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Reason monolithism: A Darwinian dilemma for “relaxed” realism

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Abstract

Street formulated a Darwinian Dilemma for realist theories of value. Much criticism of her formulation of the dilemma targets the second horn, posed by the scientifically implausible assumption of a tracking relation between our attitudes and evaluative truth. This paper shows how a recent wave of metaethical realism, most prominently defended by Scanlon, succeeds without a tracking relation and thus avoids the Darwinian Dilemma in Street’s formulation. However, Scanlon’s approach, which builds on the concept of a reason relation and defends a metaphysically pluralist, domain-specific conception of truth, runs into another version of the Darwinian Dilemma. The problem is not that Scanlon’s realism assumes a tracking relation but that it assumes what I call *reason monolithism* – the idea that there is one possible expression of the faculty of reason and that this cognitive faculty could not be otherwise, which is scientifically implausible on similar grounds.

KEYWORDS

constructivism, Darwinian dilemma, deflationism, metaphysical pluralism, multiple realizability, reason monolithism, reason relations, relaxed metaethical realism

1 | INTRODUCTION

In 2006, Sharon Street formulated a Darwinian Dilemma for realist theories of value. *Realism*, defined as a theory of objective mind-independent value, needs an explanation of the relation between our normative attitudes and mind-independent evaluative truth. If the realist assumes that there is no relation, she runs into radical scepticism. If she assumes a relation, she must give an explanation that is compatible with the fact that our attitudes are the product of evolution and natural selection.

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Street claims that realism fails, because it would have to assume a tracking relation between our evaluative attitudes and truth in order to avoid scepticism. Such a tracking relation, she claims, is implausible on scientific grounds. Many realists have criticized Street's argument. The strongest objections focus on the claim that Street's idea of *tracking* is flawed, and that realism can be defended without assuming a scientifically dubious relation between our attitudes and some mysterious entities existing out there in the universe.

In line with those criticisms, I begin by arguing that Street's target conception of metaethical realism builds on an unnecessarily strong scientific conception of what is "real" and of how we get to know what is real. The point of such criticism is not that a tracking relation cannot be explained in a scientific worldview but that it is conceptually flawed to expect such a tracking relation. Probably in part as a response to that unease, a few authors came up with proposals of metaethical realism claiming to establish mind-independent truth without assuming a tracking relation between our attitudes and something "out there". Such versions of realism are sometimes referred to as *metaphysically light*, *non-metaphysical*, *quietist*, *deflationist*, or *relaxed* accounts of realism.¹ Typically, such accounts do not modify truth or the truth-aptness of evaluative judgements. Nonetheless, relaxed realists reject the picture that such facts must be tracked in scientifically mysterious ways. As a paradigm case of this theoretical move, I investigate Scanlon's (2014) theory of realism about reasons. I show how Scanlon, by two distinct moves – by what we can call a *deflationist argument* on the one hand, and an argument for what Clarke-Doane (2017) calls *metaphysical pluralism* on the other – avoids the scientific picture underlying Street's reasoning.

I then go on arguing that these relaxed realist theories, as well suited as they are to defend realism against Street's Darwinian Dilemma, run into another sort of Darwinian Dilemma. The scope and robustness of their realist claims depends on how they respond to that challenge. If they want to establish anything stronger than what we may call *perspectival mind-independence*, I argue that they must presuppose an assumption about the nature of reason as a cognitive faculty that I call *reason monolithism*. I suggest that this idea is equally hard to establish in a scientific framework as a "tracking relation". Thus, we can formulate a new Darwinian Dilemma, targeting the recent "relaxed realist" proposals.

In section 2, I introduce Street's argument and point out why the argument targets an understanding of realism, which we may find overly scientific. Section 3 presents Scanlon's defence of realism and suggests that it is capable of avoiding the kind of dilemma that Street formulates by avoiding her strong scientific requirements for something to count as "real". Section 4 scrutinizes the mind-independence of the reason relation, distinguishes between two readings and illustrates once more how relaxed realism and scientific realism differ. In section 5, I scrutinize the scope and robustness of Scanlon's realist claim by introducing a distinction, which I tie directly to his formulation of the reason relation.

In section 6, I show in more detail why the only way for Scanlon to establish more than perspectival mind-independence would involve the assumption of "reason monolithism" and why this idea is scientifically problematic. This is so because it implies that reason is a monolithic capacity – a capacity with one distinct expression that, once it is acquired by a species, culture or individual, will lead to the same judgements and conclusions. According to an alternative view, there is not one such capacity in nature but variable cognitive capacities for functionally dealing with complex environments. "Reason" according to that alternative view, is polymorphic and multiply realizable in nature. Section 7 elucidates why the multiple realizability of reason matters for our understanding of normative matters as well as for metaethical theorizing.

¹Philosophers, including proponents of the mentioned realisms themselves, differ with regard to if and how to use these terms and which, if any, to use for their own position. In the following, I opt for the term *relaxed* to describe the attitude of trust represented in a realistic take on what is most fundamental to our thought, without urging for arguments against Darwinian considerations. I thank an anonymous reviewer for proposing that term.

2 | STREET'S DARWINIAN DILEMMA: TARGETING A “SCIENTIFIC” REALISM

Street starts out with a central challenge for any metaethical theory. This challenge is posed by the fact that our evaluative attitudes are necessarily subject to evolutionary pressures. This means that evolutionary forces have significantly shaped what we value. If we hold that moral truth is independent of our attitudes, we need a story about how moral truth and the evolutionary development of our attitudes relate to each other. We can assume either that there is no relation between them or that the evolution of our attitudes tracks moral truth; in other words, that there is a tracking relation between the evolution of evaluative attitudes and evaluative truth. These options lead the realist into a dilemma: If she goes for the first option, she must assume that most of our attitudes are “off track” (Street, 2006, 122), which leads her into radical scepticism. If she goes for the second option, asserting a tracking relation between evolution and truth, she must assume that evolutionary processes favoured ancestors who grasped moral truth, which is difficult to establish on scientific grounds (Street, 2006, 125). Thus, scepticism on the one hand, and a scientifically unacceptable tracking relation on the other, are the two horns of the Darwinian Dilemma, as Street formulates it.

Consequently, Street rejects moral realism and defends a kind of anti-realist constructivism, according to which moral truth is a function of our evaluative attitudes. According to Street’s view, “evaluative truth is a function of how all the evaluative judgements that selective pressures [...] have imparted to us stand up to scrutiny in terms of each other” (2006, 153). According to this picture, “each of us begins with a vast and complicated set of attitudes” (2006, 153), which are then continuously subjected to selective pressures. If we bring all our existing attitudes into relation to each other, order them in terms of strength, and then reflect on what all of them taken together call for – all things considered – we can arrive at an answer to the question of what reasons we have. Independently of the standpoint of creatures that (ultimately contingently) value something, there is nothing of value in the universe. In this sense, Street claims, there is no mind-independent normative truth and value derives from our attitudes – even though it is possible to be in error about what reasons one has.²

Street’s understanding of normative truth being a function of evolutionarily shaped attitudes constitutes an “adaptive link account”, according to which evolution shapes what attitudes, and accordingly, what reasons we have. Thus, her anti-realist constructivism offers a scientifically convincing story about how our judgement relates to truth – a story that can avoid a scientifically implausible “tracking account” according to which evolution tracks an independent truth. Thus, anti-realist constructivism, as opposed to realism, solves the Darwinian dilemma.

Several metaethical realists have tried to debunk the second horn of the dilemma. Some argue that it is not implausible to assume a tracking relation (Deem, 2016), whereas others reject Street’s idea of tracking and insist that moral realism does not need it (FitzPatrick, 2014). Again, others select a middle path: Copp (2008), for example, argues that a certain tracking relation between evolutionary forces and our normative attitudes – he calls it “quasi-tracking” (2008, 194) – is innocent, whereas we at the same time must acknowledge forces other than the pressures of evolution – such as “culture”, “deliberation”, or “reflection”. Both FitzPatrick (2014, 242) and Copp (2008, 190) hold that culture and reflection are influences on our attitudes that are clearly distinct from the pressure of evolution. Accordingly, we should not ask how our normative attitudes developed *as a result of* evolutionary pressures but rather how they could develop *despite of* these pressures (see FitzPatrick, 2014, 242f). What those people voice in favour of realism is the thesis that reflection, in combination with other factors, can find truth so that evolutionary forces alone do not have to be biologically modelled as truth-tracking. Street (2008b) replies that this idea merely presupposes that what our reflection is

²See also Street (2008a, 2010, 2011).

responsive to is evaluative truth. The realist still owes a story about why and how it is a mind-independent evaluative truth which our reflection is responsive to. According to Street, reflection only leads to a better understanding of our reasons given the things we already value. In this sense, reflection leads us to a truth that derives from all our existing attitudes, reflected on in light of each other.

In a nutshell, we can state that the disagreement between the realist and the anti-realist in this debate is about whether what we come to value after reflection depends on contingent evaluative attitudes we happen to have or is a response to something that is valuable independently of these attitudes.

To be sure, some philosophers try to weaken this disagreement. Enoch (2009), for example, questions the assumption that we must explain a causal relation going in one direction – either from attitudes to truths or from truths to attitudes. According to Enoch, it is sufficient for the realist to explain a *correlation* between normative truth and our attitudes (see Enoch, 2009, 421f). Enoch explains such a correlation by claiming that both normative truth and our naturally evolved attitudes relate to the aim of “survival” and thus correlate because of their relation to the same aim (see Enoch, 2009, 430–435). However, this attempt to downplay the epistemic challenge for realism seems to commit the same fallacy that Street pointed out in Copp (Street, 2008b). Such attempts just presuppose that what we call normative truth – be it, as Enoch (2009, 430) stipulates, everything that relates to the aim of survival or, as Copp (2008, 190) stipulates, everything that we find plausible after deliberation and reflection – just *is* normative truth. After this move, it is easy to account for correlations between our attitudes and what we decided to call *normative truth*.

Street seems clearly right that all we have are contingently evolved attitudes – attitudes that are what they are because they “worked” so far. We have no basis for the claim that it worked because it gets something right that is independent of the way we in fact work. Getting it right just *is* to work. This is why what works and what we find normatively correct correlates. Now, does this rather trivial fact rule out realism?

To be sure, it rules out a specific conception of realism. Realism, according to this conception, is a position assuming some substantial existents in the universe which contain or constitute value independently of their being valued by a valuing creature – objects, physical or otherwise, which have both existence and the property of being valuable. Indeed, such objects, conceptualized as self-subsistent and existing irrespective of humans, are often regarded as ontologically mysterious (see also Mackie, 1977). But what exactly could self-subsistent existence mean? And are normative questions really questions for facts that have self-subsistent existence?

We might say that scientists postulate self-subsistent existents³ when they postulate particles, molecules, cells, or relations between those existents on the physical level. Street’s view, it seems, targets realists who assume that normative facts must be mind-independent in a similar sense in order to warrant the claim that they can function as realist truth-makers. Because the view presupposes an understanding of being real that is implied in the postulation of objects by the natural sciences, I propose calling it a *scientific understanding*.

Scanlon, a recent proponent of what we can call *relaxed metaethical realism*, agrees that the world does not contain normative facts in the way it contains mountains or particles (Scanlon, 2014, 18) but still holds that there is a mind-independent truth about reasons, which we cannot derive from our attitudes. In the following, I explain how Scanlon argues for the existence of mind-independent normative facts that are not causally efficacious self-subsistent entities in space and time, and thus require no mysterious tracking. I discuss Scanlon’s position as exemplary for a sophisticated way of defending the mind-independence of

³Skorupski (2010, 421), who also defends a view of reasons as mind-independent facts but not self-subsistent existents, describes the idea of being *causally efficacious* in *space and time* as a defining characteristic of this understanding of being real (see also realism-irrealism in footnote 4).

normative facts, which is, in certain respects, also shared by philosophers such as Parfit (2011) or Skorupski (2010).⁴

3 | REALISM WITHOUT TRACKING: REASON RELATIONS, DEFLATIONISM, AND METAPHYSICAL PLURALISM

As distinct from the scientific conception of realism that I am assuming is targeted by Street, Scanlon promises a realism that can do without the problematic assumption of a specific ontological class of objects, such as “valuable things” or “reasons”, which mind tracks.

Scanlon’s position is difficult to understand but argumentatively very sophisticated. His metaethical theory is proposed in *Being Realistic about Reasons* (2014), whereas the both simple and deep core insight about reasons as fundamental elements of reality, the basic understanding of which can only be presupposed, is already found in *What We Owe to Each Other* (1998). In the following, I reconstruct what I take to be the two main components of Scanlon’s realistic take on reasons – an argument that can be called *deflationist*, and another argument that can be called *metaphysical pluralist*.

According to Scanlon, being a reason is not a matter of belonging to a specific ontological class. Reasons, according to Scanlon, are just ordinary facts, often natural facts – facts that can be assumed as existing in the universe independently of us without any problems. For example, the sharpness of an edge can be a reason for me not to touch it. Looking at the natural world with our senses, there is nothing that exists besides or over and above the edge and its physical properties, as well as human tissue and its properties. However, the edge’s sharpness functions as a reason in that very relation.⁵ Our capacity to respond to a fact in a certain relation as a reason is our most basic rational capacity that we simply must presuppose whenever we discuss or reflect about reality.⁶ That the edge’s sharpness is a reason in that relation also is a factual statement, although not a factual statement in the natural domain. Distinct from the scientific understanding I attribute to Street, Scanlon acknowledges that we can make truth-apt statements about reality in several domains. Each domain has its own truth-conditions. To verify a truth-claim in the natural domain, we must prove the existence of an entity by empirical methods. To verify a truth-claim in the normative domain, by contrast, these criteria are not applicable. Instead, we must use our reason to reflect in the right way.⁷ Postulating several

⁴Parfit is similar to Scanlon in that he discounts the question of ontology in the metaphysics of reasons. Skorupski is similar to Scanlon in that he works with the concept of the reason relation and argues for its mind-independence. Whereas Parfit (2011) calls his position *realist*, Skorupski labels his view as *irrealism*. The difference between Scanlon’s realism and Skorupski’s irrealism is subtle. Some authors mainly consider it to be a mere difference in terminology (e.g., Olson, 2018); see also Scanlon (2014, 24 FN 9). Moreover, Parfit, who speaks of non-natural realism in Parfit (2011), no longer does so in Parfit, (2017), when he speaks of non-realist cognitivism; this matter is too deep to discuss it here, but it shows once more the subtlety and difficulty of the terms.

⁵According to Scanlon (2014, 31), being a reason is a four-place relation holding between a fact p , an agent x , a set of conditions c , and an action or attitude a : $R(p, x, c, a)$. The fact p is normative in virtue of standing in R . There is a truth about whether p stands in R . This truth is independent of whether we believe it and whether we want it.

⁶This thought is indeed so central for Scanlon that he puts it at the very start of two of his major books (2014, 2 and 1998, 17). In 1998, Scanlon starts with presupposing that his readers are rational and emphasizes over and over again that rational faculties need to be presupposed and that, when somebody does not possess the basic responsiveness to reasons, no argument for thinking in such and such a way can be successful. What is a reason and what is not cannot be ultimately explained in terms of what “rationality requires” (1998, 30f) or of “what desires someone has” (1998, 37f). In 2014, the idea that you cannot explain the basic faculty of reasoning to somebody who does not have the concept of a reason, gives rise to the claim that reasons are “fundamental” (2014, 2).

⁷Scanlon uses this formulation in 2014, 70. He makes no concrete proposal, however, as to what “thinking in the right way” means. This might be due to the fact that what he does in the book is reflecting on the metaphysical nature of normative facts in general, not about how to make particular normative judgements. His aim here is not to argue that thinking in such and such a way is right, whereas thinking differently is wrong, but to make clear that, whenever philosophers present such arguments, they must presuppose their interlocutor’s capacity to understand and make use of reasons (see also footnote 6). There is, moreover, no single criterion for which way of thinking is right, as the capacity to use reason is so basic and escapes singular explanations, for example, in terms of what rationality requires. It is important to mention, though, that the route to correct normative beliefs is reflective equilibrium according to Scanlon (2014, 70f; 2017, 891) – he thus acknowledges a coherence aspect of thinking in the right way.

domains, in which factual statements can be made, is not “unscientific” as long as a statement in one domain does not involve false statements in another domain because it would be the case in postulating reasons for burning witches (see 2014, 21). When we discover that, for example, the sharpness of an edge is a reason, there is no question for what type of thing that reason is as if there was any mysterious ontological class of normative things in addition to natural things.

Discounting the ontological question in that way can be identified as a *deflationist* argument.⁸ Arguing for a plurality of domains in which truth-apt statements can be made, could be identified as *metaphysical pluralism*.⁹ Relaxed realism, as represented by Scanlon, makes use of both of these arguments.

Reasons, as depicted like this, are ontologically non-mysterious indexical facts – facts relating to particular agents in particular circumstances. Thereby, it is tacitly implied that any particular agent is the product of evolution and other historical or cultural influences.¹⁰

To be explicit, there is nothing besides or over and above these contingent natural creatures within the natural world. However, as such creatures, we can – if we possess the faculty of reason – recognize that we stand in reason relations all the time. This is, to make it explicit again, a process of recognizing or discovering, not a process of constructing or making up. This seems to be enough to speak of mind-independence in Scanlon’s opinion. But how strong or robust is such a claim? Is it not just an acknowledgment of how that process looks from our perspective as the particular reasoning creatures we are? Is it not entirely dependent on how our particular mind, cognition, or psychology works? Before we can assess how far Scanlon’s claim gets us, we must take a closer look at the term *mind-independence* in the next section.

4 | THE MIND-DEPENDENCE OF THE REASON RELATION

In this section, I examine the claim that a truth is “mind-/cognition-dependent”. According to one reading, the truth is mind-dependent if it can be logically derived from facts about the mind. According to another reading, the truth is mind-dependent if it stands in a correlation to how the mind works. I think that the disagreement between Scanlon’s realism and Street’s constructivism can be understood by distinguishing the two mentioned readings of mind-dependence.

As suggested previously, Street views realism as a theory assuming objects or attitudes that are valuable independently of any existing creature that is valuing. This assumption, however, is not part of Scanlon’s proposal. Scanlon’s proposal is nevertheless realist in that it assumes that there is a matter of fact about the reason relation – about whether a particular fact stands in a reason relation to us. Indeed, Street accepts that objective judgements in such a sense are possible.

One of the main differences between Street and Scanlon is probably that Street accepts the knowledge of our “desires”, or better, our deep evaluative attitudes, as the route to knowledge about what reasons we have. Scanlon (2014, 70), by contrast, only accepts careful reflection on the matters at hand as a route to normative knowledge. Reflecting on our desires or attitudes does not, at least not necessarily, lead to such knowledge (see also Scanlon, 1998, 37f).

⁸The deflationist reasoning is reflected in Scanlon’s early remarks that the ontological question about what kind of entities reasons are is a “misleading question” (1998, 56). If we take the right stance towards reasons, the stance of normatively responsive creatures, this question disappears (see also 2014, 14; and 1998, 19, 56).

⁹This term is used by Clarke-Doane (2017) to describe Scanlon’s realism. The idea of reality having several domains implies a Quinean take on the question of what “there is”, that can basically also be found in Carnap (see also Scanlon, 2017, 879).

¹⁰Scanlon emphasizes that normative truth can be independent of our judgement, without being independent of “what we are like” (2014, 94). As he proposes a general metaethical theory, not a particular normative theory, he does not elaborate on which features may be relevant in which context. Already in *What We Owe to Each Other*, he is open to the view that creatures in different circumstances or with different interests and aims, could “simply have different reasons” (1998, 71), without thereby accepting constructivism or the derivation of reasons from subjective attitudes.

This does not mean, important to note, that the normative truths we are aiming at do not stand in any relation, or correlation, to the kind of subjects we are.

Skorupski, who shares Scanlon's position with respect to what is relevant for this paper, elucidates this difference by help of the following biconditional: "Truths π are a reason for x if and only if x can tell, recognize, know that they are" (Skorupski, 2016, 600). Skorupski assumes that this relation between truth and our psychology is correctly stated. He and Scanlon agree that it would be odd to speak about an evaluative truth for us to which we are in no way, not even in principle, responsive (whereas being responsive here just means to be mentally capable of forming a true belief about it). The biconditional states a relation between a normative and a mental fact. However, this does not amount to constructivism according to Skorupski, because, as he says, the right-hand side of this biconditional does not *make* the left-hand side true (2016, 600). In other words, the fact that we have a subjective position to "recognize" or, better, "respond to" certain values, does not ground the statement that we have reason to do so. Nevertheless, whenever we have reason for a response, it is presupposed that we are capable of that response,¹¹ given the kind of subjects we are.

This way, a realist can agree with a constructivist on the claim that each value is related to our particular subjectivity. The crucial difference that makes a position constructivist is, however, that subjective features are used to assess the truth of a normative statement, which the realist denies. I think that the realist is right in denying the constructivist path to normative truth. Arguing that all the facts we should ultimately consider as justifications for normative statements are facts about ourselves is, first, an ethical rather than a metaethical position, and, second, not an ethical position I find convincing. I do not argue for this at this point, but Scanlon and others, such as Enoch (2006), do that at length. Nevertheless, I think that it is important to keep in mind the kind of dependence relation between truth and subjectivity that *can* be established by establishing the correspondence between mind and evaluative truth stated in Skorupski's biconditional. Even though Scanlon may be right in that we cannot logically derive what we have reason to do from facts about ourselves, he must still acknowledge that the capacities of our mind – in a sense of term – determine evaluative truth.

To make this clearer, we could also distinguish between "determining" in the sense of truth-making and "determining" in what I would call a material sense. When we, as deliberative agents, recognize a fact as making a normative judgement true, it is not necessarily a fact about our biology or psychology that we recognize or reflect on. However, we must admit that, whenever we arrive at a result of reflection, this result is determined by (the natural material of) our biology or psychology, the scope and possibilities of which we cannot leave behind. It is a fact about our biology or psychology that our mind can accept one fact rather than another as making a normative judgement true.¹²

Evaluative truth, according to a theory working with the concept of a reason relation, is *mind-independent* in the sense that it cannot be logically or deliberatively derived from knowledge about mind (in a subjective process) but *mind-dependent* in the sense that it is only true in relation to a subject with certain features.¹³ Scanlon, it seems, is very much "relaxed" as a realist, meaning that he is willing to concede the latter without believing that it touches the

¹¹This does not necessarily involve "ought implies can". The capacity to respond as a subject in a particular way, which is a capacity for a particular mental state formation, is something more fundamental. You are capable of a response, if there is a possible world in which you are not a fundamentally different subject and respond in that way. To be capable of a response in this sense does not mean that you can or do respond that way in the actual world.

¹²Being clear that responding to facts *as* reasons is something that particular minds just do, without requiring more than those very facts for justification, is not explicitly part of Scanlon's picture, but, as far as I can see, not ruled out by it either. I think that this interpretation is promising in refuting some worries against "relaxed realism", such as the one by Olson (2009). Olson worries that the mentioned types of realism just pass the buck from "intrinsic goodness" to reasons, which are equally hard to establish as intrinsic goodness. Distinguishing between the deliberative perspective of agents in which reasons show up and the perspective from which there are only (normatively neutral) facts to which certain creatures have the psychological capacity to respond to *as* reasons is a good starting point for meeting this challenge.

¹³See the inclusion of a subject variable in Scanlon's formulation of the reason relation and the textual evidence in footnote 10.

implications of realism. The implication most important to Scanlon seems to be that we should regard normative truths as discoverable rather than made-up facts (see also Scanlon, 2017).

But how strong is this claim really? Does it establish anything more than a sort of quasi-realism or perspectival realism? In the following, I show that this depends on how we think of the features of the subjects who stand in the reason relation.

5 | OBJECTIVE PSYCHOLOGICAL FEATURES AND SUBJECTIVE RESPONSES: THE CHALLENGE OF MULTIPLE REALIZABILITY

Scanlon claims that, even though our reasons in a way relate to what we are like, there is a mind-independent truth about the reason relation. Scanlon seems to think that his relaxed realism, building on a two-fold argumentation, involving deflationism and metaphysical pluralism, gets him all that we might want of a realist theory. In this section, I show that it only gets us perspectival mind-independence, unless Scanlon makes a rather difficult assumption.

First, I introduce a distinction between *objective psychological features*, facts about our desires and needs that could be established by an external omniscient observer, and *subjective responses*, ways of evaluating these facts – which could be done by the one about whom the facts hold but also by the external observer. Only if subjective responses are as clear from all possible perspectives in the universe, as objective psychological features are, I accept the label “realism” in a non-modified sense, as absolute or non-perspectival realism.¹⁴

Let us now turn to the distinction first:

Objective psychological features are biological or psychological features that can, in principle, be objectively assessed by examining the individual. We can, for example, speak about altruistic dispositions, about a disposition to feel empathy, a disposition to feel gratitude, to love one’s offspring, and many more. Such features can be genetically determined or they can be acquired tendencies. Such dispositions are lying entirely within the individual. Whether an individual has them can be established objectively, on scientific grounds, given that we have an accurate measure.

Subjective responses, in distinction from that, are less clearly determined by individual features we can assess and describe clearly. These are dispositions to evaluate these behavioural and emotional tendencies in a particular way. We can, for example, have an objectively describable disposition to feel empathy and show the subjective tendency to judge that feeling empathy is a bad thing. Each biopsychological organism, defined by a particular set of features or dispositions, can be subjectively evaluated in a number of different ways, depending on the subjective response of the person that evaluates. The person that evaluates can be the person who has the disposition but also another person. For ways of responding subjectively, or ways of evaluating, we can just say ways of reasoning.

Building on this distinction, we can distinguish between perspectival realism and non-perspectival, or absolute realism. The *perspectival realist* only claims that, from her perspective,

¹⁴For the distinction between perspectival and non-perspectival mind-independence, I refer to Veluwenkamp (2017). Like Veluwenkamp (2017), I think that both Scanlon and Parfit’s proposals amount to alethic pluralism rather than realism, unless they can establish non-perspectival mind-independence. In order to make the mind-independence claim from all possible perspectives, Veluwenkamp says, we are required to establish that it is “impossible that we would have the cognitive and conative states that would make different normative standards correct” (Veluwenkamp, 2017, 758).

through the lens of her subjective responses, there is a discoverable truth about what her objective features, her capacity to feel certain pains and pleasures etc., call for. We might say, it is an appearance from her perspective, from within her subjectivity. As such, we might say that it is made up by her particular subjectivity, whereas she herself does and cannot make it up in a conscious or intentional process of fictionalizing.¹⁵ She finds it and must exercise her reasoning capacities, over time and within a community of reasoners, to find out more about it. Whatever she finds out, however, is from within her own perspective, shaped by her particular reasoning capacities. Nonetheless, the perspectival realist might argue that the ability to find and accept some truths as mind-independent and fixed is crucial for achieving reflective equilibrium and closure, maybe even for having reflective consciousness as such. What she acknowledges not to establish, though, is that her particular subjective perspective is the only one possible or is tantamount to the perspective of the universe. This is what the *non-perspectival or absolute realist* would claim.

Now, what does Scanlon claim? Indeed, this is a hard question. He seems to tacitly assume that we are warranted in believing in the possibility of an absolute perspective, although he reminds us to be epistemically modest and aware that we can never be certain. His strategy seems to be more of an evocation of permissible trust rather than a confident argumentation.¹⁶

In the next section, I provide a more detailed argument for why a way of responding subjectively should be clearly distinguished from an objective feature that can be established, so to speak, from the perspective of the universe. Thereafter, I will explain how alternate possibilities of responding subjectively matter to us.

But now, let us first tie the distinction between objective features and subjective responses directly to Scanlon's formula (Scanlon, 2014, 31) in order to make the argument more systematic. The reason relation is formulated as: $R(p, x, c, a)$. In words: the fact that p is a reason for subject x in circumstances c to perform action a . The agent or subject variable in this formula, x , is taken to contain all the objective features, all the facts about "what we are like". We can assume without problems that there is an objective truth about what we are like. It is independent of what anyone judges that we are like.

In addition to that, there is an attitude p , which these objective psychological features call for. The relation between p and x is expressed by R . Saying that R really holds is to say that x and p are really related in that way. Being responsive to reasons, in Scanlon's picture, is to have the *capacity* to see this relation (not necessarily to actually see it). Now, in which sense does the relation R hold?

If we want to defend a full-fledged, non-perspectival or absolute realism, we must establish that the one *capable* of seeing the relation R can be x , the agent about whom the respective reason relation holds, as well as any other competent reasoner. If there is a truth about whether p stands in R , it must hold for the agent x who is related to p in that particular instance as well as for anyone else. In other words, the fact that x stands in R must hold from the standpoint of the universe, not only from the perspective of x , even though it holds about x or with respect to x .

¹⁵This delineation against fictionalism seems to be an important, if not the most important goal of relaxed realism; see Scanlon, 2017, 896.

¹⁶In his reply to Clarke-Doane (2017), who raises an argument similar to the Darwinian Dilemma, arguing that Scanlon has to decide between objectivity and reliability, Scanlon simply agrees that our moral beliefs can never be safe and writes "But that's life" (Scanlon, 2017, 890). My paraphrasing of Scanlon is that he is really "relaxed" and "down to earth", not trying to actively establish what I call non-perspectival/absolute mind-independence of moral truth but instead stressing that we cannot – and need not – establish it. We could interpret him as saying that we are simply permitted to assume it. According to Price (2016), Scanlon expresses modesty in *being realistic* rather than constructing a "bullet-prove" realism (Platonism). Alternatively, we could also interpret him as being just fine with what I call *perspectival realism*, although not seeing a need to downgrade it as "just from a human perspective". This, one could argue, is all we have – and all we should be content with. Scanlon is not clear about this and, ultimately, it does not matter what Scanlon thinks but what a plausible relaxed realism could imply.

In the following, I will suggest that this cannot be established without an assumption that is as scientifically implausible as the assumption of a tracking relation between the evolution of psychology and evaluative truth.

6 | REASON MONOLITHISM: A SCIENTIFICALLY DUBIOUS IDEA

Scanlon's realism can do without a scientifically implausible idea of human development tracking valuable entities, which are out there in the universe. He acknowledges that reasons are related to what we are like by introducing a reason relation that includes a subject variable. However, he thinks that this can be granted without denying that the truth about what we have reason to do, given what we are like, is independent of us. In Scanlon's view, evaluative truth is independent of our contingent valuing, without being independent of what we are like. In the previous section, I distinguished two different components of "what we are like": Our objective psychological features, features which we have as biological and psychological creatures and which we can objectively assess; and subjective responses, the way we relate to these objectively existing features.

In the following, I will present an argument for those who think that both components are just features or dispositions we have. Although this is trivially true in a sense, I think that we "have" these features in different ways. I think it is possible to relate to the way we are in multiple ways without being psychologically or biologically different. Whereas objective psychological features are fixed truths about the agent, subjective responses are less fixed. I bracket the question whether subjective responses are determined by individual free will, mere chance, social environment, and situation or other things. The crucial point is to understand that only the objective psychological features of a creature are determined by what this creature is like, whereas its subjective responses are not determined in that clear-cut way. Accordingly, there is probably no unique and absolutely valid way of judging what somebody has reason to do given what she is like. By contrast, this depends on the judge's particular way of responding as a subject, or his particular way of reasoning. All that can be established in an absolute sense is which features a creature *has*, not what they *call for*.

Let us take an example: Suppose Joe is a human creature defined by valuing marriage, family, and religion. Suppose there are some hard-wired features about his biology and psychology, making him prone to these constituents in human life by making him happy when he pursues it and unhappy when he deviates from it. Given these hard-wired features, it is possible to embrace the mentioned conception of the good and the kind of happiness it results in. However, it is equally possible to reject this disposition, for example, by believing it is an atavism that is valuable to overcome towards a kind of postmodern transhumanism. Choosing this path might make Joe unhappy, but it might be part of the transhumanist value package to reject traditional human happiness. Why, we might wonder, should Joe opt for that kind of transhumanist value package? After all, there is nothing in what he is like that gives him a reason to do so.

This question seems very intuitive to ask. The intuition behind it might give support to Humean proposals such as Street's. However, I think the intuition is based on a prejudice. The prejudice consists in the assumption of a subjective judgement (a particular way of responding to the world) that there is value in realizing human happiness – or that there is value in pursuing the values that make one happy. We can assume that it is, in principle, possible to determine, based on hard-wired features internal to the agent, which actions and choices would maximize this kind of happiness. Yet, what we do not know, given full knowledge of what we are like, is whether we should realize the path of happiness or an alternative path. If we are prejudiced to believe that nothing can ultimately give a reason than the pursuit of happiness, based on what we are like, then we will not see any reasons for an alternative path. Looking at real life,

however, we may not find it that odd to discount happiness, as the result of following an objectively describable psychological nature, against other values. Members of the Voluntary Extinction Movement who claim to enjoy life and nevertheless judge that it is better not to exist are only an extreme example. There are many more everyday life examples of people justifying activism, professional dedication, or even caring for a family *despite* of the fact that it does not match the way they are like. Why should we not conclude that this is grounded in a subjective value commitment, which is part of what those people are like?

The answer I suggest is that, whereas it is very well part of people's way of reasoning, it is not part of their biological and psychological features that determine objectively what they are like. Omniscience about biological and psychological features does not fully determine the subjective response. Whether Joe embraces the path to human happiness or postmodern transhumanism does not only depend on what intrinsic features he has. A huge determinant of his choice is presumably the culture and community in which he ends up. Contingent life experiences might play another part. A last part might be up to mere chance. As already mentioned, I bracket the free will question at this point.

I have no problem saying that all these circumstantial factors are, in one sense of the term, part of what we are like. However, in order to establish that a reason relation holds objectively for a creature defined by particular features, we must assume that this reason relation is recognizable for each reasonable creature. This means that each creature who possesses the faculty of reason and who has sufficient information about the agent whom the reason relation concerns can recognize that this agent has a reason. To make it short, the realist must say: No matter what you think, what you have reason to do is determined by what you are like in an objectively measurable sense (among other objectively measurable things).

The example of Joe shows that this is not possible. Whether Joe should embrace his traditional happiness in line with his human nature or embark for postmodern transhumanism in which human nature is supposed to be overcome is not determined by Joe's existing human nature. Sharing the subjective response of the postmodern transhumanist, we will judge that his objective psychological features give him a reason to overcome them. Sharing the subjective response of a traditionalist, by contrast, we will judge that the very same features give him a reason to realize them in a traditional human life.

What, now, is the reason relation in which Joe *really* stands? – for such a thing must exist if realism in the absolute, non-perspectival sense is true. I think that there is no such real reason relation. All there is are different ways of responding subjectively, or simply different ways of reasoning, not determined by what individuals are like as biological creatures but up to other factors, maybe situation, maybe free will, maybe chance. In other words, the faculty of reason is not a monolith.

What would be the price for establishing that it is – that there is one way of reasoning that gets it right? It is not the assumption of an evaluative truth that exists out there and is tracked by us, but it is an idea that is potentially problematic for similar reasons: It is the idea that “reason”, the faculty by which we “see” which responses particular features call for, is not a particular way of responding to the world but a single universal faculty. According to this picture, there is one particular “force” in the universe, which is the “force” of reason. Each biological creature that develops sufficiently acquires the same faculty of reason. It might be an empirical fact that, currently, humans are the only higher animals that possess this faculty. However, it is not impossible that other species on earth or in the universe develop it as well. If they do so, they will in principle be able to recognize the reason relations holding for every creature in each circumstance. All they need is full information about the features of these creatures and their circumstances.

I call this view *reason monolithism* or *cognitive monolithism*. The opposite view could be labelled *reason polymorphism* or *multiple realizability of reason*. According to a polymorphic

picture of reason, reason is a cognitive faculty that can occur in many different forms in nature. The most radical proponents of such a view may be found in the tradition of ecological psychology and enactivist cognitive science.¹⁷ This tradition has become very influential within philosophy of mind, cognitive science, and neuroscience, and describes “cognition”, in its most basic form, as the capacity of an organism to maintain itself in a changing world.¹⁸ Accordingly, each biological organism, in Varela’s view (Varela, 1988) even a bacterium, has its own type of cognition. We might opt for a narrower definition of “cognition” and require more complex capacities to navigate or represent the world. We might even require a certain reflexivity and responsiveness to basic laws of logics as essential to the definition of “reason”. These are mainly terminological issues. A view is compatible with a polymorphic picture of reason as long as it acknowledges variability in the expression of “reason” and a non-linear development in the evolution of “reason”. The evolution of “reason”, according to this view, has different stages and could have gone in different directions at each stage. Reason monolithism, by contrast, only allows for the possession of “reason” to a higher or lower degree. A creature with the perfect expression of reason understands how everything in the universe is supposed to be and what every creature has reason to do.

We can acknowledge that many great philosophers of the past were fascinated by the idea of reason monolithism. Without looking deeper into intellectual history at this point, I think it might be possible to discover the idea of *the* perfect “reasoner” in many philosophical or theological systems of the past.

I am not arguing that reason monolithism is false. What I am arguing is that realism about reason relations contains such an idea and that there is a burden of proof on the person defending it.¹⁹ Dennett’s book *From Bacteria to Bach and Back* (Dennett, 2017) can probably be read as a contemporary defence of the idea of reason monolithism. In a nutshell, Dennett argues that the universe contains “reasons”, and that humans, although they evolved naturally, are the species that is in the unique position to understand them. I am not taking a stance on how plausible Dennett’s theory is and whether it can successfully account for all kinds of reasons.

However, I would like to raise awareness of the fact that many empirical scientists of mind and cognition are prone towards the assumption that reason is a cognitive faculty to navigate the world that occurs or could occur in many different forms. Some scientists even argue that reason is specific for creatures with a developed form of communication in social environments.²⁰ This would be a portrayal of our faculty of reason as even more specific than species-specific.

To conclude, we can maintain that cognitive polymorphism is the more common working assumption for empirical scientists, whereas cognitive monolithism is a challenging position to establish – throughout history this was mainly attempted by intellectually very ambitious philosophers rather than evolutionary biologists. Reason monolithism is presumably as hard to establish as a tracking relation between the evolution of our psychology and a mind-independent evaluative truth. Therefore, I conclude that we can formulate a new version of the Darwinian Dilemma:

Whereas the horns of Street’s Darwinian Dilemma are *scepticism* and *tracking*, the horns of the reformulated Darwinian Dilemma are *scepticism* and *reason monolithism*.

¹⁷As a founding work for so-called ecological psychology, see Gibson (1979); see also Varela et al. (1991); with regard to “higher cognitive faculties,” mainly defended by Rietveld and Kiverstein (2014).

¹⁸See, for example, in philosophy of mind Clark (2016); see also the neuroscientific approach of predictive coding as defended by, for example, Friston (2009), Frith (2007).

¹⁹“Relaxed” realism could be interpreted as saying that there is no such burden of proof, because reason as we have it is a so fundamental part of our access to reality that we can and need not question or argue for it. My example, however, was meant to show that asking if there could be alternative types of “reason” can be philosophically interesting and existentially intriguing (see also footnote 16 and section 7).

²⁰For example, Sperber and Mercier (2017).

The scepticism that is relevant for Scanlon's realism is, of course, also slightly different than the scepticism in Street's picture. We could consider it as intertwined with the idea of reason monolithism. The Scanlonian realist can assume either that what humans possess is *the* faculty of reason or that *the* faculty of reason exists, but humans cannot be sure if or to what extent they possess it.

Consequently, we can say that Scanlon's realism does not get us as far as he might want. To be sure, the argument of metaphysical pluralism enables him to reject all Darwinian challenges that are based on a scientistic understanding of reality. Scanlon's proposal is sophisticated in that it does not need a tracking relation between our mind and a class of things in the universe that are reasons. However, this does not entitle Scanlon, and others using the conceptual tool of a reason relation, to claim fully mind-independent truth about reason relations. At best, they can defend the modified claim of "perspectival mind-independence". There are some features we can put into the subject or agent variable within the reason relation. This allows us to establish that the reason relation embraces certain objective psychological features without saying that the validity of the reason relation derives from those features.

However, we must distinguish those features from the subjective way of responding, or from the faculty of reason, that constructs or determines the reason relation as such. Scanlon's reason relation, $R(p, x, c, a)$, does not hold simpliciter but is constructed²¹ by a subjective faculty of reason that could be different. To sum up, objective psychological features define x ; and subjective responses, responses of a subject's reason, define R . We can be realists about R only if we can establish that R must be constructed in a particular way, by any reasoner.

When Scanlon presents his position as compatible with natural science, as not being touched by whatever results of science, he fails to spell out that it rests on the implicit assumption of a specific picture of cognition that might be scientifically problematic. Not only scientistic realism is therefore challenged by a Darwinian Dilemma but also the seemingly more sophisticated, relaxed versions of realism.

6.1 | Why the possibility of alternative types of cognition matters

As developed in this paper, proposals of relaxed realism, working with the concept of a reason relation and involving deflationist and metaphysically pluralist arguments, are not automatically superior to scientistic realism in avoiding a Darwinian Dilemma. Unless a realist about reason relations can successfully defend reason monolithism, the mind-independence of the reason relation boils down to what I call, following Veluwenkamp, *perspectival mind-independence*.

For a deep understanding of reasons and normativity, it might matter that there are other perspectives as well, whereas none of them is right from the perspective of the universe. According to Veluwenkamp, we might say that it is "historically impossible" for us to respond differently than the way we in fact do. However, this does not mean that it is "nomologically" or "metaphysically" impossible that we respond differently (see Veluwenkamp, 2017, 758).²² Why does the possibility of having a different way of reasoning matter to us?

I think that the example of Joe's choice between traditional human happiness and postmodern transhumanism gives a good answer to this question. According to one possible scenario, Joe lives a traditional human life, judges this to be the right thing to do and is unaware of the

²¹To avoid misunderstandings, we must be clear that subjectivity as such is a constructive activity of the mind, the point is not that we, as subjects, consciously or intentionally construct something. This emphasis is important in order to capture the delineation from fictionalism that is crucial for most relaxed realists (see also footnote 15).

²²Scanlon, to my knowledge, did not write much alternate possibilities of cognition. Interestingly, Skorupski, who, as mentioned previously, defends a relevantly similar position acknowledges that possibility at the very end of his *The Domain of Reasons* (2010) but is radically open about what to conclude from it.

possibility of making a different judgement. His way of judging might be largely due to his social surrounding – say, a church community. However, the exposure to another intellectual milieu might open the possibility to see that this judgement is not the only one possible. It need not be the case that Joe discovers a new fact about his psychology or biology or the possibility for happiness. It might just be that he discovers a new way of judging what he used to value under the description of human happiness. There is no longer any available truth about how to judge. The adoption of a way of reasoning, insofar as it can be a choice at all, is a radical choice. It is difficult to say what determines it. In any case, it is not determined by the objective psychological features Joe possesses as a biological creature. Sometimes, radical choices between fundamentally different ways of evaluating become relevant. The fact that humans can actively confront such choices can probably count as a significant motor of adaption to historical change and scientific progress.

The idea of reason monolithism, as opposed to that, is not able to capture the radical transformative openness of our faculty of reason. By contrast, a theory leaves room for conceptualizing this openness when it assumes that reason relations are perspectively mind-independent, whereas there are no reason relations that hold mind-independently in an absolute sense. Last but not least, we can say that the idea of “perspectival mind-independence” offers a conceptual advantage as compared to Street’s mind-dependent constructivism.

According to Street’s Humean constructivism, evaluative truth *derives* from the evaluative attitudes we already have. There is nothing wrong in principle with the idea that the totality of all reasons holding for us is *in fact* a function of what we currently value. However, the constructivist assumes that all that matters is what we *actually* value, not what we can possibly value. I agree in principle that it becomes difficult to establish that we have reason to value something different, unless it is clearly required by some deeper values we already have. Apart from that, I would say that it better matches the reality of value acquisition to describe it as a discovery – to describe the search for values as an explorative endeavour rather than just a commitment to whatever values we can get hold of. This view does not stand in outright contrast to Humean constructivism.²³ However, Humean constructivism fails to capture this existential dimension. There are not only the reasons that derive from the “desires” or “evaluative attitudes” we currently have. What may also be of interest for us as existentially reflective creatures are the possible attitudes which we could develop. By discovering and embodying new attitudes, we might become different subjects.²⁴ Therefore, I think it is permissible to say that all reasons, which hold *for a particular subject*, are a function of that subject’s actual attitudes. Nevertheless, it is important to add that they only hold for that subject insofar as it is that subject, and not in objective reality. The transformative potential of our subjectivity, the radical openness of our evaluative practices, is neglected by Street’s constructivism and Scanlon’s realism alike. Our understanding of normativity as an existential phenomenon, I contest, is enriched and a metaethical theory gets an interesting twist, if it incorporates this idea.

7 | CONCLUSION

In this paper, I argued that the version of realism attacked in Sharon Street’s *A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value* (2006) is scientistic in its understanding of what it means to be real. Realism can be defended without establishing a tracking relation between the

²³Even though this might not be entirely fair to Street (see, e.g., her claim [Street, 2017]) against Parfit, summarized in a nutshell in the slogan, being also the title of a paper, “Nothing Really Matters but That Is Not What Matters, it seems that constructivism suggests the claim that what follows from our evaluative attitudes is supposed to be done in an absolute sense. The perspectival realist, by contrast, holds that, from an absolute perspective, there is nothing that is supposed to be done, whereas many different cognitive communities come to different judgements about what is supposed to be done from their perspective.

²⁴See, for example, Paul’s wonderfully elaborated example of becoming a vampire in her *Transformative Experiences* (Paul, 2014).

development of our attitudes and some mind-independent existents out there in the universe called *evaluative truth*.

That being granted, some of the most sophisticated defences of so-called relaxed realism, such as the one in Scanlon's *Being Realistic about Reasons* (2014), still run into a Darwinian Dilemma. To avoid scepticism and still establish realism, they must assume an idea called *reason monolithism*. According to this view, there is only one full and correct expression of reason in the universe. *Reason* is "reasonable" from the perspective of the universe. I have not refuted this idea but suggested that it is scientifically at least as hard to establish as a tracking relation between the evolution of mind and evaluative truth. Reason monolithism is the ambitious dream of philosophers, whereas a naturalistic understanding of cognition usually depicts cognitive faculties as a functional way of navigating the world that could succeed in many different forms.

To conclude, my new Darwinian Dilemma, the dilemma between scepticism and reason monolithism, targets the probably most sophisticated forms of realism in the contemporary metaethical landscape. It constitutes a version of the Darwinian Dilemma that is different from the one that Street formulated, although still being analogous to it.

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