

PHIL 5983: Action Theory Seminar
Prof. Funkhouser
2/7/07
Williams, “Internal and External Reason”

- 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 even though they have no 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. (101)

- Note Williams’ 4 propositions about internal reasons, pp. 102–104.

- 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).

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). (104)

Williams is fairly liberal, though, as to what can serve as a motive — see p. 105.

- 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.

- 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. (106–107)

- One who believes he has an external reason to ϕ thereby has an internal reason to ϕ . Q: But, how can reason give rise to new motivation in this way?
- External reasons statements can be used to point to the 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*. (110)

But, Williams does not think that it is plausible that such an agent is irrational. So, Williams is skeptical about external reasons statements altogether. (111)