Moral Criticism and the Metaphysics of Bluff

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Bernard Williams: those who advance moral criticisms by appealing to so-called external reasons are engaging in “bluff” (“Internal and External Reasons,” p. 111).

* *Goal of this paper*:I will defend Williams’ claim that the appeal to external reasons is illegitimate. But I will do so from a perspective that is radically different from previous defenses and that is not necessarily Williams’ own.
* I will look at the *metaphysical* views that can underwrite the charge of bluff and examine the *rationalist* underpinnings of these metaphysical views.
* I will strengthen my rationalist critique of the metaphysics of bluff by putting this 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 in order to show how prevalent Kantian ethical views—even though they don’t invoke external reasons—are also vulnerable to the core, rationalist idea at work in my argument.
* However, the upshot of my argument may prove to be too strong even for Williams’ polemical purposes: my argument also threatens also to bring down the concept of acting for a reason itself, as Williams and almost all other philosophers understand it.

I. The Contrast between Internal and External Reasons

* An agent’s subjective motivational set or S includes desires, but not only egoistic desires. Also: not only desires, but also projects, commitments, etc.
* *An internal reason* is a consideration that is included in—or is derivable, by practical reasoning, from—one’s motivational set, S.
* *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.
* 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.
* A crucial feature of external reasons: they can take precedence over or override or enjoy rational authority over internal reasons.
* Two important points of agreement in the debate: first, there are internal reasons on which we can sometimes act, and, second, some internal reasons “win out” over others. Ice cream vs. tater tots.

II. Williams’ argument.

(1) If something is a reason 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.

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

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. The imperialism of internal reasons. Bluff.

III. A Rationalist Basis for Williams’ Argument

(2) is a matter of definition. Why should (1) be true? I would like to offer reasons in a rationalist spirit for (1). Again, these are not Williams’ reasons for (1).

* External reasons are distinct from internal reasons in this sense: internal reasons are already included in or are derivable from our motivational set, S. 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.
* I argue that this relation is unintelligible, that this unintelligibility grounds the truth of (1), and that it is unintelligible precisely because of the disparity between—the radically different characters of—external reasons and internal reasons.
* *The key question*: in virtue of what would this relation of authority that external reasons purportedly enjoy over internal reasons obtain?
* *The key answer*: Nothing. Because of their disparate character, we cannot understand the relation that external reasons allegedly stand in to internal reasons.
* Contrast the relation between external reasons and internal reasons with the relation between two internal reasons. It seems that all sides agree that internal reasons can stand in relations of “winning out” over (or “losing out” to) other internal reasons. This relation seems to be perfectly intelligible.
* But can we similarly understand how an external reason to help a neighbor can have authority over, can dominate, an internal reason? If we try to explain this dominance 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 into an internal reason. (This would be a manifestation of the imperialism of internal reasons.)
* Given the disparity between internal and external reasons, we can 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.
* Appealing to authority as a primitive fact just plays into Williams’ charge of bluff. Appealing to intuitions doesn’t help.
* My argument is a distinctively rationalist argument. The external reasons theorist fails to meet an explanatory demand, and so external reasons are rejected.
* One can make this rationalist move without being committed to a full-blown Principle of Sufficient Reason. Williams as a closet rationalist?

IV. 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.

* Comparison to the rejection of Cartesian mind-body interaction. Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia. Gassendi. Conway. Spinoza.
* Williams himself: “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 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 rationalist-inspired challenges to Descartes.
* The argument concerning external reasons draws on the same kind of unease concerning unintelligible relations between things of different kinds.

Other analogies:

Rejection of the distinction between representational and non-representational mental states,

Criticism of the Aristotelian distinction between form and matter,

Criticism of Frege’s distinction between concept and object (between the “saturated” and the “unsaturated”). Also: force/content distinction.

Tip of the iceberg. Analogous cases: concept/intuition distinction, will/intellect distinction, theoretical/practical distinction, scheme/content distinction, as criticized by Davidson. A few thoughts about Davidson’s argument.

V. Broadening the Critique

There still remain views that have no dealings with external reasons, but nonetheless, contra Williams, deny that reasons are everywhere the same.

Ordinary internal reasons vs. “Kantian” internal reasons.

For proponents of Kantian internal reasons, moral 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 with the capacity to be motivated to act morally.

Korsgaard puts the point this 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…. [I]f 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)

* Williams concedes to Korsgaard that this kind of view is a limiting case of internalism. But then how to argue against Kantian internal reasons? Answer: my rationalist argument.
* Thus, for a proponent of Kantian internal reasons, 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. Crucially, Kantian internal reasons have some kind of authority over ordinary internal reasons.
* But now we must ask, *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.
* Bluff again. *Ratio ex machina* again. Imperialism again.

VI. Challenging the Intelligibility of Acting for a Reason

*Troubling consequences*. I have challenged external reasons by showing how it is not intelligible for us to act on them. Similarly, I have challenged Kantian internal reasons by showing that it’s not intelligible for us to act on them. But now we must ask—*and you knew it would come to this!*—is it intelligible for us to act even on ordinary internal reasons? I could also ask: in virtue of what does one desire win out over another?

That is, 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?

* 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 at work in the so-called causal theory of action associated with the work of Davidson and his ilk. On this view, we see 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 in a way that doesn’t already presuppose that the bodily movement is an action. (The problem of deviant causal chains.) 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.
* 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. 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. 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.
* So, 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. Just as we’ve had to give up the notion of action performed for an external reason and the notion of an action performed for a Kantian internal reason, so too now, perhaps, and for the same kind of reason, we have to give up the notion of acting for an ordinary internal reason or, indeed, for any reason at all.
* What to do? The most extreme imperialist move of all.