



## BIROn - Birkbeck Institutional Research Online

Price, Anthony W. (2016) Review of T.M. Scanlon, 'Being Realistic about Reasons'. *Mind* 125 (500), pp. 1270-1273. ISSN 0026-4423.

Downloaded from: <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/id/eprint/15144/>

*Usage Guidelines:*

Please refer to usage guidelines at <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/policies.html>  
contact [lib-eprints@bbk.ac.uk](mailto:lib-eprints@bbk.ac.uk).

or alternatively

*Being Realistic about Reasons* by T. M. Scanlon. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. Pp. ix + 132. H/b £19.99, P/b £11.99.

‘Big book, big evil’, wrote the Alexandrian epigrammatist Callimachus. This book, which derives from the John Locke lectures that Timothy Scanlon delivered in Oxford in 2009, is of a good length. It is a smooth but not quick read, being equally lucid and succinct; it can engage and inform readers without devouring too much of their time, or precluding them from pursuing its many references to the recent literature. It is more of a pleasure to read in that it leaves one time to think for oneself.

Its title is itself intriguingly ambivalent. Realism is a form of immodesty (one thinks of Platonism about numbers or values), while being realistic is a way of being modest. Scanlon’s book offers an intriguing alliance of both qualities.

The ‘reasons fundamentalism’ that he espouses can take two forms (2): (i) there are truths about reasons, and these are not reducible to non-normative truths, nor derivable from prior notions of rationality; (ii) reasons are the fundamental normative notion, by reference to which other normative notions (such as *good* and *ought*) can be analysed. Scanlon says that he is tempted by (ii), but will here only argue for (i). He is equally resistant to two ways of relating reasons internally to desires (both indebted to Hume): one can hold that (a) to have a reason to do something is to have a desire for some end which it serves, or that (b) normative judgments are really expressions of desire or preference (a view that is not so easily or directly stutable in terms of reasons). He argues (46-50) against Mark Schroeder that, if one man, who enjoys dancing, has a reason to go to a dance which another man, who dislikes dancing, doesn’t, this can simply be because the one would enjoy himself and the other wouldn’t. Adding in a reference to desire within the content of the reason seems superfluous here, and can appear self-regarding elsewhere. He argues (58-9) against (b) that it doesn’t well fit with the practice of giving advice: if I advise you to do something, it can hardly give weight to my advice that it is an expression of *my* preferences.

The omission of any proper discussion of (ii) is a sensible restriction within a short book. Yet in practice Scanlon has to discuss reasons *as if* they were independent of ‘ought’s and values. This gives rise, at crucial points, to a certain sparseness. Both (a) and (b), in different ways, try to explain how we can expect normative judgments, including statements about reasons, to be motivating for agents. (Indeed, it is a danger that they may make it inexplicable how an agent may freely and consciously act against such a judgment.) Scanlon offers what seems a bare Aristotelianism backed by a scientific gesture: human beings are rational animals, and so are such as to be motivated by reasons; how this is so is ‘another story, for neuroscientists to fill in’ (54-5). A non-essentialist explanation of how we are receptive of reasons might benefit from attending to other normative notions. If one has a reason to do what is *good* in some way that connects with one’s own welfare, or that of others with whom one has some solidarity, this reason may motivate one not just to the extent that one is reasonable. Scanlon proposes (31) that ‘is a reason for’ is a four-place relation,  $R(p, x, c, a)$  holding between a fact  $p$ , an agent  $x$ , a set of conditions  $c$ , and an action or attitude  $a$ . Is what connects the reason to *this* agent just that, independently of his motivations, he is capable of  $a$ ? Or is it there more to be said about how  $x$  is such that  $a$  has value for him, centrally (but not only) in *benefiting* him, or others with whom he can identify? Recognizing a reason for  $a$  need not amount to judging it to be beneficial; and yet a conception of practical reasons that is not underpinned by one of benefit may be too cerebral to connect with our humanity.

What is it for there to *be* a reason, anyway? What kind of world contains reasons *as such*? Facts constitute reasons: in ‘His reason was that *p*’, ‘that *p*’ is factive. Scanlon’s preferred formula relates the existence of a reason to a fact that constitutes it, but does not imply that there is any single criterion that accommodates both its being a fact that *p*, and *p*’s being a reason. For Scanlon, questions of existence and truth are internal to some framework that is constituted by a distinctive methodology. Whether *p*, given *c*, brings into being for *x* a reason in favour of *a* is a normative question that is not promoted into being a metaphysical one by the term ‘being’; for there are no ‘general, domain-independent conditions of “existence” such that the various existential claims made in every domain entail or presuppose that entities of the kinds they refer to fulfil these conditions’ (25). However, to ascend to a purely normative domain, we need to withdraw to a mode of discourse that makes normative claims that depend on no non-normative ones; e.g., we must retreat from ‘Jones has a reason to leave the burning building now’ to something like ‘Anyone in these circumstances has reason to do what is necessary to prolong his life’ (39). (This, of course, is R. M. Hare’s universalizability without his prescriptivism.)

The effect is not necessarily conservative: domains are not defined by habitual ways of thinking, but invite inquiry into how best to understand them ‘at the most abstract and fundamental level’ (25). Nor are the implications ‘minimalist’ (28); rather, they are as substantive as the domain of discourse in question. Yet this might seem too ontologically permissive: what if we had ‘established criteria for deciding whether someone is or is not a witch’ (21)? Would it follow that witches may exist, and even, given a few familiar facts, that the old lady next door (the one who has a black cat) *is* a witch? This anxiety is unreal: it is in the nature of witches to interfere in the physical world, causing ‘cows to stop giving milk’, and ‘people to become sick and die’; and the evidence is that they have no such powers. However, what of a belief in some distant paradise, peopled by spirits who keep clear of our world? Scanlon has a general reply: ‘The question about such entities is not whether they really exist ... The question is only whether we have any reason to be concerned with these entities and their properties’ (27). If so, why not concede their existence and then change the subject? It may be a better objection that one is free to say about them whatever one likes; which rather ranks them with fictions.

Yet what constraints govern our reflections about practical reasons? Reasons for belief are subject to constraints that arise from the internal relation of belief to truth. Not all beliefs are true; yet truth is the goal of belief (which has to be somehow responsive to truth-regarding considerations if it is to count as belief at all). Analogous constraints will apply to reasons for action to the extent that action aims at goals that it takes to be good. Perhaps not all action is so aimed; the constraints will still apply to action that is. Then, just as arguments against the truth of *p* offer reasons against believing that *p*, so arguments against the goodness of the goal will offer reasons against acting to achieve it. However, if reasons are self-standing, how do they get off the ground? Is this an Indian rope trick?

Scanlon proposes, ‘We can discover normative truths and mathematical truths simply by thinking about these objects in the right way?’ (70). But how *should* we think normatively? In Scanlon’s view, ‘The method of reflective equilibrium provides a satisfactory answer’ (71). Yet he notes the objection ‘that the conclusions it reaches are justified only if the considered judgments with which it begins are ... justified in some way other than by the method itself’ (82). He remains hopeful of a form of constructivism (90-104). Philosophers from Plato to Rawls have given thought to contractarian conceptions of justice that view it as an invention that serves to reconcile the interests of individuals. Whether reasons themselves can rest upon a more

profound constructivism is more doubtful. Scanlon remains hopeful, though he is sceptical of some well-known approaches.

Questions remain open that he is not trying to settle. It may be a criterion of a real concern about them that one can learn from this intelligent and uncomplacent book.

*Department of Philosophy, Birkbeck College London*

A. W. Price  
[a.price@bbk.ac.uk](mailto:a.price@bbk.ac.uk)