First strengths

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M aybe all that exists is a mass of tiny vibrating strings. But wouldn't that be surprising? What about rocks and robots, rhymes and reasons, proofs and primes? According to philosophical naturalism, whatever there is can be explained in terms of whatever scientists end up telling us about the nature of the physical world, and our ways of knowing about the physical world provide the method and standard for all of our knowledge. This radical position is popular among philosophers nowadays, mostly owing to a sense of modesty – or perhaps embarrassment – in the presence of the spectacular successes of natural science, as well as the equally spectacular failures of so many grand metaphysical systems.

In *Being Realistic About Reasons* – a powerful and superbly written short book – T. M. Scanlon defends an alternative approach. We start with a plurality of different domains. Along with the domain of science we have the domain of mathematics, the domain of normativity (ethics and rationality), and perhaps others. Any domain, as long as it is well-defined and internally coherent, is as metaphysically respectable as any other. Moreover, each of these domains is autonomous in the following sense: "The truth values of statements about a 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". To figure out whether the Higgs boson exists, we use the best scientific methods; to figure out whether Andrew Wiles found a proof of Fermat's Last Theorem, we use the best mathematical methods; to figure out if the fact that there is an alligator in your bathtub is a reason not to take a bath, we use the best normative standards. So far, so good – but an obvious problem arises for such an open-armed theory of existence.

It is said that on every midsummer full moon, the Whitethorn Fairies frolic at the top of a hill on my uncle's farm near Limerick. These same fairies are alleged to cause accidents when construction companies try to cut down whitethorn bushes. On such occasions legend conflicts with science. Scanlon insists that science would prevail in such conflicts; though it is unclear what resources his theory has to support this. But imagine an alternative legend. Rather than injuring construction workers these fairies merely grumble to themselves and think spiteful thoughts. Here legend does not conflict with science. Assume that the fairy domain is coherent and employs well-defined concepts. It seems Scanlon would have to say that these more Anglicized Whitethorn Fairies exist. The question of which of these fairies exist, for instance whether the fearsome Munster fairies are still around, would be strictly a question internal to the domain of "fairy theory".

The most promising response to this problem would be to subsume fairy theory within the natural domain, thereby excluding fairies on grounds of their failure to show up in empirical experiments. Scanlon would have to resist the analogous assimilation of the normative domain into the domain of science, to fend off philosophical naturalism. To attempt this, Scanlon needs to say more about how we distinguish domains from each other, and in particular under what conditions one domain is subsumed under another.

One suggestion comes to mind: perhaps the business of distinguishing domains is something decided by the standards of the domains themselves. Some domains are clearly imperialistic: they successively draw in more and more subject matter within their own jurisdiction. Eventually the physical domain will have jurisdiction over anything potentially causally relevant, and hence over fairies (and gods?). We undertake this process within those domains that are most plausibly distinct, successively drawing as many domains as we can into as few domains as we can. We might end up vindicating philosophical naturalism this way – if only the domain of science survives. But more likely we will end with a small plurality of domains. The key point is that we start with "our best general understanding of the nature of the concepts basic to the domain in question and to the most obvious particular truths within it". Working outwards from the most obvious particular truths, we will plausibly end up vindicating three domains: the metaphysical, logico-mathematical and evaluative/normative.

This is all rather speculative, and a further problem remains: providing some principled account of conflict resolution between domains (think about arguments between Young Earthers and geologists about how old the planet is). The problem is that for certain conflicts, it is likely that each domain will have some standards according to which it alone should prevail.

We can avoid all these problems while retaining most of the advantages of Scanlon's account by accepting the importance of some external questions about which domains there are, how they interrelate, and which domains would win which conflicts. We should embrace the über-domain.

Scanlon wants to reject the über-domain – a domain of domains – to ensure that normative claims are adjudicated only by normative standards. But this very rejection forces him to say the awkward things about the Wee Folk. It is quite proper to deny that standards appropriate to the domain of science should arbitrate claims about what reasons we have. It isn't clear that morality or rationality would survive such an incongruous arbitration. But we should be open to allowing some broader standards with which to distinguish real domains from fairy tales. Rather than resting our case for the reality of reasons on some abstract methodological prohibition, we should rest our case on the strength of the first-order convictions themselves. We really do have strong reasons to avoid intense pain, to care for our families, and so forth. On that basis we should reject any philosophical considerations that imply otherwise.