

PHIL 5983: Hume and Practical Reasoning
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VPR, Chapters 4–6

Chapter 4

- There are two senses of ‘reason’, as when we say that someone has a reason to act in a certain way. First, reasons might be motives. These are *internal reasons* (or reasons in the internal sense). But, second, we sometimes say that someone has a reason to do something regardless of whether they have a motive to do so. These are *external reasons* (or reasons in the external sense).

- Here is a first pass account of internal reasons:

A has a reason to ϕ iff *A* has some desire the satisfaction of which will be served by his ϕ -ing. (77)

Any account of internal reasons will show them to be relative to the agent’s *subjective motivational set*.

- Note Williams’s 4 propositions about internal reasons, pp. 78–80.

- Example: The man who wants to drink gin and believes that this petrol is gin. Does he have a reason to drink it? Williams says that he does not, though he acknowledges that we can certainly explain his behavior in terms of his beliefs and desires (and in *that* sense there is a reason for what he does).

- Some comments on practical reasoning:

The sub-Humean model supposes that ϕ -ing has to be related to some element in *S* [the agent’s subjective motivational set] as causal means to end (unless, perhaps, it is straightforwardly the carrying out of a desire which is itself that element in *S*). But this is only one case: indeed, the mere discovery that some course of action is the causal means to an end is not in itself a piece of practical reasoning. (80)

- Deliberation, in general, can impact S . Reflection and the imagination, in particular, can produce and extinguish motivation. And Williams is fairly liberal when it comes to what can serve as a motive.

S can contain such things as dispositions of evaluation, patterns of emotional reaction, personal loyalties, and various projects, as they may be abstractly called, embodying commitments of the agent. Above all, there is of course no supposition that the desires or projects of an agent have to be egoistic; he will, one hopes, have non-egoistic projects of various kinds, and these equally can provide internal reasons for action. (81)

- Q: Can one be unmotivated to pursue what one *needs*? Williams says “yes”, people could conceivably lack such internal reasons. If there is still a reason for such a person to pursue these things, it would have to be an external reason.
- A supposed example of an external reason: Owen Wingrave and the army.
- External reasons cannot explain actions. Only motivational states can explain action:

Now no external reason statement could *by itself* offer an explanation of anyone’s action. Even if it were true (whatever that might turn out to mean) that there was a reason for Owen to join the army, that fact by itself would never explain anything that Owen did, not even his joining the army. For if it was true at all, it was true when Owen was not motivated to join the army. The whole point of external reason statements is that they can be true independently of the agent’s motivations. But nothing can explain an agent’s (intentional) actions except something that motivates him so to act. (82–83)

- One who believes he has an external reason to ϕ thereby has an internal reason to ϕ . But how, one might wonder (especially the Humean), can reason give rise to new motivation in this way? This motivation must, according to the external reasons theorist, derive from the external reason in the right sort of way.

Owen might be so persuaded by his father’s moving rhetoric that he acquired both the motivation and the belief. But this excludes an element which the external reasons theorist essentially wants, that the agent should acquire the motivation *because* he comes to believe the reason statement, and that he should do the latter, moreover, because, in some way, he is considering the matter aright. (84–85)

- Williams denies the possibility of such new motivation, however.

Given the agent's earlier existing motivations, and this new motivation, what has to hold for external reason statements to be true, on this line of interpretation, is that the new motivation could be in some way rationally arrived at, granted the earlier motivations. Yet at the same time it must not bear to the earlier motivations the kind of rational relation which we considered in the earlier discussion of deliberation — for in that case an internal reason statement would have been true in the first place. I see no reason to suppose that these conditions could possibly be met. (85)

- Williams on the indeterminacies of practical reasoning:

There is an essential indeterminacy in what can be counted a rational deliberative process. Practical reasoning is a heuristic process, and an imaginative one, and there are no fixed boundaries on the continuum from rational thought to inspiration and conversion. To someone who thinks that reasons for action are basically to be understood in terms of the internal reasons model, this is not a difficulty. There is indeed a vagueness about 'A has reason to ϕ ', in the internal sense, insofar as the deliberative processes which could lead from A's present S to his being motivated to ϕ may be more or less ambitiously conceived. But this is no embarrassment to those who take as basic the internal conception of reasons for action. It merely shows that there is a wider range of states, and a less determinate one, than one might have supposed, which can be counted as A's having a reason to ϕ . (86)

- External reasons statements serve many functions, but it is especially important that they are supposed to be capable of pointing out the rationality or irrationality of an agent.

There are of course many things that a speaker may say to one who is not disposed to ϕ when the speaker thinks that he should be, as that he is inconsiderate, or cruel, or self, or imprudent; or that things, and he, would be a lot nicer if he were so motivated. Any of these can be sensible things to say. But one who makes a great deal out of putting the criticism in the form of an external reason statement seems concerned to say that what is particularly wrong with the agent is that he is *irrational*. (86)

- But, Williams does not think that it is plausible that such an agent is irrational. So, Williams is skeptical about external reasons statements altogether.

Postscript

- Williams’s preferred formulation of the internalist conception of reasons:

A has a reason to ϕ only if there is a *sound deliberative route* from *A*’s subjective motivational set (which I label “*S*”, as in the original article) to *A*’s ϕ -ing. (91)

Q: But what the heck is a “sound deliberative route”?

- False beliefs can defeat what would otherwise be reasons for action.
- Merely suggesting a reason, which seems like the offering of an external reason, can cause one to acquire it as an internal reason.

... there are indeed many and unclear stages on the path between cases in which it is manifestly and overwhelmingly clear that an agent has reason to do a certain thing, and cases in which my telling him what he has reason to do constitutes influencing him or getting him to see things in a new light. A realistic account should accept that there is an essential indeterminacy in this area. (92)

- Williams sees reasons as possessing both normative and explanatory force.

On the one hand, if it is said, in the normative mode, that *A* has a reason to ϕ , the speaker must envisage the possibility of *A*’s ϕ -ing for that reason, in which case the reason will figure in the explanation of what *A* does. (I appeal to this connection in the argument against external reasons.) On the other hand, if we explain what *A* does in terms of his reason for doing that thing, which is one type of giving a reason why he did it, we rationalize his conduct (in the phrase familiar from Davidson’s work); that is to say, we cite a consideration which was effective in his coming to act because it made normative sense to him. (93)

- There are all sorts of reasons that come with accepting a social practice. But Williams claims that these reasons do not stick to those who do not accept those practices, as externalism would require.

What can rationalize or render intelligible various kinds of action is certainly a social, and in some part an institutional, matter. It can be a question of historical, anthropological, and philosophical interpretation, how far these various practices are, also, variable and local. But whether they are local or more widely spread, it will equally be true that they need a basis in individual psychologies. There can be an institution of promising, for example,

only because enough people enough of the time have (internal) reason to do something because they have acted in a way that counts as promising to do that thing. There is thus no problem in understanding the exchange of reason claims between people who have internalized the practice. But we are still owed an account of what is being said when the reason claims are directed to people who are known not to have internalized the practice, or to be insufficiently responsive to it — that is to say, in cases where an externalist interpretation is definitively required. (94)

Chapter 5

- Williams’s argument is question-begging because it assumes that rational deliberation must start from the agent’s subjective motivational set.

But what we need is an answer to the question this point raises: what is wrong with those views which hold that (at least some) rational practical deliberation starts from something external to the agent’s present subjective motivational set? (101)

Chapter 6

- Kantian approaches to ethics base ethics in rationality: ethical action is a species of rational action. Such approaches might make ethical properties and ethical knowledge less mysterious. But, there are also skeptical worries about such approaches.

By *skepticism about practical reason*, I mean doubts about the extent to which human action is or could possibly be directed by reason. (103)

Korsgaard considers two such skeptical worries. First, there is *content skepticism* — i.e., how can formal principles alone yield substantive conclusions? Second, there is *motivational skepticism* — i.e., how can reason provide motives for action? Motivational skepticism is the primary topic of her paper. Korsgaard will argue that the latter skeptical worries depend on the former.

I.

- The Humean View: Reason can only help us find good means to our ends. Reason cannot provide us with ends. Korsgaard rehearses two of Hume’s main arguments for motivational skepticism, on p. 105. Korsgaard rightly points out that Hume’s first argument depends on his very limited account of rationality, according to which reason alone has very little content (e.g.,

the only knowledge of relations of ideas is logical or mathematical). So, this argument assumes content skepticism.

II.

- Korsgaard then defines *internalism* and *externalism* about motivation.

An *internalist* theory is a theory according to which the knowledge (or the truth or the acceptance) of a moral judgment implies the existence of a motive (not necessarily overriding) for acting on that judgment . . . On an *externalist* theory, by contrast, such a conjunction of moral comprehension and total unmotivatedness is perfectly possible: knowledge is one thing and motivation another. (106)

In short, internalists and externalists differ over whether there is a *necessary* connection between moral knowledge and motivation.

- Korsgaard goes on to discuss Nagel and Williams's arguments for the conclusion that reasons must be motives.

So long as there is doubt about whether a given consideration is able to motivate a rational person, there is doubt about whether that consideration has the force of a practical *reason* . . . Practical-reason claims, if they are really to present us with reasons for action, must be capable of motivating rational persons. I will call this the *internalism requirement*. (109)

III.

- Korsgaard reminds us of the varieties of practical irrationality that Hume admits. She also claims that Hume should have allowed for, but overlooked, the following kind of practical irrationality: a person recognizes something as a means to a desired end, but that person is not at all motivated to pursue that means.

So a person may be irrational, not merely by failing to observe rational connections — say, failing to see that the sufficient means are at hand — but also by being “willfully” blind to them, or even by being indifferent to them when they are pointed out. (111)

And there are analogous situations in theoretical reasoning.

- Important claim:

Thus, the internalism requirement for theoretical reasons is that they be capable of convincing us — insofar as we are rational. (111–112)

IV.

- Korsgaard charges that many think that the internalism requirement is more demanding than it in fact is.

All it requires is that rational considerations succeed in motivating us insofar as we are rational. (112)

Just because one can fail to be motivated by the greater good or by prudence, it does not follow that it is not *rational* to do so (or that these ends do not have special rational authority). Korsgaard makes the following comparison:

The fact that one might or might not be motivated to choose a certain course of action by the consideration that it is the best available means to one's end does not show that taking the means to one's ends is just one end among others, an end some people care about and some people do not. In both cases, what we have is the fact that people are sometimes motivated by considerations of this sort, and that we all think in the latter case and some think in the former case that it is rational to be so motivated. (113)

V.

- If true irrationality is possible, then argument alone cannot reliably produce rational behavior. This is contrary to some internalist conceptions. (Though, it is unclear that the internalists would call this activity 'argument'.)

◦ Note her characterizations of the *prudent person* and the *determined/resolute person*, on pp. 115–116. Korsgaard claims that strength of motivation can vary across people who share strength of reasons.

VI.

- One might argue that practical reasoning must begin with motives one already has. Korsgaard attributes this position to Williams. For Williams:

Internal reasons are reasons reached by deliberation from the subjective motivational set: they can motivate us because of their connection to that set. (116)

But, remember, Williams is quite liberal regarding what can be included in the subjective motivational set. And, he allows for modes of rational deliberation besides only means/end reasoning.

Korsgaard responds to Williams by noting that, as with Hume, his motivational skepticism depends on content skepticism.

As long as it is left open what kinds of rational operations yield conclusions about what to do and what to pursue, it must be

left open whether we are capable of being motivated by them ... Williams' argument does not show that if there were unconditional principles of reason applying to action we could not be motivated by them. He only thinks that there are none. (118–119)

VII.

- Korsgaard accepts the internalism requirement, but she does not think that it rules out any ethical theories.

VIII.

- Conclusion:

To the extent that skepticism about pure practical reason is based on the strange idea that an acknowledged reason can never fail to motivate, there is no reason to accept it. It is based on some sort of a misunderstanding, and I have suggested a misunderstanding of the internalism requirement as a possible account. To the extent that skepticism about pure practical reason is based on the idea that no process or operation of reason yielding unconditional conclusions about action can be found, it depends on — and is not a reason for believing — the thesis that no process or operation of reason yielding unconditional conclusions about action can be found. To the extent that skepticism about pure practical reason is based on the requirement that reasons be capable of motivating us, the correct response is that if someone discovers what are recognizably reasons bearing on conduct and those reasons fail to motivate us, that only shows the limits of our rationality. Motivational skepticism about practical reason depends on, and cannot be the basis for, skepticism about the possible content of rational requirements. (122)