What do you mean "This isn't the question"?[*]

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1. Introduction

It is natural to approach a book entitled *Being Realistic about Reasons* with a degree of trepidation. After all, the admonishment "Be realistic!" is usually a way of telling you that you can't have what you want. Happily, in this case, the implication is misleading. For T. M. Scanlon argues that we can have everything that he hopes for with respect to normativity. And this is not because his hopes are skimpy or idiosyncratic. For example, Scanlon claims that we can:

- Vindicate the idea that there are truths about reasons
- Vindicate the genuine normativity of reasons
- Vindicate the stance-independence of fundamental normative truths
- Explain the modal connections between normative truths and other truths
- Explain how we can have knowledge of normative truths

We agree that these are good desiderata for a metaethical theory. Not so long ago, it would have seemed obvious that taking these desiderata to be satisfied marked one as a realist of a rather strong sort about the normative. But times have become more complicated. Several philosophers have followed Simon Blackburn's lead, and sought to show how one's theoretical understanding of ethics can start out with the characteristic materials of ur-anti-realists like A. J. Ayer (1946), and nonetheless end up sounding hard to

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distinguish from ur-realists like G. E. Moore (1903). Scanlon is clear that he wants nothing to do with the non-cognitivism that underlies such 'quasi-realist' views. But he appears sympathetic at times to the idea that the desiderata just mentioned do not commit one to an expansive ontology.

In this, Scanlon is similar to so-called quietists like Ronald Dworkin (2011), Matthew Kramer (2009), and Derek Parfit (2011).[1] These philosophers characteristically accept something like the quasi-realist's *negative* program, arguing that commitments like those just mentioned do not saddle one with ontological commitments that require special defense. However, they simultaneously reject the *positive* expressivist program that is supposed by the quasi-realist to provide the underlying interpretive alternative to these putative ontological commitments. Because the expressivist program faces a familiar family of burdens, this alternative, if it could be made to work, would potentially be an extremely attractive metanormative position. However, this potential can only be realized if views like Scanlon's can do the sorts of explanatory work that seemed to call for a robust, ontologically committal realism – or at least the positive, expressivist element of the quasi-realist program – in the first place.

In this symposium contribution we have two aims: To ask for more details about Scanlon's meta-metaphysical view (while raising doubts about the likelihood of Scanlon being able to fill in those details in a coherent way); and to raise independent objections to the view, especially to its (central) application in metaethics. We ask for more details on the central notion of a *domain* – and with it, on Scanlon's official criterion of existence (§2), on the sense in which his theory is meant to be ontologically thin (§3), and on the role of pragmatic considerations in Scanlon's criterion of existence (§4). We then challenge Scanlon's account's in three ways. First, we argue that it fails to secure promised explanatory payoffs, for instance, vis-à-vis supervenience and epistemology (§5). Second, we argue that it is unclear how, at the end of the day, Scanlon's account differs from an unattractive version of hermeneutical fictionalism (§6). Finally, we note that the book does little to argue for the account that Scanlon endorses.

A recurrent theme throughout our discussion will be some pessimism about Scanlon being able to do all he wants to do without committing himself ontologically in ways he is eager to avoid. One way of focusing attention on this worry is to compare Scanlon's account – in a way he never explicitly does – to that of the philosopher we'll call the *Modest Rationalist Metaphysician* (more briefly: *Modest*). She is modest in the sense that – like Scanlon – she grants that scientific investigation is (of course!) our overwhelmingly best guide to the nomic structure of the actual world. However, and perhaps

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[1] And perhaps also Nagel (1997, Ch.6), though his is an especially difficult view to classify. See Svavarsdottir 2001 for important relevant discussion of Nagel's view.

unlike the "Quinean" whom Scanlon treats as his foil (18)[2], she takes science not to be an obviously helpful guide to topics like freedom, justice or phenomenal qualia. She is instead confident that we can answer important questions about these topics from the armchair, a priori. But unlike Scanlon, she rejects a view of existence that relativizes or contextualizes it. She thinks – in this respect, perhaps like the Quinean – that "exists" is univocal, and that there is nothing ontologically "thin" about the seemingly ontologically heavy commitments of realism about normative discourse. Modest may be a robust, non-naturalist realist, or she may be naturalist realist of sorts. But she is no quietist. And it will prove useful to see how Scanlon's views compare to Modest's. Thus, we will return to her from time to time.

2. Domains

The concept DOMAIN is at the heart of Scanlon's metaphilosophy in this book. This concept appears to provide the most general element of Scanlon's understanding of metaphysics, and seems crucial to his thinking that his view is ontologically thin. Scanlon rejects Quine's "…exclusive emphasis on the physical world" (18), and diagnoses his main mistake as that of assuming that there is one set of rules that determine what there is.

Scanlon's proposed alternative to this Quinean assumption is as follows:

> …the truth values of statements about one domain, insofar as they do not conflict with statements of some other domain, are properly settled by the standards of the domain that they are about. (19)

We read this as committing to the following principle about true propositions:

Truth-Domain   A proposition p is true if (i) there is a domain D1 such that p is about D1, and the truth of p is entailed by the standards of D1, and (ii) there is no domain D2 that conflicts with D1.

Truth-Domain raises several pressing questions.

First: What makes a proposition count as being 'about' a domain? This seems at least somewhat metaphorical: literally speaking, *the number two is prime* is about the number two, not about mathematics. What *exactly*, then, is the relation between a proposition and "its" domain?

Second, notice that Truth-Domain provides only a sufficient condition for truth. This is because we are not told what happens when the standards of

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[2] All bare page numbers are references to *Being Realistic about Reasons*.

two domains *do* conflict. Scanlon's denial of the existence of witches (presumably licensed by the supernatural domain, but ruled out by the empirical one) indicates that he thinks that in some cases of conflict, certain domains 'trump' others. But we are given no account of what grounds such domain-trumping. In this case, why is it that the empirical domain trumps the supernatural one and not the other way around? Because Scanlon suggests that the normative domain does not conflict with other domains (22), it may seem that he only needs the sufficient condition for his metanormative purposes, and that he can thus ignore these further questions. But this is not so – Scanlon's metanormative view rests on a *general* meta-metaphysical picture, and so it's fair play to raise doubts about that picture. And it's not clear that the outlines of this picture can be filled in without either entailing implausible implications, or else committing to one super-domain (the standards of which settle all domain-conflicts). The problem with the latter move is that once saddled with such a super-domain, Scanlon's view seems a mere terminological variant of Modest's: What in Scanlon's dialect is thought of as existence in this super-domain is what in Modest's dialect is thought of as existence sans phrase. It's hard to see how progress has been made.

The most pressing family of questions, however, is about how to understand the notion of a domain. We raise questions first, about how to understand what a domain is; second, about how to individuate domains; and third, about the relations between domains' metaphysics and epistemology. Together, these worries show how much more work needs to be done to explain domains within the context of Scanlon's views, and how unlikely it is that it can be satisfactorily done.

First, consider what a domain is. One natural way of understanding domains takes them to be individuated metaphysically, by the nature of the entities they contain, or some such. This way of individuating domains is not available to Scanlon, because it makes entities explanatorily prior to domains, and defeats the hope of achieving an ontologically thin kind of realism. We worry that some of the initial plausibility of Scanlon's talk of domains depends on implicit appeal to this natural way of thinking of domains, and is thus illusory.

Scanlon says instead that

> a domain is better understood in terms of the kind of claims it involves, and hence in terms of concepts that it deals with, such as number, set, physical object, reason, or morally right action. (19)

This quote may be understood as hinting at neo-Carnapian directions. But Scanlon rejects such a reading (19 n.3): despite the fact that domains should be understood in terms of concepts, the 'procedures appropriate to a domain'

are *not* settled by linguistic rules for the use of those concepts, a la Carnap. While we are sympathetic with Scanlon's rejection of Carnapianism, Carnap's view at least provides relatively clear 'rules to the game'. Once both the metaphysical and Carnapian approach are off the table, we are simply unsure we have any grip on the notion, absent a positive story that Scanlon does not provide. What sort of thing *is* a domain, then? (A collection of concepts? A collection of sentences? Of true sentences? A collection of truth-makers? Etc.)

Second, how are domains individuated? We are told that there are at least the following three domains: science, mathematics, and the normative (19). But we are not told, generally, what conditions have to be satisfied for some putative domain D to count as distinct from another putative domain D*. Far from addressing this question, Scanlon says: "…I mean to leave the question of what domains there are entirely open" (23). We don't think he can afford to do this. For, to the extent that we understand the notion of a domain, we could think of the Quinean view that Scanlon rejects as simply the view that there is a single universal domain. On the other extreme, consider a permissive view, on which every concept is associated with a domain: on this view, there is an APPLE domain and an ORANGE domain. We also don't think this is Scanlon's view. It would seem to render domains too trivial to be explanatorily useful. Further, a multiplicity of domain generates a multiplicity of conflicts between domains. So depending on how conflicts between domains are settled, the permissive view may lead either to an ontology that may be too permissive even by Scanlon's lights, or to an extremely austere one.

This leaves us with a familiar dialectic. Scanlon wants the concept DOMAIN to do central work in his argument. But there is a reasonable suspicion that any view between neo-Quinean universalism and permissivism will be unstable. We thus need at least the sketch of a non-ad hoc way of explaining which (and how many) domains there are. Absent such an explanation, it is unclear whether the notion can do any work.

Third, what is the relationship between the metaphysics and epistemology of domains? As we noted above, Scanlon claims that truth-values within domains are properly 'settled' by the standards of those domains (19). Is *settling* a metaphysical or epistemological relation? Is it the metaphysical relation of truth-making or truth-explaining, or is it that epistemological one of providing access or justification or knowledge? Scanlon nowhere explains.[3] The worry, of course, is that by exploiting this ambiguity, Scanlon can make certain claims appear more intuitively plausible than they are. The challenge is thus to disambiguate in a way that will conserve this plausibility. We are not sure this can be done (we give some reasons below). But this, at

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[3] As his discussion of reflective equilibrium shows (103), Scanlon does insist on a fairly strong distinction between metaphysical and epistemological considerations.

any rate, is what *must* be done if Scanlon is to have a plausible metanormative view.

Recall Modest. Scanlon and Modest are both confident that there are normative facts and that we can discover them. Thus far, it is not clear how Scanlon's appeal to domains is supposed to show that confidence to be reasonable in a way that Modest's is not. Indeed, given how thin our grasp of domains in Scanlon's sense is, it is possible that Modest might also accept that there are such domains. (Of course, there is a clear danger that unless they do sufficient explanatory work, domains will simply amount to an unattractive theoretical epicycle.) So far, then, it's hard to see what advantage Scanlon can claim over Modest. At the very least, it is hard to see how invoking domains can secure such an advantage.

3. Easy ontology?

Scanlon, to repeat, seems to think of his view as less ontologically committed, or perhaps as committed in some more minimal or thin sense, than those of other realists, like Modest. In this section we try to better understand this claim, and why Scanlon thinks it may be true.

As we have seen, the concept DOMAIN is central to Scanlon's account. For – as we suggested in the previous section – Scanlon appears committed to

> **Truth-Domain**   A proposition p is true if (i) there is a domain D1 such that p is about D1, and the truth of p is entailed by the standards of D1, and (ii) there is no domain D2 that conflicts with D1

In virtue of its generality, this thesis applies to ontological propositions as much as any others. As we have noted, Scanlon seeks not to commit himself to a view about how many domains there are. However, in one important passage, he considers an objection that attributes to him the view that (a) any well-defined, internally coherent "way of talking" that did not conflict with other domains constitutes its own domain, and (b) that if this way of talking specifies truth conditions for certain existential claims, then where those conditions are satisfied, the relevant claims are true (27). Importantly, Scanlon at least *appears* to embrace this liberal interpretation of his view.

But suppose that we have an adequately regimented way of thinking about *magical elves, understood as existing in a wholly causally isolated partition of the universe*. On the liberal interpretation of Scanlon's view, it seems that these conditions entail that it is true that the elves exist. Now, this *would* mark a clear difference between Scanlon and Modest (who presumably rejects Truth-Domain, accepts some domain-independent criteria for existence, and can rely on them to reject the existence of these magical elves).

But this would not be good news for Scanlon. Accepting such magical elves into one's ontology strikes us as hard to swallow, to put it mildly.[4] And that makes it hard for us to believe that there are no domain-independent constraints that restrict the scope of what it is reasonable to believe exists, and indeed, of what exists.

Scanlon himself considers the objection that his view is "too [ontologically] permissive", and that it allows existence to be vindicated "so cheaply" (27). Scanlon replies that the relevant existence questions are settled by the standards of relevant domains. But it is not clear how this is supposed to help address the objection. After all, the objection was pointing out a troubling consequence of this very commitment.

One way to read Scanlon here is as embracing the strategy of the proponent of 'easy ontology'. For example, on Amie Thomasson's view, (e.g. 2014, 142), the thesis that *whenever there are some simples 'arranged table-wise' there is also a table* is a truth which is guaranteed by the meaning of 'table'. The 'easiness' of Thomasson's ontology is supposed to be exactly a function of her assumption that the 'easy' ontological commitments are a function of

(i)   ordinary science and 'difficult' ontology (which license our belief that there are some simples arranged tablewise), together with

(ii)   analytic truths (like the 'table' thesis, above) that serve as bridge principles, taking us to new ontological commitment.

On Thomasson's account, element (ii) is what is supposed to spare us from additional ontological anxieties about tables (e.g.). The relevant existence claims ("There are tables"; "there is a table in front of me") just follow from the analytic bridge principles that constitute *what we count as true, qua existence of tables* (together with the facts about the existence of simples arranged tablewise). The fact that in posing the objection to his view Scanlon adverts to coherent *ways of talking* might seem to support a Thomasson-style interpretation. As we have seen in the previous section, however, Scanlon rejects the idea that the standards for a given domain are conceptual truths (19 n.3). And this seems to rule out attributing (ii) to him. However, (ii) is precisely the part of Thomasson's view that is supposed to explain why the relevant ontological commitments are 'easy' or 'lightweight'.

Can Scanlon's view be revised along Thomasson-like lines, by accepting analytic or conceptual bridge-principles that will secure an easy ontological status for normative truths, properties, and objects? The most natural way of understanding such a move would see it as endorsing a naturalist reduction of the normative, a reduction Scanlon is invested in rejecting. Furthermore, it

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[4] The example is a bit silly (if conclusive). But some deist views, for instance, and perhaps some other serious views in the history of metaphysics, can also serve as examples here. Surely, the existence of a coherent and well-regimented Deist theological practice would not itself guarantee the truth of its central commitments.

will seem to be an *a priori*, perhaps *analytic*, version of reductionism, one that faces perhaps *especially* serious problems. And of course, such a view is not quietist at all – rather than avoiding the metaphysical discussion Scanlon hopes to bypass, it is a major move within it. In order to endorse a Thomasson-style line, then, Scanlon has to abandon much of the rest of what he thinks, and to deal with numerous challenges he hopes to avoid. If he thinks he can help himself to such a line without committing to a naturalist reduction, he owes us an explanation how. And if he can do none of these things, it's still hard to see how he can avoid the commitment to the existence of magical elves.

Despite this, several passages in Scanlon suggest that he thinks of ontological commitment as unproblematic. For example:

> We make claims expressed by the existential quantifier in many domains, 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. The claim that mountains exist is licensed by and licenses certain other claims about the physical world. The claim that there exists a number or set of a certain kind is licensed by and licenses certain other mathematical claims. And in each case that is all there is to it. *Nothing more is claimed or required*. (25, emphasis ours)

We find this passage puzzling. First, it is again very hard to distinguish metaphysics from epistemology here. Second, one might take the passage to be grasping towards a view on which existence claims per se are somehow insubstantial, and so the existential quantifier is no guide to metaphysics.[5] Such a view would indeed distinguish between Scanlon and Modest. Scanlon says that the general idea of existence seems 'empty' in contrast to the 'significance' that domain-relative existence claims can have (23). But so far this seems to be an unhelpful metaphor. We of course get *more information* if we know that x exists and is an F, than if we merely know that x exists. And since domains are (somehow) linked to specific concepts on Scanlon's view, knowing that x exists in a certain domain will presumably thereby be informative. But the existing/nonexisting part seems like a distinct and rather important dimension in either case.

One might think that Scanlon could reject this by arguing for minimalism about 'exists' talk. Scanlon does appear to accept minimalism about 'fact' talk, according to which facts either are 'true thoughts' [i.e. propositions?] (cf. 45), or are explanatorily parasitic on them (cf. 66). However, Scanlon denies that his account of existence is 'minimalist' (28). We agree: it is unclear why commitment to the explanatory basicness of domains would lighten the ontological load.

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[5] See also Scanlon's remark (66) about facts being merely the reflections of true thoughts.

Another possibility is that Scanlon takes the ontological 'thinness' of the normative to follow from his endorsement of minimalism about normative *properties* (45). It is not clear what Scanlon means by 'minimalism' here, but he makes this claim immediately after drawing a contrast between two sorts of concepts. Scanlon notes that some concepts (e.g. WATER) are such that an adequate grasp of the concept does not guarantee knowledge of the nature of the property predicated by that concept, while in other cases adequate grasp of the concept discloses the nature of the relevant property (43). So, perhaps the idea is that properties whose natures are fully disclosed by the relevant concepts are distinctively 'minimal' in the sense of being mere reflections of our predicative practices (cf. 45 n. 46).

But this interpretation too is problematic. First, Scanlon argues that the concept REASON is nature-revealing, but he also argues that the concept MORALLY WRONG is not. If property-minimality is associated with a concept being nature-revealing, this means that many normative properties will thus not be minimal. And this in turn means that we lose the prospect of a general contrast between the ontology of the normative and that of the non-normative here.

Second, and more importantly, it is hard to understand what a concept's being nature-revealing has to do with the related property's being 'minimal' in any interesting sense. For example, phenomenal concepts are among the best candidates for being nature-revealing (see e.g. Chalmers (2003)), but this in no way suggests that phenomenal properties are 'minimal' in any metaphysical sense.

We have thus yet to find a helpful contrast that would show Scanlon to have fewer ontological burdens than Modest. Furthermore, there's the worry that Scanlon is going to be committed to lots of things that Modest will reasonably eschew – like those elves, and indeed, domains – without a clear sense of why he is entitled to be less perturbed by these commitments than Modest would be by hers.

4. Pragmatism?

In this section, we consider another important interpretation of Scanlon, as a pragmatist. One way to motivate this interpretation is to notice a structural problem for Truth-Domain: if all truth is relativized to domains, how are we to assess the truth of claims about the existence of domains, or, indeed, of Truth-Domain itself? Suppose there were a domain relative to which we could answer all of these questions. That domain would sound suspiciously privileged. Arguably, existence relative to that domain would be what *really* counts, and that domain would thus seem like an ideal candidate to provide a

privileged existential quantifier, which is precisely what would turn Scanlon's position into a terminological variant of Modest's.

Scanlon appears to notice this central problem for his view. He says:

> ...the question about domains is not whether they exist but whether they provide a helpful way of discussing certain matters. (23)

This reply is not isolated; it is part of a repeated theme in the book (for example, compare pp. 16-17, 24, 27, 85). But this reply is initially disorienting. Scanlon has told us that domains are the central organizing category in metaphysics. The next natural question is thus seemingly *which domains are there?* But now we are told this isn't the question. What could that mean?

One idea is that domain existence is not the question because the answer to this question is a trivial 'yes', in accord with the sort of easy ontology idea discussed in the previous section. However, because the most promising way of interpreting Scanlon as an easy ontologist itself appealed to domains, this interpretation runs directly into the problem that we introduced this section with.

Another idea is that domain existence is not the question because domains are not the sort of thing we can intelligibly ask existence questions about. Scanlon sometimes makes claims about the limits of meaningful application of certain concepts, such as THE WORLD (24). But he also emphasizes that there *can* be meaningful 'external' questions about claims in a domain (23), and (as we have seen) he proposes to leave the question of how many domains there are open (23), which would be odd if this question was meaningless. And, substantively, it does seem highly implausible that this question is meaningless (see, for instance, Enoch 2011, section 5.3.2).

In this section we explore a third, *pragmatist* reading of passages like the one quoted above. On this reading, the question of whether there are domains may well be intelligible and have a non-trivial answer. However, rather than simply assessing our evidence concerning whether a given domain exists, we are supposed to ask whether supposing that a domain exists provides a helpful way of discussing certain matters. Indeed, perhaps such pragmatic considerations are not just our *path* to the right answer regarding a domain's existence – perhaps they are what determines what the right answer is. One initial piece of support for this reading is that the passage above comes immediately after Scanlon invokes Carnap. And for Carnap, 'external' questions are (when intelligible) to be understood (and so answered) pragmatically.

This pragmatist reading also seems to fit with other important passages from Scanlon. For example, the passage just quoted continues:

> To say that it does invites, first, worries like Mackie's…. And if we respond to this first worry by denying that numbers, say, are part of the natural world, while still insisting that they are part of "the world" we invite questions about what this shadowy "world" is to which numbers and perhaps other non-spatial entities all belong. *It is better to avoid such questions altogether*. (24, emphasis ours)

The claim here does not seem to be that the relevant 'external' questions cannot be answered, or have an easy answer. Rather the claim seems to be that it is in some sense *better* to avoid them.[6]

This reading would also complete the explanation of why Scanlon might be an easy ontologist about intra-domain ontological questions. According to Truth-Domain, such questions are settled by the standards of certain domains. According to the pragmatist reading we now suggest, we do not need to seek out evidence for the existence of the relevant domains, but should instead simply ask whether they are useful posits. If assertability ultimately bottoms out in usefulness in this way, that constitutes a straightforward sense in which our ontological commitments are thin. And on such a reading, of course, the differences between Scanlon and Modest – who has no pragmatist bone in her body – couldn't be clearer.

This synthesis is supported by the following striking passage:

> My answer is that the question about [certain] entities is not whether they really exist. This question is settled by the standards of the domain, assuming, as I have stipulated, that their existence does not entail implausible claims about other domains, such as the natural world. The question is *only whether we have any reason to be concerned with* these entities and their properties. (27, emphasis ours).

The beginning of this passage tells us that the question of whether certain entities exist is settled by the totality of intra-domain facts (absent conflict). This supports the easy ontology part of the interpretation. The end of this passage suggests that the only remaining question is whether we have any reason to be concerned with the entities posited within a certain domain. This supports the pragmatist part of the interpretation.[7]

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[6] If we are on the right track here, we would love more details. When we evaluate talk about a certain domain, what is the metric for better or worse ways of talking? Are all of our reasons significant (can I aptly believe in those elves in order to make my grandma happy?) or are the relevant reasons restricted, e.g. to familiar theoretical virtues? Different ways of developing the view here could make it appear much more or less pragmatist. See also note 11, below.

[7] Also compare: "we have no reasons to be concerned with our general ontological commitments in Quine's sense..." (23)

If this synthesis correctly represents Scanlon's view, it invites several (related) concerns. First, and rather obviously, if the question of whether X is a genuine domain is meaningful and has an answer (as Scanlon seems to suggest), why would we not here – as elsewhere – grant that our central doxastic goal is to have accurate beliefs about this question? Why would practical concerns suddenly pre-empt our ordinary epistemic standards?[8]

Perhaps a weightier concern, however, is that if we are right to read Scanlon as combining easy ontology about internal questions with pragmatism about external questions, his view appears hard to distinguish from an unattractively global hermeneutic fictionalism. According to hermeneutic fictionalism about a discourse (such as about normative discourse), the best understanding of the discourse – for instance, of what we aim at when engaging in it – doesn't involve a commitment to truth, but to something like a pretense of truth, or perhaps truth-in-the-fiction (Eklund 2015, section 2.2). And on the current suggestion, Scanlon's view is like hermeneutic fictionalism in the sense that on this theory our assertions of the form *domain D exists* are not characteristically guided by our evidence for those beliefs, but instead by the usefulness of the assertive practice.

The view also threatens to infect the intra-domain level, derivatively. To see this, consider an example: suppose that I take 2+2=4 to be true in virtue of being licensed by the mathematical standards. But if, in going in for mathematical talk, I think (with Scanlon) that it doesn't matter whether a mathematical domain that includes such standards really exists, I seem to be indifferent to the very thing that would, if it existed, ground the truth of my ordinary mathematical claim. This is a familiar phenomenon: if one is an instrumentalist about the existence of unobservable theoretical entities, this naturally entails instrumentalism about specific scientific claims about – e.g. – bosons. So Scanlon's fictionalism, unlike that of many contemporary fictionalists, threatens to become an unattractive global thesis.

One might seek to block this conclusion by suggesting a slightly different interpretation in which an intra-domain thesis is *true* if it is useful for speakers to talk about that domain. This might help to limit the fictionalism in question to just explicit talk of domains. But it seems to have objectionable modal consequences. Suppose that some proposition P is licensed by the standards of domain D. Suppose further that we should go in for D-talk. So P is (according to Scanlon) true. Now consider a possible world in which we should not go in for D-talk (if "the only question" about domains is pragmatic, such a world must be possible). Does this mean that P is not true at that world? (Or, at least: not true for the same reasons it is true here?) This sort of

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[8] For one attempt to tie ground epistemic justification in our deepest practical concerns, see Enoch and Schechter 2008; for some critique, see McPherson and Plunkett 2015. But we don't think that this discussion can help Scanlon here.

possibility threatens to make all true existence claims true contingently, and, what's worse, contingently *on the wrong kind of considerations*: pragmatic considerations. Especially seeing that one of Scanlon's main examples is that of mathematics, this is a very unappetizing bullet to bite (Had the mathematical domain not been useful, would numbers and sets not have existed? Would two plus two not have equaled four?).[9] Given what Scanlon has to say about the judgment- and choice-independence of reasons elsewhere (93ff), this is not a bullet that he should be happy to bite.[10]

This worry too is related to the one about the disappearing gap between Scanlon's view and hermeneutic fictionalism – for arguably, hermeneutic fictionalist views face related modal worries (compare Kim 2005).

Despite the text we have canvassed, we have a hard time believing either of these variants could be Scanlon's considered view. The pragmatist reading is hard to square with Scanlon's apparent goal of providing a reasoned defense of the metanormative desiderata mentioned in §1. After all, on the reading we are considering, Scanlon is committed only to its being *useful* to talk as if there is a normative domain for which those desiderata hold. But that is surely inadequate to vindicate those desiderata.[11]

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[9] Two points are in order here.

First, a clarification. The counterfactual in the text here is importantly different from *had the mathematical domain not been useful, we wouldn't have had a reason to believe in numbers and sets*. Perhaps some understandings of indispensability arguments render this sentence plausible – our reason to believe in some entities may depend on their (theoretical) usefulness. Not so for their existence itself.

Second, the point in the text becomes more problematic to state when applied to normative discourse, because talk of whether or not we *should* go in for D-talk is already normative. This allows Scanlon some room for the dialectical moves he uses in dealing with Enoch's previous critical discussion of Scanlon's metaethics. (See Enoch (2011, section 5.3.1), Scanlon (29); See also McPherson (2011); and see our discussion below, in section 6). But Scanlon's ontological discussion aims at full generality, and so, if it is refuted by the mathematical case (or any other one), it is refuted, period.

As Daniel Wodak pointed out to us, if talk of what discourses we have pragmatic reason to engage is normative (and so, presumably, a part of the normative domain), and if the truth of any true proposition in any domain is ultimately explained at least partly in terms of the reason we have to engage in that domain, then all domains seem to be in an important sense dependent on the normative. It is far from obvious that this is an attractive result.

[10] On the other hand, Scanlon (2012, 234) does allow for reasons to depend on general facts about human nature. So perhaps he can insist that our reasons to go in for D-talk depend only on general facts about human nature? This would allow him to bite the bullet in the text. But, first, a bullet it will remain; second, of course, we need to hear more about the dependence of (basic) moral judgments on human nature; third, why think that the only reasons relevant to usefulness of domains are those that depend on human nature?

[11] Perhaps there's room in logical space for a related view – one according to which the only intelligible questions *about* domains such as D are, roughly, whether it's useful to go in for D-talk; but that once the answer to this question is "yes", licensed D-propositions (that is, *within* the domain) are true simpliciter, not just relative to D. We don't know of attempts to develop such a view in the literature, in metaethics or elsewhere, by either fictionalists or realists of Scanlon's kind. Perhaps this is not without reason.

Further evidence against a pragmatist or fictionalist reading is provided by the fact that Scanlon rejects familiar 'indispensability' arguments for ontological commitments in mathematics. These, he complains, would show mathematics to be useful,[12] but not provide reasons for us to believe that they exist (27-8). This seems to suggest that he rejects the pragmatist's characteristic gambit.

We thus both hope and expect that Scanlon will reject the reading of his view as global hermeneutic fictionalism. But if he does this, it again becomes unclear how his view is different from Modest's view, and what role the talk of domains is supposed to play in his theorizing.

5.   What Progress Has Been Made?

The preceding sections have focused on difficulties in interpreting the view that Scanlon sets out in this book. In the remainder of the paper, we seek to bracket those difficulties to the extent this is possible, and critically examine the metanormative view as we understand it. We think that the challenges we will offer apply to Scanlon's view however it is precisified vis-à-vis the interpretive questions raised in previous sections. In this section, we consider two of the central challenges to non-reductive normative realism that Scanlon purports to have solved: a supervenience challenge, and an epistemic challenge. We will ask two questions about each of Scanlon's solutions: The first is whether the solutions are promising. The second is whether the solutions appeal in important ways to the distinctive view being developed. In particular, could our foil – Modest – simply appropriate these solutions on behalf of her shamelessly ontologically committal (e.g., non-naturalistic) realism? This second question is especially important in evaluating Scanlon's view. For often, the proof of the philosophical pudding is in the theoretical eating: the attractiveness of the complicated metaphysical and metaphilosophical view discussed above will partly depend on its explanatory payoffs with respect to issues like these. If when push comes to shove, Scanlon's responses to such general objections are not significantly different from the ones that Modest can put forward (or, indeed, that her allies have been suggesting), this will undermine a seemingly major motivation for the attempt to find an ontologically non-committal realist option.

5.1 Supervenience

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[12] Notice that at least on a natural way of understanding such arguments, the kind of usefulness they invoke is theoretical usefulness. If even this kind of usefulness is one Scanlon is committed to rejecting as a guide to truth, the line of thought from note 6 above is not available to him.

According to Scanlon, the supervenience puzzle is this:

Supervenience: How are facts about reasons related to facts about what occurs, and what causes what, in the natural world? Normative facts are not entailed by such natural facts, but at least many normative facts depend on non-normative facts: they vary when non-normative facts vary and cannot vary as long as non-normative facts remain the same. This seems puzzling, and in need of explanation. (3)

We insist on one addition to this formulation (which we think Scanlon would accept): many philosophers have taken the supervenience of the normative to be *modally robust*: to hold across conceptual (or at least metaphysical) possibilities. So what is to be explained is not merely *actual* covariance (which might, after all, have been accidental) but *modally robust* covariance.

Scanlon's explanation begins by distinguishing *pure* from *mixed* normative claims. Pure normative claims are those that 'do not depend on non-normative claims at all'. Mixed normative claims are made true jointly by pure normative claims in conjunction with non-normative claims.

Scanlon's own preferred structure for the pure normative claims – a four-place reason relation - is a bit unwieldy. And Scanlon grants correctly that his reasons-fundamentalism is inessential to the explanatory core of his view (42). In light of this, we will illustrate Scanlon's idea with an (overly) simple normative theory: simple act utilitarianism.

> **Utilitarianism**   one ought to perform the act, among one's options, that maximizes net pleasure.

Suppose that Utilitarianism is the fundamental truth about what we ought to do, and that pleasure is a non-normative concept. So understood, Utilitarianism is a pure normative claim: it is not grounded in some more fundamental normative truth, combined with some non-normative fact. If it were true, Utilitarianism would partly ground a host of mixed normative claims. For example, if telling tasteless jokes at the party will fail to maximize pleasure, then this fact, together with Utilitarianism would fully ground the fact that one ought not to tell such jokes at the party.

Scanlon's way of explaining supervenience is straightforward. *Mixed* normative truths supervene on non-normative truths, and this supervenience is explained by the pure normative truths (40). For example, the covariance of what I ought to do with certain non-normative properties would be nicely explained by Utilitarianism, were it true. Truths about the supervenience of the pure normative truths on the non-normative truths is explained as follows: the pure normative truths do not vary (41), and hence – trivially – they do not vary independently of the non-normative truths.

Together, Scanlon suggests that these two claims constitute a complete explanation of the supervenience of the normative.

The first thing to notice about this explanation is that it does not appear to rely on anything distinctive in Scanlon's account: if the explanation works, Modest can deploy it in her theorizing just as well as Scanlon can, even if she is not a fan of Scanlon's talk of domains, and her metanormative non-naturalism is as ontologically committal as can be. This is because all that one needs to make Scanlon's explanation work is the idea that mixed normative claims are explained in terms of more fundamental pure normative claims (together with non-normative facts).[13]

We do not, however, think that Scanlon's explanation does everything we should want. For in order for the explanation of the mixed normative claims to work, there must be a pure normative property or relation (in our example: obligatoriness) that is necessarily coextensive with a non-normative property or relation (in our example: pleasure-maximization). If one was puzzled *at all* by the covariance of the normative and the non-normative, it is very hard to understand how explaining such covariation by committing oneself to an underlying necessary covariation between obligatoriness and pleasure maximization is going to help. For one would thereby have solved the initial problem by positing exactly the same sort of 'puzzling' modal relation to do the explanatory work.[14]

None of this is to claim that the supervenience problem for non-naturalism is insoluble, or that it is a death-blow to the non-naturalist if it is (see again Enoch 2011, section 6.2, and McPherson 2012; 2015, esp. Sections 4 and 5, for relevant discussion). It is simply to say that it is hard to see how Scanlon's own discussion makes any progress here. In particular, the attempt to be ontologically non-committal doesn't seem to be making any difference here – the supervenience challenge retains its full force (whatever exactly that is) when we move from Modest's ontologically committed realism to Scanlon's purportedly non-committal one.

5.2 Epistemology

The core epistemological challenge that Scanlon addresses is this: if there are irreducibly normative facts about reasons, how can we come to know these

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[13] And indeed, some of what Enoch (2011, section 6.2) says about supervenience is precisely along these lines. See especially the explanation of what Enoch calls specific supervenience (section 6.2.2.1).

[14] This is an instance of what McPherson 2012 calls 'bruteness revenge'. Enoch (2011, §6.2) attempts a response, but is no longer confident that it works.
Ralph Wedgwood (*forthcoming*) makes a similar point. Schroeder (2014,142) proposes a way for the non-naturalist to finesse this problem. However, Schroeder's proposal is explicitly inconsistent with some of Scanlon's central commitments.

facts (69; 120)? According to Scanlon, we can reply to this question in two stages.

The first, negative stage of Scanlon's reply to this epistemological challenge involves arguing against the idea that normative facts are a 'special sort of entity', epistemic access to which would require a faculty analogous to sense perception (70). We think Scanlon takes this to be a payoff of the alleged metaphysical thinness of his view. The idea is that *only if* one thought normative facts were metaphysically substantive, would one have to explain by what faculty we came to be in contact with the normative entities.

The positive stage of Scanlon's argument begins with the suggestion that quite generally, what is needed to answer the epistemological question is "...an overall account of the subject matter of a domain that fits with a plausible epistemology in the right way." (71). Scanlon thinks such an account for the normative will itself be a (very general) normative claim. However, as Scanlon notes, we can then seemingly run the same epistemological challenge concerning the account of the subject matter itself. Scanlon replies that this challenge can be met by the method of reflective equilibrium.

Crucially, Scanlon thinks that because normative facts do not have "some special metaphysical character", the only skeptical arguments they are vulnerable to are arguments based on substantive normative reasoning (86). So Scanlon's alleged avoidance of metaphysical commitment is again claimed to do key work here.

We think that Scanlon is incorrect about the range of possible skeptical arguments, and consequently about the payoffs of his metaphysical commitments. Indeed, we think that the hardest form of the central epistemological challenge in the vicinity *grants* the truth of our central normative beliefs, and the objectivity that Scanlon assumes such beliefs have.[15] Granting this entails that there is a *correlation* between our beliefs and the truths that they are about. This assumption seems extremely important – perhaps necessary for responsible normative reasoning and belief – and it certainly *seems* to call for explanation. So there is a deep explanatory demand here: to (at least schematically) explain this correlation (compare Enoch 2011, §7.2).

Notice that this way of understanding the epistemic challenge is not about the initial justification for our relevant normative beliefs. The worry, rather,

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[15] We take the challenge we sketch in the text to be the right way of understanding the epistemological core of the 'evolutionary' challenge made prominent by Joyce 2006, Ch. 6 and especially Street 2006. See Vavova 2015 for an alternative characterization of the epistemic structure of the general challenge.

is that however initially justified, if we come to believe that there is no way of explaining the correlation between a set of our beliefs and the relevant truths, our initial justification can be defeated. Notice, also, that the challenge thus understood has nothing (directly) to do with causal influence of any sort. The problem is that we seem committed to a surprising, unexplained, and perhaps inexplicable correlation.

This challenge puts us in a position to make three points. First, our way of stating the challenge does not make any assumptions about where the normative facts are 'located'. It is completely general and does not rely on such metaphors.

Second, this challenge helps to show that the negative side of Scanlon's strategy is dubious. Indeed, far from being invitations to skeptical challenge, metaphysical assumptions can be useful elements of candidate theories that *meet* the fundamental explanatory burden here. For example, consider the idea that the fundamental normative relations are causally efficacious. This would allow for the possibility that the normative facts causally regulate our normative beliefs, which could help to explain the correlation between normative facts and beliefs.[16] Or consider George Bealer's (e.g. 2000) modal reliabilism, which aims (inter alia) to explain such correlations without appeal to causation. As these examples show, rejecting metaphysical assumptions limits the resources available to address the underlying problem.

Third, and most importantly, it is very unclear to us how the distinctive elements of Scanlon's systematic proposal – the attempt at metaphysical lightness, the crucial reference to domains, etc. – could help to ameliorate the epistemic challenge. Explaining the correlation between our beliefs and the relevant truths doesn't seem easier if we discard the heavy ontology Modest is committed to.

One *could* take the correlation here to be a matter of brute luck (as in e.g. Rosen 1998, 398; or Dworkin 2011, 77ff), but it's doubtful that one can ever be epistemically justified in so doing. If the (purported) correlation has no explanation, it seems more reasonable to respond by reconsidering one's commitment to the correlation, than by accepting it as brute. And if one responds by lowering one's credence in the correlation between the normative truths and one's normative judgments significantly, it seems that one should also decrease one's confidence in the normative judgments themselves, perhaps to the point of suspension of judgment. Skepticism threatens.

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[16] Some of the guise-of-the-good literature discusses the causal efficacy of values – for instance, in serving as causes of desires - in a way that fits the text here. See, for instance, Oddie (2005), Schafer (2013), and Wedgwood (2006).

Perhaps there is some way for Scanlon to acknowledge the challenge in its strongest form, and then to argue that accepting the correlation as brute is only unacceptable on an ontologically "heavy" view. This would show that the distinctive features of Scanlon's account can do genuine work. But of course, we would need to see the details here – in particular, we would need to see why taking the correlation to be brute is acceptable on Scanlon's view, and more so than on Modest's. Because we have no idea how this reply might go, the explanatory virtues of the sort of view that Scanlon hopes to develop remain elusive.

6. Schmeasons (and another word about fictionalism)

In previous work (McPherson 2011, Enoch 2011, Section 5.3), we offered what we might call the 'schmeasons' (or 'counter-reasons') challenge to Scanlon. The basic idea is this. Consider two linguistic communities – the 'reasoners' and the 'schmeasoners'. Each community has a certain term – 'reason' and 'schmeason' respectively – that they take to be central to their normative practices. And in each community there are well-developed practices of criticism and evaluation that use the relevant term. But the reasoners and schmeasoners tend towards quite different substantive views in their practices. If we suppose that these practices are coherent, and constitute their own domains, then both communities might be functioning quite well relative to their respective domains. But intuitively, we want to say that all is not well: it is *bad* that the schmeasoners are sensitive to schmeasons rather than reasons.

This, however, looks like an objection that can be raised perfectly symmetrically from within each of the two domains. For the schmeasoners can point out that it is 'schbad' that we are sensitive to reasons rather than schmeasons. Our suggestion was that a metaphysically committal realism does a better job capturing what we intuitively want to say. This is because the metaphysically committal realist can say that only the reasoners – and not the schmeasoners – track the normative structure of reality.

Scanlon replies this way:

> This problem seems to me illusory. These imagined conclusions about "counter-reasons" conflict with our conclusions about reasons only insofar as they are interpreted as conclusions about reasons. (29)

But this reply misses the point of the objection. It is not about whether we genuinely disagree with the schmeasoners. (Explaining how that is possible is a deep but wholly different challenge, which we are also unsure how to meet on Scanlon's behalf). The point is that it seems wrong to say that –

epistemically speaking – everything is fine with the schmeasoners. The schmeasoners – we say – are like people who have the concept GRUE rather than GREEN: their way of thinking about reality is *inapt* (compare Sider 2011 §1.1). As Enoch (2011, 123-4) points out, it is characteristic of *fictionalism* to lack the resources to make such claims. If I am talking about fiction A, and you about fiction B, I can hardly characterize your way of talking as less fitting to reality, since both ways are simply spinning out their respective fantasies. True, from within fiction A, A-statements are privileged over B-statements. Just as true, of course, is the claim that from within fiction B, B-statements are privileged over A-statements. In a fictionalist framework, there doesn't seem to be anything that can break this symmetry. Once again, if you're committed to only doing things, as it were, from the fiction-A-perspective, you have an asymmetry. Similarly, in the opposite direction, if you're already committed to doing things from the fiction-B perspective. Scanlon seems (at the very least) analogous to the fictionalist who is committed to doing things from within the reason-fiction, rather than the schmeason-fiction. This doesn't seem to give us the kind of objectivity we are after.

This brings us yet again to a request for what would be a useful clarification: what, in Scanlon's view, distinguishes fictional domains from non-fictional ones? Scanlon seems committed to the distinction (18; 24 n. 9). But we don't yet see how he can make it out.

7.   **What's the Argument?**

This puts us in a position to put a final challenge to Scanlon, and with it a final request for more details. The book does much to at least give a feel of the view Scanlon accepts (although, as we explained in earlier sections, often in ways that leave crucial questions about the view unanswered). But nowhere in the book did we find even an attempt at *an argument* for the view. This is striking given that there is nothing obvious about the view. Why should we believe it, then? What reason does Scanlon offer to support it? We are told that Scanlon thinks that the domain-centric way of thinking "makes the most sense" (19). And we are told that it is "better to avoid [certain] questions altogether" (24). But we found it difficult to find in the book anything more by way of argument for the view it puts forward.

One possibility is that Scanlon's aim is to argue by elimination. He engages in detail Mark Schroeder's Humeanism, Allan Gibbard's expressivism, and Christine Korsgaard's constructivism, offering reasons – sometimes powerful ones – to reject them. But if Scanlon wants to argue by elimination, he needs to address *all* relevant alternatives. And as we've shown, he leaves

unilluminated his two most salient foils: non-deflationary forms of normative realism (such as Modest's), and hermeneutic fictionalism.[17]

Perhaps a more charitable interpretation is that Scanlon aims to have his view earn its keep by its explanatory payoffs. But at least with non-deflationary realism and hermeneutical fictionalism as the relevant competing theories, the discussion in §5 suggests that the distinctive features of Scanlon's view do not provide explanatory payoffs with respect to supervenience and epistemology. If this is true more generally, as we suspect,[18] it will be extremely difficult to mount this sort of explanatory case for the view.

8. Conclusion

As we suggested at the outset, perhaps the most compelling motivation for the sort of view Scanlon seems to prefer is the idea that it can provide the sort of explanatory power promised by the quasi-realist program, without the discomforts – both technical and intuitive – that many find with the expressivism that usually undergirds such quasi-realism. Or – to proceed from the other direction – to secure the objectivity for morality and normativity promised by realism, without the potentially problematic ontological baggage other realists are committed to. While there is much to admire in this book, we think it falls significantly short of delivering on this promise. As we argued in §§5-6, it is far from clear that Scanlon's view can do the sort of explanatory work that more overtly ontologically committal forms of realism can. And where it can, this is usually because it can appeal to just the same sort of explanation that such robust realists provide. For these reasons, we are not yet convinced that Scanlon has sketched a compelling competitor to the ontologically committal realism that we favor. Further, as we have sought to show in §§2-4, much still needs to be done to clarify and develop the philosophically crucial structure of the view discussed. Given the interest of the project pursued in this book, we will count our discussion a success if it encourages Scanlon to make such clarifications and provide the needed further details.

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[17] And there are yet other views to consider as well, of course.

[18] Scanlon thinks that the ontologically light features of his view also help in countering Smith on the possibility of mental states with both directions of fit (65), but it's not entirely clear to us why.

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