Reasons, Language Games and Forms of Life

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The overarching theme of this conference is "Norms: Concepts and Practices". In this talk, I shall approach that topic from the angle of a particular normative concept, the concept of a reason. More specifically, I shall discuss reasons for action, or, as they are also frequently called, practical reasons — reasons that we have for doing certain things but not others, reasons that we weigh when we decide what we should do, reasons that guide us in deliberation and action. And the point of my talk is to suggest that reasons for action as well as reasons of other kinds can only be adequately understood against the background of a highly complex linguistic practice: namely that of *taking* certain things as reasons, of *relying* on them, in their characteristic role as reasons, in communication and action. And I shall emphasize what I take to be one important advantage of understanding reasons in this way: namely that facts about reasons, including the facts concerning what reasons for action we have, need not and should not be seen as objective, if their being objective would mean that they are as they are independently of our beliefs about and our responses to them. In particular, they are not as they are independently of human 'language games' and 'forms of life': more or less localized practices of using words, embedded in regular patterns of action.

1.   Wittgenstein

This is a profoundly Wittgensteinian theme. Indeed, Wittgenstein coined both expressions, "language game" and "form of life", as they are used today across a number of disciplines, within philosophy and well beyond. In his *Philosophical Investigations*, he refers to a "whole process of using words" as a "language game", and adds that he "shall also call the whole, consisting of language and the activities into which it is woven", "language game".[1] And the word "language *game*" is meant "to emphasize the fact that the *speaking* of a language is part of an activity, or of a form of life".[2]

Now if this is a helpful way of understanding language and in particular, if it is a helpful way of elucidating questions of linguistic meaning, then it is a way of

[1] L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, § 7.
[2] L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, § 23.

understanding *all* language and *all* questions of meaning. And that means that the fact that reasons for action are part of a "language game" or "form of life", and must be understood in that context, does not yet settle the question what the point of that "language game" or "form of life" might be. In particular, it does not yet settle the question whether the language we use when we speak about reasons is, or is not, used to describe something which we might call the *objective order of reasons*. We are tempted to think that in some sense, such an order exists, even if we cannot fully understand or explain it. Moreover, there is nothing in the idea of a language game or a form of life by itself that would rule this out. After all, there is a language game of referring to planets like Venus and Mars, and there can hardly be any doubt that what is true of Mars and of Venus is largely true of them whether we know about it or not, and independently of what we say, think, or feel concerning the matter.

On the other hand, this is only one of the manifold uses of language, and we must now ask whether this model of a description of an objective order of facts does in fact apply to reasons. One reason why we should hesitate is that whatever it is, the point of the language game of giving reasons is not merely one of giving descriptions. Rather, it is the practical one of deciding what to believe and to do, and to communicate about such matters. Once again, this does not immediately exclude the possibility that objective standards concerning what to believe and what to do exist and feature in our language game as reference points, perhaps as objects of knowledge. But it raises the question whether they do, and that question can now no longer be answered in the affirmative as if that answer were obviously true. In fact, according to Wittgenstein, it is not true, and his critical investigation in other areas leads to the same result. The idea that an objective order of reasons exists is highly doubtful. The situation is essentially the same in ethics and aesthetics. As Wittgenstein argues, it is the same even where might least expect it, namely in mathematics and logic. What gives language games like these their point, and undoubtedly exists, is the immensely complicated context of human life — our activities, interests, as well as our need to navigate and understand the natural world that surrounds us.

2.   The Platonist Temptation

To some, these claims sound not only strange, but disturbing. They clearly run against the grain of some of our most trusted expectations, and some of our hopes and aspirations. It is easy to agree that the earth is closer to the sun than Mars, but further away than Venus, and that this is so no matter what anyone feels, thinks or says concerning the matter. Moreover, it is easy to agree that this is how things stand in our

solar system whether or not there are humans around to ponder the question, and that it is how things stood long before humans entered the scene. But it is not so easy to accept that this does not apply, in a different but structurally similar fashion, to reasons   not to mention to mathematics and logic. Obviously, reasons are not simply physical objects. Again, the facts about reasons are not simply natural facts. Still, there seem to be facts of the matter as to what reasons there are   and accordingly, we think of these facts as belonging to some mysteriously different order, while being equally "hard" and objective. Perhaps we even think of them as some of the most important and fundamental facts of all.

If the Wittgensteinian view is right, then this model is deeply misleading. There is no such mysteriously different order, and the ability to recognize and to think in terms of reasons does not put us in touch with anything beyond the human sphere. And the part of the human sphere that is relevant here is, at the most general level, once more that of familiar responses to a wide range of natural objects, their behaviour and their arrangement, as well as our interactions with others, given our needs, our purposes and our experience. The model of the objective order fails to give us the right account of our language of reasons, even though we are constantly tempted to think that it does.

Accordingly, it comes as no surprise that the view that I am recommending and have ascribed to Wittgenstein runs counter to a powerful and prominent tradition in philosophy. That tradition goes back at least as far as Plato, who provides an instructive, if somewhat dramatic, example of its appeal. In Plato, we find the idea that natural objects are copies or images of what he calls 'forms' or 'ideas'. The latter are thought of as prior and as superior to the former, because they are neither composed of parts, nor located in space or time and therefore not subject to change. Moreover, while natural objects depend on the 'forms' or 'ideas', that dependence runs only in that direction. What can be said is at most that all 'ideas' or 'forms' are good, so that the 'form of goodness' is established as the most basic and most pervasive of all.

Now few of us today are likely to find this picture persuasive. And there are obvious reasons for this: it strikes us as wildly fanciful, as a paradigmatic example of an invention by a philosopher, dazzling and daring as it undoubtedly is. We have no idea what these 'forms' or 'ideas' are supposed to be, where they are to be found or where they come from, how they interact with natural objects, and how we get to know them if we do. Moreover, it looks as if we can explain everything that we might care to explain without invoking such items, and that makes them look like a creative response to a problem that does not exist. In fact, the whole picture looks like a projection of

thoroughly human affairs onto the truly grand scale of the universe: our ability to use general concepts, such as the concept 'good', is turned into ontology. This is a recipe for disaster: language misleads us when we read its grammatical structure into reality. We cannot turn to language to tell us what there really is.

What is less obvious is that questions like these persist even when we bring reasons and equally, truth in ethics, aesthetics, and mathematics and logic a little closer to earth. Suppose we deny that what I called the human sphere a world of natural objects, and our responses to these objects as well as to each other exhausts the realm of the real. We can deny this without making claims about any 'forms' or 'ideas', and without taking natural objects to be dependent on anything else or as being at all deficient. All that we have to say is that in addition to what is uncontroversially part of nature and the human sphere, there is an order of reason, or value, or number, or logic, that is not captured in terms of our responses to nature alone. And this claim is much more defensible than the Platonic idea of a world that is engendered and permeated by goodness.

But while it is certainly more defensible, the more modest claim still inherits some of the problems of the Platonic account. Could the supposed order of reason not also be an invention? What is it, where does it come from, and where is it to be found? How does it enter the human sphere, and how can we have knowledge of it? Can we appeal to it to explain anything, or is it just metaphysical baggage that we are well advised to leave behind? And could it not also be a projection, once again driven by language and further elusive notions like meaning, knowledge and truth?

3.   Scanlon

I suspect that this is indeed the case, and that seen from this angle, we have to rethink some of our assumptions about our ability to appreciate reasons for action. But instead of pursuing this general theme any further, I will now consider an interesting recent example of work concerning the nature of reasons for action. As we shall see, this work helps to focus our questions and illuminates them in a different way.

The example of work I have chosen is Tim Scanlon's discussion of reasons for action in his highly influential book *What Owe to Each Other*, published by Harvard in 1998. As the title suggests, it is first and foremost a book in moral theory. But it is relevant for our discussion because the strategy Scanlon adopts is to take the idea of a reason for action as basic, and then to use it to give more substantial accounts of ideas that have

always seemed somewhat elusive in moral enquiry: value, goodness, moral right and wrong. Accordingly, Scanlon begins his enquiry by asking what reasons are, and then proceeds to give an account of value and moral right and wrong in terms of his analysis of reasons.

And the first point he makes about the concept of a reason is that it cannot be analyzed, if that entails giving it some definition in simpler and supposedly more basic terms. Thus, Scanlon writes:

> I will take the idea of a reason as primitive. Any attempt to explain what it is to be a reason for something seems to me to lead back to the same idea: a consideration that counts in favor of it. "Counts in favor how?" one might ask. "By providing a reason for it" seems to be the only answer.[3]

This point seems to me to be correct. There is no useful analysis or definition of the concept of a reason, and so understood, it is basic.

However, I suspect that this is not all that Scanlon is saying in the passage I just quoted. He also seems to suggest, if only indirectly, that the facts about reasons themselves are basic, and that the attempt to explain their structure and shape in philosophical terms is bound to fail. Accordingly, demands for such an explanation would be out of place, and this is indeed what he says more explicitly in a number of different places.

In this respect, the facts concerning reasons differ remarkably from facts concerning value and moral right and wrong, as Scanlon tends to portray them. On his account, both questions of value and questions of moral right and wrong are factual questions, susceptible to answers that are either true or false. This preserves our sense that we sometimes *know* that something is valuable, or good, and equally that we sometimes *know* what would be morally right or wrong to do in a given situation. And when we say that we know, in some particular instance, what the morally right or wrong thing to do would be, there must be a fact of the matter as to what *is* the morally right or wrong thing to do. Even where we feel hesitant and uncertain, and so do not claim knowledge of value or right or wrong in that instance, we might expect there to *be* a fact of the matter, whether we know it or not. Again, the same seems to be true of goodness and value.

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[3] Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, p. 17.

But what kinds of facts are these? What makes it the case that statements of this type are true when they are true, and false when they are false? Are these facts also basic and not susceptible to explanation? Scanlon's answer is striking. With respect to both value and goodness, and with respect to moral right and wrong, his account refers us to the basic notion of a reason. Thus, Scanlon says this about goodness:

> Goodness is not a single substantive property which gives us reason to promote or prefer the things that have it. Rather, to call something good is to claim that it has other properties (different ones in different cases) which provide such reasons.[4]

The idea, then, is that to be good is to have some further properties which give us reasons   reasons to prefer or to promote the thing in question. If so, goodness is derivative and presupposes the basic idea of a reason.

With moral judgments of right and wrong, we find a similar link. It is, however, both less direct and more complex, because it involves an essential reference, first, to the reasons of other people, and second, to the idea of a principle which other people can or cannot reasonably reject. Thus, Scanlon says that judgments of moral right and wrong

> are judgments about what would be permitted by principles that could not reasonably be rejected, by people who were moved to find principles for the general regulation of behavior that others, similarly motivated, could not reasonably reject.[5]

Accordingly, Scanlon takes "judgments of right and wrong to be claims about reasons".[6] Once again, the basic idea of a reason turns out to be central to understanding a moral idea. The basic idea of a reason is not only involved in the notion of goodness or value, but equally in the distinction between moral right and wrong.

4.   Critical Questions

For all that I have said so far, these accounts may be true to their subject matter, goodness on the one hand, moral right and wrong on the other. I myself am inclined to doubt that this is so, but that is not my present topic. What I want to ask instead is how we are to think about reasons if we accept what Scanlon says.

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[4] *Op. cit.*, p. 11.
[5] *ibid.*
[6] *Op. cit.*, p. 3.

There is one obvious problem with his account. It arises to the extent to which that account is designed to remove the mysterious aura that seems to surround properties like 'being good' or 'being morally wrong'. Scanlon offers substantial accounts of these properties that are designed to expose their structure and foundation, and while their structure is different, that basis is found in both cases in the more basic idea of a reason. Thus, Scanlon is hopeful that his account makes such properties as 'being good' or 'being morally wrong' less mysterious than they might otherwise seem:

> It describes judgments of right and wrong as judgments about reasons and justification, judgments of a kind that can be correct or incorrect and that we are capable of assessing through familiar forms of thought that should not strike us as mysterious.[7]

But despite the attractions of the idea, it merely shifts the old problem to a new place. After all, we will now want to know more about the status of the relevant reasons. Can we identify them with any confidence? Can we claim knowledge of them? If so, how? Is there a fact of the matter as to what reasons there are? What kind of fact is that? Are some of these reasons the same for every agent? And how do these facts fit into our wider account of the natural, social and cultural world that we inhabit? As long as we have no good answers to these questions, this strategy of making moral facts look less mysterious cannot possibly succeed.

Scanlon himself is aware of this danger, and he works hard to defend his account against such sceptical doubts. In my view, he does this at best with mixed success. He is at pains to point out that the existence of "substantive standards" of reasons do not commit us to some form of Platonism, just as the existence of substantive standards in mathematics do not commit us to Platonist views about numbers and their relations. That may be so, but to leave it at that is to leave us entirely in the dark as to what those substantive standards might be and where they come from. In the end, Scanlon appeals to us to take judgments about reasons at face value. Given his interpretation, to do so is to accept that there are normative facts that are independent of our judgments and beliefs about them, and that the judgments in which we have a high degree of confidence deserve to be taken as true. But is this an answer? It strikes me as a refusal to give an answer.

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[7] *Op. cit.*, p. 4.

5.   Wittgenstein Again

At this point, it is worth coming back to Wittgenstein, both for a general attitude towards such questions and for some, however sketchy, proposals. The general attitude is one of scepticism concerning Platonist pictures in all their guises. We get on well enough without supposing that mathematical language answers to some mysterious order of mathematical objects. In fact, we do not even fully grasp what such a realm could be. And we get on equally well without supposing that either ethical language or the language of reasons answers to some mysterious order of normative facts or objects. Again, we do not even fully grasp what such a normative realm could be, and the idea of its existence raises more difficult questions than it can answer.

The concrete proposal is that we should think of reasons for action and for belief as reflecting our contingent, more or less local, and perspectival commitments. The language game of giving reasons is embedded in the human form of life   and like human life itself, it neither has nor needs any rational foundation.

In closing, I will illustrate these claims with two quotes from Wittgenstein himself, taken from notes of conversations he had with Rush Rhees in the 1940s. Here is what Wittgenstein says about the Platonist picture, as applied to ethics:

> Someone may say, 'There is still the difference between truth and falsity. Any ethical judgment in whatever system may be true or false.' Remember that 'p is true' means simply 'p.' If I say: 'Although I believe that so and so is good, I may be wrong': this says no more than that what I assert may be denied.

> Or suppose someone says, 'One of the ethical systems must be the right one   or nearer to the right one. ' Well, suppose I say Christian ethics is the right one. Then I am making a judgment of value. It amounts to *adopting* Christian ethics. It is not like saying that one of these physical theories must be the right one. The way in which some reality corresponds   or conflicts   with a physical theory has no counterpart here.[8]

This is an expression of the general attitude, a rejection of the idea that there is some mysterious order of ethical fact to which we refer when we use ethical language. The same is true of reasons, and here the temptation to postulate what I called *the objective order of reasons* is equally strong. The fact is that our reasons are a function of what we

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[8] R. Rhees, "Some Developments in Wittgenstein's View of Ethics", p. 24.

take to be a reason, and what we *use* and *rely on* as such a reason in communication and action. Wittgenstein says:

> In considering a different system of ethics there may be a strong temptation to think that what seems to us to express the justification of an action must be what really justifies it there, whereas the real reasons are the reasons that are given. These *are* the reasons for or against the action. 'Reason' doesn't always mean the same thing; and in ethics we have to keep from assuming that reasons must really be of a different sort from what they are seen to be.[9]

It is no overstatement to say that we still have to fathom the depths of this view.

References

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[9] R. Rhees, "Some Developments in Wittgenstein's View of Ethics", p. 26.