

## John McDowell on External Reasons

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Suppose that the air in the room in which Meg is sitting is stale. If Meg prefers that the air be fresh, then she has a reason to do something to freshen it. Perhaps she would be wise, given this preference, to open the window. On the other hand, if Meg likes the stale air, then she has a reason to refrain from doing anything that would freshen it. Perhaps in this case she would be wise to endeavour to see that the window stays shut. Either way, the claim that the air in the room is stale is for Meg a reason to act, since in both cases it touches a desire or a preference or some other pro-attitude Meg has.

But *must* a claim touch some one or more of an agent's pro-attitudes for it to be for that agent a reason? Suppose that Meg likes the air stale but that with her in the room is an infant whose health, as Meg knows, will be adversely affected by the stale air. That she enjoys the stale air gives Meg a reason not to freshen it, but does the plight of the infant give her a reason, perhaps a better one, to open the window anyway? Certainly it would give her a reason to open the window if it happens to matter to her that the infant remain in good health. Moreover, it would give her a better reason to freshen the air than to refrain from doing so if she cares more about the infant's health than she does about her enjoyment of the stale air. But what if Meg is entirely indifferent to the infant's health or, worse, what if she wants the infant's health to deteriorate? Could the claim that the stale air will harm the infant be for Meg a reason to do something with the

intention of freshening the air even though it fails, because it engages none of her pro-attitudes, to motivate Meg to do something with that intention?

Now more than a few people, it is true, seem occasionally to speak as if in some cases it is enough that a claim be true that it be for some agent a reason to act in a specific way. That the infant's health is at risk, a person might say, is surely for Meg a reason to open the window, or to do something with the intention of freshening the air, whatever Meg's current attitudes towards the infant's health or stale air are. But is there any good argument that, despite Meg's pro-attitudes, such a claim still counts for her as a reason?

Bernard Williams, for his part, maintains that there is not. He argues instead that only a claim that engages an agent's pro-attitudes can be for that agent a reason to act.<sup>1</sup> In order to be a reason a claim must, he concludes, be able to combine with some element of what he terms an agent's subjective motivational set, the set at a moment of that agent's desires, wants, values, tastes, likes and dislikes, patterns of emotional reaction, loyalties, commitments, and projects, each of which might be characteristic of the person or new and fleeting.<sup>2</sup> This conclusion follows, he holds, from the fact that the concept of a reason is so closely tied to the concept of motivation. Now, if the concept of a reason is, as Williams maintains, closely tied to that of motivation, then for a claim to be for an agent a reason to act it must be possible, given that agent's subjective motivational set, for that claim to motivate that agent, should he or she come to believe it. But no belief could, on its own, motivate an agent; beliefs need to be combined with appropriate pro-

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<sup>1</sup>Bernard Williams, "Internal and external reasons," *Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers 1973-1980* (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 1981).

<sup>2</sup>Williams, pp. 102 & 105.

attitudes if they are to issue in actions. Clearly this is the case, according to Williams, since we need to indicate what pro-attitude the agent had as well as what he or she believed if we are to explain his or her action. Meg, let us suppose, believed that opening the window would freshen her room and, therefore, she intentionally opened the window. But to explain why she opened it, rather than left it closed, it is not enough to cite her belief; we must also indicate what particular attitude she took at the time toward freshening the air. After all, had she wanted the air to remain stale she would not have opened the window even as she continued to believe that opening the window would freshen it.<sup>3</sup>

We can, following Williams, call those claims that do touch something in an agent's subjective motivational set "internal reasons," and those claims supposed by some to be reasons though they in fact fail to touch anything in an agent's subjective motivational set "external reasons." Williams's argument, then, is meant to establish that really there are no external reasons—claims are either for an agent internal reasons or they are not for that agent reasons at all.

John McDowell, however, is not convinced. In a recent paper, McDowell questions whether the emphasis Williams gives to motivation and explanation in his account of reasons is altogether appropriate.<sup>4</sup> Reasons happen not only sometimes to issue in actions and, thus, to explain them; they also, McDowell points out, sometimes justify actions, and they supply us—at least we think they supply us—with a somewhat agent-independent means of criticizing them. An agent can, of course, have more or less, or better or worse, reason to pursue one course of action

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<sup>3</sup>Williams, pp. 106-109.

<sup>4</sup>John McDowell, "Might There Be External Reasons?", in J.E.J. Altham & Ross Harrison, eds., *World, Mind, and Ethics: Essays on the Moral Philosophy of Bernard Williams* (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 1994).

rather than another even as seen only from the perspective of his or her particular subjective motivational set. But this, according to McDowell, is an attenuated sense of more or less, or better or worse; reasons, McDowell says, admit of stronger, less agent-dependent modes of appraisal. His reflections on the normative or critical dimension of reasons lead McDowell to the thought that, though it is true that only an internal reason can motivate a person to perform an action, it is far from clear that *only* something that can motivate a person, given his or her particular subjective motivational set at some moment, is for that person a reason. According to McDowell, had he not neglected the fact that reasons are normative Williams might not have unreflectively assumed that only something that can motivate a person is for that person a reason.<sup>5</sup>

Williams's overall argument might have been persuasive, then, had it included a good argument meant to establish that the concept of a reason is as closely connected to the concept of motivation as he thinks it is. But, McDowell concludes, until such an argument is forthcoming, partisans of external reasons simply need not make their stand on the same field on which Williams has attacked them. They are free to reject at least this one of his central assumptions.<sup>6</sup>

In order to decide the issue between Williams and McDowell, if it can be decided at all, it might be useful to begin by asking what is the *point* of wanting there to be external reasons? For many the point lies in the desire to see actions not just as well- or ill-advised, but also, thereby, as ethically sound or unsound. Now it does not, of course, follow that should there be no external reasons we must fail to be able to criticize people's behaviour or to intervene to prevent them from

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<sup>5</sup>Williams discusses the normativity of reasons on pp. 102-103, but, according to McDowell, he fails to draw the proper conclusions about the ways in which reasons are normative.

<sup>6</sup>McDowell, Section 4 (pp. 6-9).

doing what they, from their own perspective, have the most reason to do. It would certainly be callous and cruel and, thus, perhaps, immoral of Meg to neglect the health of the infant near her, even as she does so for the best of her reasons. And we would certainly, given our own subjective motivational sets, have excellent reason to storm the room, open the window, and cart Meg off to jail. What we cannot do, however, if there are no external reasons, is charge Meg with irrationality. She might have sinned against the infant and against us, but she has not sinned against reason. But charge her with irrationality is what the partisan of external reasons would in fact like to do.<sup>7</sup> It would seem, that is to say, that the hope that there are external reasons is a contemporary form of the Kantian hope that actions can be appraised as rational or irrational from such a perspective that rational actions can be lauded as ethically right and irrational ones (at least some of them) can be criticized as ethically wrong.<sup>8</sup> Philosophers who are drawn to the idea of external reasons are those who would like to find that one behaves well, in an ethical sense, *because* one behaves rationally. To discover that a person has an external reason to perform an

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<sup>7</sup>See, for instance, William Frankena, "The Philosopher's Attack on Morality," *Philosophy* 49, 1974. Frankena is responding to Philippa Foot's paper "Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives," *Philosophical Review* LXXXI, 1972, a paper in which Foot arrives at conclusions similar to Williams's.

<sup>8</sup>Kant himself, of course, could not criticize any specific action as irrational, given his understanding of the concept of rationality, for no action could, in principle, be irrational. That an action was undertaken not out of respect for the categorical imperative but simply on the basis of a desire would not mean that it was irrational, but only that it was non-rational, for actions that stem from attitudes other than respect (if respect is for Kant an attitude) are neither good nor evil but simply without moral worth. Nor could Kant laud any specific action as rational, for no action could be seen to be so from the perspective of the phenomenal self. Though it might be true of some action that it was undertaken out of respect for the categorical imperative and, therefore, was rational, to know that it was undertaken out of respect for the categorical imperative would be to know how things stand in the noumenal world. Kant's external reasons, this is to note, are entirely external to the only world we can know.

action of some specific type would, on this approach, be to discover that that person is constrained by rationality itself to perform an action of that type, even though there might be nothing he or she would rather do less. It would also be to discover that it would be ethically wrong of him or her not to perform it. If it turns out to be a requirement of rationality that, for instance, one take an interest in the health of nearby infants, then Meg has an external reason to do something she believes would freshen the unhealthy air. Meg would be acting irrationally and, thus, from an ethical point of view, badly should she fail to perform some action with the intention of freshening the air.

It is easy to appreciate the appeal of the external reasons approach, at least for those concerned to find foundations for ethics. If it can be shown that it is irrational for an agent not to hold certain ethical values, then one is spared having to suppose either that there are ethical or other value properties which inhere in the objects or events of the physical world, or that the mind has faculties that allow it to perceive or intuit these properties. The difficulties with these suppositions are, of course, legion; thus, being spared having to make them by itself makes the external reasons approach attractive. But what most deeply inclines philosophers to begin with rationality rather than with axiology is the sense that if one begins with axiology one will end up having to deal with the issue of rationality anyway. Once one has established to one's own satisfaction on axiological grounds that some action is the intrinsically good or right one to perform, one will then have to confront the question why perform it? One will have to ask, that is to say, why would the fact that it is good or right to perform some action necessarily be for a person a reason to perform it?<sup>9</sup> Now if one instead begins with the question what actions it is

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<sup>9</sup>Or one would have to ask, as some utilitarians find they do, what else is it about good

rational to perform, one begins already from within the realm of practical reasons. One is from the start dealing with the issue of rational agents' own standards of rational conduct. The question why is it good or right to do that which one has reason to do (why is it good to be rational?) could, of course, be raised here, but it would seem to be easier to ignore this question as irrelevant or to dismiss it as confused than to ignore or dismiss the question why it is rational to do that which is good or right.

We can say, then, if this account of the hope and attraction of the external reasons approach to ethics is correct, that the point of wanting there to be external reasons lies in the nature of the bindingness such reasons would have on the conduct of those for whom they are reasons. Since one cannot but accept the principles of practical rationality so long as one acts, one could not fail to understand that one is required to do that which one has an external reason to do, once one believes the claim that is presented to one as an external reason. Now, of course, although one recognizes that one is required to perform an action of a specific type, one might, because of the particular pro-attitudes one has in one's subjective motivational set, perform an action of some other type. But then one would be acting irrationally—one would be out of step with one's own reasons, one's own standards of rational conduct. Thus, for us to criticize Meg for being irrational in failing to do something meant to freshen the air in her room is not for us simply to criticize her for failing to do something that we ourselves, given our reasons, would rather she had done. It is not, that is, to be imperialistic about values, for it is not to hold Meg accountable to any standards but her own.

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actions, given that their goodness is in fact motivationally inert, that would incline us to perform them?

Williams thinks that there are no external reasons because, as was said earlier, he holds that nothing could be a claim that one must accept as a reason of one's own to perform an action of a specific sort that does not somehow engage some element in one's subjective motivational set. If a claim is to be for one a reason it must potentially be able to motivate one, but this it can do only if it touches some of one's existing pro-attitudes. Of course, any claim that does engage some element in one's subjective motivational set is an internal reason; thus, Williams concludes against the partisan of external reasons, "(to put it cursorily) ... the only rationality of action is the rationality of internal reasons."<sup>10</sup>

What might the partisan of external reasons reply? As Williams notes, there might turn out to be external reasons after all if there exists some sound process of reasoning that would take one from a true claim one believed, but which did not have the requisite connections to one's subjective motivational set for it to be for one an internal reason, to an entirely new motivation, a motivation against which that claim *would* be an internal reason. But, of course, according to Williams, this is just what there cannot be, because, again, if the reason is truly external there will be no motivation associated with it, and one cannot generate pro-attitudes from beliefs alone. Now it is his insistence on this point that leads McDowell to think Williams has gone wrong. This way of dismissing the idea of an external reason works only if the concept of a reason is tied tightly to the concepts of motivation and explanation. But why, McDowell asks, must it be the case that for some claim to be an external reason there has to be some process of *reasoning* that will take one, with one's present subjective motivational set, from that claim to a new motivation? Why would the acquisition of the motivation to act upon a claim have to be through reasoning for that claim to

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<sup>10</sup>Williams, p. 111.

be for one a reason to act? It is true, McDowell agrees, that nothing one would intentionally do, given one's present motivational set, could be *explained* by citing what purports to be an external reason; but, he adds, if something is indeed an external reason, it would conclusively *justify* one's action, should one act upon it. This is so, McDowell explains, because the idea of an external reason is the idea of an ideally rational consideration. An external reason is a reason, that is, not because of some contingent psychological facts about the particular agent for whom it is a reason, but rather because it reflects important real features of the situation in which the agent finds him or herself. If, then, the agent was to act on this reason, the agent would be doing just that which is most called for by the situation itself.

McDowell's view is that the partisan of external reasons can say merely that *if* an agent was to come to see matters aright, if he or she was to come to perceive the truly salient features of the situation in which he or she finds herself, however this happened, and *then* was motivated to act on a particular claim, then that claim was all along for that agent a reason. Before the agent could see things aright it was, then, an *external* reason, for it touched nothing in his or her subjective motivational set, but even then it was a reason he or she had—he or she just was not in a position to know this. What matters, according to McDowell, is not whether there is some argument that would take an agent from his or her subjective motivational set to some other set, but whether he or she would be motivated *if* he or she simply did have a proper subjective motivational set.

It is a not insignificant implication of McDowell's view, an implication McDowell acknowledges, that an agent who fails to act on an external reason cannot be charged with acting irrationally. If there is no path of reasoning that could take an agent from his current subjective

motivational set to a new one against which the formerly external reason would be an internal reason, then it makes no sense to say that the failure to act on an external reason offends reason itself.

A lot here depends on McDowell's idea that there could be a *proper* motivational set, one that was in itself justified. What can be made of this idea? McDowell seems to be saying that different subjective motivational sets are interestingly analogous to incommensurable theories or disciplinary matrices. There is no path of reasoning that can take one from the old to the new motivational set, but one might, through training, unfamiliar experiences, imagination, and other non-rational ways of altering and fixing beliefs, come to lose the old set and acquire the new. And, moreover, one might, from the perspective of the new motivational set, view one's old set as wrong. But does the analogy hold? The trouble comes, of course, with the idea that from the perspective of one's new self one might correctly judge one's past self, not merely as substantially different from one's present self, but also as *mistaken*. Clearly one might correctly judge one's past self as less happy or playful than one's present self and, for that reason, prefer one's present self to one's past self. But has one, thereby, judged one's past self mistaken? It is, of course, the present self that is doing the preferring; moreover, there is no reason to think that the past self, on the basis of its correct judgement that the present self is happier and more playful than it is, would not prefer itself to the foolish thing it has become.

Of two incommensurable theories, on the other hand, at most one can be true.<sup>11</sup> Now the question what it is for a theory to be true is vexing, but it is not crucial for our purposes that we

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<sup>11</sup>At least if we understand the notion of incommensurability as Kuhn, Feyerabend, and Rorty do, and not as their detractors often do.

answer it. What we do have to answer, however, if we are to determine whether the analogy McDowell has suggested holds, is the question what concepts play the role, with regard to pro-attitudes, that the concepts of truth and falsity play, with regard to beliefs? McDowell cannot, it should be clear, appeal to the notions of rationality and irrationality, at least not the notion of irrationality held by the traditional partisan of external reasons. To be irrational is to be out of step with one's own standards of conduct—to go against one's own principles of practical reason—and, thus, to have attitudes which are in tension with, if not contradictory to, each other. But, as noted above, McDowell is committed to the view that an agent does not act irrationally when he or she fails, as he or she must, to perform an action for which he or she has an external reason. His or her attitudes might repose together in a state of perfect harmony.<sup>12</sup> And that is why, as with a person confronted with a theory incommensurable with the internally coherent one he or she holds, there will be no way to reason from the old to the new.

What, then, in McDowell's view, does play the role of truth and falsity with respect to pro-attitudes? So far as I can tell, nothing does; and, therefore, it seems, his argument breaks down. McDowell gives us no reason to think that in addition to being more or less coherent an agent's subjective motivational set can be more or less correct.

McDowell does, however, when explaining why it is that when a person is properly brought up he or she will see things aright from the perspective of his or her subjective motivational set, draw on views about the ontological status of value he has defended elsewhere.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>See, especially, McDowell, Section 5 (pp.9-15).

<sup>13</sup>See in particular "Values and Secondary Qualities," in Ted Honderich, ed., *Morality and Objectivity: A Tribute to J.L. Mackie* (Boston; Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), and "Aesthetic value, objectivity, and the fabric of the world," in Eva Schaper, ed., *Pleasure, Preference, and*

Perhaps we can find in these views a sense in which a subjective motivational set can be correct or incorrect in such a way as to support the contention that claims that leave a person cold might nonetheless be for him reasons.

McDowell holds that evaluative thought both presents itself to us as and, in fact, is “a matter of sensitivity to aspects of the world.”<sup>14</sup> Values, for McDowell, are part of the fabric of the world; they inhere in its objects and events as secondary qualities. We grasp the ethical, aesthetic, or other value that an object, event or situation has if we have acquired appropriate habits of thought and perception. Thus it can happen that a person can fail to be sensitive to the values of things, to the values they truly have. Now in the case of ethical values at least, to have been brought up properly is to have been brought up into a correct subjective motivational set and, thus, to have the ability to see things aright. To see things aright is to give “all relevant considerations the force they are credited with in a correct picture of one’s practical predicament”<sup>15</sup>; practical predicaments are “structured by collections of values.”<sup>16</sup> Whether one’s picture is a correct picture of one’s practical predicament—whether the values one thinks structure it do in fact structure it—is, of course, potentially a matter of discussion and argument, of ethical theorizing. But the fact that there can always be disagreement about matters of value should, McDowell insists, engender no sceptical worries about the reality of value itself so long as we continue not to “conceive our values as owing their authenticity, and their relevance to what we do, to our

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*Value: Studies in Philosophical Aesthetics* (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 1983).

<sup>14</sup>McDowell, “Values and Secondary Qualities,” p. 110.

<sup>15</sup>McDowell, “Might There Be External Reasons?,” p. 14.

<sup>16</sup>McDowell, “Might There Be External Reasons?,” p. 16.

motivational makeup or to anything in the psychological genesis of our coming to have them.”<sup>17</sup> It is a consequence of these views that for a claim to be for a person an external reason to perform an action of a specific type it would have to engage some motivation that that person would have, were he or she to have a correct picture of his or her practical predicament, which is to say the picture he or she would have had had he or she been brought up properly.

We need not, for our purposes, consider the merits of this view as a theory of the ontology of value. We need only be clear, first, that if we are to look at reasons this way, as justifications of actions from the perspective of knowledge of value, we might very well be inclined to think that though external reasons are not motivators they still are reasons. But we should also be clear that, if we do look at reasons this way, we will have given up trying to get what the partisan of external reasons traditionally has wanted to get. When the concepts of rationality and irrationality, as the partisan of external reasons understands them, are not employed in characterizing external reasons, the notion of an external reason loses the sort of critical edge it was hoped it would have. It would seem, then, that for the analogy with incommensurable theories to support a normative conception of external reasons, the role played with regard to beliefs by the concepts of truth and falsity would have to be played with regard to pro-attitudes by the concepts of rationality and irrationality. Williams indicates, by linking reasons with motivations and explanations, why they cannot play this role. McDowell’s secondary-quality analysis of value, and his associated idea that for an action to be ideally rationally justified is for it to follow on a true understanding of one’s practical predicament, cannot yield a normative conception of external reasons, since, again, as McDowell recognizes, one is not acting irrationally when one acts on what one believes is one’s

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<sup>17</sup>McDowell, “Might There Be External Reasons?”, p. 17.

best reason, even if it is not a reason informed by knowledge of that predicament's structure. But this result is not surprising given that, for McDowell, facts about value are distinct from facts about motivation.

McDowell, we can say, has moved from questions about what it is rational to do, as asked both by those who think the only rationality is the rationality of internal reasons and by those who think there is also a rationality of external reasons, to axiological questions, to questions about what is in itself truly valuable. In doing so, however, he has given up the advantages of the external reasons approach to ethics—the questions why bother to discover what is truly valuable, and why take this knowledge, rather than entirely prudential knowledge only, into account when deciding what to do, quickly force themselves upon us. Thus I conclude that even if he is right that practical predicaments are structured collections of values, and that we can be right or wrong in our appraisals of these structures, McDowell has given us no reason to think that there is anything more to the rationality of action than the rationality of internal reasons.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>I thank Don Brown, Norm Gall, and Doug Simack for helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper.