principles which seem to account for them get justice right.

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There are of course some skeptical concerns that arise with such an account, especially with respect to considered judgments. First, do we have good reason to believe that the reasoning we employ is capable of yielding determinate answers, rather than, say, our subjective views on a given issue? And second, do the judgments we come to carry any genuine authority so that people should see them as overriding?<sup>149</sup>

There is a sense in which our considered judgments are questionable at first – they are merely considered, of course, and not conclusive. But importantly, this is what the process of seeking reflective equilibrium is trying to establish; whether, in light of further considerations or principles, such judgments should be held onto, tweaked, or abandoned outright. And with respect to the second question, the answer, once again, is that this is what the process is attempting to capture. As Scanlon notes “it is only after we have, by using this method, formed a clearer view of what morality, as we can best understand it, is like that we can address the question of the reasons we have for taking it seriously.”<sup>150</sup>

While the process of seeking reflective equilibrium here has been focused on reflection with respect to justice, it is not clear to me we should think things are much different when talking about reasons of other kinds – it will just be a more basic discussion. There will presumably be a similar process of considering the interaction between principles and considered judgments, for example, simply with respect to reasons for action even where there are not reasons of justice. And importantly, we are not after what makes a reason a reason - a reason is, after all, just a consideration which counts in favor of performing some action or holding some belief. Rather, we are trying to figure out why some consideration, x, counts as a reason. And this is something we

<sup>148</sup> Scanlon, “Rawls on Justification,” 149

<sup>149</sup> Scanlon, “Rawls on Justification,” 146-147

<sup>150</sup> Scanlon, “Rawls on Justification”, 147

can reflect on and come to meaningful conclusions about – conclusions of the sort that, I think, will be able to yield determinate answers (at least in many cases) and carry authority.

In the following section I will give a deeper account of what sort of reflection is involved in practical reasoning in particular.

#### **Section 4: What Does this Amount To Practically?**

When some consideration,  $x$ , seems to be a reason how do we know whether  $x$  is in fact a reason? Scanlon proposes that there is a four-stage process that is involved in practical reasoning which helps us come to conclusions in such instances.

The first stage is just when an agent identifies a consideration which may or may not be a reason. This is when some consideration seems to be or seems not to be a reason.<sup>151</sup> The second stage, which Scanlon calls the first critical stage, is the stage in which an agent decides whether  $x$  really is a consideration counting in favor of performing some specified action. For example, if  $x$  is the pleasure I derive from  $\Phi$ -ing, is this pleasure a *pro tanto* reason for  $\Phi$ -ing?<sup>152</sup> This is followed by a third stage, and the second (and final) critical stage in which “I decide whether, taking account of  $x$  and whatever other reasons I take to bear on the matter, there is sufficient reason for adopting  $A$ .”<sup>153</sup> So, if in the second stage I come to the conclusion that  $x$  does count in favor of  $\Phi$ -ing, then I must follow this by determining whether this gives me sufficient or conclusive reason to  $\Phi$ . The fact that  $x$  counts in favor of  $\Phi$ -ing does not mean I should or that it is best to  $\Phi$ . The fact that I take pleasure in playing squash may give me reason to play. But if I have a deadline to meet for work the following day, and I do not have enough time to both play squash and get my work done, the fact that playing squash gives me

<sup>151</sup> Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, 66

<sup>152</sup> Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, 65

<sup>153</sup> Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, 65

pleasure does not give me sufficient reason to play. But however I make this determination and whatever conclusion I come to in any given situation it is a matter I must deal with in this second critical stage. And finally, given my decision about whether  $x$  is a sufficient reason to  $\Phi$ , I come to hold an attitude, forming an intention to  $\Phi$  or not to  $\Phi$ .<sup>154</sup> Given the fact that I derive pleasure from playing squash and that I have enough time to fit in a game and still meet my deadline, I may come to hold the attitude that I have time for both, and consequently form the intention to do both. If I think I have limited time, I will (hopefully) make the wise choice to form the intention to just focus on my work.

In the second stage – the first critical stage – I come to a conclusion about whether the consideration which at first seemed to be a reason is in fact a reason, or whether I was mistaken. Some will object, however, that it is unclear why I should take this to be an amendment to my initial judgment, rather than simply a new reaction altogether: “why regard this as a correction rather than just a different reaction?”<sup>155</sup> Let us consider an example to help us understand why we should not just take this to be a new reaction.

Recall our friends Lucas and Nathan. Lucas finds out that Nathan has been spreading nasty rumors about Lucas throughout their high school. Lucas initially thinks that this seems to give him reason to spread similarly vicious rumors about Nathan throughout the school. Does he have such a reason? Does Nathan's behavior give Lucas a reason to retaliate? Well, what sort of reason would it be? Is it a reason because acting in this way would even the score or deter Nathan from behaving in this manner in the future? Is this the best way to deal with the issue? Would Lucas be doing it because he thinks this would settle things between him and Nathan? Would this actually settle

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<sup>154</sup> Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, 66

<sup>155</sup> Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, 66

things, or would it only perpetuate the rivalry? Even if the former turned out to be true, is it the best way to settle things, or would there continue to be negative feelings between them? Is there a better way to handle the situation? In asking himself these questions Lucas would be trying to “clarify what kind of reason this is supposed to be and then to see whether the initial tendency to take this as a reason stands the test of reflection. If [his] initial tendency [to think that Nathan's spreading rumors about Lucas is a reason for Lucas to spread rumors about Nathan] stands after this reexamination, then [he can] conclude that it really is a reason; if it does not, then [he can] conclude that it is not.”<sup>156</sup>

These two critical stages are where the reflection occurs that I discussed in the previous section. It is just by deeply reflecting on considerations at hand that we can determine what reasons we really have, and what such reasons tell us about how we should behave, all things considered. And presumably, we can form general principles about reasons and reasoning out of these judgments. But let us return to the question of why we should think, for example, if Lucas changes his mind about spreading rumors, that this is a correction to the initial judgment rather than simply a different reaction to the situation. It seems that in this case, the conclusion is arrived at through deep consideration. Initially, what seemed to be a reason to retaliate was a reaction, no doubt based in frustration, anger etc. Of course, this is not to say these factors disqualify some consideration from counting as a reason. But, the subsequent process that Lucas goes through seems to give him a clearer picture of the situation and what is appropriate. And notably, the second conclusion comes out of an examination of the first; it does not spring to mind independently.

The process lends weight to the second conclusion – the one reached after the first critical stage – since it is the more reliable one in terms of understanding what reasons

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<sup>156</sup> Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, 66

Lucas has. Here are a couple of reasons to take this to be so: “First, the later conclusion is supported by a clearer and more detailed conception of what the reason in question might be – of exactly what it is that is supposed to count in favor of [spreading rumors about Nathan]. Second, in virtue of this reflection, it is less likely to be affected by distorting factors such as your rage.”<sup>157</sup> So, not only does this reflective process involve greater consideration which is bound to yield a clearer perspective on the situation, but this reflective process will presumably cut down on factors which initially cloud our judgment, such as the anger and feelings of vengeance Lucas no doubt harbors after hearing of the rumors Nathan spread about him.<sup>158</sup>

Something which is very important to note is that these judgments about reasons, as was discussed in the previous section with respect to justification, are flexible. I may reflect on what I take to be considerations counting in favor of  $\Phi$ -ing and come to certain conclusions, only to re-evaluate things at a different time to come to different conclusions. And this is not to say that just any conclusions are right depending on the time, but since there is less precision in determining truths about practical reasons than there is, say, in determining truths about mathematics, there is bound to be more give. But, however it is that we re-evaluate previous conclusions (i.e. however it is that you criticize me and my conclusions, or I criticize you and your conclusions) all re-evaluation is constitutive of the broader picture of practical reasoning as has been described: “[A]ny way that I can imagine criticizing these judgments and arriving at others would amount to an instance of this same general method. To be sure, we cannot establish in this way that we must accept the judgments about reasons that we do hold. All that can be established

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<sup>157</sup> Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, 66-67

<sup>158</sup> Scanlon notes that thinking of rage as a distorting factor is itself a substantive judgment. But, reflection on this is how we determine whether or not this is fair.

is that they seem, on reflection, to be correct. That, it seems to me, is enough, and as much as one could reasonably ask for.”<sup>159</sup>

Tying this in with the discussion of pure normative claims from chapter one, then, where an agent has a reason just in case relation R holds between some proposition p, circumstances c, and a prescribed action a, we come to understand what pure normative claims there are through this process of seeking reflective equilibrium. What mixed normative claim (i.e. normative claim with facts about the situation built in) is true in the situation of Lucas and Nathan is one which Lucas has to discover through reflection. In his circumstances, where Nathan has spread rumors, there is some matter of fact about what is best for Lucas to do – and there is some pure normative claim which undergirds the situation. Whether or not Lucas comes to the right answer is a substantive issue. But what he is after is trying to determine the truth of normative claims – something he can only do through critically reflecting on what he has reason to do.

Reasons are basic – there is not some thing which makes a reason a reason. Reasons *just are* fundamental. But in determining why a given consideration is a reason for holding some belief or performing some action, on Scanlon's model, since reasons are independent of us, we figure out what reasons we have simply by seeking reflective equilibrium. We examine considerations which seem to be reasons and through grappling with them, we come to more clearly thought-out, less distorted conclusions about what, in fact, we have reason to do. This is what Scanlon takes to be the nature of practical reasoning. But importantly, apart from the evident plausibility of the account, does this not seem to be what we do anyhow? In the final section I will consider how this account seems to capture our phenomenological experience of reasoning.

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<sup>159</sup> Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, 70

## Section 5: Our Experience of Reasoning

Insufficient appreciation is given to philosophical accounts of a given phenomenon which yield both plausible answers and phenomenological accuracy. Scanlon's picture of practical reasoning seems to get us just this. No doubt, people do not think in terms of these four separate stages when deliberating, but this is, in effect, what we do. There are things which strike us as reasons for various actions, and if there is some question left, we reflect further about whether we are right, and if so, what sort of behavior or action is appropriate. An account which is otherwise plausible but seems to tell a story which looks utterly different than what we experience is, I think, lacking in an important sense.

Returning to Korsgaard's view of practical deliberation, while I think on a superficial level it can make sense of our experience of deliberation, it falls short of accounting for *all* such experiences. In short, it strikes me, at least from my subjective experience, that when I am deliberating about something I am not attempting to determine whether some action can be willed as law for someone who fits the description under which I identify myself, given the internal structure of a maxim. And I do not just mean that people do not think in such terms. This would be an unfair criticism, and as I said above, it is not as if, in deliberation, we think about reasoning in four distinct stages either as per Scanlon's account. Rather, it seems to me that our reasoning does not take the form that Korsgaard proposes. But perhaps this is not always obvious. Let me take a look at where Korsgaard's account gets some phenomenological traction.

If I am a father, and I need to decide how to behave toward my son when he is sad, it seems true that I would recognize he needs to be comforted, and as his father I ought to be nurturing (though, hopefully this would come more naturally to the agent than I have suggested here). And so we might think that this follows Korsgaard's model. Being a father is a practical identify I take myself to have, and it strikes me that this

response to my son's sadness is how fathers ought to behave – in other words, it is a maxim which could be willed as law. We might think that this is just as good a candidate for explaining what is going on as suggesting that as a father I simply reflect on what reasons I think my son's sadness gives me – reasons which are basic and independent of me willing a maxim as a law.

In general, I think, when faced with certain decisions we reflect on a particular role we might play and how an exemplar who also plays such a role would behave. A young mother may ask herself what her mother would have done in such and such a situation. A teacher may reflect on how influential teachers in her life went about helping students as a model for how she ought to help students during her own career. Effectively, in light of practical roles we inhabit we see ourselves as having certain reasons. And we may try to understand such reasons by considering how the role would be ideally fulfilled. This does not strike me as obviously problematic. But it remains unclear whether, even in such cases that what we are doing is what Korsgaard suggests. And this might be hard to figure out head-on by further considering like examples. After all, it seems similarly reasonable to think, as the Reasons Fundamentalist does, that there are independent truths about how a person inhabiting a particular role ought to behave in light of a pure normative claim undergirding some particular relation in which an agent stands to a set of circumstances – where one such circumstance happens to be the practical identity he is inhabiting. And perhaps deciding between the two will result in a stand-off. So, our best bet, I think, is to examine another class of cases of reasoning to see whether either account seems unable to accommodate our experience of reasoning.

It at least appears to be the case that sometimes considerations are incommensurable. This is to say, that when I am deciding between two courses of action,

what I should actually do is underdetermined by reason.<sup>160</sup> I think this can be true of situations in which the choices at hand – i.e. either to perform action x, or action y – are mundane or perhaps very important. The considerations which count in favor of performing some action and which count in favor of not performing some action do not yield an answer about which to do. The situation is simply underdetermined by reason. Taking an example where a significant choice must be made, let us, as Raz does, look to Winch's example of Melville's *Billy Budd*. In this story, Vere is forced to make a decision regarding Billy Budd's fate: he must decide whether or not to condemn Billy Budd and execute him. He feels the weight of both “his private conscience and the 'imperial one', embodied in the military code.”<sup>161</sup> Vere ultimately decides to condemn Billy Budd. Winch, evidently would have chosen differently, though he admits he does not think that Vere made a choice which was wrong for him: “I could not have acted as did Vere; ... I should have found it morally impossible to condemn a man 'innocent before God' under such circumstances. In reaching this decision I do not think that I should appeal to any considerations over and above those which Vere himself appeals. It is just that I think I should find the considerations connected with Billy Budd's peculiar innocence too powerful to be overridden by the appeal to military duty.”<sup>162</sup>

Importantly, in comparing Winch's (hypothetical) decision and Vere's decision, we must keep in mind that the very same considerations were in play, as Winch points out – just considerations which count in favor or condemning or not condemning Billy Budd. It is not that Vere took his own identity into consideration, and that Winch took his own identity into consideration. It is just that, in the situation, neither of them could have

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<sup>160</sup> Raz, Joseph, “The Truth In Particularism.” *Engaging Reason*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999., 242 - I will not mount an argument for incommensurability here. But, like Raz it strikes me that there is widespread incommensurability. See Raz, Joseph “Incomensurability and Agency” in *Engaging Reason*.

<sup>161</sup> Raz, “The Truth in Particularism”, 239

<sup>162</sup> Raz, “The Truth In Particularism:”, 239

decided other than in fact they did. Further, “Winch does not say that it was right to convict Billy Budd (impersonally speaking, i.e. without regard to who is convicting him). He says that Vere's decision to convict was right for him. I added that this can only be if when impersonally judged neither course of action is dictated by reason, only if reason underdetermines the outcome.”<sup>163</sup> So, in order for a different action in the same situation to be the right decision for them both, it must be the case that there is no objectively proper choice – the situation is underdetermined by reason. If this was not the case, then one of the agents would have just gotten it wrong. But, Winch claims, neither of them did. And, as per the discussion of the will in chapter two, the will is what mediates between reason and action and so “the will comes into play at this stage (though, as has already been noted, that is not the only role it can play in action), and typically agents choose from incommensurate options one that they want to perform. In any case, whatever they do, they do because they choose to, not because they ought to perform that action on the balance of reasons.”<sup>164</sup>

In more ordinary cases of incommensurability, an agent's decisions will be based in inclination, desire or they will simply choose. Unique to this this example from Melville and others relevantly similar, is the experience of it being impossible to choose otherwise. Winch does not think Vere made the wrong decision, but he knows from his own perspective it would have been 'morally impossible' to act likewise.<sup>165</sup> But in either of these types of cases – mundane or significant – where considerations are incommensurable, the agent's deliberation consists simply of reflection on what they have reason to do. Let me consider how both of the views on the table – i.e. Korsgaard's and Scanlon's – are able to make sense of this experience.

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<sup>163</sup> Raz, “The Truth in Particularism”, 242

<sup>164</sup> Raz, “Incommensurability and Agency”, 49

<sup>165</sup> Raz, “The Truth in Particularism”, 242

To start, perhaps we can gain a better understanding in the disparity between the two accounts with respect to their ability to accommodate incommensurability by considering Korsgaard's distinction between procedural and substantive realism. Korsgaard is a procedural realist – i.e. she takes there to be truths about reasons only insofar as there is a correct procedure for practical reasoning. This is the process I described in the second section of this chapter. Scanlon is what Korsgaard refers to as a substantive realist, as he takes there to be truths about reasons which exist independently of any procedures. And in turn he takes there to be proper procedures for practical reasoning insofar as they allow us to get at truths about reasons.<sup>166</sup> So, the difference lies in why there is a correct procedure for determining truths about reasons. As I will discuss, Scanlon's account allows for the conceptual space needed to make sense of incommensurability, whereas Korsgaard's account, which takes there to be truths about reasons just insofar as there is a proper procedure, will be unable to accommodate the view that sometimes there are no answers about what to do, even where the procedure is rigorous.

On Scanlon's Reasons Fundamentalism, where truths about reasons are determined relative to the first-order domain of practical reasoning, and where we come to such conclusions through seeking reflective equilibrium – attempting to gain a clearer less distorted picture of whether considerations which seem to be reasons really are reasons and whether they are sufficient for issuing in some particular action – it seems reasonable to think that sometimes there will be no answer about how to measure competing considerations. And this seems to happen rather frequently.

Thinking of reasons as having determinate truth values independent of our understanding of them and as discoverable through a process of seeking reflective

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<sup>166</sup> Korsgaard, 36-37

equilibrium does not commit us to the view that there are unique answers to all questions about how to choose and to act. This is to say, it might sometimes be the case that we have decisive reason to do any of  $x$  or  $y$  or  $z$ , but no conclusive reason to do any one of them over the others. And why should we think there is always one unique answer about what to do? Seeking reflective equilibrium with respect to practical reasoning is directed at figuring out what reasons there are; what we have reason to do, what we have sufficient reason to do, and what we have conclusive reason to do. But, in the event that there are considerations which are incommensurable – reasons which simply cannot be weighed against each other so that a single or unique answer is properly yielded – this seems to be no problem for the process of seeking reflective equilibrium. The answer in such a case is that there is no unique right answer about what to do. As discussed in section three, practical reasoning is an inherently less precise process than, for example, reasoning in set theory. Notably, Scanlon points to how even set theory arguably leaves room for indeterminacy. But most importantly, what we should remember from that discussion is that even where a practice yields less precise results, we need not think it is a process without any rigor; indeed it may be more rigorous. And so while it may appear that the availability of several eligible answers presents a problem for Reasons Fundamentalism, we should not think this is the case. Sometimes, even after a rigorous process of seeking reflective equilibrium, we may come to an unsatisfactory, though not incorrect, answer about what to do: there simply is no *one* right answer. And since seeking reflective equilibrium is being in the business of determining what reasons there really are, it would be mistaken of us to insist that there must always be a unique answer about what to do. It is not impossible that there should always be a right answer – but it certainly does not seem that there is. And why must we think that there is a single right answer, in spite of our best reasoning telling us otherwise?

If I were in the situation Vere was faced with, I am not sure what I would choose – but if the considerations were genuinely incommensurable when reflected upon, then I would perhaps also be faced with this sense that it would be impossible for me to act one way (or the other). If facts about reasons are independent normative truths, then it is unclear why this cannot be the case and why this might not sometimes happen. It certainly seems to, after all. As discussed in the second chapter, this is where the will steps in and helps us decide – mediating between reason and action and helping to determine the relationship we have with our decisions. In a conflict such as Vere was faced with, I may choose one course of action only to perform the action begrudgingly, but nonetheless take myself to have reasons to act in this way and finding it impossible to act otherwise. There is just no single pure normative claim which prescribe what to do. The will just helps me determine which claim to act on, and how to feel about doing so. But, I think, within Korsgaard's account there is nothing to account for the seeming incommensurability of the alternatives in such a situation without signalling a deliberative failure.

Korsgaard's account seems unable to make sense of the apparent incommensurability of some reasons. If we understand our reasons for action as being manifestations of the descriptions under which we identify ourselves it seems that we will never encounter such circumstances – or if we feel that we do, then we have made an error in conceiving of ourselves or of how someone with such an identity ought to act. Any apparent incommensurability would be only illusory since the proper procedure would always presumably yield a determinate answer. Unlike the case of Billy Budd where Vere makes his choice not because of any reason but just because, given his moral character, he could not do otherwise, for Korsgaard taking your identity into account seems to be a necessary component of the deliberative process. As such, we can

therefore track the deliberative failure: they both failed to take their respective identities into account when this is constitutive of proper practical deliberation.

So are we just wrong in all of the cases where it seems as though the options are incommensurable? This would be surprising. After all, we know what it is like when we come to clear answers about what reasons we have in other scenarios. Might it not just be that, at least sometimes, when it seems that the options are incommensurable it is because they actually are? And so not only does Korsgaard's account fail to get at what is occurring in this example – i.e. by suggesting the incommensurability is illusory – but, I think, it signals an oddly self-regarding dimension of her account of practical reasoning insofar as it demands we take our identities into account when determining what we have reason to do.

Korsgaard takes reasoning to be a process which is performed in light of and with regard to our identities. And there is a sense in which this is true. There are reasons which will apply to the coach of a basketball team, that simply do not apply to me as a student. I have no reason to make sure there are balls pumped up and ready for a practice. The coach probably does. But it does not seem that all reasoning takes this form. Rather than making choices in virtue of my identity, I (at least sometimes) make choices, and as a result, discover things about myself and my identity. Raz suggests:

When we follow reason, or fail to follow it, we reveal and we mould our executive virtues or failings. It is, however, primarily where matters are underdetermined by reason that we reveal and mould our distinctive individuality, our tastes, our imagination, our sociability, and many of our other, including our moral, characteristics.<sup>167</sup> [And further] 'discovery', in the sense relevant here, need not be of something unknown or surprising. It can be no more than reaffirming what one thought to be the case any way. [...] The question is not, given my moral character what shall I do? To put it thus is to foreclose the possibility of change in one's personal perspective, and to deny

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<sup>167</sup> Raz, "The Truth in Particularism", 242

the self-determining, the self-creating aspect of decision and action.<sup>168</sup>

In action, we reflect on what we ought to do and form intentions to act accordingly (or discordantly). In doing so we come to learn about ourselves. Korsgaard suggests that in deliberation we consider who we are, and try to act accordingly – but this, I think, is not what we do. Rather than pre-determining who we are and acting accordingly, it seems we act, and as a result come to form and come to understand who we are.

### **Conclusion**

It is fairly clear where my allegiances lie. I have, throughout this project, been trying to bolster Scanlon's account of reasons (with help along the way from Raz). So, perhaps I am biased. But when I am reasoning, say, about what steps to take next in my professional or academic career, I do my best to attend to the considerations which count in favor of competing options. I reflect on these considerations and try to weigh them against each other. Typically, I am not in the habit of determining whether one of the potential courses of action is something which is universalizable given the descriptions under which I identify myself. And no doubt this alone is not a knock down argument against Korsgaard's account of practical deliberation. For one, perhaps people do, as a matter of practice, reason in this way. And further, even if they do not this does not make her account necessarily wrong. But, at least in regards to this issue of understanding what reasons we have, I think her account rings false from our experiences of deliberation. As I have tried to show, this is especially true when reason underdetermines an outcome.

A picture of reasons as fundamental, in which our deliberation takes the form of reflecting on the truth of potential facts seems to be much closer to what we are typically

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<sup>168</sup> Raz, "The Truth in Particularism", 244-245

doing. In effect, we are just reflecting on what is true of our relation to the circumstances in which we stand; we come to see ourselves as having reasons in virtue of facts about the relations in which we stand, rather than in virtue of facts about ourselves in particular as Nagel argues. Scanlon's view seems to make sense of reasoning across the board, whereas Korsgaard's interpretation fails to account for at least the class of incommensurable reasons, which should call into question whether it gets the rest of the cases right either. It seems that at least one of the aims of philosophy is to get at what is going on in the world. It strikes me that one good way of trying to come to grips with this is by taking into account what it is we are actually engaged in – what we experience. Scanlon's account of the process of seeking reflective equilibrium seems to do just this. Importantly, this process clearly follows from the view of reasons I have defended throughout the project where reasons are fundamental. Where reasons are basic and objective – not dependent on subjective conditions – we determine which reasons we have just by thinking carefully about them. And all the better for Scanlon's view, since this seems to be what we do anyway.

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