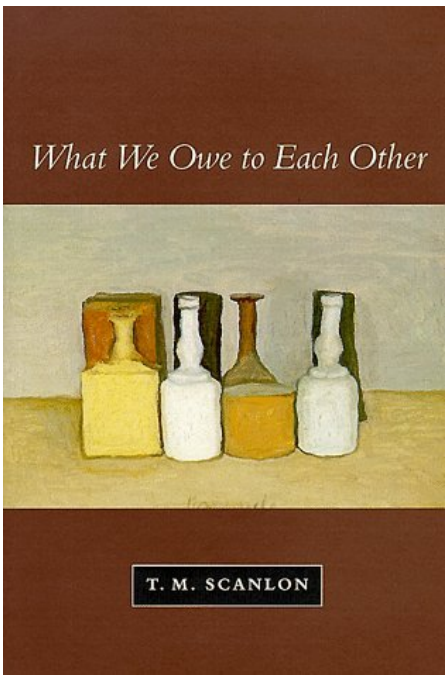

What We Owe to Each Other

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How do we judge whether an action is morally right or wrong? If an action is wrong, what reason does that give us not to do it? Why should we give such reasons priority over our other concerns and values? In this book, T. M. Scanlon offers new answers to these questions, as they apply to the central part of morality that concerns what we owe to each other. According to his contractualist view, thinking about right and wrong is thinking about what we do in terms that could be justified to others and that they could not reasonably reject. He shows how the special authority of conclusions about right and wrong arises from the value of being related to others in this way, and he shows how familiar moral ideas such as fairness and responsibility can be understood through their role in this process of mutual justification and criticism.

Scanlon bases his contractualism on a broader account of reasons, value, and individual well-being that challenges standard views about these crucial notions. He argues that desires do not provide us with reasons, that states of affairs are not the primary bearers of value, and that well-being is not as important for rational decision-making as it is commonly held to be. Scanlon is a pluralist about both moral and non-moral values. He argues that, taking this plurality of values into account, contractualism allows for most of the variability in moral requirements that relativists have claimed, while still accounting for the full force of our judgments of right and wrong.

What We Owe to Each Other Details

Date	:	Published November 15th 2000 by Belknap Press: An Imprint of Harvard University Press (first published 1999)
ISBN	:	9780674004238
Author	:	T.M. Scanlon
Format	:	Paperback 432 pages
Genre	:	Philosophy, Nonfiction, Politics

From Reader Review What We Owe to Each Other for online ebook

Beto says

Dense. Nice little dip into what he understands as Contractualism. Seems like a modified version of utilitarianism, but it suites todays world well. Difficult read, philosophical, big words, etc.

Matthew Gabb says

I came into this book excited about the premise and how Scanlon views morality as relative to those around us. But wow is this book obtuse. Scanlon had so many opportunities to play out the impacts of contractualism on today's issues -- how does it impact politics? How can it change the criminal injustice system? What does it say about race relations in the U.S., for example? -- but is never brave enough to see it through. The book is too lost in its own self-importance at times, which is a disappointment because it *is* an important work and idea, and I hope Scanlon and others give it its *proper* due in the coming years.

Leonardo says

Citado en Teoría de la Justicia.

Ross says

While it is up to us to judge whether appropriate reasons for [judgement-sensitive attitudes] are or are not present, it is not generally within our power to make it the case that these reasons are or are not there; this depends on facts outside us.

While I found "Part I: Reasons and Values" much more interesting than the heart of the contractualist theory of right and wrong in Part II, *What We Owe to Each Other* is undeniably an important piece of moral philosophy. Scanlon is deliberate and clear in his prose, though occasionally overwrought.

For example, the definition of his theory is defined in the negative: "An act is wrong if its performance under the circumstances would be disallowed by any set of principles for the general regulation of behavior that no one could reasonably reject as a basis for informed, unforced, general agreement." If you followed that on the first read, then you'll have no problem with the rest of the book. If you're like me and have trouble following double and triple negations, then be prepared to re-read sections. That being said, the book is crucial for anyone interested in contemporary ethical theory.

Alex says

T.M Scanlon’s _What We Owe to Each Other_ is not a good book. The author has good ideas, but he’s such an awful writer that he fails to communicate them well.

The book begins by arguing that reason, rather than desire, is fundamental to moral decision making. This is a refreshing counter to the prevailing direction in moral thought, best described by Kahneman and Haidt as more of an intuitive than rational process. However, Scanlon undercuts his argument by describing the rational moral matrix as a thing of such complexity that it seems, in essence, intuitive.

The author continues by by challenging the idea that value can be defined in terms of how worthy a given thought or deed is of promotion. Rather, he argues for a more complex concept of value, teeing up the book's "third act."

The "third act" brings us to the meat of Scanlon's argument: that motivations for moral thoughts and behaviors, in all their diversity across times and cultures, share one central component: "What we owe to each other." He calls this contractual thinking, and it boils down to this: "What we owe to each other" is to behave in such a way that those affected by our behavior can reasonably agree that we're behaving in a morally just fashion.

This is interesting stuff, but Scanlon hampers his book by writing like a college sophomore desperate to fill a twenty-paper before turning it in the following morning (NB: I've been that sophomore!). He prizes the passive voice. He never uses a two-syllable word when a five-syllable word will do. His sentences go on an on and on and on.

It's a shame, really. Scanlon makes excellent points and contributes to the moral conversation. He just needs a ghostwriter to help him communicate his thoughts more effectively.

Caleb says

In What We Owe to Each Other, Scanlon offers a genuinely novel ethical theory that overcomes many of the limitations of Kantian and utilitarian theories. Scanlon's contractualism owes more to Rawls and Kant than Hobbes. The contractualist principle states that an act is wrong if it disallowed by a principle that no one can reasonably reject. As a fundamental basis for morality, Scanlon maintains that this principle stands alone and cannot be founded upon any other particular basis. Instead, on Scanlon's view, the contractualist principle is an expression of a commitment to the value of humanity, which is nothing else than a willingness to treat people according to principles that they could not reasonably reject, insofar as they share this same commitment.

Scanlon takes reasons for action to be objective and accordingly applications of the contractualist principle involve a determination of whether a proposed principle could be reasonably rejected when one takes account of the reasons for action that are relevant to persons that could be affected by actions according to the principle. The elaboration of this principle is complemented by a critique of both utilitarian claims concerning the priority of promoting value and of the notion of wellbeing as concept that can play a fundamental role in ethical theory.

What is compelling about Scanlon's approach, is the idea that at the most basic level, ethics is about practical reasoning in manner that is impartial but which does not rely some foundational substantive principles. Of course, contractualism is a commitment to the substantive value of humanity and this means that Scanlon's approach is not a form of constitutivism. Scanlon says clearly that it is 'heteronomous' but if this is a problem (and there are many reasons to think that it is not) it is not the most fundamental issues that Scanlon faces.

Contractualism faces two major and related problems. First, there is reason to think that attempts to apply the contractualist principle to specific problems will face intractable disputes. Rival conceptions of the good

make it likely that in many cases there may be no way to come to reasonable consensus about what principles can be reasonably rejected. Scanlon could turn to MacIntyre's theory of tradition to address this issue but this will mean that the contractualist principle needs additional values to be adequately applied. Second, and related to this, there is a need for an account of moral education, an account that describes the process by which people come to appreciate the reasons that are relevant to adjudicating moral disputes. For this, Scanlon should turn to perspectives in virtue ethics. Again, this suggests that contractualism must be supplemented if it is to provide a complete moral theory.

Josh Paul says

10 pages of ideas stretched into a 400 page book... It get's a bit thin, as you might expect.

Nick Founder says

It was a good book probably aimed more at the academic market but I found the writing style useful for my own book writing namely concept, refer to others, analyse, conclude.

Soha Bayoumi says

Scanlon's moral contractualism: interesting but some parts are not convincing!

Joshua Stein says

So, worked through this book somewhat slowly due to intervening life circumstances. Some short commentary on the writing before getting into the substance. Scanlon's writing style is pretty much prototypical in analytic philosophy, very dry and organized in a straightforward and systematic way. I wouldn't call the writing "good" in anything beyond the academic scope, but it's serviceable and more accessible than some of the other philosophical literature on the market.

In the course of the book, Scanlon outlines his own account of normative reasons, particularly moral reasons, and what he takes to be the general underpinnings for systematically justifying moral norms, e.g. norms against causing harm, punishing people for crimes, etc. A lot of the work on this feels familiar, and has the same kind of socially oriented vibe one might expect from John Rawls. In that vein, I think Scanlon does pretty well, and the account that he offers is fairly compelling.

The course of his argument isn't really unified; it's probably not best to think of the book as an argument for Contractualism in that sort of singular way, but that's honestly fine for the course of the book. Really, the general tie in for Scanlon has to do with the very general assessment of moral judgments as about reasons. (He says as much on page three of the introduction.) Much of the book, then, is really an account of how reasons behave in the moral domain. For many in philosophy, especially in metaethics, I don't think this is satisfying as an account of obligations, as the title and dustjacket seem to imply. It does, however, act as a pretty general approach to understanding and thinking about moral reasons.

Are moral reasons responsive to social norms? Or conditioned by those norms? What gives us reason to help or protect others? What gives us reason to punish others? What gives us reasons to parent or teach in certain ways, rather than other historical alternatives? These are all questions into which I think Scanlon offers some useful insight. I don't think it answers much on the titular issue, but it still succeeds in providing a general background to an increasingly important discussion in metaethics, namely what sorts of things reasons are and how they behave.

David says

After finishing T.M. Scanlon's *What We Owe to Each Other*, I came away first, with the realization that I need to read it several more times to fully grasp his demonstrations of moral principles which "no one can reasonably reject". Second, I found myself wanting a volume II that develops the idea of rejectability more fully. In a world of value pluralism, moral skepticism and relativity – the idea that a "democratic" method might exist to find definitive or at least demarcated answers to our moral quandaries is very tantalizing to me. Scanlon, however, is realistically sober. – "The reasons we have to treat others only in ways that could be justified to them underlie the central core of morality, and are presupposed by all the most important forms of human relationship. These reasons require us to strive to find terms of justification that others could not reasonably reject. But we are not in a position to say, once and for all, what these terms should be. Working out the terms of moral justification is an unending task." Fully recognizing what he has left unsaid, Scanlon delivers a regrettably unsatisfying parting message – "I have offered a very general account of one part of morality, but even this account is incomplete. I have not, for example, offered a systematic account of how reasons for rejecting proposed principles are to be formulated and their strength assessed. On the contrary, I have argued …that these reasons cannot all be understood in terms of well-being, and I have expressed doubt that any systematic account of such reasons can be found." Despite these limitations, I believe that Scanlon has left us with the outlines of something truly important that can be built on.

What then is Scanlon offering in *What We Owe to Each Other* if not a complete method? He is offering above all a theory of the "narrow" region of morality which encompasses our duties to other people, "to present the contractualist idea of justifiability to others as an account of the reasons that underlie and shape a central part of our moral thinking. Contractualism offers a substantive account of these reasons: one that aims to describe them in a way that makes their appeal and significance more evident". Again and again he works to show how his theory best explains and unifies this region. Scanlon does acknowledge that this self-chosen label "contractualism" can mislead, since his view is not based on the bargaining or mutual advantage usually associated with contracts. However, in the philosophical tradition, contractualism is contrasted with "contractarianism". The former is based on moral motives, while the latter is based on self-interest and how to obtain socially beneficial results from it. Scanlon clearly places himself on the contractualist side of this line. Also, traditionally, social contracts are associated with political theories about the founding of society, but here Scanlon incorporates them into our ongoing, everyday relations through being able to justify our behavior to others. Since the plausible sociological origin and function of morality (from a naturalistic perspective) is the regulation of communal life, it makes sense that a theory which grounds itself in these relations through justification should be successful.

These social beginnings lead me to ask what view of moral truth or rightness Scanlon is espousing in his theory. In his view a moral right would be an action according to a principle which no one could reasonably reject and a moral wrong its opposite. But is there nothing more that gives these principles their authority, and does this mean they are merely based on human opinion or social convention – are morals in a sense "constructed"? Scanlon sees truth existing in different kinds of domains. The domain of physical experience, which science seeks to explain, is grounded in empirical facts. The domain of mathematics, logic, and morals however, can only be grounded in standards of thinking which have been shown to produce plausible, stable,

coherent results over time. According to him, the narrow moral domain of our duties to others is at its fundamental level composed of judgments about what reasons people have to relate to others in certain ways. So, in a sense it is grounded in something objective – the nature of human beings, human relations, and the world we share. These things are "not up to us". Beyond this foundation, however, the narrow moral domain can only offer a kind of “intersubjective” impartiality based on a procedure of reasoned justification which weeds out merely self-centered perspectives. This is why Scanlon emphasizes principles that "no one" can reasonably reject who is also similarly motivated to find common principles. If we have a method of reasoning that works in this way, he believes, we have no need of some metaphysical foundation to legitimize our judgments – just as we work perfectly well without one in mathematics.

In *Being Realistic about Reasons,* Scanlon’s most recent work, he goes into much more detail about his method of moral reasoning – likening it to a kind of “constructivism” only in the broad sense that it achieves its results through a set of shared procedures. I'm not a huge fan of this term since it seems to imply pure "social construction", but it has been in use since Rawls coined it in 1980, again inspired by Kant. The point is that the procedures through which moral principles are "constructed" are firmly grounded and not arbitrary. There is an element of construction as in both law and mathematics, though in all these areas it is often out of materials not of our choosing. In *Being Realistic about Reasons* he clearly states that the procedure or method of reasoning he believes most appropriate for the narrow moral realm is that of “reflective equilibrium” famously used by Rawls in *A Theory of Justice*. In this method, one reflects on one’s best considered judgments about a moral problem, sees what principles may embody it, and then looks back to see if these principles could account for the judgments alone. If not, the principles or judgments are revised. Of course, a great deal depends on how one arrives at the initial considered judgments. One thing is certain, Scanlon is not referring to a process of justifying existing beliefs. “I understand the method, however, not as a process of describing what one thinks but a method for deciding what to think. This makes better sense of the stages of the process at which one decides whether to revise or abandon what were previously one’s ‘considered judgments.’ If one were just seeking an accurate description of one’s existing views, modifying these views to make them fit a proposed description would be fudging the data. Rawls’ idea, as I will understand him, is rather that seeing what principles would or would not account for a given judgment may lead us to change our mind about that judgment and to reassess the reasons why it might have seemed plausible. …All of this supports the conclusion that the justificatory force of the fact that we have arrived at certain judgments in reflective equilibrium depends on the substantive merits of the judgments we make along the way, in beginning with certain considered judgments and in modifying these judgments and others as we progress…”. One must also consider that though reflective equilibrium can begin as a subjective standard for moral reasoning, what takes it beyond the merely subjective, is reflection on whether people in all general types of situations could also accept the principles so derived. And finally, what takes the method from the imaginatively intersubjective to the truly impartial is the test of principles in actual justificatory argumentation – ideally with “everyone.” Scanlon emphasizes the former while Habermas’ “discourse ethics” the latter. In this sense of people building justifications together, then, the “constructivist” label may be appropriate. It is also appropriate in the sense of modifying and adding to one's intuitive moral judgments. Finally, there is always a sense of "rational reconstruction" inherent in the process of theorizing about and systematizing these judgments. This is because the materials we have to work with – whether inherited, evolved, socialized, or other – are largely unformulated, and we must at least build a framework if we are to know them, comprehend them, and ultimately decide their worth.

Why do I think Scanlon’s work is important, and where can we take his methods? First, any moral theory that helps us to understand our own judgments about our duties to others is valuable in itself. Second, we are sorely in need of a common, pragmatic ethics that is justifiable to others. We need this especially for hospital and research ethics boards and for political decision making. There are too many moral theories out there to pick and choose from, and this makes reasoned consensus impossible. So I believe we need to tighten up and fill in both Scanlon’s and Habermas’ proceduralism to create an operational method for the moral-political domain akin to the scientific method for the physical. My dream, however unrealistic, is that this kind of method could become a core part of a truly deliberative democratic practice. What is already “baked into”

contractualist theories like Rawls' or Scanlon's or Habermas' is a "mutual recognition" of others as rational beings. The democratic ideals of equality, rights, and citizenship have formalized this concept legally, but their implications are left unfinished. Scanlon is forthright that *What We Owe to Each Other* is not about this realm of institutional justice; however, it is a contract theory, and could easily be extrapolated for that purpose. (Brian Barry does this in his *Theories of Justice* which led me to the present work.) Next on my reading list is Scanlon's *The Difficulty of Tolerance* which collects his essays in political philosophy. I can only hope that he completes the picture more than Habermas did. The latter's discourse ethics left the field too wide open and set unattainable goals. Clearly our deliberative methods cannot be so tight that all the conclusions we reach are entailed from the beginning, but they also must produce results. In the past decade or so there have begun "philosophical experiments" to test out ideas in a manner similar to psychological research. I would like to see this technique used to develop group moral decision making procedures based on these theories. I also have an app in mind. Whether people would accept a constraining method for moral reasoning in social practice, no matter how legitimized, is another question.

I end this review with one more quote from *What We Owe to Each Other* – recognizable once again by it's measured realism (which I lack): "Inquiry of this kind may not yield systematic theories or novel principles that give clear directives about what to do in difficult cases. It may even make some decisions more difficult, or at least more complex, by dislodging overly simple understandings of the relevant moral considerations. But it is not an insignificant form of progress, and it is, I believe, the form of progress that philosophical reflection is most likely to provide."

Rich says

I won't lie, I read this because of The Good Place.

As others have mentioned this was a somewhat dense read. I felt at times like there were just a few key points that were stretched far more than they needed to be.

Chris says

A humble and sensitive argument — contra moral relativists, utilitarians, and even more "friendly" philosophers like John Rawls — that a limited but universal core to morality exists and has value for moral reasoning. Scanlon leaves room for a plurality of values (and weights on values) while grounding this central conception of right and wrong in "what we owe to each other," reasons for acting that others cannot reasonably reject. One of the most helpful implications of contractualism as Scanlon develops it here is that accurate moral reasoning requires curiosity about the needs, experiences, and reasoning of others who are unlike us.

The argument is a bit ungainly and the writing tedious — not surprising for a work of analytic philosophy. But I found it convincing and worth reading.

Mitch says

A contemporary classic; not the easiest read but worth the effort