

Internal and External Reasons - Bernard Williams

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1. Setup

Take sentences of the form:

'A has a reason to Φ '

'There is a reason for A to Φ '¹

There seems to be an 'internal' and an 'external' interpretation of such sentences. On the internal reading, A has some motive which will be served or furthered by his Φ -ing. On the external reading, this isn't required.

Thesis: The only interpretation on which such statements are true/coherent, is on the internal reasons interpretation.

Four propositions about internal reasons:

(i) An internal reason statement is falsified by the absence of some appropriate element from S.

(ii) A member of S, D, will not give A a reason for Φ -ing if either the existence of D is dependent on false belief, or A's belief in the relevance of Φ -ing to the satisfaction of D is false.

(iii): (a) A may falsely believe an internal reason statement about himself, and (b) A may not know some true internal reason statement about himself.

(iv) internal reason statements can be discovered in deliberative reasoning.

¹ What about *general* reason statements, like 'there's a reason not to kill people...' (not agent-centered)? Return to this.

2. Internal Reasons

Internal reasons are always relative to an agent's subjective motivational set, S.² To put this in initial "Sub-Humean" terms (two options):

1. A has a reason to Φ iff A has some desire the satisfaction of which will be served by his Φ -ing.

2. A has a reason to Φ iff A has some desire, the satisfaction of which A believes will be served by his Φ -ing.

² See (i). How flexible is the "subjective motivational set"? Is it too flexible on Williams' account? Return to this.

How can we develop this Sub-Humean interpretation?

2.1. *False Beliefs*

The agent believes that this stuff is gin, when it is in fact petrol. He wants a gin and tonic. Has he reason, or a reason, to mix this stuff with tonic and drink it?

We might say 'yes'. This would allow us to explain his behavior, if the agent in fact takes a drink.

We might say 'no'. This is intuitive—the agent's desires don't match the action (see (1)).

Williams: The explanation we would get by saying 'yes' is not the kind of explanation the agent can cite to himself. We want explanations that can also figure in first-person rational deliberation.³ So we should say 'no'.⁴

An epistemic consequence of this move is that *A* can be wrong or ignorant about what he has reason to do.⁵

And, deliberation is an important explanatory element for accounts of reasons.⁶

2.2. *Needs*

An agent is sick and needs to take medicine. He consistently denies any interest in preserving his health. Does he have a reason to take the medicine?

On the internal reasons model, it seems we have to say 'no'.⁷ So perhaps this is motivation for saying he has an external reason...

3. *External Reasons*

Owen Wingrave has no desire to join the army and there is nothing in his *S* that could make him want to through deliberative reasoning. His family has a history of military participation. Does he have (an external) reason to join the army?

The puzzle for external reasons: Reasons should explain actions. But a mere fact about the world cannot move someone to act, since intentional actions require motivations. Facts need to 'latch on' to some internal subjective motivation. But, we said external reasons are *independent of motivations*. So, *prima facie*, external reasons cannot explain intentional actions.

An initial proposal: external reasons are categorical imperatives. But (a) categorical imperatives are necessarily moral, and external reasons aren't; (b) for any categorical imperative to Φ , you ought to Φ , but this is not so for external reasons. So let's reject this proposal.⁸

³ For example, "A has a reason to drink the petrol, because *A* believes his desire to drink gin and tonic will be satisfied in so doing". But *A* cannot cite this reason to himself to motivate action.

⁴ See (ii).

⁵ See (iii).

⁶ See (iv). Note that Williams mean deliberation in a robust way. Through deliberation one can: discover reasons they didn't realize they had, subtract elements from *S*, lose desires altogether, and realize they don't have reasons they thought they did.

⁷ Williams suggests an error theory: "we may well still be speaking in the internal sense, with the thought that really at some level he must want to be well."

⁸ Then where does morality fit in? If someone truly does not desire to be a good person, doesn't he still have reason to be a good person?

If you want to defend external reasons, there must be some “psychological link” between the external reason and the agent. What is that link? Proposal:

A’s believing an external reason statement about himself may help to explain his action.⁹

Worry: does such a belief constitute a motivation to act? If not, then external reasons can’t explain our actions. If yes, then it can be turned into an internal reason statement.

We could still try to save external reason statements by understanding them in a conditional way:

If *A* comes to believe the external reason statement, he will be motivated to act.

This seems workable. But it implies that coming to believe a reason statement involves acquiring a new motivation.¹⁰ There must be some “special connexion” between these things, and the agent must acquire the new motivation *because* of the belief. Updated proposal:

If the agent rationally deliberated, then, whatever motivations he originally had, he would come to be motivated to Φ .¹¹

But from the hypothesis of it not being an internal reason, there’s no way to combine elements of *S* to get the motive to Φ . Which makes this proposal impossible.

One more proposal:

A rational agent is one who has a (motivational) disposition to do what he believes is a reason to do. The agent already has the right motivation in *S*. The belief in the external reason statement automatically triggers it.

Response: believing a reason statement is essentially believing that if one deliberated rationally, one would be motivated to act accordingly. But we were asking what could explain his action. It doesn’t help us explain his action, to say “Owen desires to do what he has reason to do”.

So we should reject external reasons statements as either false or incoherent. Or, we could reinterpret them as actually expressing:

- a. Optimistic internal reasons statements (see fn. 7).
- b. Things would be better if the agent so acted.

⁹ For example, Owen has a reason to join the military because he believes that his family’s tradition of military honor is a reason to join the military.

¹⁰ If it doesn’t involve acquiring a new motivation, then we return back to the previous worry.

¹¹ Flag! What is the motivation for sliding from “coming to believe it” to “rationally deliberating”? Consider this other rendition: If he came to believe it and he rationally deliberated, then, whatever motivations he originally had, he would come to be motivated to Φ .