Internal to what?

A critique of the distinction between internal and external reasons for action (*)

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Abstract

The distinction between internalism and externalism can be interpreted in different ways, which must be kept clearly distinct. The distinction between internal and external reasons for action, proposed by Bernard Williams (1980), can be interpreted as expressing a form of internalism. If we assume that internalism seems preferable to externalism and Williams's "internal reason theorist" as an internalist, we have an example of an anti-rationalistic form of internalism. I will suggest that Williams's arguments do not justify his distinction and the consequences he draws, basically because of the unjustified exclusion of rational elements from the "subjective motivational set". Moreover, Williams's position seems exposed to a subjectivistic outcome which he himself probably would wish to avoid. Therefore, I argue that the distinction between internal and external reasons should be abandoned. Some considerations in favour of a rationalistic interpretation of internalism and of the normativity of moral reasons are then suggested.

1. The distinction between internalism and externalism in the theory of motivation, though indeed useful, stands in need of some clarification. Since it was first formulated (Falk 1947-48; Frankena 1958), it has acquired a number of similar but not identical meanings, and parallel distinctions have been introduced (e.g. internal and external reasons; see Williams 1980), generating some confusion in the debate.

This distinction responds to an important need both in the theory of motivation and in the theory of practical reason, namely the need to express the relation between the *explicative* and the *normative* value of practical judgments. The issue can be expressed in the question whether a *moral motivation* (our alleged motive when we claim to be "acting for a moral reason") can be said to give both an explication and a justification for an action deriving from a practical deliberation. If moral reasons do not explicate nor justify the action chosen on their grounds, then morality seems to be a mistification, since moral reasons are normally intended by the agent to offer the key to the understanding of the agent's choices, in terms both of causes and of arguments sustaining the choice. The connection between explication and normativity is spelled out differently in the various theories of practical reason, and the possibility of a convincing normative

ethical theory rests considerably on the viability of that connection.

2. In a general sense, the distinction between internalism and externalism tries to sort out the characteristic features of two meanings of the notion of "ought" or "obligation" in the moral language; these two meanings express two opposite views of the connection between moral obligation and motivation, so that, according to an internalist reading, motivation is *internal* to the notion of a moral "ought", while on an externalist view motivation is *external* to it. Yet, this broad distinction has been drawn and used in at least three distinct but partially overlapping ways.

In a first sense, suggested by Falk (1947-48), the issue appears to be whether moral motivation is internal or external *to the subject*, in a broad and unspecified understanding of the word "subject"; in this perspective, the internalist interpretation maintains that a moral "ought" has a "motivational" sense which is internal to the subject and "bears at least a sufficient resemblance to what ordinary usage expects of a normative term" (Falk 1947-48, p. 36); moral obligations are "conclusive reasons" which operate as "a dictate of conscience" (p. 40). Internalists in this sense contend that motivation is to be found within the acting subject whenever she honestly declares to be acting from an "ought" whose normative force she recognized in certain circumstances.

In a second sense, implicitly endorsed by Frankena (1958), internalism entails the claim that the very concept of moral obligation *logically* implies motivation, while externalism argues (as Frankena himself does) for a logical gap between them. In this sense, the distinction refers to the concept of "ought" and neither directly nor necessarily to the acting subject. For an internalist in this sense, an obligation is *essentially* motivating, that is, it cannot be present without motivating. Now, as critics of internalism have often noted, this claim seems too strong, because, without further clarification, it cannot explain such phenomena as weakness of will and *accidie*: in these situations, the actual perception of an obligation does not entail the presence of a corresponding motivation. Therefore, in these cases, the concept of an obligation, or even the acceptance of its normative power, cannot serve as an explanation of the actual agent's choices and we lose the possibility of sistematically connecting the normative and explicative value of moral reasons through the mere notion of an "ought". Furthermore, as Frankena notes, on this account we may be tempted to change the notion of obligation, making it dependent on the existing motivations of the subject. "Internalism, Frankena says, in building in motivation, runs the [...] risk of having to trim obligation to the size of individual motives": if motivation needs to be inscribed in the notion of a moral "ought", we might have to recognize as real "oughts" only those which are actually matched by a corresponding motivation; this would entail "trimming" the notion of obligation to the actual size of the subject's interests. This objection amounts to a charge of *subjectivism*. This charge probably works even better against internalism in the first sense of the distinction: if the motivational

sense of "ought" is internal to the subject, and only this sense is normative, then normativity does indeed depend on the subject's actual motivations. Although this is not what Falk intended (as we have seen, he would substitute "dictates of conscience" for motivations), that is indeed a possible interpretation of an internalist position, as we will see.

In a third sense, specified by Jonathan Dancy (1993), internalism and externalism oppose each other on whether moral reasons are *intrinsically* (but not *essentially*) motivating: that is, on whether, when they do motivate at all, they do it *in their own right* or not. In this sense, a moral reason might be present without motivating, but when it does it does not need the external sanction of a desire. Moral reasons do have a motivating power, but they do not need to exercise it whenever they are present. Separating the motivating power of moral reasons from its actual exercise might avoid the risk of subjectivism for internalism, but only if we explain what normativity amounts to in this kind of interpretation. This line of thought needs to be explored more carefully.

3. The third sense of the distinction excludes the second, although it moves the distinction away from the semantic level of discourse toward a broadly epistemological one: moral reasons ("oughts" and obligations) are not essentially motivating *qua* concepts, but they are a kind of cognitive contents that are able to motivate. The first sense is compatible with the third, but it is extremely ambiguous, since "internal/external to the subject" can be interpreted in various ways. One way of interpreting it is to use an altogether different distinction, proposed by Bernard Williams (1980), according to which reasons are, respectively, internal or external to the "subjective motivational set of the agent". This motivational set (which Williams identifies with the agent's "character") is something different from what Falk called "conscience": while Falk clearly endorsed a conception of conscience as the locus of evidence of moral concepts and principles (in terms of obligations), Williams starkly rejects the picture of morality centered on the notion of obligation and indeed refuses the notion of moral conscience as the voice of impersonal requirements concerning conduct. Furthermore, Falk and Williams faced two completely different questions: while Falk asked himself whether there existed a meaning of "ought" which implied motivation, Williams asked what kind of reasons for action there are, so that if there is only one kind of reasons (e.g. internal ones), then, if obligations exist at all, they must be reasons of that kind (e.g. internal reasons). On the other hand, both distinctions use the idea of "subject" as their turning point, aiming at tracing both the explicative and the normative character of moral reasons back to the same source, i.e. the capacity of the acting subject to motivate himself. Thus, the distinction between internal and external reasons does have some connection with the distinction between internalism and externalism in the first sense, but, at the same time, it must be kept clearly distinct from it: they are both centered on a broadly "anthropological" perspective, but they ask different questions and use different characterizations of the agent.

4. Internalism seems to be predominant in the recent debate, owing to some faults of externalism that have been repeatedly pointed out (e.g. Smith, 1994). First, externalism has difficulties in explaining in which sense a moral reason can be normative for a particular subject: if moral judgments are requirements of a rationality which is separated from the subject, then their normativity is the same as that of a state law which is imposed on the individual and which is effective only so far as it is enforced by sanctions. Morality in this perspective is an *alienating force*; blame would have a sanctionary role for morality, as that of penalties in the legal system, and the normative force for the subject would depend on an identification with the (external) point of view of morality. This picture of morality is not very attractive and seems to open the way to a dissociation of the agent from her deeds. Second, externalism cannot explain the practicality of practical reason, i.e. its action-guiding power: if externalism is true, then we never truly act for moral reasons, but always for some interest which can happen to coexist with a moral reason and so make it effective in the agent's choice. If normativity is defined not only by the critical distance of normative reasons from the arbitrariness of the individual point of view but also by their action-guiding power, that is, their ability to issue in the agent's choice and action, then externalism must deny that moral reasons as such can ever be normative in a full sense. Thus, on an externalist perspective it is extremely difficult to make sense of the common experience that we do sometimes act for moral reasons; an externalist should claim that in those cases, in fact, we act for some other unspoken non-moral reasons, because it becomes immediately evident that, thus, action can never be influenced by moral reasons and that reasons for action stem from other sources (Mackie 1977). Pradoxically enough, it seems hard, at this point, to deny that these other forces can be anything different from individual interests or dispositions (even if these are inculcated by social and educational forces), so that externalism seems to be converted into a form of "internal reasons theory" in the sense proposed by Williams: the "real" reasons for action are "internal" to the subject because they derive from his interests, although they are of a different kind from the alleged "moral" reasons. On this account, moral reasons do not motivate as "moral" ones, but as self-centered or socially conditioned reasons in disguise. But then, why not saying that "moral" reasons themselves motivate us? Externalists of this kind would like to avoid this outcome because they tend to reject morality as an external source of motivation, as opposed to the real, internal, force of self-interest. Then, the point is the conception of the nature of morality: what if we assume that its source is whithin the subject, on a par with self interest?

On the contrary, internalism can make sense of the action-guiding power of moral reasons and, at the same time, it seems able to overcome the difficulties posed to it by the amoralist, by the analogy of moral requirements with the requirements of etiquette (Smith, 1994) and by the problems of weakness of will and of *accidie* (Dancy, 1993) (1). The problems for internalism result rather from the difficulties in making sense of the critical stance of normative reasons (of

normativity in general) with respect to the particularity of individual interests. The normative claim seems to be intrinsically connected with a claim that the agent who feels a moral obligation, recognizes that he is *required* (and not just factually or psychologically compelled) to act in a certain way, and is therefore *justified* to act in that way. Traditionally, this justification has been understood in terms of *rationality* of the normative claim, so that moral reasons have been interpreted as requirements of rationality in its practical dimension (Korsgaard 1986; Smith 1994).

I will now address Williams's distinction between internal and external reasons in detail, since it expresses a point of view which tries to use a form of internalism in order to subvert the traditional intepretation of moral reasons as requirements of rationality. I will suggest that the distinction is misleading as an interpretation of the process of deliberation and that therefore it should be abandoned: even in the context of Williams's approach, the distinction does not seem to suggest a better model for the interpretation of the interplay of reason and desire in the ethical life; on the contrary, a critique of the role of moral theories and morality (in Williams's sense) should rather suggest a deeper and more original connection between desire and reason than that imposed by the distinction. At the same time, I will suggest that Williams's position shows a possible misinterpretation of the internalism requirement; Williams's account, while offering an explanation of the action-guiding power of reasons for action, fails to allow for the *critical* stance of normativity, thus resulting in a form of subjectivism.

5. Internal and external reasons express two possible interpretations of statements of the form "A has a reason to Φ " . The internal reason theorist holds that "having a reason to Φ " means having found, through a "sound deliberative route", that Φ is a way to realize one or more goals included in one or more elements in the subject's motivational set. According to Williams, such a description of the deliberative process is motivated by the aim of not separating *explanatory* and *normative* reasons: if A has a reason to Φ , that must mean that we can give an explanation of his behaviour in terms of his practical deliberation (given his motivational set) and, at the same time, that, given his motivational set and a sound deliberative route, A *should Φ* , that is, the deliberation has normative force for A. As a consequence, the process of practical deliberation, on this account, can be wrong only if there are errors concerning facts (false beliefs) relevant to the reasoning or mistakes in the logical steps of the reasoning itself; practical deliberation cannot be wrong simply because it does not comply with the requirements of a set of norms or obligations: noncompliance with moral obligations is not a case of irrationality. In this perspective, practical reason works from within the subjective motivational set.

The external reason theorist, on the contrary, would maintain that reasons deriving from outside the subject's motivational set (e.g. a set of moral imperatives

or categorically binding principles), and therefore not corresponding to any one of the elements of the motivational set (the subject's desires), can motivate the subject's action; such reasons may not serve as an explanation of the subject's performing a certain action but only in this way can they have normative force. The external reason theorist seeks to avoid the risk of subjectivism and to preserve a claim of universalizability in the process of practical deliberation, through an appeal to universally binding principles grounded in the structure of practical reason and independent from the subject's desires.

It is usually believed that the latter perspective resembles closely the view of Kant (and of many recent Kantian approaches, although both attributions should be questioned on a closer scrutiny). Roughly Kantian is the scope of distinguishing the realm of morality, whose normative force is said to depend on reason alone, from the subject's desires and emotions, in order to grant the autonomy of practical reason. Yet, this requires some qualifications. Kant's notion of autonomy is intended mainly to secure a place for the *will* as distinct from the world of phenomena, which is held by determinism; the Kantian idea of autonomy of the will implies that the normative force of a deliberation for the subject lies in *his* will, as an expression of his practical reason; free action takes place when the will is a law to itself, having excluded any heteronomous influence. In this sense, moral reasons for Kant are internal reasons, although obviously not internal to the "subjective motivational set". In a Kantian perspective, it is rather desires that are "external" to the source of moral action. On the other hand, it is also often remarked that Kant's interpretation of desires and emotions is in general rather reductive, suggesting that desire is systematically misleading as a motivation for action and separating rather rigidly reason from desire in the deliberative process. Thus, in many cases, Kant's account fails to serve as an explanation of the subject's behaviour (e.g. in the cases of weakness of will). It must be remember, anyway, that clearly Kant's aim is only to illustrate the foundations of the normative claim of practical reason and not to explain the psychology of individual action: this latter work is not a goal of the critique of practical reason, but rather the task of a pragmatic anthropology (cf. Louden 1992).

The internal reasons approach has been labelled Humean, or rather "sub-Humean", since Hume's view on the matter is said to be more complex than this Williams 1980), and it also presupposes a drastic opposition between desire and reason, an opposition clearly derived from Hobbes. The idea is that the subject's desires and interests are the only motivational force behind his deliberations and that reason can only intervene as a corrective concerning facts pertinent to the action or errors in the deliberative route. Williams rightly observes that the process of deliberation is richer and more articulate than just defining means to an end, as it also entails, for example, finding a specific form for a project or retrieving similarities and differences between situations (Wiggins, 1976; Williams, 1989), but he maintains that this does not substantially alter the internal reasons picture and its plausibility. In Williams's words: "there is an essential indeterminacy in

what can be counted a rational deliberative process" (1980, p. 110), but in any case the origin of that process must be traced back to the subject's existing motivations.

Williams argues that there can be no external reasons in a real deliberative process. In particular, the claims of morality (2) as an external source of motivation for the subject should be dismissed, since they cannot be effective, being unable to reach the subject's motivational set, and therefore they do not have a real normative force, since the latter derives from the connection of a rational consideration with the subject's desires. Thus, statements indicating external reasons for action, if considered separately in themselves, are either false or incoherent or yet the misleading expression of something else.

Here, the basic presupposition is that the normative force of a deliberation can only lay within the subjective motivational set. We should note that Williams's perspective emphasizes one of the features of the notion of normativity, that is, the *action-guiding* character of reasons for action, at the expenses of another, that is, the *critical stance* of reasons with respect to the arbitrariness of the subject's desires. In this perspective, the possibility of a critical evaluation of some basic elements in the subjective motivational set seems to be rather limited. Although Williams admits that some elements in it can be changed, it seems that the fundamental interests are given in advance for each individual, as if they were already there, and already quite individualized, *before* the deliberation takes place. In fact, Williams is very liberal as to what is included in the motivational set of an agent, so that it comprises "dispositions of evaluation, patterns of emotional reaction, personal loyalties, and various projects, as they might be called, embodying commitments of the agent" (1980, p. 105). Anyway, the elements in the motivational set are described as if they can only be of a *non-rational* kind, since reason intervenes only as the faculty that elaborates on the ways to bring a given motivation to effect into or through an action. The requirements of rationality seem to be conceived of as originally external to the subject, so that the subject's motivational set stands alone, waiting for reason to show how to become effective and perform the adequate actions in order to satisfy desires.

Williams admits for the possibility that a rational argument could make the subject realize that he has a reason to do something he did not know he had reason to do before the deliberation took place. This means that the deliberation can reveal the subject something concerning the connection between his desires and the proposed action. It is doubtful whether such a revision of one or more elements in the motivational set might also tell the subject something concerning *himself,* that is, that he had better not have certain desires or motivations because, for example, they do not harmonize well with other desires or beliefs he already has; or even, that certain desires are incompatible with a claim of reason that he, as a rational agent, could not disregard without contradiction. Here the problem, for the agent himself, is that of the ultimate justification of his actions not just as expressions of his desires but as ways to realize his ethical life. As Michael Smith puts it: "[B]y

far the most important way in which we create new and destroy old underived desires when we deliberate is by trying to find out whether our desires are *systematically justifiable*" (Smith 1994, pp. 158-159).

Tehere seems to be a problem with Williams's account of the subject's character as identical with his "subjective motivational set". We should take into consideration a different account of the idea of the character of a subject: character could be the result of a variety of forces, among which rational considerations, first suggested by education and existing practices, then interiorized as the intention to behave rationally - that is, consistently, play a decisive role from the very beginning; on such a view, a claim of rational consistency is, so to say, originally built into the subject's character. In this perspective, the internal reasons account of deliberation might still be true, and better suited than the one in terms of external reasons, but the notion of a "subject's motivational set" should be radically reformulated, since it should include a substantial requirement of rationality which Williams's account seem to exclude. But at this point, it is clear that a Humean conception of practical rationality would not be enough to respond to the demand for normativity, since it conceives of practical rationality in an exclusively instrumental way (notwithstanding the role of imagination, which in any case is to serve an end posited by desire). This account excludes in a crucial way the possibility that reason play a role in *assessing* the rationality of our deliberations in terms of *rational justification,* for example in the sense of a more unified set of desires (which can be seen as a virtue; Smith 1994, p. 159) (3).

6. Christine M. Korsgaard (1986) has recalled that the basic assumption behind the internal reason theorist's position is the conclusion drawn by Hume in the *Treatise of Human Nature* that "reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them" (1888, p. 415). Korsgaard argues that Humean skepticism concerning the motivating power of reason (*motivational skepticism*) depends on a more general skepticism concerning the powers of reason (*content skepticism*); Williams's argument seems to hold only to motivational skepticism, being otherwise less skeptical concerning the powers of reason in general (for example as regards the possibility of objective scientific knowledge - see Williams 1985). Anyway, the point is that internal reasons can motivate only because they spring from the motives one already has in his motivational set, and that any route from an element in it to an action, if "*sound*", constitutes a deliberation, although it can be not only of the means/end kind.

An important question, partially hidden by the way the argument goes, is whether reason has any kind of influence in the *formation* of these elements of the motivational set or not; if it has, the claim that practical reason cannot motivate should be seriously questioned, because it would be extremely difficult to separate the "pure" elements in the motivational set on one side and "pure" practical reason on the other. The interplay of rational considerations and desires in the original

constitution of such complex elements must be very strict: dispositions of evaluation, patterns of emotional reaction and personal loyalties can only be understood as the result of the influence of experience, mediated by rationality, by the received morality and even by moral theories, on the formation of the subject's desires and motives; during the educational process, these forces shape what is an otherwise indetermined and incoherent tension towards any object encountered in the world (i.e. desire in its original form). It is clear that practical reason has a decisive role at least in shaping the character of a person and that one need not think of rational considerations coming only after the desires have been established. Furthermore, the width of the existing desires in the motivational set, in Williams's undestanding, is so great that it is hard to think that any moral theory would be left out of it. Given this indeterminacy of the motivational set and the indeterminacy of the deliberative process according to Williams, we are led to the conclusion that either pure practical reason does not exist, or any route from desire to action constitutes deliberation, without being able to give any reasonable sense to the idea of "a *sound* deliberative route".

Anyway, the result of Williams's argument is not to demonstrate that there are no conclusions of practical reason that serve as motives to the rational agent, since this is one of his presuppositions; as it is just another presupposition, one the external reason theorist would simply refuse to accept, that the deliberative process must start from the subject's present motivations rather than from some objective values or requirements (Hooker, 1987).

7.	Finally, the internal reasons approach has difficulties in defining an intelligible sense for the notion of normative force. In which sense are moral reasons normative if only internal reasons have normative force? What is normative for practical reason in such an account, other than the motivating power of desire? It might be true that the motivational source lies in the desiring structure of the individual subject, but does not the claim to be normative implicitly go *beyond* the *actual* motivational set of the subject? Should we not distinguish between motivational and normative force?

Williams is willing to concede this point, as he says that "'A has a reason to Φ ' means more than 'A is presently disposed to Φ '" (1989, p. 36); yet, in his perspective, this means only that deliberation can correct errors of fact and reasoning involved in the agent's view of the matter; is this really enough to say that it has normative force? Williams says it is not necessary to write the requirements of prudence and morality into the notion of a sound deliberative route, and he may be right on his account of what morality and prudence are (that is, a system of external obligations); but if we inscribe into the notion of deliberation the responsibility for one's own character (and I think that Williams himself would accept this inclusion) we would have to write into it a *critical stance* that makes the subject capable of responding to reasons appropriately, modifying his desires according to some requirements of reason and of the situation. If the

subject's character were constituted solely of his present motivations (however widely these are conceived of), and if he could not transcend his actual set by appeal, for example, to notions of consistency, coherence, integrity or dignity, how could he ever be responsible for something (his own character) over which he has no control?

Therefore, we need a different account of the idea that moral reasons should have normative force. The need for normativity is probably best understood as the need for being able to build one's motivational structure so that *other rational agents* can recognize my desires as rationally justifiable, and therefore recognize me as a rational agent, even if only to criticize me. In other words, normativity seems to be connected with the need for recognition by others, which requires the possibility that my desires take a recognizable and communicable form - one that can claim some form of *universalizability* in the sense of intelligibility and appreciability by another agent, i.e. they must be at least in principle rationally approvable or disapprovable by another. On such a view, the normative claim is inscribed in the structure of action as the expression of the agent's desire to act in a way comprehensible and potentially acceptable by other rational agents, so that they can respond to it (4). The appeal to this kind of reasons should not make one think of "external" reasons at all: the agent is a whole whose "motivational set" - or rather, I would say, his will - includes a claim for rationality which cannot be totally isolated from desires, as well as his desires cannot be totally isolated from reason. It is true that "it *is* often vague what one has reason to do" (Williams, 1989, p. 38), but this does not necessarily mean that we should exclude the possibility that the deliberative process might bring some clarity through the recognition of some unconditional principles discovered inside the structure of rational action, where the notion of action obviously includes intention and therefore motivations, desires and so on.

8. A similar way of criticizing this view is the charge of "psychologism", raised against Williams by John McDowell (1995). This is the charge that the internal reasons model does not allow any critical distance between the merely empirical aspects of individual psychology (how my reasoning actually goes given that I was brought up as I was and therefore have these interests) and a notion of practical rationality independent enough from the subject to make critical assessment (by the subject himself) possible. As well known, in his famous attack against psychologism, Frege argued for a difference between the principles of logic as 'laws of truth' and the psychological 'laws of thought'. A similar difference is defended by McDowell: "The critical dimension of the notion of practical rationality requires an analogous transcendence of the mere facts of individual psychology" (1995, p. 77). This means, in turn, that practical rationality should not be conceived of as content-neutral, if it has to be really critical of the subject's motivations; we may recognize substantive reasons in the deliberative process which can help the subject structurate *his* motivational set and make *rational* choices.

The explanation of an action should serve to make it rationally intelligible to rational agents, and if we can say (and I maintain that we can) that the aspiration to have intelligible desires is a structural feature of any rational agent, then the claims of rationality (formal consistency and content-non-neutrality or truth claim - that is, *formal* and *substantive* claims) can play the role of giving the required normative force to propositions of the form "A has a reason to Φ ". This is not just to relate types of actions to types of circumstances, as opposed to relating actions to persons, as Williams (1995) replies to roughly similar suggestions by McDowell, but only to show that the agent has an intrinsic need, in order to express his desires in his actions, to transcend his motivational set and make a rationality claim in front of other possible rational agents, from whom he expects recognition. On this view, it is possible to say something which is distinctively about the subject and his motivational set, which is the internal reason theorist requirement, and so to relate the normative force of practical deliberation directly with the subject and not just with some external reasons or some formal requirement of abstract reasoning.

9. On the whole, therefore, the distinction between internal and external reasons is misleading and, in order to give an adequate account of rational deliberation, it seems that we should abandon it; in fact, it separates from the very beginning what actually are aspects of the same process, in which the interplay of desire and reason is more original and intrinsic than the distinction allows. Opposing internal and external reasons for action is just one way to focus attention on the requirement that morality not be conceived of like an external and extrinsic constraint on the subject's will. This is the claim that morality, if it exists in its own right and not as the projection of something different (e.g. a cognitive error; cfr. Mackie, 1977), is *autonomous*, that is, it depends on a demand of the subject and takes its authority from a structural dimension of the subject himself. In this sense, Williams's argument that there are only internal reasons for action simply supports the idea that morality, if taken right, has to be conceived of as autonomous. The problem with Williams's argument is that it postulates an entity, the "subjective motivational set", which does not exist as a dimension completely severed from rationality; furthermore, this postulation gives the argument a largely Humean appearance which is extremely misleading. If only internal reasons exist, then either morality does not exist *per se* (that is, it is a mistification) or it is internal as well; Williams wants to suggest that a morality conceived of as a system of external reasons is a mistification, but this does not rule out the possibility that a correct view of morality sees it as *internal* to the subject, though not to his "motivational set". But once the notion of such a set evaporates, what we have is exactly the Kantian claim of the autonomy of practical reason. The real issue at stake here is whether the *internal* character of morality necessarily entails a *subjectivistic* conclusion concerning the normativity claim of moral judgments, and in general of practical reasoning; this is a consequence Williams did not demonstrate and which probably, given his own defusing strategy toward

subjectivism (Williams, 1972), he would try to avoid as well.

10. In a subjectivistic interpretation, normativity can only mean that an individual might feel an idiosincratic imperative to perform some act. This is contrary to the common experience that some of our actions implicitly express our intention to do something which we *believe* to be what we should do in a certain situation. My choice for action expresses a desiderative reason or a ratiocinative desire that claims to be respondent to the requirements of the recognizable features of the circumstances. If I choose to be the person who performs a certain act in certain circumstances, I am expressing my belief that being such a kind of person can be good for me as a rational person among others (5).

This will to believe in our moral judgments has some important implications: first, we are interested in that our moral judgments be true, at least for ourselves, i.e., we do want to respond *adequately* to the situation; second, this implies that we want our moral judgments to be virtually *intelligible* for other rational agents; third, we want other rational agents to *recognize* that the action we chose, although it might not be the only one required by the situation, does respond adequately to it, i.e. that our judgements are intersubjectively *true*, although there can be more than one way to respond adequately to the situation. This amounts to a *universalizability* claim: a rational agent like me in the relevant circumstances ought to share the same reasons for action as mine and accept my action as a consistent expression of those reasons, although he might choose a different course or style of action. There is not only one course of action which is justifiable (apart very exceptional cases) but there are courses of action which are certainly *unjustifiable* as a rational response to the situation, because no rational agent would accept their premises and/or the modes of their performance as expressions of rational moral judgments. The ultimate foundation of this claim is the idea that a rational agent cannot exist as such (i.e. cannot ultimately be rational) without confronting himself with another subject which he recognizes as another rational agent (Ricoeur 1990).

The normativity of moral reasons results from the sustainability of this claim: if the proposed reasons for action can be shown to be consistent with the notion of a rational agent among others and with the (morally relevant) features of the situation as seen by a competent agent, then the agent is justified in his choice; those reasons can be sustained by both beliefs and desires, granted that they are both open on the world. The rationality claim of moral judgments is not only a matter of systematic justifiability (Smith 1994; he talks of "convergence at the level of hypothetical desires of fully rational agents"), which is only a formal requirement, but also a claim of substantive rationality, if you wish a *substantive truth* claim (a kind of convergence at the level of hypothetical *reasons* of fully rational agents; hypothetical desires are the desires of a subject which can survive a *rational critique*). This has two senses: i) a judgment is true if it is *ultimately* justifiable, that is, justifiable with respect to some ultimate demands of rationality

in practical issues (such as unconditioned principles of practical reason); and ii) a judgment is true if it does respond adequately to the features of the situation, that is, if it *fits* most reasonably in them, so far as they can be reasonably known by the agent. The universalizability claim is thus connected with a "respondence-to-the-world" claim: a claim for *formal justification*, in terms of a unified set of desires and of consistence with categorical requirements of reason, goes together with a claim for *substantive justification*, in terms of a rationally adequate respondence to the situation of the action judged to be done.

11. Within such a framework, moral reasons are internal in the first and third sense of the distinction, although the picture that was painted in the background has radically changed. Problems of weakness of the will and the like may still raise (although Dancy's arguments seem to hold), but at least the risk of subjectivism, and the corresponding lack of normativity, can be avoided. It is important to note that, although I have stressed the substantive claim, it is only the formal one which offers a ground for the normativity of moral reasons; they are normative insofar as they can sustain the formal requirement of universalizability for any rational agent, while at the same time facing particular circustances.

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(1) A possible line of argument here is that a true amoralist cannot exist: living without commitment to any form of communicative relationship with other human beings is practically impossible and, at the same time, any form of communicative

discourse (apart from violence) implies the willingness to engage in argumentation. This is already a moral commitment. back

(2) Williams gives the expression "morality" a specific meaning, basically connected with the idea of obligation and/or duty; the system of morality is the system of moral beliefs, typical of Western modern culture, based on a limited number of imperatives especially concerning our relationships with other human beings. See Williams, 1985. back

(3) Thus, Williams is committed to a relativistic conception of normative reasons, as Smith again suggests: "Williams's Humean view is thus in opposition to the anti-Humean or Kantian view that under conditions of full rationality we would all reason ourselves towards the same conclusions as regards what is to be done; in opposition to the view that via a process of systematic justification of our desires we could bring it about that we converge in the desires that we have" (Smith 1994, pp. 165-166). back

(4) Of course it is not actually necessary that for this reason every action must be performed in the presence of others; actions can be expressive even if done alone. Yet, a whole life with no connection with other rational agents (not even hoped for, or expected posthumously, or just dreamed of) would be unbearable for a human being. back

(5) Cf. Nagel 1970, 1986; Smith 1994, p. 176 expresses a roughly similar view; a possible point of departure are our considered judgments. back