

## INTERNAL REASONS AND THE OUGHT-IMPLIES-CAN PRINCIPLE<sup>1</sup>

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The task of this essay is to use the ought-implies-can principle (OIC) to clarify and defend Bernard Williams' claim that all reasons are internal. On the interpretation offered here, the internalism/externalism controversy initiated by Williams is about the indexicality of normative practical reasons. The central question is this: Are all of our reasons anchored to our current beliefs and desires (as internalists claim), or might we have reasons that are in no way tied to such contingent facts about us (as externalists claim)?

I will contend that although Williams provides two different arguments against externalism, only one of them can be used to effectively defeat external reason-claims. The first argument, according to which only internal reasons can *explain* rational action, will be largely ignored in favor of the second argument, which appeals to OIC as a conceptual constraint on normative reasons. Although OIC cannot directly support internalism, a plausible version of it can be used to falsify external reason-claims and thereby render internalism the default theory of practical reasons.

Since the distinction between "internal" and "external" reasons has itself been widely misunderstood, I devote the first section to explicating Williams' thesis. In the second section, I discuss the conception of sound deliberation on which internalism depends. In section three, I reconstruct Williams' central argument for internalism by recasting several examples he develops as implicit appeals to OIC. In the fourth section, I discuss the relationship between normative reasons and "ought" statements. Finally, in the fifth section I defend a relatively strong version of OIC and then explain why this version vindicates Williams' suspicion that all external reason-claims are false.

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## I. WHAT IS INTERNALISM?

Williams begins with a contrast: Sentences of the form “A has a reason to  $\phi$ ” (where  $\phi$  stands for some action) admit of either an internal or external reading. On the internal reading, “[T]he truth of the sentence implies, very roughly, that A has some motive which will be served or furthered by his  $\phi$ -ing.”<sup>2</sup> On the external reading, this is not the case. It is not especially important that Williams initially puts the point in terms of what makes *sentences* referring to reasons true or false, since he is more generally interested in what makes *claims* about reasons true or false. Nor is it important that he describes internal reasons as “serving” or “furthering” motives. When Williams explains his thesis, he argues that reasons must be the result of deliberation that begins from motives, not that reasons are merely instruments for furthering motives.

Although Williams develops his view in three separate essays spanning more than a decade, his view remains unchanged; consequently, I will freely draw upon all three essays in discussing it.<sup>3</sup> The following are alternative ways Williams formulates his view:

1. “The internal interpretation [of reasons] would be this: A has a reason to  $\Phi$  **if and only if** A has some desire the satisfaction of which would be served by his  $\Phi$ -ing.”<sup>4</sup>
2. “A has a reason to  $\Phi$  **only if** he could reach the conclusion to  $\Phi$  by a sound deliberative route from the motivations he already has.”<sup>5</sup>
3. “**If** A has a reason to  $\Phi$ , **then** (leaving aside the qualifications needed because it may not be his strongest reason) there must be a sound deliberative route to  $\Phi$ -ing which starts from A’s existing motivations.”<sup>6</sup>

Although 2 and 3 are truth-functionally equivalent conditional statements, 1 contains a biconditional. Thus, while 2 and 3 express necessary conditions for the

<sup>2</sup> Bernard Williams, “Internal and External Reasons” (1979) 101. Reprinted in *Moral Luck* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1981).

<sup>3</sup> These are, in order, “Internal and External Reasons” (1979), “Internal Reasons and the Obscurity of Blame” (1989), and Williams’ reply to McDowell in *World, Mind, and Ethics* (1995). Bernard Williams, “Internal Reasons and the Obscurity of Blame” (1989). Reprinted in *Making Sense of Humanity* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1993). Bernard Williams, *Replies. World, Mind, and Ethics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1995). John McDowell, “Might There Be External Reasons?” Reprinted in *World, Mind, and Ethics: Essays for Bernard Williams* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1995).

<sup>4</sup> Williams (1979): 101.

<sup>5</sup> Williams (1989): 35.

<sup>6</sup> The parenthetical comment in this formulation indicates that Williams’ thesis concerns *pro tanto* reasons rather than *decisive* reasons for action. Williams (1995): 187.

existence of reasons, 1 expresses both necessary and sufficient conditions. This is a careless slip by Williams, but it is also a harmless one since he later clarifies that although the presence of a desire “provides at least a necessary condition of its being true that A has a reason to  $\phi$ , [. . .] I actually think that it provides a sufficient condition as well, but this is not an issue I shall consider here.” Since Williams declines to defend the sufficiency claim, internalism in its essential form—the form that Williams argues for, rather than simply assumes—is that it is a *necessary* condition of agent A’s having a reason to  $\Phi$  that there is a sound deliberative route from his current desire set to the conclusion that he ought to  $\Phi$ .<sup>8</sup>

What is the “motive” or “desire” from which reasons are supposed to derive? Much like David Hume’s use of the generic term “passion,” Williams uses “desire” and “motive” to cover a wide variety of psychological states. These include specific goals and preferences, as well as more general “dispositions of evaluation, patterns of emotional reaction, personal loyalties, and various projects, as they may abstractly be called, embodying commitments of the agent.”<sup>9</sup> Williams dubs each person’s entire set of desires his “subjective motivational set,” or “S.” Stated succinctly, the internal theory of reasons holds that A has a reason to  $\Phi$  only if there exists a sound deliberative route which begins from S and ends with A’s belief that he ought to  $\Phi$ .

## II. SOUND DELIBERATION

Since internalism is a thesis about *normative* reasons, rather than *explanatory* reasons, one of the first questions it raises is what constitutes a “sound” deliberative route from beliefs and desires to reasons for action. To answer this we must first get a firmer grip on Williams’ conception of deliberation.

According to instrumental accounts of deliberation, practical reasoning occurs when an agent considers how best to satisfy a foregone goal. In doing so, the agent comes to believe that by taking some action, he will accomplish his goal efficiently. Williams’ conception of practical reasoning builds upon, but is considerably richer than, pure instrumentalism:

A clear example of practical reasoning is that leading to the conclusion to  $\phi$  because  $\phi$ -ing would be the most convenient, economical, pleasant, etc. way of satisfying some element in S, and this of

<sup>7</sup> Williams (1989): 35.

<sup>8</sup> This differs from Talbot Brewer’s interpretation, according to which Williams thinks we can infer the existence of a reason from the presence of an appropriate desire. “The Real Problem with Internalism about Reasons,” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 32, no. 4 (2002): 446. I will instead argue that Williams uses desires as defeaters rather than vindicators: Williams proposes only that the absence of certain desires defeats reason-claims, not that the presence of desires vindicates reason-claims.

<sup>9</sup> Williams (1979): 105.

course is controlled by other elements in S, if not necessarily in a very clear or determinate way. But there are much wider possibilities for deliberation, such as thinking how the satisfaction of elements in S can be combined, e.g. by time-ordering; where there is some irresolvable conflict among the elements of S, considering which one attaches most weight to [. . .]; or again, finding constitutive solutions, such as deciding what would make for an entertaining evening, granted that one wants entertainment.<sup>10</sup>

Williams later adds:

Other possibilities [include] finding a specific form for a project that has been adopted in unspecific terms. Another possibility lies in the invention of alternatives. One of the most important things deliberation does, rather than thinking of means to a fixed end, is to think of another line of conduct altogether, as when someone succeeds in breaking out of a dilemma.<sup>11</sup>

The examples of deliberation Williams mentions often combine practical and theoretical reasoning. Indeed, he seems to think the two are generally intertwined. Finding a suitable hobby, for example, involves gathering information about the world and then using that information to figure out which of the available activities best accord with our desires. In the process of thinking about what to do, Williams believes deliberation can also alter our initial desires.

In fact, for desires to have any sort of justificatory force, there must be a potential gap between our current desires and the desires we would have if we were to engage in sound deliberation. How big must this gap be? An answer to this question depends on what we think “sound” deliberation requires. Since Williams never develops a full account of sound deliberation, the reader is left to interpret what Williams has in mind on the basis of a few passing remarks. According to a recent interpretation of “sound” deliberation by Michael Smith and Philip Pettit, Williams thinks an agent’s practical reasons only emerge if she forms her desires “under the pressure of all of the principles of reason that there are: that is to say, *inter alia*, if she formed her desires in the light of all of the relevant information, if she exercised her imagination fully, [etc.]”<sup>12</sup>

Consider how onerous these requirements are. It is a familiar fact that we choose on the basis of imperfect information. Information is imperfect not only because it is often incomplete or unreliable but also because it is scarce and therefore costly to consume. To use an analogy from economics, deliberators face budget constraints on the use of epistemic resources and consequently gain diminishing marginal utility from consuming additional bits of information. Yet if sound deliberation requires us to spend our time and resources considering every

<sup>10</sup> Ibid: 104–05.

<sup>11</sup> Williams (1989): 38.

<sup>12</sup> Philip Pettit and Michael Smith, “External Reasons.” *McDowell and his Critics* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006) 146.

alternative and corroborating every fact relevant to a particular choice, even the most rational people would act on hunches rather than reasons. This is because it would cost too much to acquire and process the information needed to discover the reasons we have. In effect, these requirements imply that reasons are either rare luxury goods to which only the most privileged reasoners have access, or reasons are ubiquitous but extremely difficult to discover because of imperfect information.

Suppose reasons are commonplace but difficult to discover, because they are set by desires we would have under a highly idealized epistemic environment. On this view, we might claim that Hippocrates had a reason to prescribe penicillin to victims of a bacterial plague in the year 430 BCE, because he would have done so if he had fully understood the antibiotic properties of certain strains of fungus in the forests of Greece.

The absurdity of this claim suggests that the information on which reasons are based must be minimally accessible to reasoners. Call this the *accessibility claim*. If Smith and Pettit were to accept the accessibility claim, then their interpretation of “sound” deliberation would imply not that we have many reasons about which we remain permanently ignorant but rather that we have few if any reasons at all. This follows from their contention that reasons are set by desires we *would* have if we considered *all* of the information relevant to a decision, plus the empirical fact that we face severe limits on the extent to which we can acquire and process that information. So Smith and Pettit’s interpretation of Williams faces a dilemma: either (1) embrace the accessibility claim and concede that reasons are exceedingly rare (since in most circumstances we cannot consider all of the information relevant to a decision), or (2) reject the claim and accept the view that reasons are ideal entities that relatively rational people may never discover. Since Williams endorses the accessibility claim,<sup>13</sup> we are left with (1). But since Williams doesn’t seem to think reasons are especially rare, it must be the case that Smith and Pettit’s reconstruction of “sound” deliberation strays too far from Williams’ view by setting unrealistically high standards. Thus, the gap between an agent’s current S, and the shape S must take to generate normative reasons, cannot be as large as Smith and Pettit suppose.

On Williams’ view, then, sound deliberation falls short of requiring full conformity to all the “principles of reason” that Smith and Pettit describe. In fact, Williams intentionally sketches a minimalist conception of practical deliberation in order to avoid substantive disputes about precisely what “sound” deliberation requires. Some have accused Williams of begging the question in favor of his own

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<sup>13</sup> Williams thinks people sometimes act with an awareness of their reasons, which suggests he thinks the information on which reasons are based must also be available. See Williams (1979): 102.

theory by avoiding these controversies.<sup>14</sup> After all, if we assume that sound deliberation requires us to act only on universalizable maxims, for example, we end up with a Kantian conception of reasons, which might be classified as external.<sup>15</sup> But Williams' account of sound deliberation does not beg the question in favor of internalism by avoiding these disputes. Rather, Williams attempts to sketch an uncontroversial account of rational deliberation that is consistent with an internalist theory of reasons. To this end, Williams says, "the internalist proposal sticks with its Humean origins": It begins with an austere theory of deliberation (the requirements of which even a Kantian would accept) and then demands arguments for adding substantive principles.<sup>16</sup> Williams concedes that we might build more substantive principles, such as Kantian moral constraints, into a robust theory of deliberation. He merely cautions that "there has to be an argument for that conclusion."<sup>17</sup>

### III. WILLIAMS' ARGUMENTS FOR INTERNALISM

There is a great deal of controversy about just what Williams' arguments for internalism are. This is due mainly to the fact that his assumptions are often couched in his illustrations, rather than explicitly stated. To some extent, then, we must dissect Williams' illustrations in order to extract arguments.

#### A. *The Argument from Explanation*

Nearly everyone agrees that the first argument Williams gives for internalism is that whereas internal reasons can explain rational action, appeals to external reasons are explanatorily superfluous. "If there are reasons for action," Williams says, "it must be that people sometimes act for these reasons, and if they do, their reasons must figure in some correct explanation of their action."<sup>18</sup> Williams'

<sup>14</sup> Brad Hooker, "Williams' Argument against External Reasons," *Analysis* 47 (1987): 42–44. Derek Parfit, "Reasons and Motivation," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* Supp 71 (1997): 98–146; Smith and Pettit (2006): 151–52.

<sup>15</sup> Christine Korsgaard's contention that Kantians should be classified as internalists may result from her conflation of *judgment* internalism with *existence* internalism. "Skepticism about Practical Reason" *The Journal of Philosophy* 83 (January 1986): 5–25. Judgment internalists maintain that if we *believe* we have a reason to  $\Phi$ , then we will be motivated to  $\Phi$  (unless we are weak willed or practically irrational). Existence internalists, by contrast, argue that if we have a reason to  $\Phi$ , this implies the existence of a prior motivation. Korsgaard is best classified as a judgment internalist, whereas Williams is an existence internalist. For more on this distinction, see Stephen Darwall, "Internalism and Agency" *Philosophical Perspectives* 6 (1992): 155–74; and David Velleman, "The Possibility of Practical Reason," *Ethics* 106 (July 1996): 694–726.

<sup>16</sup> Williams (1979): 36.

<sup>17</sup> Williams (1989): 37.

<sup>18</sup> Williams (1979): 102.

argument, in a nutshell, is this: If there are reasons for action, and if reasons are subjectively accessible, then it must be the case that people sometimes act for these reasons (that is, people are sometimes conscious of their reasons, and this awareness causes them to act). But if this is so, reasons must play some causal (and therefore explanatory) role in a full account of rational action.

So far, this argument is neutral between internalism and externalism. The further assumption Williams seems to make in order for this to be an argument *for* internalism (or *against* externalism) is that only a *motivational* fact can explain our awareness of a reason and our subsequent decision to act on that reason. In this case the same motivational fact explains both the existence of the reason and the fact that we acted on it. The problem with this account is that if we act on a reason, the reason itself, as a conceptual entity, seems to play no causal or explanatory role in our action. Instead, our *belief* that we have a reason seems to explain the action, regardless of whether that belief is true or justified.<sup>19</sup>

Although most commentators agree that Williams' first argument against external reasons has something to do with their inability to explain action, and most also find this argument unconvincing, nobody seems to agree on what the second argument is. I will defend the view that Williams' second and most compelling argument—though it is never fully developed—appeals to OIC, which functions as a conceptual constraint on normative reasons. OIC is used to show that considerations that are unable to engage some member of an agent's S fail to generate practical reasons for that person. The argument, roughly, is that external reason-claims are false to the extent that we *cannot* reach them from our existing belief and desire sets.

### B. *The Argument from Capacity*

In order to understand Williams' second argument, it is important to highlight the intuitive force of OIC. In moral discourse it is widely assumed that for "ought" statements to apply to someone, that person must be capable of doing what the statement demands. This is because moral statements are typically thought to be action-guiding or normative. Thus, we might claim that people ought, in the moral sense, to hold doors open for strangers. But if we discover that someone lacks arms, we do not blame her for failing to hold doors, since she is physically incapable of doing so. Nor do we think she really ought to hold the door.

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<sup>19</sup> A common objection to the argument from explanation is predicated on the assumption that a *normative* item (such as the reason I had yesterday to prepare my lecture for today) can never play an explanatory role in the occurrence of an *empirical* event (such as the fact that yesterday I prepared a lecture). This assumption seems to imply that only *believed* reasons, not reasons themselves, can explain rational action. This was pointed out by Steven Darwall, *Impartial Reason* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1983) 201.

More controversially, we might claim that for a moral injunction to apply to an agent, she must be capable of conceptualizing it as something she ought to do. Williams suggests an analogous principle governing reasons: For a practical reason to apply to an agent, she must be capable of being motivated by the considerations that underlie the putative reason. That is, there must be some deliberative route from her existing motivational set to the conclusion that she ought to perform the action enjoined by the reason.

Without naming the principle, Williams tacitly invokes OIC in three central examples. Although they are developed in very different contexts, all of the examples are intended to show us how mysterious external reason-claims can appear in light of various incapacities. In the first example, Williams discusses the fictional character Owen Wingrave, whose father urges him to join the military out of a sense of family honor. Owen's father tells him that because all of his ancestors have served in the military, he too has a reason to join. Owen, however, "hates everything about military life and everything it means."<sup>20</sup> In spite of his father's pleas, there is "nothing in Owen's S which would lead, through deliberative reasoning, to his [enlisting in the military]."<sup>21</sup> Thus, Owen's current motivational set places constraints on his alleged reason to join the military.

Presumably we need a deeper description of Owen's character to understand why he deplores military life—perhaps he is a committed pacifist or has a deep aversion to the conformity military life requires. If this is so, for his father's plea to have enough purchase on Owen to get him to think he ought to enlist, Owen would have to become a very different person. This is not to say such a transformation couldn't happen over time or even that it would not be good (from some point of view other than Owen's) for it to happen. But in the example there is no discernible route from his current motivational set (or, if we wish, psychological profile) to some utterly different set in virtue of which Owen would be convinced that honor or tradition requires him to join. In the absence of such a route, we naturally conclude that he lacks a reason to join because he *cannot* be motivated by the considerations advanced by his father without becoming an utterly different person.

Of course, if we stipulate that Owen *could* be motivated by considerations of honor and family tradition, while remaining more or less the same person, then we might plausibly say he has a reason to join. But the reason is internal, since it depends on a latent motivation, or disposition, that is activated through reasoning. What the externalist wants is that "the agent should acquire the motivation *because* he comes to believe the reason statement, and that he should do the latter [. . .] because [. . .] he is considering the matter aright."<sup>22</sup> In contrast, the internalist

<sup>20</sup> Williams (1979): 106.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid: 106.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid: 108–09.

maintains that if we cannot believe the reason claim, because we lack the disposition to be motivated by the relevant considerations, the claim is false.

In another example, Williams considers the case of a callous man who abuses his wife. We would naturally try to persuade such a person that there is a reason for him to stop doing so. But in appealing to such a reason what exactly are we saying to this person? Do we mean that if he reflected on the matter, he would find or develop such a reason (via deliberation from his current motivational set)? Or do we mean that regardless of his motivational set, he has a reason to refrain from abusing his wife? Here is what Williams says:

There are many things we can say to people who lack appropriate items in their S. Suppose, for instance [ . . . ] I say, "You have a reason to be nicer to her." He says, "What reason?" I say, "Because she is your wife." He says—and he is a very hard case—"I don't care. Don't you understand? I really do not care." I try various things on him, and try to involve him in this business; and I find that [ . . . ] there is *nothing* in his motivational set that gives him a reason to be nicer to his wife as things are.<sup>23</sup>

Although Williams doesn't put the point in terms of OIC, he appeals to its intuitive force. The plausibility of the example depends on our realization that, if this person is truly *incapable* of acting from a sense of empathy or moral duty, it is futile to continue to press the case and assume he really does have the kind of reason many of us would have were we in his circumstances. Williams continues:

There are many things I can say about or to this man: that he is ungrateful, inconsiderate, hard, sexist, nasty, selfish, brutal, and many other disadvantageous things. I shall presumably say, whatever else I say, that it would be better if he were nicer to her. There is one specific thing the external reasons theorist wants me to say, that the man has a reason to be nicer. Or, rather, the external reasons theorist *may* want me to say this: one of the mysterious things about the denial of internalism lies precisely in the fact that it leaves quite obscure when this form of words is thought appropriate.<sup>24</sup>

The conclusion, then, is not that Williams thinks the imagined man necessarily has a reason to beat his wife, only that it is not clear how he could have a reason to be nicer to her, given his profound indifference to her welfare.

The kind of possibility claim made in this passage seems stronger than the one in the previous example. In the previous example, Owen lacked a reason to join the army because he was psychologically impervious to the kinds of considerations that might compel other people to join. It was impossible for him to retain any semblance of his current identity and to be simultaneously motivated by considerations of dying for his country simply in order to preserve family honor, tradition, and so on. In contrast, the idea motivating the abusive husband example

<sup>23</sup> Williams (1989): 39.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid: 39.

seems to be that we cannot coherently ascribe a moral reason to somebody who is permanently incapable of moral reasoning. If we lack the capacity to be swayed by moral considerations, we also lack moral reasons.

The final example in which Williams taps the intuition behind OIC is developed in response to a challenge posed by John McDowell.<sup>25</sup> McDowell accepts Williams' claim that an agent's reasons are tied to his motivations, but McDowell thinks we might plausibly add that we should shape people's motivations through an Aristotelian upbringing. Once we accomplish this, they will come to acquire the reasons of an Aristotelian, because they will be motivated to act in accordance with Aristotelian ideals. To this proposal Williams replies that Aristotle believed many people—including “natural” slaves and women—lack the capacity to live up to certain Aristotelian ideals. To take an example from the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle maintains that the virtue of *megalopsychia* (or “greatness of soul”) can only apply to the person who both *is* a great man and knows he is great. Of course, most people would challenge Aristotle's depiction of women and slaves, as well as his specific list of virtues. Yet if it is true that slaves and women are incapable of expressing Aristotelian virtues, Williams contends that “the incapacities from which these people suffer do affect what they have reason to do.”<sup>26</sup> If we deny that capacities constrain the reasons we have, Williams warns that we are “left with the sad mockery that a person who has been born defective as a result of *in utero* damage has reason to act as the [Aristotelian] *phronimos* acts.”<sup>27</sup> The problem, once again, is that this claim clashes with the intuition that our reasons are constrained by our abilities. In this case, the emphasis is on our physical and psychological capacities.

So Williams has two arguments against externalism. The first, *the argument from explanation*, has been duly criticized by his opponents and in any case seems neutral between internal and external theories of reasons. The second, *the argument from capacity*, suggests that all external reason-claims are false because they fail to take seriously the extent to which our desires and capacities constrain our reasons.

#### IV. OIC AND INCOMPATIBLE OBLIGATIONS

Before considering more precisely how we might use OIC to challenge externalism, let us explore the connection between normative reasons and “ought” statements. Like “ought” statements, normative reasons can be either *pro tanto* or *decisive* (in the case of “ought” statements philosophers tend to contrast what

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<sup>25</sup> “Might There be External Reasons?” Reprinted in *World, Mind, and Ethics: Essays for Bernard Williams*. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1995).

<sup>26</sup> Williams (1995): 192.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*: 193.

ought to be done *other things equal* from what ought to be done *all things considered*). Several incompatible *pro tanto* reasons may exist simultaneously but no more than one of them can be decisively action-guiding. This follows from the physical fact that nobody can act in more than one way at a time. While a juggler riding a unicycle may be able to accomplish several *tasks* with a single action, she cannot undertake more than one discrete *action* at a time.

In the absence of context, the expression “ought to  $\phi$ ” is ambiguous between a moral and non-moral interpretation. However, when it is used to signify a practical reason, it is logically equivalent with “has a reason to.” Thus, in the context of a discussion about practical reasons, from a *pro tanto* “ought” we can infer a *pro tanto* reason (and vice versa), and from a decisive “ought” we can infer a decisive reason (and vice versa). Because “ought” claims and reason-claims are interchangeable in this way, we can use OIC as a tool for testing the legitimacy of specific reason-claims.

In order to use OIC for this purpose, however, we must recognize that it governs *pro tanto* reasons and decisive reasons in different ways. When “oughts” are used to signify *pro tanto* reasons, OIC implies that the agent must be generally able—given her physical, psychological, and motivational capacities—to act on the reason which the “ought” expresses. In contrast, when “oughts” are used to signify decisive reasons, OIC implies that the agent must be able *at a particular time and place* to perform the action that the “ought” enjoins.

Failure to recognize the different ways in which OIC operates on *pro tanto* and decisive reasons has created much confusion. It has even led many to reject OIC as a conceptual truth. E. J. Lemmon, for instance, invokes moral dilemmas to show that we can have contradictory moral obligations and thus that we sometimes ought to do what we cannot do.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, some contend that since we can have incompatible reasons for action, we sometimes have reason to do—*ought* to do—what we cannot do. Following Lemmon, they conclude that OIC is merely a contingent moral principle<sup>29</sup> or an artifact of language.<sup>30</sup>

However, we can reconcile the existence of incompatible reasons with the construal of OIC as a conceptual truth, as long as we concede that only *pro tanto* reasons can remain permanently incompatible. OIC does not imply that we cannot have conflicting duties or reasons, only that we cannot be rationally required to fulfill all of them at once. As Bart Streumer has recently argued, “It cannot be the case that there is *most* reason for a person to perform an action if it is impossible

<sup>28</sup> E. J. Lemmon, “Moral Dilemmas,” *The Philosophical Review* 71 (1962): 139–58.

<sup>29</sup> James Forrester, *Why You Should: The Pragmatics of Deontic Speech* (London: UP of New England, 1989).

<sup>30</sup> W. Sinnott-Armstrong, “‘Ought’ Conversationally Implies Can,” *The Philosophical Review* 93 (1984): 249–61. Michael Stocker, “‘Ought’ and ‘Can’,” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 49 (1971): 303–16.

that this person will perform this action.”<sup>31</sup> Insofar as thought is a kind of action, we might additionally claim that there cannot be a decisive reason for a person to perform an action if it is impossible for this person to conceive of the action as one that he ought to perform.

## V. THE STRONG INTERPRETATION OF OIC

Assuming, then, that OIC is a conceptual truth about normative reasons generally (and moral reasons in particular), we must still decide whether it can be plausibly interpreted in a way that undermines external reason-claims. In a recent essay, Robert Stern distinguishes between a “weak” and a “strong” sense of OIC as applied to moral norms.<sup>32</sup> According to the “weak” interpretation, our inability to perform an action prescribed by a moral principle does not undermine its normative authority. Instead, our inability merely shields us from blame for not acting on it. Of course, there may be people who intentionally render themselves incapable of being swayed by moral considerations. And we might blame these people for causing their own callousness. Nevertheless, on the weak interpretation of OIC, there are cases in which the inability to act on a moral principle does not undermine its authority. The inability only implies that people who fail to act on the principle should not be blamed for their failure.

On the “strong” interpretation of OIC, as Stern describes it, no act can be morally required if it is beyond human capacities to perform. Although “beyond human capacities” is vague (perhaps deliberately so), the relevant capacities seem to include a physical and psychological ability to perform a particular action at a particular time, given one’s current beliefs and desires. The rationale for the strong interpretation is that moral principles are supposed to be *action-guiding*; if they fail to function as guides because we are unable act on them, they do not exist as normative moral principles. James Griffin defends the strong version of OIC as follows: “Moral norms regulate human action; a norm that ignores the limited nature of human agents is not an ‘ideal’ norm, but no norm at all.”<sup>33</sup> Although not all moral norms are supposed to directly regulate human behavior in the way a

<sup>31</sup> Bart Streumer, “Reasons and Impossibility,” *Philosophical Studies* 136 (2007): 351–84, emphasis added.

<sup>32</sup> Robert Stern, “Does ‘Ought’ Imply ‘Can’? And Did Kant Think It Does?” *Utilitas* 16 (2004): 42–61. Two caveats are in order. First, Stern focuses specifically on moral reasons rather than practical reasons. Second, when he discusses internalism and externalism, the issue at stake is moral *judgment* internalism, which is concerned with whether the judgment that an action is right necessarily generates a motivation to act in accordance with that judgment.

<sup>33</sup> James Griffin, “The Human Good and the Ambitions of Consequentialism,” *The Good Life and the Human Good* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1992). I follow Stern and Griffin in using “norms” and “principles” synonymously.

moral decision procedure does, the strong interpretation of OIC suggests that moral principles must at least be able to generate practical rules that fall within the realm of human capacities.

Rather than focusing on moral norms, I shall consider the strong and weak versions of OIC as competing conceptual claims about all normative “ought” statements, which include specific practical reasons and general principles of practical reasoning. Stern’s “strong” interpretation of OIC is not especially strong, since it requires only that reasons must be responsive to the general capacities of human beings. Given the many differences between people, how should we apply the strong criterion? If we acknowledge that incapacities place limits on the existence of normative reasons (and not just on their scope), it seems arbitrary to focus our attention on the general capacities of human beings, when there is a range of relevant differences between people. For example, if the average person can expect to learn no more than a handful of foreign languages, this does not imply that a savant with a unique propensity for language learning has a reason to limit his eccentric aspiration to learn every dialect of every European language. Conversely, the fact that an autistic savant has a reason to memorize a telephone directory does not suggest that you or I have a similar reason, since most of us are unable to acquire either the motivation or the cognitive capacity to do so. Thus, a more plausible version of the strong interpretation of OIC would index practical reasons to individual capacities rather than average human capacities. But why should we accept the strong interpretation of OIC to begin with?

Consider first why we might be tempted to embrace the weak version of OIC as a conceptual truth about normative reasons. There are some norms that every rational person must accept because they are constitutive of rationality. One example is the “means-ends principle,” which holds that rational agents must attempt to take the most efficient means to their given ends. If they fail to do so, they behave irrationally. Of course, some people fail to act on their ends, or perceived reasons, because of a crippling anxiety or psychological compulsion. If we discover that the anxiety is a result of brain damage produced by an abusive father or that the compulsion is produced by a neurological disorder, we usually do not blame these people for failing to act on the means-ends principle. But we do think that by failing to act on the means-ends principle they have violated a rational norm. Thus, the fact that such people *cannot* conform to the means-ends principle doesn’t change the fact that rational agents *ought* to do so. It merely shows that such people fail to behave rationally. Perhaps, then, as Derek Parfit suggests,<sup>34</sup> all practical reasons are like this: From the fact that some people are

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<sup>34</sup> See Derek Parfit, “Reasons and Motivation,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* Supp 71 (1997): 119, note 39; and Derek Parfit, “Rationality and Reasons,” *Exploring Practical Philosophy* (London: Ashgate P, 2001).

unable to act (or think) in accordance with certain norms, it does not follow that these norms lack rational authority. The inability at most suggests that we cannot always blame people for their failure to conform to the norms of rationality.

The argument is specious. To see why, we must first distinguish the norms that collectively constitute rationality (or good reasoning), from the norms that underlie particular reasons to act or believe. In addition to the means-ends principle, the norms of practical rationality are typically thought to include the requirements that one's operative preferences are transitive and consistent, while the norms of theoretical rationality include the requirements that one's beliefs are mutually consistent and that one's inferences conform to certain deductive principles, such as *modus ponens*. These norms, among others, jointly constitute our core concept of rationality. If some people fail to reason or act in accordance with these norms because they are distracted or brain damaged or depressed, this does not undermine their authority. The norms of rationality remain authoritative because they constitute a normative system without which we could not have, or even conceive of having, any particular reasons to act or believe.<sup>35</sup> We cannot, for example, coherently imagine a rational agent who is unable to grasp why  $\langle q \rangle$  follows from the premises  $\langle \text{if } p \text{ then } q \rangle$  and  $\langle p \rangle$ .<sup>36</sup> Similarly, we cannot conceive of a rational agent who believes he has a decisive reason to  $\Phi$ , believes that  $\psi$ -ing is the best way to  $\Phi$ , but rejects the conclusion that he ought to  $\psi$ .<sup>37</sup> We can, however, imagine a rational agent who is unable to grasp why (as we may claim) he should be kind to strangers or obey the customs of his native country.<sup>38</sup> Thus, conformity to the principles of rationality is presupposed by any particular reasons we might have.

This insight reveals the fallacy in the foregoing argument for the weak interpretation of OIC. The argument was that particular reasons to act or believe are normative in the same way the core principles of rationality are normative. In both cases, the argument goes, our incapacities fail to constrain the reasons we have: Our incapacities only show that we should not be blamed for our inability to perceive or act on a reason we have.

The problem with this argument is that there is a significant difference between "ought" in the sense of being rationally required to  $\Phi$  and "ought" in the sense

<sup>35</sup> For more on the idea of a normative system, see Joseph Raz, *Practical Reason and Norms*, 2nd ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1990) 9.

<sup>36</sup> I draw this lesson from Lewis Carroll's "What the Tortoise Said to Achilles." *Mind* 4 (1895): 287–80.

<sup>37</sup> Of course, this person might decide upon reflection that  $\psi$ -ing is morally or prudentially unacceptable. But this would imply that he never really had a decisive reason to  $\Phi$ .

<sup>38</sup> Psychopaths provide living examples of such people. For a useful discussion of the philosophical significance of psychopaths, see Gerald Gaus, *Value and Justification* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1990) 292–300.

of being required by the rules of morality or etiquette or by our personal commitments to  $\Phi$ . The difference is not that the “oughts” of rationality are more normatively compelling than those that arise from personal commitments. Your commitment to reduce the suffering of sentient creatures or to grow the world’s longest beard, for example, may constitute an essential part of your personal identity. The difference is instead that while we cannot conceive of a rational agent who routinely flouts the rules of rationality, we can conceive of a rational agent who lacks our deepest concerns and commitments and who is incapable of acquiring them. Consequently, although the strong version of ought-implies-can that I have endorsed cannot be used to show that the core norms of rationality are constrained by the capacities of individual agents, it can be used to undermine specific reason-claims by showing that the person to whom a reason is attributed lacks the relevant motivational set or deliberative capacity. It does so by denying the conceivability of a rational agent who has a reason to  $\Phi$  and yet lacks the ability to  $\Phi$  or to conceptualize  $\Phi$ -ing as something he ought to do.

If OIC is a conceptual truth about reasons, and if the most plausible version of it is the strong, individualized interpretation developed above, then it appears to undermine external reason-claims. This is because external reasons are supposed to apply to people even if they cannot be reached, through deliberation, from their current beliefs and desires. Since external reasons are supposed to be normative reasons, they must also be action-guiding. But if a reason is both action-guiding and incapable of guiding action, it seems to imply that we ought to do what we cannot do. Thus, whatever else they believe, externalists are committed to the claim that there are cases in which people ought to act in ways that are deeply impossible, given their beliefs and desires. Internalists are skeptical, and their tacit endorsement of OIC is a plausible explanation of their skepticism.

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