

Phil 104, April 17, 2007
Replies to Harman

Harman's worry: How can moral beliefs be justified, given that moral beliefs are *not causally explained* by moral facts?

Scanlon suggests that this worry arises from a misleading analogy to empirical beliefs.

- A question arises about how empirical beliefs can be justified, given that they are about objects that exist “outside of me—at a distance from my body.”
- The answer is that those objects *cause* my belief through some reliable mechanism: perception.
- If we ask the same question about our moral beliefs, we cannot answer it in the same way, by appeal to some special ability to perceive moral facts.
- But why should we ?
- Moral beliefs are not beliefs about objects existing outside of us, in space and time, with certain causal powers.
- So there is no need to suppose that our normative beliefs are justified only insofar as they are caused by facts about what we ought to do.

Dworkin makes a similar point, somewhat more colorfully:

- It's crazy to think that the justification of moral beliefs depends on “morons.”

Scanlon's and Dworkin's arguments may be bolstered by an analogy to mathematics.

- We know certain arithmetical truths, such as $2+2=4$,
- but *not* on the basis of causally interacting, via perception or something like it, with numbers.
- However, as Scanlon notes, reasoning about what ought to be done differs from (at least some areas of) mathematics. There is nothing like mathematical proof in ethics.
- Even if we grant that normative beliefs need *not* be justified by perception, or causally, the question remains *how* they *can* be justified.
- No one method for justifying them seems to us obviously correct.

“Why should we believe that wrongness exists, if wrongness does not causally explain anything? Compare witches or phlogiston.”

Reply: Unlike witches and phlogiston, wrongness is not thought to be a substance or entity with causal powers. Nor is it posited in order to explain what takes place. The point of the concept is not to explain why things happen, but instead to tell us what to do.

“There is no mention of wrongness in physics. Physics provides the most fundamental description of the world. So, strictly speaking, wrongness is not part of the world.”

Reply: The physical world is just the world *as described by the physical sciences*. From the fact that things' being good or bad is not part of the world *as described by the physical sciences* it does not follow that things' being good or bad is not part of the world.