Internal Reasons

- Williams claims that the only reasons for action are internal reasons\(^1\).
- The aim of the paper is to explain this view and then to apply it to the question of blame.
- The definition of the internalist reason for actions is that an agent has a reason to \(\phi\) only if he could reach the conclusion to \(\phi\) by a sound deliberative route from the motivational set, \(S\), he already has. \(S\) is the agent’s set of desires, evaluations, attitudes, projects, etc.
- By way of contrast, an externalist holds that the above is not a necessary condition: an agent can have reason to \(\phi\) even though there is nothing in his \(S\) that either directly, or indirectly by sound deliberation, would lead him to \(\phi\).
- Williams thinks the internalist formulation also provides a sufficient condition for a reason to \(\phi\), but doesn’t pursue the matter further in this paper.
- Even for the internalist, a reason to \(\phi\) has normative force. That is, it goes beyond what the agent is already motivated to do. We can argue that a person already had reason to do what they didn’t think they had a reason to do. It is critical that, for the agent, there is a sound deliberative route from \(S\) to \(\phi\)-ing.
- In considering what an agent had reason to do, we don’t have unlimited licence to tinker with his \(S\) – eg. by adding prudential and moral assumptions that the agent may have no reason to share. However, we can correct it with matters of fact and logic. Williams agrees with Hume that reason can correct the passions only as far as pointing out errors of fact and reasoning. I do not have a sound reason to drink a glass of poison on the grounds that I mistakenly think it’s a gin and tonic.
- Williams takes it that any rational deliberative agent has in his \(S\) a general interest in being factually and rationally correctly informed\(^2\). This is why it’s important to get the facts and logic right and write the requirement for correct information and reasoning into the definition of a sound deliberative route.
- Williams deals rather unconvincingly with a counter-example of someone needing to believe what is false.
- If we’re to go beyond factual and logical accuracy and incorporate the constraints of morality and prudence into what it is to be soundly deliberative, this requires argument.
- We assume that, for most people, some kinds of moral reasons are internal reasons. This explains why we find it so easy to import (our) moral reasons into other people’s motivational sets.
- Some ethical statements are, says Williams, factual or “world guided”. There is no dependence on the fact / value distinction in Williams’s argument.
- “Thick” ethical concepts are both world-guided and action-guiding. “Chastity” is introduced as a world-guided concept\(^3\). Such concepts belong to “forms of life”, in which the occupants think of themselves as “we” – as one community. Their \(S\)’s resemble one another’s, and difficulties only arise when this isn’t the case. I don’t understand the point at issue here.

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\(^1\) I couldn’t see this spelt out, but … is it the case that someone with no reason to act in a certain way has no moral obligation to do so? I may have a non-moral obligation – I when I’m obliged to keep the law whether I’m motivated to do so or not.

\(^2\) This seems to be a definition of rationality.

\(^3\) Discuss this with Miranda Fricker (re Cumberland Lodge). “We have no use for this concept any more”. Don’t we?
• Williams now asks what deliberative thinking is. It is not, he says, merely mean-end determination, but involves creativity. It involves fleshing out projects and thinking of alternatives or breaking out of dilemmas.
• Deliberation is not fully determinate even for a specific agent at a specific time. Since imagination is required, it cannot be fully determinate what an agent has reason to do. Consequently, and agent’s motivational set ($S$) is indeterminate.
• There are two fundamental motivations for Internalism.
  1. The relation between explanation and normativity. These shouldn’t be separated. “Should implies can”, and if this is the case, then reason explains normativity if there was a greater reason to $\phi$ than there was reason for alternative actions. The reason is contained in $S$ and the action is explained by $S^4$. On the externalist view, the reason to act enters the agent’s $S$ from the outside. Williams asks what he has then come to believe, and thinks this is a problem for the externalist$^5$.
  2. What do we say to people with a deficient $S$? Williams gives an example of someone trying to persuade someone to be nicer to his wife and concludes that in hard cases there may be nothing in someone’s $S$ that gives him a reason to be nicer to his wife$^6$. I can apply all sorts of “disadvantageous” epithets to the man, and say that it would be “better”$^7$ if he were nicer to his wife, but I cannot – as the externalist may want me to say – say that the man has a reason to be nicer. Williams thinks it’s obscure, and a major drawback of the externalist position, just when I would want to say the man has a reason$^8$.
• Williams concludes that saying that an agent has an external reason adds nothing to the “disadvantageous” / “better if” rhetoric. The sense of external reason statements is obscure. Externalist reasons are confused with internalist hopes. We launch our own internal reason statements in the hope that they’ll catch on to the agent$^9$.

**Blame**

• Blame is not just a diagnosis of failure.
• Nor is blame exclusively moral. We blame errors or missed opportunities, and blame-language is used by immoral people (eg. one thief blaming another for a blunder).

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$^4$ How do we explain weakness of will? Just the wrong choice of motivating reason by the agent from his $S$?
$^5$ I think more argument or explanation is required here. Why is this a problem for the externalist? How does an agent’s $S$ get acquired in the first place?
$^6$ So, on Williams’s internalist view, the agent has no reason at all to be nice to his wife, and therefore has no moral obligation to be so (?). There seem to me to be external reasons to be nice to your wife – marriage vows, for instance. These could link back to a person’s $S$ in the form of promise-keeping. If promise-keeping is in my $S$, then I have a duty to be nice to my wife. Do I then have an internal reason to be nice to her? I don’t think Williams tries very hard to demonstrate that I don’t, but maybe he was just lazy over the example.
$^7$ Presumably “better if” means “the world would be a better place if”? This places no obvious constraint on the agent (other than for a maximising consequentialist view) if we assume the omissions versus commissions divide.
$^8$ Clearly, we don’t have a reason to $\phi$ for every $\phi$. However, isn’t it simply the case that we do this when there is an external reason (ie. something is objectively obligatory or prohibited, even though I don’t happen to think so because it’s not in my $S$). I think Williams needs to argue why this is wrong.
$^9$ So, in the “be nice to your wife” example, a reference to vows would generate an internal reason for kindness, based on deliberation about promising – ie. if the ploy works, the reason on which the agent would act would be an internal one after all.
• Blame is more than just diagnosis. The person applying blame cares, and thinks the agent should have done better. There is still an ethical dimension even in the context of blame between criminals; the person blamed was lazy or should have cared more to get things right.

• Ought \rightarrow could, otherwise focused blame would be irrelevant. There’s a connection with advice. If it is appropriate to blame after the even, it must be the case that it would have been appropriate to advise prior to it. Blame is relevant only if timely advice would have been relevant. Advice is wasted unless ought \rightarrow can^{10}.

• Williams claims that it’s commonly held that blame is not appropriate if an internal reason is lacking in the agent (we just lock up the psychopaths). This is a reductio argument, but which way round should it go? Rather than follow Williams, we could argue that since it’s clear that we can apportion blame\^{11}, there must be external reasons (rather than since we cannot apportion blame, there can’t be external reasons). Ie. what’s clearer – Williams’s argument or common sense blame? Is Williams or common-sense blame the more suspect?

• Williams thinks, therefore, that focused blame parallels the agent’s internal reasons. How, then, should we understand blame?

• Sometimes the agent does have the appropriate reasons in his S, and he is rightly to be blamed for not allowing them to operate. However, if not, other factors may operate.

• The agent may have a desire for respect, which will provide motivation to avoid the repetition of the experience of being blamed (or of repeating actions that incur blame). So, the agent would have a reason not to \phi simply because it is considered blameworthy in his society. The agent has no direct reason to act otherwise than he did. Blame acts so as to bring to people’s attention what’s expected of them.

• Blame is reflexive – the agent should have known that he would be blamed, and acknowledgement is expected in response to blame.

• Giving advice implies that we expect the agent can move from his S to \phi by use of his imagination and the direction of his attention.

• Advice, like blame, is partly to be understood in terms of its intended effects.

• Blame, being retrospective, is less directly related to an agent’s reasons.

• Williams repeats his claim that blame is always reformative, so we don’t waste breath if it won’t work. Is this correct – do we stop blaming? More examples are required. Even if we do stop blaming people without internal reasons that we can reach, this still doesn’t imply there aren’t external reasons.

• What is focused blame?

• Williams claims that vagueness is no disadvantage for internalism.

• We need to hear the externalist account – Williams doesn’t argue both sides.

• Externalism, according to Williams, is without ethical resources.

• Williams claims his account of blame replaces an unintelligible mystery with an intelligible obscurity.

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\^{10} Can’t we say that someone ought to have had some motive in their S and that they were a deficient person on account of its absence? Is virtue ethics externalist? Ie. there’s an external reason to be a certain sort of person that it’s proper for a human being to be.

\^{11} Ie. we reject Williams view that the Moors murderers, being psychopaths, don’t warrant blame. The popular view is that since they had no internal reason not to torture children, they deserved even more blame.