

Internal Reasons and Contractualist Impartiality

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Williams's claim that practical reasons are internal reasons is analysed and interpreted as a neutral analysis, not distinctively Humean, of constraints on the concept of a practical reason. It is argued that within these constraints it remains possible to defend the impartiality of moral reasons. A reflective account of such reasons can be given in 'pragmatic' rather than 'semantic' terms. Paralleling a revisionary strategy towards Kant's theoretical philosophy, a higher order disposition to accept only reasons that can be put to others without the prospect of reasonable rejection is argued to be the internalization of a relativized *a priori* principle.

My aim in this paper is to relate the issue of the *impartiality* of moral reasons to the more general question of whether practical reasons are 'internal' or 'external' reasons, in the sense of these two terms that Bernard Williams has made familiar.¹ In my view Williams's argument that all practical reasons are 'internal' is successful on its own terms, but I do not believe that this impugns the role of impartiality as a pragmatic constraint on moral argument. I will clarify the internal reasons argument, reveal how minimal its requirements for practical reasons are, and defend it as a neutral constraint on the nature of reason in practice.² I will then offer a contractualist understanding of impartiality which renders it compatible with the internal reasons argument. In this way a central motivation to viewing moral reasons as external – the desire to provide an objective, critical perspective on an agent's reasons – can be accommodated within the ambit of an internal reasons position.

I

I will begin by briefly considering Williams's central arguments. Williams argues that statements about an agent's reasons bear two interpretations, one 'internal' and one 'external'.³ The 'internal' in-

¹ Bernard Williams, 'Internal and External Reasons', repr. *Moral Luck*, Cambridge, 1981. 'Internal Reasons and the Obscurity of Blame', repr. *Making Sense of Humanity*, Cambridge, 1995.

² A subsidiary aim will be to detach it from 'Humeanism' of the kind defended, for example, by Michael Smith in *The Moral Problem*, Oxford, 1994. See esp. n. 8 below. The question of the relation between Williams's position and that of Hume is one of several insightfully discussed in an unpublished paper by John Skorupski, 'Internal Reasons and the Scope of Blame', unpub. ms. This relation is discussed at 8–14.

³ Thus, 'internal' and 'external' are not predicates of reasons, *per se*, but predicates of statements about reasons, and are hence in the formal, not the material mode. This is a

terpretation operates under a constraint that is not applicable in the 'external' interpretation; in the internal sense, one can assert that 'A has a reason to \emptyset ' if the following truth condition obtains:

A can reach the conclusion that he/she should \emptyset (or a conclusion to \emptyset) by a sound deliberative route from, or in virtue of, the motivations that he has in his actual motivational set – that is, the set of his desires, evaluations, attitudes, projects and so on.⁴

Williams believes that the obtaining of this condition is a necessary and sufficient condition for the assertion of 'A has a reason to \emptyset ', but argues for the weaker claim that it is a *necessary* condition. The position of the external reasons theorist is implicitly defined by his or her denial of this constraint: he or she claims that a statement of the form 'A has a reason to \emptyset ' can be true in a situation where the internal constraint does not hold. Such statements can be true of A when the constraint is not operative, and therefore the sentence is warrantably assertible in a situation where A cannot reach the conclusion that he or she should \emptyset by a sound deliberative route from their current 'subjective motivational set', which Williams calls 'S'. A useful heuristic is to think of the set of motivations that an agent can deliberatively access, via sound practical deliberation, as the vague revised set S*; Williams's argument can then be rephrased as the claim that an agent's reasons must be either in S or in S*.⁵

A crucial assumption driving the argument against external reasons is that reasons for an agent, while normative, must be potentially explanatory of action.⁶ The external reasons theorist, it seems, violates this constraint. *Ex hypothesi*, a statement that a subject has reason to \emptyset that can be true when the reason is not in the agent's S, nor derivable from that S, cannot be explanatory of that agent's action. However, explained in this way, the argument may seem trivial. In every case where an agent's action is justified by a reason, where that reason is potentially explanatory of the agent's action, external reasons statements will simply collapse into internal reasons statements. However, the point is not trivial, as Williams explains:

qualification I will ignore in the sequel, speaking for convenience of 'internal reasons' and 'external reasons'.

⁴ Williams, 'Internal Reasons and the Obscurity of Blame', p. 35.

⁵ It must be borne in mind that this set can contract as well as expand in the course of revision; by vividly imagining the way you intend to satisfy your desire for an enjoyable evening by going to the theatre, you may lose your desire to go to the theatre. So 'revision' of S into S* is not necessarily 'expansion'.

⁶ 'It has been generally recognized that the concept of a reason for action stands at the point of intersection, so as to speak, between the theory of the explanation of action and the theory of the justification of action.' Michael Woods, 'Reasons for Action and Desires', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, suppl. vol., xlvi (1972), 189.

It does not follow from this that there is nothing in external reasons statements. What does follow is that their content is not going to be revealed by considering merely the state of one who believes such a statement, nor how that state explains action, for that state is merely the state with regard to which an internal reasons statement could truly be made. Rather, the content ... will have to be revealed by considering what it is to *come to believe* such a statement.⁷

Williams here identifies the crucial issue as how an agent's acceptance of a reason is best explained. The external reasons theorist is, Williams argues, committed to the claim that an agent acquires a motivation from coming to accept the external reasons statement, and because this acceptance takes the form of 'seeing matters aright'. This, in turn, establishes an equivalence between the external reasons statement being truly assertible of the agent, and the claim that if he or she rationally deliberated, then whatever motivations they had they would be motivated to \emptyset . The external reasons theorist works from the truth of the external reason, via rational deliberation, to its acceptance and the generation of a motive. In the opposite direction, as it were, Williams works from the initial S, via rational deliberation, to all the true internal reasons statements about the agent. Williams asserts that the external reasons conception is fatally flawed by its violation of the link between normative and explanatory reasons. It is a corollary of Williams's argument that he takes the external reasons theorist's position to be implicitly circular. Every attempt to justify the existence of external reasons as, as it were, the terminus of practical deliberation does so by covertly packing all the necessary ideas into the idea of an agent's S. The objection to this strategy is that it begs the question by inserting, a priori, whatever is needed in the prior conception of an agent's S to sustain the 'reasons entail counterfactuals' claim.⁸

If this connection between the normative and explanatory senses of reason is so fundamental, how can it be further defended? In my view, it can hardly be defended at all: it is true a priori and self-evident to conceptual reflection.⁹ This may explain why arguments in favour of

⁷ Williams, 'Internal Reasons', p. 103.

⁸ As Skorupski points out at 4 f., the issue is the insertion of such principles into an agent's S. If they are included in the idea of a sound deliberative route by definition, for example if they are either a priori or necessary, then they are going to be reached from anyone's S as they will be part of any route from such an S. Williams explicitly argues against this alternative interpretation of the idea of a sound deliberative route at p. 37 of 'Internal Reasons and the Obscurity of Blame'.

⁹ By contrast, Thomas Scanlon, in his interesting discussion of Williams's argument, takes Williams's thesis to be essentially a substantive normative claim, not an analysis of the idea of a practical reason. See *What We Owe To Each Other*, Cambridge, Mass., 1998, 'Appendix', p. 365.

the principle are so brief, as for example in Allan Gibbard's comments on those who violate the connection:

Some writers speak of 'reasons' in a non-Humean way, and indeed try to ground ethical theory on a non-Humean concept of reasons ... None of them, so far as I can discover, explains what he is using the term reason to mean.¹⁰

One way to reject the connection between the normative and the explanatory dimensions of the term 'reason' is to insist that reasons are properly normative and not explanatory. Another way to sever the connection is to treat them as two distinct kinds of reason:

We work with two quite different concepts of reasons for action depending on whether we emphasize the explanatory dimension and downplay the justificatory, or vice versa ... Let me say a little about the similarities and differences between *these two kinds of reasons*.¹¹ [Emphasis added].

I will assume, for the argument of this paper, that a claim such as this represents a category mistake.

II

Williams's argument has been the subject of much controversy. The overall impression that the debate between Williams and his critics conveys is one of deadlock. I believe that the first step towards breaking this impasse is a careful analysis of what is at stake in the dispute between Williams and his neo-Aristotelian critics, in particular, John McDowell.¹² Before doing so I would like briefly to characterize the *kind* of sceptical position the internal reasons theory represents.

Christine Korsgaard has distinguished two forms of scepticism about reason in practice.¹³ The first is Hegelian scepticism about whether Kantian formalism concerning practical reasons yields any substantive conclusions: 'content scepticism'. The second is scepticism as to whether a reason grounded on practical reason alone has motivational efficacy: 'motivational scepticism'. She argues that any scepticism about the pretensions of practical reasons must be content-based and that motivational scepticism has no independent force. Korsgaard argues that Hume had two arguments against the authority of reason in practice, a content scepticism and a motive scepticism, and that Williams is up dating Hume's *motivational* scepticism. I think that she is wrong about this.

¹⁰ Allan Gibbard, *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings*, Oxford, 1990, p. 161n6.

¹¹ Smith, p. 95.

¹² John McDowell, 'Might There Be External Reasons?', in *World, Mind and Ethics: Essays on the Ethical Philosophy of Bernard Williams*, ed. J. E. J. Altham and T. R. Harrison, Cambridge, 1995.

¹³ Christine Korsgaard, 'Scepticism about Practical Reason', *Journal of Philosophy*, lxxxiii (1986).

Korsgaard's central argument is that the internalism requirement, as she understands it, amounts to the claim that we can be motivated by reason *in so far as we are rational*. I would re-phrase Korsgaard's point in the following way: there is a difference between the necessitation of a conditional and conditional necessitation. If you are rational, then reason exerts its motivational force of necessity. But you need not be reasonable any more than the world need be intelligible. This distinction is, in fact, vital for the project of transcendental philosophy as a whole, although Korsgaard does not make this wider connection.¹⁴ One can no longer argue from failures to act on the basis of pure practical reason to motivational scepticism, although, importantly for my argument, content scepticism remains open. On this basis, Korsgaard takes herself to have refuted Williams as she claims that he advances a criticism of practical reason based solely on motivational, not content, scepticism. However, Korsgaard has not proved that content scepticism cannot stand alone as an independent and self-sufficient challenge to the validity of the practical deployment of reason. Her valuable rebuttal of motivational scepticism leaves content scepticism untouched as a self-sufficient challenge to practical reasoning.

In my alternative interpretation, Williams is *primarily* a content sceptic. He does not believe that the S of every rational agent can be argued, a priori, to contain altruistic or prudential reasons solely in virtue of the agent's practical rationality. Nor does he believe that it can be argued, a priori, to contain a standing disposition to accept such reasons. Korsgaard is taking on the burden of justifying these claims.¹⁵ In my view, the basis of the internal reasons argument is the prior content scepticism that says that pure, a priori, practical reason, being merely formal, can yield no substantive contents for which the motivational issue even arises. Thus, the list of the resources of practical reason, absent a proof from Kantians that one can transcendently deduce the presence of altruistic or prudential reasons in the contents of everyone's S, or a standing disposition for their acceptance, will only go as far in circumscribing the limits of practical reason as a 'Humean' assumption permits.¹⁶

¹⁴ T. R. Harrison, 'Transcendental Arguments and Idealism', *Idealisms: Past and Present*, ed. G. Vesey, Cambridge, 1982. This interpretative line was initially developed by Prauss and consolidated in Anglophone Kant scholarship by H. Allison. See his *Kant's Transcendental Idealism*, New Haven, Conn., 1983.

¹⁵ A project developed in Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, Cambridge, 1996.

¹⁶ Interestingly, Korsgaard herself changed her position on these questions significantly; see 'The Normativity of Instrumental Reason', in *Ethics and Practical Reason*, ed. G. Cullity and B. Gaut, Oxford, 1997. Korsgaard now places some distance between her own considered view and a view she now calls 'pure rationalism', writing on p. 240 that: 'According to dogmatic rationalism ... there are facts, which exist independently of

A problem for this reading of Williams is that if it is correct, there would be no disagreement between his position and that of a neo-Aristotelian theorist such as John McDowell. For McDowell argues that Kant's insights into the binding nature of moral obligations should be separated from the project of deriving moral reasons from the perspective of pure practical rationality. If McDowell shares a commitment to content scepticism with Williams, I have to explain why they disagree over the possibility of external reasons. The mere existence of the dispute challenges the interpretation that I have offered.

McDowell has three criticisms of the internal reasons argument. His first argument is that the internal reasons argument is defective because it is *psychologistic*: the list of the resources of practical rationality implies that the idea of a sound deliberative route is implicitly conditioned by the psychological materials from which the agent started. (Far from denying this, Williams makes a virtue of it.) McDowell argues that this makes the contents of the admittedly normative conception of practical reasons hostage to its starting point.¹⁷ McDowell dramatizes his point by appealing to cases where a person can be brought to acknowledge the force of moral reasons in a way quite discontinuous from their existing S or its possible expansion: cases such as conversion in which one cannot be brought to see the force of external reasons without a discontinuous break in the resources of practical rationality.

the person's mind, about what there is reason to do ... The difficulty with this account in a way exists right on its surface, for the account invites the question why it is necessary to act in accordance with those reasons, and so seems to leave us in need of a reason to be rational ... we must still explain why a person finds it necessary to act on those normative facts, or what it is about her that makes them normative for her. We must explain how these reasons get a grip on the agent'. Korsgaard traces this defect to dogmatic rationalism's project of deriving reasons for an agent from the reasons of an ideally rational agent. Korsgaard now seems to express the requirement that a source in pure practical reason is insufficient because it cannot explain how the reasons statements it generates for an individual agent say something distinctive about that agent. This looks like the adoption of the internal reasons requirement, not its rejection. For this reason also, Korsgaard now no longer views it as acceptable simply to stipulate that rational agents are such as to be motivated by principles of reason. This seems to be a tactical withdrawal from the argument directed against the internal reasons theory in 'Skepticism about Practical Reason'.

¹⁷ McDowell does *not* make the error of treating Williams as an instrumentalist about practical reasoning. He recognizes that the conception of practical reasoning Williams deploys reflects the influence on both Williams and Wiggins of Aurel Kolnai. For the very unpromising line of argument that Williams is covertly an instrumentalist about practical reasoning, see Elijah Milgram, 'Williams's Argument Against External Reasons', *Nous*, xxx (1996). Williams's n. on p. 104 of 'Internal and External Reasons' cites the anti-instrumentalist view of practical reasoning presented by Aurel Kolnai in 'Deliberation is of Ends', *Ethics, Value and Reality*, London and Indianapolis, 1973.

This first issue is the most important for my project of trying to break the deadlock over the internal reasons problem by eliciting relatively neutral constraints on practical reasons from the internal reasons argument. McDowell's general approach to the psychological is to see it as an interpretative construction out of intersubjective norms, located in the realm of Fregean sense.¹⁸ His 'naturalized Platonism' sees us as able to align with this intersubjective structure owing to our 'second nature'; given this picture, it is clear why McDowell feels free to assume that this structure will be defined for us by the motivational and rational structures of the *phronimos*, and why it will be culturally invariant. It is also the basis of McDowell's rejection of psychologism in the theory of practical reasons, but the acceptability of this argument is less clear.

Williams is happy to plead guilty as charged, as he does not regard psychologism as a fit reproach to a theory of practical reasons. I agree with Williams that while the structure of truth-evaluable contents may exist independently of our capacity to grasp that structure, and one can only come to see our interaction with that structure via the realm of sense as the grasp of pre-existing truth, the same constraint does not apply to what one has most reason to do. The internal reasons argument *begins* with the intuition that in the sphere of practice, our engagement with content is shaped by the psychological starting point of practical enquiry. This minimal form of psychologism seems inherent in the very idea of a theory of practical reasons, which does not share the mind-independent structure of constructivist mathematics. The obscurity lies in why McDowell thinks a view of this kind is psychologistic, given his own Davidsonian emphasis on the constitutive connection between norm and explanation implicit in psychological interpretation.¹⁹

If the theory that McDowell defends is intended to be 'anti-psychologistic' as McDowell intends that phrase, it will fall foul of the internal reasons constraint in one of two ways. First, by assuming that one can build the idea of moral reasons into an expanded account of a practically rational agent's motivational set by appealing to every agent's 'real interests' in flourishing. Second, by assuming a single unitary space of reasons which applies to both those agents properly aligned with that space and those outside it. Rejecting these assumptions, as the internal reasons theorist does, is only psychologistic in the mini-

¹⁸ McDowell, *Mind and World*, Cambridge, Mass., 1994, esp. lecture 4.

¹⁹ Given McDowell's sympathies both with Williams's Davidsonian approach to the mental and to his normative conception of practical reasoning, this charge would have to rest on the importation into Williams's argument of a stereotypically 'Humean' position which I would argue has little bearing on the internal reasons argument.

mal sense of relating an agent's normative reasons to the potential explanations of his or her actions. In such a guise, this minimally psychologistic constraint seems to me acceptable. It is certainly not psychologistic in the sense that it abandons a normative conception of reasons for a merely explanatory one. I agree that if the internal reasons position incorporated psychologism in this form, it ought to be immediately abandoned – but it clearly does not.

McDowell has a second argument against the internal reasons claim. That argument challenges the equivalence of the external reasons claim and the reasons entail counterfactuals claim. It does so by arguing that one may be brought to accept a reason regardless of the prior economy of one's S by a non-rational process, whether conversion or being 'properly brought up'. Conversion is not, I think, McDowell's preferred model for moral development. He takes it as a supplement, to accommodate drastic cases, to his more general model of the inculcation of a simultaneous sensitivity to value and the acquisition of the motivational dispositions that treat moral reasons as automatically overriding. McDowell eliminates the need for such dramatic discontinuities in motivational resources by locating agents in a situation where they have been properly educated, in an Aristotelian community of virtue, such that their external reasons – their objective interest in human flourishing – are accessible to everyone's S. But those agents outside the community of virtue may still be viewed in McDowell's theory as having external reasons statements about their real interests being true of them. He is thus committed to the external reasons model. He denies, however, that he has violated Williams's constraints because of his prior rejection of the claim that there is an equivalence between an external reasons statement being truly assertible of the agent, and the claim that if he or she rationally deliberated, then whatever motivations they had they would be motivated to \emptyset .

The pressing question is why Williams should dissent from any of this. The answer lies, in part, in Williams's insistence that he holds a *relativized* conception of practical reasons. Reasons must, on his view, say something distinctive about the agent they purport to characterize. It is this corollary of the internal reasons claim that poses problems for McDowell's second argument. Williams suggests that this argument rests on the mistake of believing that the material equivalence between the truth of the external reasons claim and the reasons entail counterfactuals claim is something that *could figure in the first personal deliberations of the agent*. The false interpretation of the internal reasons position is that an agent of whom the external reasons claim can be truly asserted could, through deliberation, come to see the reasons entail counterfactuals claim as true of themselves

also. But if that point does rest on an exegetical misunderstanding on McDowell's part, it modulates quickly into McDowell's third argument. That is the argument that the content of an external reasons claim, for an appropriately specified agent, can derive its content from an appeal to the idea of a *phronimos*.

Williams denies that the content of an agent's reasons is to be explained by relating their S to the S of such an ideal Aristotelian agent, the *phronimos*. Williams does not believe that there is just one ideal S, upon which all agents should converge, because he is sceptical as to whether there is a single, determinate form of life available to modern theory of the kind Aristotle was able to draw upon. Nevertheless, Williams argues that there is a further, special point about McDowell's neo-Aristotelian position that is separable from the general concern about the kind of objectivity available to neo-Aristotelianism:

[It] raises a problem which is as much ethical as analytical[...] what A has most reason to do in certain circumstances is what the *phronimos* would have reason to do in those circumstances. But in considering what he has reason to do, one thing that A should take into account, if he is grown up and has some sense, are the ways in which he relevantly fails to be *phronimos* ... The homiletic tradition, not only within Christianity, is full of sensible warning about the dangers of moral weightlifting.²⁰

The charge, then, is of illegitimate *idealization* in the theory of practical reasons, an idealization that severs the link between justifying and explanatory reasons. The best reply to Williams's argument is that of Anthony Price, who has argued that the *phronimos* will not advise the morally weak to do what the *phronimos* would do if located in their situation; the *phronimos* will, rather, tailor his or her advice to the feebler moral powers of the advisee.²¹ Point taken, but this seems to concede to Williams the relativity of moral reasons, which is simply another way of expressing the internal reasons argument. Moral advice tailored to individual circumstance implies that we cannot read off from the reasons of the *phronimos* the reasons for the agent without relativization. This seems to concede that the agent's reasons are internal in the required sense. What is the *phronimos* doing, when he or she tailors his or her moral advice to the advisee, if not observing the internal reasons constraint?

An immediate response is to say: doing what any prudent moral adviser does, namely, tailoring the content of one's advice to the circumstances of the advisee. Any theory of normative explanatory

²⁰ Williams, 'Reply', Altham and Harrison (ed.), p. 190.

²¹ A. W. Price, 'Reasons and Desires', unpub. ms. Presented at a University of London seminar on practical reasoning, 1995.

reasons would do as much.²² However, this does not seem to me to be a decisive consideration. If the moral adviser is tailoring moral advice to his or her addressee, is this not in the hope that the content of the reason will say something distinctive about the agent to whom it is addressed? Is there any clear sense, now, of the role of the *phronimos* in giving us the *content* of such a reason, construed as the external reasons theorist must construe it?

Nevertheless, this crucial point does seem to me to be the location of the most promising way of breaking out of the impasse between the internal and the external reasons theorist. The question is: how does one take up an objective, critical perspective on an agent's reasons? Williams says: by launching an 'optimistic internal reasons statement' that goes beyond the contents of the agent's existing 'S' (or presumably such advice would be redundant) but remains within his or her expanded 'S*'. We hope that it is a reason they can metaphorically 'reach' by sound practical reasoning. The external reasons theorist says more: the reason is there for him or her, regardless of their starting point, because it was 'there' for them all along. Williams is primarily sceptical about the explanation of this external reasons claim that takes reason itself to be a source of motivations.²³ In addition, he is secondarily critical of the neo-Aristotelian position which finds this source in an ideal model of the practical reasoner.

I would respond, however, that we can borrow a pair of distinctions that Kantian theorists make without emulating their claim that pure practical reason is itself a normative source. The first distinction is between taking an 'objective perspective' on reasons as itself a generator of reasons, as opposed to merely a filter on a person's existing motivations. The second (connected) distinction is between the legitimacy of abstraction and that of idealization.

For the sake of argument, assume that taking up an objective perspective on an agent's reasons is to take up an impartial perspective on such reasons, which nevertheless respects the relativity of reasons to an agent's expanded 'S*'. It does so by ensuring that the impartial perspective is not itself a generator of new motives but a matter of endorsing already accepted motivations, or deleting accepted motivations that fail to withstand reflective scrutiny. Further, add the desideratum that an impartial theory of moral reasons must avoid Williams's critique of neo-Aristotelian theory by neither assuming that we all share the same motivational set/real interests under idealization, nor idealizing our capacities to be motivated by moral reasons. I suggest that the alternative is to imagine our reasons as constrained

²² A point that I owe to Brad Hooker.

²³ A corollary is that Williams is sceptical of the external reason theorist's accusation that a person who does not 'see' the external reason true of them is thereby 'irrational'.

by an *abstract* procedural constraint, applied to our existing normative motivations, the content of the agent's revised S. The role of imagination in practical reasoning may be expanded to include the application of this procedural constraint.

To avoid making too strong a claim, and thus to invite Williams's reformulated critique, this constraint on our reasons must *not* attempt to capture the normative force of moral reasons via an idealized theory of the practically rational agent. There is an important difference between the legitimate procedure of abstracting and the illegitimate feature of idealizing. Abstraction selects, and deletes, but it does not introduce characterizations of the phenomena it models which are, in the actual world, false.²⁴ McDowell's ideal theory attributed to all agents the fiction that we should all come to converge on the subjective motivational set of the ideal agent, the *phronimos*. This does seem a proper target of Williams's criticisms, but it is unclear that a conception of a constraint on practical reasons that is abstract, rather than ideal, need fall foul of this aspect of Williams's argument.

There is, I suggest, a 'chain fallacy' in McDowell's argument. For any given individual, we need to obtain some critical purchase on the reasons that agent actually has (McDowell's point) while saying something distinctively about that individual (Williams's point). But the way McDowell has obtained this critical perspective is by postulating that ideal individual who can provide optimal critical grasp on any other – the *phronimos*. This now loses the sense in which critical purchase on the individual says something distinctive about that individual. Price attempts to bridge that connection by tailoring moral advice to the particular agent while arguing that the idea of the *phronimos* remains, as it were, the *source* of our normative purchase on the motivations of individuals.

But why do we have to take that route? Why do we need to say that the idea of a normative criticism of an agent's actual reasons that offers us a critical distance from that particular individual's motivations takes us all the way to the idea of the *phronimos*? Rather than tailoring the idea of advice drawn from an ideal to a non-ideal, actual individual, can we not dispense with such an idealization? I would argue that we can. We still have the resources of abstraction. In the course of taking up a critical perspective on his or her own reasons, an agent can be objective about such reasons without *idealization*. We can view our reasons as subject to a form of abstract procedural constraint. How would this view work, and does it take us beyond the content of 'optimistic internal reasons statements'?

²⁴ Onora O'Neill, 'Constructivism in Ethics', repr. *Constructions of Reason*, Cambridge, 1989, esp. pp. 209 f.

III

The external reasons theorist operated with a particular model of how to take up an objective perspective on an agent's existing reasons: a perspective modelled on the psychological dynamics of the acceptance of theoretical truths. There is an ultimate critical perspective on the S of any agent, namely, those reasons statements that are true of the agent, as it were, 'all along'. But this argument proves too much: It iterates the fact that we want critical leverage on any agent's perspective, in order to generate that perspective that will give us a critical perspective on any agent. This fiction is then substantiated either by a source in pure reason, or by the contents of the S of the *phronimos*. There seems room for a conception of the objective criticism of an agent's reasons that offers less, while offering more than the content of an 'optimistic internal reasons statement'.

My positive proposal detaches the idea of an impartial reason from that of an external reason; the historical connection between the two conceptions is contingent and unfortunate. Humeans, too, can talk about impartiality and contemporary contractualism represents a view of this kind. Contractualism is usually presented as being of Kantian origin. It is a comprehensive, reflective account of moral rightness and wrongness, which seems to derive such properties from a construction procedure in an ontologically modest way. This construction procedure can be viewed as a way of cashing out the motivational efficacy of reason and, therefore, as supportive of a Korsgaardian view of practical reason.²⁵

This is not my understanding of contractualism. For the purpose of developing my argument, the limited amount that I want to take from it is that it offers a pragmatic, rather than a semantic, account of impartial reasons. It presupposes that agents with an interest in morality – socialized, moralized agents – possess a certain kind of internalized psychological structure. That structure grounds a fundamental ethical disposition: the disposition to justify one's actions to others on grounds they could not reasonably reject. However, that is not a functional characterization by which the agent need first personally regulate his or her deliberation. Nor does this constraint impose any distinctive content. Instead, as I will argue, a constraint that functioned in this way would combine the elements of necessity and contingency in the structure of moral reasoning in a promising way.

²⁵ For an interpretation of this kind, see Samuel Freeman, 'Contractualism, Moral Motivation and Practical Reason', *Journal Of Philosophy*, lxxviii (1991). For a contrary view of contractualism as basically Humean and externalist, see Jay Wallace, 'How to Argue about Practical Reason', *Mind*, xcix (1990).

The general contrast between a 'semantic' and a 'pragmatic' account of a concept lies in whether one looks to intrinsic features of a concept to explain its distinctive features, or to its extrinsic, functional role.²⁶ The contractualist, promisingly, does not elucidate impartiality by looking to intrinsic features of a certain class of reasons, but rather to the role of a certain kind of pragmatic constraint on the acceptance of reasons. Agents with an interest in morality view it as a constraint on their own reasons that they can be put to reasonable interlocutors without reasonable rejection. The 'impartial point of view' functions here, as Rawls urges in a related context, as a 'device of representation'.²⁷ It is a heuristic standpoint which invites us to take up a certain perspective towards already existing moral knowledge and moral principles and our consequent motivations.

An important value to those inculcated into morality is avoiding appealing to partial interests in moral debate and argument. Conversational maxims of reasonableness, wholly context dependent and informal, sustain our recognition that one dimension of those moral claims that impinge on the interests of others is impartial defensibility.²⁸ Re-casting this traditionally Kantian ideal of impartiality into a Humean framework involves two major departures from the traditional project of grounding moral reasons. First, it departs from the identification of the moral point of view with the perspective of practical rationality *per se*. Second, it abandons the attempt to ground a norm internal to the practice of moral deliberation on a deeper norm which is external to that practice. Underpinning such attempts is a mistake about the nature of objectification and what is involved in offering an objective grounding for a reason.

Reflection on the way in which our judgements are tied to a point of view suggests that a more objective conception of the world involves 'perspectival ascent'; namely, the forming of a conception that is less dependent on perspectival modes of conceptualization.²⁹ However, any such 'ascent' should in my view be interpreted as a 'Hegelian' rather than 'Cartesian' model of objectification.³⁰ The salient difference is between a pattern of objectification which strips appearance away,

²⁶ I take the distinction from Edward Craig, *Knowledge and the State of Nature*, Oxford, 1990, pp. 33 f.

²⁷ John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, New York, 1993, pp. 24–8.

²⁸ Jeremy Waldron invokes the idea of placing appeals before an individual's 'tribunal of reason' in his 'Theoretical Foundations of Liberalism', *Philosophical Quarterly*, xxxvii (1987). The term 'reasonable rejection' is, of course, Scanlon's: the first presentation of this form of contractualism was presented in 'Utilitarianism or Contractualism', *Utilitarianism and Beyond*, ed. A. Sen and B. Williams, Cambridge, 1982.

²⁹ I take the useful phrase 'perspectival ascent' from Mark Sacks, *The World We Found*, La Salle, Illinois, 1989, p. 95.

³⁰ Jonathan Dancy, *Moral Reasons*, Oxford, 1993, pp. 147–53.

revealing it to be an illusion, and another form of objectification which embeds an 'appearance' in a wider context.

The traditional defence of impartial reasons is unhappy with its contingent grounding as a norm internal to moral argument and attempts to ground it on a more objective basis. The standpoint of the practical is tacitly assumed to be a standpoint of engagement, of subjectivity and of appearance, to be defended by taking up a new perspective which is external to practice, disengaged, 'objective' and capable of stripping away false appearance. However, this approach then severs the link between norm and explanation and immediately runs into the internal reasons constraint. If, however, the constraint of impartiality is vindicated not by Cartesian but by Hegelian objectification, the result is quite different. There is in principle no difficulty in the objective perspective endorsing already existing motivations and the perspective it offers is an abstract rather than an ideal perspective. This point, in essence, explains my belief that impartial reasons can be internal reasons.³¹ If the impartial point of view is understood as a device of representation, a conception of impartial reasons can be developed which harmonizes with the internal reasons constraint. My concluding task is to suggest how the account of impartial reasons I have offered can be related to an independently plausible account of moral psychology.

IV

If the previous section described the *possibility* of a form of objectifying theory, which takes the normative goals of the external reasons theorist and attaches them to a certain view of impartial reasons, much remains to be explained. The claim is that normally socialized individuals with an interest in morality are disposed to take up a certain kind of perspective on their reasons. This perspective is an abstract perspective, in which the agent filters his or her reasons in the light of his or her standing disposition to justify such reasons to reasonable interlocutors, such as not to anticipate reasonable rejection. What is the status of this disposition? Has it not just been inserted a priori into the S of every practically rational agent? The

³¹ Williams himself seems to have been led to reject an impartialist account of moral reasons because he associated it, quite plausibly, with a Cartesian model of objectification in Thomas Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism*, Oxford, 1970. In that text moral reasons are 'objective', achieved by a process akin to 'perspectival ascent' and can be interpreted as both 'external' and impartial. Nagel replied that he did not conceive of the objective standpoint as capable of generating motivations in its own right but merely as a heuristic device and has now clearly adopted the more defensible position, in *The View From Nowhere*, Oxford, 1986, ch. 9.

claim that we are all motivated to be impartial is just as implausible as the claim that we all have a standing disposition to accept external reasons.

The outline I am offering accepts the internal reasons theorist's strictures on the source of practical reasons. No attempt is being made here to ground our ethical reasons on a source in pure practical reason, nor to insert them, a priori, into the S of every practical agent solely in virtue of his or her practical rationality. That would be, as Williams has pointed out, entirely circular. We are dealing with those agents who have an empirical interest in morality and, as McDowell would urge, are 'properly brought up'. These fully socialized agents have a standing disposition to justify their acceptance of reasons in the light of an abstract conception of themselves as parties to a certain kind of procedurally specified moral dialogue. This disposition, however, is not itself best viewed as a motive akin to other motives.³² Given its role in the psychological economy of fully socialized agents, the disposition to impartiality is better viewed as a structural constraint. It functions as a principle would function were it an instance of the relativized a priori.

Let me offer an analogy. Kant claimed that geometry was made up of synthetic a priori principles and was Euclidean. It turned out, however, that the physical world was best described by a geometry that was Riemannian. What ought the Kantian to say? One thing that he or she can do is to make a distinction and thereby to introduce the idea of a relativized a priori. In Michael Friedman's words, we can separate out two concepts of the a priori: 'necessary and unrevizable, fixed for all time, on the one hand, "constitutive of the object of [scientific] knowledge", on the other'.³³ Kant's account of geometry should be

³² Thus I do not want to rehabilitate the unpromising idea of an externalist 'desire to be moral', recently defended by Sigrun Svavarsdottir in 'Moral Cognitivism and Motivation', *Philosophical Review*, cviii (1999). Any such idea is vulnerable to Michael Smith's objection that while we may desire to do the right thing, we do not desire to do so under *that* description.

³³ I cannot enter here into the intriguing current debate over a priority, well represented by the essays in *New Essays On The A Priori*, ed. P. Boghossian and C. A. B. Peacocke, Oxford, 2000. But in that anthology Michael Friedman extends his defence of a distinction indebted to Reichenbach's as an account of the a priority of mathematics in 'Transcendental Philosophy and A Priori Knowledge: A Neo-Kantian Perspective'. In the same volume Phillip Kitcher accepts that this is a viable notion of the a priori, but makes two further points that seem to me to be true and interesting: that this notion cannot do all the work that the tradition demanded of a stronger conception of a priority (one that Kitcher favours) and in particular it cannot establish an authoritative, experience independent framework for future enquiry (pp. 75–7). Relatedly, Kitcher's second point is that the assumption doing the work here is of the truth of historicism, pp. 90–1. While I recognize that Kitcher is pointing to controversial features of mathematical knowledge, it seems to me that in the case of moral reasons recognition of these two features makes the account more, not less, plausible.

understood as a priori in the latter sense, but not in the former. This general strategy can, I suggest, be applied to the current problem too. I suggest that our standing disposition to act on reasons that we can put before others without reasonable rejection is an internalization of a relativized a priori principle.³⁴

In the light of this analogy, let me put my claim this way: Our practical deliberations are shaped by a certain deliberative structure, which we may third personally characterize as a commitment to the impartiality of our reasons. But this is not to build into every agent's S a motive to impartiality. To explain what I mean by this, let me return to the contrasts between the view I am outlining and the traditional project of grounding moral reasons on pure practical reason. I have accepted the independent plausibility of content scepticism.³⁵ Content scepticism is directed to two peculiar features of Kant's theory, the purity of practical reason, and its a priori derivation. Korsgaard's reformulation of internalism paralleled wider discussions of Kant's theoretical philosophy which attempt to separate the method of transcendental argument from the doctrine of transcendental idealism. On this view, Kant was misguided in believing that he had to begin his transcendental argumentation with necessary truths about experience. Contingencies, combined with conditional necessities, support the method of transcendental argument without requiring the doctrine of transcendental idealism.³⁶ However, an 'analytical salvage' along these lines would avail us little when it comes to content scepticism: any such project would have departed from the target of Williams's pessimism and Korsgaard's optimism. For there are reasons internal to the Kantian system as to why Kant is driven to an extreme position on the over-determination of moral action by both empirical causation and pure moral motive.³⁷

Nevertheless, while one would openly depart from Kant's extreme view on these matters, one could attempt an ethical equivalent of the

³⁴ Here is another analogy that I owe to Adrian Moore. What role does the norm of consistency play when you investigate the structure of the physical world? A presupposed role: you do not explicitly adopt a principle of consistency, but if you accepted inconsistent representations of the world, investigating what there is, is not the project you could intelligibly be engaged in. I suggest that the disposition to contractualist impartiality is presupposed in a similar way.

³⁵ Thus I am in no way suggesting that the constraint of impartiality determines any specific content for moral reasons. I mean two more precise things by this. I do not believe that moral reasons are essentially 'public' and hence altruistic in content. Nor do I believe that impartial reasons can be explained as both agent-neutral and universal, as I do not believe that the agent-relative/agent-neutral distinction is a tenable one. I argue for both of these claims in 'The Scope of the Agent-relative', unpubl. ms.

³⁶ Harrison, esp. pp. 215–8.

³⁷ Charles Larmore, *Patterns of Moral Complexity*, Cambridge, 1989, ch. 4, pp. 85–90; *The Morals of Modernity*, Cambridge, 1996, pp. 35–40.

analytical salvage with more modest ambitions. Paralleling its theoretical counterpart it would look not for a priori knowledge of necessary truths about human psychology and motivation, but relativized a priori knowledge of truths which are only conditionally necessitated postulates of the theory.³⁸ Such a theory avoids the excessive anti-psychologism inherent in McDowell's illegitimate idealization of moral psychology. The theory is compatible with the minimal psychologism of the internal reasons argument position, which requires no more than a link between the explanatory and justificatory senses of the term 'practical reasons for an agent'. It would thus have met the desiderata established both from Williams's critique of neo-Kantianism and his critique of neo-Aristotelianism in such a way that it could offer an account of the harmony between impartial reasons and human motivation that satisfied the internal reasons constraint.

The version of impartialism I have outlined takes this form: It defends the impartiality of reasons, but does so in a framework that observes the psychologistic constraint, and it needs to be supplemented by a moral psychology which is an instance of the relativized a priori, not a priori as Korsgaard required. It evades Williams's critique of neo-Aristotelian theory by not assuming that we all share the same motivational set/real interests under idealization but it is permitted to view us as capable of an abstract representation of our reasons and their structure.

A theory which grounds impartial reasons in a realistic psychology builds on the following points. First, we should replace the Kantian assumption that our interest in morality is non-empirical with a conception of our moral interests as inescapably empirically conditioned and subject to contingency.³⁹ Second, we should take from Thomas Nagel not a commitment to a similarly a priori and pure conception of moral motivation to that of Kant's original theory, as Korsgaard mistakenly does, but rather a commitment to structural explanations in moral psychology.⁴⁰ Moral motivation should postulate within the agent an authoritative structure which embeds non-desire-

³⁸ This is the neo-Kantian strategy replicated in the case of his theoretical philosophy, for example by Reichenbach in *The Theory of Relativity and A Priori Knowledge*, Berkeley, CA, 1965.

³⁹ Larmore, *Patterns*, pp. 87–9.

⁴⁰ Korsgaard, in 'Scepticism about Practical Reason', esp. at 32, takes the moral of Thomas Nagel's *The Possibility of Altruism*, Oxford, 1970, to be that moral philosophy can teach us psychology, which should come as news to psychologists. For the alternative proposal of interpreting Nagel as having isolated the role of structural motivation in moral psychology, see Samuel Scheffler, *Human Morality*, Oxford, 1992, ch. 5. I agree with Scheffler that this is one of the most promising lines of argument in *The Possibility of Altruism* and the current paper can be seen as a development of one of Nagel's lines of thought.

driven motivation, which Scheffler calls authoritative motivation. He turns to psychoanalysis as an example of a psychological theory that is in broad outline naturalistic, postulates such a structural source of motivation, and captures the twin phenomena of the resonance and the fragility of moral demands in our lives, factors which in turn reflect the susceptibility of moral motivation to familiar deformations.⁴¹

This is the precise point at which the contractualist position I have discussed can draw on the traditional project of 'grounding' external reasons. It does not postulate that alongside a fully socialized agent's reasons there exists a further first order reason, the desire impartially to justify one's actions. Nor need we view this disposition as a higher order desire either – not in the sense of a 'higher order' functional state. I do not believe that it is too misleading to call this internalized principle a higher order disposition.⁴² However, this is on the understanding that such a disposition is part of the cognitive architecture of the agent's practical reasoning.⁴³

Compare an analogy that I used earlier: the presupposed role of the norm of consistency when you investigate the structure of the physical world.⁴⁴ You do not explicitly adopt such a principle but if you accepted inconsistent representations of the world, you could not intelligibly be viewed as engaged in the business of representation. Similarly, the fully socialized agent does not have some meta-level desire to have moral reasons that are impartially defensible. But if such a meta-level

⁴¹ Scheffler, pp. 86–8.

⁴² I refer to a 'higher order disposition' as it is plausible to maintain that particular dispositions of character, such as virtues, have distinctive patterns of motivation associated with them. The disposition I am concerned with has a regulative status towards such particular motivations. Williams himself has a similar story to tell about how, given the truth of the internal reasons thesis, blame actually operates. His account invokes a 'proleptic mechanism' whereby one appeals in moral criticism to 'the desire to be respected by people whom, in turn, one respects'. This invokes a reason proleptically as it makes it true that a person has a reason motivated indirectly by this desire. The difference between his account and the one I have offered here is that the disposition I cite is more minimal: The motivation to want to be respected by others is a substantial ethical motivation, whereas the desire to advance reasons to others without reasonable rejection goes less deeply into ethical motivations. But merely because my notion is the more minimal, it does not, for that reason, allow one simply to presuppose its universality of scope and in that I agree with Williams. (By way of contrast, Scanlon, in *What We Owe To Each Other*, takes the universality of moral reasons as a premiss from which one can argue against the idea that moral reasons are internal.)

⁴³ Freeman makes a similar suggestion at 298 f. concerning the role of the central disposition contractualism attributes to agents, but takes his proposal to vindicate the Kantian origins of the theory as it demonstrates that such motivations have a 'formal basis in practical reasoning'. I do not see that the sense of 'formal' Freeman explains has this consequence; I agree with Scheffler that we are dealing with structures which are relativized a priori and compatible with a broadly naturalistic account of motivation. I leave it open whether this position is better traced back to Hume or to the philosopher that Grice once called 'Kantotle'.

⁴⁴ The analogy is described in n. 34.

norm cannot be interpreted as holding of such an agent, the enterprise of giving moral reasons is not one in which they can intelligibly be viewed as engaging. Let me emphasize that I do not view this constraint as itself determining content – that is why I view it as formal – but this does not mean it is vacuous. This is, I think, as much content as remains to the idea of a ‘moral point of view’.⁴⁵

A moral psychology of this kind contains principles that are instances of the relativized a priori and thus perfectly matches the desiderata for an acceptable theory that I have developed. Its postulated explanatory structure is only a priori relative to a postulated body of theory; it locates, within this naturalistic perspective, a psychological explanation-cum-vindication of an impartial constraint on moral reasons. In order for this to be possible, it is important that the theory must *not* attempt to capture the normative force of moral reasons via an idealized theory of the practically rational agent. McDowell’s ideal theory attributed to all agents the fiction that we should all come to converge on the subjective motivational set of the ideal agent, the *phronimos*. This does seem a proper target of Williams’s criticisms, but it is unclear that a conception of practical reasons that involves abstraction, rather than idealization, need fall foul of this aspect of Williams’s argument.

We are, therefore, supplementing William’s account of the resources of practical reasoning. Such reasoning centrally involves imagination, but in fully socialized agents with an interest in morality this includes the capacity to view one’s reasons as subject to an abstract procedural constraint, a constraint built into the structure of practical deliberation. An agent’s existing deliberative standpoint – the content of his or her S – provides the matter of deliberation, but a higher order disposition structures its form. This allows one to explain how one could subject an agent’s reasons to an objective constraint, the constraint of impartiality, and thereby have critical leverage on their motivations. This constraint does not invoke the fictions of pure practical reason, nor or an ideal reasoner who provides independent critical purchase on any actual reasoner. The form of our criticism is not to argue, to take a Williams example, that a man who is needlessly cruel to his wife has an external reason statement for him not to do so to be true of him ‘all along’. Our purchase on his motivations is to argue that he himself has reason to accept only those reasons that, were he fully rational, he

⁴⁵ I should add that as I regard my view not as supplying particular motivations but rather shaping the architecture of deliberation, it is distinct from neo-Kantian attempts to make impartial reasons a class of reasons, but a class with a distinctive ‘failsafe’ role in moral deliberation. I have in mind here Barbara Herman’s influential position in ‘On the Value of Acting from the Motive of Duty’, repr. *The Practice of Moral Judgement*, Cambridge, Mass., 1993.

could put to co-deliberators without the prospect of reasonable rejection. That is to say more than we can only put 'optimistic internal reasons' statements to him.

To conclude. I have analysed Williams's argument against external reasons and have endorsed both his underlying content scepticism and his relativization of an agent's reasons to his or her expanded set of internal reasons. I have accepted that a theory of such reasons must be minimally psychologistic. However, I have presented an account of impartial reasons, contractualist in inspiration, that can harmonize both with these constraints and with an independently plausible account of moral psychology. The result gives us the resources to take up an objective perspective on an agent's reasons, while dispensing with the fiction of a maximally objective perspective, such that any agent could be criticized on the grounds that he or she is not 'seeing matters aright' and failing to acknowledge an external reason.⁴⁶

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⁴⁶ I owe thanks for helpful comments on and criticism of previous drafts of this paper to Roger Crisp, Brad Hooker, Adrian Moore, Richard Norman, Martin Stone, Anthony Savile, and Gabriel Segal. I was in the fortunate position of being able to see John Skorupski's paper on this topic, a contribution to a volume that I am editing, before this paper was finalized and I learnt a great deal from his discussion. Special thanks (as ever) for many improvements to this paper to Kathryn Brown. This paper was completed during research leave supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Board. I am grateful to the Board for this support.