Moral Criticism and the Metaphysics of Bluff

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At a climactic—and, indeed, incendiary—moment in Bernard Williams’ classic essay, “Internal and External Reasons,” Williams says that those who advance moral criticisms by appealing to so-called external reasons are engaging in “bluff” (p. 111). Williams thus alleges that condemning certain actions of others as somehow not only immoral, but also irrational or contrary to reason is nothing more than a kind of pretense. To say that a favorite pastime that so many of us happily engage in is empty, well—to use an American colloquialism—“them’s fightin’ words!” Indeed, in criticizing certain moral criticisms in this way, Williams’ words are fightin’ words about fightin’ words.[[1]](#footnote-1)

*Why* does Williams proffer these meta-fightin’ words? Readers—and indeed perhaps Williams himself—have struggled to articulate a precise argument for this claim that there are no external reasons and that those who try to invoke them in criticism of others are engaging in bluff. Thus, the force of Williams’ point has remained, at best, elusive, perhaps even to Williams himself.[[2]](#footnote-2)

In this paper, I first want to defend Williams’ claim that the appeal to external reasons is illegitimate. But I will do so from a perspective that is radically different from the ones usually at work in considering Williams’ position. Indeed, this perspective is one that may or may not (probably not!) be in the spirit of Williams’ actual reasons for rejecting external reasons, so it is important to keep in mind (as I will remind you from time to time) that I am not offering an interpretation of Williams here. The distinctive aspect of my approach is that I argue that a rationalist line of thought can support Williams’ claims. To bring out this line of thought, I will examine the metaphysical commitments of those who engage in what Williams calls bluff. I will then reject those commitments on powerful and widely popular rationalist grounds. I will, in other words, endeavor to support Williams’ charge of bluff by investigating what I call the metaphysics of bluff and by offering a rationalist critique of that metaphysics.

I will further strengthen the way in which I see the rejection of the metaphysics of bluff as grounding Williams’ position by putting my rationalist critique in a much broader context of analogous, similarly rationalist critiques of views in widely different domains of philosophy.

I will then deploy my rationalism-infused argument against external reasons more widely than Williams actually deploys his own argument. In particular, I will show how prevalent Kantian moral views—even though they don’t invoke external reasons—are also vulnerable to the core, rationalist idea at work in my defense of Williams’ rejection of external reasons.

However, as I will sketch at the end, although my rationalist argument may offer much-needed support for Williams’ controversial claim and may deepen and extend his conclusions, the upshot of my argument may prove to be too strong even for Williams’ polemical purposes. This is because, in bringing down external reasons and certain internal reasons as they are conceived in important Kantian theories, my argument threatens also to bring down the concept of acting for a reason itself, as Williams and almost all other philosophers understand it.

I. Arguing Against External Reasons

I begin by trying to lay out Williams’ argument, such as it is.

First, we must ask: what is an external reason? And correlatively: what is an internal reason? I should apologize at the outset for using the dreaded and multiply ambiguous terms “internal” and “external.” Nonetheless, because the debate is conducted in these terms, I will use these labels while endeavoring to make clear exactly what I mean by them.

Let’s start with internal reasons and with what Williams calls the agent’s subjective motivational set or S. S contains desires, such as the desire to go to embroidery school or the desire to have ice cream or the desire to help others. As Williams emphasizes, these desires need not be egoistic (“Internal and External Reasons,” p. 105). Williams also makes clear that the set, S, is populated not merely by desires, but also by other, perhaps more robust (but still subjective), states such as projects, commitments, loyalties, etc. Perhaps all these elements can be spelled out in terms of desires, but there is no need to suppose that this is so. The internality of internal reasons simply consists in the fact that these reasons are a function of existing desires, projects, etc., that do or can motivate one to act.

The “do or can” here is also important, for Williams wants to allow, indeed he insists, that included in one’s S are reasons that—even if they are not at the moment explicitly considered by the agent—are in some way reachable via practical reasoning from other, perhaps more explicit, elements in S.[[3]](#footnote-3) As Williams puts it, “internal reasons statements can be discovered in deliberative reasoning,” and through deliberation, “an agent can come to see that he has reason to do something which he did not see he had reason to do at all” (*ibid*., p. 104).

By contrast, an external reason is a reason for one to act that can apply to one regardless of one’s desires, projects, etc., i.e. independently of what is already in the agent’s S. These are reasons for one to act even if the agent is not at all antecedently motivated to act on those reasons, and even if these reasons are not derivable by practical reasoning from one’s existing motivations. If the agent does not, in fact, act on those reasons, then the agent can be said to be irrational or acting contrary to reason, and indeed contrary to reasons that he himself has but is not motivated by.

The external reasons theorist thus recognizes two fundamentally different kinds of reasons—external reasons and internal reasons—and, for the internal reasons theorist, there is not this division among reasons. (However, we will see later that some internal reasons theorists embrace a different kind of division, one within the class of internal reasons.) Thus, for the external reasons theorist, reasons are not everywhere the same, but for the internal reasons theorist, reasons are everywhere the same in this respect at least: they are all internal, i.e. included in or derivable from one’s motivational set.[[4]](#footnote-4)

A further important feature of external reasons is that external reasons do or can take some kind of precedence over internal reasons or over one’s subjective desires. In some cases at least, external reasons for action can *override* internal reasons or, perhaps, simply provide reasons that somehow challenge the course of action one’s desires or internal reasons move one toward. For the external reasons theorist, external reasons thus enjoy some kind of rational authority over internal reasons, and this provides a basis for moral criticism of one who acts contrary to these external reasons.

It will be helpful, before we turn to ways to support the rejection of external reasons, to note two important points of consensus in the debate: first, there are internal reasons on which we can sometimes act, and, second, some internal reasons “win out” over others. Thus, I may have a desire for ice cream, a paradigmatic internal reason, and also a desire for tater tots, another paradigmatic (although somewhat odd), internal reason. And I may simply desire ice cream more than tater tots on a given occasion, and thus I act on the desire for ice cream. This desire—instead of the desire for tater tots—gets me to act. Proponents of external reasons and deniers of external reasons alike do not dispute (at least not so far) that at least some internal reasons—desires or inclinations of this kind—are reasons on which we sometimes act and, in that sense, are reasons that win out over other internal reasons.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Indeed, the debate between external reasons theorists and their opponents can be presented in terms of this point of agreement: given that ordinary desires, etc. are reasons on which we sometimes act, is there also a good basis for saying that there are considerations of a different kind—external reasons, reasons that are independent of an agent’s motivational set—that have some sort of precedence over internal reasons? Williams, of course, argues that there is no good basis for positing such external reasons. And it is to his argument that we now turn.

For Williams, there is nothing—no reason—above the fray of our passions, desires, commitments, etc. that can, as it were, save us from them by morally adjudicating conflicts between them. Any such adjudication—if adjudication is to be had—is provided from within our internal reasons by desires and passions themselves. There is no external authority, no *deus ex machina* or, better, no *ratio* (reason) *ex machina* to which we can appeal.

Here is one way to see Williams’s argument as proceeding. His first point is:

(1) If something is a reason for an agent to act in a certain way, then the agent is motivated to act in that way, or the agent can—through a process of rational deliberation based on their existing motivations—arrive at a motivation to act in that way. In other words, a reason—as a reason—must engage with one’s existing motivations in order to be a reason.

McDowell helpfully puts Williams’ point this way: “ethical reasons are reasons only for those who have motivations to which ethical considerations speak, or can be made to speak.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

Again, the motivation to act in a certain way need not, for Williams, already be an explicit element in one’s motivational set; rather, all that is required is that there be some deliberative path from one’s existing motivations to a motivation to act in the way in question. Thus, (1) is a claim about the connection that reasons must have to our existing motivations; it is the claim that reasons must have some purchase on our motivations.

Williams goes on to claim in what is, in effect, a partial definition of “external reason”:

(2) If a reason is external—i.e. is independent of our motivational set, S—then that reason does not or cannot engage with our existing motivations.

As Williams puts the point: “The whole point of external reason statements is that they can be true independently of the agent’s motivations” (“Internal and External Reasons,” p. 107).

From (1) and (2) it follows that:

(3) If something is a reason for an agent to act, then it cannot be an external reason.

In other words, if anything counts as a reason for one to act, then it is thereby already internal.

We can see here, from Williams’ perspective, a kind of imperialism of internal reasons. Given (1) and (2), an allegedly external reason—if it is to count as a reason—must, as it were, turn into an internal reason in order to qualify as a reason. Given (1) and (2), internality spreads throughout, and holds sway over, the realm of reasons, excluding the purported external reasons. This exclusion of externality and this sweeping expansion of internality I call “the imperialism of internal reasons.” With this take-over of reasons by the internal, we can see that, for Williams, reasons are, as I said, everywhere the same.

Given this imperialism, to appeal to external reasons is to appeal to something that, given (1) and (2), is incoherent: it is to appeal to something that, as a reason, must engage with our motivations but that, as external, does not engage with our motivations. Because of this incoherence, as Williams sees it, the criticism of someone as irrational for acting against a so-called external reason is an empty criticism. It is, as Williams says, mere “bluff” (“Internal and External Reasons,” p. 111).[[7]](#footnote-7)

This rejection of external reasons and this charge of emptiness and bluff that Williams lays at the feet of the external reasons theorist depend on (1) and (2). (2), of course, is true simply by the definition of “external reasons” as spelled out by Williams. So the weight of this argument turns on the strength of (1), the claim that a reason should engage our motivations.

Why should (1) be true?

I would like to offer reasons in a rationalist spirit for (1). Although, as I note below, Williams says some things that may point in the direction I chart out here, this line of thought and its development are mine and I do not attribute them to Williams. As I stressed at the outset, I am not presenting these reasons for (1) as part of an interpretation of Williams. There have, of course, been a number of sophisticated reconstructions of Williams’ argument, but none, as far as I am aware, takes the rationalist line that I take here in my non-interpretation.

Recall that, for the external reasons theorist, internal reasons are already included in or are derivable from our motivational set, S, but external reasons, by definition, are not. Despite this disparity, the external reasons theorist holds that external reasons stand in a relation of some kind of authority over internal reasons. Indeed, external reasons count as reasons, for the external reasons theorist, only if they enjoy this authority relation. I want to argue that this relation of authority is unintelligible and that this unintelligibility grounds the truth of (1) and is the source of the unintelligibility of external reasons.

This relation of authority is unintelligible precisely because of the disparity between—the radically different characters of—external reasons and internal reasons. The key question here is this: in virtue of what would this relation of authority that external reasons purportedly enjoy over internal reasons obtain? That is, the key question is: in virtue of what could something from outside, and not derivable from, my motivational set stand in a relation of authority over internal reasons? And the key answer is: nothing. Because of their disparate natures, we cannot understand the relation of authority that external reasons allegedly stand in to internal reasons. Since this authority relation is unintelligible and since, as I noted, external reasons can count as reasons only if there is this kind of authority relation, it follows that external reasons are not legitimately reasons.

Contrast the relation between external reasons and internal reasons with the relation between two internal reasons (or, as I will later call them, two ordinary internal reasons). As we saw, it seems that all sides agree that internal reasons can stand in relations of “winning out” over (or “losing out” to) other internal reasons. Thus my desire for ice cream gets me to act, and my desire for tater tots does not. Given that my desire for ice cream and my desire for tater tots are both part of the same system of internal reasons, and given that the former desire, say, is greater than the latter, this dominance of the former desire over the latter seems to be perfectly intelligible. (I’ll question this point later in the paper; but for now I’m merely seeking to build on something that seems to be agreed on by philosophers engaged in this debate.)

But can we similarly understand how an external reason to help a neighbor—a reason, let’s say, not based on or reachable from my motivational set—can have authority over an internal reason, such as my desire for tater tots, a desire that is within my motivational set? Given that these reasons are dissimilar in that they are parts of different systems, how can one stand in a relation of authority over the other? If we try to explain this authority by saying that we have a desire to help our neighbor that is greater than our desire for tater tots, then we turn the purported external reason to help the neighbor into an internal reason. (This would be a manifestation of the imperialism of internal reasons.)

*How*, we can ask, is it that external reasons have authority over internal reasons? That is, *what enables* them to stand in this relation of authority? I don’t see how these questions can be answered. Given the disparity between internal and external reasons, the relation of authority that external reasons stand in to internal reasons is unintelligible and a mystery. We can, from this point of view, no more see how the consideration—external to one’s S—in favor of helping one’s neighbor has authority over one’s internal reasons than we can see how the rival consideration—equally external, let’s say—of harming one’s neighbor has authority over one’s internal reasons.

Of course, we can try to say on behalf of the external reasons theorist that certain external reasons—such as the consideration in favor of helping one’s neighbor—just do have authority over one’s internal reasons, and there’s no deeper reason, no account of *how* they stand in this relation. To take this line is, in effect, to treat the authority of external reasons as a primitive fact. But to appeal to this kind of primitive fact and thus to fail to meet a natural demand for explanation as to *how* a consideration gets to be an external reason is really to play right into Williams’ charge of bluff. To say that there is nothing in virtue of which a certain consideration counts as an (external) reason, yet that consideration is still a reason is, perhaps, not far removed from the bluffer’s ploy of criticizing without having any basis for so doing.

Matters aren’t helped at all if the external reasons theorist appeals to a so-called intuition that such-and-such a consideration is an external reason with authority over internal reasons.[[8]](#footnote-8) At this point, to appeal to such an alleged intuition is nothing more than dogmatically digging in one’s heels in an *ad hoc* and peremptory manner. Such a move is just what we might expect from a bluffer, but it’s not a legitimate strategy to adopt in the articulation and defense of a philosophical position in a setting of great controversy.

My argument is a distinctively rationalist argument. The charge is that the proponent of external reasons posits relations between external reasons and internal reasons that are unintelligible, i.e. relations that obtain without a sufficient reason. The external reasons theorist—given the disparity between external reasons and internal reasons—inevitably fails to meet an explanatory demand, fails to specify what it is in virtue of which external reasons have authority over internal reasons. External reasons thus, like a *ratio ex machina*, inexplicably arise and are unintelligible. Because of this unintelligibility of the alleged relation between external reasons and internal reasons, external reasons, I am arguing on rationalist grounds, are to be rejected. In effect, external reasons are to be rejected because, if they were to obtain, there would—because of the disparity between purported external reasons and internal reasons—be *no reason* for the kind of relations they are alleged to have to internal reasons. Rejecting something because its existence would involve such unintelligibility or brute facts is what I am calling a rationalist move.

One can, perhaps, make such a rationalist move without being committed to a full-blown Principle of Sufficient Reason which rejects brute facts in general. The particular brute facts rejected here are the brute facts that the alleged relation between disparate external reasons and internal reasons would bring in its train. Rejecting such brute facts may be compatible with denying the Principle of Sufficient Reason more generally, but, even so, the rejection of this specific kind of brute fact is an expression of a commitment to the explanation of certain facts, and such a commitment is a hallmark of at least a limited form of rationalism.

And, yes, in answer to a question that I am sure that I am sure you now have, I am understanding the charge that invoking external reasons in moral criticism is engaging in bluff as a rationalist claim. And I am suggesting that Williams is closer to rationalism than many—including perhaps Williams himself—may have supposed that someone with a “sub-Humean”[[9]](#footnote-9) view could possibly be.[[10]](#footnote-10)

My aim in this section has been to show that Williams’ argument can perhaps most powerfully be defended by casting it in the rationalist light that I have shone on it. Williams may or may not welcome being tarred with the brush of rationalism (again, probably not, I dare say). But if the shoe fits….At any rate, this isn’t the first time I’ve portrayed certain philosophers as closet rationalists or at least as closer to rationalist motivations than they perhaps admit or realize.[[11]](#footnote-11)

II. A Club of Rationalists

To display the power of—and to further support—the rationalist argument I have advanced in support of Williams’ rejection of external reasons, I would like to place this argument in a broader context of influential and similarly rationalist-inspired critiques of philosophical positions in other domains of philosophy. I have argued that the relation of authority or precedence or some kind of dependence between two kinds of reasons is to be rejected as unintelligible precisely because those kinds of reasons differ radically in their natures. This aspect of my argument may sound familiar, and that’s because it *is* familiar.

The dynamic of this argument is also to be found in many famous criticisms of Cartesian mind-body interaction—relations of causal dependence between changes in a mental, wholly non-physical and non-extended substance and changes in a corporeal, extended and wholly non-mental substance. Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia first raised at least one aspect of this worry about interaction between things of such different natures in 1643, and since then similar criticisms have been put forward by any number of other philosophers responding to Descartes, philosophers as diverse as Conway, Spinoza, and Gassendi.[[12]](#footnote-12) Indeed, Williams himself gets in on this anti-Cartesian act when, with one of his characteristically vivid labels, he speaks of “the scandal of Cartesian interaction” in his book on Descartes:

It is often said…that there was something deeply mysterious about the interaction which Descartes’s theory required of two items of totally disparate natures, the immaterial soul, and the gland or any other part of an extended body. (Williams, *Descartes: The Project of Pure Enquiry*, p. 287).

One aspect of Elisabeth’s and Williams’ and others’ worries here is that, given their disparate natures, there is no way to explain *how* the mind and the body interact or what it is *in virtue of* which they interact. In this light, these criticisms, with their demands for explanation, can be seen as metaphysical, rationalist-inspired challenges to Descartes who is often regarded in other aspects of his philosophy as a rationalist.[[13]](#footnote-13)

The argument concerning external reasons that I developed in the previous section draws on the same kind of unease concerning unintelligible relations between things of different kinds. In this case, the things are reasons of different kinds, and the relations are not, perhaps, causal relations, but rather relations of authority or overridingness or some kind of precedence. Yet the general contours of the arguments are the same. In the mind-body case, Descartes’ opponents, including Williams, and in the reasons case, Williams again or me, on behalf of a Williams-esque argument, challenge certain kinds of unintelligible relations between disparate things precisely because and to the extent that the things in question are disparate and thus these relations are unintelligible.

The point here, I should stress, is not, in the first instance, whether you find this kind of criticism of Cartesian interaction convincing; rather the initial point is that the argument against external reasons that I have developed is strikingly similar to an extremely influential argument that many have found to be very powerful in undermining a certain relation between Cartesian minds and bodies. I am arguing that the argument concerning reasons of differing kinds standing in certain relations is likewise powerful. This similarity illuminates the strategy of the Williams-esque argument I have developed. This illumination is not only valuable in itself, but it also increases the pressure to accept the force of the Williams-esque argument that I have developed. If one accepts or is even tempted by the rationalist-themed argument against Cartesian mind-body interaction (as so many are and have been), then—given the structural similarity between that argument and my Williams-esque argument against external reasons—there is additional pressure to accept that argument against external reasons.

The analogy here is not just to the case of Cartesian mind-body interaction, it is also to any number of other philosophical positions which invoke certain relations between radically different kinds of things. Thus, let me just mention briefly three other cases in which the same dynamic of rationalism-inflected challenges to views that posit relations between disparate entities is at work.

Consider the view of the mind as containing both representational mental states—states that somehow represent or are about things—and non-representational states, such as qualia or purely phenomenological states. States of the different kinds interact or engage in various ways, e.g. a feeling of pain or pleasure may lead us to have certain beliefs, etc. This is a very common conception of the mind. Of course, it is challenged by theories of mental states, in general, as purely representational. One particularly rationalist motivation for such a representational theory—similar to the reasons just outlined against Cartesian mind-body interaction—is that it is difficult to understand how such different kinds of mental states, representational and non-representational, could enter into dependence relations or other kinds of relations.[[14]](#footnote-14) The workings of the mind would proceed more intelligibly, on this view, if the mind were characterized simply in terms of representation. From this perspective, the problem of the relation between representational and non-representational mental states is an analogue of the mind-body problem within the mind itself. Spinoza and Leibniz can be seen as having this kind of motivation for their versions of a representational theory of the mind.[[15]](#footnote-15) As with my Williams-esque argument, the focus here is on relationality: in this case, the aim is to reject as inexplicable—and *because* it is inexplicable—any conception of mental states according to which mental states of radically different kinds interact and depend on one another. And, as before, this parallel is not only illuminating in itself, but it also—to the extent that one is inclined to accept this kind of argument against a representational/non-representational distinction—a source of additional pressure to accept the kind of argument against external reasons that I have developed.

Next, to cast the net even more widely, consider a historically extremely important form of Aristotelian-inspired metaphysical position according to which substances consist of matter and a certain form (often called a substantial form) which, on this view, makes a thing the kind of thing it is. On this kind of Aristotelian view, it is this combination of form and matter that is responsible for the kinds of objects that populate our world. There are many versions of this basic picture, and there are many kinds of objections to at least some of these versions. One perennial worry arising from a clear rationalist orientation is that there is no intelligible way for matter and form—two disparate items—to engage with one another so as to be responsible for a substance. This challenge is prominent in Descartes, Leibniz, and other early modern thinkers as well as in much other criticism, earlier and later.[[16]](#footnote-16)

My point here is that the Williams-esque critique of external reasons that I have developed is analogous in this respect to powerful, rationalist critiques of certain versions of an Aristotelian form-matter distinction: the engagement between disparate form and matter is, many have thought, unintelligible, and, I am arguing, the engagement between external reasons and internal reasons is similarly unintelligible. Further, I am (again) attempting to increase the pressure to accept my Williams-esque argument against external relations in the following way: if one finds, as many have, the rationalist-themed argument against an Aristotelian form-matter distinction powerful, then—given the structural similarity between that argument and my argument against external relations—there is additional pressure to accept that argument against external relations.

Finally, consider Frege’s distinction between objects and concepts. In order for there to be a thought or a proposition, a concept or concepts must combine or engage somehow with an object or objects. Objects are, as Frege says, “saturated,” complete on their own, and concepts are “unsaturated,” inherently standing in need of completion by an object. When concept and object combine or engage in the right way, there is a thought or proposition which is somehow composed of these items of rather different kinds. Many have objected to this picture on the ground that there is no good way to understand *how* items of these two kinds “interact” or engage. If they combine or engage because of a further entity—a combiner—then we quickly get into a vicious regress once we ask the natural question: how does the combiner combine? And if you don’t appeal to something like a combiner, then, it seems, you are treating the fact that they combine as primitive, without a ground or explanation. For these reasons, many have charged that the saturated/unsaturated distinction has no explanation, and to speak of such a distinction is merely to employ a metaphor or apply a label; it is not a means of illumination. We can, of course, say *that* the different kinds of items engage, but *how* they do so remains unexplained. For at least some of the critics of the Fregean saturated/unsaturated distinction, this distinction is to be rejected because it is nothing but an unintelligible relation between disparate entities.[[17]](#footnote-17) Again, we have a powerful and influential objection in a rationalist spirit to the relation between disparate entities, an objection that is illuminatingly analogous to my Williams-esque argument against external relations. And again, we have corresponding additional pressure to accept the force of my argument.

I should note that the four examples I have given of parallel arguments are only the tip of the iceberg. The history of philosophy and contemporary philosophy are replete with analogously (and, perhaps, implicitly) rationalist lines of thought challenging relations between disparate things. Going out on a limb here, I would say that other cases of distinctions that can be and have been criticized on similarly rationalist grounds include: the analytic/synthetic distinction, the concept/intuition distinction (in Kant and others), the will/intellect distinction, the theoretical/practical distinction, and the scheme/content distinction (as criticized by Davidson). Thus, there are many more sources that can illuminate the power of the argument I have developed against external reasons and many more potential sources of additional pressure to accept that argument.

IV. Broadening the Critique

Despite these august parallels, the Williams-esque argument I have advanced is still rather limited. This is because, as so far formulated, the argument undermines only external reasons. There remain views that have no dealings with external reasons, but nonetheless, contra Williams, deny that reasons are everywhere the same. Such views, while steadfastly adhering to a kind of internalism, draw some kind of sharp distinction among internal reasons, a distinction that seems to underwrite and make possible the kinds of charges of irrationality and the kinds of criticism of our actions that stem from ordinary desires that Williams seeks to deflate. Such views see a significant difference between our contingent desires or inclinations and other internal reasons that stem instead from our very nature as practically reasoning beings or from the very structure of practical reason itself.

Thus, if this kind of view is correct, our very nature as beings capable of practical reasoning provides us with reasons to act or motivations to act that are independent of our ordinary contingent desires or inclinations. Such reasons, which are thus included in the motivational set of all rational agents, are certainly internal. However, these reasons are not what might be called ordinary internal reasons which are, in the way Williams describes, a function of our contingent desires or inclinations. Instead, these internal reasons are of a special kind: because they are a function of our rational nature itself, they have some kind of authority or precedence over ordinary internal reasons. Because proponents of this special kind of internal reasons often get their inspiration from Kant, I will call these special internal reasons, “Kantian internal reasons.”

Of course, even though I have these Kantian internal reasons and even though they are capable of motivating me, I may choose, in a given case, not to act on these reasons. In such a case, I lay myself open to moral criticism and to the charge of being irrational, of going against the dictates of reason. The point, however, for proponents of Kantian internal reasons is that this criticism is not based on a failure to act on external reasons, but on a failure to act on reasons that are internal because our rational nature provides us all, insofar as we are rational, with the capacity to be motivated to act morally. Korsgaard puts the point his way:

If one accepts the internalist requirement [viz. that reasons for action must be capable of motivating rational persons], it follows that pure practical reason will exist if and only if we are capable of being motivated by the conclusions of the operations of pure practical reason as such. Something in us must make us capable of being motivated by them, and this something will be part of the subjective motivational set….[W]hat seems to follow from the internalism requirement is this: if we can be motivated by considerations stemming from pure practical reason, then that capacity belongs to the subjective motivational set of every rational being. (Korsgaard, “Skepticism about Practical Reason”, p. 21)

Initially, there were indications in Williams that he saw his attack on external reasons as challenging this kind of picture in which we have reasons for acting provided by our rational nature.[[18]](#footnote-18) But in light of Korsgaard’s paper which sets out how a Kantian position can and should count as one that appeals only to internal reasons in practical thought, Williams acknowledges that his argument against external reasons—however good it may be—does not by itself tell against the legitimacy of what I am calling Kantian internal reasons.[[19]](#footnote-19)

However, this important concession or clarification by Williams leaves it unclear on what basis he would now seek to argue against—as he clearly would like to do—a Kantian position, a position which invokes Kantian internal reasons. I would like to show how the considerations underlying the rationalism-infused argument I have developed against external reasons can be deployed anew against Kantian internal reasons. Again, though, I am not attributing this line of thought to Williams.

To set the stage for this redeployment, let me say a bit more about the character of Kantian internal reasons as envisaged by their proponents. Korsgaard and Darwall will be my main examples here because their positions are so well-developed and clearly articulated, but other examples would also serve well.

Both Korsgaard and Darwall are avowedly internalists in something like the sense I have been using in this paper: an internalist about reasons believes that reasons for action must be capable of motivating. Crucial to their positions is some kind of distinction between kinds of (internal) reasons. Thus, Korsgaard distinguishes between what she calls subjective and objective ends. Subjective ends are a function of inclination, while objective ends are determined by reason, i.e. by the nature of practical reason. (“Kant’s Formula of Humanity,” pp. 107, 113). These objective ends are what I am calling Kantian internal reasons and, for Korsgaard, they have precedence over subjective ends or ordinary internal reasons. Similarly, Darwall distinguishes between personal and impartial points of view (*Impartial Reason*, p. 61), and he insists on a distinction between something like Kantian internal reasons and ordinary internal reasons. And, like Korsgaard, Darwall stresses that these Kantian internal reasons stand in a special normative relation to ordinary internal reasons. For Darwall, certain objective reasons—that is, Kantian internal reasons—override subjective reasons: “objective considerations of morally right conduct generally override subjective reasons when they conflict” (*ibid.*, p. 137).[[20]](#footnote-20) Similarly, Darwall regards moral reasons as “finally authoritative in settling questions about what to do” (*ibid*., p. 215; see also p. 175).

Thus, for both Korsgaard and Darwall, although there are no external reasons, there are two radically distinct kinds of internal reasons: reasons that are a matter of inclination or of a subjective or personal point of view versus reasons that are dictates of reason itself and are a matter of an objective or impersonal perspective. For these philosophers and for proponents of Kantian internal reasons in general, reasons—i.e. internal reasons—are not everywhere the same.

This disparity between ordinary internal reasons and Kantian internal reasons will prove damaging to proponents of Kantian internal reasons, just as the disparity between external reasons and internal reasons proved damaging to external reasons theorists. Consider the key point that, despite their different natures, Kantian internal reasons are intended to have some kind of authority over ordinary internal reasons. Although Kantian internal reasons and ordinary internal reasons are both internal, we still want to ask, as we did in the case of external reasons, *how*—*in virtue of what*—do Kantian internal reasons stand in this relation of authority over ordinary internal reasons? As with external reasons, it’s not enough merely to *state* or *claim* or *invoke an intuition* that Kantian internal reasons and ordinary internal reasons stand in this relation, we want insight into what makes it the case that they stand in this relation. Otherwise, it’s not intelligible how Kantian internal reasons come to have this authority, and the claim that they do have this authority is empty. For this reason, the charge of bluffing seems to be as applicable to those who level moral criticism based on a claim of Kantian internal reasons as it is to those who level moral criticism based on a claim of external reasons.

Here’s another way to make this point, a way parallel to a point I made in connection with external reasons. All sides, as I noted, seem to agree that we can and do act on or are motivated by ordinary internal reasons and that action inspired by such reasons is intelligible. *Given* that acting on the basis of ordinary internal reasons is intelligible, how is it *also* intelligible (as the Kantian internal reasons theorist claims) that Kantian internal reasons—rather disparate in nature from ordinary internal reasons—can have authority over those ordinary internal reasons? How is it that this different kind of (alleged) reasons can override ordinary internal reasons, in light of the agreed-upon claim that ordinary internal reasons (seemingly unproblematically) can motivate us? From this point of view, the invocation of Kantian internal reasons as having precedence over ordinary internal reasons seems unintelligible. A Kantian internal reason seems as much of a *ratio ex machina* as external reasons seem to be. That is, Kantian internal reasons seem to have all the mystery and all the ungrounded authority over ordinary internal reasons that, as we saw, was the downfall of external reasons.

A proponent of Kantian internal reasons may, perhaps, say at this point that Kantian internal reasons can have such authority because such a reason reveals that we would be contradicting ourselves somehow if we failed to act on them: we would be violating a general principle that we already accept. But even if it could be shown that we do have such a general principle and that we would be contradicting ourselves if, in certain cases, we acted on ordinary internal reasons instead, the key question would still not be answered: *how* do these Kantian internal reasons have authority over us or *how* are they binding on us? That is, *why* is the requirement that we not contradict ourselves binding on us?

Perhaps one can say at this point: well, it is the fact that we *desire* not to contradict ourselves that explains how Kantian internal reasons are binding on us. Sure, but now a similar round of questions awaits us. About this desire not to contradict ourselves, we can ask: is it an ordinary internal reason, like other contingent desires? If so, then it is a desire that we might easily not have and so it’s hard to see how this desire can be the source of the special authority that proponents of Kantian internal reasons want to grant such reasons for all agents. So then the desire not to contradict ourselves must be no ordinary desire (no ordinary internal reason). Perhaps then it is, on this view, a desire that we necessarily have in virtue of being practical reasoners. But even if all this is so, the same kind of question arises again about this non-ordinary desire: in virtue of what does or can this special, necessary desire to be consistent have authority over ordinary desires? Given that we have ordinary internal reasons, such as the desire for ice cream,how is it the case that the desire to be consistent—a desire independent of our ordinary desires—should have authority over these ordinary desires? This is the original question that remains unanswered. In this light, appealing to the necessary desire to be consistent seems merely to be restating the claim that Kantian internal reasons have authority over ordinary internal reasons and seems not to be explaining how this claim can be true.

In this argument against Kantian internal reasons, we can see imperialism at work again, more specifically, in this case, the imperialism of ordinary internal reasons. If some alleged Kantian internal reason is to be a genuine reason as distinct from ordinary internal reasons, then we must be able to find it intelligible how it can have authority over ordinary internal reasons. But, as we’ve just seen, in light of the agreed-upon intelligibility of the motivational efficacy of ordinary internal reasons, one cannot see other kinds of reasons—such as Kantian internal reasons—as genuinely having authority, and thus such alleged reasons are not genuine reasons. Once again, ordinary internal reasons take over the entire space of practical reasons.

Of course, I cannot address in detail here all possible attempts to defend the view that there are Kantian internal reasons over and above ordinary internal reasons. My general point against all such attempts is that the question of *how* do or can Kantian internal reasons override or have precedence over ordinary internal reasons is left unanswered. The key idea driving my argument, then, against Kantian internal reasons—as in the argument against external reasons—is the rationalist-inspired thought that the relation between two distinct kinds of reason (in this case, between two distinct kinds of internal reason) must be explicable. And here the point is that the proponents of Kantian internal reasons have not made intelligible how—given the disparity between such reasons and ordinary internal reasons—the Kantian internal reasons can stand in a relation of authority over ordinary internal reasons. The proponents of Kantian internal reasons have stated that there is such a relation, but they have not rendered it intelligible, nor can they. Again, Kantian internal reasons are another case of a *ratio ex machina*.

Finally, in order to illuminate and further support this critique of Kantian internal reasons, we can assemble again the comparison cases I previously invoked. Thus, analogous to the rationalism-infused critiques of various metaphysical views discussed in section IV, the rationalism-infused critique of Kantian internal reasons is that there is no way to explain how such disparate things as ordinary internal reasons and Kantian internal reasons are related. There is, therefore, no way to explain how Kantian internal reasons enjoy the authority they are alleged to have.

V. Challenging the Intelligibility of Acting for a Reason

I have been exploring the metaphysics of Williams’ charge that the invocation of external reasons in moral criticism amounts to bluff, and I have argued that a concern with explanation can substantiate this charge in a way that may not have been envisaged by Williams. Adopting this approach has not only enabled me to put Williams’ argument against external reasons on a more solid footing that enables it to draw support from powerful, analogous arguments from throughout philosophy, but has helped us to understand in a new way how Williams’ argument can be extended to challenge widespread Kantian positions concerning reasons for action. It may have seemed to some of the many proponents of external reasons or Kantian internal reasons that appeal to one of these kinds of reasons over and above ordinary internal reasons would be our salvation—would save us from the scourge of the inclinations and desires we happen to have—by introducing another kind of reason with authority over our ordinary internal reasons. But, as my rationalism-inspired critique shows, such salvation is not meant to be. Nothing and no one—not even God, not even reason, not even human nature—is coming to our aid. We are, it seems, left to the devices of internal reasons—ordinary internal reasons—which turn out to be the only kind of reason there are. We face, then, a kind of anarchy in the realm of ordinary internal reasons. Any appeal to other kinds of reasons in moral criticism is simply bluff.

However, as troubling as such anarchy is, this way of defending, illuminating, and extending Williams’ argument may have further, even more troubling consequences. We have challenged external reasons by showing how it is not intelligible for them to have authority over internal reasons. We have, in a similar way, challenged Kantian internal reasons. But now we must ask—and you knew it would come to this!—is it intelligible for us to act on ordinary internal reasons? We could also ask—and this may come to the same thing—in virtue of what does one desire win out over others?

Throughout this debate, as we have seen, all sides have taken for granted the intelligibility of acting on ordinary internal reasons, that is, the intelligibility of a certain relation between ordinary internal reasons and our actions. But perhaps this assumption should be challenged in a way similar to the ways that the coherence of a certain relation between our actions and external reasons or Kantian internal reasons was challenged. Thus, I now ask (here I go again): in virtue of what do ordinary internal reasons and actions stand in the relations they seem to stand in?

This question can be approached in two different ways, neither of which, I shall argue, leads to satisfactory results. Begin by noticing that when we seek to explain the relation between an ordinary internal reason and an action, we can characterize the action whose relation to an ordinary internal reason is to be explained either in terms that are independent of its relation to the ordinary internal reason in question or in terms of its relation to the ordinary internal reason.

The former way of proceeding is roughly the strategy of the so-called causal theory of action associated with the work of Davidson and his ilk.[[21]](#footnote-21) On this view, we see an action as a bodily movement that stands in the right kind of causal relation to beliefs, desires, and intentions—in effect, to ordinary internal reasons. A problem with this approach is that there is no good way to spell out the right kind of causal relation between ordinary internal reasons and bodily movement that doesn’t already presuppose that the bodily movement is an action. In this case, then, we have no illuminating grasp of what it is for an agent to act on an ordinary internal reason, in much the same way that, as my earlier arguments showed, we have no illuminating grasp of the relation between actions and external reasons or on Kantian internal reasons. More specifically, in this case, the ordinary internal reason and the bodily movement or mere event characterized in terms that do not presuppose the ordinary internal reason are too disparate for us to intelligibly see how they can be related in the way that is needed in order for the ordinary internal reason to be the reason on which the agent acts.[[22]](#footnote-22)

The second way of proceeding—according to which the action is characterized in terms of its relation to the ordinary internal reason in question—does not fare much better. This second approach is roughly that of Anscombe and of her illustrious followers.[[23]](#footnote-23) But here, if the action is characterized as an action done for a certain reason, then we have not really succeeded in understanding what it is to act on a certain reason. Since the action is specified as an action performed for the reason in question, when we say that the agent performed a certain action for a certain reason, we are doing no more than saying that the action performed for a certain reason was performed for that reason. All well and good, but all trivial too. We don’t get any insight into what it is to act on an ordinary internal reason by being told that the action is an action performed for that reason, for now we are only led to repeat: what is it to perform an action for a reason or for an ordinary internal reason? Here the reason and the action are not too disparate; instead, they are too closely related in order for us to have an illuminating account of how they stand in the relation of reason-giving.

Obviously, this challenge to the coherence of the idea of acting on ordinary internal reasons has been merely sketched here. Nonetheless, this line of thought, in the spirit of the previous challenges to the notions of acting on other kinds of reasons, is enough for us to see that the problem of unintelligible relations between disparate things can come back to haunt even the proponent of the view that reasons for action are everywhere the same. Williams’ criticism of external reasons, when properly understood and defended in terms of a rationalist investigation of what it is to act for a certain kind of reason, thus threatens to undermine the very notion of actions performed for a reason. Just as we’ve had to give up the notion of an external reason that has authority over one’s action, and just as we have to give up the notion of an action performed for a Kantian internal reason, so too now, and for the same kind of reason, we may have to give up the notion of acting for an ordinary internal reason or, indeed, for any reason at all.

If something like this thought is on the right track, then what are we to do? One natural place to turn to is an assumption at work behind this conclusion and behind all of the accounts we have considered, viz. the assumption that there is a distinction between a reason (of whatever kind) and the action for which it may or may not be a reason. Once the assumption that there is such a distinction is made, then each of the theories we have considered gets into trouble by seeking to explain—and being unable to explain—the relation between reason and action. So perhaps the place to focus our attention on now is this assumption, and perhaps what we should do is give up the assumption of a distinction between reason and action.

Here’s one way we might begin to envisage abandoning this assumption. We saw that there was a problem with external reasons as distinct from internal reasons, and thus that external reasons had to be assimilated to internal reasons. Similarly, we saw that there was a problem with Kantian internal reasons as distinct from ordinary internal reasons, and thus that Kantian internal reasons had to be assimilated to ordinary internal reasons. In the same way, now that we’ve uncovered a similar problem about ordinary internal reasons and reasons for action generally as distinct from actions, perhaps reasons for action should be assimilated to actions. In the most extreme imperialist move of all the imperialist moves in this paper, reasons for action are taken over by actions themselves, and there is no longer any distinction between reason and action. We may thus head toward some kind of monism of action. These are some of the incendiary thoughts to which my efforts to defend, illuminate, and extend Williams’ already incendiary thoughts concerning internal and external reasons lead.[[24]](#footnote-24)

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1. G.E.M. Anscombe and Philippa Foot utter similar fightin’ words in their wide-ranging critiques of certain moral theories. Anscombe seems as concerned as Williams is with the emptiness of certain moral criticisms when she laments “this word ‘ought’ having become a word of mere mesmeric force” (“Modern Moral Philosophy,” p. 8). Similarly, Foot when—with a tip of the hat to Anscombe—speaks of those who, “relying on an illusion,” try “to give the word ‘ought’ a magical force” (“Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives,” p. 315). Williams’ claim about bluff, I believe, echoes these earlier concerns about mesmerism and magic. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Williams, “Internal Reasons and the Obscurity of Blame,” p. 35. Finlay, “The Obscurity of Internal Reasons,” especially p. 12n42, helpfully catalogues commentators on Williams who have found Williams’ arguments less than transparent. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In some cases, this reasoning is based on desires that one would have if one were informed of certain facts of which one is currently unaware. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The external reasons theorist and the internal reasons theorist may differ further with regard to their conceptions of internal reasons. For some external reasons theorists, it may be the case that internal reasons are not themselves genuinely normative reasons and are only motivational reasons (Parfit, *On What Matters*, vol. 1, p. 37). For some internal reasons theorists, it may be that internal reasons are both motivating and normative. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See, e.g., Korsgaard, “Skepticism about Practical Reason,” p. 11; Schroeder, *Slaves of the Passions*, p. 2; andRailton, “Moral Realism,” p. 166. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. “Might There Be External Reasons?” p. 68; see Williams, “Internal Reasons and the Obscurity of Blame,” p. 39, and Parfit, *On What Matters*, vol. 2, p. 269. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. In *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, Williams similarly speaks of “[t]he fiction underlying the blame system” (p. 193). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. For example, Boyd, “How to Be a Moral Realist,” pp. 206-09, appeals to intuitions in this context. For a general critique of the reliance on intuitions in philosophy and also of the related method of reflective equilibrium (which Boyd also invokes here), see Della Rocca, *The Parmenidean Ascent*, chapter 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Williams, “Internal and External Reasons,” p. 102. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. But see “Internal Reasons and the Obscurity of Blame,” pp. 39, 43, for suggestions in Williams that point in the direction of the line of thought I have developed. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See, for example, Della Rocca, “Playing with Fire” and *The Parmenidean Ascent*. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. For Elisabeth’s criticism, see AT 3.661, in Atherton, p. 61, For Spinoza’s criticism, see, e.g. *Ethics* 1p3 and 5 pref. For Gassendi’s criticism, see AT 7 344-45/CSM II 239. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. For Descartes’ fundamentally anti-rationalist response to criticisms of this kind, see, AT IXA 213/CSM II 275. 6 med: AT VII 88/CSM II 60-61. For more on this characterization of Descartes and his critics, see Della Rocca, “Causation without Intelligibility and Causation without God in Descartes,” p. 248. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. To be sure, there may be other motivations for a representational theory of mind as well. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. For developments of this theme in Spinoza and in Leibniz, see Della Rocca, “The Power of an Idea: Spinoza’s Critique of Pure Will,” and Simmons, “Changing the Cartesian Mind.” [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. For challenges to some versions of an Aristotelian form-matter distinction, see Descartes, AT III 506/CSMK 208; AT III 212. Leibniz, *Discourse on Metaphysics*, section 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. For Frege’s position, see especially “On Concept and Object.” Frege acknowledges that the saturated/unsaturated distinction is a “logically primitive phenomenon” (“On the Foundations of Geometry: First Series” in *Collected Papers on Mathematics, Logic, and Philosophy*, p. 281, quoted in Price “Frege’s Unmanageable Thing”). For this kind of criticism of the *how* of the saturated/unsaturated distinction, see Ramsey, “Universals.” Speaking of the alleged distinction, between a term for a concept and a term for an object, Ramsey says, “it is hard to see any ground for distinguishing between them” (p. 408). Magidor similarly criticizes the saturated/unsaturated distinction as “hopelessly metaphorical.” David Lewis levies a similar criticism in “Tensing the Copula,” p. 6. Finally, Kimhi invokes this kind of charge in his case against Fregean philosophical logic. See Kimhi, *Thinking and Being*, pp. 98-99. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. “Internal and External Reasons,” p. 108. Korsgaard notes this characterization by Williams of broadly Kantian views (“Skepticism about Practical Reason,” p. 22n16). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. See “Internal Reasons and the Obscurity of Blame,” p. 37 and p. 44n3. See also Williams’ response to McDowell, “Replies,” p. 220n3. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. For Darwall, these subjective considerations are not, by themselves, genuinely normative reasons, though they may be motivating reasons. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. See, *inter alia*, Davidson, “Actions, Reasons, and Causes.” [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. In this and the next two paragraphs, I pursue objections explored in more detail in *The Parmenidean Ascent*, chapter 4. There I include references to some of the vast literature on deviant causal chains in the philosophy of action. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. See, *inter alia*, Anscombe, *Intention*. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Acknowledgements [↑](#footnote-ref-24)