

## Defusing Counterexamples against Motivational Internalism

### Abstract

Externalists argue that motivation is external to moral judgments on the grounds that people can be unmoved by their moral judgments. I reply that people sometimes act indifferently to their moral considerations not because their moral judgments lack motivation but because their moral judgments are obstructed by rival desires. It appears that the moral motivation wanes while the moral judgments linger. In reality, however, the moral motivation is only made inconspicuous by the motivation of the opposing desires. A moral judgment is subject to obstruction just like an emotive judgment and a gustatory judgment.

**Keywords:** Moral Judgment, Motivational Internalism, Motivational Externalism, Obstruction

Park, Seungbae (2016). "Defusing Counterexamples against Motivational Internalism", *Filosofija. Sociologija* 27 (1): 23-30.

### 1. Introduction

Is motivation internal or external to a moral judgment? Motivational internalism (internalism hereafter) says that motivation is internal to a moral judgment, i.e., motivation to act in a certain way is constitutive of a moral appraisal. It follows that when we make a moral judgment, we are necessarily motivated to act in accordance with the moral judgment. For example, if we make a moral judgment that saving a drowning child is moral, we are invariably motivated to save a drowning child. Thus, it is conceptually impossible to make a moral judgment without being motivated to act accordingly. Put differently, where there is a moral judgment, there is suitable motivation in all possible worlds.

Internalism sketched above clashes head-on with motivational externalism (externalism henceforth). Externalism is the doctrine that motivation is external to a moral judgment, i.e., motivation is not an essential component of the moral judgment. We may be motivated to act in a relevant way when we make a moral judgment. For example, when we make a moral judgment that murder is wrong, we may be motivated to refrain from committing murder and to condemn murderers. But the motivation is just an accidental accompaniment of the moral judgment. Thus, it is conceptually possible to make a moral judgment without the relevant motivation, i.e., we may make a moral judgment without being suitably motivated in some possible worlds.

Meta-ethicists distinguish between two versions of internalism, the strong version and the weak version. The strong version is the one depicted above. It states that there is a metaphysical necessity between motivation and a moral judgment. The weak version, on the other hand, holds that there is a nomological necessity between motivation and a moral judgment. On this account, where there is a moral judgment, there is relevant motivation in the actual world and in the *nearby* possible worlds where the laws of nature hold. In remote possible worlds, a moral judgment is not accompanied by suitable motivation. What I mean by internalism throughout this paper is not the weak version but the strong version.

The aim of this paper is to defend internalism from the influential counterexamples provided by Alfred Mele (1996), Russ Shafer-Landau (2003), Caj Strandberg (2004), and Christian Miller (2008). They claim that people can make moral judgments without being motivated to act in accordance with their moral judgments, so moral judgments are devoid of motivational force. I reply that people sometimes act contrary to their moral considerations

not because their moral judgments were motivationally listless but because their moral judgments are obstructed by other more powerful desires. The notion of obstruction will be expounded below. In the following sections, I first develop a theory about how rival desires interact with one another with respect to the production of actions and then utilize it to defuse the counterexamples provided by the aforementioned philosophers.

My response to the counterexamples is different from the internalist responses summarized in Björklund, Björnsson, Eriksson, Olinder, and Strandberg (2012). Internalists argue that motivation is internal to moral judgment only for mentally normally agents (Björnsson 2002; Blackburn 1998: 59-68; Eriksson 2006: 172-187; Gibbard 2003: 154; Timmons 1999: 140), for rational agents (Korsgaard 1996; Smith 1994; Wallace 2006; Wedgwood 2007: 23–26; van Roojen 2010), and for morally perceptive agents (McDowell 1978, 1979; McNaughton 1988: Chapter 8; Tolhurst 1995; Wiggins 1990). These philosophers' approaches can be strengthened by my approach to the counterexamples against internalism.

## **2. The Obstruction Theory of Desires**

Let me begin with an everyday example. John and Jane encountered a snake on a mountain while they were hiking. John instantly made the emotive judgment that the snake was scary, so he was motivated to step back. But he stepped forward because he wanted to prove to Jane, his girlfriend, that he was a courageous man. His desire to exhibit courage was significantly stronger than his emotive judgment about the snake. As a result, he acted contrary to the emotive judgment. In this situation, it appeared that the desire to move back did not exist. In reality, however, it existed all along with the desire to move forward. When John moved forward, his hands trembled due to his emotive judgment about the snake. But for the emotive judgment, his hands would not have trembled. Thus, the emotive judgment had a certain effect on his behavior.

To take another example, upon seeing a glass of wine, Jane made a gustatory judgment that alcohol was palatable, so she was motivated to drink it. But her gustatory judgment was made to appear to be powerless by her other desire. Being pregnant, she had a desire to protect her baby, which was more powerful than the desire to drink alcohol. As a result, she avoided drinking the glass of wine. In this situation, the desire to drink the wine coexisted with the desire to protect her baby. It is not the case that the gustatory motivation ended while the gustatory judgment remained. The desire to protect the baby prevented the desire to drink the glass of wine from moving her hand toward it. It appeared that the gustatory motivation did not exist. In reality, however, it existed. The effect of its existence resonated in her behavior. For example, the sight of the glass of wine made her mouth water, although it did not make her hand grab it. She only appeared to be unmoved by her gustatory judgment.

When two conflicting desires are approximately of equal strength, none of them produces actions of their own. For example, there might be no significant difference between the power of John's fear of the snake and the power of his desire to exhibit his courage. The two opposite feelings continuously exist together in his mind with none of them dominating over the other. As a result, none of them prompts John into an action one way or the other. In such a situation, John vacillates between stepping back and forward. The two rival desires basically tied in their competition to generate an action. He only appears to be unmotivated by his emotive judgment that a snake is scary.

To take another example, Jane might wish to drink a glass of wine and want to protect her baby at the same time. The two opposing feelings continue to compete with each other in her mind to produce actions, but none of them clearly outdoes the other. In such a situation,

she is ambivalent about drinking the glass of wine. The degrees of the opposing desires fluctuate as her mind swings back and forth, so the balance between them is broken from time to time. But overall none of them is strong enough to generate actions of their own. As a result, no action ensues one way or the other. Jane continues to waver between drinking and not drinking the glass of wine. In such a situation, she only appears to be unmoved by her gustatory judgment that alcohol is palatable.

The foregoing examples lead us to what I call the obstruction theory of desires according to which our mind is an arena in which conflicting desires often contest for our actions, and a desire may obstruct its rival desire. For example, John's desire to exhibit courage obstructed his emotive judgment about the snake, and Jane's desire to protect her baby obstructed her gustatory judgment about alcohol. The concept of obstruction can be fleshed out as follows. Let  $D_1$  and  $D_2$  be rivaling desires. To say that  $D_1$  obstructs  $D_2$  means that  $D_1$  prevents  $D_2$  from producing an action.  $D_1$  might be far more powerful than  $D_2$ , or they might be approximately of equal strength. If  $D_1$  is far more powerful than  $D_2$ ,  $D_1$  produces an action of its own whereas  $D_2$  does not. If  $D_1$  and  $D_2$  are approximately of equal strength, none of them induces an action of its own.

To say that  $D_1$  obstructs  $D_2$  does not mean that  $D_1$  annihilates  $D_2$ , i.e.,  $D_1$  drives  $D_2$  out of existence. It is for this reason that I prefer the term 'obstruct' to the term 'defeat.' For  $D_1$  to defeat  $D_2$  entails that  $D_2$  ceases to exist, and hence it does not have an effect on an agent's behavior. When  $D_1$  obstructs  $D_2$ , however,  $D_2$  persists intact.  $D_2$  is only made inconspicuous by  $D_1$ . In other words, it looks as though  $D_2$  does not exist because of  $D_1$ , but in fact it does. It has a persistent effect, although subtle, on an agent's behavior. It does not, however, have sufficient power to produce an action of its own. For example, John's emotive judgment persisted intact along with his desire to demonstrate courage, making him step forward hesitantly. Without the motivation of the emotive judgment, he would have moved forward unhesitatingly.

An obstruction relation holds not only between two desires but also among three desires or more. Two congenial desires may work together to overshadow a third desire, their common rival desire. In such a case, the two desires jointly act as an obstacle preventing the third desire from issuing an action. An example of this interesting mental phenomenon will be provided in the following section where I confront the counterexamples leveled against internalism.

The obstruction theory of desires is merely an extension of Plato's theory of soul. Plato claims that our soul consists of three distinct elements: the rational element, the spirited element, and the desiring element. His rationale for the view is that there can be conflicts among the three elements. For example, we sometimes refuse to drink water even when we are thirsty, which indicates that there can be a conflict between the desiring element and the rational element (Plato 2003: 135). There can also be a conflict between the spirited element and the desiring element (Plato 2003: 136). For example, we may vacillate between looking and not looking at dead bodies. After looking at them, we may feel angry about ourselves. Plato's theory of soul distinguishes among the three elements, whereas the obstruction theory of desires distinguishes among diverse desires. Therefore, the obstruction theory of desires is only more fine-grained than Plato's theory of soul.

### **3. Counterexamples**

#### **3.1. Listless Woman**

Mele (1996) offers an example of a listless woman in order to show that a moral judgment can be purged of motivation. Imagine that a woman lost her husband and children in a recent

plane crash, and as a result she suffers from clinical depression. She has been taking care of her ailing uncle for years. She continues to judge that she is morally required to assist her uncle. After the plane crash, however, she “is utterly unmotivated to assist him” (Mele 1996: 733). So internalism is false.

For the obstructionist, however, Mele’s example does not pose any threat to internalism. The unfortunate woman is in fact motivated to assist her ailing uncle when she judges that she ought to assist him. Her moral judgment is only obstructed by depression. If we ask her whether she ought to help her uncle, she would say “Yes” in accordance with her moral judgment, despite the fact that she suffers from depression. Given that she was motivated to say “Yes”, it is likely that she is also motivated to assist her uncle, although the motivation is not powerful enough to overcome depression and to generate the relevant actions. No sensible internalist would claim that moral motivation is always powerful enough to produce a moral action.

If moral judgments are devoid of motivation because people sometimes go counter to their moral judgments, so are emotive and gustatory judgments because people sometimes fail to act in accord with their emotive and gustatory judgments. As delineated earlier, John moved forward despite his emotive judgment that a snake is scary. Jane abstained from drinking alcohol despite her gustatory judgment that alcohol is palatable. The unfortunate women suffering from depression may also decline to eat an apple, although she thinks that an apple is delicious. Moral, emotive, and gustatory judgments are all in the same boat with respect to the issue of motivation. There is no reason for thinking that moral judgments are devoid of motivation, whereas emotive and gustatory judgments are full of motivation.

Externalists might object that moral judgments fundamentally differ from emotive and gustatory judgments in that there can be justifications for moral judgments, but not for emotive and gustatory judgments. We can justify the moral view that murder is wrong by pointing out that if someone is murdered, he and his family will be deprived of future enjoyments they would otherwise have access to. But there can be justification neither for the emotive judgment that a snake is frightening, nor for the gustatory judgment that alcohol is palatable.

On close examination, however, there can be justifications for emotive and gustatory judgments too. When you see a snake, you feel scared, and you have a certain phenomenological property. The phenomenological property justifies the judgment that a snake is scary. When you drink alcohol, it tastes palatable to you, and you acquire a certain phenomenological property, i.e., you come to know what it is like to drink alcohol. The phenomenological property justifies the judgment that alcohol is palatable. It is wrong to think that there can be no justification for emotive and gustatory judgments. Consequently, moral, emotive, and gustatory judgments are in the same status with respect to the issue of justification.

William P. Alston (1976) would accept my suggestion that a phenomenological property can justify an emotive judgment or a gustatory judgment. He rejects the coherentist idea that only a belief can justify another belief, arguing that a nondoxastic mental state, such as reason, perception, and memory, can also justify a belief. For example, when you see a cat on the mat, you have a certain perception, and the perception justifies your perceptual belief that a cat is on the mat. It is not the case that the perceptual belief can only be justified by other beliefs. In Alston’s spirit, I argued that a phenomenological property, which is kind of a nondoxastic mental property, can justify an emotive judgment and a gustatory judgment.

### **3.2. Soldier**

Let me turn to Shafer-Landau's counterexample against internalism. Suppose that a soldier thinks that it is his duty to fight for his country. After thinking about killing, however, he disregards what he takes to be the moral demand imposed upon him:

Imagine a soldier during wartime who believes it his duty to fight for his country. He knows that in two weeks' time he will be called to the front. As the days pass, he dwells increasingly on the horrors he may face. His fortitude diminishes accordingly. After several days he is struck by what seems to him a complete absence of motivation to fight. (Shafer-Landau 2003: 150)

Note that the soldier thought that it was his duty to fight for his country, but now he does not have any motivation to fight. It seems that a moral judgment may linger while its motivation wanes, so motivation is external to moral judgments.

Internalists can again conjure up the obstruction theory of desires to meet Shafer-Landau's counterexample. On the internalist account, the soldier was in fact motivated to fight for his country when he attended to the moral judgment. His moral judgment endured the fear of killing others and being killed by others in the battlefield. The motivation of his moral judgment only appeared to have vanished. In reality, it was only made inconspicuous by the horror of the battleground. Thus, the example of the soldier illustrates not that his moral judgment is motivationally impotent but that his moral judgment is obstructed by a more powerful desire. No sensible internalist would strive for the inordinately strong thesis that moral judgments can never be obstructed by other desires. After all, it is obvious that moral judgments do not always predominate over other mental properties. Like other mental states, they are vulnerable to obstructions by their opposing mental states.

### **3.3. Civil Servant**

Let me move onto Strandberg's ingenious counterexample against internalism. Suppose that Amanda has been working for her government as a tax officer for several years. Her job was to investigate tax evasions. She was passionate about her job at first, but she has been in her position for so long that she is now tired of her repetitive work. She no longer feels enthusiastic, but still believes that it is morally right to track down tax evaders. When she is in such an emotional state, her boss assigns a case to her, and she starts to investigate it:

She holds that it is right for her to investigate into all the facts relevant to a particular case. However, due to the way she feels about her work, she is not motivated to do so by any other motive than an egoistic one. (Strandberg 2004: 191)

Amanda was unmoved by her moral consideration. What prompted her to do what she took to be the morally right thing to do is not her moral judgment but the selfish motive to keep her job. The selfish motive is external to her moral judgment. Therefore, this example "provides support to the view that internalism is mistaken" (Strandberg 2004: 192).

Internalists can again appeal to the obstruction theory of desires to blunt Strandberg's counterexample. On the obstructionist account, Amanda was motivated to investigate the tax evasion case when she made the moral judgment that it was right to investigate the case. But her moral judgment was obstructed by her disgust at the repetitiveness of her work. Her disgust was in turn obstructed by her selfish motive to keep her job. The moral judgment and the selfish motive worked together to overcome the disgust. Had it not been for the moral judgment, Amanda would have been overall less motivated to investigate the tax evasion case.

An analogical argument can be constructed to support the foregoing obstructionist account of Amanda's moral judgment. Suppose that Tom was stranded on a desert island

where there were no edible things except apples. He liked apples, so he did not have any problem on the first day in the island. As days passed, however, he gradually became fed up with apples. He began to miss other food. On the third day, he reached the stage where he was unmoved by his gustatory judgment that an apple is delicious. In other words, the effect of his gustatory judgment was no longer noticeable due to the negative desire about apples he acquired over the past three days. Suddenly, however, hunger arose in his mind. As a result, he ate some apples. In this situation, it is false that the hunger sensation alone has driven him to eat the apples. The hunger sensation received assistance from the gustatory judgment in overcoming the newly acquired negative desire toward apples, and they jointly issued the action of eating the apples. But for the gustatory judgment, a more intense hunger sensation would have been required to generate the action of eating the apples. The same is true of Amanda's moral judgment above. It is false that the selfish motive alone has prodded her to investigate the tax evasion case. Her moral judgment and selfish motive formed an alliance to obstruct her negative desire toward the repetitiveness of her job. The moral motivation persisted all along with her moral judgment and her disgust toward the job. But for the moral judgment, a more intense selfish motive would have been required to investigate the case.

### **3.4. Mother**

Internalists may weaken their position in the face of the counterexamples of amoral people, arguing that amoral people are irrational and only rational people are motivated to act in accord with their moral judgments. Miller (2008) tries to refute even this weakened internalist position with his counterexample of a mother who acts contrary to her moral judgment without being irrational:

Consider a mother who reaches the conclusion, after conscientious deliberation and as a result of the indoctrination which she has received as a member of her cult, that it would be morally best for her to sacrificially kill her child for the good of the cause, and suppose that she decides to do so. When the moment arrives for actually murdering her child, however, she may find that she cannot go through with it – not because she has reconsidered the matter and changed her mind about what morality requires by her own lights, but simply because she cannot bring herself to give her child away. At the same time, she experiences this inability as liberating and as an expression of who she truly is as a person. (Miller 2008: 249)

Note that it is rational for the mother to be unmotivated by her moral judgment because her moral judgment is a product of the cult indoctrination. This brilliant counterexample seems to demolish even the more plausible internalist thesis that only rational people's moral judgments are motivationally potent.

Miller's counterexample, however, does not block the internalist move to explain away seemingly unmotivating moral judgments with the use of the obstruction theory of desires. Like other examples we examined so far, it only illustrates that the motivation of a moral judgment can be made to appear to be nonexistent by a powerful rival desire, and it does not show that a moral judgment is devoid of motivation. On the obstructionist account, the mother was in fact motivated to kill her child when she made a moral judgment that it was morally right for her to kill her child, and her motivation endured her motherly love for her child along with the judgment. Her moral judgment was only obstructed by her motherly love toward the child. Thus, internalism remains unscathed vis-à-vis Miller's counterexample.

## **4. Objection and Reply**

It might be objected that it is unfair of me to distort the original examples provided by the

quoted externalists above. For example, Shafer-Landau originally claimed that the soldier was not motivated at all to fight for his country, while he made the moral judgment that it was his duty to fight for his country. I added to Shafer-Landau's example my opinion that the soldier was in fact motivated to some extent to fight and that his motivation was only obstructed by a stronger desire.

This objection brings to light the core difference between externalism and internalism on the issue of whether or not we can make a moral judgment without being motivated to act in accordance with the judgment. There is a scientific study which indicates that I was right to add my opinions to the examples. Jung Hoon Sul et al. (2011) discovered that there is a neural difference between the decision on what to believe and the decision on what to do. A particular part of a rat's brain called the rostral AGm is activated when it makes the decision on what to do:

Our results indicate the involvement of the rostral AGm not only in action selection but also in valuation, which is consistent with the finding that AGm activity is modulated by expected reward. (Jung Hoon Sul et al. 2011: 6)

It is likely that neuroscience will also discover a part of a human brain that activates when we make a decision on what to do, but does not activate when we make a decision on what to believe. For example, the part of the brain activates when we choose to watch a movie over drinking a beer, but it does not activate when we decide to believe that the earth is round as opposed to flat after considering all the evidence regarding the shape of the earth. Such a discovery would support internalism and undermine externalism.

## **5. Conclusion**

There is a tradition in meta-ethics to criticize internalism by providing counterexamples of people who act contrary to their moral judgments. I attempted to defuse them, arguing that people sometimes appear to be unmotivated by their moral considerations not because their moral judgments are motivationally inert but because their moral judgments are obstructed by more powerful rival desires. Our mind is an arena in which conflicting desires contest for our actions. Moral judgments can be obstructed by opposite desires just like emotive and gustatory judgments. Moral, emotive, and gustatory judgments are all in the same boat concerning the issue of motivation. If moral judgments are devoid of motivation, so are emotive and gustatory judgments. If emotive and gustatory judgments are motivationally efficacious, so are moral judgments.

The influential counterexamples provided by Mele, Shafer-Landau, Strandberg, and Miller do not refute the modest thesis that moral judgments can be obstructed by rival desires, although they do rebut the strong thesis that moral judgments can never be obstructed by other desires. Internalism does not require the strong thesis. No sensible internalist would insist that the motivation of moral judgments can never lose their salience in the presence of more powerful rival desires. This paper has a simple message to externalists that they would need to come up with more sophisticated counterexamples to refute internalism because Plato's theory of soul provides a theoretical resource for internalists to defuse counterexamples leveled at internalism.

## **References**

Alston, W. 1976. "Has Foundationalism Been Refuted?", *Philosophical Studies* 29: 287-305.

- Björklund, F., G. Björnsson, J. Eriksson, R. Olinder, and C. Strandberg 2012. “Recent Work on Motivational Internalism”, *Analysis Reviews* 72: 124-137.
- Björnsson, G. 2002. “How Emotivism Survives Immoralists, Irrationality, and Depression”, *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 40: 327-344.
- Blackburn, S. 1998. *Ruling Passions*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Eriksson, J. 2006. *Moved by Morality. An Essay on the Practicality of Moral Thought and Talk*. Uppsala: Department of Philosophy.
- Gibbard, A. 2003. *Thinking How to Live*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Korsgaard, C. 1996. *Skepticism about Practical Reason*. In *Creating the Kingdom of Ends*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- McDowell, J. 1978. “Are Moral Requirements Hypothetical Imperatives?” *The Aristotelian Society*, Supplementary Volume 52: 13–29.
- McDowell, J. 1979. “Virtue and Reason”, *Monist* 62: 331-350.
- McNaughton, D. 1988. *Moral Vision: An Introduction to Ethics*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Mele, A. 1996. “Internalist Moral Cognitivism and Listlessness”, *Ethics* 106: 727-753.
- Miller, C. 2008. “Motivational Internalism”, *Philosophical Studies* 139(2): 233-255.
- Plato 2003. *Republic*. G. R. F. Ferrari (ed.) and Tom Griffith (trans.) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Shafer-Landau, R. 2003. *Moral Realism: A Defense*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Smith, M. 1994. *The Moral Problems*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Strandberg, C. 2004. *Moral Reality: A Defense of Moral Realism*. Ph. D. Dissertation, Lund University.
- Sul, J., S. Jo, D. Lee, M. Jung 2011. “Role of Rodent Secondary Motor Cortex in Value-Based Action Selection”, *Nature Neuroscience* 14: 1202-1208.
- Timmons, M. 1999. *Morality without Foundations*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Tolhurst, W. 1995. “Moral Experience and the Internalist Argument against Moral Realism”, *American Philosophical Quarterly* 32: 187-194.
- van Roojen, M. 2010. “Moral Rationalism and Rationalist Amoralism”, *Ethics* 120: 495-525.
- Wallace, R. 2006. “Moral Motivation”, In *Contemporary Debates in Moral Theory*. James



Dreier, (ed.). 182-195. Oxford: Blackwell.

Wedgwood, R. 2007. *The Nature of Normativity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Wiggins, D. 1990. "Moral Cognitivism, Moral Relativism and Motivating Moral Beliefs", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 91: 61-85.